

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Emor

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ShabbatShalom.org

Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

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The Fax of Life

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May 14, 2022

GOOD MORNING! My beloved friend and mentor Rabbi Kalman Packouz, of blessed memory, was the most generous person I ever met. He was generous with his time and resources and he opened his home to everyone. As I slowly begin to sort through thirty years of accumulated stuff in my home, I am constantly stumbling upon items that he gifted me.

He brought me gifts from his trips abroad, eBay, Office Depot, and Home Depot. It wasn't just me – anyone who was lucky enough to have him as a friend was inundated with gifts. Some were simple and others were beautifully elaborate. But the real gift was that he was always thinking about you. The Hebrew word for friend is *chaver*, which is from the root of "to be connected or attached." He was the quintessential definition of a friend.

With the US population hovering somewhere around 330 million, you'd think Americans wouldn't suffer from a lack of people in our lives. Nonetheless, a recent survey found that the majority of Americans have fewer friends than they did three decades ago.

Per the study, nearly half of all Americans – 49% – reported having fewer than three close friends. This marks a nearly twofold increase from 1990, when less than one-third (27%) of Americans had three or fewer close friends. In 1990, 33% reported having 10 or more close friends, compared to just 13% today.

Even worse, a mind-boggling 12% of interviewees claimed to have zero friends today, four times as many as 30 years ago.

Naturally, the COVID-19 lockdown is partially to blame for today's loneliness epidemic. According to the survey, "nearly half (47%) of Americans report having lost touch with at least a few friends over the past 24 months."

To be sure, the categorization of friendship has been rendered essentially meaningless by Facebook and other social media. As I explain to my students born in the 21st century, Facebook friends are not really your friends. Do you want to know who your real friends are? Ask them to borrow a thousand dollars or to come out at 3 am to give your dead car battery a jump; you will quickly learn who your real friends are.

If you think friendship is easy then you have never been a true friend.

This upcoming week, on Thursday, May 19th, we will celebrate Lag B'Omer. What is this holiday all about?

Between Passover and the holiday of Shavuot we have a Torah mandated obligation to count each of the 49 intervening days. This is known as the counting of the *Omer* (the *Omer* was a barley offering from the first harvest that the Jews would bring to the Temple in Jerusalem. *Omer* is actually a measurement of volume roughly equating to three quarts).

Forty-nine days are counted from the second day of Passover until the fiftieth day, which is Shavuot – the holiday celebrating the receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. There is actually a *mitzvah* to count each specific day, which is done at the completion of *Ma'ariv*, the evening service.

This is also a period of national semi-mourning, thus there are no weddings scheduled during this time. Additionally, many do not get haircuts or even shave during this time. Why? Because it was during this period that Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students died for not showing sufficient respect for each other.

There are two customs for observing the semi-mourning period. The first is to observe it from the end of Pesach until the 33rd day of the *Omer*, known as Lag B'Omer (in Hebrew the word *lag* has a numerical value of 33), this year Thursday, May 19th. The second custom is to observe it from *Rosh Chodesh Iyar* (the beginning of the Hebrew month of *Iyar*) until Shavuot. Unusual for our heritage, each year one can choose which custom to follow!

Lag B'Omer is historically significant for multiple reasons. On this day, the plague that was killing Rabbi Akiva's disciples stopped. It is also the *yahrzeit* (yearly anniversary of the death) of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, reputed author of the *Zohar*, the book of Jewish mysticism. Tradition has it that the day of his demise was filled with a great light of endless joy through the secret wisdom that he revealed to his students in the *Zohar*.

In Israel, there are huge bonfires across the country. From Pesach onwards, the children gather fallen branches and build pyres often 20 or 30 feet high. Then, as it grows dark, they are lit and the sky is filled with flames (and smoke). The fires are symbolic both of the light of wisdom Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai brought into the world and as a "yahrzeit candle" in memory of his passing. Haircuts and weddings take place on this date and there is much festivity including dancing, singing, and music.

This period of national mourning for Rabbi Akiva's students has been observed for almost two thousand years. But this tragic episode in Jewish history also forces us to confront a very difficult question: How is it possible that the students of Rabbi Akiva, the teacher who famously said, "Love thy friend as thyself is a towering principle of the Torah," would be guilty of not according proper respect to their friends? How is it possible that Rabbi Akiva's guiding principle would be ignored by his very own students?

