

## Rabbi Akiva: From Ignoramus to Inspiration

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### • Reinvention as a Student

#### 1. Talmud, Ketubot 62b (Koren translation)

ר"ע רעיא דבן כלבא שבוע הוה. חזיתיה ברתייה דהוה צניע ומעלי, אמרה ליה: אי מקדשנא לך אזלת לבי רב? אמר לה: אין. איקדשא ליה בצינעה ושדרתייה. שמע אבוה אפקה מביתיה, אדרה הנאה מנכסיה.

Rabbi Akiva was the shepherd of ben Kalba Savua [one of the wealthy residents of Jerusalem]. His daughter saw that he was humble and refined. She said to him: If I betroth myself to you, will you go to the study hall [to learn Torah]? He said to her: Yes. She became betrothed to him privately and sent him [off to study]. Her father heard [this and became angry]. He removed her from his house and took a vow prohibiting her from benefiting from his property.

#### 2. Avot d'Rabbi Natan 6:2 (Kasher translation)

"נְהִי שוֹתֵה בְצִמָּא אֶת דְּבָרֵיהֶם." (אבות א:ד) - זה רבי עקיבא. מה היה תחלתו של רבי עקיבא? אמרו בן ארבעים שנה היה ולא שנה כלום. פעם אחת היה עומד על פי הבאר אמר "מי חקק אבן זו?" אמרו "לא המים שתדיר [נופלים] עליה בכל יום." אמרו [לו] "עקיבא, אי אתה קורא (איוב יד:יט) 'אֲבָנִים שִׁחֲקוּ מִיָּם'?" מיד היה רבי עקיבא דן קל וחומר בעצמו: מה רך פסל את הקשה, דברי תורה שקשה כברזל, על אחת כמה וכמה שיחקקו את לבי שהוא בשר ודם. מיד חזר ללמוד תורה. הלך הוא ובנו וישבו אצל מלמדי תינוקות. א"ל: "רבי, למדני תורה." אחז רבי עקיבא בראש הלוח ובנו בראש הלוח. כתב לו אלף בית, ולמדה...

"And drink thirstily of their words" (Avot 1:4) - this refers to Rabbi Akiva. What were the origins of Rabbi Akiva? They say that he was forty years old and had still not learned anything. Once, he was standing at the mouth of a well and he said: Who carved a hole in this stone? They said to him: It is from the water, which constantly [falls] on it, day after day. And they said: Akiva, don't you know this from the verse (Job 14:19), "Water erodes stones"? Rabbi Akiva immediately applied this, all the more so, to himself. He said: If something soft can carve something hard, then all the more so, the words of Torah, which are like steel, can engrave themselves on my heart, which is but flesh and blood. He immediately went to start studying Torah. He went with his son and they sat down by the schoolteachers. He said to one: Rabbi, teach me Torah! He then took hold of one end of the tablet, and his son took hold of the other end. The teacher wrote down *aleph* and *bet* for him, and he learned them...

#### 3. Rabbi Yehoshua Falk of Lissa, Binyan Yehoshua on Avot d'Rabbi Natan

**א"ב ולמדה.** אע"פ שמוכח לעיל דמקרא היה הלומד אפשר הכוונה בכאן שלמדו א"ב על דרך דאיתא שבת דף קד. ...  
*Aleph-bet*, and he learned them - Even though it was proven earlier that he studied Tanach, it is possible that the intent is that he learned *aleph-bet* in the manner described in the Talmud (Shabbat 104a)...

#### 4. Talmud, Shabbat 104a (Koren translation)

אָמְרֵי לִיָּה רַבֵּנּוּ לְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לֵוִי: אֲתוּ דְרַדְקֵי הָאֵידִנָּא לְבֵי מְדַרְשָׁא וְנֶאֱמְרוּ מִיֵּלֵי דְאַפִּילוּ בִימֵי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן נוּן לֹא אִיתְמַר פְּוֹתֵיָהּ: אֶלֶף בֵּית — אֶלֶף בֵּינָה. גִּמְמַל דַּלִּית — גְּמֹול דָּלִים. מֵאֵי טַעְמָא פְּשׁוּטָא פְּרַעֲיָה דְגִמְמַל לְגַבֵּי דַּלִּית — שָׁכֵן דְרַכּוּ שָׁל גְּמֹול חֲסָדִים לְרוּחַ אֲחֵר דָּלִים.

The Sages said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: Young students came today to the study hall and said things the likes of which were not said even in the days of Joshua bin Nun. [These children who only knew the Hebrew alphabet interpreted the letters homiletically.]

- *Alef bet* means learn [*elaf*] the wisdom [*bina*] of the Torah.]
- *Gimmel dalet* means give to the poor [*gemol dalim*]. Why is the leg of the *gimmel* extended toward the *dalet*? Because it is the manner of one who bestows loving-kindness to pursue the poor.

