

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [7]

Rabbi Akiva and his Wife

Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 62b



Background to Our Story

Rabbi Akiva



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Kiddushin. Koren publishers Jerusalem. 459.

Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef was one of the greatest of the *tanna'im*. He lived from just after the destruction of the Second Temple until the bar Kokheva revolt. According to legend, Rabbi Akiva began his studies at the age of forty, when Raḥel, the daughter of the wealthy Kalba Savua, consented to marry him on condition that he would study Torah.

Rabbi Akiva became the student of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya. Ultimately, he became a prominent Torah scholar with twenty-four thousand students. Among Rabbi Akiva's first students were Shimon ben Azzai and Shimon ben Zoma, with whom he entered the orchard (see *Ḥagiga* 14b), i.e., engaged in the study of esoteric elements of the Torah.

Subsequently, Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, among others, became his students. He was a staunch supporter of bar Kokheva's revolt against Rome and even declared him the Messiah. During the period of the Roman emperor Hadrian's decrees, Torah study was prohibited, but Rabbi Akiva continued convening assemblies and teaching Torah. Ultimately, he was apprehended and executed, and he is one of the ten martyrs whose execution is described in liturgy.

Rabbi Akiva collected early rabbinic statements and began organizing the material of the Oral Torah. The Mishna, redacted by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and his disciples, is based on his work.

Mishnah Ketubot, Chapter 5. Mishnah 6



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ketuvot. Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem

With regard to one who vows that his wife may not derive benefit from marital relations with him, Beit Shammai say: He may maintain this situation for up to two weeks, but beyond that he must divorce her and give her the payment for her marriage contract. Beit Hillel say: He must divorce her if it continues beyond one week. Apropos the husband's obligation to his wife regarding marital relations, the Gemara mentions other aspects of this issue:

Students may leave their homes and travel in order to learn Torah without their wives' permission for up to thirty days, and laborers may leave their homes without their wives' permission for up to one week. The set interval defining the frequency of a husband's conjugal obligation to his wife stated in the Torah (see Exodus 21:10), unless the couple stipulated otherwise, varies according to the man's occupation and proximity to his home: Men of leisure, who do not work, must engage in marital relations every day, laborers must do so twice a week, donkey drivers once a week, camel drivers once every thirty days, and sailors once every six months. This is the statement of Rabbi Eliezer.

Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 62b



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ketuvot. Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem

Rav Berona said that Rav said: The *halakha* is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer. Rav Adda bar Ahava said that Rav said: This is the statement of Rabbi Eliezer, but the Rabbis say: Students may leave their homes to study Torah for as long as two or three years without permission from their wives. Rava said: The Sages relied on Rabbi Adda bar Ahava's opinion and performed an action like this themselves, but the results were sometimes fatal.

Torah scholars leaving their homes to study Torah



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ketuvot. Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem

Students may leave – **הַתְּלִמְדִים יוֹצְאִין** : Torah scholars may leave their homes to study Torah without permission from their wives for up to two or three years, in accordance with Rav Adda bar Ahava. The Rema writes that if the wife gives her husband permission, he may go for as long as she allows, as implied by Rava's words and the continuation of the Gemara (Rambam *Sefer Nashim, Hilkhot Ishut* 14:2; *Shulhan Arukh, Even HaEzer* 76:5, and see 76:6).

Ben Kalba Savua



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ketuvot. Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem

Ben Kalba Savua – **בֶּן כַּלְבָּא שָׂבוּעַ** : The family of ben Kalba Savua was one of the wealthy and powerful families in Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple. It was said that they were one of the three families who would have had the financial ability to support the entire city for many years of siege. It seems that the family was descended from Caleb, son of Jephunneh, and that this was the source of their name. There is also a poetic extrapolation that he was called that because anyone who entered his home as hungry as a dog [*kalba*] would leave satisfied [*savua*]. In several places, the Talmud describes the difficult life of Rabbi Akiva and his wife during the many years when she was banned from benefitting from her father's property. This Gemara implies that the couple had children; at least one daughter, as mentioned at the end of the discussion in the Gemara, and possibly several sons as well. It seems that Rabbi Akiva also had children from a previous marriage.

Marriages in the Talmudic Time



Betrothal (Eirusin)

The first stage of the marriage process. The bond created by betrothal is so strong that, after betrothal, a woman requires a divorce before she can marry another man. Similarly, sexual relations with other men are considered adulterous and are punishable by death. At this stage the betrothed couple may not yet live together as man and wife, and most of the couple's mutual obligations do not yet apply.

