

Elie Wiesel Legends of the Midrash: The Book of Job

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive November 2, 1967

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Once upon a time in a distant land there was a man just and pure, fearing God and avoiding evil, who provoked jealousy in heaven if not on earth. His name was Job. You are all acquainted with his fate and the legends attached to it. Through the problems he incarnates and the trials he endures, the man seems familiar and even contemporary. His account is topical, rooted in the present. We respond to his quest as if he were a [00:01:00] foreigner.

Whether you have read his book or not you know its content, or at least you think you do, as I did. He belongs to our innermost landscape, to what is most fragile in our memory, to the most sensitive and secret part of our being. Perhaps you have met him in your neighbor who simply wanted you to lend him your ear. You have advised him as a colleague. You have betrayed him as a friend. Perhaps he is the person living in the apartment above or below yours. He has lost fortunes, but not hope, [00:02:00] not yet.

He's the relative of your wife who has lost his hope and has kept his money and yours. Perhaps he is the fellow passenger in the seat next to yours in the restaurant, in the train, in the airplane, peculiarly quiet. Why is he so quiet? Job may be a moment of your past, a reflection of some existence lived previously by someone, not you, an upsurge of anguish contained but not subdued. He may be a mirror, a thousand times broken and kept together by the images he [00:03:00] he chooses to save or let go.

For he is the art of turning life and death into legend. In him they all meet and become one. And we are still trying to tell his tale, although at times we foolishly believe it to be our own or yours. At this point I think I should stop briefly. An explanation seems in order. *Ma inyan shmitah l'Har Sinai?* What does Job have to do with the subject of our lecture tonight? [00:04:00] Perhaps it has to do with me and you. After all, it is you who have to endure.

Like Job I have taken upon myself the task to view certain tales as means of communication. And you all know the fate of Job. He did not succeed too well, at least not in the beginning. However, while Job is asking too much, I now realize that I have promised too much. To talk on the legends of the Midrash would

require more than one hour, more than one evening, [00:05:00]
perhaps more than one person.

Actually, all the legends that I know, and perhaps you do know more than I do, it would take more than one evening and more than one person to capture whatever makes them legends. And all our encounters, four of them, could easily be used to prove precisely that point, that perhaps these encounters will be fruitless, that legends can be told in a certain way but not explained and surely not lectured upon. [00:06:00]

It is not for nothing that the Talmud is compared to the ocean, but unlike the ocean it would take more than a lifetime to cross it or even to measure its depth. Then why did I choose the subject? Perhaps because it is raining tonight, and I don't like rain. Perhaps also because I do like legends, especially legends linked to a past which used to be mine and to a wisdom which was not.

As a child I listened to my teachers [00:07:00] reading each year the same legends before Tisha B'Av, Rosh Hashanah, or Pesach. Each year I discovered them anew, the splendor of the services in the temple, the destruction of the sanctuary, the desperate endeavors of the sages to keep Judaism alive. And

somehow my masters did succeed to keep these legends alive. I remember I used to see the persons they talked about, all of them or in part, and somehow I was linked to them.

I was in Israel this year during the war and immediately afterwards. And when I came to the *Kotel Maaravi*, [00:08:00] which I saw for the very first time in my life, for a second I stopped, and the second turned into hours. And I became confused. I simply didn't know whether all the legends that I have learned when I was a child were legends and I simply remembered them or they were true and they were still going on and the present is the legend of the past.

I used to like legends, and I still do because they do give a form of life to Judaism [00:09:00] just as the halacha does. I remember the legends, not all. Mainly I remember the characters in them. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai escaping from besieged Jerusalem and saving Yavne. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai used to hound me. As a child I admired him. He did save the Talmud. Assuredly he did save the Jewish people, us.

Yet later on when I began studying not only history of legends but contemporary history I found Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai more disturbing. After all, he [00:10:00] did collaborate with the

enemy. What is more important, to save the spirit and collaborate with the enemy or to die as a hero and a martyr? I don't have the answer yet. I only try to maintain and to preserve, in my way, the legend.

I remember Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai. Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai to whom some attribute the Zohar. A man wild, almost savage and cruel, hiding in the cave for his anger could have destroyed the world. I remember the 10 martyrs of the fate, Rabbi Akiva [00:11:00] and his laughter, Rabbi Yishmael and his tears. A voice from heaven was heard, "Yishmael, Yishmael, if I hear one more cry I shall restore the universe to its primary chaos," and Rabbi Yishmael did not cry. Often I wonder why not. Perhaps he did cry. I am sure he did, judging from the chaos in the universe.

I remember Hillel, and I am sure you all know Hillel and his legends because they are very short. The most famous one, someone came to Hillel and said [00:12:00] teach me the Torah while I stand on one leg, and Hillel said what you do not want people to do to you, you do not to them. Strange because I do not like to listen to lectures. (laughter)

Once I asked my masters, and my masters were many in a small town somewhere in Transylvania named Sighet. I asked specially one of them who was my real master, a kabbalist, and I always hound him the way he does hound me, [00:13:00] except he cannot take revenge. I asked him, "I can't understand the importance of halacha, of the law." We study the halacha in order to know how to obey laws, how to behave, how to do what God wants us to do, how to be good Jews, good human beings, and there are so many halachot. There are so many laws for every hour of the day, for every imaginable situation. Therefore the Torah actually is more than a religion. It is a way of life for every second and every person.

So I understand why we study it, but what is the importance [00:14:00] of studying the aggadatah, the legendary part, the part of tales in the Talmud. What is the importance of listening to legends? And he answered, do not underrate the role of the listener. God himself needs man to make his voice heard. By accepting from legend whatever subtlety it has to give, you add to its richness. You listen to a tale, and it is no longer the same. And my master quoted the Talmudic saying, "Do you wish to know who created the world with the power of words? *Mishe'amar v'haya ha-olam*. Open yourself to legend. The substance of legends is what makes life a mixture of deed,

voice, and mood. It is what remains after the events as such is forgotten.

