

THE RASHBI

RABBI SHIMON BAR YOCHAI

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is best known as the author of the *Zohar*, the classic work of Kabbalah. Explaining God's hidden mysteries, the Kabbalistic tradition was part of the Torah received by Moses at Sinai. In the early generations after the Torah was given, Kabbalah was discussed only through allegory and parable, which disguised the concealed secrets of the Torah and protected them from being misused by the unworthy. Until the time of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, explicit Kabbalistic terms were not used openly. By authoring the *Zohar*, Rabbi Shimon established a new school for understanding the Kabbalah, bringing its wisdom further down into the world. It remained unparalleled until the system of the Arizal – Rabbi Isaac Luria – was introduced in the Holy City of Tsfat in the sixteenth century.

Originally, the *Zohar* consisted of volumes of notes, restricted to a very small secret circle. When the group finally broke up, the manuscripts were hidden in a vault, and were not uncovered until the thirteenth century. They came into the hands of one of the most prominent Kabbalists of the time, Rabbi Moshe de Leon, who edited and published them in the 1290s. The Kabbalists of that generation knew enough about the writings of the *Zohar* to recognize it as authentic, and they accepted the work with virtually no controversy. This led the way for the Arizal's new system in the late 1500s. The Arizal opened the doors to the *Zohar* of Rabbi Shimon, clarifying its mysteries and teaching the initiated how to apply its wisdom.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was born in the Galilee and became a *Tanna* – one of the great Sages of the Mishna. Living during the era of the Roman persecutions, he was a disciple of Rabbi Akiva in the second generation after the destruction of the Second Temple. The Talmud recounts that Rabbi Shimon was condemned to death for insulting the Roman government. He and his son, Rabbi Elazar, fled to a cave where they remained for thirteen years, meditating and studying the mysteries of the Torah together. They rose to such a level that they became worthy of mystical revelations from Elijah the Prophet. After twelve years, Rabbi Shimon and his son left the cave and while walking in the fields, saw people working the land, engaging in the mundane affairs of the world instead of learning Torah. They became so disturbed and angry by this that any place they looked upon immediately burnt up. A heavenly voice called out, "You came out of the cave to destroy the world? Go back in!" They returned to the cave and studied for another twelve months. They then raised their hands to heaven and said, "Merciful Father! Even the wicked aren't judged in *Gehinnom* for more than twelve months – it is enough to be judged as the wicked are judged." Their prayers were accepted and a heavenly voice told them to exit the cave once again. This time they saw an old man hurrying along with two bundles of fragrant myrtles in his hands. As for the reason, he explained that he was bringing myrtles home in honor

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of the Sabbath. From this, Rabbi Shimon and his son were appeased. They saw how it was possible to reach the highest levels of holiness through everyday actions. Subsequently, Rabbi Shimon established a new school of mysticism based on the Torah secrets he had learned with Elijah the Prophet. Seventy years after Rabbi Shimon's passing, his students wrote down his central teachings, forming the main body of the *Zohar*.

Rabbi Shimon passed away on *Lag B'Omer*, the thirty-third day of the *Omer* counting. The period of the *Omer* begins on the second night of Pesach and leads up to Shavuot, fifty days later. It is marked by many customs related to mourning, because it was during this period that 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva, men of exceptional caliber, were struck by a plague for their failure to accord one another proper love and respect. On *Lag B'Omer*, the plague ceased.

Lag B'Omer also marks the day of Rabbi Shimon's passing. Before he left the world he said that, every year, this day should be marked with celebration instead of mourning. The day is filled with a great light because of the secret wisdom he revealed to the world through the *Zohar*, and is thus a cause for tremendous rejoicing. To this day, *Lag B'Omer* is celebrated with special festivity in the Land of Israel through much dancing and singing. In particular, large torches and bonfires are lit and can be seen throughout the country from great distances.

In Meron, at the gravesites of both Rabbi Shimon and his son, Rabbi Elazar, the festivities and rejoicing are especially marked. Over 100,000 Jews – religious and secular alike – converge each year on the site in the Upper Galilee, making it one of the most popular national festivals. On this day, it is a time-honored custom to give the first haircut to boys who have reached the age of three, leaving them with side-curls. Many people travel to Rabbi Shimon's gravesite for *Lag B'Omer* from other locations in the world to experience the unique holiness and extraordinary spiritual goodness of the day.

The Arizal and his students strongly emphasized the tremendous spiritual benefit of rejoicing in honor of Rabbi Shimon on *Lag B'Omer*. Afterwards, the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples – who continued the traditions based on the Kabbalah – also strengthened this custom. Rebbe Nachman spoke of the greatness of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, as well, revealing his own connection to him through the discourse printed at the beginning of *Likutey Moharan*.

"Tzaddikim are greater after their passing than when they were alive" (*Chullin 7b*). Anyone who has been in Meron on *Lag B'Omer* can attest to the truth of this well-known statement of the Talmud. The sheer number of people who continue to visit his gravesite in Meron on *Lag B'Omer*, as well as throughout the year, indicates that the spiritual power of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai lives on. ■

