



“You shall love your fellow Jew as yourself”--This Is an Essential Principle of the Torah The Vital Lesson to Be Learned from the Harsh Punishment Suffered by the Students of Rabbi Akiva

This week, we will read parshas Kedoshim, which is always read during the weeks that we count the Omer. Thus, we will endeavor to draw a connection between the weekly Torah portion and Sefiras HaOmer. We find in parshas Kedoshim one of the most important positive commandments of the Torah—the mitzvah to love one’s fellow Jew (Vayikra 19, 18): **“ואהבת לרעך כמוך—אני ה'—you shall love your fellow as yourself; I am Hashem.** Rashi comments in the name of the Toras Kohanim: **Rabbi Akiva said, “This is an essential principle of the Torah.”**

The sacred words of the holy Tanna, Rabbi Akiva, reverberate throughout the Jewish world year after year and penetrate the hearts of all Jews, especially during the days of Sefiras HaOmer. During this period, we mourn the deaths of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva, who perished during the days of the Sefirah, because they neglected to treat one another with due respect. Let us review the pertinent passage from the Gemara (Yevamos 62b):

אמרו, שנים עשר אלף זוגים תלמידים היו לו לרבי עקיבא מגבת עד אנטיפרס, וכולן מתו בפרק אחד מפני שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה, והיה העולם שמם [מתורה], עד שבא רבי עקיבא אצל רבותינו שבדרום ושנאה להם, רבי מאיר ורבי יהודה ורבי יוסי ורבי שמעון ורבי אלעזר בן שמוע, והם הם העמידו תורה אותה שעה. תנא כולם מתו מפסח ועד עצרת.”

They said: Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of disciples extending from Gevat to Antiparis. They all died during one period of time, because they did not treat each other with respect. Thus, the world was left barren (of Torah) until Rabbi Akiva came to our Rabbis in the south and taught it to them. They were Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yossi, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua; it was these disciples who upheld Torah-study at that time. A Tanna stated: All of the disciples perished between Pesach and Shavuos.

It seems quite clear that this personal tragedy is what prompted Rabbi Akiva to declare: **“ואהבת לרעך כמוך—this is an essential principle of the Torah.** His students perished because they failed to treat each other with mutual respect. Hence, during these days when

we mourn their loss, it behooves us to consider the grave importance of the mitzvah to love your fellow Jew as yourself, seeing as they paid the ultimate price for failing to heed this basic principle.

Regarding this vital mitzvah, the esteemed Mahari of Komarna, zy”a, provides us with a fascinating allusion in Zohar Chai (Shemos, Part 2). Among the taryag mitzvos, HKB”H gave us the mitzvah to love the Almighty in the passuk (Devarim 6, 4): **“ואהבת את ה' אלקיך—you shall love Hashem, your G-d.** He also gave us the mitzvah to love one’s fellow Jew, which appears in this week’s parsha: **“ואהבת לרעך כמוך אני ה'.”** Amazingly, the gematria of **“ואהבת את ה' אלקיך”** is exactly the same as the gematria of **“ואהבת לרעך כמוך אני ה'”**. Not only does this illustrate how important this mitzvah is in the eyes of HKB”H, but it teaches us that loving one’s fellow Jew is on a par with loving Hashem. If one is negligent with regards to the mitzvah of “Ahavas Yisrael,” it is viewed as if he is negligent, chas v’shalom, with regards to the mitzvah of “Ahavas Hashem.”

Rabbi Akiva’s Disciples Were Punished because They Were Reluctant to Share Their Torah

To better appreciate the gravity of Rabbi Akiva’s declaration: **“You shall love your fellow as yourself; this is an essential principle of the Torah—**we will introduce the commentary of the great Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech of Blozhov, zy”a, in Tzvi LaTzaddik (Moadim, Iyar, 3, 10):

“מעולם תמהתי על דברי הש”ס, שכל הכ”ד אלף תלמידי רבי עקיבא מתו בפרק אחד מפני שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה, שהוא באמת תמוה ופלא להבין שבשביל חטא קל כזה יתמו כל האלפים האלה, גדולי עולם מקבלי תורה מפי רבי עקיבא עד משה רבינו ע”ה, יתמו וימותו כולם על שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה.”