Of course, you must know Hebrew and Aramaic, but simply in parenthesis, let me tell you that if I'm trying to teach you, teach you is not a word really, but to transmit something that I have learned, it is because I do believe in the Talmud as a whole, as a way of life, and maybe even as a source of salvation for the future. [00:16:00]

Two thousand years ago Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was right in his way. The temple was destroyed. Jews were about to be dispersed, and Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai foresaw the Jews are about to begin and go on a very long road. And he needed to give them *Seidah laderech*, food for the road. And this food for the road was meant to be the Talmud.

Therefore, my friend, Eliahu Amikam, began a very great and daring venture to translate the Talmud into English with all the [00:17:00] regalia and facts in monthly brochures, book of the month club. Buy it.

The Talmud, as you surely know, is divided between the aggadatah, the tale, and the halacha, the law. It is said that

halachot can be forgotten. Can be. They are, judging from myself. Halachot can be forgotten in war. Joshua forgot 300 of those transmitted to him by Moses. Moses himself forgot some of those he heard at Sinai. No mention is made of forgotten aggadot, or forgotten legends. Still, I did forget more [00:18:00] than I remembered.

While preparing for this lecture I simply became ashamed. I became ashamed before the child I once was, and he has now become my teacher. There is a story about not a Talmudic rabbi but about a composer, not even a Jewish one, a Russian one, of all people, Rimsky-Korsakov, whose music I do not like. But the stories worth telling, although perhaps had he studied the Talmud his music would have become better. As one of five new Russian composers, he was invited to teach [00:19:00] at the conservatory. I think it was in Petersburg. He hesitated to accept it because he at that time, didn't know music at all. I mean the technique of music.

His friends, Balakirev, Lyadov, poor composers too, insisted that he should say yes, probably for the same reason that I accepted to be here tonight. But before each of his appearances at the conservatory, they, his friends who knew music, taught him the lecture he was going to deliver. And later he remarked,

I was not the best teacher in the conservatory. That I know.
But I also know [00:20:00] that I was the best student.

Well, thanks to you I have become a good student again. Thanks to you I rediscovered legends I knew and liked, and now, being older, I realize that aggadah and halacha do not oppose one another. No demarcation line divides them. Some legends shelter genuine halachot, and some halachot sound like legends. I admire two great minds today which represent the both aspects of the Talmud. One is Professor Shaul Lieberman of the seminary and the other one is Professor Heschel of the seminary. Heschel I admire for his aggadatah, and Lieberman for his halacha.

[00:21:00]

At times I find, and I am sure if Dr. Lieberman would know he would be angry, but I find legend in his halacha. A couple of weeks ago, for instance, he told me, you know, the beauty of halacha, he says, the ethic of Jewish thought and law, if a man destroys the temple, he is not punishable by death, simply *makot*. He receives a whipping, 39 times. But if a man kills a man he is punishable by death, and yet the temple to us, the dwelling of God, no one should enter the [00:22:00] temple, the sanctuary, except the high priest, Yom Kippur, and if anyone

does enter he is punishable by death. But to destroy it, it's only stones.

He wanted, of course, to show me the beauty of halacha, but I found in it a quality of legend. It showed not only the humanity and the depth of feeling that man felt towards man then but the magnanimity of one to another. I also liked, when I was a child, the disputes in the Talmud which mainly are legends about halacha. [00:23:00] The frequent disputes between various schools of thought, bet Shammai and bet Hillel, Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Yishmael. They are often of great literary value. Some are lessons in humility. Others are challenges to fantasy. The participants are not abstract figures indulging in exercises in futility but living persons, each with his own style, each with his own temper.

For instance, we know and we can see that Rabbi Yohanan was handsome. Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah was not. Rabbi Yehuda was always complaining of being ill, but Reish Lakish was strong. Rabbi Shmuel, the poor man, [00:24:00] was small. Rabbi Yose was secretive, withdrawn, and silent. And Rav Safra was a bachelor.

Hadn't I know all this Tannaim and Amoraim, all these giants?
Hadn't I absorbed their legends, I wonder whether I would be the
man I am, the writer I try to be. When Rabbi Meir came to study
with Rabbi Yishmael he was asked, "What is your profession, my
son?" And the new disciple said, "I am a scribe, a writer." To
which the master replied, "Be careful, my son, for if you omit
or add one word the whole world might crumble." [00:25:00]

Strange, we Jews. Whatever you do and say, it immediately
implies universal cataclysms or celebration. And most Midrashic
legends follow this advice. They are terse, tense, concise,
condensed. Not one line is superfluous. Of course, most are
fragmentary, but each is an entity with its own question and its
own answer, though more often than not the dividing line between
the two is abolished. It is said that our sages used to pray so
that scribes, writers, would not get rich. Times change.

[00:26:00]

Perhaps then legends are to be told and not written. That would
seem to be more entertaining, and to entertain others is
considered holy work. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi took a walk with
the prophet Eliyahu, Elijah, in the marketplace, which was full
of people. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi asked the prophet, tell me, is
there anyone here who has a *chelek l'olam haba*, who has his

place in paradise? Rabbi Joshua wanted to know, I don't know why.

The prophet first said no. But then he looked better and said yes and pointed with his finger towards two *bat'chanim*, two clowns. [00:27:00] They will enter paradise, he said, for they give joy to people. But clowns do not use words, do not write words. Perhaps that is why so many writers today, having to renounce paradise, are trying to get something at least here in this world.

Another legend which hounded me in recent years was about again Rabi Yohanan ben Zakkai. He said, "I was walking on a road and saw a man gathering wood. I spoke to him, but the man did not reply. [00:28:00] Later this man came to me and said I do not belong to the living. And that is all. And this story, which had no relevancy in the text, is so sensitive and so beautiful because it contains everything. It gives you the character of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai more than 100 pages written by me.

