

The Haggadah's Hidden Hero (It's Not Who You Think)

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As usual, I am indebted to my dear friend Rabbi Ben Skydell of Congregation Orach Chaim of Manhattan's Upper East Side. Rabbi Skydell and I have been preparing Shabbat Hagadol and Shabbat Shuva Derashot together for several years now; he always does the lion's share of the work and his incisive readings and excellent research always help refine and expand our ideas. May we go from strength to strength!

I also want to dedicate this derasha in memory of my Rebbe, Rabbi Ozer Glickman, HaRav Ozer Yeshaya ben Dov HaKohen zt"l, who was taken from us too early when he passed away suddenly this week at the age of 67. Rabbi Glickman was known to us in Dallas, as he had been here as a scholar in residence here several years ago. There is too much to say about Rabbi Glickman to relegate it to a short preamble to a Shabbos Hagadol derasha, but I am keenly feeling the loss of a mentor, a guide and a source of encouragement in my learning and Avodat HaKodesh. May his memory and example be for a blessing.

In a narrow, winding alley in the Old City of Yerushalaim, a remarkable encounter took place on Erev Pesach some 90 years ago. An older gentleman with thick-rimmed spectacles walked slowly yet purposefully, surrounded by a group of younger men. His name was Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, the Chief Rabbi of the land of Israel and founder

of the Merkaz HaRav Yeshiva. He was walking with his students on the way back from the Kotel, preparing themselves spiritually for the awesome Seder evening ahead. Coming in the other direction was an elderly man with a flowing white beard, dressed in a long, gold-striped caftan. He, too, was surrounded by an entourage. It was Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, spiritual leader of Jerusalem's *yishuv hayashan*- the older settlements within the walls of the Old City and the newer neighborhoods settled by the broader Hungarian community of Yerushalaim. Most of the inhabitants of these neighborhoods affiliated with the umbrella spiritual and administrative body created by Rav Sonnenfeld, known as the Eidah HaChareidis. Rav Sonnenfeld was known as "The man on the ramparts" for his staunch traditionalism and his uncompromising fight against the pernicious winds of secularism, and particularly of secular Zionism. From his community, there was often vociferous opposition to Rav Kook, himself unabashedly traditional in his religious world view, but whose mystical writings praised secular Zionists in their efforts to rebuild the Land of Israel. To the *yishuv hayashan* and Rav Sonnenfeld's students Rav Kook represented a heretical and pernicious fifth column, and to Rav Kook's students, those who objected to Rav Kook were wickedly disrespectful and hopelessly backwards. One can imagine that the tension was palpable. Rav Sonnenfeld turned to Rav Kook and said, "*Iber a yohr, ihr vet zoyche zayn tzu geyen borfis in blut.*" "In a year, you should merit to go barefeet in blood." Rav

Kook's students were beyond livid-this sounded like an unforgivable curse, yet the next thing they knew, Rav Kook had a smile on his face and said "Amen!" After they parted company, Rav Kook explained to his students that Rav Sonnenfeld had bestowed a talmudic blessing upon him. The Talmud (Pesachim 65b) describes how, in Temple days, there were so many Paschal lambs offered that the Kohanim waded in their blood. Rav Sonnenfeld was blessing was blessing Rav Kook- his ideological opponent, his dear friend and a Kohen- that he would merit to take part in the service of the Korban Pesach.

A spiritual, mystical dreamer and a hard-nosed, pragmatic traditionalist encountered each other day on the Jerusalem cobblestones, but it was neither the first time nor place these archetypes met.

The Seder in Bnei Brak

Before actually talking about the Exodus from Egypt, the Haggadah spends some time describing how important it is that we talk about it. By way of illustration, the Haggadah recounts the story of the five rabbis (perhaps it was a "Man Seder") who reclined together in Bnei Brak, and spoke all night about the Exodus from Egypt.

הגדה של פסח

מעשה ברבי אליעזר ורבו יהושע ורבו אלעזר בן-עזריה ורבו עקיבא ורבו טרפון שהיה מסבון בבני-ברק והיו מספרים ביציאת מצרים כל-אותו הלילה, עד שבאו תלמידיהם ואמרו להם רבותינו הגיע זמן קראת שמע של שחרית.

It happened once [on Pesach] that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon were reclining in Bnei Brak and were telling the story of the exodus from Egypt that whole night, until their students came and said to them, "The time of [reciting] the morning Shema has arrived."

It's the eternal question asked everywhere and every year after the Seder (and, in the diaspora, after both sedarim): "What time did you finish?" The participants at this seder would have secured bragging rights by answering, "We didn't!" Perhaps you've been to *Sedarim* like this- the kind that seemed endless, in which every Dvar Torah is shared and every word of the Haggadah is parsed. Note that, despite the subject matter, the Haggadah does not explicitly state that the event being described was a Seder, and it does not say who was hosting this gathering. The Lubavitcher Rebbe pointed out, however, that the text offers an important clue, because the Rabbi Akiva was the Chief Rabbi, the *mara de'atra*, of Bnei Brak. It was he who was playing host to the Seder that evening.

