

Rabbi Akiva's Optimism

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Of all the rabbinic sages of antiquity, perhaps none was more influential or famous than Rabbi Akiva. Among his contemporaries, R. Akiva was revered not only for his knowledge of Jewish law, but also for his creative and influential exposition of the Bible. In one of the most surprising of talmudic tales, Moses himself is awed by R. Akiva's exegetical ability:

R. Judah said the name of Rav: When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One engaged in affixing coronets to the letters. Said Moses, "Lord of the Universe, who stays thy hand?" He answered, "There will arise a man, many generations from now, Akiva ben Joseph by name, who will extract from every tittle heaps and heaps of laws." Said Moses, "Lord of the Universe, permit me to see him." He replied, "Turn around." Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [of R. Akiva's students] and listened to the discourses on the law. Unable to follow their arguments, he was ill at ease; but when, coming to a certain subject, the students said to the master, "How do you know this?" And the latter replied, "It is a law given to Moses at Sinai." He regained his composure. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One and said, "Lord of the Universe, you have such a man, and yet you give the Tora through me?" He replied, "Be silent, for that is what occurred to me."¹

Yet while R. Akiva's legal statements are numerous, his autobiographical reflections are few. Other than the barest of details, we lack any thorough account of his life. What we have, rather, are snapshots, stories about R. Akiva that appear here and there in the rabbinic literature. Pieced together like parts of a puzzle, they allow us a glimpse of his unusual personality, most notably a singular character trait: His extraordinary optimism. It was this optimism, in fact, that enabled him not only to overcome severe challenges in his own life, but also, and more importantly, to enable the Jewish people to endure the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile at the hands of the Romans:

R. Gamliel, R. Elazar ben Azarya, R. Joshua, and R. Akiva... were walking towards Jerusalem. When they reached Mount Scopus [from which it is possible to see the Temple Mount], they tore their clothing. When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox running out of the area where the Holy of Holies had been. They began to cry, while R. Akiva laughed. They said to him, "Why are you laughing?"... He replied, "Isaiah the Prophet said, 'I will bring two reliable witnesses regarding my people, Uriah the Priest and Zecharia ben Yeverchياهو.'" (Isaiah 8:2)... the verse in Isaiah makes Zecharia's prophecy dependent on Uriah's. In Uriah's case, it is written, "Therefore, because of you, Zion will be plowed under like a field." (Michah 3:12) In the case of Zecharia, we find, "Yet again, elderly men and elderly women will sit in the streets of Jerusalem.... Now that I have seen Uriah's prophecy fulfilled in full detail, I know that Zecharia's prophecy will also be fulfilled." Hearing that, R. Akiva's colleagues said to him, "Akiva, you have comforted us. Akiva, you have comforted us."²

The idea that optimism is important, even powerful, is hardly new to us. Indeed, fields such as psychology, sports, and even medicine have long touted the potential of positive thinking to help man triumph over the greatest of odds. Yet only recently has optimism itself become the focus of serious research, with studies across America dedicated to the exploration of the "optimistic" personality. What, these studies seek to determine, are the advantages and disadvantages of optimism? And what determines whether a person adopts an optimistic approach to the world or a pessimistic one?

Martin Seligman, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania and the founder of a school known as “positive psychology,” has devoted much of his career to the study of optimism. Since Freud, Seligman argues, psychotherapy has focused on the negative aspects of the human psyche. Though mental illness is undoubtedly an important subject of research, a one-sided focus on the flaws in the human mind, what Seligman terms “negative psychology,” can have terrible consequences—contributing, in the words of psychologist Paul Vitz, “to the widespread victim mentality characteristic of today’s American society.” For many psychologists, Vitz writes, “we are all victims of past traumas, abuse, and neglect caused by other people.” And if we are all victims, then “we are not responsible for our bad actions, since they are caused by what others have done to us.” As such, the discipline of psychology “has changed the way most of us think about ourselves,” and not in a good way.³

