

## Akiba's last moment

✠ Akiba was brought to trial; his judge was to be his former friend, Rufus. There was no possible defense against the charges. Akiba had violated the law by offering instruction to his disciples.

Akiba was found guilty and condemned to death. Still attended by his faithful Joshua, he retained his courage and his strength of mind until the very end.

The popular story tells that the Romans killed him by tearing the flesh from his living body. As he lay in unspeakable agony, he suddenly noticed the first streaks of dawn breaking over the eastern hills. It was the hour when the Law requires each Jew to pronounce the *Shema*.

Oblivious to his surroundings, Akiba intoned in a loud, steady voice, the forbidden words of his faith: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

Rufus, the Roman general, who superintended the horrible execution, cried out: "Are you a wizard or are you utterly insensible to pain?"

"I am neither," replied the martyr, "but all my life I have been waiting for the moment when I might truly fulfill this commandment. I have always loved the Lord with all my might, and with all my heart; now I know that I love the Lord with all my life."

And, repeating the verse again, he died as he reached the words, "The Lord is One."

The association of the *Shema* with the great martyr's death made its recitation a deathbed affirmation of the faith, instead of a repetition of select verses. And to this day, pious Jews hope that when the end comes they may be sufficiently conscious to declare the Unity of God, echoing with the last breath the words which found their supreme illustration in Akiba's martyrdom.