



**Partners In Torah**  
**San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura**  
**Take home Dvar Torah**

5785 Parshat Emor  
May 13, 2025

*By: Rabbi Avi Cohen*

***Hello, Welcome!***

**Partners In Torah is a community-wide,  
independent and inclusive adult education  
program**

**focusing on understanding Jewish  
relevancy to our lives by studying text  
most interesting to each participant.**

**Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour  
each week, friendships are forged between  
mentors and mentees.**

***Partners in Torah  
has proven to be effective at reclaiming the  
rich  
legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and  
guidance  
for many who have, until now, lacked  
access.***

***Thank you for joining us!***

**Please encourage friends to join you in  
participating so that we may grow  
together as  
a community.**

## תשפ"ה Parshat Emor

This week's portion contains the mitzvah "to count the *omer*," one which, at this time of the year, we are in the midst of fulfilling. Starting from the second day of Passover, we make a blessing every night for seven weeks thanking Hashem for sanctifying us with His mitzvot and for commanding us to perform the mitzvah of counting the *omer* by announcing, "today is the (current #) day of the *omer*."

Seemingly unrelated, for 33 of the 49 days that the omer is counted, the Sages have imposed the observance of some of the laws of mourning to all members of the Jewish nation.

The שולחן ערוך (*Shulchan Aruch*, the *Code of Jewish Law*) teaches us of a custom not to marry from Pesach until the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the count; for it was during those 33 days that Rebbe Akiva's 24,000 students died. We thus, for all generations express our sorrow over the tragic loss of so many Torah scholars, by observing some of the laws of mourning, *viz*, not to get married, take haircuts or shave, or listen to music, just like someone who is in mourning.

These practices raise many questions. Why did all of Rebbe Akiva's students die? What crime did they commit that they were punished so severely? And if indeed they died as the result of a crime, why would we mourn them? They seemingly deserved it.

The Talmud in Tractate (*Yevamot* 62b) reveals the reason behind the death of Rebbe Akiva's students.

אמרו שנים עשר אלף זוגים תלמידים היו לו לרבי עקיבא מגבת עד  
אנטיפרס וכולן מתו בפרק אחד מפני שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה והיה העולם  
שמם עד שבא ר"ע אצל רבותינו שבדרום ושנאה להם ר"מ ור' יהודה ור' יוסי  
ורבי שמעון ורבי אלעזר בן שמוע והם הם העמידו תורה אותה שעה תנא כולם  
מתו מפסח ועד עצרת

*Rebbe Akiva had 12,000 pairs of students from Antifras to Givat [two cities far from each other] and all of them died in a short time **because they did not treat each other with respect**. After they died, the world was desolate of Torah, until Rebbe Akiva went to the Sages in the south of Israel, Rebbe Meir, Rebbe Yehudah, Rebbe Yossi, Rebbe Shimon, and Rebbe Elazar ben Shamua, and they restored the Torah to its glory. All the students died between Pesach and Shavuot.*

So we know the problem that triggered their deaths, but that points to an even bigger problem: How does disrespecting another render someone worthy of the *death penalty*? True, the Torah is very meticulous about how we treat each other, and it forbids embarrassing or even speaking evil, Lashon Hara, about another person; but no death penalty is mentioned! So, why did they die?

A Midrash provides a deeper understanding of the disrespect that went on among the students.

מדרש רבה בראשית - פרשה סא פסקה ג

י"ב אלף זוגי תלמידים היו לר"ע מעכו ועד אנטיפרס וכולם בפרק אחד מתו למה שהיתה עיניהם צרה אלו באלו ובסוף העמיד שבעה רבי מאיר ורבי יהודה רבי יוסי ור' שמעון ורבי אלעזר בן שמוע ורבי יוחנן הסנדלר ור' אליעזר בן יעקב ואית דאמרי ר' יהודה ור' נחמיה ורבי מאיר רבי יוסי ורשב"י ור' חנינא בן חכינאי ורבי יוחנן הסנדלר א"ל בניי הראשונים לא מתו אלא שהיתה עיניהם צרה אלו לאלו תנו דעתכם שלא תעשו כמעשיהם עמדו ומלאו כל ארץ ישראל תורה

