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PREFACE

I consider it a privilege to be writing a book about Akiva ben Yosef for The Jewish Publication Society, not only because of the significance of the subject, but because the first important work on Akiva in English was written some eighty years ago by my esteemed teacher and mentor Louis Finkelstein of blessed memory and reprinted by JPS in 1962 (*Akiba: Scholar, Saint and Martyr*). It is important, however, to make it clear that this volume is not intended in any way as an update or revision of Professor Finkelstein's monumental work. His book remains an outstanding study that still stands on its own merits. More importantly, his work and mine are fundamentally different in their aims. Professor Finkelstein, with his encyclopedic knowledge and breadth of vision, took all the sources, integrated them, and created a full-fledged biography of the great Sage, placing the sources in historical contexts according to his understanding. My work, on the other hand, makes no such attempt, since current scholarship places a great emphasis on differentiating between the reliability of various sources.

Over the past half-century much progress has been made in understanding the history of the period between the end of the Great Revolt and that of the Bar Kokhva Rebellion (73 CE–135 CE) as well as in the way in which the Rabbinic sources concerning that period are to be understood. Modern scholarship and new, more sophisticated interpretation of the Rabbinic sources have changed our perspective on many aspects of Rabbi Akiva's life and legacy. Not all scholars agree on all of these matters concerning Akiva, as is to be expected. Some seek ways to verify the historicity of at least

part of what appears in these writings; others feel that the most we can say is that these sources tell us what their writers believed and wanted us to know.

As long ago as the beginning of the last century, the great scholar Louis Ginzberg wrote that "a full history of Akiva, based upon authentic sources, will probably never be written, although he, to a degree beyond any other, deserves to be called the father of Rabbinic Judaism."[1] Some three-quarters of a century later another esteemed scholar of Rabbinics, Judah Goldin, claimed that it is not possible "to write a biography in the serious sense of the word" of any of the talmudic Sages.[2] The reasons are many, among them that none of the sources, even the oldest of them, is contemporaneous with the life of their subjects, that the sources contradict one another, and that they do not always contain accurate transcriptions of the original material. There is even some doubt as to the authorship of many of these sayings and traditions.

As time has progressed scholars have become ever more skeptical about the reliability of Rabbinic writings, to the point where some feel that nothing can be known with absolute certainty about any of the Rabbinic figures. A recent article by Rutgers University professor Azzan Yadin-Israel made the case that there is virtually nothing we can know about Akiva as a youth.[3] Avigdor Shinan of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, contends that we actually know nothing of the history of Akiva except what the writers of the sources wanted us to learn about his life.[4]

In this volume I have carefully weighed and sifted through this scholarship in order to create a more nuanced understanding of the man, to differentiate between those sources that are clearly later legends and the earlier ones, which are closer to the facts, as nearly as they can be determined. I have endeavored to differentiate between the more reliable, factual traditions and the later, fanciful stories and to relate whatever can be gleaned from them, leaving the rest to our imagination. And so this work is not and could not be a

full and detailed biography of Akiva, since it deals only with those parts of his life about which there is reasonably reliable information.

I have also striven to elucidate Akiva's methodology and ideology wherever possible, for when all is said and done, it was Akiva's unceasing work in preserving and molding Jewish Law and legend that made him the outstanding figure he was and that had such a great impact on the development of Rabbinic Judaism.

The sources that tell of Akiva's life, especially those concerning the start of his Jewish learning and of his late years and his death, are found primarily first in early tannaitic literature and then in later talmudic and aggadic works. The earlier writings were all composed in the Land of Israel. They include the Mishnah—the compilation of mainly legal discussions and conclusions by the Sages who lived before the year 200 CE, as compiled by Rabbi Judah the Prince; the Tosefta, material by those same Sages that was not included in the Mishnah; tannaitic midrashim, expositions of the texts of four books of the Torah—the *Mekhilta* (Exodus), the *Sifra* (Leviticus), *Sifre Numbers*, and *Sifre Deuteronomy*; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, material connected to the section of the Mishnah known as *Avot* (the Fathers); the minor tractate *Semahot*, concerning death and mourning—all produced in their final form between the third and fourth centuries CE. The somewhat later works from the Land of Israel include the Jerusalem Talmud (c. 500 CE), *Genesis Rabbah*, and others. The major work from Babylonia is the Babylonian Talmud, completed around 600 CE.

