

SEFIRAS HAOMER AND RABBI AKIVA'S STUDENTS: TORAH AND LOVE

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the Counting of the Omer, is a day of celebration. The mourning that had been observed during the Omer period until this day is suspended. One of the reasons for this celebration is that the students of Rabbi Akiva stopped dying on this day. (See I:20 for more information on Rabbi Akiva's students and I:22 for more information on Lag B'Omer.)

The tragic death of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva is discussed in the Talmud. The Gemora in the tractate of Yevamos (62b) tells us that Rabbi Akiva "had 12,000 pairs of students...and all of them died in one period of time because they did not conduct themselves with respect towards one another." The Medrash phrases the reason for the students' death a bit differently, by saying that they died because "they were jealous of each other." The Yefas To'ar explains this Medrash by saying that the students did not want to help each other in their studies. This seems a bit odd. These students were the leaders of their generation. They were revered scholars, each distinguished in his own right. What exactly was it, then, that caused all 12,000 pairs to suffer the same fate?

Another perplexing issue is the terminology used to describe the time period in which they died. The Gemora in Yevamos cited above continues to say that the students died in the time period between Pesach and Shavu'os. However, we have seen that we celebrate Lag B'Omer because the deaths stopped on that day. That being the case, why does the Gemora say that they died during the entire time period; it should have said that they died until Lag B'Omer!

In the sixth Mishna of the sixth chapter of Pirkei Avos, we find that Torah is acquired by means of forty eight qualities. During the 49 day period when we count the days until Shavu'os, the day the Torah was given, we are to prepare ourselves for the gift of the Torah by perfecting these 48 qualities within ourselves. Rav Eliyahu from Vilna, the Vilna Gaon, writes that it is possible for a person to have positive traits other than these that increase ones receptivity towards Torah. However, it is impossible for any one person attains proper levels in all 48 qualities. Only by working together with another who may possess those qualities which the other lacks, it is possible for these two to reach the completeness in all of these 48 qualities, and thereby acquire Torah.

The Chasam Sofer writes that the students of Rabbi Akiva died during the 49 day time period because they were lacking in one specific quality of the 48 listed that is to be perfected : loving G-d's creatures. Why did this particular quality have such a terrible impact? Being that the only way

one can even dream of reaching completeness in the 48 qualities and thereby acquiring Torah is through the assistance of another, if there is a lack of cooperation, Torah will never be acquired. Only when one freely loves his brother and exhibits care for his fellow Jew can one possibly acquire Torah.

During the days of preparation for accepting the Torah, the students of Rabbi Akiva were to be perfecting these 48 qualities needed for acquiring the Torah. However, they were slightly lacking in one area: care for one another. The Talmud never says that 24,000 students died, but rather 12,000 pairs of students died. Yes, each student learned with and cared for one other. However, the remaining 23,998 students were somewhat slighted. Yes, the 2 students learned with each other. However, they did not help all the others in learning as they should have. Therefore it was truly 12,000 pairs that died.

Being that these 12,000 pairs were lacking the quality that was essential for acquiring Torah, they were found to be totally unprepared to receive the Torah. As the time period between Pesach and Shavuos is the time during the year when we must be prepared to receive the Torah and the students, through their own correctable flaw, we not prepared, this was the time that was deemed appropriate for them to suffer the consequences. The Gemora chose its words carefully. It is true the students stopped dying on Lag B'Omer. However, they died when they did because it was "between Pesach and Shavuos," the time dedicated to preparation for the receipt of the Torah.

The lesson from the students of Rabbi Akiva is multi-faceted. For one, we must be sure to take the necessary actions during the Sefira period so that we are prepared to accept the Torah on Shavuos. Also, unless we exhibit love for our fellow Jew, we will never be able to be prepared to receive the Torah. Furthermore, we need our fellow Jew to help us acquire the Torah. May harmony pervade the nation of Israel so that we all learn together, so that we all compliment and supplement each other, and so that we will all be prepared to accept the Torah on Shavuos as it was accepted originally: with unity, like one man with one heart.

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