This is not the only place we encounter Rabbi Akiva at our Seder; there is another place, though it easy to miss. By way of introduction, I'd like to share with you one of the most excruciating 10 minutes I can ever recall

spending at a Seder. It was over two decades ago, and my family had a couple for the second Seder who were highly intelligent, educated and growing in their Jewish learning. At the time, Hebrew was not their strong suit. We would come to discover that math was not, either. When we arrived at the part of the Haggadah in which various Rabbis debate the number of plagues that occurred in Egypt, our guests were completely lost. They could not penetrate the language barrier that prevented them from understanding the different opinions about the number of plagues that befell the iniquitous Egyptians. Fortunately for them, they happened to be present at a Seder conducted by a world class mathematician in the person of my father, who patiently translated the Hebrew words for “fifty” and “five” and explained that each finger of God represents 50 plagues, the entire hand represents 250 if you multiply those numbers together. My father tried hard to conceal his annoyance, and I believe he succeeded...but I’m pretty certain we didn’t. I think one of the reasons we were so annoyed is that we had stalled at what many consider the most boring part of the Seder by far. Paradoxically, it is this “boring” section that contains some of the most vivid and even fanciful descriptions in the Haggadah, and it is here that we meet Rabbi Akiva once again. Rabbi Akiva offers the most punishing estimate of the amount of plagues, asserting that the Egyptians suffered total of 300 plagues, 50 by land and 250 by sea.

We encounter Rabbi Akiva yet again, though not by name, later in the Haggadah, after we recite the first part of Hallel. The Talmud (Pesachim 116b) records a two-part debate.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת פסחים קט עמוד ב

משנה...עד היכן הוא אומר בש"א עד אם הבנים שמחה ובה"א עד חלמיש למעינו מים וחותם בגאולה ר"ט אומר אשר גאלנו וגאל את אבותינו מצרים ולא היה חותם רבי עקיבא אומר כן ה' אלקינו ואליך אבותינו יגינו למועדין ולרגלים אחרים הבאים לקראתנו לשלום שמחים בבניין עירך וששים בעבודתך ונaccel שם (מן הפסחים ומן הצבחים כו' עד בא"י גאל ישראל):

Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 116b

Mishnah...Since one does not complete hallel at this point in the seder, the mishna asks: Until where does one recite hallel? Beit Shammai say: Until "Who makes the barren woman dwell in her house as a joyful mother of children, halleluya" ([Psalms 113:9](#)). And Beit Hillel say: Until "Who turned the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a fountain of waters" ([Psalms 114:8](#)). And one concludes this section of hallel with a blessing that refers to redemption. Rabbi Tarfon says that although one should recite: Who redeemed us and redeemed our forefathers from Egypt, one who did so would not conclude with the formula: Blessed are You, Lord. Rabbi Akiva says that one recites a different version of this blessing: So too, the Lord our God and the God of our forefathers will bring us to future holidays and Festivals in peace, happy over the building of Your city and joyous in Your service. And there we will eat from the Paschal lamb and other offerings, etc., until: Blessed are You, Lord, Who redeemed Israel.

Where in Hallel should we conclude the maggid section, and what blessing should we make afterward? Beit Shammai says that we should say the first paragraph of Hallel as a conclusion to Maggid, and Beit Hillel says we should say the first two paragraphs of Hallel. And what about the blessing afterward? Rabbi Tarfon says that one should recite: "Who redeemed us and

redeemed our forefathers from Egypt,” without reciting the concluding phrase “Blessed are You, Lord.” Rabbi Akiva says that one recites a different version of this blessing: *So too, the Lord our God and the God of our forefathers will bring us to future holidays and Festivals in peace, happy over the building of Your city and joyous in Your service. And there we will eat from the Paschal lamb and other offerings, etc., until: Blessed are You, Lord, Who redeemed Israel.*

Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva have radically different versions of this blessing, with Rabbi Tarfon eschewing most of Rabbi Akiva’s lengthy text. The Rashbam explains that the point of dispute is whether this is a blessing of praise, like the kind we would recite before the performance of a mitzvah or partaking of an item of food- this is the view of Rabbi Tarfon-or a blessing entirely of hope and entreaties, per Rabbi Akiva.What is the meaning of Rabbi Akiva’s version of this blessing, and how is the Rashbam’s explanation evident in it?

Rabbi David Abuderham, in his commentary on the Haggadah, explains that Rabbi Akiva was using the Seder to make reference to other holidays:

ספר אבודר罕 סדר ההגדה ופירושה
למועדים ולרגלים אחרים. למועדים אלו ראש השנה ויום הקפורים. ולרגלים אלו פסח ושבועות וסוכות ואע”פ שהם בכלל מועדים רמזו באומרו ולרגלים שיזכנו לעלות לירושלים בכל רגל ורגל משלשתן.

Rabbi David Abudarham (Spain, 14th Century) , Order of the Haggadah and Its Explanation

For festivals and other holidays: Festivals refers to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Holidays refers to Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, even though they are holidays as well. Using this terminology hints at the prayer that we merit to ascend to Jerusalem on each one of these three holidays.

Rav Tzidkiyah HaRofeh, the Italian Halachist, in his work *Shibbolei HaLeket*, views this as a prayer for the ability to celebrate future holidays unmarred by the harassment of hostile authorities bent on restricting our freedom of religion.

