

Parsha Ponders

Lag BaOmer | May 19, 2022 | 18 Iyar 5782

*Accumulation, not Regression*¹

היום שלשה ושלושים יום, שהם ארבעה שבועות, וחמשה ימים לעומר

Today is thirty-three days, which are four weeks and five days of the Omer²

Lag BaOmer is the culmination of a mourning period that takes place during *Sefiras HaOmer*. Why have we been mourning? Our Sages tell us³ that in the days between Pesach and Shavuot, 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's students died. What was the reason? We are told that they didn't treat each other with *כבוד*, often translated as respect or honor. How could this be? Furthermore, another version of the story says that *ענייהם צרות בתורתם*, they were selfish with their Torah⁴. A third version says they didn't fill the land of Israel with their Torah⁵. How can we make sense of this?

We are all too familiar with a concept known as *yeridas hadoros*, that the generations over time descend in spiritual heights⁶. Those closer to the National Revelation at Mount Sinai are assumed to have a far greater understanding and appreciation of the Torah. The further we get from that monumental moment, the larger the gap between us and them is formed. This gap makes it harder for us to grasp the depths of the sea of Torah.

Sometimes, the difference between the generations is more pronounced. There's no comparing the spiritual and Torah giants from before the Holocaust, to those from after. The destruction caused by the Nazis devastated world Jewry, not just in physical numbers, but also in spiritual abilities. It would make sense to suggest the same was true before and after the destruction of the Second Temple. The devastation of the Roman exile was so great, that the Sages that rose afterwards couldn't have been anywhere near on par with those from before the Roman decree.

Rabbi Akiva and his students were the generation after the destruction. We can suggest that his students were aware of this gap in spiritual heights, and that this was the explanation for their behavior. They felt that they were insignificant with respect to the earlier generations. As such, they didn't consider their Torah to be worth anything. It's not that they were selfish with their Torah, but *ענייהם צרות* literally means their eyes were narrow with regards to their Torah. They didn't see it as worthwhile. They didn't feel they had anything to contribute to the land of Israel, so they didn't spread their Torah. Finally, they didn't honor each other because they all felt unimportant. What then was their sin? Weren't they right?

¹ Based on a *shiur* heard from [Rav Zev Leff](#), Rav of Moshav Matisyahu

² Weekday Siddur. Many say *בעומר*, but [Rav Leff](#) felt that according to his approach to *Sefiras HaOmer*, as will be explained, the more appropriate version would be *לעומר* (putting aside that no one calls the day "Lag LaOmer")

³ [Yevamos 62b](#)

⁴ [Kohelles Rabbah 11:6](#)

⁵ I didn't find this version. However, the *Midrash (ibid)* does say that Rabbi Akiva told his new students (after the previous ones died) to go and fill the land of Israel with Torah. It also says this immediately following the statement that they were stingy with their Torah. It would seem the two ideas are related

⁶ While the concept of *yeridas hadoros* is ubiquitous throughout Jewish works, some of the earliest usages of the specific phrase *הידור הדורות* date only from the 1700s, such as by [Rav Yaakov Emden](#) in his [Mor Uktziah](#) § 88 and the [Nodah B'Yehudah](#) in his [Derushei Tzlach](#) § 14. However, this concept has its roots in [Shabbos 112b](#) and [Eruvin 53a](#)

Many ask the simple question: If all the generations until now have been unsuccessful at being deserving of Moshiach and the ultimate redemption, how can we expect to be any better? In truth, this is only a question if we assume that each generation is looked at individually. However, if we were to consider that each generation builds on the previous one, the question doesn't get started. If a giant can't reach a certain height, that doesn't mean a little person on his shoulders can't help. With all the merit that's been accumulated until now, there's no reason our acts of good can't be the final hammer blow⁷.

There's an unusual story we are told about Rabbi Akiva and his students⁸. בקשו תלמידיו לנמנם, his students wanted to doze off during his lesson. To arouse them, Rabbi Akiva asked them why Queen Esther chose to rule over 127 countries. He answered that it was because her ancestor, Sarah, lived for 127 years. His students immediately woke up. What's how long Sarah lived for have to do with anything? Why would this lesson wake up his students?

Another way to read it is not that the students wanted to doze off. Rather, they wanted to be inactive. They didn't want to accomplish anything. As we said, they felt insignificant, and that their Torah was worthless. They therefore didn't feel the need to spread it. Rabbi Akiva was trying to inspire them and have them realize their mistake. Esther could have also said, "Who am I?" She was many generations from the giving of the Torah. She too could have thought she was insignificant. However, she realized that she descends from Sarah. It's not just that she had prominent lineage, but she knew that all the collected merits over the generations would come to her aid. She had the potential to save the Jewish people, and indeed she did.

Rabbi Akiva tried his very best to inculcate this message into his student's psyche. Unfortunately, it didn't stick. Since they weren't able to accomplish their life's mission, their lives were cut short. It's only appropriate that this happened during the *Sefiras HaOmer* period. They failed to learn their self-worth from the *mitzvah* of *Sefiras HaOmer*. One could think that the *mitzvah* to count the *Omer* is 49 individual counts. However, if that were true, why do we say: "today is X days of the *Omer*"? If anything, this formulation clearly demonstrates that *Sefiras HaOmer* is an accumulation⁹. Every day we're working on ourselves, in preparation for receiving the Torah on Shavuot. While each day is its own job, with its own mission, we don't start from scratch. Everything builds and builds, until we reach spiritual heights we never imagined.

Lag Sameach and Good Shabbos

⁷ [Beis Elokim](#) by the [Mabit](#)

⁸ [Bereishis Rabbah](#) 58:3 and [Esther Rabbah](#) 1:8. See [Torah Sheleimah](#) to [Genesis](#) Chapter 23 § 8 for variant versions of this *Midrash*. For another treatment on this *Midrash*, see <https://parshaponders.com/chayei-sarah-5781>

⁹ [Ray Leff](#) presented *lumdus* how both in terms of the *halacha* and in terms of the *hashkafa*, *Sefiras HaOmer* is an accumulation