

REBBE AKIVA'S STUDENTS – RESPECT!

Background

Rebbe Akiva had established a huge and powerful Torah network from one end of Israel to the other. He had 24,000 loyal students, who all learned from him. Yet they all died in one short time period because לא נהגו כבוד זה לזה — they didn't treat each other with honor.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת יבמות דף סב/ב

אמרו שנים עשר אלף זוגים תלמידים היו לו לרבי עקיבא מגבת עד אנטיפרס וכולן מתו בפרק אחד מפני שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה והיה העולם שם עד שבא ר"ע אצל רבותינו שבדרום ושנאה להם ר"מ ור' יהודה ור' יוסי ורבי שמעון ורבי אלעזר בן שמוע והם הם העמידו תורה אותה שעה תנא כולם מתו מפסח ועד עצרת אמר רב חמא בר אבא ואיתימא ר' חייא בר אבין כולם מתו מיתה רעה מאי היא א"ר נחמן אסברה

[Chazal] said: there were 12,000 pairs of students who were students of Rebbe Akiva, from [the cities of] Givas to Antiferas. All of them died in one time period because they didn't act with honor towards each other. The world was desolate until Rebbe Akiva came to the Rabbis in the south and taught them: Rebbe Meir, Rebbe Yehudah, Rebbe Yosi, Rebbe Shimon, and Rebbe Elazar, the son of Shmuah. They re-established the Torah. The time (that the students of Rebbe Akiva died) was from Peasach till Shavuos. Rav Chama, the son of Bar Abba, and some say Rebbe Chiah, the son of Avin, say they all died a horrible death. To what does this refer? To Acsarah.

Questions

These people were all great *talmidei chachamim* who invested hugely in studying Torah. We know that the *mitzvos* between man and man are a major force in the Torah. How is it possible that they trampled on something so basic to the Torah way of life?

What makes this question even more difficult to understand is that their Rebbe, Rebbe Akiva, taught "רבי עקיבא זה" — that loving another like oneself is a great principle in the Torah. This is a theme that runs throughout the Torah with numerous manifestations and examples. So, if their Rebbe taught this as such a fundamental concept in the Torah, how is it possible that they were לא נהגו כבוד זה לזה, that they didn't treat each other with honor?