

Elie Wiesel In the Talmud: Hanina Ben Dossa

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Once upon a time in the land of our ancestors there lived a great man who was known for his prayers and his miracles, a man of fervor and passion who throughout his life was involved with his people, its children, its heritage, its aspirations, a man of extraordinary inner beauty and strength. And yet there is something about him that troubles us. This man, who knew the art of dealing with words, somehow surrounded himself with silence.

The hero of our story [00:01:00] was in fact an antihero. As we shall see later, Rabbi Hanina ben Dossa was a contemporary of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, which means that he lived in terrifying times, and yet there is nothing in his work that reminds us of the terror of the times. And therefore we are troubled. But still let us go back to his prayers, and let us read.

One day Rabbi Hanina, son of Dossa, decided that like all other Jewish pilgrims from Judea, he must not come to the temple of Jerusalem empty handed. The poorest of the poor has something

to offer, if not a sheep than a handful of flour. But Rabbi Hanina, son of Dossa, could not even bring that kind of offering. You see, he [00:02:00] was poorer than the poorest of the poor. He possessed nothing, literally nothing except his burning desire to give God something, anything.

In despair he took a stone, a large piece of rock, and began to chisel it, saying to himself since I cannot do anything for the master of the universe I shall try to help those who serve him. I shall bring this stone to Jerusalem so that the tired pilgrims can sit down and rest. The trouble was that Rabbi Hanina was weak, and the stone was heavy. He was unable to lift it, let alone carry it. As he pondered his problem he suddenly noticed five men who happened to pass nearby. He asked them to help him. [00:03:00] And they agreed for the right price. Some say five selaim, others say hundred selaim, which was the currency of the time.

A hundred, Rabbi Hanina didn't even have one. Too bad. The five men shrugged their shoulders and went on their way. No sooner had they left than five other men appeared out of nowhere in the same place in the desert. Would they help him carry the heavy stone to Jerusalem? Certainly they would, for proper pay. Rabbi Hanina panicked. But I have no money, he said. All

right, they answered. We'll let you have our services free, but under one condition. You must give us a hand. He did. And as he did he found himself transported with the stone into the temple courtyard in Jerusalem. His helpers, [00:04:00] they had vanished. He could not even thank them. The five angels had ascended back to heaven.

Well, from this legend we learn a number of things about this peculiar sage who seems to have been both vulnerable and strong and triumphant in the extreme. First we learn that he did not reside in Jerusalem, since he had to go there during the three annual periods of the pilgrimage. Second, that he was desperately poor. Third, that he was absolutely impractical.

Why would anyone choose to work on a stone so heavy that five people were needed to help carry it? Couldn't he have found a smaller one? But we also learn that he had the power to perform miracles. It's not easy to enlist angels as one's private [00:05:00] porters. And lastly, that when he did perform miracles he did so almost unwittingly, unconsciously. His request was not specific. He did not ask for angels. They came to his rescue anyway.

Of course there is a question here that we also should ask. Since he was capable of performing miracles, why didn't he perform the miracle of getting the money? And the answer is it's easier to get angels than to get money when you have no -- (laughter) There is also a lesson to be drawn from this episode. Angels, as angelic as they are, do not like to do all the work by themselves. They need your assistance. You want miracles, with pleasure, but you must also do something. [00:06:00] You must also take part in them. Do not rely on heaven alone. Help it along as it works for you.

So this is what we learn from our hero or antihero tonight. His name has been linked to fables more often than to laws, to miracles more often than to ideas. But above all his name is linked to prayers. And believe it or not, they were Jewish, and yet God heard them. (laughter)

He could be mistaken for the Hasidic rabbi, as a matter of fact, one wonders why Hasidism has not claimed him as it claimed Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and Rabbi Meir Baal HaNes. But with your permission and possibly encouragement we shall try to see why this was not [00:07:00] done. And to achieve this end, as usual, we must examine the character as he is depicted in the Talmud and the Midrash. He is most certainly a Talmudic master,

and as such we must ask ourselves does he have a system of his own, a destiny attributed to him alone? Who is he, and what is the substance, the texture of his language? In what way is his teaching relevant to my generation and yours since my generation and yours had such difficulty in finding the proper prayer?

In the course of our annual encounters we have tried to penetrate the enchanted and enchanting universe of the Talmud through the scrutiny of its most colorful sages. We have been struck by the compassion of Hillel the elder and the intransigence of [00:08:00] Shammai. We have been shaken by the tragic vision of Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai and anguished by the solitude of Rabbi Meir and the despair of the son of Abuyah, *acher*, the other.

We have discovered within the pages of the Talmud the dazzling world in which the people of Israel, through its use of language and memory, managed to survive centuries and hate and torment while living in an alien and hostile society. Let us repeat, and we shall never repeat it often enough, that the Talmud constitutes a living force for our people, more than a volume, more than a series of volumes, more even than the lifestyle.

It is an expression of a collective desire to teach and to be taught. It's an expression of a memory in which nothing is lost for [00:09:00] nothing remains isolated. A unique masterwork encompassing all areas of human creative endeavors ranging from history to mathematics, from etymology to philosophy and astronomy and gastronomy, the Talmud has served and continues to serve as vantage point for innumerable wanderers and dreamers.

Thanks to personalities like Rabbi Yehuda, the prince or Resh Lakish, the gladiator, the teachers and students throughout the generations may centuries later claim kinship with their forebears. Though physically separated from Jerusalem, they nevertheless dwelled in Jerusalem. They did not live in Jerusalem, nor do we. But Jerusalem, thanks to the Talmud, lived inside them as it lives inside us.

The greatness and the audacity of Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai, Rabbi Hanina's contemporary, [00:10:00] lay in understanding that after the destruction of Jerusalem the Jewish people would face a long, harrowing exile, that it would desperately need a kind of spiritual map to orient and preserve itself. And that is precisely what the Talmud was and still is. No other people produced such a masterwork, but then no other people endured such trials.