I have attempted to separate these sources by chronology. I view the earlier ones from the Land of Israel as more reliable, since they are closer to Akiva in both time and place. By comparing these to the Babylonian Talmud, one can see the way in which the earlier sources served as a basis for the later ones and that these later writings added much legendary material and often changed what had come before. This does not mean that everything in the early material is necessarily factual. Even there, literary forms and fictional fantasies had sometimes been imposed on whatever facts

were known. On the other hand, material is sometimes found in later sources, especially in casual asides, that seem to reflect ancient traditions and should be taken seriously.

Legal matters are thought to be more reliable than historical ones, since the Sages made every possible attempt to memorize and pass on those teachings and traditions exactly as received from one generation to another. Nevertheless, even there caution is advised, since we sometimes find the same laws or sayings ascribed in different places to different Sages. Furthermore, early manuscripts do not always read the same as later, printed texts.

DEALING WITH LEGENDS

Some of the most important people in human history have turned into legends, legends that, through the years of telling and retelling, have become fact and reality. The heroes in Homer and in the great Greek dramas may have been based on real people, but to know what they really were like, what they really did and said, is impossible. They live through the legends that they generated. Similarly important religious figures such as Abraham, Moses, and King David are known to us only through the literature that brings them to life. The same is true of the very early central figures in Christianity and Islam. The separation between fact and fiction, between life and legend, is murky indeed. This is also the case of the great Sages of Israel, be it Yohanan ben Zakkai, Hillel, and Shammai or the subject of this book, Akiva ben Yosef, whose lives are known to us exclusively through the Rabbinic literature in which stories are told of their actions and teachings and where sayings are recorded in their names.

The legend of Akiva has become part and parcel of Jewish lore, so much so that it has influenced Jewish life and even Jewish Law and practice. His story has been told and retold in many forms from ages past to this very day, in poetry, song, and fiction, as well as in numerous scholarly tomes and articles. With the possible exception of Hillel, Akiva is the most well-known of all the early

masters, a beloved figure representing the best features of Rabbinic leadership and the willingness to give one's all, including life itself, for the sake of God and Torah. It is no wonder that his name has become associated with so many Jewish institutions and movements.

Yet there is no doubt that it is easier to tell Akiva's story in fiction than in historical prose, since the sources we have for him are incomplete and are spread over several centuries, none of which is closer than a few hundred years after his death. Worst of all, they often contradict one another. So "the story" that is woven so deeply in our consciousness is really a simplification and an amalgamation of those sources, sewn and patched together in a way that has become an appealing legend. In the end it is more an idealization of a Rabbinic Sage than it is a reliable story about Akiva the actual man. His legend will undoubtedly live on, as do so many fascinating legends. And with the tools now available to us we can begin to understand how the legends about him were created and what they were intended to achieve. Legend aside, the search for truth and honesty compels us to be willing to make distinctions and to appreciate Akiva for what he was and what he accomplished, as well as for what he has become in Rabbinic legend.

Here in this volume I've striven to separate fact from fiction concerning his life and have tried to discern his basic beliefs and his contribution to Rabbinic Judaism, as far as that is possible. I have made copious use of the many scholarly works published on the subject over the past several decades and have indicated in the text, and more completely in the endnotes, the names of the scholars and their works that I have used to help me create my own ideas. I of course take full responsibility for whatever I have written and hope that it will serve to shed light on the life and work of one of the greatest and most unusual of our Sages, Akiva ben Yosef.