I have always been perplexed by this passage in the Talmud—that all 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva’s disciples perished during the same period of time, because they failed to treat each other with respect. It is truly perplexing and astonishing

that these thousands would perish for such a seemingly minor offense--that world renowned scholars, who had received the Torah from Rabbi Akiva back to Moshe Rabeinu, a”h, would perish and die for failing to treat one another respectfully.

The Tzvi LaTzaddik explains the matter based on a teaching in the Midrash (Koheles Rabbah 11, 6). After his 24,000 students died, Rabbi Akiva initiated new students and said to them: **“The first ones only died because they selfishly withheld their Torah from one another; you will not be the same. Immediately, they rose and filled all of Eretz Yisrael with Torah.**

Thus, we learn a novel interpretation from the Midrash. When the Gemara claims that Rabbi Akiva’s disciples failed to treat each other with respect, it means that **they selfishly withheld their Torah-knowledge from one another.** The unique Torah that each had personally gleaned from Rabbi Akiva, they kept to themselves. They refused to be magnanimous and to pass on what they had learned to their fellow students. Therefore, Rabbi Akiva admonished the new disciples not to selfishly hoard their Torah-knowledge. Heeding his remarks: **“They immediately rose and filled all of Eretz Yisrael with Torah.”** Based on this premise, the Tzvi LaTzaddik explains the gravity of Rabbi Akiva’s students’ flaw:

“והענין הוא, שהתלמידים הראשונים לא היו רוצים להנות זה לזה בתורה מחמת שנאה, ולא היה מגלה כל אחד ואחד לחבירו מה שיודע וקיבל מרבו מפני השנאה שביניהם, וממילא מובן המכשלה הגדולה שיצא מזה, אחר שכל עיקר בחינת תורה שבעל פה נסמכת, על המקבלים איש מפי איש עד משה רבינו ע”ה, ואחר כי חיים הם למוצאייהם כתיב, והם עשו להיפך, לפיכך נענשו מדה כנגד מדה היפך בחינת החיים המובטח למוצאייהם.”

The point is that the first disciples did not want to allow the others to benefit from their Torah due to hatred. So, each disciple would not reveal to his colleague what he knew and received from his teacher. The resulting tragedy is obvious. After all, the essence of Torah she’b’al peh relies on receiving from one another all the way back to Moshe Rabeinu, a”h. And since it states (Mishlei 4, 22): **“For they are life to those who find them”—and they did the opposite; therefore, they were punished measure for measure with the opposite of the life promised to those who find them.**

This explains very nicely why Rabbi Akiva specified: **“ואהבת”** לרעך כמוך, זה כלל גדול בתורה” When a person studies Torah, it is essential that he remember the vital principle: **“You shall love your fellow as yourself”—**respect your fellow disciples by learning with him and sharing with him everything that you have learned. Similarly, you should pay attention and listen to everything that he has learned. For, it is the way of the tradition of Torah to be studied together and passed on.

Rabbi Akiva Sacrificed His Life Teaching Torah to Make Amends for Failing to Prevent the Deaths of His Disciples

I would now like to present an idea to our royal audience with the utmost reverence and adoration. Based on what we have just learned, we can begin to comprehend to some minor degree why Rabbi Akiva was willing to place himself in jeopardy at the end of his life in order to disseminate Torah to the masses. Here is the pertinent passage from the Gemara (Berachos 61b):

“תנו רבנן פעם אחת גזרה מלכות הרשעה שלא יעסקו ישראל בתורה, בא פפוס בן יהודה ומצאו לרבי עקיבא שהיה מקהיל קהילות ברבים ועוסק בתורה... אמרו לא היו ימים מועטים עד שתפסוהו לרבי עקיבא וחבשוהו בבית האסורים... בשעה שהוציאו את רבי עקיבא להריגה זמן קריאת שמע היה, והיו סורקים את בשרו במסרוקות של ברזל והיה מקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים. אמרו לו תלמידיו רבינו עד כאן, אמר להם כל ימי הייתי מצטער על פסוק זה ‘בכל נפשך’ אפילו נוטל את נשמתך, אמרתי מתי יבוא לידי ואקיימנו, ועכשיו שבא לידי לא אקיימנו, היה מאריך באחד עד שיצתה נשמתו באחד, יצתה בת קול ואמרה, אשריך רבי עקיבא שיצאה נשמתך באחד.”