No wonder that our enemies tried so many times to burn the Talmud, not the Bible, mind you, the Talmud. They sensed its specific importance for the Jewish people. Without the Talmud and its mysterious light, our people might have succumbed to resignation. But then the Talmud encompasses more than one period, more than one school, more than one [00:11:00] master. The Talmud reflects a multitude of ideas, an infinite variety of interpretations. And so wide is the scope of the Talmud that it combines opposites and even reconciles them.

You will find in its realm leniency and rigor, kindness and strictness, fantasy and poetry, precision and exaggeration. The miracles of Rabbi Hanina and the silent martyrdom of Rabbi Yishmael, heroes and antiheroes fill the Talmudic universe with their dreams and nostalgia for the Talmud means coexistence, tolerance, openness, respect for knowledge. It means a celebration of words, a celebration of melody. [00:12:00]

So then, let us enter the magnificent if ancient gates of this eternal sanctuary, erected with and within language, and listen to its puzzling legends about the puzzling master whose life was prayer. But wait a minute, haven't we forgotten something, someone? Before opening those gates we must open these doors.

One of the mysteries in life and in literature is that two persons or three or four can live through the same events and yet not react the same way to them. [00:13:00] A poet, an architect, and a merchant may enter at the same time the same forest. The merchant will see the trees and think how am I going to sell them? The architect may see the trees and think, well, I'm going to build tree houses. And the poet will see the trees and will sing a song.

Rabbi Hanina Ben Dossa, like his contemporaries, lived through extraordinary times. And yet he didn't react to them. Is it possible, is it possible that the great man in the Talmud could witness great tragedies, great challenges, dramas, and yet somehow remain insensitive to what is happening around him?

What do we know about Rabbi Hanina Ben Dossa? [00:14:00] Friend and disciple and perhaps companion of Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai, he must have been about his age, perhaps a little older. Like him he lived in the Galilee, in Arav, some time in Jerusalem. He was married to a woman who was as famous for her piety as he was for his. She too accomplished miracles. People came to consult her about their problems. She was practical and sensible. And she should have been remembered in her own right,

but as in so many other instances, she is not even given proper credit. We do not even know her name. This is equally true of their children. We know that they had a son and a daughter. But we know very little about them. There are no sayings [00:15:00] attributed to them. Few anecdotes are attached to their names. In fact, again, they too are anonymous.

All the stories and legends center on Rabbi Hanina. Yet they do not help us gain an insight into his personality. His biographical data are astonishingly sketchy. He is mentioned only three times in the Mishnah and mostly in the Aggadah, in the legend. Where was he born? Who were his parents? Where did he live, study, work? The legend we read in the beginning leads us to assume that he was a stone cutter by trade, but that is the only concrete clue we are given. We don't even know when he died and where and how, which is rather unusual for a historical figure in the Talmud. He quite [00:16:00] simply vanished not from but inside the Talmud.

Why is he rarely shown in the role of a husband, father, and teacher? And what kind of teacher was he anyway? He had no school of his own, so what circles did he belong to? As friend of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, he must have been a pacifist, but unlike him he was never involved in political activities. We

can easily follow Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai as he tries to influence events. But we can follow Rabbi Hanina Ben Dossa only with great difficulty.

Obsessed with the supernatural, he seems to have followed an invisible path, only his voice reaches us. And we listen to him, but we do not see him. We listen to his stories, which are lovely, [00:17:00] impossible, and implausible, filled with wonder. Like the story of his goats, people couldn't understand. Where did Rabbi Hanina ben Dossa get all those goats? A poor fellow like him, how did he manage to acquire so many goats? And they were right in asking the question, but well, let us read.

One day a stranger stopped just in front of Rabbi Hanina's house and left him his chickens. Without saying a word he disappeared. "Take good care of the chickens," Rabbi Hanina told his wife, "But remember, do not eat the eggs. They are his, not ours." The result? The chickens laid eggs that became chickens which laid more eggs.

And soon [00:18:00] the entire house was full of chickens. They were everywhere, under the table and on the table, on the benches, on the bed. So Rabbi Hanina's wife, in her wisdom,

decided to sell the chickens, and with the money she bought a few goats. Her reasoning, though goats take as much room as chickens, they are less noisy. And above all, they do not multiply as fast.

Years later a stranger appeared outside Rabbi Hanina's house and asked, "Where are my chickens? I left them here." And without further ado Rabbi Hanina gave him the goats. Clearly the wife was the business man in the family. It was her idea to sell the chickens and buy the goats. Still there is something important missing in this charming and amusing fable. A description of the expression [00:19:00] on the stranger's face as he observed the metamorphosis of the chicken.

Now listen to a variation of the same theme. When Rabbi Pinchas, son of Yair, son-in-law of the celebrated Rabbi Shimone bar Yochai, lived somewhere in the south, two wandering beggars entrusted him with their sole possession, a small amount of wheat. They promised to return but did not. So what could Rabbi Pinchas do? He took care of their savings. He planted the wheat and let it grow in his field, then reaped it and stored it in his granary. Year after year he followed the same practice. Seven years later the two beggars reappeared in his house and wanted their wheat back. "Of course," said Rabbi

Pinchas, "But first you must go and find some camels and donkeys, [00:20:00] for you will need them to carry away what has become yours."

Well, never mind the differing details, one stranger instead of two beggars, chickens instead of wheat. The structure of the fable remains the same, as does its significance. Neither Rabbi Hanina nor Rabbi Pinchas wished to profit from what was not theirs. But this is not the only story that has been attributed to both sages. There are others as well.

In spite of the 100, 150 years that separated the two they seem to share many legends, many strange episodes, even their donkeys played similar parts in similar situations and elicited the same conclusions, as we shall hear later. Now, may we question the Talmud as to the reason for these similarities? How is one to interpret this unabashed plagiarism in a work to which innumerable [00:21:00] teachers and students have devoted their lives in order to preserve the sacredness of whatever was and is authentic?