In his Haggadah *Nagid VeNafik*, Rabbi Benjamin Gitelsohn, a Rabbi first in Lithuania and then for several decades in early 20th century Cleveland, offers another innovative interpretation in the name of the Vilna Gaon:

See that which I wrote previously s.v. “Joyous Festivals” in the name of the Gaon Rabbeinu Eliyahu z”l concerning the difference between “joy” (simcha) and “happiness” (sason). For “joy” relates to the beginning of an endeavor, whereas “happiness” relates to the end. The beginning of our joy will come with the building of our Holy City, and the end will be with the sacrificial worship in the Holy Temple. Hence we are “joyful” in the building of your city, and “happy” in your (sacrificial) worship.

The Haggadah does not mention Rabbi Akiva explicitly in this context, but it does rule in accordance with his position, as this is the blessing we recite that concludes Maggid.

If I were to conduct a survey and ask who the hero of the Seder is, I would think many people might say it is Moshe; after all, he is the leader of the Jewish people through the exodus from Egypt. But Moshe's name is mentioned only once in the Haggadah, yet we encounter Rabbi Akiva, and his views, at every turn. Why is Rabbi Akiva accorded so much "airtime" at our Seder?

Rabbi Akiva and the Talmud

Professor Barry Holtz, Professor of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary, presents a fascinating thesis:

Consider for a moment the following thought experiment. Let us think of the Babylonian Talmud not as we usually do-not as a vast compendium of laws, legends, debates and interpretations, but rather as a massive, multivolume postmodern experimental novel. Wilder than Moby Dick, beyond the imagination of James Joyce, more internally self-referential than anything dreamed up by David Foster Wallace. Hundreds of pages of dialogue, of discussions that start but never end; organized, it seems on the surface, by free

association, and filled with hyperlinked cross-references across the wide expanse of its domain. It has no beginning and no conclusion. It just is. It is as if the Talmud expects that you have read it all before you've read a single page.

In this novel, as in any novel, there are settings. Here there are real places with real names: Jerusalem, Bene-Berak, and Tiberias-all in Eretz Yisrael, or the Land of Israel-as well as Egypt, Babylonia and Rome. There are stories-some miraculous, some quite mundane. And there are characters-farmers and merchants, priests and Romans, women and children, slaves and free people. And most of all there are rabbis-rabbis who constantly talk and debate and prod one another to greater feats of argumentation. It is their world, the landscape of rabbis, that most dominates this novel. And amid all this excess, all these words and characters, if we were to ask, "Who is the hero of this extraordinary book, who is its central figure?" I think-despite the vastness of the work, it's not such a difficult question to answer-it is Rabbi Akiva, a "father of the world," as the Jerusalem Talmud calls him.

Professor Holtz may be on to something. Rabbi Akiva is somehow discussed in virtually every area of Talmudic endeavor. Statecraft, commerce, mysticism, biblical interpretation, halachic rulings, interpersonal relations, repentance and, ultimately, his tragic martyrdom- for each of these and so many more, there is a story *about* Rabbi Akiva or a statement *from* him. Rabbi Akiva is the Haggadah's hidden hero because he is the main character

of the Seder, and he is the main character of the Seder because he is the main character of *the entire Talmud*. Still, what is the Haggadah trying to teach us by placing Rabbi Akiva at its center?

It's all the same dispute

In several places in his writings, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, of blessed memory, postulated that if two people in the Mishnah or Talmud engage in frequent debates, even if these debates are unrelated and cover a variety of subjects, those debates always center on some fundamental point of dispute. I believe this methodology can be useful in revealing Rabbi Akiva's role at the Seder, if we use it to analyze Rabbi Akiva's relationship with another frequent debate partner, someone who was also at that fateful Seder in Bnei Brak. I refer to Rabbi Tarfon.

Who was Rabbi Tarfon?

I remember once spending time in a certain community where I was introduced to a woman with an extraordinary life story. Coming from a secular background in a different country, her Rabbi told me that several years earlier, she could not even read the Aleph Bet. Consumed with a desire to become Jewishly lettered, she devoured any Jewish text she could,

and paid (and may still pay) well known teachers in Israel to conduct *chavrutot* with her. Every spare moment she had, beginning with her daily 5 AM workout, was spent in some form of Jewish study. Her formidable intellect and steely determination turned her from someone with virtually no Jewish knowledge into one of the most learned people in her community. The way her Rabbi described her was that she is a “modern day Rabbi Akiva.” Rabbi Akiva’s transformation from an ignorant and aggressively anti-intellectual shepherd into the great Rabbinic leader of his generation is told in a number of different places; perhaps best known is the passage in the *Avot deRabbi Natan*, that describes an epiphany that changed the trajectory of Rabbi Akiva’s life. As he beheld the water lapping against the stones of a well, he thought to himself, “What carved these stones? The water did, slowly, every single day. If the water can do that to the stones, which are hard like steel, imagine what the words of Torah can do to my soft heart!” This *beraita* describes how Rabbi Akiva took his son, and together they engaged a tutor to teach them the Aleph Bet. Slowly, Rabbi Akiva worked his way through the canon of Torah until he had mastered it completely. But while he knew the information, he still needed to be trained in the *logic* of the Mishnah, so he challenged Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua on every letter, every point of logic and every law, reviewing it to himself afterward. It was through this diligence that Rabbi

Akiva was able to reveal hidden facets of Torah interpretation that had never come to the world before.

