

## From Her Love

The wisdom of the sage of love is reflected in his knowledge of true reality; in his understanding of love in all its manifestations and with all the difficulties it entails; in his grasp of the “forms” (in the Platonic sense); in his experiences in the mutable world of everyday existence; and in his tireless efforts to behave in a perfectly moral fashion in his personal and public life. Some have therefore understood the Platonic interpretation of philosophy as the “wisdom of love” and the philosopher as the sage of love. Although the designation might not apply to each and every thinker or philosopher, it would certainly apply to someone whose teachings and life experience centre around the theory and practice of love. Such a sage was Rabbi Akiva<sup>1</sup>—who was discovered by virtue of a woman’s love, whose thought and halakhic rulings engaged with the philosophy of love in all its manifestations, who “rescued” the Song of Songs from suppression, who established “love your fellow as yourself” as the greatest principle in the Torah, and who departed the world in a supreme expression of love of God, with all his soul—even when that was taken from him.

Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph was one of the greatest sages of the mishnaic period, if not the greatest.<sup>2</sup> His legendary figure, leadership, halakhic method and thought occupy a central place throughout the tannaitic and amoraic literature: in the Mishnah and the Talmuds, in halakhic and aggadic Midrash, as well as the later Midrashim, redacted over a period of centuries. “When Jose ben Yoezer of Zeredah and Josphe ben Yohanan of Jerusalem died, the *ashkolot* [in the sense of “*ish she-hakol*

*bo*”—one in whom all can be found—i.e. the perfect sage] ceased from the world ... and none appeared until Rabbi Akiva” (JT, *Sotah* 9, 10). The figure of Rabbi Akiva, as portrayed in Rabbinic literature, is that of the perfect sage: accomplished in theory and in deed, in Halakhah and Aggadah, in *peshat*, *derash*, *remez* and *sod* (the four levels of exegetical interpretation, represented by the acronym *PARDeS*—Orchard) but, above all, in moral conduct that stands the test of everyday life, in all its minutiae. This is the paradigm of the perfect sage,<sup>3</sup> and it is clearly the way in which Rabbi Akiva is perceived in the following *baraita*, cited in the Talmud<sup>4</sup>:

Four entered the Orchard, and they were: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, *Aher* and Rabbi Akiva ... Ben Azzai glimpsed and died ... Ben Zoma glimpsed and was harmed ... *Aher* slashed among the plants, Rabbi Akiva entered and emerged safely.

This is subsequently reiterated in the Talmud as: “Rabbi Akiva ascended and descended in safety”. He thus emerged from the Orchard as he had entered it: the perfect sage.

### DISCOVERY BY VIRTUE OF LOVE

The extraordinary figure of Rabbi Akiva first appears *in a love story*. The legends that describe his early years do not attribute any inherent greatness or unusual qualities to him. The initiative and impetus behind all that transpired came from Rachel,<sup>5</sup> daughter of the wealthy man for whom the ignorant and unschooled Akiva worked as a shepherd. Any attempt to understand the figure of the sage of love should thus begin with Rachel’s love. Rachel was the “midwife” who helped Rabbi Akiva to bring his knowledge into the world. In this sense, Rachel served as Rabbi Akiva’s Socrates, the pioneer who stimulated and encouraged her interlocutor to follow the path she had laid out—the path of Torah and wisdom. The Socratic process, from Rachel’s perspective, was a complete act of love, including courtship, attraction, passion, consummation—and the fruit of their love: the birth of knowledge and wisdom.

The extent to which love—in this case of a woman for a man—can serve as a creative and driving force can be learned from the love of Rachel, the daughter of a wealthy man, for her father’s shepherd. Her loving eyes did not see the difference between her station and that

of the simple shepherd. Her loving heart did not consider his ignorance an obstacle to a relationship between them. Her feelings discovered the great potential that lay within him. Her love was the impelling force that raised him from the lowest of stations to that of the greatest of the tannaim. Her love not only enabled him to become a great scholar and a venerated teacher, but also inspired and set him on his path as the sage of love.

Rabbi Akiva was the shepherd of Ben Kalba Savua. His [Ben Kalba Savua's] daughter saw that he [Akiva] was modest and excellent. She said to him: "If I become betrothed to you, will you go to the house of study?" He replied: "Yes." She became betrothed to him in secret, and sent him off. Her father heard, cast her out of his house and disinherited her.

(BT, *Ketubot*, 62b)

The author of this legend saw Ben Kalba Savua's daughter, although not mentioned here by name, as the true protagonist. It is she who noticed Akiva—although we may assume that he, too, had seen her and was not indifferent to the presence of his master's daughter. This fact is not reported, however, as it would have been entirely irrelevant had she not seen him and been attracted to the point of proposing her betrothal to him. Not only did she see him; she observed him sufficiently to draw conclusions regarding his character. The daughter of Ben Kalba Savua approaches Akiva and engages him in conversation: "If I become betrothed to you, will you go to the house of study?" Akiva's reply consists of a single word: "Yes".

The description of the act of betrothal in this account is extremely unusual. Betrothal (*kiddushin*), as it appears in the talmudic and halakhic literature, involves action on the part of the man, with the woman merely consenting to be his wife. In the language of the Mishnah, "a man bethroths", while "a woman is acquired", betrothed to him. At traditional Jewish weddings today, the man recites the phrase: "You are hereby betrothed to me with this ring, in accordance with the law of Moses and Israel". The woman, if she agrees to be betrothed to him, merely accepts the ring, without saying a word. The written commitment (*ketubah*) given to the woman by the man reads, in Aramaic, "And this woman consented and became his wife"—consent that does not take the form of a public statement. In the above legend, however, no active role is assigned to Akiva—although it is self-evident that it is

he who performs the act of betrothal, by giving her something of minimal value. Furthermore, the text does not say that he betrothed her, but that she became betrothed (*nitkadsha*) to him<sup>6</sup> and that she was the one who sent him off after their betrothal: “She became betrothed to him in secret, and sent him off”.

In the talmudic legend, it is Rachel, the high-born daughter of a wealthy man, who initiates contact with Akiva ben Joseph, a common shepherd—a descendant of converts, according to tradition—who was also a complete ignoramus who had “never studied at all”. Nevertheless, he attracts her attention. She recognises the potential within his personality, sees that he is “modest and excellent” and proposes that she become betrothed to him—but stipulates a condition: that he go to the house of study.

“She became betrothed to him in secret, and sent him off”. They parted after their betrothal, in the hope that he would learn to read and write and study a little Torah that she might then present him to her father and they could marry. Betrothal—called *kiddushin* or *erusin*—was generally conducted in the house of the bride’s father and effected a change in the woman’s personal status, from single to married. The betrothed woman would remain in her father’s house after the betrothal, and when the groom would finish building (or otherwise preparing) a home for them, he would bring her to it, the wedding feast would then take place and the couple would begin their lives together. The betrothal of Akiva and Rachel was, of course, not conducted in her father’s house. Rachel thus became betrothed to Akiva in secret, probably in the presence of no one but the necessary witnesses. She thus created a mutual commitment between them, sent him off in the hope that he would study—on the assumption that once he had studied a little, he would be acceptable to her father—and returned home. Later, in the same source, we discover how right she was in her assumption. According to the text, many years later, after Rabbi Akiva had completed his long course of study and had acquired twenty-four thousand students, his father-in-law came to consult with him regarding the vow he had made to disinherit his daughter. It never occurred to Ben Kalba Savua that the great rabbi whom he had gone to consult on a matter of religious law was, in fact, his son-in-law: “When her father heard that a great man had come to town, he said: “I will go to him. Perhaps he will release [me from] my vow”. When he came to him, [Rabbi Akiva] said to him: “Had you known that her husband would become a great man, would you still have disinherited her?” He said to him: “[Not if he had studied] *even*

*a single chapter, even a single law*". He said to him: "I am he". He [Ben Kalba Savua] fell on his face and kissed his feet, and gave him half of his fortune" (BT, *Ketubot*, 63a).

Rachel's plan had been that, after their betrothal, Akiva would go to the house of study, learn a little ("even a single chapter, a single law"), thereby becoming acceptable to her father after the fact and enabling them to marry. Before he had a chance to study, however, her father discovered that she had secretly betrothed herself to an ignoramus, threw her out of his house and vowed that he would not help her or support her in any way. Rachel was thus left with no choice and married Akiva anyway, although he had not yet fulfilled his part of the agreement—to go to the house of study to learn Torah.<sup>7</sup> The couple was condemned to a life of poverty, without a roof over their heads. Only in the winter did they find shelter in a barn:

In the winter they would sleep in a barn, and [Akiva] would pick straw out of her hair. He said to her: Were it in my power, I would give you a 'Jerusalem of gold' [diadem]. Elijah appeared to them as a man, and called from the threshold: "Give me a little straw, for my wife has given birth, and I have nothing on which to lay her down." Rabbi Akiva said to his wife: "Behold this man does not even have straw." She said to him: "Go, sit in the house of study." (BT, *Nedarim* 50a)

Akiva is not deterred by poverty and exhibits romantic, optimistic behaviour, as well as a sense of moral responsibility. The relationship between Akiva and Rachel is that of a pair of lovers, and their romance is not dulled by the poverty in which they live. How moving the description of the loving man picking bits of straw out of his wife's hair and whispering in her ear: "Were it in my power, I would give you a 'Jerusalem of gold' [diadem]". Rachel, however, is not impressed by words of love, but rather by a seemingly trivial incident, which, once again, offers her a glimpse of her husband's unique personality, his modesty and his greatness. Poverty does not drive Akiva to despair or distort his principles and moral outlook. Not only does he refuse to allow hardship to spoil romance; he is also quick to share what little he has with someone poorer than himself. This incident provides Rachel with the opportunity to guide him towards her goal, and she answers her husband in a manner that seems entirely beside the point, but which is, as far as she is concerned, the only point. This man she loves for his superior qualities must go to the house of study: "She said to him: 'Go to the house of study!'"

He went and sat in the house of study for twelve years. When he returned, twelve-thousand students came with him. He [over] heard an old man say to her: “How long will you persist in your living widowhood?” She replied: “Were he to listen to me, he would sit for another twelve years.” He [Rabbi Akiva] said: “In that case, I have [her] permission.” He returned and sat for another twelve years in the house of study. (BT, *Ketubot*, 62b–63a)

According to the talmudic account, Rachel lived for more than two decades alone and poor, a “living widow”, but steadfast in the desire that her husband study Torah. Most readers perceive this lengthy separation as something that severely undermined their relationship, dismissing the emphasis place by the author on the fact that she herself had initiated the separation, lovingly and willingly. Rachel’s love for Rabbi Akiva brings her to love the wisdom and the Torah study to which he had dedicated his life at her behest. He returns to her after having fulfilled his love pledge to study and acquire wisdom—not merely going to the house of study, but becoming a great sage and teacher of thousands. In so doing, he justified the expectations Rachel had harboured from the moment she first laid eyes on him, recognising his immense potential.