Perhaps because it's a matter of aggadah, meaning legend, fantasy, not halachah, which is the law. The Talmud feels free to use poetic license. Maybe so. In the realm of halachah,

which deals with law and law alone, the importance of faithfulness to tradition, therefore to truth, is forever being stressed. Everything is done to give the author proper credit. *Haomer davar bishem omro*, say our sages, whoever repeats anything in the name of its author hastens redemption.

In matters of halachah, it is vital for the student to know whether a particular interpretation or decision [00:22:00] comes from the school of Rabbi Akiva or from that of Rabbi Yishmael. The person behind the teaching is as important as its philosophy and its problems. Legal decisions are therefore linked to specific masters, and no mistakes are allowed. However, in the world of aggadah, of legends, the approach seems more lenient. And so the same fable may describe more than one sage.

In other words, characters are interchangeable, though the story remains the same, which is a good theory, perfectly plausible, except it hurts. It hurts when you think that the victim is Rabbi Hanina Ben Dossa. Not only do we have laws in his name, but the legends in his name are being shared by more than one person. So what do we give him? What has been left as his?  
[00:23:00]

Another story. One day the wife of Rabbi Hanina, overwhelmed by sadness, turned to her husband and said, "Listen, you are known as a man whose prayers are being heard in heaven. Then why don't you do something to help us overcome misery?" "What would you like me to do?" he wondered. "Pray," she said with understandable exasperation. "You know how to pray, then pray. Pray for some money. How long can we go on living like this?" she said.

"Don't you see?" said Rabbi Hanina. "If we are poor here, it's because we shall be rich there in heaven. And he thought, naively, that his answer was pure logic, but so was the question that followed. "Why don't you ask for an advance?" (laughter) [00:24:00] Rabbi Hanina had no choice but obey. He prayed. And he got an advance. His wife's wish was fulfilled. A hand came down from heaven holding a table leg made of pure gold, which even in those noninflationary times was worth millions.

But that night the sage saw in a dream the celestial palace where the just men of all times dwell in the presence of the eternal one and his eternal glory. He saw them all sitting at their own golden tables, their own golden three-legged tables. And suddenly he noticed himself sitting there, except that he seemed sad, more melancholy than the others. And he wondered

why, until he understood. His table had only two legs.

[00:25:00] At dawn he told his wife his dream. Well, he told her everything, always. He told her what he saw, the mutilated table, the sadness, and to her credit she agreed right away. The heavenly advance had to be returned. Rabbi Hanina said another prayer, and once more a hand came down from heaven and took back the golden table leg whereupon, some sages commented beautifully, the second miracle is more astonishing than the first, for the future is easier to change than the past.

It is impossible to wipe out the memory of an event, impossible to start all over again as though nothing happened. The Almighty gives but does not claim back, says the Talmud. Only life is given and claimed back. What happened to Rabbi Hanina, therefore, is an exception [00:26:00] to the rule, and it is the miracle of a miracle.

Is Rabbi Hanina altogether an exception? Probably. Most of his contemporaries say so. They all stress again and again the power of his prayers. The story we just read is but one illustration of his impact in heaven. He can make things appear and also disappear. Of course, there is a disturbing aspect to this story too.

Listen. Both Rabbi Hanina and his wife believed that they are so righteous and so pious that they will be rewarded in the other world, the world of truth. But how could they be so sure? How could they be so sure of their piety and worthiness? Were they not exposing themselves to the grave sin of vanity and therefore lose everything they had?

They did not. Both of them were [00:27:00] innocent and pure enough to be immune to vanity. If they believed in some future rewards it was only because their present was too burdened with suffering. And so they clung to the belief that suffering too may be an advance. And the more pain you endure now, the less you will receive there later. And they had endured quite a lot.

But let us stress the story is not about riches or poverty, not even about contracts. It's about prayer, prayer, which opens all the gates. He prayed well, Rabbi Hanina. That was his principle virtue, his characteristic mark, his distinction. Some masters were known for their wisdom or their social position, others were praised for their scholarship or their piety. He, Rabbi Hanina, was praised for his prayers.

[00:28:00] And I insist again they disturb me.

They reflect him but not his times. Remember, remember the dramatic events that shook up his generation and all subsequent generations, and yet the events are absent from his supplications. From his prayers alone one would not even guess that the land of Israel was going through turbulence and anguish, that the mood in the world was fraught with destructive and perhaps self-destructive violence along the lines drawn up far away in Rome.

We read Rabbi Hanina's stories, and we fail to find in them the slightest concern for the victims of the Roman invaders or occupants. How come? And yet we know. We know from other sources in the same Talmud that in Judea the situation [00:29:00] was disastrous, intrigues, plots, and counterplots. The royal family is influenced by the alien imperial family in Rome. The sages teach and study, but the politicians listen to Rome, where murder is an accepted vehicle to obtain power. Just one line will explain to you what happened then in Rome. Claudius is killed by his wife who is killed by her son Nero who orders Seneca to commit suicide and ends up committing suicide too. Four generations in blood.

Still, Rome is conquering the world. Its triumphs seem irrevocable, and soon it would bring Jerusalem to her knees.

And what is Rabbi Hanina doing? He says prayers, which is good, but he prays for too little, which is not so good. He could demand anything and get it. [00:30:00] Why did he declare himself content with individual happiness? Why didn't he use his powers for his entire people? We know that his prayers were obeyed, for he would pray with such fervor and concentration that the outside world ceased to exist, that he himself would cease to exist.

When he said what was on his heart, when he spoke to God, creator of man and the universe, he would attain total abnegation of being, absolute elevation of the soul. Legend has it that a serpent wrapped itself around his leg while he was saying his prayers, and he did not feel it. Another time he was bitten by a scorpion. How did it happen? Listen, that scorpion was notorious for biting passersby. Show me his hiding place, said Rabbi Hanina. They showed him a hole in the street, and he put his foot on it. [00:31:00] Provoked, the scorpion bit him and died.