*Rebbe Akiva had 12,000 pairs of students from Acco until Antifras and they all died in a short time, **because of צרות עין - tzarut ayin**, which translates as “narrow eyes” ... Rebbe Akiva told his new students, “My sons, **the first ones died because they had***

*‘narrow eyes,’ be sure not to follow in their ways.” Those new students restored Torah to the whole land of Israel.*

The character flaw of “*narrow eyes*” is that one cannot stand to see someone else having what he has. He wants to be the only one to have it and thus receive all the attention and notoriety; when someone else has it, he feels as if the person has taken it from him.

The Midrash seems to give an entirely different reason for their punishment than does the Talmud, where it says that the reason for their deaths was a lack of respect for one another.

Rather, the Midrash provides us with the *insight* necessary to understand the nature of their lack of respect for one another, and why, in this context, it proved fatal.

Although the 24,000 students may have been very knowledgeable in Torah and were deeply involved in understanding every nuance of what their great Rebbe, Rabbi Akiva, taught them, they nonetheless lacked proper motivation. They were interested only in displaying what great scholars they were, and how erudite they were, and not in the truth of the Torah. They suffered from צרות עין, being upset when another said a good *dvar Torah*, feeling that his friend has stolen his thunder, so to speak. On the contrary, they wanted to delegitimize the other person’s Torah so that the author didn’t look better than them. This of course is completely the wrong attitude. This person is not interested in the truth. One who is interested only in the truth would be excited to learn it and would embrace it no matter who said it. Not only that, he would naturally respect the author of the *dvar Torah* for his brilliance. But, because they were “narrow eyed,” each student saw the other as a personal threat, and, hence,

they had no respect for one another. The better the other person was in his Torah learning, the more diminished the others felt, and the greater reason to disrespect him.

Moshe Rabbeinu, on the other hand, was a טוב עין, someone who wanted everyone to have everything that he had. Such a person is the only person worthy of teaching Hashem's Torah to the Jewish people, because Hashem's Torah is every Jew's rightful inheritance! The teacher must try to teach the student everything that he knows and empower him to discover the rest on his own! The more the student knows, the more successful is the teacher.

Rebbe Akiva was a crucial and essential link in the transmission of the Torah from Sinai, and he was destined for this role, from the beginning of creation.

The Talmud (Avoda Zara 5a) notes:

אמר ריש לקיש: מאי דכתיב, "זה ספר תולדות אדם וגו'." וכי ספר היה לו לאדם הראשון? מלמד שהראה לו הקדוש ברוך הוא לאדם הראשון דור דור ודורשיו, דור דור וחכמיו, דור דור ופרנסיו. כיון שהגיע לדורו של רבי עקיבא, שמח בתורתו ונתעצב במיתתו

*Reish Lakish said: The verse in Genesis 5:1 says: "This is the account of the descendants of Adam..." Did Adam actually have a book to look at? The meaning of this is that Hashem showed Adam each future generation and its teachers, its Sages, and its leaders. When Hashem reached the generation of Rebbe Akiva, Adam rejoiced about Rebbe Akiva's Torah and was saddened by his death.*

The Talmud (Menachot 29b) relates an even more interesting story about Rebbe Akiva.

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: בשעה שעלה משה למרום מצאו להקב"ה שיושב וקושר כתרים לאותיות. אמר לפניו, "רבש"ע מי מעבב על ידך?" אמר

לו. "אדם אחד יש שעתיד להיות בסוף כמה דורות ועקיבא בן יוסף שמו שעתיד לדרוש על כל קוץ וקוץ תילין תילין של הלכות." אמר לפניו, "רבש"ע הראהו לי." אמר לו, "חזור לאחורך." הלך וישב בסוף שמונה שורות ולא היה יודע מה הן אומרים תשש כחו כיון שהגיע לדבר אחד אמרו לו תלמידיו, "רבי מבין לך?" אמר להן, "הלכה למשה מסיני." נתיישבה דעתו!

