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The Sages of Our People: Akiba, 1967.

Sages of our People - Akiba Daniel Jeremy Silver January 15, 1967

that Akiba is flesh of our flesh and his dignity and his faith and his courage, his vision, his humility, and his wisdom represent all that Job represents to man. You remember that simple statement of faith that Job makes when he has been whipped and scourged and suffered every indignity: 'Naked came I to my mother's womb and naked I shall return there, the Lord has given, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord. " Naked came I out of my mother's womb - Job intended this phrase metaphorically. Akiba might have applied it quite literally for Akiba was poverty's child. He was born in a peasant's hovel in one of those squalid villages which dot the Judean plain very close by to Lida where the giant transports now descend to unload their human cargo. You may have seen Akiba who was exactly in his youth like those shepherd lads, those bedouin urchins, that could be seen from the roadside of Israel tending the flock of their fathers and of their villages all the while clothed in rags. Naked came I out of my mother's womb - Akiba was a child of poverty. He inherited only the leneal burden of the poor. His lot was to labor unto weariness. His was no Cinderella story. There is no fairy princess, no Pharoah's daughter to pull him from the Nile, bring him out as was Moses from the slave pens of Egypt. At thirty a man, Akiba was as poverty stricken, as illiterate, as impoverished and as ignorant as he had been at three. His lot seemed to be that of the suffering masses of humanity who have labored unto the weariness of the grave.

Have you ever wondered how it is the suffering and the bruised maintain some shred of dignity? How it is that those whose lot is so hapless, the serf, the slave, the felahim, the peasant, the Akiba, how it is that these people somehow manage to hold on to their own self-respect, to their dignity. Fate has, of course, known many an impoverished scholar, many a saint in tatters, but almost all of these people were

were at least granted the boon of knowledge, of learning, as children, though they lived in the dirt and the dust, in the mud and the muck, at least their minds could range freely through all the highways and byways of the world, but not so Akiba. To Akiba life was blackened by the peasant's ignorance as well as by the peasant's lot. His life and his philosophy give us some clear inkling of how the suffering many have managed to hold on to that spark of nobility which God has implanted within each of us and which society does so much to blot out and to rub out and to erase for most men.

You know, we who live in these abundant surroundings have a way of magnifying every annoyance to a major storm. The poor cannot afford this luxury. He looks for that one pallid ray of sunshine which somehow shines through the overcast. He turns each day, each experience, about until it refracts some moment of delighting joy. Akiba said it this way, and he said it not in Hebrew but in Aramaic in the vernacular of the poor. Whatever life threw up at him, this was his motto: All that God doeth He doeth The wisest of the poor have always cultivated a very simple protein philosophy. It amounts to no more than a stoic optimism and the ability to find in each moment, to drain each moment of what little capacity for joy it holds, the ability to minimize one's suffering and not to maximize it, to turn each moment that can be turned into a joyous moment, into a simcha. We have a marriage, a happiness in the family, but more often than not, what do we do with it. It becomes a moment of conspicuous display. We worry about it. We expose ourselves during it and we end up not enjoying it at all. The poor cannot afford this squandering of opportunity. An occasion such as a wedding would be a simcha, a fiesta, a moment of conspicuous joy. They must draw from it enough happiness to carry them through weeks and months of humdrum, hapless, hopeless routine. So it is their lot to keep their chins up, their souls high, to say as Akiba would say all his life: All that God doeth He doeth for the best.

Now most of Akiba's friends in later life were scholars and most of these men had been raised in more comfortable surroundings than Akiba's, and this hearty good cheer which Akiba cultivated was a little bit too much for them. Have you ever noticed how we, the more accustomed we become to our security, the happier we are in our abundance, the more we turn to a literature which throws up at us the misery of life? How we rejoice in the theater which is tragic, which insists that life is absurd and man is no more than an ant that can be stepped on and made to whimper? It's as if, afraid of our happiness, we turn to poverty and to ignorance and to the blight of life and say, this is the raw elemental thing, this is life as it is, somehow there is in there some lesson to be learned about life, but Akiba had lived in the dust and eaten the dirt; he knew what it was to live under the blackness and the darkness of ignorance for he knew that there is no virtue when there is no knowledge in the stench of poverty. He'd had enough as the poor of the world have always had enough and he was determined not to turn back into the misery of life, but to somehow find a way and turn each miserable moment to lighten it, to find some color, some meaning, some rejoicing in it.

