“A time for weeping and a time for laughing” (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

A Talk with Samuel L. (“Sam”) Katz

**Biographical Note**

Samuel L. (“Sam”) Katz, a philanthropist, entrepreneur, and senior executive in the New York business community, is an alumnus of the Yeshivah of Flatbush and holds a degree in economics from Columbia University. He began his career in 1986 as an analyst with Drexel Burnham Lambert. Between 1988 and 1992, he was Vice President of the Blackstone Group. In 1992–1995, he co-chaired Sabre Capital. From 1996 to 2005, he was in charge of strategic development processes with Cendant.

Today, Sam Katz is a senior partner at TZP and has multiple executive responsibilities with various companies. He is president and founder of the Youth Renewal Fund, a philanthropic organization that has been active for more than twenty-eight years in narrowing disparities in the Israeli education system.

**Babylonian Talmud, Makkot 24a**[[1]](#footnote-1)

It once was that Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva were walking along the road, and they heard the sound of the multitudes of Rome from Puteoli at a distance of one hundred and twenty *mil*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

They [the other sages] began weeping and Rabbi Akiva [was] laughing.
They said to him: Why are you laughing?
He said to them: And you, why are you weeping?
They said to him: These gentiles, who bow to false gods and burn incense to idols, dwell securely and in tranquility, and [for] us, the House of the footstool of our God, [the Temple,] is burnt by fire, and shall we not weep?

[Rabbi Akiva] said to them: That is why I am laughing. If it is so for those who violate His will, for those who perform His will, all the more so [will they be rewarded].

On another occasion, they were ascending to Jerusalem. When they arrived at Mount Scopus [and saw the site of the Temple], they rented their garments [in mourning, in keeping with halakhic practice].
When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox that emerged from [the site of] the Holy of Holies.
They began weeping, and Rabbi Akiva was laughing.
They said to him: Why are you laughing?
He said to them: Why are you weeping?

They said to him: [This is the] place [concerning] which it is written: “And the non-priest who approaches shall die” (Numbers 1:51), and now foxes walk in it; shall we not weep?
[Rabbi Akiva] said to them: That is why I am laughing, as it is written, “And I will take to Me faithful witnesses to attest: Uriah the priest, and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah” (Isaiah 8:2).
What is the connection between Uriah and Zechariah? Uriah [prophesied] during the First Temple [period], and Zechariah prophesied during the Second Temple!
Rather, the verse established that [fulfillment of] the prophecy of Zechariah depends on the [fulfillment] of the prophecy of Uriah.
In [the prophecy of] Uriah it is written: “Therefore, for your sake, Zion shall be plowed as a field, [and Jerusalem shall become rubble, and the Temple Mount as the high places of a forest”] (Micah 3:12), In Zechariah it is written: “There shall yet be elderly men and elderly women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem” (Zechariah 8:4).
Until the prophecy of Uriah [concerning the destruction of the city] was fulfilled I was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled.
Now that the prophecy of Uriah has been fulfilled, it [is] evident that the prophecy of Zechariah [remains] valid.
They said to him, in this language: Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us.

**Havruta**

**Gil:** Our story begins with a description of people taking a walk. Is it a delegation of sages? Are they on their way to Rome?

**Sam:** They may be walking past a large Roman fortress city in the Land of Israel, possibly Caesarea. What interests me most is Rabban Gamliel’s role in the group. Is Rabban Gamliel, as the Patriarch, merely observing the events? Is he involved in the discussion? Does Rabbi Akiva disagree with him, too? The Talmud appears to leave this question open.

**Gil:** The interesting thing is that we have two stories here, although they may also be read as one story with two parts.

**Sam:** Correct. At first glance, the topic of both stories is the same and both reflect the same way of thinking. Together, they teach us one way to give comfort.

