

**Rabbi Akiva's Sacrifice**  
**Yom Kippur**  
**Wednesday & Thursday, October 8 & 9, 2008**

**Rabbi Charles Feinberg**

There are times when we read a text we have read many times and we say to ourselves, "there is something odd here!" This year I had that experience when thinking about the martyrology service at the end of Musaf. Here at Adas we do the martyrology at the very end of the service along with the Yizkor Service in the middle of the afternoon. The martyrology is a Midrash and an acrostic poem on the death of ten rabbis who martyred themselves because of Roman persecution in the second century CE. Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael were two of these ten martyred rabbis.

The Roman Emperor Hadrian had decided to rebuild Jerusalem which had been destroyed by Roman armies during the Jewish revolt against Roman rule in the previous century. The city had lain in ruins and Hadrian wanted to rebuild it as a Roman City. He promised to rebuild the city, but in doing so renamed it Aelia Capitolina after both himself and Jupiter Capitolinus, the chief Roman god. A new temple dedicated to the worship of Jupiter was also built on the ruins of the Second Temple, which had been destroyed in 70 C.E. These anti-Jewish policies of Hadrian triggered in Judea a massive Jewish uprising, led by Simon bar\_Kokhba\_and Rabbi Akiva. Our people had hoped that Hadrian would permit them to rebuild the Temple on the Temple Mount. Disappointed and enraged, our people revolted a second time under the leadership of Bar Kokhba. The revolt lasted three years and was put down with great loss of life and devastation to the land. During the rebellion, Hadrian issued decrees banning the observance of many mitzvot such as circumcision, Shabbat, holidays, and the public study of Torah. The rabbinic leadership---many of the rabbis who were martyred----decided to defy the decrees. They were arrested, tortured, and executed. In the Martyrology, we read the story of their torture and executions.

As I was thinking about these stories, I suddenly asked myself, "Why do we praise these rabbis?" Why do we glorify them with a special section of the service on Yom Kippur? Judaism teaches that we are not supposed to give up our lives willy-nilly for the Torah or its commandments. These same rabbis and their students and subsequent generations of rabbis

taught that we are supposed to give up our lives only if someone commands us on the pain of death to commit murder, to be engaged in sexual license, or to worship idols. According to Rabbinic teaching, we are also supposed to give up our lives if we are commanded to break any commandment in public. Hadrian didn't tell Jews to do any of these. Moreover, one of the martyred rabbis, Rabbi Yishmael taught that the Torah and mitzvot were given to live by and not to die by. Why would these rabbis decide to turn their backs on their own teachings and publicly defy Hadrian? They could have gone underground, taught secretly, or just lay low for some time. Eventually, the decrees were rescinded and Jewish life was restored to the land of Israel. We know that in other periods of persecution in our history, Jews did just that.

The question stands, "Why do we honor the martyrdom of these ten rabbis?" They had choices other than martyrdom. What does their martyrdom have to teach us today when we live in an age rife with murderous acts of bloodthirsty martyrdom?

The first lesson for us is that sometimes we have to act not according to the strict letter of the law. Sometimes we have to act beyond what the law requires in order to teach a deeper lesson about Torah, about God, or about life. I believe the martyrdom of the ten rabbis teaches us deeper lessons about Judaism, especially about life and death. According a number of different sources these rabbis died to demonstrate that there can be no faith, no spiritual life without Torah. They also taught us that there are spiritual values worth dying for.

The Talmud puts it this way in describing Rabbi Akiva's sacrifice: *"Once when the evil kingdom decreed that Jews not study the Torah, Pappus ben Yehuda came upon Rabbi Akiva. He had called together congregations to study Torah in public. Pappus asked Rabbi Akiva, 'Are you not afraid of the Roman authorities?' Akiva said to him, 'I will come up with a parable for you. To what is this similar? Our situation is similar to a fox who walks along a riverbank and who sees fish gathered together in schools moving from place to another. The fox said to them, ~Why are you fleeing?~ They said to him, ~we are fleeing from the nets that human beings throw upon us.~ He said to them, ~come up onto dry land! You and I can live together just as my and your ancestors lived together!~ They said to him, ~Are you the one about whom they say you are the smartest of all animals?~ You are not smart, but a fool! If we are afraid in a place where we are accustomed to be, in a place where we will surely die all the more so!~ So it is with us,* continued Rabbi Akiva. *Now we sit and study Torah, about which it is written it is our life and*

*the length of our days; all the more so if we deny the Torah to ourselves."*

The Talmud is teaching that learning Torah is as important as life itself. Listen carefully to the story. There are two kinds of death: real, material death and spiritual death. According to Rabbi Akiva spiritual death is far worse than our real, material death. Rabbi Akiva says, "if we are afraid in a place where we are accustomed to be, in a place where we will surely die all the more so." We have more to fear from cutting off our soul from God, from not studying Torah than from any death that we might suffer at the hand of the Roman oppressors. For Rabbi Akiva, for the Mahzor, and ultimately for our tradition, spiritual values are far more important than material values and things. They are even as important as life itself. Because they are as important as life itself, there are times when we should risk our lives for the sake of Torah or for the sake of spiritual values.

