**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Lag Ba-Omer – On Rabbi Akiva**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

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**Introduction**

In honor of the approaching celebration of Lag Ba-omer, I will take the opportunity to speak about Rabbi Akiva. The Gemara records the deaths of multitudes of Rabbi Akiva's students during the period of the counting of the *omer*:

Rabbi Akiva said: If a man studied Torah in his youth, he should also study it in his old age; if he had disciples in his youth, he should also have disciples in his old age. For it is stated: "In the morning sow your seed, etc." (*Kohelet* 11:6).

It was said that Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of disciples, from Gabata to Antipatris, and all of them died at the same time, because they did not treat each other with respect. The world remained desolate until Rabbi Akiva came to our masters in the south and taught Torah to them. These were: Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yose, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamu'a; and it was they who revived the Torah at that time.

A *Tanna* taught: All of them died between Pesach and Shavuot. (*Yevamot* 62b)

Rabbi Akiva was a very great figure, to the point that, according to an account in the Gemara, Moshe wondered why he had not been chosen to receive the Torah: after God showed him a lesson given by Rabbi Akiva that Moshe himself was unable to understand, Moshe said to God in response: "Master of the Universe, You have such a person and yet You give the Torah through me?" (*Menachot* 29b).

What do we know about Rabbi Akiva's character? What emerges from the stories about the beginning of his journey, about his teachings, about the end of his life and his death?

**A Mighty Will**

The most striking feature in all the stories we are told about Rabbi Akiva is the demands that he made of himself. He had great willpower. He was willing to set high goals and pay the prices to achieve them, no matter how difficult.

Were it not for this quality, Rabbi Akiva would not have started studying Torah at the age of forty (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 6:2). Before that, he was an "*am ha-aretz*." It should be remembered that the term *am ha-aretz* refers to a person who does not observe the Torah and the *mitzvot* with all their particulars, but who does observe Torah in a broader sense, with an emphasis on the experience. In today’s terms, the main thing in this perspective is to go to synagogue on Shabbat. It is true that "the majority of *amei ha-aretz* tithe their produce" (*Shabbat* 13a, and elsewhere), but nevertheless the Sages did not rely on them, because as a rule they did not take the *halakha* seriously.

When Rabbi Akiva decided that he wanted to live a halakhic Judaism, and not just an experiential one, he went for it with all his might and reached tremendous achievements. He developed a study method, expounded "upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws" (*Menachot* 29b), and shaped the Oral Law. The decision to sit down with small children as a forty-year-old adult, and learn the *alef-bet* with them, comes with heavy costs to one’s psychology and self-image; all the more so in the case of Rabbi Akiva, who certainly knew his strengths and was aware that he was many levels above the class. Nevertheless, he was willing to pay the price in order to study Torah.

Later, he devoted twelve years outside his home for Torah study, and then twelve additional years (*Ketubot* 62b). Twenty-four years of separation from one's spouse is a tremendous sacrifice, yet Rabbi Akiva and his wife did not hesitate. Of course, there are other opinions regarding the correct marital model – which appear in the Gemara there in *Ketubot* (62b) – but when Rabbi Akiva and his wife decided that this was the model they believed in, they went for it with all their might. I cannot prove this, but I imagine there is a great similarity here between Moshe Rabbeinu and Rabbi Akiva: both of them "disappeared" for many years at the beginning of their journey, during which they built their Torah – and ultimately they returned as great leaders.

The Gemara in *Eiruvin* (21b) relates that in Rabbi Akiva’s old age, when he was in prison due to the decrees issued against the Jewish people, he would use the little water he received first and foremost for the ritual washing of his hands, and only then would he drink the remainder. It is clear that the *halakha* did not call for this under such circumstances, but Rabbi Akiva was not ready to give up the ritual washing of his hands for even one day. The same great willpower was manifested again in the tragic but uplifting moments of his execution (*Berakhot* 61b).

**Refusal to Compromise**

With all this, it is important to pay attention to the flip side of the coin: Rabbi Akiva’s high personal standards and willpower did not come alone, but brought with them great decisiveness with respect to his positions. Rabbi Akiva tended to see reality in black and white, and he had very resolute opinions about it. One prominent example of this is the following statement:

It was taught: Rabbi Akiva said: When I was an *am ha-aretz*, I said: Would that I had a scholar [before me], and I would maul him like a donkey. His disciples said to him: Rabbi, say like a dog! He said to them: This one [a donkey] bites and breaks the bones, while the other [a dog] bites but does not break the bones. (*Pesachim* 49b)