Seligman, too, first built a name for himself by focusing on the negative. His earlier experiments were dedicated to what he termed “learned helplessness,” a study of how certain psyches seemed more predisposed to give up than others. Eventually, however, he came to believe that, as Vitz put it, “what is needed to balance our understanding of the person is a recognition of positive human characteristics that can both heal many of our pathologies and help to prevent psychological problems in one’s future life.”⁴ The result was positive psychology, a field that “emphasizes traits that promote happiness and well-being, as well as character strengths such as optimism, kindness, resilience, persistence, and gratitude.”⁵

Seligman’s first book on the subject was entitled *Learned Optimism* (1990), in which he delineated the distinct traits that embody the optimistic personality. In approaching the talmudic stories about R. Akiva, the Talmud’s consummate optimist, we may find Seligman’s book a valuable tool in understanding the emphasis the sages placed on describing this unique trait of his. More importantly, it may help us comprehend how the Jewish people as a whole managed to persevere—and even flourish—throughout the arduous centuries of exile.

Seligman begins his discussion by distinguishing between those who tend towards optimism and those who do not:

How do *you* think about the causes of the misfortunes, small and large, that befall you? Some people, the ones who give up easily, habitually say of their misfortunes: “It’s me, it’s going to last forever, it’s going to undermine everything I do.”

Your habitual way of explaining bad events, your explanatory style, is more than just the words you mouth when you fail. It is a habit of thought, learned in childhood and adolescence. Your explanatory style stems directly from your view of your place in the world—whether you think you are valuable and deserving, or worthless or hopeless. It is the hallmark of whether you are an optimist or a pessimist.⁶

Perhaps the most important distinction between optimists and pessimists, Seligman tells us, is their “explanatory style,” or the way they explain misfortune. “People who give up easily believe the causes of the bad events that happen to them are permanent,” he writes.⁷ In contrast, those “who resist helplessness believe the causes of bad events are temporary.”⁸ In other words, pessimists believe their flaws cannot be overcome, whereas optimists are convinced that they can.

Thus in R. Akiva we encounter a man who awakens one day to his own ignorance—and concludes that it is not a permanent condition. Rather, it is but a superficial flaw to be overcome:

What were R. Akiva’s beginnings? It is said, up to the age of forty, he had not studied a thing. One time, while standing by the mouth of a well in Lydda, he inquired, “Who hollowed out this stone?” and was told, “It was water falling upon it constantly, day after day.” They said, “Akiva, haven’t you read that ‘water wears away stone’ (Job 14:19)?” At that, R. Akiva asked himself all the more so, “Is my mind harder than this stone?” He immediately returned to study Tora, and he and his son sat with a children’s

teacher.... The teacher wrote down *alef* and *bet* for him... he went on learning until he had learned all five Books of Moses.⁹

R. Akiva's studies began, at the age of forty, against a background of poverty, illiteracy, and ignorance. Having humbled himself to attend school with children, he mastered the Bible and then turned to the complex discipline of the Oral Law. Yet R. Eliezer, who would later become his mentor, at first reacted coolly to the newcomer:

Then he went and sat before R. Eliezer and R. Joshua. "My masters," he said to them, "Reveal the sense of Mishna to me." When they told him one halacha, he went off to reason with himself. This *alef*, he wondered, what was it written for? That *bet*, what was it written for? This teaching, what was it written for? He kept coming back, kept inquiring of R. Eliezer and R. Joshua....

All the thirteen years that R. Akiva was with R. Eliezer, R. Eliezer paid little attention to him, so that when R. Akiva offered his first clinching argument, R. Joshua quoted the verse, "There is the army you paid no attention to; now go out and fight it."¹⁰

A forty-year-old man, having never studied a text in his life, arrives at the academy. He is ignored and rebuffed by the leading rabbi for well over a decade. What qualities of character are required in order to endure repeated humiliation and rejection, and emerge as a man of incomparable stature?

