

Signs in the Well

written by
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How do you make big changes?

A Legendary Life

Rabbi Akiva is considered among the best and most dedicated Torah scholars in Jewish history. He lived during the time of the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (70 CE). With the Temple gone, studying Torah became the focus of Judaism, and *yeshivot* (academies) flourished across Israel in places like Lod and Yavneh, which are near the modern city of Tel Aviv. Rabbi Akiva studied for many years with famous rabbis and then started a *yeshiva* (academy) in the town of B'nei Brak. In addition to being a rabbi, leader, and judge, Akiva contributed some of the most profound and enduring teachings in the *Mishnah*, an important text of rabbinic law and debate that is still studied today. All this from someone who didn't even know how to read for the first half of his life! To learn more, visit pjlibrary.org/signsinthewell.

Shepherding a Flock

Akiva spent many years as a goat-herd. Some of the most famous figures in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) were shepherds, too: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, even King David. Some teachers, like the famous 20th-century rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, think it's not a coincidence that so many ancient Jewish leaders cared for animals at some point in their lives. Shepherds spend a lot of time alone in nature, away from noisy people or places that could distract them. This quiet allows shepherds time to think deeply and grow the kind of inner spiritual strength that leaders need to change the world. Others point out that shepherding is symbolic: just as shepherds guide their flocks, leaders must make sure their followers do not get lost. This explains Akiva's thought at the end of this story: "Today, I am still a kind of shepherd: I have become a leader of my people."

Learning Is a Journey

"As the water made its mark in the stones," Akiva thinks as he looks into the well, "knowledge will make its mark in my mind." Though water drops are gentle on their own, together over many years they can change the stone's surface. The well helps Akiva see that even though he can't read at age forty, each letter he learns will bring him closer to knowing how to read one day. Another important force behind the historical Rabbi Akiva's transformation was his wife, Rachel. Rachel strongly supported Akiva's Torah studies even though she and Akiva were poor. Her encouragement helped shape the destiny of one of Judaism's most important teachers. Akiva's path shows us that growth does not happen overnight, and people can learn new things at any age.

TALK IT OVER WITH YOUR KIDS

When have you surprised yourself by doing something you thought was out of reach? How did it feel to achieve that?

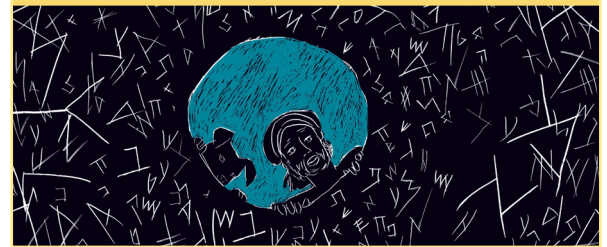
When he is herding goats, what things does Akiva do that help shape him as a teacher and a leader?

One of Rabbi Akiva's most famous teachings is "Love your neighbor as yourself." Why do you think Rabbi Akiva called this the Torah's "most important rule"?



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HANDS ON!

Make Encouragement Stones

When Akiva finds an encouraging message etched in stone, he is inspired to follow his dream and become a great teacher. It takes too long for you to write a message in stone with water, but how about using paint?



Supplies

Stones — large, flat surfaces are ideal
Nontoxic acrylic paint
Newspaper
Paintbrushes
Oil-based paint pen
(optional, but helpful)



Spread newspaper over your painting surface, then paint the stones however you like. Once dry, use a fine-tipped paintbrush or a paint pen to write encouraging messages like "Keep it up!" or "You can do it!" Then give these stones to friends and family who could use an encouraging word.