#### 5. Avot d'Rabbi Natan 6:2 (Kasher translation)

היה לומד והולך עד שלמד כל התורה כולה. הלך וישב לפני רבי אליעזר ולפני ר' יהושע אמר להם: רבותי, פתחו לי טעם משנה. כיון שאמר לו הלכה אחת, הלך וישב לו בינו לבין עצמו. אמר: (אלף זו למא נכתבה בית זו למא נכתבה) דבר זה למא נאמר. חזר ושאלו והעמידן בדברים. רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר אמשול לך משל למא הדבר דומה לסתת שהיה מסתת בהרים פעם אחת נטל קרדומו בידו והלך וישב על ההר והיה מכה ממנו צרורות דקות ובאו בני אדם ואמרו לו מה אתה עושה. אמר להם הרי אני עוקר ומטילו בתוך הירדן אמרו לו אי אתה יכול לעקור את כל ההר היה מסתת והולך עד שהגיע אצל סלע גדול נכנס תחתיו סתרו ועקרו והטילו אל הירדן.

And he went on studying until he learned the whole Torah. Then he went and sat before Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua. My masters, he said, open up the sense of the Mishnah to me. When they told him one law, he went off and sat down to work it out for himself. (This *aleph* – what was it written for? That *bet* – what was it written for?) Why was this thing said? He kept coming back, and kept asking them, until he reduced his teachers to silence. Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: I will give you a parable to tell you what this was like: Like a stonecutter who was hacking away at the mountains. One time he took his pickaxe in his hand, and went and sat on top of the mountain, and began to chip small stones away from it. Some people came by and asked him: What are you doing? He said to them: I am going to uproot the mountain and throw it into the Jordan! They said to him: You cannot uproot the entire mountain! But he kept hacking away, until he came to a big boulder. So he wedged himself underneath it, pried it loose, and threw it into the Jordan.

- Reinvention as an Educator: Part 1

#### 6. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Land of Truth: Timeless Tales, Timeless Teachings*, p. 177

Why, for example, is there a guard at the study house who won't admit poor students without payment? On whose authority does he turn them away?... This probably reflects an elitist and aristocratic perspective, namely that Torah study should be limited to a wealthy and scholarly elite, and not extended to the common people. The guard functions as a gatekeeper who denies those who do not meet these standards an opportunity to study Torah.

#### 7. Rabbi Ovadia m'Bartenura, *Commentary to Pirkei Avot 1:1* (Sefaria Community translation)

"וְהַעֲמִידוּ תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה. לְאַפּוֹקֵי מִרְבֵּן גְּמִלְיָאֵל דְּאָמַר (בְּרַכּוֹת כח.) כָּל תַּלְמִיד שֶׁאֵין תּוֹכוֹ כְּבָרוֹ אֵל יִפְגַּס לְבֵית הַמְדַרְשׁ, קָא מְשַׁמַּע לָן שְׁמַלְמְדִין תּוֹרָה לְכָל אָדָם וְאֵין צְרִיךְ לְבַדֵּק אַחֲרָיו.

"Raise up many students": (This is meant) to exclude (the words of) Rabban Gamliel, who said "Any student whose exterior is not like his interior shall not enter the Beit Midrash (Berachot 28a)." We derive from this that we teach Torah to every person; there is no need to inquire after him.

#### 8. Talmud, *Ketubot 62b-63a* (Koren translation)

אזיל יתיב תרי שנין בבי רב. כי אתא אייתי בהדיה תרי סרי אלפי תלמידי, שמעיה לההוא סבא דקאמר לה: עד כמה קא מדברת אלמנות חיים? אמרה ליה: אי לדידי ציית, יתיב תרי סרי שני אחריני. אמר: ברשות קא עבידנא, הדר אזיל וייתיב תרי סרי שני אחריני בבי רב. כי אתא, אייתי בהדיה עשרין וארבעה אלפי תלמידי. שמעה דביתהו הות קא נפקא לאפיה, אמרו לה שיבבתא: שאילי מאני לבוש ואיכסאי, אמרה להו: יודע צדיק נפש בהמתו. כי מטיא לגביה, נפלה על אפה קא מנשקא ליה לכרעיה, הוּו קא מדחפי לה שמעיה, אמר להו: שבקוה, שלי ושלכם שלה הוא.