Rabbi Akiva held an extreme attitude towards Torah scholars before he studied Torah, and he continued to express firm positions later in his life, in the context of having learned. Thus, he opposed Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai's decision to ask for Yavneh and its Sages, instead of the Temple: "Rabbi Yosef, or as some say Rabbi Akiva, applied to him the verse: ‘God turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish’ (*Yeshayahu* 44:25)” (*Gittin* 56b). According to Rabbi Akiva, one must not compromise; when something is right, one should go for it! If it is possible to ask for the Temple, you should ask for the Temple, and there is no justification to compromise for Yavneh and its Sages. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, however, saw the situation differently; as the Gemara explains, he was concerned that if he asked for the Temple, he might not receive anything at all. Who knows where we would be today if we had not been left with Yavneh and its Sages?

Another expression of Rabbi Akiva's refusal to compromise is found in his unequivocal support for the Bar Kochva rebellion. While other Sages had their reservations about Bar Kochva or opposed him, Rabbi Akiva supported the rebellion to the end: "When Rabbi Akiva saw Bar Kozba he would say: This is the Messianic king" (*Yerushalmi Ta'anit* 4:5). About seventy years had passed since the destruction of the Temple, and he believed that this was the opportunity for redemption. He imagined that the revolt would restore sovereignty to Israel, and presumably he was also looking forward to the rebuilding of the Temple. But when you go for "all or nothing," sometimes you get everything and sometimes you get nothing. After the first Gulf War, I heard an interview with retired Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, in which he was asked what his lessons were from the war. His answer: "It is good to be a superpower." The other side of the same lesson pertains to a country that is not a superpower: from that same war, it is possible to conclude that it is not a good idea to provoke a superpower. *Chazal* (*Yerushalmi*, ibid.; and *Gittin* 55b, 58a) give shocking descriptions of the terrible destruction that took place in Beitar and its surroundings during the suppression of the rebellion, including:

There were four hundred synagogues in the city of Beitar, and every one had four hundred teachers of children, each of whom had under him four hundred pupils, and when the enemy entered there, they pierced them with their staves, and when the enemy prevailed and captured them, they wrapped them in their scrolls and burnt them with fire. (*Gittin* 58a)

The Gemara often uses the number four hundred to denote a great quantity. Using it three times expresses a doubled and redoubled multitude. There was a great world of Torah in Judea, and it was destroyed in the wake of the rebellion. Ultimately, it was a terrible disaster, a disaster that might have been preventable.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**The Death of Rabbi Akiva's Disciples**

In light of Rabbi Akiva's total support for the Bar Kochva rebellion and his uncompromising way of doing things, I would like to offer an explanation for the story of the death of his students. You can choose to accept it, but you can certainly choose not to.

When the Gemara (*Yevamot* 62b) says that Rabbi Akiva had twenty-four thousand disciples, it does not necessarily mean that he taught them all directly. After all, it is unlikely that everyone sat in his class and heard his *shiurim* – such a huge number of students is unreasonable! Therefore, it seems that "disciples" refers to those who promoted his teachings, his followers.

If that is the case, the Gemara likely means that Rabbi Akiva would assemble communities and enthuse the hearts of thousands with his words about the need to fight the Romans and bring about redemption. But these exciting ideas are precisely the ones that led his disciples not to show respect for each other. It does not say that Rabbi Akiva had twenty-four thousand disciples, but that he had "twelve thousand pairs of disciples." It may be suggested on the homiletical level that only one of each pair of students accepted his view of the rebellion.

But even if only half of his students agreed with his ideas about the Bar Kochva revolt, all of his students would have inherited his decisiveness. Half of the students were convinced that the Bar Kochva revolt was the only hope for redemption, and the other half were certain it would bring about a great disaster. Everyone believed that this was a fateful issue, and there was no room for civility. Civility and mutual respect, the prohibition not to publicly embarrass another person, and the rest of the values governing the relationships between a person and his neighbor, are important when dealing with commonplace issues, but people tend to set them aside when it comes to such fateful matters. They believed that in decisions concerning the people of Israel, the process of redemption, there is no room for compromise or nuance! Both sides were convinced that they were saving the people of Israel, and all means were acceptable to reach that end.