You know, Akiba was happy to tell his youngsters a story. He claimed it was autobiographical, but, as you know, a preacher has some license. Here's his story:

He was once making a tour around Palestine with two companions. They came late at night to a small village. They asked for lodging. Those who lived in the village were either unwilling or unable to provide a bed and board. The companions grumbled, but Akiba said, of course, all that God doeth He doeth for the best. They went out into the field and Akiba busied himself looking for a level place where they could pitch their tent and spread out their bed roll. Night came on the scene. These men had brought with them a lantern, a rooster and a donkey. Don't ask me why, but they had a lantern, a rooster and a donkey. The winds came up, the wind blew out the light.

The friends grumbled, but, of course, Akiba said: All that God doeth He doeth for the best. A cat came and pounced on the rooster, killed the rooster, and the friends grumbled. Needless to say Akiba said what he always said. The donkey broke its tether and wandered off into the wilderness. The friends grumbled. Akiba rolled over, all that God doeth He doeth for the best, and he went back to sleep. Came the dawn. When he looked up and looked about he noticed a cloud of dust and smoke above the village. They returned to this small town and found that during the night bedouins had invaded, fired the town, taken all the men as captives to be sold into slavery. Had they slept in the village, had the bedouins seen their light, had the rooster crowed, had the donkey brayed, surely - all that God doeth He doeth for the best.

Now, of course, this kind of sturdy good cheer can, if taken to excess, become a debilitating philosophy of fatalism. Those who do nothing, who throw themselves on God's mercy, all the while proclaiming their piety and their faith, generally find that after they have proclaimed again and again their piety and their faith, their lot is more miserable than when they began. This is the kind of religion that Karl Marx pillaried when he spoke of the spiritual life often being the opiate of the masses, but Akiba was no fatalist. He didn't preach pessimism or despair. His whole life was a resounding aye, yes, to man's need to struggle and to achieve. He was a preacher of social revolution. He was a preacher of social reform. He himself had taken when he was over thirty his own life in hand. He had completely turned it inside out, made something of himself out of a very ordinary beginning. Akiba had no patience with those who resigned themselves to their fate, but he equally had no patience with those who spent their lives complaining and whimpering against their fate. There are certain inevitablities in life death and disease, fate to change your fortune, and there's no time Akiba meant, there's

no time and there's no place and there's no virtue in constantly complaining about things.

The peasants married late in the first century of the B. C. E. When he was about thirty Akiba married. Job, you remember, wasn't very fortunate with his marriage. He was afflicted, his wife turned against him. Curse God, she said, he's dying, but Akiba was blessed. Indeed, the wife was the making of the man. Now she was no famous beauty, this Rachel who became his wife. She brought no impressive dowry. She, herself, was a child of the poor and yet they found together that wonderful rare intimacy, that sharing, that companionship, that love which is the true mark of a marriage which our sages used to say is the marriage that is made in heaven.

We owe the verse that I read to you this morning, the verses of the Song of Songs, to this marriage. The poems are old. These are poems that were sung around the wedding festivals of ancient Israel. In the year 90 of the Common Era, 1900 years ago, there was an assembly of all the scholars in Israel at Yagmen. The subject was a final editing, final editorial decision as to what books should be included in the Bible and which should be left out. Akiba was by then one of the great sages of our people. There were many who argued, the more puritanical among the rabbis, that there was nothing in the Song of Songs which qualified it for Scripture and, indeed, the verse is too physical, too descriptive to belong in a Holy Book. The majority were inclined not to argue, but Akiba argued, vehemently. Love was the most holy of human relationships. There was nothing in the proper love, the true love, between a man and a woman which was unseemly. If all the books of the Bible are holy, he said, the Song of Songs is as the holiest of holies. He had found this holiness with his Rachel. My beloved is mine and I am my beloved - such was his prestige and such was his advocacy that this wonderful verse was saved for us. And in every generation as the teachers of Israel have read from Song of Songs they have been reminded forceably that our faith is not a dual faith, that ours is not a puritanical faith, that we do not look askance at the normal physical expressions of life, but we insist that where there is love, where there is loyalty, there is the presence of God between a man and his mate.

