

The period between Pesach and Shevuos is a very interesting period of time. On the one hand, we celebrate the two greatest simchos in the history of Klal Yisroel—we are in the process of moving from Yetzias Mitzrayim to Kabbolas HaTorah. We are going on a journey, step-by-step for 49 days, to grow and reach a point of kabbolas haTorah where Klal Yisroel say “naaseh venishmah”. It should be a time of overwhelming simcha. But as we all know, at the same time we are in strange period of aveilus over the death of the 24,000 talmidim of Rabbi Akiva.

There is another similar coming together of contrasts in the parsha of the week at this particular time of year—Parshas Shemini. This is not an accident. It also describes a time of unbelievable simcha—where the Shechinoh finally descended upon the mishkan, alongside tragedy and aveilus —when the two gedolei hador died on the spot. Moshe told Aharon Hakohen that Nodov and Avi’hu were greater than even you and I. Just imagine the gadlus—it was a devastating loss.

This overlap of simcha with aveilus is being experienced on many levels: the time from Yetzias Mitzrayim to kabbolas haTorah, and the cycle of parshiyos. How do we understand this?

The aveilus over the death of the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva requires that we reflect on the root causes. After the churbon of the second Beis Hamikdosh, everything was destroyed. Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai started to rebuild in Yavneh. He rebuilt Klal Yisroel by rebuilding limud haTorah. Approximately 50 years later, Klal Yisroel is flourishing again. There are yeshivos everywhere. The greatest of the yeshivos was led by Rabbi Akiva. The gadlus of Rabbi Akiva overwhelmed even Moshe Rabbeinu when Hashem showed him the future at Har Sinai!

But 12,000 pairs of his talmidim died. Why? Not because of arayos or avodo zoro. It was because each chavrusoh was not giving proper respect to each other. The gemara says the world was absolutely devastated by this. After undergoing the churbon and then the rebirth which gave such hope for the future, all their hopes were dashed. There is a very deep lesson here for all of us that we must review every year.

There are two contradictory gemaros. One gemara asks: “Why was the first Beis Hamikdosh destroyed?” It gives a very straightforward answer: because of the three aveiros chamuros. But another gemara says the reason for the churbon was unknown and Hashem had to reveal it to them through a nevuah. It was because of bitul Torah. So which one is it?

The Netziv answers that although arayos, murder, and avodo zoro are certainly severe enough to cause the churbon, the effects of those aveiros can be mitigated by the zechus of limud haTorah. Such is the power of limud Torah! But since there was bitul Torah, the shield against the aveiros wasn’t there and the aveiros brought the churbon.

There is yet another gemara: Why was the second Beis Hamikdosh destroyed? The gemara adds that there was a tremendous amount of limud haTorah at the time. The gemara answers because of sinas chinom. The Netziv commented that even though there was limud haTorah at the time, it still didn’t protect them from the effects of bad middos. It turns out to be more severe than avodo zoro, gilui arayos, and murder! So now we understand why Rabbi Akiva’s talmidim didn’t survive.

The last few shmuessin, I discussed why plagues come to this world. One statement of Chazal explains that it is because of arayos—as we

saw from the dor hamabul, Hashem does not tolerate arayos.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Ovos mentions matnas anyim and Shemitah as well as various chiyuvei misah.

But now we have another reason for a plague—the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva died from a plague because their learning didn’t penetrate down to their middos. If Torah doesn’t elevate you and uplift you and instead makes you arrogant and corrupts your middos, it is worthless. It causes devastation to the world.

The Rambam, on the posuk where Moshe Rabbeinu asks to know Hashem’s ways and find favor in Hashem’s eyes, explains that it refers to the middos of Hashem. It connects to the posuk where Hashem praised Avrohom Ovinu for instructing his progeny to follow in Hashem’s derech of middos tovos. This is how we find favor in Hashem’s eyes.

Moshe Rabbeinu asked: what are these middos in particular? How do I incorporate them into my life? Hashem responds with the 13 middos of rachamim. This is how the Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim understands Moshe Rabbeinu finding favor in Hashem’s eyes. It shows us how vital middos tovos are to yiddishkeit.

The Rambam in Hilchos Teshuvah explains that alongside limud haTorah, middos tovos are also absolutely critical to gain entry into olom haboh. Why is this so? In the end of Moreh Nevuchim, the Rambam says that the goal of all Torah and mitzvos and davening is to establish an ongoing connection with Hashem. This is why Moshe Rabbeinu asked from something extra—not just knowledge—what are His middos of rachamim which will develop my neshomo and give me a deeper connection?

The Rambam, in his introduction to Perek Chelek talks about aveiros which cause one to lose olom haboh. He then cites a list of corrupt middos which also prevent one from achieving olom haboh. Why? If a person’s middos are so corrupt, and his neshomo is on such a low level, he doesn’t deserve to be close to Hashem. In order to merit olom haboh, your neshomo has to be refined and uplifted by the Torah.