מסכתות קטנות מסכת אבות דרבי נתן נושא א פרק I

רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר אמשל לך משל. لما הדבר דומה לסתת שהיא מסתת בהרים פעם אחת נטול קרדומו בידו והלך וישב על ההר והוא מכח ממנו צורחות דקות ובעו בני אדם ואמרו לו מה אתה עושה. אמר להם הר' אני עוקרו ומטיילו 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 וא"ל אין זה מקום אלא מקום זה. כך עשה להם ר' עקיבא לר' אליעזר ולר' יהושע. אמר לו ר' טרפון עקיבא עלייך הכתוב אומר מבci נהרות חבש ותעלומה יוצאה אור (איוב כ"ח י"א) דברים המסתורים מבני אדם הוציאם ר' עקיבא לאורה:

...Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: "I will tell you a parable to explain what this matter is like. It was like a stonemason who was cutting away in the mountains. Once he took his axe and sat on the side of the 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."

Rabbi Tarfon said: "Akiva, about you scripture says, 'He dams up the sources of the streams so that hidden things be brought to light' (Job 28:11). Things concealed from human beings, Rabbi Akiva brought to light."

Rabbi Akiva's diligence and single-mindedness in the pursuit of knowledge is what allowed him to chip away at stones, and to cast aside the biggest obstacles that blocked his path to learning. Rabbi Tarfon was in awe, not just

of Rabbi Akiva's diligence, but of his creativity. He viewed Rabbi Akiva as an extraordinary mind who was capable of exceptional insight, revealing that which was hidden from others. But Rabbi Tarfon's esteem for Rabbi Akiva did not stop him from debating him on numerous occasions. We've already referred to the debate about the beracha that closes out the Maggid section—whether it is the lengthy, prayerful version that concludes with a blessing, or a shorter one that does not. There are several other debates between the two that could shed some light on the fundamental point of dispute between them.

The Talmud in Masechet Kiddushin records an incident in which Rabbi Tarfon and several other elders were reclining in an attic in the house of Nat'za in Lod, debating the loftiest of philosophical matters.

קידושין ח:

וכבר היה רבי טרפון וזקנים מוסובין בעליית בית נתזה בלבד נשאלה שאילה זו בפניהם תלמוד גדול או מעשה גדול
נענה רבי טרפון ואמר מעשה גדול נענה ר"ע אמר תלמוד גדול נענו כולם ואמרו תלמוד גדול שהתלמוד מביא לידי
מעשה

In connection to the mishna's statement about the importance of Torah study, the Gemara relates the following incident: And there already was an incident in which Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were reclining in the loft of the house of Nit'za in Lod, when this question was asked of them: Is study greater or is action greater? Rabbi Tarfon answered and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva answered and said: Study is greater. Everyone answered and said: Study is greater, but not as an independent value; rather, it is greater as study leads to action.

“Is action preferable, or is study?” Rabbi Tarfon was adamant: action is better than study. Rabbi Akiva answered, “No! Study is greater!” Everyone answered that study is greater, but not as an abstract value disconnected from reality. Study is only greater when it *brings a person to action*. Once again, it is Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon are the primary debaters.

If Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon are having the same debate, but in different guises, what indeed is their fundamental disagreement? Perhaps some more light can be shed on this by looking at a statement by Rabbi Tarfon, this time without the counterpoint of Rabbi Akiva. There is a Mishnah in Nazir that describes a situation that may seem foreign and irrelevant to us. Six people are walking together on the street, and another person approaches them from the opposite direction; he looks extremely familiar to them, but not everyone agrees on his identity. Reuven turns to Shimon and, certain of the identity of the approaching individual, says, “I am hereby a nazir if this person approaching us is so-and-so.” Shimon is equally certain, and says “I am hereby a nazir if this is *not* so-and-so.” The other four participants, not content with leaving well enough alone, add their two cents. A third member of the group said: I am hereby a nazir if one of you two is a nazir, and a fourth said: I am hereby a nazir if neither of you is a nazir, and another added: I am hereby a nazir if *both* of you are *nezirim*. The final person said, “I am hereby a nazir if **all** you who spoke

before me are nazirs.” Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai disagree on this issue. Beit Shammai say that by virtue of stating that they are nazirites, *everyone* who said so is one, no matter whether their condition had been fulfilled. Beit Hillel say: Only he whose statement was *not* fulfilled is a nazir. Rabbi Tarfon says that *none* of them are nazirs. Rabbi Tarfon’s reasoning is simple: a vow of *nezirut* must be pronounced in an explicit manner, without any hint of uncertainty.