Before addressing the specific case of Akiva and Rachel’s separation and subsequent relationship, it is worth examining the broader context of discussions and tales of other sages who left their wives for the purpose of going “to a place of Torah”. For the most part, the following discussion does not relate specifically to the protagonists of this chapter or to Rabbi Akiva’s philosophy of love, although Rabbi Akiva is cited here and there and, in one case, a source text refers explicitly to the example of the separation between Rachel and Rabbi Akiva. As their relationship and Rabbi Akiva’s philosophy of love did not exist in a vacuum, this apparent digression in fact provides the basis for a deeper and clearer understanding of the subjects addressed in this book.

## MARRIAGE AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT: HELP OR HINDRANCE

There is a deep-seated belief that human spiritual growth also entails a corresponding detachment from the material world. Most people thus expect those following a spiritual path to renounce corporeality, seeking only to satisfy their basic physical needs—reduced, at the highest levels of spiritual enlightenment, to the bare minimum necessary for physical and

hence spiritual survival. One of the needs that may be renounced without jeopardising physical existence is sexuality.

Those who have attained spiritual heights and enlightenment, the truly righteous, tend to be viewed by society (and often by themselves) as extraneous, set apart, and thus unconstrained by the rules of socialisation. They are free to study, meditate, pray, pursue wisdom or the divine—or all of the above.

Couple relationships are considered to be at odds with spiritual and intellectual development or, at the very least, to pose a problem—in and of themselves, for those seeking to eliminate physical needs not strictly necessary for existence, and in terms of the socialisation from which such individuals have been subtracted, due to their separate nature. At best, one who manages to conduct a marital as well as a spiritual life is credited with having accomplished both. In the popular imagination, marital life and spirituality cannot coexist on the same plane.

Any discussion of marriage and intellectual and spiritual development in Jewish sources must necessarily be conducted on the basis of the ingrained dichotomy described here. I will explore the various positions regarding partial or complete abstinence, as well as the question of the legitimacy or necessity of abstinence for those who have attained a high spiritual level.<sup>8</sup> Finally, I will seek to determine whether the relationship between Rachel and Rabbi Akiva coincides with any of the approaches to abstinence found in talmudic and midrashic sources.

The Rabbis considered harmonious marriage, including a physical relationship—a crucial part of marital harmony—a prerequisite for human spiritual fulfilment. Is this the case at all spiritual levels? Are there no circumstances in which abstinence, if only limited, is required? There is no one answer to these questions in Rabbinic literature—and certainly no clear, consistent position of the kind found in some of the mediaeval texts.<sup>9</sup> To some extent, this issue underlies the debate regarding Torah study and marriage, and which of the two takes precedence:

The Rabbis taught: [In the matter of] Torah study and marriage, one should first study Torah and then take a wife, and if one cannot be without a wife, he should first marry and then study Torah. Rabbi Judah said in the name of Shmuel: “One should first marry and then study Torah.” Rabbi Yohanan said: “How can one engage in Torah with a millstone around his neck?” There is no dispute. The one refers to us, and the other to them.

(BT, *Kidushin* 29b)

The *baraita*<sup>10</sup> raises the question of (temporary) abstinence by juxtaposing Torah study and marriage in a situation where there is some conflict between them. They all agree that a man is obligated to marry. The question is merely whether he should postpone marriage in order to study Torah first. The tannaitic source does not resolve the question of Torah study and intellectual development versus marriage, making the answer a matter of individual disposition. Serious study and the mastery of all areas of Torah knowledge demand great dedication, which could be affected by the need to devote time to a wife and, later, to a growing family. Moreover, just as the Rabbis urge one to build a home and secure a livelihood before marrying, mastery of the Torah is also important in order to provide a solid foundation for the family's spiritual life. If, however, one is distracted by sexual desire—"if one cannot be without a wife"—then he should first marry and only then set aside time for Torah study. Thus, according to the tannaim of the Tosefta and the source cited in the Gemara, the question is one of personal nature, disposition and behaviour. This gives rise to further discussion of the tannaitic source, among the amoraim. The Gemara concludes that there is no real dispute between the amoraim and that the difference between them reflects different customs: "The one refers to us, and the other to them"—that is, this is our custom and that is theirs. In other words, the assertions of the amoraim—Rabbi Judah in the name of Shmuel, and Rabbi Yohanan—refer to the different practices of the Jews of the Land of Israel and those of Babylonia. Early talmudic commentators<sup>11</sup> differ, however, regarding which opinion should be associated with the Jews of the Land of Israel and which with those of Babylonia. Was it the Palestinian custom to marry and then study Torah, whereas the Babylonians saw this as an obstacle to intellectual growth, or vice versa?

From the various sources and later commentaries on this debate, we may conclude that it was the sages of the Land of Israel who advocated early marriage and spiritual and intellectual development within the framework of marriage.<sup>12</sup> Explicit talmudic sources relate to the Torah study of married scholars as superior: "The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for ever" (*Psalms* 19:10)—Rabbi Hanina said: "This refers to one who studies Torah in purity. Who is that? One who marries and then studies Torah" (BT, *Yoma* 72b). The context of Rabbi Hanina's statement is a discussion of the nature of a true sage (one who is both outwardly and inwardly virtuous), and the potential of the Torah to act either as an "elixir of death"—to the detriment of one whose approach



and behaviour are unworthy; or as an “elixir of life”—to the benefit of one whose behaviour is worthy. In other words, Torah study must be accompanied by appropriate behaviour, and it is in relation to this that Rabbi Hanina proposes the principle of studying Torah “in purity”—that is, that one should first marry, and then, untroubled by desire, study Torah. Elsewhere, the Talmud compares the Torah offered to God by sages everywhere—and not limited to a specific location—to the incense and oblations offered to God in the Temple in Jerusalem. This comparison implies that Torah study—like the Temple sacrifices—must be performed in a state of purity and that a Torah sage must marry: “When sages engage in Torah everywhere, I consider it as if they have burned incense and made offerings to My name. ‘And pure oblation’ (Malachi 1:11)—refers to one who studies Torah in purity: who first marries and then studies Torah” (BT, *Menahot* 110a).

The prophet Malachi speaks of corruption and contempt for the Temple offices, as irreconcilable with God’s greatness among the nations and the ubiquitous study of Torah. When the sacrificial rites are deficient, Torah study makes up for their loss. Malachi expresses disappointment in the priests (Malachi 1:6, 9): “You priests, who despise My name ... I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, nor will I accept an offering from your hands”. The priests’ perception is limited, and they do not grasp that unlike the glory of idols, God’s glory does not depend upon His worship in the Temple. “For from the rising of the sun to its setting, My name is great among the nations; and in every place incense and pure oblations are offered to My name; for My name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts” (ibid. 1:11). According to the talmudic interpretation of this verse, it is the Torah sages and those who engage in Torah study throughout the world who proclaim God’s glory among the nations. As noted, the prophet’s primary intention was to rebuke the priests, but the comparison of Torah study to the sacrificial cult is not without implications for those who engage in Torah study. If the Torah study of the sages is on the same plane as the priestly offices, it too must be performed in a state of ritual purity. They are thus compelled to marry, in order to ensure their purity in study.

These Talmudic texts played an important role in the debate with Christianity regarding the questions of celibacy and original sin. While the Church Fathers considered Jews depraved because they engaged in procreation, the Jews—in turn—believed Christian monastics to be impure, because of their failure to marry. Attitudes to marriage would become

a prominent feature of Jewish–Christian polemics. One extreme position taken against Christian abstinence is based on a reverse argument—contrary to the belief that abstaining from corporeality and physical contact with the opposite sex is the path to spiritual ascent and self-purification, it is claimed that Christians who have not married and borne children should be considered impure specifically because of their abstinence.<sup>13</sup> Celibacy is denounced on the grounds that it not only fails to confer greater purity, but in fact causes those who practise it to fall into a state of impurity, as their sexual desires are not satisfied within the framework of marriage and the harmony of an enduring relationship. The very same argument used by Christians in support of celibacy is thus turned against it.

The above conclusion that it was, in fact, the sages of the Land of Israel who advocated early marriage and spiritual/intellectual development within the framework of marriage is consistent with another talmudic source, in which the sages of Palestine are credited with the view that marriage is a prerequisite for spiritual development: “A man who is without a wife dwells without joy, without blessing, without good [...]. In Palestine they say: Without Torah, without wisdom” (BT, *Yevamot* 62b). The Babylonian sages held marriage in high regard and attributed great virtues to it, while associating their absence with the sin of bachelorhood. The sages of the Land of Israel added Torah study and intellectual development—the capacity for wisdom—to the list of virtues contingent upon marriage and the support with which a woman provides her husband. We must remember, however, that such assertions are a matter of exegetical interpretation and personal outlook, not a description of reality. Actual circumstances may have been very different from halakhic requirements, or perhaps such statements reflect an attempt to change reality by recommending certain types of behaviour.

Early marriage would often involve temporary separation to allow the husband to travel to “a place of Torah”, or to attend the academy of one of the famous rabbis. Such absences for the sake of Torah study for determined periods of time generally enjoyed the support and consent of the wife, who favoured her husband’s intellectual development and success. Modern scholarship has determined that early marriage—followed by lengthy periods of separation—was in fact more prevalent in Babylonia than in Palestine.<sup>14</sup> In my opinion, the difference in practice between the two communities was not that marked, and people married or married off their children as soon as they could afford to do so financially. Once married, some left their wives for short or extended periods

of time, as people do today for a variety of reasons. They did so in order to dedicate themselves to Torah study, or to other matters, such as earning a livelihood or amassing wealth—less extensively documented in the talmudic literature—resulting in prolonged absences.<sup>15</sup>

The Rabbis present us with a fascinating debate regarding self-fulfilment and intellectual development. To what extent do such things contribute to establishing a firm foundation for family life, and to what extent is marriage an impediment to intellectual growth? The discussion affords equal weight to both sides of the dilemma and is, therefore, of practical and universal relevance.

