

Rabbi Akiva's Optimism

By Yossi Ives

Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva were walking along the road towards Rome when they heard the sound of the multitudes of Rome at a vast distance, such was the scale of the city. The other Sages began weeping, but Rabbi Akiva laughed.

They said to him: "For what reason are you laughing?"

Rabbi Akiva said to them: "Why are you weeping?"

They replied: "These idolatrous gentiles who destroyed the Holy Temple dwell securely and in tranquility, while our Holy Temple lies in ruins – shall we not weep?"

Rabbi Akiva retorted: "That is why I am laughing. If the wicked who violate G-d's enjoy such benefits, all the more so will those who perform His will merit just rewards."

On another occasion:

These same sages were ascending to Jerusalem. When they arrived at Mount Scopus and saw the rubble of the destroyed Temple, they rent their garments in mourning. When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerge from the site of the Holy of Holies. They began to weep, but again, Rabbi Akiva laughed.

They asked him: "For what reason are you laughing?"

Rabbi Akiva responded: "Why are you weeping?"

They replied: "This is the place about which it is written: 'And the non-priest who approaches shall die,'¹ and now foxes roam in it; and shall we not weep?"

Rabbi Akiva said to them: "That is why I am laughing... Uriah prophesied: 'Therefore, because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become rubble, and the Temple Mount as the high places of a forest.'² In Zechariah³ it is written: 'There shall yet be elderly men and elderly women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem.' Until Uriah's prophecy of destruction was fulfilled, I was afraid that Zechariah's prophecy of redemption would not be fulfilled. Now that the prophecy of Uriah has been fulfilled, I am confident that the prophecy of Zechariah is valid.

The Sages said to him: "Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us."⁴

In the first story, we see a delegation of leading sages heading towards Rome. But why were they travelling there, 1,500 miles from home?

The Roman Empire had long had its boot on the neck of Judea, and had destroyed the Jewish commonwealth along with the Holy Temple. This was a time of great oppression against the Jews, and these outstanding rabbis had come to confront their oppressors and appeal the harsh decrees imposed on the Jewish People in the Holy Land. Weeping under those circumstances made sense – laughing did not.

Likewise, in the second story, the sages were facing the site of the destruction of the holiest place in Judaism. It had been so decimated that the area had been reclaimed by nature, such that foxes were strolling around. For dozens of generations, this had been a national symbol, the site of Jewish worship, and now it lay in ruins. Surely, it would be surprising for a saintly rabbi to find the scene a cause for laughter!

The sages' reaction to Rabbi Akiva laughing—"Why do you laugh?"—is understandable. Not much is funny about the situation. But why did Rabbi Akiva ask in return, "Why are you crying?" Surely the answer to that must have been blindingly obvious. Rabbi Akiva, who was later martyred by the Romans, was fully aware of the tragic situation facing the Jewish People at the time.

In fact, Rabbi Akiva also tore his clothes as a sign of mourning when he approached the Temple Mount, so he clearly shared his colleagues' view that this was a sorrowful occasion. Why did he later begin laughing?

Moreover, why was it only Rabbi Akiva who found it appropriate to laugh, while all the other sages could only weep? What was it that Rabbi Akiva saw that they did not?

The Rebbe offers a beautiful and insightful explanation that reveals a timeless lesson.

Rabbi Akiva was fully cognizant of the oppression and humiliation being meted out by the Romans – that was the bitter reality that he and everyone else had to endure on a daily basis. Multiple times a day, the Jewish inhabitants of the Holy Land were reminded of their subjugation.

Rabbi Akiva's question, "Why are you weeping?" was actually **why now?** "We've been mourning for years now," Rabbi Akiva was saying. "Why have you suddenly burst into tears at this moment? What just happened to make you cry?"

To this, the sages responded, "It is true that we are continually oppressed, but what we are seeing now is truly overwhelming." Being hit – in story one – by the full power of Rome was a mighty psychological blow. They knew from terrible first-hand experience that Rome was strong, but coming to Rome and realizing how immensely powerful and wealthy it was produced a crushing sensation. "We weep," the sages explained, "because we cannot fathom how the people who wrought us such evil can enjoy such success."

Witnessing the total desolation of the place where the grand Holy Temple once stood – in story two – was too much for the sages to bear. They know well that the Temple had been destroyed and the Jewish nation had lost its independence, but seeing the full extent of the loss that day provoked the deepest sadness. Watching the foxes at home in this most sacred place brought home just how great the loss.

So, the answer to, "Why do you weep now?" was because "This is worse than anything we have seen so far."

To which Rabbi Akiva responded: “It is true that this is worse than we could have imagined – I get that – but surely that also means that when things finally turn around for us, they will be even better than we had imagined.” Rabbi Akiva did not deny that the scenes he was witnessing with his colleagues were devastating, but he was convinced that this was the harbinger of a triumphant future.

Rabbi Akiva also rent his garments at the scene of desecration, but he refused to become depressed by it. He showed his rabbinic colleagues how to find the seeds of hope in the depths of despair. The rabbis found his sentiment greatly comforting, as do we 2,000 years later.

But why was it only Rabbi Akiva who was able to see things in this positive light?

Rabban Gamliel was the president of the Sanhedrin, as were his father and grandfather. He had been raised in “Jewish royalty,” with a proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. Rabbi Elazar ben Azzaria was a Kohen, a member of the priestly clan, and from a family of great wealth and prestige. Rabbi Yehoshua was a Levite, and had been among the choristers in the Holy Temple.

All three rabbis had always enjoyed high social status, and two of the three came from privileged backgrounds. Contrast that with Rabbi Akiva, who until age 40 was an illiterate shepherd. His father was a Roman convert, a former soldier in the very army that had brought such misery upon the Jews. Rabbi Akiva started out life as an outsider, marginalized and ignored.

Had anyone met the simple shepherd Akiva at age 40, they would have concluded that nothing could possibly come of such an ordinary person, lacking knowledge, status, wealth, and prestige. He occupied a place at the very bottom of the social ladder. When Akiva decided to study Torah, he knew he had a veritable mountain to climb. He compared it to water penetrating a rock; his was a hopeless case.

Yet that was not how things worked out. After several years of dedicated application to study, this “nobody” turned into the leading sage of his generation, the illustrious teacher and mentor, the pride of the Jewish People. Who could have thought that possible?!

Rabbi Akiva knew from his own life story that it is not about how things begin, but how they end. As bad as things are, they can always be transformed for the better. Reflecting on the lessons his own life had taught him, Rabbi Akiva knew it was wrong to judge by the present difficulties. Now I am a downtrodden shepherd, but one day I may be the leader of a people. Now our Temple lies in ruins, but the future could still be bright.

As we contemplate hardships in our own lives, we may become despondent. Please remember the powerful teaching of one of Judaism’s most beloved sages: Don’t let today’s difficulties define you or your future. Let not the challenges of today rob us of our belief in the potential of tomorrow.

Adapted from Likutei Sichot, vol. 19, Shabbat Nachamu.

FOOTNOTES

1. Numbers 1:51.
2. Micah 3:12.
3. Zechariah 8:4.
4. Makkot 24a-b..

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