

Parshat Emor 5777

Rabbi Akiva's students- We are in the period of the Omer between Pesach and Shavuot, and the command to count the Omer is in this week's Parasha. Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of students. They all died in the Omer period because they did not treat each other with respect (Yevamot 62b). Rabbi Nachman adds that the physical cause of their death was *askera*, which Rashi defines as a plague of diphtheria.

Rav Sherira Gaon wrote in his *Iggeret* that they died as a result of *shemada*, which would suggest that their deaths had to do with the use of force and Roman persecution. *Etz Yosef* comments on Bereishit Rabba 61:3 that they died in the battle of Betar. The *Etz Yosef* comments similarly on Midrash Rabba Kohelet 11:10 that they died in the war of Bar Cozba, while *Ein Chanoch*, citing the *Iggeret* of Rav Sherira Gaon, comments that they died in the battle of Betar.¹

Did the students die in a plague that swept their yeshiva or on the battlefield? Further, Rabbi Akiva famously taught that "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Vayika 19:18) is a great principle in the Torah. What caused his students to behave so disrespectfully to each other that they deserved to die?

Rabbi Riskin addressed these questions in an article published for Parashat Kedoshim 5774. Rabbi Riskin wrote that we have no corroborating evidence, either from a parallel Talmudic passage or from the period-historian Josephus that a plague broke out at this time. He proposed instead that Rabbi Nachman's *askera* might come from the Greek *sicarii*, which means "by the sword", which would remove the discrepancy between sources regarding the cause of death. Rabbi Riskin noted that Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai, who was one of the teachers of Rabbi Akiva, had prescribed accommodation with Rome just prior to the Temple's destruction. He met the Roman General Vespasian, and made the deal of giving up Jerusalem in return for the city of Yavneh and her wise men (Gittin 56a). One version of the Talmud records that Rabbi Akiva vehemently disagreed with the "dovish" approach of his Rebbe. Undoubtedly, Rabbi Akiva was a great idealist who believed passionately in Jewish national sovereignty over Israel and Jerusalem. But according to this version of the Talmud, the heat of the moment caused him to speak in less than respectful terms concerning a leading Jewish Scholar and one of his foremost teachers. Rabbi Riskin suggested that Rabbi Akiva's own disciples learned not from what their Rabbi taught

¹ Etz Yosef is a commentary on Midrash which generally aims to give the plain meaning of the text. It was written by R. Chanoch Zundel ben Yosef of Bialystok (early 19th century). Ein Chanoch was the work of R. Chanoch Henich Dov Teitelbaum from Sassov.

as much as from what their Rabbi said. They too did not speak respectfully to each other, especially when they had differing political views among themselves. We see from here the awesome responsibility of a Rebbe. We also see what eventuates when people supposedly on the same side deflect their energy away from the enemy and towards their own internal dissensions. This is the causeless hatred which has always caused Israel to miss its chance for redemption.

In his *Peninei Halakha*, Rav Eliezer Melamed, Rosh Yeshivat Har Bracha, suggests an alternative explanation that aligns with Rashi's explanation of *askera*. Some of Rabbi Akiva's students joined the Bar Kochba rebellion while others continued in their studies. The two camps behaved contemptuously toward each other. Each claimed to be greater, boasting that its activity was more important and effective, and the other was of no benefit. Because of this groundless hatred between soldiers and students, all of them were stuck down, on the battlefield or by plague. By not respecting each other, the students of Rabbi Akiva drove a wedge between Pesach and Shavuot, between national aspiration and Torah, and therefore they all died during this period.

My own thought is to connect the deaths of the 12,000 pairs of students with the much earlier battle against Midian (Bemidbar 31). There Moshe was commanded: "A thousand from a tribe, a thousand from a tribe ... a thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for the legion." (31:4-5). The repetition of "A thousand from a tribe, a thousand from a tribe" in verse 4 suggests a total of 2,000 per tribe, or 24,000 in total, yet 12,000 went out to battle. Various explanations are provided as to how the 24,000 comprised 12,000 pairs. Given that "a thousand" is repeated again in verse 5, one of the explanations in Midrash Tanchuma is that 3,000 were sent per tribe, a third to go to battle, a third for logistics, and a third to pray for those who went to battle. Baal HaTurim observes that verse 4 begins and ends with the letter aleph, signifying the number one – unity. All were unified with one heart in their service to G-d, whatever role they played.

There are many lessons to be learned for today. Much has been discussed and will continue to be discussed as to who and how many should be active on a war front, as against working in support but not actually in the battle, and as against supporting the armed forces in prayer and learning. The important lesson is that whatever role one has in defending Israel, one must treat with dignity and respect all others in their various roles. The model to follow is the unity in the successful battle against Midian, and not Heaven Forbid the acrimony among Rabbi Akiva's students that ended in disaster both in the Yeshiva and on the battlefield.