R. Akiva vs R. Ishmael – Handout

# Genesis 9:6

שֹׁפֵךְ דַּם הָאָדָם בָּאָדָם דָּמוֹ יִשָּׁפֵךְ כִּי בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹקים עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; For in His image did God make man.

# R. Akiva (50-135 CE) vs R. Yishmael (90-135 CE) - Origins

# Avot D’Rabbi Natan (Recension A, chapter 6)

What were Rabbi Akiva’s beginnings? It is said: When he was forty years old he had not yet studied a thing. One time he stood by the mouth of a well. “Who hollowed this stone?” he wondered. He was told: It is the water which falls upon it every day, continually. It was said to him: Akiva, have you not read the verse: “The waters wear away the stones”? (Job 14:19) Thereupon Rabbi Akiva drew an inference with regard to himself: if that which is soft wears down that which is hard, then all the more so shall words of Torah, which are hard as iron, hollow out my heart, which is flesh and blood!

Thereupon, he turned to the study of Torah. He went with his son and they appeared before an elementary teacher. Rabbi Akiva said to him: Master, teach me Torah. Rabbi Akiva took hold of one end of the tablet and his son took the other end. The teacher wrote Aleph Bet and he learned it; Aleph Tav and he learned it; the book of Leviticus, and he learned it. He continued studying until he learned the whole Torah.

He went and sat before Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua. He said to them: My masters, teach me the meaning of the Mishnah. When they told him one law, he went off and sat by himself. He said: This Aleph, why was it written? That Bet, why was it written? That “thing”, why was it said? He came back and asked them, and he reduced them to silence.

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: I will tell you a parable. To what may this be compared? To a stonemason who was hacking away at the mountains. One time he took up his pickaxe and went and sat on a mountain and began to chop tiny pebbles from it. Some men came by and asked him: What are you doing? He said: Behold, I am uprooting the mountain and casting it into the Jordan River. They said to him: You cannot uproot the entire mountain. But he continued hacking away until he hit upon a large rock. He crawled under it, broke it loose uprooted it, and cast it into the Jordan. He said to it: That was not your place, but this is. This is what Rabbi Akiva did to Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua.

# Talmud Bavli – Gittin 58a

There was an incident involving Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya who once went to the great city of Rome, where they said to him: There is a child in prison with beautiful eyes and an attractive appearance, and his curly hair is arranged in locks. Rabbi Yehoshua went and stood by the entrance to the prison. He said, as if speaking to himself: “Who gave Jacob for a spoil, and Israel to the robbers?” (Isaiah 42:24). That child answered by reciting the continuation of the verse: “Did not the Lord, He against Whom we have sinned, and in Whose ways they would not walk, neither were they obedient to His law?”

Rabbi Yehoshua said: I am certain that, if given the opportunity, this child will issue halakhic rulings in Israel, as he is already exceedingly wise. He said: I take an oath by the Temple service that I will not move from here until I ransom him for whatever sum of money they set for him. They said that he did not move from there until he ransomed him for a great sum of money, and not even a few days had passed when this child then issued halakhic rulings in Israel. And who was this child? This was Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha.

# R. Akiva vs R. Yishmael - Torah

# Talmud Bavli – Menachot 29b

When Moshe ascended to the heavenly heights, he found God sitting and attaching crowns to the letters of the Torah. Moshe said: Master of the Universe, who is holding You back from giving the Torah as it is? God said to him: There will arise one man in many generations, Akiva ben Yosef is his name, and he will expound heaps of halakhot upon every jot and tittle. Moshe said before God: Permit me to see him! God replied: Turn around. Moshe went and sat behind eight rows of students. But he did not understand what they were saying. Moshe grew weak. When they reached a certain matter, Rabbi Akiva’s students asked him: Master, from where do you know this? Rabbi Akiva answered them: It is a halakha transmitted to Moshe at Sinai. Upon hearing this, Moshe was comforted. He returned and came before God, and said: Master of the Universe, You have such a man, and yet You give the Torah through me? God replied: Be silent, for such is my decree.



# Talmud Bavli – Nedarim 3a

…the Torah speaks in the language of man…

# Genesis 1:1

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹקים אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ.

# Talmud Bavli –Chagigah 12a

R. Ishmael questioned R. Akiba when they were going on a journey together, saying to him: you have served twenty-two years upon Nahum of Gimzo, who used to explain the “et” throughout the Torah; what exposition did he give of “et” the heaven and “et” the earth? Said R. Akiba to him: If it had said, ‘heaven and earth’, I could have said that Heaven and Earth were names of the Holy One, blessed be He. But now that it says: ‘“et” the heaven and “et” the earth’, heaven means the actual heaven, and earth means the actual earth.

# The Thirteen Rules of R. Ishmael

1. An inference from a lenient law to a strict one (kal va-ḥomer), and vice versa.

2. An inference drawn from identical words in two passages (gezerah shavah).

3. A general principle (binyan av) derived from one text or two related texts.

4. A general law followed by specific examples (kelal u-ferat) [where the law applies exclusively to those examples].

5. A specific example followed by a general law (perat u-khelal) [where the law applies to everything implied in the general statement].

