

Gertcel Davydov

AKIVA AND RACHEL

One of the Greatest Love Stories of All Time



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«Издательские решения»

Davydov G.

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This book draws the reader's attention to the story of high love that existed 2000 years ago between Rabbi Akiva and Rachel as described in the Talmud. Thanks to his wife Rachel, Akiva went from being an illiterate shepherd to becoming one of the greatest wise-men in Jewish history. This story took place approximately two thousand years ago and since then has been passed from generation to generation as an example of the idea of high love in a relationship between a man and a woman.

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Akiva and Rachel

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Gertz Davydov

Translator Joanna Dobson

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This book draws the reader's attention to the story of high love that existed between Rabbi Akiva and Rachel as described in the Talmud. Thanks to his wife Rachel, Akiva went from being an illiterate shepherd to becoming one of the greatest wisemen in Jewish history.

This book tells the story of Akiva who, being born into a poor family, received no education. Akiva grew up to be a simple shepherd travelling from place to place doing various manual tasks. One day, destiny sends him a remarkable gift in the form of a meeting with a beautiful girl. The young, well-educated Rachel is the only daughter of Kalba Savua, the wealthiest man in Jerusalem. Akiva falls in love with her at first sight and the meeting changes his life to the core. Aware of the huge gap in age and social status that separates them, Akiva tries to put Rachel out of his mind and yet, he cannot help himself. Noticing the shepherd's modesty and other fine qualities, Rachel agrees to become his wife on the condition that he study the wisdom of the Torah. Rachel's father Kalba Savua is strongly opposed to their marriage. Rachel understands very well that it won't be easy to transform an illiterate thirty-five year old man into a learned scholar but her heart and mind are firmly set. When Kalba Savua learns of his daughter's betrothal, he drives her out of the house deprived of her inheritance.

This story took place approximately two thousand years ago and since then has been passed from generation to generation as an example of the idea of high love in a relationship between a man and a woman. As the plot develops, the book raises important themes like the necessity of prayer, the illusory nature of the world and the idea that there is no such thing as pure coincidence, everything is predetermined.

"All is foreseen, and freedom of choice is granted"
Rabbi Akiva (Mishna, Pirkei Avot, 3:15).

Chapter 1 Jerusalem! Jerusalem!

After the fall of Jerusalem in the year 3830¹, when the Second Temple was burned down, the sages in Judea sought by all possible means to preserve centres of Torah study. Some opposed the Jewish rebellion believing that the opportunity to continue studying the Torah was more important than political independence. Nonetheless, determined individual units opposed the Roman army which led to disaster. The city was almost totally destroyed and the survivors found themselves in incredibly challenging conditions.

Despite the fact that the sun had made its return journey across the sky and was already setting on the horizon, a sweltering heat still gripped the city. Looking out across the outskirts of Jerusalem a traveller walked doggedly onwards determined to reach the market square before dark. He wandered for hours between narrow streets, each as similar as one drop of water to another. Desperate to reach the market by late afternoon, he decided to wait out the heat taking refuge in the shadow of a high tree. Having rested a while in the shade of the broad-crowned tree, the man noticed a shop a little way off where a merchant was selling spices. He got up and quickly made his way towards it.

An elderly Jew sat on a bench by the entrance.

“Peace to you², sir”, said the traveller.

“Peace to you,” said the grey-haired Jew.

“Does this road go to the market?”

“Yes, keep straight on and you’ll come to the market.”

The traveller asked permission to stand in the shade for a while and catch his breath. The merchant agreed willingly and offered the traveller some water. The stranger quickly drained the vessel offered to him.

“Thank you, sir.”

“It is always very hot in Jerusalem at this time of year. Would you like some more?”

“No, I have quenched my thirst, thank you.”

“You look tired. Have you come far?” asked the shop owner taking the pitcher from the traveller’s hands.

“Yes, it’s been a long journey.”

“Over the years, I have learned to tell at a glance, who is who. I knew as soon as I laid eyes on you that you aren’t from round here. Who are you looking for in Jerusalem?”

“I don’t know anyone here. I have come to Jerusalem from Galilee³ in search of work,” said the man. My name is Akiva ben Yosef⁴. I am a Ger⁵.

“My name is Shimon.” The elderly gentleman spoke his name with dignity. “I have been trading spices in Jerusalem for sixty years now.”

“I don’t suppose you would you have any work for me?” asked Akiva. You are a man of years and I am willing to do any kind of work, even hard physical work for a modest pay.”

“What work could I possibly offer you, a trader in a plundered, ruined city? Trade used to be good but now we thank God if we have enough money for food and drink. You must be hungry?”

“Yes, but I have a little money. I’ll get myself something to eat at the market”.

¹ According to Jewish Chronology; 70 a.d.

² In Hebrew there is no equivalent to the formal version of “you” when addressing a person in the singular.

³ Galilee is a historical region in the north of Israel.

⁴ Akiva Ben Yosef – lit. “Akiva son of Joseph”.

⁵ A Ger is a descendant of a non-Jew, converted to Judaism.

“Save your money for later. You’ll need it, and anyway, the market will soon be closing and the traders will be in a hurry to get home. If you have no friends in Jerusalem, dine with my wife Dvora and I. It would be our pleasure.”

Akiva was taken back. Such a show of hospitality was quite unexpected.

“I can work for my supper. That would only be fair as you don’t know me at all.”

“There is no need for you to earn your supper. We would be honoured if you would share a meal with us.”

“What honour can there be in the presence of a man as simple as I, for you, the people of Jerusalem?” said Akiva, now even more surprised.

“If you dine at our house, you will give us the opportunity to emulate our forefather Abraham, at least in some small way. Abraham pitched his tent in the desert and invited travellers into his home. He took no money from them. His only request was that they read a blessing after the meal and thank the One God.”

“Is Abraham a relative of yours?”

“Abraham is a relative to all of us. He is the father of many nations. My wife and I always try to invite guests to our home following the example of our forefather Abraham, especially on major holidays.”

“I have never heard of him.” Akiva admitted.

“Hum,” thought Shimon shaking his head, “even here in Judea it appears one may still come across a person who hasn’t heard of Abraham.”

“Well, in that case, at least break bread with us. You can tell me about yourself and I will tell you a bit more about Abraham and Jerusalem,” the shop owner said. Shimon’s wife went out to the barn for food enough to prepare an extra portion for their guest. The men entered the home, took off their shoes and the shop owner offered Akiva some water so that he could wash after his long journey. Then Shimon washed and he and Akiva sat down at the table that had been prepared for them.

The guest took his place at the table next to the shop owner. Before starting to eat, Shimon spoke a blessing after which they began to dine. Akiva ate with great appetite but tried to restrain himself because he didn’t want to appear rude. He was enjoying a large piece of meat when his host asked, “Akiva, how do you usually earn a living?”

“I do all kinds of things. I have herded cattle, I chop wood or gather firewood in the forest to sell at market.”

Shimon’s question forced Akiva to drag his attention away from his plate of delicious food.

Shimon’s wife interrupted them, “Shimon, let our guest eat his dinner. Then you can talk.” The spice trader heeded his wife’s advice and let Akiva enjoy his food.

Akiva quickly emptied his plate and enthusiastically agreed to the offer of a second helping. Akiva’s manners slightly embarrassed the city dwellers but being hospitable hosts, they tried not to show it. When they had finished eating, Shimon asked Akiva to read a blessing with him but Akiva explained that he was illiterate and didn’t know any blessings. Shimon was shocked by Akiva’s admission but saying nothing more about it, he spoke a blessing whilst his wife set about clearing the table.

Shimon returned to the question he felt compelled to ask, “Didn’t you go to school as a boy? How is it that a grown man like you doesn’t know how to read or write?”

“I was sent out to work at a very young age and so even though I am now over thirty years old, I have never had the time or the means to study,” Akiva said sadly.

“Akiva, it won’t be easy for you in Jerusalem. Here people call the illiterate am-aamrets⁶.”

“It is too late at my age to do anything about it.”

⁶ Am-aarets, lit. ‘people of the earth’, the ignorant, common people.

“The Holy Scriptures tells us that it is never too late. Remember that. You said you have no friends in Jerusalem, is that right?”

“Yes, that is right. I don’t know anyone here at all.”

“It’s late. Stay with us tonight and tomorrow morning, we’ll think about what you might be able to do here in Jerusalem.”

Akiva usually woke at dawn but on this occasion, he slept until lunchtime. He was finally woken by the scorching rays of the August sun. When he finally appeared, he found his hosts already waiting for him at the table.

“I haven’t slept like this for a long time. I am usually up at dawn and go to bed late at night. It must have been the long journey that made me sleep so late.”

“It is good that you slept well. We tried not to wake you, as you will need your strength.”

Shimon’s wife quickly laid the table and invited her husband and their guest to eat breakfast. Akiva ate with great enthusiasm as he had done the evening before. Hesitating, it occurred to him suddenly that he was taking advantage of the hospitality offered to him and that it would be quite wrong to devour everything on the table.

“What’s the matter Akiva?” the hostess asked, “Why have you stopped eating?”

“Thank you, but I am full already and I should set off. I have stayed much longer than I intended.”

“Don’t rush. Eat, drink, you will need your strength. Where do you plan to go Akiva?” Shimon asked.

“I will go to the market and ask the traders there whether anyone needs an extra pair of hands. I have to find work to pay for food and lodgings.”

“Kalba Savua might be employing workers.”

