YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

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**LAG BA-OMER 5772**

**SICHA OF HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT”A**

**Rabbi Akiva’s Students and *Derekh Eretz***

Adapted by Lavi Bigman

Translated by Kaeren Fish

*Lag Ba-omer* is a popular holiday, for obvious reasons: the bonfire, a day off from school, etc. However, *Chazal* depict this day in a rather less happy way. The Gemara (*Yevamot* 62b) teaches:

"They said: Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousands pairs of students … and they all died within a short time, because they did not treat each other with respect (*kavod*). And the world was desolate, until Rabbi Akiva came to the sages of the south, and taught them."

According to tradition, *Lag Ba-omer* is the day on which the plague ceased – and this, apparently, is the source of our celebration, although in our times this holiday has also assumed kabbalistic and mystical significance.

Let us pose a question concerning the above Gemara: after such a cataclysmic tragedy, Rabbi Akiva headed south, and taught the sages there. What did he teach them? The Gemara and *Rishonim* do not address this question. He must have taught them many areas of Torah, including some of its deepest secrets, but seemingly the matter goes further than this.

Rabbi Akiva watched as a tremendous population – in both quantitative and qualitative terms – was devastated because they did not treat one another with respect. Having recognized the problem, what would be the first thing that he would do upon reaching the south, in order to rebuild the world of Torah? If the Torah of twenty-four thousand students was silenced because they did not treat one another with respect, then the first priority would obviously be to address this phenomenon, to try to heal this disease, to descend to the roots of the problem and rebuild the edifice that had been lost.

At the beginning of Creation, too, we find destruction, and the same question we raised above presents itself: when Noach is saved from the Flood, what should his first act have been? The answer should be clear: at exactly the point where Adam left off, Noach should have continued to be fruitful and multiply. In contrast, when Rabbi Akiva is faced with a world no less desolate, his task is not to start again from the point where he left off. The first message with which he must start the rebuilding is that of *tikkun* – repair. He must teach his disciples, and society in general, how to behave towards each other and how to overcome the evil disease that had spread amongst them – even amongst the dwellers of the *beit midrash*.

The order in which Rabbi Akiva is meant to act when he moves south in order to teach Torah, is deduced by *Chazal* from the Creation of the world. They note that "*derekh eretz kadma la-Torah*" - worldly manners preceded the Torah. What is the meaning of this precedence? On the literal level, it would seem to indicate chronological priority. If Rabbi Akiva wants to recreate the world from "nothing," as it were, he can derive guidance from the Creation of the world, and try to inculcate the moral values which should characterize a *ben Torah* and the *beit midrash*.

If we try to imagine what Rabbi Akiva spoke about with his students, it seems that we can deduce at least two points arising from the Gemara. Firstly, that "they did not treat one another with respect." The terrible plague broke out not because his students humiliated or degraded each other – we cannot imagine the students of Rabbi Akiva behaving in such a manner. It seems, then, that what is expected of a *ben Torah* and a place of Torah is far more than this.

In the world of Halakha, there is a distinction between two concepts: *kavod* and *bizayon*. The concept of "honor" (*kavod*) appears in relation to honoring one's father and mother, and the Gemara concludes that if a father foregoes his own honor, then his honor is foregone (i.e., his child is exempt from the gestures of honor that he is usually required to perform). However, while a father may forego the honor due to him, he is not entitled to acquiesce to humiliation or degradation (*bizayon*). Conversely, we too must draw a distinction between the absence of humiliation or degradation, and the presence of honor. One message that Rabbi Akiva brings with him, then, is that it is not enough that people do not degrade each other. There is a need for positive honor.

A second point that deserves our attention is the distinction between the individual and the collective. The emphasis in the above Gemara is not on the honor of the community or rejection of a group. The emphasis is on the honor that they did not show *one another* – one person to another, on the most individual level. On the one hand, one may ask how twenty-four thousand people could ever show honor to each other – how could they have the time and the energy? On the other hand, the message is that not only must a person show respect to another as part of a group, but also "to one another" – one individual to another.

