

Elie Wiesel In the Talmud: Eleazar ben Azaryah

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Tonight a story, a fascinating suspense story about revolutions and counterrevolutions, plots and counterplots. Except they do not take place in some political setting but rather in the Talmud. *Tanu rabanan*, this is what our masters have taught us. Bo bayom, on that memorable day in the great and prestigious academy of Yavneh where hundreds and hundreds of students and scholars delved deep into the law under the presidency of Rabban Gamliel, son of Shimon, son of Gamliel.

A serious and unprecedented event took place. The old [00:01:00] authoritarian yet revered leader was dismissed and a practically unknown young man elected to replace him. Many generations of analysts, Talmudic analysts, to be precise, try to understand exactly what had happened. Was it simply the outcome of a sudden and short power struggle, a premeditated putsch? Was power that important to Talmudic sages? Did it play such an important role in Judaism? Did Moses seek power? No, he did not, nor did Jeremiah. Only politicians seek power. Could it be that our sages were politicians?

In that context we must ask the question how is one to explain [00:02:00] this open though nonviolent revolt in a spiritual world where for centuries respect for tradition and seniority was part of the very foundation of collective study and teaching? The event provoked a shock that reverberated throughout the scholarly community in Judea and beyond.

Understandably so, never before, in fact, never since Moses, the first of all teachers, had there been an organized rebellion against a duly elected leader who personified the law, the authority of the law, and what is more, for no apparent moral reason.

Bo bayom, it was as though an earthquake had shaken up the Talmudic world, so much so that some sages inaccurately claimed that whenever this expression [00:03:00] appears in the Talmud it refers to that event, meaning to that revolt and the events immediately following.

What is the story? On that fateful day, still under the impact of what had occurred, we know now that participants felt free, free to reexamine certain laws that governed the national and individual lives inside Roman occupied Judea. Furthermore, they chose to act upon delicate problems that had remained in suspense since the famous disputations that had opposed the

house of Shammai to the house of Hillel. The compilation of the Mishnah began that day. Thus one must consider that that day was extraordinary and significant.

Old customs and procedures were brushed aside in order to celebrate youth and its nonconformists and [00:04:00] antiestablishment tendencies. Have I just painted you a picture of our own '60s? Nothing is new in the history of ideas and surely not in the Talmud. There are times when we should look back to get a better understanding of what is confronting and baffling us now, and the other way around as well.

So tonight we shall once again return to the Talmudic era and explore its eternal relevance by learning about its masters and their problems. We shall study their stories and predicaments and try to enter their hidden universe whose reality has become our secret memory or the secret of our memory. We shall retell legends and tales about extraordinary sages whose words found their way into our own. [00:05:00] We define ourselves in relationship to them. They are all our ancestors. They are all our guides.

In years past we have tried to penetrate the layers of time and legends surrounding Rabbi Akiva and his courage, Rabbi Shimon

bar Yochai and his mystical solitude, Rabbi Hanina's piety and Rabbi Zeira's innocence, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's achievements and Elisha ben Abuyah's failures. The stories about them contain wisdom and knowledge, search for truth and beauty. Their laws have for us become literature, just as their literature is literature. And what literature.

Both enchanting and forceful it appeals to our imagination and sets us on fire. Enter its gates and your life will be altered, enriched, endowed with mysterious density. It is not always factual, never mind. Only journalists and [00:06:00] Marxists preach the sanctity of facts. (laughter) Many of them fail to see the difference between facts and truth.

The Talmud is a gallery. What Paul Valéry said of Chaillot is true of the Talmud. "*Il dépend de toi, said Valéry, qui passon, que je sois tombe ou trésor. Que je parle ou me taise.*" It depends on you whether the Talmud speaks to you or not. Talmud means study, the study of study. *Ta shema*, come closer and listen and get involved in what you hear, in what you remember. Be willing to listen. Do so and every line will infuse you with ancient passions.

In the Talmud, if properly approached, the smallest incident takes on proportions of major events. The slightest challenge becomes provocation. "*Shor she-nagach et ha-parah...Mei-eimatai korin et shema b'arvit?*" Questions related to criminal and civil law, problems related to theological quests and anxiety all set in distant times and places and yet, and yet our lives and thoughts have followed and continued to follow their pace.

We live here. We work here. We study here. But in retelling tales of the temple we are transported into its burning sanctuary. Away from Jerusalem we dwell in Jerusalem. Listen carefully and you will hear the priests as they go to services. You will hear the Levites as they sing their daily chants, the same chants we repeat every morning or whenever we wish to express our distress or our joy.

Study the Talmud and your memory will be affected more than that. [00:08:00] It will be awakened. What would we do without memory? What right do we have to claim Jerusalem as our eternal city were it not for the conviction that our memory derives from its own? More than history, more than jurisprudence, more than philosophy, the Talmud represents all of these and more. It transcends all that is futile. It elevates all that has been humbled. The Talmud is life itself. It is the melody that

holds words together and makes them coherent and the vision that brings people together. Its glory enriches the present for it turns simple statement into poetry.

May I repeat what we have stated here so many times before?

Were it not for the Talmud our people would never have survived the long journey into exile. While Jews were being murdered in the streets, steps away in obscure houses of study [00:09:00] children and their grandparents went on delving into the glory and sadness of Jerusalem. That is what kept them alive another minute, another century, a minute that lasted centuries, that lasted until this day.

So let us remember. Let us remember tonight an episode which has intrigued many of our teachers, a scandal. A scandal that occurred at the summit, at the top. We shall examine its entire cast of characters. We shall weigh their motives, and we shall try to comprehend how this coup had become possible and how it eventually was put down.

