

**RABBI AARON**

Editor, Torah Tidbits

**GOLDSCHIEDER**

*The seven weeks of Sefirat HaOmer, which we are now counting, bring to mind the personality of Rabbi Akiva. The rituals of mourning that mark these days are based on the tragic death of Rabbi Akiva's disciples. With this background in mind it is fitting to highlight three teachings from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt"l that address the significant role Rabbi Akiva played in Jewish history and lessons to be learned from him for our own avodas Hashem.*

## The Power of Positivity

Of all the rabbinic sages of antiquity, perhaps none was more influential or famous than Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik can be counted among those who were drawn to Rabbi Akiva's teaching. In his vast array of drashot the Rav highlighted teachings from this great Talmudic sage accentuating a common theme which sheds a light on Rabbi Akiva's astounding legacy.

### **Rabbi Akiva's Mikveh**

Rabbi Akiva lived the first fifty years of life with the Temple of Jerusalem in existence. He personally witnessed the tragedy and experienced the trauma of its destruction. Based on the final Mishna in Masechet Yoma, we get a glimpse of the first Yom

Kippur following the Temple's destruction. We can only imagine what it must have meant to observe the holiest day absent of the rituals and the Kohen Gadol and the avodah in the Beit Hamikdash.

Rabbi Akiva was not deterred. He resiliently declared to the broken-hearted nation: "Happy are you, O Israel! Before whom are you purified and who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven...Hashem is the hope [lit. "Mikveh"] of Israel" ; just as the mikveh purifies the impure, so does the Holy One Blessed Be He purify Israel (Final Mishnah Tractate Yoma).

The Rav explained that Rabbi Akiva was powerfully conveying the idea that God is so desirous for closeness with His beloved people that ultimately He Himself effects purification. God chooses to bypass the procedures that were required when the Temple stood. God exhibits even greater mercy and love when the people of Israel are forlorn and desperately need compassion. (Rabbi Soloveitchik on the Days of Awe, pp. 99-101).

### **The Kriat Shema of Yaakov and Rabbi Akiva**

Why is it that an individual only fulfills the mitzvah of the *Shema* by reciting it twice daily? Why isn't a single recitation sufficient? The Rav offered an exquisite explanation how the morning and night reading of the *Shema* are intertwined. He directs our attention to two remarkable

readings of the *Shema* in our ancient past: One by Yaakov and the other by Rabbi Akiva.

Yaakov descends to Egypt to finally reunite with his beloved son Yosef. The moment that they embrace, the Sages teach, Yaakov utters the words of the *Shema*. His words directed to God were evinced with unbridled joy. Yaakov was finally able to see the hand of God at work and how the *atzat Hashem he takum*, that the plan of God was always at play. The words of *Shema* were an expression of love. By contrast the *Kriat Shema* of Rabbi Akiva was enunciated under duress. The great master of Torah recited the *Shema* while undergoing torture, his body raked with combs of iron<sup>1</sup> (*Mesorat Harav Chumash*, Bereshit, pp. 342-343, YU Torah, *Kriat Shema and Birkhot Kriat Shema*, Genack).

There is the morning *Shema* and the night *Shema*. There are moments when faith in God comes easily and other times where it is excruciatingly difficult to believe. The two recitations of the *Shema* represent the unfailing faith of a Jew. The day signifies light and clarity and the evening represents darkness and hiddenness.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Rabbi Akiva's tragic demise was not only his own. His dashed hopes in the Bar Kochba rebellion and witnessing the traumatic loss of the Temple were nearly impossible to bear.

2 The word for evening, *erev*, relates to the word *irbuviyah* (bewilderment or confusion). Judaism teaches, said the Rav, that man can find God even in His concealment. Moreover, we have an even greater need to find Him when we are faced with suffering.



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The Rav suggested that the two themes can be detected in the noticeable change of wording we attach to the Shema in the morning and night:

“Rabba bar Chinena Saba said in the name of Rav: Anyone who does not say *Emet Ve-yatziv* at *shacharit* and *Emet Ve-emuna* at *ma’ariv* has not fulfilled his obligation [of *Keri’at Shema* as fully enacted], as it is said, “To tell in the morning of your kindness and your faithfulness in the nights.” (*Tehillim* 92:3) (*Berachot* 12b)

The morning language of *Ve’yatziv* connotes God’s palpable presence and abiding strength. The language we attach to the Shema at night, *Emunah*, is suggestive of the notion that one must garner their strength to be faithful in challenging times.

The Talmud, in another striking passage, alludes to the interdependence between the morning and evening *Shema* based on the number of blessings surrounding the *Shema*. In the morning three blessings are recited and in the evening four are recited (*Berachot* 11a). Rashi offers a beautiful explanation for the total number being seven. He quotes the Talmud Yerushalmi

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The Rav suggested that rabbinic statement that the “Shechina is found in the *maarav* (west)” suggests that even in a state of *erev* (darkness) and when faced with *irbuviyah* (paradox) the Almighty is present. (*Al Hatefillah*, pp. 177-179)

that the seven blessings are based on the verse, “Seven times a day I praise You.” (Psalms 119:164). The two recitations of the Shema are to be seen as a single unit.<sup>3</sup> (*Al Hatefillah*, p.72)

### **Rabbi Akiva and Turnus Rufus**

Only a man of unceasing optimism would begin at the age of 40 to study Torah. Only a man of extraordinary resilience could witness the death of his 24,000 students and could pick up the pieces and start over with only five disciples (*Yevamot* 62b). The Rav exquisitely emphasized that it was not merely Rabbi Akiva’s optimistic view towards life but his iron will, determination, and self-sacrifice that led to his successes. This powerful message is conveyed in the following episode.

The Rav cited a dialogue between the evil Roman governor Turnus Rufus and Rabbi Akiva (*Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat Tazria, Siman* 7). Turnus Rufus asked: If God hates the uncircumcised, why does He create man in an uncircumcised state? Rabbi Akiva rejoined: “Does the earth yield its bread?” In his elliptical response, Rabbi Akiva conveyed that, just as God desires that man bring forth bread through effort, it is only man who can sanctify himself. If man wants to attain holiness the initiative

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3 Seven is also the number of *Sheva Berachot* which is indicative of amarige. Through thick and thin a couple remains committed and loyal.

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rests with him: He must circumcise himself, *be'damayich chayi* - Through your blood you all live (Yechezkel 16:6). Only through the "blood" of his personal sacrifice shall man live on a holy plane. Without tilil and suffering, there is no holiness. (Derashot HaRav, Lustiger, p.173)

Rabbi Meir Soloveitchik, a great-nephew of the Rav, suggested that Rabbi Akiva's very name hints to his unusual personality. Akiva is essentially an aramaic variant of Yaakov, or Jacob. The name Jacob and Akiva both derive from the word *Ekev*, or heel. The heel is the lowest portion of the body, yet, at the same time, it is the first part of the body used to step a step forward. In other words, it is precisely one's initial downfall that can ultimately emerge as a key to progress. ('Rabbi Akiva's Optimism', Meir Soloveitchik, AzureOnline) ■

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