6. A general law followed by specific examples and concluding with a general law (kelal u-ferat u-khelal): here you may infer only cases similar to the examples.

7. When a general statement requires clarification by a specific example (kelal she-hu ẓarikh li-ferat), or a specific example requires clarification by a general statement (perat she-hu ẓarikh li-khelal) [then rules 4 and 5 do not apply].

8. When a particular case, already included in the general statement, is expressly mentioned to teach something new, that special provision applies to all other cases included in the general statement.

9. When a particular case, though included in the general statement, is expressly mentioned with a provision similar to the general law, such a case is singled out to lessen the severity of the law, not to increase it.

10. When a particular case, though included in the general statement, is explicitly mentioned with a provision differing from the general law, it is singled out to lessen in some respects, and in others to increase, the severity of the law.

11. When a particular case, though included in the general statement, is explicitly mentioned with a new provision, the terms of the general statement no longer apply to it, unless Scripture indicates explicitly that they do apply.

12. A matter elucidated from its context (davar ha-lamed me-inyano), or from the following passage (davar ha-lamed mi-sofo).

13. When two passages contradict each other, a third passage that reconciles them.

# R. Akiva vs R. Yishmael – Philosophy

# Midrash - Sifrei (Deuteronomy 41)

Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Yossi Hagalili were reclining at the house of Aris in Lod. The question was raised before them: Which is greater, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva said: Study is greater. They all answered and said: Study is greater because it leads to action. Rabbi Yossi Hagalili said: study is greater because it preceded [the mitzvah of] Challah by forty years; tithes by fifty-four years; the sabbatical years by sixty-one years, and the Jubilee years by one hundred and three years. And just as the punishment for study is greater than that for action, so too is the reward for study greater than that for action. As it is written: “And you shall teach them to your children and speak of them” (Deuteronomy 11:19)

# Midrash - Mechilta DeRabbi Yishmael (Beshalach; Vayasa 1)

“If you do what is right in His eyes” (Exodus 15:26): This refers to business transactions. This teaches that if a person conducts business transactions honestly and if people look upon him favorably, it is considered as if he has fulfilled the entire Torah.

# R. Akiva vs R. Yishmael – Example of Torah Study

# Numbers 15:30-31

וְהַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר־תַּעֲשֶׂה בְּיָד רָמָה מִן־הָאֶזְרָח וּמִן־הַגֵּר אֶת־ה’ הוּא מְגַדֵּף **וְנִכְרְתָה** הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מִקֶּרֶב עַמָּהּ

כִּי דְבַר־ה’ בָּזָה וְאֶת־מִצְוָתוֹ הֵפַר **הִכָּרֵת תִּכָּרֵת** הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא עֲוֺנָה בָהּ

But the person, be he citizen or stranger, who acts defiantly reviles the LORD; that person shall be **cut off** from among his people.

Because he has spurned the word of the LORD and violated His commandment, that person shall be **cut off**—he bears his guilt.

# Talmud – Sanhedrin 64b

It is stated with regard to one who blasphemes: “Because he has despised the word of the Lord, and has breached His mitzvah, that soul shall be excised [hikkaret tikkaret], his iniquity shall be upon him” (Numbers 15:31). The phrase “hikkaret tikkaret” is interpreted as follows: “Hikkaret”; the sinner is excised in this world, meaning that he will die prematurely. “Tikkaret”; the sinner is excised in the World-to-Come, and he will not merit everlasting life. This is the statement of Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Yishmael said to him: But isn’t it already stated in the previous verse: “He blasphemes the Lord; that soul shall be excised [venikhreta]” (Numbers 15:30)? Are there three worlds in which the sinner is excised? Rather, from the term in the verse “venikhreta” it is derived that the sinner is excised in this world, from the term “hikkaret” it is derived that the sinner is excised in the World-to-Come, and nothing is derived from the doubled verb “hikkaret tikkaret,” as the Torah spoke in the language of people.

# Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel – Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations (p.33-34)

Rabbi Akiva could be credited with seeking out the wondrous. Rabbi Yishmael could be credited with shunning the wondrous. He shook no structural beams; nor did he impose his authority on the text. Among his good qualities was a level-headed caution. Better in his eyes was a single measure of reflection on what is written and given than massive speculation above and beyond the very limits of apprehension. One who sees Rabbi Yishmael in a dream should “anticipate wisdom”. Rabbi Yishmael’s teachings contain straightforward logic, and with it lucidity, simplicity of language, and an aversion to intellectual games. Attributions to him have no superfluity of language or florid expressions. He sought to strip Scripture of anthropomorphisms and to excise unnecessary metaphor and imagery. But Rabbi Akiva’s teachings sought to penetrate to inner depths with profundity and potency of language. He did not shrink from anthropomorphism, but rather he preserved the concrete in Scripture, cherished imaginative meanings, added metaphorical embellishments, and created images of the supernal world.

# A Debate for the Ages

* Immanence vs. Transcendence
* Work vs. Study
* Rationalism vs. Mysticism
* Messianism vs. Pragmatism