Listening to this tale and to the tone of the voice you suddenly realize that Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai did live through the destruction of Jerusalem, and he did see so many corpses that at the end he confused the living and the dead. [00:29:00] And if this tale haunted me it's because he spoke for us. Those he saw

were the same we today often see, and those he met were the ones we will never meet again.

One more legend. It deals with a very learned and complicated discussion between Tannaim about a certain kind of stove, the *ha-tanoor shel ha-achna'i*. I don't even know how to translate it. The question was the purity or the impurity of the stove. Said Rabbi Eliezer, "I am right, and I shall bring you proof," which he did. In fact, he brought all the [00:30:00] proofs in the world, but the other sages refused to accept.

In parenthesis, Rabbi Eliezer, you should know, was a very unfortunate figure. He had, apparently, everything he wanted, including wisdom and knowledge. It is written that all the halachot are his, whatever he says, [thence?]. He rules, and yet once it is said in the Talmud, a legend, not about halachot and perhaps it is the vengeance of the legend makers against the halacha in the Talmud. It is said that Rabbi Eliezer one day gave a lecture. After he began speaking the first row of people simply got up and left. He continued. The [00:31:00] second row of people got up and left. He continued. He was left alone.

The problem with lectures today is not how perhaps to keep an audience, which is rather presumptuous to say, but how to get it in, especially when it is raining. Rabbi Eliezer said, "If I am right, let this tree prove it," and the tree moved away. "Trees are no proof," said the sages. "If I am right, let the tree" (break in audio) -- were reprimanded by Rabbi Joshua.

"Scholars are discussing the Torah here. What is it your business to interfere?" That is the language. It helped. Out of respect for him [00:32:00] they did not fall down, but out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer they did not straighten up.

(laughter) "If I am right," said Rabbi Eliezer, he had no choice, the last recourse. "If I am right, let heaven prove it." And a voice was heard from heaven supporting his position. "We do not listen to voices from heaven," exclaimed Rabbi Joshua. Because rabbis are stubborn. He even said something very beautiful. "The Torah was given at Sinai once, and since it's our business, not yours." (laughter)

We do not listen to voices from heaven, said man to God.

[00:33:00] And Rabbi Eliezer's minority of one did not prevail, even though he was right. Later, Rabbi Nathan happened -- took a walk to meet the prophet, the same prophet Eliyahu, Elijah, and asked him, "Tell me, what did he, the Almighty, do at that

moment?" And the prophet told him, "He was smiling. He was smiling and saying *Nitzchuni banai, nitzchuni banai*. My children have defeated me. My children have defeated me."

Thus God condoned both sides, although contradictory. *Eileh v'eileh divrei Elokim chayim*. Both sides are right. [00:34:00]

And God, my master used to tell me, may very well be within contradiction itself. And since legend does not hesitate to reveal to us that God has smiled, I think I may change the punctuation of his remark. Not *nitzchuni*, but *natzchuni banai*, and there is a difference. It is not a past tense, not a statement of fact, but a plea. Not "they have defeated me," but "please, let them defeat me," which, in a nutshell, is the spirit and the courage of Jewish thought. [00:35:00] God has created man and gave him the power to revere him, more, the desire to do so.

And here we are almost back where we began, with Job provoking God. And in a way, in his own way defeating him. I chose to speak about Job out of convenience. I thought it would be easier and perhaps simpler also to limit our subject to one person alone and see his place and his metamorphosis in the Midrash. And incidentally, I must warn you. I do intend to use the same approach in the remaining lectures. Legends are built

around people, not around ideas. One should capture their flavor, [00:36:00] sense their warmth, and leave theories to others, to scholars for example, of which I am not.

Poetry is made of words and not of ideas, Rimbaud or Verlaine were supposed to have said. The same applies to legends. Hence, two weeks from now we shall concentrate on one of the most disquieting and fascinating innovators in the Hasidic movement, Rebbe Mendel of Kotzk, the holy rebel who attempted to achieve redemption through anger, silence, and solitude. He will be followed by the master of Hasidic tales, the Kafka of Hasidism, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. Both shook the pillars of Hasidism, one through his silence [00:37:00] and the other through his stories. And their impact is still felt.

However, tonight the subject being the Midrash, we shall confine ourselves to one figure and see legend at work. Why Job? The choice seems arbitrary, and it is. There are more tales, more digressions, and more daring ones about numerous other fathers and sons in the Talmudic literature. The first man, the first murderer, the first believer, the first liberator, the first rebel. Each name, each case opens a door to enchantment, to delusion of senses, to breathtaking fervor.

In comparison with Adam, Moses, or David, Job's place is almost insignificant. But his imprint is not. And if we [00:38:00] chose him it is simply because he fits our purpose better. Except for Abraham, no one's condition is existentially more tragic and confusing but his. But unlike Abraham, he manages to preserve a hidden sense of humor which is rare in scripture and in the Talmud as well.

Furthermore, he must be the despair of biographers and the joy of novelists. Not only did he defy God, he defies history. His fate seems to be determined entirely by legend and by legend alone to the point where his very existence appears in doubt. Well then, with your permission, let us begin anew. [00:39:00]

Once upon a time, once when? We can't tell. His name is mentioned in no history book, and his own offers little help. Yehezkiel and Daniel refer to him *en passant* and all the rest is commentary. Was he their contemporary? Perhaps. But other legends link him to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob and to Moses and to the judges and to Achashverosh and Solomon and even to the Babylonian exile. His grave, as I was warned by Professor Lieberman, who wrote a brilliant essay on that, his grave [00:40:00] is to be found in four different places. And no one knows where they are. (laughter)

If one is to ascribe some degree of credence to all this he must have lived not 210 years, as one Talmudic version claims, but more than 800 years. Strange, he who perhaps knew of life nothing but other people's dreams seems to have outlived them all. He who perhaps wasn't even born, appears to have achieved immortality. He seems to have had a passion of accumulating birth certificates. Like B. Traven's favorite character, he comes from too many shores, not to be stateless. [00:41:00] He transcends time and chronology alike, and the same goes for nationality. Was he at least Jewish? Yes and no. Most legends say no and stress his being one of the tzadikim or prophets among the non-Jews. As usual, others say that a man as great and kind as he was must have been Jewish. (laughter)

One legend locates him inside the royal palace of Pharaoh, who employed him as an advisor. Jews are always advisors. Egypt was then confronted, you guessed it, with a Jewish problem, the first in a series. [00:42:00] But unlike today, in 1967, the Jews then wanted to get out of Egypt, (laughter) and Pharaoh refused to let them go. Had he succeeded, Nasser would have no problem today.

