

Elie Wiesel In the Talmud: Rabbi Akiva Revisited

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Elie Wiesel:

Scholar, hero, devoted husband, loyal friend of governors, and mystical visionary, Rabbi Akiva is special. No other Talmudic master has had such a stormy and exciting existence. No other teacher has had a life of such extraordinary adventure. That is why, some 20 years ago, he was our very first teacher that we tried to meet in our Talmudic gallery. And that is why we felt we ought to revisit him again, now.

A legend. Said Rabbi Yehudah in the name of Rav, "When Moses, our teacher, went up to heaven to receive the law, [00:01:00] he found God, blessed be He, experimenting with various new symbols and ornaments for the Torah. 'Why don't You give it to us as it is?' Moses wondered aloud. 'It is difficult enough. Why complicate it even more?' 'I have to,' God replied, 'for after many generations, there will be a man named Akiva ben Yosef -- Akiva, son of Joseph -- who will discover secrets within every word, in every syllable. But in order for him to find the secrets, they must be placed there.' 'Could You show him to me?' Moses asked, a bit puzzled. Unable to refuse Moses

anything, God said, critically, '*Chazor l'ahorecha*, turn around, go backwards.'

And Moses went back into the past [00:02:00] and found himself thrust into the future. He found himself at a Talmudic academy, sitting in the eighth row, which meant way back, listening to a discourse on his teaching, on his work. But the discourse was incomprehensible to Moses. He didn't understand a word. It all sounded so obscure, so alien to him. Naturally, he felt terrible. But then, he heard a disciple ask the lecturer, '*Rabbi, minayin lekha?*' What proof is there that what you say is true, that your interpretation is correct? And the teacher, Rabbi Akiva, answered, '*Halakhah leMoshe miSinai*, that is what Moses was told at Sinai.'

Now, having been given proper credit, (laughs) Moses (laughter) -- [00:03:00] the first Jewish author in history -- felt a little bit reassured. Yet something kept bothering him. '*Ribono shel olam,*' he said, 'Master of the Universe, if You have a man like him, a scholar like him, why do You need me? Why don't You appoint him as Your messenger? Why don't You have him give Thy law to Thy people?' God, once again, cut him short. '*Shtok,*' He said, 'keep quiet. *Kakh alah b'machshevah lefanai.* This is how I see things.'

Satisfied or not, Moses did not insist. But soon, he became curious. 'Master of the Universe, could You be so kind as to show me the scholar's reward, just as You have shown me his learning?' Again, God made him turn around, and go back in the past, so as to see the future. And this time, Moses found himself [00:04:00] in a marketplace, with Rabbi Akiva in the middle of a crowd. It was Rabbi Akiva's last day of torture, and martyrdom. The day of his execution at the hand of the Romans. And Moses couldn't suppress his astonishment. 'Zu Torah v'zu s'charah?' he burst out. 'Is this the reward for devotion to learning, to study, to Torah? Is this the fate of those who choose to obey Your law, and study mine?'

And again, God answered in the same harsh manner. 'Shtok,' He said, 'be quiet. *Kakh alah b'machshevah lefanai.* This is how I see things, and they are not to be questioned.' And so Moses, in awe, like Rabbi Akiva after him, must have understood that there are moments when God wants His chosen to be silent."

Before we continue, just a few remarks. [00:05:00] Since Rabbi Akiva is synonymous with study, of course I thank those who come in the afternoons to study with Rabbi Lavey Darby, to prepare these encounters. I think the idea of studying before studying

is important, since I as a Hasid know that the preparation for a mitzvah is more important, often, than the mitzvah itself.

Number two, which is an important thing, this discourse, this study, for the last four years, is devoted to the memory of my teacher, my friend, the late Shaul Lieberman, *zichrono livracha*. I have never understood why in the laws of mourning, which are so special in the Jewish tradition, [00:06:00] we are told that one must mourn over the death of a master, just as one mourns over the death of parents. And I have understood it, really, only after Shaul Lieberman passed away.

Literally, I miss him every day, whenever I open the Talmud. I see his face, and I question his eyes. He had a very special sense of humor. In addition to his erudition, compassion, knowledge, sensitivity, he was also funny. I remember in 1967, during the three weeks preceding the Six-Day War, when we were all terribly afraid, we were all convinced that a catastrophe was waiting for Israel -- once he said to me, he said, "Don't worry," he said. "God has invested too much in Jewish history. [00:07:00] He cannot pull out." (laughter) He said, "God is a good banker." (laughter)

Speaking of banks, I must also share with you something very gratifying. Last week, here, I spoke about Vladimir and Masha

Slepek, and I said I somehow couldn't accept the idea that the Slepaks should spend two days in Vienna, instead of going straight to Israel -- there was no plane. I must say, the next day, some of you -- I won't mention names, not to embarrass anyone -- some of you called, and you gave me emotional reward and satisfaction. They called, simply saying, we are ready to underwrite, chartering a plane. A plane was chartered, with your help, and Slepek, therefore, [00:08:00] came to Jerusalem on Monday instead of Wednesday. (applause)

Now, back to the story of Rabbi Akiva. I am sure you have guessed it, that the story appeals to me. It appeals to me for many reasons. First, do not accuse me of immodesty, but on occasion, I identify with Moses. (laughter) Not the great leader and the prophet, but the writer. It happens that I, too, read what people write about my work, and I, too, fail to understand a single word. (laughter) Second, the theme of silence as part of theodicy has always fascinated me. Third, it is gratifying for us to learn that questions that trouble us today also troubled Moses. [00:09:00] Fourth, I am mystified still by Rabbi Akiva's passivity during his agony. He seems to have welcomed suffering and death. Rather than rebel and turn his pain into an existential insurrection, his punishment into an act of supreme protest, he decided to submit and pray, rather

than emphasize the question of all questions: that of the role of divine justice in human anguish. He allowed it to remain unanswered, and for some time, I did not like his passivity.

