

Shavuos: The Power of Continuity

By Steven Genack

The climax of the Jewish nation occurs on Shavuos, a feat only reached through rigorous and consistent preparation. The Torah provides a magical message regarding the significance of continuity and wholeness in the time leading up to the giving of the Torah, and the Talmud instructs us how to succeed in Torah, as can be deduced through the tragic loss of Rabbi Akiva's students.

In Leviticus 23:15, we are told to count seven whole weeks. This refers to the time between Pesach and Shavuos. This counting must be consistent, with no stoppages. If the *bracha* is forgotten for a full day, this is a lack of continuity, and the person may no longer continue counting with a *bracha*.

The counting, on the one hand, is in commemoration of the Korban Omer that was brought on the second day of Pesach but also to mark the time of preparation for the giving of the Torah. This is why the Rav, *zt"l*, notes we don't say a *shehecheyanu* blessing on the Omer, as it is a mere preparation for the giving of the Torah. However, the preparation must be complete and consistent, with no gaping holes.

During this same time period, later in history, Rabbi Akiva lost his 24,000 students. We must delve into the personality of Rabbi Akiva and the travails and triumphs he experienced with his students and explain why their deaths occurred at a time set aside for the counting of the Omer – a time of joy and exhilaration, time that marks the onset of the giving of the Torah.

It remains undisputed that the Oral Law, in its entirety, follows the opinion of Rabbi Akiva. In Sanhedrin 86a, the Gemara says, "Rabbi Yochanan says an anonymous Mishnah goes like Rabbi Meir, *tosefta* like Rabbi Nechemiah, *sifrah* like Rabbi Yehudah, and they all are according to Rabbi Akiva." In the area of character, Rabbi Akiva's prize pupil and the author of the Zohar, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, told his students to learn from his own middos because



his middos were *terumos mi'trumosav* (a scintilla apportionment) compared to Rabbi Akiva's.

The question now remains as to how the ambassador of the Oral Law can endure such tragedy out of the Torah that follows his opinion in every area of the law. Perhaps we can return to the theme of the power of continuity in attempting to address this issue.

Kesuvos 62b-63a tells that Rabbi Akiva studied in yeshiva for twelve consecutive years, amassing 12,000 students. As he returned home with his 12,000 students, he heard an old man provoke his wife, "How long will you remain a living widow?" to which she replied, "If my husband would only listen to me, he would devote himself to another twelve years of uninterrupted study." Upon hearing this, Rabbi Akiva returned to the yeshivah to study for another twelve uninterrupted years, by the end of which time he had gathered 24,000 *talmidim*.

I believe many lessons lie within this story. It would be of no surprise if the story is used in *shalom bayis* panels and middos discussions. However, when analyzing anything relating to Rabbi Akiva, surely every nuance relat-

ing to the study of Torah must be honed in upon. Thus, one can postulate a *chakirah* (question) relating to Rabbi Akiva's studies: did he study a consecutive twenty-four years in yeshivah, with no stoppage, for indeed he never entered his physical home after the first twelve years, or was there indeed a stoppage because he left the physical walls of the yeshiva at that time?

In such a scenario, it may be said that Rabbi Akiva studied two separate blocks of twelve years. I would argue that there was a physical separation from the yeshiva, and that is why the Gemara in Yevamos 62b specifically says he had "12,000 pairs" of students, as opposed to characterizing them in totality as 24,000. In essence, there was a stoppage in Rabbi Akiva's learning, creating two blocks of twelve, not a consecutive twenty-four, leading to a divided student body who couldn't relate to one another.

The counterargument can be found in the Chazon Ish's *Emunah U'bitachon*, where he says that since Rabbi Akiva never entered his home, there was no stoppage (I was alerted to this Chazon Ish by Rav Hershel Schechter, whom I had the *zechus* to escort to Far Rocka-

way on the LIRR). Perhaps a proof for the Chazon Ish is that the students were called pairs. In other words, they were all equals, though they learned over a 24-year period.

The Gemara in Yevamos continues, "The world remained desolate until Rabbi Akiva came to our masters in the south and taught the Torah to them. These were Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yose, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua; and it was they who revived the Torah at that time."

How was Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai successful in creating a continuity of Torah? Certainly, it's no coincidence that his *yahrzeit* is on Lag B'omer as a *yom hillulah*, day of *simcha* for Torah (Ye'eros Devash). In essence, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai personified the opposite of the tragedy of the divided 24,000 students, offering a respite in the mourning.

Shabbos 33b relates that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his son went to hide in a cave to avoid Roman persecution. The Gemara must be analyzed to extrapolate why Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's memory lives on with such fortitude and what aspect of Rabbi Akiva was he *metaken* (did he remedy).

A miracle occurred, and a carob tree and a well of water were created for them. They used to remove their clothing and sit up to their necks in sand. All day they used to commit traditions to memory, and at the time of prayer, they dressed, covered, and prayed. And then they took off their clothes so that they would not wear out. They lived in the cave for twelve years.