Here, too, Seligman can help us to better understand R. Akiva. In *Learned Optimism*, he describes how his experimental observations of optimism began. Recognizing that of all professional disciplines, the field of sales required a remarkable degree of willingness to overcome rejection, Seligman met with the leaders of Metropolitan Life, one of the leading insurance companies in America. At the time, Metropolitan Life administered to all applicants for sales jobs a standardized test that focused on intelligence and inherent aptitude for salesmanship, and rejected those who did not score high enough. Seligman suggested, however, that a second series of tests be administered, geared not toward innate ability, but rather explanatory style:

Whether one approached rejection as permanent or temporary. He further proposed that a team of salesmen who failed the original tests but registered as being optimistic in nature be formed in parallel with those salesmen who had been hired based on the conventional method. The results were striking: The optimists who had initially been rejected “outsold the pessimists in the regular force by 21 percent during the first year and by 57 percent in the second year.” In other words, not only were the optimists better salesmen, they “kept improving over the pessimists.” The reason, Seligman explains, is that while intelligence and aptitude should initially be “at least as important as persistence,” over time, as “the mountain of no’s accumulates, persistence should become decisive.”¹¹

Seligman’s findings suggest that R. Akiva’s extraordinary intelligence alone would not have been sufficient to enable him to blossom into the man he became. Thus, though his aptitude was apparent from the beginning of his studies, only his *persistence* allowed him to endure. But Seligman discovered something else about the optimistic mindset: Not only do optimists persist in the face of challenges, but challenges actually encourage them to work harder. As an example, Seligman discusses the psychological profile of champion American swimmer Matt Biondi, whose first performances in the 1988 Seoul Olympics were below expectations. Sports pundits predicted that he would never be able to overcome the initial humiliation, and thus had no chance at victory. But Seligman was certain that Biondi would respond to initial failure as an incentive to try harder:

We had... simulated defeat under controlled conditions in the pool. Nort Thornton, Biondi’s coach, had him swim the one-hundred-yard butterfly all out. Biondi swam it in 50.2 seconds, a very respectable time. But Thornton told him that he had swum 51.7, a very slow time for Biondi. Biondi looked disappointed and surprised. Thornton told him to rest up for a few minutes and then swim it again—all out. Biondi did. His actual time got faster—50.0. Because his explanatory style was highly optimistic and he had shown us that he got faster—not slower—after defeat, I felt he

would bring back gold from Seoul. In his last five events in Seoul, Biondi won five gold medals.¹²

The optimistic personality sees setbacks not only as temporary, but as springboards to achievement. And for an optimistic person of religious faith, this perspective dovetails with a belief in history as a divinely directed drama, or a providential plan. We may speculate, then, that the years of rejection only encouraged R. Akiva; rather than facilitating failure, R. Eliezer's dismissal ultimately engendered his success.

In piecing together information about R. Akiva's personality, we may even take note of the derivation of his name. "Akiva" is essentially an Aramaic variant of *Yaakov*, or Jacob. Like Akiva, the patriarch Jacob is depicted as having a remarkable capacity to persevere, mainly by working for his deceitful uncle Laban for fourteen years in order to earn the right to marry his beloved Rachel. Moreover, the names Jacob and Akiva both derive from the word *ekev*, or heel.¹³ As my father, Rabbi Eliyahu Soloveichik, once pointed out, the heel is the lowest portion of the body, yet, at the same time, it is the first part of the body used to take a step forward. In other words, it is precisely one's initial downfall that can ultimately emerge as a key to progress.

Yet for all optimism's advantages, R. Akiva's optimistic approach was not always without its detractors. Indeed, in his fervor, R. Akiva found himself at odds with both predecessors and colleagues alike. For example, the leader of rabbinic Jewry at the time of the Temple's destruction in the late first century C.E.—the generation before R. Akiva—was R. Yohanan ben Zakai. It was he who was most influential in shaping Judaism during the many centuries of exile that followed. According to the Talmud, R. Yohanan recognized that the Judean revolt against Rome was doomed. As such, he was convinced that the rabbinic leaders had to prepare the Jews for an age in which sacrificial rituals—long the locus of Jewish worship—no

longer existed. Smuggled out of a besieged Jerusalem, the rabbi sought an audience with Vespasian, then the general of the Roman armies and soon to be made emperor. After finding his favor, the rabbi was able to secure from Vespasian a promise for anything he wished. R. Yohanan then requested permission to found an academy in Yavneh, in order that Tora study continue. According to one version of the story in the Talmud, it was R. Akiva who later criticized this decision, as, in his opinion, R. Yohanan should have seized the moment to save the Temple, rather than giving up and preparing for life after the destruction:

