

The Omer Imbalance

The Hidden Meaning in the Mourning for Rabbi Akiva's Students



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A neighbor approached me recently with the following question: Over the course of history, the Jewish people have endured unspeakable suffering. From *Churban* to pogrom to exile to Inquisition, all leading up to the unimaginable losses during the Holocaust, we have plenty to mourn for. Yet, when we look at the Jewish calendar, while *Chazal* set aside *Tisha B'av* (and the Three Weeks) as a mourning period for basically everything else, we devote almost five full weeks to remember the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's students. Not to sound crass, but mathematically, "only" 24,000 students died during that period. Of course it was tragic, but over any given **three-day** period in Auschwitz during the *Shoah* the Nazis regularly eclipsed that number. Why do we devote so little of our calendar to the Holocaust and so much of it to a seemingly smaller tragedy in the course of Jewish history?

I would like to suggest two possible answers to this difficult question. First and foremost, even as we enjoy the blessings of the Land of Israel, we nevertheless live in a time of exile. Without the *Beit Hamikdash* and *Sandhedrin*, we lack the ability to enact religious legislation. Even if we could agree on a specific day to devote to the Holocaust (which we can't – just think about the never-ending debate about *Yom Hashoah*), we couldn't establish that day in *halachically* binding manner. Of course we should have a fast day for the Holocaust. But we're stuck in *halachic* limbo, a situation which will continue until we either reestablish the Sanhedrin (something we could but won't do), or *Moshiach* arrives, whichever comes first.

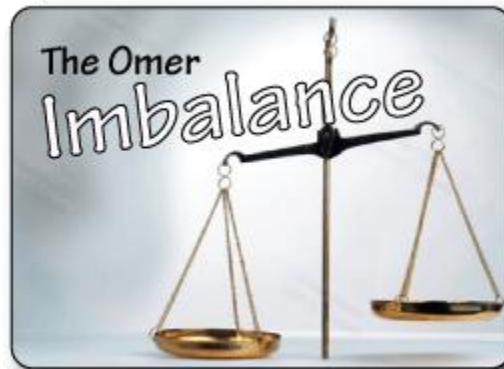
Yet, there's another, deeper origin for the mourning period of *Sefirat Ha'omer*, which explains why we observe such an extended period of mourning.

Rav Moshe Zvi Neria zt"l (the former head of *Yeshivot Bnei Akiva*) noted (see [41 מס' עלון מסי' - מאמרי אמונת עתיד](#)) that the *Gemara* conveys precious little information about the death of Rabbi Akiva's students. In fact, all we know is that they died, *בזה*, – מפני שלא נהגו כבוד זה בזה – "because they did not demonstrate honor towards each-other." (*Yevamot* 62b) This in and of itself seems troubling: how could it be that the students of Rabbi Akiva, whose mantra specifically focused on interpersonal relations ("Love your neighbor as yourself"), did not adhere to his central tenet? How were they his students if they failed to follow his most basic teachings?

Rav Sherira Gaon recorded the story of their deaths somewhat differently, writing: *והיה שמד על תלמידי רבי עקיבא* – "and there was a persecution against the students

of Rabbi Akiva." (*Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon*, 1,1) We still must wonder the persecution focused specifically on Rabbi Akiva's students?

Rav Neria answers these questions by reexamining a famous story that appears in the *Gemara* (*Brachot* 60b-61a).



A person should always be in the habit of saying, 'Everything that God does is for the good.' Just as [happened] to Rabbi Akiva, who was travelling on the road. When he arrived at that [unnamed] place, he sought out housing and they did not give it to him. He said, 'Everything that God does is for the good.' He went and slept in the wilderness. With him were a rooster, a donkey and a lantern. A wind came and extinguished the

lamp; a cat came and ate the rooster; a lion came and ate the donkey. He said, 'Everything that God does is for the good.' That night, the legion came and sacked the town. He said to them (the people with him), 'Did I not tell you, 'Everything that God does is for the good.'?

Rav Zvi Yehudah Kook zt"l notes that the story itself seems to defy logic. Imagine that Rabbi Akiva arrived in our hometown looking for a place to stay overnight. Can we imagine of a scenario in which we would refuse a great Torah sage a place to stay, forcing him to sleep unprotected in the wilderness? Rav Kook explains that the episode occurred during the time of the Bar Kochba rebellion. The Romans had already gained the upper hand and had begun searching for the leaders of the rebellion, including Rabbi Akiva and his students. It stands to reason that the Romans threatened any city which harbored any member of the rebellion with swift, devastating retribution. When Rabbi Akiva arrived at the town, the people refused to house him and his entourage for fear of attracting Roman vengeance. The Romans did attack the city, and despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that they came away empty-handed, the town was destroyed.

We can readily understand why the *Gemara* doesn't mention this episode explicitly. *Chazal* often engaged in self-censoring so as not to stir up foreign powers in whose midst the Jewish people resided. Nonetheless, the *Gemara* alludes ever so cryptically to Rabbi Akiva's leading role in the Bar Kochba rebellion, giving us an indication about the cause of his student's demise and the nature of the mourning period that we observe during the Omer.

