

# AND RABBI AKIVA *Laughed...*

*What response is appropriate when hearing the battle cries of the invincible Roman army? What should be the reaction when seeing ruined Jerusalem and the Holy Temple's rubble? What is the proper response of a disciple seeing his beloved teacher dying in torment...?*

**L**aughter? Certainly not. But according to the Talmud, such was Rabbi Akiva's response in these very situations.

Roman battle cries heard miles away caused the sages to weep. Rabbi Akiva laughed.

Frolicking foxes on the Temple Mount — where once only the high priest dare tread — brought tears to the eyes of the sages. Rabbi Akiva laughed.

The death throes of their teacher, the saintly Rabbi Eliezer, wrenched sobs from the throats of the sages. Rabbi Akiva laughed.

The destruction of Jerusalem can be called the Jewish tragedy *extrordinaire*. It claimed millions of lives and unleashed a 2,000 year torrent of crusades, pogroms, *jihads* and holocaust. Arguably, it is the worst thing that ever happened to the Jewish people.

The death of a Torah scholar, not merely a Jewish tragedy, is a global one. Because "Torah scholars increase peace in the world."

In each case, the destruction of Jerusalem and the death of a Torah scholar, laughter would seem the most inappropriate of reactions. How, then, is Rabbi Akiva to be understood?

## **Simcha - Happiness**

Happiness has many expressions, and in Hebrew there is a word for each. The happiness expressed in laughter is called *Simcha*.

Sometimes people laugh. Every once in a while something strikes their funny bone, and they giggle, chuckle or burst out howling. Why? What causes the *simcha* of laughter?

Rabbi Saadia Gaon offers a novel insight into this phenomenon: When a person suddenly gains a straight perception of reality, the result is laughter. A flash of reality obliterates time-honored falsehoods, and the soul laughs.

This novel idea, the link between truth and laughter, is expressed in Psalms:

”אור זרוע לצדיק”

”ולישרי לב שמחה...”

“Light is sown for the righteous, and for the straight of heart, *simcha*...”

Bare to the truth, the ‘straight of heart’ are ever open to deeper and deeper perceptions of reality. Thus, their heart is sown with ‘*simcha*,’ the joy expressed in laughter.

”פקודי ה' ישרים משמחי לב...”

“Hashem's commandments are ‘straight,’ they bring *simcha* to the heart...”

Hashem's commandments bring *simcha* because they are ‘straight.’ Torah study and observance confront a person with hitherto unrealized insight, hence *simcha* and laughter.

When Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, Rabbi of the Lubavitch Chassidim, was arrested for organizing a network of Torah education in Russia, a KGB officer put

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*“ A flash of reality obliterates old illusions, and the soul laughs.”*

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a gun to his head and demanded he name his col-laborators. The Rabbi laughed.

No believing Jew is afraid to declare, "I believe in the World to Come." But a loaded gun brings the existence of the World to Come into such crisp focus, the alternative is instantly reduced to absurdity.

And so Rabbi Akiva laughed. He laughed because he excelled in the quality of 'straightness of heart.' His keen perception of reality allowed him immediately to glean the kernel of truth from the very event his comrades mourned.

## Renewal - Consolation

• "Akiva, why do you laugh?" the sages asked him when they heard the clamor of Roman legions.

"Why do you cry?" Rabbi Akiva replied. "Idol worshipers dwell in peace and security, while the Holy Temple is burnt to the ground ... shall we not cry?"

"That's why I'm laughing," said Rabbi Akiva. "If this is how G-d rewards the Romans — who are so wicked and cruel — for the good deeds they sometimes do, how much more will be the reward of the righteous people in the World to Come."

• "Akiva, how can you laugh?" they asked standing at the Temple ruins.

"Why do you cry?" he replied.

"The Holy of Holies about which it's written, 'Any unauthorized person who enters shall die,' and now foxes play there? Shall we not cry?"

"That's why I'm laughing," said Rabbi Akiva. "Seeing the fulfillment of the prophecy — *"Zion will be plowed like a field"* — I more deeply internalize the knowledge that *all* the prophecies will be fulfilled, including those that foretell the rebuilding of Jerusalem!"

• At their teacher's deathbed, Rabbi Akiva explains:

"Our teacher, Rabbi Eliezer, enjoyed an ideal life ... his wine never soured, his oil never went bad. He was completely successful in everything. I had a suspicion that he

was somehow receiving his reward in this life, and that he had no part in the World to Come. Now that I see his suffering, I realize he's being purged of whatever minute sin he may have committed, and that his reward in the next world remains intact."

• And faced with death by torture for the 'crime' of teaching Torah, Rabbi Akiva laughed. "All my life I've been waiting to fulfill the concept 'You shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul...' and now I finally have the chance."

May we all merit to become 'straight of heart,' to approach Rabbi Akiva's depth of truth. And then, may we say, as the sages did, "Akiva, you have comforted us. Akiva, you have comforted us."

### Sources:

- Tractate Makkot 24a
- Tractate Sanhedrin 101a
- Tractate Menachot 61b
- Talmud Yerushalmi, Berachot 9:5

**"Akiva, you have comforted us.  
Akiva, you have comforted us."**

The Zohar reveals Rabbi Akiva's name hinted in the very verse so aptly depicting his outstanding straightness of heart:

<i>light</i>	<i>ohR</i>
<i>is sown</i>	<i>zaruA</i>
<i>for the righteous</i>	<i>latzadiK</i>
<i>&amp; for the straight</i>	<i>u'lyishrel</i>
<i>of heart</i>	<i>leV</i>
<i>happiness</i>	<i>simchA</i>

Take the last letter of each word, and what does it spell?  
**R' AKIVA!**