Fortunately, the upheaval has been richly and abundantly documented. Those who witnessed it recorded everything, and the one who recorded it, according to some sources, [00:10:00] one, the famous ben Azzai. Scene after scene, incident after

incident we watch the plot unfold, first clandestinely, perhaps subconsciously, then overtly. We are allowed to listen to the questions, the outcries, the protests, the protests of the crowd, which at first is groping for direction until it bursts into action. We are there as things happen and -- but let us not run too fast.

We shall narrate the event by following sequence after sequence. Details are important. Patience. For the moment we must be satisfied with one piece of additional information the text offers us in the Talmud. And I quote, "As soon as Rabban Gamliel, the president, was removed from office, the guard who stood at the entrance to the academy was [00:11:00] dismissed. And so all those who wanted to study could enter freely and listen." Must we therefore in the sixteenth year of our encounters add anything? Is it necessary? I dare hope nevertheless that in this place doors can be opened without a rebellion. (laughter) [00:12:00]

It all began with a disciple, at this point anonymous, who appeared before Rabbi Yehoshua and asked for a ruling on the following question: is the maariv prayer obligatory or voluntary? "Voluntary, of course," said old Rabbi Yehoshua. Strangely, the disciple was not satisfied and went to solicit

the opinion of Rabban Gamliel himself who took the opposite position. "The maariv prayer," he said, "is compulsory." At that point the disciple, still anonymous, voiced his astonishment.

"How is it," he said, "that Rabbi Yehoshua ruled otherwise?" "Oh?" said Rabban Gamliel. "Wait, [00:13:00] wait until the scholars gather. Wait for the debaters. They will enjoy this." When they arrived the president did not open the session with the customary expression *sha'alu*, ask questions, but simply pointed at the student and allowed him to arise to his feet and, as in a well-staged play, to ask his question for the third time.

"The maariv prayer, the very last one, is it voluntary or not? May it ever be omitted therefore?" Normally the question should have been followed by a discussion. But the president obviated any such thing by announcing his decision right there. "The maariv prayer," he said, "is obligatory." Having enunciated his point of view, he moved his gaze over the participants and [00:14:00] asked whether anyone dissented.

Only one voice was heard, that of Rabbi Yehoshua. "No," he said. "No one disagrees." Where upon Rabban Gamliel, the

president, evidently lost his temper. "What?" he asked angrily. "Didn't you tell a student here earlier that the evening prayer was voluntary? Stand up, Yehoshua, and let the witnesses speak." And the old and venerable teacher, among the most respected of the academy, stood up and waited for the debate to unfold and be concluded.

His defense was peculiar. He confessed right away using an obscure aphorism. He said, "When a living person opposes a dead person the living person has a chance to win because nobody would contradict him." (laughter) "But since the witness is alive," he said, "I cannot deny." [00:15:00] And the incident was closed, and Rabban Gamliel resumed his discourse as though nothing had happened without even bothering to invite his adversary and colleague to sit down. He just continued to speak, leaving Rabbi Yehoshua to stand.

And this inevitably led to a reaction by the other members of the academy and the crowd, and they began to whisper, to fidget, to voice their displeasure at the public humiliation gratuitously inflicted on Rabbi Yehoshua. And it didn't take long for the whispers to become outcries. "Enough!" they said. "Enough!" And the president was obliged to stop, and from then on the study session took a dramatic turn. A decision was taken

to disavow the regime, to dismiss the president Rabban Gamliel, and to appoint someone else to replace him, someone who -- as always in such upheavals, [00:16:00] factions emerged supporting and/or opposing various candidates. The first name that came up, that of Rabbi Yehoshua himself, was discarded immediately. Why? Because he was too directly involved in the incident. The second candidate, Rabbi Akiva, one of the great masters of his generation, why was his candidacy rejected? I don't like to admit it but I have to, because of his social and economic status. He was not only poor but a descendent of poor family background. Had he been a famous family son, a famous son of a famous father, he would have made it.

In truth he was hurt, and he made no secret of his disappointment when the choice fell on a young but wealthy scholar, a member of an influential family, Rabbi Eleazar, [00:17:00] son of Azariah, whose ancestor was Ezra the scribe. When the position was offered to him, Rabbi Eleazar was surprised. He felt honored and flattered, but his submitted response was thank you, thank you, but I must go and consult my wife, (laughter) which he did, and from this we learn that one must always consult one's wife. (laughter)

And her answer was emphatic no. (laughter) And she was right. Displaying an amazing knowledge of human relations and weaknesses, she advanced an argument whose logic seems irrefutable. "Why should you accept this position?" she said. "What they have done to your predecessor they will end up doing to you." Still Rabbi Eleazar did not heed her advice, and from this [00:18:00] some students learn (laughter) -- anyway.

Rabbi Eleazar's reasoning was as follows. And I quote, "Consider the use of a bottle. It will be broken tomorrow. Is that any reason for not using it today?" And so he announced to his friends that he had decided to accept the nomination. He made his acceptance speech, about which we may have to say certain things later, and took the appropriate steps to inaugurate his reign. The first was to open wide the doors of the academy and to put a stop to elitist programs.

Imagine almost 2,000 years ago and we already had free education and open admissions. (laughter) Anyone wishing to study could now [00:19:00] come and study. As a result, hundreds of benches had to be brought in to accommodate the newcomers. Next the academy took up cases left unresolved for many generations, and the emphasis really was on change, exuberance, youth.

Enthusiasm ran high, hope even higher. All was well that ended well. Or was it?

The rebellion was short lived. It lasted one day, according to some sources, several months according to others. You know how Jews are. First they made the president suffer. Then they felt sorry for him. (laughter) And they reinstated Rabban Gamliel as president. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah's wife's premonitions had come true. The very same who had removed Rabban Gamliel now removed his successor.

