Truth in a House of Mourning

A Dialogue with Dr. Ruth Calderon

**Biographical Note**

Ruth Calderon was born in Tel Aviv. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Bible, Philosophy, and Jewish Thought from *Oranim Academic College* and a Master of Arts and Ph.D. degrees in Talmudic Homiletic Literature from the *Hebrew University of Jerusalem*. In 1989, she and Motti Bar-Or established and managed *Elul*, an egalitarian bet midrash for religious and non-religious men and women. In 1997, she received the *Avi Hai* prize for this project. After completing studies at the *Mandel Institute for Educational Leadership*, she returned to Tel Aviv to establish the *Alma House for Hebrew Culture* in 1995. She served as a member of the Nineteenth Knesset representing the *Yesh Atid* Party and was Deputy Speaker of the house. Her books *HaShuk, HaBayit, HaLev* (*The Market, the Home, the Heart*) (Keter, 2000) and *Alfa Beta Talmudi* (*Talmudic Alphabet*) (Yedioth Ahronoth, 2014) present a personal reading of Talmudic homiletics.

**Assorted Passages from Tractate Semahot**

**Semahot 14:12**

R. Meir says: One who sees a mourner within thirty days [of his bereavement] speaks to him and afterward inquires after his welfare.

After thirty days but within twelve months, he inquires after his welfare and then speaks to him.

Rabbi Meir says: After twelve months, he does not refer at all [to the bereavement].

For R. Meir would draw an analogy: To what may it be compared? To one who has a wound and it healed, and a physician came and said to him, “Pay me a fee and I will lance your wound and heal you.”

It is as if he inflamed his wound anew.

So whoever reminds a mourner after twelve months it is as if he inflamed his wound anew.

**Semahot 8:12**

R. Akiva said: A king had four sons.

One was silent when afflicted,

another protested when afflicted,

another begged for mercy when afflicted,

and another when afflicted said to his father, “Afflict me.”

Abraham remained silent when afflicted, as it is stated, “Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering” (Genesis 22:2).

He could have argued, “Yesterday You said to me, ‘For it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you.’”

Yet he is silent, as it is stated, “So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac” (Genesis 22:3).

Job protested when afflicted, as it is stated, “I say to God, ‘Do not condemn: Let me know what You charge me with’” (Job 10:2).

Hezekiah beseeched God for mercy when afflicted, as it is stated, “Thereupon Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to God” (Isaiah 38:2).

Some say that Hezekiah also protested as it is stated, “[He said, ‘Remember how I have walked before You sincerely and wholeheartedly,] and have done what is pleasing to You’” (Isaiah 38:2).

David said to his Father, “Afflict me,” as it is stated, “Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity, and purify me of my sin” (Psalms 51:4)

**Semahot 8:13**

We do not interrupt the study of the Torah until the soul departs from the dying man.

When R. Simeon, the son of R. Akiva, fell ill, he [R. Akiva] did not interrupt [his studies in] his *beit midrash* but made inquiries after him through a messenger.

The first messenger came and reported to him, “He is very ill.”

He said to [his disciples], “Continue to ask questions.”

The second came and reported, “He has grown worse.”

[R. Akiva] returned [his students] to the study of the Torah.

The third came and reported, “He is dying.”

He said [to his disciples] “Continue to ask questions.”

The fourth came and reported, “He is dead.”

Whereupon he [Rabbi Akiva] arose, removed his *tefillin*, rented his garments, and said to them, “Our brother-Israelites, hearken! Until now we had the duty to study the Torah but from now onward we are obligated to honor the dead.”  
A large assembly gathered to bury R. Akiva’s son.

H said to them, “Bring a bench for me to the cemetery.”

He stood [upon it] and expounded, “Our brother-Israelites, hearken! Not because I am a scholar [have you come here], there being greater scholars here than I; not because I am a rich man [have you come here], there being richer men here than I; the men of the South know R. Akiva, but how should the men of Galilee know him? Men know R. Akiva, but how should women and young children know him? If you have come for Akiva, there are many Akivas in the street! Rather, I know, that you have taken the trouble to come here only for the honor of the Torah, [for] you said “The teaching of his God is in his heart” (Psalms 37:31) and for the sake of the commandment [to honor the departed]. All the more so is your reward very great. I would be comforted even had I seven sons whom I [now] buried. Not that a man desires to bury his children, but I know that my son is destined for the World to Come because he caused the public to be righteous.

**Semahot 8:8**

When R. Simeon b. Gamaliel and R. Ishmael were captured and it was decreed against them that they should be put to death, R. Ishmael broke into tears;

R. Simeon said to him, “*Avrekh*,[[1]](#footnote-1) two steps more and you will be in the bosom of the righteous, and yet you weep!”

He replied, “Do I then weep because we are about to be executed? I am weeping because we are about to be executed [in the same way] as murderers and desecrators of the Sabbath.”

He said to him, “Perhaps you were having a meal or were sleeping when a woman came to ask [a ruling] concerning her ritual impurity or her cleanness, and your servant told her that you were asleep. And the Torah states, “[You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan]. If you do mistreat them…” What is written afterward? “[I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me] and My anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, [and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans]” (Exodus 22:21-23).

