

DOES COMPETITION CONFLICT WITH UNITY?

CASE STUDY

The Jewish Metro Center was recently founded to introduce young Jewish professionals to Judaism. They decided to hold a big event the night of Shavuot with an extraordinary lineup of speakers and an all-night buffet. Members of Congregation Shalom V'Achdut, the established synagogue in town, complain to their rabbi in frustration and say, "Our shul will be empty on Shavuot night because everyone will be at the Center!" The rabbi replies, "If they spend the whole night learning, what's the problem?"

As a longtime member of the congregation, how might you respond?

THE SOURCE

רבי עקיבא אומר שנים עשר אלפים תלמידים היו לי מגבת ועד אנטיפרס וכולן מתו בחיי בין פסח לעצרת ובסוף העמידו לי שבעה ... אמר להם הראשונים לא מתו אלא מפני שהיתה עיניהם צרה בתורה זה לזה אתם לא תהיו כן. קהלת רבה יא:

R. Akiva said: I had 24,000 students all over the country and they all died in my lifetime between Pesach and Shavuot and in the end I developed seven ...

He said to them: The original students died because they were resentful of each other's Torah accomplishments. You should not be like this.

Kohelet Rabbah 11:10

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

If the Midrash above quotes R. Akiva as stating that the students died because of resentment (עיניהם צרה בתורה), why does the Talmud, *Yevamot* 62b, state that they died because of lack of honor towards one another (שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה)?

Insight #1

One should never be resentful of other's accomplishments in the hope that they fail. However, one can and should envy the accomplishments of others in order to motivate oneself to be a better person.

Commentary of Rabbeinu Yonah to Avot 4:21

Insight #2

The Midrash and the Talmud are not giving conflicting accounts. R. Akiva's students behaved disrespectfully towards one another, and the root cause of that behavior was that they were resentful of the accomplishments of one another.

R. Yosef Kahaneman, cited in Siftei Chaim, Moadim III pg. 45

Insight #3

We should never be resentful of other people's Torah accomplishments because the ultimate goal of service of God is to honor His name. We are all teammates in that mission and we should work as teammates, not opponents to achieve that goal.

R. Yechezkel Levenstein, Ohr Yechezkel Vol. IV pg. 138

Digging Deeper: Can you think of one example in your life where envy was used positively? Negatively? What was the end result in each situation?

Digging Deeper: When we see two groups in conflict, how can one determine the root cause of the conflict? What can be done once that is determined?

Digging Deeper: Based on R. Levenstein, how should the members in the case study respond to their rabbi?

Additional Texts for Further Exploration

Ramban, Vayikra 19:18

The phrase “love your neighbor as yourself” is an exaggeration because a person cannot love his friend as much as he loves himself. Furthermore, R. Akiva already taught that your life comes before the life of your friend. Rather the commandment is to love one’s neighbor unconditionally, the same way one loves oneself absolutely ... because sometimes one will love a neighbor for specific things and not others, such as a desire that the neighbor succeeds in his financial pursuits but not in his pursuit of wisdom ... This verse commands that we should not have this type of envy in our hearts, but we should love all of the successes of our friends the same way we love our own success and we should not have any limits on this love.

רמב"ן, ויקרא יט:יח
וטעם ואהבת לרעך כמוך - הפלגה, כי לא יקבל לב האדם שיאהוב את חברו כאהבתו את נפשו, ועוד שכבר בא רבי עקיבא ולמד חייד קודמין לחיי חברך. אלא מצות התורה שיאהב חברו בכל ענין כאשר יאהב את נפשו בכל הטוב ... כי פעמים שיאהב אדם את רעהו בדברים ידועים להטיבו בעושר ולא בחכמה וכיוצא בזה ... ויצוה הכתוב שלא תהיה פחיתות הקנאה הזאת בלבו, אבל יאהב ברבות הטובה לחברו כאשר אדם עושה לנפשו ולא יתן שיעורין באהבה.

R. Akiva is known to have said that “Love Your Neighbor” is a great principle of the Torah. Compare and contrast Ramban’s formulation of “Love Your Neighbor” with Rabbi Akiva’s charge to his students not to be resentful of one another’s accomplishments.

Shemot 4:10-14

10 And Moses said to the Lord: 'Oh Lord, I am not a man of words, not yesterday, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.' ... 14 And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses, and He said: 'Is there not Aharon your brother the Levi? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, **he is coming to meet you; and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart.**

שמות ד:י-יד
י ויאמר משה אל ה' בי אֲדַנִּי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנִכִּי גַם מִתְמוּל גַּם מִשְׁלֵשׁ גַּם מֵאִזְ דִּבְרָה אֶל עֲבָדֶךָ כִּי כָבֵד פֶּה וְכַבֵּד לְשׁוֹן אֲנִכִּי: ... יד וַיִּחַר אֵף ה' בְּמֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הָלֹא אַחִיךָ הַלְוִי יִדְעָתִי כִּי דָבָר יְדַבֵּר הוּא וְגַם הִנֵּה הוּא יֵצֵא לִקְרֹאתֶךָ וַיִּרְאֶךָ וַיִּשְׂמַח בְּלִבּוֹ:

Shabbat 139a

R. Milai said, as a reward for “and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart,” [Aharon] merited wearing the breastplate of justice on his heart.

שבת קלט.
אמר רבי מלאי בשכר וראך ושמה בלבו וזכה לחשן המשפט על לבו.

Why do you think Aharon specifically merited the breastplate of justice for being happy about Moshe’s appointment? What does being happy about the success of others have to do with justice?

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