Still, Jewish power [00:20:00] struggles are different after all. Having removed the young Rabbi Eleazar from high office, they in turn felt sorry for him. It's the old story of the Jew who says that both sides are right. And when his wife argues that such a judgment is impossible, he answers that she's also right. (laughter) Surely it was an embarrassing situation, one that offered no solution. How was it possible to spare the feelings of one leader without hurting those of the other?

Not to worry, just rely on Talmudic scholars. They can do anything and did. In the end, they managed to formulate a fair modus vivendi. Rabban Gamliel reassumed the presidency, and Rabbi Eleazar stayed on as his deputy, and thereafter, we are

told, Rabban Gamliel lectured two Saturdays and [00:21:00] Rabbi Eleazar the third. And soon, very soon, the storm subsided. Things settled down, and life continued as before as though the first campus uprising in Jewish history had been nothing but an episode, in which case it would only be fair for us to applaud the sages' wisdom and repeat, with tongue in cheek the Talmudic saying that Talmudic scholars increase the chances of peace in the world.

Is this the end of the story? Not at all. Having retold it schematically I suggest we analyze it now in greater detail. All its heroes and protagonists deserve our attention. They all are illustrious, erudite. They all had meaningful lives. They all had made an impact on Jewish thought and legend, and yet I must admit that at first [00:22:00] none of them really appeals to me as a human being except for Rabbi Eleazar's wife.

(laughter)

There is in all of them something perplexing and even troubling. It is only when we read the stories again and again and bring to them our experiences that we begin to understand them. Well, I shall stop here to briefly survey the context of the event. And so let us pay a quick visit to Judea and bring back a firsthand report.

Rome is victorious and Jerusalem is in mourning. The first century of the Common Era is drowning in violence and eloquence. Seneca and Tacitus, Flavius and Paul observe the scene. The Roman Empire [00:23:00] still strong but is already beginning to decline. A new religion will soon claim its scepter while in occupied Judea, in the Jewish land, all seems almost stable, almost quiet. Political structures have changed. What does it matter? The central authority has moved away from Jerusalem. Never mind. What matters is that Torah is alive. For those who teach as for those who study it, therein lies the meaning of life.

Ten years, 20 years have elapsed since the national catastrophe which culminated in the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of its temple. And yet Judea continues to live, to believe, to pray, to listen and transmit words that have echoed in its heart since Sinai. Jewish warriors are dispersed throughout the empire, but Jewish honor has not been diminished. Hadrian and his cruel edicts will not [00:24:00] prevail. Jewish passion for learning, Jewish quest for truth and humanity constitute an antidote to despair.

Young freedom fighters are already organizing clandestine bases in the mountains. And when they will finally strike at the occupying enemy their struggle will be remembered as one of the most glorious in history. In his message to Rome Hadrian will omit his traditional phrase, and I quote, "I and your soldiers are well." They are not well. Armies come and go, as do empires, but people's dreams never die. The law given to man in the desert in the hope of vanquishing the desert inside man, will enhance his inner sovereignty and thirst for immortality.

The proof: the ruins of its nationhood are still visible everywhere, and already it is demonstrating an astonishing vitality, living its present without denying its past.

[00:25:00] Better yet, it has started to build its future, our future. Those sages, those disciples of the law, those men drunk with God's word, how do they manage not to yield to resignation? They manage.

At Yavneh, for instance, a city of ideas founded and extolled by Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, one feels as though one could hear the heart of Judea singing its hope and clinging to its heart.

Although for another 10 years a Jewish king, Agrippa II, occupies the legitimate throne, no one pays attention to him.

People know of his admiration for and his subservience to Rome.

He may be the king, but he is an assimilated Jew. [00:26:00] In times of crisis, when Israel's collective destiny is at stake, people turn not to assimilated Jews but to the sages and teachers and students, the repositories of ancient and living knowledge, a knowledge both eternal and mystically urgent. In the academies of learning the sages transcend their differences and spread the call of Israel, the history of its dreams and experiments with God.

Naturally Rome watches the scene suspiciously. Domitianus orders his emissary Pompeius Longinus to reinforce discipline. Jews want to serve their religion? Let them, as long as their worship and study keep them out of politics. That is what concerns Rome, politics. The empire is still strong, but at the summit too many murders are [00:27:00] being plotted and executed. There is uncertainty everywhere.

The war of the Jews proved that the imperial army is not invincible. Today's victors may be defeated by tomorrow's. The war of the Jews has also proved that the word solidarity is real for Jewish communities everywhere. What happens to one community appears and must affect all of us. What occurs in Judea reverberates in Alexandria, Arabia, Cappadocia. Jews want to remain Jews even if it means they will suffer. This is

something Rome is unable to comprehend. If to be Jewish means to suffer, then why not stop being Jewish? Why remain faithful to traditions that offer no reward? The less Rome understands the more oppressive it becomes. [00:28:00]

Like nowadays in certain cities it is dangerous to be a Jew, so much so that the Talmudic leadership does not dare convene in full session of 71 or 72 members of the Sanhedrin, because Rome would view any meeting as a revolutionary plot. And delegations and emissaries are dispatched to Rome where they encounter as much success as failure. History will go on. History does go on. In the final analysis, the destiny of the Jewish people, we must remember that, is determined by the Jewish people and no one else.

The future of the Jewish people lies in Yavneh more than in Rome or Washington. And in Yavneh, like in Washington, much depends on the president. Appointed by Rome, the president is accepted by his peers and approved by the people. A putsch seems virtually impossible [00:29:00] except in the case we have the privilege and the pleasure to discuss tonight.