The Rabbis taught in a Baraisa: Once, the wicked regime (Rome) decreed that the Jewish people should not engage in Torah-study. Pappus ben Yehudah came and found Rabbi Akiva as he was convening public assemblies and engaging in Torah-study . . . They reported that it was not very long until they apprehended Rabbi Akiva and imprisoned him . . . When they took Rabbi Akiva out to be executed, it was the time to recite “Krias Shema.” They were combing his flesh with iron combs, yet he was accepting upon himself the yoke of heavenly sovereignty. His students said to him, “Our teacher, even to this extent?” He said to them, “All my days, I was troubled by this verse—‘with all your soul’—even if He takes your soul. I said to myself: When will I have the opportunity to fulfill this verse? Now, that I have the opportunity, should I not fulfill it?!” He lingered on the word “echad” until his soul departed with “echad.” A heavenly voice called out and proclaimed: “Fortunate are you, Rabbi Akiva, that your soul departed as you said ‘echad.’”

The commentaries go to great lengths to explain why Rabbi Akiva jeopardized his life by teaching Torah publicly to large gatherings. He could have done so clandestinely. Let us suggest, however, that due to his extreme humility, he blamed himself for not educating his first group of students properly. He felt that he should have impressed upon them the importance of refining their midos and being magnanimous; they should have shared their Torah and influenced one another in a positive manner. As Rashi teaches us (Devarim 1, 13): **“ואשמם בראשיכם”—the word “ואשמם” is missing the letter “yud,” to teach us that the blame for Yisrael’s**

sins rests on the heads of their judges; they should have objected and pointed them (Yisrael) in the right direction.

To rectify his perceived shortcomings as a mentor and teacher, he opted to place his life in danger knowing full-well that he would be persecuted for teaching Torah in public gatherings. In this manner, he atoned for failing to inculcate in his previous disciples the obligation to share their Torah with others. Hence, he told his new disciples: **“All my days, I was troubled by this passuk—‘with all your soul’—even if He takes your soul. I said to myself: When will I have the opportunity to fulfill this passuk? Now, that I have the opportunity, should I not fulfill it?!”** Thus, he informed them that he yearned his entire life to sacrifice his life by teaching Torah publicly to make amends for the deaths of the 24,000 disciples that he failed to educate properly.

The Torah Is Only Acquired in Groups

I would like to propose a wonderful explanation for the reason Rabbi Akiva’s disciples were punished so severely. As we have learned, they all died during the time of Sefiras HaOmer—the days and weeks of preparation for the receiving of the Torah on Chag HaShavuos. Now, our blessed sages have taught us that the Torah cannot be acquired individually; friends must join together to study and analyze its teachings. This is emphasized in the Gemara (ibid. 63b) expounding on the passuk (ibid. 27, 9):

“הסכת ושמע ישראל, עשו כתות כתות ועסקו בתורה, לפי שאין התורה נקנית אלא בחבורה, כדברי יוסי ברבי חנינא, דאמר רבי יוסי ברבי חנינא, מאי דכתיב חרב אל הבדים ונאלו, חרב על שונאיהם של תלמידי חכמים שיושבים בד בבד ועוסקים בתורה.”

The word “הסכת” teaches that you must form groups (a play on the word “haskeit”: “asu kitot”) upon groups to engage in Torah-study. For Torah is only acquired in groups. This accords with the words of Rabbi Yossi the son of Rabbi Chanina. For Rabbi Yossi the son of Rabbi Chanina said: What is the meaning of that which is written (Yirmiyah 50, 36): “There will be a sword against those who are alone, ‘v’noalu”? There will be a sword against the enemies of those Torah scholars who each sit alone and engage in Torah-study.

We will endeavor to explain why Torah scholars who study alone deserve such a harsh punishment—**“a sword against those who are alone.”** Additionally, we will endeavor to explain why such scholars are described as **“בדים”**. Let us refer to the passuk in parshas Terumah (Shemos 25, 10): **“ועשו ארון עצי שטים...”**—**they shall make an Aron of shittim wood etc.** They expound on this passuk in the Midrash (S.R. 34, 2): **“מפני מה בכל הכלים האלה כתיב ‘ועשית’ ובארון כתיב ‘ועשו’:** ארון. אמר רבי יהודה בר רבי שלום, אמר לו הקב”ה, יבואו הכל ויעסקו בארון כדי שיזכו.” Pertaining to the Aron, it is written **“they shall make”;**

whereas, with regards to all of the other vessels, it is written **“you shall make.”** Rabbi Yehudah the son of Rabbi Shalom explained: **Thus, HKB”H intimated to Moshe that everyone should come and participate in the making of the Aron, so that they would all merit a part of the Torah.** We learn from this Midrash that since the Aron housed the two luchos, it symbolizes Torah-study.

