

## **Message in the Mourning** **Rabbi Maury Grebenau**

If we take a look at the numbers, the custom of mourning for 33 days of the Omer seems to be very unusual. This is close to 10% of the Jewish calendar which is a very long time to be mourning. The Tur (Orech Chaim 493) tells us that the mourning is due to the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students. We have unfortunately experienced much loss in our History and are hard pressed to find such a lengthy and involved mourning period. Even for the commemoration of the destruction of both Temples and the many lives which were lost in that period we have only three weeks of mourning. For Rabbi Akiva himself and the other nine leaders of the generation who were killed (*asarah harugei malchiyut*) we have a mention twice a year<sup>1</sup> but no days of mourning.

There is a second reason that this custom of mourning is counterintuitive. The period of the Omer, from Pesach to Shavout, is in its essence a happy and exciting time. We are counting up to receiving the Torah and are eagerly anticipating our experience at Har Sinai. According to the Sefer HaChinuch and others, this excitement is the very essence of the counting of the Omer. The idea of having an overlay which seems to run so counter to the basic character of the day is surprising.

If we look back at the Gemara which records their deaths, we can draw out an important lesson which may help to answer our questions. The Gemara (Yaevamos 62b) which famously speaks about their deaths due to a lack of respect for one another also contains a second part which is less well known. It tells of Rabbi Akiva's second set of students which were just five but they were the ones who carried the Torah forward to the next generation. This second group represented the authors whose statements populate the vast majority of the Mishna and other Tanaitic works<sup>2</sup>. Rav Shrirah Goan, in his famous letter, spends time explaining why the vast majority of the Mishna is comments from this generation and mainly from R' Akiva's later students. Without going into the details of his answer, we see that this second set of students were able to succeed where the first group failed and thereby helped create the backbone of the structure of the Oral Torah.

In this light, the main point of the Gemara is to contrast the two groups of students and the message seems to be that in order to be someone who carries the Torah forward to the next generation scholarship is not enough. The Gemara explains that R' Akiva's original students did not accord the proper respect to one another. It seems that in order to really have the Torah transmit to the next generation we must have excellent Middot (character traits) as well as great Torah knowledge. This is clearly reflected in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Avot where the 48 ways of

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<sup>1</sup> Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av

<sup>2</sup> See T.B. Sanhedrin 86a that any unauthored statements in the Mishna are attributable to R' Meir, one of the five students and similar statements are made about the works of Midrashei Halacha.

acquiring the Torah are listed<sup>3</sup>. The vast majority of them have much more to do with character development than erudition in Torah.

I learned this lesson over the years of watching a friend of mine when I was learning in YU. When I first got to YU we were both in the same shiur. This fellow would spend the entire three hours of preparation time every morning trying to understand what the rebbe had said the day before. He worked hard but it seemed clear that intellectually he wasn't cut out for the shiur. There were so many other programs to choose from and so many other shiurim, I felt that someone should tell him that he would be better served in another shiur. But he persevered and slowly began to understand what was going on. Over the next six years or so I watched him surpass the other people in the shiur and become one of the strongest students in the Beit Midrash. I learned a lot about willpower and our ability to become smarter<sup>4</sup> but as I look back another lesson emerges. This fellow had some of the most sterling middot of anyone; I think it was no coincidence that he was able to grow so much in Torah.

This is the lesson of Rabbi Akiva's students which is important enough to be recalled even during this time and for so long. So this overlay really is also all about getting ready to accept the Torah and recognizing the need to grow in our middot in order to accept the Torah. It meshes perfectly with the character of the days and is not really a break from the central idea of the Omer at all. In addition, the need for an extended period is also a direct result of this message. Becoming an expert in the laws of the Torah is time consuming and difficult but even more challenging is to change ourselves into vessels which can accept the Torah and transmit it to the next generation. This was in some way the failing of Rabbi Akiva's first students and the success of his later students. Every year we need to be reminded of these models as we approach Shavout. The message in the mourning is a basic idea about how to approach accepting the Torah.

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<sup>3</sup> Many appropriately map them to the days of the Omer with one day at the end to bring all the qualities together

<sup>4</sup> We now refer to this as neuroplasticity and it is well documented that our brain does indeed have the capacity to grow. See, for example, Carol Dweck's research in her book *Mindset*