

DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

This past Sunday we celebrated our 33rd anniversary dinner in the Atrium Plaza amid an outpouring of heartwarming support for the yeshiva. Over 500 participants attended the event, which was distinguished by the moving, personal testimonials of three of our students who shared riveting glimpses of their spiritual journeys.

Dovid Bernal, who embraced Judaism under difficult circumstances, gave a fascinating account of his family's transition from being devout Christians to observant Jews. Another student, Andrew Waters shared the humorous side of being a baal teshuva, drawing appreciative laughter from the audience as he recalled some of the interesting ups and downs of his shidduch proposals. A third student, Matt Jackson, captivated the audience with some of the challenges and triumphs of his personal saga.

In addition to presenting the awards, the Rosh HaYeshiva, Rabbi Rokowsky, shlita, called upon Yerachmiel Simins, Esq, Chairman of the Board, to update the assembled on exciting developments taking place at Ohr Somayach. The evening ended on a high note as participants left inspired by the mesiras nefesh and dedication of the many friends and supporters that continue to make the Ohr Somayach dream a reality.

The period between Pesach and Shavuot that we are presently experiencing is marked by a dual nature. It is on the one hand celebratory as we count the omer in preparation for receiving the Torah. But it is also characterized by a more somber nature as we observe a period of mourning to recall the tragic deaths of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students. We can only imagine what giants of knowledge and character Rabbi Akiva's disciples must have been, yet it was during this period leading up to Shavuot, that a devastating plague wiped out the entire group.

The question is what was so unique about these events, as tragic as they were, that justified enshrining them as an integral part of the Jewish calendar? Other tremendous calamities that befell our people of equal or even greater magnitude did not receive the same status as the death of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students.

The Talmud teaches us that the underlying cause for their tragic death was that "they didn't accord one another sufficient respect." A serious flaw, certainly, but was it truly so fatal and unforgivable that it triggered such a profound tragedy? How can we fathom this?

The key to understanding this mystery perhaps lies in the most famous of Rabbi Akiva's teachings,

based on a verse in this week's Torah portion: V'Ahavta L'Reacha K'mocho. Love your fellow as yourself, I am Hashem (chapter 19 verse 18). Rabbi Akiva added to this command his succinct observation that "this is a fundamental principle in the Torah," meaning that this mitzvah is the foundation upon which rests every other facet of the Torah and all its commandments.

The challenge facing the students of Rabbi Akiva was not a simple one. Our sages make a trenchant observation about human nature. "As different as each face is from another, so too do people's minds and attitudes differ." The great Kotzker Rebbe observed that the comparison between facial appearances and opinions is instructive. For just as it would not be reasonable to expect uniformity of facial appearances, it is equally unreasonable to expect uniformity of thought and attitudes. We are all different and should be expected to express these differences in our approach to life.

Thus, when the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva studied his teachings, the result was 24,000 different nuances of understanding. Instinctively, based on our own instinctive self-regard, we each tend to favor our own ideas over those of our peers. Once I have formulated an opinion it becomes difficult to fully appreciate and respect another's approach. But the disciples of Rabbi Akiva were expected to live in accordance with his quintessential teaching; to love another as one loves himself and to respect one another's interpretation as if it were their own.

When they failed in this test, it revealed in their makeup a fatal flaw. Rabbi Akiva's students were meant to be models for all future generations, yet there was a fissure in the foundation. Over time this hairline crack would grow to undermine the Jewish people's essence, the love and respect for one another that mirrors Hashem's love for us. These students did not have what it would take to ensure that the Torah would be transmitted in all its purity to future generations.

It is critical that we observe the lesson of this tragedy as we journey out of Egypt and prepare ourselves to receive Hashem's Torah. When we love ourselves and see our own vision and understanding as the only right way, we find it difficult to appreciate others and see things from their perspective. It is only when we truly love and endorse others on the same plane as we endorse ourselves that we can transcend our ego-centered vision and be prepared to internalize the Torah's truths.

By bonding with our fellow Jews and recognizing we all emanate from one source, the Heavenly throne, then we can be truly one with Hashem and fully absorb the infinite wisdom that is contained within His holy Torah.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos,

Rabbi Naftali Reich Text Copyright © 2012 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).

Rabbi Reich is on the faculty of [the Ohr Somayach Tanenbaum Education Center](https://www.torah.org/torah-portion/legacy-5772-achareimos/).