One

AKIVA'S EARLY LIFE

Akiva ben Yosef may be the most well-known and beloved of the early Rabbinic Sages, the Tannaim,[1] but his life is largely a mystery and will probably always remain so. As the Talmud scholar Louis Ginzberg famously wrote, "A full history of Akiva, based upon authentic sources, will probably never be written, although he, to a degree beyond any other, deserves to be called the father of Rabbinical Judaism."[2] Akiva ben Yosef was "the man who marked out a path for Rabbinical Judaism for almost two thousand years."[3] His contribution to Rabbinic Judaism was so great that tradition designated him as one of the two "Fathers of the world," the other being his contemporary rival, Rabbi Ishmael.[4] In an early midrash Akiva was termed one of three without whom "the Torah would have been forgotten in his time." The others were Shaphan, the scribe who brought the newly discovered book of Deuteronomy to King Josiah in the sixth century BCE (2 Kings 22:14), and Ezra, the scribe who returned from the Babylonian exile and held a public ceremony affirming the divinity and authority of the Torah in the fifth century BCE (Nehemiah 8–9).[5]

When the Talmud wanted to prove the importance of Rabbi Judah the Prince, who was said to have been the greatest sage since Moses himself,[6] it stated that he had been born on the very day that Akiva died,[7] thus indicating that Akiva could be replaced only

by one as great as that. Yet of Akiva's early life, we know virtually nothing. The sources, even those that are clearly legendary, tell nothing of him until he was a mature man. We do not even know when he was born.

The generally accepted assumption is that he died at an advanced age during the Bar Kokhva Rebellion and the Hadrianic persecution, somewhere around the year 132 CE,[8] although, as we shall see in chapter 8, the sources concerning that are far from clear. Avot de-Rabbi Natan B (*ARN*-B, in chapter 12), considered by many to be an early tannaitic work, posits that Akiva lived 120 years, in which case he would have been born around 12 CE and begun his studies in 52 CE. This is impossible, since that is prior to the destruction of the Temple and to the founding of the schools in Yavneh and Lod (Lydda) where Akiva studied. Obviously, then, 120 years is a schematic figure, taken from the biblical life of Moses, and is, in biblical symbolic terms, the life span of worthy individuals. If we assume that Akiva lived a long life, he would have been eighty or so when he died; therefore his birth would have been somewhere around the year 50 CE (the second half of the first century CE), some twenty years before the destruction of the Second Temple and the beginning of the Roman exile.

Akiva was born and lived most of his life near Lod in the lowlands of Judea, far from the metropolis of Jerusalem and the seat of religious studies. The name Akiva, which was not uncommon at the time,[9] is a variation of Akavya. The Hebrew root is the same as in the name Yaakov (Jacob), meaning the heel, the curved part of the foot, or possibly "to follow after."[10] In most Hebrew sources it is spelled in the Aramaic fashion with an *alef* at the end, but in the Jerusalem Talmud the form is the Hebrew one, ending with a *heh.*

Aside from the fact that his father's name was Yosef, the sources tell us nothing about the members of his family or their background. Nothing is known of his mother or any siblings. It would have been

unusual for a family to have only one child, unless the mother died prematurely or could not have any other children. Of course the argument from silence is hardly conclusive, since Rabbinic sources make no attempt at writing complete biographies of the Sages and show little interest in telling such stories unless they contribute to some important ethical or legal teaching. Either Akiva grew up in a normal family, surrounded by mother and father and brothers and sisters, none of whom was considered important enough to be mentioned, or else he was an only child, possibly without a mother to tend to him through his adolescent years. All of that can only be left to our imagination.