*Rebbe Yehuda quoted Rav: When Moshe went into heaven to receive the Torah, he found Hashem placing crowns on some letters. (the special font of the Sefer Torah has seven letters that receive crowns - like the three fine lines on top of this Zayin.)*



*Moshe asked Hashem, "What are those crowns for?" Hashem told Moshe, "There will be a man after many generations - Akiva ben Yosef – who is destined to derive piles and piles of laws from each of the little lines of these crowns!" Moshe said to Hashem. "Show him to me!" Hashem showed Moshe Rebbe Akiva's classroom, telling him to observe from the back of the room. Moshe could not understand what they were saying and became nonplussed. Then, a student asked Rebbe Akiva, "What is the source of that law?" When Rebbe Akiva answered, "This is the law as Hashem gave it to Moshe on Sinai," Moshe became consoled.*

The Sages wonder about Moshe's inability to understand what Rebbe Akiva was saying. How is it possible? All the Torah that we have is from Moshe Rabbeinu, and if it didn't come from him, it isn't Torah! Our Sages tell us that even the answer to any future question that a student will ask his Rebbe in the classroom was told to Moshe! So how could Moshe not understand what Rebbe Akiva was saying?

The short answer is that Moshe Rabbeinu gave us the written Torah. Hashem also taught Moshe the Oral Torah, the explanations of the mitzvot (the commandments), that Moshe relayed to the Jewish people as he taught them the Torah. However, Moshe who received the Torah straight from Hashem, knew the Oral Torah in the context of the Written Torah.

Rebbe Akiva, who was many generations later, had developed methods of teaching the Oral Torah that were suitable and necessary for his and future generations. This is why Moshe could not understand what he was saying. Of course, Moshe knew all the concepts and ideas that Rebbe Akiva was teaching; but he knew them in the form of the written Torah. Now, however, the concepts were being presented in a way that was foreign to Moshe.

This constituted Rabbi Akiva's greatness, which represented his critical and essential contribution to the Torah. He was the one endowed with the unique ability to transmit the Written Torah with the Oral Torah to the future generations. He developed ways of teaching the Torah so that it was accessible to all of his students. (Perhaps, this is why he had so many students! They all heard of his fame, and came to learn Torah from him.) Rabbi Akiva was the Moshe Rabbeinu of the Oral Torah. Just as Moshe was the conduit through whom Hashem conveyed the Written and Oral Torah to the Jewish people at Sinai, Rabbi Akiva was the conduit through whom Hashem's Oral Torah would be conveyed to the Jewish people for all future generations.

The Oral Torah that we have today is a product of Rebber Akiva and his five students whom he taught after the demise of his 24,000 students.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 86a) teaches us:



דאמר רבי יוחנן: סתם מתניתין רבי מאיר סתם תוספתא רבי נחמיה  
סתם ספרא רבי יהודה סתם ספרי רבי שמעון וכולהו אליבא דרבי עקיבא

*Rabbi Yochanan said: The general opinions in the **Mishna**, are from Rebbe Meir. The **Tosefta** is from Rabbi Nechemiah, the **Sifra** is from Rabbi Yehuda, and the **Sifri** is from Rabbi Shimon, all according to the teachings of Rebbe Akiva. (These four books comprise the core of the Oral Torah. The Talmud is written to explain them)*

This is why Adam rejoiced when he saw the Torah of Rebbe Akiva. He saw that Rebbe Akiva's teachings would secure the transmission of the holy Torah to all future generations.

One would think that to play such a vital role in the Torah's transmission Rebbe Akiva would have been born to the most righteous and pious of families and would have been a child prodigy in his Torah study. But that is not the case! We learn of Rebbe Akiva's truly remarkable story in Avot D'Rebbe Natan, Chapter 6.

מה היה תחלתו של ר' עקיבא. אמרו בן ארבעים שנה היה ולא שנה  
כלום.

