

Tales of the Talmud Rabbi Akiva



What were Akiva's 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 Lod, he inquired, "Who hollowed out this stone?" and was told, "Akiva, haven't you read that 'water wears away stone'?"¹—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 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.

Avot d'Rabbi Natan

R. Shimon bar Yochai said: "My teacher, R. Akiva, would expound on the verse, 'A star has risen from Jacob'²—Kusiba³ has risen from Jacob!

When R. Akiva would see Bar Kusiba he would say, "That is King Messiah!"

R. Yohanan b. Torta said to him, "Akiva! Grass will grow on your cheeks and the Son of David will not yet have come!

Masechet Ta'anit, Talmud Yerushalmi

¹ Job 14:19

² Numbers 24: 17

³ Another name for Shimon bar Kochba.



R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav:

When Moses ascended on high, he found the Blessed Holy One engaged in affixing crowns to the letters. Said Moses, “Lord of the Universe, Who stays your hand?”⁴

He answered: “There will arise a man at the end of many generations, Akiva b. Joseph by name, who will expound many, many laws from each marking.” Moses replied, “Lord of the Universe, permit me to see him!”

He replied, “Turn around.” Moses turned and sat down behind eight rows of seats [and listened to the legal arguments]. Moses had no idea what they were saying, and became distressed. But when they came to a certain subject, the disciples said to the master, “How do you know this?” and he replied “it is a law given to Moses at Mount Sinai.” Thus Moses was comforted.

At this Moses returned to the Blessed Holy One and said, “Lord of the Universe, You have such a man, and yet You give the Torah to me!” He replied “Be silent—this is My decree.” Moses continued, “Lord of the Universe, you have shown me his Torah... show me his reward!”

He replied, “Turn around.” Moses turned around, and saw them weighing out his flesh in a marketplace. “Lord of the Universe,” Moses cried out, “such Torah he had, and this is his reward!”

He replied “Be silent—this is My decree.”

Masechet Menachot, Talmud Bavli

⁴ i.e. is there anything lacking in the Torah that these crowns are necessary?