The formation of the Jewish People started on the eve of the Exodus in the first month, Nissan, and culminated with the giving of the Torah at Sinai in the third month of Sivan. This nation-building process is symbolized in the progression of the first three astrological symbols: Aries, the lamb, symbolizes the unity of the group - in a flock the lamb feels itself identical to its neighbor. Also, just as sheep follow a shepherd, the Jewish People accepted the leadership of Moses.

Our month, the month of Iyar, is symbolized by the Shor, the bull, which desires to dwell in isolation. Iyar is therefore a time of introspection and self-development, a time of preparation for receiving the Torah in Sivan. However, there were times when the Jewish People also exhibited the rebellious qualities of the bull and 'bucked' the leadership of Moses and Aaron when they rebelled in the desert during this month.

This process of individual growth is connected to the counting of the Omer - which takes place mostly in Iyar. But when the individual is over-emphasized this can lead to disaster, as happened when the students of Rabbi Akiva all died because they failed to give each other enough respect.

If you're flying over Israel on the night of Monday 6th of May this year, and you look down out of your plane, you will see thousands of bonfires dotting the landscape as far as the eye can see. For that night will be Lag B'Omer - the 33rd day of the day of counting the seven weeks Pesach and Shavuot. Throughout history, the period of the Omer has been fraught with tragedy for

The 49 Steps

When you look forward to something very much, when you fix your gaze on a special moment in the future, you count the days to that event. When the Jewish People left Egypt, even though their newfound freedom was very sweet to them, their gaze was fixed on a moment that Moses told them would arrive seven weeks later - the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

From the second night of Pesach, every night for seven weeks, we count the days that have passed on this spiritual journey from Egypt to Sinai. We call
she Jewish People: Some 1,900 years ago, all 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died during the Omer because they failed to give each other enough respect. Exactly 900 years ago, whole Jewish communities were obliterated in Germany during the First Crusade. Many, women and children were slaughtered, and Torah scholars burned alive. 250 years ago, Ukrainian peasants under the leadership of a petty aristocrat called Bogdan Chmielnicki (y's), aided by Dneiper Cossacks and Tartars from the Crimea unleashed a terrible massacre: In the synagogue in N emirov, the Cossacks used ritual knives to slaughter the inhabitants. In this town alone, 6,000 men, women and children were butchered.

In remembrance of Rabbi Akiva's students and the other tragedies, it is the custom to abstain from things that bring joy to the heart: Weddings are not held; We refrain from cutting our hair as is the custom of a mourner.

But why do we light bonfires on the 33rd day of the Omer?

**The Hidden Light**

When all 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's students had died, the world was desolate. The Torah had been forgotten - there were no pupils to go out and teach and disseminate the light of the Torah. Rabbi Akiva traveled to the rabbis of the South and taught them. On Lag B'Omer, he layed his hands of the heads of these, his last five disciples, giving them smicha (rabbinical ordination). And from that day, the world began to brighten from these five points of light. As the day of their ordination was the 33rd day of the Omer, we light bonfires in Israel to symbolize the great light that the Torah represents.

One of those last five disciples of Rabbi Akiva was the great Talmudic sage Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. His departure from this world also occurred on Lag B'Omer. On the day of Rabbi Shimon's passing, a great light was revealed to his students when he uncovered many of the hidden secrets of the Torah. This was written down in the Zohar (lit. 'shining'). The bonfires symbolize the light of the hidden wisdom that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai revealed on Lag B'Omer.

Sometimes, when we think of spiritual greatness, it seems so far away from us - another galaxy. We think to ourselves that we could never be really spiritual. It's all too difficult. We're too enmeshed in the physical world and its baubles and its lures. All it took was seven short weeks for the Jewish People to rise from the pits of pollution to the heights of closeness to the Creator. But the key to their success was that their gaze was heavenward. As Oscar Wilde put it "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

When we fix our eyes on the stars of spiritual greatness, when we turn our heads heavenwards, Hashem draws us close to Him and the distance between heaven and earth is a mere seven weeks.