



## LEARNING TO HONOR YOUR FELLOW JEW

### THE LOSS OF RABBI AKIVA'S TALMIDIM

The *gemara* Yevamos (62b) tells us about the 12,000 pairs of *talmidim* that Rabbi Akiva had.<sup>1</sup> They didn't learn in one building. They were spread out from a place called Gabos until Antifras - a network of yeshivos under Rabbi Akiva's leadership. To imagine such a *yeshivah* is unbelievable.

My nephew (Rav Sholom Ber Sorotzkin) in Eretz Yisrael has what he claims is the biggest *reshes* of *kollelim* and *yeshivos* in Eretz Yisrael (Ateres Shlomo). It goes across Eretz Yisrael, and has around three and a half thousand *talmidim*. It's *taka* mind blowing. And Rabbi Akiva had 24,000 *talmidim*! And they all died in a very, very short time, between Pesach and Shavuos. That loss is simply unimaginable. How many Lakewoods would that be? And the world was *shamem* (desolate) of Torah! The *gemara* (ibid) says that reason for that was because *שְׁלֹא נִהְגּוּ בְּבוֹד זֶה לְזֶה* - they did not respect each other. And you could imagine Rabbi Akiva under such conditions. If he would have "lost it" – if he would have lost his mind and walked around in a mindless state – it wouldn't have been any *chiddush* to us.

Now, the *gemara* (Bava Metzia 84a) tells us that there was once a tremendous *talmid chacham*, R' Yochanan who had a *talmid muvhak*, Reish Lakish, who was also his brother-in-law. And when his *talmid muvhak* died, he was completely gone. R' Yochanan had lots of *talmidim*. R' Yochanan experienced tremendous *tzaros* in his life. He lost ten sons, giants, and he used to carry around the remains of his last son in his pocket. There is a *shaaleh* what it was. Was it a nail, was it a bone, was it a tooth? And when he met somebody who was down, he would comfort him. But when he lost his one *talmid*, Reish Lakish, the *gemara* says that he lost his mind! After Reish Lakish died, R' Yochanan was wandering in the streets, asking: *היכא את בר לקישא היכא את בר לקישא*, *where are you, Bar Lakisha?* And finally, the *chachamim* had to *daven* that R' Yochanan should die. It's mind boggling.

So Rabbi Akiva loses 24,000 *talmidim*. Amazingly, he moved to the south of Eretz Yisrael and he started over again. He began with five *talmidim*: R' Meir, R' Yehudah, R' Yosi, R' Shimon and R' Elazar ben Shamua. Through these five, they restored the entire *Torah sheba'al peh*, the entire Torah of Rabbi Akiva, the entire *mesorah* of Rabbi Akiva, which is vast. They restored it. These were *tana'im*. We have no *musag* what Rabbi Akiva was, or what his *talmidim* were.

There is another *gemara* that gives you an idea of Rabbi Akiva's greatness. The *gemara* in Chagiga (14b) tells us that there were four people - great *talmidei chachamim*, who decided to utilize the name of Hashem to travel into *shamayim*. The *gemara* says, *ארבעה נכנסו בפרדס*, *four entered the orchard*.<sup>2</sup> This concept is generally referred to as "going behind the curtain." There is a show – there is in front of the curtain and there is behind the curtain. They went behind the curtain. Rashi explains that these four *talmidei chachamim* עלו לרקיע על ידי שם - *they went up to Shamayim through pronouncing the Name*. Who were they? Giants. Ben Azai, Ben Zomah, Acher and Rabbi Akiva. Ben Azai soared to *shamayim*, he took a look at what was going on and he died. He didn't make it back. Ben Zomah looked at what was going on and he became wounded, *nifgah*. *Acher* - who was the *rebbe* of R' Meir - his mind got so messed up, and he went off the *derech*. *נפק אחר לתרבות רעה* - *he went astray*. You learn one lesson from here. Don't rush to go to *shamayim*. Wait your turn. You're going to have a turn. Everybody has a turn. You just hope, when your turn comes, they push the button in the elevator for going up instead for going down. But it's not advisable to go before your time. And it says, the *malachei hashares* are not "tickled pink" when they see guests. They don't like people, *בני אדם קרוצי המר* - *the sons of man molded from matter*, in other words, mortals coming and playing in their fields. So when Rabbi Akiva showed up, *הניחו לזקן, אמר להם הקדוש ברוך הוא*, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu said to them, leave this old man alone*, *שְׂרָאוֹי לְהִשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בְּכְבוֹדִי*, *for he is fit to serve My Glory*. You hear that? Of all the *tana'im*, he was the only one that Hashem says, "Let him go." He can play. He can stay with us. The greatest *rosh yeshivah* in history!