Betrothal (Kidushin)

The act by which a woman becomes betrothed to a man. In principle there are three ways of betrothing a woman: with money or with its equivalent, e.g., a ring, which the bridegroom gives to the bride, with a document in which he attests that he is betrothing the woman; by sexual intercourse. The third method, though legal, was prohibited by the Sages to prevent licentiousness. All three methods require that the act of betrothal be performed willingly by both the man and the woman, if she is a minor her father must approve, and there be two suitable witnesses to the act. After the couple is betrothed, it is prohibited for the woman to engage in sexual relations with any other man like a married woman. Moreover, her mother, daughter, and other close relatives become permanently forbidden to her husband; likewise, his father, son, and other close relatives become permanently forbidden to her. The betrothed couple may not live together until the marriage ceremony beneath the wedding canopy is performed and the marriage blessings are recited. For many generations betrothal and marriage have been performed together on the same occasion, in order to prevent many halakhic and practical complications.

Marriage (Nisuin)

The second stage of the marriage process, following betrothal. Marriage is effected by having the bride and groom come under the bridal canopy and it immediately confers both the privileges and the responsibilities associated with marriage upon the newlywed couple. After marriage, if one spouse dies, all the laws of mourning for a close blood relation apply to the surviving spouse. If the wife of a priest dies, he is permitted to become ritually impure while seeing to her burial. All the monetary rights and obligations that apply to married couples take effect after marriage. A married woman is permitted to eat *teruma* if her husband is a priest.

Ketubah (Marriage contract)

A legal document given by a husband to his wife upon their marriage, stating his obligations toward her during and after their marriage. The contract includes a lien on the husband's estate, the minimum amount being 200 dinar for a virgin bride and 100 dinar for other brides. That sum is payable if she is divorced or widowed. The general guidelines for a marriage contract are provided by the Talmud. However, its particular provisions are often based on local custom. In addition, the marriage contract may include individual stipulations agreed to by the husband and wife. The marriage contract gives the marriage halakhic legitimacy. Without it, the couple's relationship is considered licentious.

Vow



A personal vow, i.e., a voluntary commitment to refrain from performing an action or deriving benefit from another. This vow is, in effect, a type of reverse consecration. Instead of consecrating an object, the one taking the vow commits himself to regard the object he wishes to prohibit or the person from whom he wishes not to benefit as though it were consecrated to the Temple. Any object can be prohibited in this manner, and one who fails to fulfill his vow violates the mitzva: "He shall not profane his word" (Numbers 30 :3). It is also possible to prohibit one's own property to

another by means of a vow. The other person must then treat that property as consecrated. One can prohibit another's property only to himself. The vows of a female minor, a young woman, or a wife may be annulled by her father or husband, respectively (see: Nullification of vows). Others can also be released from their vows (see: Dissolution of vows) by a Torah scholar or a rabbinical court, if it can be shown that their vows were not made with complete awareness and intent. The Sages were very strongly opposed to the taking of vows. That explains the widespread practice of stating: Without a vow, before undertaking certain commitments, and they encouraged people who vowed to dissolve those vows. If one makes a statement in the form of a vow, but it is evident that his intention was not to has no legal standing. Indeed, in certain case: it is prohibited for him to testify, lest he damage the defendant's reputation. Nevertheless, there are several instances where credence is accorded to the testimony of a single witness. One example is with regard to the law: of a wife suspected of infidelity (*sota*). The testimony of a single witness that a woman who had secluded herself with the man with regard to whom her husband had warned he] committed adultery with him is sufficient to require her husband to divorce her.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Ketuvot 62b

רבי עקיבא רעיא דבן פלגא שבוע הוה. חזיתיה ברתיה דהוה צניע ומעלי, אמרה ליה: אי מקדשנא לך אזלת לבי רב? אמר לה: אין איקדשא ליה בצניעה, ושדרתיה. שמע אבויא אפקה מביתיה, אדרה הנאה מונכסיה.

אזיל ותיב תרי סרי שנין בבי רב, כי אתא – אייתי בהדיה תרי סרי אלפי תלמידי. שמעיה להווא סבא דקאמר לה: עד כמה קא מדברת אלמנות חיים. אמרה ליה: אי לדידי צניית – ותיב תרי סרי שני אחרוני. אמר: ברשות קא עבידנא. הדר אזיל ותיב תרי סרי שני אחרוני בבי רב. כי אתא, אייתי בהדיה עשרין וארבעה אלפי תלמידי. שמעיה דביתהו, הות קא נפקא לאפיה. אמרו לה שיבכתא: שאילי מאני לבוש ואיפסאי! אמרה להו: "יודע צדיק נפש בהמתו". כי מטיא לגביה – נפלה על אפה, קא מנשקא ליה לכרעיה. הווי קא מדחפי לה שמעיה. אמר להו: שבקוה, שלי ושלכם – שלה הוא.