**Havruta**

**Gil:** It was you who chose tractate Semahot as the topic of conversation. Can you explain why you chose this of all tractates?

**Ruth:** After I lost my partner, Avinoam, I plunged into enormous sadness and did not know what to do with it. Then I picked up *Kaddish* by Leon Wieseltier. Wieseltier kept a “Kaddish diary” of sorts; even though he had ceased to live in accordance with the halakha, he recited the *Kaddish* for his father three times a day in synagogue. During that time, he also began to study the history and meaning of the *Kaddish*. Every morning after services, he studied the *Kaddish* in the ancient Jewish sources and the outcome of his investigation was a touching and compelling book. In this volume, Wieseltier converses with various voices from the sources of Jewish culture, debates or agrees with them, and raises arguments of his own in response to what they say.

In my attitude toward the *Kaddish*, I sense a contradiction. I lost my mother when I was twenty-one. The text of the *Kaddish*, which extols and glorifies Divine justice, was very hard for me. I was offended by the assumption that my mother’s death in the prime of her life was just or worthy of an encomium. Just the same, the *Kaddish* is dear to me. I know it by heart. And for me, it did not stop at the end of the period of mourning. It is a *Kaddish* of orphanhood for my whole life. I send “Kaddish postcards” whenever I happen to visit a synagogue, usually when I am abroad. I feel as though I am sending my parents postcards of love and longing, as though the *Kaddish* is a postcard of the kind the Israeli Army used to give soldiers to send to their parents—a standard postcard on which you can add a few personal words. A postcard that is sent to the World to Come. But this year, with the death of Avinoam, I searched for another way to find solace, to recover. Then I read Rabbi Soloveitchik, who speaks about his wife’s death[[2]](#footnote-2) and describes how much help he received from studying tractate Semahot. So I thought it might help me, too. I sought comfort in Torah.

I began to post a daily passage from tractate Semahot on my Facebook page about seven years ago, every morning. As time passed, a group of 800–900 people came together and studied with me. The experience with the *mishna yomit*, the daily *mishna*, was good for me and I began to post a *halakha*[[3]](#footnote-3) from tractate Semahot every day the same way.

Many people were upset. After all, tractate Semahot is not among the favorites, like Berakhot, Hagiga, or even Sota. After a few days, people began to write in response, “What happened to you? Why are you sad all the time?” Still, after things calmed down, a group came together and the study of a halakha from this tractate became part of my daily discourse.

**Gil:** I can identify with this experience through the way I personally coped with the loss of my brother—*havruta* study of ancient texts while struggling with the question of their relevance for us can bring comfort to the grieving psyche. The author of the Psalms expressed the healing power of this study in the following words: “Were not Your teaching my delight, I would have perished in my affliction” (Psalms 119:92).

**Ruth:** I felt that waking up in the morning and hearing the news right away is un-ecological. In the morning, when the mind has not yet stirred from dreaming, to plunge straightaway into all the noise and depravity that the morning news offers seems wrong to me. I searched for something that would give me some padding against it, to start the day with something that connects me with the world more correctly.

Since learning Torah is a meaningful part of my life, I chose to start my day with learning. As against the *daf yomi,* which requires a tremendous effort, learning one mishna per day is a small and unambitious thing to do. The Mishna is written in the lovely Hebrew of the Sages; reading it is a pleasure in itself. That is how I began my day. I noticed that exactly when I had completed the year of mourning, I would finished the tractate. Someone apparently redacted it that way, making it correspond to the number of days in the year, not including Shabbat.

When you are learning, you are not alone. Mourning is first of all this aloneness, this terrible absence. The tenor of the Mishna—a “low-cholesterol” tone of voice—is not emotive but rather mild and mature, very to-the-point, very impersonal but not in an off-putting sense, different from any book or film, in which the powers of drama and emotion sprinkle salt on your wounds. And precisely due to its mildness, it addresses itself successfully to the matters themselves: What should one do? To stand up or not to stand up? To bring a gift or not to bring a gift? To bring food? Which food? How many people?

I am not a halakhic person in the accepted sense of the term, but I greatly appreciate the halakha as an enormous project. Even though the halakhic culture, like lots of things, is quite often swept into extremism, its protocols of life make a wonderful text. I do not accept the authority of the halakha “like a tub”[[4]](#footnote-4) but I search for a point of contact with it. My father taught me that before doing anything, I should consult. So I consult with the traditional literature and this consultation often grants me, if not the right decision, then at least a way to think about it, the right way to phrase the question.

**“It Is As If He Inflamed His Wound Anew”**

**Gil:** For me, the halakha that more than anything else, even radically, expresses the tractate’s sensitivity to human psychology, is 12:14, which advises us not to ask the mourner how they are after a certain period of time:

R. Meir says: One who sees a mourner within thirty days [of his bereavement] speaks to him and afterward inquires after his welfare.

After thirty days but within twelve months, he inquires after his welfare and then speaks to him.