### IN SLABODKA, THEY NEVER SAID A BAD WORD

When we talk about the fact that they were *לֹא נִהְגּוּ בְּבוֹד זֶה לְזֶה*, we don't mean that they were very bad to each other. My *zeide* (Rav Avigdor Miller, zt"l) was once trying to bring out the level of greatness in the Slabodka *yeshivah* in pre-war Europe. In the six years before World War II, when the *yeshivah* wasn't at its highest - the Alter from Slabodka wasn't there already. His son-in-law was there and amazingly, there was a big *yeshivah* going on.

<sup>1</sup> אמרו: שנים עשר אלף זוגים תלמידים היו לו לרבי עקיבא מנבט עד אנטטיפרס, וכולן מתו בפרק אהר, מפני שלא נהגו בבוד זה לזה. והיה העולם שמש, עד שבא רבי עקיבא אצל רבותינו שברדו ושנאה להם: רבי מאיר, רבי יהודה, רבי יוסי, רבי שמעון, רבי אלעזר בן שמעון, והם הם העמידו תורה אותה שעה.  
<sup>2</sup> תנו רבנן: ארבעה נכנסו בפרדס, ואילו הו: בן עזאי, ובן זומא, אחר, ורבי עקיבא. אמר להם רבי עקיבא: קשאתם מניעין אצל אבני שיש טהור, אל תאמרו "מים מים", משום שנאמר: "דובר שקרים לא יכון לנגד עיני". בן עזאי הציץ ונת, עליו התתוב אומר: "קור בשני ה' המותה להסידיר". בן זומא הציץ ונפגע, ועליו הכתוב אומר: "דבש מצאת אכול דבית פן תשבוענו והקאתו". אחר קיצץ בנטיעות. רבי עקיבא יצא בשלום.

My grandfather said, in the six years that he was there, he never once heard the word *shlecht* - i.e. bad. Could you imagine that?! Could you be *masig* that?! I can't *masig* it. They would never say about someone that he's a *shlechter*, he's a bad man, a bad person, or a bad thing. They would never say *shlecht* about a *mensch* over there. They said *nisht gut*, not good. That's what they said. They also wouldn't use the word *shaigetz* in reference to a *goy* because *shaigetz* comes from the word *sheketz* which is something disgusting, and a *goy* is also created in the *tzelem Elokim*. Even though, as the *zeide* said, they are far from the ideal picture of a *tzelem Elokim*, they are still made in the *tzelem Elokim*. They never called them *shkotzim*. It's amazing!

Now, if they did this in Slabodka, I can only begin to imagine what the level of conduct was in the *yeshivah* of Rabbi Akiva among his *talmidim* who were *tana'im*! So when it says they weren't לָזֶה יָהּ כְּבוֹד יָהּ לָזֶה, you understand that it must have been something very, very slight.

### HASHEM CARES WHEN WE TREAT PEOPLE WITH RESPECT

A person has to know that Hakadosh Baruch Hu does care how people relate to each other. You have to know that. Hakadosh Baruch Hu does care how people relate to each other.

Unfortunately, today, there is a *minhag* among some *yeshivah bachurim* that has been picked up from the street. It's a terrible *minhag*. They like to bang each other on the back because they are brothers. Bam! They like to come behind another guy and put their knee behind his legs if he's standing straight, trying to give a jolt to make him think he's falling. They bang one another on their backs. They like to call each other bad names when they hear the *goyim* call each other. So they call each other *goyishe* names. Of course, it's all done in a joking manner. But what it does is that there is no *kavod zeh le'zeh*. It shows you have no *kavod* for a Yisroel, you have no *kavod* for a *ben Torah* and ultimately, you are not being *mechabed* Hashem.