**Gil:** But do the two stories really teach the same principle twice?

**Ups and Downs**

**Sam:** I am not sure at all. The logic of Rabbi Akiva’s argument in the first story is problematic. He claims that if idol-worshipers who defy God’s will are happy and content, then all the more so will be the Jewish people’s reward. The problem with this argument is that we did God’s will before the Temple was destroyed. There was Torah study; we kept the commandments. This argument is disappointing. The second story, in contrast, speaks of a different kind of hope, a vision independent of actions and their outcomes. By presenting this story, Rabbi Akiva wishes to teach us a principle about the pendulum nature of the flow of life. As I see it, the purpose of the story is to teach us not about the power of the Holy Spirit but something important about the way of the world. The prophets predicted destruction and disasters but added that the Jews would be redeemed and the time of the Second and Third Temples would come. It is of this structure of ups and downs, of devastation and hope, that life at large is built.

**Gil:** Is this, in your opinion, why the expression “Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us” appears only at the end of the second story?

**Sam:** Definitely. At the end of the first dialogue, his associates could have replied: “What kind of comforting is that? In what way did you help us? After all, we did God’s will, we are still doing God’s will, and our Temple is burnt!” But once they hear from him that the process is cyclical and their lives will be rebuilt, they may truly find comfort.

**Gil:** In a certain sense, the story depicts the Sages’ envy of the glory of Rome. It is a little puzzling. Are destruction and devastation not reason enough for weeping? Why is this comparison with Rome’s success needed? It echoes the complaint against God concerning how the righteous suffer while the wicked triumph. It is noteworthy that these sages do not hold Rome accountable for the destruction of the Temple; they blame it on idol worship. How can it be, they wonder, that the houses of idolatry stand and flourish while the house of the Lord is destroyed?

**Sam:** From this perspective, the question that occupies them is much broader than it seems at first.

**Gil:** The first story is strongly reminiscent of the image of Judea Capta that the Romans imprinted on coins that they minted after they quashed the Great Rebellion. The embossment emphasizes the difference between the Roman soldier, standing proudly, and the captive Judea, seated, broken, and weeping, at his side. This image, created by the Romans to celebrate their victory, also carries a challenging theological question from the Jews’ side. Eventually, the Church Fathers would enunciate this question directly as an everlasting proof against Judaism: the Jews’ wretched, humiliated condition is resounding evidence that their way is mistaken and God has therefore abandoned them. One would almost say that our homily asks the very same question.

**Sam:** The question is whether Rabbi Akiva answers this difficult question.

**Rabbi Akiva’s Laughter**

**Gil:** Rabbi Akiva does something very emphatic here. Had he refrained from weeping with them and told them, “Stop crying, there’s nothing to cry about, it will be okay,” it would have sufficed. However, he behaves as though Rome’s success gives him contentment. His behavior seems paradoxical and its purpose is educational: He exudes contentment and hope as he observes the possibility of grandeur and might, even if these belong to the transgressors of God’s will for the time being.

**Sam:** Rabbi Akiva’s laughter reminds me of Sarah’s: “Then [the Lord] said to Abraham: Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’” [Genesis 18:13].[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Gil:** But that is the opposite of our story: Sarah’s laughter expresses her disbelief in the tidings she received, in contrast to Rabbi Akiva’s laughter, which reflects faith and hope.

**Sam:** Perhaps Sarah, like Rabbi Akiva, understands what is afoot and foresees the honoring of God’s promise to the nation. In the second part of the story, we read about Rabbi Akiva and his comrades walking to Mount Scopus. Mount Scopus, of course, is so-called because it overlooks the Temple Mount.

**Gil:** They observe [the Temple Mount] and rend their clothes.

**Sam:** Their response is halakhic. They are stuck in the moment and cannot see the broad picture.

**Gil:** No tears have flowed yet. Something else triggers their weeping. “When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox that emerged from [the site of] the Holy of Holies.” Why specifically a fox?

