

A Story about Rabbi Akiva from the Talmud

Talmud Berakhot 61b.

"In the time of Rabbi Akiva, the Romans who ruled over Israel ordered the Jews to stop studying Torah, or be put to death. But Rabbi Akiva would not stop studying. One day a non-believer asked him, "Rabbi, why do you risk your life by studying and teaching Torah?" Akiva answered with one of his favorite stories:

...There was once a fox who had gone hungry for a very long time. Rabbits ran too fast for him, and squirrels hid before he could catch them with his heavy paws. If only he could find something to eat and a place to rest...that was when he thought of the stream. It was a stream filled with swiftly swimming fish. As he neared the stream, the fox thought of ways to trick the fish into swimming close enough to catch. Thinking he was very clever, the fox sat down panting at the edge of the stream. He spoke to an old fish in a whisper: "I have run all this way," he told the fish, "to tell you that men have come into this forest. Some are heading toward this stream right now to catch you!" The fish swam closer to hear the sly fox as he spoke in a whisper. "They won't want me. I am too skinny and tough to eat. They will try to catch a nice fat fish like you! But I have come to help you, my friend. Climb out of the water onto my back. I will carry you to safety." The fox leaned over to scoop up the fish, but the fish darted "No thank you," said the wise old fish, "A fish out of water will surely die. But as long as I am in the water I can try to avoid the fisherman's nets, and the fox's paws, too!" Rabbi Akiva added: "The Torah is a Jew's home, just as water is home for a fish. If we are in danger now, while we study, think about how much more danger we will be in if we stop studying Torah!" With that, Rabbi Akiva turned and went back to his studies."

