

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

RACHEL AND RABBI AKIBA: ANOTHER RETELLING OF THEIR TALE

If a man forbade himself by vow to have intercourse with his wife, Beit Shammai ruled [she must consent to the deprivation for] two weeks. Beit Hillel ruled: [only for] one week. Students may go away to study the Torah without the permission [of their wives for a period of] thirty days. Laborers [may go away without permission for only] one week. The times for conjugal duty prescribed in the Torah are: for men of indendent means, every day; for laborers, twice a week; for ass drivers once a week; for camel drivers once in thirty days; for sailors once in six months. These are the rulings of Rabbi Eliezer. M. Ketubot 5:5, B. Ketubot 61b)

Here we have the other version of Rabbi Akiba's life story. It is not focused so much on how he attains wealth as his wife's devotion to their common vision of his future as a great sage.

Rabbi Akiba was a shepherd of Ben Kalba Savua. His [Ben Kalba Savua's] daughter, saw how modest and good [the shepherd] was. She said to him, "If I became betrothed to you, would you go to [study at] the academy?" He said to her, "Yes." She was [then] modestly betrothed to him and sent him away. [When] her father heard [what she had done] he sent her from his house and vowed that she could have no benefit from his belongings.

[Rabbi Akiba] went, and spent twelve years at the academy. When he came [back home] he brought twelve thousand disciples [with him]. He heard an old man saying to her, "How long will you live like a widow [, your husband abandoning you for his studies]? She said to him, "If he would listen to me he would study another twelve years." Said [Rabbi Akiba], "I am doing what she permits." He returned and went and studied twelve more years in the academy.

When he returned] he brought 24,000 disciples with him. His wife heard [of his arrival] and went out to meet him. Her neighbors said to her, "Borrow some [decent] clothes and put them on." She said to them, "A righteous man regards the life of his beast. (Proverbs 12:10)" When she came to meet him she fell on her face [before him]. [Rabbi Akiba's] attendants [sought to] push her away [when] he said to them: Leave her alone, [for what is] mine and [what is] yours are [really] hers.

Her father heard that a great man had come [to town] and he said: I'll go to him. It is possible that he will invalidate my vow [against my daughter]. When [Kalba Savua] came to him, [Rabbi Akiba] said to him: If you had known he was a great man would you have sworn your vow? He said to him: [Had he known] even one chapter or even one single halakhah [I would not have made the vow]. [Rabbi Akiba] said to [Kalba Savua]: I am he! He fell upon his face [before Rabbi Akiba] and kissed his feet and also gave him half of his wealth. (B. Ketubot 62b-63a)

Who has the power in this story? The most powerful person, as Rabbi Akiba readily admits, is Rachel. She has the strength to withstand poverty after having lived in luxury. She is clear-eyed in her vision of what will be good for her (marrying Akiba) and good for her husband (sending him off to become a great scholar). All of Ben Kalba Savua's supposed power comes to naught when faced with his daughter's clear vision. Of course, we might also speculate that she was rebelling against a wealthy, powerful (and overbearing?) father by marrying an impoverished, illiterate shepherd. In the end, Ben Kalba Savua willingly admits defeat, wanting only to reestablish his relationship with his daughter. Thus, perfect symmetry is achieved in this legend: the illiterate, impoverished shepherd is, in the end, a learned, wealthy scholar because of the clear vision and moral power of his wife. It is Rachel who is most in touch with God's will, and willing to act on her insight, who has the most power in this story.

Discussion Questions:

1. How is this story similar to the one in Nedarim? How is it different? Do we learn anything different about the characters in the story or is it simply a retelling of a familiar legend?
2. What do you make of the focus here on Rabbi Akiba's wife's sacrifice?
3. Both this story, and the one in Nedarim, are in Aramaic rather than Hebrew, suggesting a later date of composition. Can you imagine a more contemporaneous, less idealized, version of the story? How might it go?