

## Derashah Acharei Mot 5784: Perpetuating the Masorah by Honoring Others<sup>1</sup>

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### Critically Endangered

The World Wildlife Fund publishes a list of “critically endangered” species; it includes the African Forest Elephant, the Black Rhino and the Sumatran Rhino. If they had kept such a list in the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE, they would have had to include “Observant Jews”.

Consider the absurd number of extinction-level events and threats that Judaism was facing:

- Destruction of the Beit HaMikdash
- The rise of Christianity
- The internal religious schism of the Tziddukim and Perushim
- The internal political schism over rebellion against the Romans
- The murder of our greatest leaders by the Romans, memorialized as the עשרה הרוגי מלכות
- The crushing of the Bar Kochba revolt
- The Roman decree banning the teaching of Torah, on penalty of death
- The Roman decree banning ordaining judges, on penalty of the death of the closest Jewish community
- Our scattering in a Diaspora across Southern Europe and North Africa

And all without a written version of the Torah or Halachah

In fact, the gemara talks about many ways in which Torah of that period nearly disappeared:

- One gemara teaches that parents were not qualified to teach their children Torah; it would have disappeared if not for Yehoshua ben Gamla’s invention of Jewish schools.<sup>2</sup>
- Another gemara claims that rabbinical courts would have been lost due to Roman persecution if not for the heroism of Rabbi Yehudah ben Bava in ordaining new students.<sup>3</sup>
- In a feat of desperation, Rabbi Chiya himself crafted traps to snare a deer, slaughtered the deer, worked the hide and wrote out the Torah on it to teach it to five children, to ensure that Torah would survive.
- In fact, when the Sages moved their center to Yavneh they thought Torah could disappear; only Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai disagreed.<sup>4</sup>

### Killing for lack of respect? And demolishing Torah along the way?

So I don’t understand. With Judaism facing so many threats, why did Hashem see fit to destroy the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva, creating a situation that the gemara in Yevamot describes as an עולם שומם, a “desolate world” in which all of Rabbi Akiva’s Torah – the Torah which would ultimately be the foundation of the recorded Torah sheb’al peh – could have been lost?<sup>5</sup> Why add to the danger?!

And another question: a gemara says that these 24,000 students perished in a plague מפני שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה, because they didn’t show respect to each other.<sup>6</sup> Since when is disrespect grounds for death? And again: Even granted their personal misconduct, shouldn’t Hashem have let them survive to convey Torah to the next generation?

### Torah demands we respect ourselves

I think we need to take a closer look at the importance of the respect that they lacked for each other:

- Obviously, respect is vital for basic human relations, always
- Also, respect was particularly vital at a time when the Roman Empire so degraded us. A thousand years later, Rav Yehudah HaLevi would write the Kuzari “in defense of the despised faith,” to reinforce the spirits of his beaten-down brethren. Facing such powerful external derision, we need to feel like somebody, not to make each other feel like nobodies.
- And years ago I heard Rabbi Yonasan Sacks make a third point, perhaps the most relevant of all. Those students of Rabbi Akiva couldn’t have succeeded in teaching Torah if they didn’t treat others with respect.

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this is based on my notes from a dvar torah by R’ Yonasan Sacks at the RCA Convention 5767

<sup>2</sup> Bava Batra 21a

<sup>3</sup> Sanhedrin 13b-14a

<sup>4</sup> Shabbat 138b

<sup>5</sup> Yevamot 62b

<sup>6</sup> Granted that our Fourteen Centuries shiur saw another possibility, that they died in Bar Kochba’s revolt, based on language of שמדא in Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon

I mentioned at the shul dinner that the Rebbe Reb Zushe insisted that he should be judged only according to his own potential, but a midrash<sup>7</sup> informs us **הייב כל אדם לומר מתי יגיעו מעשי למעשי אברהם יצחק ויעקב**, that we are obligated to challenge ourselves, “When will my deeds equal those of my ancestors?”

Equaling Avraham and Sarah, Miriam and Moshe, is impossible – but our hope rests in the fact that Hashem envisions this unthinkable success in each one of us. If Hashem gave us life and entrusted us with the Torah, then surely Hashem respects us, and an awareness of that respect is what enables us to dream of reaching the level of our ancestors. But if these 24,000 “communicators of the Torah” don’t see each other as worthy, then how will they ever inspire the next generation to see themselves as worthy?

Had their flaw been only a personal matter, maybe Hashem would have spared them because of the need for Torah students and teachers. But their flaw of disrespect made them poisonous, and so Hashem saw a need to eliminate the branches that bore poisonous fruit.

### The next cadre got it right

With the 24,000 gone, what happened to Torah? The gemara says that Rabbi Akiva travelled to southern Israel and found five new talmidim, and those students restored Torah, under the leadership of that tanna who said that **וואהבת לרעך כמוך** is the Torah’s greatest principle.

