

CLASS 66 - TAZRIA - METZORA

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

REBBE AKIVA AND HIS STUDENTS

"Rebbe Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students...they all died at one time, between Pesach and Atzeres, because they did not behave with Kavod towards one another, and the world was desolate until Rebbe Akiva came to our teachers in the South and taught them; R. Meir, R. Yehuda, R. Yossi, R. Shimon, and R. Elazar ben Shamo. It was they who established the Torah at that time..... they [the twenty four thousand students] all died a terrible death Askarah [choking]." (Yevamos 62b)

"When Moshe went up to heaven, he found Hashem sitting and tying crowns atop the letters. He said: "Ribbono Shel Olam, is somebody holding you back?" [why do you need to add to what you have written?]."

"After a number of generations, there is destined to be one, Akiva ben Yosef is his name, who will interpret piles of Halachos upon each and every jot."

"Ribbono Shel Olam, show him to me!"

"Look behind you"

He [Moshe Rabbeinu] went and sat in the back of eight [or eighteen] rows and did not understand what was being said. His strength diminished. When they reached one subject, his students [Rebbe Akiva's] said: "Rebbe, where do you know this from?"

He said to them, "Halacha L'Moshe MiSinai." His [Moshe's] mind settled.

He came back before Hashem and said, "Ribbono Shel Olam, You have a person such as this and You are giving the Torah through me!"

"Quiet! Such is the thought that arises before me."

"Ribbono Shel Olam, You have shown me his Torah, show me his reward."

"Look behind you."

He saw them weighing his flesh [Rebbi Akiva's] in the meat market.

"Ribbono Shel Olam, Zu Torah V'Zu Scharah?!?" - This is Torah and this is its reward?!?"

"Quiet! Such is the thought that arises before me." (Menachos 29b)

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During Sefiras HaOmer, we count towards Kabbalas HaTorah. Varied customs of mourning are observed during this period, which raise a number of pertinent questions.

Why did the students of Rebbe Akiva die during this specific time? What is the relationship between Kabbalas HaTorah and the students of Rebbe Akiva?

Further, how is it that Moshe Rabbeinu could not understand the teachings of Rebbe Akiva?

Let us begin by explaining the differences between the Torah of Moshe Rabbeinu and that of Rebbe Akiva.

The Torah of Rabbi Akiva is defined by Chazal as interpretation of the crowns above the letters.

Letters form words. Words are the basis of speech and the means by which we express ourselves.

Moshe Rabbeinu brings the Torah down to earth and transmits it to the Jewish people. His words are recorded for posterity: "These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel." (Devarim 1:1)

But, not all teaching can be expressed. Certain ethereal constructs are too subtle to be translated in physical terms, and these ideas must remain in the heart of man. These concepts are beyond words.

They are the crowns above the letters.

"The Written Torah is on earth, for it was given to us on earth, and the Oral Torah is planted in our hearts, in the heart of each individual, and there is nothing of it on earth. This is the meaning of 'Asher Nosan Lanu Toras Emes' - the Written Torah; 'V'Chayei Olam Nota B'Socheinu' - the Oral Torah." (Vilna Gaon, commentary to Mishlei 23:5)

Moshe Rabbeinu succeeded in connecting the physical world with the spiritual to the extent that there was no distinction between them. All of existence was transformed into one integral whole, and the Torah was manifest in daily life, with the earth ruled by Torah law rather than the laws of nature.

But ever since the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent loss of prophecy, the Torah remains hidden in the world of the spirit. While the physical world of today hides the rule of G-d, its truth does remain clear in the heart of man. Man has learned to compartmentalize his very self. His world has two disparate elements; a physical surface, and a spiritual core.

The difference between the world of Moshe and that of Rabbi Akiva is not merely clarity of vision, but the integration of their world with the surrounding environment.

Let us explain.

In the Written Torah there is no physicality.

In comparison, the Sages of Torah SheBaalPeh fence off the physical world whose encroachment threatens the spirit of man. The essential Torah is limited to the internal dimension of the Tzaddik's heart.