Although a number of talmudic anecdotes would appear to support the scholarly view that it was common practice in Babylonia for men to leave their wives for the sake of Torah study, such cases were not widespread,<sup>16</sup> but rather exceptions to the rule. Sages such as Rabbi Ada bar Ahavah, who wished to justify absences of this kind under certain conditions, were a minority, as demonstrated by the sources below. Most of the Rabbis completely rejected this practice and sharply condemned it:

Rava said: “There were scholars who relied on the words of Rabbi Ada bar Ahavah and acted of their own accord [absenting themselves from their homes for the sake of study], as in the case of Rabbi Rahumi, who studied before Rava in Mahoza. It was his custom to return home every Yom Kippur eve. One day, he was deep in study [and forgot to go home]. His wife was expecting him, [thinking]: ‘now he will come, now he will come’. [When] he did not come, she became discouraged and shed a tear. He was sitting on the roof [at the time], and the roof gave way beneath him and he was killed.” (BT, *Ketubot* 62b)

Scholars who were absent from their homes for extended periods of time without their wives’ consent, sometimes cited custom to justify their behaviour, which ran counter to the halakhic norm. Rabbi Ada bar Ahavah believed that Torah scholars were permitted to leave their wives for a number of years. The Talmud, however, sharply rejects this position and presents those who do so as deserving of death. Rava said that scholars who relied on the opinion of Rabbi Ada bar Ahavah “acted of their own accord”—that is to say that although it was indeed the halakhic view of Rabbi Ada bar Ahavah, it had been rejected within the framework of normative Halakhah. Thus, any who chose to act in such a fashion did so entirely on their own, as they should not have relied on this opinion. The

expression *avdei uvda be-nafshayhu* (“acted of their own accord”) may also be understood “acted [against] their lives”, intimating that those who relied on Rabbi Ada bar Ahavah were deserving of death. We thus discover that not only did their Torah study not justify their absence, it did not even protect them from harm, as witnessed by the terrible punishment suffered by Rabbi Rahumi, who died because he had made his wife unhappy. Although he did not mean to cause her sorrow, he was punished for having left her to study Torah, living away from home.<sup>17</sup>

The strong message against leaving home is not limited to a single story or a few statements in the Talmud, but appears repeatedly. While the story of Rabbi Rahumi concerns a grave violation of married life and year-long absences, the Torah scholar in the following account absented himself from home only on weekdays, honouring his wife’s conjugal rights (*onah*) on Sabbath eves:

Judah, son of Rabbi Hiyya, son-in-law of Rabbi Yannai would go to the house of study, and return to his home every [Sabbath eve] at twilight. And when he came, a pillar of fire would appear before him. One day, he was deep in study [and forgot to go home]. When Rabbi Yannai failed to see that sign, he said to them [to the members of his household]: “Turn his couch over [a sign of mourning], for were Judah alive, he would not have failed to perform his marital duty.” It was ‘like an error pronounced by a ruler’ (Kohelet 10:5) [which then comes to pass], and his [Judah’s] soul departed.” (BT, *Ketubot* 62b)

This is not the story of an abstinent scholar who left his wife for an extended period of time, like Rabbi Rahumi in the previous story. The rabbis determined the appropriate frequency of marital relations for Torah scholars to be once a week—on the Sabbath eve—and Judah, son of Rabbi Hiyya, adhered to this principle, returning from the house of study every Sabbath eve at twilight. On Sabbath eve, he was so absorbed in his studies that he did not arrive at the usual time. His father-in-law, Rabbi Yannai, instructed members of the household to overturn Judah’s bed—a sign of mourning—explaining that only death would have prevented him from observing the commandment of *onah*. Rabbi Yannai’s words came to be: Judah was punished and died.

In this story, the Talmud seeks to condemn those Torah scholars and men in general who neglect their wives’ conjugal rights, and the message—that there can be no justification for abstinence—is absolutely

clear. Rabbi Judah was, after all, a Torah scholar, who on a single occasion became so absorbed in his studies that he “forgot himself”—only natural for one engaged in profound study. Rabbi Yannai, however, was absolutely convinced of his death, for had he been alive, he would not have neglected the obligation of *onah*. In failing to observe the commandment of physical union with his partner, he became effectively dead. The fact that this failure was the result of his devotion to Torah study—his intellectual, spiritual calling—does not protect him or safeguard the vitality he lost through his abstinence. The very same message arises from the early *midrashim* that stress the tremendous deficiencies of bachelorhood, that one who does not have a wife is incomplete and his life is not worth living, and from the Talmud’s sharp denunciations of sexual abstinence. Such abstinence, even when it is only temporary and for the important purpose of Torah study, may lead to death. Apart from showing sensitivity to a wife’s feelings, the Rabbis wished to make a clear statement: there is no aspect of life—as spiritual or lofty as it may be—that can replace or come at the expense of married life. Nothing can compensate for the deficiencies of bachelorhood or sexual abstinence.

There are many talmudic and midrashic (both earlier and later) sources that condemn bachelorhood. In this context, it is worth mentioning the well-known talmudic story of Ben Azzai, one of the greatest of the tannaim and, unusually, a bachelor. Ben Azzai himself denounces, in extraordinarily sharp terms, those who eschew marriage:

It was taught: Rabbi Eliezer says: “One who does not engage in procreation it is as if he sheds blood, as it is written ‘He who sheds the blood of man by man his blood shall be shed’ (Genesis 9:6) followed by ‘and you, be fruitful and multiply’ (ibid. 7).” Rabbi Jacob [var. Akiva]<sup>18</sup> says: “It is as if he diminishes the image [of God], as it is written ‘for in the image of God He made Adam’ (ibid.), followed by ‘and you, be fruitful and multiply’.” Ben Azzai says: “It is as if he sheds blood and diminishes the image, as it is written ‘and you, be fruitful and multiply’ [Rashi: it is written after both and so it is as if he has failed both things].” They said to Ben Azzai: “Some speak well and do well, others do well but do not speak well, and you speak well but do not do well! Ben Azzai said to them: What can I do, for my soul desires Torah? The world can be perpetuated by others. (BT, *Yev<sup>a</sup>mot* 63b)

Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva (or Rabbi Jacob) express sharp condemnation of bachelorhood: one calls bachelors “spillers of blood”,

i.e. murderers (!), and the other accuses them of “diminishing God’s image”—an expression that can be taken to imply heresy. According to Rabbi Eliezer, the bachelor’s sin is against the children he never had because he failed to marry. It is thus as if he had taken their lives. According to Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, his sin is against God, whose presence in the world is established by means of the positive actions performed by each and every person created in His image. In preventing the birth of potential sanctifiers of God’s name, the bachelor diminishes that presence.

Both approaches harshly condemn bachelorhood. Not satisfied, however, Ben Azzai goes even further in condemning one who fails to marry, by uniting the two approaches and charging the bachelor with murder *and* heresy! Ben Azzai’s words astonish his colleagues, who see their bachelor friend’s extreme approach as hypocrisy. It is worth noting that the talmudic text does not end with a condemnation of bachelorhood in general or of Ben Azzai in particular, but with Ben Azzai’s words of self-justification: “What can I do, for my soul desires Torah? The world can be perpetuated by others”. This conclusion opens the way for an anomaly within the normative system: avoidance of marriage on an individual basis. Nevertheless, this option is not explicitly stated in the Talmud, which condemns bachelorhood in general and Ben Azzai’s behaviour in particular.

The atypicality of Ben Azzai’s bachelorhood, the criticism levelled at him by the Rabbis, and the remainder of the talmudic discussion on this matter reinforce the view that abstinence must be avoided even at higher spiritual levels.<sup>19</sup> The talmudic account (BT, *Ketubot* 63a) does not leave Ben Azzai’s case open, or Ben Azzai himself a bachelor. The extreme opponent of bachelorhood eventually married, allowing him to engage both in “perpetuating the world” and in studying Torah—the object of his “soul’s desire”: “Rabbi Akiva’s daughter did the same for Ben Azzai [married him and enabled him to continue to devote himself to Torah study]—of which people say: “Ewe follows ewe [*rehela*—an allusion to Rabbi Akiva’s wife *Rahel*], as the mother acts so does the daughter”. The daughter of Rabbi Akiva (who set out on his course by virtue of her mother’s love, and lived apart from her for more than two decades to study Torah) married Ben Azzai and enabled him to continue his studies. Having seen how her mother had supported her father’s dedication to Torah study, she followed in her footsteps, marrying Ben Azzai. On the one hand, we see another example of the phenomenon of partial

abstinence (also rejected by the Rabbis) and, on the other hand, the message that bachelorhood is unacceptable even for a Torah sage as devoted to study as Ben Azzai.<sup>20</sup> It is unclear from the talmudic text whether the marriage was ever consummated and whether Ben Azzai actually lived with the daughter of Rachel and Rabbi Akiva.

Halakhic authorities who discuss these talmudic sources take a somewhat surprising approach, showing understanding for extreme individual deviation—like that of Ben Azzai—from the norm, although they do not actually advocate it:

One whose soul, like that of Ben Azzai, constantly desires Torah, is ravished by it, cleaves to it all his days, and does not marry—has not sinned. That is on condition that he is not overcome by [sexual] desire. If, however, he is overcome by [sexual] desire, he must marry, even if he already has children. (Maimonides, *Hilkhot ishut* 16, 3)<sup>21</sup>

Note Maimonides' use of expressions taken from the vocabulary of love: "soul desires" (the expression used by Ben Azzai), "ravished", "cleaves". In so doing, he stresses the fact that emotions particular to love of a woman may—in such exceptional cases—come to focus on the Torah.<sup>22</sup> Halakha shows understanding for this unusual phenomenon ("he has not sinned"). Such behaviour is thus not entirely prohibited, but is by no means recommended—not even for such a person. Its permissibility stems from the concentration of all of the emotional resources that might otherwise have been devoted to love of a woman, on Torah study. One might say that, in the exceptional case of one whose entire emotional being is focused on Torah study, the rabbis preferred celibacy to a situation in which such a person might marry and abandon his wife, condemning her to a state of living widowhood. On the other hand, those whose desire for Torah study does not fill their entire beings to the exclusion of all other inclinations ("if he is overcome by sexual desire"), he must marry, even if he has already fulfilled the commandment to procreate, since he has thereby demonstrated that his soul can only be made whole within the context of marriage. This view is reflected in the general obligation to marry even if one has already fulfilled the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply": "Even if a man has a number of children, he may not remain without a wife"<sup>23</sup>—a position affirmed by Maimonides and the other mediaeval halakhists.<sup>24</sup> In cases like that of Ben Azzai, emphasis is placed on the wholly exceptional nature

of the phenomenon, while permitting such individuals to live celibate lives, focused entirely on Torah study—on condition that they are not “overcome by sexual desire”.

In rabbinic discourse regarding the relationship between spiritual and intellectual development and marriage, there is no place for the argument that abstinence is a precondition for spiritual enlightenment. The focus on relatively minor issues, such as the order in which one should marry and study, as well as the conclusions reached by the talmudic sages and the mediaeval halakhists, barely leaving room for exceptional individuals such as Ben Azzai, clearly demonstrates the complete rejection of celibacy *as a philosophy* or an effective path to spirituality. Scholars who, nevertheless, advocated celibacy as a way of life, and Jewish sects that practised it, were thus at odds with the position taken by the rabbis—whose forceful and repeated condemnation of celibacy may, in fact, have been meant to counter such manifestations.

