



Sefirat HaOmer



English version

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Love vs. Respect

Sefirat Haomer is a time of character refinement. 12,000 pairs, 24,000 students of R Akiva, all died at this time for not honoring each other. (Yevamot 62b) The main Avodah during the Omer is to correct that Middah of respect.

There are three questions one can ask. R' Akiva taught that the main rule of the entire Torah is to love your friend as you love yourself. (Sifra Kedoshim, Yerushalmi 9 Nedarim) How could R Akiva's own students transgress the main teaching of their mentor? And why did this happen, specifically, between Pesach and Shavuoth? Also, isn't it strange that R Akiva's students are referred to as 12,000 "pairs", and not 24,000 disciples?

The Shem Mishmuel answers with a beautiful twist. But first, he writes a lesson about respect. Respecting another is only possible if you recognize that the other person has a strength that you, yourself, don't have, or if he is superior to you in some way. Respect usually stems from recognizing that the other person is greater than oneself in a certain aspect of his personality.

However, in your own body, your right hand will not show respect to your left hand. Your toe will not show respect for your ear, for both are part of one body. Respect is not applicable

here; no one part is greater than another, for they are all part of the same "one". The students of R' Akiva learned the importance of loving one another, *but they took their Rabbi's teaching of love to the extreme*. Each one felt that the others were a part of himself. They failed to accord to one another individual identity. As if they were all one. And this was their mistake. Love has no boundaries. But respect does. They loved each other with boundless love, in a way that they all felt one. That is why they are referred to as "pairs", for no one had an identity or a boundary.

Heimish is a good thing, as long as it is not too heimish. Because when there are no boundaries, there is no respect. Aharon's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, died because of this. They got too close to G-d. Their sin was *בקרבתם לפני ה'*. They did not realize their boundaries. And this is the reason why R Akiva's students died during the Sefirah. The Sefirah is a time where we count days and we count weeks. Where we give value to both: collectivity for weeks and individuality for days. The students of R' Akiva were on such a high level that they were expected to notice this lesson of balancing individuality with unity and learn from it.

This is a lesson for all areas of life. The best way to treat your wife is how you treated her



before she became your wife. The best way to treat your children is as if they are guests, even though they are your guests for 20+ years. Treat them with no less respect than you would treat your neighbor's children. Once you perceive the kids as part of a family, part of a whole, and with no individuality, identities become blurred. The formula to the successful family is found in the balance between individuality and collectiveness. As the Haggadah mentions אחד חכם אחד רשע וכו' One the wise, one the wicked, one the simpleton, one that doesn't know how to ask. Why one, one, one, one? Because in order for your family to function with harmony, you have to respect each child for what he is, with his own individuality and identity.

The Mishna teaches, רבי אומר, איזוהי דרך ישרה, שיבור לו האדם, כל שהיא תפארת לעושיה ותפארת לו מן האדם. (Avot 2;1) A successful relationship, a lifelong relationship, is a balanced one. I once saw a refrigerator magnet that said, "Love is not looking into each other's eyes. Love is looking in the same direction". I would like to take the theory that love is about going in the "same direction" a step further. Love and relationships are like driving a car. A good driver, a smooth driver, knows how to efficiently balance two crucial elements in his car: the gas pedal and the brakes. If you overuse or underuse either of these, no one will want to be your passenger.

In the journey of relationships, there are also two pedals. There is the pedal of love. You push that pedal each time you give of your time, money, effort or soul. Saying yes. No boundaries. What is mine is yours. That is the pedal of love.

And then, there is the brake pedal. Knowing when to say no. How to say no. How to stand up for yourself. How to respect yourself and

your boundaries, so that you can also respect others and their boundaries. Although the gas pedal is very important to get you where you want to go, if there are no brakes, do not get into that car!

All relationships have two main factors. Dos and Don'ts. The do's of a relationship do not carry as much weight as the don'ts. You can give all your money, all your time, your whole Neshama, all the "do's", but if you are not careful to refrain from the things that you are not supposed to do, the "don'ts", the whole relationship can come crashing down.

A common misinterpretation many Orthodox Jews have is that a Mitzvah means a good deed. A mitzvah is a commandment. The root of the word is, צוה which means command. Or, on a deeper level, a Mitzvah is a way of building a bond between the Jew and His Creator, from the word, צוותא, together.

There are positive commandments and there are negative commandments. And, just as the negative commandments are much more severe than the positive commandments, relationship issues are usually problems with Don'ts more than they are with Do's. My experience in helping people improve socially tells me the following. Those who are doing great with the do's but not with the don'ts have much rockier relationships than those who are good with the don'ts, but not with the do's.

Jackie Robinson, the first African American baseball player said something I can't forget. "I'm not concerned with your liking or disliking me... All I ask is that you respect me as a human being". Respect is not earned through achievement. It is insignificant what another person has accomplished. Respect is because the other person is a human being, and because he is created in the image of G-d.