The debates between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon- about the blessing at the end of Maggid and about whether study or action is better, and the statement by Rabbi Tarfon about who is a nazir, seem to have nothing to do with one another, but in fact, they are deeply interrelated, as they all speak to the differing world views that each one espoused. Professor Joel Gereboff of Arizona State University put it in his work on Rabbi Tarfon, *He always rules that objective facts are determinative... Tarfon’s non-legal concerns are very limited...*

In other words, Rabbi Tarfon was the realist, the one concerned with the way things are. No wonder Rabbi Tarfon rules that action is better than study- because actions are the most important barometer of spiritual development. No wonder he says that what you actually *say* determines if you are a Nazir- because our words, and not our intentions, determine who we are. And no wonder he says that you recite a simple blessing at the end

of Maggid, instead of a series of hopeful, prayerful entreaties- because as much as we yearn for redemption in the future, we are sadly not yet redeemed *now*. Rabbi Tarfon is concerned with results and reality, not with ambiguities and aspirations.

Rabbi Tarfon's realism is starkly contrasted by Rabbi Akiva's eternal optimism. Rabbi Akiva lives in a world in which study is the ideal, because it *should* lead to the moral and ethical development of a person's actions. That is the story of his own life, isn't it? His optimistic belief in the transformative power led him to apply himself relentlessly to his studies, and to become the remarkable Torah scholar he was. Indeed, Rabbi Akiva's optimism is the theme of another one of the most famous stories related about him, related at the end of Makkot and, in the text on your source sheets, the Sifri in Parshat Ekev:

ספר דברים פרשת עקב פיסקא מג

וכבר היי רבנן גמליאל ורבנן יהושע ורבנן אלעזר בן עזריה ורבנן עקיבא נכנסים לרומי שמעו קול המניה של מדינה מפיטייליס עד מהה ועשרים מיל התחליו הם בוכים ורבנן עקיבא מצחק אמרו לו עקיבא מפני מה אנו בוכים ומתחווים מצחק אמר להם מהם אתם בכitem אמרו לו ולא נבכה שהגויים עובדי עבודה זרה מזבחים לאלים ומתחווים לעצבים יושבים בטח שלוח ושאן ובית הדום רגליו של אלהינו היה לשירות אש ומדור לחיות השדה אמר להם אף אני לך צחקתי אם כך נתן למכווני קל וחומר לעושי רצונו.שוב פעם אחת היי עוליים לירושלים הגיעו לצופים קרעו בגדייהם הגיעו להר הבית וראו שועל יוצא מבית קדשים התחליו הם בוכים ורבנן מצחק אמרו לו עקיבא ליעולם אתה מתמייה שאנו בוכים ואתה מצחק אמר להם וכitem אמרו לו לא נבכה על מקום שכותב בו +במדבר א נא+ והזර הקרב יומת הרי שועל יוצא מתוכו עליינו נתקיים +אייכה ה ז - יח+ על זה היה דזה לבנו על הר ציון שם שועלים הלכו בו אמר לך צחקתי הרי הוא אומר +ישעה ח ב+ ואעדיה לי עדים נאמנים את אוריה הכהן ואת זכריהו בן יברכיהו וכי מה עניין אוריה אצל זכריה מה אמר אוריה +ירמיה כ' יח+ ציון שדה תחרש וירושלם עי' תהיה והר הבית לבמות יער מה אמר זכריה +זכريا ח ד+ כה אמר ה' צבאות עוד ישבו זקנים וזקנות וג' ורוחבות העיר וג' אמר המקומ הרי לי שני עדים האלו אם קיימים דברי אוריה קיימים דברי זכריה ואם בטלו דברי אוריה בטלים דברי זכריה שמחתי שנתקיימו דברי אוריה לסופ' דברי זכריה עתדים לבוא, בלשון זה אמרו לו עקיבא נחמתנו

Rabbi Akiva, together with Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, entered Rome in the aftermath of the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. Seeing the teeming streets of that metropolis of evil, they began to bawl. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, began to laugh. Incredulous, they asked him, “Why are you laughing when we are crying?” Rabbi Akiva responded, “Why are you crying at all?” They explained that the sight of rampant idol worship by the people who destroyed the Beit Hamikdash and had never paid for their heinous acts was just too much. Rabbi Akiva explained that he was laughing for that very same reason. If a peaceful and prosperous life is the reward for those who rebel against God, imagine the kind of reward in store for those who fulfill His commands!

On yet another occasion, the same cohort of Rabbis ascended to Jerusalem, and saw the former site of the Beit Hamikdash laying in ruins, desolate, with foxes cavorting in the place where the Kodesh Kodashim, the *sanctum sanctorum*, had once stood in all its splendor. The Rabbis began to cry, and once again, Rabbi Akiva laughed. Incredulous, they asked him, “Akiva, you are a strange person. Why are you laughing when the rest of us cry?” Once again, Rabbi Akiva replied, “Why are you crying?” “Isn’t it obvious?,” they replied. “The house of God lays desolate, the epicenter of Jewish sanctity- the place most *Jews* weren’t allowed to enter on pain of death- is now defiled by wild animals. How could you not cry?” Rabbi Akiva replied, “God has appointed two witnesses- Uriah and Zechariah. Uriah said,

Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem shall be in ruins, and the Mount of the Abode like forested hills

This prophecy of Jerusalem's desolation has, indeed, come to pass. But the two are linked, so that if Uriah's prophecy happens, Zechariah's will too. Zechariah prophesied that one day, the streets of Jerusalem will be teeming with elderly men and women, leaning on canes due to advanced age, and that the same streets will reverberate with peels of gleeful laughter from children at play. If the first came to pass, the second certainly will! With this, the other sages told Rabbi Akiva "You have comforted us!"

