

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: Job Revisited

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive October 6, 1983

Elie Wiesel:

With your kind permission, I would like to invite you to join me tonight on a journey. Together we shall meet a man whom we will never know in a land without boundaries or national character and hear a story that may or may not have happened then, though it is happening now.

Some of you may remember that once upon a time, meaning 17 years ago, we spoke of a man, of that man, whom we considered then to be both unusually simple and unusually complex. He was both hero and victim in a tale whose reverberations have been [00:01:00] heard and felt for centuries. Let's visit him. His name -- we have problems with his name because we don't really know where the name comes from. *Ish haya b'eretz Utz v'Iyov shmo*, there was a man in Utz whose name was Iyov, but what does Iyov really mean?

In fact, they may say that the name gives us a description of his tragic destiny. It means I-yov or I of, which means where is father? Where is our Father, where is He, He, God, the Father of us all, when man needs Him most to overcome or at

least to understand the misfortune and the injustice that have befallen mankind.

Now, why was he, Iyov, Job, chosen to be tested by God? Why was he driven to curse his own [00:02:00] life? What could he possibly have done to deserve such pain, such agony? All that he had amassed in the course of many decades, his possessions, his acquisitions, his memories, all of them were taken away from him. His children were killed. He was alive, but all that was left him was overwhelming disorientation and disgust.

And then surely you remember the story and its magnificent rendering in scripture: God's casual conversation with a tireless tourist named Satan, the succession of messengers and their similar, indeed, almost identical report, Job's unfathomable silence and then that of his friends; their sterile, almost pointless dialogues; Job's ways of challenging God and God's way of challenging Job; and then at last you remember this curious, [00:03:00] puzzling, disturbing, happy end. The conclusion of the story, why not admit it, leaves us dissatisfied. Our thirst has not been quenched. After reading the book we know as much about Job as we did before but nothing more. We understand God's ways as much or as little as before,

no less but no more. We still fail to comprehend the behavior of the characters in the cast. Who are the characters?

Let's remember, the first one, of course, is always the first, He's God. But then comes Satan and some silent characters, the B'nai Elokim, the angels who were Satan's friends who had allowed Satan to come in with them to meet God. And then we have Job's wife, their children, his friends, and at the end [00:04:00] his new children.

The relationship between all of them is curious. We don't understand the relationship between Job and his wife, as we shall see later, between Job and his children, as we shall see later, and we don't understand, of course, the relationship between Job and himself. If at one point God says to him maybe, maybe you didn't know what you were saying or doing; God knew. But when Job says to God maybe you mistook me for someone called *oyeb*, that means that perhaps *oyeb* meaning enemy. Job was his own enemy.

We shall see that there are many troublesome points that we have not touched upon 17 years ago. What we have touched upon is the obvious, is the unfriendly relationship that exists between his friends and him, [00:05:00] the overwhelming despair of Job and

God's long silence and then God's long talk, which did not break the silence.

But what is the book about? Is it about suffering, faith, rebellion, family relations? Is it about the economic decadence of a tribe? Here was a man who was a capitalist and then became a poor member of the proletariat. Is the book about justice? Or is it about perversion of ideas? These questions and many others have never been fully answered. Talmudic sages and modern scholars have tried to elucidate Job's pathetic options ranging from rebellion to submission.

So Job as we remember him is a fleeting yet obsessive image of man turned symbol, or perhaps a symbol in search of a man.

Indeed, was there [00:06:00] such a man? No, says a Talmudic sage. *Mashal haya*, he was only a parable. And commented Rabbeinu Shem Tov, oh, he lived, all right, but he only lived to serve as a *mashal*, to serve as a parable.

So Job is the eternal story of man's weakness and man's right and possibility to overcome that weakness. Job is an awesome legend. Job, a moment of fear and trembling, a question mark. Together, some of us have encountered him here 17 years ago. In fact, he was our first topic. But he would not leave me. He

kept on haunting me. His file remained open, the questions unanswered. And so I continued to search for new and new old sources. I went back to Talmud Bavli, the Babylonian Talmud, Yerushalmi, back to the Midrash Iyov, to modern literature, Jung's [00:07:00] Answer to God. Can you imagine the chutzpah? God didn't answer, but he did. Kierkegaard's and Kafka's attitude towards Job, and tell me, why did Voltaire hate Job? He wasn't even Jewish. Only because, quote, he complained too much.

Why have both Islam and Christianity exaggerated Satan's role, especially in relation to Job's wife? In my research I stumbled upon new commentaries. I gathered a word here, a surprise there, a point of reference, an omission, a repetition. For you know, there comes a time in the life of a man when one must choose between contradicting or repeating one's self, and I would rather choose contradiction.

But gradually I became convinced that after 17 years one may, indeed one must examine new evidence in this [00:08:00] astonishing case and see where it leads us. And so as we begin yet another annual pilgrimage to the sources of our collective memory and imagination, perhaps we should stop for a brief moment, as we always do, for a few preliminary remarks. And the

first is perhaps I should express a sense of surprised gratification. I don't know how are we to explain Job's sudden popularity? Perhaps because he has aged, but so have I. And perhaps that is why I understand him better.

I wonder how many here have been here 17 years ago. I know that I have been here. I often think back over the last 17 years, Adam and Moses and Jeremiah and Jonah, Esther and Joseph. You remember Joseph, the first Kissinger in Jewish history.

(laughter)

We have studied [00:09:00] much. And I have learned more.

There are new developments in these encounters that force me to study, and therefore I'm so grateful. This year, as some of you may know, John Ruskay, who is the educational director of the Y, has established study groups who meet before our encounters.

And under (inaudible) Lavey Yitzchak Derby, who was a descendent of the great Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, they studied together the text before we studied here. And 150 people came this afternoon, which is a great credit really to this institution and to yourself.