As much as I admired and revered Rabbi Akiva, and still do, a hero of many dreamers, I could not help but see his image as that of a consenting martyr, an image which preceded him. We are told in various Midrashic sources that from the very beginning of time, he was meant to suffer, and to glorify suffering. Adam himself had been allowed to view Akiva's tragic ending, and he felt sorry for him, as we do. [00:10:00] *Samach v'Torahto*, Adam rejoiced in his learning, but felt sad about his death.

Was there no free choice reserved for Akiva? He himself articulated the delightful paradox. *Hakol tzafui*, he said. All things are foreseen. But *hareshut n'tunah*, we may still enjoy the privilege of choosing freely. Freedom is a gift, which does not prevent us from still obeying God's will. Did he say that to explain his own condition? That, the prediction of Adam and Moses notwithstanding, he could have chosen to follow another path? Was he saying that his death was his own doing? The fact that countless generations of victims and martyrs have

claimed kinship with him has made the problem even more acute, more challenging.

Who knows? Had he spoken up, had he revealed his anger, had he protested against what was happening to him, [00:11:00] his faith and ours might have taken a different course. For I remember the nocturnal processions of Jewish families walking towards death. It seems that they, too, like Rabbi Akiva, were offering themselves to the altar. It seems that they, too, had given up on life, as he had. Why didn't Rabbi Akiva opt for defiance? Why didn't he proclaim his love of life up to the very moment it was taken away from him? Why didn't he weep instead of rejoice? Didn't he consider that to die willingly for one's faith could eventually be interpreted as an element of weakness in that faith? What kind of law is the law which brings suffering and cruelty upon those who serve it with all their might and with all their soul?

Why was he so quiet, as the story will point out later? Why did he laugh, as we shall see later? Is it that he meant to resist suffering by magnifying it, [00:12:00] by pushing it to its limits? Did he mean to defy death by welcoming its dominion? Seen in this light, Akiva, the hero of my childhood, the song of my adolescence, suddenly emerges as a disturbing and complex

figure. One who elicits reverence, as well as compassion. But before we extend our compassion to him, don't you think we ought to reserve some for those who are patiently waiting outside?

(laughter) (applause) [00:13:00] (pause)

Nu? (pause) And now, let's study. Is it because of the striking similarity between his times and ours that Rabbi Akiva seems more present, more relevant, than many other Talmudic personalities? As a survivor of the *Churban*, the destruction of the Temple, he had to find a way of conferring a meaning to the *Churban*. He had to learn, and teach, how to deal with its aftermath. How to explain and articulate what cannot -- should not -- be explained. What to tell old men whose memories were wounds. [00:14:00] What to tell young people who wondered why they should go on praying, or dreaming, or living as Jews in a world that seemed to have been drained of Jewishness. Why they should go on affirming spiritual values, rather than military ones?

As one who walked amid the ruins of the Temple, he had to find a way to build again, upon those very ruins. He, who saw what Roman civilization had done to Jews, felt the need to discover the words and images necessary to prevent Jews from giving up on all civilization. In a world shattered by despair, he had to

show how to cope with despair. And this is, perhaps, why we feel so close to him. For more subjective reasons, as well, as we shall see, he had the qualities of an artist. He was stubborn, [00:15:00] passionate, uncompromising, and a ladies' man. He mastered the art of waiting. He mastered the art of telling tales, and of turning stories, literature, theater -- words, into a weapon.

He waited years and years for his wife, and made her wait for him. He often laughed, even when his companions found cause to mourn. *Akiva sachak* or *sichek*, Akiva laughed, is an expression often used in the Talmud, he smiled. And he always had a magnificent story to tell of enchanted times, and faraway places. It was impossible to resist falling under his spell. Now, who was he?

On the surface, his life may seem a glorious success story. [00:16:00] A poor shepherd boy marries a beautiful girl, inherits her father's money, makes it in society, becomes famous, and even manages to die a hero. Everything about him seems exaggerated, almost unreal. When he is poor, he is the poorest. Before he was educated, he hated learned men so much that he wanted, and I quote, "to bite them like a donkey," unquote. And his disciples asked him, "Why not like a dog?"

And he said, "Because a donkey's bite is more painful."

(laughter)

When he became known, his fame spread from one corner of the world to the other. Like Moses, he's said to have lived 120 years. Like Moses, he's said to have been buried with heavenly assistance. Now, did a rich girl [00:17:00] named Rachel fall in love with him? Did she make him marry her? Did she persuade him, at the age of 40, to go to school and begin studying? Were they disowned, and later readopted, by Rachel's father, the famous Kalba Savu'a? Did the Roman governor Tineius Rufus seek Akiva's friendship? Did the governor's wife fall in love with him? Did she eventually marry him?

These are legends, and there are legends upon legends that answer yes to all these questions. And what was his attitude towards Bar Kochba, the famous young general who stood up to the Romans and fought them bitterly to the end? Did he encourage his rebellion? And why did he crown him the Messiah? And what about the strange adventure he and his three friends had upon entering [00:18:00] the orchard of forbidden knowledge, the *Pardes*? He alone emerged unharmed. We have repeated the story a few times here, each time from a different perspective, from those who participated in it, and each time we ask the question,

"Why is it that Akiva alone emerged unharmed?" Everything about him is puzzling.

Born in Lod, or Lydda, around the year 40 or 50 of the Common Era, he had a difficult childhood. His father Yosef, probably a convert or son of converts, did not have the means to send his son to school. Even though under King Agrippa I, the country was enjoying economic prosperity, some people were poor, and he was one of them. Now, politically, the situation wasn't too bad either. The Romans allowed the Jews to maintain a certain measure of [00:19:00] national sovereignty and religious freedom. Jerusalem was still the spiritual and political center of the nation. The authority of the *Sanhedrin* was undisputed, and the splendor of the temple, unblemished.