[Rabbi Akiva] went and sat for twelve years in the study hall. When he returned, he brought twelve thousand students with him, and as he approached he heard an old man saying to his wife: For how long will you lead the life of a widow of a living man [living alone while your husband is in another place]? She said to him: If he would listen to me, he would sit [and study] for another twelve years. [When Rabbi Akiva heard this] he said: I have permission to do this. He went back and sat for another twelve years in the study hall. When he came back, he brought twenty-four thousand students with him. His wife heard and went out toward him to greet him. Her neighbors said: Borrow some clothes and wear them. She said to them: "A righteous man understands the life of his beast" (Proverbs 12:10). When she came to him she fell on her face and kissed his feet. His attendants pushed her away, and he said to them: Leave her alone, as what is mine, and what is yours, belongs to her.

#### 9. Talmud, *Ketubot 63a* (Koren translation)

שמע אבוה דאתא גברא רבה למתא, אמר: איזיל לגביה, אפשר דמפר נדראי. אתא לגביה, א"ל: אדעתא דגברא רבה מי נדרת? א"ל: אפילו פרק אחד ואפילי הלכה אחת. אמר ליה: אנה הוא, נפל על אפיה ונשקיה על כרעיה, ויהיב ליה פלגא ממוניה.

[In the meantime] her father heard that a great man came to the town. He said: I will go to him. Maybe he will nullify my vow [and I will be able to support my daughter]. He came to him [to ask about nullifying his vow, and Rabbi Akiva] said to him: Did you vow thinking that [this Akiva] would become a great man? He said to him: [If I had believed he would know] even one chapter or even one *halakha* [I would not have been so harsh]. He said to him: I am he. [Ben Kalba Savua] fell on his face and kissed his feet and gave him half of his money.

## 10. Tosafot, Ketubot 63a

"אדעתא דגברא רבה מי נדרת?!" - וא"ת והלא אסור לפתוח בנולד, דאמרינן בנדרים בפ' ר' אליעזר (בדרים דף סד.) כיצד אמר קונם שאיני נהנה לפלוני ונעשה סופר כו'?! וי"ל דהכא לא חשיב נולד, כיון שהלך לבי רב דדרך הוא בהולך ללמוד שנעשה אדם גדול...  
"Did you vow thinking that [this Akiva] would become a great man?" - If you will ask, is it not forbidden to revoke a vow based on a circumstance that developed afterwards, as it says in Nedarim 64a, "if one says 'I will not benefit from another,' and that person became a scribe, etc.?" The answer is that this case is not considered a circumstance that developed afterwards, since [Rabbi Akiva] went to the yeshiva, and it is typical that one who goes to learn will become a great person...

### • Reinvention as an Educator: Part 2

#### 11. Talmud, Yevamot 62b (modified Koren translation)

ר"ע אומר: למד תורה בילדותו, ילמוד תורה בזקנותו. היו לו תלמידים בילדותו, יהיו לו תלמידים בזקנותו, שנא' "בבקר זרע את-זרעך [ולערב אל-תנח נדך וגו']". אמרו שנים עשר אלף זוגים תלמידים היו לו לרבי עקיבא מגבת עד אנטיוכוס, וכולן מתו בפרק אחד, מפני שלא נהגו כבוד זה לזה.

Rabbi Akiva says: If one studied Torah in his youth he should study more Torah in his old age; if he had students in his youth he should have additional students in his old age, as it is stated: "In the morning sow your seed, [and in the evening, do not withhold your hand] etc." They said by way of example that Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students from Gevat to Antipatris [in Judea], and they all died in one period of time, because they did not conduct themselves with one another in a manner of honour.

#### 12. Talmud, Yevamot 62b (Koren translation)

והיה העולם שָׁמֵם [רש"י: שנשתכחה תורה] עד שבא ר"ע אצל רבותינו שבדרום, ושנאה להם ר"מ ור' יהודה ור' יוסי ורבי שמעון ורבי אלעזר בן שמוע. והם הם העמידו תורה אותה שעה.

And the world was desolate [of Torah] until Rabbi Akiva came to our Rabbis in the South and taught them. [This second group of disciples consisted of] Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua. And these are the very ones who upheld the study of Torah at that time. [Although Rabbi Akiva's earlier students did not survive, his later disciples were able to transmit the Torah to future generations.]

#### 13. Talmud, Sanhedrin 86a (Koren translation)

סתם מתני' ר' מאיר; סתם תוספתא ר' נחמיה; סתם ספרא רבי יהודה; סתם ספרי ר"ש. וכולהו אליבא דר"ע.

An unattributed mishna is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Meir; an unattributed *baraita* in the *Tosefta* is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Neḥemya; an unattributed *baraita* in the *Sifra* is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda; and an unattributed *baraita* in the *Sifrei* is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Shimon. And all of these are in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Akiva.