Now, of course, there's a love which debilitates, just pleasure seeking which consumes and destroys a person, but there's also a love which is the making of the man, the making of the woman, the love which gives us a new sense of perspective, a new sensitivity, a new awareness of our potential. Rachel saw in Akiba, in this peasant lout, in this strong, tall, lumbering man who knew only the skills of the field and the herd, she saw his wisdom and as wives will, she prodded and she goaded and she nagged and she loved and she insisted that Akiba take the one ladder of opportunity which was open to the poor, the ladder of learning. What can I do learning? But I'm thirty years old - you're never too old to learn. How will I support us? You don't have to, I'll support myself and I'll support the child, worry only about keeping your body and soul together and earning a few pennies to pay the doorkeeper at the academy. Legend has it that Rachel even sold her hair to the wig maker in order to send Akiba, her husband, off to school. Akiba went to learn his abc's. His mind was rusty and he came to his studies after a long day in the field, tired out and exhausted. He worked, he tried, he failed, he gave up, he turned back to the field, back to the sheepcoat. And Rachel? She goaded, she prodded, she nagged and she loved and she shamed Akiba. When her older son was five years old Rachel said, Akiba, you may want to live in ignorance, you may be satisfied with your lot, but I'll not have it for the boy. He'll learn to read, he'll learn to move himself up in life. And you know what Akiba did? This man now of thirty-five. He went to kindergarten with his five-year old son. He sat in the class for tots with the village schoolmaster and he learned his abc's, and he persevered, and he studied, and he quickly absorbed all the village master had taught them and he went off to Yagna, the great academy, and there he studied for years with the finest

of the scholars of Israel. A man who was illiterate at 35, at 45 was the most famous scholar and teacher of our people.

Now, there are some self-made men who end up looking down at those who are not able to climb the slippery ladder. Somehow if I have made it and there are those who have not something in me says they're less than I, they're not to be respected. Akiba knew better. All is in the hands of the heavens, he said; so much of life is a matter of circumstance and of chance, of the chance meeting of people, of his chance marriage with Rachel, so much is in the hands of fate, if you will, that we have no right to judge another's fate. Except for our fear of heaven, except for the faith by which we live, except for the dignity and the decency and the quality of our being, this is ours, by this you judge the man, not by the success of his life. Akiba was the greatest sage of our people and the man who had the profoundest respect for the poor, for the unsuccessful, for the mass, for those the Germans used to tick off as the lumpen proletariat, those who are lumps, clods, beneath contempt. No man is beneath contempt. All are created in the image of God. It is only that in life there is much misfortune and much hate and there is the cruel oppressor, Rome, one must not judge a man by his status even as one must not judge a woman by her sex.

You know, the ancient Near East had this contempt for womankind. Women were alright, they had their place, but they must be kept in their place, behind the veil. I often wonder if they were so wrong. But Akiba, Akiba who had learned through Rachel the true divinity that is in a woman, Akiba had no such patience, had no such contempt. He once threw out in his classroom this question: What is true wealth? And one scholar who was more eager than wise answered: true wealth is to have a hundred vineyards and a hundred slaves to tend the vineyards. That's the answer most men give. They set out to make a fortune in order to have a fortune, and no better reason than that.

Another somewhat wiser young man answered: true wealth is the ability to be happy with whatever you have, whatever be your lot, low labouring class, the middleclass, wealth, you can be happy with what you have, that's true wealth. And Akiba smiled and said simply: true wealth is a marriage with a woman whose deeds are comely; true wealth is marriage with a woman whose deeds are comely. Akiba knew the virtue of a woman and he knew the meaning of love. After all, he saved the love poetry of the Bible for us. He was not a blushing puritan, but how he would have been shocked by this age of ours, this age which makes a multi-billion dollar commercial business out of sex; this age which makes a carnival out of marriage. Akiba put it very simply: For a husband and wife have merit. With a loyalty and love and companionship and a sense of shared interest and shared purpose, God is with them. Where husband and wife have merit God is with them and where a husband and wife have no merit, where there is only the lust, only the moment, the burning fire consumes them. They burn the candle at both ends. Their love has no staying power. It means nothing ultimately to their soul, to their being, it is only the animal act of two who have renounced their dignity.

Everything is in the hands of the Heaven, everything is in the matter of fate and destiny of circumstance except the quality which is yours, your kindliness, your sensitivity, your generosity of spirit, your ethical concerns, your vision, your courage, this is you, no one can strip you of it and no one can take it from you.