Could anyone other than a Rabbi Akiva, the eternal optimist, see these abjectly depressing situations in such a positive way?

Influences

Indeed, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon's respective worldviews make sense when you consider the influences on their thinking. There is a famous passage in the Talmud (Shabbat 31a) about various gentiles who wished to convert to Judaism, and whose approach proved to be a source of great annoyance to Shammai. We should stress that when we describe Hillel and Shammai, we refer to the actual Hillel and the actual Shammai, and not *Beit Hillel* and *Beit Shammai*, the academies that promulgated their world

view. Perhaps the most famous one is the middle story, about the person who asked Shammai to tell him the entire Torah “on one foot.”

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף לא עמוד א

שוב מעשה בנכרי אחד שבא לפני שמאלי, אמר לו: גירני על מנת שתלמידני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגלו אחת. דחפו באמת הבניין שבידו. בא לפני הילל, גייריה. אמר לו: דעתך סני לחברך לא תעביד - זו היא כל התורה כולה, ואידך - פירושה הוא, זיל גמור.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a

There was another incident involving one gentile who came before Shammai and said to Shammai: Convert me on condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot. Shammai pushed him away with the builder’s cubit in his hand. This was a common measuring stick and Shammai was a builder by trade. The same gentile came before Hillel. He converted him and said to him: That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study.

Does this sound familiar? It’s the “golden rule”- do unto others...But it should sound familiar because it is so similar to Rabbi Akiva’s “bumper sticker” statement, stated in the Sifra in Parshat Kedoshim:

ספרא קדושים פרשה ב פרק ד

ואהבת לרעך כמוך רבי עקיבא אומר זה כלל גדול בתורה בן עזאי אומר זה ספר תולדות אדם זה כלל גדול מזה:
Sifra, Kedoshim 2:4

Rabbi Akiva taught: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus, 19:18) This is the most important rule in the Torah." Ben Azzai says: "This is the book of chronologies of Adam" (Genesis, 5:1) is a more important rule than this (one).

Rabbi Akiva was heavily influenced by the original Hillel, who had enough faith in people that he believed that even their annoying questions concealed a sincere desire to connect to God, and therefore boiled down all of the Torah in one pithy interpersonal soundbite. And what about Rabbi Tarfon, the realist? The Talmud tells us explicitly that he was a student of Shammai.

ברכות י:

א"ר טרפון אני הייתי בא בדרך והטהתי לקרות לדברי ב"ש וסכנתו בעצמי מפני הלוטים

Berachot 10b

With regard to this *halakha*, Rabbi Tarfon said: Once, I was coming on the road when I stopped and reclined to recite *Shema* in accordance with the statement of Beit Shammai. *Although Rabbi Tarfon was a disciple of Beit Hillel, he thought that fulfilling the mitzva in accordance with the opinion of Beit Shammai would be a more meticulous fulfillment of the mitzva, acceptable to all opinions.* Yet in so doing, I endangered myself due to the highwaymen [*listim*] who accost travelers.

Rabbi Tarfon's realism is heavily influenced by Shammai, who looked at the prospective convert who made ridiculous requests, and saw nothing but what was in front of him- a lazy buffon interesting in nothing more than a Jiffy Jew course, reducing the complexities of Judaism into memorable soundbites from the Cliffs Notes edition. Shammai- and later *Beit*

Shammai-is concerned about what *is*; Beit Hillel is concerned about what *could be*, and it is this worldview Rabbi Akiva embraced. This is why he is the hidden hero of the Seder night, a night in which we celebrate and yearn for salvation and believe that it is present and possible. It is Rabbi Akiva who hosts the Seder in Bnei Brak, his bailiwick, when the participants were still reeling from the aftermath of the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash. No doubt they were all recalling the Kohanim wading ankle-high in Paschal blood, the aroma of roasted lamb deeply lodged in their olfactory memories, memories of Yerushalaim teeming with pilgrims giddy with anticipation of another Pesach together. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah and Rabbi were Kohanim and at least Rabbi Tarfon, an elderly man by then, had served in the Beis Hamikdash, their pain deeply acute. And no doubt those poignant memories were coated with a patina of pathos, as they mourned for what had been, and what now was. Yet, still reeling from the destruction, Rabbi Akiva guided them as they stayed up all night talking about exodus and redemption, comforting them by giving them hope. It is Rabbi Akiva who gave the most generous, even fanciful, assessment of the number of plagues the Egyptians experienced- because he believed that poignant and optimistic Yiddish expression, *der aybishter bashtrufz zeine soynim*- God punishes His enemies- and it is Rabbi Akiva who says we should say a long entreaty at the end of Maggid, in which we pray for future occasions of redemption.

But if Rabbi Akiva's life story is a testament to the power of optimism, it is also cautionary tale about what happens when it is unchecked. Remember that it was also Rabbi Akiva who believed unconditionally in Bar Kochba, the false Messiah. The Medrash (Eichah Rabbah) relates the skepticism with which his colleagues viewed this would be savior:

R. Yohanan said: Rabbi (Yehuda HaNasi) would expound A star shall step forth from Jacob thus: do not read “star” (kokhav) but “liar” (kozav). When R. Akiva would see Bar Kokhva, he would exclaim “this is the King Messiah.” R. Yohanan ben Torta replied (to him) “Akiva grass will grow from your cheeks and still the son of David will not come.”

