

What The Students Can Teach Us : Part II (Edited Transcript)

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This is the first aspect of commemorating the death of Rebbe Akiva's students of relevance to us today ? the central importance of Torah scholars and Torah learning. But there is something else we can learn.

The Talmud probes into the background of these students and arrives at a conclusion surrounding their deaths. It's important to keep in mind that the Talmudic sages possessed a level of intellectual and spiritual insight that we simply do not have today, and it would be difficult for us to make a similar judgment call. But what they concluded about the students was that ?Lo nohagu kavod ze laze? ? that they didn't afford one another the proper honour and respect, and that it was for this reason that the tragedy struck. Again, today, we could never presume to connect a particular event to a particular moral cause. We don't have that insight. That the great sages of the Talmud were able to do so was due to a combination of intellectual, prophetic, spiritual insight that today we cannot even fathom.

What emerges is that during this time period, we not only remember the importance of Torah learning to our ongoing survival as individuals and as a people, but also the importance of, as we says in Yiddish, being a mensch. We appreciate the importance of being a decent human being; of treating one another with respect. This was the area in which these incomparably great Torah scholars fell short, and we need to learn from their mistakes.

Why them in particular? Why was this group of students so important in teaching us this lesson? Again, I would like to refer to the teachings of Rav Aharon Kotler. He explains that there are certain crucial points in Jewish history where the Torah is being crystallised in its clearest form. We know that when the Torah was given, it was transmitted in the form of the Written Torah ? the Five Books of Moses, and the Oral Torah ? the tradition that was then handed down by word of mouth and debated amongst the Talmudic sages and eventually transcribed in the form of the Mishnah and the Gemara, which in combination is called the Talmud.

The students of Rabbi Akiva were at the forefront of crystallising the oral tradition. Rabbi Akiva was the foremost sage of the Mishnah, and his students were at that crucial point in Jewish history where the oral tradition ? which had been handed down faithfully from teacher to student, parent to child, though the generations ? was being formulated. It was to be formally edited and written down about 130 years or so later, and it was at a crucial stage of its development.

Explains Rav Aharon Kotler, we have the following Torah principle: ?Im ein derech erez, ein Torah?, without basic human decency there is no Torah. Torah cannot be built or even exist where there is no foundation of basic menschlikheit. Rav Kotler says that at these crucial times of the Torah's development it's important that the level of human decency be at the highest possible level. He cites the fact that when Moses prepared to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai, he didn't eat or drink for forty days and nights while he was on the mountain. Our sages explain that the reason he fasted was because he was following the derech erez ? the basic etiquette ? of the place. Angels don't eat and drink, and so, while in the heavens, studying and transcribing the Torah from G-d, Moshe didn't either ? in deference to the derech erez, the custom of the place.

Remarkably, he endangered his life in the process. We know that virtually any Jewish law is set aside for the purpose of saving life. So really he was entitled to eat and drink. Yet we see that G-d engineered a miracle so that Moshe would be able to fulfill the strictest requirement of derech erez while he was up on the mountain. Rav Aharon Kotler asks, why was it necessary to go to such trouble? He explains that at the moment that Torah was coming into the world, the circumstances surrounding its introduction needed to be perfect, particularly ? given the principle, Im ein derech erez, ein Torah ? in the realm of derech erez. And, therefore, G-d turned nature on its head, and Moshe put his life in danger, to ensure Torah entered the world in a state of perfection.

Similarly with the students of Rabbi Akiva. They were involved in crystallising the Oral Law into a form as pristine as when Moses

received it on Mount Sinai, and therefore it was absolutely critical that they too observed the highest level of derech erez. What may have been tolerated in other generations could not be tolerated at this point because it would have tainted the process at a crucial stage of development. Im ein derech erez, ein Torah ? meaning the Torah that would have emerged would not have been Torah at all. When there is no derech erez, no basic human decency, it poisons everything. It ruins the Torah itself because it is predicated on those foundations.

Let's try and understand this concept in more depth. What do we mean when we talk about derech erez in relation to Torah? Is Torah separate from derech erez? The Maharal of Prague explains that we have two elements of wisdom. There is derech erez, which he calls the chochma tachtona, the 'lower wisdom' ? the wisdom of this world. And there is Torah which he calls the chochma elyona, the 'higher wisdom'. There is a certain basic standard of human conduct that a person needs to meet in this world, and this is governed by the principles of derech erez. However, G-d brought the Torah into the world to raise this base level to something much higher. And, therefore, in many ways the Torah itself does not address the basics that are required, because it assumes a person has those already. The Torah ? G-d's revealed wisdom ? is there to build on the foundations that should already be in place.

But what happens if the Torah ? advanced morality and advanced spirituality ? is accessed by someone who doesn't even have the basics? That would be like a person going to study advanced maths at university without having learnt basic addition and subtraction. It becomes a bizarre, futile exercise. If the fundamentals are not there how does one begin to understand advanced moral and spiritual principles? And, therefore, there is a requirement which our sages stipulate: 'Derech erez kadma l'Torah' ? that basic human decency needs to come before the Torah. Derech erez must precede the torah both logically and chronologically because the Torah is there to build on those foundations and raise one up to the absolute highest levels of morality and spirituality. And so if a person accesses Torah without these foundations, what is then created is a weird hybrid personality, who has the trappings of excellence in certain areas but lacks the basics in others. It is a jarring, unnatural combination.

