

Maaseh Berabi Eliezer: The Grateful Rabbis

For Az Nashir Hagaddah

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Gratitude is not just a feeling it is a posture, an orientation, a way of being. It is not simply thankfulness for a past grace but an affirmation of a future possibility.

The rabbis frame the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* through this lens. The Mishna in Pesachim 14 teaches: מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח - that we begin the retelling with *genut* (shame/disgrace) and end with *shevach* (praise). But why praise? The logical opposite of shame/disgrace is dignity or pride, not praise. In their ineffable wisdom, centuries before the language of “positive psychology” became fashionable, the sages understood that the only way to leave *Mitzrayim*—our narrow straits—is to practice praise.

Praise, especially of God, cracks us open. In the awe and humility born through encounter with transcendence, the drabness of existence is illuminated. We see ourselves as part of a national narrative that stretches through time and space. That vision cultivates gratitude. But gratitude is never automatic; it requires interpretation.

Two people can look at the same reality and see very different things. Gratitude demands a particular lens. The famous Talmudic Sage - Rabbi Akiva - embodied that lens. Where others saw only despair, he saw possibility. Watching water erode rock, he interpreted it as proof that Torah could penetrate his own hardened heart (Avot De'Rabbi Natan 6). When his colleagues wept at the sight of a fox in the ruins of the Temple, Rabbi Akiva laughed (Makkot 24B). They saw destruction; he saw the promise of children once again playing in the streets of Jerusalem.

Rabbi Akiva was the quintessential interpreter who held the secret weapon of the Jewish people: the posture of gratitude, the ability to reframe reality through hope. And not hope as passive optimism, but hope as active stance—the work of envisioning and striving for a better future.

To begin life at forty. To learn with children half his age. To lose 24,000 students in a plague and start again with five. To hold grief and tragedy, yet still cultivate space for hope. This was Rabbi Akiva's greatness: a daily practice of gratitude even in despairing times.

This is why, on that night of the Haggadah, the sages gathered not in Yavneh with Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, the Nasi, but in Bnei Brak, the home of Rabbi Akiva. It was never about the place—it was about the person. Rome loomed large. Rebellions smouldered. The crushing disappointment of Bar Kochba's failed leadership weighed heavily on the Jewish spirit. And so, they travelled to the one man who could reframe reality—the visionary who could teach them to tell the story of Exodus, and the story of their own moment, through the lenses of gratitude and praise.

All night they sat, until students interrupted: “The time for reciting Shema of shacharit has arrived.” In that moment, as they told the story of *Mitzrayim*—the narrow straits—they were enacting the verse from Tehillim: “*From the narrow place I called to God; He answered me with expansiveness*” (*min hameitzar karati Yah, anani bamerchav Yah*). Rabbi Akiva moved

them from the narrow place to the wide space of gratitude where they could truly hear God – *shema*. There they were taught that even when we think it is dark, dawn may already be breaking somewhere beyond the narrow confines of our vision. Sometimes, when we are enveloped in unimaginable grief, we need another to remind us that hidden within the darkness lies the seed of renewal, waiting to be uncovered.

This was Rabbi Akiva. Even in his death, flayed by the Romans, he reframed his suffering for his students: “This is the moment I have long awaited.” He interpreted his own death not as tragedy, but as fulfilment.

We need Rabbi Akiva today. To reframe our reality, to help us tell our story in moments of unprecedented upheaval. To sit, as those sages once did, at his table in Bnei Barak. To speak of our narrow straits, yet remember that even in the darkest night, dawn is already rising.