

Look on the BRIGHT SIDE



Jewish law actually requires a positive attitude | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

THE TALMUD TEACHES¹ THAT THE FAMOUS RABBI

Akiva had 12 000 pairs of talmidim (a total of 24 000 students) and that all of them died one year during the seven-week/49-day period that we are commanded by the Torah to count (commonly referred to as Sefiras HaOmer) annually between the second day of Pesach and Shavuot. To commemorate this loss, there is an annual custom to observe a semi-mourning period between Pesach and Shavuot.

Following the death of Rabbi Akiva's students, the Talmud describes the world as "desolate", and Rashi explains this to mean that the Torah was being forgotten². There are moments in Jewish history when all seems lost – when we teeter on the verge of annihilation. This was one of those times. Can we even begin to imagine the devastation – both on a national level, as well as on a personal one for Rabbi Akiva? Here he must have thought that he had surely secured an incredibly bright future for the Jewish people – 24 000 Torah scholars to go forth and transmit Torah to the next generation – and then he watched helplessly, as

it all slipped away until there was literally nothing left. His life's work completely destroyed in the course of a few weeks.

And to drive the point home even further, Rabbi Akiva wasn't a young man when this terrible incident occurred. We're taught that at the age of 40 years old, Rabbi Akiva had never studied Torah.³ When he finally did begin to study, he went with his son to a teacher of young children and they learned together, starting at the only place they could: the very beginning – learning Aleph Beis. With the boundless support of his beloved wife, Rachel, Rabbi Akiva would eventually spend 24 consecutive years studying in yeshiva, during which he and his wife did not see each other and she lived as a virtual widow. So he was likely 65 or 70 years old, or perhaps even older, when this tremendous loss occurred.

At an age when most people are starting their retirement, cutting down on their activities, and spending time with their grandchildren, Rabbi Akiva was tested with finding the inner strength to prevent the Torah from being forgotten by

the Jewish people. And the Talmud⁴ tells us, as we might have guessed, that he succeeded, that this state of desolation dragged on until Rabbi Akiva finally picked himself up and travelled south, where he taught five new students. And through those students, he managed to re-establish a future for Torah, and along with it, the Jewish people.

So, we have to ask ourselves, how does a person pick himself up from such incredible depths? Others have faced such devastation and, unfortunately, not fared as well. So where did Rabbi Akiva find the inner strength – the inspiration and the drive – to start all over?

Rabbi Akiva taught⁵ that a person must always accustom himself to saying: "Everything that G-d does, He does for the best." And the Talmud relates an incident that happened to Rabbi Akiva and which he taught as a proof for this profoundly fundamental Jewish belief. Rabbi Akiva was travelling along on the road and he arrived at a certain town, where he sought lodging – but, unfortunately, there were no vacancies. Can you imagine travelling a great distance, arriving at your hotel exhausted from your journey, and being told that they've lost your reservation, that there's a convention in town and there simply are no vacancies? Who doesn't bristle at just the mere thought of such a situation? What was Rabbi Akiva's response? Did he ask to see the manager? Did he get angry or complain? He said, "Everything that G-d does, He does for the best," and he went and he slept overnight in a field.

At the time, Rabbi Akiva had with him: (1) a rooster – his alarm clock⁶, what we use our cell phones for nowadays; (2) a donkey – his mode of transport, ie, his car; and (3) a candle – a light source. A wind came and extinguished the candle, leaving Rabbi Akiva in utter darkness. A wild cat came and ate the rooster – no more cell phone. A lion came and ate the donkey – no more car. Rabbi Akiva was having what we would call "a really bad day". What did he think as he sat there alone in the dark bereft of his possessions? "Everything that G-d does, He does for the best." That same night, robbers came and took the people of the town

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captive. When he later learned of this, Rabbi Akiva said: “Didn’t I tell you that everything that G-d does, all of it is for the best?” Rashi explains⁷ how Rabbi Akiva saw these events: if the candle had been lit, the robbers would have seen him; if the donkey had brayed or the rooster crowed the robbers would have heard the animals and would have come and taken Rabbi Akiva captive too!

Our problem is that it isn’t always so obvious to us that what Hashem does is actually for the best! We can’t always see the many dangers that Hashem saves us from or appreciate how much worse things could have turned out than the way they actually did. It’s all too often not clear to us why we sometimes experience so many frustrations – both great and small – in our lives. And we also have our own ideas and opinions as to what really is for the best.