So let us reopen our tale, shall we? The President Rabban Gamliel has an argument with his illustrious colleague Rabbi

Yehoshua because of an anonymous student, and a new candidate, almost unknown, is proclaimed winner. But was he even a candidate? No. Was he but in the running? No. But then why was he chosen and when so many other sages were present? Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva were considered disqualified, all right. We can accept that. But there were others eminently qualified for the high position. Among the 71 or 72 members there were certainly some who had, to say the least, seniority over Rabbi Eleazar, son of Azariah. In fact, wasn't he the youngest, [00:30:00] just a bit too young?

His wife said so herself and said so to his face. When she mentioned his age he had this charming and touching answer.

)*"Harei ani k'ben shiv'iim shanah"*I look old, he said. I look like an old man of 70. And Talmudic legends add that indeed at that moment his hair turned some say gray, some say white.

Well, well, if nothing short of a miracle was needed to assure his election, why was he elected altogether? Only because he was rich and the son of influential parents with connections in high Roman circles? If the sages wanted to censure their leader Rabban Gamliel why didn't they replace him with one of his peers?

Furthermore, assuming they felt the need to censure him,
[00:31:00] why humiliate him in public? How is one to explain that because of a simple legal matter regarding prayer, of all things, an assembly of great scholars decided unanimously to impeach their president, something that has never been done before? Something was wrong with them, not with him. No, sorry. Something was wrong with him too and with everyone else connected with the incident.

Let us study the case of Rabban Gamliel versus Rabbi Yehoshua. Much is known about Rabban Gamliel, his wealth, his position, his thirst for power, his severity in matters of discipline. Nobody doubts his leadership qualities. They are evident. He is a leader, strict, rigorous [00:32:00] to the point of insensitivity. He must be right always. His superiority must always remain unchallenged. His word is law. And woe unto anyone trying to oppose him. Even when he is alone, alone against everybody he must win and often does. Just imagine, when he speaks the audience is paralyzed.

The only single student who dares ask a question does so at his instructions. And when the student receives his answer from the president no one dares to speak up. Why? Why this fear? Granted it is difficult to oppose a president, but then why did

he hasten so to voice his opinion? What about the good old principle of consensus? Normally he should have spoken last, not first, nor should he have shamed Rabbi Yehoshua. Mind you it was not their first quarrel. Earlier [00:33:00] they had disagreed on other matters as well, for instance, the very important issue of the calendar. But that's another story. And here it is. (laughter)

Two witnesses, as required by law, appeared before the tribunal and said that they had seen the new moon on the night of the 30th day but not the next night. "It doesn't matter" declared the president. "They have seen the new moon. That's enough for me. Now we know when to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the New Year."

"No," said Rabbi Dossa, son of Harkinas. "Their testimony sounds faulty. If they have failed to notice the new moon on the second night it means they may not have seen correctly. It is," and he gave a marvelous image, "It is as if they claim to have seen a woman giving birth [00:34:00] tonight and to have seen the same woman the next night still with child."

Seems logical. Rabbi Yehoshua thought so and said so, whereupon the president, in a rage, sent him an emissary with the following message. "I order you to appear before me with your cane and your purse on the day which according to your

calculations would be Yom Kippur." We can image Rabbi Yehoshua's plight and predicament. He asked Rabbi Dossa what to do. And Rabbi Dossa, son of Harkinas, answered, "You must obey, my friend. If we begin to question the decisions taken by Rabban Gamliel's tribunal we shall end up questioning all the decisions of all the previous tribunals, including those of Moses."

And Rabbi Yehoshua, in spite of his advanced age, in spite of his high position rose on his Yom Kippur [00:35:00] dressed as for a simple week day and with his cane and his purse appeared before the president. The story must have made the newspapers. Crowds must have gathered to observe the spectacle, the drama of the old man showing his obedience to their leader. As for the president, he greeted his visitor warmly. He kissed him on his forehead and said, "Peace unto you, my teacher and my pupil. My teacher, for you are wiser than I, and my pupil for you have chosen to respect my wishes."

That was very magnanimous because he won. But what about the law? Who was right according to the law? Rabbi Dossa's view is closer to truth than Rabban Gamliel's. The two witnesses could not have seen two consecutive nights one with the moon and the other without it. They must have been mistaken, which means

that [00:36:00] their testimony was questionable, which means that Rabbi Dossa was right in suspecting them and Rabbi Yehoshua was right in supporting him. But then why did the president rule otherwise?

He was entitled to his opinion, and it was his opinion that prevailed. But then why was he angry? You may say the president is entitled to his anger. But why was he angry not with Rabbi Dossa but with Rabbi Yehoshua? There can be no excuse, especially since both scholars, however reluctantly, immediately submitted to his will. His misplaced anger was not forgiven by the people. They remembered. The people always remember.

Another story? Another story. This one is about another incident, and it involves a calf that had the misfortune of being a firstborn, [00:37:00] a *bechor*, and therefore untouchable. It was destined to be sacrificed in the temple and could not be used for any other purpose. The only way for the calf to escape that distinction was to break a leg or wound its lips or eyes. In other words, only an accident could be a blessing for him or his owner.

As a result, there were many accidents. (laughter) And so the rabbis, who were not born yesterday, issued a decree. Even a wounded *bechor* could not be slaughtered for consumption or other commercial use. Then, lo and behold a certain Rabbi Tzadok, a famous Rabbi Tzadok, a pious man revered in all circles for his integrity, happened to have a *bechor* who happened, accidentally to wound its mouth while eating.

Being absolutely certain that this was a bona fide [00:38:00] accident, Rabbi Yehoshua allowed Rabbi Tzadok to treat the animal as any other, as though he were not firstborn. And the president heard of the decision. His rage flared up. "What?" he exclaimed. "You practice favoritism? Everybody must abide by the same law." And here again Rabbi Yehoshua displayed extreme humility and admitted his error. But the president again was not satisfied. In open session he reprimanded him and said, "*Yehoshua, amud al ragleikha v'yeidu b'kha.*" Stand up. Stand on your feet and let people bear witness against you, and the old master stood like a schoolboy while Rabban Gamliel delivered a long lecture.

