

Elie Wiesel In the Talmud: Rabbi Zeira, Commitment to Israel

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Elie Wiesel:

Before setting out on his journey to the land of Israel he fasted 100 days or 300 days or 900 days, it all depends which source you consult, so as to forget the teaching he had received in the prestigious Babylon academies. Whether the experiment was successful or not we do not know. The Talmud chooses not to tell us, to our regret, for we might have learned something original about the possible interaction between food and spirituality or about dieting in ancient Palestine. (laughter)

It is quite possible that having become a full-fledged member of the Palestinian scholarly community he did indeed forget his Babylonian *girsā diyankuta*, his childhood studies in Babylon. And it's equally conceivable that he remembered them precisely because he [00:01:00] didn't want to remember them. What is of interest and puzzling to us is his strong desire to forget. To forget what and why?

Aren't Jews committed to memory? Aren't we defined and sometimes shielded by it? Aren't we supposed to enrich it, to delve deeper into it at all costs at all times? We are

supposed, indeed ordered, to remember what we endured in Egypt, what we heard at Sinai, what we did throughout the centuries of exile or salvation. Then why did Rabbi Zeira aspire to erase from his memory what he learned in Babylon? And after all, what he learned was Torah.

These are disturbing questions. There are more. Listen. Having arrived in Eretz Yisrael, in the land of Israel, he acquired a great reputation, [00:02:00] which he surely deserved, but whenever Rabbi Zeira spoke of Babylon, which he remembered after all, he referred to it with disdain. He seemed to harbor towards his Jews some deep-seated grudge, totally uncharacteristic of his temperament and nature. I quote, "Ugh, those stupid Babylonians," he would exclaim when speaking about them.

He who usually expressed nothing but love for all man, including the sinners, including the wicked, and judged everybody *lekaf zechut*, favorably, showed himself strangely intolerant when it came to Babylonian Jews. It seems even stranger when we consider throughout the Talmud he is depicted as a likeable man. Few are as liked in Talmudic literature. He is praised for his piety, his modesty, and naturally for his erudition.

As we [00:03:00] shall see later, he is a kind of antihero, an innocent in the fullest sense of the term. And we have tried to speak about him last year. Everything happens to him, and it is always sad. He is forever falling victim to bad luck, to unpleasant surprises. And yet he is never bitter. He goes on living his life as though nothing happened. He goes on smiling as if to say please, don't feel sorry for me. I am happy. I may even be happier than you.

Well, we invite you to meet him tonight. We almost met him, as I said, last year, and some of you may recall that we alluded to him to some extent. I came to like him and to study him really because of our master and teacher Rabbeinu Shaul Lieberman, whose favorite he is. And I worked and worked with Professor Lieberman and with my friends and the Talmud trying to [00:04:00] find really more material, always more material about the character and did, until I found some strange sources that said that he, who loved Israel so much, actually left it. And that gave me some food for thought. If he left Israel something was wrong either with Israel or with him. So what was wrong? And of course I looked and looked and looked, and what I found I'll tell later.

In the process the antihero became a hero. Did he really? Compared to Rabbi Akiva and his spectacular adventures, to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his legendary solitude, to Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and his tragic yet triumphant achievements, Rabbi Zeira and his life story may appear pale and even uninteresting. Unlike Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai he lived in quasi-normal times. [00:05:00] The period, like the drama, the tragic quality of the first century when Jewish destiny itself was in the balance.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was involved in war and survival of his nation, not so Rabbi Zeira. In his life the situation was more or less quiet. The borders were open. You could go from Babylon to Palestine and back without any problem, granted the land was dominated by foreign troops; granted Christianity began then building its own movement, but sages continue to study and people to remember. And Rabbi Zeira's life was not in danger ever.

But when you explore the sources about him and when you explore them in depth you realize that as so often is the case first impressions are superficial and therefore must be deceiving. As a master he is equal to the greatest. As a person [00:06:00] he is fascinating in spite of his simplicity. As a subject he is

perfectly fitting for this fifteenth annual Talmudic encounter. For he illustrates a problem, a dilemma which are an intrinsic part of our constant preoccupations as Jews of the diaspora.

I refer, as you may have guessed already, to the question, painful for some and joyful for others, and irrelevant for a few but very few, of the tense, intense and miraculous relations that existed between Babylon symbolizing the diaspora and the land of Israel. These two communities, these two notions, these two endeavors, these two modes of life and ideas and allegiance, can they in any imaginable way be reconciled, or are they to remain forever incompatible? No one in the Talmud has illustrated as much, [00:07:00] as vividly, as personally with his deeds and words the gravity of the problem. Where is the solution to be found, in harmony or in divorce?

To celebrate the study of Talmud Yerushalmi and Talmud Bavli, the Babylonian and the Palestinian Talmud, we intend tonight, therefore, to follow Rabbi Zeira in his troubles. We shall smile with him but not at him. We shall listen to his teachers on both sides of the visible and the invisible frontier. We shall witness with him and thanks to him the magnificent explosion of Jewish thought. We shall admire the tenacity of

Jewish need for integrity and Jewish quest for truth despite  
endless temptations and persecutions

We shall follow him into the stimulating and dazzling universe  
of Talmud, of Talmudic study, and these two words are strange  
words because they have [00:08:00] the same meaning. What does  
it mean? It means the study of the study. But there in the  
Talmud time ceases to exist as obstacle and emerges as haven for  
scholars and disciples who through the fiery vehicle of words,  
of language strive and often succeed with tolerance and  
friendship to rebuild within our collective memory a sacred  
temple in honor of God and his children.

The Bible has no beginning, but the Talmud has no end. I mean  
no official end. Rav Ashi concluded the editing of the Talmud  
but refrained from sealing it. And he did so on purpose, to  
allow us to continue for centuries and centuries and beyond.  
Every one of us may, while studying its obscure passages and  
illuminating tales, link our soul to its own and see its destiny  
as our own.

The [00:09:00] Talmud therefore is always written in the present  
tense. And that is why we study Talmud with such passion, and  
that is why you need passion to study it. And that is why our

enemies have, throughout generations of suspicion and hostility, hated it and us with such passion. They envied us the Talmud even more than the Bible. The Talmud filled them with fear. They sensed that it was the most tangible reason for our survival in exile. That is why they tried so often to ridicule it or even burn it.

