

"And the name of the man of Yisrael who was slain . . . (was) Zimri ben Salu . . . And the name of the woman who was slain, the midyanis (was) Casbi bas Tzur . . . (25:14,15)

The *Yalkut Reuveni* cites the *Ra'mah Mi'Panu*, who states that the famous *Tanna* Rabbi Akiva was the *gilgul nefesh* (reincarnation) of Zimri. The wife of Turnus Rufus, on the other hand, who later became Rabbi Akiva's wife, was in reality the *gilgul* of Casbi. Indeed, the illicit advances which Casbi made to Zimri were "corrected" through her future *gilgul's* marriage to Rabbi Akiva. He explains that this is the reason that Rabbi Akiva died in such a torturous manner, by having his flesh raked off his body with metal combs. When Zimri came before Moshe with Casbi, he grabbed her by her hair and asked, "*This woman, is she forbidden or permissible? If you say she is forbidden, then who permitted you to marry the daughter of Yisro?*" Because Zimri grabbed Casbi by her hair, Rabbi Akiva, who was Zimri's *gilgul*, was destined to have his skin torn off with metal combs.

Horav M. Wolfson, Shlita, suggests that a profound insight may be noted. Zimri's act of immoral defiance caused a plague during which twenty four thousand Jews perished. Rabbi Akiva's students, who died during the period between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, also numbered twenty four thousand! This amazing insight can be further advanced by reflecting upon the relationship between the stated "mistake" of Rabbi Akiva's students and the sin committed by *Bnei Yisrael*, which resulted in the devastating plague.

Chazal teach that Rabbi Akiva's students died because of their lack of respect for one another. Contrary to mistaken opinion, they were not sinners. Indeed, they were the greatest scholars. Despite their lofty level of *Torah* erudition, however, their character development seemed slightly lacking. Hashem assesses His devotees with a very precise measure, leading to severe punishment. Lack of respect for one another indicates selfishness. This seemingly innocuous form of self devotion can be a precursor to greater forms of self worship, such as immorality and, ultimately, idol worship. These sins, which represent the tragic flaw of *Bnei Yisrael*, were the cause of the terrible plague which decimated twenty four thousand of them.

A lesson can be gleaned from Rabbi Akiva's students and their failure. The greatest evil invariably has its roots in innocent behavior which, when allowed to germinate, can grow to terrible proportions. One should be constantly vigilant to take note of any behavioral deviation and make the proper adjustments, so that it does not grow into an irreversible condition.