#### 14. Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner, [Derashah \(Parshat Emor 5767\)](#)

#### 15. Pirkei Avot 6:1 (chabad.org translation)

רבי מאיר אומר כל העוסק בתורה לשמה, זוכה לדברים הרבה. ולא עוד אלא שכל העולם כולו כני הוא לו. נקרא רע, אהוב, אוהב את המקום, אוהב את הבריות, משמש את המקום, משמש את הבריות.

Rabbi Meir would say: Whoever studies Torah for Torah's sake alone, merits many things; not only that, but [the creation of] the entire world is worthwhile for him alone. He is called friend, beloved, lover of G-d, lover of humanity, rejoicer of G-d, rejoicer of humanity.

#### 16. Talmud, Sanhedrin 20a (Koren translation)

"יראת ה' היא תהלה" - זה דורו של ר' יהודה ברבי אילעאי. אמרו עליו על רבי יהודה ברבי אילעאי שהיו ששה תלמידים מתכסין בטלית אחת ועוסקין בתורה.

Who fears the Lord, she shall be praised"; this [is a reference to] the generation of Rabbi Yehuda, son of Rabbi Ilai [who lived after the decrees of Hadrian, when the people were impoverished and oppressed]. It was said about Rabbi Yehuda, son of Rabbi Ilai, that six of his students would cover themselves with one garment [due to their poverty], and [nevertheless they would] engage in Torah study.

### 17. Talmud, Berachot 7a (Koren translation)

ואמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי יוסי: מנין שאין מרצין לו לאדם בשעת כעסו, דכתיב: "פני ילכו ונהנתהי לך". אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: המתן לי עד שיעברו פנים של זעם ואנייה לך.

And Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Yosei: From where is it derived that one must not placate a person while he is in the throes of his anger, [rather he should mollify him after he has calmed down]? As it is written, [when following the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses requested that the Divine Presence rest upon Israel as it had previously, G-d said to him]: "My face will go, and I will give you rest" (Exodus 33:14). [Rabbi Yohanan explained:] The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses: Wait until My face of wrath will pass and I will grant your [request. One must wait for a person's anger to pass as well].

### 18. Talmud, Ketubot 67b (Koren translation)

רבי שמעון בן יוחי: נוה לו לאדם שימסור עצמו לתוך כבשן האש ואל ילבין פני חברו ברבים.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: It is preferable for a person to deliver himself into a fiery furnace so that he not whiten the face [of, i.e., embarrass] his friend in public.

### 19. Pirkei Avot 4:12

רבי אלעזר בן שמוע אומר: יהי כבוד תלמידך קרוביך קשלה, וכבוד חברך כמוךא רבך, ומורה רבך כמוךא שמים.

Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua said: let the honour of your student be as dear to you as your own, and the honour of your colleague as the reverence for your teacher, and the reverence for your teacher as the reverence of heaven.

#### • Teaching Reinvention

### 20. Talmud, Makkot 24b

שוב פעם אחת היו עולין לירושלים, כיון שהגיעו להר הצופים קרעו בגדיהם. כיון שהגיעו להר הבית, ראו שועל שיצא מבית קדשי הקדשים, התחילו הן בוכין ור"ע מצחק. אמרו לו: מפני מה אתה מצחק? אמר להם: מפני מה אתם בוכים?...

On another occasion they were ascending to Jerusalem [after the destruction of the Temple]. When they arrived at Mount Scopus, they rent their garments [in mourning]. When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox that emerged from the site of the Holy of Holies. They began weeping, and Rabbi Akiva was laughing. They said to him: For what reason are you laughing? [Rabbi Akiva] said to them: For what reason are you weeping?

### 21. Talmud, Makkot 24b (Koren translation)

אמר להן: לכך אני מצחק... באוריה כתיב: "לכן בגללכם ציון שדה תהרש וירושלם ענין תהלה ותר הבית לבמות גער". בזכריה כתיב: "עד ישובו זקנים וזקנות ברחבות ירושלם." עד שלא נתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה - הייתי מתיירא שלא תתקיים נבואתו של זכריה, עכשיו שנתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה - בידוע שנבואתו של זכריה מתקיימת. בלשון הזה אמרו לו: עקיבא, ניהמתנו! עקיבא, ניהמתנו.

[Rabbi Akiva] said to them: this is why I am laughing... In [the prophecy of] Uriah it is written: "Therefore, for your sake Zion shall be plowed as a field [and Jerusalem shall become rubble, and the Temple Mount as the high places of a forest]" (Micah 3:12), where foxes are found]. In [the prophecy of] Zechariah it is written: "There shall yet be elderly men and elderly women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem" (Zechariah 8:4). Until the prophecy of Uriah [with regard to the destruction of the city] was fulfilled I was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled [as the two prophecies are linked]. Now that the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, it is evident that the prophecy of Zechariah remains valid. [The Sage] said to him [employing] this formulation: Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us.