Then Rabbi Hanina took the dead scorpion and brought it to the house of study saying you see, it is not the scorpion that kills. It is the sinning. And thereupon all the students

exclaimed, Woe unto the man who is bitten by the scorpion, and woe unto the scorpion who has bitten Rabbi Hanina.

Rashi has an extraordinary commentary on this episode. Rashi says, in the name of *gaonim*, that when a scorpion bites a human being both of them must run to find water and whoever reaches the water first remains alive. Well, the scorpion had begun to run while Rabbi Hanina remained motionless, but don't worry. A miracle occurred, and the well sprung up under his foot.

[00:32:00]

His supernatural powers naturally gained him a reputation which spread throughout the provinces and affected all segments of society. People who were in seemingly hopeless trouble came to Rabbi Hanina Ben Dossa. They expected him to accomplish the impossible, and often he did. Except that to him nothing was impossible. Prayers made all things attainable, if only people knew how to pray. But most had never learned. Others had forgotten, so they flocked to him.

The president himself, Rabban Gamliel, needed his intercession. He sent two emissaries to Rabbi Hanina Ben Dossa with an urgent plea to pray for his sick son. Rabbi Hanina did, and the president's son recovered. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai too

addressed himself to his pious friend when his son fell gravely ill. Rabbi Hanina, his head buried in [00:33:00] his lap, which was the customary position for prayer, implored God to cure the son of his revered teacher and friend. And again, his intercession proved successful, so much so that Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai praised his exceptional powers.

He said, "If I, ben Zakkai, had tried to pray all day I would have failed." His wife was offended and showed it. "What?" she exclaimed. "Could it be that he is worthier than you?" But Rabbi Yohanan reassured her. "Between the two of us there is a difference of function, not of merit. You see, Rabbi Hanina is, so to speak, God's servant whereas I am his minister. A minister needs appointments. A servant comes and goes at any hour."

Strange [00:34:00] Rabbi Hanina knew when he succeeded and when he failed. Not in advance but during or after the prayer. Often he would conclude his plea and turn to the parent and say go home. Your child is no longer in danger. And they would ask him, How do you know? Are you a prophet? And he would answer, I am neither prophet nor son of prophet. It is much simpler. When I feel that my prayer ran smoothly I know that it is being heard. When it does not I know that there are obstacles.

But in all fairness, he rarely met with failure. His pleas meant something in heaven. His wishes were fulfilled, even when they seemed odd or contradictory. He was moody, God didn't mind. God is used to.

One day Rabbi Hanina took a walk with a basket full of salt on his head. Suddenly it began to rain. [00:35:00] "Master of the universe," he exclaimed, "look, the whole universe is happy now, for it needs rain, only your son Hanina is sad." So the rain stopped immediately. When he came home he changed his mind and his plea. "Master of the universe," he said, "look, the whole world is sad. Only your son is happy." Naturally it began to pour again.

Again, this anecdote too is typical of the man and his singularity. In the beginning he always seems worse off than his contemporaries, and in the end he is the one who must help them out. It hadn't rained for weeks and weeks, and now just when Rabbi Hanina was outside, just when he carried precious salt, it began to pour. Well, isn't this characteristic of an antihero?

Let's admit it, logically and normally Rabbi Hanina should rather be counted among [00:36:00] the heroes in the Talmud. Isn't he admired by his peers and loved by everybody? Isn't his voice heard in heaven and below? Aren't his exploits of such quality that they shake his credulity and the incredulity of everybody around him? Doesn't he possess extraordinary gifts, divine powers? Isn't he famous, highly influential and celebrated? Isn't he wiser than the sages, more powerful than the wealthy? Perhaps.

At this point a short analysis of the concept of the hero would be in order. In the vocabulary of our western civilization, who is a hero? Someone who has achieved distinction, meaning someone who is different, meaning someone who is famous, meaning someone who others describe as hero. Someone who rises above the crowd and impresses it with his [00:37:00] or her particular qualities, virtues or triumphs. A hero is someone who both acts on events and provokes them. His biography is history when it is not the other way around.

A hero is naturally center stage. People look at him. They look up to him. He is someone to be worshipped, idolized, but not necessarily emulated. Jupiter, Bacchus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Faustus are all gods or half-gods whose human impulses and

instincts have been exaggerated on purpose to distinguish them from the rest of us common mortals. Not so in the Talmud. The Talmudic hero is just the opposite. He's someone who forever must lead the way, who forever must serve as an example. He is someone you and I can identify with. So the ancient Greeks did not [00:38:00] praise modesty. To them pride was considered a virtue whereas our sages saw in pride a stumbling block. The Talmud extols modesty as much as justice.

In its literature the hero is above all endowed with qualities of the heart, compassion for one's fellow man, concerns and woes rank among the highest priorities in our tradition. We were born to help one another in our quest to attain perfection. Redemption is based on compassion, compassion for our people in exile, for the redeemer in exile, and for God, whose *shechinah* dwells with us in exile.

To hasten redemption is to perform the ultimate heroic act, but those who occasionally engage in this kind of mystical heroic activities do so in secrecy, which means the ultimate hero [00:39:00] remains invisible. And the real hero is unreal. Now, what is the Talmudic concept of a hero? Last week we studied a biblical one, a person who is committed to both belief and action is heroic, Abraham rather than Isaac, Israel instead

of Jacob. The biblical hero is alone, alone for God, alone with God, as Abraham was alone.

The Talmudic approach is somewhat different. And we have the best definition in Pirkei Avot in the ethics of our fathers: *ayzehu gibor hachoveysh et yitzro*. For once we have a perfect definition. Who is a hero? He or she who overcomes temptations, seductions, desires, instincts, and so on. In other words, it is not a physical but a spiritual [00:40:00] attitude that makes the person a hero.

The hero is sovereign, independent, displaying the courage of his or her convictions. The hero does not depend on the image he or she projects on the public. He does not have to enter popularity contests for the part of the most beloved or the most feared or hated person in the land, nor does the hero have to win elections.

