

# JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

## Lag Ba'Omer

Customarily, we do not get married from the beginning of the Omer count until the 33rd day, popularly known as Lag Ba'Omer. The *Tur* (13th Century) explains that avoid this happy occasion then because the students of Rabbi Akiva died precisely during this period. The Talmud (*Yevamot 62b*) says the students died as punishment for not treating each other with the proper honor. Nowhere in the Torah does it say one receives the death penalty for not honoring another person, so why would they have deserved death for this conduct?

Let us address this issue by examining two other mysterious teachings. The Talmud (*Sotah 4*) records that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said, "Anyone who is arrogant, it is as if he worships idols." In the *Zohar*, a work attributed to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, it also says "Anyone who is angry is as if he worships idols." Now, arrogance and anger are certainly terrible character traits, but they tend to be expressed between people. So why does Rabbi Shimon say that a haughty or angry person is like a worshiper of idols, one of the most severe sins between man and G-d?

Since every person has unique talents, certain people will always surpass others in particular areas. Is it wrong for a person to be cognizant of the areas in which he excels? R' Yaakov Weinberg showed that Maimonides clearly knew he towered over his peers in terms of his Torah knowledge. For he writes in his Introduction to *Mishneh Torah* (Code of Jewish Law) that in order to compile this work, one must have mastery of all the Written Torah and Oral Torah, including all areas of Talmud and Midrash. So he definitely knew of his amazing greatness.

The difference between the humble person and the arrogant one lies in the humble man's realization that all of his talents and achievements are gifts from G-d. Conversely, the arrogant individual fools himself into thinking he accomplished everything on his own, thereby pushing G-d out of the picture. If one realizes all of his talents are gifts from G-d, there is no room for him to pride himself over another person, because Hashem simply gave the other person a different set of blessings. Ramban adds that a humble person will recognize that every other person actually has an area in which they excel even more than him. The humble person realizes G-d created many varieties of people, and endowed each one with something special and great.

Similarly, a person is bound to get angry at others if he feels he controls how everything goes. When things do not go as he planned, he will take out his anger on the party responsible for getting in his way. However, if one internalizes the notion that things do not always go as expected because G-d did not want it so, then he can drastically minimize the degree of his anger and displeasure with other people. After all, G-d created those particular circumstances, and He even



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influenced the other people to make the decisions the way they did. If one has a keen understanding of G-d's involvement in the world, he will have to try hard to justify reasons for real anger and resentment.

When someone does not honor another person, he fails to recognize the G-d given gifts which the other persons possesses. He denies the spark of Godliness that every person has, as every person is made in the image of G-d (*b'tzelem Elokim*). When one belittles another person, in essence he has temporarily forgotten that this person is a child of G-d. Of course, one should not respect another person when he exhibits evil or inappropriate behavior. But in general, a person should strive to appreciate other people and respect them for who they are, despite their limitations.

While we must show the proper dignity for every human being, the Torah demands we show special honor for true Torah scholars who embody the ideals of the Torah. When a person studies Torah at every free moment and constantly strives to live his life according to the *mitzvot* of the Torah, the Torah requires that this role model receive special respect. In Talmudic times, they would even excommunicate someone who intentionally denigrated a great Torah scholar (see *Moed Katan 16a*).

While it is difficult for us to fully grasp how the students of Rabbi Akiva could deserve death for not honoring each other, we learn a profound lesson from this occurrence. We see the importance of appreciating each person's unique Godly spark. Additionally, we see the need to appreciate budding Torah scholars, people working to uncover the depths of Torah and its teachings. If we understand Rabbi Akiva's students' lack of honoring one another as a deep affront to G-d and His Torah, and not simply as a bunch of impatient people squabbling with one another, then we can begin to understand how they might receive a punishment as severe as death. Also, since greater people are held to higher standards, Rabbi Akiva's students most probably were punished more severely than other ordinary folk might have been punished for the same infractions. This time of year is an opportunity to strengthen ourselves in seeing the greatness of every person, especially the virtues of those people who embody Torah ideals.

*Shabbat Shalom*

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