

# Parsha Ponders

Re'eh | August 13, 2020 | 24 Av 5780

## *Life worth living<sup>1</sup>*

בנים אתם ליקוק אלקיכם לא תתגודדו ולא-תשימו קרחה בין עיניכם למת

You are children to Hashem, your G-d; don't maim yourself, nor remove hairs on your head<sup>2</sup> for the deceased<sup>3</sup>

*Parshas Re'eh* contains many *mitzvos*. A couple that are unique are the prohibitions of לא תתגודדו and לא תשימו קרחה. The Torah precedes these *mitzvos* by telling us that we are children of Hashem. He doesn't want us deforming our bodies in grief. Many people had the practice, and some even today, to injure themselves or pull out their hair, as a display of grief at the loss of a relative. Hashem doesn't want that of His children. We are commanded not to maim ourselves, and not to remove hairs for the deceased.

As such, Tosafos are perplexed<sup>4</sup> at a story<sup>5</sup> about Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva's teacher, Rabbi Eliezer HaGadol, had passed away. Rabbi Akiva encountered the funeral procession, and was stricken with intense grief. He injured himself<sup>6</sup> in his mourning. Seemingly this was prohibited, due to לא תתגודדו. How could Rabbi Akiva transgress an explicit verse in the Torah? Tosafos answer<sup>7</sup> that he wasn't injuring himself due to the loss of Rabbi Eliezer's life. Rather, he was grieving the loss of the Torah. What does this mean?

An amazing explanation is given by Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz zt"l. What's the essence of the prohibition of not injuring oneself for the dead? By doing so, the person is in effect showing that now that they've lost this loved one, life is no longer worth living. Hashem is telling us that this is not so! We are children to Hashem. Life is still worth living, even after suffering this loss. We have a loving Creator who is so close to us. He is our Father in Heaven.

However, this doesn't apply to a loss of Torah. Torah is our life; it is our length of our days<sup>8</sup>. True, Rabbi Akiva mourned the loss of his teacher, and their special relationship. However, he also mourned the loss of the Torah that his death effected. There was still so much to learn from him, and now he'll never be able to. In a sense, Rabbi Akiva legitimately felt his life was less worth living. As such, his extreme mourning was justified, and no prohibition was involved.

Now, Rabbi Akiva was one of the greatest of Sages. If he felt such pain at the loss of Torah, when he knew everything, how much more so must we, who know relatively nothing, yearn for more Torah. We should always strive to learn more, and beg Hashem to grant it to us. Then life will truly be worth living.

Good Shabbos

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Shearim BaTefillah § שו"ע p. 39, by Rav Shimson Dovid Pincus zt"l

<sup>2</sup> Literally: between your eyes. See Makkos 20a

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 14:1

<sup>4</sup> Tosafos to Sanhedrin 68a s.v. היה מכה and Yevamos 13b s.v. דאמר רחמנא

<sup>5</sup> Sanhedrin *loc. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> See there the intensity of what he did

<sup>7</sup> See Tosafos to Yevamos *loc. cit.* for another answer

<sup>8</sup> כי הם חיינו, ואורך ימינו, as we say in Birkos Kriyas Shema in the morning. This is based on Deuteronomy 30:20.

Although the commentaries there don't specifically apply it to Torah, Kiddushin 40a does. Targum "Yonasan" *ad. loc.* also applies that verse to Torah. See as well Berachos 55a