One might go farther and say that in the Talmud a hero does nothing to be or to appear heroic. Examples, David's teacher, the famous Ahitophel, was called *gibor b'Torah*, a hero in Torah, in study. As for Samson, the prototype of the hero, *Shimshon Hagibor*, the hero, [00:41:00] Samson is considered by our sages

as one of the *kalei olam*, a lightweight. You may even say a nogoodnik.

Strange but true, physical strength, military bravery, what we call heroism, is not a virtue that is praised in the Talmud. The Talmud is not at all impressed, for instance, with Bar Kokhba's military operations. Quite the contrary, the Talmud reproaches Bar Kokhba his heroism for he relied on it too heavily.

Military heroes are never offered as examples. The greatest of the military heroes in the history of the Jewish people is Yehudah ha-Makabi, Judah the Maccabee. And do you know that he is not even mentioned in the Talmud? The Hasmona'im are, but not Judah. [00:42:00] In the Talmud a hero is someone who works on himself, on herself but for the sake of others. Someone who dwells in his own garden alone is not heroic. Had Moses stayed in heaven he would have become our prophet but not our teacher. Had Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai remained in the cave he would have kept his visions to himself. Learning is important to the individual, but to share it is more important.

Why is a *mamzer talmid chacham*, a learned bastard -- sorry, a bastard who is also a scholar -- why is he to precede the high

priest who is ignorant? Because in learning man can always go higher and higher. Also, when it comes to learning, the more one gives the more one receives. Hence the emphasis in the Talmud on study and good deeds for they imply others.

[00:43:00] Theology matters less than human relations.

So what about Rabbi Hanina? The texts do not mention his scholarship. All they mention is his ability to help those in need, be they strangers or members of his own family, which on the surface cannot but seem strange. We would imagine a hero to be selfless, concerned exclusively with communal affairs, helping orphans, rescuing widows, even at his own expense.

But Rabbi Hanina quite willingly performed miracles on behalf of his own family. And this is one more thing we learn about our character tonight. Nepotism in the Talmud. Is this ethical? Is this what our sages wished, a teacher, a master, a hero to be? Well, the answer may very well be [00:44:00] yes. To care for one's family first is human, and in our tradition heroes must delve into their humanity before they can fulfill their various roles.

Albert Camus's question about the saint can be rephrased about the hero as well. Is it possible, Camus asked, for man to be

saint without God? And is it possible, we wish to know, is it possible for man to be hero without his fellow man? No, it is not. Whatever pulls the individual away from society, from involvement with society, is to be condemned, according to our tradition. *Derech erez kadma l'Torah*, manners must precede scholarship. Abstract erudition may turn into a futile game of the intellect. Words are links not only between one another but also between human beings. The emphasis on the other is paramount [00:45:00] in Judaism.

*Achrayut*, which means responsibility, contains the word *acher*, the other. We are responsible for the other and therefore, first of all, responsible for those closest to us. Take the high priest. On Yom Kippur it is his duty and privilege to pray for the welfare of the entire community of Israel, but before that he must pray for the welfare of his own family. Yes, his family ranks first. It would be inhuman to require him to place strangers ahead of his parents and brothers and sisters. Only if he loves them can he love the entire household of Israel.

Do not think of this as a weakness, quite the contrary. I see it as strength, inner strength, spiritual strength, moral strength. Had Rabbi Hanina helped all the strangers and not his own kin, I [00:46:00] confess that he would appeal to me less.

A person who is insensitive to people he knows and who love him will ultimately be insensitive to those he or she does not know and does not care to know.

The fact remains that Rabbi Hanina, all his powers notwithstanding, rarely makes use of them for his own personal benefit. He stops the rain after he is all wet. Remember that. Why didn't he stop it before, preventively?

Remember also that he could become rich if he chooses to, but he stays poor to the end of his life. Why? He simply doesn't know. He doesn't know that he is poor. His economic situation is desperate, but he is unaware of it for the simple reason that he needs nothing. And that's the Talmudic hero or antihero for you, someone who needs nothing [00:47:00] and thinks he has everything.

The text says it explicitly and with humor when it echoes God's astonishment. Day after day, we are told, *bat kol yotzei*, the heavenly voice is heard. The whole world, says the voice, is being fed only thanks to my son Hanina. And he is satisfied with one measure of a fruit, a dry fruit called carob from one Friday to another. Translation, Rabbi Hanina, the pillar of creation and the darling of its creator, *Hanina b'ni*, he said,

my son Hanina, could ask anything and obtain it, but he doesn't ask. He doesn't want anything.

A prefiguration of Peretz's famous "Bontshe Schweig", he is satisfied with little and even with less than that. The result, [00:48:00] he often has less and less. His situation is so bad that his family has nothing to eat on Shabbat. Story: bashful and embarrassed, his wife, in order not to arouse pity, made believe that all meals were provided for. On Fridays she would go through the motions of preparing them with care. She would light the oven and place empty pots on the fire. Her neighbors saw the smoke and did not suspect the truth. However one of them was nasty. And she once said to herself I know they have nothing to cook for Shabbat. Why the smoke?

And she decided to go and find out. She knocked on the door, and in her embarrassment, Rabbi Hanina's wife withdrew to her bedroom. When her bad, nasty neighbor entered the kitchen a miracle took place. The oven was filled with bread, and the kneading through with dough. The neighbor saw the bread in the oven and yelled [00:49:00] out, "Quickly, the bread will be burned. Bring the bread shovel." "I know, I know," Rabbi Hanina's wife calmly replied. "I have just gone to get it."

I like her calm. But it seems that the entire family was miracle prone. (laughter) Something was forever happening to its members. One Baraita maintains that Rabbi Hanina's wife really went into the bedroom to fetch a bread shovel because she was accustomed to this kind of miracles. (laughter)

They occur not only to the parents but to their daughter as well. Listen. One Shabbat eve, late Friday afternoon, Rabbi Hanina noticed that his daughter was moody, was in a bad mood. She was troubled and unhappy. He wanted to know the reason, and she replied, "Father, something terrible happened. I mistook the two vessels containing oil [00:50:00] and vinegar, and I poured the vinegar into the Shabbat lamp." It was late in the afternoon, too late to correct the mistake. "Do not worry," said her father. Using a simple but magnificent argument, *mi she-amar shelashemen yidlok*, He who ordained that oil should burn can also order that vinegar shall burn.