During the *Omer* period, we mourn not just the death of Rabbi Akiva's students, but the failure of their cause. Rabbi

Akiva hoped for nothing less than the conquest of Yerushalayim and the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash. He hoped to usher in the Messianic era, with all of the promise for repairing the world that this entailed. Had Rabbi Akiva succeeded, all the pogroms and persecutions would never have taken place. There would have been no Inquisition, no Chmielnicki Massacres and certainly no Holocaust.

Alas, God ordained them to fail. The Jewish people and the world were not yet ready for true redemption. But the failure of a Messianic movement was so devastating that Chazal even saw fit to override the normal joyous period of Nissan with the mourning of the Omer (something modern-day rabbinic leaders are simply unwilling to do regarding Yom Hashoah). Seen in this light, we can understand why the scope of mourning for Sefirat Ha'omer overwhelms all other religious mourning periods. It was worse because the death of Rabbi Akiva's students opened the door for the centuries of Jewish suffering that followed.

Why does the Gemara then explain that Rabbi Akiva's students died because, "they did not practice respect towards each-other?" This description seems to indicate that they failed to comprehend even his most basic teachings. Perhaps his "students" – the leaders of the rebellion - truly failed to understand his motivations. He wanted to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash; they wanted Jewish sovereignty. He wanted אגודת קדושים – "A nation of priests and a holy people"; they wanted a secular state. So they failed, and the rest, as they say, was history.

Describing Rabbi Akiva's rebellion, Rabbi Pinchas Stolper [writes](#),

The rebellion raged for six years. Bar Kochba's army achieved many initial victories. Many non Jews joined Bar Kochba's army -- it is reported that it grew to 350,000 men -- more men than the Roman Army. Bar Kochba was so successful that Hadrian called in all of his best troops from England and Gaul. Rome felt threatened as never before. On Lag Ba'Omer, it is believed by some, Bar Kochba's army reconquered Jerusalem, and we celebrate that great event today. For four years Jewish independence was restored. Many believe that Bar Kochba actually began to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash, the Temple. Some even believe that he completed the building of the Third Temple.

There were two Roman legions in the country when the uprising began, one in Jerusalem and one near Megido. Both were decimated by Bar Kochba's men. Reinforcements were dispatched from Trans-Jordan, Syria and Egypt but these, too, were mauled. The legion sent from Egypt, the 22nd, disappeared from the listings of military units published in Rome, and scholars speculate that it was cut up so badly, probably around Lachish, that it ceased to exist as an organized force. The Jews apparently employed guerilla tactics - foraging from their underground lairs, ambushing convoys and striking at night.

In desperation, Hadrian sent for his best commander, Julius Severus, who was then engaged in battle at the hills of far off Wales. Severus imported legions from the

lands of Britain, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria. So badly had the Romans been hurt in the bruising campaign that Severus, upon returning to Rome to report to the Senate on his success, omitted the customary formula "I and my army are well".

This was total war. In the middle of the effort to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash the tide turned and Bar Kochba lost the support of Rabbi Akiva and the Sages who backed him. What happened? Bar Kochba had murdered the Tannah Rabbi Elazar. He accused the great Rabbi of revealing the secret entrances of the fortress city of Betar to the Romans. It is now believed that this betrayal was the work of the Jewish Christians who wanted to undermine Bar Kochba. Rabbi Akiva then realized that Bar Kochba no longer possessed the qualities which initially led him to believe that he was the Messiah.

There was an additional spiritual dimension to the failure of the Messiah-ship of Bar Kochba as well; whether the spiritual failure of Rabbi Akiva's students was the cause -- or whether it was the failure of Bar Kochba to rise to the spiritual heights expected of the Messiah is beyond our knowledge. For then - out of the blue, the great plague Askera descended and struck. The dream collapsed. For reasons that will probably forever remain obscure, the students of Rabbi Akiva were not considered by Heaven to have reached the supreme spiritual heights necessary to bring about the Messianic Age. As great as they were, an important factor was missing.

Seen in this light, the only comparable loss that I can imagine would be the destruction, God forbid, of the State of Israel. Over the past sixty years, we've embarked on Rabbi Akiva's journey – albeit without his guiding vision. We've witnessed amazing military victories against our enemies. Despite the efforts of our enemies, Israel enjoys safety, security and unprecedented economic success.

But we find ourselves at a critical fork in the road. It cannot be coincidental that all of the events relating to the Modern State of Israel, from the declaration of the State to the conquest of Yerushalayim, took place during Sefirat Ha'omer. I get the sense that these events must repair the tragedy of the Omer of old. But whether that happens depends upon us. Will we transform this incredible experiment from the ראשית צמיחת גאולתנו – the beginning of the first flowering of the redemption – into something more tangible? Now that we have some semblance of safety, are we taking the next step? Or, will we too misunderstand the mission, settle for a secular state without any larger aspirations, and risk the same devastating consequences?