Akiva must have been 30 when Titus and his legions brought Judea to her knees. Misery, oppression, pain, agony, affliction, humiliation. The defeat was total. The surrender, unconditional. Young warriors were sent to Rome as slaves. Children were abandoned with no strength to cry. Corpses of starved victims were stretched out in front of their charred homes, awaiting burial, according to the law of Israel. Some Pharisees decided to give up marrying. [00:20:00] Why multiply? Why bring children into such a wretched world? Fortunately,

they were overruled by those who followed Rabbi Yishmael, who was the adversary and friend of Rabbi Akiva, and he said Israel had to survive its sanctuary. Life had to go on, for Israel is the sanctuary.

Now, was Akiva married before he met Rachel? Probably, yes. He had a son from his first wife, who died. As shepherd in the service of Kalba Savu'a, the wealthiest Jew in town -- who, according to some sources, opened his granaries during the Siege of Jerusalem and fed the entire population -- Akiva noticed his beautiful daughter, or, was noticed by her. Anyway, it was love at first sight. Theirs is one of the most innocent [00:21:00] and moving love stories in the entire Talmudic literature.

Disowned by Kalba Savu'a, the newlyweds lived in total poverty. Akiva collected wood, half to sell and the other half to use at home. Annoyed by the smoke, the neighbors complained, "Akiva, Akiva," they said, "*ibadetanu beashan*, you are killing us with your smoke."

In despair, they offered to buy his entire stock. So he could afford candles, and perhaps a better stove. But he refused, and he said, "I like wood. I study by its light, I am warmed by its heat, and at night, when I am tired, I use it as a pillow."

Eventually, his stock did run out, and then it was Rachel's turn

to provide for the family. She sold [00:22:00] her magnificent hair, and with the proceeds, she bought bread. And they, at that time, must have felt close to despair.

Then, a legend. The prophet Elijah, disguised as a beggar, appeared at their door. "Please," he said, "could you lend me a bit of straw? My wife is about to give birth, and we have no bed in our home." And Akiva turned to Rachel. "See?" he said. "There are people who are poorer than us." To which she said, "Go and study at the *Beit HaMikdash*." Not too logical a response? (laughter) Rachel had her own logic (laughter), and perhaps she understood that actually, in order to understand the meaning of the words of prophet Elijah, one has to study the stories about prophet Elijah. [00:23:00]

Since their first meeting, she had made up her mind, and his. Without his knowing. She was convinced that he must go to school, and there is, in fact, a Talmudic story which views this as a condition of her marrying him. "Tell me," she said, "if I marry you, will you go away and study?" "Yes," he answered, "I will." And so, they eloped. And Akiva was bound to his part of the contract, and he went away to study.

There is a third story, naturally. Akiva and his son were walking in the forest when they came upon a well. And he asked someone who stood there, "Who made the hole in this stone?" "Drops," came the answer. "They did it. If enough drops fall on the stone, they will eventually change the outlook of the stone." Said Akiva, "If a stone can receive water, [00:24:00] my heart can receive Torah." And so, he and his son went to a teacher and began learning the *Alef-bet*. At the time, he was 40. You see? The founder of adult Jewish education was Rabbi Akiva. (laughter) No wonder Rachel fell in love with him.

He first studied with Rabbi Nachum Ish Gamzu, a legendary figure who praised God for all that happened to him. Good or bad. He was called Gamzu because of his favorite expression, "*Gam zu l'tovah*," everything is for the best. Was it his influence that made Akiva accept suffering with such equanimity? Later, he studied under Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah. Legend has it that he stayed away from home for 12 years. Upon returning, [00:25:00] he overheard an argument Rachel was having with a neighbor. "Your father was right to disown you," said the neighbor. "Akiva is unworthy of you. Look. He left you. He abandoned you. For 12 years he abandoned you." And Rachel answered, "If he listened to me, he would go and study for another 12 years."

Having heard that -- meaning, having received her permission or encouragement or order -- Akiva did not even bother to enter his home. He went back to the *yeshiva* for another 12 years. But when he next came home, as Rabbi Akiva, as the local boy who made good, he was greeted by numerous admirers, and Rachel could not even get close to him. Eventually, he noticed her in the crowd, and said, "Make room for her. Let her come near me, for" [00:26:00] -- and he used a marvelous expression. "*Sheli veshelachem, shela hu*, whatever you and I have, whatever you and I have tried to achieve or obtain and accomplish, we owe it to her."

Few women received such recognition. Surely, not in public. He also brought her a present, which teaches us that when a husband goes out of town (laughter) -- Rabbi Akiva brought Rachel something called *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*. Jerusalem of Gold. A kind of tiara which few people could afford in those times. And it's a marvelous, marvelous coincidence that the Six-Day War actually stood under the song, under the melody, of *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*, [00:27:00] and in those times, in those days, when you were in Israel, for weeks on end, from morning to night, all you heard -- from soldiers and from civilians, in radio and in the street, was *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*. And I wonder whether

they knew that the words *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav* came from Rabbi Akiva.

The tiara that he brought was so splendid that the wife of President Rabban Gamliel became envious, and she complained to her husband, asking him why he was less generous than Rabbi Akiva. And Rabban Gamaliel answered, "Have you suffered as much as Rachel has suffered? Have you done for me what she did for her husband? Have you supported me the way she supported him?" I think that Rabban Gamaliel should have offered a tiara to his wife. (laughs) Why not? We are not paying for it. (laughter) [00:28:00] But he was right, in his evaluation of Rachel. After all, think about it. Wasn't she the first woman who made a sacrifice and worked hard so as to allow her husband to get a college degree?

She was so great a person, so devoted a wife, that she involuntarily did harm to other women. Convinced that every woman was like Rachel, Rabbi Akiva, in his legislative interpretations, was often unfair to the average woman. For instance, he states that a man may divorce his wife, not only for gossiping, but also for arousing gossip. Or he may divorce her because he has found another woman more attractive. And one sage has claimed, "Akiva, if we were to adhere to your views, no

woman would be safe with her husband." [00:29:00] But please do not worry. In this domain, Rabbi Akiva was overruled. So you may rest assured.