With this in mind, let us focus on an additional detail commanded by HKB”H concerning the construction of the Aron (ibid. 13): **“ועשית בדי עצי שטים וצפית אותם זהב, והבאת את הבדים בטבעות על צלעות הארון לשאת את הארון בהם, בטבעות הארון יהיו הבדים לא יסורו. You shall make staves of shittim wood and cover them with gold; and insert the staves into the rings on the sides of the Aron, with which to carry the Aron. The staves shall remain in the rings of the Aron; they shall not be removed from it. You shall put in the Aron the Testimony that I shall give you.** Now, seeing as the Aron symbolizes the study of Torah, clearly the two staves—**“bahdim”**—designed to transport the Aron are vital to the study of Torah; so much so that it is prohibited to remove them from the Aron. We will endeavor to explain their significance.

We can suggest that HKB”H wanted to teach us that **“talmidei-chachamim”** are analogous to the staves of the Aron, since they carry the Torah on their shoulders. So, just as the Aron requires two staves, so, too, Torah-study requires at least a twosome. The reason being that an individual studying alone is liable to err, chas v’shalom, and misinterpret and distort the words of G-d, since there is no one standing opposite him to evaluate the veracity and accuracy of his chiddushim and logic. This is the message conveyed by our sages in the Mishnah (Avos 4, 13): **“ואל בינתך אל תשען”**—**and do not rely on your own intuition**—for, it is impossible for a person to be impartial regarding his own ideas and reasoning.

On the other hand, when colleagues study Torah together, analyzing and employing dialectic, it is possible to clarify issues and arrive at the truth of the matter. When one poses questions and the other responds, agreeing with or refuting each other’s arguments, the true halachah emerges. In the words of the wisest of all men (Koheles 4, 9): **“טובים השנים מן האחד אשר יש להם שכר טוב: two are better than one, for they get a better return for their labor.** Regarding this subject, we find illuminating insights from our sages (Ta’anis 7a):

“אמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא, מאי דכתיב ברזל ברזל יחד, לומר לך, מה ברזל זה אחד מחדד את חברו, אף שני תלמידי חכמים מחדדין זה את זה בהלכה... אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק, למה נמשלו דברי תורה כעץ, שנאמר עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה, לומר לך, מזה עץ קטן מדליק את הגדול, אף תלמידי חכמים קטנים מחדדים את הגדולים. והיינו דאמר רבי חנינא, הרבה למדתי מרבותי, ומחברי יתיר, ומתלמידי יתיר מכולך.”

Rabbi Chama the son of Rabbi Chanina said: What is the meaning of that which is written (Mishlei 27, 17): "ברזל בברזל" —iron sharpens iron? It teaches you that just as one piece of iron sharpens another, so, too, two Torah scholars sharpen each other via their halachic debates. . . Rav Nachman the son of Yitzchak said: Why are the words of Torah compared to a tree, as it is said (ibid. 3, 18): "עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה" —it is a tree of life for those who cling to it? It teaches you that just as a small piece of wood ignites a larger one, this is also the case with Torah scholars—the younger ones sharpen the minds of the older ones. And this is the gist of Rabbi Chanina's statement: I have learned much from my teachers, and from my colleagues even more, but from my students more than from them all.

We can now shed some light on the profound elucidation of our blessed sages: **"There will be a sword against those who are alone (habahdim), 'v'noalu"?** **There will be a sword against the enemies of those Torah scholars who each sit alone ("bahd b'vahd") and engage in Torah-study.** The fact that Torah-scholars should learn with a companion is derived from the staves—"bahdim"—of the Aron. Therefore, when Torah-scholars study Torah alone as individuals, they are sitting **"bahd b'vahd."** In other words, they do not represent the two **"bahdim"** that were supposed to be attached to the Aron at all times. Instead, they are sitting separately—"bahd b'vahd." Therefore, they are punished, chas v'shalom, as indicated by the passuk with **"a sword against the 'bahdim."**

The Chesed of the Torah Is that It Is Meant to Be Taught

Following this line of reasoning, we will proceed to explain why "midas hadin" prevailed over the disciples of Rabbi Akiva sentencing them all to death. We have learned in the Gemara (Succah 49b):

"מאי דכתיב ביה פתחה בחכמה ותורת חסד על לשונה, וכי יש תורה של חסד ויש תורה שאינה של חסד, אלא תורה לשמה זו היא תורה של חסד, שלא לשמה זו היא תורה שאינה של חסד, איכא דאמרי תורה ללמדה זו היא תורה של חסד, שלא ללמדה זו היא תורה שאינה של חסד."