The rabbis sometimes compare Rabbi Akiva to Moses, and his separation from his wife Rachel naturally evokes Moses' separation from his wife Zipporah:

And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married: for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken also through us?” ... And the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the door of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both went out. And He said, “Hear now my words: When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make myself known to him in a vision, and speak to him in a dream. Not so my servant Moses, who is trusted in all My house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, manifestly and not in riddles; and the likeness of the Lord he beholds. How then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?” ... And when the cloud departed from over the tent, Miriam was leprous, white as snow.... (Numbers 12:1–11)

According to midrashic interpretation, the prophet Miriam understood that her brother Moses had separated from his wife or even divorced her, in order to remain celibate. She believed there could be no justification for such behaviour, even for the sake of heaven, because prophecy does not mandate celibacy. She discusses the matter with Aaron, stressing that Moses' wife is a “Cushite”, i.e. a beautiful woman—both in appearance



and in deed, according to commentators—and Moses should have no reason to leave her.<sup>25</sup>

“And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses.” How did Miriam know that Moses abstained from procreation? She saw that Zipporah no longer adorned herself with women’s ornaments, and asked her: “Why do you no longer adorn yourself with women’s ornaments?” She replied: “Your brother pays no heed to such things.” (*Sifre, Beha’alotkha* 12, 1)

Miriam notices that Moses’ wife Zipporah has been neglecting her appearance and has stopped wearing women’s ornaments. She therefore deduces that Moses has separated from her, and they are no longer living as a couple. This brings to mind the story of Rabbi Akiva’s wife Rachel, who went out to greet her husband, after his long years of absence, dressed in her old, threadbare clothing, having refused to borrow clothes from her neighbours. After they are reunited, he buys her a “city of gold” diadem and other ornaments.

Miriam is troubled by Moses’ separation from Zipporah, discusses it with Aaron and is punished for the sin of evil speech (*lashon ha-ra*). Note: she spoke the truth! According to Halakhah, the sin of speaking ill refers to giving a truthful account of someone’s negative actions. According to the Midrash, her intentions in speaking to Aaron were good. She meant to praise Moses for his devotion but, at the same time, “to promote procreation”. Her words to Aaron were certainly not idle gossip or intentionally evil speech, but an attempt to promote the observance of a commandment: to get Moses to return to his wife and resume married life. Spiritual development at the level of prophecy is not contingent upon abstinence and, what is more, could not possibly require one to abstain from fulfilling a commandment. Miriam therefore expresses her surprise:

And they said: “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses?” Has He not also spoken with our forefathers? Yet they did not abstain from procreation. Has he not spoken also through us? Yet we have not abstained from procreation. (ibid.)

This is the message in the words of Miriam and Aaron, who were prophets in their own right: even the lofty spiritual level of prophecy does not require celibacy. In this context, it is worth citing Rabbi Saadia Gaon

on the subject of sexual intercourse: “And were it an obscene thing, God would have spared his prophets and messengers, peace be upon them, from it; for you see one of them say ‘give me my wife’ (Genesis 29:21) without shame, and one say ‘and I went to the prophetess’ (Isaiah 8:3) without disguise”.<sup>26</sup>

God’s reply, in the biblical text itself and in its midrashic interpretation, is unequivocal: Moses’ prophecy is *sui generis*—unlike that of any other prophet. Uniquely, Moses attained a spiritual level akin to that of the angels, enabling him to refrain from fulfilling the commandment of marital relations, and justifying his self-imposed celibacy.

The uniqueness of Moses’ prophecy as justification for his celibacy appears in later sources as well, most notably in the *Zohar*:

“But as for you, stand here by Me” (Deuteronomy 5:28). Henceforth, Moses separated completely from his wife, adhering [to the divine] and ascending to another plane—of male and not of female. Fortunate is the lot of Moses, a faithful prophet who attained lofty planes that no other human being has ever attained. Of which it is written: “one who is good before God shall escape from her” (Kohelet 7:26). What is good? That is Moses, as it is written: “that he was good” (Exodus 2:2).<sup>27</sup> And since he was good, he ascended to another lofty plane. (*Zohar* III, 261b)

According to the *Zohar*, Moses is the only one ever to have attained such a lofty plane. He alone is called “good before God”, and thus, he alone ascended to the highest of all planes, where the feminine essence has no place—hence “[he] shall escape from her”.<sup>28</sup>

Maimonides also associates Moses’ abstinence with his unique level of prophecy:

None of the prophets prophesied at will. Not so Moses, who dons the holy spirit and is visited by prophecy whenever he wishes, without focusing his mind or preparing for it, as he stands prepared at all times, like the angels, and therefore prophesies at any time, as it is written: “Stand still, and I will hear what the Lord will command concerning you” (Numbers 9:8). And this was promised to him by God, as it is written: “Go say to them, return to your tents. But as for you, stand here by me” (Deuteronomy 5:27-28)—teaching us that when prophecy departs from all of the prophets, they return to their tents, that is to their physical needs, like the rest of the people, and therefore do not separate themselves from their wives. Moses, however, did not return to his former tent, and therefore separated himself

from women forever, and from all similar things. And his mind became bound to the Eternal Rock, and the majesty [of God] never departed from him, and the skin of his face shone, and he became holy as the angels.” (Maimonides, *Hilkhot yesodei ha-Torah* 7, 6)

This passage, by Maimonides, appears to reflect the ideas of the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes)<sup>29</sup> of Cordoba on the subject of union with the Active Intellect. According to Ibn Rushd, the highest level of human perfection requires an intellectual union, unhindered by physical needs. Scholars have questioned such unequivocal Averroan influence, however, suggesting that Maimonides’ position may derive from the Neoplatonic elements in his thought, particularly in the matter of intellectual perfection.<sup>30</sup> In any event, Maimonides seems to maintain that it is prophecy itself that requires abstinence and separation from corporeality. While other prophets may return to their “tents” once prophecy has departed from them, Moses may not, as prophecy never leaves him. Or perhaps abstinence is a consequence rather than a requirement of prophecy: when one is filled with the prophetic spirit, there is no room for anything else. According to this interpretation, God’s reply to Miriam and Aaron is that Moses is not to “blame” for his abstinence. When God says “Not so my servant Moses, who is trusted in all My house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, manifestly and not in riddles”, it as if He is saying: in giving him My prophecy, in speaking to him directly and revealing Myself to him, it is I who prevents him from engaging in procreation.

Another passage in the *Zohar* offers further justification for Moses’ abstinence—beyond his uniquely exalted level of prophecy:

It is said of you [Moses] “but as for you, stand here by me” (Deuteronomy 5:27): All of Israel may return to their tents [i.e. to their wives, after having abstained from sexual relations for three days prior to the revelation at Mount Sinai], but you may not, until the final redemption. And who caused this? The mixed multitude [who caused Israel to worship the golden calf], on account of whom “he cast the tablets out of his hands” (Exodus 32:19). (*Zohar, Ra’aya mehemna*, III, 279a)

The “mixed multitude”<sup>31</sup> caused the first tablets to be broken, and it was up to Moses to redress the situation, i.e. to maintain the same heightened spiritual/prophetic state in which he had originally ascended

Mount Sinai—in order to fashion a second pair of tablets, and ensure the people's redemption and entry into the Land of Israel. That Moses was held personally responsible is explained by the fact it was Moses who decided, of his own accord, to convert the “mixed multitude”—a group of Egyptians, including Pharaoh's soothsayers and wise men, who were awestruck by the miracles they had witnessed during the plagues—and allow them to join the departing Israelites. Rashi offers the following explanation of God's words to Moses in the verse “And the Lord said to Moses: Go down; for your people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves” (Exodus 32:7): “It does not say ‘the people have corrupted’, but ‘your people’—the mixed multitude whom you received of your own accord and converted without asking Me, saying ‘It is good that converts should adhere to the Shekhinah’. Now they have corrupted themselves and others”. In other words, Moses is required to repair the damage that he himself had caused.<sup>32</sup>

According to the midrash quoted in the *Zohar* and in parallel sources, Moses' sexual abstinence was not due to his unique level of prophecy, but the result of the sin of the golden calf—caused by the “mixed multitude” that had left Egypt together with the Israelites. Moses' task was to remain in a constant state of prophetic inspiration, as a form of restitution (*tikkun*), lest the sin of the golden calf recurs, and that is why he was prevented from returning to his tent and his wife, like everyone else. The idea of abstinence as restitution contrasts, however, with other positions taken by the rabbis, discussed here in various contexts, whereby observance of the commandment of *onah* (marital relations) is, in fact, considered an act of restitution/perfection, while abstinence and celibacy are strictly forbidden. As both views are cited in rabbinic literature, both are worthy of consideration.

In any event, the very fact that the various midrashim devote so much effort to justifying Moses' abstinence speaks for itself, as does the multiplicity of explanations offered—reflecting a clear objection to abstinence in general, even for those on the highest spiritual plane.

We could leave it at that and say that the phenomenon of Moses and his prophecy are the exceptions that prove the rule: with the unique exception of Moses, human perfection can only be attained through the union of male and female; prophecy, the highest level of human development, is also attained through union, not separation. This is undoubtedly the prevailing, albeit not unequivocal view in rabbinical literature, as a number of midrashim leave room for the possible justification

of abstinence in general, and among prophets in particular.<sup>33</sup> In *Genesis Rabbah*, for example, we find the following:

And God spoke to Noah, and to his sons with him, saying: ‘And behold, I establish my covenant...’ (Genesis 9:8). Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Nehemiah; Rabbi Judah says: “Because he violated the commandment, he was humiliated. Rabbi Nehemiah said: he went beyond the commandment and acted in holiness. Therefore, he and his sons were favoured with [direct divine] speech, [as it is written], ‘And God spoke to Noah, and to his sons’.<sup>34</sup>

According to Rabbi Judah, it was Noah’s abstinence from conjugal relations that brought about his downfall and humiliation, while Rabbi Nehemiah seems to imply that Noah’s abstinence was, in fact, a virtue. The sources pertaining to Moses, however, do not present both views, but simply reject sexual abstinence. What is more, they appear to preclude a hermeneutical compromise based on the unique character of Moses’ prophecy, suggesting rather, that even such exceptional circumstances fail to justify complete sexual abstinence. The very fact that Miriam’s words are deemed “evil speech” (*lashon ha-ra*—the halakhic definition of which is, as noted, the true account of a negative action) rather than “slander” (*dibah*) would seem to indicate something negative in Moses’ behaviour, for if not, what was the subject of Miriam’s evil speech?