“Who is Kalbu Savua?”

“One of the three wealthiest men in Jerusalem” said Akiva’s host. I take spices to his family once a week and we have become good friends over the years. His house is always full of guests which is why he has the nickname Kalba Savua⁷.

“Why the strange nickname?” asked Akiva surprised.

“Because even if a dog enters his house hungry, it will still leave satisfied. His door is always open to visitors and he too tries in this way to emulate our forefather Abraham.” Shimon paused for a moment and then with some sadness added,

“Since the failed revolt, the Romans have been taxing him heavily.”

“Did he take part in the uprising?” asked Akiva, again with some surprise.

“He is not only wealthy and respected, he is a faithful son of the homeland. He is one of the three most affluent residents of Jerusalem who helped the rebels.”

“Who were the other two?”

“Nakdimon ben Guryon and Ben Tsitsit Akeset. Their wealth is legendary. The three of them together could feed all Jerusalem.”

“Why then were the Romans successful in capturing Jerusalem and destroying the city?”

“Learning of the approach of the Roman army, Kalba Savua, Nakdimon Ben Guryon and Ben Tsitsit Akeset filled their warehouses with food, which in the case of a siege on the city would have lasted for twenty-one years. They were certain that the Romans would never have the forces or supplies to withstand a long siege and that they would retreat. Some of the residents of Judea didn’t want to follow their plan, desperate to fight with the Romans face-to-face. They set fire to the warehouses in the hope that, when the city was left without food and water, waiting would no longer be an option and the other citizens would follow them into battle. We all know how it ended.”

⁷ Kalba Savua lit. ‘the satiated dog’.

“I would consider it an honour to work for such a respected man. If he takes me on, I shall be very grateful to you Mr. Shimon.”

“There’s no need to thank me. Finish your breakfast and we’ll go and see Kalba Savua together. I am delivering some spices there today” said the trader, and then, as if reading the question in Akiva’s eyes, he said, “Jews must help each other and stick together particularly in times that are as hard for the people as these.”

Akiva was excited. If he was successful in getting work with the rich man, he would receive a good salary, a roof over his head and survive these difficult times.

Having secured the heavy spice sack over the donkey’s back they set out on their journey. The road they took passed by the market.

“If it doesn’t work out, I’ll come back here before sunset and look for work amongst the merchants. Maybe one of them will need my help,” said Akiva.

The old man stopped him and said:

“You can always come to the market and no doubt here, you’ll find bits of work, but being employed by Kalba Savua would give you much more certainty.”

“Yes, Mr. Shimon, you’re right.” Akiva agreed. “I am already thirty. I want to find a good job where I can work quietly up until my old age”.

In the distance, beyond the city market, stood the ruins of numerous buildings and among them there remained a single surviving wall.

Catching his companion’s gaze fall on the city ruins, Shimon explained:

“This is Temple Mount. Here a Temple used to tower above the ground! Our ancestors revered this site and for a thousand years, they came here to pray.” The Romans looted and destroyed our Second Temple just six years after it was built on the 9th of Av⁸ in the year 3830⁹. That wasn’t the only sorrowful event that took place on this date. The First Temple, the Temple of King Solomon¹⁰, built around a thousand years ago, was also destroyed on the 9th day of Av.

“You might think me stupid Mr. Shimon but I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“Akiva, what right have I to think you stupid? We are all equal before the blessed Almighty and each has a right to their own opinion of events that have taken place in the past. If He, the All-merciful, had wanted everyone to have the same view on events, He would have made it to be that way. But given that we are all different, then that is how it should be. I often wonder why these recent events and the destruction of the Temple of King Solomon took place on the same day of the year. Perhaps it is a sign of some kind?”

“I can’t answer that question for you, Mr. Shimon. Why do you call the First Temple the Temple of Solomon? Was it built by Solomon the Wise?”

“Yes, the First Temple was built by the great King Solomon, whom many call Solomon the Wise. He is rightly regarded as the wisest man that ever lived. Some people call him Solomon the Great because his reign is considered an era of the blossoming of the monarchy and Judaic power. He was famous for his fantastic wealth and most importantly, for his wisdom and fairness. When I look at what is happening in Jerusalem today, it reminds me of the story of Solomon’s ring. I find some comfort in it I suppose.”

“Really? What was special about his ring?”

“They say that the phrase ‘this too shall pass’ was found etched into his ring. And in moments of great anger, King Solomon would look at the inscription and it helped him regain his peace of mind. Once though, there was a time when he couldn’t control himself, despite staring at the inscription.

⁸ Month Av is the fifth month in the Hebrew calendar counting from the exodus from Egypt. It corresponds approximately to July-August.

⁹ 2 August year 70 A.D..

¹⁰ King Solomon (in Hebrew “Shlomo”) was the son of King David from Bat-Sheba, the third Jewish King. King Solomon is survived by his three books: “Shir a – shirim” (Song of songs), “Mishlei” (Proverbs of King Solomon) and “Kohelet” (Ecclesiastes).

In a rage, he tore the ring from his finger and was about to throw it away, when at the very last moment, he noticed illuminated letters on the inside of the ring. He held the ring closer and read the inscription which said: 'and this too shall pass'. At that, Solomon burst into laughter and put the ring back on his finger."

With those words, the merchant gave a heavy sigh.

"Perhaps these times which are so challenging for our people will also pass..."

"You are a wise man too Mr. Shimon. Even if Kalba Savua doesn't hire me, I shall still be very grateful to you."

"I do my best to study. I debate with the wisemen of the Torah, the students of the yeshivas¹¹, I attend the synagogue, but I am a very long way from the wisdom of King Solomon. He was a great King, worthy of the honour of building the Temple, but I am a mere mortal. Akiva, should you ever wish to, you could always come to the synagogue with me."

"Dear Mr. Shimon, forgive me, but I am not ready for that yet. And you know, so far in my life, my impression of religious people has not been particularly positive."

"There's no pressure! Everyone has to come to it of their own free will. Everyone has to find their own path to wisdom but let me know when you do feel ready."

Akiva nodded silently and the rest of the journey they barely spoke a word, each lost in their own thoughts. It was almost midday and the heat of the sun beat down mercilessly, when finally Shimon said, "Well, we have arrived. This is the house of Kalba Savua."

From the height at which Akiva and Shimon stood, they could see a huge house with a blooming garden and field with a river flowing through it.

* * *

The travellers passed through the gates of Kalba Savua's estate and, taking hold of the spice bag, Shimon set off towards the huge house leaving Akiva in charge of his donkey. As he passed by the wooden well that stood in the middle of the yard, the merchant saw a young girl running towards him. She must have been about twenty years of age and she was extraordinarily beautiful. She warmly welcomed the guest offering him a pitcher of water drawn from the well. Shimon washed himself and having taken a drink of cold water, he entered the large house.

Relieving Shimon of the pitcher, the girl filled it again as she always did to water the donkey. Spotting the stranger, she walked up to him.

"Have a drink," she said, holding the pitcher out towards the guest. "You and Mr. Shimon must have had a long journey."

Akiva modestly took the pitcher from the girl's hands looking carefully into her dark brown eyes. In that second, Akiva fell in love and the doors of his lonely heart flew open to greet her.

"Have as much as you want. I'll feed and water Mr. Shimon's donkey. The poor beast must be tormented with thirst. It looks tired," the girl continued.

Filling another pitcher with water, she poured it into a deep trough and leading the donkey to water began stroking his fur whispering tenderly, "Drink little donkey, you have come a long way today and must be very tired."

When the donkey had drained the trough, the girl took the pitcher from Akiva's hands and returning it to its place by the well, walked back into the house.

Kalba Savua greeted his old friend with due honour and invited him to dine. Their meal together was spent discussing matters in Jerusalem and the future of Jews in their native land. Then as usual, Kalba Savua made to accompany his guest to the door, when Shimon said, "May I ask a favour of you?"

¹¹ Yeshiva – literally 'a sitting'; a higher Jewish institution of religious learning.

“If trade isn’t going very well and you need some money, I would be happy to help” Kalba Savua said without a moment’s hesitation. “You can pay me back when you are able, and if you can’t return the money, then we shall both think nothing of it. You are like an older brother to me.”

“Yesterday, someone came to my house and I invited him to share a meal with us. He has travelled from afar and is looking for work. I would like to help him but I can’t really offer him anything. I thought I’d ask you whether you can help.”

“Dear Shimon, you worried me. I thought something serious had happened. Bring him here. I’ll give him work, food and lodgings. I need assistants and managers who can run the farm. I can’t manage on my own anymore.”

“It’s true Kalba Savua, we aren’t getting any younger. We need people. But this man won’t cope with such a responsible position. I don’t think he’d be suitable to manage the farm. Do you have anything simpler?”

“Simpler... why? As it is you who has asked me, I’ll give your man good work.”

“Akiva can’t read or write. I think it would be difficult for him to work as your assistant.”

“How old is he?”

“He is nearly forty. He’s am-aarets but he comes across as a really good person, despite everything.”

“It’s rare to come across a man in Jerusalem these days who is illiterate at that age but he’s a faithful Jew? He attends the synagogue, knows the prayers and reads blessings after a meal?” Asked Kalba Savua.

“No, he says he has spent his whole life doing hard physical work and has never had the luxury or time to study.”

“Ok, well, I’ll ask one of my men to teach him the prayers...after he’s finished his work of course” said Kalba Savua laughing. “The head of livestock has increased. I need a good shepherd. Bring your Akiva here and my assistant Ezra will show him the property and livestock.”