Then Vespasian said to R. Yohanan, “I am now going away from here and will send someone else to take my place. You may, however, make a request of me, and I will grant it.” Said R. Yohanan, “Give me Yavneh and its sages....” R. Joseph, or some say R. Akiva applied to him this verse, “God turns the wise men foolish,” as R. Yohanan should have asked him to spare Jerusalem. But R. Yohanan thought that Vespasian would deny such a request, and so there would not even be the saving of a few.¹⁴

Here, then, we have R. Akiva the optimist, and R. Yohanan the realist. The former saw the Roman military onslaught as a temporary setback, and found in Vespasian’s offer a providential opportunity to save the Temple; the latter was certain that nothing could prevent the Roman ravaging of Jerusalem. The former would have gone for broke; the latter, believing that tragedy was imminent, attempted to save what he could. We do not know whether R. Yohanan ever regretted his decision, but a clue can be found in the story of his death:

And when R. Yohanan lay ailing, his disciples came to visit him. Seeing them, he began to cry. They asked, “Light of Israel, pillar of Tora, strong hammer—why do you weep?” He replied, “If I were being taken before a king of flesh and blood, who is here today and in the grave tomorrow... even so I would weep. Now that I am being taken before the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, who lives and endures forever and ever and

ever, whose anger if he is angry with me is an everlasting anger, who if he imprisons me imprisons me forever, who if he puts me to death puts me to death forever, and whom I cannot persuade with words or bribe with money—even more now that there are two paths open before me—one leading to paradise and one to hell, and I do not know by which of them they are taking me—should I not weep?”¹⁵

Commentators on this passage have had difficulty with the premise that a sage as righteous as R. Yohanan would have so much to fear in facing his maker. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, for example, has suggested that R. Yohanan thought back to the day when Vespasian offered to grant his any request. He believed that he was saving Judaism, but on his deathbed, he wondered whether it was true, or whether R. Akiva was right after all. Had he read Vespasian correctly? Could he have asked for more—indeed, could he have prevented the exile altogether? Writes Rabbi Soloveitchik:

Who at the time could foresee how Vespasian would reject so enormous a request as the sparing of Jerusalem? This difficult decision, perhaps the most difficult question in Jewish history, R. Yohanan had to decide by himself without consultation with colleagues, in a fleeting moment! He was therefore never certain that he had decided correctly. On the one hand it appeared to him that he could have influenced Vespasian to spare Jerusalem, as... R. Akiva thought, and his heart bled at not having asked for it. On the other hand, he thought, “It was forbidden to place in possible danger the lives of the sages of Yavneh and the Oral Law...” Notwithstanding the sanctity and importance of the Temple, national existence is not dependent on it. However, without the Oral Law... the Jewish people would not continue to exist... How many restless nights and sorrow-filled days ensued for R. Yohanan because of this doubt? We cannot even imagine it. Thus it was that in the last moments of his life... There were two paths—one correct, the other not correct; one leading to paradise, the other to hell.¹⁶

In other words, R. Yohanan was tormented by the question of whether he would be remembered as Judaism’s Churchill or its Chamberlain. Today,

however, he is revered as the former. Thus, if it is R. Yohanan, rather than R. Akiva, who became the father of rabbinic Judaism, it is because the former believed that, as Seligman notes, in times of great crisis, optimism is insufficient:

In many arenas of life, optimism is unwarranted. At times we do fail irremediably, and seeing those times through rose-colored glasses may console us but will not change them. In some situations—the cockpit of an airliner, for example—what’s needed is not an upbeat view but a mercilessly realistic one. Sometimes we need to cut our losses and invest elsewhere rather than find reasons to hold on.¹⁷

Here, then, is one possible case in which we might recognize the importance of limits on optimism: It took the positive thinking of a R. Akiva to convince the Jews of his own generation that the ultimate redemption was still certain, but it took the realism of a R. Yohanan to prepare for the long, hard centuries in the meantime.