Although the midrash cited above (*Sifre, Be-ha’alotkha*) claims that God commanded Moses to abstain from sexual relations, another midrash portrays Moses’ abstinence not as a divine commandment, but as something he did of his own accord:

Moses did three things of his own accord and God agreed with him: He added a further day [of abstinence prior to receiving the Torah], abstained from conjugal relations and broke the tablets. (BT, *Shabbat* 87a)

According to this source, even Moses—despite his unique and lofty level of prophecy—was not initially commanded by God to abstain from sexual relations. Only when Moses decides to separate himself from his wife on his own initiative does God “agree with him”. The mediaeval talmudic commentators stress that had he not abstained of his own accord, such abstinence would not have met with God’s approval, since “a man is led along the path he chooses”.<sup>35</sup>

Later versions of the story present a somewhat more complex picture. The story in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*<sup>36</sup> differs from the legend recounted in the tractate of *Shabbat* (87a), which simply conveys the message that Moses took the initiative in abstaining from sexual relations and in other matters, and God agreed with him. The authors of the later source, on the other hand, sought to reconcile the story with the halakhic norms of their time. First, the radical wording “and God agreed with him” is replaced with something softer, more in keeping with halakhic discourse: “and his opinion coincided with that of God”. In other words, Moses examined the three issues closely and drew practical conclusions from them—based not on explicit scriptural references, but on logical inference (using the “a fortiori” method)—which turned out to coincide with God’s will. Some, however, deemed even this softened version unacceptable, and the text in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* cites a number of scholars who argue that Moses’ decision to abstain from sexual relations was not his own, but a direct commandment from God—a view they believe is supported by scripture. These scholars do not seek to mitigate the talmudic legend, but rather reject it outright. Rabbi Judah ben Beteira’s interpretation is entirely in keeping with the plain meaning of the biblical text in Numbers 12. He interprets God’s detailed reply to Aaron and Miriam as affirming that He had explicitly commanded Moses to separate from his wife. A further, unattributed view cites other scriptural evidence that Moses had been specifically commanded to remain celibate. The passage’s final words, “and his opinion coincided with that of God”, are thus superfluous.

Another version of *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* attempts to keep the legend within the framework of halakhic discourse.<sup>37</sup> This text presents yet another version of the story, in which the focus is not the independence of Moses’ initiative, but rather the protective “fence” he placed around the commandment that the Israelites abstain from sexual relations for two days—adding a third day. This corresponds to the passage from the tractate *Shabbat* (87a) cited above: “Moses did three things of his own accord...”. Such “fences” are perfectly legitimate in rabbinic tradition and the responsibility of religious leaders, who are charged with the task of “placing a fence around the Torah”. Moreover, in this case, there is scriptural evidence that God concurred with Moses in this matter. Regarding Moses’ own abstinence, he “reasoned” (i.e. inferred a fortiori) that he was required, by law, to separate himself from his wife. This was, however, a personal law pertaining to Moses alone and stemming

from the difference between Moses and all other Israelites: "... Israel, who are not a special instrument ... I who am a special instrument ...". Moses reached the logical conclusion—due to the difference between himself and all the others—that he must separate from his wife. This conclusion is entirely in keeping with halakhic norms, i.e. with the discourse to which the authors of *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* were committed and the framework within which they operated.

The rabbinic interpretations we have seen place very little stock in the connection between sexual abstinence and spirituality—viewed, at most (and according to some, not at all), as an expression of the unique nature of the greatest of the prophets. The ideal of conjugality, love and harmony between man and wife, remains unshaken, even at the highest level of prophecy ever attained by man—that of Moses. Almost ignoring the spirit of the biblical text, the rabbis are guardedly critical of Moses or, at the very least, do not present his abstinence as an ideal or unequivocal expression of spiritual perfection.

So too, Rabbi Akiva's separation from Rachel should not be interpreted as a necessary condition for his spiritual development. From the very first, Rachel made her betrothal to him contingent upon his going to the house of study. Akiva doubted his own ability, but Rachel believed in the ignorant shepherd's potential to become an accomplished scholar, even at his advanced age—on condition that he learn directly from Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. Rachel did not relent until she had sent him off to the house of study and until he had become, as she believed he would, a great scholar and renowned teacher.

### "WHAT IS MINE AND YOURS IS HERS!"

In many cultures, love of wisdom and love for a woman are perceived as conflicting or even wholly incompatible with one another, and the fact that Rabbi Akiva left his wife in order to go to the house of study exemplifies this conflict. Rachel herself, however, relieved the tension between the two, combining them into a single love. In complying with her wish that he devote all of his physical and emotional resources to study, Akiva demonstrated his commitment to their love.

One who had begun his married life without a home, picking straw out of his beloved's hair, went on to become the greatest of sages, respected by all, and a very wealthy man. He never forgot his years of poverty and the things he whispered lovingly to his young wife

in a barn on a winter's night. He considered them a kind of vow<sup>38</sup>—one he intended to keep as soon as he had the means to do so:

His [Rabbi Akiva's] wife would go out in a long-sleeved tunic (*kardutin*) and a 'city of gold' [diadem]. His students said to him: "Rabbi, you have shamed us by what you have done for her." Rabbi Akiva said to them: "She has suffered a great deal with me in the Torah." (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 6)

Great is the power of love at the beginning of the relationship, as the couple faces the initial difficulties of life together—especially when love itself is the cause of those difficulties. Through love, they manage to overcome all obstacles and adversities. A drastic transition from poverty to extreme wealth poses no less of a challenge, however, and Rabbi Akiva does not forget the romantic promises he made in those difficult times in the barn. Decades later, he buys his wife the jewels and gifts he promised her then, reaffirming his love for her, courting her and expressing his gratitude. Rabbi Akiva is now the admired teacher of thousands, the most revered and esteemed sage of his generation,<sup>39</sup> and no longer the simple shepherd he was when he married. Although no longer poor—if only because his father-in-law has given him half of his vast fortune—his students think it unbecoming of their elderly rabbi to behave in such a frivolous manner, giving his wife lavish gifts. They, who were so proud of their teacher, are now ashamed of him and do not hesitate to criticise him. The relationship between rabbi and students, as it appears in this story, is noteworthy. The students have no qualms about criticising their teacher for extravagant or immoral behaviour. A teacher's decorous and dignified comportment also reflects upon his disciples, and their reaction when they believe he has behaved inappropriately is: "You have shamed us, Rabbi!"

What bothered the students, according to some commentators, was Rabbi Akiva's ostentation. This interpretation is supported by a further detail recounted at the beginning of the same passage and in other sources as well, regarding Rabbi Akiva's extravagant lifestyle: "He had tables of silver and gold and climbed to his bed on golden ladders".<sup>40</sup> Other commentators explained the students' "you have shamed us" to mean "you have shamed us before our wives", as they lacked the means to buy such things for them.<sup>41</sup>

The students demanded that Rabbi Akiva, known for his concern for his students' honour,<sup>42</sup> live up to his reputation.<sup>43</sup> Rather than



telling them of the promises he had made to his wife 20 years earlier, he explains that the honour of the Torah is not cheapened by his actions, since his wife is an integral part of the recognition he has won. The sacrifices he made for the sake of Torah study were, first and foremost, her sacrifices, and the privations she suffered during his long years of study far exceeded his own.

I have portrayed the students' criticism and Rabbi Akiva's answer here in ethical-ideological terms. In mediaeval and later commentaries, however, the students' criticism or "misunderstanding" is given a halakhic explanation.<sup>44</sup> The "city of gold" is also known as a "bride's crown" and was a crown or diadem of gold imprinted with the form of the city of Jerusalem. Due to "Titus' War"—which ended in the destruction of the Temple—the rabbis decreed that "brides' crowns" should not be worn.<sup>45</sup> This was one of a series of decrees enacted by the rabbis to restrict celebratory practices at a time of persecution and tragedy. The criticism voiced by Rabbi Akiva's students could thus have been of a halakhic nature, in the light of the prohibition against "brides' crowns"—according to the interpretation (ultimately rejected) that the ban was against wearing such items in general, and applied to all women. Most sources, however, stress the fact that the prohibition specifically concerned brides at their weddings, while other women were allowed to wear a "city of gold".<sup>46</sup> The students' criticism might then be explained as follows: The purpose of the rabbinic decree was to remind brides and their families, at a time of personal joy, of the sorrow caused by the persecution of "Titus' War" and the destruction of the Temple—yet Rabbi Akiva, with the very same ornament, sought to bring his wife joy. According to this interpretation, Rabbi Akiva's pertinent reply is that the rabbi's decree was indeed meant to induce sorrow or detract from the joy of bride and groom, but such measures are unnecessary where Rachel is concerned, as she has already "suffered a great deal with me in the Torah".

Another interpretation dates the rabbinic decree not to the period immediately preceding the destruction of the Temple ("Titus' War"), but to a later time. The "city of gold" was thus an ornament imprinted with the image of Jerusalem, with which brides would adorn themselves, specifically to commemorate the destruction of the Temple<sup>47</sup>—a practice subsequently prohibited by the rabbis. According to this interpretation, the halakhic criticism levelled at Rabbi Akiva is far more serious, as he is accused of having undermined mourning customs adopted in the wake of the destruction of the Temple.<sup>48</sup> According to this interpretation,

Rabbi Akiva's reply is no less pertinent or interesting. He rejected his students' opinion, on the grounds that his wife had already suffered more than enough, and there was no need to add to her suffering.

Rabbi Akiva's gifts to Rachel are the kind of gifts a groom gives to his bride. Having studied Torah and become a scholar, he now meets the conditions of betrothal that Rachel stipulated when she first saw him, allowing them to begin anew, under the conditions she had originally envisioned.

In his explanation to his students, Rabbi Akiva does far more than merely repeat the known facts. The suffering "in Torah" that she shared with him was not due to the difficulty of separation during the many years he spent in the house of study and she lived as a widow in her husband's lifetime. She did not regret that. On the contrary, as the talmudic legends stress, that was her wish: "Were he to listen to me, he would sit in the house of study for another twelve years".<sup>49</sup> The cause of her great suffering "in Torah" was the fact that he did not immediately fulfil the condition that she, in her love for him, had stipulated *prior* to their marriage: "If I become betrothed to you, will you go to the house of study?" He promised her that he would, but failed to keep his promise, and Rachel found herself cast out of the home of her wealthy father, and married to a poor ignoramus, who loved her very much and promised to buy her expensive jewels, but withheld the most precious jewel of all: he did not go to the house of study. Akiva must certainly have had a reason to break the promise he had given her. He felt that he could not leave her alone with a child, in such a state of poverty, without his support. From her perspective, however, their economic hardship in no way justified his remaining with her. The fact that he had not gone to study was a source of great distress to her, and having the man she loved by her side offered little consolation. She seized upon the appearance of Elijah in the form of a poor man whose wife was in labour and lacked even straw to lie on. Akiva used the opportunity to comfort her in their poverty and distress, pointing out that some are in even greater straits, and Rachel replied: "Go to the house of study!"

