



The Fire of Torah

Topic

Lag BaOmer

Grade Level(s)

1st – 3rd

Big Ideas

Fire often represents danger, but it also brings much good to the world.

The Torah is sometimes associated with fire, often because of how the Torah helps to mold people.

Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Learn the story of Rabbi Akiva's students
2. Make a connection between fire and Torah
3. Produce their own fire of Torah to focus on how they can be kind themselves

Relevant Vocabulary

סְפִירָה (Sefirah)	Counting
עֹמֶר (Omer)	Sheaf, Bundle
סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר (Sefirat HaOmer)	Counting the Omer
בְּרֵאשִׁית (Bereisheet)	The Book of Genesis
שְׁמוֹת (Shemot)	The Book of Exodus
וַיִּקְרָא (Vayikra)	The Book of Leviticus
כְּבוֹד (Kavod)	Respect

Materials / Technology Needed

- Torah and fire images (included as separate download)
- Safety scissors
- Writing implements
- Markers (optional)
- Glue sticks
- Tech Option: Drawing app (e.g. Hello Color Pencil) (optional)

Prepare in Advance

- For younger students, cut out the Torah and fire images.

Background for Leaders

According to the Torah, there is a *mitzvah* to count the days and weeks of the 49-day/seven-week period from *Pesach* to *Shavuot*. Rabbinic interpretation posits that this period begins on the second day of *Pesach*, which coincides with the ceremony of waving an offering of an *omer* of barley (*Vayikra* 23:11). Thus, the counting period is referred to as *Sefirat HaOmer*. Using *gematria* (the system in which Hebrew numbers are represented



The Fire of Torah

through Hebrew letters), *Lag BaOmer* is a literal name for the 33rd day of this counting period as *Lag* comes from the Hebrew ל'ג, where ל = 30 and ג = 3.

While *Pesach* and *Shavuot* are joyous holidays, the time of *Sefirat HaOmer* is traditionally a sad time during which certain laws of mourning are observed.* The earliest explanation given for why this is a sad time comes from the Talmud, which explains that Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of students who were struck by a plague that decimated their numbers during this period. The reason given for the plague is that the students did not have *kavod* for one another (Tractate *Yevamot* 62b). On the 33rd day of the Omer, the plague ended.** As a result, *Lag BaOmer* offers a respite from mourning.

With the 33rd day being a joyous day after a period of mourning, a tradition developed over time to light bonfires on the night of *Lag BaOmer*. There is debate over where the practice started, but many explanations revolve around the *yahrtzeit* (anniversary of the death) of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a student of Rabbi Akiva in the 2nd century who is credited with writing the Zohar (though historically the Zohar did not appear until the 13th century). Many of the explanations revolve around the light that bar Yochai brought to the world through his teachings.

Given the connection between bar Yochai's teachings and the tradition to light bonfires it is worth noting that many Midrashim detail how the Torah is comparable to fire (e.g. *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* 16:3). One prominent Midrash posits that the Torah was written with black fire on white fire (*Midrash Tanhuma, Bereshit* 1:1, et al.).

*For example, traditionally there are no weddings or haircuts during this time.

**Note that other events over time have affected the traditional customs of *Sefirat Haomer*. Perhaps the greatest impact was caused by the Crusades, which tended to cause their greatest damage to Ashkenazic communities during the spring period during which *Sefirat Haomer* occurs.

Description of Activities

1. Make two columns on the board. Label one "Ways That Fire Helps" and the other "Ways That Fire Harms."
 - a. For at home learning this can be done on a sheet of paper or on a device.
2. Ask students to brainstorm ideas for what can go in each column.
 - a. Some possible ways fire helps might include keeping people warm, providing light, and cooking food. Note that, when someone is said to be "on fire," it usually means that the person is achieving excellence.
 - b. Some possible ways that fire harms might include hurting people's bodies and destroying houses.



The Fire of Torah

3. Explain that *Lag BaOmer* is approaching and that many people have a tradition to light bonfires to celebrate the day. Bonfires are big fires that people celebrate around but that need to be controlled in order for people to be safe.
4. Tell students that the Torah is often associated with fire. Ask how the Torah might be like fire.
 - a. Some possible ideas might include: Torah provides light to people. Torah warms the soul. (A relevant example that might not be in the natural thought process of younger students is that Torah can mold who we are in a similar way that fire heats metal so that it can be molded into a usable form.)
5. Tell students the story about Rabbi Akiva and his students. Emphasize that the problems they encountered are attributed to the lack of *kavod* that they showed each other. If no students make the connection, point out that the fires of *Lag BaOmer* can be seen as a way of thinking about the Torah and how it can teach people to be kind and respectful to each other.
6. Tell students that they will be placing their own fire of Torah.
 - a. Students brainstorm ways in which they can be kind or respectful to each other (e.g. being good listeners, giving compliments to each other, etc.)
 - i. If helpful, offer examples from the Torah of people who demonstrated kindness and/or respect to others. (See the Appendix at the end of this activity.)
 - b. Students cut out the Torah image and the fire images.
 - c. Students choose 3 – 5 ways that they would like to work on being kind and respectful to others and write them on the fire images (one kindness per image).
 - i. Students can also add color to the flames.
 - d. Students glue the fire images onto the Torah.
 - e. Students share their fire of Torah with the class if they are comfortable doing so.
 - f. **Tech Option:** Students use Hello Color Pencil or another drawing app to create Torah and fire images and then add their kindness goals.



The Fire of Torah

Appendix:

The Bible is filled with examples of people offering kindness to others. The ones listed below are just a few to get started.

- Abraham welcomed guests to his home, the mitzvah of *hachnasat or^him*. (*Bereisheet* 18: 1 – 8)
- Rebekah brought water to Abraham's traveling servant (often understood to be Eliezer) and then watered all of his camels. (*Bereisheet* 24: 11 – 25)
- Moses chased away menacing shepherds and then watered the sheep of the seven daughters of the priest of Midian. (*Shemot* 2: 16 – 17)
- Rahav protects the spies sent by Joshua, and the spies then make sure that Rahav is protected when Joshua and the people attack Jericho (*Joshua* 2: 1 – 24, 6: 22 – 25)
- Jonathan watches out for David even when he knows that his father wants to do harm to David. (1 Samuel 20: 4 – 42)
- Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi, her mother-in-law, even when things look bleak for Naomi. (*Ruth* 1: 7 – 19)