

# POWER OF RABBI AKIVA

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

*This dvar Torah was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 236, The Do's and Don'ts of Giving Tochacha. Good Shabbos!*

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## The Power of Rabbi Akiva

This week's parsha contains the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" [Vayikra 19:18]. There is a very famous Medrash (Sifra) that children sing: "Rabbi Akiva said that the mitzvah to love your neighbor as yourself is the fundamental principle of the Torah." There is a similar Talmudic passage [Shabbos 31a] concerning a gentile who was interested in converting to Judaism. He asked Hillel to teach him the whole Torah "while standing on one foot". Hillel instructed him -- what you would not want done to you, do not do to others.

It is obvious to us that it can be very hard to observe this mitzvah properly. But I have a theory that it is specifically Rabbi Akiva who can justifiably preach to us regarding the importance of this mitzvah.

This time of year - between Pesach and Shavuot - is the period of the Omer Counting, when we observe certain mourning customs in memory of Rabbi Akiva's students. Rabbi Akiva had 24,000 students, a mind-boggling number compared to our current concept of a "big" Yeshiva. Rabbi Akiva was a great Rosh Yeshiva (Dean). Yet during the Omer period, his 24,000 students all died.

If you or I were Rabbi Akiva and we had a Yeshiva with 24,000 students and our whole Yeshiva died - due to some character flaw, which ultimately reflected negatively on the Rosh Yeshiva - what would our reaction be? Most people's reaction would no doubt be, "I am not cut out to be a Rosh Yeshiva. I must be doing something wrong." This must have been a devastating experience for Rabbi Akiva. This was his life's work -- and they all died!

What, however, does the Talmud tell us? "When Rabbi Akiva's students died and the world was desolate, he got up and went to the south of Eretz Yisroel and started over again!" [Yevamos 62b]

It seems evident that Rabbi Akiva had unbelievable resilience. He was the type of person who, despite experiencing the biggest disaster, could find something positive within that disaster,

providing him with the ability to continue onward. He had an incredible ability to be able to evaluate the worst of situations and believe that "all is not lost".

Another example of Rabbi Akiva's resilience is evident from an incident that occurred following the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash [Holy Temple]. The Talmud tells us [Makkot 24a], that several Tanaim were walking near the area that was once the Holy of Holies. There was total destruction surrounding them. When they saw a fox emerge from the site of the Holy of Holies they all began to cry, except for Rabbi Akiva, who began to laugh. Rabbi Akiva saw the positive in the situation: If the prophecy which predicted the destruction came true literally, then the prophecy which predicted the redemption will also come true literally.

Rabbi Akiva tells us [Yoma 85b] "Happy are you Israel -- Who purifies you? Your father in Heaven".

Rabbi Akiva personally experienced Yom Kippur when the Bais HaMikdash was still standing. He experienced the Kohen Gadol [High Priest] doing the special Service of the Day, as well as the instant knowledge of whether it would be a good year or a bad year. There was nothing more beautiful than the radiance of the Kohen Gadol when he emerged from the Holy of Holies.

But Rabbi Akiva had to deal with a generation that had to experience a Yom Kippur soon after the Temple's Destruction, when there was no Kohen Gadol. Imagine how the people felt! This is a Yom Kippur? And Rabbi Akiva went to them and convinced them that Yom Kippur was still beautiful. We do not necessarily need a Kohen Gadol! We are now purified directly by G-d Himself.

Rabbi Akiva's strength was that he always saw the positive in every situation. That is why he taught: "Love your neighbor like yourself". Every person has SOME positive aspect. The Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760) interprets the word "Kamocho" (as yourself) in this pasuk [verse] as follows: When a person gets up in the morning and looks at himself in the mirror he thinks, "I am basically a good person. I have my faults and foibles; I am not perfect. But I am more good than bad." This, the Baal Shem Tov says, is how we must evaluate our neighbor: He is basically good; I will overlook his faults.

This is not always easy. It requires us to focus on the good, rather than the bad -- to always see the glass as half full rather than half empty. That was the power of Rabbi Akiva and this is the key to the fulfillment of the mitzvah that is called "The fundamental rule of all of Torah".

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Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.  
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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (#236). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: The Do's and Don'ts of Giving Tochacha. The other halachic portions for this Parsha from

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