

## Suicide- Part I

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Dayan Shlomo Cohen

Suicide in Jewish law is a grave sin and many halachic questions have arisen around it. Is a soldier who is taken captive allowed to commit suicide to save himself from torture and from giving over information which might endanger the lives of other people? In addition, being taken captive can cause tremendous demoralization among the other soldiers. The captive can be used as a card in a prisoner's exchange and dangerous prisoners might be freed because of him. A number of Jewish commanders in the Israeli army have been quoted as telling their troops that they must not at any price allow themselves to be taken captive. As recent as 2009, a commander told his troops, "The last grenade is for you." What is the Torah opinion about this?

The Gemara tells us that falling into the hands of the enemy is a most frightening thing because of the uncertainty. The enemy can starve, torture, and even kill you. There is a disagreement in *halacha* whether one can commit suicide in such a case. In 2015, during the War in Gaza, Rav Elyashiv ruled that the soldiers should not commit suicide, seeing as nowadays the enemy usually capture soldiers to use as pawns in prisoners exchange. Even if dangerous prisoners would be let out, it is only a *safek* (doubt) that they will harm others and that is not a reason to permit suicide. Nonetheless, if a soldier were to commit suicide, he would not lose his portion in the Next World and he would be buried with all the respect and honor due to any other soldier who died in action. Rav Elyashiv brought a proof to his decision from

a responsa of the Maharsham. A question came to the Maharsham about a group of very respectable people who had lost everything and in order to save themselves from the shame of the situation, they committed suicide. Were their relatives permitted to mourn for them? The Maharsham answered that what they had done was prohibited according to *halacha*. However, because they did it to save themselves from tremendous suffering thinking that it was permitted, they were considered unintentional sinners and their relatives could mourn for them.

The Torah tells us in *Bereishit*, "*V'ach et damechem l'nafeshechem edrosh m'yad kol chaya edreshenu u'myad adam.*" Rashi explains, the *Torah* allows man to kill an animal. However, someone who spills their own blood, Hashem will demand judgement. We learn from this verse that the *Torah* prohibits suicide. The *Shulchan Aruch* tells us that if someone commits suicide, he is not mourned or eulogized. We do however respect and express concern for the family left behind, as it is certainly not their fault and their loss is difficult. The *Shulchan Aruch* says, in a situation where it is unclear how the person died, we presume that the person did not commit suicide and we would mourn normally. A person who finds himself in extraordinary circumstances, where he had no choice but to commit suicide to save himself from suffering or captivity, is mourned normally. We learn this from King Shaul who committed suicide to save himself from suffering and being taken captive by the *Pelishitim*. The Redak says Shaul did not sin because the prophet Shmuel had already told him he would die in the war.

He knew he would be caught. He didn't want to suffer the torture, so he took his life. The *Beit Yosef* brings proof from the *Medrash in Bereishit Rabba* on the verse in *Bereishit*, "*Ach et damchem...*" *Ach* comes to exclude the case of Shaul Hamelech who was allowed to kill himself. In fact, the people were punished for not eulogizing Shaul in a fitting way.

The Rosh in *Moed Katan* says further that King Shaul was permitted to commit suicide to avoid torture. There have been many cases throughout Jewish history where Jews have done the same. The Gemara in *Gittin* recounts a terrifying story of 400 boys and girls who were taken captive by the Romans. They understood that they would be sold as slaves to be used for immoral reasons. The girls asked, will we get *olam haba* if we jump into the sea. The oldest of the children brought a verse proving that they would, and immediately they jumped into the water. The boys then said, if the girls committed suicide although they would be used in the normal way that girls are used, how much more so should we commit suicide if we will be used in an abnormal way. And they too took their lives. The Gemara then praises them, "*Ki alecha haragnu kol hayom.*" Tosfos explains, they were afraid they would be tortured, so they were allowed to commit suicide. Another Tosfos in *Avoda Zara* says that one may not damage one's own body. Rabbeinu Tam adds, where one is afraid that he will be tortured to convert and perhaps he won't be able to withstand it, it's a *mitzva* to harm oneself and even commit suicide as brought down in the Gemara in *Gittin*.



## The Meaning of Learning Torah

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Yitzchak Cohen

In Perek vav of Avot D'Rav Nosson it says, "Yehi beitcha bayit v'aad l'chachamim; Let your home be a meeting place for *Torah* scholars." Take people into your home and help them but take from them Torah. Ask the scholars to learn with you, to inspire you, and to help you grow. The Mishna continues, "V'hevei mitabek b'afar ragleihem; Cover yourself in the dust of their feet." What does *mitabek* mean? Follow the footprints of your Rebbe or walk right behind him in his steps. Some of the dust that touched his feet will then touch yours. In addition, when learning with a Rebbe, let him sit higher up while you sit at a lower respectful position.