Rabbi Meir says: After twelve months, he does not refer at all [to the bereavement].

For R. Meir would draw an analogy: To what may it be compared? To one who has a wound and it healed, and a physician came and said to him, “Pay me a fee and I will lance your wound and heal you.”

It is as if he inflamed his wound anew.

So whoever reminds a mourner after twelve months it is as if he inflamed his wound anew.

**Ruth:** It is the opposite of the intuition of modern psychology, which is eager to return to the trauma. The Sages say no, do not go back there. Let the wound heal. Check carefully whose need it is, the mourner or the consoler. It is an impressive display of human sensitivity. And it helped me personally to draw a line.

**Gil:** It seems to me that the Sages did not hesitate to deal with even the most intimate matters in this tractate.

**Ruth:** There are questions that it is not polite even to speak of, but the Sages write about them and they do so without dramatizing. What a pity that this tractate is hardly studied. Usually, Bible or Talmud is studied, but the Mishna (including the *masekhtot ketanot*) is very well suited to our reality here as Jews in Israel. It touches on so much of life with enormous sensitivity to humanness and in such amazing Hebrew.

**Gil:** For me, tractate Semahot’s combination of the halakhic details that are outlined in most of the chapters with its homiletic elements is surprising but necessary. In Chapter 8, for example, there is a series of homilies about the Ten Martyrs,[[5]](#footnote-5) including Rabbi Akiva. The collection includes an audacious passage in which Rabbi Akiva speaks about four sons (Semahot 8:11):

R. Akiva said: A king had four sons.

One was silent when afflicted,

another protested when afflicted,

another begged for mercy when afflicted,

and another when afflicted said to his father, “Afflict me.”

**Ruth:** Why did you choose this homily?

**Gil:** I consider it important because it expresses Rabbi Akiva’s daring willingness to touch the sensitive topic of how people deal with being tormented by God, “My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?” (Psalms 22:2). All of this from the mouth of Rabbi Akiva, who is so strongly identified with the passage: “All my days I have been troubled by the verse: With all your soul, meaning: Even if God takes your soul. I said [to myself]: When will the opportunity be afforded me to fulfill this [verse]? Now that it has been afforded me, shall I not fulfill it?”[[6]](#footnote-6) Do his remarks in the passage in tractate Semahot critique the various ways of reacting to torments? Does he wish to legitimize all of them? Might he see them as a natural range of possibilities for the believer?

**Ruth:** “One was silent when afflicted”— there’s something very loud, if not aggressive, about this silence.

**Gil:** “Abraham remained silent when afflicted.” Abraham is considered the patriarch of faith. In the Jewish tradition, the binding of Isaac is a formative event of faith in God.

**Ruth:** I would like to say regarding Abraham that it is the other way around. Abraham is afflicted and maintains silence. To be silent is sometimes, in fact, to control, to control emotion. In the binding of Isaac story, we do not regard Abraham as a submissive person but as a man of total faith. He does not criticize his Creator with his silence. When you tell your child something and they fall silent, their silence is very loud and makes you wonder whether you might have done something wrong. There’s power in taking punishment and being silent.

**Gil:** If we observe the others, Job is afflicted and protests, Hezekiah was afflicted and pleaded, as is written:

“Thereupon Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to God” (Isaiah 38:2). Some say that Hezekiah also protested as it is stated, “[He said, ‘Remember how I have walked before You sincerely and wholeheartedly,] and have done what is pleasing to You’” (Isaiah 38:2).

He argues! He tells God: “I don’t deserve this because I was okay.” This, too, is defiance.

**Ruth:** But Job also says “I don’t deserve this.”

**Gil:** Job is indeed presented as the protestor. In contrast to all of them, David is the ultimate acceptor. He tells his father “Afflict me.” It does not trouble me that you continue “wash[ing] me thoroughly of my iniquity, and purify[ing] me from my sin,” even if it hurts.

**Ruth:** It is like Rabbi Akiva, who wanted to accept torments of love:

When they took Rabbi Akiva out to be executed, it was time for the recitation of *Shema*.

They were raking his flesh with iron combs, and he was accepting upon himself the yoke of Heaven [i.e., reciting Shema].

His students said to him: Our teacher, even now, [as you suffer, you recite *Shema*?]

He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by the verse: With all your soul, meaning: Even if God takes your soul. I said [to myself]: When will the [opportunity] be afforded me to fulfill this [verse]?

Now that it has been afforded me, shall I not fulfill it?

He prolonged [his uttering of the word:] One, until his soul departed with “One.” (Bavli, Berakhot 61b)

A psychological stance like this in the face of death seems unique to me. Rabbi Akiva’s willingness to accept pain and, even more so, his death-wish, exist nowhere else. Rabbi Akiva tells the Romans, as it were: You think you defeated me but in fact, you are “stagehands” in my play. At long last, you set up a perfect scene for me at the right time and in the right place. I have fulfilled the commandment of “with all my heart”; now I can fulfill “with all my soul,” too. It is a perfect and absolute spiritual act.

