

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

HOW RABBI AKIBA DIED

Rabbi Akiba died a martyr's death at the hands of the Roman government. Perhaps it was his ability to be in this world and the world of the Pardes at the same time that allowed him to deal with his torture .

Our Rabbis taught: Once the wicked Government [Rome] issued a decree forbidding Israel to occupy themselves with the Torah. Pappus ben Judah came and found Rabbi Akiba publicly bringing gatherings together and occupying himself with the Torah. He said to him, "Akiba, are you not afraid of the Government?" He replied, "I will explain to you with a parable. To what is this [situation] similar? To a fox was once walking alongside of a river, and he saw fishes going in swarms from one place to another. He said to them, 'From what are you fleeing?' They replied, 'From the nets cast for us by people.' He said to them, 'Would you like to come up on to the dry land so that you and I can live together in the way that my ancestors lived with your ancestors?' They replied, 'Are you the one that they call the cleverest of animals? You are not clever; rather, you are foolish. If we are afraid in the element in which we live, how much more in the element in which we would die!' "So it is with us. If such is our condition when we sit and study the Torah, of which it is written, 'For it is your life and the length of your days (Deuteronomy 30:20)', if we go and neglect it how much worse off we would be!"

They said, it was only a few days until Rabbi Akiba was arrested and thrown into prison, and Pappus ben Judah was also arrested and imprisoned next to him. He said to him, "Pappus, who brought you here?" He replied, "Happy are you, R. Akiba that you have been seized for busying yourself with the Torah! Alas for Pappus who has been seized for busying himself with idle things!" When they took Rabbi Akiba out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the Shema. And while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the kingship of heaven [i.e. saying the first part of the Shema]. His students said to him, "Our teacher, even to this point?" He said to them, "All my days I have been troubled by this verse, 'with all thy soul', [which I interpret] even if He takes thy soul. I said, 'When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this?' Now that I have the opportunity shall I not fulfill it?" He prolonged the word echad [one] until he expired while saying it. A Bat Kol went forth and proclaimed, "Happy are you, Akiba, that your soul has departed with the word echad!" The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He, "Is this Torah, and is this its reward?" [He should have been] "from them that die by Thy hand, O Lord. (Psalms 17:14)" He replied to them, "Their portion is in life. (Psalms 17:14)" A Heavenly Voice went forth and proclaimed, "Happy are you, R. Akiba, that you are destined for the life of the world to come." (B. Berachot 61 b)

Akiba was persecuted during the rule of Publius Aelius Hadrian, the Roman emperor from 117-138 C.E. Hadrian decided to erect a Roman city on the ruins of Jerusalem and call it Aelia Capitolina in honor of himself. This may have been one of the causes of the Bar Kokhba Revolt which lasted from 132 to 135, and in which Akiba was involved. In addition, Jews might have expected history to repeat itself and be allowed to rebuild the Temple after 70 years as they had done after the First Temple's destruction and were preparing the way for this to happen. After his general Julius Severus crushed the revolt, Hadrian issued harsh decrees restricting Jewish activities. He made circumcision and Torah study capital offenses. After the revolt, Hadrian built a temple to Jupiter where the Temple had stood. Hadrian's decrees were not reversed until his son took the reins of power.

Akiba was executed by the Hadrianic government and became the model of Jewish martyrdom. Not only did he brave death to teach Torah, but he suffered death gladly; happy that he could genuinely fulfill yet another mitzvah with his dying breath. To this day some Jews stretch out the last word of the Shema in part, as a recollection of Akiba's faith. In Sefer Zichron Shalom, a commentary on Berachot, it is noted that Akiba was saying the first line of the Shema,

which is called the Yoke of the Kingship of Heaven. In Hebrew it is called Ol Malchut Shamayim. The first letters of these words, when rearranged, spell Shema. In other words, the acceptance of God's rule in our lives is the core of the Shema's message. To be able to fulfill the complete meaning of the Shema with all his heart and soul and body was a supreme joy to Akiba. The version of this story in the Jerusalem Talmud reports that Akiba laughed with joy as he fulfilled this mitzvah.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Akiba shows that it is possible to make death into a positive experience. How can death be given meaning today?
2. Some people draw out the last word of the Shema in remembrance of Rabbi Akiba. How will this story change your recitation of this verse?