R. Akiva, of course, lived well after the Temple’s destruction, and was at the peak of his career when, some sixty years after R. Yohanan’s fateful choice, the Judeans mounted their final stand against Rome, known as the Bar Kochba revolt. Although the revolt’s leader was named Simon Bar Kosiba, R. Akiva saw him as far more than a military leader. Thus he dubbed him *bar kochba*, “son of a star,” to signify his status as nothing less than the messiah himself. But once again, many felt that R. Akiva was far too optimistic in his estimation:

When R. Akiva beheld Bar Kosiba, he exclaimed, “He is the king messiah.” R. Yohanan ben Torta responded, “Akiva, grass will be growing out of your cheeks and the messiah will still not have come.”¹⁸

Why was R. Akiva so certain that redemption was at hand? Maimonides, the leading Jewish philosopher of the medieval period, looked to the Talmud when he wrote that Israel will be redeemed only if it repents; in

other words, redemption will occur only if Israel *deserves* to be redeemed. This notion that redemption depends on the worthiness of the Jewish people allows us, perhaps, to suggest that R. Akiva's belief that the messianic era was at hand reflected his optimism regarding the spiritual state of the Jewish people. Unfortunately, the acrimony that marked internal Jewish relations prior to the Temple's destruction existed, to some extent, according to the Talmud, in R. Akiva's time as well. Indeed, the death of legions of R. Akiva's disciples is attributed, above all, to their own moral failings:

It is said that R. Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of disciples between [the towns of] Gabbath and Antipatris. All died [during his lifetime] at the same time [between Passover and Shavuot], because they did not treat one another with respect. The world was desolate until R. Akiva came to our masters in the south and taught them Tora—he thus taught R. Meir, R. Judah, R. Yose, R. Simeon, and R. Elazar ben Shamua. He said to them, “The previous disciples died only because they begrudged one another the knowledge of Tora. See to it that you do not act like them.”¹⁹

If R. Akiva was perhaps overly generous in judging his generation, it can perhaps be ascribed to the belief, based on his own experience, that everyone is capable of a dramatic life change. If, he reasoned, he was able to transform himself from an ignoramus into one of Judaism's greatest scholars, surely the flaws of his flock could be similarly overcome. It is noteworthy, then, that the man who criticized R. Akiva's eschatological optimism was R. Yohanan ben Torta. For like R. Akiva, his life story was no less improbable than R. Akiva's:

There once was a pious man who had a cow for plowing. After some time the man became poor and sold the cow to a Gentile. The Gentile plowed with it for six weekdays; on the Sabbath he took it out to plow, and it chafed under the yoke and did not want to work. He hit it but it refused to budge. When he saw this, he went to the pious man and said, “Come take your cow. For six days I have worked with it, and on the seventh I have taken it out, and it refuses to do any work at all, and no matter how

much I hit it, it refuses to budge.” When he said this, the pious man understood why it did not do work, for it had been trained not to work on the Sabbath. Said the pious man, “Come, and I will make it plow.” When he reached it, he said in its ear, “Cow, cow! When you were in my keep you would rest on the Sabbath; now that my sins have caused [my poverty] I have sold you to a non-Jew, please stand and perform the will of your master.” It immediately stood and sought to work. The Gentile said to the pious man, “I will not let you go until you tell me what you did, and what you said in its ear; maybe you bewitched it!” Said the pious man, “Such and such is what I said to him.” When the Gentile heard this, he paled, and shook, and judged to himself, “If this [animal] that has no speech, intellect, or understanding recognizes its Creator, I, whom God created in his image and gave intellect and understanding, shall I not recognize my Creator?” He immediately converted and merited to study Tora, and he was called R. Yohanán ben Tortá [R. Yohanán the Son of a Cow].²⁰

In light of R. Yohanán ben Tortá’s own dramatic turnaround, it may seem surprising that it is he who argued with R. Akiva concerning man’s capacity for change; not everyone, he maintained, could so easily undergo the transformation that the two of them had experienced. Faith in the Jewish people, insisted R. Yohanán ben Tortá, as important as it is, has to be taken with a dose of realism.

