

## Introduction

### Text #1: Roland Barthes. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*.

Am I in love?—yes, since I am waiting. The other one never waits. Sometimes I want to play the part of the one who doesn't wait; I try to busy myself elsewhere, to arrive late; but I always lose at this game. Whatever I do, I find myself there, with nothing to do, punctual, even ahead of time. The lover's fatal identity is precisely this: I am the one who waits.

## Part One: Rav Rehumi and His Wife

**Text #2: Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 62b.** English translation [**bold text**] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*.

### תלמוד בבלי מסכת כתובות סב:ב.

כִּי הָא דְרַב רְחוּמִי הָוּה שְׁכִיחַ קַמֵּיהּ  
 דְרַבָּא בְּמַחְזָא. הָוּה רְגִיל דְהָוּה אָתִי  
 לְבִיתֵיהּ כָּל מַעְלֵי יוֹמָא דְכִיפּוּרִי. יוֹמָא חַד  
 מְשַׁכְּתֵיהּ שְׁמַעְתָּא, הָוּה מְסַכְּיָא דְבֵיתָהּ:  
 הִשְׁתָּא אָתִי, הִשְׁתָּא אָתִי. לֹא אָתָא. חָלַשׁ  
 דְעֵתָהּ, אַחִית דְמַעְתָּא מַעֲיָנָה. הָוּה יְתִיב  
 בְּאִגְרָא – אַפְחִית אִגְרָא מִתּוֹתֵיהּ, וְנָח  
 נַפְשֵׁיהּ.

This is as it is related about Rav Reḥumi, who would commonly study before Rava in Meḥoza: He was accustomed to come back to his home every year on the eve of Yom Kippur. One day he was particularly engrossed in the *halakha* he was studying, and so he remained in the study hall and did not go home. His wife was expecting him that day and continually said to herself: Now he is coming, now he is coming. But in the end, he did not come. She was distressed by this and a tear fell from her eye. At that exact moment, Rav Reḥumi was sitting on the roof. The roof collapsed under him and he died. This teaches how much one must be careful, as he was punished severely for causing anguish to his wife, even inadvertently.



## Loving and Waiting: A Talmudic Perspective on Relationships

### Text #3: Dr. Ruth Calderon. *A Bride for One Night.*

Much ink has been spilled on the battle that raged in Rav Rehumi's soul. He was torn between the study house and his home, between the texts he learned, which took on a life of their own, and the woman who waited for him to return...

If Rav Rehumi achieved any fame, it is thanks to his wife, and if he acquired a reputation, it is as a tragic hero. His character seems to be a pun on his unique, extraordinary name: *Rehumi* in Aramaic means "love" and can be interpreted as either "loving" or "beloved." Rehumi's wife loved him. As such it is she who renders his name appropriate for him—she makes him "beloved." Though nameless, and though described sparingly, she emerges as a character thanks to the skill of an anonymous master storyteller. Her great love enables her to overlook her husband's failings, though she is not blind to them...

This is the story of a loving wife and a husband whose Torah renders him incapable of sensing another's pain. A romantic reading will view Rav Rehumi as a man who has a poor sense of priorities, who preferred to devote himself to Torah instead of to a woman. A moralizing reading will blame him for sacrificing her good for his own. But I view him as a man who simply did not know what love is. The only area in which he was not mediocre was in his loving wife's estimation. Only through her eyes was he deserving of his name. She allowed him to trample on her soul and, through this tragic story, to achieve immortality.

## Part Two: Rabbi Akiva and Rachel

**Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 62b-63a.** English translation [**bold text**] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*.

