



The Paradox of Respect and Humility

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What makes Lag Ba'Omer, the 33rd day of the Omer, special? Why has this day become an oasis of relief, and even celebration, amidst the generally mournful period between Pesah and Shavuot?¹ The Talmud tells us simply that one year, R. Akiva's 24,000 students all died between Pesah and Shavuot; a post-talmudic tradition asserts that the plague that felled them came to an end specifically on the 33rd day of the Omer.² Something about this day ended the catastrophe that befell these second-century sages.

The Shem mi-Shmuel (Emor 1912) is bothered by the broader context of the story. According to the Talmud's tale, R. Akiva's 24,000 students died "because they did not show respect to each other" (*mip'nei shelo nahagu kavod zeh la-zeh*). These were the students of the greatest sage of the day—perhaps the greatest sage in all of Jewish history! How could it be that they were all so morally decrepit as to fail to show each other respect? Even if one concedes—as our experience may suggest—that sometimes (often, even!) great scholars get so caught up in

¹ There are different positions and communal traditions regarding when, exactly, the mourning practices of the Omer are in effect; see Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayyim 493:1-3. However, as both those customs (when taken as a whole) and the talmudic passage on which they are based make clear, there is something mournful about the entirety of this period.

² R. Menahem ha-Meiri, Beit ha-Behirah, Yevamot 62b; see also the roughly contemporaneous testimony attributed to R. Yehoshua ibn Shueib at Beit Yosef Orach Hayyim 493.



their learning that they fail to live up to basic standards of decency, could this have been true of all 24,000 students? And even if it was, once students began to die, would these sages not have had the religious insight to ask what they might have done to bring about this calamity and thereby to change their ways? How could it be that all 24,000 acted this way, and continued to act this way even as their world fell apart around them?

The answer, suggests the Shem mi-Shmuel, has to do with the nature of respect:

ונראה דהנה ענין נהיגת כבוד זה בזה...[היא] מצד שרואה בחברו מעלה שאין בו ע"כ נוהג כבוד בו שהרי בפרט זה הוא גבוה ממנו, וכן זה בזה, שלא יתכן שלא יהי' אחד גבוה מחברו בפרט אחד.	It seems that showing respect to each other results from seeing in someone else a virtue that is lacking in yourself. Therefore, you show them respect, for in this particular regard, the other is greater. And this [respect] goes in both directions, for it cannot be that the other is not greater than the first in some particular regard.
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Respect for another person is fundamentally a recognition that I can learn from you in some way. There is some specific way in which you are greater than I—perhaps you are more generous, or more inquisitive, or more emotionally sensitive. When I recognize that aspect of you that I currently only aspire to—that way in which you are “greater” than I—I respect you. And most critically, the Shem mi-Shmuel says that this approach should lead to respect for all, because “it cannot be that the other is not greater than the first in some particular regard.”

והנה באדם פרטי אף שיש בו אברים חלוקים במעלה, מ"מ אין שייך לומר שאבר זה יחלוק כבוד	But behold, with a single individual, even though they have distinct limbs with different traits, nonetheless, it is not sensible to speak of one limb showing
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לזה שהרי הכל אחד, וא"כ לכאורה חברים שהם כאיש אחד בלב אחד ממש יש מקום לומר שלא שייכת חלוקת כבוד זה לזה שהרי כולם כאיש אחד ממש. ונראה שזה הי' טעם תלמידי רע"ק. אבל באמת אינו כן, שהרי כל צדיק וצדיק יש לו מדור בפני עצמו, ואינו דומה לאדם אחד, ואף שנרצים מצד הכלל מ"מ נרצים ג"כ מצד הפרט.	respect to another, for they are all one whole. If so, it would initially seem that colleagues who are truly like "one person with one heart,"³ one could say that it is not sensible to speak of them showing respect to each other, for behold they are all truly like one. And it seems this was the reason of the students of R. Akiva. But this is not the truth, for behold, each and every righteous person has their own place, and they are not like one person. And even though they are desired [by God] as part of the whole, they are also desired as an individual.
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We can understand the failure of R. Akiva's students to treat each other with respect as flowing from an admirable place. As colleagues, united in their devotion to the Torah they learned from R. Akiva, they might have felt a familiarity with each other that prevented them from seeing what made each of them, as individuals, special. If, as the coaching cliché has it, there is no "I" in team, there is also no "you" in it. When I completely submit myself to the collective, I also lose my ability to see others in their own individual beauty and glory. This, says the Shem mi-Shmuel, is what happened to R. Akiva's students.

This way of thinking about the plague on R. Akiva's students might explain why it ceased specifically on Lag Ba'Omer. There is a tradition to connect each of the seven weeks of the Omer to a respective *sefirah* (an emanation of God with a congruent spiritual trait) and likewise for each day of the week. The first day of the Omer, for example, is *hesed* in *hesed*—*hesed* being the first of these *sefirot*—while the second day moves on to *gevurah* in

³ See Rashi on Shemot 19:2.



hesed, and so on. By this reckoning, Lag Ba'Omer (the fifth day of the fifth week of the Omer) is *hod she-be-hod*. Literally, *hod* means “glory,” but perhaps because it sounds like the word for acknowledgment and thanks (*hoda'ah*), it is often understood to represent humility and even self-abnegation. Somehow, then, this *sefirah* stands for both splendor and humility; somehow, the sense of standing out is connected to understanding that we are part of a whole. Perhaps, arriving at this day that embodies both glory and humility, R. Akiva's students understood for the first time that they were indeed desired by God both as individuals and as parts of the whole, that they were both limbs of the larger body, but also each a shining star in their own right.

If, this Lag Ba'Omer, we can each see ourselves and others in such a way, then we will be well on our way to meriting the Torah on Shavuot.