*What was Rebbe Akiva's beginning? He was 40 years old and had never learned a word. He did not even know the Hebrew alphabet.*

Rabbi Akiva testified about himself, "Before I became a scholar, if you would have shown me a sage, I would have bitten his foot like a donkey." They asked him, "why are you being so specific as to say, 'like a donkey'?" He answered, "I chose the donkey because when a donkey bites, it breaks the bone. That is how much I hated them."

What made Rebbe Akiva think that he could succeed in Torah at the age of 40 years old?

The Avot D'Rebbe Natan tells us the story. An ignorant shepherd, Rebbe Akiva was once standing next to a well when he noticed that a stone had a hole worn through it.

He wondered, "What made that hole in the stone?"

They answered him that the drops of water that constantly dripped on it over many years, created the hole.

Rebbe Akiva was amazed and thought to himself, "If water, which is so soft, could bore a hole in a rock that is so hard, certainly the Torah, whose words are as sharp and penetrating as arrows, will make an impression on my heart that is so soft."

Upon teaching us this story, my Rebbe, Harav Chaim Kraisworth ל"צ, asked us the following question: "Did the first drop of water that fell on the stone make an impression on it?" Initially, we thought, of course not! What could one drop of water possibly do? But upon thinking a little deeper, we had to conclude that it must have made *some* difference to the rock, however small and imperceptible; for, if the first drop did nothing, the accumulation of millions of drops could also have accomplished nothing.

This, said my Rebbe, is what Rebbe Akiva realized. I quote his exact words in Yiddish as they are indelibly etched in my brain. "Nor, is muz treefen a sach." "But, it must drip a lot" (it takes a lot of drops). Even though we don't see the impression that the individual words of Torah are making on our hearts, as they drip consistently, over time, the effect upon our souls becomes clear. Rebbe Akiva was up to the challenge of taking it one step at a time for the long run, and it paid off.

My Rebbe added another important lesson from this story. “Do you think that Rebbe Akiva was the only person to notice the hole in the stone? Over the many years, many people must have noticed it and marveled at the ability of the soft water to bore a hole in a hard stone. Rebbe Akiva was the only one who took it to heart and said to himself, ‘Okay, but what’s the lesson? What’s the action item from this amazing phenomenon?’ Everyone else just marveled at it and continued on his merry way without seeking a lesson that they could apply to themselves. What made Rebbe Akiva so special was that he took the lesson deeply to heart and thus became the Moshe Rabbeinu for the Oral Torah.

I shudder to think what Torah would look like today had Rebbe Akiva not made the choice that he did. But we see a remarkable thing: he was created for this mission, as both Adam and Moshe had foreseen. However, *he* had to make the decision to fulfill that calling. This is the beauty of freedom of choice. Hashem has created each of us with a mission in life, and He has endowed us with all the tools that we need to fulfill that mission. But it is up to us to make the correct choices that will bring us to fulfill that mission. Moreover, because **we** made the correct choices, we are entitled to all the credit for the accomplishments that follow.

With this background information about Rabbi Akiva, we have answers to the questions we asked about his students’ death for not respecting one another.

Because Rebbe Akiva’s students were to be the link to transmit the Torah to the future generations, it was imperative that they receive and transmit the lessons learned from their Rebbe without any distortion. For the Torah to be eternal, it must be pure Torah. Any foreign ideas or concepts that seek to enter the Torah

will contaminate it, rendering it no longer Hashem's holy Torah, but, rather, a variation of it, one that will not endure. The lines of transmission must be pure.

Because Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students were צרי עין – “*narrow eyed*,” they were not learning the Torah for the sake of knowing its pure truth. They were learning it to show off their prowess in Torah and were not interested in the truth for the sake of the truth. Hence, they could not be the link to the future and so had to perish to make way for new students to take over this critical task.

Rebbe Akiva was well aware of the problem with his students, and he tried everything in his power to try to correct their attitudes and behavior, but the students were not receptive to his efforts.