The plague which killed Rabbi Akiva’s talmidim came from disrespecting one another. Their learning didn’t refine their middos. Having a chavrusoh requires having genuine respect for someone else’s Torah. You aren’t learning for your ego gratification. If you lash out when you are proven wrong by your chavrusoh and never admit a mistake, or you are constantly out to prove your chavrusoh wrong, something is deeply wrong with your learning. We have to see the tzelem Elokim in every human being. People aren’t just tools for boosting one’s ego.

The Torah we learn has to affect us and transform who we are, on every level. Otherwise, there is no point to learning—we don’t learn just for the intellectual stimulation and satisfaction—which is indeed unbelievable. If I don’t keep in mind that I am trying to understand Hashem’s mind through learning Torah, it has no value.

Before the churbon Bayis Sheini, there was tremendous limud haTorah. Rabbi Akiva’s talmidim were also on an unbelievable level of understanding Torah. But Hashem wasn’t interested. Rabbi Akiva’s whole life was about building Torah, but it was wiped away and he had to start over again with the five special tannoim. We have nothing recorded from all those 24,000 talmidim. We are constantly quoting those five talmidim throughout Torah Shebaal Peh.

So on the one hand, we are in a time of unbelievable simcha—moving from Yetzias Mitzrayim to kabbolas haTorah. Shevuos is our own kabbolas haTorah! What can be a greater joy? But as we are building every day to a higher level, we have to be cognizant that it can turn to tragedy. We still mourn for the loss of those talmidim and for ourselves.

The gemara says a powerful thing. The natural tendency of people is to be jealous and see everyone else as a competitor. That is human nature. We have to fight against it. The Torah demands that we change this inborn nature. Learning Torah lishmoh, as Rav Chaim of Volozhin explains, means making achieving the emes the highest goal. My ego and my bad middos will certainly get in the way of connecting my mind with Hashem's mind. If my only goal is to get the deepest havonos haTorah, I cannot be out to prove myself right and put down other people.

Simultaneous with this time of year is the tragedy of Nodov and Avi'hu. Chazal provide numerous explanations for their downfall. The common theme among all of them is that they were gedolei hador and thought too highly of themselves. They were too good to marry because everyone was below their stature. They didn't feel that they had to consult Moshe Rabbeinu because they knew better. They thought they can use alcohol in their avodas Hashem because they knew better.

There is a mitzvah of not subtracting and not adding to the Torah. The Netziv asks: I can understand the reason for telling me there is an issur to add mitzvos. It isn't obvious that I can't do that. But who would think it is permitted to remove a mitzvah—not to keep a mitzvah? Why is there a separate mitzvah to tell me to keep all the mitzvos? And who are we talking about?

He answers that there are people who think that the 613 mitzvos are for the masses. But I am special and I can work out my own derech avodoh. For such a person, the Torah has to tell us that we all must stay within the derech avodoh of 613 mitzvos. There is no-one who is above the Torah's limits.

Nodov and Avi'hu thought they were superior and could formulate their own derech avodoh with this ketores. They thought the limitations in the avodas hamishkan were for regular people—not for them. But they were wrong. Every Jew has to fit his unique avodas Hashem into the same parameters of the 613 mitzvos—from Moshe Rabbeinu all the way down. This is why Moshe Rabbeinu emphasized that these

two individuals were on the highest level possible—and despite this, they still weren't able to say they knew better and could do what they thought was right. No-one later in history can say that if they are on a higher level, they can make their own rules.

That is last week's parsha of Shemini. This is why it ties in to the period of aveilus over the talmidim of Rebbi Akiva. We—in our own time in history—are standing in a time that is similar to that of Rebbi Akiva. Boruch Hashem, we haven't lost those numbers. But the yeshivos are closed and the shuls are closed. The world is devastated. Hashem is giving us a slap in the face, telling us He doesn't want our Torah and our tefilloh. He doesn't like the way Klal Yisroel has been running their mosdos of Torah and tefilloh. There is something basic lacking and we need to rectify it. Once we develop genuine respect for one another like the five talmidim of Rebbi Akiva, then we can rebuild.

We aren't zoche to sit in the walls of the beis hamidrash like we are used to. Why are we in this situation? We have to do a serious cheshbon hanefesh. Mageifos come because of arayos as we discussed, for having too much pride in our work and not giving enough tzedaka as we discussed, and also for having too much ego and not respecting each other.

We are experiencing a gezeirah from shomayim on the world and on our community in particular. Here in Eretz Yisroel, we have been zoche to a tremendous yeshuah from death compared to the rest of the world. On the other hand, Hashem has closed the yeshivos and chadorim and shuls—not only in Eretz Yisroel but worldwide. Hashem is telling us to get our act together before we resume our regular routine. It is a deep idea that we all have to take seriously especially in this time of year.

We have to appreciate that we are now being tested in our resolve to learn Torah on a serious level under trying circumstances. It isn't as hard to learn as in previous times in our history of shmad. But we need to be more self-motivated and pro-active than ever. We can't rely on the social structure and social pressure of a mosod of Torah as in the past. Make sure your limud haTorah is sincere and use Torah to grow in your middos tovos.

Hashem should help and bring us out of this situation to a point where we can re-open the yeshivos and chadorim and shuls and be mekabel Moshiach very soon.