



Lag B'aomer Balancing The Individual And The Nation Rabbi Hershel Reichman

During the weeks between Pesach and Shavuot we mourn the passing of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva who were decimated in a plague. Why did they die? What caused the plague to cease on Lag B'aomer? What can we learn from this tragic episode?

The Gemara tells us that the students died because they did not give each other sufficient respect. The Shem Mishmuel discusses two contrasting approaches to understand this puzzling statement.

While the written Torah is limited, the oral Torah continues to evolve. Great Torah scholars with their own unique thinking continuously delve into the intricacies of *Shas* (the entire corpus of Talmudic teachings) and develop new and original Torah thoughts. Since this process involves the individual, it can lend itself easily to pride. Continuous disputes between scholars may lead to selfish vested interest. Developing one's independent thinking, yet at the same time valuing another scholar's view, is a challenge all Torah scholars have to grapple with. Rabbi Akiva's students became so enthralled in their own learning that they would not consider each other's view. Each thought his own way was best. This may have been their flaw and why they were punished.

The Zohar writes that the students of Rabbi Akiva were a reincarnation of the 24,000 Jews of the tribe of Shimon who died in a plague in the desert. They were punished for rebelling

against Moshe and for thinking that they understood Jewish law better than he did. Their self-centeredness drove them to their death. This same sin of egoism and pride spelled the death sentence for Rabbi Akiva's students. Unfortunately, after being tested a second time they failed again. Similarly, the areas in which we see ourselves sinning time and time again are usually what we are on this world to correct. Hashem gives us the ability to conquer our urges and correct our failings. *Sefira* is an opportune time to rectify what needs fixing.

Shem MiShmuel offers an alternative, second explanation. Every Jew has a double role, to be an individual and to be a part of the collective nation. At Matan Torah, there was a total unification. Klal Yisrael was as one man with one heart. While receiving the Torah was a national event, the actual fulfillment of the *mitzvot* depends on each individual. Just as our body has many parts, but remains one integrated whole, we must see ourselves as a part of one national unit. Then there is no place for pride. The students of Rabbi Akiva understood this concept of unity incorrectly. They loved each other so much that they fused into a single entity. They did not see it necessary to give each other honor, just as a person would not give any extra respect to his own legs or hand. This may have been their sin.

The month of Nissan represents *klal*, the community. In this month, the nation's Exodus from Egypt occurred. Iyar symbolizes the *prat*,

the individual. In this month each Jew counts his own Omer. On *Pesach Sheini*, every person brings his individual sacrifice. Sivan is the resolution of *prat* and *klal*. The sign of Iyar is twins. Though the Torah was given to the Jewish nation, it was also given to every individual. Every Jew has his own personal share in Torah. As one universal whole, there is no room for pride. Yet on the individual level, we need to give each other honor. Rabbi Akiva's students did not understand this delicate balance and therefore they were decimated.

Lag Ba'omer begins the last third of the *Sefira* period. It corresponds to the last *ashmora* (third) of the evening, when light begins to filter into the world. Whether the students died because of too much *prat* or too much *klal* as they misinterpreted them, on Lag Ba'omer the perfect paradigm of Shavuot begins to be felt.

In many ways a husband and wife symbolize this symbiotic relationship. While they are two parts of one soul, they are still two separate individuals. Being as one is a powerful state, but runs the risk of not giving one's spouse the proper respect. We need to realize that though we are meant to unite, we each have a unique contribution to make to our families and to the world.

This Lag Ba'omer, may we attain the perfect balance of *prat* and *klal*, not losing sight of each Jew's precious individual worth, while uniting as one to serve Hashem.