

Lego of Despair

Rabbi Yosef Koval | Parshat Behar | May 20, 2022

Certain sounds trigger an immediate emotional response in my brain. One of those is the sound of Lego being spilled onto the floor. More specifically, the sound of a large bucket, filled with approximately 10,000 little pieces of Lego, being spilled onto the floor.

My son, Chaim, loves to play with Lego. He can play for hours on end, building and constructing all types of creations and it is a great activity for both him and us as it keeps him busy and entertained. Over the years we have amassed a tremendous collection of Lego (much of it from elaborate sets that were built, taken apart and then tossed into the ever-growing collection of other random pieces) so that by now the large container in which we store it contains literally several thousands of small pieces of assorted Lego. But while he is fantastic at building the Lego, he is not all that great at cleaning it up when he is done. Hence, it is not unusual for him to empty the ENTIRE box of Lego onto the floor, oftentimes shortly after I had just cleaned up from the last spillage, leaving me the job of cleaning up after him. (For all of you parenting experts, yes, I know that I should not be cleaning up for him. It's just sometimes not worth the fight.) So, anytime I am sitting and minding my own business when out of the back of my head I hear the sound of thousands of pieces of Lego cascading onto the floor, I tense up and my inner voice (which sometimes mysteriously makes its way into an outer voice, a veerrry outer voice), goes "NOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!"

Recently, in addition to the usual Lego cleanup, my basement was in shambles. An assortment of toys and games littered the floor (Heaven forbid any of my cherubic kids would have picked up after themselves), including the mountain of Lego pieces. I decided to tackle the basement over the course of a few days, setting aside some time each day to do a bit of cleaning. It was a cleanup task that made the Exxon Valdez spill look like it needed a few paper towels to clean. But, with determination and persistence, I managed to get the basement (eventually) sparkling clean.

I pulled Chaim over and in very deliberate and clear terms explained to him how long I had worked on cleaning the basement and how I wanted him to keep it clean and to clean up after himself etc. At least that's what I THOUGHT I told him. Apparently, he heard me say "Chaim, I know I just spent the better part of a week cleaning the basement for you, but I think it's just too clean and I would really appreciate it if you quickly made it all a huge mess again." Obviously a very simple case of misunderstanding.

As if on cue, the next day I heard the dreaded sound of Lego spilling onto the floor. I came

downstairs to discover the Lego, and many other things, strewn about the floor, undoing most of my hard work.

My initial reaction was a deflated sigh (ok, maybe that was my second reaction. I won't divulge my initial reaction in this setting.) I was ready to throw in the towel and resolve to not bother cleaning the basement ever again. But alas, I have a house to maintain and some dignity and self-respect to preserve, so I set to the task of cleaning up once again.

I am certain this, or a variation of this, is a familiar occurrence with many of you who have or had the privilege of raising young children. While your children might be better at keeping neat or taking care of their belongings, most parents have had to deal with some situation of having invested a lot of energy and time into something, only to have it quickly undone by their angelic little darling.

This scenario, while a nuisance to be sure, is still something small in the big scheme of life and I use it only to draw a parallel to a bigger picture. Many people can think of much greater examples in their lives where they set out to do something and poured in a tremendous amount of blood, sweat and tears into a project or endeavor only to have it collapse for one reason or another. Perhaps it involved an investment of time or money. Maybe it was energy and emotion. Whatever the case, it was a mission or project that came at a great cost. And now it fell apart. The natural human reaction is to give up and throw in the towel. It is for such instances that we should lean on gaining inspiration from the great Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Akiva was one of the greatest figures in Jewish history. A scholar whose knowledge was second only to Moses and who goes down as one of the preeminent sages of all time. But Rabbi Akiva did not start learning at a young age. Only at the advanced age of 40 years old did he decide to turn his life around and dedicate his life to Torah study. His story (and even greater, the story of his incredible wife Rachel) is one of the most amazing stories of sacrifice and dedication ever to be told but which this article's space constraints do not allow for at the moment. The point I would like to focus on is that in a span of 24 years this rabbi went from not knowing the Hebrew alphabet to becoming the teacher of 24,000 students! You read that correctly, I did not add a zero by accident. These 24,000 students were to be the bearers of the Holy Tradition and the transmitters of Torah study and knowledge to the future generations of the Jewish people. Tragically, in a 33-day period, all 24,000 of his students perished in a plague. For that reason, this time on the calendar has been designated as a time for communal mourning.

On Thursday of this week is a day on the calendar known as "Lag Baomer", a day which is

celebrated as a minor holiday. The reason for the joyous feelings is because, as the Talmud tells us, the students of Rabbi Akiva ceased to die. The obvious question asked by many commentaries is – why is that a reason to celebrate? A massive calamity occurred and because it now stopped it's a cause to be joyful? We can understand putting a halt to the mourning observances, but it seems incongruous to suggest making it a day of celebration for that reason.

One answer given is that we do not celebrate the cessation of the death of the students but rather the reaction of their rabbi, Rabbi Akiva, upon witnessing this tragedy. The Talmud tells us that after his devastating loss, when his entire student body was wiped out, he went and found five more students and began to teach them his Torah. And from these five students we now have, some 1500 years later, the majority of the Torah which we study.

From all the mind-boggling anecdotes of the life of Rabbi Akiva, what I find most inspiring is this resiliency he displayed. Consider, he gave up everything in this world in order to completely change his life and serve G-d. With self-sacrifice that we can't even begin to fathom he reached the zenith of his mission after 2 ½ decades by forming a yeshiva with a population that would fill Madison Square Garden. And then, in just a month's time, it all vanished. Nothing left. Zero. Anyone else in his shoes would have likely folded up their tents and retired to Florida. After all, by this time Rabbi Akiva was 70 years old. He gave it all he had, he tried hard and now he was done. But he didn't do that. He picked himself up off the mat and went and found 5 new students and started over. And from that second effort we have all of our Torah today. All because Rabbi Akiva refused to throw in the towel.

This is what we celebrate on Lag Baomer. The resiliency and fortitude of Rabbi Akiva and the inspiration we as a nation have drawn from him in having that same determination and perseverance.

Think of how a short time ago our nation lost 6 million souls. We came to these shores completely decimated and downtrodden. Judaism in this country was at an all-time low. Yet these survivors of the Holocaust, much like Rabbi Akiva, drew from their inner strength and began to rebuild. And rebuild they did, to the tune of the flourishing and successful Jewish community that we have today which seemed inconceivable just 75 years ago.

So, the next time you feel defeated, whether from something minor (relatively speaking) like a container of Lego spilling for the umpteenth time, or from major setbacks in your personal life or spiritual growth, think of Rabbi Akiva and start again. It's never too late.

And the next time you want to play with Lego you are welcome to stop on by. Just do me a favor and clean up afterwards!