“He is with me now waiting outside by the gates.”

“Then he may as well start work today” said Kalba Savua smiling.

“Thank you, Kalba Savua. You do so much for our community. Bless You!”

“I have no doubt that if you were able, you would do exactly the same.”

“I’m just a simple merchant, but you, Kalba Savua, are a respected man, a tzadik¹². People are composing legends about you and no doubt in a thousand and even two thousand years from now, people will still speak of you as one of the richest men in all Jerusalem.”

Shimon found Akiva and told him the good news. Akiva thanked his patron warmly and set off with Ezra the farm manager, Kalba Savua’s assistant to get to know the farm.

Ezra showed Akiva the layout of the estate and on Kalba Savua’s instruction, led him into a private room in the house where the servants lived. Kalba Savua gave Akiva a good salary and a free table together with the other servants.

Akiva enjoyed his work. He could herd the sheep single-handedly for long hours by the river. He was delighted with how things had turned out and felt he could happily live that way of life for the rest of his days.

¹² The word “tzadik” is derived from the word “tzedek”, which in Hebrew means “justice”; a person who strives to live by the laws of the Torah and help their neighbour.

Chapter 2 The spring storm

*I belong to my beloved, and my beloved is mine; he grazes among the lilies.
(Shir a-Shirim (Song of Songs), 2:16)*

The autumn was exceptionally wet that year. Akiva continued to work tending the sheep on Kalba Savua's estate and received a good wage in return. Each morning, he drove the flock out of the fold and made his way down to the pastureland near the river. The sheep grazed peacefully while the shepherd admired the beauty of nature and the flowing of the river.

Akiva took great care of his flock and always made sure that the animals grazed in a fine spot where the grass was lush. He protected the sheep from excessive cold, noise and scorching heat. On days when Kalba Savua's guests wished to lunch outside in the summer house where they could enjoy the beautiful view of the river and spend long hours debating the future of the Jewish people, Akiva would drive the sheep to a more peaceful spot. Akiva believed that calm sheep would produce more wool and that the meat would be juicer and have a richer aroma. On days when the young girl came to the summer house, reading her book for long hours in the company of her maid, Akiva let the flock stay by the river, occasionally throwing a glance in the girl's direction to see whether she ever looked at him. But the girl was engaged in her reading and did not notice the shepherd. When her eyes became tired of the text before her, she would cast her glance to the river watching the water glisten under rays of burning sunlight.

On Fridays, Akiva drove the sheep to pasture early at the first rays of the morning sun so that he could return to the house before dark. Shabbat began after sunset¹³, and on Kalva Savua's estate no-one worked on the Shabbat. Sometimes Mr. Shimon would invite Akiva to spend the Shabbat at his home. The elderly couple were always pleased to see Akiva and joyfully greeted their guest.

Akiva had long been trying to guess who the beautiful stranger might be that had given him a drink of water by the well that day and what her name might be, but his questions remained unanswered. Fearing the wrath of the farm manager, Akiva decided it would be better not to ask him who the girl was and so said nothing about it to anyone.

Sometimes, when he returned to the estate after his work was done, he went to the well, hoping to catch even the slightest glimpse of the lovely girl. Having filled the pitcher, Akiva would bring it to his lips and drink from it slowly, giving himself time to take in what was happening around him. Sometimes he did catch sight of her hanging sheets with her maid, feeding the horses or filling the huge trough beside the door with kitchen waste. She filled it regularly so that stray dogs would have something to eat. Akiva liked to watch her working, but most of all, he loved to see her warm smile.

One day, when he was filling the pitcher with water, Akiva heard the sound of dogs barking loudly. When he turned round to see what was happening, he spotted a stray dog running towards the trough and barking viciously at the young girl who was, as usual, filling it with kitchen waste. Spying the pan in her hands and smelling something edible, the dog continued barking at the girl until she was forced to drop the pan, spilling its contents on the ground.

Akiva rushed to her aid shouting in an attempt to drive away the savage looking animal. The dog retreated with reluctance but then decided to return and win the pan after all. Akiva shook his fist at the dog but he didn't have his rod with him. Before making its escape, the dog bit his hand. The girl rushed to help Akiva but the shepherd silently turned his back to her and walked away.

¹³ Shabbat (Saturday) is the seventh day of the week in Judaism. According to the laws of the Torah, this is a day of rest. Shabbat begins on Friday evening and is considered the most important of all Jewish holidays.

The girl watched the man as he quickly disappeared in the direction of the river to wash his wound clamping the bleeding bite with his other hand. She had never seen so much blood and that evening it was a long time before she could fall asleep for thoughts of the hero-shepherd.

By nature of his work, it wasn't the first time that Akiva had suffered a bite from a dog, insect or snake, and so he didn't think too much of it. He rinsed his hand in the river water, bound it tightly, and then fell into thinking about the girl. "Perhaps she is the maid's daughter, as she accompanies her everywhere, or perhaps she is a relative of Kalba Savua," Akiva reasoned to himself.

The days passed and then weeks and months. Circumstances in Judea went from bad to worse. Jerusalem was being destroyed and the city dwellers struggled to make ends meet. They regularly paid heavy taxes to the Romans so as not to repeat the fate of other Jews who had been sold into slavery. In the absence of the Temple, the residents of the city tried to recreate the spiritual life in Judea and preserve the Holy Scriptures for the Jewish people.

Akiva had very little to do with any of it and thought neither about the Torah, nor the destruction of the Temple. Every day he drove the sheep to pasture and anxiously awaited a meeting with his beautiful stranger.

* * *

Akiva planned to spend the following Shabbat with Shimon. After lunch, he drove the sheep into the barn and having informed the manager that he would not be present at the festive meal, he set off for Shimon's house. At the main gate he recognised the girl-reader with wonderful long hair. Her neck was decorated with a gold chain from which three letters hung which meant nothing to Akiva. He could not take his eyes off her and almost hit his head on the gate as he passed. All the way to Shimon's house, the shepherd could think only of the beautiful girl.

After a hearty dinner, Shimon gave the blessing to complete the Shabbat meal. Then he gave Akiva and his wife a brief description of the key aspects of the week's chapter of the Torah and after all the traditions had been observed, he asked his guest:

"Akiva, how is your work with Kalba Savua going?"

"Really well, thank you. I have never had such enjoyable work and such a good wage. I like herding the sheep and spending the day in the fresh air."

"Do you not get tired?"

"I've been doing physical work ever since I was a small child, so I am used to it. Compared to some of the work I have done in the past, working for Kalba Savua is relatively easy. I used to work the whole year round, from morn till night without a day off, whereas now I rest on the Shabbat and on holidays. Mr. Shimon, I have been meaning to ask you. Is today a special Jewish holiday?"

"No! Why do you ask?"

"Everyone has been busy rushing about at Kalba Savua's estate since this morning."

"Kalba Savua is celebrating his sixtieth birthday today. I was at his house today. I took fresh spices and even managed to give the birthday boy a silver Menorah from Yavne¹⁴. He persuaded me to stay and share in the joyous occasion with his many friends. Even Rabbi Ben Zakai¹⁵ was there, but I made my excuses, raised a glass of red wine to his health and hurried home for the Shabbat.

"Who is Rabbi Johanan ben Zakai?", asked Akiva.

"Oh, he's one of the most famous and respected rabbis. He is head of the yeshivas in the city of Yavne and today, the spiritual leader of all Judea. I am lucky enough to have spoken with him

¹⁴ The menorah, lit. "lamp". A seven stemmed lamp (menorah) stood in the Jerusalem Temple; Since ancient times the menorah has been a symbol of Judaism; a Jewish religious attribute.

¹⁵ Rabbi Johanan ben Zakai was a prominent Rabbi and sage in the era of the destruction of the Second Temple, who headed the Sanhedrin in the city of Yavne.

a few times. He's an amazing person and a real example of a good leader. It's amazing to see such an elderly person retain such mental clarity, wisdom and strong leadership qualities."

Having heard Shimon mention Kalba Savua's estate, Akiva's thoughts returned to the girl and the rabbi seemed less important. Listening to his host recount with great enthusiasm his first meeting with Rabbi Johanan ben Zakai, Akiva searched for the words with which to pose the question that had tormented him for so long. As soon as there was a short pause, unable to wait until the end of Shimon's story, Akiva said, "Mr. Shimon, may I ask you something? You often visit the estate of Kalba Savua. Tell me, what is the name of the young girl who lives in the house?"

"There are a lot of women living there. They clean the house, some help on the farm, others cook and then there are the women who do the washing. Who is it among them that you like?" asked the old man with a smile.

"A very sweet girl, about twenty with beautiful long hair."

"Point her out to me if you get a chance and I might be able to introduce you to her. If she is a decent girl and she works for Kalba Savua, then I'll put in a word for you."

"A young girl with long black hair. Do you remember, the first time we entered Kalba Savua's home, she gave us some water from the well and the last time you went there with spices, she saw you and Kalba Savua to the gate. I was returning from the pasture with the sheep."

Shimon was struggling to remember who had seen him out on Wednesday when he was leaving Kalba Savua's house. Then Shimon shuddered and said, "Forget about her!"

"What's the matter Shimon?" Dvora his wife asked in alarm.

"Forget about her. Don't even look at her," Shimon repeated insistently. Then he turned to his anxious wife and said, "Do you realise who he is talking about? He's referring to Rachel, Kalba Savua's daughter."

