

**Akiva Revisited**  
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In honor of the launching of Rabbi Reuven Hammer's book, *Akiva: Life, Legend, Legacy* (The Jewish Publication Society, 2015)

We are all indebted to Reuven's lucid and admirably documented contribution on Rabbi Akiva. It is extremely well written, a joy to read, and a rare opportunity to learn about the multi-dimensional personality of probably the greatest of the Tannaim. His book evinces intensive, extensive, and meticulous research as he skillfully draws together the multiple Rabbinic sources like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle in order to capture and bring to life Rabbi Akiva. It is a remarkable and enlightening work of biography.

To all these plaudits I cannot but add the word "audacious." I think that there are very few who would deign to attempt such a study after two classics have been written on Rabbi Akiva, classics by two of Reuven's very own respected and esteemed teachers! First, there was the volume of Professor Louis Finkelstein ל"ר's: *Akiba: Scholar, Saint and Martyr*, written in 1936, whose third printing, in paperback, appeared in 1978 (Atheneum Press, New York). This is an encyclopedic work which delineates Akiba's life, stage by stage, accentuated by tempting chapter headings, heralding his adventurous life career: In the Depths, Among the Foothills, On the Heights, A Perilous Summit, Approaching the Precipice, and The Apotheosis. Reuven's intention, however, was not to produce an updated version of this work; rather, he sought to wrestle with the reliability of all these sources in the light of

modern scholarship. He attempts to weigh and evaluate sources, some of which were only recorded hundreds of years after Akiva's death. He took upon himself, in an exemplary fashion, the task of sifting out legend from history, fact from fiction, and life from legend, in order to describe life colored by legend.

And, thus, we find in Reuven's book a range of reservations and doubts regarding the authenticity of many traditions attributed to Akiva. After reading the volume, one feels like asking, "Would the real historical Akiva please stand up!" Akiva today, in our eyes and understanding, is a legend who has become a reality: The shepherd who learned the alphabet with his son; the husband whose wife encouraged him, upon reaching the age of 40, to commence his studies; the one, who after some two decades returned as the wealthiest and learned of all the sages, rewarding his wife with a "Jerusalem of Gold"; the outstanding teacher with myriad students; the man of action and spokesperson for his people in Rome; the one of four who entered *pardes* בשלום and exited בשלום; the one who saved *Shir Ha-Shirim* from *genizah* by describing it as the holiest book in the Bible, קודש הקודשים; the one who remarked, "הכל צפוי והרשות נתונה", voicing the paradox of free will and providence; the master of both הלכה and אגדה; the one who collected, arranged, preserved, and systematized the many unwritten traditions of the Rabbis up to his time; and the man who was imprisoned and tortured whose last words, while reciting the שמע, were, "בכל נפשך", "even if He takes your life." You can indeed read all these sources in Prof. Finkelstein's volume, but Reuven not only cites them; he also objectively evaluates them.

I believe that Reuven's task was also exacerbated by having to take into consideration Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel's magisterial three-volume Hebrew work: תורה מן השמים באספקלריה של הדורות של הדורות, translated by Gordon Tucker as *Heavenly Torah as Refracted through the Generations* (London, Continuum, 1976).

Prof. Heschel ז"ל acutely and profoundly delineated two major schools of Rabbinic thought personified by the only two figures in all of Aggadic Rabbinic literature who are called אבות העולם, "Fathers of the World," that is, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva. The former, Rabbi Ishmael, was the rational, critical, straightforward, lucid, literal interpreter of Scripture, stripping the Bible of anthropomorphisms ( דברה תורה בלשון ) (בני אדם; אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו). Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, viewed Scripture in a transcendent, mystical, esoteric, and apocalyptic manner, colored by a poetic spirit. Since everything in the Torah is written in divine language, it contains no extraneous word, letter, jot, or tittle. One should always expand, not confine, interpretation. For example, according to Rabbi Akiva, the first את in בראשית ברא includes the sun, the moon, and the stars, while the second את refers to the grass, herbage, and even the Garden of Eden. Rabbi Ishmael, for his part, criticizes him and remarks that both occurrences of את are the natural syntax of the verse. A further example, not cited in Reuven's work, is in connection with the ציצית in Num. 15:39, that one should make fringes on the corners of one's garment, and then וראיתם אותו. Rabbi Ishmael the פשטן says, "Look at it," i.e., the ציצית. But according to Rabbi Akiva, if you follow this commandment, וראיתם אותו, then you will see אותו, Him.

I view, Rabbi Ishmael as סלם מוצב ארצה and Rabbi Akiva as וראשו מגיע השמימה

After these masterful works, I asked myself before reading his book, "Would Reuven be able to plough his own path and not merely repeat those of his venerable predecessors?" I am happy to say that he did, and he did so very successfully.