If it’s any consolation, even Moshe Rabbeinu struggled with this – and ironically – the episodes from the Talmud which illustrate this very point involve none other than Rabbi Akiva! The Talmud relates⁸ that at the time that Moshe went up on Har Sinai (Mount Sinai) and ascended to heaven to receive the Torah, he found Hashem sitting and attaching crowns to the letters of the Torah. So Moshe asked, “Why are You attaching crowns to the letters of the Torah?”

And Hashem answered, “There is one man – and Akiva ben Yosef is his name – and in the future he will expound on each and every tip from these crowns, mounds and mounds of halachos (laws).” Moshe then asked Hashem to let him see this

man. So Hashem told Moshe to turn around, and when he did, Moshe found himself in a classroom. He sat down at the back and listened to Rabbi Akiva as he taught. But Moshe was unable to follow what Rabbi Akiva was teaching and began to get upset over this – until the students asked for the source of a particular halacha, and Rabbi Akiva answered that the halacha in question was a halacha l’Moshe m’sinai (a law that had been given to Moshe orally on Sinai). At this point, hearing that Rabbi Akiva had attributed this teaching to him, Moshe was comforted. So Moshe returned and he came before Hashem. Having recognised the greatness of Rabbi Akiva, who could elucidate the Torah in ways that even Moshe himself could not understand, he said to Hashem: “You have a man like this, and you’re giving the Torah to me?” And Hashem replied to Moshe, “Be silent. This is what I’ve decided.” So Moshe said to Hashem, “You’ve shown me his Torah, show me his reward.” Hashem told Moshe to turn around, and when he did, Moshe found himself in a meat market, where he saw the flesh of Rabbi Akiva being weighed and sold. [As is well-known, Rabbi Akiva was tortured to death by the Romans.⁹] Moshe said to Hashem, “This is the Torah and this is its reward?” And Hashem again replied: “Be silent. This is what I’ve decided.”

We can’t fathom Hashem’s infinite thoughts; His calculations; His decisions. And we don’t have sufficient knowledge to know what truly is good or bad – or for the best. As Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch comments regarding our inability to comprehend the apparent prosperity of the

wicked and the suffering of the righteous: “[W]e do not have sufficient insight either to determine a person’s moral worth or worthlessness, or to judge whether that which befalls [a person] is indeed a blessing or a calamity. Therefore it behoves us to abstain from passing judgment in either case, and not to permit our own short-sighted view of the events we witness to influence our own decisions.”¹⁰

Throughout the course of a person’s life, there will be ups and downs – good times and bad – happy times and sad. Rabbi Akiva is teaching us a crucial lesson here: he’s telling us to mentally prepare ourselves. He’s telling us that we must train our thoughts in a very specific way so that we are ready to face the inevitable – just like a person who knows that a hurricane is imminent and spends day-after-day boarding up his windows and filling sand bags and placing them around his home, in order that, when the storm eventually does strike, he won’t be swept away by it. So important is it that a person actually does this – that the Shulchan Aruch (the Code of Jewish Law) codifies this teaching of Rabbi Akiva, requiring us to habituate ourselves to saying, “Everything that G-d does, He does for the best.”¹¹

The quality of our lives is essentially dependent on the attitude through which we filter all of our experiences. Let us be reminded of the need to constantly recognise the great lesson of Rabbi Akiva that everything that G-d does, He does for the best, regardless of our very limited ability to always see it that way, let alone to understand it. ■

¹Yevamos 62b

²Rashi on Yevamos 62b, d”h sh’mam

³Avos D’Rebbi Nosson 6:2

⁴Yevamos 62b

⁵Brachos 60b

⁶Rashi on Brachos 60b, d”h hava bahadei targ’la (*explaining that the purpose of the rooster was to wake him from sleeping*)

⁷Rashi on Brachos 61a, d”h hakol l’tovah

⁸Menachos 29b

⁹See Brachos 61b

¹⁰Gertrude Hirschler (Translator).

Chapters of the Fathers: Translation and Commentary by Samson Raphael Hirsch. Feldheim Publishers, New York. 2006. Page 70 (quoting commentary to Mishnah 4:19, Rabbi Yonai...)

¹¹Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 230:5