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ARE YOUR FIRES BURNED OUT?

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Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day in the counting of the Omer, which always falls on the 18th day of Iyar, is the lone happy, joyous day between Pesach and Shavous. On this day, according to tradition, the terrible plague which devastated the students of Rabbi Akiva who were fighting under the leadership of Bar Kochba in the last big revolt against Rome, ceased. Also according to tradition this is the day upon which Simeon Bar Yochai, one of the most famous of Rabbi Akiva's disciples, died. In Israel Lag B'Omer is celebrated in a very peculiar way. On this day bonfires are lit and everyone sings and dances around them until either the fires go out or they are overcome with fatigue.

What a strange way to celebrate this holiday. Tradition has it that on the day he died, Rabbi Simeon Bar Yochai's bedside was surrounded by a brilliant flame which radiated throughout his home until the moment he died. In commemoration of t is it became customary to light bonfires. But why should this be so? Rabbi Simeon Bar Yochai is not the only personality whose presence was said to have radiated warmth and light. This is explicitly said of Moshe in the Bible and yet this is in no way commemorated.

It seems to me that the tradition of Rabbi Simeon Bar Yochai's radiant personality and the terrible catastrophy which overtook the Jewish people in his generation are related. Because of the terrible sufferings they endured many people had lost their capacity to feel. The fire within them had burned out. They existed but they could not feel. Rabbi Simeon Bar Yochai who suffered more than most in that generation, having had to spend seventeen years hiding in a cave, was able to restore their capacity to feel. After him the numbness of the catastrophy lessened, thefires began to burn. Unfortunately, there are too many people for whom life is dull and meangless. Their fires have burned out. To them the holiday of Lag B'Omer speaks. Whatever your problems, whatever your fears, never let your fires be out. Perhaps this is what the students are talking about rather than other things when they talk about the need to care, to be concerned, to be committed.