**Gil:** The expression “A king had four sons” strongly reminds me of the famous text in the Passover *Haggada*. “Corresponding to four sons did the Torah speak; one [who is] wise, one [who is] evil, one who is innocent, and one who doesn't know to ask” (Pessah Haggada Sefaria Edition). The correspondence is striking. Now, of course, one may also ask if the account in the *Haggada* ranks the sons’ value in the way they are presented. The text is known to appear in various versions. In some of them, the order is wise, evil, innocent, and does not know to ask. In others, the order is wise, innocent, evil, and does not know to ask. The reordering of the sons cannot possibly be random.

**Ruth:** To me, the Pessah *Haggada* text contends with the indecision of a teacher or a parent who has to cope with different kinds of pupils.

**Gil:** The reader gets the impression that the *Haggada* wants to stress the father’s ability to accommodate all four sons together. They are all part of the family. No one is left out. According to this interpretation, we should not look for a hierarchy here.

**Ruth:** In the Pessah *Haggada*, there are four types of learning styles. Here you have four types of faith.

**Gil:** But the question is whether there’s a hierarchy within the styles. Is one better than the other?

**Ruth:** I think Rabbi Akiva, who lists these four types, is actually speaking about himself. David wishes to be punished for the sin of the good life, the sin of lust, and he asks God to forgive him for it. Whereas us—what did we do? Rabbi Akiva asks. We taught Torah and look how we are all being tormented. This is the question of suffering; in their day, I think, the faith question was in plain view—as it was in the Holocaust: an outcry of sorts, of “What is really going on here? What’s happening here?” It reminds me of the beginning of our conversation, where the possibility of reciting the *Kaddish* with intention came up. Rabbi Akiva’s consciousness, however, is in a place where there’s no doubt whatsoever.

**The Four-Field Model**

**Gil:** We find this four-field matrix, for example, in the midrash about the four species of flora used on Sukkot. These symbolize, the midrash says, different types of people in terms of whether they have or lack good deeds and Torah.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Ruth:** What saddens me here is the criticism of the protestor. After all, protest itself is an act of connection, of allegiance.

**Gil:** The protestor in our text reminds me of another four-field matrix that appears in Rabbinical literature: the four men who entered the *pardes* [orchard].[[8]](#footnote-8) In this story, too, four forms of reference to questions of faith are presented. One of them is protest.

Our Sages taught: Four entered the orchard [*pardes*, i.e., dealt with the loftiest secrets of Torah], and they are as follows:

Ben Azzai; and ben Zoma; *Aḥer*, [the other, a name for Elisha ben Avuya]; and Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Akiva, [the senior among them,] said to them: When [upon your arrival in the upper worlds,] you reach pure marble stones, do not say: Water, water, [although they appear to be water,] because it is stated: “he who speaks untruth shall not stand before my eyes” (Psalms 101:7).

Ben Azzai glimpsed [at the Divine Presence] and died. With regard to him the verse states: “Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His pious ones” (Psalms 116:15).

Ben Zoma glimpsed [at the Divine Presence] and was harmed [i.e., he lost his mind]. With regard to him the verse states: “Have you found honey? Eat as much as is sufficient for you, lest you become full from it and vomit it” (Proverbs 25:16).

*Aḥer* cut down the shoots [of saplings. i.e., he became a heretic].

Rabbi Akiva came out safely.

According to the Jerusalem Talmud,[[9]](#footnote-9) Aḥer, Elisha b. Abuya, cuts down shoots of saplings in the orchard due to his puzzlement about injustice and the suffering of the righteous. It is this question that occupies every student when they encounter the story of the Ten Martyrs:

[One day] he was sitting and reviewing in the valley of Ginosar and saw a man climbing to the top of a date palm taking the mother with the chicks[[10]](#footnote-10) and descending safely.

The next day he saw another man climbing to the top of a date palm, taking the chicks, and sending away the mother. When climbing down he was bitten by a snake and died.

He [Elisha ben Abuya] said, it is written, “Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life” (Deut. 22:7). Where is the faring well for this one? Where is the long life of this one? He did not know that Rabbi Yakov had previously explained,

“In order that you may fare well” in the future world which is all good,

and “have a long life” in the future which is eternal.

Thus, when Rabbi Akiva in tractate Semahot refers to the son who is afflicted and protests, he may have in mind a figure who is already known to be his opponent, Elisha ben Abuya, the sage who protested and cut down the shoots.

**Between Life and Death, Between the Private and the Public**

**Gil:** Tractate Semahot 8:13, has more to say:

We do not interrupt the study of the Torah until the soul departs from the dying man.

When R. Simeon, the son of R. Akiva, fell ill, he [R. Akiva] did not interrupt [his studies in] his beit midrash but made inquiries after him through a messenger.

The first messenger came and reported to him, “He is very ill.”

He said to [his disciples], “Continue to ask questions.”

The second came and reported, “He has grown worse.”

[R. Akiva] returned [his students] to the study of the Torah.

The third came and reported, “He is dying.”

He said [to his disciples] “Continue to ask questions.”

The fourth came and reported, “He is dead.”