Shimon's face was flushed red with concern. Despite all his wife's efforts to soothe him, Shimon continued to worry.

"If Kalba Savua learns that you like his daughter," the old man said to Akiva, "or even worse, if he knows that you want to be introduced to her, he will make sure that you will never work anywhere in Jerusalem ever again. Do you want to lose your job and go back to searching for a wage every single day?"

Akiva looked down and said, "I didn't mean to upset you. It simply never occurred to me that Kalba Savua could have such a young daughter."

"She is a late child, which is why he loves her so much and takes such good care of her. His daughter is everything to him. Please, Akiva, put her out of your mind," Shimon said, more calmly now.

Both Akiva and Dvora tried to change the topic of conversation to something more neutral and once Shimon had calmed down, they all retired for the night.

Akiva was filled with sorrow at the news he had heard. It was a long time before he was finally able to sleep. How could a man as poor as he marry Kalba Savua's daughter? Akiva convinced himself to take Shimon's advice and put her out of his mind but he couldn't help himself. Rachel was all he could think about. Now that he knew her name, it seemed to him the most beautiful name in all the world. Akiva tried to weigh everything up a second time and this time was determined to get a grip on himself and forget about the beautiful young woman once and for all to avoid wrecking his own life and threatening the friendship that existed between Mr. Shimon and Kalba Savua.

* * *

Life went on just as before. Akiva's first winter at Kalba Savua's estate was particularly cold. He had to work very hard in the severe winter conditions to protect the flock. He looked after the

sheep with great care and spend most of his time with them as the work helped him forget about Rachel, at least for some of the time.

Gradually, the spring sun began to warm the people of Jerusalem helping them recover from the cold of winter. The path that lead to the river on the estate dried out and Akiva began driving the flock out towards the banks more regularly. Days of beautiful sunshine were from time to time followed by rainy days but the wet weather was no shadow over Akiva, who received great pleasure from his work. Every year, in the run-up to Pesach¹⁶ a census was carried out on Kalba Savua's estate. Despite the severe cold of the winter months, Akiva had succeeded not only in preserving the head of cattle but in increasing their number.

The farm manager was very pleased with Akiva and promised to speak with Kalba Savua about increasing his wage.

On the Kalba Savua estate, as in all Judea, Pesach was celebrated with great enthusiasm despite all the difficulties of the time. After the celebrations were over, Akiva started driving the sheep down to the river every day, although as soon as the clouds filled the sky and threatened rain he would hurry to drive the herd back to the fold.

One spring day Akiva was caught in a sudden downpour. He struggled to manage the herd who, on hearing the rolls of thunder, scattered in different directions bleating with panic. Akiva was drenched to the skin but did his best to drive all the sheep back into the fold. Having finally closed the door behind them Akiva dreamed of sheltering from the rain and hurricane force winds himself, changing his clothes and warming himself through, when glancing back over towards the pasturelands, he thought he spotted an abandoned lamb. The powerful gusts of wind had blown one of the lambs towards the river. The little animal fought with all its might against being blown into the river until all its strength was spent.

Akiva ran to help the lamb when a surge of wind blew the animal off its feet and into the river. Seeing the current carry the exhausted lamb downstream, Akiva jumped into the water and with swift movements managed to reach the lamb and drag it onto the bank. The lamb was terrified and trembling with cold. Akiva made towards the summer house upwards of the riverbank in the hope of finding shelter from the continuing downpour. The shepherd quickly climbed the incline and ran to the summer house hugging the rescued lamb to his chest. Rachel was standing in the alcove. As soon as he noticed her, Akiva turned to rush out from under the roof back into the rain until the girl's words reached his ears.

"Where are you going? Please, come back. You need dry clothes. Here, take my cloak."

Akiva refused the cloak with a slight movement of his head but returned silently and sat on the edge of the bench turning his body towards the river to avoid looking at her. In his anxiety, he hugged the trembling lamb even more tightly.

"When you saved me from the dog, I prayed for a long time that everything would be all right and that you hadn't suffered on my account. I didn't tell anyone what happened because I didn't want the story to reach my father. If he finds out, he'll forbid me to feed the dogs and horses and won't let me out of the house. If I had not seen that you were ok the next day, I would have told my father and he would have instantly called the best healers. You are a brave and decent man. Now that I have seen how you saved the lamb, I am convinced of it. Not every shepherd would jump into the river to save a lamb even if it were their own. But you leapt to save an animal that is not even your own property."

Akiva said nothing. Rachel continued, "Last autumn I often watched you herding the sheep by the river but it was too cold in winter and I rarely came down here. I love to watch the water and the current. I can sit here for hours lost in thought and contemplation. I think about life, not about life itself and why we are born, but about my own role in life, why I am here in the world and my

¹⁶ Pesach is a Jewish spring festival celebrated to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt.

true purpose. I often think about the future. What do you think about when you look at the river?” Asked Rachel.

Just as she finished speaking there was another clap of thunder and the lamb bleated piteously in fear. Rachel took off her shawl and handed it to Akiva.

“Wrap the lamb up in this. It’ll warm him up and he’ll calm down.”

Akiva took the shawl and wrapped it around the lamb’s body. The rain began to subside gradually losing its force. Without stopping to say goodbye, Akiva quickly set off for his room carrying the little rescuee with him. Rachel also made her way home.

That evening, Akiva lay on his bed pressing Rachel’s shawl to his body. He could barely believe that they had met and that rather than laughing at him, she had chatted away so sweetly. It was all a dream. Only the shawl that Rachel had given him to wrap around the lamb proved that it was real. Akiva breathed in the subtle scent of the shawl immersing himself once again in the feeling of the day’s meeting with Rachel. Akiva’s dreams carried him far away but he tried to calm himself and fall asleep after what had been a tiring day. In the morning, he decided to take the shawl with him and give it to Ezra or one of the other employees, so that they could return it to their mistress.

It was a beautiful day with not a single cloud in the sky. Akiva drove the sheep to pasture and then, as usual, sat on a stone by the river from where he could gaze at the water. The lamb he had saved the night before grazed close to him and from time to time he stroked the lamb’s silky coat. Akiva’s soul was in turmoil. On the one hand, he could not wait for Rachel to appear but on the other, he was afraid of seeing her again as he understood that if he did see her again and hear her gentle voice, he would fall in love with her even more deeply and would no longer be capable of living without her. The summerhouse was empty. Eventually the sun started to set on the horizon and it was time to return to the estate. Akiva got up from his stone holding his rod in his right hand and the shawl in the other, ready to drive the sheep back for the night.

“Hello. I see you have my shawl. I’ll come down for it.”

Akiva was gripped by a sudden fear. He didn’t know how to behave or what to do with himself. Rachel picked her way carefully down towards the river and Akiva held out her shawl. Their eyes met for a brief moment. “She is more beautiful than ever” thought Akiva but not a split second passed before he dragged his eyes away from her.

Having taken the shawl, Rachel said, “I’m pleased to see that you are well after what happened yesterday. Where’s the lamb you rescued?”

Akiva pointed to the lamb which he had kept close to his side the entire day.

“It’s so sweet. If father would allow it, I would take it home to my room. I would feed it wash it and even let it sleep with me. Its coat is so soft and its eyes so beautiful and sad, don’t you think?”

Akiva didn’t utter a word, whether because of what Shimon had said, or whether because he was afraid of saying something stupid and disappointing Rachel, he couldn’t tell.

“Are you always so quiet?” Rachel asked, slightly offended. “I like to talk, particularly on a day as beautiful as today. What kind of weather do you like best? What’s your favourite season of the year?” The girl showered him with questions but Akiva did not reply.

“Can you at least hear me?”

Akiva nodded his head in confirmation.

“Oh good, I was beginning to worry, what a relief, I thought you might be deaf. Can you talk?”

Akiva nodded his head again preventing his eyes from making contact with the gaze of his beautiful conversant.

“I know you can talk” Rachel continued, “because I’ve heard you speaking with Ezra.”

Akiva still said nothing.

“So why don’t you say anything? Has Ezra forbidden you to talk to me, or perhaps on seeing me you lose the gift of speech?”

Akiva nodded again nervously.

“I don’t understand,” Rachel smiled, “do you always answer a question with yes?”

Akiva shook his head.

“The first refusal” Rachel laughed. She wasn’t going to give up. “Do you have a name?”

Akiva was silent.

“You’ve turned into deaf and dumb again?” Rachel found Akiva’s behaviour amusing and at the same time, just a little insulting. “You don’t want to tell me your name, you won’t talk to me you don’t answer any of my questions and you won’t even look at me. What has Ezra said, that if you look at me you’ll turn to stone?” Rachel joked.

Akiva felt exactly as if he had turned to stone and had turned both deaf and blind in an instant.

“I have to go now, father will be getting worried.” Rachel thought for a moment and then said, “Write your name in the sand.”

From somewhere, Akiva found the strength to speak and confessed that he didn’t know how to read or write and then added:

“My name is Akiva.”

Rachel laughed cheerfully, “You’re a grown man and you don’t know how to write your own name?”

With that Rachel turned and left. Akiva dropped his head in sorrow. “Why did I tell her that I can’t read or write?” Akiva thought. “She’ll never talk to me ever again. She’s a well-educated young woman and is seeing an ignoramus like me for the very first time. I should have said nothing and then at least I could have seen her from time to time, heard her lovely voice; now... now she’ll keep me at a distance.”