Another remark would be that I try to find something new in our own work here, and perhaps you should, or if you so wish, write

questions that you have [00:10:00] with regard to these exposes, and I promise you that at the last lecture I will answer them, and perhaps I will read them later.

However, what was the leitmotif, the dominant theme of every one of our encounters held here since we first invited Uncle Job to join us and tell us some of the adventure stories that made him famous? What was it? It was study. Commitment to study, passion for learning. What is the Jewish tradition if not a journey within language? Sometimes a journey of silence making its way through words. What is the Jewish tradition if not an obsession with justice for words and with words, an obsession with an idea forever the same, the idea of man's need of humanity as reflected in God's, [00:11:00] the idea that in spite of obstacles, communication, after all, is possible, that words are vehicles, not weapons, that prayers can be received and offerings shared.

Adam chose knowledge instead of immortality, but then to ask knowledge is immortal. What Moses heard at Sinai we repeat to this day. What Rabbi Akiva saw when saying *Shema Yisrael* we see when we respond *Baruch Shem Kevod Malchuto*. Words can grow and age and mature, and therefore some gain to be repeated. Some of you might remember the old Yiddish lullaby, which is the most

beautiful one, *Oyfen Pripetchik*. That is what a Jewish mother would sing to her child. And what did she say? (, that you will grow, only then will you know how many tears are in these letters, says the Jewish mother to her child.

Oh yes, we know about the tears, but we also know about the joy. We know about the fire. The little flame became a gigantic fire which consumed mankind's illusions, and yet our song continues to reverberate in our heart, and our thirst for learning remains as strong as before. *hafoch ba, hafoch ba, de kulah ba*. Turn to scripture, return to it again and again. It contains all the possibilities, all the legends that have shaped our attitudes to life and memory. Without the Torah of Israel, what would the people of Israel be like?

That is why we are told *v'hagita ba yomam va'laila*. We are ordered to study day and night, young and old, rich and poor. No one is exempt from study. The poorest of the poor Jews in Eastern Europe in my town and in others deprived themselves [00:13:00] of food and clothes so as to hire a melamed, a teacher for their children, something Job failed to do.

If you have studied the text, and I'm sure you have, then you have seen that Job was a good father but not a good Jewish

father. Read the text. It says so implicitly. His sons and daughters were never home, always attending parties. Did they ever open a book, study, acquire knowledge? If yes, their grades are nowhere mentioned. That their behavior was not the best is clear from the story itself. Job, we are told, had some suspicions about them, and therefore he brought offerings to God. He was afraid. Maybe they had sinned in their hearts against God.

But if he was suspicious, why didn't he do something about it? Why didn't he speak to them? Why didn't he educate them?

[00:14:00] Why was he so indulgent and so kind, so uncritical towards them? Did he believe that they were always right? So you see, Job can be, and is, a source of constant surprise. So removed in time and almost rendered fictional by legend, he never fails to touch anyone who approaches him.

We are told in the town where the then Rabbi Akiva was preaching about the *Dor HaMabul*, the generation of the floods, nothing happened, statistics. But then he taught the Book of Job, he cried and so did the others. Do you know why the high priest would read the Book of Job alone with the elders of Israel on the eve of Yom Kippur? To make him think and to make him cry. The story and the lesson of Job helped him get ready for the

next day when he would enter the sacred sanctuary and utter the ineffable name of God [00:15:00] for the sake of Israel and the world.

All this is very strange. God surely was Job's problem. But Job is not only God's problem, he's ours as well. And therefore tonight we shall meet him again, and in order to meet him we shall study again the same text but from a different perspective, perhaps. And we shall invoke certain legends that we have acquired since. But remember, all these legends are always made with the same 22 letters of the alef bet, the 22 letters that a Jewish mother was singing about in her lullaby. And what are they? They are alef, bet, gimel, dalet. What is dalet? Dalet in Hebrew means also delet, and delet means a door, which reminds me that the doors are closed. (applause)
[00:16:00]

So let us start again. *ish haya b'ereetz Utz*, there was a man in the land of Utz. *Iyov shmo*, his name was Iyov. *V'haya ha-ish ha-hu*, and that man was *tam v'yashar v'yireh Elokim v'sar mayra*. He was upright and good and fearing God and turning away from evil.

Now, the problems, you found them already. [00:17:00] We don't know where the land of Utz is. We don't know who Job is. Usually in the Jewish tradition we always get the name of the father. It should be Iyov Ben, the son of someone. As you know, the only person about whom it cannot be said is Adam. After all, what a marvelous condition for Adam. No complexes at all, you know. (laughter) But for Job it's impossible. He had a mother. Who is she? He had a father. Who is he? We don't know.

Even furthermore, even the compliments that the text pays Job are not in the right order. Any student who goes to a creative writing course knows that you start, as we say in the Talmud *ma'alim b'kodesh v'ayn moridim*. You start low and you go higher, which means you should start, *v'sar mayra*, after all, who doesn't [00:18:00] turn away from evil, and then *yir'eh Elokim*, who is fearing God, and then *yashar* and then *tam*. But here, right away we are told that the logic of Job is not our logic, that something is in this story which is so different that we must view it as a different story.

And then when you see it that way you realize that the entire cast of characters at the first reading is presented in a negative light. Let's start with Satan. After all, Satan talks

too much, but that's his job. Who else, the friends, we know how bad they are. The wife, she is nudging. And Job himself is negative because either he gave [00:19:00] in too soon or too late. That means we don't accept. If really his protest was true and genuine it should have continued.

So from all viewpoints you see that everyone in this book, in the beginning, could be seen in a negative light. Furthermore, the problem is even worse when you realize who began the story, who is at the origin of the drama. It wasn't Satan. It was God. Remember, usually it is Satan who tries to seduce, so to speak, man and tries to betray man talking to God against man. In this case it's not Satan who began. Satan happens to be there. It is God who is challenging. [00:20:00] It is God who is influencing Satan to be Satan. It is because God begins a story that Job has to suffer.