שמע אבויא דאתא גברא רבה למתא, אמר איזיל לגביה אפשר דמפר נדראי אתא לגביה אמר ליה אדעתא דגברא רבה מי נדרת? אמר לו: אפילו פרק אחד ואפילו הלכה אחת. אמר ליה: אנא הוא. נפל על אפיה, ונשקיה על כרעיה, ויהיב ליה פלגא ממוניה.

Rabbi Akiva was the shepherd of ben Kalba Savua.

The daughter of Ben Kalba Savua saw that he [Rabbi Akiva] was humble and refined. She [the daughter of Ben Kalba Savua] said to him [to Rabbi Akiva]: If I betroth myself to you, will you go to the study hall to learn Torah? He [Rabbi Akiva] 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 will you lead the life of a widow of a living man? 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 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 and he [Rabbi Akiva] said to them: Leave her alone, as my Torah knowledge and yours is actually hers.

In the meantime her father heard that a great man came to the town. He [the father of Rabbi Akiva's wife] said: I will go to him [to Rabbi Akiva]. Maybe he will nullify my vow. He [the father of Rabbi Akiva's wife] 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 [the father of Rabbi Akiva's wife] 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 [Rabbi Akiva] said to him: I am he. Ben Kalba Savua fell on his face and kissed his feet and gave him half of his money.

Comprehension Questions

? For how many years didn't Rabbi Akiva see his wife?

? What does the answer Rabbi Akiva's wife gave the *old man* in our story mean?

? How did Rabbi Akiva interpret his wife's answer to the *old man*?

? What does it mean "*my Torah knowledge and yours is actually hers*"?

? Why did Kalva Savua come to see the "Great Man"?

Analysis Questions

? What are the qualities of a "righteous man" according to our story?

? Can you describe the personalities of Rabbi Akiva, Kaba Savua, Rabbi Akiva's wife and the students?

? What is the test Rabbi Akiva's has to pass in our story?

? What are the transformations we see in our story?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

! The "Tzadik" Versus "The Rest of Us"

EPILOGUE

Appendix

Rabbi Akiva's Daughter Takes After her Mother

Appendix to the Story in Ketubot 62b

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.

Parallel Version to the Story in Ketubot 62b

Babylonian, Talmud Nedarim 50b

Rabbi Akiva became betrothed to the daughter of bar Kalba Savua. When bar Kalba Savua heard about their betrothal, he took a vow prohibiting her from eating all of his property. Despite this, she went ahead and married Rabbi Akiva.

In the winter they would sleep in a storehouse of straw, and Rabbi Akiva would gather strands of straw from her hair. He said to her: If I had the means I would place on your head a Jerusalem of Gold, a type of crown. Elijah the prophet came and appeared to them as a regular person and started calling and knocking on the door. He said to them: Give me a bit of straw, as my wife gave birth and I do not have anything on which to lay her. Rabbi Akiva said to his wife: See this man, who does not even have straw.

She said to him: Go and be a student of Torah. He went and studied Torah for twelve years before Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua. At the completion of the twelve years, he was coming home when he heard from behind his house that one wicked person was saying to his wife: Your father behaved well toward you. He was right to disinherit you. One reason is that your husband is not similar to you, i.e., he is not suitable for you. And furthermore, he has left you in widowhood in his lifetime all these years. She said to him: If he listens to me, he should be there for another twelve years. Rabbi Akiva said: Since she has given me

permission through this statement, I will go back and study more. He turned back and went to the study hall, and he was there for another twelve years. Eventually he came back accompanied by 24,000 pairs of students. Everyone went out to greet him, as he was by then a renowned teacher, and she too arose to go out to greet him. That wicked person said to her: And to where are you going? As she was excessively poor, she was not dressed in a grand manner, as fit for the wife of one so esteemed. She said to him: "A righteous man regards the life of his beast" (Proverbs 12:10). She came to present herself before Rabbi Akiva, but the Sages tried to fend her off, as they were unaware of her identity. He said to them: Leave her. Both my Torah knowledge and yours are hers. When bar Kalba Savua heard, he came and requested the dissolution of his vow, and it was dissolved.