Chapter 3 The hole in the rock

For love is strong as death. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.

(Shir a-Shirim (Song of Songs), 8:6—7)

Over the days that followed, Akiva did not see Rachel anywhere. After resting on the Shabbat, he returned to his duties as usual. He drove the sheep out of the fold sending them in the direction of the river. Once he had found his spot and was sitting on the bank of the river, he became deeply absorbed in thoughts of Rachel.

The more Akiva ran the memory of their last meeting in his mind, the more he relinquished the hope of ever seeing her again. Yet that day, quite unexpectedly, Rachel appeared in the meadow. Plucking up her courage, she said, “Peace to you, Akiva. I wanted to apologise for my behaviour the last time we met. I haven’t ever met anyone before who couldn’t read or write.”

Akiva smiled sadly, “People often laugh at me when they find out that I am illiterate. At first I found it hurtful, but I have got used to it now.”

“I promise I won’t ever laugh at you again,” Rachel said.

“Thank you.” Akiva was genuinely grateful for her words.

Akiva thought Rachel looked a little tired and so he suggested she sit down on a stone next to his. Rachel accepted his offer with pleasure and having spread her shawl out on the stone she sat down beside him.

“Are you comfortable there?” Akiva asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Rachel answered readily. “You told me your name the last time we met but I didn’t tell you mine. It was rude of me. My name is Rachel. I am Kalba Savua’s daughter.”

“I know,” said Akiva quietly. “You have a beautiful name. Who are you named after?”

“Our foremother Rachel.”

“Tell me about her,” said Akiva.

“Do you really not know who Rachel is?” Rachel asked surprised. “She was the wife of our forefather Jacob. I hope you know who Jacob is.”

Akiva shook his head.

“I’ll tell you then. Jacob was the son of our forefather Yitzchak and our foremother Rivka. Hiding from his brother’s rage, Jacob went to find Lavan, his mother’s brother. Lavan had two daughters, the older one Lea and the younger one, Rachel. Jacob fell in love with Rachel at first sight and to marry her, he agrees to serve as a shepherd in Lavan’s house for seven long years. For Jacob, the seven years passed as if they were seven days because his love for Rachel was so strong.”

“Seven years for the right to marry. How can that be possible?” Akiva asked in disbelief.

“Well, Jacob agreed to it and his love for Rachel was so strong that the years flew by.”

Rachel was quiet for a few moments collecting her thoughts before continuing.

“Listen to what happened next. When the seven years were up, Jacob went to see Lavan and asked for Rachel’s hand in marriage. Lavan agreed, chose the wedding day and invited many guests. Jacob didn’t trust him though and agreed with his bride to be that she would make a special sign to him before the ceremony began. When the wedding day arrived, Lavan tricked Jacob and swapped Rachel for Lea. Jacob only realised what had happened after the wedding when she removed Lea’s veil, by which time, it was too late. Later, he learned from Rachel, that to save her sister being humiliated before all their guests, Rachel told her sister about their secret sign.

Lavan said that Jacob could work another seven years in his house and then he could finally have Rachel as his wife. Jacob immediately agreed as he and Rachel truly loved one another. Later they had a first-born called Joseph. Sadly, Rachel died whilst giving birth to her second child Benjamin.”

“That’s a really sad story,” Akiva said thoughtfully. “It would be very rare today for someone to be capable of what Jacob did then. I would never give my beloved to another. If Rachel loved Jacob so strongly, how could she have let her sister have him?”

“Our foremother Rachel was a very compassionate woman. She loved Jacob but let her sister have him to save her from humiliation. She cried for days and nights at the thought of Jacob embracing another woman after seven years of waiting but she never regretted what she had done.

To this day, Jews come to pray at Rachel’s grave in Beth-Lehem¹⁷ at their most difficult times in the hope of evoking the mercy of the All-mighty. Our foremother Lea and our forefather Jacob are buried in Hebron¹⁸.

“Could you do what Rachel did?” Akiva asked, meeting Rachel’s eyes with a searching look.

“I don’t know, I have never been in love. I don’t think there are people like that anymore who are willing to give up everything for the sake of those they love.”

Rachel looked thoughtfully in the direction of the river, admiring its current.

“Sometimes I think that Rachel didn’t love Jacob enough, given what she did, and then at other times I am amazed at how strongly she must have loved him to let her competitor into her own home.”

“What was Jacob’s fate?” Akiva asked.

“The story of Jacob and his sons is very long. I’ll tell you about it sometime but it’s already getting dark and I must go. I could go on forever about our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” said Rachel with a soft smile.

“I know about forefather Abraham because Shimon talks about him a lot,” said Akiva.

“It’s good that you know about our forefather Abraham. He is the father of Isaac and the grandfather of Jacob.” Rachel was pleased. “He had a huge tent that stood at the centre of the desert. Abraham received travellers who passed his home and invited them into his tent. He gave them water so they could wash their feet, and then gave them food and drink. In Abraham’s day, people worshipped wooden statues and were steeped in paganism. Abraham was the first person who publicly spoke of the existence of the One God. Even in his early childhood, he understood that the world has a one Creator and that people must serve and worship the Creator alone.”

“You are so young and yet you know so much!” Akiva said unable to contain his admiration.

“My father says, that everyone should know the history of their people. It’s a pity that you know so little about the lives of our forefathers.”

“I have never had the time or opportunity to study,” said Akiva justifying himself. “I have spent my life in the meadow herding cattle or in the forest collecting dry wood and now it’s too late.”

“It’s never too late to learn,” said Rachel. “If I have time, I will come and see you and tell you about the history of our people. Today is the eve of the Shabbat and preparations in the house are already in full swing. I’d better hurry. I am supposed to be helping. We’ll be preparing food until late in the evening and tomorrow morning we’ll tidy the house and when the Shabbat begins I’ll go to the synagogue with my father.”

Akiva thanked Rachel who then grabbed her shawl and hurried towards the house. Akiva drove the sheep into the fold for the night. He would have to be up early the next morning with all the work that had to be done on the eve of Shabbat. Lying in his bed at night, Akiva thought about the stories Rachel had told him and barely had time to blink before the dawn light began seeping in through the window. Akiva got up, had something to eat and went off to work.

In the morning of the Shabbat, there were always lots of people on Kalba Savua’s estate. The vegetable traders always brought him the best vegetables and the fruit traders the best fruit and the fishermen brought him the freshest fish of their catch. Akiva had long become accustomed to the

¹⁷ Beth-Lehem, literally “House of Bread”. In Russian “Vifleem”.

¹⁸ Hebron is one of the most ancient cities in the world and is situated not far from Jerusalem, 30 km to the south. The Jews consider Hebron a sacred city like Jerusalem, Safed and Tiberias. On the edge of Hebron is Ma’arat HaMachpelah (Cave of the Patriarchs), where our forefathers and foremothers lie: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah.

hustle and bustle of the Shabbat preparations and so paid no attention to the noise and activity. Having fed and watered the sheep, Akiva set off for Shimon's house having informed Ezra that he was leaving the estate.

The fish cooked on the coals and fresh flat bread that were served at Mr. Shimon's house were particularly delicious.

"Akiva, will you have another piece of fish?" Asked Shimon's wife Dvora. "You work hard. You need to keep your strength up."

"Have another piece," said Shimon, joining in his wife's encouragement.

"Thank you," said Akiva, handing over his plate. "We eat very well at Kalba Savua's and work on the estate isn't really that hard. Mr. Shimon, can I ask you something? I would like to say a blessing after the meal also. Will you teach me?"

Shimon was delighted and said:

"That's wonderful, yes, I'll gladly help you. If you want to study the Scriptures I can introduce you to the yeshiva students in Jerusalem and they'll teach you the main prayers and teach you the history of the Jewish people."

"Won't you teach me? I don't want to have anything to do with the yeshiva students."

"Why not?" Asked Shimon eating his fish.

"Because they look down on the likes of me. Their role is to study the Torah and to help people, right?"

"Yes, Akiva, that's correct," said Shimon.

"But that's not how it is in reality. They think they are better than anyone else and have totally lost touch with the simple folk. They are only kind to rich people. They laugh at the likes of me and treat us with disdain."

"You'll meet very different kinds of student," said Shimon. "People naturally talk and say all sorts of things about them. You need to get to know some of them in person."

"Mr. Shimon, with respect, in my life I have met many yeshiva students and those I have seen behaved very badly. As soon as they find out that I am illiterate they laugh at me rather than offering to help. They mock me publicly when they see me selling brushwood at the market and rather than stepping in, the other students just stood there laughing. I was so ashamed. I blushed and wanted the ground to swallow me up. All I could do was keep my head down and carry on working. When I see them on the street now, I want to take revenge and bite them as hard as a donkey."

Dvora was listening attentively to Akiva's story. Shimon decided to soften the tone of the conversation with some humour.

"Akiva, why would you want to bite them if you dislike them so much, and if you must bite, why like a donkey and not a dog?"

"When a dog bites, it does not harm the bone but when a donkey bites, it breaks the bone with its teeth. Now do you understand how much I hate them?"

"Hate is a terrible thing," said Shimon more seriously now. "It was because of hate between the Jews that the Second Temple was destroyed."

"Ok, I agree that hate is a bad thing. But is mocking people a good thing? Is it really a good thing to humiliate people in front of others?"

Dvora shook her head silently, anguished by what she had heard. It wasn't the first time she had heard stories about the bad behaviour of the yeshiva students but she had never thought it was really true or even quite so bad. She believed Akiva who had obviously spoken from his heart trying hard to find the words to express his pain.