And strangely enough, Job senses it. He feels it instinctively because he never speaks to Satan. He only speaks to God. You read the whole story, and you see that the Talmud, which is of course preoccupied by it, has already taken certain steps how to solve this, the mystery. The real problem in the Talmud, as the Talmud sees it, is whether Job, who everybody agrees was a good

man, whether he did what he did because he loved God or because he feared God.

And in most cases those who are against Job, because the Talmud is usually divided, as you know, for and against, and those are against say, [00:21:00] oh, when he was good he was good only because he was afraid of God. There is a next step that not only was he afraid of sin, he was afraid of punishment. And that, of course, in the Talmud is a terrible thing to say. In our times it would be a compliment. (laughter)

Read the text and you see a tragedy because a tragedy has some comic connotations. [00:21:30] The next sentence, when you read in the narrative, is what? We take the reader up in heaven, and we listen to a very strange, bizarre conversation between God and Satan. On the surface the dialogue is banal, inconsequential, almost gossipy.

Did you happen to meet my friend Job? Yes. Is he well? Isn't he marvelous? You read the exchange of words, and you realize that they lay the [00:22:00] foundation for Job's trial and punishment. What begins with a harmless conversation ends in intolerable pain. God praises Job only to force Satan to oppose him. And that is the impression one gets from the text. God's

compliments are meant to arouse Satan's envy, Satan's jealousy, Satan's criticism. And Satan understood it. Otherwise he would not have dared to go on contradicting God. Satan was only an instrument, and therefore he disappeared later so quickly.

But one thing we have seen, it was enough for God and Satan to talk for Job's quiet and serene family life to be totally shattered. A messenger arrives with bad news. He has hardly finished when a second one arrives with worse news and the third with much worse news, destruction, catastrophe, [00:23:00] death and murder. Each time each messenger ends his report saying, poetically, and I alone escaped to come here and tell the tale.

I had problem with this passage all the time. The problem is how come that Job believed them? Any psychiatrist will tell you that the first impulse is to reject such a report. When a person gets a bad medical report about himself, herself, about friends or family, the first thing is it cannot happen to me. Especially in this case when it's against all the laws of chances that all these catastrophes should happen in one day to the same person and the messenger saying the same thing. Job normally should have said, come on. This is a [00:24:00] script. Somebody has written a bad script. Or he should have said it's a bad dream. It cannot happen to me.

Instead, Job believes them. Why does he believe them? And my feeling is he believes them because of another problem that the Talmud poses and answers all the time. You know, the old joke is not a joke. Was he Jewish? The Talmud, in 99 cases, says he wasn't Jewish. And they go to length, to great length to prove, all the Talmudic sages, that he wasn't Jewish. He was a counselor. He was this. He was that. He wasn't Jewish. He was a prophet to the gentiles. He was even the messiah to the gentiles. But he wasn't Jewish.

And yet, we study Job. We love Job. We take him, as we shall see later, we take him as the basis for our thought and prayer. [00:25:00] What does it mean really? Remember that also, that we Jews are not only concerned with Jewish suffering. Anyone who suffers, be it Job who isn't Jewish, we are concerned, and that is the universality of Judaism.

However, there is another reason, I believe. Job believed the messengers because he wasn't Jewish. (laughter) If he had been Jewish he would have started asking questions, first of all. (applause) Are you sure? Really? And where were you, and how come you came out? Unfortunately, we have seen it. In my lifetime, when I was young, in Eastern Europe there was a time

when [00:26:00] messengers would go from ghetto to ghetto, from community to community warning, and we didn't believe. We should have.

So Job was not Jewish, but his suffering was. And again, in the Talmud, we'll speak about it more next week when we discuss Rabbi Ishmael and his attitude towards Job, the Talmud, of course, was concerned for another reason too. Why did he suffer? And the reason was, that why did Job suffer? God and Satan played a game and Job suffered why? So they invented all kinds of marvelously naïve and innocent but beautiful reasons. Some of them are even so wise that they should be applicable to us today.

Usually we say that he suffered for two reasons. One, God wanted to take the Jews out of [00:27:00] Egypt. Satan opposed God. So God said to Satan, you know what, haven't you met my friend Job? Take care of him a little bit. And while Satan was busy torturing Job, God surreptitiously saved the Jews out of Egypt. Thank you, Satan.

Another reason, which is more beautiful, that Job was one of the three advisors in the court of Pharaoh. And when Moses came and said *Shlach et ami*, let my people go, Pharaoh asked his advisors

what to do. So the good one, Yitro, said let them go. The bad one, Bileam, said don't let them go. Well, he needed a decisive vote, so he turned to his third counselor, Job. And Job kept silent. Says the Talmud, because of this silence, he had to suffer. [00:28:00] Silence in such case, means indifference, and indifference in such case is a crime. Indifference to evil is evil. Because in times of danger, indifference never helps the victim, only the aggressor, the oppressor, the killer.

So we see that Job doesn't fare too well in the Talmud because he had sinned. Indeed he suffers because of his sin. There is another character in the book whom I love, his wife. She is the victim of victims. Poor wife, her role in the beginning is that of an antagonist, for no reason, even an irritant. And the text really is, I think, unfriendly to her and unfair. She is present but mute. Her only [00:29:00] contribution to the story and to the whole book is one line, really, one line. And what is the line? *Barech et Elokim, va'mayt*, curse God and die. Having added to her husband's despair, she withdraws behind the stage and stays there observing but unobserved until the end. And suddenly she becomes an object rather than a subject in her own story. And I am asking why such injustice? After all, whatever happened to Job also happened to her. Granted, when God talked to Satan He, perhaps tactlessly, inquired only about

Job, not about his wife. But is that a reason to ignore her altogether? Weren't they part of a family unit? Weren't they joined in marriage? When Job lost his wealth she too was left with nothing. [00:30:00] When Job lost his children, weren't they her children as well? The ordeal intended for Job affected them both. But then why is the entire book about Job and not about his wife?

