

There is a minhag in Klal Yisroel to observe various forms of aveilus during sefiroh. It is a very old minhag going back to the Geonim. And it was re-invigorated after the Crusades in Europe, where many Jewish kehillos were destroyed and many Jewish lives were lost this time of year. In general, the murder of Jews started around Pesach time – in the spring. This was because during the winter, it was too cold to travel, plus there was the outrageous libel of Jews using Christian blood for matzos on Pesach. This absurd, outrageous libel continued until the famous Beilis trial in the 20th century and beyond.

The basic minhag of aveilus during sefiroh comes from the death of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 talmidim, that occurred between Pesach and Shavuos. The obvious question is why was this such a disastrous event in our history that we have to keep up the minhagim of aveilus for it 2,000 years after they died? In addition, we have fast days to commemorate certain days of disaster in our history. Why do we still fast over these events that happened so long ago?

The Rambam explains very clearly that every disaster that befell Klal Yisroel is a result of our spiritual failings. The purpose of a fast day is to reflect on the causes for the tragedy and insure that we are working to remedy those causes. We keep fasting over the churbon today because we still don't have a Beis Hamikdosh, and we need to remind ourselves of the failings that brought about the churbon and take concrete steps to bring it back.

We don't fast and mourn just for the sake of focusing on the tragic loss and wallowing in misery. People said that we need to keep remembering the Holocaust in order to prevent another one from happening. People erroneously claimed that after the world confronts what resulted from all the Jew-hatred in Nazi Germany, wide-spread Anti-Semitism will no longer be tolerated in the western world. But we see from all the events of the last year and a half how mistaken these beliefs about the Holocaust and Anti-Semitism are. Just commemorating and remembering tragedy does nothing.

We think about the death of these 24,000 talmidim only because Chazal told us about the reason why they died and how to correct it. The Rishonim say that when a tzoro happens, there is a chiyuv to make a cheshbon hanefesh to understand which spiritual failure was involved and how to correct it. The Aruch Hashulchan, in siman alef of Orach Chaim, cites the opinion of the Smag that there is a mitzvah d'oraisho to introspect when bad things happen as a binding halacha.

So of course, if something happened a year and a half ago on Simchas Torah, you can try to blame Netanyahu, the Shin Bet, the IDF, or anyone else, but that's not the point. It accomplished nothing. The Rambam and the Smag say you have to internalize the fact that anytime a tragedy happens to us, Hashem is behind it and He is using it to make us focus on and change our behavior – for the better.

Let us focus on the story of Rabbi Akiva and his talmidim. The gemara doesn't say 24,000 talmidim died. It says 12,000 pairs of talmidim died. And they all died between Pesach and Shevuos which left the world desolate. To put things in perspective, this period was about 50 years after the churbon Bayis Sheni. Rabbi Yochanon Ben Zakkai realized that the churbon was inevitable, so he negotiated to have the Romans spare Yavne and its chachomim. We have to preserve the Torah in order to rebuild Klal Yisroel. Right after that, there was an explosion of limud haTorah, and Rabbi Akiva was the head of the biggest yeshiva, with thousands of talmidim. Klal Yisroel started to feel that we are starting

to get back on our feet after losing the Beis Hamikdosh.

The only way to rebuild after churbon is through limud haTorah.

But then all these talmidim died in such a short period and all those hopes of rebirth were dashed. It was a major national trauma – hard to imagine how devastated Klal Yisroel must have felt at that time. And Rabbi Akiva had to start all over again with just five talmidim.

Why did all those talmidim die? Chazal tell us that it was because they did not show enough respect for one another. And these are the top talmidim of the greatest Rosh Yeshiva of Eretz Yisroel, and they are leading the rebirth of Klal Yisroel – but they still died. Despite all their Torah learning, Hashem decided that if they aren't able to respect one another properly, their Torah isn't worth anything. They were taken away and Rabbi Akiva had to begin again.

We have to remember this tragedy and learn from this tragedy. We have to mourn and reduce our level of simcha, but people feel unconnected to it all.

We have a minhag to start saying Pirkei Avos after Pesach. The first mishna traces the mesorah from Moshe to the Anshei Knesses Hagedolah. But Rav Chaim Volozhin, in Ruach Chaim, points out that it does so in an inconsistent way.

מִשֶּׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי, וּמִסֻּרָה לִיְהוֹשֻׁעַ

It says Moshe 'kibbel' Torah mi'Sinai, but then it switches to 'u'mosoroh' li'Yehoshua instead of u'Yehoshua 'kibbel' mi'Moshe. Or it could have said, Hashem 'mosoroh' li'Moshe, u'Moshe 'mosoroh' li'Yehoshua. Why the switch from Moshe to Yehoshua?

Look at the first Rashi at the very beginning of Sefer Yehoshua, which begins with Hashem telling Yehoshua that Moshe died. Why was this necessary? Of course Yehoshua was well aware that Moshe died!