The Netziv argues in several places that this phenomenon is the same "baseless hatred" which the Sages said (*Yoma* 9b) was the cause of the destruction of Jerusalem in the Second Temple Period.[[2]](#footnote-2) While the people of the First Temple Period shed blood in their wickedness, the people of the Second Temple were "destroyers of Jerusalem – for the sake of heaven." This is how the Netzivdescribes the situation:

They were righteous and pious, and they toiled in Torah study, but they were not upright in their worldly conduct. Therefore, because of the baseless hatred in their hearts for each other, they suspected anyone who they saw acting contrary to their opinion in the fear of God to be a Sadducee or a heretic. And because of this, they came to excessive bloodshed and to all the evils in the world, until the Temple was destroyed. (*Ha'amek Davar*, introduction to *Bereishit*)

As an aside, note that in another discussion of the relationship between the destruction of the First Temple and the destruction of the Second Temple (*Harchev Davar*, *Devarim* 4:14), the Netzivfocuses on greed as an expression of baseless hatred. He concludes his harsh words there with the assertion: "And it still dances among us" – the same Satan of baseless hatred. He wrote this at the end of the nineteenth century; what should we say today?

**And Yet – Flexibility**

Having explored Rabbi Akiva’s willpower, his refusal to compromise, and the death of the students, I would like to point out another quality of Rabbi Akiva that is very important to complete the picture. Rabbi Akiva also was endowed with great flexibility. Despite his confidence in his positions and his insistence on them, in situations where he was convinced that he had to change direction, he did not hesitate to do so.

His flexibility is expressed first in his decision to start studying Torah at the age of forty (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 6:2), and it returns impressively in his responses to the death of his students and to the failure of the Bar Kochva revolt.

I have already mentioned *Chazal's* description of the terrible destruction that occurred with the failure of the Bar Kokhva revolt. One prominent aspect of all the tragedies of Jewish history – whether the Crusades, the Holocaust, or the Bar Kokhva revolt – is the damage caused to the Torah world. Rabbi Akiva had twenty-four thousand disciples – and they all died. The Sages sum up the situation following the loss of Rabbi Akiva’s students with the words: "The world remained desolate!" (*Yevamot* 62b).

Moreover, as noted above, Rabbi Akiva had expected Bar Kokhva’s rebellion to be the beginning of redemption; he anticipated the restoration of Jewish sovereignty and the renewal of the Temple and its service. From his perspective, in particular, the reality of the suppression of the revolt was an enormous blow. And yet, he stood up and continued – and in this lies his greatness. Even after the Holocaust, there were rabbis who continued their work, but there were also those who did not. The desire to continue, and the actual rehabilitation, are not at all self-evident.

Rabbi Akiva internalized the failure of the revolt; he did not close his eyes to it. He looked directly at the new, unexpected, and painful reality – and continued to teach Torah. Here we see the great leadership of Rabbi Akiva. Although, as mentioned, strong-willed leaders who refuse to compromise may not be suited to preventing a possible crisis – after the crisis has already occurred, they are the most suitable to resolve it and raise up the community anew.

This is the way of the world. There are many varieties of situations and cases, and there are also many different types of people. There are those who are suitable to lead in situation A and not in situation B, and there are those who are suitable to lead in case B and not in case A. Churchill saved Britain in World War II, but he was not the right leader for the period after it.

Rabbi Akiva was not satisfied with the restoration of the world of Torah that had been destroyed, and his flexibility was not exhausted by his ability to rise from the ashes of the destruction. He did something more: in the wake of the death of his disciples, he introduced a radical change in his educational method. Initially, he would assemble communities and enthuse the hearts of thousands. However, after realizing the consequences of this approach, he decided to recalibrate and set a new path: he headed south to a more peaceful region, and instead of speaking to thousands, he invested his efforts in intensive and personal study with only five to seven students. It was precisely from this intense investment, in that small and limited group, that the Oral Torah grew:

For Rabbi Yochanan said: [The author of] an anonymous *mishna* is Rabbi Meir; of an anonymous *tosefta*, Rabbi Nechemya; of an anonymous [dictum in the] *Sifra*, Rabbi Yehuda; in the *Sifre*, Rabbi Shimon; and all are taught according to the views of Rabbi Akiva. (*Sanhedrin* 86a)

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on Shabbat *Parashat Behar* 5782.]

1. Once, on Lag Ba-Omer, Rav Medan and I disagreed on this issue. He talked about how the Bar Kokhva revolt created such difficulties for Rome that it was forced to bring in soldiers from Britain – the far end of the ancient world – in order to suppress the rebellion. I argued that we must remember not only the middle of the story but also the end; the rebellion was indeed a nuisance for Rome that was only solved thanks to reinforcements brought in from the other end of the empire, but in the end, the Romans succeeded in bringing these soldiers and suppressing the rebellion. A person who has great willpower and refuses to make compromises is likely to amass great achievements as an individual, but for the collective, such leadership can be harmful. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ha'amek Davar*, introduction to *Bereishit*; *Harchev Davar*, *Bamidbar* 35:34; *Ha'amek Davar*, *Devarim* 32:5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)