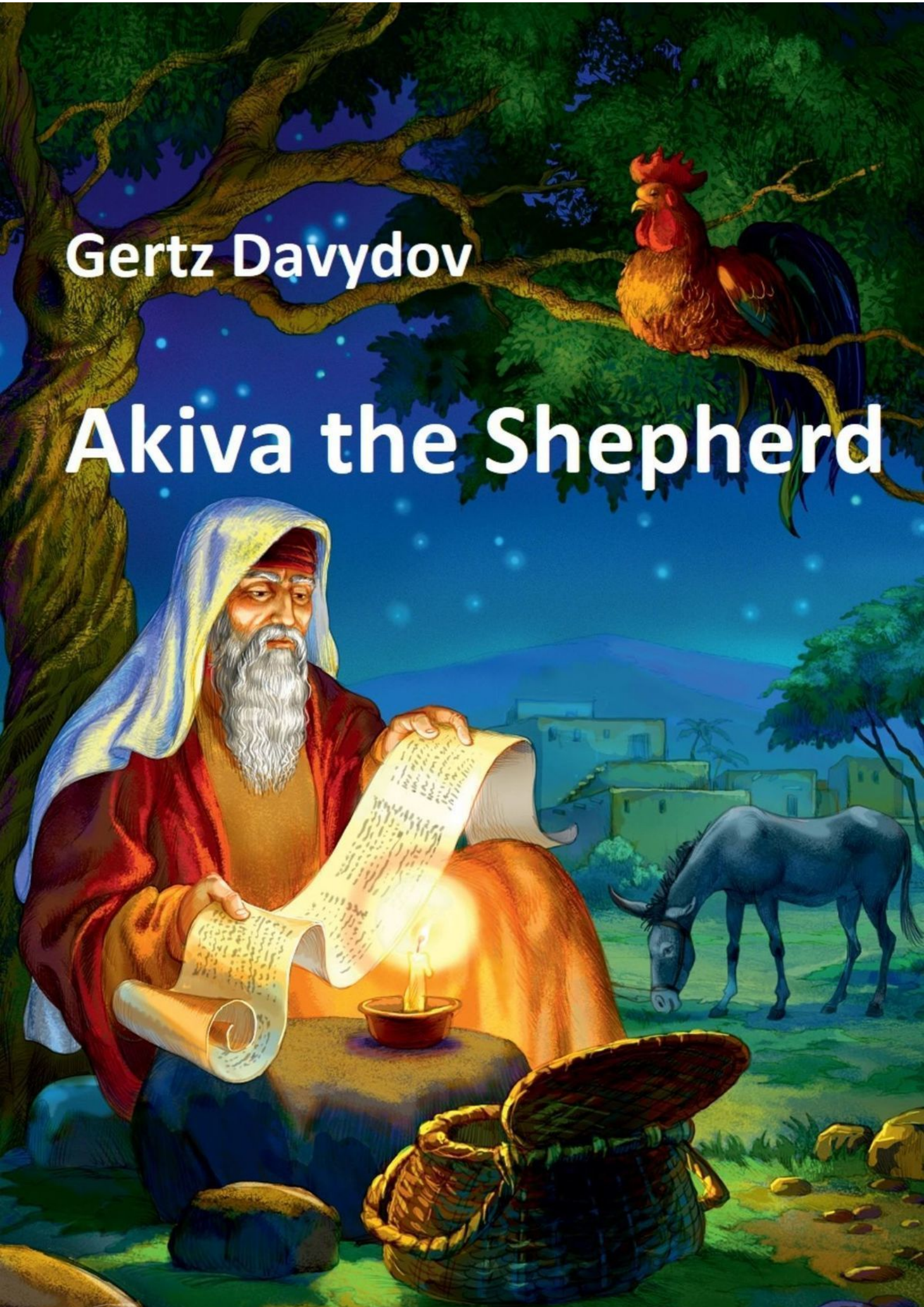


Gertz Davydov

# Akiva the Shepherd



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**Akiva The Shepherd. English edition**

«Издательские решения»



**Davydov G. (.**

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The book “Akiva the Shepherd” is about a man who worked his way up from a simple shepherd to a great sage. Akiva spent his youth as a shepherd for Kalba Savua, a wealthy citizen of Jerusalem, who had a very beautiful daughter, Rachel. Akiva fell in love with the girl and promised her if she had married him he would have started learning. Akiva kept his promise. At the age of forty, he started his studies despite hardship and mockery, eventually becoming one of the greatest sage in history.