For us the Talmud represents a possibility of transcending the present and extending its boundaries. We repeat an ancient discussion, and we become participants. We study the interpretations of old laws and customs, and they commit us today. We recall what has been said 2,000 years ago, and we gain the impression that every word, every sentence, [00:10:00] every question, every impulse, every silence, and every answer, everything in them were meant for us, particularly when they bear the imprint of one of the great masters. And Rabbi Zeira is one of them.

Rabbi Zeira's passion for study, his all-consuming love for Eretz Yisrael, his unbending principles, his belief that self-mortification may get and therefore must get some meaning and some result, his interest in every aspect of suffering and learning demonstrate that he is someone special. But then how could he not be someone special?

And so, friends, *Ta shema*, as we say in Talmudic language, come closer and listen to what our sages have taught us so that we, their disciples, may repeat again and again. *Ta shema*, come closer and listen to some beautiful yet troubling tales of once [00:11:00] upon a time, thoughts of yesterday and today. Come and listen to adventures and misadventures of a unique teacher and scholar who like all his friends and disciples believed, as we do, that to anyone who wishes to learn Talmud no doors ought ever to remain closed. (laughter)

Let us listen to a story. The day Rabbi Zeira saw his dream [00:12:00] fulfilled, the day he finally set foot in the holy land, he entered a butcher shop to buy a pound of meat. "How much is it?" he asked. "Fifty cents and one whiplash," said the butcher, tongue in cheek. "I'll give you 60 cents, but spare me the whiplash," answered Rabbi Zeira. "Impossible," said the butcher. Our local custom has it that no one gets meat unless a whiplash is added to the price."

Flabbergasted, Rabbi Zeira tried to bargain. "I'll give you 70 cents, 80, 90. I'll give you 100," in vain. It was to be a package deal or no deal. In despair and because he was hungry and also because he came from a physician, Rabbi [00:13:00]



Zeira accepted the whiplash and purchased his meat. Later in the day he went to the house of study where he met the sages whom he had known by reputation and who knew him as well.

"You sure have weird customs in your community," he told them. They asked him to explain and so he did. "It seems impossible to get food here without being beaten up in the process." They were shocked and quickly dispatched messengers to fetch the butcher. Only they arrived too late. His coffin was being carried out of his house. Convinced that it was Rabbi Zeira who had cursed and punished him, they turned to him and voiced their astonishment.

"Do you think that this practical joke deserved such harsh punishment?" And Rabbi Zeira swore that he had nothing to do with it. "I wasn't even angry at him," he said. "I really believed [00:14:00] that this is the local custom, and therefore I submitted without protest."

What lessons may we draw from this evidently authentic episode? First is this -- authentic. (laughter) Firstly that Rabbi Zeira did his own shopping. (laughter) Secondly that Jewish butchers in Palestine loved to play practical jokes on their intellectual customers. And thirdly that Rabbi Zeira must have been a

perfect target for everyone who wanted to play practical jokes for he was excessively credulous, or hungry, or both. And lastly, from this episode we learn that, *klitah*, or absorption problems were already serious [00:15:00] then. (laughter) New immigrants didn't have an easy time in Eretz Yisrael.

Unfortunately, not much is known of his life in Babylon. What kind of childhood did he have? Whom did he marry? When did his wedding take place and where? When did he make his Aliyah to Palestine exactly? Nothing of all this has been recorded neither by him nor by anyone else.

Perhaps he considered himself so unimportant that he didn't bother to talk about his private affairs. What do we know about his personal life? Who is Rabbi Zeira? Born in Babylon in the third century of our common era, he was orphaned at a very young age. His father had served as tax collector for the royal Persian government, but unlike his colleagues he had enjoyed the general esteem of the community.

Several versions mention [00:16:00] the fact that he died before he could educate his son. Some sources believe that Rabbi Zeira lost both his parents when he was young. One day he was heard exclaiming aloud, and I quote, "I am sorry to have neither

father nor mother to cherish and honor and thus obtain my share in paradise," end quote. But then he was told a story of Rabbi Tarfon who was walking with his mother on Shabbat when she took a bad step and slipped and thus lost her slipper. Her son immediately went down on his knees and, placing his hands before her, made her walk home on his palms. Commented our sages, "Had Rabbi Tarfon done that even a 1,000 times he would still not have shown half the respect a son owes to his mother."

Rabbi [00:17:00] Zeira also was told the story of Rabbi Ishmael and his mother. And she came to the sages to complain about her son's behavior. "He doesn't honor me enough," she said. And they refused to believe her. "Rabbi Ishmael shouldn't honor his mother? Impossible." So she was asked to explain, and she did. "Every time when he returns home from the house of study," she said, "I want to wash his feet and drink the water. And he says no." Commented the sages, and I quote, "If such is her wish and her pleasure, if such is her concept of honor, of *kibud eim*, it is her son's duty not to interfere."

Said Rabbi Zeira, "Now I thank God that I have no mother."

(laughter) And he too explained, "For I [00:18:00] would never be able to do what Rabbi Tarfon did nor endure what Rabbi Ishmael did."

Zeira means little. Rabbi Zeira, therefore, you can imagine him, was small, weak, thin, of dark complexion. He was nicknamed in the Talmud *patya uchma*, which means a black pot. Another nickname that was given to him was *charicha k'tin shakya*, the man with narrow shoulders or narrow hips, also the singed one. Because he was physically unattractive he got himself into trouble in places where he wasn't known.

There are those who enjoy being cruel towards victims of nature's cruelty. Hunchbacks and dwarves were held up to ridicule then even more than now. Of course Talmudic legend makers explain his nicknames in their own way. One story has it [00:19:00] that throughout his life Rabbi Zeira feared hell and its flames. And he would pray not to be touched by them. And every month he would undergo a self-imposed test. He would light a fire in the stove and enter it. And the flames would touch his body but leave it unharmed. Then one day certain sages, his colleagues, probably jealous of his immunity, gave him the evil eye, and divine protection was withdrawn from him, and the next time he tried he was singed.