Having delineated both the successes and setbacks of R. Akiva’s optimism, we can now inquire into the roots of this outlook. Here we have a man who, on his own account, spent the first forty years of his life in bitter ignorance. He then reached the conclusion that his status need not be permanent, and that his troubles could be overcome. He applied this positive thinking to the problems facing the nation of Israel, and declared those to be temporary, as well. And it was his optimism—an optimism rooted in his belief in a providential plan—that provided his fellow sages with much-needed comfort on Mount Scopus.

But in our discussion thus far, we have yet to answer the question: *Why* was he so optimistic? What convinced him, after forty years of ignorance, that he could become a scholar? What sustained him through more than a decade of ill-treatment by his teacher? And, finally, what was the source of his overwhelming faith in the potential of his fellow Jews to change their lives, to embrace the Tora, and to become worthy of redemption?

At the end of *Learned Optimism*, Seligman notes the high incidence of depression in American society, and asks why this is so. He answers that one's optimism is often linked to the presence of sustaining people or institutions in a person's life. Likewise, the abundance of depression in today's society is linked to the radical individualism that has come to characterize modern times:

The life committed to nothing larger than itself is a meager life indeed. Human beings require a context of meaning and hope. We used to have ample context, and when we encountered failure, we could pause and take our rest in that setting—our spiritual furniture—and revive our sense of who we were. I call the larger setting the commons. It consists of a belief in the nation, in God, in one's family, or in a purpose that transcends our lives.... But our epidemic of depression is not merely a matter of the paltry comfort we get from society at large. In many ways extreme individualism tends to maximize pessimistic explanatory style, prompting people to explain commonplace failures with permanent, pervasive, and personal causes. The growth of the individual, for example, means that failure is probably my fault—because who else is there but me?.... To the extent that larger, benevolent institutions (God, nation, family) no longer matter, personal failures seem catastrophic. Because time in an individualistic society seems to end with our own death, individual failure seems permanent. There is no consolation for personal failure.²¹

It is with this theory of optimism in mind that we can truly grasp the significance of the dramatic transformation that occurred in the life of a shepherd named Akiva. The first forty years of his life were spent not only in ignorance, but alone. What changed his life was none other than

a woman: The love and faith of his wife Rachel, who gave up everything in order to marry the man in whom she believed, and in whom she saw so much potential.

R. Akiva worked as a shepherd for Kalba Savua. When Kalba Savua's daughter [Rachel], saw that even though Akiva was unassuming, there was something extraordinary about him, she said, "If I am willing to be betrothed to you, will you attend a house of study?" R. Akiva answered, "Yes." So she betrothed herself to him in secret. When Kalba Savua learned what she had done, he drove her out of his house and vowed that she was not to benefit from any of his property.

At that, she went off and [openly] married Akiva. When winter came, [they were so poor that] they had to sleep in a straw bin. As R. Akiva picked the straw from her hair, he would say, "If I had the means, I would give you a 'Jerusalem of gold.'"²²

R. Akiva at last experienced the uplifting power of love, and the power that stems from returning that love, as well. For him, Rachel was his "commons," a framework and context for his life that sustained him over the many difficult years that followed. We see this clearly in the following story from Nedarim:

Soon after, she said to him, "Go now and study"; he went and spent twelve years before R. Eliezer and R. Joshua. At the end of the twelve years he came to his home, and heard from behind the house one person saying to [Rachel], "Your father was correct in the way that he treated you, as Akiva is not worthy of you! Further, he has left you to live the life of a widow all these years!" She said to him, "If it were up to me, he should spend another twelve years [studying Tora]." Said he, "Since she has given me permission, I will return." He returned and spent twelve years there.²³

R. Akiva, we are told, studied for twelve years at the academy with R. Eliezer and R. Joshua. He then returned to Rachel, only to leave soon thereafter to resume his studies once more. We also know, from another source quoted above, that for the first *thirteen* years of study, R. Eliezer ignored R.