How do we know this? The Talmud teaches us (Shabbat 55a) that when the righteous leaders do not rebuke their congregants for their wrong doings, the leaders are punished first. They are held accountable for their congregant's sins because they did not teach them the right path to follow. Similarly, if Rebbe Akiva had not been admonishing his students for their inappropriate behavior, they could not be blamed. It would have been his fault for not teaching them that their behavior is inappropriate and dangerous, and he would have been punished first. But, because we see that Rabbi Akiva survived his students, we must conclude that he was not guilty of not rebuking his students.

Rebbe Akiva is the one who goes down in history as saying:

מדרש רבה בראשית - פרשה כד פסקה ז

ר"ע אומר (ויקרא יט) ואהבת לרעך כמוך זה כלל גדול

*(Leviticus 19:18) “Love your fellow as yourself; this is the Torah's most important rule.”*

It would seem that this is what he was repeatedly preaching to his students. Love your neighbor as yourself, because you and your fellow Jew are really one. You are like two types of cells in a human body, both of which have identical DNA and are working tirelessly to support and maintain the body. This is the Torah's most important concept because this is what is necessary to pass the Torah, unadulterated, to the next generation. This is why their lack of respect for a fellow student was fatal and why they all had to perish.

This is the reason for the mourning. What a tragedy that all the Torah that the 24,000 students would have brought forward was lost on account of this character flaw. We have what we have from just five students; could you imagine how much there would have been from 24,000?

The students all died between Pesach and Shavuot. There seems to be a deep connection between their problem and the time period in which they died. During the days of the Omer, as the Jewish people journeyed from Egypt to Sinai, they were working on divesting themselves of the influence of Egypt and trying to come closer to Hashem in preparation for receiving the Torah. They were busy purifying themselves of their inappropriate biases and attitudes. They wanted to be the purest receptacle possible so that they could properly receive Hashem's holy Torah.

We know that they reached their objective because the Hashem testifies that as the Jewish people stood at Mount Sinai, they were a unit of one.

The Torah tells us that the Jewish people journeyed from Refidim on Sunday, the last day of the month of Iyar, and reached Mount Sinai on Monday, the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Sivan. They received the

Torah on Shabbat the 6<sup>th</sup> of Sivan. When the Jewish nation arrived at the Sinai desert, the Torah (Exodus 19:2) tells us.

(ב) וַיֵּסְעוּ מִרְפִּידִים וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְּבַר סִינִי וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבַּר וַיַּחַן שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶד הָהָר

*2) They journeyed from Rephidim and arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the Wilderness, and Israel **encamped** there opposite the mountain.*

The Sages point out an anomaly in this verse. Since we are talking about the Jewish nation – a multitude of people – should not the verse have used the plural form for the word encamped, “and they encamped”? Instead, the Torah uses the singular form of the verb וַיַּחַן - “and *he* camped.”

Rashi explains that this is no error. It teaches us that when they arrived at Mount Sinai on the 1<sup>st</sup> of Sivan, they were like “one man with one heart.”

During their 45-day journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai, the Jewish people underwent an extraordinary transformation, from a people who had worshipped idols to a cohesive group unified in their mission to serve Hashem. This was an amazing accomplishment, and a highpoint in Jewish history. They maintained this level of unity for six days until the Torah was given.

The idea of “one man with one heart” implies that in their personal growth, each reached a level where he was focused on the singular goal of serving Hashem without giving thought to his own personal ideas or biases. When everyone in the group is focused exclusively on the goal with no personal interest involved, there is no competition or jealousy between its members. The success of each individual member is experienced as the success of

the entire group. Reaching such a high level of harmony was a milestone for the Jewish people and was the prerequisite to receiving the Torah. Thus, they would receive it as purely as it was given with no interference from personal biases.

This profound lesson is what should have been on their minds during the counting of the Omer, and even with the constant teaching of their Rebbe telling them, “Love your fellow as yourself, you must respect one another!” they did not change their ways.

This is a time in our calendar for introspection and correction, something that we need to be thinking about also as we count the Omer every day. As we observe the laws of mourning for the students of Rebbe Akiva, we are reminded of the lesson of why they died specifically during this period of time. This will help us with our personal growth during these impactful days.