



A lesson from
Aleph Learning Institute

The Gift of Life

High Holidays 5779 Lesson 1// Series 4

Two people were traveling in a desert and one of them possesses a pitcher of water. If both of them drink, they will both die. If one of them drinks, he may reach a town where there is more water. **Ben Petura** (Talmud Tractate Bava Metzia 62A) expounded, "Better that the two of them drink and both will die, rather than for one to see the death of his fellow." Until Rabbi Akiva came along and taught: The Torah states (Vayikra 25:36), "Let your brother live with you." This indicates that your life precedes the life of your friends. Your brother should live **"with you,"** and not at the expense of your life. According to Rabbi Akiva, he may drink it himself and save his own life. **Jewish Law follows the viewpoint of R. Akiva.**

As an example here is a story: First-hand account, that is completely accurate, as recorded in the book "Mikadeshei Hashem" by Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Meisels, a Rabbi imprisoned in Auschwitz. The event took place in Auschwitz on Rosh Hashana 1944. The Nazi commander decided to eliminate all boys between the ages of 14 and 18 not deemed big enough or healthy enough to work. He ordered that a vertical post of a predetermined height with a horizontal beam attached at the top be placed in the courtyard behind the camp blocks. Erev Rosh Hashana, 1,600 boys passed single file under the beam. Reaching the beam meant that they were assigned work. 1,400 were not tall enough and were scheduled for elimination r"l. The boys were guarded by Jewish kapos and were not given any food or drink.

The next day, first day of Rosh Hashanah, a Jew approached Rabbi Meisels, and asked his ruling on the following: "My only son is in the cell block. He will be killed tonight. I have enough money to bribe the kapos and save him. If I save him, the kapos will take another child in his place and will kill that child instead. Does the Torah allow me to save my only son? Rabbi Meisels reports that he was seized with trembling as he was forced to rule on a question of life or death. Due to the fact that the Kapos lives were in danger if they fell short of the fixed number of victims, their practice when bribed to release a prisoner, was to grab a replacement first. This would mean that another life was at stake as a result. Rabbi Meisels told the father that since this is such a grave case and he has extenuating circumstances (no Halachic source books and no clarity of mind) he cannot answer such a question. The father responded: "It is clear to me that you must feel it is not permitted. Your refusal to answer me is your ruling. I will do nothing to save him at the expense of another. I accept G-d's decree with love." Rabbi Meisels was torn to pieces over this and pointed out that it was Rosh Hashana, the same day that Abraham brought his son Isaac to the altar, for the Akeidah (we blow the shofar, ram's horn as a significant reminder). Imagine, here is a Jewish father in Auschwitz and what is his moral dilemma: May he save his only child, if another will die, as a result?

In Leviticus 19:18: Love your fellow as yourself. Rabbi Akiva commented: This is the fundamental principle of the Torah! And yet we find in the aforementioned Talmudic debate, he rules, that you drink the water yourself and abandon your friend. Is this not an outright contradiction to his teaching about love for another?

The profound answer is found in the Talmudic story about the death of Rabbi Akiva. When the Romans torturously murdered the great sage Rabbi Akiva, he was reciting the Shema—"Hear O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is One", and his Soul departed while saying, "Echad". His bewildered students questioned him as to how under tortuer he can recite the Shema. Rabbi Akiva

Continued

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Thank you!

replied: "All my life, I strived to fulfill the mitzvah, "You shall love G-d with all your soul," even if he takes your soul. "I have the opportunity to fulfill this injunction, I should not fulfill it?"

Now we can finally elucidate our Talmudic debate at hand. Interestingly, until Rabbi Akiva came along, none of the sages argued with Ben Petura. They all felt that their disagreement with his ruling may stem from their own innate desire for self-preservation, the deepest human instinct at all cost, rather than from the objective conviction that this was G-d's will. When Rabbi Akiva challenged the ruling of Ben Petura and declared, "Your life takes precedence over your friend", his ruling was heard differently. Rabbi Akiva lived his entire life to transcend the basic core animal instinct of self preservation. His life meant, "I live for G-d. I am here for G-d. All of me. All of the time. My entire body and my entire personality." As he was saying the Shema that was not his moment of gloom; it was the moment he was waiting for.

Only Rabbi Akiva who declared that loving your fellow as yourself is the basis of the entire Torah, could come and state: G-d desires, "Your brother shall live **with you**. Thus, your life takes precedence. Rabbi Akiva is saying that life is sacred and divine. For our unique mission in life, no one else can accomplish. As long as your time has not come, you have an obligation to live.

A story is told about a man who risked his life by swimming through the treacherous riptide to save a youngster from being swept out to sea. After the child recovered he thanked the man for saving his life. The man looked into the little boy's eyes and said, "That's okay kid. Just make sure your life was worth saving."

Dear Friend:

This Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur let us pray to be written and sealed for life. Let us pray for meaningful and purposeful life, worth living. Open your eyes, open your hearts and embrace your life.

The past three years we brought you "Lesson in a Box". Our new venue is "Lesson Out of The Box". We hope you will enjoy learning a Torah Lesson brought to your doorstep and ready to go, anywhere, anytime, for your soul pleasure!

Best wishes for a Healthy, Happy, Prosperous New Year 5779!

Sincerely,



Rochel Kaplan , Director Aleph Learning Institute