

Love Lust and Longing in the Talmud
Class One - Rachel and Rabbi Akiva
Melton Gesher at the JCC
October 10, 2012

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ketubot, pages 62b – 63a

R. Akiva was a shepherd of Ben Kalba Savu'a. The latter's daughter, seeing that he was modest and excellent, said to him, 'Were I to be betrothed to you, would you go away to the house of study?' 'Yes', he replied. She was then secretly betrothed to him and sent him off.

When her father heard [what she had done] he drove her from his house and forbade her by a vow to have any benefit from his estate.

[R. Akiva] went and spent twelve years at the house of study. When he returned home he brought with him twelve thousand disciples. [While in his home town] he heard an old man saying to her, 'How long will you lead the life of a living widowhood?' 'If he would listen to me,' she replied, 'he would spend [in study] another twelve years'. Said [R. Akiva to himself]: 'In that case I have her permission', and he departed again and spent another twelve years at the house of study.

When he finally returned he brought with him twenty-four thousand disciples. His wife heard [of his arrival] and went out to meet him, when her neighbors said to her, 'Borrow some respectable clothes and put them on', but she replied: 'A righteous man is deeply connected to the soul of his animals'. (Proverbs 12:10) On approaching him she fell upon her face and kissed his feet. His attendants were about to thrust her aside, at which point [R. Akiva] cried to them, 'Leave her alone, mine and yours are hers'.

Her father, on hearing that a great man had come to the town, said, 'I shall go to him; perchance he will invalidate my vow', When he came to him [R. Akiva] asked, 'Would you have made your vow if you had known that he was a great man?' '[Had he known]' the other replied, 'even one chapter or even one single commandment [I would not have made the vow]'. He then said to him, 'I am the

man'. The other fell upon his face and kissed his feet and also gave him half of his wealth.

The daughter of R. Akiva acted in a similar way towards Ben Azzai. This is indeed an illustration of the proverb: 'Ewe follows ewe; a daughter's acts are like those of her mother.'

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Nedarim, page 50a

Rabbi Akiva was the shepherd of Kalba Savu'a. The daughter of Kalba Savu'a betrothed herself to R. Akiva. When her father heard thereof, he vowed that she was not to benefit from aught of his property. Then she went and married him.

In the winter they slept in a hay-barn, and he would pick out the hay from her hair. 'If it were only in my power,' said he to her, 'I would present you with a Jerusalem of Gold diadem.' Elijah came to them in the guise of a man, and cried out at the door. 'Give me some of your hay, for my wife is giving birth and I have nothing for her to lie on.' 'See!' R. Akiva observed to his wife, 'there is a man who lacks even hay.' She counseled him, 'Go, and sit in the house of study.'

So he left, and spent twelve years [studying] under R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua. At the end of this period, he was returning home, when from the behind the house he heard a wicked man jeering at his wife, 'Your father treated you suitably. Firstly, because he is your inferior; and secondly, he has abandoned you to living widowhood all these years.' She replied, were he to follow my wishes, he would remain for another twelve years'. 'Seeing that she has thus given me permission,' he said to himself, 'I will go back.'

So he went away for another twelve years, [at the end of which] he returned with twenty-four thousand disciples. Everyone flocked to welcome him, including her [his wife] too. But that wicked man said to her, 'And whither art thou going?' 'A righteous man is deeply connected to the soul of his animal' (Proverbs 12:10), she retorted. So she went to see him, but the disciples wished to repulse her. Leave her alone,' he told them, 'for mine and yours are hers.'

When Kalba Savu'a heard thereof, he came [before R. Akiva] and asked for the remission of his vow and he annulled it for him. From six ways did R. Akiva become wealthy from the property of Kalba Savu'a...

Talmud of the Land of Israel, Tractate Shabat 6, 7

'A tale of Rabbi Akiva, who made his wife a City of Gold diadem. [The Patriarach] Raban Gamliel's wife become angry and jealous of her. She came and told her husband. He said to her: 'Would you have done for me what she had done – selling her hair and giving him [the proceeds] that he might study Torah?'

Avot deRabbi Natan 6, 2

He and his son sat before the teacher of children. He said to him: 'Rabbi, teach me Torah. Rabbi Akiva held the top of the slate and his son wrote the aleph-bet at the top of the slate and he learned it. Aleph to tav and he learned it. The Book of Leviticus and he learned it. He continued learning until he had learned the entire Five Books of Moses.

Second Book of Shmuel, chapter 12

¹The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor.²The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle,³but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.⁴"Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him." ⁵David burned with

anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die!"

Avot deRabbi Netan 6, 2

One day, when Rabbi Akiva's situation had improved, and he made his wife shoes of gold and a City of Gold diadem, his students said to him: 'Rabbi, you have shamed us by what you have done'. Rabbi Akiva said to them: 'She has suffered a great deal with me in the Torah'.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot page 17b

[Our Rabbis taught]: Greater is the promise made by the Holy One, blessed be He, to the women than to the men; for it says, "Rise up, ye women that are at ease; ye confident daughters, give ear unto my speech" (Isaiah 32:9). Rav said to R. Hiyya: Whereby do women earn merit? By encouraging their children to go to the synagogue to learn Scripture and their husbands to the House of Study to learn Mishnah, and waiting for their husbands till they return from the House of Study.