Here, we need to be clear. This isn't to say that the students of Rabbi Akiva were guilty of not living up to standards of basic human decency; on the contrary, they were great people. But what Rav Aharon Kotler is explaining is that they failed to meet the standards of perfect derech erez required at this pivotal moment in the crystallisation of the Oral Torah. And in falling short, they ushered in a tragic period in our history.

During this time of public mourning, when we go through the motions of not listening to music, not celebrating weddings, not cutting our hair, we remember not only the loss of great Torah learning ? without which Judaism is meaningless, but also the loss of basic human decency, of treating one another with proper dignity and kindness befitting every single human being ? without which Torah cannot even exist.

Now this issue of 'Lo nohagu kavod ze laze' ? of not paying people due respect ? is important because there is a natural tendency not to give enough honour and praise and recognition to another human being. I would like to share with you a very interesting passage from the Talmud which articulates this beautifully. In Chapter Four of Pirkei Avot ('Ethics of our Fathers?'), Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua says 'Let the honour of your student be as dear to you as your own; the honour of your colleague as the honour for your teacher; and the honour for your teacher as the honour of Heaven.'

So each statement goes up one level. Your student you should treat as a colleague, your colleague you should treat as a teacher, and your teacher you should give the level of respect you would give G-d. How do we understand this? Surely we should give people the honour they deserve? Why give them more than they deserve? Reb Chaim Volozhiner ? the great student of the Vilna Gaon who lived a few hundred years ago ? explains that the natural tendency is to always underplay another person's honour and recognition. A person will always perceive the honour they themselves are due with greater clarity than the honour of somebody else. And, therefore, the Mishnah is saying is that if we pay someone more honour than we perceive they are due, we will get it just about right. Whereas if we give the person the amount of honour we think they deserve it's going to be too little. Show a student as much honour as you would a colleague then you will get it more or less right. The same with a colleague and a teacher, and a teacher and G-d Himself.

The teaching of this Mishnah is so important because one of the most basic human needs is for recognition; to be noticed by others. As King David says in Psalms, "What is man that you should take notice of him?" The greatest sense of self-esteem comes from realising that G-d actually takes note of us; that He gave us laws to keep and instructions to follow shows us that He is interested in the way we conduct our lives. That is the greatest compliment that G-d could ever have given us - that He even notices us in the first place. When another human being notices us that, too, is a great compliment.

How do we notice people? We notice people by greeting them and looking them in the eye; by giving them praise and acknowledging their presence. That acknowledgement and recognition is one of the deepest of human needs and, therefore, we have to go out of our way to give it to people in greater quantities than we actually think they need because then we will just get it about right. Perhaps this is where the students of Rabbi Akiva fell short. Perhaps they paid each other the honour due a colleague rather than the honour due a teacher. And in so doing, they underpaid.

There is another Mishnah in Pirkei Avot that states: Heveh mekabel et kol adam besever panim yafot - "Receive every person with a friendly face".

There are three aspects to this requirement, corresponding with the three descriptive words used by our Mishnah. The first is "panim" - "face". The Mishnah is teaching us that when you are talking to someone - whether you are thanking them, requesting something from them, greeting them, conversing with them - you need to direct your face towards them. The second element is "besever" - "your face should be expressive". It's no good giving someone an expressionless look while you try to communicate with them - that conveys a coldness; a detachment and disinterest in the other person. The third element is the nature of that expression. Says the Mishnah, your expression should be "yafot". It should be warm and kind and friendly and engaging and full of joy.

So often we encounter people that we don't see or acknowledge they are even there. The common tendency is to see past them or through them. For example you are engaging with a waiter in a restaurant, or someone who is serving you; find out what their name is, acknowledge their presence, let them feel that you know they are there. A tip is very nice but that is just a commercial transaction. One needs to also tip a person by thanking them and engaging with them on a human level. That's a fundamental part of what it means to be a good human being - showing recognition.

There are countless passages from Pirkei Avot that deal with this important mitzvah to give people recognition. "Who has honour?", asks a Mishnah in Chapter Four. The answer: "He who gives honour to others." This is the Torah's definition of an honourable person. The conventional wisdom is that one achieves glory and honour by seeking it from others. In fact, that is a guaranteed way of not getting it. The Talmudic sages teach that honour runs away from those that pursue it.

Rabbi Yosef Yehudah Leib Bloch, the famed Telze Rosh Yeshiva, explains the psychology. He says that honour and recognition is given by human beings to their peers out of their own discretion and goodwill. It is nobody's to claim by right. When people are inspired by the lofty and valuable contributions and actions of others, then they naturally accord them the honour and recognition they deserve. But when they sense that the person they wish to honour is actually demanding, or desperately seeking, their approval, the natural reaction is to withhold it. Because there is nothing more humiliating and nothing more ineffective than having to be in a position to have to ask for it.

So we need to look out for opportunities to notice people; to really see who they are, to notice what they are doing. We need to be generous in giving real and meaningful praise, recognition and honour so that we can indeed learn the lessons of this period of the calendar - the lessons of the students of the great Rabbi Akiva. The lesson of the importance of the study of Torah and the importance of Torah scholars in our lives; and the lesson of what it means to give a person recognition and respect. To give a person kavod - that very important word which comes from another Hebrew word kaveid, meaning weight or heaviness. We need to show others that they are weighty. Every single human being deserves honour. Every single human being is owed honour. And it is our mitzvah - our duty - to give it as often as possible.