**Sam:** Afox appears to belong to the savage world of nature.

**Gil:** This place was so guarded, protected, and holy that no one could approach it apart from the High Priest once a year. Now, all of a sudden, it is open to one and all. This is when the sages begin to weep; only then, as it were, do they truly understand. This internalization reminds me of a story in the Talmud, in tractate Berakhot,[[4]](#footnote-4) about the death of Rav, the great Amora. When Rav died, the students followed his coffin and, of course, rented their clothes. The Talmud relates that after they returned from the funeral procession, they sat down at the riverbank and prepared to have a meal. In literary terms, what we have here, as Rabbi Soloveitchik[[5]](#footnote-5) explains, is an attempt to return to the flow of life, to the current of the river. As they partake of their meal, they ask themselves a halakhic question about the requirement of reciting the *zimun[[6]](#footnote-6)* before Grace after Meals, and they have no answer. With this, Rav Adda bar Ahava stands up and says: “Rav is dead, and we have not yet learned the halakhot of the Grace after Meals.” He realizes at this moment that he should tear his clothes again. Consider it: they had been at the funeral, they had buried Rav, they knew he had died, and they had torn their clothes for him. But precisely at this quotidian moment, at which the reality of his departure suddenly strikes them, the awareness that you no longer have the teacher to whom you used to direct your questions—it is then that the most authentic anguish erupts. Our story seems to make a similar point. As the sages grieve over the destruction of the Temple in the middle of an ordinary day-to-day outing, the realization of what they have lost penetrates, and their grief advances to its next stage, that of acknowledgment and internalization.

**Sam:** This may also explain why the story is designed in two parts: two stages of internalization.

**Gil:** The sages’ internalization is their acknowledgment of the desolation that has befallen the Holy of Holies. The Talmud’s account is a literary radicalization, of course. It would suffice to see a fox walking around on the grounds of the Temple. The narrator, however, emphasizes that it “emerged from [the site of] the Holy of Holies”—the holiest place in the Temple.

**Sam:** Here, of course, comes the confusing moment: “They began weeping, and Rabbi Akiva was laughing.” He seems unable to understand their weeping and they explain it to him: “[This is the] place [concerning] which it is written: ‘And the non-priest who approaches shall die,’ and now foxes walk in it; shall we not weep?”

**Gil:** They do not say “And now idol-worshipers burn incense in it.” The problem is not that non-Jews are offering sacrifices there. It is that the holiest and most guarded place, which no one was allowed to approach, has become ownerless, desolate, and deserted—a place where foxes wander. An intimate, closed place has suddenly been blown wide open. The sages’ argument depends on their taking an extreme position, as in the first part of the story. The idol-worshipers deserve the greatest punishment but look how well things are going for them—while for us, the house of our Lord has been put to the torch, and the holiest and most restricted place there has become open to all. Of course, one should weep!

**Sam:** Rabbi Akiva answers, quoting Isaiah: “‘And I will take to Me faithful witnesses to attest: Uriah the priest, and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah.’ But what has Uriah got to do with Zechariah? Uriah belongs to the First Temple and Zechariah to the Second.” That is lovely; the Talmud gives the text an academic reading; it is almost biblical criticism. Is Rabbi Akiva confusing two eras? No: “The verse [in Isaiah] the verse established that [fulfillment of] the prophecy of Zechariah depends on the [fulfillment] of the prophecy of Uriah.”

**Gil:** By saying that one prophecy depends on the other he links them together.

**Sam:** Rabbi Akiva wants to teach his colleagues a lesson in the cyclical nature of life, a cycle of building, destruction, and redemption. Only this insight of cyclicality and process allows one to look ahead. Elsewhere in the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva is typified by viewing life from the perspective of a cycle of destruction and construction, sorrow and happiness. The Talmud[[7]](#footnote-7) reports that after losing 12,000 pairs of students, Rabbi Akiva chose to migrate southward and raise a new rabbinical leadership comprised of Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yose, and Rabbi Yehuda.

