

RAV MOSHE TZVI NERIYAH: THE LEGACY OF RABBI AKIVA

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The Talmud (*Yevamot* 62b) relates that Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of students, and all of them died between the holidays of Pesach and Shavuot because they did not act respectfully with one another.

Rav Moshe Tzvi Neriya, a student of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook's, asks a well-known question: how could the students of Rabbi Akiva act in this fashion? Was it not Rabbi Akiva himself who noted that the Torah's commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself" is a central tenet of the Torah? (Sifra to Vayikra 19:18, cited by Rashi ad loc.) Additionally, Rav Neriya notes the comment of the Talmud (*Pesachim* 22b), that Rabbi Akiva was the one who expounded the word "et" in the verse "*et Hashem Elokecha tira*" — you shall be in awe of the Lord your G-d — to include Torah scholars, emphasizing the special respect they deserve. Is it really possible that students who had been hearing such messages could act so disrespectfully to each other, so much so that they all deserved death!?

Rav Neriya answers by citing sources in the Talmud, Ge'onim, and Rishonim¹ that indicate that the students of Rabbi Akiva were actually guerilla fighters as part of Shimon Bar Kochva's revolt against

the Romans. Rav Neriya also suggests that Talmudic self-censorship led to the omission of more direct mentions of these circumstances.

He further cites *Berachot* 46b-47a:

תנו רבנן אין מכבדין לא בדרכים ולא בגשרים
ולא בידים מזוהמות.

The Rabbis taught: One should not show honor [to greater people by according them precedence] on paths, on bridges, or when their hands are dirty [and they need to be washed].

Rav Neriya argues that surely the students of Rabbi Akiva behaved honorably with each other in their daily lives. But when it came to the "paths" and "bridges" that they were fighting on, there was no reason to give friends, or even elders, a preference — in fact, it was prohibited to do so. As partisans fighting in forests to defend Eretz Yisrael, there was a need to do the best possible job, no matter who was fighting next to you, and how much greater in Torah they may have been. The Torah itself deemed it necessary to temporarily place Rabbi Akiva's teachings aside so they could be successful in battle for this important goal. This is what the Talmud was trying to hint to us by telling us that they did not act respectfully with one another — they were in a circumstance where such behavior was impossible,



Rav Moshe Tzvi Neriya zt"l
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fighting a war to defend their beloved homeland.

Known for his involvement in establishing Bnei Akiva, as well as in founding many high schools and Yeshivot Hesder that combined love of the Land of Israel with Torah education, Rav Neriya truly carried the message of Rabbi Akiva and the passion of his students with him. Torah study, the love of Am Yisrael, and the love of Eretz Yisrael were all dear to Rabbi Akiva, his students, and Rav Neriya. May we merit to continue their legacies for many years to come.

Endnotes

1 See, for example, Yerushalmi, *Ta'anit* 4:5, Bavli, *Sanhedrin* 93b, *Berachot* 48b, 60b, *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon* 1:1, Rambam, *Melachim* 11:3, *Ta'anit* 5:3.