Concerning the socioeconomic status of his family, again the sources are silent. There are, however, a few clues that lead to the conclusion that they were neither well educated nor wealthy. He had no scholars in his family background, a fact he himself admitted. In the Jerusalem Talmud, one of the earliest works that contains his sayings, Akiva remarks that when Rabban Gamliel II was forced to step down as head of the academy in Yavneh, he, Akiva, was not appointed in Gamliel's place because others, who were not greater than he in learning, had greater ancestors. "Happy is the man whose ancestors earn him merit," he said. "Happy is the man who has a peg upon which he can raise himself!"[11]

In an offhand remark found in the Babylonian Talmud that has the ring of truth to it, Akiva recalls that in his youth he was an *am ha-aretz* (an ignorant peasant), something there was no reason for him to say were it not a fact. "When I was an *am ha-aretz*, if I encountered a scholar, I would have bitten him like an ass!"[12] Although in the original meaning of the term an *am ha-aretz* was simply a country person, it had come to mean illiterate and therefore ignorant.

Again, all the sources, early and late, insist that he began to learn to read at the age of forty. Forty may be an exaggeration, as was 120, but the meaning is clear: he was a mature individual, even married with a child, yet probably unlettered, when he began his studies.[13]

Looking back at his early years, remembering what he had done in his youth, Akiva once remarked to his students, "I give thanks to You, O Lord my God, that You have set my portion among those who sit in the house of study and not among those who loiter at street corners in the marketplace!"[14] That is what he had been—and what he might still have been had not something occurred that changed his life.

As for his financial standing, again the same early sources in Avot de-Rabbi Natan note Akiva's lack of resources when he began to study. "In the future judgment, Rabbi Akiva will put all the poor in a guilty light. For if they are asked, 'Why did you not study Torah?' and they will say, 'Because we were poor,' they shall be told, 'Indeed, was not Rabbi Akiva even poorer and in wretched circumstances!'"[15] Akiva was forced to depend first on his own labors and then on his wife's help during that period of time. Had his family been better off, it would be expected that they would have helped him, but at no time is there any mention of them in that regard. All of these things together indicate that Akiva's background, if not one of profound poverty, was at the very least of a family without status and without learning. The chances of a person from such a background becoming one of the foremost Sages of Israel, famous, influential, and beloved, would seem to have been nil, and yet, as is well-known, that is what happened.[16]

The section of Judea where Akiva was born and in which he grew up and lived much of his life was in the lowlands, not far from the coast of the Mediterranean Sea[17] near the city of Lod.[18] Unlike the hill country that led from there up to Jerusalem, it was fertile agricultural land and was populated and owned by prosperous farmers. If, as seems likely, Yosef was not one of them, this family might have belonged to the landless poor, to those who worked either as day laborers or as tenant farmers. According to a third-century source (Tractate Semahot, 9, usually appended to the Babylonian Talmud), when Akiva's father died, others bared their shoulders as a sign of mourning, but Akiva did not. Since

the law was that one does not perform that act of mourning if the parents "were not worthy," this may be another indication of the low status of his family.

Tenant farmers lived a life of uncertainty and penury. Much of what they produced had to be given to their landlord. If that were the case for Akiva's family, then Yosef would have had little time for his son and would have had little to teach him except for the skills needed to eke out a living as a landless peasant. Illiterate himself, it would never have occurred to him to bother to attain schooling for his child, nor was such schooling easily available at that time for country folk without independent means.

Akiva's childhood and early adulthood, when he was an ignorant peasant, an *am ha-aretz*, took place, then, in the final years of the Second Temple, which was destroyed in the year 70 CE. In that prewar period, living in the lowlands, far from the metropolis of Jerusalem and the center of religious and political intrigue, he would have been ignorant of the major currents of Jewish thought and practice that flourished at that time. All that we know for certain in that regard is that he hated the Pharisaic Sages with a passion.[19]