Akiba was a man among our scholars, a man whose basic integrity, whose basic decency, we can do well to emulate, but he was also a scholar, one of the great minds of our people. It was Akiba who helped to fashion the structure which became the mishnah, the basic post-Biblical code of our law. It was Akiba who devised the methods of interpretation which allowed the Bible to be opened up, which gave elbow room to those who

wanted to reinterpret the basic Jewish constitution, to make it fit new conditions in a new age.

When Akiba was still an ignorant peasant Judea rose in revolt against Rome. In the year 68 after a hundred years of misrule the Judeans had enough. The Roman governors who had come to the province had bilkedthem of their wealth and taxed them and overtaxed them and had turned justice into bribery, had destroyed the very fabric of all that was decent in social life. They had threatened the religious life. They tried again and again to close down the sanctuary. Finally, in the year 66 of the Common Era when the governor of Floris, the Roman governor, robbed the treasury of a half a million dollars which was sent there, designed for religious purposes, the youngsters, the beatniks of Jerusalem, went out on the streets with a beggar's bowl in their hands in those days instead of carrying posters they went out with a beggar's bowl - and they said, alms for the love of Floris, alms for the love of this governor who is so poor, so needy, that he must steal that which is consecrated to God. And Floris sent out the cavalry and the youngsters were beaten, killed, and the priests in the temple the next day refused to offer the sacrifice which was offered each day for the safeguard and for the protection of the Caesar. The troops were sent out and many were massacred and all of Judea rose in rebellion. The Judeans fought for four years. A million Jews were to die in that military action. They destroyed many a Roman legion and for every legion that they destroyed two more were sent. Finally, all of Judea was reduced to slavery. The walls of Jerusalem were razed, the Temple was destroyed, plowed into the ground. The great cult center which had been the glory of Judea, the glory of the Jews for almost a thousand years, was no more.

Now the scholars of that day had to create and sculpt a new structure for our Judaism. They created what we call rabbinic Judaism, a Judaism which is centered on

the school, which was centered on the synagogue and which was centered on the home. You need no longer offer sacrifice, you need no longer throng to the Temple. All that has to be done within the religious discipline can be done within the synagogue, within the school and within the home, but as decade followed decade, as unsuccessful revolt followed unsuccessful revolt for we Jews in those days were a mighty rebellious people, today we think of ourselves as rather conservative, law-abiding. In 66 we rose in rebellion in Juda. In 112 we rose in rebellion in Crete. A quarter of a million Jews were destroyed in Crete. In 115 we rose in rebellion in Cyrene, 200,000 Jews were massacred in that rebellion. In 132 of the Common Era we rose again in rebellion in Judea, almost two million Jews were killed or exiled during that rebellion. As the years followed one another the Jews began to ask: why must we absorb all these defeats; why must we retain our difference; why must we remain the servants of the one god; what virtue is there in Jewish continuity? They hadn't even bothered asking this question for a long time, but now they asked it, and this ex-peasant provided them the answer. They turned back to the Bible, to the prophet Isaiah, and they read there that Israel was to be a light unto the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring the prisoners out of the dungeon, to bring the poor up from his misery. Jews, he said, were designed to be the advocates of the Torah to mankind. He taught what we call today the doctrine of the mission of Israel. We are not chosen for privilege or for power or for political independence. We are chosen to be God's agents upon earth, to be those who by example and by word of mouth and by teaching and by encouragement lead mankind to the vision of the oneness of God, the mountain of the Lord. He said it in a strange way. He put it in the form of a prayer: When Thou, O Lord, didst redeem us from Egypt, Thou didst redeem Thyself. God, in a sense, is imprisoned until there are those who are willing to open the door of the prison house, to take the faith out into the world, to

make it effective and vital and vigorous and meaningful and visible and that is the fate, the glorious fate, of the Jews. And if you suffer defeat it is because you are attempting to maintain the faith, but understand wisely what you must stand up for and where you must be peace-loving, what accommodations you can make. It was Akiba who taught our people to stand firm when it is a question of basic integrity, of incest, of murder, of rape, of when you're commanded by the dominant power to do anything that is unseemly, vulgar, stand up and be willing to die for your faith, but if it's only a matter of ritual, of lighting a light or not lighting a light, of observing one's sabbath or not observing one's sabbath, of observing one holiday or not observing it in public, bide your time, find ways of observing it subrosa, surreptitiously, and hiding if you need to, but do not put your life again and again needlessly on the block. That wisdom has been part of the wisdom of survival which has sustained our people.