What else are we told about his biography? That he was a Kohen, married, and a father of a son named Ahava, or Akhba, meaning love or brotherhood. The wedding had taken place during Sukkot, we don't know which year, inside the Sukkah, and we know it because it pleased him [00:20:00] for as he put it, quote, "He could perform two *mitzvot* at the same time."

For a while he engaged in textile trade. He must have been not too good a businessman for he gave it up. Certainly his true and totally absorbing passion was study and study *lishma*, for its own sake. The date of his death was not recorded, but we do know that he was blessed with a long life and that even when his physical strength was gone his mind remained astonishingly clear and perceptive.

He was an excellent educator, and he would say, I quote, "Do not promise a child things you cannot keep, for then you teach him how to lie." It was his custom to conclude his prayers in the following manner, "Oh God, help me not to go astray. Help me not to bring shame to my parents."

A legendary man himself in his own time, [00:21:00] a hero and victim of many stories, he actually disliked stories. All books of aggadah, of legend, were in his view meant for readers who

enjoy magic and superstition. He was a rationalist, and in a debate over mystical initiation, who ought to be allowed to study the secret knowledge of Merkavah, and who ought not, he took the hard line. One must be worthy and ready of such initiation, he said. Instant mysticism, he didn't believe it, nor do I.

Whereas Rabbi Hiyya says one may receive *Roshei Perakim*, headlines from Kabbalah, Rabbi Zeira states that that too is dangerous. To receive *Roshei Perakim*, one must be an *Av Bei Din*, a head of rabbinic tribunal or *kol mi shelibo doeg b'kirbo*, anyone who is sensitive, who has a [00:22:00] concerned heart for other people. He or she may study Kabbalah.

His teaching inspired innumerable laws, commentaries, anecdotes, and sayings both in the Palestinian Talmud and in the Babylonian Talmud. For better or for worse he forever attracted attention among scholars who praised him and among common people who made fun of him. He was known for two passions: his precision in study and his love for Eretz Yisrael. The first dominated his mind and the second his soul.

He would spend days and days for weeks on end tracking down one proposition handed down in the name of Rabbi Yohanan or one of

his colleagues. He would tirelessly run from master to master, from school to school, from city to city, especially to visit the so-called *de'rabbanan nechutei*, the [00:23:00] wandering scholars, those wandering people who traveled from Palestine to Babylon and back to question them about the authenticity of a quote or even an afterthought.

Occasionally he would insist upon the traveler to repeat it 10 times, 40 times, and there were those, of course, who got annoyed and told him so. He didn't mind, and he didn't care. He went on asking. He would not let go of his source until he got it right, until he knew exactly what the master in Babylon or, of course, in Palestine had meant by whatever he said.

Rabbi Zeira admired Rabbi Hiyya, son of Abba, and this is how he explained it. I quote, "Rabbi Hiyya made sure he never distorted anything he heard from Rabbi Yohanan, and that was enough for Rabbi Zeira because that was the most [00:24:00] beautiful and the rarest of virtues: to faithfully transmit. What one receives from one's master is a privilege that elevates both the disciple and the teacher."

And so to anyone who knows anything about Talmud it is clear that Rabbi Zeira's greatness is that he symbolizes tradition.

And he himself epitomized tradition. No one displayed such passion, such commitment to truthful transmission. Everything had to be checked and rechecked. Every idea tested again and again. Every formulation examined from all angles. He didn't trust blind men as vehicles of ideas or quotes, and he explained why: because the blind man didn't see the person when the person said what the person was supposed to have said. He wanted the expression [00:25:00] of the person, not only the voice and not only the words.

Now, why was transmission so vitally important in those days? It is simple. There were no books available then. I mean no written books, no published volumes, only human beings. And they served as living libraries or encyclopedias. Yes, you could consult them, turn the pages, question them and even annotate them. Were it not for those sages and their extraordinary recall capacities the oral tradition might have gotten lost, and we needed it for our very survival.

And that is why Rabbi Zeira was so careful, so analytical, so prudent when studying someone else's views, because remember, to print corrections or retractions, as some papers do today or should do, was impossible then. And Rabbi Zeira believed



[00:26:00] that if we want to serve truth we must communicate truth as it was.

Actually, his two passions were linked to one another. One of the profound motivations for his wish to go and reside in Eretz Yisrael was to be able to study under Rabbi Yohanan of whom we had spoken, I think, two years ago, and for whom he proclaimed boundless admiration. But then why did he talk about going instead of going? Why did he keep on singing his Zionism, his love for Eretz Yisrael instead of joining those sages and scholars who picked themselves up and went there?

He had a problem. His Babylonian teacher, the great Rabbi Yehuda, son of Rabbi Yechezkel, was against his Aliyah on principal. He believed that to go to the Holy Land before messianic redemption was forbidden by Jewish law. [00:27:00] And he quoted the biblical verse, *Bavela yuvau v'shama yihyu*, they, meaning the children of Israel, will be brought to Babylon and will stay there, and he, Rabbi Yehuda, read it literally. They will stay there means they must stay there in Babylon, until what time? Until God in heaven will decide to put an end to that prophecy and replace it with another one, the one about ultimate consolation and liberation. With a teacher like that Rabbi Zeira was afraid to make Aliyah.

Moreover, he enjoyed a genuine reputation among scholars in Babylon. His prestige was great and went beyond his immediate circle. He was respected, esteemed, admired. Granted, he was not fully ordained. No one received *smichah* in Babylon, but in his case that was quasi-irrelevant. Everyone knew that he could get the title rabbi immediately in any of the Palestinian academies. [00:28:00]

A Talmid Chacham of his caliber needed not to worry about titles. In fact, as we shall see later, he cared little about them even in Palestine. All that mattered to him was knowledge, the quest for truth, and whoever possessed knowledge was worthy of respect.

One day when he was staying with Rav Huna, the president, he served the Rav a glass of wine and a glass of oil, holding both in one hand. Rav Huna's son scolded him. "Why don't you use your second hand? Has it been cut?" quote, unquote. Rabbi Zeira, forever humble, chose not to answer. But the old, venerable Rav Huna reprimanded his son. "Have you no shame?" he asked him. "Here you are seated, and you allow a sage such as Rabbi Zeira to serve us, and that is not sufficient for you? Must you insult him too?"