Another sage objected to his total devotion to study. Akiva performed a disservice to the poor, he complained. Because of him, the poor could no longer invoke poverty as a reason for their inability to pay tuition. True, Akiva was poorer than the poor. And yet, he managed to study. But another sage added with exquisite humor, "Do not worry. The poor would still be able to claim in their defense that they did not have Rachel for a wife."

For Rachel, stubbornness was a virtue. For Akiva, too. We are told that he sat in Rabbi Eliezer's presence for 12 years without ever uttering a single word. Without ever being asked by the teacher to intervene in the debate, [00:30:00] without ever being noticed by the teacher. Legend has it that the teacher never so much as knew who he was, and one day, Akiva stumbled upon an unknown corpse in the road -- we call that a *met mitzvah*. Remembering that the high priest, should it happen to him on Yom Kippur, the most sacred day of the year, must neglect all other duties and tend to the corpse, Akiva carried the man into town, arriving there exhausted, drenched in sweat,

only to be reprimanded by his teacher. "A *met mitzvah*, an anonymous corpse," he was told, "must be buried where he is found. With each step you took, you were guilty of shedding blood."

But Akiva was not discouraged. He understood he still had much to learn, and he learned so well that one day he asked Rabbi Eliezer -- the same Rabbi Eliezer -- [00:31:00] certain questions, to which the old master had no answer. In due time, he came to be treated as an equal by renowned teachers. Better yet, his opinion usually prevailed. Listen to the Talmud, and I quote, "*Stam Mishnah* -- simply Mishnah, means Rabbi Meir. *Stam Tosefta*, additions to the Mishnah, left out by Rabbi Yehudah the Prince, means Rabbi Nehemiah. *Stam Sifra* means Rabbi Yehudah. *Stam Sifrei* means Rabbi Shimon. They are the authors or the editors, but all of them reflect the work of Rabbi Akiva."

Called the great collector of ideas, notions, principles, he baffled his contemporaries with his ability to sort them out and organize them logically, coherently. Well, the ignorant shepherd has reason to become a great teacher in Israel, [00:32:00] and though lacking in ancestral nobility and official titles, he has emerged as a dominant figure in rabbinic circles

throughout the land. And he had more authority than most of his peers, and even some of his masters.

Popular with students, he sometimes had trouble getting along with his colleagues. He occasionally disagreed with Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, whom he admired. Here is an example. The question was whether ritual slaughterers were permitted to sharpen their knives on Shabbat. Rabbi Eliezer said yes, because they needed sharp knives to sacrifice animals, even on Shabbat, for the temple. Rabbi Akiva said no, "let them prepare their knives on Friday," he said, and his decision prevailed. Said Rabbi Eliezer, who was hurt, [00:33:00] and he said it not without sorrow, "You defeated me in matters of *shechita*, slaughtering, which involves knives, and therefore I am afraid that knives will cause you to die."

It was Rabbi Akiva who organized the first campus rebellion in Jewish history -- against Rabbi Gamaliel, which resulted in the removal of the old master as academy president.

Characteristically, it was Rabbi Akiva who was chosen to bring Rabbi Gamaliel the bad news of his resignation -- forced resignation. Why he? Because he was daring? No. Because he was delicate, and because of his integrity, and because of his genuine kindness, in spite of the appearances. There was never

anything personal in his motives. His only loyalty [00:34:00] was to study, to Torah.

Listen the way he describes his relationship to Eliezer -- to Rabbi Eliezer. The same man who predicted his tragic death. And I quote, "Rabbi Eliezer has said, 'If all the oceans were ink, and all the trees pens, and all the heavens and the earth rolls of parchment, and all the men scribes, they would not suffice for the writing of the Torah which I have studied. Yet I have not covered more of the total body of the Torah than one can draw water by inserting a finger into the sea. Nor have my pupils taken from me more than a brush dipped into a bottle.'" To which Rabbi Akiva commented, and I quote him, "I cannot even admit having taken that much from his teachings. What I received amounts to the fragrance given off by the citrus, [00:35:00] and the light taken from one candle by another, and the water drawn from a brook. The beneficiary enjoys the fragrance, increases the light, and is refreshed by the water, but the giver has lost nothing."

Though teaching in his own *yeshiva* at B'nai Brak, he would often visit the academy at Yavneh, established by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, to take part in the deliberations of the *Sanhedrin*. He once arrived late, and waited outside in order not to disturb

the scholars, until someone exclaimed, "*HaTorah bachutz*, the Torah is outside." And then, he had been invited to enter, in order to help the assembly continue the debate and reach a decision.

His impact was felt in the fields of *Aggadah*, the legend, and *Halakha*, the law. [00:36:00] If it were not for him, says the Talmud, the Torah would have been forgotten. Thus, his life and work have inspired numerous legends and fables. He appears to the imagination of the learned and unlearned alike. He's loved by mystics and rationalists as well. He's the perfect hero in everyone's book. And yet, and yet, I have some problems with Rabbi Akiva.

His attitude towards suffering disturbs me, because he seems somehow to be attracted to it. His disciples saw him weep on the Sabbath. "Rabbi," they asked him, "isn't it written, *v'karat la'Shabbat oneg*, that one must find joy in Shabbat?" And he answered, "Weeping gives me joy." [00:37:00] As you see, therefore, that he had -- he was blessed with a sense of humor, and with a deep sense of beauty. On the Biblical commandment, *v'ahavta l'reiakha kamokha*, and thou shall love thy fellow man like thyself, Rabbi Akiva commented, "Yes, this is a great principle. But what is the restriction? Thou shall not say,

'Because I was humiliated, my friend ought to share in the humiliation. Because I was cursed, let part of the curse follow my friend.' *V'ahavta l'reiakha kamokha*, thou shall love thy fellow man, applies only to good things, not to bad."

