Rabbi Akiva and the Jewish Fish

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Around the year 130 CE, 60 years after the destruction of the Second Bet haMiqdash, Emperor Hadrian's horrific decrees included a ban on learning and teaching Tora. In this way, the evil Roman emperor sought to erase the Jewish Law from the minds and hearts of the Jews. Hadrian knew that as long as the Jews were faithful to God and obeyed His laws they would not regard him as the sovereign of the Jews. Now, Hadrian's decree left the Jews with only one alternative: civil disobedience. The Jews rebelled against this decree and some of them paid for this act of faith with their own lives. However, not all Jews agreed that a Jew had to fight and risk one's life to preserve the Tora. Just like today, there were Jews in those days who didn't mind living like Romans. These assimilated Jews criticized the Sages for "provoking the Romans" and "increasing anti-Semitism" by promoting the Tora. The Gemara in Berachot 61b records a fascinating encounter between two Jews with opposing views on this subject. One of them was none other than Rabbi Aqiba, the most prominent rabbi of that time.

THE FIRST MEETING

This story takes place during the year 134 or 135. Ribbi Aqiba was born in the year 50, so when this story happened he must have been around 80 years old. Defying the decree of the Romans, Rabbi Aqiba taught Torah in public. The Gemara tells us about an assimilated Jew named "Papos son of Yehuda" (□□□□ □□□□□ □□). The first thing we notice is that this individual had already adopted a Latin name, "Papos", separating himself in this symbolic, but the very eloquent manner, from his Jewish past, represented by the iconic name of his own father:

“Yehuda” (which means “from Judea” or “Jewish”). This person, with a Hebrew past and a Roman present, confronted Ribbi Aqiba when he was teaching the Tora and said, “Aquiba, aren’t you concerned that you are provoking the Romans? They will catch you and sentence you to death !” For Papos, Jews living as Jews “provoked the wrath of the Romans.” And for him, the only way we Jews can live in peace, and avoid anti-Semitism, is by living like the Romans. It is amazing to see how relevant this story, which is 2000 years old, is not outdated. As unfortunately, millions of Jews in the United States and around the world think or act in much the same way as Papos did at the time.

FOX AND FRIENDS

Ribbi Aqiba responded to Papos with an extraordinary parable: Once a fox was walking near the river and saw the fish running back and forth as if fleeing from some danger. The fox, hungry, and trying to trick the appetizing fish, asked them: What are you running from? The fish said: We are escaping from the fishermen’s nets. Then the cunning fox said to them: ‘Why don’t you come upon the shore together with me? Here we can live in peace and safe from the fishermen’s nets. The fish responded to the fox: We can’t believe that you’re considered the smartest of all animals: You don’t realize that if we fear for our lives while we are in the water, which is our natural habitat, do you think we will be able to survive out of the water? Ribbi Aqiba then explained the metaphor to Papos: The Torah is to Jews what water is to fish. As long as we remain within our Tora, and live by it, even though we expose ourselves to danger, we can continue to breathe, survive and avoid being caught by the Romans who are after us. But if we accept the deceptive invitation of the fox and abandon the Tora, jumping out of the water, we will be committing suicide.

TWO KINDS OF ROMANS

Ribbi Aqiba clarified to Papos that there are two types of

Romans: The fisherman and the fox. They both seek the same thing: to swallow the fish, dead or alive! The only difference is that the fishermen do not hide their intention. The Roman army persecutes the Jews, spreads its nets in broad daylight, and does not try to hide its lethal intention. The fox, on the other hand, is more subtle. Roman politicians and intellectuals invite us to be one with them and live together as one people: ”the Romans”. Same as the Greeks did before – the Romans offered the Jews the “Pax Romana”, that is: being part of the powerful Roman Empire, but now with one condition: Get out of the water, leave the world of Tora. Ribbi Aquiba concluded: “I teach Tora because I will rather be exposed to fishermen and get caught than commit spiritual suicide by jumping out of the water”.

Eventually, Ribbi Aqiba was caught by the Romans and sentenced to death. But while he awaited his execution he had a second encounter with Papos ben Yehuda, but in a completely different place: prison.

To be continued