

The Secrets of Meron



Yoram Bilu

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The Hillula of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai

- In relative terms, the pilgrimage to RaShBY's sanctuary in Meron is one of the biggest pilgrimages in the world bringing together up to 500.000 celebrants (7% of the Jewish population) from all over the country.
- The pilgrimage is by far the biggest annual gathering in Israel.
- As the putative author of the holy Zohar, The canonic text of Kabbalah, RaShBY is viewed as as the greatest mystical figure in the Jewish pantheon of saints.
- The festival is an eye-dazzling spectacle, taking place inside and outside the sanctuary in which the tombs of Rabbi Shimon and his son, Rabbi Elazar, are enclosed.
- Indoors, the atmosphere is ecstatic and devotional; outdoors, it's joyous and more leisurely as people are camping and picnicking in the forests around the site. The combination of "high" and "low," spiritual and mundane concerns is typical of the pilgrimage spirit (represented in the fair).

Clarification of terms

- Hillula (Aramaic) = Wedding party
- Pilgrimage: *Aliyah* but not *Aliya LaRegel*
- Compare: *Hajj* vs. *Ziara* (Arabic: visit).
- Popular versus formal, scriptural religion
- “The center out there” – the significance of the voyage.
- *Communitas*, liminality.
- Meron brings together Ashkenazim and Mizra’him, Haredi, orthodox, traditional, and secular celebrants from all ethnic groups in a festive atmosphere. The joyous ambiance blurs the boundaries between groups but doesn’t erase them,
- Mass-pilgrimages as modern phenomenon: Pilgrims-tourists.
- Logistics. The State as a saint impresario.
- Anti-structure (?): the carnival spirit. Rituals: lighting the bonfire, the procession from Abu’s synagogue, the *halaka*.

Origins

- There are few midrashic references to RaShBY's burial cave in Meron (Baba Metzia 84b, Psikata de-Rav Kahana, Beshalach 23), but testimonies to his *hillula* there do not precede the 16th century.
- Note that popular practices related to the cult of saints are non-existent in the Talmud.
- The holy precinct in Meron first appears in texts from the beginning of the second Millennium, but the focal place is not RaShBY's sanctuary and the festive time is not Lag Ba'Omer
- The holy site is the **Cave of Hillel and Shamai** on the eastern slope below the sanctuary, where a magical procedure is taking place, without reference to a fixed date or a public ritual.



The ritual in the cave

The miraculous phenomenon of water coming up and filling a hollow stone (“...and it’s not a spring”). Compare with the Ritual of the Holy Fire in the Holy Sepulchre on Easter. At the end of the 13th century, the Nagid Rabbi David, Maimonides’ grandson, uses the magical properties of the cave against his opponents.

During the Mameluke period, the magical tradition was institutionalized and transformed into a public ritual of rain quest conducted on **Second Passover**, the 15th of Iyar (3 days before Lag Ba’Omer). RhShBY’s tomb is mentioned in the sources but is not accorded special ritual significance.

“Elleh Ha-Masa’ot” (1244-1291):

- “And in Meron there’s the burial cave of Hillel and Shamai and their students, all in all 32. And **Israelites and Ismaelites** gather there on Second Passover. And the Israelites pray and utter chants. And when they find water in the cave they are all joyuous because it’s an omen that the year will be blessed. And many times they didn’t find water, but when they prayed the water came at once. And there is Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai...”