But he believed that all men were good, and he believed that all Jews were princes. In other words, he believed the poor people were rich, rich without money. Today, it's easy, by the way. The master of aphorisms, [00:38:00] many of his sayings still govern our conduct and our *weltanschauung*. "What is life?" he once asked, and he gave this image which is striking: "The store is open, the storekeeper gives you everything on loan, but the book is open, and the hand is writing everything down. Nothing is forgotten, and one day, one must face one's judge."

One day, his friend, Governor Tineius Rufus, asked him, "Why does your God hate us pagans?" Rabbi Akiva said he wanted to sleep on it. Next day, he told the Governor, "I had a peculiar dream. I saw two dogs. One was called Rufus and the other Rufina." "Are you out of your mind?" the Governor shouted. "Rufina is my wife's name, and Rufus is mine." (laughter) "I don't understand why you are angry at me," Akiva replied calmly. "We eat and dogs eat. [00:39:00] We drink and they drink. We live and die and so do they. Yet if I compare us to them, you

are angry. Just imagine how angry God, creator of man and the universe, must be when you compare Him to an idol which you worship as a god."

On another occasion, the same Tineius Rufus taunted him, "If God wanted some people to be poor, what right do rich people have to help them?" (laughter) And he continued, he said, "Imagine a slave jailed by his king. If you smuggle food to the prisoner, won't the king be angry?" And Rabbi Akiva answered, "Imagine a king who jails the son he loves. If you smuggle food to that prisoner, won't you be rewarded by the father?" Rabbi Akiva concluded, "It is up to us to decide whether we want to be God's slaves or God's children."

[00:40:00] He was a hero of many tales, involving many themes. There were some he himself told, and he was a superb storyteller with a keen sense for suspense. And there were some others told about him. Many of his stories deal with his frequent journeys abroad. As a member of official missions and delegations, he visited Rome, Egypt, Cyprus, and I remember, in Georgia and Russia, Jews told me of their ancient tradition that says that Rabbi Akiva had come to visit their ancestors in Georgia. He met Flavius, he met Hadrian. We find him various places in Asia Minor, meeting simple people as well as generals and

philosophers. A poor child of poor parents representing his people militarily defeated, but spiritually sovereign. And he felt at ease with rulers and kings.

One personality he did not meet: Paul. [00:41:00] Both wanted to save humankind, one from within as a Jew, the other from without. And therefore, they could not have met. Some claim he traveled so much, so far, in an effort to establish calendar dates around the new moon. Others believe his motives were political in nature. Rabbi Akiva acted as General Shimon bar Kochba's roving ambassador to distant and dispersed Jewish communities, organizing them to open new fronts, recruit sympathizers, and volunteers. Raise funds, and engage in diversionary tactics against Rome.

This last hypothesis seems persuasive, and I like it. It's poetic. But some scholars maintain that the scrupulous examination of the corresponding dates would prove it to be fantasy. Well, I like the fantasy. What has been ascertained beyond doubt is that Rabbi Akiva traveled wildly and widely to help Jews live as Jews in Judea. He must have mastered foreign tongues [00:42:00] and sciences, including medicine and astronomy, for he was admired by non-Jewish personalities whose decisions he often succeeded in influencing in favor of Judea.

But most of the time, he was at his *yeshiva*, with his pupils, to whom he was both teacher and friend. When one of them fell ill, he came to see him so he would not feel left out.

When the country needed rain, he prayed for rain. He simply recited the awesome yet heartbreaking prayer which dominates our High Holidays liturgy, *Avinu Malkeinu*, our Father and King, *ein lanu melech elah atah*, we have no other King but You. *Avinu Malkeinu*, our Father and King, have mercy on us, for Your sake. And it rained. Asked the Talmud, "Why was his prayer received, whereas Rabbi Eliezer's was not?" [00:43:00] And the answer in the Talmud is that because Rabbi Akiva was patient with people, lenient, forbearing with everyone.

Generally speaking, I would say he was a humanist. As such, he opposed capital punishment. "If I were in the *Sanhedrin*," he proclaimed, "there would be no death sentence issued, ever." The court may have lost a good judge, but the Talmud gained a marvelous teacher. And a daring one, at that. He was the first to free himself from the text. He was so great in that, that he dared to free himself from the strict interpretation of the text, opening an entirely new era in the Talmud, especially in the field of *Aggadah*, of legend. And with him, the tale of the law became part of the law itself. For him, every word, every

letter in Scripture, carried special significance, [00:44:00] and therefore, his discourses must have been well-attended. His new approach could not but excite his listeners. Still, it happened that even he did not always succeed. Once, while lecturing, he noticed his pupils falling asleep, and so he quickly switched to another subject, and spoke about the beauty of beautiful women. He spoke about Queen Esther, and they all jumped up, totally awake. Which is a good method. Perhaps we should use it.

A teacher above all, teaching was his first love. It took the death of his son to move him to interrupt a session with his students, and listen to a story. Rabbi Akiva was in the middle of a class when he was informed that his son Shimon was gravely ill. "*Sha'a'lu*," the master said, [00:45:00] using the ritual expression of teachers, "Go on, ask questions, let us stay with the issue before us. The dialogue must continue." Another messenger came to announce that Shimon's condition was worsening. The expression was, "*Hichbid*." The master went on teaching.

A third emissary appeared. "*Goseis*." Shimon was in agony. "*Sha'a'lu*," murmured the anguished father. "Continue, ask questions." And then the last messenger arrived. "*Hishlim*."

It was all over. Only then did Rabbi Akiva remove his *tefillin*, his phylacteries, tear his garments, and only then did he begin to mourn, saying, "Until now we were bound to study Torah. Now we must pay our respects to a man who has passed away." And he then, at the funeral, delivered one of the most moving eulogies in Talmudic literature. [00:46:00]

"Hear me," he said. "Hear me, my brethren of the house of Israel. It cannot be that you have assembled here because I am a sage, for there are among you many who possess more wisdom than I. Not because I am wealthy, for there are among you wealthier people than I. The men of the south know Akiva, but do the men of the north know him? The men may know him; do women and children know him? No. You have come to honor Torah, and in this, I find comfort."