### HOW THE CHAFETZ CHAIM TREATED PEOPLE

You have to understand that *talmidei chachamim* and *tzaddikim* were just amazing when it came to this type of *avodah*. If you take a look at the *sifrei Chofetz Chaim*, there is a *sefer* written by his son. It is called *Dugma Midarkei Avi*. I remember when I found it, I was extremely excited. Here is a person who grew up in the house of the Chofetz Chaim, and he's willing to share with you a *dugma* (an example) of the ways of his father. And he writes like this: בפועל, in actuality, in reality, you know what the Chofetz Chaim's mind was preoccupied with constantly? Now, the Chofetz Chaim was a *masmid*. He was a *masmid*, *shpitz masmid*. He was *kuloi kodesh*. And his son said that, בפועל היה דעתו תקוע תמיד בבין אדם לחבירו, his mind was constantly preoccupied with *bein adam lachavero*. בין בדברים גדולים, whether it was big things, בין בקטני קטנות, whether it was the smallest of things. Could you imagine the Chofetz Chaim being preoccupied with small things?

### PUTTING HIS YOM KIPPUR ASIDE

Listen to a story that we have, *baruch Hashem*, from the Chofetz Chaim. One year, on one of the holiest nights of the year, the night of Yom Kippur, after the people finished *davening*, and left the *beis medrash*, the Chofetz Chaim remained involved in his *avodas hakodesh* since some lamps were still shining in the *beis medrash*. Suddenly, the Chofetz Chaim became aware of some noise in the *beis medrash*. He turned around and he saw Hershele. Hershele was an alter *bachur*. He was already 60. A real alter *bachur*. And he was sitting on one of the benches. He was considered a *shtikel nebach* because he had been looking for a *shidduch* and couldn't find one. So the Chofetz Chaim's *rachmanus* was moved and the Chofetz Chaim decided to forget about his Yom Kippur. He put his Yom Kippur aside. He didn't tell the guy to come to him. He walked over to where he was sitting and he sat down next to Hershele, and put his hand on his shoulder, and began to be *mechazek* him and being *me'oded* him, giving him encouragement. And the Chofetz Chaim began to tell this Hershele his life story, about the many *tzaros* he went through from when he was a child. His father died when he was very young. The Chofetz Chaim was subjected to an onslaught by a fellow named Adam Hakohen. (He tried to get the Chofetz Chaim off the *derech* in his teenage years and every year the Chofetz Chaim gave a *shmuess* about it. He used to say about him, 'Adam Hakohen *yemach shemo vezichro*.' He spoke *lashon hara* about this fellow, the *rasha merusha* who tried to get him off the *derech* and almost succeeded. He was from the Reform movement and he saw the Chofetz Chaim was a good catch). Chofetz Chaim said that he was forced to get married when he was 17 years old to somebody who was 26. He was sick with heart problems. So he started telling all his stories. His poverty, this and that. And he said, "Listen, you see, *baruch Hashem*, things turned out okay." He spent the entire night talking to him on Yom Kippur night. It's amazing that the Chofetz Chaim should have a bull session with a guy to be *me'oded* him. He could have told him "Come back after Yom Kippur, I'm busy now." But he didn't. This was the *avodah* of his Yom Kippur. This was the *kavod* he had for a *pashute bachur*, not a *talmid chacham*.

R' Leib, the Chofetz Chaim's son, writes in his *sefer* that there was another year, on the night of Yom Kippur, that the Chofetz Chaim called together all the older *bachurim* who weren't yet married and he was *me'orer* them, and *mezarez* them to be *mishtadel* to try to find their *zivug* this year. And he *bentched* them on the night of Yom Kippur. This is called being concerned about others in such a tremendous way. It's mind boggling!

### RAV YISRAEL'S VIEW

There is a famous story with R' Yisrael Salanter (1809-1883). He turned to somebody on Yom Kippur. The guy looked like he was really into it. R' Yisrael Salanter turned to the fellow and he asked, "What's the time now? *Vos is de zeiger*?" The guy ignored him. He was 'flying' in *shamayim*, you understand. R' Yisrael said to him, "Because you're motivated and moved because of *pachad* Yom Hadin, I'm at fault? I have to suffer? *Adaraba*, the more you go up in your *madreigos* on this holy day, you should

double and triple your *kepeida*, your *zehirus*, in the *kavod chaverecha*, in the *kavod* of somebody else.” Unbelievable!

