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Losses are painful, but they don't cancel out the joyous times

by rabbi judah dardik

Bechukotai

Leviticus 26:3-27:34

Jeremiah 16:19-21, 17:1-14

In one of the lesser-known mitzvahs, the Torah directs us to count the 50 days between Passover and Shavuot, counting up to the joyous receipt of the Torah. Much like young children anticipating a birthday party, we count up day by day and week by week in expectation of a wonderful gift.

This week, Friday and Shabbat are the 33rd and 34th days of the Omer.

In ancient times, the Omer was both a materially and spiritually joyful season. The marketplace was flooded with fresh grain, we had just finished one holiday, knew that another one was on the way, and celebrations of Torah study would soon be upon us. But that didn't last.

In the second century C.E., shortly after the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem, tragedy struck. The Talmud (Yevamot 62B) teaches that this became a sad time, as result of the death of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva due to a plague.

In one short period, most of the Torah scholars in the world died and the period of the Omer became synonymous with mourning. Afterward, when Rabbi Akiva started over again, he found all of five students to teach. It was they who ultimately taught others and re-established the educational system.

Seemingly overnight, 24,000 students of one of the greatest teachers in Jewish history were gone. Can you imagine the scene? Shortly after Passover, there is suddenly nowhere to send children to school, as the teachers are all gone. One walks from town to town, looking for someone to whom to address questions about Jewish life and thought, but there is no one. A time for mourning indeed.

The losses continued mounting for 32 days of the Omer, but on the next day they stopped. This day was thereafter referred to by the acronym for the number 33 ("Lag B'Omer"), and is celebrated as a minor holiday until this day. But what in the world could anyone have been celebrating?

A careful look at the phrasing of the talmudic text is revealing. The precise wording does not say that "24,000 students" died, but rather refers to "12,000 pairs of students." Why?

Perhaps Rabbi Akiva, surviving this trauma, is teaching us something about valuing relationships in trying times. When he thought of his beloved students, he thought of them in connected pairs (symbolizing relationship) rather than as solitary individuals. He could have given up on the loss of those relationships and thrown in the towel. But instead, he tried again, and found five students. He taught them, and they taught others, and Torah came back to the world.

This conveys a fundamental point. Rabbi Akiva valued relationships even as he felt the concurrently dull and stinging pains of loss. Did he suffer less in missing his students because he had five new ones? Certainly not. The pain of that loss was to stay with him forever. However, he continued on and rebuilt and had new joys in seeing Torah flourish once again. Lag B'Omer celebrates the joy of finding value in what is, rather than focusing on what was lost.

Too often, we look at our relationships in terms of their net outcome. Was it a "good" relationship or a "bad" one? Is it still there for us or did it end painfully? On the whole, was it "worth it"? In our minds we cancel out the good with the bad, and vice versa.

But this simply isn't true — pain and joy in a relationship do not cancel out. Sometimes our relationships with the people whom we hold most dear (our spouses, children, parents, siblings and friends) hurt us; they hurt us badly either by action or through loss. It can be almost crippling, as we felt so close and vulnerable with this person.

But the fact that loving them hurts us terribly does not cancel out the good times, either. The joy and the pain exist simultaneously.

Who knew this better than Rabbi Akiva? His joy and his pain were with him all at once. And he did not let the pain make him give up on having relationships. Instead he persevered, went on to seek companionship and connection —, and taught Torah once again.

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