This is the great distress that Rabbi Akiva inflicted upon his wife Rachel—the fact that he did not go immediately after their betrothal to study Torah, and delayed fulfilling the promise he had made by a few years. Only when their sons got older and the time came to bring them to a teacher that they might learn to read and write did he overcome his embarrassment and begin to study together with his son: "He and his

son went and 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 *alef-bet* at the top of the slate and he learned it; *alef* [to] *tav* and he learned it; the book of *Leviticus* and he learned it. He continued learning until he had learned the entire Torah” (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, ver. A, ch. 6).

In the eyes of the many readers of the tales of Rabbi Akiva, the fact that he “left” his beloved wife for decades is incompatible with his legendary character as a whole. This element of his biography is hard to reconcile with the title “sage of love”<sup>50</sup> and his many sayings on the subject of love. The natural place for lovers is by each other’s side, and Rabbi Akiva’s prolonged absence tarnishes the idyllic image. Talmudic legend addresses this issue, citing an anonymous sage who wonders how long she will continue her living widowhood,<sup>51</sup> while, according to another version of the story,<sup>52</sup> her husband’s absence results in her harassment by a wicked man who does not desist even when Rabbi Akiva returns at the head of a multitude of students. This is the source of the mistaken tendency to interpret Rabbi Akiva’s words, “she has suffered a lot with me in the Torah”, as a kind of justification of his long absence. As I have noted, however, it was not the separation, the longing or the loneliness throughout the many years in which he applied himself to Torah study with an infinite devotion that caused Rachel grief, but in fact the long period in which he failed to keep his promise to go and study. The legend, in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, describes the depths of Akiva’s ignorance—complete illiteracy: “His son wrote the *alef-bet* at the top of the slate and he learned it; *alef* [to] *tav* and he learned it”. How much Rachel suffered, having to live with a man who didn’t even know the letters of the alphabet. Finally, he learns to read and write together with his son and begins to study Torah as well: “the book of *Leviticus* and he learned it”. As children begin to study the Torah with the book of *Leviticus*, so did Rabbi Akiva.<sup>53</sup>

“He continued learning until he had learned the entire Torah”. Only then was he worthy of complying with her request demand that he go to the house of study—to the academy of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua. Rabbi Akiva expressed this in the words “she suffered with me”: the suffering was on my account, until she succeeded in getting me to study Torah—stressing all the more her absolute right to all of the standing and honour I have attained. That is also the message that arises from the following story:

A tale of Rabbi Akiva, who made his wife a “city of gold” [diadem]. Rabban Gamaliel’s wife became angry and jealous of her. She came and told her husband. He said to her: “Would you have done for me what she did for him—selling her hair and giving him [the proceeds] that he might study Torah?” (JT, *Shabbat* 6, 7)

The President (Nasi) Rabban Gamaliel’s wife saw the “city of gold” Rabbi Akiva had given to his wife Rachel and was jealous of her. When she told her husband what Rabbi Akiva had done for his wife and that it was only fitting that the president of the Sanhedrin does the same for *his* wife, Rabban Gamaliel replied: “Would you have done for me what she did for him—selling her hair that he might study Torah?”

The suffering that Rachel endured with him in the Torah was thus not the suffering of separation, as many mistakenly believe, but rather the suffering of a life of poverty and self-denial and, above all, as we have seen, her great sorrow over the time that passed until he finally went to study Torah.

Rachel presents a more complex vision of love than merely living side by side, for richer or for poorer. Love, to Rachel, is a driving force and the source of creativity and growth. “If I become betrothed to you, will you go to the house of study?” She does not love the illiterate shepherd as he is. Her love for him is aroused when she recognises of his character and his potential, taking it upon herself to help him realise that potential. Her love is not stagnant but evolving and comes to fruition in Rabbi Akiva’s accomplishments, in his becoming the greatest sage of his generation. Rabbi Akiva’s return at the head of his students is the climax of this love story. Let us now see how it ends, in the two versions of the story:

<i>BT Ketubot</i> 62b	<i>BT Nedarim</i> 50a
When he returned, twenty-four thousand students came with him. His wife heard and went to greet him. Her neighbours said to her: borrow clothing and dress yourself. She said to them: “A righteous man knows the spirit of his beast” (Proverbs 12:10). When she came before him, she prostrated herself and began to kiss his feet, and his students pushed her [away]. He said to them: “Leave her. What is mine and yours is hers”.	He went away for another 12 years, and returned with twenty-four thousand pairs of students. Everyone went out to greet him, and she too went to greet him. The wicked man said to her: “And where are you going?” She said to him: “A righteous man knows the spirit of his beast” (Proverbs 12:10). She went to appear before him and the students pushed her away. He said to them: “Leave her alone. What is mine and yours is hers”.

According to the version of the story in *Ketubot*, Rachel's neighbours try to convince her to borrow pretty clothes and to dress up in honour of her husband's return. We know that Rabbi Akiva himself attached importance to women caring for their physical appearance as a factor contributing to marital harmony—an approach reflected in his halakhic rulings.<sup>54</sup> Her behaviour, according to this account, is completely self-abasing: she prostrates herself and kisses his feet. His students, who see a strange woman dressed in rags kissing their rabbi's feet, push her away.

The version in *Nedarim* features the same wicked man who, 12 years earlier, had justified her father's decision to disinherit her over the ne'er-do-well husband who had abandoned her and made her a living widow. He continues to torment her: "And where are you going?" Your husband left you when he was a nobody. Do you really think he will notice you after all these years, especially now, when he is a great sage and you are still the same miserable creature? The description of the meeting between Rachel and Rabbi Akiva is far less dramatic in this version: "She went to appear before him and the students pushed her away", seeking to prevent her from joining those who had come to greet the great rabbi.

What is particularly disturbing here is not the extent to which she humbled herself before him—whether she prostrated herself or merely sought to be received by him—but rather the words with which she refers to herself, ostensibly comparing herself to a beast. "A righteous man knows the spirit of his beast", she replied (quoting from the book of Proverbs), whether to her neighbours or to the wicked man. One need not be particularly aware or have feminist sensibilities to wonder at the use of such imagery, and indeed, as we shall see below, the use of this expression from the book of Proverbs troubled talmudic commentators throughout the ages. Some explain that having heard that a great man had come to town and not knowing whether it was Rabbi Akiva or not, she went to greet him anyway, remarking that a righteous man would not humiliate someone, even a poor woman like herself.<sup>55</sup> Others reject this reading entirely, claiming that the texts are corrupt and originally cited a different verse from Proverbs (29:7): "A righteous man knows the cause of the poor". Rachel's answer to her neighbours is thus that she need not mask her poverty before the righteous man, as he is fully aware of the existence of the poor; while her reply to the wicked man is that unlike those who wield temporal power, a truly righteous man treats all with respect, even the poor. A further explanation suggests that the bucolic imagery was meant to appeal specifically to Rabbi Akiva, who

had been a shepherd. Rachel remembered how she had recognised his unique qualities in the way he had treated the sheep he tended for her father.

Her words may also be an allusion to Rabbi Akiva's statement that "poverty becomes a daughter of Jacob like a red ribbon on the head of a white horse".<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the Jewish People is compared to a handsome beast, and the comparison is not considered derogatory. A similar comparison, with positive connotations, also appears in Song of Songs (1:9): "I have compared you, O my love, to a mare among Pharaoh's steeds". In any event, the many comments elicited by the use of this phrase are indicative of the fact that scholars and readers throughout the generations have been uncomfortable with this comparison, whether made by Rachel herself or ascribed to her by the author of the legend. A look at Proverbs 12, from which the phrase is taken, will allow us to understand the phrase in its original context:

*He who loves correction loves knowledge; but he who hates reproof is a brute. A good man will obtain favour from the Lord; but a man of wicked devices He will condemn. A man will not be established by wickedness; but the root of the righteous will never be moved. A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband; but she who does shamefully is as rottenness in his bones. The thoughts of the righteous are justice; but the counsels of the wicked are deceit. The words of the wicked are to lie in wait for blood; but the mouth of the upright will deliver them. The wicked are overthrown, and are no more; but the house of the righteous will stand. A man will be praised according to his intelligence; but the perverse of heart will be despised. Better is he who is lightly esteemed and is a servant to himself, than he who plays the man of rank and lacks bread. A righteous man knows the spirit of his beast;*<sup>57</sup> *but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel. (Proverbs 12, 1–10)*

The chapter compares the path of the righteous to that of the wicked: the former love correction and knowledge, while the latter hate reproof and are deceitful and ignorant. The righteous are diligent and unashamed of their poverty, while the wicked spend their time in idleness and neglect, in the company of wastrels like themselves. Rachel goes to meet her husband, who is (in the words of Proverbs 12:1) one who "loves correction, loves knowledge". She who was the first to recognise his moral qualities, that he was "modest and excellent", brought him to love knowledge, in the belief that love of morality (correction) and love

of knowledge are one and the same, is called (following 12:4) “a virtuous woman”, who is “a crown to her husband”. Although she is poor and dressed in rags, there is no shame in that (12:9): “Better is he who is lightly esteemed and is a servant to himself, than he who plays the man of rank and lacks bread”. One who does not despise labour of any kind and is servant to himself is better than one who is so filled with pride that he refrains from work and therefore suffers privation. Rachel has nothing to be ashamed of. “A righteous man knows the spirit of his beast”, its desires and needs, and provides for them.<sup>58</sup> The end of the verse (“but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel”) may be applied to the wicked man who tormented her. From Rachel’s perspective, her needs are not material and are in fact satisfied only by Rabbi Akiva’s going to study. She goes to greet him, knowing that he knows her spirit, for it is her spirit that caused him to study, to acquire knowledge and to achieve greatness. The comparison to a beast is therefore not degrading. It is meant to convey the idea that honour or shame is a matter of self-perception. A righteous man knows even the spirit of his beast, and that knowledge is not beneath his dignity, but rather a manifestation of his righteousness. All the more so her spirit, which longed for him to study Torah all of those years, out of love for “correction and knowledge”.

In a similar vein, one might interpret “the spirit of his beast” as referring not to her, but to the beast within himself. “A righteous man who knows” is thus juxtaposed with “the spirit of his beast”. “A righteous man who knows” expresses awareness of the value of Torah study, while “the spirit of his beast” addresses the need, the longing to study Torah, for without the Torah, all that remains is the beast without the spirit. The unique insight of the righteous man lies in this knowledge, in the recognition that the spirit of the beast must be sustained, its spiritual needs satisfied—with Torah study. “Knowing the spirit of the beast” is thus the essence of the interaction between Rachel and Rabbi Akiva. The knowledge that was initially hers alone had become his/their shared knowledge. She does not need to borrow clothes and cover herself before him, because that is not the basis of their relationship. According to the version of the story in *Nedarim*, she answers the wicked man’s question (“And where are you going?”) with “A righteous man knows the spirit of his beast”, as if to say: “This has been my goal ever since I married him, and in all of these years, to get him to understand this. Now that he does, I am going to greet him”. She goes to greet him,

knowing that her great sacrifice has not been in vain, that her work has been rewarded and that he was worthy of her love.