Those five students were Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yosi, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua<sup>8</sup> - and all of them absorbed and embraced and promoted the message of honoring each other:

- Rabbi Meir wrote: **המברך את ישראל כאלו מברך את השכינה**,<sup>9</sup> One who blesses another Jew is as though he is blessing Hashem.
- Rabbi Yehudah ruled that a rabbinical court must show deference to other courts, even to their inferiors, to prevent offense.<sup>10</sup>
- Rabbi Yosi said, **מימי לא עברתי על דברי חברי**,<sup>11</sup> priding himself on never having refused a friend’s request.
- Rabbi Shimon said **נוח לו לאדם שימסור עצמו לתוך כבשן האש ואל ילבין פני חברו ברבים**,<sup>12</sup> It would be better to throw oneself into a furnace rather than embarrass another person in public.
- And Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua said, **יהי כבוד תלמידך חביב עליך כשלך, וכבוד חברך כמורא רבך, וכבוד רבך כמורא שמים**,<sup>13</sup> Treat the honor of your student like your own honor, and the honor of your colleague like the awe of your teacher, and the awe of your teacher like the awe of Heaven.<sup>13</sup> He was also very careful not to enter the shiur after everyone had come into the room, lest they be forced to rise for him.<sup>14</sup>

These students of Rabbi Akiva learned the lesson: The representatives of Torah must teach the worth of every human being, so that their students will feel worthy of fulfilling the Torah and transmitting it forward.

### The success of those 5

These respect-filled new talmidim of Rabbi Akiva became the giants of our masorah. We are taught:

- **סתם משנה ר' מאיר** - Every Mishnah, every building block of the Talmud, is authored by Rabbi Meir unless attributed to another.<sup>15</sup>
- **סתם ספרא ר' יהודה** - Every halachic comment of the Midrash on the book of Vayikra, is authored by Rabbi Yehudah unless attributed to another.<sup>16</sup>
- **סתם ספרי ר' שמעון** - Every halachic comment of the Midrash on Bamidbar and Devarim, is authored by Rabbi Shimon unless attributed to another.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Yalkut Shimoni 830

<sup>8</sup> That’s the list in Yevamos 62b and Yalkut Shimon Koheles 989, but Bereishis Rabbah 61 has 7.

<sup>9</sup> Midrash Tanchuma Vayeichi 5

<sup>10</sup> Yerushalmi Pesachim 6:1. In a version of this derashah in Emor 5767 I credited Rabbi Yehudah with saying Greeting a friend is like greeting Hashem, but I can’t find where I first saw this. I know that Yerushalmi Eruvin 5:1 has it from R’ Yishmael, but I must have seen it in R’ Yehudah somewhere as well.

<sup>11</sup> Shabbos 118b

<sup>12</sup> Berachos 43b

<sup>13</sup> Avos 4:12

<sup>14</sup> Megilah 27b

<sup>15</sup> Sanhedrin 86a

<sup>16</sup> ibid

<sup>17</sup> ibid

- Rabbi Yosi was so respected, such an anchor of masorah, that other chachamim would change their positions just because he disagreed, without even knowing his arguments!<sup>18</sup>
- And Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua was so respected that Rebbe, Rabbi Yehudah haNasi, reported that people would cram into the beit midrash to hear him; six תלמידים would sit in the space of an amah.<sup>19</sup>

The honor these students accorded others, in tandem with their own brilliance, turned them into the eternal anchors of Torah.

Like Rabbi Akiva's students, we are the transmitters of Torah in a fragile time.

- It's a time when our children and students suffer derision from the outside world, online, on college campuses, in the street.
- It's a time when our children and students new temptations and obstacles which have never been seen before in our history, courtesy of the internet as well as modern social integration, making them doubt their ability to carry on our masorah.

We bear the responsibility of the students of Rabbi Akiva, to accord everyone honor, to send the message that the person with whom we are speaking is a בר הכי, is worthy.<sup>20</sup>

### Closer - Lag ba'Omer

We are taught<sup>21</sup> that the students of Rabbi Akiva died during 33 days of the Omer, and Lag ba'Omer is the day when Rabbi Akiva began to teach his five new students - and there's an interesting relationship between Rabbi Akiva's lesson of respect, and the day itself.

According to Pirkei Avot,<sup>22</sup> there are 48 מדות with which one acquires Torah. The talmidim of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter used to practice one of the 48 on each day of the Omer, so that by Erev Shavuot they were spiritually prepared to receive the Torah anew.

Counting down the list, we find a remarkable coincidence when we arrive at Lag ba'Omer: The 33<sup>rd</sup> element on the list, the one which is identified with Lag ba'Omer, is none other than אהוב את הבריות, to love other people.

This was the foundation stone upon which R' Akiva re-built the masorah on Lag ba'Omer, and in every generation it is the foundation stone. The lesson cost us 24,000 students of R' Akiva 1900 years ago, and we've been mourning ever since - but if we embrace it, as those final five תלמידים did, then our children, their children, and their children's children, will right the wrong of that generation and transmit our Torah into the future.

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Eruvin 14b

<sup>19</sup> Eruvin 53a

<sup>20</sup> We all know this, but I want to stress that this idea applies particularly to the way we raise children - any children, whether our own children or the children of others.

An example: Rav Shlomo Aviner, in his Pirkei Chinuch, warns against rebuking children with language that we would never use with adults. If an adult were to put his feet on the couch, we might politely ask him to be careful about dirtying the furniture; we certainly wouldn't shout, "How many times do I have to tell you to get your feet off the couch!" The laws of respect certainly apply to קטנים as well as adults; it is incumbent upon us to make sure that children understand their own value, and the respect we have for them.

<sup>21</sup> Pri Chadash Orach Chaim 493

<sup>22</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> perek