Consulted on how to solve the crisis, Job, says legend, preferred to remain neutral. In order not to commit himself, he kept silent. But in times of need, where life and death and honor are at stake and Jews are at stake, silence is a sin. He paid for it later. One may presume that this legend, like most of the others, was invented in order to explain his subsequent ordeal. But the question then is [00:43:00] why accuse him of indifference to the plight of Jews if he wasn't one himself?

Even if he wasn't, says legend, he was related to them. You know, some of my best friends. (laughter) He was related to them by intermarriage. To show you again how contemporary Job can be. One version affirms that he married Jacob's daughter Dinah, who in his hypocritical testament is introduced to us as his first cousin, himself being the son of Asaph. But how did he manage to get into the royal palace in the first place? Perhaps his cousin Joseph had something to do with it.

Nepotism, as you may know, is [00:44:00] not the product of the twentieth century, which is one of the few good things that can be said about it.

Anyway, Job fled both his country and his situation and did so in a great hurry for he somehow managed to reach the land of Canaan much before the Jews. For legend tells us that he died

the day the *meraglim*, the first scouts sent by Moses, entered the promised land. That is, says legend, why they founded it deserted and saddening and desolated. The whole population attended the funeral of their illustrious citizen Job. Thus the *meraglim* were unjustly accused of slandering the holy land, as they in the Bible.

It was all Job's fault. He could have chosen another day, [00:45:00] another place to die. Strange that Moses, the greatest prophet of all, and a relative at that, was unaware of all this. It is even more strange that according legend, he is supposed to have been the author of the book of Job. Even without research facilities that are at my disposal, he could have been better informed on the whereabouts of his hero. But one must admit, in his defense, that Job was not an easy person to handle.

Contrary to his philosophical projection, his case history is discouraging and so complex. Often he seems to be one character in search -- if Pirandello may forgive me -- in search of a hundred authors [00:46:00] simply to confuse all of them and me. To him there can be no gap between generations, for he solved it. For he's part of all of them. One legend even assigns to

him a residence in Tiberias with a *beit midrash* of his own, as a free gift.

And if all this is not enough, there comes a disciple of Reb Shmuel Ben Nachmani and says the Job: He was nothing but a metaphor, a parable, an allegory. But *Lo haya v'lo nivra ki mashal haya*. if you think that that's the end of all the possibilities, of course you are wrong. That's not the end yet. This last hypothesis itself burst into different directions. Some raised the possibility that he existed, but [00:47:00] his suffering was invented. Others, God help me, suggest that to the contrary Job never existed but he did suffer. (laughter)

Let us talk then about his suffering, without which the legend would lose its *raison d'etre*. You remember the story. Job was rich, very rich and happy, and according to certain texts, rather powerful. He had a wife, seven sons, three daughters, and an immense domain, a genuine kingdom. He was loved but not feared, famous for his wealth, charity, and wisdom. All this is from scriptures to which the Talmud adds nothing but details, insisting, or rather exaggerating, on the number of sheep and cattle he had [00:48:00] and on the magnitude of his kindness towards his fellow man.

His children were giving parties in a kind of 'Peyton Place.'
And their father begged God's forgiveness on their behalf.
Then, as a prologue, comes the dramatic description of the blows
that struck him. And here again, few novelists could outdo him.
He lost his wealth, his children, his attachment to life. One
after the other messengers came, and each pushed him deeper and
deeper into his prison, into his role of condemned victim.

This brief description has unique theatrical power. "While one
was still talking, another has already arrived and [00:49:00]
said a fire fell from the sky and burned cattle and man alike.
I alone survived and came to tell you the tale. Later the enemy
took hold of the camels and killed the man by the sword. I
alone survived and came to tell you the tale. While he was
still talking another has already arrived and said thy sons and
daughters ate and drank in the house of thy first born. And
then a wind came sweeping from the desert and smashed the house
and killed its inhabitants. I alone survived, and here I am
telling you the tale."

Job tore his clothes, cut his hair, and mourned his losses but
did not complain. Then he became sick, [00:50:00] filled with
sorrow, repugnant to others and to himself, and ended up losing
his last illusions in the friendship of man and their creator.

Only then did his lip part and he began cursing his past. "May the day I was born be lost in darkness and the night that greeted me remain mute and isolated." And he threw his question at the absent face of God. Why? Why me? Why now? What is the meaning of all this suffering? What is the logic and what justice in this chain of calamities?

He knew as we do that he committed no sin, that he never acted against the law and the will of [00:51:00] God. His moral qualities receive praise in all Talmudic quarters, which compare him to Abraham in more than one way. Legend tells us that he was one of four men who discovered God on their own and that he was born circumcised. Therefore he suffered later. And that he tasted paradise while still alive. And that like Abraham he aspired to save a community of man, in fact, all mankind. His generosity was proverbial. I almost said legendary. Like Abraham, he opened the four doors of his house to all directions so the poor could enter immediately instead of going around looking for a door and for a man and for a piece of bread.

