



Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph

Do you know me? I lived so long ago that even your great, great, great, great, great grandparents weren't alive when I lived. I'm Rabbi Akiba, also known as Rabbi Akiva - I'll answer to either name. I was born about 50 years after the start of the Common Era - the period of time right after we started counting from the year 1.

There aren't any books written about me that have completely correct information - most people couldn't read and write when I was alive - so there isn't a great history about me. But let me tell you what people do know about me. I started out my life as a shepherd and I was married to a wonderful woman named Rachel. Her father didn't like me and cut her off from her family - something that was really hard on her. She had been rich and now we were terribly poor - she even had to sell her hair to help support us!

I wasn't always a beloved and honored rabbi - I started off being entirely uneducated and I thought very little of those rabbis who spent all of their days studying. Then when I was 40 years old and had several children, I went back to school and was lucky enough to study under an amazing teacher, Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who had been taught by the great scholar, Yochanan ben Zakkai. Tradition says that I stayed at the school for 12 years and another tradition says that I stayed for 24 years. When I returned to my home I had 24,000 disciples (followers/students) that came with me and I was able to establish a great school.

I was a great *tannaic* rabbi - do you know what that is? That term means that my views - my interpretations of Torah - are recorded in the Mishna. The Mishna is a written record of the debates by famous and brilliant rabbis about what the Torah really means. You can find the Mishna in the Talmud. So people are still reading and studying today what I wrote about 2,000 years ago - pretty cool, huh?

One of the qualities I was known for is my modesty - modesty is sort of like humility - someone who is modest doesn't go around bragging about his or her accomplishments. I was never impressed by someone who made a big deal about how great they were.

I am really known for my organizing the halakhah - these are Jewish religious laws that were originally learned in the Torah. But there are lots of questions raised by the Torah and I worked really hard to organize them so people could make sense of them. With my fellow rabbis, we discussed these laws and interpreted them so that they made sense and applied to the people who lived when I lived. In other words, we made these laws more meaningful and useful to people living in the 1st and 2nd centuries. My method has allowed the halakhah to continue to be updated over the centuries - so the practices that you use today can make sense to you.

You might know something about my death - it was really horrible. But you have to understand some history. The 2nd Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in the year 70 CE by the Romans. Thousands of people died in the fighting and thousands more were sold as slaves. Even though the Romans considered the Jewish nation defeated and destroyed, the remaining Jews banded together to try to rebuild Jewish life. The Jews were so successful that in the year 135 CE a Jewish soldier named Bar Kosiba started a revolt to get the Romans out of Jerusalem. I joined that revolt because I was sure that Bar Kosiba (who I nicknamed Bar

Kochba) was really the Messiah – the one promised to bring peace to the whole world. The rebels fought for 6 years and won quite a few victories and even re-took Jerusalem. But even a great scholar like me can be wrong. I finally realized that Bar Kosiba was not the Messiah and stopped supporting his efforts. And just then a horrible plague struck our community. Every day thousands of my students were dying from this plague and I was helpless to save them. Then, an amazing thing happened. On the 33rd day of the counting of the Omer (the time between Pesach and Shavuot), the plague disappeared and the dying stopped. It was a miracle. But on the 5th day of the Hebrew month of Tishrei (in the Fall), I was taken captive by the Romans tortured. Why? Because I was teaching Torah to my students and they wanted to stop me. They tortured me in public to frighten people into behaving the way they wanted. I realized that it was time to say the Shema, and so as they hurt my body, I recited the words that Jews everywhere recite every day – *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad* – Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One. I finally understood the words of the *V'ahvta* – and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all you soul and with all your might.

I bet you recite the Shema in synagogue, too, right? Religious Jews all over the world recite the Shema right before they die, just as I did. And if you are in the sanctuary on Yom Kippur during the Musaf, you will hear about how I and several other rabbis of my time became martyrs in the poem called *Eleh Ezkera*.