Akiba lived until he was 95 years of age. He had the peasant's sturdy frame, he profited from the exercise of the field. During most of those years he was a great advocate of peace, of accommodation, but during the latter years of his life the Roman rule became more honorous indeed. Jews were proscribed and prohibited from worshipping in public. They could no longer come to Jerusalem. Finally, the worship of God was prohibited in the synagogue, Finally, the teaching of the Torah was prohibited in the school. And one Simon Bar Kozeba, Bar Kochba, rose in revolt and Akiba added his strength of 92 years to that revolt and the Jews fought and they fought well, but they were ultimately destroyed. And Akiba, who during the 90 years of his life had made many riends among the philosophers and the great spirits in the Roman camp, Akiba was overed his life on one condition, that he would not teach the Torah. The governor, Tinius Rufus, who had been a friend of his said, Akiba, you're 92 years of age, 93, why do you persist in teaching, why not submit, live out your few remaining

years in peace? And Akiba answered him with a story. A fox came to the bank of a river and he saw the fat succulent fish swimming in the river and the fox began to swipe with his paw to try and catch one of the fish. The fish were faster than the swipe of the paw, they could always elude the paws. Finally, the fox resorted to propaganda. down He lay quietly on the bank and bathed in the sun and he said to the fish, what a delightful day it is here, how warm the sun, how beautiful is nature. Come out, join me, we'll sunbathe together. And the fish shook their heads and shook their fins - what is a fish out of water - dead. Man must stay in his element. The environment of the Jew, that which alone gives him life, gives him integrity, is the Torah, is his teaching, and if I must give up that teaching, if my people must be stripped of this one thing which is theirs uniquely, which is their soul, there is no more life for us. And knowing that he suffered, he were caught the penalty of death, Akiba went to the tree under which he had taught yea these fifty years and he gathered around him his students and he began to teach them the lessons of the Torah. And the governor sent his armed men and this 92-year old scholar was hauled off unceremoniously to the jail of Caeseria and there he continued to teach. His students came as beggars and as merchants with their carts, peddlers with their push carts, into the walls of the citadel and they would sing out as the Arab always does in the marketplace: needles for sale, needles for sale, tell us, O Akiba, is the woman who is divorced privately truly divorced? There was a problem. The Romans prohibited more than two Jews from coming together. A Jewish marriage or a Jewish divorce requires the presence of two witnesses. It had to be done in public, but now they were prohibited by the law from doing it and students were asking the master for their answer. And Akiba would call down in the Aramaic which he and his students understood, but which the Roman guards did not: have you any spindles, have you any spindles, yes, it is valid, yes, it is valid, send me two, send me two.

He continued to teach to the very end.

Naked came I out of my mother's womb and naked I shall return there. At the age of 95, the three years of imprisonment, 90 years of living, 50 years of being the most famous scholar of our people, Akiba was stripped of his clothes, hauled out into the courtyard of the citadel of Caeseria, his hands were tied to the stake, kindling was placed around him, and it was lit, and with the phrase of the shema, Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might, Akiba was burned to death, the faith of God on his lips. This is the man whom our tradition calls the equal of Job, he would not curse God, he would not curse his fate, he had great love for his people, he had great hope for his faith.

The legend says that even as he repeated the dogma of our tradition at his execution he taught: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might. My children, he said to his students who stood nearby, with all my heart, with all my soul, I have never known what these words required of me til this moment, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God in life and in death with thy life and with thy death.

Kaddish

Friday Jan. 13, 1947 Sunday Jan. 15, 1967

Those who passed away this week

KENNARD E.GOODMAN HARRY HIMELFARB MARJORIE LIEBERMAN

Yahrzeits

SAMUEL GOULDER
SOPHIE LUBIN
FLORENCE M.GOLDMAN
ANN BUKSTEIN OPPENHEIMER
FRIEDA BERK
RALPH I. BASS
FLORENCE BROWN WIESENBERGER

RALPH I. BASS
FLORENCE BROWN WIESENBERGER
STELLA MOSKOWITZ KOHN
WALTER L. BENJAMIN
RABBI MOSES SILVER

ISAAC KLEIN
MARY WEITZ
JAY B.GOODMAN
ROSA SCHARTENBERG
NATHAN M.CARL

EDITH W.LEFTON
JACK LAMPL, SR.
MAX A.FELDMAN
LILLIAN COHN

READ FRI. JAN 13 ONLY
Moses J. GARSON

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