

THE FUNDAMENTAL RULE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"The Fundamental Rule of the Torah." This is the unprecedented level of importance given by Rabbi Akiva to the mitzvah (commandment) of "Ve- ahavta le-reacha kamocha, You shall love your fellow as yourself."

Mitzvos are Hashem's gift to us - they are all precious. Yet we do find that many tzaddikim (righteous individuals/religious leaders) put a greater degree of emphasis on certain specific mitzvos which, it seems, were especially meaningful for them. For instance the Ropshitzer Rav zt"l, whose yohrtzeit was this Thursday, 11 Iyar, cherished the mitzvah of sukkah. It is said that not a day went by that he did not speak about the sukkah, or learn from tractate Sukkah, or say a dvar Torah about Sukkos. The famous tzaddik Rabbi Chaim of Tshernovitz zt"l, author of Be'er Mayim Chaim, was connected with all his soul to the mitzvah of Shabbos. And the Rebbe R' Elimelech zt"l, it is told, put a special emphasis on the mitzvah of tzitzis.

In this vein, it seems appropriate to say that Rabbi Akiva had a special place in his heart for the mitzvah of loving one's fellow man. This mitzvah, he said, is the Fundamental Rule of the Torah! The rest [of the Torah] said Hillel (Shabbos 31a), is merely an explanation [of this mitzvah].

In light of this, we can readily understand that Rabbi Akiva found it necessary to teach his students the following halacha (law): "Two people who were walking in the desert but only one of them had a flask of water; if both of them will drink from it, they will both die [there is not enough]. If only one drinks from it, he will live. What should be done? Rabbi Akiva taught: Your life (i.e. the life of the one who owns the flask) comes before the life of your fellow (Bava Metzia 62a)." The students of Rabbi Akiva, who had no doubt been infused with their Rebbe's credo of loving one's fellow, would have readily given up their own lives in favour of the lives of their friend. If not that halacha demanded that they drink from the flask, their natural reaction would have been to do the opposite.

At this time of year, between Pesach and Shavuos, we perform the mitzvah of Sefiras ha-Omer (the counting of the days up to when the Omer offering was brought). Though the days of sefiras ha-omer have no direct connection with sadness or melancholy, they have nonetheless over time become days which represent mourning to the Jewish nation. During this period, we refrain from listening to music, taking hair-cuts, shaving, celebrating weddings, etc. The main reason for this is because, as the Gemara (Yevamos 62b) relates: "Rabbi Akiva had twenty-four thousand students whom he taught Torah. They all died at one time... And it was taught: [They all died] between Pesach and Shavuos." What brought on this terrible, unthinkable catastrophe? The Gemara tells us: "[They

died] because they did not treat one another with respect."

Now this is truly puzzling. Of all things that the students of Rabbi Akiva could have done wrong, how is it possible that they mistreated the one mitzvah that their Rebbe constantly preached and praised above all others? Which he referred to as the "Fundamental Rule of the Torah?" These, let us remember, are the same students who had to be counselled to drink from their last flask of water: otherwise they would likely have sacrificed their own lives for their friends. And they died, a most terrible and sudden death (see Gemara *ibid.*), because they treated each other with disrespect? How can we resolve this apparent contradiction?

Perhaps (I once saw this in a sefer), though, therein lies a very important lesson. Sometimes it is easier to do a great thing - even to sacrifice one's own life - for a friend, than to simply treat him with respect. To give up one's very life - that is a very grandiose and glorious mitzvah. As we contemplate the thought, images of self-sacrifice and self-righteousness fill our minds. I do not doubt for a minute that any one of us, if the need would arise, would at least strongly consider giving of his own life to save that of others. But to simply treat others with respect - with decency and honour and consideration - is a task that in many ways is much harder to achieve than even the most difficult of tests. Its difficulty lies in its simplicity. It is so simple and straight-forward that we often lose sight of its importance, the way a person will sometimes fail to see a lost object because it's sitting right in front of his eyes. The same person for whom we would, if the need arose, risk our own lives to save theirs, may nonetheless find themselves heartlessly teased/harassed/not-respected in their school/work/synagogue etc. Many a fire-fighter has been awarded a medal of honour for rescuing a child from the throngs of a blazing fire, but how many awards have been given for those people who live their lives striving to respect and be considerate of others?

Were one to come across his friend wounded, G-d forbid, he would surely take the shirt off his back in order to cover him. Yet to afford our friends and acquaintances the respect - respect of their opinions, values, property, of their privacy - that they deserve, can be such a difficult thing to do. We must take the unfortunate example of Rabbi Akiva's students, and what happened to them, and look into our own lives. Are we really treating others with respect and courtesy? Our friends, neighbours, co-workers, parents, brothers, sisters, spouses, even our children all deserve a degree of respect. It is something that can be achieved only by diligently observing the mitzvah of *ve-ahavta le-reacha kamocho* - love your fellow as yourself. We all appreciate being respected; so let's share that respect with others.

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