Whereupon he [Rabbi Akiva] arose, removed his tefillin, rented his garments, and said to them, “Our brother-Israelites, hearken! Until now we had the duty to study the Torah but from now onward we are obligated to honor the dead.”

Rabbi Akiva does not stop the lesson to do what any reasonable person would do: go to his family. His comportment seems almost indifferent, in contrast to the way the Talmud describes his grief upon the death of his mentor. Rabbi Eliezer:

Rabbi Akiva encountered [the funeral procession on its way] from Caesarea to Lod. [Rabbi Akiva] was striking his flesh [in terrible anguish] until his blood flowed to the earth.

He began to [eulogize Rabbi Eliezer] in the row [of those comforting the mourners,] and said: “My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen” (II Kings 2:12).

I have many coins, but I do not have a money changer [to whom] to give them. (Bavli, Sanhedrin 68a)

**Ruth:** I find this story immensely difficult. It is a terrible story. A large crowd gathers to bury Rabbi Akiva’s son and he tells them: “Take a bench to the cemetery for me.” It’s something like “Set up the amplifier and let’s get a class going.”

His son’s death becomes an opportunity to give a class. The shock that this causes the reader reminds me of Zen stories, but I cannot identify with it. I pity anyone who lived with him.

**Gil:** But maybe one should not take this story out of its context. Rabbi Akiva feels he must send the public a message here. He takes his private grief and makes it a source of inspiration for the public at a time when they evidently needed this message.

**Ruth:** The way he uses his own “celebrity” is also interesting.

**Gil:** “You are enchanted by something greater than me and greater than you, something that comes from the Torah.” That is how he explains it to them.

**Ruth:** I agree. Here he turns things upside-down from the usual course of a large funeral, as in the funerary processions of great Hasidic rebbes, of Rabbi Ovadia Yosseph, or of Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, which became displays of power. He says, I am turning this funeral upside-down and “cleansing” it: You are here not for me but for the honor of the Torah. It is charming.

**Gil:** There is an additional message. Rabbi Akiva proclaims that he denies the drama of the death. The deceased will go on to life in the World to Come. It is a very political message—dedicating life to the World to Come. If we link it to its historical context, we will see that he counteracts his parental instinct. There was some very radical message here that he thought important to convey at that precise moment. The Torah is under attack, our identity is under attack, and now this is what has to be done; this is the ideal. What is more—it seems that the Sages had an interest in deliberately mingling the laws of personal mourning with mourning for the leaders and the disaster of the entire nation as reflected in the legend of the Martyrs.

**Ruth:** But not on your son, Rabbi Akiva. Please implement the ideal on yourself. Do not do it on your family and the members of your household.

**Gil:** It should not surprise us when we recall the Talmudic account of the choices he made in his personal and family life. Rabbi Akiva, the Babylonian Talmud tells us, sacrificed marital and family life for the value of Torah study by famously leaving his wife behind for the sake of Torah study.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Ruth:** The question is whether this extremism and inhumanity are essential. Can’t one be a great halakhist while maintaining moderation, balance, and respect for humanity? Tractate Semahot, after all, amplifies our understanding of what having a son is. “A dying man is regarded as a living entity in respect of all matters in the world: he holds [his brother’s wife] tied to the leviratical marriage, he frees [his mother] from the obligation of a leviratical marriage and enables her to eat *terumah*, and he [may also] disqualify her from eating *terumah*.”[[12]](#footnote-12) He is considered a living person in every sense until he truly dies—“We do not tie up his cheekbones, or stop up his apertures, or place a metal vessel or anything which chills on his navel […] until he dies.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The halakha says that as long as the person is not dead, let them be. You have no right to meddle. Do not manage their death. In my eyes, this is a statement that empowers the human condition, that says this is the greatest thing there is. There’s a Divine image here. A person was alive and now they are still not dead, they are dying. It is a special time, one that entails respect and sensitivity. And in contrast, not to come home when your son is dying?! Perhaps your interpretation somewhat closes this gap by saying look, we are in a special situation.

**Gil:** It is a state of emergency if you wish, and Rabbi Akiva is acting under “emergency regulations” as it were.

**Ruth:** A state of emergency. Especially as everyone’s watching us.

**Gil:** It reminds me of the famous passage in Bavli Tractate Menahot 29b, which also touches on the question of reward. Moses ascends to the heavens and speaks with the Holy One about Rabbi Akiva:

Rav Yehuda says [that] Rav says:

When Moses ascended on High, he found the Holy One, Blessed be He, sitting and tying crowns on the letters [of the Torah].

[Moses] said before Him: Master of the Universe, who is preventing You [from giving the Torah without these additions]?

[God] said to him: There is a man who is destined to be [born] after several generations, and Akiva ben Yosef is his name;

he is destined to derive from each and every spine [of these crowns] mounds and mounds of *halakhot*.

[Moses] said before [God:] Master of the Universe, show him to me.

[God] said to him: Return behind you.

[Moses] went and sat at the end of the eighth row [in Rabbi Akiva’s study hall], and did not understand what they were saying.

[Moses’] was distressed.

When [Rabbi Akiva] arrived at [the discussion of] one matter, his students said to him: My teacher, from where do you derive this?