THE PHARISEES AND OTHER SECOND TEMPLE SECTS

The Second Temple period was a time when the books of the Torah were consolidated and became the accepted constitution of the Jewish people. But the interpretation of the Torah became a matter of conflict, and different sects emerged, each contending that its interpretation was the correct one. The three major sects, as described by the Jewish historian Josephus, were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes, although other groups, such as the Dead Sea Sect, also existed. In general the divisions reflected socioeconomic differences as well as religious distinctions. The Sadducees constituted the wealthy classes, including the priesthood, and taught a conservative approach to religion, stressing the literal interpretation of the Torah and rejecting any ideas or laws that were not found in the written text. The Pharisees, although

a small sect themselves, were favored by the plebian masses. They represented the urban population and taught a progressive approach to Judaism, interpreting the Torah in such a way as to allow for new ideas and new developments and including oral traditions as well as written ones. There were significant divisions within the Pharisaic ranks: the more liberal School of Hillel and the more rigid School of Shammai.[20] Even here there were socioeconomic divisions: the Shammaites included people of greater wealth such as landowners in the fertile lowlands, while the Hillelites were generally the poorer classes, townsfolk or farmers of the hilly countryside.[21]

Most Jews seemed to favor the Pharisees, even though they did not actually belong to that sect or follow all their strict observances. "They observed the Sabbath and holidays, heard the scriptural lessons in synagogue on Sabbath, abstained from forbidden foods . . . circumcised their sons on the eighth day, and adhered to the 'ethical norms' of folk piety."[22] However, the Pharisees themselves described another group whom they called *amei ha-aretz*, literally "people of the land" or country people, but in essence meaning ignorant and boorish. This was not a sect or organized group, but a term that described those individuals who were not careful in their observance and therefore not to be trusted, and it was generally applied to small landowners and tenant farmers.[23] One definition of an *am ha-artez* was "whoever has sons and does not rear them to study Torah."[24] As *amei ha-aretz*, Akiva's family would not have been particularly scrupulous about matters of ritual purity or of tithes. It is doubtful if they would have identified with any of the religious movements that flourished at that time.

During the time of the Great Revolt (66–73 CE), Roman armies swept through the lowlands where Akiva lived, but there were no great battles or devastation such as occurred in Jerusalem or in the Galilee, where the fighting was fierce. If any of this made an impression upon the young Akiva, it is never recorded that he ever spoke of it or alluded to it in his teachings. His negative attitude to

the Romans, however, especially in his later years, may have been influenced by what he saw and experienced at that time.

Prior to the Great Revolt, extremist freedom fighters had roamed freely through the villages of Judea, where Akiva lived, operating there unhindered.[25] What impression had they made on the young man? There is nothing to indicate that he took part in the uprising in any way, but he could hardly have been ignorant of what was going on around him. Unlike some of the Pharisaic leaders of that time, such as Yohanan ben Zakkai, who counseled acquiescence to the Romans, fifty years later during the years of the Hadrianic decrees and the Bar Kokhva Rebellion, Akiva never did any such thing. If the opinions of his pupil Shimon bar Yohai are anything like his teacher's, Akiva had nothing but disdain for the Romans and welcomed the possibility of their overthrow. For Akiva, Rome was Edom, the enemy of Israel, as Esau had been the enemy of Jacob. He was one of those who felt that "the voice of Jacob" was the cry of oppressed Jews against "the hands of Esau"—the Romans who killed so many Jews at the time of the revolt.[26]

To an unlearned youth, any Pharisaic Sages who appeared in his area would have been perceived as arrogant men who despised people like himself and made extravagant demands for strictness of observance and payment of all sorts of tithes the poor could hardly afford. His attitude might have been similar to that expressed in Christian scripture as the way Galilean peasants thought of the Pharisees a few generations earlier. Of course the Christian scripture cannot be taken as unprejudiced, since its intent is to show that the teachings of Jesus were superior and more loving than those of the Pharisees. Nevertheless even within Rabbinic writings there are descriptions of some within the Pharisaic group who were haughty and overbearing. "The plague of Pharisees brings destruction upon the world," says the Mishnah.[27] And an early teaching cites seven types of Pharisees and describes their faults, while also quoting King Jannai as saying, "Fear not the Pharisees and the non-Pharisees but

the hypocrites who are the Pharisees because their deeds are the deeds of Zimri but they expect a reward like Phineas."[28] An unlettered youth would hardly have made a distinction between a true Pharisee and the hypocritical imitators.