It is Rachel's love that made Rabbi Akiva a scholar, one of the greatest and most influential figures in all areas of Jewish culture in his own and subsequent generations. When she came before him, she prostrated herself and kissed his feet. His students began to push her away, and he said to them: "Leave her. What is mine and yours is hers". All of my Torah, and therefore all of your Torah, belongs to my wife Rachel, because it emanates from her love. As Rashi explains (*Ketubot*, ad loc.): "The Torah that I have studied and that you have studied is by her hand". It is she, through her love, who insisted that I study Torah, that I persist in my studies and that I go on to teach you. What is mine and what is yours is hers. The wisdom and Torah of the sage of love belongs to the woman who loved him. Rachel's love brought Rabbi Akiva's wisdom to fruition, making his Torah and that of his students for all generations hers. The sage of love is a woman's creation, and a woman's love gave birth to his wisdom.

## NOTES

1. I was first introduced to this idea by Professor Warren Zev Harvey, in a course he taught on the concept of love, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. See also A.I. Kook's short essay "*Shir ha-Shirim*", in H.Y. Chamiel (ed.), *Be'oro: Iyyunim be-mishnato shel ha-Rav Avraham Yitzhak ha-Kohen Kook ZTz"l uvdarkhei hora'atah*, (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 511–513 (first published in B.M. Lewin [ed.], *Alumah* [Jerusalem, 1936]).
2. J.N. Epstein, *Mevo'ot le-sifrut ha-tanna'im* (Jerusalem, 1957), p. 71. Z. Frankel, *Darkei ha-Mishnah* (Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 118–119.
3. His friends and students praised him highly—for example: "Rabbi Tarfon said to him: 'Akiva, any who separate themselves from you, it is as if they have separated themselves from life'" (BT, *Kiddushin* 66b; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 6). See also Ben Azzai's remarks in BT, *Bekhorot* 58a; and Sotah 49a: "When Rabbi Akiva died, the honour of the Torah ceased from the world, the arms of the Torah ceased from the world and the wellsprings of wisdom were sealed."
4. BT, *Hagigah* 14b; Tosefta, *Hagigah* 2, 3, and in *Hekhalot zutarti*. The subject is treated at length in chapter 9: "Orchard of Love".
5. I owe the idea of viewing Rachel as the catalyst and presenting the love story between Rachel and Rabbi Akiva from her perspective, to Professor Eliezer Schweid of the Hebrew University, who commented



on my interpretation of this love story in my book *Be'ikvot ha-ahavah* (Jerusalem, 2000). I thank him for having shown me the correct reading of these legends.

6. The word *nitkadshah*—she became betrothed—in the passive form, appears frequently in the talmudic literature, to indicate that a woman is betrothed (see, for example, BT, *Gittin* 89a). A woman's active participation in the act of betrothal may, perhaps, be inferred from the case of a woman who refused betrothal from one man and became betrothed to another (BT, *Yevamot* 108a).
7. Shmuel Safrai, *Rabbi Akiva: Hayav u-mishnato* (Jerusalem, 1970), pp. 11–12. Safrai questions the tradition of Rabbi Akiva's marriage to the daughter of Kalba Savua from a chronological point of view, claiming that the latter was one of the wealthiest men in Jerusalem prior to the destruction of the Temple, while Rabbi Akiva could not have been more than 15 years old at the time. The doubts that Safrai raises, based on a comparison and chronological analysis of the Babylonian and Palestinian sources, cannot be ignored. This does not mean, however, that the traditional narrative should be rejected entirely. I am surprised that Safrai does not mention the reading "*devar dekalba savua*" ("of the son of Kalba Savua"; BT, *Nedarim* 50a), found also in manuscript. This appears to suggest that Kalba Savua may have been used as a patronymic rather than as a reference to a specific individual. The text in *Ketubot* also reads "Rabbi Akiva was the shepherd of *Ben Kalba Savua*", so that he may in fact have herded the sheep of the son (*ben*) of the wealthy Kalba Savua of Jerusalem rather than those of Kalba Savua himself. In his Hebrew translation of the Aramaic text, Safrai (p. 68) renders Ben Kalba Savua—Kalba ben Savua, adding in a note (n. 1): "One of the wealthiest men in Jerusalem prior to the destruction of the Temple" (*Gittin* 56a)." Indeed, the text in *Gittin* refers to the wealthy Jerusalemite himself as "Ben Kalba Savua", rather than "Kalba Savua", and some sources (albeit from a later period) do refer to him simply as "Kalba Savua" (see, e.g. *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 6). It is therefore possible that "the daughter of Ben Kalba Savua" (BT, *Ketubot* 62b) was, in fact, the granddaughter of the family patriarch prior to the destruction of the Temple.

I would like to stress, however, that the precise dating of the story and the questions raised by Safrai are not relevant to the present discussion, which deals with the lessons and ideas presented by the aggadic text, rather than with historical "facts". To put it another way, I am far more interested in the consciousness generated by the legend over the ages, than in its "actual" occurrence. My approach to the corresponding Babylonian and Palestinian texts on the subject thus differs from that of Safrai, who views them as "alternative" sources, whereas I see them

- as complementary. I say this somewhat cautiously, as I generally consider Safrai's research more accurate than my own understanding of the texts.
8. For further elaboration, see Rothenberg N', *The Wisdom of Love: Man, Woman & God in Jewish Canonical Literature* (Boston, 2009), pp. 191–207. The discussion of abstinence in the present volume is based on what I wrote there.
  9. Much has been written on the systematic approach of Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, in *Emunot ve-deot*, Rabbi Bahya Ibn Pakuda in *Hovot ha-levavot*, Rabbi Judah ha-Levi in *Kuzari*, and other central figures. See also Rothenberg N', *Ibid.*, pp. 208–212.
  10. Parallel source: Tosefta, *Bekhorot* 6, 3; see also commentaries ad loc.
  11. Rashi and Rabeinu Tam, BT, Kiddushin 29b, in Tosafot, par. beg. "Ha lan ha lehu".
  12. See Hidushei Maharsha and Tosafot Ri ha-Zaken, *ibid.*; and Rabbi Akiva in BT, Sanhedrin 76a. See also Leviticus Rabbah 21.
  13. See, for example, *Nizzahon Vetus* (a collection of Jewish anti-Christian arguments, compiled in the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries), p. 178. See also I.M. Gafni, "The Institution of Marriage in Rabbinic Times", in D. Kraemer (ed.), *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory* (Oxford and New York, 1989), pp. 14–28. The Mesopotamian Church father Aphrahat wrote, against the Jewish approach: "I have written to you, my beloved, concerning virginity and sanctity, because I have heard about a Jewish man who shamed one of our brethren, the children of our Church, saying to him, 'You are unclean, for you do not take wives. But we are holy and excellent, who procreate and increase seed in the world'" (trans. J. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-century Iran* [Leiden, 1971], p. 82; for the Syriac text, see W. Wright [ed.], *The Homilies of Aphraates, the Persian Sage* [London, 1869], vol. 1, pp. 345–355). In a similar vein, John Chrysostom wrote, in the fourth century: "*The Jews disdain the beauty of virginity, and this is not astonishing because they have dishonored Christ himself, born of a virgin. The Greeks admire it in amazement, but only the Church of God praises it*" (John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, 1,1, trans. S. Rieger Shore, in S. Rieger Shore and E.A. Clark [eds.], *On Virginity; Against Remarriage* [Lewiston, NY, 1983]). For further discussion, see J. Cohen, "*Mitzvat piryah u-reviyah u-mekomah ba-pulmus ha-dati*", in I. Bartal and I. Gafni (eds.), *Sexuality and the Family in History* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1998), pp. 83–96; and J. Dan, *Al ha-kedushah: Dat, musar u-mistika ba-Yahadut u-ve-datot aherot* (Jerusalem, 1997) pp. 338–339.
  14. Daniel Boyarin (D. Boyarin, "Internal Opposition in Talmudic Literature: The Case of the Married Monk", *Representations* 36 [Autumn, 1991],

pp. 87–113) offers an extremely original and interesting analysis of the dilemma of Torah study versus married life, although a little forced, at times, and probably not an accurate reflection of reality. I disagree with Boyarin's assertion that the Babylonian practice of combining marriage with protracted absences for the purpose of study created "a class of married monks". It is also my opinion that Boyarin places undue emphasis on the "unresolved tensions" (as he calls them) between the demands of marriage and dedication to Torah study. Every intellectual pursuit, and Torah study in particular, entails a desire to dedicate oneself wholly to study, to "immerse" oneself in the world of learning, unencumbered by everyday concerns. One who has had such an experience may wish to postpone marriage or withdraw—to one extent or another—from family life, for a given period of time. In this sense, the phenomenon is not unique to the talmudic period, but is common to many different cultures, and is well-known even in our own time. Boyarin is clearly aware of the fact that the texts on which his argument is based may be understood in very different ways, and thus treats his assertion as a "possible interpretation" rather than a definite conclusion. The choice of the word "monk" is unfortunate, however, as a heading for his analysis. Torah scholars who lived apart from their wives for a time did not do so in order to be purer or holier, or because they viewed sexual relations as base physicality. On the contrary, the concept of purity is associated specifically with married life—free from the dangers of sinful thoughts or desires that may result from abstinence. It was thus not a matter of escaping or avoiding marriage, but of undisturbed dedication to something else: Torah study. The word "monk" is therefore inappropriate. On understanding social reality from written sources, see Adiel Schremer, "*Ben shemoneh esreh le-hupah? Gil ha-anisu'in shel Yehudei Eretz Yisrael bi-tekufat ha-Bayit ha-Sheni, ha-Mishnah ve-ha-Talmud*", in Bartal and Gafni (eds.), *Sexuality and the Family*. Schremer, who makes no reference to Boyarin, provides a thorough and careful historical analysis, asserting, *inter alia*, that the information provided by rabbinical texts is insufficient to determine actual circumstances at the time. See also: Schremer, Adiel, *Zachar Unekeva B'ra'am, Male and Femlae Created He Them: Jewish Marriage in Late Second Temple, Mishnah and Talmud Periods*, Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2003. pp. 80–101.