Let's imagine a book written by her or about her. Would she be as ungenerous towards him as he seems to have been towards her? When he snaps at her, *k'achat ha-n'vaylot t'dabri*, I cannot even translate it in good English. This is not Job, a character in a holy book. He shouldn't talk to anybody like that and surely not to his wife. What did she say? What did she do?

She had simply offered him an option but after all, isn't the whole book about it? That means the book explores attitudes towards injustice, [00:31:00] suffering as a form of injustice. So we have all kinds of attitudes: passivity. In the beginning Job in the beginning accepts -- or suicide, which she advocates. When she says *barech et Elokim va'mayt* - curse God and die, that means she's offering him, you know what, if that's the case, suicide. Why not?

It can also be, of course, *tziduk ha'din kidush ha-Shem*, to accept God's ways as he does in the beginning. And it can be rebellion, as he also chooses an attitude. But for offering an attitude, an option, must she be rebuked and sent out for the entire book? (laughter) If ever there exists a male-oriented book in scripture (laughter) it's Job. Now tell me, aren't you glad [00:32:00] that he isn't Jewish? (laughter)

And yet, the book has been included in the canon. Its lesson has become part of our collective consciousness, and only now do I realize really how much we owe that book. Take for instance the laws of mourning. They all derive from Job. You remember in the text he put ash on his forehead. He tore up his clothes. He sat on the floor. He used the ritual expression *Adoshem natan Adoshem lakach - yehi shem Adoshem m'vorach*. God has given. God has taken. May his name be blessed. And then he withdrew into himself, delving in his own anguished memory. And the three friends who came to visit him remained at a certain distance. This is the law. This is how we should behave towards someone in mourning.

At first they looked and they looked. They listened. That's the law. We must give [00:33:00] the mourner the initiative, not to spring surprises on him, not to ask certain questions

that would hurt him or her. It's the mourner that dictates our behavior. And we take it from Job. Even the law of shiva, to sit seven days, comes from Job. And some of you may have studied these laws, and I submit to you that these are the most compassionate, the most poignant, the most beautiful laws in recorded history. There isn't an area in legislation, in behavior, in theory, in practice, in which our sages have invested more effort, more imagination, and more compassion than the area of mourning. We owe it to Job.

He also gave us a magnificent lesson in silence. [00:34:00] His silence was both response and challenge. For seven days and seven nights he was silent, and so great was his pain that no words could express or contain it. It's like Aharon, the brother of Moses when his two sons died. The text simply says something which, I would give up all my books if I could have written these two words, *Vayidom Aharon*, and Aaron kept silent. The line before this they died for entering the sanctuary, for bringing *Eish Zarah*, alien fire, whatever that means. And here is a father, *Vayidom Aharon*.

There is a suffering which commands silence. Job had seven sons and three daughters. And he lost them all. And he lost them all. He lost more than that. He lost, I think, his very faith

in relationships. What do you think he thought [00:35:00] not only about his friends, what do you think he thought about friendship, having heard his friends?

And therefore in the beginning he chose silence. And often I envy him for a silence that generated and inspired more silence. For one thing our generation needs today is a little bit of silence. It is the noisiest generation ever.

You read the text, and then you realize that the three friends are anything but friends. You know there are three terms in Hebrew to describe friendship or a friend. It is *yadid, b'yamim yedid Adoshem*. And *yadid* is very beautiful. It comes from two words, *yad* and *yad*, hand in hand. *Chaver*, which means to cleave together, *l'hitchaver*, to be one, and *rea*, which is kind of comradeship. [00:36:00] And *rea* has the, strangely enough, also the same word for *ra*, evil. That means there are some people who can be friends at the same time they're their own friends. And whenever they speak in Job it's always this expression: *shloshet ray'ay Iyov*, for they were evil.

What did they tell him? They tell him Job, you are guilty. Otherwise you wouldn't have suffered. Why are they angry at him? Because they are angry. When you hear, you hear them, and

the development is a dramatic development in their discourse, they are angry for what, I ask you? Has he cursed God and they should come to God's defense? Not at all, he hasn't. What did he say? He said *arur yom m'valed bo*, cursed be the day that I was born. He simply expressed [00:37:00] his despair. So what's wrong with that?

A man suffers. Worse, a man sees the suffering of his family, of his children, or his world, and he shouldn't even be sad? What do they want? What they say to him is inhuman. And again, you read the text, as I am assured that Rabbi Derby did with this group, that the escalation of the idea that Job is guilty, they go even farther than that. And I don't forgive them for that. They say not only are you guilty but your children were guilty. Otherwise they would not have been killed. My God, to dare say that about children.

One of them goes even farther and says you don't even suffer. You pretend you suffer. [00:38:00] You are only doing it for publicity purposes. It's in the text. And they use alternately logic, emotion, passion to convince him, to deprive him of his own deep and personal convictions. I don't like them because they are on the side of the winner always, always on the side of God. It's so easy. Their insolence, their insensitivity are

shocking. And whatever they say is so unnecessary, so unjust, so gratuitous. There could have been no other purpose than to bring him to his knees, to defeat him, to crush him, to give him the feeling that he is alone and that he is in a world without friends.

But who sent them? What motivated them? Who were they? They pretended to speak for God, and they may have thought they were God's friends, but they were only his defenders. They were [00:39:00] Satan's allies, for they did to Job psychologically, mentally what Satan had done physically. And that tormented him. They tortured him. And because of them I came closer and closer to Job. Their words ring false. They are deceitful.

Now I understand it better than when I studied first Job. There are degrees in suffering. To suffer from nature is one thing, from human beings is another. To suffer from strangers is less cruel than to suffer from friends. And Job's real tragedy, I mean his ultimate tragedy began when he felt misunderstood, worse, judged, condemned, betrayed by people who claim to be his associates.