"Are they really allowed to treat simple people like me with such disdain? Do they really have a right to mock those who can't read or write?"

"No, Akiva" said Shimon placing his hand on his guest's shoulder in a fatherly fashion. "Of course, they don't have any right to behave in that manner. They are supposed to help people,

the rich and the poor, and to treat everyone with respect, irrespective of their wealth. It sounds to me as if you came across some very strange yeshiva students,” said Shimon after a brief pause.

“Lots of the yeshiva students are like that. If you don’t believe me you can ask other simple folk,” said Akiva, keen to express what he felt. “They might treat you and other respectable people differently but they treat the ordinary folk in whatever manner they like. They think they are above us but they don’t work or fight, or do anything useful. Unlike them, I have always earned my own living. They live on donations from people like Kalba Savua and instead of carrying out their duties all they can think about is how to increase their own wealth and surround themselves with luxury.”

Akiva was angry.

“I find their company and their views unpleasant. Perhaps if they had treated me differently, I might have found time to study but I became too disillusioned with religion and these academic types.”

“Akiva, trust me, the majority of them are decent people and what they are doing is very important. They are studying the Holy Scriptures,” said Shimon, trying to convince his guest but it wasn’t an easy task.

Akiva continued his rebuke. “They study the Holy Scriptures from childhood but what does it teach them, to insult, humiliate, lie and mock? I might be illiterate but I would never lie to anyone, say hurtful things, or just walk past someone who needed my help, whether they were rich or poor. Once, after a hard day, I managed to earn just one coin and I shared it with a poor, elderly man who was on the street because I know that I have a strong constitution and will survive if I miss supper for a day, but I wasn’t sure what would happen to the old man if he did not have anything to eat that day. I can’t remember how many times I have seen yeshiva students with full bags of food and their noses up in the air, walk past those in need without sharing so much as an apple with them.”

“Perhaps Akiva is right,” thought Shimon. “Maybe they do treat the ordinary folk badly. Perhaps they do behave differently towards me and other wealthy people but mock and sneer at those like Akiva. Now I can imagine just how much humiliation he must have suffered and thousands of others like him. He’s right. Who would want to go and study after suffering so much insult and humiliation?”

Akiva paid no attention to his troubled hosts and continued letting out his pain, “The yeshiva students are supposed to be setting an example to others of humility, modesty and mutual respect and not dividing people into rich and poor, literate and illiterate. That’s why I used to hate religious people, but after meeting you my life has totally changed. I have learned a lot and understand all sorts of things that I didn’t see before. I had never met people like you before, you, Kalba Savua and Dvora. You treat simple people with respect and try to help everyone no matter what their position. When you saw me on the street, you offered me a meal and a place to stay the night without expecting anything in return and it was then that I realised that things weren’t as bad as I had thought. There are still decent people in the world.”

Having calmed down a little and caught his breath, Akiva said, “Forgive me. All sorts of thoughts and feelings have built up inside and I have no-one to share them with.”

Shimon thought for a moment and said, “There are lots of people like us in Judea. The yeshiva students with whom I have spoken in Jerusalem and other cities say that they are always happy to take in guests. I am certain that many of those who follow the laws of the Torah and our forefather Abraham would have done exactly the same and offered you a bed for the night.”

Akiva countered his benefactor once again, “Saying it and doing it, are different things. I try to learn from everything I see and hear, and your hospitality has helped me understand that people have to set an example to others through their actions, not their words, and when the rich and the poor act from their conscience, then the people of Judea and will be properly strong and cohesive.”

After the meal Shimon gave a blessing and this time Akiva repeated the words after him. Once the Shabbat was over, Akiva returned to Kalba Savua’s house. He had long forgotten about the heated

conversation about the yeshiva students. All his thoughts were now devoted to Rachel. Akiva's story had made a deep impression on the elderly Shimon and his wife. They had discovered that their newfound friend, the illiterate shepherd was in fact a wise man, pure in heart and mind.

* * *

One day rolled into another and Akiva's life became endlessly monotonous without the relief of seeing Rachel, but then on a wonderful spring day when Akiva was busy tending to the sheep and gazing over at the river, he heard the soft tones of a female voice:

"What are you thinking about Akiva?"

Akiva turned round and was met by a vision of Rachel looking as lovely as ever. Her long hair played and shone in the sunlight and her eyes...

Akiva hesitated. He looked at Rachel as if he was seeing her for the first time and found himself unable to speak a word.

"Akiva, what's the matter? Have you forgotten how to talk again?" Rachel chirped, as cheerfully as a bird.

"No, I was just lost in my thoughts. I have been watching the water flowing in the river and contemplating life. I've been here since early this morning." Akiva's power of speech finally returned.

"I can watch the water for hours and a fire. It's calming, isn't it?" Rachel said, picking up the thread of the conversation.

"Last time I saw you, you rushed off to help prepare for the Shabbat. How did it all go?" Said Akiva, trying to control his nervousness.

"The Shabbat went really well. Everyone was very jovial! We had lots of guests, family and friends, as we always do. They only left yesterday evening, after the Shabbat. I helped the women clear up until midnight and then, after reading prayers in my room before bedtime, I fell asleep and slept really well." Rachel whirled about, gracefully raising her arms, her laughter ringing out like a bell.

Akiva could not tear his eyes away from her.

"Rachel, you are still young. You must take care of yourself."

Rachel stopped spinning, her breathing quick and deep. Akiva even thought he could feel her breath.

"When there are a lot of visitors, you do not think about yourself. You just think about finishing everything as quickly as possible and going to bed. Yesterday, I was so tired that today I slept in until midday. I remembered to read the prayers though and after breakfast, I decided to come out for a walk," Rachel replied smiling good-naturedly.

"What prayers do you read in the morning and before you go to sleep?"

"Before going to sleep, I thank the merciful Creator for the day, for the fact that I have lived through it, and in the morning, for the fact that I have woken up, and then I read the morning blessings."

Rachel's response was a revelation for Akiva.

"Everyone wakes up in the morning. Do you really need to give thanks for that?"

"Yes Akiva, we must express gratitude and thanks to the Creator for everything He gives us. We are used to waking up in the morning, to the sun rising and setting, the day following night, to the trees bearing fruit, but we must understand, that it is all a miracle. Everything that happens in our world – the world itself exists only by the grace of the Creator."

"What else is in the prayers?" Everything Rachel said was so new and curious to Akiva that she never ceased to surprise him.

"If you knew how to read, I would bring you a prayer book and other religious texts for you to study."

“It’s too late for me to learn anything now and start studying religious books.” Akiva was quiet for a moment and then with a sudden bitter smile, he said, “Rachel, tell me, for what? What do I have to thank the Creator for, that at thirty years of age I still can’t read or write?”

Rachel was embarrassed and did not reply.

“You have everything going for you. You are young, beautiful, rich and clever. You have a lot to thank the creator for, but I who have nothing, not even a home, tell me, what would you have me thank the creator for?” Akiva had become increasingly angry.

“There is so much in this world that you can be thankful for. You have to learn to see the good in things. You can be grateful that you see this gorgeous sun, that you hear the sound of the river and the rustle of the leaves on the trees, that you can walk, for lots of things, that you have work, that you have a roof over your head, that you are caring, attentive and wise. See how much you have to be grateful for,” Rachel said tenderly, as if she were speaking to a child.

“You call me wise,” Akiva laughed, “but you barely know me.”

“You don’t have to have known a person for many years to understand whether they are wise or not. There are people who read a lot, who can talk on a variety of topics with a clever expression on their face, but even with the best will in the world, you could never call them wise. And then there are those who may even be illiterate, but you can spot their wisdom a long way off. Wisdom is a gift from the Creator. You either have it or you don’t. Akiva if you could study, you would make a good rabbi.”

“Rachel, soon I will be forty. School is for children who have been learning since they were little,” Akiva said but he had softened his tone no longer showing his anger. Rachel stuck to her own point of view.

“It is never too late to learn.”

The young girl threw a glance at the sun, which was already setting beyond the river. It was time for her to go.

“Will you come again tomorrow?” Akiva asked, his voice carrying simultaneously notes of hope and despair.

“I don’t know yet. Akiva, try and turn over a new leaf in your life, and think about what I said about learning. I am certain that much in your life still lies ahead of you. Try and pray before you go to sleep,” advised Rachel before hurrying away.

“But I don’t know any prayers!” Akiva cried after her.

“Just speak words of gratitude and say what’s in your heart.” Rachel’s sonorous, girlish voice reached him now from a distance.

After Rachel had left, Akiva sat by the river for a long time thinking over what she had said. He thought about his conversation with Rachel until he lay down to sleep. Having thanked the creator for the day, for the fact that he had a job and a roof over his head, Akiva fell into a deep sleep.

* * *

In the morning Akiva drove the herd down to the river again dreaming only of one thing: to see Rachel again. Over and over, he caught himself thinking that he could not live without seeing her again. Even the fear of losing his job no longer affected him.

Hearing someone’s footsteps from afar, Akiva turned to look and spotted the long-awaited silhouette. The young girl approached him and as she had done on the previous occasion, she said quietly:

“Peace to you Akiva.”

“Peace to you Rachel!” The shepherd answered her with bated breath.

“Did you say a prayer last night before going to sleep? Rachel asked.

“Yes, I did, but in the morning I forgot,” said Akiva and as if apologising held open his hands. Rachel was pleased.