He provided, says legend, for the neglected widows so they could [00:52:00] get married. He worked for the orphans without their knowing it. The money that he gave, says legend, became itself a source of blessing. Whoever received a penny didn't need to

come back again for another. The penny brought him luck. Job, a miracle maker? Yes. Listen to what legend tell us. In his kingdom nature itself abided to his rule. The weak overcame the terror of the strong. The goats defeated the wolves. No wonder that Solomon, the king, included him among the seven founding fathers of the universe.

Furthermore, his name was almost included in our most sacred invocations that we repeat daily, three times daily, [00:53:00] *Elokei Avraham Elokei Yitzchak Elokei Yaakov v'Elokei Iyov*, and the God of Job. His name would rank as high as theirs, like Abraham, like Isaac, like, Jacob. We would appeal to him too to intercede on behalf of his people.

But then why was he punished? A prophet, a just, a saint. What did he do to deserve pain and humiliation? What truth was his suffering meant to affirm, alter, or deny? What principle was he requested to uphold, to erase? All Talmudic legends about him tend to answer these questions, appease his anger and ours, [00:54:00] which confronted Judaism much before him, much after him.

If God intended to test Abraham, was it Isaac's fault? Cain rejected all responsibility on God and said to him, "If the

thief steals and the guard does not prevent him from stealing, if one does his job and the other not, who is to blame? Not the thief. Why didn't you stop me, you God, who can stop the sun from hurting the earth?"

Another version, Cain said to God, "You can bear everything. Why won't you bear my deed as well?" And still another outcry, "Why punish me for doing something without realizing what it was and what its outcome might be? After all, I have never seen a [00:55:00] man kill or getting killed."

Incidentally, Abel could question God in the same manner with the same outrage. Why me? Why wasn't he the victim? What did I do to deserve premature death? I heard once an answer given by a young rabbi. Abel was too egocentric, too preoccupied with his prayers. Cain, for some reason, became melancholy, the Midrash says. The two brothers, having the whole world for themselves, quarreled about the future location of the temple. Each wanted it to be on his ground. Cain lost and was upset. *v'naflu panav*, his face became tormented. Abel must have noticed it [00:56:00] yet did not even try to comfort him in his loneliness, did not behave as a friend, let alone as a brother, although his brother then had no human presence near him. That was Abel's sin, coolness of the heart, indifference.

But that explains Abel, not Cain. Cain did kill, he had to, and we are all his descendants, even Abraham. Was he indifferent to the agony of Isaac? Of course not. He was full of pain and pity. And he gave both his pity and his pain as an offering to God. Job did not. The comparison between Abraham and Job is all pervasive. In their quarrels with [00:57:00] God, they use almost the same language. Both succeeded in getting God to intervene. Too late. Sodom was destroyed. Job's family killed. Yet both Abraham and Job were only tested, not punished. Abraham understood it. Job did not.

Why the parallel between the two? It sounds as if ancient storytellers had meant to console Job, as his friends did, using a somewhat primitive method. Why are you complaining? Do you think you are the only one whom God makes fear and tremble? Your case is not unique. Whatever happens to you now has already happened to the man chosen by the Almighty. And Abraham did not complain. He submitted to his will. [00:58:00]

Job's answer could read as follows: so what? I couldn't care less whether my case is new or not. When man's fate is involved, repetition is no attenuating circumstance. Each man may and should pronounce words carrying universal indictment.

Yes, unlike Abraham, Job was insolent, not vain. And perhaps it is why this very insolence helped him keep his sanity just as Abraham kept his through humility.

However, the tragedy of one person may be linked [00:59:00] to another's but does not explain it and justifies it even less.

Let us read another legend in which Job's name is mentioned.

Again, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. I told you he haunts me.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai mourned the death of his son, and his disciples came to console him. Rabbi Eliezer reminded him that Adam too had been grief stricken and consoled. Said Rabbi Yohanan, "Is my own pain not enough? Why do you add to it that of Adam?"

Rabbi Joshua then reminded him that Job too had suffered losses but accepted consolation. Said Rabbi Yohanan, "Is my own pain not great enough? Why do you add to it that of Job?" Rabbi Yose then reminded him of [01:00:00] Aaron, the high priest who had witnessed the death of his two sons in the sanctuary but uttered no word of anger. Said Rabbi Yohanan, "My own pain is sharp enough. Do not add to it that of Aaron," for in this case, psychologists are wrong and philosophers are right. Tragedies do not cancel each other out. They accumulate, as do injustices.

One never suffers alone, even if it is supposed to be for the sake of others. Suffering generates suffering. Abraham's pain contained that of Adam and Cain. Job's pain in turn contained that of Abraham. Precedents in this case may [01:01:00] provide consolation but do not constitute justification. Here the Judaic tradition defers from the Buddhist and even from the Christian one. To link individual suffering to God's or to the cosmic one does not solve the question but rather strengthens it. And therein lies its universality. Each individual is a beginning and an end deserving an answer to his question. Each man is Abraham, and his quest is valid. One attempt at an answer is given in the book itself.

In the prologue we learn that there is a culprit, Satan, one of the *b'nei Elokim*, one of God's children whom [01:02:00] God meets and to whose troubling impressions from below he listens, *nashot ha-aretz bati*. The eternal instigator of man against God is shown here as the instigator of the eternal one against man. He challenges him to a bet, to a duel. Job becomes a means, an instrument, worse, a battlefield. The dialogue is friendly, almost causal. "Have you seen my servant Job? Isn't he the most loyal of all man?" "Why shouldn't he be?" Satan replies.

"He is good because you are good to him. Let him worry. Let him suffer, and we shall see what we shall see."