### THE TCHEBINER RAV'S DERECH

There are a lot of *tzaddikim* like this. There's a mind boggling, amazing *ma'aseh* with the Tchebiner Rav, R' Dov Berish Weidenfeld (1881-1965) who came from the city of Tchebin (Poland) to Eretz Yisrael. He was a *masmid niflah she'ein kamoso*. I mean, he was a *heilige yid*, a *talmid chacham muflag*. He was *zocheh* to tremendous *kavod*, tremendous *haracha*. He lived in Shaarei Chesed in Yerushalayim. One Yom Kippur night, he was coming home from the *beis medrash* and he passed the central *beis haknesses*. It was called Khal Chassidim. Sitting there were some Holocaust survivors, some *nebachs* who went through the *tzaros* of the Holocaust and they were singing marches, European marches from Europe. *Alter niggunim* that they used to sing in the home, in *chutz la'aretz*.

The Tchebiner Rav himself was a Holocaust survivor. He lost most of his family and his city in the war. He understood what they were going through, so he decided, instead of going home, he is going to stop in and keep them company. I've seen pictures of the Tchebiner Rav, shuffling along. He went into the *shul* and spent a very long time with them, singing with them, and reviewing history. A while later, there was another major *talmid chacham* who lived in Shaarei Chesed who was going home. Who was that? None other than R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (1910-1995). He used to talk a lot in learning and he asked *shaalos* to the Tchebiner Rav. And he knew that he was one of the older *ge'onei hador*. R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach opens the *shul* doors. He hears people singing. You don't make *tischen* Yom Kippur by night. He opens the door and who does he see? A *por alter zekeinim*, not exactly *groise chassidishe* rebbes and who is sitting with them? The Tchebiner Rav *einer alein* (himself)! And this giant is sitting among them and he is singing marches with them! R' Shlomo Zalman was blown away.

Now, R' Shlomo Zalman had a *minhag* that every *motzai* Yom Kippur, he would come to the Tchebiner Rav to ask him for a *brachah* for a *gut yahr*. So he came to him and he said to him, “*Yelamdeinu Rabbeinu*. I have a *shaaleh*,” he said. “What was the Tchebiner Rav looking for in that *shul*, in the *chevrah* of these people? I know time is very valuable to you and the night of *yom hakadosh*, why is this the *chevrah* you're looking for?” So Tchebiner Rav said, “If you already asked, I'm going to answer you. Last night, on the way home, I had a plan. I had a very exact plan of what I was going to do when I got home. What was that? I was going to learn the entire *meseches Yuma*, the entire *mesechta* in one night. (You should know that he was a *gaon*. 90 blatt in just one night! Until the morning!) But when I passed in front of the *shul*, I heard the voices of these people who were saved from the Holocaust and I understood they were *tzubrochene menschen*. And they were warming themselves up by singing *niggunim* and marches so I thought to myself the following *shaaleh*. ‘What is going to cause Hakadosh Baruch Hu more *nachas ruach*? Does He prefer me to be *mesayem* the whole *meseches Yuma* tonight, or maybe I should sit with these *tzubrochene* people and be *mesamei'ach* them?’ And I concluded that *vadai* Hakadosh Baruch Hu is going to be happier if I sit with these *tzubrochene menschen*. And this is what I did. That was my *avodas hayom*.” It's a mind-boggling *ma'aseh*.

When R' Shlomo Zalman said over this *ma'aseh*, he said that he had a tremendous *chalishas hadaas* from this story. He said, “I always thought that I'm *mishtadel* to do what Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants from me. That's what I thought. And still and all, how come I'm so far away from the Tchebiner Rav, the *gaon* of Tchebin? But when I saw his *middos, aza ma'aseh*, then I understood where he gets his *siyata deshmaya* to *shteig ois* unbelievably *bemaalos* hatorah.” It's *l'lo gevul*, it's beyond, it's unreal.