I cannot at this point not tell you a story once I heard from a very famous Hasidic rebbe who is in New York, the Lubavitcher Rebbe who was a great physicist as well. And few years ago he sent out a letter to one of his admirers who is a physicist too. And the rebbe tried to prove to him scientifically that all the nonsense that science is spreading about the age of the world is

sheer nonsense because the world really is only 6,000 [00:51:00] years old.

So one day a disciple of his asked him, Rebbe, but how is it possible? Really Rebbe, 6,000 years? Today there are instruments, and these instruments are powerful and foolproof. At the same time we found fossils. And you know, when you take the instruments and you examine the fossils you will see that these fossils are 5, 6 million years old. And the rebbe had a marvelous answer. He said, "Listen, the Almighty God created the world. Why couldn't he put in that world 5 million-year-old fossils?" (laughter)

Anyway, it worked for Rabbi Hanina's daughter too. And a Baraita says that the miracle occurred. The vinegar burned. And in fact it burned until the end [00:52:00] of Shabbat, until the Havdalah services. And for this we are all grateful to Rabbi Hanina because he gave us a clue how to solve the energy problem. (laughter)

What strikes us in all these tales of miracles is not only that they occur but also that they are not accompanied by the usual outcries of surprise, excitement, and exuberance. They are welcomed quietly with simplicity. Does a Talmudic antihero

expect them to happen? I rather think that he hardly sees them happen. For Rabbi Hanina, miracles are not miracles. They do not impress him because, listen well, on the level of God miracles do not exist whereas on the level of man everything is a miracle. And not only things we do not understand, the others too. The fact that we are able [00:53:00] to grasp the meaning of certain events and understand a few elements, isn't that in itself yet another miracle?

Every creature, every tree, every object in creation has its place and its meaning and has its part to play. It is up to man to understand this and with some luck articulate it. Said Rabbi Hanina, and I quote, "The biblical ram sent by God to save Isaac as he already lay on the altar has been created before creation with the sole purpose of saving Abraham from sacrificing his son. \_\_The ram didn't just happen to be on Mount Moriah. He had been sent there deliberately, and he stayed on in history. Nothing of this special then, was lost," said Rabbi Hanina Ben Dossa. "The ashes were dispersed in the sanctuary of the temple. The sinews were used by David as strings for his harp. The skin [00:54:00] was claimed by prophet Elijah to clothe himself. As for the ram's two horns, the smaller one called the people together at the foot of Mount Sinai, and the larger one

will resound one day, one day heralding the coming of the messiah."

From this poetic interpretation we learn of his basic attitude towards life. All that exists contains a divine secret and a goal that transcends the secret. Reality and legend are intertwined. What legend is for us may have been reality for someone else. Memory and imagination are not necessarily incompatible. They may complement one another.

Look at Rabbi Hanina's example of the ram whose lifespan encompasses the entire history of mankind. It begins before the beginning and will go on after the end. [00:55:00] But then in Rabbi Hanina's private gallery the ram is not the only animal with a legendary destiny. His goats too were special. Remember them? We mentioned them earlier, the chickens that became goats.

Well, Rabbi Hanina's neighbors accused them of trespassing on their property. "My goats?" exclaimed Rabbi Hanina.

"Impossible. You know what?" he went on. "I shall prove it to you. If they are guilty, let them be devoured by bears. If they are innocent, let each of them bring back a living bear in

its horns." And that very afternoon the goats returned from the field with bears on their horns.

Well, I don't know what Rabbi Hanina did with the bears, but the Talmud redeemed them by introducing them into the enchanted fantasy of its universe. There they met other animals. There was even a lion among them [00:56:00] and also a donkey. The story of the donkey, listen: One day it was stolen. And why didn't Rabbi Hanina use his powers to find it? Because there was no need to do so. That donkey knew how to take care of its own interests. It simply went on a hunger strike. It refused to eat. And perhaps you would wish to know why. Because the thieves tried to feed it with untithed hay, and the thieves got annoyed.

"What shall we do with this animal?" they cried out. "It's going to die and rot away here." So they let him go free, and naturally the donkey found its way back into Rabbi Hanina's courtyard. Two centuries later a Babylonian sage, a certain Rabbi Zeira, exclaimed, If our [00:57:00] forbears were like angels, then we are humans. If they were like humans, we are donkeys. But after a brief meditation he added, but not like the donkey of Rabbi Hanina Ben Dossa.

In other words, that would have been too great an honor for that particular donkey was special. It obeyed the law concerning all the practices, and without even trying, the donkey made the thieves look foolish. Actually, I was going to speak of Rabbi Zeira tonight as well at great length because I saw thought that Rabbi Zeira would be just the other part of the antihero for Rabbi Hanina.

But I began studying him with our great master Rabbi Shaul Lieberman who loves him, and I got to love him as well. And suddenly I realized that Rabbi Zeira is a real hero. [00:58:00] So he will have to wait until next year. (laughter) But in the meantime, in the meantime let us conclude his saying. When he said that if our forebears were like humans we are like donkeys but not like the one that belonged to Rabbi Hanina Ben Dossa, he finished the sentence by saying not even the one that belonged to Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. And there we go again.

Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Pinchas, who lived 150 years apart, share not only stories about miracles but also about donkeys and their wisdom. For a similar anecdote was told of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair's donkey which also refused to be fed whenever the hay was, according to law, unfit for nourishment. Poor Rabbi Hanina. Few stories are his exclusively. Even the tale about his role

as rainmaker has been ascribed with some important variations, as we shall see, to another sage, the famous Honi HaMe'agel.