Akiva at every turn. Only after this protracted period did R. Akiva finally succeed in proving his brilliance. Thus, it was during the period of his rejection that R. Akiva returned for the first time to his wife. It is not hard to imagine that R. Eliezer's merciless treatment had finally worn him down. Then R. Akiva heard his wife speak proudly of his dedication to Tora. Her unconditional love for him, combined with her unfailing belief in his potential, enabled him to return to R. Eliezer. And it was then, and only then, that he offered his first decisive argument. If this reconstruction is accurate, then Rachel was responsible for R. Akiva's success: Had he not overheard her statement of love upon his return home, he would surely not have gone back to the academy—and would not have emerged as the sage of his generation, teacher to thousands. The story concludes:

When he came [back the second time], he had twenty-four thousand students with him, and everyone went out to meet him.... [Rachel] came to see him, and the rabbis pushed her away. Said he, "Leave her alone! All that is mine and yours is hers."²⁴

Thus did a woman's love transform an illiterate into a scholar; thus did his faith in her love sustain him during twelve years of rejection by his teacher. Even optimism, then, has its limits, and ultimately requires a commons—for example, marital love—to re-ignite it. Yet R. Akiva's relationship with Rachel taught him about far more than merely the possibility of perseverance in the face of disappointment. It also taught him about God's relationship with the Jewish people. Thus does Rachel emerge as the savior not only of one shepherd, but of Israel in its entirety.

E*thics of the Fathers*, also known as the mishnaic tractate Avot, is a collection of rabbinic aphorisms. As such, it offers a window into the distinct personalities of the rabbis. There we find the following statement attributed to R. Akiva:

He used to say, “Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of God. A special love [was shown man], for it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God.... Beloved is Israel, for they are called the children of God. A special love [was shown Israel], for it was made known to them that they were called the children of God, for it is written, “You are children to the Lord your God.”²⁵

All humanity is beloved, R. Akiva informs us, but Israel especially so. But then R. Akiva adds that not only are the Jews beloved by the Almighty; as an additional note of divine favor, they are *told* that they are beloved. This statement may seem redundant, but with R. Akiva’s biography in mind, we can understand his likely intention; he was, quite simply, speaking from experience. Remembering how Rachel’s love changed his own life, R. Akiva realized that there is nothing more sustaining than being informed that one is loved. Thus, too, does God make it known that the Jews are his children. If knowing that Rachel loved him enabled R. Akiva to approach any obstacle optimistically, R. Akiva realizes, the knowledge of God’s love could likewise sustain the Jewish people during any trial.

When the Temple was destroyed, the Jewish people faced a crisis unlike any other in its history. For centuries, the sacrificial system had served as the primary medium of atonement before the Almighty. Every Yom Kippur until the Temple’s destruction, all of Israel’s eyes were fixed upon the high priest, as his every act helped determine whether the Jewish people would be forgiven. But now, suddenly, true forgiveness seemed impossible. To this, R. Akiva responded that though the Temple was gone, the God of the Temple would never abandon us, nor would he refrain from forgiving his children:

R. Akiva said, “Fortunate are you, O Israel! Who purifies you, and before whom are you purified? Before your Father in Heaven, for it is written, ‘And I will sprinkle upon you pure waters and purify you,’ and it further states, ‘God is the *mikveh* of Israel.’ Just as a *mikveh* purifies the defiled, so too God purifies Israel.”²⁶

