

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

בס"ד

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Gershon ben Yakov.
"May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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15 IYAR

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS EMOR

Like Father Like Son

And the son of an Israelite woman, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel....and he pronounced the Name (of Hashem) and cursed. And they brought him to Moshe... (24:10-11)

The last section of this week's *parsha* deals with the unfortunate story of the individual that cursed Hashem by using the explicit name that he heard at Mount Sinai (see Rashi ad loc). He was then jailed until it could be determined how he was to be punished. Hashem informed Moshe that the punishment for cursing Hashem is death by stoning.

Remarkably, the Torah then interjects into the story several seemingly irrelevant laws: "A man who mortally strikes another human shall be put to death [...] A man who inflicts a wound on another shall be punished in a like manner; a break for a break, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth..." (24:17-20). Additionally, there are several laws of jurisprudence regarding making restitution for injuring an animal. The Torah then continues with the narrative of the story, and the *parsha*

ends with the blasphemer being taken outside the camp and stoned to death.

What is the reason for the interjection of these laws into the story line? Why did Hashem see fit to include them in His answer to Moshe?

Rashi (ad loc) points out that the blasphemer's father was the Egyptian that Moshe killed in Egypt. This was the Egyptian that had attacked a Jew the day before and Moshe killed him with the explicit name of Hashem. There is a fascinating Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 58b) which uses that story as proof that a non-Jew who strikes a Jew is punished with death. The very next line in the Gemara states "and so R' Chanina said, one who hits a Jew on the chin it is as if he hit the chin of the *Shechina*."

The Gemara is teaching us that an attack on a Jew is an attack on God Himself. The



Egyptian who struck a Jew was put to death by Moshe because his act was considered an attack on God. Remarkably, the same explicit name that Moshe used to kill the father of the blasphemer is the name that gets cursed by the blasphemer. In other words, his father was killed for an indirect attack on God and his son took it a step further by directly attacking God.

It is for this reason that the story is interrupted by the laws of killing and maiming a Jew: an attack on a Jew is the same as an attack on God. The point is driven home by the placement of these laws in the narrative of the story of the direct attack on God. Quite possibly, the other laws of jurisprudence are included to teach us that when we punish someone we also have to be cognizant that he too is a reflection of Hashem, and we must treat him with the utmost care in the process of meting out justice.

Did You Know...

Next week we celebrate Lag B'Omer. Though many activities and community gatherings are currently prohibited due to coronavirus, there are multiple *minhagim* for this special day that one could still observe at home with the family. Of course, we recommend only shooting arrows, lighting bonfires, and having barbecues if you have a backyard where you can safely do so.

The question is, why do we do all of these things? Why is this day such a day of celebration?

Why do we light bonfires (aside from being a "kosher" outlet for pyromania)? Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, the greatest of the students of R' Akiva, passed away on this day. In the *Zohar* (3:291a), it relates that the overwhelming flood of spiritual light had such a potent effect on the world that the sun did not set until Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai had finished conveying his wisdom and passed on, and that a spiritual fire surrounded his deathbed the entire day (*Zohar* 3:296b). We light fires

to commemorate the spiritual revelation that occurred on this day.

So why is this day such a celebration? The reason is that Rabbi Shimon was convicted of a capital crime by the Romans. By all rights, he should have died well before his time. But through tremendous self-sacrifice (hiding in the cave for 12 years) and a series of miracles (the carob tree and the stream that gave him food and water), Rabbi Shimon was able to live out a full life. Some say he left the cave on this day (*Orah Chaim* 493, 7).

Teachers and Students

The Gemara (*Yevamos* 62b) relates the tragic demise of Rabbi Akiva's students who perished between Pesach and Shavuot: "It was said that Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 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. The world remained desolate until Rabbi Akiva came to our Masters in the South and taught the Torah to them. These were Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yose, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua; and it was they who revived the Torah at that time."