Akiva experienced the Great Revolt against the Romans, ending in the destruction of the Second Temple, the razing of Jerusalem, the deaths of thousands upon thousands of Judeans, the exile and slavery of thousands more, and the armies of Rome. Only after that, in the postwar period, did he begin to study and change his way of life.

FROM TEMPLE WORSHIP TO TORAH STUDY

When the Great Revolt was over, much of Judea recovered swiftly. Landowners there had capitulated and were permitted to retain their land and continue farming.[29] Nevertheless everything in Jewish life changed radically, beginning with the way in which Jews governed themselves. All power was now in the hands of the Romans, who retained Caesarea as their capital. Jerusalem ceased to exist as far as Jews were concerned. The Sanhedrin that had sat there no longer functioned. With the disappearance of the Temple and the cessation of the cult, the power of the priesthood also vanished. The Sadducean group no longer existed. The Essenes and other sects had also vanished. The Sages—the leaders of Pharisaic Judaism—remained the only influential source of religious teaching. Under the leadership of Yohanan ben Zakkai they assumed whatever political power they could, and the seat of power transferred from devastated Jerusalem to the center of learning and jurisprudence that Ben Zakkai had established in Yavneh,[30] south of Jaffa, not far from where Akiva lived.

For all intents and purposes, Yavneh became the new Jerusalem, the center of the Rabbinic court and the source of Jewish learning. Ben Zakkai went so far as to name his court the Sanhedrin.[31] There was increased activity and more public learning now in that area than before. Perhaps that began to make a difference to Akiva's

attitude. Otherwise how are we to understand the metamorphosis that changed this youth, who hated men of learning, into one who desired to enter into the circle of the learned? The Pharisees' attitude toward people like Akiva and his father was characterized by the distinguished historian Salo Baron as ambivalent, "at once cherished as ardent followers and despised as ritually unreliable illiterates."[32] No wonder Akiva would have torn apart any Sage from that group. But the Pharisees no longer existed as a sect. Instead there were learned men, Sages, now known as Rabbis, who sought to spread the knowledge of the Torah and of Jewish practice among the masses, creating a Judaism that could outlive the loss of the central sanctuary, the Temple, the sacrificial worship, and the Priesthood, a Judaism that could exist even without independence and self-government. These Sages became the predominant religious leaders of Judea and played an ever more important role in the life of the nation. Torah study became the center of religious life, and teachers roamed the land eager to impart such knowledge. The disputes that had led to divisions and the creation of sects that did not recognize one another's legitimacy had disappeared. Now there were differences of opinion and discussions and disputes, but the overwhelming desire was for inclusiveness and for respect for differences.[33] This new emphasis on the study of Torah[34] together with the increased importance of prayer transformed Judaism and enabled it to survive the crises of the destruction of the Temple.

Perhaps Akiva encountered these Sages, heard their public lessons, which took place in the open where anyone could listen, and began to feel the need for something more in his life. Without learning, without skills, without resources, what kind of a life could he look forward to? Scratching out a poor living as his father had done, perhaps finding a wife, if he could even afford one. For a young man of intelligence—and his subsequent history surely proves that he was extraordinarily gifted—such a life must have been unbearably frustrating.

Both fact and fiction are replete with tales of young people with

brilliant, unrecognized potential who were discovered by a teacher or some other person who was able to discern the hidden talent and help the otherwise unknown youth to realize himself and achieve greatness. The Akiva of legend has been provided with such a person in the unlikely character not of a teacher or professional, but of a young woman with whom Akiva falls in love—his future wife. But is this fact or fiction?