At this point, perhaps, with your permission, I would open one more parenthesis and tell you of another discovery [00:40:00] I

made about Job. I was teaching Job last year at Yale, and there I had colleagues whose field is ancient literature. And one of them, Professor Bill Hallo, showed me some extraordinary texts from the late Babylonian period, some 800 years before the era, the Common Era. And some of these texts sound just like texts taken from Job, with the exceptions I will make later.

Listen, there's always a dialogue there between a righteous sufferer and his friend. So listen to the righteous sufferer who is suffering, and he's pleading with his friend, and he said, oh, wise man, let me speak to you. Then will I, the sufferer not cease to revere you, for where is a wise man like you? Where is a scholar who can compete with you? Where is a counselor to whom I can unfold my grief? I am [00:41:00] devastated. I am in the depths of distress. My father and my mother left me unprotected. My body is exhausted, weak from emaciation. My good fortune is passed. My security has gone. Does a happy life still await me? I would like to know.

And the friend answers, oh, palm tree, tree of abundance, my honored bother, endowed with all wisdom, gold, and jewel, you are as steadfast as the earth, but the plan of the gods is concealed. Look at the proud, wild ass on the plain. The arrow will hit the one who trampled on the fields. Look at the lion

you mentioned, the enemy of cattle for the wickedness which the lion committed, a trap awaits him. The one endowed with riches, the newcomer who heaps up profit will be burned by the king in the fire before his appointment time. Do you want to go the way these have gone? Seek, rather, the lasting grace of your god.

[00:42:00]

And the sufferer says those who do not seek their god, they go the way of prosperity, but those who pray to their gods are impoverished and embittered. And it goes on and on, these dialogues of the suffering man who says I want justice, and his friend says if you want justice you must have faith in your god. God is justice.

So he said but I'm suffering. He says well, you are suffering, but seek God's answer to your suffering. What it is shows here? It shows exactly the situation between Job and his friends. On one hand, on one side you have Job, who suffers, and on the other you have the people who explain it to him, his suffering. (laughter) This man is suffering, and they are making theories.

There is a difference between the old Babylonian texts and,
[00:43:00] I would read to you more, but simply we don't have that much time. They're beautiful texts. The difference is

that it's true that the problem of theodicy has already preoccupied ancient people, ancient scholars and poets. Well, the difference between the Babylonian texts and Job is that in the Babylonian text there is nothing but dialogue, only argument and counterargument. And there is no development, while in the Book of Job there is a marvelous, creative approach. It moves from verse to verse, from chapter to chapter, that the characters develop their own rhythm and they invoke their own destiny.

The other difference is that in the Akkadian and Babylonian text the sufferer speaks only to his friend, never to God. In our text Job speaks always to God. Even when he speaks to his friends he speaks through [00:44:00] them. He speaks to God. They only serve as instruments of communication because his quarrel is not with them. It's with Him.

But then they often fail to understand him altogether. They comprehend only his silence, which is to their credit. But when he speaks of his problems they are not there. I believe that his wife, I come back to her, plays a better role. What does she say? Get over with it. She's perceptive. I think she's courageous. I think she's strong-willed. And she spoke her mind. And she has a sense of literature. The sentence is

marvelous. It's clear. It's poignant. It says exactly what it wants to say.

What does she say? She [00:45:00] knew. She's too wise not to know that man can never defeat God, not even in a theological argumentation. Her purpose, therefore, was to spare her husband from further disillusionment. She wanted him to die before the three friends came. Good for her. Why wait for them and be exposed to more humiliation? Die now. You cannot win. And furthermore, which, maybe we should take her words literally. *Barech et Elokim va-mayt*. We say curse God because very often in this context, rather than say curse we say *barech*, the opposite.

But maybe she meant it. Maybe she really said *barech et Elokim va-mayt*, die while blessing God. Why curse? Bless him and [00:46:00] die. And this is *Kiddush HaShem*. And therefore, he's harsh with her. I think he shows no respect for her feelings, for her sorrow, and for her identity. He shows no compassion towards her and no appreciation for her advice and her assistance, and she's hurt.

And maybe that is why she withdraws. Maybe that is why she is no longer there on stage. After she has said what she has said

she disappears. But you sense her presence. She's there, all right. There is one midrash that said that she died, but she didn't. She was there. And you know why? We will see later, how we know that she was there.

We know that she is brooding, and she is right because I think she's the only good person in the play. But then, let's also be tolerant towards her husband's impatience, his restlessness. His entire [00:47:00] being is one open wound. No wonder that he's quick to insult. Her solution was radical but too easy. After all, you don't solve metaphysical questions with sweeping generalizations.

But in the process, as we said, there are attitudes that suddenly come into the open in the text. Suicide, which is surgery. You curse, and you die, and finish. The play is over. Curtain. You may also formulate philosophical questions in a way that make all answers impossible or implausible. You may also accept the answers in advance before the questions, and in so doing you reject all the questions. For Job there is no answer. For his friends there are no questions. And for Job's wife neither are valid.

But the book is also, I believe, not only about suffering. It's about the problem of injustice. [00:48:00] And the book clearly approves of its hero. Job is described as honest and pious and hospitable. And the Talmud goes even farther, comparing him to Abraham. You know the Talmud says had Job spoken without anger, which means he might have said the same words but without anger, we would have included him in our daily prayers. And we would have said *Elokei Avraham*, the God of Abraham, *Elokei Yitzhak*, the God of Isaac, *v'Elokei Yaakov*, the God of Jacob, *v'Elokei Iyov*, and the God of Job.

But he suffered, and he chose anger. Why did he suffer? Because of a deal, a deal made by God and Satan. On the surface the answers appear to be yes. But beneath the surface, beneath the surface it's more puzzling. I believe [00:49:00] that of all the injustices done to Job, do you know what is the greatest? What I think is the most humiliating, the most demeaning is the fact that never, never does he learn the truth and the origin of his story.

