

Rabbi Akiva Eiger.

Yahrzeit date: 13th of Tishri, 1833

[Written by Rabbi Moshe Zuriel]

It is no mean feat to remember all of the Talmud by heart. Nevertheless from time immemorial we have had such Geonim; true few by number, but we know of their existence. But it is even a greater sign of distinction to be able to ask such deep questions concerning Talmudic lore that there is rarely a man alive that is able to resolve those queries. This distinction belongs to the great personality who is the subject of our essay. Of course through the passage of years he must have asked hundreds or thousands of "I'yun" questions, but he was able to resolve most of them. But when we find his annotation on the margin of our Shass, concluding with the acrostic "ZIG" (Tzorech I'yun Gadol), then we know that only one of Hazal (our ancient sages) can resolve the dilemma.

Let us start with some biographical material.

He was born in Eisenstatt (Germany) in 1761. His mother was well learned in Talmudic readings (so says Rabbi Maimon, in "Midei Hodesh be-hodsho", volume six, p. 81).

- Rabbi Akiva was a child prodigy and at the age of 6 knew all six sections of Mishnayot by heart, with the commentary of Rebbe Ovadia Bertnora.
- Rabbi David ha-Lachmi (in his book "Hachmei Israel", page 260) informs us that at the age of 13 he wrote a book of Hiddushim to the Tractate of Hullin.
- At the age of 12 he commenced his remarkable book "Kuntress Milli de-Nzikin" (which he concluded after his marriage).
- At the age of 15 he started giving regular lectures on the Talmud.
- After getting married at the age of 19, he moved to Lissa and studied diligently for ten years, being supported financially by his father in law.

By the year 1791 (Age 30) he moved to Friedland, where he instituted a Yeshiva, and he earned a great reputation for his erudition. He had hundreds of students, and answered Responses to questions arriving from far flung Jewish communities. It was here that he developed close relations with Rabbi Ya'akov of Lissa, the author of "Netivot ha-Mishpat" (used in all yeshivot today).

So too he was intimate with Rabbi Moshe Sofer (the world famous "Hatam Sofer"). When the Hatam Sofer became a widower, he remarried and took as a wife the daughter of Rabbi Akiva Eiger (who was at that time also a widow).

In 1814 he was invited to assume the responsibility of being Rabbi of Posen, which had a much larger population than that of Friedland, and he recognized that he could expand his yeshiva and influence even a greater number of students. However the "maskilim" (the assimilationists) fought his tenure and tendered a complaint to the government that his candidacy was undesirable since he was ignorant of the national language (German). They did succeed in getting a government order prohibiting him from accepting more than six students who were not citizens of Germany. Many prominent government officials made his acquaintance and understood his great worth (So writes Rabbi ha-Lachmi). Therefore they disregarded the bizarre slanders of the Epikorsim.

Due to his charming personality, many of the greatest Rabbis of his generation received their Torah training at his hands: for instance:

- Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalisher (one of the great proponents for bringing Korbannot on the Temple Mount in our days),
- so too Rabbi Ya'akov Mecklinger, author of "ha-Ktav ve-ha-Kabbalah".
- So too the famous Rabbi Israel Lifshitz, author of "Tifferet Israel" on the Mishnayot, studied under his tutelage, and quotes him constantly. And so too many other students unnumbered.

As abovementioned, The Hatam Sofer was his son-in-law. His great grandson, Rabbi Shlomo Sofer, wrote the biographies of these two sages in his classic "Hut va-Meshulash". From that book we cull many a gem (pp. 168-225). He writes (p. 177) that the sage suffered from physical weakness, eating only the minimum amount of food to keep his body alive. His daily schedule of study was to start learning day after day, starting at "Hatzoss" (midnight). In order to be awake and alert, the first thing he did upon ariza"l was to immerse himself in a ritual Mikvah, no easy matter in those Northern climates. Many a time he had to break the ice in order to immerse himself in the intensely cold waters.

He did not rely entirely on the merit of Torah study per se, but was alert to deal constantly with charity and favor (ibid, p. 179). The Hebrew Encyclopedia (volume two, p. 630) retells that when the region suffered from a great plague of cholera, Rabbi Eiger went from house to house to deal with the lack of food, which would sustain the bodies against the illness. This action was so extensive and so successful, that the national King Friedrich III bestowed upon him a medal of great honor. He also instituted many societies to deal with "hessed" (Visiting the sick, burying the dead, clothing the impecune, orphan houses etc.)

"Hut va-Meshulash" (page 183) retells that once there was a need to arrange public matters in Warsaw, and both he and his colleague **Rabbi Haim of Lissa** (author of "Nitivot ha-Mishpat") travelled there by coach.

