

Striking a Balance- Sefirat HaOmer

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles
Summary by Channie Koplowitz-Stein

The period between Pesach and Shavuot, Sefirat Ha'omer, is considered a time of mourning for the death of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 disciples. Yet Lag B'Omer, the thirty-third day in this period, is considered a day of rejoicing. How do we reconcile this inconsistency? The simple explanation is that on that day Rabbi Akiva's students ceased from dying.

The history of the Jews as a separate and distinct people begins in Egypt and continues with our redemption from there, culminating with our acceptance of the Torah at Sinai as one people with one heart, one community. This whole process began with the sale of Joseph who ended up in Egypt as a servant to Potifar. But even though the sale of Joseph was instrumental in creating our nation, the brothers who sold him still committed a cardinal sin and were liable for the death penalty. They were never punished, but the taint of their sin carried forward through the generations, and during the Roman Empire, the Romans killed ten great sages of Israel. These, our tradition tells us, constituted the atonement for the ten brothers who conspired in the sale of Joseph. Among these sages was Rabbi Akiva.

There is also the matter of the number of students who died; 24,000 deaths through a plague is a number familiar to us from the Torah. In the desert, that same number of Israelites died at Shittim because of the sin of worshipping Baal Peor.

There seems to be a thread running through from Biblical times, from Joseph to the generation in the desert, ending with Rabbi Akiva and the Roman Empire. It is fascinating to examine the salient personalities of each of these times and connect the individual strands.

Every character trait has both positive and negative aspects. Love of one human being for another is among the highest traits one can have, as exhibited by our patriarch Abraham. But unrestrained love becomes perverted and requires the controlling influence of the inner strength and discipline of a Yitzchak. The synthesis of these two elements is achieved in Jacob and reaches its zenith with Joseph who withstood the temptation of Potifar's wife and remained true to his heritage. This love coupled with restraint served as the model for the Jews in Egypt. Without this synthesis, love is not true; it is egotistical and self-serving rather than giving, and breeds anarchy rather than community.

This absence of restraint was the main focus in the worship of Baal Peor – a total negation of all human decency, a statement that no one can tell me what to do for only I am my own master and my own god, and I live only for my own gratification.

Those who sinned with Baal Peor in the desert were then reincarnated as Rabbi Akiva and his 24,000 disciples. Their souls had learned the lesson that love must have boundaries. They

loved each other completely, recognizing themselves and each other as parts of a complete whole, of a community, and understood that they all served the One True God in holiness. But they had not yet learned to honor and respect each other as unique individuals, each with his own special path and unique talent in the service of Hashem. They lacked the vision and ultimate discipline to synthesize the love of individual faculties and personalities within the group and respect that individuality. They did not die because they loved improperly, as those in Shittim, but rather because they did not accord each other proper respect. This was their specific mission in this incarnation, and they failed. This was the reason they suffered the harsh punishment of death.

The sin of Baal Peor occurred in Shittim in the desert. The sin of Rabbi Akiva's disciples was a sin of not recognizing the shitah, the path of another as a valid path to the service of Hashem.

In the laws of counting the omer, each Jew must count for himself, yet all Jews follow the same sequence at the same time. Every Jew has to count because every Jew counts. Every Jew is both an important individual and an important part of the community. May we take the lesson learned from the deaths of Rabbi Akiva and his students, to incorporate true kavod to every individual within the community of Jews as a whole.



Parshat Emor-The Power of Speech

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Avishai David

Parshat Emor primarily focuses on three topics. Initially the Torah discusses the halachot of Kohanim and that which relates to their service in the Beit Hamikdash. Subsequently it devotes the bulk of the parsha to the holidays, and then ends with the tragic episode of the megadef, the blasphemer. What is the common thread running through these three elements?