If God or Satan had stopped the play at one point, at the end, and said to Job, friend, do you know how all this began? You did nothing wrong. It was really a wager between me and Satan. I think Job was entitled to know the truth. He never learned

the truth. And therefore, throughout his journey from despair to despair, he gropes in darkness. [00:50:00] He experiences the melancholy of a man like Kafka's hero waiting for the door to be opened to be admitted inside the law, a man in jail waiting for a door to open, for a sound to break the silence, for dawn to disperse the shadows.

Read his discourses and you will marvel at his striking imagery. The metaphors he uses, and he uses frequently, often refer to imprisonment. There is always a person lying in his room, riveted to his pain. Or there is a person, a fetus, really, closed inside its mother's womb. Job is alone, and he says it in other words. He also realized that as a human being he's mortal, thus vulnerable, and thus easily reduced to dust, hence his humility. Even when he is angry he speaks without arrogance.

So humble is his language, I'm sure you realized it, that many of his lines are being used in [00:51:00] our liturgy on Yom Kippur. What is man, he says, and we repeat after him on Yom Kippur, only a shadow. What is life, he says, and we repeat after him on Yom Kippur, a passing whim. What is human ambition? An illusion in the desert. I quote, "Our days are those of a hireling." And we repeat after his quote on Yom

Kippur, what is a man? What is man that you should magnify him?
What is man that you should as much as notice him?

Listen further. *Adam y'lud isha k'tzar yamim, u'sva rogez.*
K'tzitz yatza, vayivrach ka'tzayl. Man's days are short, and
his troubles or his angers are many. He comes like a flower and
leaves like a shadow. We remember the Yom Kippur prayer that we
all love on Kol Nidre evening. *ki hinei kachomer b'yad ha-*
yotzer. [00:52:00] We are like pottery in the hands of the
potter, like a ship in the hands of the captain. We are
instruments in the hands of the artist, the worker, the creator.

Note one omission still in the many examples of the *Ki Hinei*
Kachomer. It is never said, it is never hinted that we are like
a toy in the hands of a toymaker because no human being is a
toy, anything else but a toy. But then what about Job? Wasn't
he a toy in the hands of two great toymakers?

The midrash, as you know, does allow Job to guess but only for a
fleeting second to guess that maybe it was a game. For, maybe
you remember, you have studied it, this legend is the only one I
repeat from then, from 17 years ago, which I like because it's
beautiful. It is at one point, [00:53:00] at one point Job
trying to understand. He wants to understand what is happening.

He turns to God. He says maybe mine is a tragic but only a case of mistaken identity. Maybe you confused Iyov with Oyev, the same words, the same letters. Maybe you have mistaken me, Job, with Oyev, the enemy.

And you know, God didn't answer any of Job's questions except this one. And God's voice, says the midrash, roared in the temples. Pull yourself together, man, and listen. Many hairs have I created on the human head, and every single hair has its root. I don't confuse roots. How could I confuse Iyov and Oyev? Many drops have I created in the clouds, and every single drop has its own source. I confuse neither drops nor clouds. How could I confuse Iyov and Oyev? [00:54:00] Many thunder bolts have I created and for each bolt a path of its own. I don't mistake one bolt for another. How could I confuse Iyov and Oyev?

I also want you to know, says God, that the wild goat is cruel with its young. As they are about to be born she climbs to the top of a very high rock and lets the little ones drop from the precipice. And so I prepared an eagle to catch them on his wings. But were the eagle to arrive one moment too early or too late they would fall to the ground and be crushed. I don't confuse moments or lightning bolts or drops or roots, and you

are asking me if I am confusing Iyov and Oyev, Job and the enemy?

Now, why did God tell him this story? Because He loves stories? So do I. But as you know, all stories have more than one meaning. In creation, everything has a purpose. All events are endowed with meaning. [00:55:00] And so God is above time. He's also in time. And so He is against evil. He is responsible for both good and evil. And the mystery of suffering implies God but indicts man and man alone.

Job's mistake, according to the Talmud, was not that he asked the question but that he dared to formulate answers. From his own individual case he wanted to build an original universal theory. Because he suffered unfairly, all suffering was unjust, which means the whole world is unjust. In which case, then nothing matters. If both the just and the unjust get what they do not deserve, or if they get the same thing, then the principle of justice has no meaning.

Comments the Talmud, and I quote, "Job's theory had but one aim, to remove the idea of justice and fairness from human existence. 'The just was born just, and the wicked was born wicked.'

[00:56:00] Job said to God. 'And you, God, made them what they

became. In that case, everything is your doing. But then why is the one rewarded and the other punished?" God's answer is powerful and crushing. It questions not Job's ideas but the perception on which they are based.

Where were you, He said, when I laid the foundation of the earth? Speak up if you have understanding. Actually, at this point my friends who are judges and lawyers will tell you that Job should have demanded that God's question be ruled out of order. (laughter) It is absolutely irrelevant. It is unrelated to the accusation. It's absolutely not related to his torment. After all, Job's question is not where Job had been when God created [00:57:00] heaven and earth. The question is where God had been when Job underwent agony. But if Job chose to remain silent and listen, it is because God had criticized him for using, and I quote, "words without knowing what they mean." And from the moment Job doubted his own language he knew that his case was lost.

Said the midrash, when God addressed Job out of the whirlwind He spoke as a pupil addressing his teacher. A strange role for God, isn't it? He chose it for one purpose only, to confuse Job. Job had expected God to speak to him as judge, king, or

even father, not as pupil. Pull yourself together, said God. I am going to ask you certain things, and you better answer Me.