There are those who might be tempted to interpret R. Akiva's words as claiming that the loss of the Temple is, for Israel, immaterial; that, because forgiveness can be found with or without the sacrifices, one need not long for the return of the Temple. Yet as we have seen, R. Akiva was deeply upset that R. Yohanan ben Zakai had, as he saw it, let the Temple slip through his grasp. Moreover, it was R. Akiva who, on Mount Scopus, assured his fellow sages that the Temple's destruction would ultimately be undone. But R. Akiva did insist that the historical setback of the Roman conquest, though terrible, was not eternal, and did not reflect a permanent rejection of Israel by the Almighty. For not only were the Jewish people beloved, but God himself had taken pains to let them know it. Could there be any clearer sign that he continued to believe in their potential, even without the Temple, to achieve forgiveness and ultimately merit the Temple's rebuilding? As the philosopher Michael Wyschogrod has written in his own interpretations of R. Akiva:

There are those for whom prayer and repentance as the basis for forgiveness of sin is a great advance over reliance on bloody sacrifices. Those who hold this view... cannot possibly understand what was involved in Judaism's shifting to prayer and repentance as the center of its religious existence.... That Jews who survived the destruction of the Temple could be made to believe that on the Day of Atonement their sins would be forgiven, even though there was no Temple and no sacrifices, borders on the miraculous. It was possible not because the prophets long ago had taught that sacrifices were not important (which is not what they taught), but because the ancient Jew felt God's love for him and could therefore come to believe that his sins would be forgiven without the Temple and its sacrifices.²⁷

This, then, was R. Akiva's message to the Jewish people, a message that allowed them to endure an almost incomprehensible assault on their faith: Through the sustaining power of love, anything can be overcome. Through the sustaining power of love, even the most stunning setback can be made to seem temporary.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the chief rabbi of Great Britain, recounts that he was standing on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem when he suddenly realized “that it was here that R. Akiva and his colleagues stood, contemplating the ruins of what had been Judaism’s holiest place,” and where R. Akiva gave his comrades that “courage to hope.” Hope, writes Rabbi Sacks, “is not a mere instinct. It is born in faith—the faith that God exists, that he keeps his promises and that he forgives. A people that never loses hope cannot be defeated. The Jewish people kept hope alive. Hope kept the Jewish people alive.” No doubt, for our survival, we have R. Akiva to thank. But just as much, we have the woman who loved him, believed in him, and gave up everything for him, millennia ago.

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Notes

1. Menahot 29b.
2. Makot 24a-24b.
3. Paul C. Vitz, “Psychology in Recovery,” *First Things* (March 2005).
4. Vitz, “Psychology in Recovery.”
5. Vitz, “Psychology in Recovery.”
6. Martin E.P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (New York: Pocket Books, 1991), pp. 43-44.

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7. Seligman, *Learned Optimism*, p. 44.
 8. Seligman, *Learned Optimism*, p. 44.
 9. Avot D'rebbi Natan, version A, 6.
 10. Avot D'rebbi Natan, version A, 6; Jerusalem Pesahim 6:3.
 11. Seligman, *Learned Optimism*, p. 104.
 12. Seligman, *Learned Optimism*, p. 164.
 13. Genesis 25:26.
 14. Gitin 56b.
 15. Brachot 28b.
 16. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks* (Brooklyn: Judaica Press, 2002), pp. 51-52.
 17. Seligman, *Learned Optimism*, pp. 107-108.
 18. Jerusalem Ta'anit 4:5.
 19. Yevamot 62b.
 20. Pesikta Rabati 14. For an interesting discussion of the debate between R. Akiva and R. Yohanan ben Torta, and of their respective biographies, see the essay by Rabbi Ari Kahn at www.aish.com/omerLagBOmer/omerLagBOmerDefault/Rebbe_Akivas_243000_Students_.asp.
 21. Seligman, *Learned Optimism*, pp. 284-286.
 22. Ketubot 62b-63a; Nedarim 50a.
 23. Nedarim 50a.
 24. Nedarim 50a.
 25. Mishna Avot 3:14.
 26. Mishna Yoma 8:9.
 27. Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People of Israel* (Northvale, N.J.: Aronson, 1996), p. 17.