And thus [01:03:00] Job becomes the protagonist in a drama unfolding on his own stage with the director remaining behind or above the scenes. No wonder Job does not begin to grasp its development. He simply fails to understand what is happening to him, let alone why. This is reflected in another legend. Job turned to God and said, "Master of the universe, perhaps a tempest has passed before thee and you have confused Iyov," Job, "and oyev," which means enemy. Strange as it may sound, most of his questions remain unanswered except this one. Was God hurt in his pride? Perhaps God too [01:04:00] admires language. Because he did -- (break in audio)

"-- and for every drop a mold of its own so that two drops should not come from one mold. I do not confuse drops. How could I confuse Job and oyev? Many thunderbolts I have created in the clouds, and for each bolt a path of its own so that two bolts should not follow in the same path. I do not confuse thunderbolts. How could I confuse Job and oyev?"

And God goes further, mingling mythology and nature. He says, "The wild goat is cruel to her young. When she crouches to give

birth she goes up to the [01:05:00] top of the mountain so that the young should fall off and die. So I prepare an eagle to catch it in its wings and put it before her. Should the eagle be one second too early or one second too late, and the young would be killed. I do not confuse the seconds. How could I confuse Job and oyev?"

I do not know whether this is really true in nature, whether the wild goats do these things. Perhaps God or the legend maker does not know much about nature, but he does know much about poetry. Was Job really that naïve to suggest that God doesn't know grammar? I would rather believe it to be a provocation. Job intends to provoke God, even through the sin of arrogance, in order to justify his suffering retroactively. [01:06:00] Since there is punishment, let it be motivated. He wants it to be a result, a consequence, and not as Gide would say, un act *gratuit*.

He therefore would prefer to think of himself as guilty for his innocence would leave him in the dark. He would gladly sacrifice his soul for knowledge. What he requests is not improvement or happiness but an answer, any answer, a certainty, any certainty, an indication on any level that man is not a toy, that man is defined by himself alone. That is why Job turns

against God, in order to find him. He needs to hear his voice even though he knows that his voice is to [01:07:00] crush him. God as an enemy is better than God indifferent.

Also, Job needs God for he feels abandoned by his fellow man. His wife pushes him, of course, to a solution of weakness. His friends pity him. And he wants neither weakness nor pity. His rebellion is directed as much against them as against God, in whose name they pretend to speak. His rebellion's directed against his own solitude in which he sees the face of God beneath the face of man. The scene is best described in the book itself and slightly illustrated in the Midrash.

As the two rivals God and Satan withdraw from the stage, Job receives the visit of three of his friends. Later they become four, [01:08:00] Eliphaz HaTemani, Bildad HaShuchi, and Tsofer HaNamati. At first they don't recognize him. No wonder, he has changed. They have not. Then they burst into tears, tear off their clothes, put ashes on their heads, and sitting next to him on the floor do not speak for seven days and seven nights. Commentary of the Midrash.

They behaved like him. They got up when he did. They ate when he ate. They drank only when he did. That was their way of

showing their compassion and respect. For certain griefs can be expressed by silence alone. Hence the verbal outbursts that follow are a letdown. We are moved by the three friends when they are silent. The moment they open their mouths [01:09:00] all emotion is gone. They are painfully disappointing to Job as well as to their readers. They talk too much. They insist on explaining to him things that happened to him.

Says Eliphaz the Yemenite, "No man is without sin, nor are you. Who knows what you have done to endure the wrath of God."

Bildad HaShuchi he tries the soft selling approach. Granted, you are unaware of what you might have done, but surely you must admit that God makes no mistake. If you do not know your sins, he does. As for the third one, Tsofer HaNamati, he resents Job's vanity. "Who are you to question God's methods and aims?" Are you surprised that with such friends Job, in exasperation, [01:10:00] addresses his plea to and against God and that, in the Talmud, the people of Israel is compared to Job? Are you surprised at that?

Too often, like Job, the Jewish people found itself in the past without friends. Like him we are accused of having betrayed the Almighty and forced him to punish us. Like him we hear remarks that we are wrong to transform suffering imposed upon us into

pride. How many times Christians tell Jews it's enough. Do not talk so much about suffering, about *tzarakos*. How appalling.

Two thousand years ago one man died on the cross, a Jew at that, and for 2,000 years the Christian world doesn't stop speaking about [01:11:00] it. And now -- but well, even if Job wasn't Jewish he became Jewish. Beaten, he had no chance to win in a society in which to suffer and to expiate have the same meaning when Jews are concerned. Yet our sages made attempts to help him get out of his ambiguous predicament. Since he wanted at all cost to invent for himself some kind of sin they were willing to oblige.

Job, they said, had no faith in resurrection. Another one said he was silent, too silent before in Egypt. Not silent enough, said a third one. [01:12:00] *Iyov lokeh umevaet*, says a fourth one, he resisted affliction. Minor sins with abnormal, unfair repercussions. So a different and opposing argument was made. Job did not suffer for his own sins but for those of mankind at large.

One Midrash more modest makes him a martyr for the Jewish people. Moses and the Jews, says the Midrash, were on the point of leaving Egypt when Satan, again, appears before God and

presents his objections. Master of the universe, says Satan, these people here have been infidels and godless. How could you not perform miracles on their behalf? These people here, how can you possibly think of helping them cross the Red Sea?

Rather than overrule his objections, God prefers to use diversionary [01:13:00] tactics. And he points out to Job and said to Satan, well, have you see my friend, my servant Job? Take care of him first. And while Satan was busy with his prey, God clandestinely led his people out of Egypt.

Logically, logically both Satan and Job should have developed, to say the least, anti-Semitic tendencies. Imagine, we say of them what most people say of us. They were used by Jews, worse, for Jews. Job at least could find comfort in the idea that although his ordeal was unjust it was not in vain. But not Satan. Satan, says the Talmud is more to be pitied than Job. Not only was he [01:14:00] fooled by God but he also was, poor man, in the situation of someone ordered to break the barrel but save the wine.

