

Fables from the Jewish Tradition
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(9)

The Fox and the Fish
Babylonian Talmud Berachot 61b



Background to the Fable “The Fox and the Fish”

Deuteronomy 32:46,47

“...Apply your hearts to all the words that I have testified against you today, with which you are to instruct our children, to be careful to perform all the words of this Torah, for it is not an empty thing for you, for it is your life, and through this matter shall you prolong your days on the Land to which you cross the Jordan to possess it,” (Deuteronomy 32:46,47).

Akiba Ben Joseph (Rabbi Akiva)

By Lisa Katz, About.com <http://judaism.about.com/od/jewishbiographies/a/akiva.htm>

About.com

Rabbi Akiva (approximately 50-135) was one of the greatest of the Tannaim (Scholars of the Mishnah, the earliest written form of the Oral Torah). He was also a founder of rabbinic Judaism.

Akiva was not educated as a youth. His wife Rachel encouraged him to study. It is said that he began to study Torah at the Yavneh academy at the age of forty. It is said he studied for thirteen years without expressing any opinion. And that the first opinions he did express were brilliant. His logic, method of exposition, and memory made him an extraordinary student. In time, Akiva, with novel and liberal views, became a leader at the Yavneh Academy.

After receiving a bequest that made him financially secure, Akiva opened his own academy in Bene Berak. Akiva's success as a Torah Scholar is revealed by the fact that his name is mentioned over 270 times in the Mishnah.

When the Romans declared they would build a pagan temple on the site of the destroyed Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, the Jews, led by Shimon Bar Kochva, rebelled. Rabbi Akiva became the spiritual leader of the Bar Kochba Revolt. Rabbi

Akiva even proclaimed Bar Kochva to be the Messiah early in the struggle, but he later retracted this opinion.

Despite Roman decrees against teaching Torah, the aged Rabbi Akiva continued to teach. Akiva was arrested by the Romans. Some say he died in prison. Tradition, however, says that after being imprisoned for three years, he was put on trial and sentenced to death. While the Romans were torturing him to death, he recited the Shema and explained to those present that now he understood the true meaning of loving the Lord with all they heart, soul, and might.

Marcelo Ferder's drawing

? How do the fish look in Marcelo Ferder's drawing?

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ברכות דף סא.ב

רבי עקיבא אומר: בכל נפשך אפילו נוטל את נפשך. תנו רבנן: פעם אחת גזרה מלכות הרשעה שלא יעסקו ישראל בתורה, בא פפוס בן יהודה ומצאו לרבי עקיבא שהיה מקהיל קהלות ברבים ועוסק בתורה. אמר ליה: עקיבא, אי אתה מתירא מפני מלכות? אמר לו: אמשול לך משל, למה הדבר דומה - לשועל שהיה מהלך על גב הנהר, וראה דגים שהיו מתקבצים ממקום למקום, אמר להם: מפני מה אתם בורחים? אמרו לו: מפני רשתות שמביאין עלינו בני אדם. אמר להם: רצונכם שתעלו ליבשה, ונדור אני ואתם כשם שדרו אבותי עם אבותיכם? אמרו לו: אתה הוא שאומרים עליך פקח שבחיות? לא פקח אתה, אלא טפש אתה ומה במקום חיותנו אנו מתיראין, במקום מיתתנו על אחת כמה וכמה אף אנחנו, עכשיו שאנו יושבים ועוסקים בתורה, שכתוב בה (דברים ל') כי הוא חייך וארך ימיך - כך, אם אנו הולכים ומבטלים ממנה - על אחת כמה וכמה.

A fox was walking along the bank of a river when he saw a school of fish swimming to and fro. "Who are you fleeing from?" he asked.

"From the nets the men are throwing at us," replied the fish.

"Perhaps you would like to come up on dry land, so that you and I can live together, just like my ancestors lived with yours?" asked the fox.

The fish answered, "You—whom they call the shrewdest of all animals—are nothing but a fool. If we are afraid in the only place we can stay alive, how much more afraid will we be in a place where we will surely die?!"

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Rabbi Akiba told this fable to Papos ben Yehuda, a Jewish collaborator with Rome. On finding the teacher absorbed in the teaching of Torah even though the Roman government had prohibited it on pain of death, Papos ben Yehuda asks him if he is not afraid of being caught.

The fable supports Rabbi Akiba's famous interpretation of the verse "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your

might" (Deuteronomy 6:5). He explains that, as fish cannot live out of water, their source of life, so the people of

Israel cannot live without Torah, their source of life. Rabbi Akiba taught: "Even when they take your soul" (your life).

? In Rabbi Akiva's interpretation of our fable; who are the fish and who are the fisherman? What symbolizes the fox?

? In which way can Rabbi Akiva's outlook be viewed as suicidal? In which can Pappos ben Yehuda's outlook be viewed as suicidal?

Wrapping Up

When there is more to life than life itself

Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

K-3rd GRADES:

1)

What did the fox tell the fish to do in order to get away from the fishermen? Was he really trying to help them?

2)

What would have happened to the fish if they had followed the fox's advice?

3)

Why is it important to think carefully about what advice other people give you before you act?

4th-6th GRADES:

1)

What did the fish understand to be the fox's real reason for giving them this advice?

2)

Could you think of another solution for the fishes' dilemma?

3)

In what situations would you say it is better to "play it safe" than to take a risk?

4)

When is it OK, or even better, to take a chance on something ?

5)

How can you know when someone might be trying to fool you or even get you to do something which you normally would not do? How can you respond?

7th-12th GRADES:

1)

What do you think this fable is telling us about human nature and human relationships?

2)

In our daily morning prayers we ask God to protect us from "ruthless opponents, be they members of the covenant or not." Who might such people be in your life? Do you think this is a cynical way of looking at life or not? Give your reasons.

3)

The expression "like a fish out of water" usually refers to situations where a person is in a totally different environment and may not know what to do. Here the fable refers to a life-and-death situation. What are the things that you feel you must have

in order to survive? What about your family? Your Jewish community? The Jewish people?

Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh

Post Reading Strategy: Scintillating Sentences and Quizzical Quotes

"A Scintillating Sentence is a sentence that the student thinks represents a significant idea, illustrates a particular point of view, or has special meaning for understanding the content. A Quizzical Quote is a sentence that the student doesn't understand or thinks that others in the class may find confusing."

(Stephens, E. and J. Brown. A Handbook of Content Literacy Strategies. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon, 2004.)

Steps:

1)

Teacher provides excerpt from literature. Students read. Teacher shows two Scintillating Sentences and two Quizzical Quotes.

2)

Teacher provides second excerpt and asks students to find one-two of each kinds of statements.

3)

Students then write statements on sentence strips to display around the room. Each statement includes author, title, page number, and the student's initials.

4)

Students walk around and read each other's statements.

5)

Each student explain why they chose their Scintillating Sentence or asks the class to explain their Quizzical Quote.

Variations:

1)

Put a piece of chart paper next to each statement. Have students respond on the chart paper to the statement.

2)

Use statements as journal prompt. Students may either write on the statement they chose or another one.

Students and teacher discuss why these are scintillating sentences. The teacher may begin the discussion about what is intriguing about these sentences and what is confusing. Students can learn to decipher this kind of language, but they do need assistance.

Now, ask the students to find one or two examples of each kind of statement from "The Fox and the Fish." Another discussion should take place. Next, each student should select one statement to print on a sentence strip from this or any story and these can be displayed around the room.