A Lag B'Omer Lesson

I got a call the other day from New York. It was from a girl who was dating, who was confused. “I want to marry a boy that is learning. The boy I am dating wants to learn in Kollel for a few years. But I do not want to take on myself responsibility for the financial department of the family. My parents will support us, and I want to be honest to my future husband about how long I am okay with him staying in learning. My parents are willing to help for a limited amount of time, but then, what? I do not want my husband to expect me to get money from my parents for him to stay in learning longer, if they are not ready to continue their support...” (see Rama EH, 2;1)

There is no one answer to this question, and the subject is very, very complex. There are many girls who approach this dilemma by somehow saying to the boy they want to marry exactly what the boy would want to hear. And they hope for the best. This girl, though, wanted to be honest, open and fair.

This is what I told her. I hope that it was the right answer. Learning in Kollel, dedicating the first few years of marriage to learning Torah, has great advantages. The learning after marriage is totally different from the learning before marriage, and if one takes it seriously, he will merit to start his marriage on the right foot. Something that is invaluable.

But this girl was talking about more than just a year or two. So I told her what I learnt from my Rebbe. The Rambam says, “And why did the Tribe of Levi not merit a portion in the Land of Israel along with their brothers?

Because the Tribe of Levi was set apart to serve G-d and to teach His straightforward ways to the People, and that is why Levites do not go to war, and G-d is their portion. And not only the Tribe of Levi is such, but each and every man of the world, whose spirit is uplifted, and his intellect is capable of grasping this concept, to stand before G-d and to serve Him, to know G-d,... and he throws off his shoulders the burdens of calculations that people make for themselves; this person becomes sanctified as holy of holies, and G-d will be his portion, and his inheritance, for ever and ever. And he will deserve to have his needs met in this world, just as the needs of the Kohen and Levi's needs were met by G-d.” (Shmitta Vayobel 13; 12 -13)

Of course, it makes sense that if you can't pay bills and you do not have a way - a source from which to pay back loans, your husband will have to consider getting a job. If he can swing it, a job in Kodesh would be great, like teaching, or something similar. But the honest answer of how the Kollel person, or the person in Kodesh live, is that he lives without planning. As long as he can make it through the month, he can stay in Kollel. But the essence of a Kollel person, the essence of working in true Kiruv, or in true teaching, is not worrying about where you will have next month's money from. Of course, live with a plan. But if the plan is taking over the learning, teaching, etc., then this is not the real Shevet Levi. Part of working for G-d is knowing that you will not know how G-d will set up your future. Tell the boy, that you are supportive of having him learn, not supporting him to learn. As long as he is dedicated, and you aren't



borrowing money you can't pay back, you are willing to live on as tight a budget as you can, while still feeling "normal".

This is something that we learn from R Shimon Bar Yochai. R' Ovadia M'Bartenurah, R' Chaim Vital, the Chidah and Sdei Chemed say that R' Shimon passed away on Lag B'Omer, and it is a day of celebration. Why do we celebrate Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the Omer? If R' Shimon died on that day, shouldn't we be sad, not happy? And aren't we supposed to be sad that the students of R' Akiva perished?

The Chattam Soffer explains that Lag B'Omer was 33 days after the Jews left Egypt. It took them 30 days to finish the supply of Matza they carried on their back. And, for three days they went without bread. Day 33 was the day they received the Mannah.

R' Shimon Bar Yochai in the Mechilta (D'Rebbi Yishmael, Parashat Beshalach) writes that the Torah was given only to those who ate the Mannah. The reason why the ones who ate the Manna merited receiving the Torah is because the only way to really learn the Torah well is by not worrying about tomorrow's bread. If you saved some Mannah for tomorrow, it got wormy. The more

engrossed in Torah you became, the more conveniently the Mannah was available to you. This is what kept R Shimon and his son alive in the cave.

The Talmud in Berachot(35b) brings the opinion of R Shimon Bar Yochai, that when someone studies Torah, and does the Will of G-d, their work will be done by other people. Not everyone is cut out for this. But those who take upon themselves responsibility to bring G-dliness to the World have a firm basis to support their decision.

This day of Lag B'Omer is the day that R Akiva taught the Oral Torah and ordained his last five students. (Kaf Hachaim תצג:כ) That was the only link of the chain of the Oral Torah from Har Sinai, to the Torah we have today.(Sanhedrin 86a) In the merit of this day, we have all of the Oral Torah. And on his last day, Lag B'Omer, R Shimon allowed his student R' Abba to write the Hidden Torah. Being that R Shimon was the greatest of R Akiva's five students, and being that despite the hardships R' Shimon went through, he died a *natural* death, Lag Baomer is a day of celebration. A day to commemorate the light of Torah we have in the world, in the merit of those people who dedicate their lives to Torah learning.

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