

# TO LIVE

If you happen to be in Israel on the eighteenth of Iyar, you might want to stop at a northern town called Meron. A center for tourism all year round, on this special day Meron, high in the mountains of the Galilee, buzzes with activity.

The reason lies in a grave. Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, who passed away on the 33rd day of the Omer, is buried there. And on that day, Lag BaOmer, Jews from all over Israel flock to this place to light bonfires, sing and dance, and share in the eternal presence of the *tzaddik*. It is a place said to contain the story of many miracles.

More than one parent will take along a three-year-old son to Meron and, in accordance with the custom, give him his first haircut, his *upshemish*. Why there and then? Beginning on Pesach, when we start counting the Omer, haircuts, along with weddings and other joyous events, are prohibited, in order to mourn for Rabbi Akiva's students, who died of a plague during that time. Whereas the plague subsided on Lag BaOmer, the mourning lifts then and we become free to rejoice.



One eventful Lag BaOmer fell on a Thursday night in 1923 (5683). As usual, thousands gathered at the grave site of Bar Yochai; as the air glowed orange with bonfires, people sang and prayed. Because the holiday fell on *erev* Shabbos, many

decided to stay on an extra day and allow themselves a sort of double holiday and a special Shabbos.

On that Sabbath morning, the synagogue near Bar Yochai's tomb was bursting with worshipers. Suddenly, after *musaf*, a voice rang through the hall: "A three-year-old boy has just died!"

"What?"

The voices swelled louder. "What boy? Whose boy? How?"

The room soon thundered with yelling and crying. There was cause for special grief: apparently

the mother had prayed hard to have this boy. Numerous times she had traveled to Meron to beseech the great Rabbi Shimon for Divine aid, vowing that as soon as her boy turned three she would bring him to Meron for his first haircut.

"Just yesterday she brought him here," lamented one man. "Cut his hair—kept her word, just like a true G-d-fearing woman. Such a shame. A beautiful little

boy, too. One day here, the other day gone. Such is life."

The others nodded in sad agreement. Mothers, upon hearing the story, hugged their children tight. Everyone wept for this woman, so quickly deprived of her own motherhood.

Within minutes the mood of Meron had changed from sublime delight to utter sadness. Scarcely anyone had an appetite for the midday Sabbath meal.

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# FOREVER

BY DEVORAH KIRSCH

Suddenly a shriek pierced the air. The mother was crouching in one of the synagogue's rooms, where her dead son lay waiting for burial after the Sabbath.

She wrung her hands and wailed, "Oh, Rabbi Shimon! I have brought my son before you out of blessing and thanks. Why must I be rewarded like this? My son, who was given to me by Hashem in your merit, only to be wrenched away! Why, just yesterday I brought him here, singing and rejoicing out of love for the mitzvah of cutting his hair and beginning his pathway through the Torah. Why, Rabbi Shimon, why? Why was he cut down?"

Her cries grew louder, so loud that everyone from everywhere in Meron gathered around her in pity. She remained at her son's feet, moaning.

"Oh, great leader! Again I beg you! Do not send me away empty-handed! Restore my son in good health and mind. You, who dwell in the Heavenly court with the Blessed One — I know you can change Divine decree. Didn't Hashem give *tzaddikim* the power to make decrees? *Tzaddik gozer veHaKaddosh Baruch Hu mekayem* — a righteous person decrees, and G-d fulfills his wish! I beg you to heed my plea."

Miserably she walked away. The child was left alone in the room, where soon the air stilled. It was so quiet that one could almost taste the silence.

"Ima!"

The synagogue was largely empty. Only a few

men had remained, to recite Psalms or pore over passages in the Talmud and *Zohar*. One of them lifted his head quizzically.

"Ima!"

The men hurried into the room.

"Ima!"

The childish voice grew louder, attracting the ears of the crowd outside. They stopped to listen.

"Ima!"

The child's mother had also heard. By the time she rushed back to the synagogue, her son was on his feet, standing on the floor where minutes before he had lain (supposedly) in eternal sleep.

"Ima," he said, "I want some water. I'm thirsty."

The mother scooped him up in her arms, weeping hysterically, while the crowd looked on in disbelief. Someone there, a physician, pushed his way forward and with a "Pardon me" to the mother took the boy and examined his face, eyes, and mouth.

"Why, he's perfectly well," exclaimed the man. "It's as if he hadn't died!"

"Blessed be He who revives the dead," chanted the crowd.