The passuk in Mishlei (31, 26) employs the expression **"Toras chesed"**—literally: "Torah of kindness." The Gemara questions the meaning and significance of this phrase. The first opinion defines **"Toras chesed"** as Torah that is pure in purpose; a second opinion suggests that this term refers to Torah that is passed on to others.

Upon further consideration, it becomes apparent that the Gemara's two explanation are connected. A person who learns Torah with the purest of intents—"l'shma"—wishes only to

please his Creator. He does not learn Torah for his own pleasure or edification; instead, he teaches what he has learned to others, in order to enhance the glory of Heaven—"kevod shamayim." We can suggest that this is the deeper implication of the term **"תורה לשמה"**. For, the word **"תורה"** means to teach and guide others. Hence, a person who transmits his Torah to others fulfills the true meaning of **"Torah l'shma."** In other words, he engages in Torah-study **"לשמה"**—to accomplish the very implication of the name **"Torah."**

Let us now focus on the conclusion of Chazal's words cited above: **"Torah that is studied with the intent of teaching it to others is considered a Torah of chesed, whereas if it is not studied with the intent of teaching it to others, it is considered a Torah not of chesed."** We have learned in the Gemara (A.Z. 4b) that one should not pray the Mussaf service of Rosh Hashanah alone during the first three hours of the day, because "din" prevails at that time. Hence, one's deeds might be scrutinized and one's tefilos will be ignored. This prompts the Gemara's question based on the statement of Rav Yehudah in the name of Rav (ibid. 3b):

"שתים עשרה שעות הוי היום, שלש הראשונות הקב"ה יושב ועוסק בתורה, שניות יושב ודן את כל העולם כולו, כיון שרואה שנתחייב עולם כליה, עומד מכסא הדין ויושב על כסא רחמים, שלישיות יושב וזן את כל העולם כולו מקרני ראמים עד ביצי כנים, רביעיות יושב ומשחק עם לוייתן שנאמר לויתן זה יצרת לשחק בו."

The day is comprised of twelve hours; during the first three hours, HKB"H sits and engages in Torah study. During the second (three hour) period, He sits and judges the entire world. When He sees that the world deserves annihilation, He rises from the throne of "din" and sits down on the throne of "rachamim." During the third (three hour) period, He sits and feeds the entire world—from the horns of the "re'eimim" to the eggs of lice (from the exalted to the lowly). During the fourth (three hour) period, He sits and plays with the Leviathan, as it is stated (Tehillim 104, 26): "You created this Leviathan to sport with it."

Thus, we learn that HKB"H does not sit in judgment during the first quarter of the day; He merely engages in Torah-study. This seems to contradict the Gemara's contention that one should not daven alone during those three hours, because it is a time when "din" prevails. However, according to the Gemara's second answer, it is apparent that although HKB"H sits and studies Torah during the first three hours of the day, nevertheless: **"תורה" דכתיב בה אמת, דכתיב אמת קנה ואל תמכור, אין הקב"ה עושה לפני משורת הדין, דין דלא כתיב ביה אמת, הקב"ה עושה לפני משורת הדין—the Torah is associated with "emes" (truth), for it is written (Mishlei 23, 23): "Purchase emes (Torah) and do not sell." Therefore, HKB"H does not go beyond the limits of strict "din" (justice), during that time period. During the period of "din" (i.e., the**

second three hours), however, **which is not associated with “emes,” HKB”H may neglect the limits of strict “din.”**

Torah Itself Is Associated with “Din” It Is Sweetened by Teaching It to Others

Thus, we learn a fundamental principle regarding Torah-study. The Torah itself is called **“emes”**—it represents strict “din.” Hence, during the first three hours of the day—when HKB”H engages in Torah-study—He does not judge with leniency. In truth, this notion is extremely surprising. It seems inconceivable that when a Jew engages in the study of Torah, the epitome of “emes,” he subjects himself to “din,” without the possibility of leniency. After all, we have a passuk extolling the virtue of Torah-study that states explicitly (ibid. 3, 16): **“אורך ימים בימינה בשמאלה עושר וכבוד”**—**length of days is at its right; at its left, wealth and honor.** In other words, Torah-study is associated with long life, wealth, and honor.

