

Class 2

Class Two Rabbi Akiva and Love

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan

Version B, Chapter 12

Translation by Tal Ilan, Mine and Yours are Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature (1997)

What were the beginnings of Rabbi Akiva? They say he was forty years old and had not learnt a thing. Once he was standing at the mouth of a well. He asked: Who carved this stone? They said to him: the water which washes off it daily. They said to him: Akiva, have you not read "Waters wear away the stones" (Job 14:19)? Immediately Rabbi Akiva applied the *a-fortiori* principle to himself. If the soft (water) has sculpted the hard (stone), how much more so will the words of Torah, which are hard as iron, carve into my heart which is flesh and blood? Immediately he returned to the study of Torah. He and his son went and studied from teachers of children. Akiva said to him [the teacher]: Rabbi, teach me Torah. Rabbi Akiva held the top of the slate and his son held the top of the slate. The teacher wrote *aleph, bet* for him and he learnt it. From *aleph* to *tav* and he learnt it ... He went on studying until he had learnt the entire Torah ... When they [his masters] told him one *halacha*, he went and sat by himself and said to himself: This *aleph*, why was it written? This *bet*, why was it written? Why was this said? ... It was said he did not die until he slept on golden beds and made a golden crown and golden sandals for his wife. His sons said to him: People are making fun of us. He said: I will not listen to you. She also suffered much with me in the (cause of) Torah.

[בדרים נ' א:א-ד'](#)

דלי ציפתא ואמר ליה לשלוחא חזי מאי איכא מיהו לא ניחא לי דאיתהני בהדין עלמא ר' עקיבא איתקדשת ליה ברתיה (דבר) דכלבא שבוע שמע (בר) כלבא שבוע אדרה הנאה מכל נכסיה אזלא ואיתנסיבה ליה בסיתוא הוה גנו בי תיבנא הוה קא מנקיט ליה תיבנא מן מזייה אמר לה אי הואי לי רמינא ליך ירושלים דדהבא אתא אליהו אידמי להון כאנשא וקא קרי אבבא אמר להו הבו לי פורתא דתיבנא דילדת אתתי ולית לי מידעם לאגונה אמר לה ר' עקיבא לאנתתיה חזי גברא

Class 2

דאפילו תיבנא לא אית ליה אמרה ליה זיל הוי בי רב אזל תרתי סרי שנין קמי דר' אליעזר ור' יהושע למישלם תרתי סרי שנין קא אתא לביתיה שמע מן אחורי ביתיה דקאמר לה חד רשע לדביתהו שפיר עביד לך אבוך חדא דלא דמי לך ועוד [שבקך] ארמלות חיות כולהון שנין אמרה ליה אי צאית לדילי ליהוי תרתי סרי שנין אחרנייתא אמר הואיל ויהבת לי רשותא איהדר לאחורי הדר אזל הוה תרתי סרי שני אחרנייתא אתא בעשרין וארבעה אלפין זוגי תלמידי נפוק כולי עלמא לאפיה ואף היא קמת למיפק לאפיה אמר לה ההוא רשיעא ואת להיכא אמרה ליה (משלי יב, י) יודע צדיק נפש בהמתו אתת לאיתחזויי ליה קא מדחן לה רבנן אמר להון הניחו לה שלי ושלכם שלה הוא שמע (בר) כלבא שבוע אתא ואיתשיל על נידריה ואשתריי ואשתרי מן שית מילי איעתר רבי עקיבא מן כלבא שבוע מן אילא דספינתא דכל ספינתא עבדין ליה מין עינא זימנא חדא אנשיוה על כף ימא אתא הוא אשכחיה ומן גוואזא דזימנא חדא יהיב ארבעה זוזי לספונאי אמר להו אייתי לי מדעם ולא אשכחו אלא גוואזא על כף ימא אתיוה ליה אמרו ליה עביד מרנא עליה אישכח דהוה מלי דינרי דזימנא חדא טבעת ספינתא

[Nedarim 50a:1-7](#)