Years later the town of Meron still spoke of this amazing story. And pilgrims who flocked to honor a great leader knew it wasn't his death they were commemorating. For does a holy man really die? When he ascends to the next world, he continues to pray for the welfare of the Jewish people. *Tzaddikim* live forever. JR

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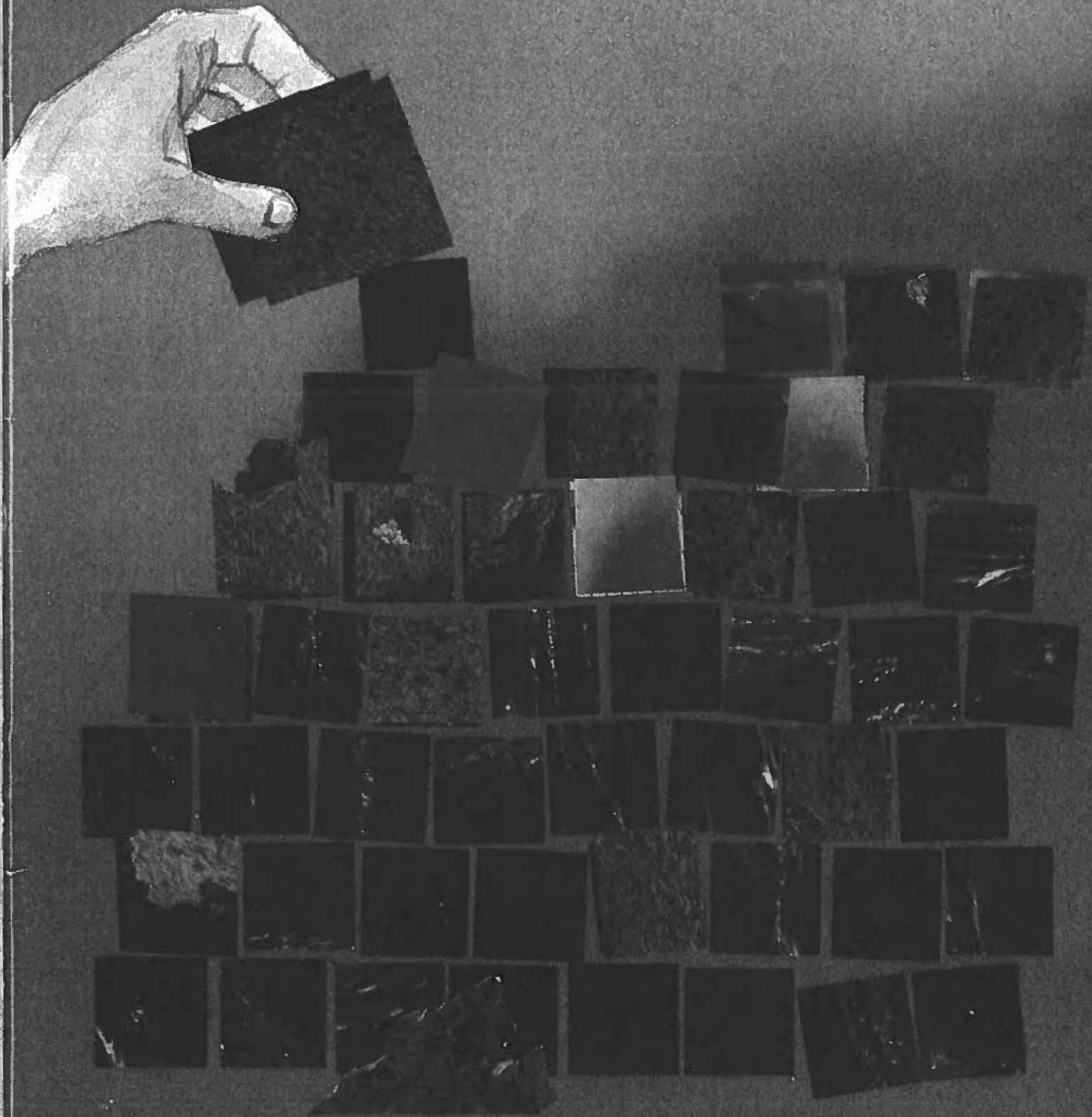
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## TO OUR READERS

Lag BaOmer is one of the happier days on the Jewish calendar. Although it is considered a minor holiday, Lag BaOmer has become a day of celebration.

This is especially true in Meron, Israel, where can be found the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, whose *yahrzeit* falls on Lag BaOmer. On that day every year thousands gather in tiny Meron to light celebratory bonfires and sing and dance.

Rabbi Shimon is considered the father of Jewish mysticism — the Kabbalah. "To Live Forever" tells the tale of one particular Lag BaOmer in Meron and a miraculous event that occurred there. Rabbi Shimon is also the subject of this month's biography.

In "That Certain Power," a special pair of *tefillin* makes its way from owner to owner, surviving against all odds.

The Cordoba family saga continues in "Unshaken As the Continent," with the story moving towards the Revolutionary War.

A happy Lag BaOmer to all!

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Chayah Sarah Cantor's writing is

always enjoyable.

"Passing Through" (Adar II) is just the latest example of her abilities as a writer. Whether telling over a chassidic story or writing on other topics, she just seems to have a unique style.

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