

## **Post-Pesach Blues** **Rabbi Maury Grebenau**

*It was said that R. Akiba had twelve thousand pairs of disciples, from Gabbatha to Antipatris, and all of them died at the same time because they did not treat each other with respect... A Tanna taught: All of them died between Passover and Pentecost. R. Hama b. Abba or, it might be said, R. Hiyya b. Abin said: All of them died a cruel death. What was it? — R. Nahman replied: Askera (T.B. Yevamos 62b Soncino translation)*

When we think of the time between Pesach and Shavous known as Sefirs HaOmer (the counting of the Omer) we frequently think of it as a subdued time. If one looks in the Torah itself they may be surprised to see that the time between Pesach and Shavous is not characterized by mourning at all. If anything, it would seem to be a festive time when we enjoy the new harvest and await the receiving of the Torah on Shavous. The customs of mourning that are observed during this period are a later development. The above piece of Talmud is the source mentioned by the codifiers as the reason for the customary mourning, which recalls the tragic deaths of so many great Torah scholars.

When we take a close look at this piece of Talmud there are a number of things that stand out. Why does the Talmud go to such pains to tell us details that don't seem to be significant? The nature of the plague as well as the exact time that the plague occurred, don't seem to be vital information. Additionally, it is interesting to note that the Talmud chooses to relay the number of students who died as 12,000 pairs, instead of 24,000 people. The higher number would seem to be a better way to stress the enormity of the tragedy; why does the Talmud choose to express it in this way? Once we have a broader perspective many of the pieces will fall into place.

The Talmud states that the reason the students died was that, “they did not treat each other with respect.” This is certainly unfortunate, and all the more problematic since they were students of Torah, and yet such devastation seems harsh. Why is this so heinous a crime to deserve such an unforgiving punishment? The answer may begin with the teacher, Rabbi Akiva. One of Rabbi Akiva's most famous teachings is his view on the most important verse in the Torah<sup>1</sup>. He chooses, ‘*V'Ahavta LaReecha Kamocha*' – ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Rabbi Akiva who was so passionate about the respect one must show his fellow was the teacher of these students. This compounded an already serious offense.

The plague is mentioned because the nature of *Askera* is that it is a disease that begins in the mouth, and is therefore associated by the Talmud (Shabbos 33a) with the sins of speech. This too highlights their unfortunate mistake and stresses that it was a punishment from Hashem. The Talmud also stresses the fact that these students were chevrusahs - learning partners who were expected to have close relationships. The

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<sup>1</sup> R' Akiva is quoted as stressing the importance of this pasuk in numerous places (for example Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:4) but the Midrash regarding the most important pasuk is found in the introduction to the Iyun Yaakov

relationship of a chevrusah involves assisting your partner in his own Torah growth. It demands a deep respect between partners, there was no room for the behavior of these students. For this reason the Talmud stresses that there were 12,000 pairs, again demonstrating the inappropriateness of their behavior.

The time period is a final example. The days leading up to Shavous are a transition between the freedom we experiences upon leaving Egypt and the national acceptance of the Torah. There was much preparation that was necessary for us to be primed for Hashem's precious gift. It is specifically during this time when we need to strive to the level that the Jewish people reached when they stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai ready to receive the Torah. Rashi (Shemos 19:2) says that the Jewish people were 'like one man with one heart.' This period is a time for us to join together as a nation, and yet Rabbi Akiva's students picked this time of year to undermine their sense of unity. Let us not forget the harsh lesson that Rabbi Akiva's students learned, we must use this time to become closer and solidify ourselves as a people as we all prepare for the gift of the Torah and the exciting revelation of Hashem, that is Shavout.