[00:59:00]

Listen. Once there was such a drought in Judea that the sages sent a messenger to Honi HaMe'agel. "Please" they say, "pray for rain." He in turn was so convinced that his intercession would be successful that he told them remove the ovens from the courtyard. Bring them inside lest they will melt in the rain. They all did right away as they were told except that it did not rain. He prayed some more with the same result, or rather lack of result.

And so he did something dramatic. He drew a circle around himself and spoke to God. "Master of the universe, your children asked me to pray for them believing that I have influence on you. And therefore I swear to you that I shall not move from here until you have mercy on them and give them rain." At that point the first rain drops began to fall but very slowly. His students [01:00:00] were not impressed.

And they said this kind of rain came only to please you but not us. "I want real rain," exclaimed Honi HaMe'agel. "Enough rain to fill caves and tunnels," and instantly the rain turned

violent and became so frightening that the people pleaded with him not to allow it to destroy the world. Said he, "Master of the universe, I asked for rain of blessings, not of punishment." Only then did the rain turn natural. After a while the people urged the sage to make it stop altogether. Commented Honi HaMe'agel, "Master of the universe, your people are very strange. They are unable to cope with excessive mercy or excessive punishment. You are very angry. They cannot stand it. Are you very kind? They cannot stand it either." So in time [01:01:00] the weather and the people settled down, and things returned to normal.

Rabbi Hanina had the same powers, the same powers, and he was as famous for them as was Honi HaMe'agel. One day he was told that the daughter of Rabbi Nehunya, the public well digger, had had an accident. She had fallen into an open well. Impossible to get her out. Rabbi Hanina prayed for one hour and remarked, "She will be all right." He prayed for another hour and said, "She is all right." He prayed for a third hour and declared, "She is out."

And using his favorite expression, he explained, I am neither prophet nor son of a prophet. Still, I was sure that nothing bad could happen to the child of a pious and just man like Rabbi

Nehunya who has contributed so much to the welfare of so many people. However, the Talmud considers it necessary to mention that at the [01:02:00] later date Rabi Nehunya did lose one of his children, his son. The son of the well digger died of thirst.

A similar story involves Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. He was told of a pious man, a Hasid, says the Talmud, who spent his time digging wells for the benefit of thirsty travelers and passersby. Instead of rewarding him, life punished him. His daughter, who was soon to be married, was swept away in a torrential river, and no one ever saw her again. People came to console the father, who refused to be consoled. Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair heard of the tragedy, and he too came to console the father who refused to be consoled. Said Rabbi Pinchas to his companions, "Is this the Hasid, the pious man you talked to me about? What kind of Hasid is he if he [01:03:00] refuses to be comforted?"

But when they explained the situation to him he understood, and this is how he addressed the Almighty. "Master of the universe, this man honored and served you and his fellow man with water and now you choose to punish him with water?" whereupon a voice was heard, the daughter had reappeared, and she is alive and

well. Commented one sage, an angel came to her rescue, and he looked like Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair.

What remains of Rabbi Hanina's life and work? What distinguishes him from his contemporaries? What will we remember of his teachings? What does the Talmud remember? A few stories, fables, anecdotes, sayings, aphorisms. For example, [01:04:00] I quote, "If your fear of heaven precedes your wisdom your wisdom will last. If it follows it, it will not." And also, I quote, "If your deeds weigh more than your knowledge, then it will stay with you, if not, it will not."

Interesting his emphasis on deeds and disturbing as well. Rabbi Hanina suddenly a man of action, a philosopher of action? Have we missed some hidden element of his personality? Wasn't he known rather for his stories and his prayers? The fact is that the Talmud insists on linking him to action. After he died the masters proclaimed, and I quote, "With him gone, there are no more *anshei maaseh*," men of action. They no longer exist in our midst. And this is difficult to understand.

Except that perhaps he and we have different interpretations of the word action. He could well have seen action as an extension of prayer and contemplation. [01:05:00] Prayer leads to action.

Prayer is action. And viewed in this manner, Rabbi Hanina qualifies perhaps as a true man of commitment and a powerful man of action.

But at this point we must return to what we said in the very beginning of our encounter tonight. An annoying question must be raised and confronted head on. If he was so great in his prayers, how is one to comprehend his failure to pray for the survival of his people and for the sake of its eternal city? For in addition to everything else there exists one more element that looms as an obstacle between us and Rabbi Hanina. There is a missing element in his biography. [01:06:00]

Listen again. He was Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's contemporary, thus he must have lived the beginnings of the national tragedy if not the tragedy itself. He may well have witnessed the siege of Jerusalem and even the destruction of Jerusalem. And in that case he must have seen the temple go up in flames, the sanctuary reduced to ashes, and the valiant princes and warriors of Judea deported as slaves to Rome and its circuses and to distant slave markets everywhere. And yet no echo of this gigantic upheaval is to be found in his tales and sayings.

There is no record of a single tear shed over the destruction of the holy and indestructible city. Incredible but true. The event has no place in the wondrous tales by him or about him. How is one to explain such omission, such insensitivity? How are we [01:07:00] to understand that from a man, a Jew, a nationalist as fervent as Rabbi Hanina?

Wasn't it he who proclaimed *Ein adam elah m'Yisrael*, meaning that the Jew is closer to humanity than anyone else, that the Jew must be more human than anyone else? How is one to reconcile all this with his silence over the deaths of thousands and thousands of Jews during the Roman invasion of Jerusalem? You read the Jerusalem Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud, various Midrashic sources, and you realize that in the life and work of this great master and sage, the *churban habayit*, the destruction of the temple and what it symbolizes is totally absent.

Understandably we react to this with wonder. What are we to make of it? Does it mean that for Rabbi Hanina the *churban* was an historical episode, an event like any other, a tragedy like any other? [01:08:00] Does it mean that he did not appreciate its weight of suffering, its unique dimension both from a religious and a historical viewpoint? How is one to explain the

silence he created in him and around him? Worse, how is one to explain the Talmudic silence around his silence?

