

Rabbi Akiva's Seder Table: An Introduction

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Rabban Gamliel and the elders were reclining [at the seder] in the house of Baitos the son of Zonin in Lod and they were engaged in the halakhot of Passover all night until the call of the rooster.

Tosefta Pesachim 10:12

It is told of Rabbi Eliezer (lived in Lod, second generation Tanna), and Rabbi Yehoshua (lived in Peki'in, second generation Tanna) and Rabbi Elazar the son of Azarya (lived in Yavneh/Tzipori, third generation Tanna), and Rabbi Akiva (lived in Bnei Brak, third generation Tanna) and Rabbi Tarfon (lived in Lod, teacher of Rabbi Akiva, third generation Tanna) were reclining at the seder service in B'nei Berak, and had spent the whole night telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt, until their pupils came and said to them: "Our masters, it is time to recite the morning Shema!"

Passover Haggadah

מעשה ברבן גמליאל וזקנים שהיו מסובין בבית ביתוס בן זונין בלוד והיו עסוקין בהלכות הפסח כל הלילה עד קרות הגבר.
תוספתא פסחים י"ב

מעשה ברבי אליעזר ורבי יהושע ורבי אלעזר בן עזריה ור' עקיבא ור' טרפון שהיו מסובין בבני ברק והיו מספרין ביציאת מצרים כל אותו הלילה עד שבאו תלמידיהם ואמרו להם רבותינו הגיע זמן קריאת שמע של שחרית.
הגדה של פסח

While there are several accounts of rabbinic Passover seder gatherings, the most famous of these is the account recorded in our Haggadah: the seder of Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar the son of Azarya, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon. This account appears in the Haggadot of Geonim, such as R. Amram Gaon, and the Haggadot of Rishonim, including that of the Rambam (*Hilchot Chametz u'Matza, Nusach Haggadah*), Tosafot (*Ketubot 105a, s.v. de-chashiv*), and the Ritva.

Several questions arise when analyzing this account:

1. Rabbi Akiva is one of the younger members of the rabbinic cohort present at the gathering, while Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua are elder members. Rabbi Elazar the son of Azarya is the *nasi* (president of the high court and of the rabbinic community). Why does the seder take place in Rabbi Akiva's hometown of B'nei Berak and not in a city where one of the more prominent members of the group resides? Normally, the student is expected to visit the

I wish to thank Yeshiva University Presidential Fellows Daniel Elefant and Anosh Zaghi for their assistance with this introduction.

teacher. It is not common for a teacher to visit a younger student.

2. Why do these particular Tannaim sit together around the seder table? Do they represent something unique or is this a random grouping of rabbinic figures?

To answer these questions, we must first note that the Pesach Haggadah is divided into two parts. The first is the pre-meal section of the Haggadah, where we recite maggid and consume ritual foodstuff —matza, wine, maror and charoset—and the post-meal section of the Haggadah. The pre-meal section of the Haggadah focuses on the Jewish people's servitude in and eventual redemption from Egypt. The post-meal section of the Haggadah focuses on the future redemption and destiny of our people and society.

The Talmud states (*Pesachim* 116b) that we bifurcate the recitation of Hallel. In the maggid section of the Haggadah, we recite the first two psalms of Hallel. This is due to the fact that these psalms focus on the Egyptian saga. The third psalm and the remaining psalms of Hallel are recited in the post-meal section of the Haggadah as they focus on the Messianic era (*Pesachim* 118a).

This division prompts disagreement between two of the rabbinic participants at the Passover seder we read about in our Haggadot, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon. Rabbi Tarfon contends (*Pesachim* 116b) that the concluding blessing for maggid should focus solely on the theme expressed in maggid and the pre-meal section of the Haggadah, namely the redemption from Egypt. Rabbi Tarfon's version of this blessing reads, "*Blessed are you Lord our God Who has redeemed us and redeemed our fathers from Egypt.*"

Rabbi Akiva disagrees. He refuses to allow this blessing to focus only on the redemption of the past. He insists that the blessing of maggid also contain language that focuses on the future:

Rabbi Akiva states: [the blessing should also include] likewise O Lord our God, God of our fathers, enable us to celebrate many other festivals and holy days which will come peacefully upon us; joyful in the rebuilding of Your city, and exalting in Your service: and may we eat there of the festive sacrifices ... Blessed are thou our God who has redeemed Israel.

Pesachim 116b

רבי עקיבא אומר כן ה' אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו יגיענו למועדים ולרגלים אחרים הבאים לקראתנו לשלום שמחים בבנין עירך וששים בעבודתך ונאכל שם מן הזבחים ומן הפסחים ... ברוך אתה ה' גאל ישראל.
פסחים קטז:

For Rabbi Akiva, it is never sufficient to focus on the past. We must always remember to look toward the future and its redemption.