And this incident illustrates that even Rav Huna had problems with the young generation. [00:29:00] (laughter) But it also illustrates that he knew how to defend Rabbi Zeira's honor.

But then one day Rabbi Zeira finally made his decision. He would break all ties with exile. He would go on Aliyah. But how would he go about informing his irascible teacher that he was leaving him? Several times he was on the edge of revealing his secret to him. At the last moment he lacked the courage to begin. At the last moment he would find an excuse to postpone the confrontation until later, always later, and weeks went by and months, possibly years.

The student couldn't tear himself away from his master, and then it happened. Rabbi Yehuda was taking a bath, and Rabbi Zeira came to announce his departure. And he heard the master giving instructions to the bath attendant, what to hand him first, what to put on first. And Rabbi [00:30:00] Zeira exclaimed almost in ecstasy, and I quote, "Had I come here only to learn that it would have been worth my while." But if you read the text you realize that was not the reason for his coming to the bath. He had come prepared for the last time to speak to his teacher, to tell him, to inform him of his irrevocable decision.

But once again he lacked the courage to do so, and once again he left him without unburdening himself of his secret, of his secret dream, of his burning desire. And so he left. He left Babylon without saying farewell to, and without receiving the blessing of his unique and uniquely beloved and respected teacher. But he left him.

At this point perhaps we ought quickly to open parenthesis and examine the situation of the Jews [00:31:00] in Babylon and of their brethren in Palestine. And thus we shall have a better understanding of what Rabbi Zeira left behind and of what he was about to discover. The contact between the two communities had been maintained regularly, frequently for centuries, and to be more precise, since King Jehoiakim's exile. History has recorded the tragic events that followed. Nebuchadnezzar and his legions invaded Judea, burned the temple, desecrated the sanctuary and carried off the princes and warriors of the defeated Jewish army as prisoners and refugees. They settled in nostalgia and hope. *Al naharot Bavel sham yashavnu gam bachinu, b'zochreinu et Tzion.* You remember the Psalm is by the waters of Babylon, there we sat, there we wept as we remembered Zion.

Jerusalem is a city of ashes, but its children uprooted and far away under the enemy's rule learned how to build on memories a new temporary existence. [00:32:00] In doing so they followed Jeremiah's advice. In his famous letter to the exiled Jews in Babylon the prophet told them to build houses and homes, to arrange weddings for their sons and daughters. In other words, not to yield to resignation, not to give in to despair, not to accept the enemy's victory as eternal or justified but to transform waiting into a dream and suffering into a prayer and prayer into creative expectation and faith. Live, Jeremiah told them. Live and celebrate life even when it seems somber. Wager on the future even when it beckons to you from the other side of darkness.

And so the community in Babylon grew in numbers and in depth. It became a diaspora. When its leaders returned home after 70 years to rebuild the temple many remained behind unwilling to give up gains and possessions and friends perhaps they had acquired. And so the Jews of Babylon created their own [00:33:00] centers of learning, their own spiritual fortress that later had an impact on the Jewish people everywhere, including at home.

Generations came and vanished. Empires changed rulers and systems, but Jewish life in Babylon continued. Persians succeeded Babylonians, upheavals followed upheavals, but in spite of the internal and external crises of endless turbulence the Jewish community managed to keep its social structure alive. As long as Jews refrained from getting involved in political affairs they could undertake any project and bring it to fruition.

They enjoyed total freedom of practicing their religion, studying Torah and teaching it, as we shall see later. As far as faith was concerned the government was tolerant. All it wanted from the Jews was their financial contributions to their campaigns, any campaign. The Jews were so comfortable in Babylon that in spite of their fidelity to the temple of Jerusalem, which they supported with [00:34:00] considerable donations already then, they did not support the Jewish revolt against Rome, which began in the year 66.

The military and political activities of their brothers in Judea were deemed foreign, and therefore they preferred not to take part in them so as not to endanger their own wellbeing. Simply put they had it too good in Babylon. It was kind of a golden age.

Two brothers, both leaders, Anilai and Asinai, went so far as to establish their own sovereign province, and it actually lasted some 20 years. After the fall of Jerusalem, Babylon represented a natural center of attraction for a new wave of homeless and hopeless Jewish merchants, teachers, workers, and their families, granted the academies in Yavneh, Lod, Sepphoris, and Tiberius could glory and did in having elevated the level of intensity of study to dizzying heights in spite [00:35:00] of Roman occupation, yet the future seemed uncertain.

It was enough for one Caesar to be assassinated by his heir, and they all were, for Judea to tremble. For the consequences of every shake up at the top in Rome inevitably produced an ill effect on the decimated Jewish community in Palestine. Strange as it may sound, the situation in Babylon seemed more stable. The Jewish community enjoyed many rights and was ruled by its own state-appointed president to control his own government apparatus with its officials and law enforcement agencies. He could, if he wished, levy taxes and sit in judgment over a variety of offenses including capital crimes. Only the rabbis could oppose him with impunity. And at times they had the courage to do so.

When they demanded a tax-free statute for themselves the president was outraged at first [00:36:00] but conciliatory in the end. You don't fight rabbis, and surely not when they speak on behalf of Torah. And he, the president, only spoke on behalf of secular power. Moreover, some of the rabbis were prestigious teachers who could indeed compete with their colleagues, the Tannaim in Palestine who ultimately were victorious.

In case of conflict, Palestinian academies have the last word in all debates. Especially since Rabbi Yehuda, the prince, published a Mishnah around the year 200. The unique position and privilege of Palestinian learning was never disputed in Babylon. All this notwithstanding, there was a lively and fervent debate going on between the two communities, and both benefited from it.

Scholars studied with more vigor. Students learned with deeper enthusiasm. In spite of geographical distances [00:37:00] they argued over hundreds and hundreds of issues. We are witness to heated arguments, passionate confrontations. Jewish intellectual life was rarely as stimulating, as productive, or as creative.