We see how these *gaonim* respected others. They were *noheig kavod zeh lezeh*. They were *noheig kavod* to *pshutei am*, to simple people. And to each other? *Kol shekein*, for sure. What's there to talk about?

But today, somebody comes in and what do we do? It's a new joke. You want to be *mesamei'ach elokim ve'anashim* so a guy comes into the *shul*, he looks a little bit like an *ish pashut*, so now you have who to make fun of a little bit. Make *mesamei'ach*.

### RAV SHMUEL'S YEDID

R' Shmuel Rozovsky (1913-1979) was a king. He was a very classy, regal personality. A *gaon*, a *lamdan*. The Brisker Rav (1886-1959) had a tremendous *kavod* for him. His rebbe, R' Shimon Shkop (1860-1939) was *zocheh* to be *maamid* amazing *talmidim*, who impacted the world of Torah in a way that few others were *zocheh*. After every *shiur* R' Shmuel gave in Ponevezh, tons of *talmidim* came around him and they jumped on him with *shaalos*, questions. R' Shmuel would walk and they would walk with him. One time, they were walking in the *yeshivah* and suddenly, they saw the cleaner from the *yeshivah*, an *alter* Russian *yid*, named *Avremele*, pushing his pail and mop trying to make his way into the group. He said, “*Ich vill gein* to the rebbe.” He wanted to come to the rebbe, R' Shmuel. He comes to R' Shmuel and he starts to tell R' Shmuel that he's having a lot of *tzaros*. R' Shmuel says, “*Vos iz?*” So he says, “I'm living in a *freier* neighborhood and my neighbors are *mechalel* Shabbos *befarhesia*, and it bothers and disturbs my *menuchas* Shabbos to no end.” And he said to R' Shmuel, “*Ven ich hob gevein a yungerer russier*, when I was a young person in Russia, we were careful with *shemiras* Shabbos *bemesiras nefesh* and now, in my old age, when I come to Eretz Yisrael and *shemiras* Shabbos is supposed to be self-understood, *min hashamayim* I have to deal with *aza gezeirah* to be *sovel*, to tolerate the noise of *chilul* Shabbos?!” He said, “Rebbe, *efsher ken men helfen*, maybe you can help me to get out of my *tzaros?*”

R' Shmuel tried to put him in a good mood, to tell him a cute *vertel*, but he wasn't taking it. He wasn't calming down. And he told R' Shmuel like this, “If the *inyan* is not going to be taken care of, I'm going to be forced to go back to Russia.” Then Russia and the Iron Curtain hadn't come down yet. The Iron Curtain was still up. They all laughed. All the *bachurim* smiled from the threat and R' Shmuel smiled too and he said, “R' Avraham, before you go back to Russia, make sure you stop by and tell us shalom and tell us goodbye.” That was the end of the story. A lot of *bachurim* saw this and the story was over. No one thought there was going



to be any continuation to this story. No one even had a thought that anything was going to come out of that talk. But a number of days went by and the *bachurim* found out that they were very, very mistaken.

From the minute R' Shmuel got home, he got on the phone. And he said, "There is a *yid* who is uncomfortable because of *chilul* Shabbos." What do I care what his job is? So he's the cleaner in Ponevezh. "You've got to help him." He picked up the telephone. He called somebody who he knew who worked in the Department of Housing, *misrad hashikun* and he had good relations with him. He told the guy that he has a good friend, a good *yedid*, they work together, and he's suffering from his neighbors. There are *freier* neighbors in his neighborhood. "Please, we have to find him another neighborhood, a *frum* neighborhood to live in. We have to find him a place." The guy said to himself, "Listen, he's a good friend of R' Shmuel and he works with him together in Ponevezh, *nu*, it must be someone special!" So within a number of days, the *inyan* was *mesuder*. He got him a different *dira*. Not only that, but the guy sent his grandson to help with the move from one apartment to the next!