15. Without citing any specific source, let it suffice to mention the many references in the Mishnah, Tosefta and Talmuds, to "a woman whose husband went abroad" [Isha Shehalakh Ba'ala Lemedinat Hayam].
16. Maharsha on BT, Kiddushin 29b, par. beg. "Ha lan" (second half).
17. "It was his custom to return home every Yom Kippur eve" would seem to imply that he was away the entire year. This is not necessarily the case

however. See Y. Frankel, *Iyyunim be-olamo ha-ruhani shel sippur ha-aggadah* (Tel Aviv, 1981), p. 101.

18. This sharp condemnation of bachelorhood, attributed to Rabbi Akiva, is, of course, consistent with his philosophy, as described above. The reading "Akiva" appears in various citations and parallel sources (see gloss on the page in *Yevamot*). It is highly likely that the correct reading is in fact "Akiva", based on the content of the cited verse, "for in the image of God He made man" (cf. *Mishnah, Avot* 3, 14), the chronology of the sages of the Talmud, and parallel readings. In a parallel source, in *Genesis Rabbah* (Noah 32), Rabbi Jacob does not appear at all, and the discussion begins with Rabbi Akiva's statement that "It is as if he diminishes the image [of God]", followed by the statements of Rabbi Eliezer and Ben Azzai: "Rabbi Akiva taught: 'One who sheds blood is considered as if he has diminished the image [of God]. Why? What is the reason that "he who sheds the blood of man [by man his blood shall be shed]"? Because "in the image of God He made man".' Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah taught: 'One who fails to procreate diminishes the image [of God]. Why? "For in the image of God He made man" is followed by "and you, be fruitful and multiply".' Ben Azzai taught: 'One who fails to procreate [it is as if he sheds blood] and diminishes the image. Why? What is the reason that "he who sheds the blood of man [by man his blood shall be shed]"? Because "in the image of God He made man". After which it is written "be fruitful and multiply".' Rabbi Elazar said to him: 'Well are the words of those who do them. Ben Azzai speaks well but does not act [accordingly]'. He [Ben Azzai] said to him: 'What can I do, for my soul desires Torah? The world can be perpetuated by others.'" In my opinion, this is the more accurate reading, and the reading "Rabbi Jacob" in *Yevamot* is a corruption.
19. See *Yevamot* 63b–64a, which asserts, citing a tannaic source, that one who fails to engage in procreation diminishes the Jewish people and causes the Shekhinah to depart from the people of Israel.
20. The principle that greatness in Torah does not justify failure to marry is reiterates elsewhere in rabbinic literature. See, for example, the story of Rabbi Hisda (BT, *Kidushin* 29b), who praised the greatness in Torah of his friend Rabbi Himnuna to his teacher Rabbi Huna. Rabbi Huna, impressed by his words, asked Rabbi Hisda to bring Rabbi Himnuna to him on his next visit, that he might meet him. When Rabbi Himnuna came to the synagogue where Rabbi Huna was praying, Rabbi Huna saw that he did not wear his prayer shawl in the manner of married men. When Rabbi Huna asked him about it, Rabbi Himnuna replied that he was indeed unmarried. Rabbi Huna then turned away from him, charging him not to return until he had married. Although Rabbi Huna was clearly

- eager to speak to him, as a great Torah scholar, he could not ignore Rabbi Himnuna's sin of bachelorhood, which he viewed as an essential flaw, precluding intellectual interaction between them, as scholars.
21. See also *Tur Shulhan Arukh*, Even Ha-ezer 1, 4.
  22. See Maimonides, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10, 3, in which he uses the same expressions to explain the commandment to love of God. See also Chapter five, Song of Songs, at the end of the first paragraph.
  23. BT, *Yevamot* 61b.
  24. Maimonides, *Hilkhot ishut*, 15, 16; *Hilkhot isurei bi'ah* 26. See also *Tur shulhan arukh*, Even ha-ezer 1, 8.
  25. Other commentators explain that Moses did not marry an Israelite woman, but a Cushite princess—seen by Miriam and Aaron as an act of conceit. God replies that Moses' marriage was not a matter of conceit—because “the man Moses was very humble”—but of chance, as he married Zipporah while a fugitive from Pharaoh. See *Da'at zekenim mi-ba'alei ha-tosafot* on Numbers 11:2.
  26. Saadia Gaon, *Sefer ha-Emunot ve-ha-De'ot*, 10, 6: “On Sexual Intercourse”.
  27. “And a man of the House of Levi wnet and took as a wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived, and bore a son: and when she saw him that he was good, she hid him for three months” (Exodus 2:1–2).
  28. The full verse in Kohelet (7:26) reads: “And I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bonds. One who is good before God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be caught by her.”
  29. Ibn Rushd (Cordoba, 1126–1198) was a Muslim philosopher and physician who influenced mediaeval European and Jewish thought.
  30. See Eliezer Schweid, *Iyunim bi-shmonah perakim la-Rambam* (Jerusalem, 1965), pp. 79–95; Moshe Idel, “*Hitbodedut ke-'rikkuz' ba-filosofiyah ha-Yehudit*”, in *Shlomo Pines Judilee Volume (Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thouoght* 7 [1988]), p. 57.
  31. See Exodus 12:38: “And a mixed multitude (*erev rav*) also went up with them”; Rashi ad loc.: “A mixture of converts of different nations.”
  32. See *Exodus Rabbah* 42, and *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Ki tissa* 21.
  33. E.E. Urbach, “*Askesis ve-yisurim be-torat Hazal*”, in *Me'olamam shel hakhamim* (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 437–458.
  34. *Genesis Rabbah* 35, 1.
  35. See *Tosafot*, par. beg. “*Ve-atah poh amod imadi*” (Rabeinu Tam).
  36. *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, ver. A, ch. 2.
  37. *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, ver. B, ch. 2.
  38. Rabbi Nissim Gaon (on BT *Shabbat* 59a) interpreted Akiva's words as an actual vow. Later commentators expressed a similar view, probably following in Rabbi Nissim's footsteps.

39. "Whose fame extends to the ends of the earth" (BT, Yevamot 16a).
40. *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, ver. A, ch. 6.
41. Hayim Joseph David Azulai (Hida), citing *Binyan Yehoshua* (Joshua Falk of Lissa).
42. See BT, *Eruvin* 54b. Rabbi Akiva's student Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua said: "Let the honour of your student be as dear to you as your own" (*Avot* 4, 12), which would appear to be his master's teaching.
43. *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, ver. B, 12 reads: "... until he had made a crown of gold for his wife, and until he had made golden slippers for his wife. His sons said to him: 'People laugh at us.'" According to this version of the story, it was his sons who criticised his actions.
44. Rabbi Akiva's behaviour is generally justified by the fact that the prohibition against a "city of gold" applied only to brides and to going out (into the public domain) with on the Sabbath.
45. Mishnah, *Sotah* 9, 14; Tosefta, *Sotah* 15, 8; BT, *Sotah* 49b; JT, *Sotah* 5, 15, and parallel sources.
46. Tosafot, *Gittin* 7a, par. beg. "*Atrot hatanim*". See also Nahmanides (*Hiddushei ha-Ramban*), *Gittin* 7a and Solomon Ibn Adret (*Hiddushei ha-Rashba*), *ibid.* Most of the commentators relate to the ban in the context of taking a "city of gold" into the public domain on the Sabbath. This would seem to imply that on weekdays, the ban would not apply to ordinary women, but only to brides. See also Yom Tov Ishbili (*Hiddushei ha-Ritba*), *ibid.*, who cites the case of Rabbi Akiva: "But for women, it is not forbidden ... except at a time of celebration, as it is written there, 'They decreed against brides' crowns', and they explain: 'What are brides' crowns?... A city of gold.' Not at a time of celebration, however, it is certainly permitted, as Rabbi Akiva gave his wife a city of Gold."
47. Joseph Teomim (author of *Peri megadim* on *Shulhan arukh*), in his commentary *Rosh Yosef*, on BT, *Shabbat* 59b, explains that the "city of gold" was worn "in order to recall Jerusalem in its devastation", following remarks by Samuel Eliezer Edels (Maharsha) on BT, *Nedarim* 50a.
48. Another opinion widely held among scholars places the conflict in question at a later date, very close to Rabbi Akiva's own time—during the second revolt (116–117), under the Emperor Trajan. The conflict is named "Quietus' War" (and not "Titus' War"), after the Roman commander Lucius Quietus, who was called upon to suppress the rebellion. See S. Saffrai, "*Hit'osheshut ha-yishuv ha-Yehudi be-dor Yavne: 8. Pulmus Kitos*", in *Bi-yemei ha-Bayit u-vi-yemei ha-Mishnah: Mehkarim be-Toldot Yisra'el*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1996).
49. BT, *Ketubot* 63a. The version of the story in *Nedarim* (50a) reads: "At the end of twelve years, he went home. From behind the house he heard a wicked man say to his wife: 'Your father did well, [for] he [your

husband] is beneath you, and what is more has left you in living widowhood for all these years.’ She said to him: ‘Were he to listen to me, he would go back for another twelve years.’ He said: ‘Since she has given me permission, I will go back.’ He went back for another twelve years, and returned with twenty-four thousand pairs of students.” See the comparison between these two sources, below.

50. See above the introduction.
51. *Ketubot*, *ibid.*
52. *Nedarim*, *ibid.*, see n. 50 and below.
53. See *Leviticus Rabbah*, *Tzav*, 7: “Rabbi Assi asked: Why are children taught beginning with the Torah of the Priests [=Leviticus] and not with Genesis? Because the children are pure and the sacrifices are pure. Let the pure come and engage in the pure.”
54. For example, he allowed a woman in a state of menstrual impurity to use kohl and rouge (i.e. to use makeup, to enhance her beauty) lest she become unattractive to her husband, and permitted divorce even when there is no cause other than the husband’s having found a more beautiful woman. See Chapter 6: Harmony in Love.
55. The three explanations cited here are those of Rashi, *Shitah mekubetzet* (Bezalel Ashkenazi) and Maharsha (Samuel Eliezer Edels).
56. *Leviticus Rabbah* 35.
57. Emphases mine.
58. This interpretation of Proverbs 12 was inspired by Mordechai Zer-Kavod’s commentary on the book of Proverbs in Mossad Harav Kook’s *Da’at Mikra* series. My late father, z”l, brought to my attention Naftali Hertz Tur-Sinai’s original interpretation of Proverbs 12:10, in *Peshuto shel Mikra* (Jerusalem, 1967): “A righteous man recognises a spirit in its distress (*Yodea tzadik nefesh be-hemiyato*)”. Tur-Sinai’s explanation is particularly apt in the context of this legend. See also Shlomo Rothenberg, “Tzofnat Pa’ane’ah”, in *Sefer Zikaron le-N.H. Tur-Sinai* (Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 169–171.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-58141-5>

Rabbi Akiva's Philosophy of Love

Rothenberg, N.

2017, XII, 226 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-58141-5