That Rabbi Zeira belonged to the elite in Babylon's Jewish society is clear. Just read the names of his friend and colleagues, Rabbi Ammi, Rabbi Assi, Rabbi Abba bar Hiyya, Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, Rabbi Abbahu, Rabbi Yakov bar Idi, all sought his company, all looked up to him. Once when he didn't feel well they prayed for his recovery, and Rabbi Abbahu went further. I quote, "Let Rabbi Zeira get well," he said, "And in gratitude I will offer a free meal to the sages."

The great Rabbi Yehuda treated him as a favorite disciple. Rav Huna, the president, often invited him to his official residence. We know this for Rabbi Zeira himself once expressed his views on the subject of how to deal with official invitations. "I refuse the [00:38:00] president's presence," he said, "but not his invitation." Firstly because he would never insult anyone, and to refuse a present would be an insult. Secondly because to reject an invitation would undermine the dignity of the office of the presidency.

But then the question arises. If the president invited him to his home and the rabbis respected him and the people liked him, why did he wish to go away to occupied Palestine? Why give up security for insecurity, the known for the unknown? Because he loved Israel? Everybody did. And I hope everybody does. And

yet not all the sages were ready to go and settle there then.  
And as for now, well, let's stay with Rabbi Zeira.

Many Talmudic tales deal with his zeal, with his burning desire to live in the Holy Land. One legend tell us that when he reached the banks of the river Jordan he was so [00:39:00] impatient to cross it that he forgot to undress. And he bathed and swam across fully clothed.

Another legend adds some embellishment to the picture. To cross the Jordan in those days one could either take a small boat or walk over a wooden bridge, which was generally considered unsafe. Naturally Rabbi Zeira in his haste and excitement refused to wait for the boat and chose the bridge instead. A heathen noticed him and couldn't help but mock him. "What a strange and impatient people you are," he told him. "Already at Sinai your mouth preceded your ears when you said *naaseh v'nishma*. You pledged to do things without even knowing what they were, and now look at yourself. Why do you put your life in jeopardy? Can't you wait for the boat?"

And Rabbi Zeira said something very moving. He said, "I am thinking of Moses and Aaron. I am wondering, [00:40:00] what

have I done to deserve something that was denied to them. They could not enter the Holy Land. Why can I?"

Need I say the obvious? At this point I confess publicly my profound affection for Rabbi Zeira for this answer. Don't you wonder occasionally what it was that made our generation worthy of witnessing some of the greatest upheavals in history. What my grandfather and his and yours did not see except in their prayers or in their dreams we see with our own eyes. The rebirth of an ancient nation in its ancient land, the restoration of its sovereignty, the new splendor of all Jerusalem. What have we done to deserve all that?

Another story. One day Rabbi Zeira went to the marketplace, again by himself [00:41:00] to buy food. As he watched the merchant he told him, and I quote, "I hope the scale has been properly adjusted," whereupon the merchant reacted angrily, "Go away he shouted. Go away, Babylonian. It is your parents and theirs, your ancestors who destroyed the temple. Get out of my sight."

Deeply hurt, Rabbi Zeira answered softly, "My ancestors? They're also your ancestors." The merchant turned away in disgust. Later in the day Rabbi Zeira went to the house of

study and listened to a lecture by Rabbi Shela on *Shir HaShirim*, on the Song of Songs. And at one point he heard the lecturer express a disturbing commentary. If all the Jews had left Babylon at the end of the first exile, the second temple would not have been destroyed. And Rabbi Zeira thought to himself, well, well, [00:42:00] the merchant was right.

Let us stop here again. With these two legends we have reached the heart of the matter. Rabbi Zeira mirrors all the feelings, ambiguities, contradictions, endless fears and highest hope and pride of all Jews who consider themselves always eternally totally linked to Israel and yet permanently or temporarily also citizens of the diaspora.

Our hesitations, our limitations, our burdens of guilt, but then also our aspirations and then also our willingness to help, our self-sacrifice, our readiness which must be there to come all the time to help our people there, it is already reflected in his life. Jerusalem versus [00:43:00] Yavneh, Yavneh versus Sura, in that case, is there a place for the Jew in the diaspora? And if so what is it? After all, none of us wants to play a role in general history. If at all we want to have our place in Jewish history. What is that place?

Rabbi Zeira asked himself these questions, and now it is up to his students and followers and disciples to do likewise. What really happened then? Remember, Ezra and Nehemiah, the greatest of the great, were fortunate enough to have been granted permission by Cyrus to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple in its splendor. But they are followed only by a minority. Why? How is it possible that there were Jews, many Jews already then 70 years after the destruction, that's all, who chose [00:44:00] not to follow their great leaders and follow them back to Jerusalem?

And now skip 25 centuries and examine the situation in Eastern Europe, not now but then, a generation ago or two. For a thousand years the Jews had been told by every ruler in every language that they were unwanted, undesirable, and yet they clung to their exile. Most left only when they were thrown out. Why did they wait so long?

Or take our own contemporaries. Let us be painfully honest and carry the thought to its however absurd conclusion. If the Jews of Babylon were co-responsible for the destruction of the second temple, what about our responsibility for what exists today in the world? If anyone had told me in my little town of Sighet that I, [00:45:00] Eliezer son of Shlomo, son of Eliezer Halevi,

would be privileged to live in times when Israel would once again be free, independent, and powerful, I would not have believed him.

But if anyone had told me then that in my lifetime there would be a free Jewish state and that I, a Hasid of Vizhnitz, a bachur yeshiva, a disciple of the Berditchever and an admirer of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, would not dwell in the land of Israel I would have believed him even less.

And yet, and yet from disbelief to disbelief here we are studying Rabbi Zeira. Hence the problem and hence the conflict. On the level of both conscience and being is it possible for a Jew to assume his Jewishness outside of Israel? Is it possible for a Jew to seek, entertain self-accomplishment, [00:46:00] self-fulfillment elsewhere than in the land of Israel?