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the leading Rabbinic personality of his generation, was the only one of the same caliber as Rabbi Akiva to disagree with him, yet Rabbi Akiva remained steadfast. Rabbi Akiva's enduring faith in Bar Kochba, and his inability to see any negative outcome in this “messianic” revolution, would have disastrous consequences, costing countless lives and rendering the Judea a bloody wasteland.

CASSIUS DIO-ROMAN HISTORY Epitome of Book LXIX

13 1 At first the Romans took no account of them. Soon, however, all Judaea had been stirred up, and the Jews everywhere were showing signs of disturbance, were gathering together, and giving evidence of great hostility to the Romans, partly by secret and partly by overt acts; 2 many outside nations,

too, were joining them through eagerness for gain, and the whole earth, one might almost say, was being stirred up over the matter. Then, indeed, Hadrian sent against them his best generals. First of these was Julius Severus, who was dispatched from Britain, where he was governor, against the Jews. 3 *Severus did not venture to attack his opponents in the open at any one point, in view of their numbers and their desperation, but by intercepting small groups, thanks to the number of his soldiers and his under-officers, and by depriving them of food and shutting them up, he was able, rather slowly, to be sure, but with comparatively little danger, to crush, exhaust and exterminate them. Very few of them in fact survived.*

14 1 Fifty of their most important outposts and nine hundred and eighty-five of their most famous villages were razed to the ground. Five hundred and eighty thousand men were slain in the various raids and battles, and the number of those that perished by famine, disease and fire was past finding out.
2 Thus nearly the whole of Judaea was made desolate, a result of which the people had had forewarning before the war. For the tomb of Solomon, which the Jews regard as an object of veneration, fell to pieces of itself and collapsed, and many wolves and hyenas rushed howling into their cities. 3 *Many Romans, moreover, perished in this war. Therefore Hadrian in writing to the senate did not employ the opening phrase commonly affected by the emperors, "If you and our children are in health, it is well; I and the legions are in health."*

Listen to the words of Rabbi Dr. Reuven Hammer in his biography of Rabbi Akiva:

Akiva-Life, Legend, Legacy by Reuven Hammer pgs. 149-150

Now one man emerged who somehow attained the allegiance of all those who wanted to fight Rome. The rebellion was well organized and lasted for three and a half years, causing heavy Roman casualties. In hindsight we know that he lead the people to disaster, and anyone with knowledge of the reality of the world situation should have known that there could be no other outcome. The Roman Empire led by Hadrian was not about to permit this tiny and insignificant province to outwit and outfight it and would pour as many resources as necessary into defeating this upstart rebellion, as it had in every previous rebellion. But hindsight is always clearer than foresight, and reality could not compete with the memory of ancient victories and a strong belief in ancient prophecies. From the point of view of those beginning the struggle, imbued with a sense of the justice of their cause, nourished by a belief in the power of the God of Israel and the memory of the miracle of the Maccabean rebellion a few hundred years before, Bar Kokhva seemed to hold the promise of a way out of the darkness in which they were living.

To [Rabbi] Akiva such an individual would have represented the hope of redemption that he had long cherished, and he made his feelings known to all...

So Who Is Right?

It is no accident that in matters of talmudic jurisprudence, there is a principle- the Halacha always follows Rabbi Akiva when he argues with one other person, though never when he argues with a body of people. Whenever possible, we take the optimistic approach, believing that people will live up to the highest standards, that they will rise to their better natures, and that a positive future is in store for us even as the present may appear bleak. But if Rabbi Akiva is the main character at the Seder, the award for Best Supporting Actor goes to Rabbi Tarfon, who is right beside him much of the way, because our Rabbi Akiva-esque optimism must carry a healthy dose of Rabbi Tarfon's realism as well. Long before Rav Kook, the mystical dreamer, and Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, the uncompromising pragmatist, met in the winding alleyways of Jerusalem, their ideological forbears shared the Seder in Bnei Brak. Judaism needs dreamers and visionaries like Rabbi Akiva, but we need pragmatists like Rabbi Tarfon as well. We need the visionaries like Rav Kook who think in lofty spiritual terms and envision a world as it could be, and realists like Rav Sonnenfeld, who fight to preserve tradition and act as bulwarks against optimism run amok. There are so many ways in which this dual model is critically important, but I'd like to discuss two in particular.