The mishna in *Avot* in this regard presents a most sweeping demand: "Rabbi Elazar ben Shamu'a says: Let the honor of your student be as dear to you as your own, and let your friend's honor be like the awe towards your teacher, and the awe towards your teacher like your awe towards Heaven" (4:12). In other words, the mishna draws an indirect parallel between the honor that one is to show to one’s friend and one’s fear of Heaven. This is a strong statement of what is required of us in this area.

In our generation we are responsible for ourselves and for our *beit midrash*. I do not mean, heaven forefend, that a plague is about to descend on us, nor am I referring to any particular phenomenon that is problematic. Still, the question arises: do we meet the extensive demands of treating one another with respect? Have we internalized the message properly?

*Lag Ba-omer* is almost upon us, but Shavuot is also not far away. The issue of treating one another with respect should also be viewed in the perspective of Shavuot and our preparations for receiving the Torah. On one level, this is significant in terms of the manner of our acceptance of the Torah. *Chazal* emphasize that *Am Yisrael* stood facing the mountain "as one person with one heart." This does not mean to say that there was complete unanimity concerning every personal, social and national issue. Obviously, there were differences of opinion – indeed, that is a healthy state of affairs. But such differences of opinion should not entail scorn for one another; rather, they should be expressed with the appropriate respect, with readiness to hear a different opinion, and allowing others to speak up.

Furthermore, the ability to show respect for others is one of the central pillars of the *derekh eretz* that precedes the Torah. From the mishna in *Avot* it is not clear what exactly is meant by *derekh eretz.* Rabbeinu Yona connects this concept with the nature of Shavuot, via another mishna in *Avot*, which lists a series of values that are connected to one another: "Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria says: If there is no Torah, there is no *derekh* *eretz;* [but] if there is no *derekh eretz,* there is no Torah…" (3:17).

Rabbeinu Yona insists that the chronological order in which these values appear is important:

"This means to say that first one has to work on his character, and through this the Torah will come to rest upon him, for [the Torah] will never rest in a body that does not have good character – [for example,] one who first studies Torah and then takes on the commandments - for this is impossible. And that is as it is written, *'na'aseh ve-nishma* (We shall do and we shall hear)'..." (ad loc).

The placing of *derekh eretz* prior to Torah parallels the statement, "We shall do and we shall hear." "We shall do and we shall hear" means that we will fulfill God's words even if we don't understand all the details. It means that a person fulfills the commandments out of a total acceptance of the yoke of Heaven.

The expression "We shall do and we shall hear" is recorded not in *parashat Yitro*, but only at the end of the giving of the Torah, in *parashat* *Mishpatim*. *Am Yisrael* did not attain the level of "We shall do and we shall hear" at the beginning of the process, but rather at its end. The Gemara, in *Massekhet Keritut*, and the Rambam (*Issurei Bi'a* 13:1) tell us that God's covenant with Israel was forged with three things: circumcision, immersion, and sacrifice. It is only at the end of this process that the conversion was complete.

The preparation for receiving the Torah continues throughout the counting of the Omer, and reaches its climax with the acceptance of the Torah on Shavuot. The crowning glory of this experience is our presence before God and our utterance of that same declaration that has echoed throughout the generations: "*Na'aseh ve-nishma*." While we usually interpret this to mean first a blind obedience and afterwards a deeper understanding, on Shavuot the expression assumes another dimension: *derekh eretz* precedes Torah.

Obviously, *derekh eretz* is a very broad subject. However, its main principle is that every *beit* *midrash* should aspire to correct the problems that existed in Rabbi Akiva's *beit midrash*. This thought should accompany us as we approach the great fire of Sinai revealed on Shavuot.

(This sicha was delivered on Lag ba-Omer 5768 [2008].)