When was Rabbi Zeira more himself, when he was waiting to go to Eretz Yisrael or after he had gone there? But then why did he wait so long, and why are we waiting so long? Of course I must say I have only a relative answer. I cannot tell anyone to go to Israel since I am not there, but I can tell all of us that we must define ourselves as Jews also with regard to Israel, that

Israel can never be outside the equation, which means the equation of my life or yours, no matter what.

It is part of the definition. It is part of our being. It is even part of our question if it is not the question. But then I read some sources which disturbed me and made me look into Reb Zeira even [00:47:00] more. Some sources suddenly said that Rabbi Zeira, the great hero, wasn't such a hero. True, he went to Israel. He went to the land of Israel, but then he went back to Babylon.

Ah, I said, if he did go back to Babylon then something is strange. Why did he? He already saw the truth. Why did he reject it? And he became then, to me, more than a Talmudic character. He became to me a subject for a literary investigation or for a psychological investigation. And I lived with Rabbi Zeira and with my wife for some time. (laughter)

What is it in Jewish mentality, in Jewish destiny that moves many of us to choose dream over reality and prayer over realization. Is it that we are all incurable, tainted with nostalgia? Is it the waiting [00:48:00] that makes us Jewish? Are we really more attracted by the quest than by its goal? Are

we so completely prisoners of our questions that we are afraid of the answers?

Actually, Rabbi Zeira is somewhat less intriguing and less perplexing than his teacher Rabbi Yehuda. After all, Palestine with its academies would have welcomed him and his pupils with open arms. Why did they choose to stay in Babylon or Rome or Alexandria? What was it that held Rabbi Yehuda back? The biblical injunction? What was good enough for Ezra and Nehemiah wasn't good enough for him and them and us?

Moreover, had he decided to leave most of his disciples would have joined him. Can you imagine the consequences? Can you imagine what would happen if all the teachers in today's diaspora, followed by all their students with all their families, would suddenly heed the call of Jerusalem? [00:49:00] It is indeed unimaginable. And therefore I am asking you as I am asking myself, why is it unimaginable?

I know these are painful questions. Many masters lived in Babylon and stayed there. And more than one sage really went back to Babylon. Take for instance, Rav. You know, the other said of Rav Yishmael, Rav, the pillar of the Talmud, Rab Zeira's teacher. He actually left his Palestine and went to Babylon.



Rabbi Levi ben Sisi and many others, why such a *yerida*? Why such defection?

If indeed *avira d'araa makhkim*, if the air of Eretz Yisrael makes you wiser, as Rabi Zeira put it, why did they return to the less potent one abroad? Why did they go or return to Babylon only to taste briefly, fleetingly exile and servitude? So as to better appreciate Eretz Yisrael.

Did they [00:50:00] go to Babylon only for the pleasure of returning to the Holy Land? I have no answer. There may be one, but I don't know it. In religious terms it's simple. For the members of Neturei Karta, for example, the question doesn't even arise. All things are determined up in heaven, exile and return. Both depends on God's will. But for those of us who do not claim to possess such absolute certainties and strength or weaknesses how do we orient ourselves at the crossroad?

If we were to analyze the problem in metaphysical or historiosophical terms we might conclude that the tension between the two communities would and should produce positive results. But does it? I wish it would. But I have never, I repeat, never heard so many Israelis complain so often, so

vigorously, so bitterly against our non-Aliyah, as in the last two or three [00:51:00] years.

Can I blame them, even if they blame us? Of course, I believe, and I do believe *be'emunah shlaymah* , with my whole heart, that this is specific about our destiny, that we have to live in dialogue, that we have to question one another, help one another as long as we are waiting for the messiah. But what do we do in the meantime? Who is right? Rabbi Zeira? Yes. Rabbi Zeira is always right. But what about his long wait? True, he did put an end by going to Palestine, but he waited. Well, we are also waiting.

Well, perhaps therein may reside the great secret of Rabbi Zeira. He taught us both the art of waiting and the necessity of acting. True he waited, but at one point he left. He said that he had seen in his dreams that he was not to go to Eretz Yisrael [00:52:00] as long as his sins were not forgiven. Does this apply to us too? Possibly. We believe that since we are waiting we must do something with our waiting, and to be Jewish means to wait, to wait for the coming of the messiah, yes, the messiah who shall confirm meaning and melody to every word and every song and every impulse.

Rabbi Zeira is right now, when he is in Palestine, just as he was right then, before he went to Palestine. Does it sound like a contradiction? I am not afraid of contradictions. Rabbi Zeira had reasons to leave Babylon, and Rabbi Yehuda had arguments for staying there. He was needed in Babylon and so were the other sages and teachers like him. They were needed to erect monuments in time and in words when monuments in places, geographically, however holy, were trampled and reduced to rubble.

Rabbi Yehuda never claimed the Babylonian academies [00:53:00] were meant to replace those in Eretz Yisrael but on the contrary that they were to serve as their echo and their extension. Just as Yavneh never aspired to take the place of Jerusalem, Sura never thought to serve as substitute for Sepphoris or Tiberius. In Jewish history everything is connected as in a concentric circle. We turn in the same direction hoping to reach the inner point, the center itself which conceals, which is eternal in creation.

In other words, to attain fulfillment as part of mankind, a Jew must work and live in symbiosis with his or her people. His or her individual project must encompass the community and not exclude it. Does that mean that we must at all times

unconditionally support the philosophies and the policies of the government of Israel? [00:54:00] Well, that's to explosive an area for me. (laughter) Let me stay clear of the minefield of politics.

But I do believe that at all times we must defend Israel. But it is still easier to return to our hero of tonight's tales, the shy and marvelously naïve Rabbi Zeira whose own adjustment to Eretz Yisrael gave birth to many stories and many difficulties. The butcher is cruel to him. The merchant is angry. He suffers as a newcomer. Quickly forgotten. The masters, the sages, the scholars welcome him in their midst with all the respect due to his rank.

He stays with his beloved Rabbi Yohanan, and later his disciples will stay with him and feel for him the same passionate admiration. He learns and teaches. He receives and gives of himself. He gives himself to friends and pupils alike. He's happy in Eretz Yisrael. So respected is he in the community that when his friend [00:55:00] Rabbi Eleazar falls ill people want to appoint him to his leadership position. But Rabbi Zeira has no taste for public functions. So instead he undertakes another long fasting period, 100 days only, to pray for his friend's recovery.