Rashi explains that Moshe's death means it was the end of a certain period of history. Only Moshe was capable of receiving the Torah from Hashem in a complete and unadulterated way. After he died, there is no more additions to the Sefer Torah. Why? Because Moshe was the humblest of all men. He achieved a total negation of his ego and was completely given over to Hashem's will. This meant Moshe was the perfect vessel to receive the Torah from Hashem. שְׂכִינָה מְדַבֶּרֶת. מתוך גרונו. Everyone else has two voices talking when he speaks: his neshomo and his own selfish ego with all its cheshbonos. None of Moshe's own personality mixed together with his reception of the Torah, and communication of the Torah to Klal Yisroel.

But all later ba'alei mesorah had some minute level of ego involved in their transmission of Torah. It was not on the same level as Moshe's. Therefore, the mishna changes from 'Moshe kibbel' to 'mosoroh li'Yehoshua'. Only Moshe received the purest Torah in its entirety; all the rest transmitted Torah on a lower level.

In the early generations of Tanoim, there were few disputes. Shammai and Hillel themselves had a very small number of them. But machlokes exploded in the generation of their talmidim. Why? Chazal tell us that they were not sufficiently focused on absorbing the teachings of their masters. They had other agendas while they were learning. Hillel and Shammai were on the level where they put their egos aside and were willing to hear each other's arguments and understand them fully. They were open to being corrected and were willing to resolve disputes and admit they made a mistake. They kept refining their ideas with each

other and clarified the matter with sincerity until they smoothed out all their differences. So there were very few cases of lasting dispute.

The next generation didn't have this dedication to understanding the d'var Hashem to the point of complete clarity where they wanted to resolve the differences. They wanted to promote their own ideas more than reconciling them with someone else's ideas. So machlokes kept growing and growing. By the time it came to the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva, the drive to promote their own ideas and outdo their chavrusa's came to a breaking point.

Everyone learning Torah has to realize that your chavrusa also has a tzelem Elokim and he is also trying to understand Hashem's Torah to the best of his ability. Do you appreciate that you are both out to achieve the same goal? Or are you in competition with one another? Are you listening to the other person's ideas? Or are you trying to outdo each other, unwilling to concede the other's valid points and arguments? If you can't respect the Torah of your chavrusa, then your Torah isn't worth much either. Your job is to build upon each other's Torah and learn from each other's insights – not to take each other down and put him down.

When people think of which yeshiva they want to attend, rarely do I find that the priority is, "where can I get the most yiras shomayim and become the biggest talmid chochom I can be?" They have all kinds of other goals and agendas to be in yeshiva, besides growing in Torah. They have their own "mehalech" in learning already at age 18, and complain that they can't adjust to someone else's "mehalech".

But Torah is built on a genuine desire to understand the d'var Hashem. And someone else who has the same goal makes him worth listening to and evaluating his ideas carefully and honestly.

The time of sefiroh is a time to reflect on why Rabbi Akiva's talmidim died. Those reasons are relevant to us always. When we begin a 3-month summer zman, we have to have one goal – "how am I going to grow in Torah and yiras shomayim – together with my chavrusa and together with my chavirim?" It doesn't matter how he learns – you can learn all kinds of important things from anybody who learns with sincerity. It is a time of year to reduce our level of simcha and remember that the tragedy of Rabbi Akiva's talmidim is replicated in every generation.

We live in a very interesting time in Jewish history. There is a war being waged against the yeshiva world here in Eretz Yisroel. It may not be obvious to everyone, but it's happening in all kinds of ways. There are two reactions you can have: One reaction is to be aggressive and call everyone who is fighting Torah 'reshoim', etc. But we have to look inwards and ask uncomfortable questions too. If there is a tzoro that is threatening Torah, we have to ask: 'what is the failure in our limud Torah that is bringing on this threat?' Sefiroh points to the failure of not giving kovod to one another.

The Netziv raises a stiroh between the two explanations given for the churbon Beis Hamikdosh. One gemara says the cause for the churbon of the first Beis Hamikdosh was the severe aveiros of avodo zoro, gilui arayos, and shefichus domim. But another gemara says it was because of the sin of bitul Torah! Which sin was it?

The Netziv answers that the power of Torah is so great, that had Klal Yisroel been really dedicated to limud Torah, it would have protected them from the punishment of churbon they deserved from committing those 3 severe aveiros. Torah is so powerful that it could stop the churbon – just like it maintains the survival of Klal Yisroel in Eretz Yisroel today. There is no other explanation!

But in Bayis Sheni, they did learn Torah! So why was there churbon despite their limud Torah? Apparently, sinas chinom is so great, that even your Torah can't protect you from this aveiroh. You can't build yourself in Torah together with sinas chinom and disrespecting your chavirim.

This powerful lesson is so important that we had minhogim of aveilus for century after century in order to keep this lesson in mind every year. Hashem has no need for your Torah if your learning comes at the expense of the kovod of your chavirim. When you lose respect for your chavrusa, you undermine the sincerity of your attempt to understand Hashem's Torah. You don't really care if he's right. You care more that your idea takes prominence and your ego is satisfied.

If you have an honest desire for the truth, then you will respect your chavrusa's ideas as much as your own, and then the emes of Torah can come out.