Moshe Rabbeinu cannot understand the Torah of Rebbe Akiva. Moshe sees the One G-d everywhere, and relates all of life directly to Him. To him, there is no distinction between life and Torah.

Rebbe Akiva also understands the physical world to be an expression of Hashem's will, but as a separate entity, one whose hidden message is revealed only to the discerning man. The Torah of Rebbe Akiva cannot be separated from man himself, for it exists in life to the extent that man understands it.

The Talmud expresses this idea in the following way:

"A certain wicked man advised Yannai HaMelech to execute the sages of Israel."

"What will be of the Torah?, asked Yannai."

"The Torah is tied away and placed in the corner, whoever wishes to learn, may come and learn!"

"Said Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak: at that moment, he [Yannai] was inflicted with apostasy. He should have responded: that suffices for Torah SheBiKtav, but what about Torah SheBaalPeh?" (Kiddushin 66a)

Let us analyze this response. The Torah SheBaalPeh would be lost without the oral transmission of the Sages. Does that still hold true today, when all of the Oral Torah has since been committed to writing? Could one not now say: the Gemara is here on the shelves, whoever wishes, let them come and learn!

Certainly not.

The transmission of Torah from teacher to student is not merely a practical method for spreading Torah. It is the Torah.

It is not the written information alone that defines Torah. It is the human life that gives expression to Torah that forms the very substance by which Torah continues to exist.

"How foolish are most people, who stand up before a Sefer Torah but don't stand before a great man!" (Makkos 22b).

The Sefer Torah has the holiness of Torah. But a Talmid Chacham is the Torah itself.

The Torah sage identifies completely with his Torah. It is indistinguishable from his very self. For this reason, the Talmud often attributes an opinion to a Tanna by saying A'Liba D'Hai Tanna. Literally, 'by the heart of this Tanna'. His opinion was not only intellectually held, but rather, is an expression of his very essence. For the same reason, no Sage contradicts a prior opinion, for one does not argue with one's self.

Each opinion is firmly held, hence, the many disputes that were never settled. Pure intellect does not bend.

It demands respect.

The students of Rebbe Akiva failed to honor one another. Hence, an element of their Torah was missing, and their Kabbalas HaTorah was incomplete.

They failed to perceive that the Torah exists solely within the heart of each individual scholar. In the thought of man, which is parallel to the thought of G-d. It is this thought that arose before G-d as the proper place for the Torah of Rabbi Akiva, the crown above the letters.

The students of Rebbe Akiva die during the period when Klal Yisrael prepares for Kabbalas HaTorah. A Torah that has been shorn from the heart of man cannot be accepted.

They die during the first thirty-two days of the Omer period.

Thirty-two. As in Lev. Or Kavod. (Lev and Kavod both equal thirty-two in Gimmatriya). This is the Lev and Kavod that remain in disrepair and for which we still mourn

They are punished with a death of Askarah, choking. The Torah remains unrealized and unexpressed, for they are unable to speak. It will abide in the world of Machshava, a dimension of pure thought.

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At the moment of Rebbe Akiva's martyrdom, to the amazement of his Talmidim, Rebbe Akiva recites the Kriyas Shema with fervor, testifying to the unity of G-d and His absolute dominion.

Elsewhere, the Talmud records a second incident. Rebbe Akiva and his colleagues pass the site of the abandoned Bais HaMikdash, and while the others cry in bitter mourning, Rebbe Akiva surprises them with his unexpected laughter.

These two disparate events are Rebbe Akiva's defining moments. He is able to perceive what others cannot, and his life gives expression to a Torah that is beyond words.

This is the thought that comes before G-d as the flesh of Rebbe Akiva is being weighed for market. It is this Torah that remains hidden, locked away in the heart of each and every man, waiting for its eternal truths to be discovered.

"Zu Torah V'Zu Scharah" - this is Torah, and this is its reward.

Have a good Shabbos.

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