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# **Akiva The Shepherd**

## **English edition**

**Gertz (Gertcel) Davydov**

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## Akiva The Shepherd

Before the Second Temple was destroyed, Akiva lived in the Galilee – a region in northern Israel. He was born into a poor family and worked as a simple shepherd in his youth, not knowing how to read or write. He had to work hard from early morning till late evening to earn his daily bread. When Akiva wasn't tending sheep, he chopped wood and sold it at the market.

In the year 66 of the Common Era, the Jews rose up against the Roman Empire, only to be suppressed. The Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed soon after, and the Romans levied exorbitant taxes on the people of Judea. Life became very difficult for the Jews. That is when Akiva decided to move to Jerusalem. Once there, he continued chopping wood and selling it at the market until he finally secured a job as a shepherd at an estate belonging to a very wealthy resident of Jerusalem, a man named Kalba Savua, which means “satisfied dog” in Hebrew. His hospitality was so great that even dogs that wandered into his yard would leave well fed and satisfied. He strived to emulate the forefather Abraham, who together with his wife Sarah had set up a tent to welcome wayfarers.

Kalba Savua had a beautiful daughter named Rachel. Young and educated, she was fond of reading and, despite being a lady of good society, always eager to help out with the housework.

Akiva took a strong liking to Rachel, but he could not muster up the nerve to tell her. She was, after all, the daughter of the esteemed Kalba Savua, while he was just a simple shepherd.

Rachel often watched Akiva carefully tending to the sheep, taking care of each one. She thought to herself that if this shepherd became a well-read man, with time he would become a fine rabbi.



Finally, overcoming his many doubts, Akiva asked for Rachel's hand in marriage. Seeing how humble and honest the shepherd was, the young heiress to the estate accepted his marriage proposal, but on one condition:

Akiva, I will marry you if you learn to read and write. I am deeply convinced that you will make a fine rabbi.

Rachel, – Akiva replied sadly, – A person can only learn to read and write during the childhood years. It's too late for me. I have lived in this world for thirty-five years and I still don't even know the alphabet.

It's never too late to learn, – Rachel objected. – I will help you and support you in everything you do. If you devote yourself to learning, then the words of the Torah will enter your heart.

Akiva promised the lady of his heart that he would begin studying and thanked her for agreeing to marry him.

Rachel couldn't wait to share the happy news with her father, hoping that he would approve of her choice and accept Akiva into the family. But when Kalba Savua found out that his only daughter has decided to marry a shepherd who cannot read or write, and does not even know a single prayer from the Torah, he turned her and the shepherd out of the estate. If that weren't enough, he vowed never to speak to his daughter again and stripped her of her inheritance.

## Life In The Horse Barn

Rachel pleaded with her father to change his mind, but it was in vain – his resolve was firm. Akiva and Rachel spent long days and nights wandering around the city in search for a place to live, but could not find anything suitable. Realizing that the money Akiva had saved would not be enough for them to find a decent home in Jerusalem, they decided to move into an abandoned horse barn in the vicinity of the city.

Rachel tended to their home, while Akiva continued gathering brushwood in the forest and chopping wood, which he then sold at the city market. The money he earned was just enough to put bread on the table. All week long they ate very humble food, but on Friday evening, which was Sabbath eve, Rachel always prepared a special Sabbath meal.

In the wintertime it became more difficult to gather wood because the forest was a long way off and Akiva did not have any warm clothes. But with the arrival of spring, Akiva began gathering more brushwood and earning more money, which allowed the young couple to move to a comfortable accommodation on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

The years went by. Akiva and Rachel had a baby boy, whom they named Yehoshua. After that they had a baby girl, Shulamit, whom Akiva loved with all his heart. All this time, he continued working tirelessly. In the early morning, he made his way to the forest to gather brushwood. Then he sold it at the market and returned home in the late evening. He continued this way day in and day out for several years. But when the time came for Yehoshua to begin learning to read and write, Rachel reminded her husband of his promise. She explained that the children need a well-read father who they could look up to.



Of course, Akiva hadn't forgotten his promise, but he could not muster up the courage to go to school since he thought that the age of forty was too late to begin learning to read and write. However, Rachel did not even think of letting him off the hook and insisted that Akiva go to the



Yeshiva. She believed that he was capable of becoming a good rabbi and told him that if he would begin studying, he would surely succeed.