**Gil:** According to this explanation, Rabbi Akiva is so loyal to this approach that the Talmud[[8]](#footnote-8) relates:

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 [reciting *Shema*, thereby] accepting upon himself the yoke of Heaven.

His students said to him: Our teacher, to this extent?

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

A voice descended [from heaven] and said: Happy are you, Rabbi Akiva, that your soul departed with “one.”

Even at this most personal, most painful moment, he expresses his conviction that even this suffering is part of the life cycle; it is another way the Holy One tests us.

**Sam:** In my eyes, all of this is connected with the account in the Talmud[[9]](#footnote-9) about Rabbi Akiva’s background. Rabbi Akiva knows from life experience that reality can surprise. That the simple man he used to be would become what he is today is inconceivable, but it happened anyway.

**Gil:** Is this the origin of his optimistic outlook? Is it from here that his hope was born?

**Sam:** Exactly. His biography taught him about the ability to hope and to believe that matters now seemingly lost can still change, and “There shall yet be elderly men and elderly women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem.” It is this that gives hope and comfort.

I would like to add something personal here. The Talmudic account corresponds with the basic human condition of searching for logic in reality and trying to continue, even amid horrible tragedies, to seek justice and fairness under the circumstances of our personal lives. I learned from my experience not to measure the value of my life at only one level and to derive satisfaction by reflecting on previous successes.

After we studied this sugya together for the first time, I witnessed first-hand the unthinkable suffering of a family that had lost its twenty-one-year-old daughter. If ever there was a case of injustice, the suffering of the righteous, it was this case, when a vibrant, good young woman was lost to her family and the world forever. I understand the despair of the sages—Rabbi Akiva’s comrades—as they confront their greatest fears. In confronting a life that ceased so tragically, I can better understand their inability to experience any emotion other than horror or sadness. This lengthy experience broadened my point of view on the struggle between optimism, creativity, and the wish to move ahead, on the one hand, and the harsh reality that many members of our society experience, on the other. That courageous family coped with its inconceivable loss in a way that evoked appreciation and respect. Even though they managed to pronounce the words “You have comforted us, you have comforted us” and to rise from the ashes, the story of their path to convalescence will never end.

**Gil:** Some criticize Rabbi Akiva and argue that his demonstrative support of the Bar Kokhba rebellion, described in the Talmud, and his interpretation of “A star rises from Jacob” (Numbers 24:17) as referring to Bar Kokhba ultimately caused enormous damage. In the Talmud, we find direct criticism of him. Rabbi Johanan ben Torata tells Rabbi Akiva: “Akiva, grass will grow on your cheeks, and still the son of David will not have come.”[[10]](#footnote-10) According to what we have said, it turns out that Rabbi Johanan ben Torata was asking him not to delude the nation with false hopes. Rabbi Akiva refused to be influenced by reality or by the views of those around him. Some would say that endangered the fate of the Jewish people with his all-out support of Bar Kokhba’s irrational uprising. The massacres described in the Talmud that resulted when Hadrian quashed the uprising, were even worse than the events surrounding the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Conversely, one may argue that it was this struggle, along with the optimism and hope that has accompanied our nation in all hard times, that ultimately sustained the nation’s spirit.

**Sam:** Perhaps this is the spirit of Rabbi Akiva.

**Today’s Challenges**

**Sam:** I find Rabbi Akiva’s message in our story to be very meaningful, both personally and at the community and national level. Everyone has to contend daily with difficulties, disappointments, and failures. It is therefore so important to adopt a broad, balanced perspective and see the positive as well. According to tradition, the Second Temple fell because of pointless hatred among Jews and infighting among the different sects. This can be said to be a microcosm of our national history. Unfortunately, it is conspicuously evident in today’s State of Israel as well, even at times of crisis, when it seems as though things are only getting worse and worse. I would like to take Rabbi Akiva’s point of view from this narrative. Unlike the other sages, who seem enslaved to a mentality of destruction and see only a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies, Rabbi Akiva manages to see beyond this, something more fundamental, important, and meaningful to which one may aspire and from which one may also derive hope for a sound and perfect world. Today we need leaders of Rabbi Akiva’s caliber, who can take the reins of the nation and show it a picture greater than that of destruction that sometimes seems irreparable.