And to increase his sense of bewilderment, God directed his attention to the greatest mystery of all, that of *ma'aseh bereshit*, the mystery of the beginning, saying [00:58:00] did I ask you for advice on how to create being out of nothingness? Do you know the laws that govern nature and the universe? On what does the universe repose? You don't know. Does it mean that it doesn't exist?

But there are innumerable things that you cannot see. Does it mean that you should not have faith in them or in Me, says God? What about your soul? Can you see it? And yet it exists. So God did not deny Job's right to question the validity of his own tragedy, only his determination to generalize it, and therefore turn human pain and divine intent into abstraction.

Job does with God what the friends of Job did to Job. They took concrete pain and turned it into abstract notions, and he, Job, did the same when he spoke to God. Now, I think so, that when he [00:59:00] did that he almost became his own enemy because he spoke like his friends. And they were wrong because they claimed that his suffering was justified, that all suffering is

justified. But he was wrong because he said that no suffering is justified. They were guilty of refusing to understand someone who is suffering, but Job was guilty of not understanding someone who witnesses suffering.

But again, they are all guilty of reducing human anguish and torture to theories. And therefore they were all rebuked by God, the friends more so because they had no excuse. Job had. Also, he needed God, whereas they invoked Him only as pretext. Job needed God to convince himself that although he himself didn't know the answer God did. Job was ready to accept divine injustice but not divine indifference.

If God [01:00:00] is not present in history then history is absent from human conscience. If God is God, God is, at the beginning and at the outcome of all our endeavors. How did the great Rabbi Zusha of Hanipol put it? I don't mind suffering as long as I know that I am suffering for the sake of God. Job's attitude was somewhat different. He didn't mind suffering as long as he knew that his suffering came from God. Did he acquire such a conviction during his two dialogues with God? No, never did God tell him that He was the one who made him suffer. Never did he tell him for what reason He made him

suffer. And all he did was to counter his questions with other questions.

They're beautiful, very poetic. Do you know the place where darkness is dwelling? Have you ever seen the gates of death? [01:01:00] Have you ever perceived breath of the earth? Has the rain a father? Out of whose womb came the ice? Who can number the clouds in wisdom? Who provides food for the raven? Questions and poetry, poetry and questions, and one more intriguing, more mysterious than the other.

It is as though God had decided to teach Job a course in cross-examination procedures. You, a human being, think you have questions? Listen to Mine. But I think that in doing so God offered Job, and through him to all of us, a new understanding of the mysterious man-God relationship. It is not defined by that which distinguishes question from answer but by that which separates one question from another. What then is man? A question mark [01:02:00] reflected in and opposed to and completed by another question mark for there is quest in question, man's quest for God and God's infinite quest for man, and both are in exile from one another inside one another. And both are longing for an answer, perhaps the same answer.

And that is why Job, right away, without hesitation, yields to God and submits to His will. He now understands that the essence of man lies in his ability to ask questions and to receive them as well. And that is why he doesn't argue his case but shows us immediate abdication. He understood that whereas he could question God's answer he could not but accept God's questions. The fact that God questions man was more important to Job than for God to answer.

Is there a greater tribute the Creator could pay to his creature? God spoke [01:03:00] to him in a manner of a pupil means He asked him questions the way a pupil asks his master questions. And for Job, obviously, that was enough.

What about us? Is it enough? The fundamental issue raised by the Book of Job is did he come through his ordeal a winner or a loser? Was he a victim of injustice or his own victim? At the end of the story we wonder who carried the day. What we do know with certainty is who lost. The three friends. God himself gives them a piece of our mind. Job endured everything, says Kierkegaard, until his friends arrived. Then he grew impatient. And so do we, and so does God.

I am angry at you, said God to [01:04:00] Eliphaz the Yemenite, at you and at your two friends. I am angry at you for not having spoken in the right manner as my servant Job did, for God dislikes flattery. He doesn't need it. God, the source of truth, demands truth and nothing else. No substitute for truth. And so he dismisses the three false friends who had claimed to speak on his behalf. Man is defined by his attitude towards his fellow man.

Had the three friends stood by Job in his distress they would have come closer to God. But wait a minute. The text speaks now about three friends. What about the fourth, Elihu? He also appears. He appears at the end on the stage just before the denouement of the plot. What happened to him? You read the text. He is the most vicious of them all. He repeats their arguments but uses insolence all his own. From the text it's clear that he is the youngest. He's ebullient, arrogant, offensive. [01:05:00]

Why has he arrived so late? He came when he felt that Job had already been weakened by the others. He came only when he thought it was safe to speak against Job. There was no more danger. And therefore God, wisely, ignores him. Elihu is a character in the play to whom God doesn't even refer. No wonder

that in some sources he's identified as the reincarnation of Satan who uses him to stage his own comeback.

Of course, the total losers, humor-ly speaking, are Job's children. Alive they were unhappy. They must have resented their father's constant and possibly unwarranted suspicion. In death they were maligned by their father's friends. They never had a chance. They died too young. [01:06:00] The injustices inflicted upon them cannot be collected.

But what about the chief protagonist? What about Job himself? For him, the outcome seems quite ambiguous. He won because his three or four adversaries lost. Still, did he in fact lose because God won? Here the logic is of a different nature. God's victory does not necessarily mean man's defeat. Quite the opposite. It illustrates man's participation in that victory and the other way around. When God says in the Talmud *nitzchuni banai*, my children's victory is Mine, says God. When man is sincere, when his or her outcry is genuine and genuinely motivated, they cannot lose.

The fact is that in his final concession speech, Job sounds humble and repentant. I abhor myself, [01:07:00] says he. I have sinned. I have erred. I am sorry. I am but dust and

ashes. I wanted to know what I will never know, things I am incapable of knowing. I wanted to understand things that lie beyond my comprehension, but now it's all over. I won't do it again. I promise.