Notwithstanding, based on our current discussion, we can reconcile the matter fabulously. It is precisely for this reason that it is imperative to learn Torah for the sake of teaching it and passing it on to others. As we have learned in the Mishnah (Avos 2, 8): **“אם למדת”**—**if you have learned much Torah, do not ascribe any merit to yourself, because this is the purpose for which you were created.** For, as we have learned, the Torah itself is the personification of “emes” and as such represents “din” in its purest and strictest sense. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to perform an altruistic act typifying pure “chesed”; we must teach the Torah to others. This “chesed” counteracts and diminishes the forces of “din” associated with the Torah; in its merit, “midah k’neged midah,” we are treated with “chesed” and leniency.

This then is the lesson conveyed by the Gemara’s elucidation: **“פיה פתחה בחכמה ותורת חסד על לשונה... תורה ללמדה זו היא תורה של חסד”**—**if one’s Torah is not transmitted to others, it maintains the status of strict “din,” it is not associated with “chesed.”** Only after it is taught to others is it transformed into **“Torah chesed.”**

The Reason HKB”H Began the Torah with the Letter “beis”

It gives me great pleasure to apply this premise to explain the juxtaposition of the two pesukim in Mishlei (31, 26-27): **“פיה פתחה בחכמה ותורת חסד על לשונה, צופיה הליכות ביתה ולחם עצלות לא תאכל.”** **She opens her mouth with chochmah (wisdom), and the Torah of chesed is on her tongue. She anticipates the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of laziness.** According to Rashi’s commentary on the passuk (ibid. 10): **“אשת חיל מי ימצא”**—a “woman of valor” is a

metaphor for the virtues of the holy Torah. This interpretation is based on the elucidation in the Gemara (Pesachim 49b) related to the passuk (Devarim 33, 4): **“תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה קהלת יעקב, אל תקרי: מורשה אלא מאורסה.”** **“The Torah which Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the congregation of Yaakov.”** Now, do not read the word in this passuk as **“morashah”**—meaning an inheritance—but rather as **“meorasah”**—meaning a betrothed. Here we learn that the Torah is Yisrael’s **“Eishet Chayil.”**

We will now introduce a teaching in the Tanna D’Vei Eliyahu (end of Chapter 31) explaining why HKB”H began Torah she’b’chsav with the letter **“beis”** rather than with the letter **“aleph.”** It is because HKB”H wished to begin with a berachah:

“ומה נשתנה הבי”ת מכל הכ”ב אותיות, שבה ברא הקב”ה את עולמו, שנאמר בראשית ברא אלקים את השמים ואת הארץ, והלא אין ראוי לומר אלא אלקים ברא בראשית, ומה תלמוד לומר בראשית ברא אלקים.”

Why is the letter “beis” different from all the other twenty-two letters of the aleph-Beis with which HKB”H created His universe? Wouldn’t it have been more appropriate for the Torah to begin “אלקים ברא בראשית”, beginning with the word “Elokim” and the letter “aleph”? So, why does it begin with the passuk “בראשית ברא אלקים” with the letter “beis”? It answers: “התורה נאמרת תחילה בב’ שהוא לשון ברכה, ולא נאמרה באל”ף בתחילה שהוא לשון “קללה של ארור” —the Torah opens with the letter “beit,” which is associated with “berachah,” and does not open with the letter “aleph,” which is associated with the curse of “ארור”.

To explain why the letter **“beis”** is associated with **“ברכה”**, whereas the letter **“aleph”** is associated with **“ארור”**, let us refer to Rashi’s commentary on the opening passuk of Bereishis. He asserts that HKB”H created the world for the sake of the Torah, which is called **“Reishis.”** Additionally, he points out that the opening passuk of the Torah employs the name **Elokim** rather than **Havaya**, because He initially intended to create the world based on **“midas hadin”**; however, realizing that the creation would not endure based on this strict standard, he added **“midas harachamim.”**

Let us combine these two explanations. HKB”H wanted to create the world for the sake of the Torah, which is called **“Reishis”**; it is also called **“אמת”**. As we learned above, **“emes”** is associated with absolute, strict **“din.”** This is consistent with the allusion presented by the Ba’al HaTurim that the last letters of the words **בראשית ברא אלקים** form the word **אמת**. Therefore, HKB”H initially thought to create the world with **“midas hadin,”** which is emblematic of the Torah. Therefore, He partnered the midah of **“rachamim”** with the midah of **“din,”** but prioritized the former.

