

# Rabbi Akiva's Legacy of Love and Respect



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The Gemara (Yevamot 62b) tells us that the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva all died between Pesach and Shavuot because they did not treat each other respectfully. A Geonic tradition (cited by Me'iri to Yevamot 62b) adds that the students stopped dying on the 33rd day of the Omer (just over a week away).

However, this entire story is hard to understand. Rabbi Akiva was known to champion the cause of love for friends and fellows, most notably writing that “וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ”, “love your neighbour as yourself” (in Parshat Kedoshim, Vayikra 19:18), is a “great principle of the Torah” (cited in Rashi to Vayikra 19:18). How could the students of a teacher who emphasized this teaching so much be so lax in that very same area?

One answer may be that perhaps this famous teaching of Rabbi Akiva’s came as a result of the terrible tragedy that befell his students. After seeing such great Torah scholars punished so forcefully for behaving inappropriately with one another, he felt it necessary to publicize the importance of this Mitzvah by stating that it is a central theme in the Torah. (See <https://judaism.stackexchange.com/a/28109/16354>).

Another possibility is that “love” and “respect” may not always overlap. It is possible that Rabbi Akiva’s students loved, looked out for, cared for, and helped out one another. But what may have resulted from this camaraderie was that they viewed fellow Talmidei Chachamim simply as ‘friends’, not as other Torah scholars whom they needed to hold in the highest regard. If this was the case, the lack of respect was not simply to their colleagues, but to the Torah knowledge that those same ‘friends’ had gained from Rabbi Akiva.

This understanding sheds light upon a teaching relayed by Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua, whom the Gemara lists as one of the five eminent disciples of Rabbi Akiva after the loss of his original group of students:

רבי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן שְׁמוּעָה אוֹמֵר, יְהִי כְבוֹד תַּלְמִידְךָ חֲבִיב עֲלֶיךָ כְּשֵׁלְךָ, וְכְבוֹד חֲבֵרְךָ כְּמוֹרָא רַבָּךְ, וְמוֹרָא רַבָּךְ כְּמוֹרָא שְׁמַיִם

*"Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua says: Let the honor of your student be dear to you as your own, and the honor of your peer like the reverence of your teacher, and the reverence of your teacher like the reverence of Heaven".*

As a successful student of Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua realized that the error of those before him was in this regard. No longer could 'Yeshiva friends' simply be buddies. They must also respect and fear each other as the students of their distinguished teachers, and as the Talmidei Chachamim that they really are.

During this time of the year, let us take this opportunity to not only make sure to show love to each other, as per Rabbi Akiva's teaching of **וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֵךְ כְּמוֹךָ**, but to also remember that proper respect and reverence for the Torah and its scholars should come along with that love for others.

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