



Kosher Torah

צט"י
תורה לחיים
Learning for Living

שׁוּיִתִּי ה' לִנְגֻדֵי תַבְּעִיד

Keep your feet on the ground; keep your eyes on the goal; open your heart to Heaven...

THE OMINOUS DAYS OF OMER

*By Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok
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The days of counting of the Omer are considered by many to be the most ominous days in Jewish tradition. According to the Gemara, during the first 33 days of the Counting of the Omer, a plague ravaged the students of Rabbi Akiva, killing 24,000 of them. A spiritual answer was sought for this devastating event and it was discerned that they were punished by Divine decree because they failed to show proper respect towards one another.

We have here a very important question to ask. Since when is not showing respect to one another such a serious sin that it can open up a whole population to a deadly illness? In our many sins, most of us today do not show proper respect towards one another and we are not being decimated by deadly disease! What was so unique about the students of Rabbi Akiva?

The answer to this question is that the students of Rabbi Akiva were unique. They were like us in one sense and at the same time very unique and very much not like us in another.

Rabbi Akiva's students were unique in that they were his students. They were students of one of the leading Rabbis of his generation, indeed of all times. Of Rabbi Akiva, the Gemara relates that he was worthy enough to have received the Torah on Sinai in place of Moshe Rabbeynu. That is an extremely high level, reached by only the select few.

To have been a student of Rabbi Akiva meant that such a one had to be of the highest caliber of individual. Indeed, we see this so in Rabbi Akiva's surviving student, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, master of the Holy Zohar.

In light of the lofty position held by Rabbi Akiva, the levels of kedusha (holiness) expected by his students was of a heightened level, greater than that to be expected by rank and file Torah students. Indeed, to be a student of Rabbi Akiva meant that one was leaps and bounds higher than the rest and by definition closer to HaShem than the rest. Herein lied the blessing, but also the problem.

The students of Rabbi Akiva can be compared to Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aharon HaKohen, who offered "strange fire" before HaShem. Although our Sages speak



of these two righteous souls as having been blemished at that moment, their punishment of death was rather harsh in light of what their blemish supposedly was. In other words, like the students of Rabbi Akiva, Nadav and Avihu were punished far more severe than would have been normally expected.

Here then is the point. The students of Rabbi Akiva, like Nadav and Avihu before them were out of the ordinary. They were special. As such, special rules applied to them. What might be considered a minor blemish in others was for them a major sin. In other words, due to their advanced level and training they should have known better than to have done what they had done.

Indeed, G-d does judge different people differently. He does hold certain people at a higher level more accountable than others. Therefore, when we show disrespect towards one another we are not punished for this grievous sin with the same level of severity as were the students of Rabbi Akiva. We are not on their lofty level. We are punished in accordance to the level where we are at. In this respect we have an advantage over them, the same advantage a child has over an adult. A child is not punished for his ignorant violation of the law. An adult however is not considered to be ignorant.

Rabbi Akiva's students were spiritually mature in comparison to us, who are like spiritual adolescents. They were held to a higher criterion of judgment. A mere act of disrespect for one on such a high level can be compared to the act of murder by someone not so lofty. They paid the price for their insincerity and left for the generations that followed and us a lesson and example.

The days of the Counting of the Omer are ominous in and of themselves, regardless of whether this event with Rabbi Akiva's students happened then or not. Indeed, it was not the event of the deaths that made these days ominous, but rather the ominousness of these days that caused the deaths to occur during then.

According to the Kabbalah, the days of the Omer lack the complete Light of HaShem that shined first in Egypt on Pesah night and then again on Sinai 50 days later on Shavuot. During this interlude, the supernal sefirotic Lights are in a state of "re-building."

Day by day, level by level the Divine Lights revealed on Pesah are being "re-charged." This procedure continues until Shavuot when all the Lights are recharged and rebuilt, thus enabling the revelation of the Torah. However, in the mean time, these intermediate days, are days of incompleteness and lack of Light.



Therefore, the Sages knowing this spiritual truth instituted that during the days of Omer one act with behaviors of mourning and spiritual caution. Like mourners, during this time, we do not cut our hair, but new clothes or celebrate weddings.