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Now two personal anecdotes about Heschel in this connection, which I wish to share with you before I continue. Once sitting together with Heschel in the JTS dining room, I asked him with whom of the two does he identify, Rabbi Ishmael or Rabbi Akiva. Remember, this is Heschel who wrote major works on the Prophets,

Maimonides, and Abarbanel, and the same Heschel who composed *God in Search of Man*, *Man is Not Alone*, and *The Sabbath*. His answer, clever as always, was, and I quote: שני תאומים מתרוצצים בקרבי. And Gordon Tucker, in his preface, without knowing of this conversation, came to the same conclusion when he wrote, “Heschel didn’t want to take sides.”

A second anecdote: I had a somewhat similar problematic situation as you, Reuven, but nevertheless, totally different. I was the Associate Editor of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, assisting my teacher of blessed memory, Professor H. L. Ginsberg, with a million(!)-word allotment for entries on the Bible (the second largest after the entry “Contemporary Judaism”). Since I realized that I would be reading and editing for some years, I selected for myself to write only a very few entries, except for one, and that was the major entry on “Prophets and Prophecy.” At that time, and up until now, I was and am very influenced by Heschel’s remarkable contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon of prophecy. I was afraid that my entry would merely repeat Heschel’s, written in miniscule. So I made a very sober decision to compose my entry with all that was *not* found in Heschel’s book, with the exception of the opening paragraph.

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Reuven, your task was a bit easier, since you didn’t have to start anew, but rather skillfully and creatively integrate, mold afresh, and add your own insightful and prudent approach to the understanding of Rabbi Akiva. It was as though you, Reuven, also entered *pardes* and came out not only unscathed but even energized and fulfilled.

Now, allow me to add my personal disappointment—neither with the content or structure of the book, nor with Reuven’s superb research or fluent prose, but with the sober thought that came with his pertinent conclusions. So much so, that what I,

and may I add many of you present here, assumed to be historical fact, turned out to be legendary “history.” I wish to refer in particular to two major stories, one probably the most well known in the life of Rabbi Akiva and the other which touches me personally. First, the account of his martyrdom, that with his final breath, he expired while reciting the word אהד. I quote from Bavli, Berakhot 61b: “When Rabbi Akiva was being led to execution, it was the time for the recitation of the Sh’ma. They [the Romans] were combing his flesh with combs of iron while he was accepting upon himself the kingship of heaven. His disciples said to him, “Our master—even at this point?” He said to them, “All my life I was troubled by this verse—‘with all your soul’ [בכל נפשך] — [meaning] even if someone takes your soul! I said, ‘When will this come to me and I will fulfill it?’ And now that it has come to me, shall I not fulfill it?!” He prolonged the word אהד, “one”, until his soul departed. In Reuven’s words, “It is a much later literary creation glorifying martyrdom” (p. 171).

Second, I’m sure many of you here have heard of my discovery of “Jerusalem of Gold” associated with Rabbi Akiva. Therefore, I will save you an additional hour of listening to me now... but allow me an extremely brief summary. It was reported that Akiva, in his youthful poverty, promised his wife Rachel (to whom, by the way, Reuven dedicated his book, to his very own Rachel) that were he ever able to afford it, he would make her a gift of a “Jerusalem of Gold”—a promise which was eventually fulfilled when he, it is told, became very affluent toward the end of his life. After an intensive examination of the Rabbinic sources that equate the term “city of gold” with “Jerusalem of Gold,” I was able to show that this was a descriptive term for a crown of gold in the form of a city wall, with its turrets and towers. So why am I disappointed? The identification of the crown is correct, but many of the manifold anecdotes connected with Akiva’s life now appear to be legendary—and I had taken them naïvely at face value.

I know that you are all waiting for one critical remark about Reuven's work. Well, here it is: Reuven, when your book hopefully goes into future printings, you might consider adding more details regarding some of the sources; for example, you cite the Mekhilta by page, but you do not mention which edition, which makes it difficult to examine the source itself. And that's it for my criticism!

In sum: Reuven, you are to be heartily congratulated for producing yet another book that may be added to your list of prodigious publications. Yet when one reads extremely carefully, one will discover that Rabbi Hammer, the theologian, the scholar, and the sober commentator on the momentous religious and political issues of our times and our Movement, could not but avoid deftly and subtly, leaving his own indelible imprint on the conclusion of his research, and I quote from p. 183: "Akiva's reinterpretation of Jewish law in light of current developments and needs remains an important principle for those who see Judaism changing and evolving with the times."

ראובן, יישר כחך!