This is how the *gedolim* had respect for every person. This is how they expressed their respect for others in practical terms.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESPECTING PEOPLE

Rabosai, you have to know that this is what the Ribono Shel Olam wants from us. And if the Ribono Shel Olam wants this from us, this is something we have to deliver. You say you can't finish *Yuma* in a whole night? Okay, maybe. But to treat each other with *kavod*, to treat *pshutei am* with *kavod*, to go out of your way to do for people and you're not going to get *kavod* for this. When you sit in the *beis medrash* on Yom Kippur night and you're singing with somebody, you're not going to get any *kavod* from this. No picture is going to be taken. And those people are not going to *chap* that you're doing anything big. You help a poor *yid* move from *dira* A to *dira* B, no one is going to look at you. But that is what Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants from you.

I had a story this year. An *alter bachur*, a 55-year-old person had a stroke *erev* Yom Kippur. He called me up *erev* Yom Kippur, he wasn't talking clearly, and he told me what happened. "So where are you? I'm going to come over right away." I went down to the hospital and there was a *balabos* who called me up. He said, "Are you in the hospital? Get out of the hospital. You don't belong in the hospital *erev* Yom Kippur." He said, "You have to be in the *yeshivah*, be with the family. Don't stay in the hospital." I said, "This is my *avodas hayom*. If I have to, I'll stay Yom Kippur also." *Baruch Hashem*, we had a *talmid* who was willing to stay with him. That was a terrible stay for those hours, because he was in an emergency room in the old hospital that had no windows in it. It was a *daled al daled*. It was very hot. I was *mamash* getting claustrophobic. I walked out a couple of times, but I saw that the fellow was struggling with eating. He told me, "I don't need your help." "Just let me help you a little bit." "I don't need your help." He's the kind of guy who likes to be independent. He started eating his soup and the soup ended on the floor. And then he ended up on the floor. I said, "Now you can let me help you a little bit?" He said, "A little bit." I said, "I'm not going to do it for you. I'm just going to lean the plate on my hand. Hold your own body like this." And then the *talmid* stayed with him. Did the *talmid* miss Yom Kippur? He said, no. He *chapped arein* Yom Kippur. Not only that. He had a double mitzvah because on *motzai* Yom Kippur, the man didn't want to let him leave. By that time, I was *platzing* already, just thinking about being stuck in that place. The *bachur* stayed there for two days with that man, without walking out of that place. I am going to tell you something: he had the best Yom Kippur, more than a lot of *yidden*! That is the Yom Kippur Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants from a person.

We should all learn from that. And now it's history, but not for him, because he was *zocheh* to be *koneh* a treasure, by being *mechabed* somebody whom he didn't know. And the sick person told me, *mamash* he was *mechayeh meisim*!

Hakadosh Baruch Hu should help us, when we see these opportunities, that we should *chap* them and we should utilize them.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

When we ponder the unimaginable loss of the 24,000 *talmidim* of Rabbi Akiva - one of the most tragic events in our history, one that almost ended the oral Torah tradition - we are reminded of the Chazal that identified the root of that tragedy, *שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה*. Those *talmidim* were all *tannaim* and represented the power of the Torah for the millennia (they were the "fathers" of the Oral Torah, because Rabbi Akiva was the transmitter of that Torah), and they were held to a much higher standard than any subsequent generation. But still and all, the most basic lesson for us to learn from this tragedy, is that Hakadosh Boruch Hu cares how we relate to and treat each other. The stories of *tzaddikim* - of how the Chofetz Chaim put his own Yom Kippur to one side in order to give *chizuk* to an *alter bochur*, Heshel, throughout the night, or how the Tchebiner Rav sang old marches with Holocaust survivors on Yom Kippur night, instead of his prior plans to finish the entire *meseches* *Yuma*, or how Rav Rozovsky arranged a new apartment for a janitor from the Ponevezh Yeshiva - should inspire us to change how we relate to and care about other people. This coming week, if I see a *yid* whom I don't know well, or even a complete stranger - whether in my shul, my yeshiva, or my office - I will go out of my "comfort zone" to do something for him, to help him, to treat him with *kavod*. If I am in a yeshiva, I will be *mechabed* a younger *bochur* with a kind word, or a "good morning" with a smile. And in the *zechus* of going the extra mile by thinking and caring about another *yid* during these remaining days of the *Sefirah* - while remembering the consequences of *שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה* - I will fulfill Hashem's *ratzon* and will, *IY"H*, have the most uplifting Shavuot of my life!