All his contemporaries were weeping and weeping over the event, reflecting over its mystical significance. Not he. All prayed for the salvation of Jerusalem, not he. Why not? More than anyone else he should have cried and prayed for the sake of his people. He who could, with words, with words alone alter events and save lives, why didn't he use them to prevent the unspeakable disaster [01:09:00] and spare Jerusalem the ultimate humiliation? Why didn't he do anything? Why didn't he say anything?

Was it because he didn't care? I cannot believe it. I cannot believe that he didn't care. I refuse to believe that he wasn't hurt. These are pertinent and painful questions, and the answer? Is there an answer? All we have to go on is on a series of hypothesis, and all equally plausible and equally implausible.

The first one reflects Professor Lieberman's view, and it sets the time of Rabbi Hanina's death perhaps, I insist, perhaps before the destruction of Jerusalem. And of course this shows the method and the methodology of Professor Lieberman.

Everything should be simple. Since Rabbi Hanina didn't cry,  
[01:10:00] that means there was no reason for him to cry.

Well, if we accept this possibility the chapter can be closed right then and there. But what if he died later or during? Nothing in the sources indicates even an approximate date when Rabbi Hanina passed away, and this is most unusual. We are not even told how old he was when he died. So I believe it's quite conceivable that he did live through the tragic years of the *churban*.

Let us suppose he did not. Let's suppose he died before the destruction of Jerusalem. So what? The tragedy began much earlier, didn't it? The land was under Roman occupation and domination for quite some time before. The population was divided between pacifists and activists, Kamsa and Bar Kamsa, the zealots and their opponents, and rich and the poor. The nation was obviously heading towards catastrophe. And most scholars, most teachers, all of them in fact, seem to have  
[01:11:00] reacted to the unfolding events each in his own way, whether with sorrow or anger, faith or resignation.

Only Rabbi Hanina said nothing. Did he fail to see the signs on the wall? Did he not experience the same fear as his friends?

None could help but relate to the danger if not disaster. How did he alone manage to remain aloof? How can one be sure of how he, in fact, reacted? How can one ascertain, how can one gauge the profound and inner response of any man to such cataclysmic events?

So I suggest we explore another hypothesis. I believe that he did witness the siege of Jerusalem and the burning of the sanctuary. And this is, I believe, why he did not pray. He did not pray after, well, did he pray [01:12:00] before? Did he pray to prevent the defeat? I believe that the reason for his silence is that he was struck dumb, mute. In the face of the atrocities he as a human being felt powerless, helpless, speechless. A natural reaction. When pain becomes unbearable the person withdraws into his or her most private shelter surrounded and protected by muteness.

In other words, Rabbi Hanina may have been so wounded by the tragedy, so wounded by the disaster that struck his generation that he could not cope with it in his usual manner with words of prayer and supplication. He did not pray because he was unable to pray. [01:13:00] In the presence of so many widows and so many orphans roaming through the ruins of Jerusalem he lost his

voice. His lips became sealed. The hero of prayer behaved like one of the victims.

The difficulty with this approach lies in the fact that there is nothing in the text to support it. Silence must be explained and corroborated by words, not by more silence. Had Rabbi Hanina's silence been attributed to the reasons we just formulated somewhere in the Talmud a clue would have been waiting for us, a sentence, a remark, a question mark. None is to be found in the text.

And therefore I suggest let us examine the last hypothesis, that he died during or after the destruction and that he did try to prevent it through prayer. As the enemy drew closer, as death's shadow loomed larger on the horizon, as darkness spread, Rabbi Hanina must have prayed with more vigor, more fervor [01:14:00] than ever before. He must have tried to shake the heavens and appeal to the celestial throne itself to cancel the evil decrees and spare his people further pain. A man like him, whose action was prayer, must have mobilized all his efforts and made use of all his powers to protect Jewish children. But he failed. This time his prayers were not heard. His pleas were not received.

And that is why he remained silent afterwards. And that is why the Talmud kept silent about his efforts, so as not to embarrass his memory and also in order not to discourage his followers in subsequent generations from making their own attempts to save their contemporaries through prayer.

I believe in this [01:15:00] hypothesis because we, children of our generation, have learned that there were times when prayers were not received. And so the absence of the *churban* in his life and tales suddenly becomes understandable. We can empathize with a man for whom the *churban* was so deeply present that the only way he could react was with total silence. And so my friends, in conclusion, let us say that his words, as his life, ended in silence. The miracle did not occur. Jerusalem was not spared.

Whatever hypothesis we accept, one thing is clear, and that is beautiful. The Talmud does not try to embellish its characters by endowing them with exploits or attempts [01:16:00] they did not undertake. Nothing is done in the Talmud to gain affection for Rabbi Hanina by describing his lonely fight for the preservation of Jerusalem and its glory. No one describes him as a leading figure. No one sings his praise. No one echoes his pain. His is the silence of the silence for in the Talmudic

universe the hero often is not the one who succeeds but the one who fails to succeed. It is not only the one who undertakes successfully or not to perform miracles but also the one through whom miracles are accomplished or withheld.

And so it seems Rabbi Hanina was simply Rabbi Hanina, a man who believed so totally in prayer that he broke through all the gates of heaven to obtain favors for his fellow man. Rabbi Hanina was a sage who chose to take care of his neighbors rather than get involved in national politics. He was a master who [01:17:00] taught us then and now the importance of every day miracles, small gestures, chance encounters that every word may evoke wonder. Every man can hasten redemption. And every human being is the center of creation.

And Rabbi Hanina, through his failures, taught us that sometimes we try and we fail. Sometimes we speak and we are not heard. Sometimes we implore and our supplications are not received, and yet we must go on trying. We must because he did not because he remained silent. So like Rabbi Hanina we wish we could go to Jerusalem to find some consolation for ourselves, some cure for our anguish, some hope in these hopeless hours. And we too wish we had an offering to bring. And like him, [01:18:00] we are

condemned to carry stones so heavy that they cannot be lifted,  
except that unlike Rabbi Hanina, we do carry them in our hearts.

(applause)

**M1 :**

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