

A Self-Created Sage: Texts about The Origins of Rabbi Akiva

Dr. Barry W. Holtz

I. What was the beginning of Rabbi Akiva? It is said: He was forty years old and he had not studied anything. One time he stood at the mouth of a well and said: “Who hollowed out [חָקַק] this stone?” He was told: “It is the water which falls upon it every day, continually.” They said to him: “Akiva, have you not read the verse, ‘water wears away stone’ (Job 14.19)?”

Immediately Rabbi Akiva drew the inference [דָן קָל וְחוֹמֵר] that the verse applied to himself: if what is soft wears down the hard, how much the more so shall the words of the Torah, which are as hard as iron [בָּרוּץ], hollow out my heart, which is flesh and blood! Immediately he turned to the study of Torah.

He went together with his son and they appeared before a teacher of young children. Said Rabbi Akiva to him: “Master, teach me Torah.” Rabbi Akiva took one end of the tablet and his son the other end of the tablet. The teacher wrote down “aleph bet” and he learned it; “aleph tav,” and he learned it; the book of Leviticus, and he learned it. He went on studying until he learned the entire Torah.... (Avot de Rabbi Natan Version A, Chapter 6)

II. “The Lord said to Abram: Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1)

This may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a castle in flames. Is it possible that the castle lacks a person to look after it, he wondered? The master of the castle looked and said, “I am the master of the castle.” Similarly, because Abraham our father said, “Is it conceivable that there is none to look after the world?” The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him, “I am the Master, the Sovereign of the universe.” (Genesis Rabbah 39:1)

III. “Harden not your heart, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness; When your fathers put Me to the test, tried Me, even though they had seen My deeds.” Psalm 95:8-9:

IV. “When I was an *am ha-aretz* I said, who will give me a sage so that I could bite him like a donkey.’ His students said to him: ‘Rabbi, you mean bite him like a dog.’ He replied them: ‘No, a donkey. Because a donkey bites and breaks bones; the dog bites but doesn’t break a bone!’” (Tractate Pesahim in the Babylonian Talmud, 49b).

V. . . He went and sat before Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua. “My masters,” he said to them, “uncover the meaning of Mishnah for me.”

When they told him one law he went and sat by himself. “This aleph,” he thought, “why was it written? This bet why was it written? This thing why was it said?” He came back and asked them—and reduced them to silence. (Avot de Rabbi Natan Version A, Chapter 6, adapted from Goldin’s translation)

VI. . . Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar says: I will tell you a parable to explain what this matter is like. It was like a stonecutter who was cutting away in the mountains. Once he took his axe and sat on the side of a mountain and began chipping away tiny stones. People came by and asked him: “What are you doing”? He said to them: “Look, I am uprooting this mountain and throwing it into the Jordan River.”

They said to him: “You can’t uproot an entire mountain”!

But he continued chipping away at the mountain until he came to a large rock. He crawled under it, broke it, uprooted it and flung it into the Jordan, saying to it: “This is not your place—that is!”

This is what Rabbi Akiva did to Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua.

[כך עשה להם ר' עקיבא ר' אליעזר ולר' יהושע]

Rabbi Tarfon said: “Akiva, about you Scripture says, ‘He dams up the sources of the streams so that hidden things may be brought to light’ (Job 28:11). Things concealed from human beings, Rabbi Akiva brought to light.” (Avot de Rabbi Natan, Version A, Chapter 6)

VII. Man sets his hand against the flinty rock
And overturns mountains by the roots.

He carves out channels through rock;
His eyes behold every precious thing.

He dams up the sources of the streams
So that hidden things may be brought to light.
(Job 28:9-11)