

Lag B'Omer in Yerushalayim

JERUSALEM REFLECTIONS

AKIVA AARONSON

The tragedy of *Lag B'Omer* last year has not left the hearts of Israel, nor the headlines, since over the last few months preparations and new regulations for the day were gradually publicised in the press. Nevertheless, since last year – so much done *l'ilui nishmas* – we have begun to rebuild. As *Lag B'Omer* approached this year a sense of joy began to return.

In our communities, the first identifiable sign of the approach of *Lag B'Omer* appears already straight after Pesach. It's then that the main occupation of *cheder* boys upon returning home each afternoon becomes collecting wood for the *medurah* (bonfire). For them it's an *Avodas Hakodesh* into which they put real concentration and effort. Every moveable piece of wood is located and *shlepped* – crates, boxes and more – from local shops and building sites. Step by step it accumulates, and gradually a holy mountain of wood rises, ready for the great day.

In the period before *Lag B'Omer*, another organisation very busy is the one dedicated to the needs of *Kohanim* in *Eretz Yisrael*, *Agudas Mishmeres Hakehunah*. It's necessary particularly at this time

of year since *kohanim* also travel to Meron. However, it's not only in Meron itself where they have to be careful, but also on the routes leading there, since there are many ancient *kevarim* in the north. Familiar posters adorn the walls of the various districts of Jerusalem detailing the roads to avoid – they may pass close to or even over an ancient cemetery – as well as the bus routes which are forbidden. In their eagerness to get near, *kohanim* must be careful about ascending the mountain! A phone number even provides further information upon request. It's the *kohen* hot-line!

The night of *Lag B'Omer* arrives, greeted with a festive atmosphere. Most people daven *Maariv* early – a feeling of climax and relief reached when the *chazzan* calls out '*Hayom Shloshah u'Shloshim Yom b'Omer*' – and afterwards everyone rushes home to gather the family. One of the *choshuvim* lights the shul *medurah*, and the festivities begin. It is followed by dancing and of course '*Bar Yochai*', '*V'Amartem Ko Lechai*' and '*Amar Rabbi Akiva...*'

Festivities continue on with the distribution of *arcticim* – ice lollies – to the children, especially

welcome on this warm evening. It's preceded by a special announcement that enough have been ordered to satisfy all needs. Nevertheless, a stampede ensues to where they are being given out! Enterprising boys also sell *yambabam* – candy floss in English, or cotton candy if you're an American – earning themselves a tidy profit. There's also a well-practiced custom to make small bonfires and to roast marshmallows over them. They come out hot, crispy on the outside, and tasty even for adults!

From Jerusalem's northern hills one can look towards the city, to Mattersdorf, Unsdorf, Romema, Kiryat Belz and so on. Even from a distance one can make out giant bonfires, lighting up the night sky, a thin smoke filling the atmosphere. The feeling of excitement continues even into the next day, with the closure of girls' schools and the return of those who went to Meron, with an account of all the goings on there.

Toraso magen lanu...Adoneinu bar Yochai!

www.akiva-aaronson.com



When white elephants get old

LETTER FROM TEL AVIV

JAY LEVINSON

It all started as a routine, if not monotonous, trip from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. I took a ride to the main floor, bought a discounted daily ticket, descended 80 metres (260 feet) with three escalators, walked to Platform 1, and boarded the express to Tel Aviv. Ten minutes later the train pulled out of the station. Opened in 2018, the trip to Tel Aviv is advertised to take only 28 minutes, with only one stop at Ben Gurion Airport. Wait a moment. There is a big "But..." Take into consideration the time lapsed from arriving at the station until getting to Tel Aviv. Add on that I was going to Arlozorov / Savidor, the third station in Tel Aviv. The train takes more or less the same time as the bus to get to the same destination when there is no traffic, though admittedly the rail

line is much more comfortable.

My first stop in the big city was in Reading, once famous for its power station. Problem. There is no direct bus, so I took a circuitous route with a change of buses. And, the buses took a further circuitous route. Most of Rechov Ben Yehuda, once a main street, has been closed for the past year. Light rail construction.

Riding through Tel Aviv was an education. I did see two shuls and a *mehadrin* pizza shop, but the tone of the city is definitely secular, which was obvious judging by the people were dressed. I even saw a sign advertising, "Fresh dog food delivered daily to your door."

Finally, we arrived in Reading at what was once was a large and architecturally well-planned funeral facility with controlled access, multiple rooms for

services, and more than ample parking. Welcome to the white elephant. After a grand opening but sparse use, the expensive building was closed barely ten years after the first funeral. Some say it was too big, others too impersonal. No one wanted to buy it, having the stigma of having what was once was used for the dead. For years it has remained on prime land, fenced in, and hosting only weeds. A sign cites use by the police and ZAKA/Tel Aviv, but all was locked tight.

Why take two buses back to the train? I thought to take the No. 4 bus directly to the Central Bus Station (CBS) and take a bus back to Jerusalem. Construction on the station started in 1967, but it was halted for many years due to financial issues. I remember passing the grey cement walls

of the unfinished building on my frequent trips to Tel Aviv fifty years ago. Finally, when it opened in 1993, there was a bustling business on the seven floors of the building. Slowly, however, a white elephant emerged from the edifice. The lower two floors were closed due to ventilation problems. The neighbourhood deteriorated drastically, and the business centre of Tel Aviv moved northward.

I entered on the third and fourth floors. Most businesses were closed, and those that were operating catered mostly to non-Israelis. Okay, the signs said Egged on the sixth floor. The nearest escalator did not work, so I took an elevator and walked down the row of bus lanes, but no Number 405 where it used to be. I bought a Diet Coke and

asked the seller where is the bus to Jerusalem. "Oh, that line is on the seventh floor!"

Back down the row of bus lanes, then I found two escalators, one of which did work. Surprise! I just missed a bus, and now it runs only once every thirty minutes. Once it was the primary line to Tel Aviv, leaving every 10 minutes or during rush hour fill up and go. I had no trouble finding a seat, but not because I was first in line. I was one of only 12 passengers on a bumpy ride, so much so that it was difficult texting my wife to prepare lunch. Next time the train!

What do you do with a massive building that has outlived its usefulness? It has been condemned, but it still stands as an overstuffed white elephant.