What are these spiritual values? They are the values we celebrate on Yom Kippur: justice and mercy. Sim Shalom at the end of Amidah contains a fuller list: a Torah of life, the love of kindness, justice, blessing, mercy, life, and peace. These are what I call spiritual values because we cannot touch them, we cannot see them, we cannot hear them, we cannot smell them, and we cannot taste them. We cannot put these values in the bank nor can we invest them in some financial instrument. They are universal not particular. While they are Jewish values par excellence, most other nations and religions have embraced some or all of them. Since these values are abstract entities, they have more power than the mightiest army. They have more power than the Roman Empire or any superpower. For unlike the material, the tangible, these values have the power to touch hearts and to open them to love and understanding. Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael as the pre-eminent spiritual leaders of their day believed that they should risk their lives for these values. Their sacrifice touches our hearts. It makes us realize that they were willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of their faith in God and His Torah.

Moreover, both Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael believed that by putting the spiritual ahead of the material we can summon the courage to protest injustice, to do Teshuvah, to seek forgiveness, and to grant forgiveness. If the material is primary, if all we care about are our bank accounts, our homes, our cars, and our clever electronic devices---if all we care about is what we can count---then we will never take any risks for justice, for Teshuvah, for asking

forgiveness, or for granting forgiveness. It takes courage--another spiritual value--to change ourselves. It takes courage to address injustice. It takes courage to ask for forgiveness or to grant it. We can muster that courage only if we realize and accept that the material has no lasting value. Thus we read the story of the martyrdom of the ten rabbis to teach us to take risks for spiritual values. The story reminds us that sometimes--in extreme and unjust conditions--we must risk our lives for a spiritual value, for justice or mercy.

Thus the real import of the story is to teach us that No-thing is something and something is No-thing. The holy, God Himself- is nothing; i.e., God is No-Thing. What is important and essential to life is not something---things we can touch, collect, see, taste, or smell. Those things we should surely not risk our lives for. But what is essential and worth risking our life for are the No-things of life: love, kindness, justice, courage, learning, and peace. Holiness on one level is nothing at all. Think about it. We have no images of God in any way. The best way the Torah could represent God was by saying that No-thing could represent God. Once we say that God is a something, we define God, thereby limiting Him. Only No-thing can be eternal. Once we say God is something, then God will die and at some point cease to exist. For every something in the world ultimately passes from it.

Only Nothing can embrace all being, infinite possibility, and therefore, the presence of God. One who expects Nothing has no guarantees, just openness to possibility. There can be no creation without Nothing. Rebirth is only as far away as Nothing. Hasidic masters taught there can be no change from one form into another without first attaining Nothingness. An egg must first cease to exist as an egg before a chick emerges. But it takes great courage to enter the No-thing of limitless possibility and no guarantees. To believe that God is No-thing may give us the courage and the power to let go of the old self, idols, compulsions, and blocks that prevent us from doing justice, loving mercy, or walking humbly with God.

The story of the martyrdom of the ten rabbis is also about our fear of death and overcoming it. These rabbis risked their lives by learning and teaching Torah in public. They could do this only because they fully accepted that their bodies were finite and ultimately doomed. Their bodies were something, on the way to perishing from this earth. But their souls were No-thing! Their souls would never perish as long as they put spiritual values---the values of Torah--ahead of material values, the values of something. By embracing the spiritual, by embracing what is No-

thing, we also affirm that we too are a combination of something and no-thing. Our nothingness is what is really important and which can attain eternal life.

Yom Kippur is about our fear of death and overcoming it. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner has written, "*Yom Kippur is not eating, not sleeping very much, not having sex, not dressing in fine clothes, and looking in the mirror and seeing what you're going to look like after you died. And the most joyous noise a Jew can hear is the sound of the Shofar announcing the end of Yom Kippur, because it means that you have lived through the day of death and not died.*" This is the day of our death! What a gift: to live through our death every year! When we look into the mirror what will we see? Will we see a person who has been courageous in taking risks for the pursuit of justice? Will we see a person who allowed his or her heart to be touched by love and mercy? Will we see a person who put spiritual values over material ones? What will we see? Will we see a person afraid of death and oblivion? Or a person who is able to live in the moment, knowing that moment can be taken away at any time?

You may want to ask me now, "do you really believe, Rabbi Feinberg, that there is something on the other side? Do you believe that we live after death?" To be honest, I don't really know. No one really knows. I believe that if we do reach the other side, it will be a totally spiritual existence--it will be a life of No-thing. Such a life is unimaginable. It is impossible for me to imagine the pleasures, satisfactions, or challenges of such an existence. So like many of you, I talk to myself a lot whether such a realm exists. But I do believe that our Torah and our faith teach us that the life of the spirit is far more valuable and powerful than the life of material things. Because I believe that, I believe in the possibility that our own spirit, our soul, is eternal.

The martyrdom of the ten rabbis, the leadership of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael, and their place in the Yom Kippur liturgy teach us so many things: that a life devoted to Torah and other spiritual values is far more important than a life devoted to counting or amassing things. The example of these rabbis teaches us that we must take risks in order to establish and strengthen spiritual values. They teach us that in extreme circumstances some must go beyond the strict letter of the law and risk their life for justice or mercy. Above all, they teach us that there is abundant life even in death. They teach us how not to be afraid of death. This is a day on which we are bidden to overcome our fear of death. May the example of the ten rabbis inspire us all. Amen.