[Rabbi Akiva] said to them: [It is] a *halakha* [transmitted] to Moses from Sinai.

His mind was put at ease.

[Moses] returned and came before the Holy One, Blessed be He.

He said before Him: Master of the Universe, You have a man like this and You are giving the Torah through me?

He said to him: Be silent; this intention arose before Me.

He said before Him: Master of the Universe, You have shown me his Torah, show me his reward.

He said to him: Return [to where you were].

He went back and saw that they were weighing [Rabbi Akiva’s] flesh in a butcher shop [*bemakkulin*],

He said before Him: Master of the Universe, this is Torah and this is its reward?

He said to him: Be silent; this intention arose before Me.

**Ruth:** Yes, Moses was the first to issue the outcry that we should issue here: “This is Torah and this is its reward?” In this homily, Moses cries out against Rabbi Akiva’s afflictions even though he is ostensibly Rabbi Akiva’s rival.

**Gil:** If we go back to Rabbi Akiva’s parable of the four sons of the king in tractate Semahot, then in fact, within all the “no”—I’m not protesting” and the like—Rabbi Akiva says a little “yes.” Seemingly he praises the loving acceptance of torments. The very fact that he raises the topic, however, may indicate that the problem does trouble him, that it troubles him badly. So the way he shouts “I accept the judgment,” as it were, may say the opposite.

**Ruth:** Indeed, it is a rule in reading poetry: When no, no, no, no, no appears all the time in a poem, it really means yes, yes, yes, yes.

**The Quest for an Explanation**

**Gil:** The journey to creating meaning in life takes place not only in Rabbi Akiva’s conduct. It is hard to uncouple from the impression of an incessant quest for an explanation:

When R. Simeon b. Gamaliel and R. Ishmael were captured and it was decreed against them that they should be put to death, R. Ishmael broke into tears;

R. Simeon said to him, “Avrekh, two steps more and you will be in the bosom of the righteous, and yet you weep!”

He replied, “Do I then weep because we are about to be executed? I am weeping because we are about to be executed [in the same way] as murderers and desecrators of the Sabbath.”

He said to him, “Perhaps you were having a meal or were sleeping when a woman came to ask [a ruling] concerning her ritual impurity or her cleanness, and your servant told her that you were asleep. And the Torah states, “[You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan]. If you do mistreat them…” What is written afterward? “[I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me] and My anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, [and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans]” (Exodus 22:21-23).

The sins that R. Simeon chooses for his investigation of suffering are odd: “Perhaps you were having a meal or you were sleeping when a woman came to ask …” Does it really go that far?!

**Ruth:** I find it problematic to look for culpability in the victim. On the other hand, perhaps this search releases us from the lack of an explanation; maybe we would rather feel guilt than injustice.

**Gil:** Some would say that this story wishes to instill an educational message: If someone in need of help has reached your doorstep, train those in your household not to turn them away.

**Ruth:** I find it hard to be moved by this purist approach. I criticize part of today’s Religious Zionism on these grounds because I sense something phony here. I am aware that the text speaks in many voices. I connect in particular with the voice that says it is a mighty thing simply to be a person—not to be “okay” all the time, to be right all the time, but to try to be a good person who is sensitive to people, and if something bad happens it is not a punishment. I think about our lives exactly this way. My mother and father and Avinoam did not die because they did something bad; it is the human condition. From my standpoint, the Torah gives comfort from the very act of learning it and not in our finding the reason for our loss within it. These reasons do not comfort me.

**Gil:** I am not sure the goal is to comfort as much as it is to educate. Often it seems the Sages occupy themselves with this quest in order to extract from it an educational message.

**Ruth:** That is right, as in the Talmudic story that connects Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s afflictions with his treatment of animals: “[There was] a certain calf that was being led to slaughter. [The calf] went and hung its head on the corner of Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi’s garment] and was crying. [Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi] said to it: Go, as you were created for this. [It was] said [in Heaven:] Since he was not compassionate [toward the calf,] let afflictions come upon him.’[[14]](#footnote-14)

The world is chaotic and you can try to deny it. If you live in a place that is inhabited only by your kind, and at school, your children see only what you choose for them, and they do not watch television and do not use the telephone, so you are *hared* [anxious/*haredi*]. You are more and more anxious about acknowledging that the world God created lacks an explanation. One might think instead that this is its beauty and its power.

**Gil:** You have aptly described the way to cope with the natural processes of growing and blossoming and wilting. But do not forget that many of these texts were written in the middle of tremendous catastrophes.

**Ruth:** There’s evil in the world; not everything happens because of us.

**Father and Son**

**Gil:** The Sages never tire of looking for meaning. We previously mentioned the story of Rabbi Eliezer’s death. If we relate to the narrative flow and recall how it began, we can learn more about Rabbi Akiva’s suffering and its meaning:

When Rabbi Eliezer took ill, Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues came to visit him. He was sitting on his canopied bed [*bekinof*], and they were sitting in his hall [*bateraklin*];

That day was Shabbat eve, and [Rabbi Eliezer’s] son Hyrcanus entered to remove his phylacteries, [as phylacteries are not worn on Shabbat. His father] berated him, and he left reprimanded.