Then Eliyahu Hanavi came and stood at the opening of the cave. He said, "Who will tell the son of Yochai that Caesar is dead, and his decree was canceled?"

They then went out. They saw people plowing and planting. Rabbi Shimon said, "They are forsaking eternal life and occupying themselves with temporal life." Every place upon which they cast their eyes was immediately burned.

A heavenly voice came out and said, "Did you come out to destroy my world? Return to your cave!" They returned and lived in the cave for twelve months.

At the end of that time, they said, "The sentence of the wicked in Gehennom is twelve months."

A heavenly voice came forth and said, "Get out of your cave," and they went out.

Everything that Rabbi Eliezer destroyed, Rabbi Shimon repaired. Rabbi Shimon said, "My son, I and you are enough for the world!"

When Shabbos was about to start, they saw an old man carrying two bundles of myrtle, running at twilight. They said to him, "Why do you need these?"

He said to them, "In honor of the Sabbath."

They said to him, "And isn't one enough for you?"

He said to them, "One is for 'remember,' and one is for 'keep'" (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12).

He said to his son, "See how the commandments are beloved by Israel!" Their minds were at ease.

His father-in-law, Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, heard and went out to meet Rabbi Shimon. He took him into a bathhouse. While he was treating his flesh, he saw that there were cracks in his skin. He started crying, and his tears flowed and caused him pain. He said to Rabbi Shimon, "Woe to me that I saw you thus!"

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said to him, "Blessed are you that you saw me thus, because had you not seen me thus, you would not have found me thus [learned]. In the beginning, when Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked one question, Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair would give twelve answers. In the end, when Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair would ask a question, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai would give twenty-four answers."

Rabbi Shimon and his son lived in sand up to their necks and studied for twelve straight years. This is very reminiscent of Rabbi Akiva's first immersion in Torah when he acquired his first 12,000 students in twelve years of study. Interestingly, the Gemara notes that at the end of twelve years, Eliyahu Hanavi came and stood at the opening of the cave. He said, "Who will tell the

He asked again, "If you're taking only one step at a time, how do you reach the top?"

son of Yochai that Caesar is dead, and his decree was canceled?" In this scenario, a messenger from Gd was telling them they may leave. Their exit from the cave wasn't a personal decision, nor were they acting upon their own intuition. They completed a consecutive twelve-year period with no self-imposed stoppages. This was unlike Rabbi Akiva who consciously decided to divide his years of study. This is why Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was able to revive the Torah, remedying the noncontinuous Torah of Rabbi Akiva.

Upon arriving at the end of the story, we are told that originally Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked his father-in-law a question and would get twelve answers, and now his son-in-law would ask him a question and Rabbi Shimon would offer 24 answers. Why 24? The answer is simple. He answered for the 24,000 *talmidim* of Rabbi Akiva that perished. There was no inherent stoppage of Torah learning that took place in the life of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, and thus no unevenness in what he gave over. And

that is why he is able to offer a respite on Lag B'omer from the mourning over the 24,000 students. His essence was *metaken* (a remedy) for them.

It is possible that the students of Rabbi Akiva perished in the days between Pesach and Shavuot as they had a *chisaron* (lacking) of *shelemus* (continuity, wholeness, and consistency). They originated from a source of Torah

that was uneven and not consecutive. They were not the personification of continuity, which is required when we count the Omer.

The Chazon Ish was once asked how, in his weakened condition, he was able to make it up the steep hill to his house when he went to the shul at the bottom of the hill on Mondays and Thursdays. He answered that he took one step at a time. The person didn't understand

the answer. He asked again, "If you're taking only one step at a time, how do you reach the top?" The Chazon Ish answered the same. The point is there is no need to jump to achieve everything at once, however, one must take a step and then another step, with no large stoppages, to achieve the desired goal.

Rabbi Shlomo Amar, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, upon a visit to Far Rockaway, New York, was asked by a *bachur* how he could succeed in learning. The rabbi responded, "*Chazer! Chazer!* And *chazer* more!" In other words, review, review, and review – and without stopping. Don't put any stoppages in between.

Rambam says in Hilchos De'os 1:7 that to succeed in inculcating a trait to be part of our essence, we must repeat it over and over with no stoppages until it becomes a part of us, and then performing actions with that trait becomes habitual. Perhaps in reaching a level of continuity and consistency, we can accept the Torah in wholeness and harmony. ▲

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The Chiddush of Shlomo Hamelech

Koheles 1:9 says, "*Ein chadash tachas hashemesh*" (there is nothing new under the sun). Its basic understanding is that there is nothing new that man can create or imagine that hasn't been created or explored already.

Using *remez*, we can extrapolate that the Jewish months (*chodesh*) are not guided by the sun, but rather by the moon using the lunar calendar.

Using *drash*, we might understand that *chadash*, new grain, does not exist anymore in the season of the sun, for by then it's *yashan*, old grain.

Using *sod*, we could say there is no such thing as *chiddushi* Torah in this world, for any "new" *chiddush* is merely uncovering the potential already embedded in the Oral Law from above.