Naturally he is offered *smichah*, the coveted ordination, but he goes into hiding. Excessive humility, at the end he accepted ordination and the compliments that go with it. Only when he was told that when a person is ordained all his sins are forgiven. That's why we have so many rabbis in America.

(laughter)

But judging from what we have learned of his character we may offer a different reason for his opposition to be ordained. He wanted to illustrate graphically, personally his disapproval of the rabbinic system in certain parts of Palestine where, don't be shocked, the regrettably rabbinic titles could be sold and bought. [00:56:00] Even then, yes. If you could not get *smichah* for a small sum of money you could get it for a large sum. Of course only from a small school. (laughter)

Clearly for a man of integrity like Rabbi Zeira this practice constituted supreme blasphemy. How could they peddle Torah for money? Torah can be neither sold nor bought. Torah offers itself freely only to all who offer themselves to her. As Rabbi Zeira's favorite disciple, Rabbi Yirmeyah bar Abba, once said whoever consents to be a slave to the Torah in this world will be free in the world to come.

Money for Torah, yes, but Torah for money? No. Listen to a characteristic incident. It took place in Tiberius. Rabbi Zeira and his friends were sitting in front of the house of study chatting when suddenly they noticed one [00:57:00] of those, quote, "false or phony" rabbis passing by. "So let's pretend we are engaged in study," said one master, "and we won't have to stand up and pay respect to his title." "No," said Rabbi Zeira, "I refuse to pretend. I want him to know why I am not standing up."

As is the case of other masters, Rabbi Zeira's life mirrors life around him. Every biography contains and becomes an element of history. As you study Rabbi Zeira you learn much about his times. From his attitudes to laws you will know which of the people obey them and which disobeyed them. That there was corruption in all social circles, political and spiritual, we know. Corruption accompanies power, and in those times rabbis had power.

But that is but a detail and of marginal importance. Generally speaking, the milieu of Torah was remarkably pure and dominated by an absolute commitment to justice [00:58:00] and truth and friendship, friendship above all. Always we must remember that.

The tolerance of the sages towards another, even when they disagreed is remarkable, and we find it nowhere in the world except in extraordinary Talmudic tradition.

Rabbi Zeira was particularly known for his human virtues. Straight yet compassionate, unbending yet charitable, he was called the Babylonian Hasid. He prayed a lot and fasted a lot. A poignant and charming parable is told about him. The average person ought not to annoy his or her employer with too many demands, he said. But with God it is the opposite. The more we turn to him the better he likes it.

Variation on the same theme, and I quote, "When a person receives a guest he offers him a bed for the night. If the guest comes back he will be given a chair. (laughter) If he comes back a third [00:59:00] time he'll get a bench. If he still comes back a fourth time he'll be shown the door." With God it's different, says Rabbi Zeira. The more often you return to him the closer he draws you.

The Talmud teaches us a certain law about prayer. Whoever forgot to say his maariv prayer and remembered it in bed can stay in bed. That is the law, marvelously lenient and understanding. However, once it happened to Rabbi Zeira. While

in bed he remembered that he had forgotten to recite maariv. So out of respect for the law he stayed in bed. But out of love of prayer he couldn't fall asleep all night. (laughter)

When Rabbi Zeira was already an old man he would walk leaning on Rabbi Yirmeyah or Rabbi Hagai, and one day they noticed a man who passed with a lot of firewood. "Please," he said, "bring me a chip to clean my teeth." [01:00:00] But then he changed his mind. "Don't," he said. "If everybody took a chip the man's lot would disappear.

Comments the Jerusalem Talmud, not that Rabbi Zeira was so exceedingly pious, but he wanted to warn people to observe the commandments of Torah. In other words, one must serve as an example, as does the creator of man.

In those times, when a public fast was proclaimed the holy scrolls of the law would be brought into the street and ash placed inside as a sign of contrition and mourning. When Rabbi Zeira would see the Torah in such state of abandonment he would shiver with every fiber of his being. He apparently had also a refined sense of humor occasionally. One day he attended a meeting where his peers discussed the coming of the messiah. And he turned to them and said, "Please, I beg you to stop for



it is because of your talking that he is not coming." And he explained, "Haven't we learned from our [01:01:00] sages that the messiah will come, *behesach hadaat*, inadvertently? He will come when nobody pays any attention."

He also said people who run to hear a lecturer are rewarded for having run since few will understand anyway. (laughter) Once when Rabbi Abba raised a judicial question Rabbi Zeira turned to his disciple and said, "Whoever knows the answer will get a glass of very special wine." Two pupils raised their hands. "There goes my wine," said the master.

Another time he was asked to give his opinion on a matter that, as usual, opposed the house of Shammai to the school Hillel. And he said if I were not afraid to push my head in the middle of two lions in full fight I would answer you, but --" and he didn't answer.

There exists a weird story about him in the Treaties of Megillah, which we studied last week. [01:02:00] It was Purim, and Rabbi Zeira, according to custom, got drunk. Being Rabbi Zeira, who wanted always to do the mitzvah very well, he got very drunk. But he wasn't alone. His friend Rabba was with him. Had they gone beyond the permissible stage of

intoxication? Had they reached ecstasy? Perhaps. In the spirit of *ad d'lo yada*, Rabba seized a knife and cut his friend's throat. Rabbi Zeira fainted and died.

It was not until the following morning that Rabba realized what he had done. So he did what he could. He prayed. And miraculously brought Rabbi Zeira back to life. A year later they were together again celebrating Purim. (laughter) And Rabba ordered drinks, but Rabbi Zeira refused. (laughter) He said, "Enough," he said. "Miracles don't occur every day." (laughter) [01:03:00]

He lived a long life, so much so that his disciples wanted to know what was his secret? He gave an answer. He said, "I never lost my temper. I never envied anyone. I never walked four steps without *tifillin* and Torah. I never reflected on divine matters in unholy places. I never napped in the house of study, not even accidentally, and I never ridiculed a colleague."