[Hyrcanus] said to his [father’s] colleagues: It appears to me that father has lost his mind.

[Rabbi Eliezer] said to them: He, [Hyrcanus,] and his mother have lost their minds. How can they neglect prohibitions [punishable by] stoning (i.e. Shabbat preparations), and engage in prohibitions by rabbinic decree, [such as wearing phylacteries on Shabbat]?

Since the Sages perceived that his mind was stable, they entered and sat before him at a distance of four cubits, [as he was ostracized (see Bava Metzia 59b) and it is forbidden to sit within four cubits of an ostracized person.]

[Rabbi Eliezer] said to them: Why have you come?

They said to him: We have come to study Torah,

He said to them: And why have you not come until now?

They said to him: We did not have spare time.

He said to them: I would be surprised if these [Sages] die their own death, [i.e., a natural death].

Rabbi Akiva said to him: How will my [death come about]?

He said to him: Yours will be worse than theirs. (Sanhedrin 68a)

In one possible reading, the story helps to explain Rabbi Akiva’s death. Rabbi Akiva visits his ostracized mentor, who is bedridden, and asks him about the fate that awaits him. The mentor’s cruel answer is: “Yours will be worse than theirs.” An innocuous reading of the story would see this as a literal prophecy: Rabbi Eliezer predicts Rabbi Akiva’s gruesome impending death. On a second glance, however, one may find a post-factum message here. After Rabbi Akiva’s tragic death, the Sages searched for the reason and placed it in the mouth of Rabbi Eliezer, who had been ostracized and whose pupils were avoiding him.

**Ruth:** The Sages indeed attributed visionary abilities to people on the verge of death.

**Gil:** Yes, but it is hard not to see real criticism of the shunning of Rabbi Eliezer here—a criticism that lends some meaning to the punishment of Rabbi Akiva, his greatest pupil and the man who, in the story of Akhnai’s oven, apprises him of the Sages’ decision to ostracize him.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Ruth:** It is also a text about their relationship: a dramatic text about relations between a teacher and his student, a student as close to him as a son, a non-biological son who is nevertheless a real son. It is the biological son who misreads the situation and says, “It appears to me that father has lost his mind.” His father’s reply attests that he has lost nothing, “He and his mother have lost their minds ….”

**Gil:** Rabbi Eliezer had a complex relationship with his own father, who disowned him because he did not follow in his footsteps. Rabbi Eliezer fled from his home.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**Ruth:** Yes, that is how it began.

**Gil:** So he has a father like this and a son like this. Rabbi Eliezer replaces his biological father with his spiritual father, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. But look, Rabbi Eliezer’s spiritual son, none other than Rabbi Akiva, betrays him when he participates in the ban.

Rabbi Eliezer’s father disowns him because he fled from him to the bet midrash. Now Rabbi Eliezer himself, Rabbi Akiva’s spiritual father, dooms Rabbi Akiva to a cruel fate because he escaped from him when he ostracized him. There’s a multigenerational transition here.

**Ruth:** The story of Rabbi Eliezer’s death has a powerful father and son moment that can also be read metaphorically as God and man, mentor and student, as well as father and son. Such is the metaphorical depth of the religious experience.

**Gil:** And despite their spirituality, it is evident that tractate Semahot does not dismiss the importance of simple existence and understanding the regular ways of this world. This world is not only an unimportant passageway where one should not linger.

**Ruth:** That is right. I think the Sages look at the individual and say: What an amazing thing this is, I stand, I move, and I am truly happy that I am alive.

But you say, correctly, that alternative ideologies arise at a time of devastation—humanist and non-judgmental ideologies such as that of Viktor Frankl, who remained a humanist after all the atrocities he describes in his book (*Man’s Search for Meaning)*, Primo Levi (*If This Is a Man*), or Etty Hillesum, who kept a diary (*Etty: A Diary 1941–1943*). These people managed to see spots of light even in the Holocaust, in the heart of darkness.

**Gil:** The Piaseczner Rebbe wrote in a world turned upside-down, in the Warsaw ghetto. His public sermons were published in the book *Esh Kodesh* (English: *Sacred Fire: Torah From the Years of Fury 1939–1942,* [Jason Aronson, Inc.](https://www.abebooks.com/book-search/publisher/jason-aronson-inc/), 2002). In those difficult days, as he and those around him were suffering personal and public disasters and tragedies day in and day out, he oscillated between two poles—let-us-mend-our-ways-and-repent and a “protest” or complaint of sorts against God: “It is indeed astonishing that the world still stands after so many such cries…. Innocent children, pure angels, are being killed and slaughtered just because they are Israelites…. They fill the entire space of the cosmos with their cries—and yet the world does not revert to primordial water. It remains the same, as if God were unmoved.”[[17]](#footnote-17) This book has gained acceptance in Jewish communities and these statements, which recur in several places in it, resonate with Rabbi Akiva’s “protest”—a protest that reflects not heresy but faith.