He had authority to torture Job but not to take his life. Worse than that, Satan couldn't even boast of being at the origin of Job's suffering for according to the Midrash, it was chosen by

Job himself. God gave him the choice between poverty and pain. Said Job, perhaps in this he was Jewish, "I would rather endure all the tortures in the world than be without money." He ended up, and in this again he was Jewish, getting both poverty and sickness. But he did get rid of Satan, whose sudden disappearance, even from dramatic point of view, is [01:15:00] unexplained. Moved one sage to make him come back posing as a fourth friend of Job, Elihu, to push him still farther away from any source of hope.

Except for the short prologue and even shorter epilogue, the book of Job offers no ground for legends. It doesn't need to. The dialogues between Job and his friends and later between Job and God are pure literature, pure, powerful, poetry. The lines are poignant. The images acquire a maddening density. Heaven and earth provide a scenery for the ultimate encounter of man and himself and his Creator.

Listen. Job speaks, "Granted, I am guilty, but what and why [01:16:00] should it matter to You, the keeper of all man? Why did You choose me as a target, me, crushed under my own weight? Are You contented now, now that you oppress whomever you create?" Listen to what he says of himself. "I have rolled my head in ashes. My face is red from crying, and the shadow of

death weighs down on my eyelashes." And then this outcry, which for generations of exile echoed in our history, "*Eretz, al tichasi dami*," a plea to the earth to absorb his blood and to nature at large not to shelter his despair.

The [01:17:00] intensity of the words attains poetic heights of unbearable beauty, giving power to him who has nothing left but words. Until now Job searched for someone to lean on, for something he could accept as stable and just and truthful, a possibility of an answer if not an answer itself. He failed. Then the poorest man on earth, the loneliest and weakest man under the sun pulls himself together and decides to rebel, finding a primary force in his very poverty, weakness, and loneliness.

In rejecting easy solution and compromises he acquires a strength which is beyond man's fragile imagination. He becomes legend. The man indicted and condemned and punished is now defying all those who have [01:18:00] judged him. He launches an investigation, and God is the defendant. And Job does speak up in outrage, telling God what God should have known, that something is utterly wrong in God's world. The just is punished, the criminal rewarded, or the lot of both is one in

the same, which is worse, for that means that God removed himself from his creation.

At this point Job, the accuser, forgets, to use an expression of Jean Cocteau, he forgets that one ought to know how far it is permitted to go, too far. He insults his so-called friends, but through them and beyond them it is God who he is aiming at. Says he, "God who is powerful despises the unfortunate.

[01:19:00] He pushes away him who cannot stand on his feet and needs comfort. But the thieves live peacefully in their tents, and those who deny him are appeased." And the supreme defiance, "Let him come. I know it's dangerous. I know it's hopeless. I know he may kill me, but I want to speak. I want him to come. And I lift my eyes and my tears towards God. Let him grant justice to man, his adversary."

And this desperate act of courage was not futile. God enters the tale, moves into history, and chooses to be heard. The Midrash says Job's hair was caught in tempest, and God's voice was in it. Does it mean that [01:20:00] the whole dialogue, the whole confrontation took place in his mind? It is possible. Whether hallucination or reality, it makes no difference. The story is not affected by it. Anyway, God, the Jewish God, answers with some other questions.

"Where were you when I have created mountains and winds? What do you know of my secrets that you dare to question my ways? What do you know of my means and my ends in matters of justice and truth and good and evil?" God does not utter a single word which Job might interpret as a justification of his ordeal. He does not say you have sinned, nor does he admit his own error, yet Job surprisingly states his vindication and withdraws immediately. [01:21:00]

The fierce rebel bows his head at the very first battle. As soon as God spoke Job repents. Is he satisfied with God's voice to the point that he neglects its content? Is he pleased by having been at the origin of this splendid poem recited by God himself? Is that all he wanted, to inspire a literary work?

As soon as God has spoken, Job backs away from his demands and says yes, I am small. I am unworthy of thy word and thy thought. I did not know. I did not understand. And from now on I shall live in remorse in dust and ashes. Well, Job, our hero, subscribes suddenly to unconditional surrender and accepts total defeat. [01:22:00] But here legend rebels for him. The Midrash rectifies and contradicts the spirit of the book.

God was forced to appear before Job, says the Midrash, and forced to cure him from all his sicknesses. The Midrash says that God spoke to Job as a disciple to his master. But this victory must have been another crushing blow to Job, saved by his sense of humor. He thought the judge to be cruel and terrifying, worse, insensitive. And here He is obedient and humble. He is the disciple and not the master of man in defeat and outrage.

Now it appears that all is well that ends well. Everybody's happy. Job because he heard God's voice after and during his anger. God because Job stopped bothering him. [01:23:00] His friends, because Job forgave them. Satan alone might complain, but he is absent, and as the French say, the absentee's always wrong anyway.

As for Job, the book tells us of his complete vindication. He became even richer than before and had more money, more glory, more cattle. He again had seven sons and three daughters. They were the most beautiful girls in the world. Listen to the father's pride. "And he lived another 140 years."

The last line in the book is also the last stroke of irony. *Vayamat Iyov zaqen us'vayamim*, which has so many

interpretations. He died as an old man saturated with years, saturated with life. Which could mean despite the blessings showered upon him he had enough. He [01:24:00] knew how fragile happiness could be and is, and he knew how hard it is for man to adhere to victory. But in the epilogue he seems to have been satisfied with his fate. Well, that is his business. I am not.

Much as I admired his rebellion, I am troubled by his quick surrender. Cursed and grief-stricken, he seems more human and especially more dignified than after his reconciliation with God, man, and his own past. I know many scholars claim that the end has nothing to do with the book itself. It was added in order to reassure true believers. Perhaps the tale had a different ending. Perhaps Job died without giving in, without repenting, without recovering his health and memory.

Strange, but the Talmudic [01:25:00] literature, which has so many things to say about the beginning of Job, says almost nothing about his end. The experienced storytellers of the Midrash prefer to stay away from a subject, which is probably not to their liking. The third act in any tragedy must be climactic. Here it is disappointing repeal. It is a happy end worthy of Hollywood.