Already then the audience reacted angrily to so much harassment. People began to grumble in discontent. Their protests grew louder and louder. At one point they yelled "*l'chuzpat,*

l'chutzpit" [00:39:00] the interpreter to stop, and he did. And Rabban Gamliel was unable to finish his lecture. As for the third and final incident, one with which we began our encounter tonight, it's related to a question, as I said, about the *maariv* prayer. And as it would happen often throughout the centuries, a discussion on prayer degenerated into a scandal. For the third time the president humiliated his associate, and this time was to be the last. He was made to pay the consequences.

He was removed then and there. Well, come to think of it, wasn't that the proper thing to do? Could the academy permit the holder of legislative power to use it as chief executive, to use it to offend his peers in learning and their disciple, thus offending [00:40:00] their very attachment to Torah and its values? And also was he totally lacking in compassion for people? Astonishing, Rabban Gamliel, could the prince of Torah really be so heartless, so arrogant? Did he truly believe that abstract law was more important than even one human being?

It is difficult to understand him. One may admire him, fear him, but one cannot love him. He seems too involved with power, his power. He is not vulnerable enough, not accessible enough. Worse, he is not a friend to his friends. For remember, he is particularly, if not exclusively harsh with his friends. He

forgives Rabbi Tzadok. He is lenient with Rabbi Dossa, but remains inflexible, excessively [00:41:00] demanding, and cruel with Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Eliezar ben Hyrcanus, whom he even excommunicated at one time. Why?

We fail to understand him. But then for good measure let us admit that his victim is not much easier to understand. Why is Rabbi Yehoshua so passive? Why is he so submissive? The teacher of Rabbi Akiva, a Talmudic giant, the *Av Beit Din*, Rabbi Yehoshua never protests, never argues. Why doesn't he? Is it weakness or exaggerated respect? How is one to explain his abrupt turnabouts? He clearly has personal convictions. Doesn't he consider them worth defending, worth fighting for? Could it be that he wishes to please all sides and be [00:42:00] everybody's friend?

First he sides with Rabbi Dossa. Then he deserts him. He says yes to Rabbi Tzadok only to change his mind minutes later. As for the maariv prayer, remember, first he says one thing, then having heard the president, having discovered that the president had a different opinion, he doesn't even try to explain, to debate, or to even offer regrets when the president asks, no objections? He hastens to say no. At least he could have said

Mr. President, thank you for changing my mind (laughter) or my vote.

We fail to understand how such a great personality and leader whose mind is so clear and whose learning is so vast could humble himself in public before another, any other. I would have preferred to see him straight and forceful, fighting for his ideas with courage and probity, even if it meant losing his vice presidency.

Why then [00:43:00] didn't he speak up? Because vice presidents never speak up. (laughter) If Rabbi Yehoshua was motivated by weakness then he should not have attained such a high position in the first place. Intellectually, this must be outspoken. They must defend the honor of Torah without fear or ulterior motives. Because of Rabbi Yehoshua's weakness Rabban Gamliel almost becomes more appealing as a character.

Isn't it possible, at least conceivable, that Rabban Gamliel was harsh with him because he, Rabbi Yehoshua, was so weak? Because he wanted to test him, to test his integrity to see how far he would go in saying yes and yes and yes again? Too much modesty, an exaggerated need to be conciliatory always ends with everybody to be linked by everybody are not good for leadership.

From a leader, even from a number two, we expect some measure of resolve to open [00:44:00] new gates, to show a new path, and to remain firm no matter how many times one is contradicted.

And so we find fault with the second member of tonight's colorful cast of characters. What about the others? The sessions were attended by the most prestigious and illustrious teachers and scholars of the time. They heard the president as he reprimanded their colleague, yet they waited until the third incident to speak up, to intervene. Why? Where were they during the first two unpleasant scenes? How can we justify their silence, their passivity at a time when their colleague's honor was publicly assaulted?

Even when the response finally did come, where did it come from? Not from the elite, not from the members of the academy but from the people, the audience, the simple citizens who had come from all over to study and who could not tolerate the humiliation [00:45:00] inflicted on a teacher they must have admired for his gentleness. It is clearly indicated in the Talmudic text itself, I quote, "*Ad sherin'nu kol ha-am*" unquote. The session was interrupted by the people, *kol ha-am*, not by the scholars. The people whispered and made noises protesting against Rabban Gamliel's way of treating Rabbi Yehoshua.

As in any good scenario the story tells us what the people actually said. And I quote, "How long will he continue to torture poor Rabbi Yehoshua? First we had the story of the calendar. Then came the incident with the calf. Now we starting all over again because of a prayer? Let us remove him from office." And that is exactly what they did. They removed him, impulsively, without the slightest discussion or deliberation, which is additional proof that the move was taken by the crowd rather than by [00:46:00] the academy, or call it, rather than by the board.

The board, as boards are wont to do, would have established commissions and committees and hearings. Crowds have no patience for delays. For the people, revolutionary moments are just that, moments. Lost opportunities are lost, often forever. Does this mean, therefore, that the crowd represents the good guys in the script? Is the implication that they are good and worthy of praise, that we should like them? Well, they are not beyond reproach either.

Firstly because they too waited too long. It may not have seemed long for them, but it surely must have been long for Rabbi Yehoshua. Secondly, why did they resort to such a radical

solution? [00:47:00] Couldn't they have sent a delegation to the president or sent him a letter or signed petitions or published ads in the world famous Daily de Galilee Times?

(laughter)

Thirdly, why did they do to the president the very same thing he had done to their hero? They humiliated him in public. And why did they use the ultimate weapon, impeachment? And lastly, did they even have the right to impeach him? But of course one must be strong to reason with crowds. They act instinctively. They must have interpreted the silence of the sages as consent.