Glorious Rabbi Akiva. Only death could interrupt his love affair with Torah. It is he who said, "*V'Talmud Torah k'neged kulam*, there are many commandments that we are supposed to obey and follow. [00:47:00] But the study of Torah is equal to all. The study of Torah combines them all." And still, I am troubled. I am troubled by his attraction to suffering which precedes death, and therefore, to death itself. When he came to visit the old Rabbi Eliezer on his deathbed, he consoled him

with the words, "*Havivin yesurin*, there is something good about suffering. Suffering has a redeeming aspect." What? A redeeming aspect? And I, who believe that the Jewish tradition does not encourage suffering, but the fight against suffering. And I, who grew up thinking that Jewish history is not, or not only, a history of suffering, but of responses to suffering.

Another episode in Rabbi Akiva's life that troubles me. The adventure in the *Pardes*, the orchard of forbidden knowledge. [00:48:00] Four friends entered it. One lost his mind, another lost his faith, a third lost his life, and only Rabbi Akiva entered in peace and emerged in peace? How is that possible? An event that destroyed his friends had no effect on him? Was he so immune to their plight, to their ordeal, to their suffering, to their punishment? Was he, perhaps, insensitive to what they discovered in the garden?

Along the same lines, Rabbi Akiva and the sage named Ben Patura argued over an interesting dilemma. Two men walk in the desert, and one of them has a jug filled with water. The water would be sufficient for one to survive, not for two. What should they do? Said Ben Patura, "The two must share the water, even if it means that both would die in the desert." Rabbi Akiva disagreed. [00:49:00] "The owner of the jug should keep it for

himself." And his argument: "It is written, *v'chai achikha imakh*, and your brother shall live with you, which means, your life, *hayekha kodmin*, your life comes before that of your friend." And as one who celebrates friendship in all his writings, I was upset by Rabbi Akiva's decision. How could he separate friend from friend? And favor one man simply because he owned a jug full of water? The romantic in me agreed with Ben Patura. Friends must remain loyal and united until parted by death.

More evidence against Rabbi Akiva. His strange views on Bar Kochba. How could he, a man of his experience and erudition, place his contemporaries in such peril? [00:50:00] Didn't he know that false Messiahs are dangerous to the Jewish people? Didn't he know that one must not give dates of the coming of the Messiah, nor must one name the Messiah? A great sage, Rabbi Yochanan ben Torta, meant to hurt him in his response to Rabbi Akiva's Messianic fervor, and therefore he went as far as to tease him, and he said, "Akiva, Akiva, *assavim yaalu bilechayecha u'ben David lo ba--* . Grass will grow out of your jaw. You will long be dead, and the Messiah will still not be here." One cannot avoid being troubled by these aspects of Rabbi Akiva's endeavor. And yet, and yet, he remains our teacher. And our hero.

Let us reexamine the problems we just referred to, starting with the last. Bar Kochba -- [00:51:00] I believe Rabbi Akiva felt close to Bar Kochba. Rabbi Akiva was already an old man when they met, and Bar Kochba must have impressed him with his youthful vigor and patriotism. Rabbi Akiva remembered the time when Judea was free, and he so wished to see it free again. Roman oppression grew harsher and harsher. The Roman was the supreme ruler over all Jews, and all Jews were treated as slaves. Jews were subjected to degradation and doom. Rome's objective was to deprive Jews of all possibility of hope.

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, a brave young warrior appeared on the stage. Talmudic sources indicate that 400,000 youngsters rallied around him. The Roman historian Dio Cassius [00:52:00] quotes a higher figure: 580,000. Even the Shomronites, ancestral enemies of Judea, joined the ranks of Bar Kochba's army. Every volunteer had to prove his courage by biting off one of his fingers. And the sages asked Bar Kochba, "Why are you making cripples out of our youngsters?" And he said, "How, then, should I test their bravery?" And they gave him advice. "Let every one of them with his bare hands uproot a Cedar of Lebanon. But he must do so while horse riding." And 200,000 Cedars of Lebanon were uprooted.

Bar Kochba's battle lasted three and a half years. In the beginning, Hadrian did not take him seriously. The first reports from the front made him laugh. But then, he stopped laughing. [00:53:00] Dio Cassius relayed that 50 fortifications and close to 900 citizen villages fell to Bar Kochba, forcing the Roman legion to evacuate Judea, and Shomron, and the Galilee. For the first time in 60 years, Jews ruled again in their own land. They even had their own coins, their army, their laws. Rome, then, was forced to send reinforcements under the command of General Julius Severus. Eventually, Bar Kochba's Jewish army was defeated. Because of Roman superiority? Because of Bar Kochba's vanity, says the Talmud, which is the pacifist civilization represented in the Talmud.

At one point, Bar Kochba is supposed to have addressed himself to God, saying, "Since You have abandoned us, O God, since You no longer fight on our side, in our battles, we implore You, simply not to mix in." [00:54:00] (laughter) "We don't want Your help, but at least don't help Your enemies -- our enemies." Was it due to his blasphemy or his foolishness that he took on the great Roman Empire? The fact is that the war ended in tragedy. Rome won. Judea was punished by the victor in the cruelest way imaginable.

You should know that according to our historians, the tragedy then was statistically superior to the one that we have endured, but one should never compare tragedies. Statistically, more Jews lost their lives then than in 1939-45. Most of Rabbi Akiva's students -- according to one source, there were 24,000 -- most of them who had joined the fight fell in the mountains of Judea. And the corpses were again left unburied, and we are told that [00:55:00] the day when they were allowed to bury the dead, a special prayer was invented, *Ha-tov Veha-meitiv*, God who is good and who makes other people good. The tragedy that struck the population matched in intensity all the other tragedies that befell Jewish history.

