

The Fox and the Fish

A Jewish Story

Key Ideas: Special books, persecution, religious leaders, carrying on a tradition

There have been many times when it has been hard to be a Jew and the rule of the Emperor Hadrian was one of those times. Often the news from the Empire was bad – invasions and wars and high taxes – and it was easy to blame the Jews. Then blame changed to hate so that, all over the Empire, Jews were driven from their homes, their synagogues burnt, persecution following them, wherever they fled. Then there came the final blow: the Emperor decreed that the study of Torah was unlawful. No one was to own a copy or teach it in any form to others. All the scrolls that the Romans could lay hands on were burnt. They would arrest and kill anyone who tried to hide the holy scrolls or show them respect, not to mention those who read or taught others about them. This was not the first time such things had happened to the Jews. Persecution had fallen on them so often that they had worked out ways to trick the rulers and their police and continue to study their precious Torah as usual. It was a risk, of course and when the searches became more thorough and constant the people worried for their own lives and even more for the lives of their children. This was such a moment and so Rabbi Akiva decided to leave the city and take his closest followers with him, deep into the desert. They would not be disturbed there and could read and study Torah as they wished, in peace. But he was mistaken. The soldiers even raided their hideout in the desert and they were lucky to escape with their lives. Devout Jews could not find cover anywhere so the people murmured against God. After all, they were decent-living people who did all in their power to honour and observe the Law. What had they ever done that God should treat them like this? How could this be fair? They brought their complaints to Rabbi Akiva. How long must they go on living like this? Every day they were on the run from one place to another, on the watch, hiding. Every night their sleep was broken by some alarm and every waking moment was filled with worry. They could see no point to it any more. In the past, the rabbi had taught them how privileged they were to own the Torah. But what use was that if there was never a moment when they could study it in peace, never a single time that they closed it when they didn't wonder if they would still be alive ever to open it again? Why could they not be like other people and live out their lives in peace?

It was clear that these complaints saddened Rabbi Akiva. For some days he kept to himself. One evening, he called all the followers and seated them around him at the campfire. 'Lift up your eyes to the hills and reflect,' he told them. 'Once upon a time, there was a shoal of fish. They were not very big

fish; rather, they were tiny and not very important. They lived in a corner of the lake and life was hard. Big fish, swift and fierce and very hungry, often darted into their corner of the lake and swallowed up many of the little fish. Above them, boats trawled long nets through the water to catch them. They had to be on the watch constantly, ready to swim away, far and quickly, to escape them. Other times, when everything was still and at peace and they felt they could settle and rest at last, the beaks of birds would shatter the stillness of the water to snatch them and carry them away. The fish decided that they had to find a place where they could hide and rest and be free from all these dangers. They set off round the lake to find it. Eventually, they chose a spot near the shoreline, full of rocks and long, dense weeds, which gave dark shade and caves and tunnels to hide in. They settled in for a long stay.

One day, shortly afterwards, a sly fox was walking along the bank of the lake and noticed the fish resting on the warm sand in the sunshine under the water. He licked his lips thinking of the delicious supper they would make. The problem was to catch them. He sat for a while, watching them and thinking. Then he began to talk aloud. "Poor, little fish," he said. "What a very hard life you have. All those fierce fish that chase you all over the lake to catch you. If they miss you, the fishermen are always waiting with their nets and their hooks. And just when you feel there might be a moment of peace, along come the birds with their sharp beaks to snatch you away forever. No one has so hard a life as you." By now, all the fish had gathered to listen. The sway of their tails in the water showed their total agreement with everything that the fox was saying.

Then the fox cocked his head to one side and said, thoughtfully, "Of course, you could always leave the water and come out to the dry land. Your enemies will never think to look for you on the land. Dry land would be the safest possible place for you." The eyes of the fox pleaded for agreement but the fish kept him waiting some time for an answer. Then, almost together, they shook their heads. "You are very right, Fox. The lake is a hard and dangerous place for us but if we were to move to the dry land we would all surely die. Bad as the lake is, the dry land, outside our water, is surely worse." The shoal of little fish turned and dived to their hiding place deep in the weed. They were very glad to have found it. It was home.

'My people,' said Rabbi Akiva, 'do you understand? We are like the little fish. Amongst our neighbours we are poor and do not matter very much. We also live in a lake, the lake of Torah, and it too is hard and dangerous. We have our foxes too, who seek to trick us with sweet words and snatch the Torah from us. But just as a fish cannot live without water, neither can you be a Jew without Torah. It is the well of water that gives us life. We must always remember that.

So, the Jews continued to pray and study and celebrate Torah. At times there were complaints but the mention of fish always put a stop to them.

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