Had but one scholar stated his opposition, had but one sage admonished them -- when scholars argue over Torah, you stay out of it -- they might have gone home. But the scholars remained silent in the face of the crowd's anger. No wonder that in the general confusion the successor chosen was Eleazar ben Azariah, [00:48:00] a relatively young and unknown and surely inexperienced leader.

But there too, we may ask the question why did he accept? Why didn't he answer please, don't use me as an instrument to settle your accounts? I will not allow you or anyone to manipulate me into shaming the president. I respect Rabban Gamliel, and I

love Rabbi Yehoshua, and I shall not do anything to hurt either's feelings. Why did he say yes so quickly? Wasn't he just a bit too eager?

Well, we said it earlier. Most of the characters in our cast appear anything but flawless. Even the great Rabbi Akiva seems to have been affected negatively by the incident. He had sought the presidency, and when he lost it to Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah he could not hold back his disappointment. He cried.

We may therefore deduce that *bo bayom*, [00:49:00] on that particular day of tension and stress, everyone concerned, except for Rabbi Eleazar's wife, everyone showed his least attractive side. The episode brought out the most negative aspects of their tempers and characters. That is unless we are mistaken. (laughter) Which means unless we offer a different reading of the story, which in the Talmud is always possible and even desirable. We can always say "*u'meidakh gisa*" on the other hand.

Yes, on the other hand we find it possible and even commendable to review the case and proclaim all the potential defendants innocent. Rabbi Akiva, in voicing his pain, taught us a lesson in frankness. He sought high office [00:50:00] and wanted us to

know that there is nothing wrong in seeking high office. One must not hypocritically diminish what one cannot obtain. It is human to aspire to go higher and higher. And it is human to be disappointed when you are left behind.

As for Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, he became president against his own will. He neither sought the position nor particularly wanted it. When it was offered to him he did not grab it. On the contrary, timidly, apprehensively he answered that he would go home. Poor man. He knew that he was not chosen on merit but probably because his more illustrious peers could not be chosen. He must have known that his tenure could not last. Still he said yes. Better be president for one day than not at all. After that one day he would, after all, remain ex-president.
(laughter)

Our teacher Saul [00:51:00] Lieberman is correct, of course, in saying had Rabbi Akiva been chosen he would have remained president for life. The reason for selecting young Rabbi Eleazar was that to remove him presented no problem. Both Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua knew from the beginning that it was only a game. And he himself knew it, as did his intelligent wife. But then why did he accept the nomination?

Out of respect for the scholarly community, out of affection for his teacher Rabban Gamliel?

Rabban Gamliel surely would have been more hurt had his position been handed to his opponent Rabbi Yehoshua or even to his peer Rabbi Akiva. Somehow it seemed less of a blow to be replaced by young Rabbi Eleazar because it was so absurd.

Let's consider now Rabbi Yehoshua's [00:52:00] apparent weakness of character. Why not call it flexibility instead and respect for the high office of the presidency? He understood that having lost its sovereignty, the people of Judea needed another institution to symbolize royalty and authority. In effect, the president had succeeded the kings and princes of Judea and Israel. And thus, for a scholar to disobey his leader would be tantamount to inciting general disobedience. The office would be adversely affected and so would the Jewish people.

That is why he chose consistently to avoid open conflicts with the representative of authority at the academy. It must have cost him to disregard his own views and bow to the presidents. He knew that it was Yom Kippur. And yet he went to see the president who behaved and made him behave as if this were just another working day. [00:53:00] He apparently decided to go to

any length to avoid scandals and dissension and criticism of the Israeli authority, his primary concern the collective destiny of his people. And that destiny demanded that he understand not only those who agreed with him but also those who disagreed, those who fought him, those who reprimanded him.

Had the president asked him for his opinion before offering his own he would have given it. But once he knew what the president thought he refused to disagree with him for the president represented Jewish continuity. And to question his authority meant to doubt Moses. As Rabbi Dossa put it, between Gamliel and Moses the chain had to remain intact.

In that context all decisions became irrevocable. Does this mean the Talmudic traditions negate the possibility of debates? Quite the contrary. [00:54:00] Talmud and debate are almost synonymous. Debates are important. They are necessary and even indispensable, only before the decision has been made, not afterwards. Once the decision has been made and made known it is beyond the reach of scholars and students alike. It is beyond appeal.

That is perhaps the reason why Rabban Gamliel was so intransigent. Son and grandson of martyrs and heroes, he had

but one obsession, to maintain the integrity of Jewish law and life. To rule for him meant to make decisions, at times difficult and painful ones. One day he exclaimed, and I quote, "Master of the universe, You know that whatever I have done was for the sake of Your name and Your glory. Whatever I have done was to prevent quarrels within Israel."

He was not popular, never mind. [00:55:00] He looked for continuity, not popularity. And if that sometimes meant hurting his friends he would hurt them and himself. He considered himself a victim of circumstances, a victim of his obligations. The price of leadership was to accept his condition, to hurt and be hurt. That is why he did not attempt to argue with those who removed him from office. He cited no law, quoted no reference, made no appeal for compassion or support. Of course he could have turned to Rome, but Rome's support was not what he wanted. He wanted to be Israel's spokesman in Rome to Rome and not the other way around.

Still he was feared. As president he enjoyed many privileges. He had the power to impose sanctions and imprisonment. His severity must have caused resentment. He was replaced by someone who was his very opposite. [00:56:00] Let's see the difference between the two. Rabban Gamliel cultivated the

elite. Rabbi Eleazar broke down all social and intellectual barriers. Rabban Gamliel said "*Lo yikhanes*", anyone who is not *tocho kiboro*, anyone who is not thorough, thorough in his own views and absolutely committed to integrity. Rabbi Eleazar did not put anybody to test.