But what about Rabbi Akiva? What was his role in that story? Together with other teachers, he was arrested. The Governor's friendship could not protect him from Hadrian's vengeful edicts. But then, why did he crown Bar Kochba as the Messiah in the first place? And here is my hypothesis. Twofold: one, I feel that Rabbi Akiva felt sorry for Bar Kochba, who, in a way, was opposed by the rabbinic establishment, which was pacifist, and [00:56:00] he couldn't accept the idea that Bar Kochba would think bad things about rabbis. Bar Kochba probably would have thought, "What kind of rabbis are they, that they don't help

me?" And therefore Rabbi Akiva said to himself, "At least one rabbi will be on his side."

The other layer, the other side of the same attitude, I believe, is that as a mystic -- and Rabbi Akiva was a mystic, and this we learn from his *Pardes* experience -- he was mainly concerned with problems related to ultimate redemption. And when his *Pardes* adventure failed, he may have decided upon a different strategy. Now, what was his experience in the *Pardes*? I think he entered the *Pardes* in order to bring redemption to his people, whereas the other three had different objectives, and therefore, [00:57:00] he came out in peace.

But it failed, and so he chose a different tactic. Instead of waiting for a Messiah sent down by heaven, he would force heaven to accept the Messiah chosen by him. The Talmud says, "*HaTzaddik gozer vebaKadosh baruch hu mekayem.*" The just man orders, and God, blessed be He, must implement his order. And so, Rabbi Akiva may have thought, "If I and hundreds of thousands of children of Israel proclaim this brave and valiant young general, the redeemer, God will have no choice than to anoint him as redeemer." But his scheme ended in disaster. History had taught us a bitter lesson. One does not play with eschatological matters with impunity. And Rabbi Akiva knew it.

[00:58:00] He had tried to interfere with the laws of time, and he was ready to accept the punishment. As in every great adventure, his battle was with God, as much as it was for God. A battle which ended in defeat.

Bar Kochba lost militarily, Rabbi Akiva mystically. Redemption remained far away. God did not permit anyone, not even Rabbi Akiva, to precipitate events and accelerate time. Having lost, Rabbi Akiva had to accept the consequences. And that is why he welcomed suffering with such equanimity. And that is why he accepted death with such serenity.

Death came after an imprisonment that lasted three years. One legend has it that the governor's wife, Rufina, interceded on his behalf with her husband, in vain. The legend goes on to say that she had fallen in love with the old sage, and that after Rachel's passing, Rabbi Akiva married Rufina, who had converted to Judaism. [00:59:00] If so, we understand why the governor refused to commute his sentence. (laughter)

But this is only a legend. What we know with certainty is that while in jail, Rabbi Akiva kept on studying and teaching. His faithful student, Rabbi Yehoshua Hagarsi, visited him there and served as liaison agent with the scholarly community outside,

and later, when prison rules grew harsher, underground methods were devised. Disciples would walk up and down the street, posing as peddlers with needles, shoelaces, to sell. "What is the law regarding private *halitzah*?" said Rabbi Akiva to them, and he answered. He answered, "Private *halitzah* in your case is appropriate," and he went on, saying, "How much are the needles? How much are the shoelaces?" And they went on saying, "How much are the needles? How much are the shoelaces? And what is the law for this? And what is the law for that?"

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai [01:00:00] came to see him in prison, and pleaded with him, "Teacher, teach me." And Rabbi Akiva refused. The disciple insisted. And Rabbi Akiva said, allegorically, "More than the calf who wants to suckle, the cow is eager to feed it. But it is dangerous." Commented the disciple, Rabbi Shimon, "If suckling is dangerous, then the calf is in greater danger." In other words, Rabbi Akiva was ready to endanger himself, but not others.

He was ready to advocate suffering for himself, but not for others. And that is why he taught clandestinely, unlike Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion, who persisted in teaching publicly. There had been a time when Rabbi Akiva himself did so, too. He, too, gathered crowds in public squares, and told them the law. A

sage named Papos ben Yehuda warned him, "Aren't you afraid?" And Rabbi Akiva answered him with a parable. "One day, the fish decided to leave the ocean. [01:01:00] So strong was their fear of being caught by the fisherman's net.

'Where do you think you are going?' asked the shrewd fox, who happened to see them from the top of a hill. And the fish told the fox their fear of being caught by the fisherman's net. 'I will help you,' answered the shrewd fox. 'Come with me, assured. I will protect you.' 'Where is your shrewdness?' countered the fish. 'If we are in danger in our natural surroundings, how much greater will the danger be out of our element?'"

In other words, if studying Torah is perilous, not studying is far more perilous. For Jews, in those times. And in all times. Protection must come from Torah. Perhaps not from Torah alone, but you cannot exclude Torah.

The same sage, Papos ben Yehuda, was arrested shortly afterwards. In his message to Rabbi Akiva, he said, "You are lucky, Akiva. You were arrested for studying Torah, whereas I was arrested for more frivolous reasons." [01:02:00] Yet, the study and teaching of Torah did not shield Rabbi Akiva.

Sentenced to death by torture, he was among the Ten Martyrs of the faith whom we admiringly remember on Yom Kippur. When Rabbi Akiva died, his peers lamented, "His passing constitutes a warning. Supreme chaos is about to descend upon the world."

Chaos. The ultimate punishment in Jewish tradition. Worse than war, worse than collective punishment. Worse than famine and bloodshed, chaos is the eschatological trauma in Judaism. Disorder on a universal scale, confusion and anarchy transcending time, space, and language. What is worse than evil? The triumph of evil, and that is chaos, for in chaos, good and evil are intertwined and interchangeable. Evil triumphs when it poses as good. And so, Akiva's death was not only a tragedy for the Jewish nation, it signaled catastrophe for the Roman Empire as well, [01:03:00] and ultimately, for the whole world.

So here we are. Back where we started. The scene of Rabbi Akiva's execution, which Moses had been allowed to observe even before it occurred. There are many descriptions of what took place there, all of them powerful. We see the old master in the middle of the crowd, we watch the Romans combing his flesh with iron combs, as was the custom then, and he is laughing. "Are you a magician?" the governor wants to know. "Do you feel no

pain?" The disciples ask him the same question, though somewhat more politely. They, too, are eager to understand their teacher's apparent happiness in the face of death.

