

Avot de Rabbi Natan Nusach B 12

What were Rabbi Akiva's (95-135 CE) beginnings?

It is said: Up to the age of forty, he had not yet studied a thing. One time, while standing by the mouth of a well in Lydda, he inquired, "Who hollowed out this stone?" and was told, "Akiva, haven't you read [in scripture] that *water wears away stone* (Job 14:19)? It was water [from the well] falling upon it constantly, day after day."

At that, R. Akiva asked himself: Is my mind harder than this stone? I will go and study at least one section of Torah. He went directly to a schoolhouse, and he and his son began reading from a child's tablet. R. Akiva took hold of one end of the tablet, and his son of the other end. The teacher wrote down *alef* and *bet* for him, and he learned them; *alef* to *tav*, and he learned them; the book of Leviticus, and he learned it. He went on studying until he learned the whole Torah.

Then he went and sat before R. Eliezer and R. Joshua. "My masters," he said to them, "reveal the sense of Mishnah to me."

When they told him one *halakhah*, he went off to reason with himself. This *alef*, he wondered, what was it written for? That *bet* - what was it written for? This teaching - what was it uttered for? He kept coming back, kept inquiring of R. Eliezer and R. Joshua, until he reduced his teachers to silence.

All the twelve years that R. Akiva was with R. Eliezer, R. Eliezer paid little attention to him, so that when R. Akiva offered his first clinching argument to him, R. Joshua quoted the verse *There is the army you paid no attention to; now go out and fight it* (Judg. 9:38).

Simeon ben Eleazar said: I shall tell you a parable to illustrate what R. Akiva did. He was like a stonecutter hacking away at mountains. One time he took his pick ax in his hand, went and sat on top of the mountain, and began to chip small stones from it. Some men came by and asked him, "What are you doing?"

"I mean to uproot the mountain and cast it into the Jordan."

"Can you possibly do such a thing?" "Yes." He continued hacking away until he came to a big boulder. He placed an iron claw under it, pried it loose, uprooted it, and cast it into the Jordan. Then he spied another, even bigger boulder, placed an iron claw under it, and cast it into the Jordan, saying, "Your place is not here, but there." (By perseverance and skill, he achieved what appeared to be impossible.)

Akiva had to perform such uprooting of "big boulders" with [the instruction of] R. Eliezer and R. Joshua, in keeping with the verse *He falls to work upon the flinty rocks, he turns mountains up by the roots, he carves out channels through rock, and his eye beholds every precious thing* (Job 28:9-10).

Each day R. Akiva would gather a bundle of twigs - half of it he would sell to provide food for himself, and the other half he would use for his personal needs. His neighbors rose up in protest, saying, "Akiva, you are all but choking us with smoke! Sell us the twigs, buy oil with the money, and study by the light of a lamp." He replied, "I find many uses for the twigs. To begin with, I study by the light they give; then I keep warm by their heat; finally, I sleep on some of them."

It is said: Before R. Akiva departed from the world, he owned tables made of silver and of gold - he even ascended his couch by a stepladder made of gold. His wife used to go out shod with golden sandals and wearing a golden tiara.

"Master," his disciples said to him, "you put us to shame [before our wives] by what you are doing for her."

He replied, "Much suffering did she endure with me for the sake of Torah."