

Rabbi Akiva's Wealth

The power of Yosef, the first to engage with 'modern' culture.

Rabbi Akiva's Secret

This week, I'd like to talk about WikiLeaks—you know, that famous website that has made international news several times in the past, and which probably will again in the future.

And speaking of secrets, WikiLeaks reminds us that in Judaism, too, there are secrets, fascinating facts that are not so well known to the average person.

So this week, I'd like to tell you all something that's not very well-known: Rabbi Akiva, one of the greatest Jewish leaders of all times, was a downtrodden poor man in his youth, not to mention an ignoramus who hated rabbis and Torah scholars. Ultimately, however, after decades of study, not only did Rabbi Akiva become a leading Torah scholar, but also became rich too. And the Talmud (Tractate Nedarim 50a) asks, "How did Rabbi Akiva become rich?" The question is a simple one: How indeed did a rabbi who dedicated his entire life after age 40 to Torah study become rich?

To explain this, the Talmud cites several background stories. So let's start with the most famous one.

In his youth, Rabbi Akiva was a simple shepherd who worked for a man named Kalba Savua, who was one of the richest residents of Jerusalem. Now Rochel, Kalba Savua's daughter,

sensed that there was something special about the poor shepherd who couldn't read or write. And she wanted to marry him.

Obviously, if you're some kind of Donald Trump and your daughter wants to marry the janitor in one of your skyscrapers, you're not going to exactly agree to it—and neither did Kalba Savua, who opposed his own daughter with all his might and even cut her out of her inheritance.

But after many years, when Rabbi Akiva returned to Jerusalem completely transformed, and accompanied by 24,000 students, Kalba Savua begged him to annul his vow, and then gave him all his wealth.

That's one explanation as to how Rabbi Akiva got so rich.

But the Talmud also tells us a story about a Roman Caesar who hated the Jews. One day, while consulting with his ministers and advisors, he asked them a question: "A person who has gangrene in one leg and his leg is decomposing, what should he do? Should he amputate his own leg to save his own life or not? And if he does do it, it will cause him great pain. So what's better?"

So his advisors answered him, "It's worth cutting off your leg so that you live and then heal."

But the Caesar's question was a metaphor against the Jews, whom he hated and compared to a gangrenous leg that needs to be cut off and gotten rid of. So the Caesar was happy to hear that his advisors agreed with him.

Now, among the advisors was a friend of the Jews whose name was Ketiya Bar Shalom. He opposed this decree against the Jews, and he turned to the Caesar and said: “You won’t succeed in killing them all because they’re scattered to the four corners of the world, from one end of the world to the other.” What he meant was that you’ll never succeed in getting rid of them anyway, and additionally, you should know that everyone will call you a Caesar with an amputated kingdom.

The Caesar listened and said, “Your words are correct. But the law in Rome is that anyone who intellectually defeats the king gets thrown into the furnace.” So off the king’s soldiers dragged our poor Mr. Ketiya to a horrible death.

But on the way, they bumped into a Roman high society lady. She called out to Ketiya, “If you’re getting killed because you defended the Jewish Nation, go and convert!” So he performed a circumcision on himself. And before he was executed, he loudly called out, “I hereby bequeath all my property to Rabbi Akiva and his friends” (Talmud, Tractate Avodah Zarah 10b).

So that’s the second explanation.

But the Talmud brings an additional explanation for Rabbi Akiva’s wealth. Rabbi Akiva would regularly conduct debates on Judaism with the leaders of Rome. And the story is told that he engaged in such debates with Turnus Rufus, who was the governor from Rome over the territory of Judah, and constantly defeated him—and in front of the Caesar himself.

Naturally, Turnus Rufus was very humiliated by getting defeated every time, and right in front of the Caesar too. So one

time, he came back home in a really bad mood. His wife Rufina asked him, “What happened? Why do you look like that?” So he told her that this Rabbi Akiva keeps defeating him in debate every day and makes a mockery of him. So his wife told him, “With your permission, let me go and make him sin” and thus destroy his career.

Well, Gov. Rufus agreed, and off went Mrs. Rufus to seduce Rabbi Akiva.

But to her astonishment, Rabbi Akiva reacted to her appearance in a very strange way. The Talmud tells us that “he spit, laughed, and cried.”

So she asked him, what’s going on here? What’s the meaning of this behavior? He answered her: the reason for spitting was to teach her a lesson that all human beings come from a putrid drop, and the reason he wept was that the day would come that she would die, and after that, all her physical beauty would rot away in the grave.

As for the reason he laughed, this he did not want to reveal to her.

Now when Mrs. Rufus heard such life-changing wisdom, she was greatly inspired by Rabbi Akiva’s greatness, and so she asked him if she could still change her ways—if there was a path of amends she could take after she had planned to do something as illicit as seducing Rabbi Akiva. So Rabbi Akiva told her that there indeed was.

Years later, after Governor Rufus died, Rufina Rufus actually

converted to Torah true Judaism—and even married Rabbi Akiva! And when she did, she brought a fortune with her. The Talmud tells us that that was the reason Rabbi Akiva had laughed—because he had seen with his divine intuition that she was destined to convert and marry him.

What we see from these stories is that Rabbi Akiva had debates and connections with the leaders of Rome, and he influenced them and personally exposed them to the beauty of the Torah—so much so that one of them was ready to give his life for the sake of the Jewish Nation.

Which brings us to this week's Torah portion.

Yosef and Chanukah

In this week's Parshah, we learn that Yosef was the first member of the family of our Patriarchs to leave home and go out there into the world to spread faith in the One G-d.

Now it may be true that Avraham, his great-grandfather, had done this before him, but it had not been done by Yitzchak and Yaakov. On the contrary, we find that Yaakov was a “stowaway” in the school of Shem and Aiver for 22 years, during which he studied Torah. In this yeshivah, if we can even call it that, there were a total of three students: Shem, Aiver and Yaakov himself.

So the first member of the family to leave familiar surroundings and head out to “the nakedness of the land,” meaning the capital of hedonism, was Yosef. And there in Egypt, “the name of Heaven was secure in his mouth,” so much so that his Egyptian master knew that whatever Yosef did was successful

because “G-d was with him” (Bereishis 39:3).

And it is this idea that we find at the holiday of Chanukah—the one holiday that was celebrated outside the walls of the home. All the other Jewish holidays are celebrated in the context of family, inside one’s house, or inside the synagogue. Chanukah, on the other hand, is the one holiday that we celebrate “at the home’s outer doorway”—specifically geared for the outside. The goal of this holiday is “pirsumei nisa,” or “publicizing the miracle.” And what do we do on Chanukah? We light candles to light up the public.

Ultimately, my friends, this is the essential mission of every Jew: To be “a light unto the nations”—to bring the light of Judaism to “all inhabitants of the world.”

The Rebbe says: When a Jew influences his non-Jewish business connections to explore the Seven Noahide Laws, he will not only not suffer any material loss or alienate the people he does business with, but on the contrary, they’ll respect him even more, and rely on him, and want to do more business with him.

Good Shabbos.