



Parashat Emor

We're All Ambassadors

In Parashat Emor the Torah presents one of the most important of the 613 Biblical commands – the prohibition against “Hillul Hashem,” defaming the Name of God: “You shall not desecrate My holy Name” (22:32). A religious Jew who acts in a discourteous or unseemly manner dishonors God, thereby desecrating His Name.

We currently find ourselves in the period of Sefirat Ha’omer, the weeks between Pesah and Shabuot, when we observe a number of mourning practices. Weddings and celebrations are not held, and we refrain from haircutting and shaving. During these weeks, we mourn the tragic death of Rabbi Akiva’s 24,000 students, who all perished in the brief period between Pesah and Shabuot as a result of a severe illness. These students were outstanding Torah scholars, but, as the Talmud teaches, they did not treat each other respectfully (“She’lo Nahagu Kabod Ze La’ze”). They were punished for this disrespectful behavior, and all 24,000 students died a painful death.

Many have wondered why God visited such a severe punishment upon Rabbi Akiva’s students. Certainly, it is understood that the Torah demands respectful treatment of other people, not to mention toward Rabbis and Torah scholars. But where do we find disrespectful behavior toward one’s peers as a capital crime, which is punishable by deadly illness?

Two famous rabbis – the Ben Ish Hai (Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad, 1833-1909) and the Hafetz Haim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan of Radin, 1839-1933) – both

answered that in truth, Rabbi Akiva's students were punished for transgressing the sin of Hillul Hashem. The manner in which they spoke to, and treated, one another left people with a very bad impression of the Torah world which they represented. It made them think that Torah tarnishes, rather than enhances, a person's character, and that the Torah encourages unseemly behavior, God forbid. And it was for this defamation of the Torah that Rabbi Akiva's students were punished so severely. Failure to treat others respectfully does not, in itself, render one liable to severe punishment, but Hillul Hashem indeed ranks among the most grievous sins in the Torah, and thus Rabbi Akiva's students were killed.

This terrible tragedy should send a stern warning to all observant Jews today. As one Rabbi put it, all religious Jews today serve as ambassadors of Torah. We are easily identifiable to outsiders, and they reach conclusions about religious Jews based on how we present ourselves. We must exercise extreme care to act and speak politely and with consideration not only because this is what the Torah demands, but also so that we make a favorable impression of Judaism. Even if we do not always realize it, each one of us is an ambassador, and bears the obligation to present the proper image of Torah values.

We must learn from the tragic mistake of Rabbi Akiva's students, and ensure to speak to all people in a polite, courteous and respectful manner.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Mansour

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