But there is one sentence in this short but poignant passage that upon rereading strikes us as significant. *v'esh'alcha v'hodi'eini*. I shall ask questions of you, and you will answer me. It's exactly what God had told him earlier when out of the whirlwind he said pull yourself together, man. *Esh'alcha v'hodi'eini*, I have questions for you to answer. Now, why did Job use the same expression? To point to his secret resolve to continue the dialogue? To declare his determination to go on asking questions? If he won't we will. As far as I'm concerned they remain unresolved. The happy end is too abrupt, too obvious.

God says let's forget our [01:08:00] misunderstanding. And Job, a true gentleman, is willing to oblige. And all of a sudden Job is once again wealthy, respected, with a sense of fulfillment. And I quote, "All his brothers and sisters and acquaintances from before came to break bread with him and console him and get him money, jewelry, and gold as presents," unquote. How strange. Where were they when he needed them?

Suddenly he had seven sons and three daughters, and these daughters were all beauty queens. It said in the text the most beautiful in the land. Unlike the first set, these children had names, identities, and they must have been famous in their own right. But one detail is missing here. Did he remarry? No. He didn't have to. I told you, she was there. He was still married to the same wife. [01:09:00]

She had remained there throughout the entire year of his ordeal. She had heard every argument, every word, every insinuation, yet while everybody took part in the debate she kept quiet. Her silence is as impressive as their words and perhaps more so. But now she reappears on stage. And both decide to embark upon a new beginning. Difficult, so what? Impossible, so what? For a couple that has gone beyond its own despair nothing is impossible. They rebuild their home, their lives, their hopes. Is that the lesson offered in their book? That it is given to human beings to start all over again, to overcome anguish and bitterness, to affirm faith in life in spite of all that threatens and diminishes and humiliates life?

Is that Job's greatness, that he was able to once again assume his responsibilities of a father and a husband? That his memory

[01:10:00] and his soul were covered with scars, however invisible, however intangible, is clear from the expression used to describe his death. *Vayomat Iyov*, and Job passed away at the age of 280 years, *zaken*, an old man, *u'sva yamim*, old and saturated with years.

And you know this expression occurs also in the story of Isaac in the Akedah but not Abraham nor Jacob. Both Isaac and Job had enough. Having seen and endured too much at the hands of too many adversaries they were fed up with life. And both were too elegant, too delicate to express that feeling. As long as they were alive they celebrated its virtues. When death came they allowed it to carry them without regret as a song in the night.

And so Job does remain our hero for many reasons. He suffered and rebelled [01:11:00] against his pain, yet though he suffered he did not make other people suffer. In our tradition he symbolizes innocent suffering. Even though he was not Jewish, therefore, he symbolizes the universal implications in Jewish suffering.

I also like him because, let's admit it, he never denied God, not even when he protested against him. He stopped protesting as soon as God spoke to him out of the whirlwind. There is a

time for protest and a time for restraint, a time for memory and a time for forgiveness, a time for rebellion, a time for penitence.

One could argue that he should not have admitted to having committed sins that he knew nothing about. But he never said that he felt guilty. All he said was that he felt responsible. Did he wish to make God feel guilty? If so he died without knowing whether he had succeeded or not. All God said [01:12:00] was that He, God, too was responsible. The mystery of mans' limitations was thus matched by that of God's limitless powers. And what they have in common is the justification of its absence in the future of creation itself.

In conclusion, the drama of Job, the tragedy of Job as well as his troubling mystery can be found in one key sentence we have overlooked 17 years ago and tonight. And I think that this is the key sentence. It reads *hein yik't'leini lo ayachayl*. And usually it's translated as follows: though he will slay me, I shall continue to place my faith in him. Or I shall go on longing for him, meaning God.

In other words, Job affirms [01:13:00] his faith in spite of his suffering, in spite of his sense of loss, and in spite of the

presence of death around him, which means in spite of his doubts. He simply discards them. However, some midrashic sources indicate a different if not contrary approach. And they spell the word *lo* not lamed vav, which means him, but lamed alef, which means no. And now, let's reread the entire verse.

hein yik't'leini, though he could kill me, he could slay me and would, *lo ayachayl*, I shall not be longing for him. I shall not place my faith in him. For the second part of the same sentence, listen to it. *Ach d'rachai el panav ochi'ach*. I will maintain my own ways [01:14:00] before him. Which means it is not a denial. It's a protest.

And so the question whether Job did or did not lose his faith is condensed in this one brief verse. Is there an answer? Perhaps we could state, using Talmudic precedents, that *Eileh v'eileh divrei Elokim Chayyim*, both explanations justified by God may be true, but aren't they contradicting one another? Precisely.

The Talmud teaches us that there is nothing wrong with paradoxes. It is not given to man to solve contradictions but to assume them, to live them, and in moments of grace transcend them. But there exists a third explanation. You know, on the other hand. (laughter) It is possible that there is no

contradiction. It is possible that Job kept his [01:15:00] faith and rebelled against it at the same time and doing the same thing and saying the same words.

It is possible that having reached the height of his despair he achieved something new. He showed us that faith is necessary to rebellion but that also rebellion is possible within faith. There exists a time when the two are intertwined so as to strengthen one another instead of negating one another.

Ultimately, poor Job. We feel such sadness when we think of him. He learned that he lived in a world that was cold and brutal and cynical, in a world without true friends. It is in such a world that God seeks to join man in his solitude. The story of Job, [01:16:00] a story to denounce hypocrisy. Job thought that God had mistaken him for an oyev, an enemy. And yes, the four letters are interchangeable, alef, yod, vav, bet.

But there is another way of arranging those letters which is avoy, which means alas, oy. But I prefer to see the name because after all we are the people of the name. I prefer to see Job's name and in a different light and to use a manner which some mystics or kabbalists like to use, the gematria. Numerically Iyov, Job, is 19. And I found another word in my

vocabulary which also numbers 19. It is alef, chet, yod, which means *achi*, which means my brother Job. My brother, our brother.

Thank you. (applause)

M1:

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