Rabban Gamliel adhered to the strict obedience of the law.

Rabban Eleazar loved poetry and legend. He is the one who made the decision to incorporate *Shir Hashirim*, the Song of Songs and *Kohelet*, the book of the Ecclesiastes into the canon. Whereas Rabban Gamliel chastised, Rabbi Eleazar comforted. Rabbi [00:57:00] Eleazar's most ardent wish was to cleanse mankind from its sins, for in his eyes it had suffered enough with the destruction of the temple.

So charitable was he that he forbade slander, ranking it as one of the gravest sins. To spread or receive slander deserves harsh punishment. Compassionate with his fellow citizens, he once remarked, and I quote, "That to earn a living was more of an accomplishment than crossing the Dead Sea." He emphasized the humanity of man and his vulnerability. What would Torah be without manners, thus without respect for one's fellow man? He's quoted in the ethics of our fathers, that *Ein kemach, ein Torah*, "Celestial and earthly needs are inseparable. One needs

both to survive." Also, and I quote, "A man whose knowledge goes beyond his deeds is like a tree whose branches [00:58:00] are stronger than his roots."

His ideal was to attain truth through deeds. Ideas must be put into practice. And his most beautiful and penetrating saying, and I quote, "Yom Kippur," he said, "has been given us to obtain forgiveness. But God can forgive us only sins committed against God. Sins committed against another human being cannot be forgiven, not even by God, only by that other human being."

He had a marvelous sense of interpretation. Example: about the plagues in Egypt it is written in the text "*Vataal hatzfardeiah*" , and a frog, in singular, emerged and covered the land of [00:59:00] Egypt. Said Rabbi Akiva, that means that there was one frog, and the frog was large enough to invade the entire country. Answered Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, "Kiva, Kiva, why are you dealing with homilies, with matters of aggadah, of legend. They are too complicated for you. You study law. In truth," said Rabbi Eleazar, "there was one frog that arrived on the scene, only one. And that frog began to whistle. And all the others came running. (laughter) And they covered the land."

Which means, and I heard it, it's beautiful, beautiful interpretation, I heard it in shul, that means that the other frogs had been there before below the surface. And isn't this a poignant illustration of the situation today? One incident was enough to encourage [01:00:00] many, many hidden anti-Semites to come out into the open. One was whistling, and then there were two, and then there are ten, and now there are in the thousands.

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah was generous, well-mannered, refined, conciliatory, healing. And those were his virtues. He was not a great legislator. His name is quoted only seven times in the Mishnah. What will remain of him is his humanism. "*Ha-Torah nitnah bilshon b'nei adam*" he said. And that is very important. The Torah was given to human beings in their human language, which means the words of Torah are links. The words of Torah are offerings and openings, not obstacles.

How can we not love him? It is Rabbi Eleazar who said, and I quote, [01:01:00] "A tribunal that passes even one death sentence in 70 years is to be called murderous." So we respond to him because of his humanity and because of his teaching. Power did not go to his head. He was not changed by it or even affected by it. In fact, it brought him closer to the common people. He used his position to help them more. But that was

Rabbi Eleazar. He strove to bring people, all kinds of people closer to one another. Instead of polarizing Jewish scholars he tried to establish links and bridges between them.

His very first speech, his inauguration speech, was an appeal, solemn and challenging for pluralism. He spoke of the uniqueness of God and that of His people. Yes, each of us may choose a different path, but at the end, as at the [01:02:00] beginning, we come to realize that God is one and that He is the same for all of us. Those who purify things and those who declare them unclean, those who say yes and those who respond no, we all put our faith in the same Creator. In other words, we may espouse opposing views and advocate conflicting principles, but none may claim to be closer to the truth than another.

And this message of extreme tolerance was one that was sorely needed then, if only to soften the harshness of Rabban Gamliel's interpretation of Jewish tradition. And yet Rabbi Eleazar's reign was short lived. His wife's premonitions proved correct. How did it happen? Let us read the text.

Bo bayom, on that very day, an Ammonite [01:03:00] who had converted to Judaism, a certain Yehuda, appeared before the

scholars in the academy and asked, "Am I allowed to become part of the Jewish community?" "No," hastened to declare Rabban Gamliel. "Yes," stated Rabbi Yehoshua. "You have taken on our faith, and now you are a son of the Jewish people."

"What?" exclaimed Rabban Gamliel. "Does scripture not tell us that neither the Ammonite nor the Moabite shall enter the community of the Lord?" The argument was excellent, but Rabbi Yehoshua had a better one. "Have we not been told," he said, "that the Ammonites and the Moabites no longer dwell on their lands, that King Sancheriv has merged all the nations?" In other words, we no longer know who is an Ammonite or a Moabite.

But Rabban Gamliel still did not concede defeat. "It is [01:04:00] also written in scripture," he said, "that the descendants of the Ammonites are destined one day to return to their homeland. That surely means that they are separate and already an entity of their own." "Correct," said Rabbi Yehoshua. "But it is also written that God will bring back the children of Israel to their homeland, and yet many have not returned." In other words, what is true of Israel is equally true of the Ammonites.

And sure enough, Yehuda, the convert, was accepted as a full-fledged member of the Jewish community. And soon after Rabban Gamliel said, and I quote, "Since the law is now according to Rabbi Yehoshua it is time for me to go and ask for his forgiveness," which he did.

The story continues, but we must stop once more to analyze what has been said so far. It contains the key and the answer to many [01:05:00] questions we raise tonight. Try to imagine the scene in Yavneh. Rabban Gamliel has just been removed from office, and yet when a visitor introduces a question he answers first, no doubt out of habit. He has not yet realized that he is no longer president.