**Ruth:** Tremendous effort is invested in not losing faith. Losing the “narrative” that gives meaning to life is truly as frightening as losing life.

**Gil:** Along with the homiletic parts of tractate Semahot, most of the tractate is packed with systematic and detailed rules concerning the care of the dead and additional matters related to mourning.

**Ruth:** I find the poetics of the Mishna enchanting in literary terms:

We may not close the eyes of a dying man. Whoever touches and moves him is a murderer. R. Meir used to say: He can be compared to a lamp that is dripping; should a person touch it he extinguishes it. Similarly whoever closes the eyes of a dying man is considered as if he had taken his life. We may not move him, wash him, or place him on sand or salt until he dies.

[…]

For a non-Jew or a slave, we do not occupy ourselves [with his funeral rites] at all, but we exclaim of him, “Alas lion! Alas, mighty man!”

R. Judah said: “Alas, Tabi! Alas, faithful man who ate of his labor!” (Semahot 1)

“Alas, faithful man.” How beautiful. Such profound and simple use of Hebrew.

**Semahot: Literally Happy Occasions**

**Gil:** The choice of the tractate’s title, Semahot, is thought-provoking and somewhat ironic [as it literally means “festive occasions” in Hebrew].

**Ruth:** Yes, but “It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting” (Ecclesiastes 7:2). I agree with the message of this verse—after you have experienced grief you are no longer afraid to comfort mourners. People usually avoid coming into contact with mourners, they cross the street, and they do not know what to do, as if grief is contagious or dangerous. The main thing, I think, is confusion.

**Gil:** It is not simple. Sometimes it is truly hard to know how to comfort. If you comfort too much, it is out of place; too little is not good either. It is hard to know. On the topic of silence, the Sages say: “The reward for [attending] a house of mourning [*bei tammaya*] is silence”[[18]](#footnote-18) because silence is the best way for those consoling the mourners to express their empathy. That is, silence is the main thing. You do not visit a house of mourning in order to talk.

**Ruth:** The key is compassion. To approach the mourner and be at their side, not to tell them: Very well, at least … (he left you children, etc.).… Comforting never begins with “at least.”

There’s a secret of sorts that is not divulged to people who are not orphans and to people who are not mourners: orphanhood alongside the sorrow, also provides a kind of freedom; grief provides a kind of clarity. I find that when people visit during the *shiva*, the conversations are more authentic, the encounter is clean, free of matters of power and making an impression.

The collision with death, with that certainty that we so strongly deny, makes people more serious. It creates a better chance of intimacy and true encounter. Therefore, the ironic-sounding title Semahot*,* happy occasions, is real.

**Gil:** One of the names that Jewish tradition gives the cemetery is *beit ha-haim*, the house of the living. It is a lovely and correct name in itself; it is truly a place that serves not the dead but the living.

**Ruth:** There are stories[[19]](#footnote-19) about it being possible to encounter the dead in their burial caves as if they are alive in there. I understand that feeling.

**Gil:** Let’s conclude by talking about the here and now, this country, and how to live in it.

**Ruth:** The two underlying principles of Zionism—the National Home and an exemplary society—challenge us at present, too. The question of an exemplary society—the kind the Zionist thinkers wanted to establish here—means focusing on the question of what one should die and surrender one’s soul for, or on asking how to lead a more decent life: to make sure we do not pollute the soil, the air, and the sea; that there should not be a hungry child here; that there should be no schoolchild who cannot take part in an extracurricular group or a school trip; that we should not live as the masters of other people and deprive them of their freedom; that our public sphere should be free of malicious speech and crudity. This, in my eyes, is contemporaneous Zionism and is our true challenge today.

1. A title of honor, alluding to Genesis 41:43. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rabbi Yosef Dov (Joseph Ber) Soloveitchik, *Min ha-sa’ara* [*Out of the Whirlwind*] (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Books, 2009), pp. 56–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Semahot is not a tractate of the Mishna but one of the *mesekhtot ketanot*, “small tractates” that date to the period of the Geonim. For this reason, a sub-unit of a chapter is not referred to as a *mishna* but as a *halakha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bavli, Shabbat 88a, in which God forced them to accept the Torah by overturning Mt. Sinai above them like a tub. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A list of ten sages who died as martyrs to Roman persecution. The ten sages became the topic of many liturgical poems and midrashim. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bavli, Berakhot 61b. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Vayikra Rabba 30:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bavli, Hagiga 14b. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hagiga 2:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In defiance of the biblical commandment “If, along the road, you chance upon a bird’s nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young” (Deuteronomy 22:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bavli, Ketubot 62–63. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Semahot 1:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Semahot 1:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Bavli, Bava Metzia 85a. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Bavli, Bava Metzia 59b. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Don Seeman, Daniel Reiser, and Ariel Evan Mayse, eds.,*Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal: The Prewar and Holocaust Legacy of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira* (Albany, NY: SUNY Series in Contemporary Jewish Thought, 2021), p. 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Bavli, Berakhot 6b. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Such as “Rabbi Bena’a was marking burial caves”—Bavli, Bava Batra 58a. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)