According to the Kabbalists, these prohibitions last the entire period of the Omer, until the day before Shavuot. Not all however are as cautious as the Kabbalists. Traditional religious Ashkenazi Jews, observe these restrictions only until the 33rd day of Omer, Sephardim one day more.

Even today, like in Rabbi Akiva's times, we have different levels of students. The Kabbalists today can be compared to the higher level student of Rabbi Akiva, whereas the rest of Torah students can be compared to the rank and file who did not achieve the higher lofty status.

Kabbalists today are in fact the modern students of Rabbi Akiva, editor of the Sefer Yetzirah and of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai (Rabbi Akiva's heir), author of the Zohar. Kabbalists today, like the students of the great Masters before them are required to live up to the higher level, above and beyond the practices of those around them. They are to be respected and admired for this. Any lack of such respect is a sin of equal proportion as that shown by Rabbi Akiva's students long ago to one another.

Thank HaShem that those today who disrespect Kabbalists, Rabbis and often Orthodox Jews in general are not held spiritually accountable in the same way as was Rabbi Akiva's students. Who knows how many of us today could survive such tight Heavenly scrutiny.

Although today our sins have not opened us up to be struck down by disease, we nonetheless do bring upon ourselves our own suffering.

Omer is a time for us to be careful. Omer is a time where we are spiritually vulnerable to receive recompense for our sins. Omer is a time of a spiritual "Murphy's Law," which states that if something can go wrong, it will go wrong and at the worst possible time.

We cannot change the ominous influence that Omer brings upon us. Yet, we can change our focus of attention from that which can go wrong, and place it onto that which we can do right.

During these 49 days of Omer when the forces of severity rule over the Jewish people, the Kabbalists recognize that there is no general supernal union of the sefirotic powers. Therefore, they refrain from attempting to perform such unions in their prayers. During the time of Omer, the Kabbalists do not perform meditations in prayer (kavanot), with one exception, this being the counting of the Omer itself.



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During the counting of the Omer, the Kabbalists participate in the re-building of the sefirotic structure, sefirah by sefirah, week by week, until all is complete on the 50th night, the night of Shavuot.

Each week of the seven weeks repairs one of the seven sefirot. Each day of the week repairs one of the seven aspects within each of the seven sefirot. Thus during the first week, the sefirah Hesed is built. Day one, the Hesed of Hesed is built, day two, the Gevurah of the Hesed is built, day three the Tiferet of the Hesed is built and so on. Week two the Gevurah is built in the same way. Day one of week two the Hesed of Gevurah is built, day two of week two, the Gevurah of Gevurah is built and so on.

On the 49th day of Omer, the Malkhut of the Malkhut is finally built. On the 50th day, the crown of Keter, Hokhma, and Binah is added to the rebuilt lower seven within seven thus completing the whole, bring with it the revelation of the Torah.

This cycle we repeat every year. It is not only an event in time, it is also an event in mind. It is a psychological process of inner growth and spiritual maturation that we are destined to follow. As we build the spiritual Lights in the supernal world, so we build the inner "lights" of expanded consciousness within us. What greater expansion of consciousness can there be than the receiving of the Torah!

Yet, although the Torah comes in its time, we must first build the necessary receptacle in order to properly receive it. Not for naught does the Talmud call the students of Torah, builders, for they build the supernal world of the sefirot and teach us how to build the inner worlds of spiritual maturity, mental ability, emotional security, and physical stability.

Omer is a time to be careful. It is not a time to be fearful. If we keep our hearts on Heaven and our eyes upon the building of the sefirot every day of the 49 days, we will be blessed by HaShem and protected from all harm.

The order of the sefirotic building during the Omer can be found in most Orthodox Siddurs (prayerbooks). Regardless of what one understands or not, one should pay attention to what each day of the counting means. The little bit of light that one allows in one's soul on that one day, might be enough to save one from the ominous power of the Omer that lurks over us during this time.

May HaShem protect and defend His people Israel, and bring to us a safe counting and completion of the supernal lights.