One should imitate one's Rebbe's actions as a child imitates his parents. One should learn from him and try to be like him as much as one can. There should be awe, admiration, and emotion when learning *Torah* together. One should know that the Rebbe's words go back to Sinai, to *devar Hashem*. The Magen Avraham says that when one prays, "V'keiravatunu malkeinu l'avodosacha," one should have in mind Har Sinai. Torah is not

just a subject but a way that brings us back to the giving of the *Torah* on *Sinai*. It's in our past but also in our present. We relive it every single day by associating and learning with *Torah* scholars. Rabbi Eliezer who followed and respected his teachers, taught us to be *mitabek*.

"*Vehevei shoteh b'tzoma et divreihem*; He would drink with thirst their words." This is Rabbi Akiva. The Chida tells us that if a person is extremely thirsty, he should drink slowly and not gulp all the water down at once, as it could damage him. So too, *Torah* should be studied slowly in order to absorb it. The ideal Rebbe doesn't throw all his ideas out. He builds up his shiur slowly one point at a time so that his students can best synthesize it. This is Rabbi Akiva.

The Mishna goes into great length to explain how Rabbi Akiva became what he became. He was forty years old, "*V'lo shana k'lum*; He had never learned anything." Some say he knew nothing, not even the form of an *aleph*. But some say *shana* refers to the Oral Law. The

Written *Torah* he knew but he had never studied the Oral Law. What inspired him to thirst for *Torah*? He was standing near a spring and he saw that drops of water had bored a hole through a stone. He concluded, if something so soft as water can have such an effect on a hard rock, how much more so can the Oral *Torah* that is hard, effect my heart. If water can take a solid and convert it to a non-solid, then *Torah* can take a heart and convert it to understand. That's the power of *Torah*. "*Pekudei Hashem yesharim mesamchei lev*." The words of Hashem are straight and bring joy to the heart.

The Mishna is not just telling us a story about Rabbi Akiva. It's telling us how we should live. The Gemara tells us that both Hillel and Rabbi Akiva obligate the poor. Both studied *Torah* despite their poverty. How can we compare ourselves? Can we ever reach their level? The Gemara in *Kiddushin* says that the *Mishna* is telling us not what they were, but what they are. Even Rabbi Akiva needed Hashem's help to overcome his *yetzer hara*. If Hashem helped him, He can surely help us all.

## Leah & Devora The Unique Quality of Womens Prayer

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

*Chazal* say that from the day that Hashem created His world, there was no person who thanked Hashem till Leah. She said, "*Hapaam odeh et Hashem*; This time I will thank Hashem." *Chazal* learn that this time there was thanks, but not before. This seems puzzling. Didn't people who lived before Leah, thank Hashem? Did not Noach thank Hashem after saving him from the flood? Did not the *avot* express thanks numerous times?

Rashi explains that when Leah had her first three sons, she did not thank Hashem. The *imahot* knew through prophecy that there would be 12 children. Yaakov had four wives so they assumed each of them would have three children. When Leah had her fourth son, she realized she had gotten something beyond her share and that is why she thanked Hashem. The Torah explains the names of the tribes. Leah called her first son Reuven, "*Ki ra'ah Hashem b'oni*, Hashem saw my anguish." She meant to say that Hashem had

proven here that passively pretending to be Rachel and marrying Yaakov had been the right thing to do. When she had Shimon she said, "Hashem heard that I am hated." When she had Levi she said, "Now my husband will accompany me." All three births reassured Leah that she had done the will of Hashem. When she had the fourth child, it was like a normal woman having a child. She was reassured already, but nevertheless she did not look at it as a natural thing and specifically thanked Hashem. This was the greatness of her act and it is what *chazal* point out as unique.

The Kesav Sofer gives another explanation that he heard from the *Maharam Shick*. Leah called her son Yehuda, so that each time she would call him by name, she would remember that she had to thank Hashem. Not only did she not look at it as a natural thing, but she saw it as a miracle that she wanted to continuously remember. And in fact, the

Jewish people are called Yehudim based on this.

The Pardes Yosef explains that there are two terms for giving praise, *l'shabeach* and *l'hodot*. *Shevach*, praise, is thanking Hashem for something He did for us. *L'hodot* is when someone goes through something seemingly difficult and then discovers that it was really very good. When Leah felt like the secondary wife to Yaakov it was difficult. However, when she realized that she was receiving more tribes because of this, then she acknowledged that what she had perceived as bad was really good. This is why she expressed thanks. We have the ability as Jews to praise Hashem when it is difficult and when it is good. This is what makes us unique. Leah said, "*Hapaam*." Each time we go through something, whether we see it as good or bad, we must thank Hashem. That is the nature of the Jewish people and that is why we are called Yehudim.