

Dear Rabbi:

I have heard that the period of “Omer” which we are in now, between Passover and Shavuos, is sort of a mourning period. What are we mourning about, and how does that connect to the holiday of Shavuos, which we are “counting down” towards?

L.Z.

Dear L.Z.,

The “limited mourning” period is in remembrance of the untimely death of 24,000 students of the great Rabbi Akiva, who dies of a plague during this period, “leaving the world desolate,” as the Talmud relates.

The message is, as the Talmud tells us, that they died for not properly honoring each other. That connects to Shavuos, because Sinai was the paradigm situation of Jewish unity, as they stood together as one, with one heart and resolve. The honor given each other at that moment was complete. This is a necessary prerequisite for the receiving of Torah. Every Jewish soul corresponds to a letter in the Torah, all the souls are fixed together as one in that holy scroll.

A lack of respect causes separation, a tear in the scroll, rendering it incomplete and lacking.

That was the message of the students’ deaths during the period of preparation for Shavuos, when we yearly reaccept the Torah.

We must mourn the divisions among us and strive to reconnect and honor each and every Jew as a letter of the Torah scroll.