Trust The Process

In last week's Sunday's New York Times Magazine¹, the First Words section analyzed a phrase that has become part of our vernacular- "Trust the process." The phrase has been around for a while, but it really entered the lexicon through the machinations of Sam Hinkie, the short lived general manager of the Philadelphia 76ers. Sam Hinkie was a student of analytics, and he realized that in order for the Sixers to secure the championships their fans demanded (and who is more obnoxious than a Philadelphia sports fan?), the Sixers either needed to win championships or draft the superstars needed to do so. However, the rules of the draft favor teams with terrible records, so Sam Hinkie began to do the unthinkable- he had the 76ers tank in a spectacular way. Throughout the abysmal 2016 season, he implored fans to "Trust the Process"- a phrase that became so inextricably linked with the team that 2014 draft pick Joel Embiid nicknamed himself "The Process." Philadelphia fans were slow to warm to this new paradigm, but eventually, they bought into it fully. Fans started tweeting "In Hinkie We Trust!" The problem was that not everyone did trust the process, as much as that became the slogan of the Sixers, and Sam Hinkie was fired (though technically, he resigned) by leadership that looked at current results, not at a strategy for future championships. Another cry started animating the Sixers

¹

https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/13/magazine/is-it-better-to-trust-the-process-or-to-change-it.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Ffirst-words&action=click&contentCollection=magazine®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=2&pgtype=collection

fan base: “Sam Hinkie Died For Our Sins.” As long as “Trust The Process” has been the unofficial slogan for the 76ers, and as long as the players Hinkie drafted are still playing there, there has been a great deal of talk about the way he revolutionized basketball. But I think there is something more significant that happened here, one that has ramifications off of the basketball court as well: Sam Hinkie changed what it means to be a fan. So many sports fans are defined by their suffering, as they loyally support consistently abysmal teams. Just ask the ten thousand or so fans who staged a protest in downtown Cleveland after the Browns’ winless season this past year. In some cases, fans are defined by their support of teams that are relentlessly excellent, no matter at what cost- ask any Patriots fan. And in still other cases, fans are defined by the length of their suffering *before* the long awaited win- to wit, the fans of the Cubs and the Red Sox. But to fans of Sam Hinkie and the Sixers, the present was no longer of any concern or interest. They were entirely focused on the future, and the promise of greatness that would emerge from present travails. One fan held up a sign at a game that said, “Now We’re Stinky, But I Trust Hinkie. Go Sixers!”

Lehavdil, this is not unlike the debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon. I think these different conceptions of fandom are a useful framework to view our discussions of community. Is our allegiance to a community and its institutions dependent solely a community’s *present*, or

² <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/2729018-the-definitive-history-of-trust-the-process>

upon the future potential it has? If we see a bleak outlook for a community's future, are we formulating a plan to change it? We all know people who can see no wrong in the institutions with which they affiliate, whether their children's schools, their shuls or, more broadly their religious ideology and the attendant communities that affiliate with it. As long as they or their children are happy *now*, these institutions can do no wrong. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those for whom there is always a current source of discontent, always a glaring fault, always a way in which their needs are not being met. These people, too, are implacably focused on the present. The challenge, in talking about our communities, is to to be like Sam Hinkie fans. That does not mean we should be Pollyannaish; failing to acknowledge real faults means they will never be repaired, no matter how optimistic we may feel. And focusing only on the problems and current challenges, without a belief in and roadmap for the future, breeds relentless negativity and cynicism, and is tantamount to rooting for a community to fail. It is for this reason that Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon are both present at our Seder tables- because we need both their approaches. Are we fans of our community? Do we promote it from without and within? Do we believe that there are even better days ahead and have a way to bring them to fruition? When people express an interest in joining us, do we encourage them to do so or do we try and talk them *out of it*, as I heard that several people tried to do with some of our youth director candidates? That is not

to say that we should be blind to our challenges- but every community and every institution has them and the more good people we have, and the more we think into the future, the more likely we will be to solve them. And it means that if we are realistic about a deficiency, we have to volunteer to be part of the solution, or else we are part of the problem.

The Kids Are All Right

But there is another area where the Rabbi Akiva/Rabbi Tarfon paradigm rings true, albeit on a smaller stage. Rav Shlomo Wolbe, the renowned Mashgiach, was particularly insightful when it came to child-rearing. In the second volume of his letters, he railed against the practice of virtually every Jewish parent:

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Letters and Writings, Volume 2, p. 227

I wish to write to you concerning that which I have heard several times from parents who are disappointed with the way their child turned out, as though the child didn't become what he or she could. I wish to tell you that there is no notion more foreign to me than this. I will explain clearly, that parents should never create expectations for themselves about how their child should turn out as an adult. At each stage in life, parents should think about that stage and what is best for their child. It is possible to err, but they should always do what they think is best. They should never imagine even a little about the future of

*the child! I know from my own experience that expectations of this nature are nonsense. There is a Greek expression: “Be yourself!” This is what parents have to do with all their children- to raise them to **be themselves**.*

This may seem extreme, even non-Jewish. After all, don’t we all have high hopes for our children? Yet in our optimism and expectation for their future, we often focus our energies on raising the child *we want* rather than the child we have. Instead of parenting a child, we try and cultivate a product. As a result, we may steer- or stunt- our children’s religious, spiritual and intellectual development because of ideologies we espouse or visions we harbor of who they will become. We may discipline our children either insufficiently or excessively based on our unrealistic image of who they are, and we may push them on career trajectories that are poorly suited to their temperaments and talents. There is nothing wrong with believing, a la Rabbi Akiva, that our children are destined for great things, but that has to be tempered with a healthy dose of Rabbi Tarfon-style realism of who those children *are*.

Conclusion

In just a week, we will sit down to our Seder Table, accompanied by the full sweep of Jewish history. Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon will be there alongside us, accompanying our Haggadah journey every step of the way. Let us greet them with optimism, and let us be realistic in bringing it to fruition.