**Gil:** What you are calling for, I would say, comports well with Rabbi Akiva’s point of view as described in additional Talmudic texts. Rabbi Akiva consistently urges us not to settle for appearances. In the Sages’ dispute about the sanctity of the Song of Songs, some were offended by the expressions of physical love that appear in that text. Rabbi Akiva proposed an alternative reading and ruled: “All the writings are holy but the Song of Songs is holy of holies.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Even if on the surface, the Song of Songs seems inappropriate for canonization as a book of the Bible, a more far-sighted view manages to find additional meanings in it.

Rabbi Akiva emphasizes this important point in our text. At a simple level, we do observe absolute devastation, but if we insist on extending our gaze, we may imagine and visualize the rebirth of the city of Jerusalem. Even in the struggle over the legitimacy of the Bar Kokhba uprising, Rabbi Akiva insists on believing in the possibility and was not deterred by the risk that is apparent from a simple reading of reality. Even if the rebellion was a terrible failure, the spirit of hope was not. The belief that one must not despair even if a sword is laid across one’s neck gave the Jewish people tremendous powers of steadfastness.

**Sam:** You have to do your utmost and not accept the destruction as a fait accompli.

**Gil:** We are studying this Talmudic passage in New York, which some would call today’s Rome. Through the window right now you can hear “the sound of the crowds of Rome.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This exhilarating, perhaps raucous city has been blessed with many who have done very well, but not all of them have found it important to engage in trying to generate hope. How did it come about that you have been personally involved for so many years in the field of philanthropy for Israeli society?

**Sam:** It is true that foxes are still walking around, but it is also true that there are “elderly men and elderly women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem.” One must not lose hope. For me personally, it is indeed an interesting question. I have always felt a sense of responsibility. It is also my fundamental approach to Judaism. Being a chosen people means having a mission. We are no better than others but we have more responsibility. Even though people usually tend to think about me as a stern and serious-looking person, I strongly identify with Rabbi Akiva’s laughter. It delights me to see the encouraging outcomes of our philanthropic work among the most disadvantaged parts of Israeli society. It fills me with new hope every day.

**Gil:** You have been involved in this philanthropic activity for many years, from a very early age. Can you think about a moment when you decided that this is what you would be doing?

**Sam:** Many, many years ago when I worked with Blackstone, the chairman of the company was Pete Peterson, a special and extraordinarily successful man who had established the company and donated most of his accumulated wealth to others. I remember hearing him say that of all of his material achievements in business and other sectors, what really mattered to him was knowing that he was doing more for others than for himself. He wanted to have “He created change” as his epitaph. This request influenced me greatly and helped me to develop a clear view of the philanthropic mission in which I wanted to take part. Both of my parents are teachers and many of my relatives are involved in education and community affairs, charity, and helping others. My family always set an example for me: We should not be among those who sit on the fence and just moan about things; instead, we should be among those who engage in *tikkun olam* continually and believe in it. This belief in *tikkun* can generate true hope.

1. Based (with adjustments) on the William Davidson Edition, downloaded from sefaria.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A Roman mile – roughly a kilometer. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Translated from the Hebrew in accordance with *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures, The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bavli, Berakhot 42b. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rabbi Joseph Ber Halevi Soloveitchik, *‘Al ha-teshuva: Devarim she-ba’al pe,* ed. Dr. Pinchas Pelli (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 1980), p. 180 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Where people eating together recite a collective blessing. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bavli, Yevamot 62b. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bavli, Berakhot 61b. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bavli, Ketubot 62b. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Yerushalmi, Ta’anit 4:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mishna, Yadayim 3:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bavli, Yoma 20b. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)