### תלמוד בבלי מסכת כתובות סב:ב-סג:א.

רבי עקיבא רעיא דבן פלבא שבוע הוה. חזייה ברתיה דהוה צניע ומעלי, אמרה ליה: אי מקדשנא לך אולת לבי רב? אמר לה: אין איקדשא ליה בצניעה, ושדרתייה. שמע אבוא אפקה מביתיה. אדרה הנאה מנכסיה. אזיל יתיב תרי סרי שנין בבין רב, כי אתא - אייתי בהדיה תרי סרי אלפי תלמידי. שמעיה לההוא סבא דקאמר לה: עד כמה

The Gemara further relates: Rabbi Akiva was the shepherd of ben Kalba Savua, one of the wealthy residents of Jerusalem. The daughter of Ben Kalba Savua 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. Rabbi Akiva went and sat for twelve years in the study hall. When he came back to his house he brought twelve thousand students with him, and as he approached he heard an old man saying to his wife: For how long

קא מדברת אלמנות חיים. אמרה ליה: אי לדידי ציית - יתיב תרי סרי שני אחרני. אמר: ברשות קא עבידנא. הדר אזיל ויתיב תרי סרי שני אחרני בבין רב. כי אתא, אייתי בהדיה עשרין וארבעה אלפי תלמידי. שמעיה דביתהו, הות קא נפקא לאפיה. אמרו לה שיבבתא: שאילי מאני לבוש ואיכפסאי! אמרה להו: "יודע צדיק נפש בהמתו". כי מטא לגביה - נפלה על אפה, קא מנשקא ליה לכרעיה. הוה קא מדחפי לה שמעיה. אמר להו: שבקוה, שלי ושלקם - שלה הוא.

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, as your current apparel is not appropriate to meet an important person. 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 as they did not know who she was, and he said to them: Leave her alone, as my Torah knowledge and yours is actually hers.

שמע אבוא דאתא גברא רבא למתא, אמר איזיל לגביה אפשו דמפר נדראי אתא לגביה אמר ליה אדעתא דגברא רבא מי נדרת? אמר לו: אפילו פרק אחד ואפילו הלכה אחת. אמר ליה: אנא הוא. נפל על אפיה, ומשקיה על ברעיה, ויהיב ליה פלגא ממוניה. ברתיה דרבי עקיבא עבדא ליה לבן עזאי הכי. והיינו דאמרי אינשי: רחילא בתר רחילא אזלא, כעובדי אמה כן עובדי ברתא.

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. The Gemara relates: Rabbi Akiva's daughter did the same thing for ben Azzai, who was also a simple person, and she caused him to learn Torah in a similar way, by betrothing herself to him and sending him off to study. This explains the folk saying that people say: The ewe follows the ewe; the daughter's actions are the same as her mother's.



## **Text #5: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. *The Strife of The Spirit.***

She [Rachel] was drawn, as by a magnet, to the sheep pen where Akiva was to be found. She found herself watching him, unable to throw off the superimposed image of the scholar. And he, taller and stronger than the others, and far more youthful and agile than most of those younger than he, seemed to be oblivious of her. In fact, he paid scant attention to anyone, men or women, though many of the latter—shepherdesses and wives of herdsmen—were clearly attracted to him. To be sure, it was not only a physical force that emanated from him, it was a kind of light, something to which everyone joyfully surrendered. She wondered whether anyone else was aware of it as she was.

Was she in the grip of a fascination, or a love, that was out of bounds? Or was her feeling of strong certainty something beyond what could be interpreted as womanly passion? It was not a desire to possess or to be possessed. It was rather a need to do something for him, an irrepressible urge to save him from the oblivion to which he was doomed by the circumstances of his life...

And so the two were banished to years of poverty and destitution in another village far away [after they were married and her father disowned her]. But Rachel made Akiva abide by his promise. He studied. It is said that he learned to read with his sons. It is said that he made such phenomenal progress in all written and unwritten knowledge that few living men could be compared to him. Most wondrous of all, he became a great leader in Israel—the undisputed head of the Sanhedrin, where the law of the Jews and the vast body of postbiblical literature called the Talmud were formulated.

And of all the great teachers of the centuries of the Talmud period, scholars and sages of profound wisdom and purity of life, the greatest of them all was Rabbi Akiva. But that is another, a much longer story.

Much of what happened to Rachel remains in obscurity, as she herself preferred. Her joy was in his triumph, which, in barely twenty years, exceeded all that she could ever have imagined. Moreover, since Rabbi Akiva lived to very ripe old age, he managed to impress on the law and wisdom of Israel the power of a unique and rich personality, more so perhaps than any other single individual since Moses, the lawgiver himself.