

24,000 Plus One**Based on the Teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe**

There was once a man who had twenty-four thousand disciples. He taught them to love, but their love was too absolute, too true, to be loving. They died, and their death spawned a period of mourning that darkens our calendar to this very day.

This man had one disciple who devoted his entire life -- literally his every minute -- to the pursuit of truth. Yet his truth was true enough to love. He, too, passed from this world, and the anniversary of his passing is celebrated as a day of joy and festivity to this very day.

This, in a word, is the story of Lag BaOmer -- the story of Rabbi Akiva and his greatest disciple, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

A Celebrated Death

The 18th of Iyar is Lag BaOmer -- the 33rd day of the Omer Count which spans the seven weeks from Passover to Shavuot. Two joyous occasions are associated with this day. During the Omer period we mourn the deaths of 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva who died in a plague because, as the Talmud informs us, "They did not conduct themselves with respect for each other"; Lag BaOmer is the day on which the plague ended and the dying ceased. Lag BaOmer is also the anniversary of the passing of Rabbi Akiva's greatest disciple, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Before his death (many years later, without connection to the plague), Rabbi Shimon referred to the day of his passing as "the day of my happiness" and instructed his disciples that it be observed each year as a day of joyous celebration.

Why is the passing of Rabbi Akiva's other disciples mourned as a national tragedy, while the passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is remembered with celebration and joy? Indeed, the very same day that celebrates the end of the dying of Rabbi Akiva's disciples, celebrates the death of his greatest disciple! To unravel the paradox of Lag BaOmer, we must first examine the root of the disrespect that caused the plague amongst Rabbi Akiva's disciples.

Rabbi Akiva taught that "Love your fellow as yourself is a cardinal principle in Torah"; indeed, this is the most famous of his teachings. One would therefore expect that Rabbi Akiva's disciples would be the foremost exemplars of this principle. How was it that they, of all people, were deficient in this area?

But their very diligence in fulfilling the precept "Love your fellow as yourself" was their undoing. Our sages have said that "Just as every person's face differs from the faces of his fellows, so, too, every person's mind differs from the minds of his fellows." When the twenty-four-thousand disciples of Rabbi Akiva studied their master's teachings, the result was twenty-four-thousand nuances of understanding, as the same concepts were assimilated by twenty-four-thousand minds -- each unique and distinct from its 23,999 fellows. Had Rabbi Akiva's students loved each other less, this would have been a matter of minor concern; but because each disciple loved his fellows as he loved himself, he felt compelled to correct their erroneous thinking and behavior, and to enlighten them as to the true meaning of their master's words. For the same reason, they found themselves incapable of expressing a

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hypocritical respect for each others' views when they sincerely believed that the others' understanding was lacking, even in the slightest degree.

The greater a person is, the higher are the standards by which he is judged; in the words of our sages, "With the righteous, G-d is exacting to a hairsbreadth." Thus, what for people of our caliber would be considered a minor failing had such a devastating effect upon the disciples of Rabbi Akiva.

The Thirteenth Year

But there was one disciple of Rabbi Akiva who learned to overcome the pitfalls of uncompromising love and uncompromising truth, as exemplified by the following incident in the life of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai:

The Talmud relates that when the Roman rulers of the Holy Land placed a price on the heads of Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar, they hid in a cave for twelve years. During this time, they spent every minute of their day studying Torah. When they emerged from the cave, they were shocked to discover people plowing and sowing: how could people set aside the eternal life that is Torah and occupy their days with the transitory life of the material? So intense was their wrath at such folly that whatever met with their burning glance went up in flames. Proclaimed a voice from heaven: "Have you come out to destroy My world? Return to your cave!" Rabbi Shimon's thirteenth year of study, while increasing his knowledge and appreciation of the truth of Torah, also taught him the value of endeavors other than his own. Now, wherever he went, his look would heal rather than destroy.

The 4,000-year history of Jewish learning has known many great and diligent students of Torah; yet none epitomized the absolute devotion to the pursuit of the divine truth to the extent exemplified by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Throughout the writings of our sages, his example is cited as the ultimate case of *torato um'nato*, "one whose study of Torah is his sole vocation."

Certainly, then, Rabbi Shimon's commitment to truth was no less absolute than that of Rabbi Akiva's other disciples. Yet his truth was true enough to love. In his thirteenth year in the cave, he attained a dimension of the divine truth that tolerates, indeed embraces, the many and diverse avenues of connection to G-d which the Creator has provided to a humanity whose minds, characters and temperaments are as diverse as their number. In his thirteenth year in the cave, Rabbi Shimon attained a level of truth in which he could utterly devote himself to the eternal life that is Torah, and advocate such devotion for everyone else, and at the same time appreciate and respect the path of those who serve G-d via the temporal life of material endeavors.

So the very same day that celebrates the end of the plague amongst Rabbi Akiva's disciples also celebrates the passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. The Chassidic masters explain that the passing of a righteous person marks the point at which "all his deeds, teachings and works" attain the pinnacle of fulfillment and realization and the point of their most powerful influence upon our lives. And the deeds, teaching and works of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai are the ultimate rectification of Rabbi Akiva's disciples' tragic failure to achieve the proper synthesis of love and truth that would make their love true and their truth loving.

As Yourself

As noted above, it is only among men of the caliber of Rabbi Akiva's disciples that such a failing could bode such devastating results. But our sages chose to record this story for posterity and fix it in our lives with a series of laws that govern our behavior in the weeks

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between Passover and Shavuot each year. Obviously, we, too, have something to learn from what happened to Rabbi Akiva's disciples.

The lesson is twofold: we must learn from their virtues as well as from their mistakes. We must learn to care enough for our fellow man not to indulge his errors and accommodate his failings. This might be the easiest and most socially comfortable way to behave, but, rather than tolerance, it bespeaks an indifference toward his or her welfare. On the other hand, we must never allow our commitment to his betterment to lessen in the slightest our respect and esteem toward him, no matter how misguided and unresponsive he might be.

If this seems paradoxical, it is. But the ability to embrace this paradox is at the very heart of the Torah's commandment to "Love your fellow as yourself." For in regard to ourselves, it is a paradox with which we are quite comfortable -- every psychologically healthy person loves himself unconditionally and, at the same time, incessantly strives to improve himself. This paradox we must also cultivate in our relationship with others: on the one hand, we must never compromise our efforts to improve our fellow man out of respect for his views and feelings; on the other hand, we must never allow these efforts to compromise our love and respect for him.

For to succumb to either compromise is to fail to love him as we love ourselves -- a principle which Rabbi Akiva considered fundamental to G-d's blueprint for life and of which Hillel said: "This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary."

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