The Jews of Warsaw, knowing in advance of their impending arrival, were flattered at the opportunity of seeing these two great sages, and masses were waiting their arrival, at the outskirts of the city. Upon seeing their coach, they unhitched the two horses and the Jews themselves physically drew the coach towards the center of Warsaw. This was to show great honor and to personally participate in honoring the Torah. However something odd occurred.

When **Rabbi Akiva** saw the great multitude surrounding the coach (which was roofed and the windows were curtained, as was the custom at that period) he assumed that the honor was intended for Rabbi Haim, certainly not for Rabbi Akiva (so he thought due to his great humility). So he slipped out unobtrusively from the coach, so that he too could participate in this Mitzva. Since each Rabbi was peeking out from the window on his side of the carriage, his partner Rabbi did not pay attention and didn't know of this action.

But exactly so too thought **Rabbi Haim**, that certainly the horde of adherents flocking around the coach came for the sake of Rabbi Akiva, and not for him. The thought occurred to him to slip out and participate in the honors for Rabbi Akiva. It is important to note that since in that period photography was unknown, and Matmidim in study did not waste the time to sit before a portrait painter, and newspapers of the period had no pictures; therefore nobody there really knew how these Rabbis looked. Therefore amongst all the bearded and long jacketed Jews there, all looked similar and nobody of the crowd paid attention to the two strangers mingling in their number, pulling along that wheeled coach towards the center of town.

It was only when they reached the local synagogue, and expectantly pulled open the doors, only then did they discover a completely empty coach!



That book (p. 190) brings a personal letter from Rabbi Akiva, testifying that the entire matter of being an official Rabbi was strange to his personality. He took advice by his wife and requested to be released from his position, so that he'll be able to open up an elementary school! In that letter we have an important disclosure, that many a time the Mussar conversations with his wife lasted till midnight! (Her name was Glueckel, the German name for Mazal). Rabbi Akiva felt such great regard for his wife's piety, that he concludes his letter (p.191) "May her z'chut stand to my benefit!".

There on page 192 he remarks that he would rather be a beadle ("shamash") of the congregation, and support himself honorably, rather than be an officiating Rabbi.

After his wife died, at the young age of 33, and he remarried, he was grateful to G-d and wrote in a letter "Great is the grace of G-d who has granted me a wife better and greater than I deserve". He was in the Mussar habit of making a daily (each nightfall) reckoning of all his missteps or wrong deeds, from day to day. (page 206, see there another letter of humility, p. 198).

An interesting item is mentioned there (p. 214-215) that he arrived in the town of the renowned Gaon Rabbi Mordechai Bennett, and since he was there for Shabbat, he was invited to give a Halacha lecture in the synagogue. Of course he prepared something of high standard. But in the middle of the discourse, the local Rabbi interrupted him and asked a question pertaining to an apparent contradiction in the opinions that Rabbi Akiva ventured. Rabbi Akiva thought a moment, and then immediately returned to his seat, explaining that his lecture was built on a mistake. The local Rabbi was consternated, since apparently he caused shame and chagrin to the famous Rabbi Akiva Eiger.

When they returned to the house of the host, after the prayers, he intended to apologize for his abrupt interruption and to ask forgiveness.

What was his great surprise that before he got a chance to bring up the subject, Rabbi Akiva started explaining the Gemara, and according to what he said, there was no room for any questions on what he said.

The host now asked: "Why didn't you say that publicly an hour ago, when I asked you? Apparently you didn't discover that answer just now, but you knew it all along?"

Rabbi Akiva answered simply: "Look now. If I would have repelled your question, your congregants would feel less respect for you, since you asked a question which is not applicable. But now that I "absorbed" the bane of being "wrong", you are honored, since you showed mastery of the Talmud literature. But the fact that my name is impugned, what does that matter? I am only an itinerant, a passing visitor. If they think that I don't know much, what damage is that?"



The "Hebrew Encyclopedia" informs us of the many important books he bequeathed the Jews:

- "Halluka de-rabbanon" (1822),
- "Comments to the Mishnayo" (1825),
- "Gilyon Ha-Shass" to all of the Talmud (1830),
- "Sh'elot and Te-shuvot" (1834),
- "Hidusim to the Shass" (1858),
- "Comments to the Shulchan Oruch" (1859), and many other works.
- He wrote a commentary to the Talmud Yerushalmi, which is considered "lost".



His character made an important mark on Jewry, and when one cites an example of Talmudic expertise, his name is used.

As abovementioned, his great humility caused him his mastery (as mentioned in Eruvin 54a).

May his merit stand to our stead.