...One day while gathering brushwood on a river shore, Akiva's eye fell on a large stone with a deep hollow. "Where did this hollow come from?" he wondered. He realized that it must have been the drops of water that fell onto the stone. "Just as the falling water drops, one by one, day by day, year by year, can pierce a large stone, so the words of the Torah will be able to enter my heart," Akiva thought.

He rushed home to tell Rachel the happy news: he was finally ready to fulfill his promise. Thus, at forty years of age, Akiva set out to learn to read and write together with his son.



## A Donkey With A Flower On Its Back

On the first day of school, the children pointed fingers at Akiva and laughed at him out loud. They found it very funny to see a grown man sitting next to them in the classroom.

Akiva and Yehoshua sat at a narrow desk on two low chairs. The chairs were obviously designed for children, so Akiva was very uncomfortable sitting on one. The teacher was repeatedly distracted by the creaking noise that the tiny chair made whenever Akiva moved a muscle, and this distracted the other students as well. By the time the lesson was over, Akiva's chair fell apart completely, which made the students and teacher burst out laughing. Akiva fell down on the floor, showered by ridicule from his young classmates. His feelings were so hurt that even though he wasn't injured by the fall, he vowed never to attend school again.

Patiently waiting for the school day to end, Akiva went home together with his son. The whole way back he scolded himself for pandering to Rachel and agreeing to start studying at such a late age. He only wanted one thing: to get home, lock himself up in his room and forget that shameful experience.

When he reached the gate of his house, Akiva heard the voice of his elderly neighbor, Ishra. The mean old man could not miss an opportunity to jeer at his neighbor either:

What do you say, Akiva? How was your first day at school? – the neighbor asked with a sneer. – Did you make any friends in class?

Akiva said nothing in response and, lowering his head, rushed into the house, where his wife waited for him, her face flushed with delight.



After dinner Akiva told Rachel that he would not be going back to school. He would be better off working more to enable their children, Yehoshua and Shulamit, to study and grow up literate. Hearing her husband say this, Rachel became teary-eyed. She was very offended by Akiva caring so

much about what other people thought of him while being completely indifferent to what his wife thought. She understood that it was very difficult for him to be ridiculed by others at his age, but she did not even think of settling for his decision to give up his studies. She did not sleep all night long, and at the first break of dawn she took all the money they had and went to the city market.

After returning home and making breakfast, Rachel woke up her husband and son. She fed them, sent Yehoshua off to school, and then asked her husband to come with her to the backyard. There, Akiva saw a donkey tied to a tree.

– What is this, Rachel? – Akiva asked in bewilderment.

– It's a donkey, – Rachel replied nonchalantly.

– Where did you get it? And why is it so old, with a dent in its back like a two-humped camel?

– I bought it at the market today.

– And how much did you pay for it?

– Everything we had, – Rachel replied, looking at Akiva with anticipation.

– Rachel! – Akiva exclaimed loudly, grabbing his head. – You gave away all our savings for this old donkey?! Whatever do you need it for? Do you want to show it off to people at the market for money? But it can't do anything other than eat and sleep!

– Well, you need something to help you carry brushwood, don't you? This will be your assistant.



– You call that an assistant? For that kind of money you could have at least bought a good donkey! This one may just barely make it all the way to the forest, but on the way back I'll surely have to carry the brushwood and the donkey on my own back. Then I'll have a dent in my back in no time too...

– Akiva, please, do everything I tell you and later we'll decide what to do next, – Rachel entreated her husband.

– What are you up to this time? – Akiva wondered.

Rachel picked up a handful of soil, filled the dent in the donkey's back with it, took a flower out of a pot and planted it in the middle of the dent. Then she covered it all up with a small shabby rug and said, "Take this donkey to the market with you for a whole week, okay?" She gave her husband an inquiring, hopeful look.

– Rachel, what has come over you? Are you in your right mind?! People are looking for any excuse to poke fun at me as it is, so why are you helping them?

– Akiva, choose, – said Rachel, looking more stern now. – You can either do as I say or go to school with your son tomorrow.

Akiva had to agree:

– Fine, I will do as you ask if that's what it takes to end this conversation once and for all.

Akiva did not understand what Rachel was up to, but he took the donkey with him to the forest as his wife had instructed him to. After gathering enough dry twigs and loading them onto the animal's back, he made his way to the market.



Seeing Akiva with a donkey that had a flower growing out of its back, the merchants and shoppers passing by began jeering loudly.

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