

PARASHAS ACHAREI MOS

A Matter of Opinion

The two festivals of Pesach and Shavuot come in such rapid succession they almost seem like one extended celebration. Indeed, some commentators compare the intervening days between Pesach and Shavuot, when we count down to the Omer, to Chol Hamoed, the Intermediate Days of the Festivals. By rights, this should be one long period of uninterrupted festivity - but it is not.

The days of Sefiras Haomer, the Countdown to the Omer, are also days of mourning and sadness. We mourn a catastrophe that befell the Jewish people in Talmudic times, shortly after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Talmud (Yevamos 62) tells us that a plague broke out among the disciples of Rabbi Akiva during the period between Pesach and Shavuot, killing twenty-four thousand of them.

This was indeed a terrible tragedy, but an annual memorial is nevertheless somewhat puzzling. Unfortunately, Jewish history is a long succession of terrible tragedies that blankets the entire calendar, and if we were to observe annual mourning for them all, we would never cease to mourn. Our Sages, therefore, selected only the most disastrous calamities for annual commemoration. Why then does this plague rank among the most disastrous calamities ever to befall the Jewish people?

Furthermore, let us consider the cause of the plague. According to the Talmud, it happened because "they did not have sufficient respect for one another." Two problems immediately come to mind.

First, why would an infringement on the respect of their fellow disciples precipitate such dire consequences?

Second, why indeed did they fail to respect each other sufficiently? Rabbi Akiva was one of the foremost proponents of *ve'ahavta lere'acha kamocho*, loving one's fellow as oneself; he considered it one of the fundamental concepts of the Torah. Surely then, he would have stressed this idea to his disciples, impressing on them the importance of treating other people with absolute respect. After hearing such words from the holy lips of Rabbi Akiva, how could twenty-four thousand of his disciples even consider being disrespectful to one another?

The commentators explain that Rabbi Akiva's disciples were certainly people of sterling character who would never have dreamed of uttering a single rude word to another person. Rather, their "disrespect" manifested itself in the intellectual sense.

The Talmud tells us that just as no two people are exactly identical in their appearance, they are also not identical in their outlook and opinions. Every person has his own particular way of looking at things, and no one else in the world has exactly the same perspective. When Rabbi Akiva taught his disciples, each one absorbed the teachings according to the nuances of his particular perspective. This was, of course, as was to be expected. But how did they view the opinions of their colleagues?

This is where the “disrespect” came into play. They could not acknowledge the possibility that other people’s perspectives might also have validity. Each one considered his own opinion the absolute truth and the opinions of his colleagues as erroneous. This attitude reflected a lack of objectivity and intellectual honesty. They were so enamored of their own wisdom that they could not see the wisdom of others and respect their opinions. The transmission of the truth of the Torah to future generations, however, required intellectual purity and integrity, and these disciples were found lacking in that respect. Therefore, in order to prevent the chain of transmission from being compromised, these disciples perished in a plague.

And we mourn. We mourn the loss of twenty-four thousand great Torah scholars. But even more, we mourn the riches of Torah knowledge and insight we could have gained from an additional twenty-four thousand conduits of Torah, with all the textures and nuances of their varied perspectives - if only they had been worthy. How these disciples could have made the Torah blossom before our eyes - if only they had been able to achieve perfect objectivity. But they did not, and our loss is irreplaceable.

In our own lives, we sometimes become so wrapped up in our own point of view that we fail to acknowledge the possibility that an opposing point of view may also have validity. There is an element of egotism and conceit behind such an attitude. We love ourselves, and therefore we must be right. But if we find it in ourselves to love our fellow as we do ourselves, we will suddenly see the world with a new and profound clarity. Things that bothered us will no longer do so. Things we did not appreciate will take on new value and importance. And more likely than not, we will discover we have gained much wisdom and peace of mind.