“That’s a good start. Learn to thank the merciful Creator for everything.”

“Why do you always repeat the word ‘merciful’?” Asked Akiva.

“Because the Creator is merciful to all his creations.”

“Rachel, if He really is merciful, then why did He allow the Romans to destroy the Second Temple?” Akiva said, directing the complex question at the girl he loved.

“The Rabbis believe that the Romans are simply an instrument in His hands. It’s not the Romans who destroyed the Temple. We did that. Our actions brought about the destruction of the Temple. The Romans simply carried out the Creator’s judgement. The First Temple, the Temple of King Solomon,” said Rachel continuing her story “was demolished in punishment of three sins: bloodshed, idolatry and the retreat of the Jews from the laws given to them by God¹⁹. Now that there is neither idolatry nor bloodshed, the wisemen have come to the conclusion, that there were spiritual reasons for the destruction of the Temple. They tend to think that the Second Temple was destroyed due to unfounded hatred. The All-merciful probably doesn’t like how we treat one another. We have forgotten how to forgive.”

“How was that evident?” Akiva asked his voluntary teacher.

Rachel answered patiently. “It was everywhere and in everything. People overfilled the cup of His unlimited patience. Shortly before the Temple was destroyed, something happened. A wealthy man from Jerusalem held a feast and invited lots of guests including my father who was unable to attend because he was away. The man who arranged the feast had a close friend called Kamtsa and a sworn enemy, Bar Kamtsa (The story of Kamtsa and Bar Kamtsa is cited in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin). The man sent his servant to invite his friend Kamtsa to the feast but the messenger got the address wrong and conveyed the invitation to Bar Kamtsa. Bar Kamtsa couldn’t understand what was happening and asked the messenger again whether the invitation was really meant for him, to which the messenger confirmed that it was.

Deciding that his enemy must be offering a reconciliation, Bar Kamtsa suspected nothing, put on expensive clothes and went to the feast at the house of his enemy. He took his place amongst the guests but when the host saw him there, he shouted: “What are you doing here? How dare you come into my house uninvited?”

Bar Kamtsa realised that the messenger must have made a mistake and said, “I will pay you for my portion of food, only please, do not humiliate me in front of all the other guests. Many respected people of Jerusalem are among them. How will I appear in their eyes?”

The host refused to accept his request so Bar Kamtsa offered to pay for half the entire cost of the feast but the host still wouldn’t agree.

“I will pay for everything!” Bar Kamtsa cried, “Only please don’t throw me out in front of all these people!”

But the host refused even then and insisted that the unwanted guest leave his home. Enraged, Bar Kamtsa was forced to leave in disgrace.”

“And what about the guests: they just sat there saying nothing?” asked Akiva.

“Yes, there were many respected people and wisemen there but they chose not to get involved in the conflict. So then Bar Kamtsa decided to take revenge on the host and his guests who had refused to stand up for him. He went to see the Emperor and told him that the Jews were plotting a revolt against the Roman Empire. To prove it, he asked the ruler to send a calf to the Temple for sacrifice. On the way, Bar Kamtsa gave the calf a small injury, knowing that under the laws of the Torah, animals with that kind of blemish are unsuitable for sacrifice.

The rabbis argued for a long time over whether the calf could be used as a sacrifice or not. Many of them understood the significance of denying the Romans permission to make sacrifice and

¹⁹ Talmud, Yoma 9B.

nonetheless, they turned the Roman Emperor down. The emperor was furious and sent his army into Judea. The Roman troops invaded Jerusalem, burned the Temple to the ground and sacked the city.”

“It’s hard to say who was right and who was wrong,” thought Akiva. “The wealthy man who held a feast and treated his guest badly, or the wisemen, who witnessed the argument but said nothing, or Bar Kamtsa, who brought anger to his entire people on account of a personal insult.”

“Yes, it’s a difficult one. But there is also an indirect cause for what happened. It clearly reflects the attitude people had towards one another that reigned in Jerusalem at the time. Now we are left with no Temple. The Romans have taken many of Jerusalem’s inhabitants prisoner. My father is very worried about the future of our city and our people. He argues that without a strong leader, the Jews will never be taken seriously and the Romans will enslave us” said Rachel.

“Surely there isn’t such a great lack of wise rabbis that none among them could stand out as a leader?” said Akiva doubtfully.

“It’s hard to unify the people. A large proportion of the rabbis represent leaders to a small handful of students but are vindicated in the eyes of others and so there’s no single, powerful force. You know Akiva, there’s something I have been thinking about a lot ever since I met you. I don’t know why but I have this feeling inside, that if you were literate, you could be a strong leader. You could unify everyone!” Rachel admitted.

“Rachel, what on earth are you saying? If those who are so highly respected cannot unite the people, what could I possibly do, a simple shepherd?” Rachel’s words had come like a bolt from the blue.

“Most of them are more concerned with themselves than with the needs of the community. Akiva, I see how you care for the sheep. You have a good heart and I think you could turn out to be a great leader, capable of uniting a lot of people around you. Why don’t you want to learn to read and write and study the Torah?” said Rachel trying to persuade him.

“You forget, I am thirty-five years old. It’s too late for me to start studying at my age” Akiva said disagreeing with her.

“But it isn’t too late,” said Rachel, “if you studied hard and conscientiously then the words of the Torah would speak to your heart.”

“Rachel, I don’t have the money to give up work and study. Thank you for your warm words. No-one has ever spoken of me so highly” said Akiva, not without some sadness.

“I have to go now Akiva, but mark my words, it’s never too late to start learning. The wisemen say that we must keep learning forever, right up until old age.”

Long after they had parted Akiva continued to mull over Rachel’s words and everything she had said about him.

Every day, Rachel came to the river and they she and Akiva talked for hours becoming close friends. Akiva had never been so happy as he was spending time with Rachel, talking to the sweetest, most wonderful girl in the world.

Akiva intended to spend the forthcoming Shabbat in the home of the old man Shimon and his wife.

In Shimon’s house the jangling sound of crockery could be heard as Shimon’s wife Dvora cleared the table after the Shabbat meal. Concerned by his guest’s silence, Shimon asked, “Why are you so quiet today Akiva, has something happened?”

Akiva said nothing.

“My eyes do not deceive me. Tell me what has happened.”

“All right, I will tell you, only please listen to me, and don’t be angry. Recently, Rachel and I have become very close. We see each other almost every day and we talk for ages. What do you think? Is there even a grain of hope that I could be the husband of Rachel, daughter of Kalba Savua?”

“You didn’t take my advice after all. You didn’t keep your distance” said Shimon sadly. “Akiva, as your elder, please, forget about her before it is too late. It’s for the best, for you and for her. Find

another woman who is worthy of you and have a family. Why torment yourself and the young girl? You may be mistaken and have misinterpreted your conversations as an expression of some special attention on her part.”

“Mr. Shimon, I am certain that there is something more between us than simple conversation. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. I can’t forget about her, not for one moment. I look for her everywhere and in every sound I strain to hear her voice”.

“The moment Kalba Savua learns of your affections, he will drive you off the estate and you will again wander round Judea in search of a wage” said Shimon, admonishing his ward.

“So be it. I am not afraid of anything any more. I want to be with her. Let him drive me away. I can’t live without her” said Akiva decisively.

“It’s useless trying to talk about it” thought Shimon giving a heavy sigh.

“Mr. Shimon, Do you think I don’t know that she is an impossible dream for someone like me and that we can never be together?” Akiva continued.

“So if you understand, why do you continue to spend time with her?”

“I tried to take your advice but I just can’t help it. It’s something more powerful than I am. I can’t begin to describe what she means to me. I have never experienced anything like it. Until I met Rachel, I hated this world and everything in it. Even if nothing can happen between us, I dream only of one thing; that it last as long as possible. I’d give my whole life just to spend one minute with her. I have lived a dull life but now at least I will have something good to remember when I die,” Akiva pronounced sadly.

Shimon felt sorry for Akiva. He could see the love and respect the shepherd felt for Rachel and having thought for a moment he said, “I can see you have made your mind up and there is nothing I can say to stop you. All I can do is ask you to think it through one more time.”

“Dear Mr. Shimon, I have already thought it all over and have made my decision. If fate has destined her to be mine, then we will be together.”

“Rachel is a fine young woman. Perhaps she will agree to be your wife and you will live a good life together. A lot in life depends on your wife. If you have a wise woman at your side who commands your respect, you will try to become a better man so as not to disappoint her.”

“Thank you Shimon for your kind words. I really need them at the moment.”

“Oh Akiva! Don’t forget” lamented Shimon suddenly, “you are almost twice her age and you are very different kinds of people, different in position and means. An affair like that can only end in tragedy.”

“So the reality is that a simple man like me, is not worthy of happiness and Rachel cannot be the wife of a poor shepherd?” Akiva’s eyes shone. “But I have to try. If she is my destiny, we will be together. And if she isn’t, then I shall spend the rest of my life alone,” said the shepherd despondently.

“Akiva, Akiva,” sighed Shimon heavily, “I can see there is nothing anyone can do. Since you mentioned her the first time, I have tried to dissuade you, to frighten you into giving up on the whole idea, but your intentions are obviously serious and I respect you for that.”

Mr. Shimon was silent for a moment and then he said confidently:

“If I was in your shoes and I liked a girl, do you know what I would do? I wouldn’t listen to an old man like me. I would go and talk to her father.”