The answer is embedded in the name of the Parsha itself, "Emor," which comes from the root word "Amira," to speak. When the Torah introduces the topic of Kohanim it says, "Emor el hakohanim." The moadim are described as

mikraei kodesh, and the Targum explains that this refers to a particular time that has great significance. The Rambam notes that these are the holy days when Klal Yisrael would gather to thank and praise Hashem. Our main focus and avodah on Yom Tov is amirah, saying shir v'shevach to Hashem. Similarly, we see the great negative power of speech through the story of the megadef.

In Breishit the Torah portrays the creation of man, "Vayehi adam l'nefesh chaya." Man became a living being. Targum translates nefesh chaya as ruach m'mimaleh, the power of speech. Hashem gave man the ability

to express himself and to articulate his ideas. This makes him unique over all segments of creation.

"Emor v'amarta." The Kohanim followed the dictums of Hashem. Through amirah one can come to unbelievable levels. And indeed during the moadim, when a Jew communes with Hashem, he can scale very great heights. Conversely, corrupted speech causes a person to fall to the lowest depths, as evidenced by the blasphemer. The lesson of Parshat Emor is the potency of speech. May we merit to use this gift correctly.

The Beauty of Every Jew

Based on Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller's shiur on Lag Ba'Omer

The sifrei halacha (books of Jewish law) state that Lag Ba'Omer should be celebrated with "kzat simcha" – some joy. The famous reason for this joy is that the students of Rebbe Akiva stopped dying on that day. But the reason they stopped dying was because there were no more students left to die. Is that a reason to celebrate?

Let's examine why they deserved death. The Sages say that they did not treat each other with kavod – respect – and therefore they were stricken with a disease that caused them to choke to death. The term kavod can also be translated to mean heavy. This heaviness implies recognizing another person as significant. It means making him feel that you want to listen to him, and that he has a worthwhile message that only he can convey.

What makes a person unique? Externally, we may share similar characteristics, but internally our souls are vastly different. Rabbi Akiva's students failed to recognize that every Jew has infinite value and has a distinctive approach simply because he is different than all other people. They were punished with choking – a state where a person cannot take in air. Failing to give kavod to another person means ceasing to take in ruach – spirit. When

a person does not honor another Jew, it shows that he has stopped appreciating that person's unique spirit.

Every Jew deserves kavod, but especially a talmid chacham – Torah sage – because his soul is entwined with Torah. Really knowing someone means knowing his thoughts. Learning Torah means knowing Hashem's thoughts and bonding your mind to Hashem's mind. A talmid chacham learns Hashem's Torah and grows so close to Him that Hashem's divinity flows through their middot. So when one gives kavod to a talmid chacham, one in essence gives kavod to that part of Hashem that lives inside every great Jew.

Why do we celebrate on Lag Ba'Omer? We rejoice that Rabbi Akiva did not succumb to despair after his monumental loss. We marvel at his exceptional fortitude in gathering five new students and transmitting to them the Oral Tradition we have today. Rabbi Akiva taught, "V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho, zeh klal gadol ba'Torah – Love your friend as yourself, this is a prime principle of the Torah." Torah takes you to a place where you can find Hashem. The first place where you can find Him is within the heart of every Jew.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai was one of the five students of Rabbi Akiva. He revealed the secrets of the Torah – how to find the divine spark inside oneself and in other people. Rabbi Shimon said to come to his tomb on the anniversary of his death, Lag Ba'Omer, and to rejoice. The Maharal quotes the Zohar, which says it is easier to build a connection with a tzaddik after his death, because then he is no longer constrained by physicality. Some aspect of the tzaddik's spirit remains at his resting place and it wishes to give of itself. However, the degree to which you identify with the tzaddik is the degree to which the tzaddik will identify with you.

On Lag Ba'Omer when we visit Rabbi Shimon's tomb, we are in essence saying, "Rabbi Shimon, you brought penimiyus (inner reality) into the world, we want to see penimiyus and goodness in ourselves and in other people. In the merit of this give us what we need to accomplish our mission in life."

If you don't merit to be at the actual tomb on Lag Ba'Omer, let this not discourage you. Put joy in your heart and find the place within you that responds to this profound message. Then you can experience true simcha on Lag Ba'Omer.