Probably the most difficult question that must be asked is: How can the students of R' Akiva, the man who famously taught "love thy friend as thy self" as a major principle of the Torah, be guilty of not according proper respect to their friends? They are identified as the students of R' Akiva; how is it possible that R' Akiva's guiding principle would be ignored by his very own students? Additionally, why does the Talmud recount the story as 12,000 pairs of students, why not just simply say 24,000 students perished?

It must be pointed out that the Gemara never said that the students of R' Akiva

were disrespectful to one another. The Gemara seems to say that they didn't treat one another with enough respect. What does this mean?

There are two seemingly contradictory *Mishnayos* in *Pirkei Avos*. In the second chapter, the *Mishna* (either 10 or 15 depending on which edition you're using) says, "R' Eliezer says – let the honor of your friend be as precious to you as your own." In the fourth chapter, the *Mishna* (either 12 or 15) says, "R' Elazar ben Shammua says – the honor of your friend should be like the reverence of your teacher." Well, which one is it? Should the honor of your friend be as precious as your own or as precious as your teacher's?

There is no contradiction. There are different types of friends. Maimonides, in his commentary (*Perek 1, Mishna 6*) on the words "acquire for yourself a friend," explains that there are three levels of friendship. The highest level, according to Maimonides, is where each friend is helping the other grow and reach his potential as they learn from one another. Maimonides continues "and this is similar to the love of a student for his teacher and of a teacher to his student." In other

words, there is a type of friendship in which the relationship demands that each person treats the other as if he were his teacher.

That is what R' Elazar ben Shammua meant by "the honor of your friend should be as precious as the reverence of your teacher." This is what the students of R' Akiva failed to do. They only treated their friends with the respect demanded by R' Akiva's dictum of loving your friend like yourself. They failed to treat their *chavrusas* with the respect of a teacher. This is why the Gemara calls them "twelve thousand pairs" – the sin was in how each *chavrusa* pair treated one another.

Unquestionably, this is why we learn the lesson from R' Elazar ben Shammua. He was one of R' Akiva's final students, one of the last five ordained by R' Akiva. R' Elazar ben Shammua had internalized the bitter lesson that befell the earlier students of R' Akiva. That is why he taught that it isn't enough to treat your *chavrusas* with respect. You have to treat them with the same respect due to a teacher.

Did You Know Continued...

The climax of his great life was the reveal of the Torah's greatest inner secrets, and on this day the *Zohar* came out. Also, this day was the end of a period of mourning for Rabbi Akiva's students, thousands of whom died in a plague during the counting of the *omer*.

One reason for the *minhagim* of using a bow and arrow is that Hashem shows a rainbow (*keshes*) in the sky when we deserve destruction, but the rainbow is the ancient sign from *Parshas Noach* that He will not do so (*Eitz Yosef* on *Medrash Rabbah* to *Bereishis* 35:2). In several

generations, the rainbow was not seen because of the merits of some unique individuals. One of those people was Rav Shimon Bar Yochai (*Medrash Rabbah Bereishis* *ibid*). Therefore, many *tzaddikim* have the custom to shoot an arrow from a bow (representing a rainbow) that did not appear during the lifetime of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai.

Interestingly, the Chasam Sofer was strongly opposed to Lag B'Omer celebrations. He argued that one should not make a new *yom tov* that is not based on a miraculous event, that has no basis in *shas*, and that is based on the death of

someone (*Shaylos Vitushuvos*, page 94). Furthermore, Rabbi Yoseph Caro believed that Lag B'Omer should be the final day of mourning and should not be celebrated as a holiday. This is why Sephardim have the custom of keeping all the laws of mourning until the 34th day.

The Chasam Sofer (*Chasam Sofer*, Y.D. 233) also says that it was on the 18th of Iyar (Lag B'Omer) that the *manna* began to fall.

The Mechaber says Lag B'Omer will always fall out on the same day of the week as Purim (*Orach Chaim* 428).