His respect for people can be illustrated by the law on leprosy. Surely you know the law according from the Bible. If a house is contaminated the priest must inspect it before declaring it worthy or unworthy of being occupied. However, if the house is dark one must not open the windows for inspection. In other

words, give the house the benefit of the doubt. Said Rabbi Zeira, "This applies to human beings as well. Do not open windows to look into them. Don't search for people's possible weaknesses. [01:04:00] Every person is presumed just."

So in his personal and academic life he avoided conflict and controversy. Once he threw himself into an oven when he noticed a man whom he might have embarrassed. And that was his principal: better burn than shame your fellow man. Being a Kohen, he was not allowed to participate in funerals except twice. Once he was forced to participate in the funeral of the president and the second time when he was asked to deliver the eulogy of Rabbi Abin bar Hiyya who had tragically died at a young age. He was 28.

And Rabbi Zeira began with a parable. "Once upon a time," he said, "a king hired workers to take care of his vineyard but chose one of them after 2 hours to walk at his side and talk and talk. Yet in the evening he paid them all the same salary, and some complained. 'We worked hard all day whereas he left after 2 hours [01:05:00] to chat with you. Why such favoritism?' Said the king, 'What you have done in one day he did in 2 hours.' And that," said Rabbi Zeira, "was true of Rabbi Abin as

well. In 28 years he accumulated knowledge that all sages could not absorb in 100 years.”

But then there comes a time when one can no longer digest ideas and concepts and impressions. There does a come time when the body is heavy and the mind is tired. What does one do then? How does one fulfill the mitzvah of study when one is too old to search deeply for the magic beauty of a hidden clue left by earlier generations of scholars and pupils?

Rabbi Zeira found a way. He would go and sit at the entrance to the house of study and rise before those sages who could still study as though to teach us yet another lesson: to respect those who respect Torah is but another form of showing respect to Torah. [01:06:00]

When did he die, at what age? We don't know. We do know that he had prayed to God not to survive his friend Rabbi Yehuda ben Yechezkel. He did not want to live in a world without friendship. We also know that both died within one month from one another.

At one point he felt death approaching. He prepared himself and his friends to be ready. He ordered his disciples not to mourn

him so as not to interrupt their study, and especially not to organize the customary mourner's meal for the next day. Because in those days such meals were part of the funeral ceremony. We forget that. Strangely enough, the blessings that were recited at the funerals are the same one hears at weddings with a certain change.

Instead of saying, for instance, *baruch m'sameach chatan v'kallah*, blessed thou, he who rejoices, [01:07:00] the groom and the bride, they said *baruch m'nachem avaylim*, blessed be he who consoles the mourners. Why was this ritual abolished? Because too often some guests got drunk.

Anyway, Rabbi Zeira died an old man. Who attended the funeral? Was his son still alive? Were there other members of his family? An anonymous speaker delivered the eulogy, and its brief content has been recorded in our chronicles. I quote, "Babylon gave him birth, Eretz Yisrael educated him with love, and woe to Tiberius, which has lost its most precious jewel."

It is said that his death was mourned in the underworld as well. Coarse men, *reshaim*, and wicked men, says the Talmud, are quoted as having lamented aloud. And I quote, "As long as he was alive he would spend time with us and beseech divine [01:08:00] mercy

on our behalf. Now that he is gone who will intercede for us in heaven?"

Need we add that Talmudic sages were not too pleased with him associating with persons of poor reputation? The text says so explicitly. But he did not care. God has many children, and if God loves them why shouldn't he? And if God doesn't, why shouldn't he?

And so we suddenly realize that at times Rabbi Zeira did stand up to his peers and spoke up to defend his principles and his friends, whoever they may be, and above all to plead for Israel as we must all plead. And let us not worry if we are accused of loving Israel too much. If we are accused and rightly so, it is we don't love Israel enough. And those who may use our love for Israel as a reason to hate us, they hate us anyway. [01:09:00] And those who may produce more anti-Semitism, anti-Semitism I no longer believe is a Jewish problem. It's their problem. We shall go on, but how they will go on hating when all hate generates self-hate, I don't know.

This too I learned from Rabbi Zeira, for I have learned a lot from Rabbi Zeira since I began following him and loving him and studying him. Oh no, Zeira, small, he wasn't small at all. He

was a giant. He was great. True, I had troubles with him in the beginning, too good a man, too kind, too naïve, too innocent, too passive. I couldn't discover his dark side. Is it possible really that he did go back to Babylon after all? I wished he did. I would have had a good story. (laughter)

Furthermore, there were the sources, a few sources, so I bothered all of my friends. [01:10:00] What do you think? Did he go or didn't he go back? No, he did not. The time has come for us to take leave of Rabbi Zeira, and we do so with some measure of sadness. This unassuming sage who throughout his life saw to de-dramatize events and managed to flee the limelight, well, he caught our fancy.

This eternal peacemaker who sincerely believed that no person is wicked, that evil doesn't exist, that one shouldn't even look for it, what would he say about our generation, about our waiting, about our lack of self-sacrifice? Would he order us to leave all windows closed? What would he say about us Zionists living away but not estranged from Zion?

I wish I could ask him, and I do. But I am not sure I understand his answer, not in this respect. [01:11:00] At times one senses a mystery in him, around him. His transparenence must

have been deceptive. Some areas of his personality remain impenetrable. Some commentators do believe that he became a *Yoreid*, but then I did check again and again with Shaul Lieberman. We went through all the sources. And we came to the conclusion that they were all wrong.

Firstly, it would be out of character. A man who loved Israel so much wouldn't leave Israel. Secondly, there's only one quote that enabled some commentators to believe that he became a *Yoreid*. So with a man like Lieberman we go from edition to edition, from printing to printing. We went through all the printed Talmuds, and we discovered that that quote contained a typographical error.

He didn't leave Israel, but he died in Israel. His last words were not recorded, which is unusual. Did he look into the past, into the [01:12:00] future, perhaps? What distances separate us from him? Did he die too soon? Do we live too late?

Rabbi Zeira, we are told, fasted 300 days or 900 days so as to forget. As for us, we should do something else, something more, something different, perhaps even to fast longer. We must do something so as not to forget.



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