

ROCK ON AKIVA!

by Community Contributor

"You shall love your fellow as yourself - I am *Hashem*."

Rashi states the following:

"The *Tanna R' Akiva* said, '[You shall love your fellow as yourself] is a general rule throughout the entire *Torah*.'"

When entering any profession, one doesn't get promoted automatically to a new position. He needs to work hard to get it.

If that's the case, how did Rebbe Akiva earn the title of *tanna*, which means *teacher*?

The *Gemara* says, "Rebbe Akiva was a shepherd for Ben Kalba Savua. His daughter saw that he was modest and of fine character. She asked him, 'If I marry you, will you go to the *Beis Medrash* to study *Torah*?' He said to her, 'Yes!' He then married her in secret and she sent him away to the *Beis Medrash*..."

At what age did Rebbe Akiva start learning *Torah*? When he was forty years old and he had not learned anything.

What turned him around? One time he was standing near a well and asked, "Who made a hole in this stone?" It was said to him, "The water which constantly falls every day." Akiva, don't you know the *posuk*, "Water erodes stones"? Rabbi Akiva immediately inferred the teaching regarding himself and said, "If something as soft as water can carve a hole in solid rock, how much more so can words of *Torah* - which is hard as iron - make an indelible impression on my heart." He immediately returned to study *Torah*, for forty years.

From this story, we are privy to the moment of *insight* which begins Rabbi Akiva's spiritual odyssey from ignorant shepherd to legendary scholar. It's interesting that he made this insight with the *water* and *stone* at forty. What is so unique about forty? Forty is the age when man attains insight. In addition, the *Gemara* says that *Water* is compared to *Torah* and the *Yeitzer Hara* is compared to a *Stone*. When your *Yeitzer Hara* is overpowering you, through learning *Torah*, you can diminish his power over you. As the *Medrash* says, "If you toil very much in the *Torah's* words, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* will remove the *Yeitzer Hara* from you."

We said that after Rebbe Akiva's epiphany with the rock, "He immediately returned to study *Torah*." There are two words in Hebrew that can mean *return*. One is תָּשׁוּב and תָּזָרָה. תָּזָרָה comes from the

word *חזר* which means to *review* or *repeat something*. When one finishes a *Mesechta* he says, "We shall return to you." What do those *words* mean? If one wants to ensure that the *Mesechta* he learned is securely embedded into his memory, he should review it forty times."

Avos D'Rebbe Nosson continues, "He approached teachers of small children, to educate him, beginning with the aleph beis ...He studied constantly and little by little he learned the entire *Torah*."

How did Rebbe Akiva merit learning the entire Torah? His wife suffered from living in dire poverty. As the *Mishnah* tells us, "*Torah* is acquired with... acceptance of suffering..." Even though he forty years old, he was willing to suffer embarrassment by having to sit among little children who were learning the *aleph beis*! Furthermore, "One who suffers from embarrassment will never learn." Rebbe Akiva was just the opposite. He didn't feel embarrassed to ask the teacher to teach him the *aleph beis*.

Jim Watkins said, "A river cuts through a rock, not because of its power but its persistence." *Rashi* adds, "*Stones are worn away because water is passing over them* constantly. Similarly, if you want the *Torah* to stay within you, it requires constant strengthening. What does that mean? *Rashi* says, "One is constantly reviewing his learning. You must keep your learning safe in your innards [i.e. have it well memorized], so as not to forget..."

Rebbe Akiva taught us that to achieve greatness you don't need to be someone special. As the *Medrash* states, "G-d does not bestow greatness on someone until He tests him with a small matter." However, to use the excuses of "I'm not intelligent," "I'm too old" or "I don't come from an important lineage," are all invalid. For when he started learning *Torah* at forty, he was an ignoramus and had no Jewish lineage to speak of.

The second lesson is that in life we face challenges that seem to appear to us like *rocks* or *stones* – they are impenetrable. Nevertheless, if we are persistent like *water* – taking *step* by *step* – Hashem will help us break through, overcome them and continue to rock on!

This article is dedicated:

In memory of Eliyahu ben Mordechai, Mashah Tzivyah bas R' Shlomo Zalman, Altah Soshah Devorah bas Aryeh Leibush, Chaim ben Shmuel Efraim Zalman, Tuvyah Shlomo ben Naftali Tzvi HaKohein, Esther Perel bas R' Shlomo, Miriam bas Zelig Shaul, Menachem ben Shimon, Menachem ben Zev, Sarah bas HaRav Yisroel, Yosef ben Moshe HaLevi, Yisroel ben Yeshayah, Elisheva Basyah bas Yechiel Ephraim and all the other departed souls of our nation.

For the complete recovery of Chayah Malka bas Bas-Sheva, among the other sick ones of our nation.

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