Let us elaborate. HKB”H began the Torah with the letter **“beit,”** which is associated with **ברכה**, instead of with the letter **“aleph,”**

which is associated with ארור. Thus, He provided us with an excellent way to sweeten and mitigate the “din” of the Torah. Since the numerical value of “beis” is two, while the numerical value of “aleph” is one, He was advising us not to study Torah like an “aleph”—as a lone individual. For, as we have learned, the “aleph” is associated with ארור—cursedness. In that case, one would incur the force of “din,” in keeping with the passuk: “הרב אל הבדים”. Instead, one should strive to study with a companion, symbolized by the letter “beis” associated with ברכה. Then, the force of “din” will be mitigated in keeping with the notion of “ותורת חסד על לשונה”.

We can now explain the connection between the pesukim extolling the virtues of the holy Torah very nicely. “פיה פתחה בחכמה”—the Torah opens wisely with the letter “beis” to teach us not to study Torah alone, like an “aleph.” By studying as a twosome, like the letter “beit,” the Torah is transmitted to others, and it becomes “Toras chesed”—“ותורת חסד על לשונה”. As a result, the “din” of the Torah, which is called “emes,” is diminished and sweetened.

Then, the next passuk continues: “צופיה הליכות ביתה”—the Torah anticipated the ways of her household alluded to by the first letter of the Torah, the letter “beit.” She emphasized to us the importance of learning Torah with others. Why? “לחם עצלות” “לא תאכל”—because she does not want us to study Torah alone, which promotes laziness. For, when one studies alone, one does not need to exert oneself, since there is no one there to disagree with him or to question his logic and conclusions.

I Learned Much from My Rabbis but Even More from My Students

In keeping with our current discussion, let us return to the Gemara’s statement cited above (Ta’anis 7a): **Rabbi Chanina said: I have learned much from my teachers, and from my colleagues even more, but from my students more than from them all.** In and of itself, the Torah represents absolute “din.” However, by teaching it to others, it becomes associated with

chesed and is able to mitigate the “din” of the Torah. So, what is to be done, if the students being taught by the Rabbi do not teach their Torah to others? Similarly, what is to be done if they study Torah with friends who are equal in their Torah skills and acumen? In these situations, they are liable to trigger and subject themselves to the “din” of the Torah, since it seems as if they are not transmitting the Torah to others.

Therefore, Rabbi Chanina reveals an important principle to us related to Torah-study: “הרבה למדתי מרבותי, ומחברי יותר מרבותי, ומתלמידי יותר מכולן”. These situations do not exist. Every Jew who studies Torah with a partner or in a group is teaching others. Not only is the Rabbi teaching his students Torah, but they are teaching him even more—“מתלמידי יותר מכולן”. Similarly, when studying with colleagues, each one learns more from his study-partner than he learns from his teacher. In this manner, the “dinim” of the Torah are modified and sweetened, because every individual has the ability to affect others with his Torah.

We can now begin to comprehend to some small degree why the harsh force of “din” struck the 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Akiva. They did not learn with the intent of teaching others. They did not treat each other with respect; they were not gracious; they did not transmit to each other what they had learned and intuited from Rabbi Akiva. Therefore, the harsh “din” of the Torah—which is called “emes”—was elicited. For, they neglected to make their Torah “Toras chesed” by sharing their Torah with others.

This prompted Rabbi Akiva to admonish his new disciples: **“The first ones died solely because they selfishly withheld their Torah from one another.”** Consequently, their Torah lacked the aspect of “chesed” and was incapable of mitigating the “din” of the Torah. **“Do not make the same mistake!”** They responded **immediately; they rose and filled all of Eretz Yisrael with Torah.** Thus, all of Eretz Yisrael was imbued with **“Toras chesed,”** sweetening all of the “dinim” of Yisrael and transforming them into divine chesed and rachamim.

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