This difference in perspective also enlightens a later account about the remaining participants of this rabbinic cohort:

Again it happened that [Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar the son of Azarya (in some manuscripts the person is Rabbi Eliezer), Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva] went up to Jerusalem. When they reached Mt. Scopus, they tore their garments. When they reached the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerging from the place of the Holy of Holies. The others started weeping; Rabbi Akiva laughed. Said they to him: "Why are you laughing?" Said he to them: "Why are you

שוב פעם אחת היו עולין לירושלים כיון שהגיעו להר הצופים קרעו בגדיהם כיון שהגיעו להר הבית ראו שועל שיצא מבית קדשי הקדשים התחילו הן בוכין ור"ע מצחק אמרו לו מפני מה אתה מצחק אמר להם מפני מה אתם בוכים

weeping?" Said they to him: "A place [so holy] that it is said of it, 'the stranger that approaches it shall die' (Bamidbar 1:51), and now foxes traverse it, and we shouldn't weep?"

Said he to them: "That is why I laugh. For it is written, 'I shall have bear witness for Me faithful witnesses—Uriah the Priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah' (Yeshayahu 8:1). Now what is the connection between Uriah and Zechariah? Uriah was [in the time of] the First Temple, and Zechariah was [in the time of] the Second Temple! But the Torah makes Zachariah's prophecy dependent upon Uriah's prophecy. With Uriah, it is written: 'Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed as a field; [Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the Temple Mount like the high places of a forest]' (Micha 3:12). With Zachariah it is written, 'Old men and women shall yet sit in the streets of Jerusalem' (Zechariah 8:4). As long as Uriah's prophecy had not been fulfilled, I feared that Zechariah's prophecy may not be fulfilled either. But now that Uriah's prophecy has been fulfilled, it is certain that Zechariah's prophecy will be fulfilled." With these words they replied to him: "Akiva, you have consoled us! Akiva, you have consoled us!"

Makkot 24b

אמרו לו מקום שכתוב בו והזר הקרב יומת ועכשיו שועלים הלכו בו ולא נבכה אמר להן לכך אני מצחק דכתיב ואעידה לי עדים נאמנים את אוריה הכהן ואת זכריה בן יברכיהו וכי מה ענין אוריה אצל זכריה אוריה במקדש ראשון וזכריה במקדש שני אלא תלה הכתוב נבואתו של זכריה בנבואתו של אוריה באוריה כתיב לכן בגללכם ציון שדה תחרש [וגו'] בזכריה כתיב עוד ישבו זקנים וזקנות ברחובות ירושלם עד שלא נתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה הייתי מתיירא שלא תתקיים נבואתו של זכריה עכשיו שנתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה בידוע שנבואתו של זכריה מתקיימת בלשון הזה אמרו לו עקיבא ניחמתנו עקיבא ניחמתנו:

מכות כד:

Rabbi Akiva's focus is fixed on the future redemption, even in the most difficult and trying of times. It is not coincidental that these rabbinic figures gather around Rabbi Akiva's seder table. They are individuals who were influenced by the weltanschauung of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva has the courage to be an optimist and focus on the future even in the darkest of moments. Even when there is a bounty on his head by the Romans, even when he is martyred and the future of his people seems bleak, Rabbi Akiva knows that it is tenacity of spirit that guarantees the immortality of our people.

It is significant that these personalities gather around Rabbi Akiva's table to discuss the redemption during the darkness of night. They realize that it is Rabbi Akiva's charismatic spirit that enables hope and paves the Jewish nation's path toward the morning *kriyat shema*—a credo with God that is recited when there is clarity, when one can discern between the colors of covenantal tapestry, the blue and white fringes of the tallit (*B'rachot* 9b).

It is the ability to discuss redemption during the darkness of the Hadrianic persecutions and the Bar Kochba revolt that enables students to live and thrive in the phenomenological framework of morning, a time at which the Jewish nation can be a people of destiny instead of a people of fate. It is in B'nei Berak, the city of Rabbi Akiva, the city in which we are told the descendants of our darkest enemies become sources of light, (for it is in the city of B'nei Berak that the descendants of Haman study Torah [*Sanhedrin* 96b]), that such a Passover seder must take place.

How appropriate that we inaugurate the Benjamin and Rose Berger To-Go Series with an edition celebrating the holiday of Pesach. For the lives of Benjamin and Rose Berger represent

the credo of Rabbi Akiva. The couple immigrated to America during difficult times yet recognized that the redemption and the immortality of our people is only guaranteed by Jews who are not willing to sacrifice their eternal heritage. Benjamin and Rose always saw the morning light, even in times of great peril and darkness. They sat at the seder table of Rabbi Akiva, and when the morning star arose in their lives, they created a home of *kol dichfin yeitei v'yeichol* (Let all who hunger come and eat).

We are indebted to Rabbi Hy and Ann Arbesfeld, longtime supporters of RIETS and CJF, for continuing to support Torah education by establishing the Benjamin and Rose Berger Torah To-Go series.

As we commemorate the twentieth Yahrzeit of Moreinu V'Rabbeinu Harav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik zt"l, we are reminded of the fact that it was through his teachings and communal activity that spiritual daybreak rose for the North American Jewish community. It was his partnership with gedolim such as Rav Aharon Kotler that inspired the building of yeshivot around North America. It was his blend of Torah and philosophy that inspired a generation unsure if Torah had the sophistication to speak to a post-war generation of American Jews. The Rav spent his life training the next generation of pastors, pedagogues and *poskim* to ensure a bright future for our people. May we continue to learn from his Torah and integrate his gestalt in our personal and communal lives. May his memory always be a blessing.