

NEVER TOO LATE FOR LITERACY

In Jewish tradition, Rabbi Akiva is known to be one of the wisest Jewish sages of his time. Living in the 1st and 2nd centuries, CE, he amassed a following of 24,000 students. He started out from humble origins: in one Talmudic text, he describes his background as an “am ha’aretz,” literally ‘nation of the land,’ but understood to mean illiterate or ignorant. We are also told that he only started learning to read when he was 40 years old.¹ The following text describes his first foray into reading:

He [Rabbi Akiva] and his son went and sat among the teachers of young children. He said: “Rabbi, teach me the Bible!”

Rabbi Akiva held on to one side of the [writing] board and his son to the other. He wrote Aleph-Bet and learned it. He wrote Aleph-Tav² and learned it. [He wrote] the instructions of the Priests and learned it. He kept on learning until he learned the whole Bible.³

Despite the United States having public education for children, an institution that was not available for Rabbi Akiva, there are still high levels of illiteracy, especially when viewed through the lens of race and class.

78%

of all low-income fourth-grade students are below proficient in reading⁴

18%

of Black fourth-graders were proficient in reading compared to 36% as the national average among all fourth graders⁵

In *Early Warning Confirmed*, a study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2013, they highlighted five factors that contribute to levels of early childhood reading proficiency:

1. School Readiness

Arriving in kindergarten prepared to learn and comfortable with the classroom setting.

2. High Attendance (Lack of Chronic Absence)

Regular absence from the school or classroom increases the likelihood of low reading proficiency.

3. Summer Learning

Maintaining or improving skills learned during the school year by continuing to learn during the summer.

4. Little Stress (Lack of Family Stressors)

Hunger, housing insecurity, parental depression, abuse, neglect, and more can distract children from the task of learning.

5. High-Quality Teaching

Enriched learning environments and parent engagement at home are critically important to a child’s academic success.⁶

Discussion Questions

- What factors for reading proficiency have affected Rabbi Akiva, his son, or anyone else living 2,000 years ago? How are they different from today?
- How can an awareness of racial disparities in literacy better inform your volunteer placement?
- Which of the five factors might your volunteering either support or mitigate?
- Are there other ways that your volunteering supports literacy or other positive educational outcomes?

¹ | For more on Rabbi Akiva, read *Rabbi Akiva: Sage of the Talmud* by Barry W. Holtz.

² | “Aleph-Bet” refers to the first to letters of the Hebrew alphabet. “Aleph-Tav” refers to the first and last letters, meaning from ‘A’ to ‘Z’.

³ | *Avot De Rabbi Natan*, Version A, chapter 6

⁴ | National Achievement Level Results, “The Nation’s Report Card, 2015.

⁵ | Camera, Lauren. “[African-American Students Lagging Far Behind](#)” US News and World Report, 11 December 2015

⁶ | Adapted from [Reading Partners, 5 Major Contributors to Third Grade Reading Proficiency](#), 23 September 2013