“I agree but I am so afraid, afraid of losing Rachel. You don’t understand Mr. Shimon. If Kalba Savua refuses to allow it, Rachel and I won’t be able to see each other.”

“I am prepared to go and talk to Kalba Savua myself” the old man offered, “even if it does spoil our relationship.”

“No. This is the most important thing in my life. I have to do it myself,” said Akiva decisively, turning down Shimon’s offer of help.

* * *

Akiva returned to the Kalba Savua estate and set about his duties. Early in the morning, he drove the sheep to the river and waited for Rachel to appear. He turned round to look for her at every sound, but Rachel didn't appear. It was getting dark. In the hope of seeing his beloved, Akiva decided to hang on by the river for longer than usual but eventually he left to go back for the night and drove the herd into the fold.

Back at the main house, the estate workers were having their supper in the dining room but Akiva didn't join them making straight for his room. Once inside, he lit a candle and lay down to rest. All his thoughts were occupied with Rachel totally dulling out any thought of food. He didn't feel the slightest pang of hunger despite not having eaten since morning. He could only think about one thing: Why had not Rachel come that day? However he looked at it, Akiva could not settle on a definitive answer.

Akiva worked hard to drive away his sad thoughts and dreamed only of seeing Rachel again. In his dreams, they walked hand in hand along the banks of the river discussing various topics of conversation. And when the sun began its journey home, they would sit on the tall rock watching a spectacular sunset. In his imagination they sat watching silently as the sun sank smoothly down into the river and the clouds drifted slowly into the distance. The silence was intoxicating broken only by the occasional sounds of leaves and birdsong.

A knock at the door interrupted Akiva's flight of fantasy. He got up slowly and went to open the door. Ezra stood in the doorway.

"Peace to you, Akiva. Why did not you come for supper?" Asked the manager.

"I was just feeling a bit tired and decided to rest instead," the shepherd answered, a little surprised by Ezra's appearance.

"I was worried you might have been taken ill and have brought you some supper. Have something to eat." Ezra held out the plate.

Akiva thanked him and put the plate of food on the table. Ezra left but Akiva didn't touch his supper. He just lay down again thinking about Rachel and dreaming of another meeting with her. He wanted to fall asleep as soon as possible so that he would wake up to a new day which had to bring him the opportunity of seeing his beloved Rachel.

The next day however, did not fulfil Akiva's hopes either and he returned to his room once again without seeing Rachel. He paced around the room unable to settle, going over different scenarios in his mind. The following morning, not having slept a wink all night, Akiva left his room and set off for the fold.

Thunder rolled and the sky was covered in thick, black cloud. It poured with heavy rain all day. Despite the weather, Akiva drove the herd to the river again impatient to see Rachel appear. He waited for several hours but the rain was only getting heavier and the herd threatened to scatter in all directions with every new clap of thunder. Akiva was forced to drive them back to the fold and return to his lodgings earlier than usual. He couldn't be tempted by supper on this occasion either. One thought replaced another, making him ever gloomier. "Have I really lost her? Will she really belong to someone else?" Avaricious tears built up like shining dew on Akiva's lashes. "If I don't see her again I'll die."

Akiva tried to eradicate persistent thoughts of his separation with Rachel from his mind. "Perhaps the reason she didn't come to the pasture like she used to, is because of the unrelenting rain." Akiva comforted himself.

"Yes, that's it!" Akiva felt calmer when he realised that it must have been due to the rain that he hadn't seen Rachel, in addition to which, he had been forced to drive the sheep into the fold much earlier than he usually did. That would explain it.

Then a thought suddenly occurred to him. “What if Rachel decided to come out anyway, despite the terrible weather, and is waiting for me there, whilst I, fool, sit here in the warm. I’ll go now to the river. If Rachel is by the river, she will be cold and soaked to the skin by now.”

Without even stopping to put on his coat, Akiva hurriedly left his room dressed just in a thin shirt and linen trousers, and ran towards the river. It was dark outside and the heavy rain lashed across Akiva’s face. He ran along the wet, slippery road, fell and picked himself up again continuing towards the river. His clothes were soaked in mud but he didn’t mind and hurried onwards. He made for the summerhouse found it empty. The realisation that Rachel had not been there that day at all cut with bitter disappointment.

Akiva imagined the worst. Rachel had accepted the proposal of one of the yeshiva students and they were already celebrating the happy event. Morose thoughts took even greater hold on him driving him to the edge of despair. The thought that Rachel already belonged to another, that he would never see her again broke his heart.

He stood there getting drenched in the pouring rain and it was a long time before he could take his eyes off the empty summerhouse in the hope that Rachel would finally make a sudden appearance. He waited but eventually had to admit that Rachel wasn’t coming and he sank into the madness of despair. Salty tears streamed down his cheeks. The incessant rain washed away the tears from the face of the grown man but his tears came back with ever more force. Akiva hadn’t cried since childhood but now, he just could not help himself. The tears came stronger and stronger.

“What are you crying for?” said Akiva to the rain as he fell to his knees in the mud. He raised his hands to the sky, and said, “You’re not in love like I am. You can’t imagine how wonderful she is or what it is like to have to live another day without seeing her. My head is filled with stupid thoughts but there’s nothing I can do about it. Why, oh why couldn’t we see each other today? Is it because of you that she didn’t come today? Is it all your fault? Why do you pour and pour? Why do you want to separate us? Can’t you see I’m suffering? Can’t you understand that I’ll die without her? She is all that I have in life. She is my last hope of happiness.” Akiva took a few deep breaths before his words came spilling out again, “Rain, once you gave me the greatest gift of my life, you gave me the chance to see Rachel. On that unforgettable day, you rained incessantly, and Rachel and I met in the summerhouse that I’m looking at now. That was the happiest day of my life, and now you have torn us apart. Before I met Rachel, I was blind. I didn’t see anything, didn’t know the joys of this world. After meeting Rachel I grew up. I understood at last that life can be wonderful, that there is a person in this world for whom I would willingly give my life. And now you want to take from me my sight? Why did you show me the light only to blind me again? It would have been better if I had stayed blind and never met her at all. It is easier for a person who is blind from birth and has no idea of what the visual world is like, than for someone who has been able to see, has admired all the colours of the world and then lost their sight. The pain is unbearable.”

Akiva quietened down for a moment and remembering Rachel’s voice, he muttered, “She called my name and from her lips it was the sound of sweet music and now, because of you, I can’t hear or even see her.”

Drawing as much air as possible into his lungs, Akiva gazed up at the sky and ignoring the rain, he shouted with all his might “Rain! I hate you! I hate the whole world!” Akiva tore at his chest with a cry but the rain drowned out the sound of his words.

“Why should I be denied the right to be happy? Surely it’s not my fault that I am poor and have to earn my living doing physical work? I know you’re crying because we both used to be lonely and unhappy but now I have Rachel, my Rachel, and I am the happiest man in the world. You’re just jealous. No-one loves you. As soon as you show your face, people hide from you and return to their homes but I have finally fallen in love and you won’t spoil it! You think I’m just a simple shepherd who mistook her polite conversation for affection, who mistook compassion for love. Maybe that’s how it is. Maybe I did just make it all up.”

Akiva paused and the rain hammered down even harder. He was soaked to the skin but barely noticed it and had already decided on his next desperate step for the sake of his true love.

“I can’t endure this uncertainty any longer. I’ll go right now to Kalba Savua and talk to him. What will be will be. Maybe he’ll understand after all and agree to give me Rachel’s hand in marriage and if he doesn’t, I’ll give up my life. I don’t need this world without her.”

Akiva got up and in his muddy clothes, set off decisively in the direction of Kalba Savua’s house. He wiped his tears away with his hand and went over in his mind the words he would say to Rachel’s father. The tears carried on streaming down his cheeks and he brushed them away with his palm which was plastered in clay. “Where are all these tears coming from? I haven’t cried since I was a child,” thought Akiva. “My soul must have warmed and softened since I met Rachel and everything in me that was sleeping all these years has now been awakened.”

As he approached the house, the shepherd saw the old servant locking the front door for the night. Akiva spoke to him and asked him to let him in so he could meet with Kalba Savua. Seeing the shepherd’s tatty appearance, the servant tried to find out what was going on but Akiva insisted that the servant let him into the house. Rachel, whose windows looked out onto the yard heard the two men arguing and looked out of the window to see what was happening. Rachel recognised Akiva and seeing that the elderly servant was refusing to let Akiva into the house, she dressed swiftly and went downstairs.

“What’s going on?” Rachel asked the servant.

“The shepherd, Akiva, wants to talk to your father, lady. I’ve told him that it isn’t an appropriate time and that Kalba Savua has already retired for the evening,” the servant explained anxiously.

“Go inside. I shall talk to him myself,” Rachel instructed.

Rachel walked towards Akiva who was covered in mud and trembling with cold. Water was dripping from his clothing and his eyes still ran with tears, except that now they were tears of happiness.

“Akiva,” Rachel asked anxiously, looking at his face, “What’s happened? Why do you want to see my father? Has someone insulted you?”

“No,” said Akiva humbly, dropping his head fall so that Rachel would not see that he was weeping.

“You are soaked. You’ll catch your death of cold. Wait here and I’ll bring you some warm clothes,” said Rachel.

Ignoring what she had said, Akiva asked the question that had been tormenting him, “Rachel, we haven’t seen each other for three days now. I was worried about you and thought something had happened. Why didn’t you come to the river? Have I offended you?”

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