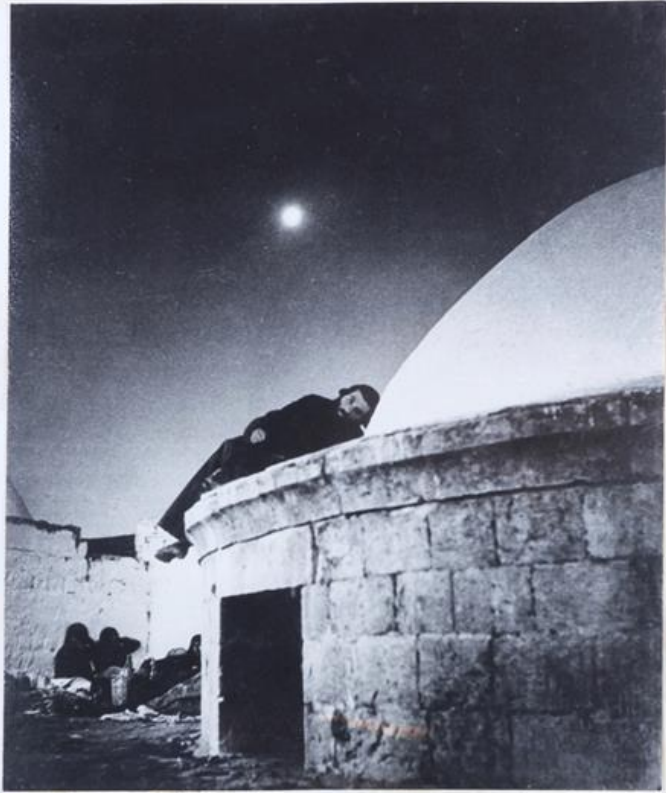


The Cult of RaShBY

- The popularity of Rabbi Shimon's cult in general and of his hillula on Lag Ba'Omer in particular is related to the emergence of 16th century Safed as the world center of Jewish mysticism.
- The ascendance of the Zohar as Kabbala's holy scripture accorded RaShBY, his alleged author, the position of an arch-saint.
- The prime mover behind this process was The Holy ARI, Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi, The founder of a new mystical paradigm that was rapidly spread among mystically oriented communities in the circum-Mediterranean and Eastern Europe (Hasidism).
- Luria discovered the location of the Idra cave where Rashby passed away while revealing deep mystical secrets to his disciples.



Merón before 1948: Iconic pictures



Merón, 1935

Nach-Tim Sidel



Meron before 1948: Artistic representations





The Maghrebi phase at Meron

- In the 1970s and 1980s most of the pilgrims were North African Jews (mostly of Moroccan origin). They invested the Hillula with distinctively Maghrebi style in terms of language, food, and music.
- They spent several days at Meron, camping and picnicking in groups of kins and friends, feasting, singing, dancing, and recounting the miracles of the saint.
- The Hasidim in contrast were the “ritual specialists,” in control of the “sacred zones” of the shrine.
- A symbolic representation of the unequal ethnic relations in the Israeli society?

Meron in the 21st Century

- The number of pilgrims is growing systematically.
- The government is more strongly invested in the site. The hillula is run as a national operation by a board of representatives from the government offices involved (maintenance, transportation, control, sanitation, health, police).
- An elaborate transportation system serves visitors from all over the country. Private cars are directed to huge parking lots from which shuttles take the visitors to the shrine.
- Part of the main road Acre – Safed is transformed into a gigantic fair, which provides for the spiritual and mundane needs of the pilgrims.
- The paved paths to the shrine are clearly marked. The site is accessible to all, the claim of various groups for a stake in the shrine had been patly thwarted. Gender separation is strictly enforced indoors.
- Vast areas around the shrine have been designated as campgrounds with running water, toilets, and garbage disposal.

The Hasidic Turn at Meron

- The recent developments at Meron indicates that the “Moroccan period” in Meron is over. The Maghrebi cultic practices, anchored in oral traditions without a binding scripture, are vulnerable to inter-generation transmission.
- Gone are the ornamented Moroccan-style tents, the Jewish dialect of Moroccan Arabic, the distinctive Maghrebi music, and the *Fesi* (red tarboosh) *Jellaba*, and other traditional garments.
- The presence of Hasidic groups, by sheer contrast, has been growing in recent years. They come in masses, highly organized according to sects and Yeshivot, and dominate the elevated spaces of the precinct where they participate in the sect’s ritual lighting of the bonfire, in the *halaka*, and in devotional prayers and ecstatic dancing.

The Halaka at Meron (1)



The Halaka: Ritual construction of male identity:

The Halaka as secondary circumcision: In a dense moment of male bonding, the child is given “the figure of a Jew.”

- The physical transformation is dramatic.
- The side-curls as a major identity marker.
- An overwhelming rite of passage in which all the senses are involved.
- Will the child remember? Even if not, at age 3 his daily schedule and practices are synchronized with the ritual’s symbolic message as he is going to spend more and more time in the all-male territory of sacred knowledge.
- The linkage between circumcision and haircut.

The Halaka at Meron (2)



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