There are two seemingly contradictory teachings in *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of our Fathers). In the second chapter we find: “Rabbi Eleazar says, let the honor of your friend be as precious to you as your own.” Yet in the fourth chapter we have a quote from Rabbi Eleazar ben Shamua: “The honor of your friend should be like the reverence accorded your teacher.” Well, which one is it? Should the honor of your friend be as precious as your own or as that of your teacher’s?

There is no contradiction. There are different types of friendships and each one requires a different level of devotion. Maimonides, in his commentary on the first chapter on the teaching “acquire for yourself a friend,” quotes Aristotle in explaining that there are three categories of friendships. Aristotle, in his work *Nicomachean Ethics*, outlines the three types of friendships: 1) those based on utility 2) those based on pleasure or delight 3) those grounded in virtue.

The first category, friendship based on utility, is the most common type of friendship. This is when people associate for a mutual usefulness to each other. An example of a friendship based on utility would be business partnerships; each partner needs the other and they share common interests. Likewise, a coworker is a friend because there is a mutual interest and often an exchange of services. Thus, a bond develops.

The second category, friendship based on pleasure, would include associations based on how the other person makes one feel – a romantic relationship will cause one to feel loved and a hilarious friend is constantly entertaining. Both of these categories of relationships are self-oriented, with the basis of the bond being what does each individual get out of it. These are the types of friendships for which we are enjoined by Rabbi Eleazar to treat our friends with the same respect we would want to be treated. Meaning, even though the relationship is rooted in self-centeredness, we must still focus on what is good for the other person.

The third and highest level of friendship is when the focus of the bond is based on an outward focus of doing for the other. The purpose and basis of this connection is that each friend is helping the other grow to reach their potential as they learn from one another. Maimonides continues, “and this is similar to the love of a teacher to his student.” In other words, there is a type of friendship in which the relationship demands that each person treats the other as if he were his teacher.

Of course, there is a dangerous pitfall to selfish friendships; sometimes they are mutually self-destructive. This occurs when neither party properly respects themselves and they facilitate a downward spiral for each other. Whether it’s participating in self-destructive behavior or condoning morally questionable acts, it’s an absolute failure in one’s responsibilities as a friend. The only way to avoid this pitfall is to expect more from the people in your life.

That is what Rabbi Eleazar ben Shamua meant by “the honor of your friend should be as precious as the reverence of your teacher.” We must put our friends on a pedestal and expect “more” of them, this means we are not to tolerate their self-destructive behavior.

This is what the students of Rabbi Akiva failed to do. They only treated their friends with the respect demanded by Rabbi Akiva’s dictum of loving your friend like yourself. They failed to treat each other with the respect due a teacher.

Unquestionably, this is why we learn the lesson from Rabbi Eleazar ben Shamua. As the Talmud relates, he was one of Rabbi Akiva’s final students, one of the last five ordained by Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Eleazar ben Shamua had internalized the bitter lesson that befell the earlier students of Rabbi Akiva. That is why he taught that it isn’t enough to treat your friends with the respect you would demand for yourself. You are obligated to treat them with the same respect due to a teacher.

TORAH PORTION: Emor, Leviticus 21:1 - 24:24

This week’s portion sets forth the standards of purity and perfection for a Cohen; specifies the physical requirements of sacrifices and what is to be done with blemished offerings; proclaims as holidays the Shabbat, Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot.

It reminds the Jewish people to provide pure olive oil for the Menorah and designates the details of the Showbread (two stacks of 6 loaves each, which were placed on the table in the portable sanctuary and later in the Temple once a week upon Shabbat).

The portion ends with the interesting story of a man who blasphemed God’s name with a curse. What should be the penalty for this transgression? Curious? *Leviticus 24:14*.

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem 6:52* Miami 7:40 Cape Town 5:36 Guatemala 6:04 Hong Kong 6:37 Honolulu 6:43

 Jo'Burg 5:12 LA 7:28 London 8:27 Melbourne 5:03 Mexico 7:45 Moscow 8:12 New York 7:46 Singapore 6:48 Toronto 8:15

“QUOTE OF THE WEEK”: Friends halve the pain and double the pleasure. — Rabbi Kalman Packouz OBM

This week’s edition is sponsored by the Lefkowitz Family in memory of their beloved mother, Babbie, and great-grandmother

Joan Lefkowitz z”l - Yita Bas Refael



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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