Secondly, again a dialogue takes place, and again it is between the two old adversaries, Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua. What happened to Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, the new president? Why did he not speak up? Wasn't he newly elected to office? He was, but he also was still in shock. (laughter) He had not yet overcome his own surprise.

Thirdly, both Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua [01:06:00] offer proof that they are good debaters. Only this time it is Rabbi Yehoshua who has the last word. Why? Because at that point

Rabban Gamliel had become just another colleague. Now he could afford to disagree with him, which means had he wished to do so before he might have defeated him as well. But I must say that the most gratifying and touching element in the story lies elsewhere, and this reconciles me with both.

Again imagine, Rabban Gamliel, the authoritarian, the powerful leader, has just been defeated, humbled in public. And yet he did not go home. Instead of brooding or showing dismay he stayed at the academy and took part on that day in the scholarly [01:07:00] debates and studying the text and exploring the law, and thus teaching his peers and us a magnificent lesson in commitment to study.

He pushed his humility to the limit when he decided to travel to Peki'in and apologize to his old opponent Rabbi Yehoshua. At this point the Talmud picks up the story, and listen. As Rabban Gamliel arrived at the home of Rabbi Yehoshua he noticed its black walls. "Could it be that you are a blacksmith?" he wondered. And Rabbi Yehoshua, with unusual and uncharacteristic nastiness replied, "Woe to the generation whose leader you are. Woe to the ship who claims you as its captain, for you do not even know how students of [01:08:00] Torah make a living and what makes them suffer."

What did he say to him is that you are so wealthy, you are so rich that you never understood poor people. And Rabban Gamliel had nothing to say except "Forgive me," he said, in vain. His host turned away from him. "Please," insisted Rabban Gamliel, "forgive me. If you cannot forgive me for my sake do it for the sake of my father." And then and only then did Rabbi Yehoshua forgive him. And the incident was closed.

Not only that, Rabbi Yehoshua began right away to lobby on behalf of Rabban Gamliel to bring him back to the seat of power. First he persuaded, not without difficulty, Rabbi Akiva not to veto his efforts. And then he went to Yavneh, fully utilizing his IOUs, his gifts, his own friendship, [01:09:00] his own credit. And in the end he won the battle. Rabban Gamliel was reinstated.

That problem was solved. Another remained open. What to do with Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, who in a way had been forgotten in the meantime. Where was he to go? Back to the ranks? That was out of the question. He did not deserve such humiliation. And so he was allowed to remain as deputy with limited duties. He would preach one Shabbat out of two or three. And once more peace was established in Yavneh.

With the passing of years the entire question of internal power became academic. The Romans were constantly finding new tactics to stifle Jewish studies and Jewish life, and thus the sages have more urge and more vital tasks to perform to save their people. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah was sent on numerous official missions to Rome together with Rabbi [01:10:00] Akiva and Rabbi Yehoshua. And then we encounter him on the Seder, Passover Eve at Brei Brak, at the clandestine meeting with colleagues spending the entire night studying and talking until their disciples arrive to warn them it is time to say *Kriat shema shel shacharit*, the morning prayers. It is time to leave for the Roman police is near.

Strange Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, how strange that his public life could be defined by what occurred to him between the two prayers, *maariv* and *shacharit*. In any event, one fact has been ascertained. After the quick revolutions and counterrevolutions in Yavneh, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah and Rabban Gamliel remained good friends. We can find no trace of resentment, anger, or repressed rancor in either of them.

Once the brackets were closed, [01:11:00] life once more became normal, intellectually intense, and as creative as before.

Therein lies their greatness. Neither the old master nor the young had wanted or used power for its own sake. Neither considered himself more deserving than the other nor more pure. Young or old, obscure or illustrious, each had the right to aspire to high office, and each knew his own limitations. Therefore neither displayed any of the well-known withdrawal symptoms: sadness, melancholy, political intrigues. Neither indulged in any of those.

Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Eleazar respected and loved one another before, during, and after the crisis which turned them into rivals. They attended the same sessions together, took up [01:12:00] cases of public concern, together worked in their respective positions. Neither felt the need to change his views and beliefs, his allegiance as a result of what had happened, eternities earlier, *bo bayom*, on that day in Yavneh.

For ultimately in the Talmudic and Jewish tradition the significance of power is not to act upon others but on ourselves, to offer freedom instead of constraint, to become a symbol of inner independence rather than compulsion. That is how we view the privilege of those who have been given the power to speak, to decide, to chart a course for their fellow man and to work for the people or the state of Israel. It goes hand in

hand with responsibility, with the [01:13:00] mandate to give people the feeling of belonging to a community, a feeling of belonging period.

We are all children of the same Father, and if He is king then we are all princes. It is given to each of us to see himself or herself sitting at the feet of all the sages in Yavneh where power meant, among other things, the ability to change words into dreams, dreams into tales, laws into hope, the meaning of life into life, and life itself into a higher meaning, into a meaning that is both divine and human, divine because it is human.

At the conclusion of the story we shall draw your attention to one final question which so far we have [01:14:00] conveniently overlooked. I wonder whether you guessed it. A question that has to do with one character whom we have failed to identify, the anonymous student who after all triggered the upheavals at the academy, the one student who went around asking questions and thereby causing trouble. Who was he?

We waited until now to reveal his name because this is exactly how it is handled in the Talmud. Suddenly at the end of the episode when we have already forgotten the beginning and the

original initiator of the entire series of events, the text gives us almost as an afterthought, the following postscript. [01:15:00] *V'oto talmid*, and that disciple Shimon ben Yochai, *hayah*.

Who was the anonymous disciple? None other than the great and celebrated scholar, rebel, and mystic Rabbi Shimon, the son of Yochai. But that is another story. (laughter)

(applause)

M1:

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