And he says, "*Kol yamai*, all my life I wanted to accomplish the commandment of loving the Almighty with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my life. And now that the opportunity to do so has been given to me, how could I not be happy?"

[01:04:00] And the text in the Talmud emphasizes that *veotah sha'a, sh'at kriyat Shema haita*. That happened to be the hour for reciting the *Shema Yisrael*, and here, let us remember the sensitive, beautiful *chidush*, innovation, offered to us by our teacher Shaul Lieberman, z"l. He said, "Why do we say *otah sha'a sh'at kriyat Shema*? Why do we say that that was the hour for *Shema*? Because that was the thing to do so. Had he died at another hour of the day, he would not have recited the *Shema*."

In other words, in dying, he did not intend to offer himself up as a spectacle. He did not prepare shattering speeches, grandiloquent statements. He simply followed the law to the end. The hero of *Aggadah*, of legends, remained a man of *Halakha*. [01:05:00] And naturally, I like and I love Rav Lieberman's *chidush*, but I remember asking him the question Rabbi Akiva's disciples asked Rabbi Akiva. Why the joy? Why

the laughter? Didn't the great master understand the risk inherent in his heroic behavior? I remember -- we all remember -- that there were too many Jews during the war who also, somehow, managed not to avoid suffering. Why?

Rabbi Akiva used to say, even then, "*Ashreikhem Yisrael, Ashreikhem Yisrael, amar Rabbi Akiva, amar Rabbi Akiva, Ashreikhem Yisrael.*" And Rabbi Akiva said, said Rabbi Akiva, blessed and happy are thou, Israel, for you are purifying yourselves before Him who purifies you. [01:06:00] And I love Rabbi Akiva. But I don't understand his optimism. *Ashreikhem Yisrael* under Roman occupation? *Ashreikhem Yisrael* when faced with torturers? *Ashreikhem Yisrael* in our own kingdom of night?

Yes, I love Rabbi Akiva. I love him for his humanity, for his passion for study. I love him for his love of the Jewish people. His argument with Ben Patura on the duties and obligations of friendship. His decision teaches us something important. When the surviving friend emerges from the desert, he is no longer alone. He will have to live two lives: his own and that of his dead friend. And often, I wonder, isn't this applicable to the American Jewish community? Six million Jews live in this land. Let every one of them choose to live his or

her life, and that of a victim, [01:07:00] anyone, who died in battle or in a mass grave.

Obsessed with the suffering of our people, Rabbi Akiva so wanted to curtail it, but he could not. The Talmud tells us that at the end of his life, he seemed to have changed in a curious way. He was affected by suffering. Once he sided with Rabbi Eliezer against Rabbi Yehoshua, although he had earlier concurred with the latter and opposed the former on that very same issue. Furthermore, three times, regarding three specific questions, he refused to take a stand and offer a ruling, something which he had never done before. Furthermore, once he went as far as repudiating opinions formulated in his own name. His mood has changed. He who used to be kind and generous towards his pupils, suddenly became strangely insensitive. He insulted one, shouted at another. [01:08:00]

What changed him? The ill-fated adventure in the *Pardes*? The tragic denouement of the Bar Kochba insurrection? Was he, like Adam, shown the Book of Creation so that he could see all the generations until the last? Had he seen his descendants, who, centuries and centuries later, would go to their deaths, sanctifying God's name in their own way, some by doing battle with a foe, and others by opposing him with prayers and dreams?

Was he the first martyr of my generation's catastrophe? Is it possible? Is it conceivable, that six million Jews died so as to force heaven to accelerate time, and bring redemption to a people that has been longing for redemption, and to the whole world?

God's injunction, *shtok*, keep silent, was addressed not only to Moses. It is meant to be heard by all of us, always.

[01:09:00] And we don't know what to do with it. Is this what Rabbi Akiva also taught us? The infinite, unfathomable depth of silence? And of laughter? And of hope, in spite of persecutions, and of joy, in spite of the enemy's temporary but so tragic triumph?

Listen to a story. It happened in Jerusalem. A small group of men slowly made their way along what once had been a busy, main street, and their hearts heavy at the scene of total desolation all around them. Rabbi Akiva and his three companions reached Mount Scopus, and seeing the ruins of the Temple, tore their clothes in grief. As they approached the holy site, a fox emerged from what had once been the Holy of Holies, and vanished. [01:10:00] At the sight of the fox, the three companions burst out crying. But Rabbi Akiva's face lit up. He smiled, and then he began to laugh with joy.

"Why are you laughing?" Rabbi Akiva's friends asked him in amazement. And he said, "Why are you crying?" They were shocked. "This was once the *Beit HaMikdash*, the *Kodesh Hakodashim*, the Holy of Holies," they said, "the place where none but the high priest could enter. And now, *shualim hilkhuvo*, foxes roam over it. Should we not cry? How can we not cry?" And Rabbi Akiva said, "That is exactly why I am laughing. Just as this prophecy of destruction has been fulfilled, that the Temple will be destroyed, so too the prophecy of restoration must one day be fulfilled, [01:11:00] and we are told that all men and women will once more sit in the streets of Jerusalem. And therefore, I am laughing."

The difference: they saw the present. He saw the future. And because he saw the future, his companions felt better, and they, too, had a glimpse of the future. And they said, "*Nichamtanu*, Akiva. You have comforted us, Akiva. You have brought us consolation."

I love Rabbi Akiva. It takes courage to laugh, when other people cry. It takes courage to see the future, when all of us are so still obsessed with the past. It takes courage to believe in study, but is there any joy outside of study? It

takes courage to have faith, but is there [01:12:00] any hope outside of faith? After all, we have learned tonight the story of a great man, and his story is not only a story of suffering, nor is it a story of affliction and death. It is surely a story of eyes that have seen beyond centuries. It is a story filled with beauty, and consolation. (applause)

M:

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