The question troubled me in the post-war years when Job was to be found all over Europe, both as a living person and as a faceless memory. I was offended by the biblical tale and its weak conclusion. Job's resignation as a man is an insult to man. He should have returned all gifts to God and say, all right, I forgive [01:26:00] you to the extent that I am involved in what you have done, but my dead children, do they forgive you? Can I speak and forgive on their behalf, in their name? Can I morally and humanly accept a denouement, a solution to a story in which they too have played a part not of their choosing? To do so would mean to say yes to injustice done to them. To say yes would make me co-responsible.

Well, I refuse to share your guilt. That is what Job, in my book, should have said at the end of his plight. If this is your answer, I do not want it. If this is your idea of happiness, I want no part of it, as I want no part of your rule and justice, and let the trial continue. It does. [01:27:00] The trial does not end with the book as the tale does not. It goes beyond it. Job is contemporary. He explains what is unexplainable today. The tales of the Midrash are contemporary, and they sound, often, as if they were told and written and lived today.

But that is also true the other way around. Events of today sometimes do throw a light on him. But this has nothing to do with the Midrash. True, but yet it does. Our generation is entitled to a new Midrash of its own. Novelists are storytellers. Their most urgent task is to make legends, which means to deal with the bare substance [01:28:00] of events. We have no time and no patience and no need for secondary episodes and for *l'art pour l'art*. We can't afford it. Proust too died in Auschwitz and in Hiroshima.

So let us quit for a moment, and before the end let us quit the parable and return for a moment and before the end to current affairs. We are still haunted by other trials no less mystifying than that of Job. You remember them, the famous and infamous trials in Moscow during the '30s, in Prague and Budapest during the '50s and then the Soviet Jewish writers. Giants of the revolution, companions and trusted friends of Lenin are accused of treason. Criminal and political plots, [01:29:00] one more sordid and absurd than the other, and yet they do not protest. On the contrary, their confessions are larger than the indictments against them.

It is stupid, it is revolting, it is repugnant to see fallen princes doing whatever they can to humiliate themselves in

public, to blacken their record more and more, to run with open eyes to damnation. Appalled, the world holds back its breath and doesn't understand. What happened to these men? What could possibly be their motivation? What is the inner force that pushes them to their own destruction? What binds them to their executioner? Are they afraid of torture, they who overcame torture in the prisons of the Okhrana?

Are they afraid of death, they who defied death day after day, year [01:30:00] after year in the death cells under the Tsar? By what willpower were they broken, they who broke all the wills of history and changed its course? How did these fighters become objects and tools, in whose hands? Newspapers talked of physical torture, psychological police methods, and even ideological ones.

Koestler, for instance, says in *Darkness at Noon* that Stalin's secret police succeeded in convincing his imprisoned victims that it was their duty to the party to betray it. Alex Weissberg in *The Accused* says the victims were made to believe that the trials and the confessions and the verdicts were nothing but part of a game and that no sentence was to be carried out.

Any one of these hypotheses may be valid. I prefer another one.

[01:31:00] Bukharin, Kamenev, Zinoviev, and their comrades did not give up their fight. But their confessions were another form of its continuation. In pushing their confessions to grotesque dimensions they had hoped to prove their innocence and have the last word. In saying yes to Vyshinsky, yes to the executioner, they had hoped to deny their guilt. In taking upon themselves impossible crimes they became accusers.

Their fight continued, and their weapon was laughter. They realized that in exaggerating their guilt they made it less credible. In accepting to play the hangman's game along the hangman's rules they had hoped to show who was guilty and who was innocent. [01:32:00] Had they defended themselves against part of the charges one might have doubted their truthfulness. That's why they did not defend themselves. Their self-accusations were in retrospect their best defense. Absurdity was their best weapon, and they used it to the limit, to the end.

That is why Job gives in so easily, so fast. It is a joke on his part. Do you know this story? Somewhere in Central Europe the Jewish community, in order to survive, must pay to the police chief money every month. Every month the chief sends his

lieutenant to bring the ransom, but the Jews are poor, poorer. One day the lieutenant returns empty-handed. He reports to his chief. "Sorry, sir. [01:33:00] They have no money left."

"They always say that. They are lying," says the officer. "No, sir," says the lieutenant. "True, they always say that, but they are not lying, not now." "How do you know?" "I know. Until now they said it and cried. Today they said it and laughed."

Thus Job, at the end of his struggle, which he knew from the outset to be senseless, for how could man really defeat God? Job at the end of his road, he discovered salvation: laughter. It was his way of continuing the trial of affirming his resistance. In saying yes to God in that way he continues to [01:34:00] question His wisdom and defy His power.

In pushing his capitulation to the limits of credibility he has, if not the last word, for who can have the last word when God is the opponent, he has at least the last thought, the last hidden thought. It is with tongue in cheek that he submits so easily, too easily, to God's will. His courage remains unblemished, his resistance unbroken, his quest unanswered. His suffering was not justified, but it was not useless either. It resulted in a

legend. And this legend, it is to inspire man to turn despair into faith, outrage into laughter, God's injustice into human [01:35:00] justice.

But here we are almost entering into the subject of our next lecture, of the Rebbe of Kotzk. So what remains, and what does remain of Job? Not even a grave, there are four unknown, an example perhaps, and a few words. Once upon a time there was a man just and innocent and pure, and this man, in his loneliness, succeeded in forcing God to take interest in mankind, which he created because He loves words and legends just as He loves man's victories, which to us so often [01:36:00] seem so frightening. Thank you.

(applause)

M1 :

Thanks for listening. For more information on 92nd Street Y and all of our programs please visit us on the web at 92Y.org. This program is copyright by 92nd Street Y.

END OF AUDIO FILE