The daughter of Kalba Shebu'a betrothed herself to R. Akiba. When her father heard of it, he vowed that she would not benefit from his property. Then she went and married him in winter. They slept on straw, and he had to pick out the straw from his hair. 'If only I could afford it,' said he to her, 'I would present you with a golden Jerusalem.' [Later] Elijah came to them in the guise of a mortal, and cried out at the door. 'Give the some straw, for my wife is in labor and I have nothing for her to lie on.' 'See!' R. Akiba observed to his wife, 'there is a man who lacks even straw.' [Subsequently] she counselled him, 'Go, and become a scholar.' So he left her, and spent twelve years [studying] under R. Eliezer and R. Joshua. At the end of this period, he was returning home, when from the back of the house he heard a wicked man jeering at his wife, 'Your husband did well to you. Firstly, because he is your inferior; and secondly, he has abandoned you to living widowhood all these years.' She replied, 'If were he to hear my desires, he would be absent another twelve years.' "Seeing that she has given me permission," he said, 'I will go back.' So he went back, and was absent for another twelve years, [at the end of which] he returned with twenty-four thousand disciples. Everyone flocked to welcome him, including her [his wife]. But that wicked man said to her, 'And where art thou going?' 'A righteous man knows

Class 2

the life of what is his,' she retorted. So she went to see him, but the disciples wished to turn her away. 'Make way for her,' he told them, 'for my [learning] and yours are hers.'

תלמוד ירושלמי: מסכת סוטה פרק ט

דף מו, א פרק ט הלכה טו גמרא

מתניתא ועל האירוס רסיסה? אלו הן עטרות כלות זו עיר של זהב. ר' עקיבה עשה לאשתו עיר של זהב וקניאת בה איתתיה דרבן גמליאל. אמר לה מה הוית עבדת היך מה דהוות עבדה דהוות מזבנה קליעתא דשערה ויהבה ליה והוא לעי באורייתא.

Talmud Yerushalmi: Tractate Sotah

Section 9:15, 24C

What is a crown worn by a bride? It is a golden tiara. R. Akiva made for his wife a golden tiara [in the shape of the city of Jerusalem], and the wife of Rabban Gamliel saw it and was jealous of her. She came and told her husband. He said to her, "If you had done what she did, I would have been glad to make one for you. She sold her braids of hair and gave him the proceeds, so that he might labor in the Light [of Torah]."

"The Gift of the Magi"

A short story by O. Henry (1905)

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing left to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the look-out for the mendicancy squad.

In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."

Class 2

The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, the letters of "Dillingham" looked blurred, as though they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.

Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a grey cat walking a grey fence in a grey backyard. To-morrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling - something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honour of being owned by Jim.

There was a pier-glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen a pier-glass in an \$8 Bat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its colour within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out of the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.

So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her, rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

On went her old brown jacket; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she cluttered out of the door and down the stairs to the street.

Where she stopped the sign read: 'Mme Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds.' One Eight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the 'Sofronie.'

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade.

Class 2

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practised hand.

"Give it to me quick" said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation - as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value - the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 78 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task dear friends - a mammoth task.

Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.

"If Jim doesn't kill me," she said to herself, "before he takes a second look at me, he'll say I look like a Coney Island chorus girl. But what could I do - oh! what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?"

At 7 o'clock the coffee was made and the frying-pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.

Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit of saying little silent prayers about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: "Please, God, make him think I am still pretty."

The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two - and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves.

Jim stepped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.

"Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold it because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again - you

Class 2

won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice-what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet, even after the hardest mental labour.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"

Jim looked about the room curiously.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said, with an air almost of idiocy.

"You needn't look for it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you - sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it went for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered," she went on with a sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"

Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction. Eight dollars a week or a million a year - what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

"Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said, "about me. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first."

White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.

For there lay The Combs - the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped for long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise-shell, with jewelled rims - just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

And then Della leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, "Oh, oh!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to {lash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

"Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

Class 2

"Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

The magi, as you know, were wise men - wonderfully wise men - who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.