

Elie Wiesel In the Talmud: Rabbi Ishmael Ben Elisha, the Martyr

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive October 13 1983

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) And it came to pass that when the great and revered Rabbi Yishmael was tortured at the hands of Roman soldiers for having studied Torah his pain was so overwhelming that he could not repress an outcry. And so powerful was that outcry that it shook heaven and earth. Nevertheless, we are told, the torturer continued to punish the saintly Jewish scholar, and so terrible was the pain he was made to endure that Rabbi Yishmael later shouted again. And his second outcry was more thundering than the [00:01:00] first. It shook the heavenly throne itself.

"Why has he been made to suffer so much?" the angels asked. "Is this the reward for his devotion to learning?" "*zu Torah v'ze s'kharah?*" "Once a decree has been issued it cannot be revoked," was God's answer. And He hastened to add, "If Rabbi Yishmael cries out once more I shall restore the universe to its primary chaos." And so kind and considerate was Rabbi Yishmael that he remained silent. And as we know, the world was saved.

This legend, however magnificent and awesome, presents some problems of plausibility. Since when is God so [00:02:00]

sensitive to Jewish complaints? (laughter) And since when is he so afraid of Jewish tears? Since when is he moved by Jewish outcries?

Furthermore, is it conceivable that the very existence of mankind be linked not only to the good manners but to the tolerance of physical pain of any Jew? Was Rabbi Yishmael aware of all this? Were the Romans aware? More important is the question why didn't Rabbi Yishmael cry? Why didn't he threaten his tormentor? "Listen, soldier, if you do not stop I have a secret weapon. I shall shout, and this will bring destruction upon you." Or again, theologically speaking, [00:03:00] why didn't he address himself to God, "Master of the universe, either or. Either You see to it that my torture comes to an end or the whole world will come to an end. Is that Your desire?"

Why did he choose to remain silent? But there is another question as well. Are we sure that he remained silent? Perhaps he did cry out. Look at the world around us. But these are some of the questions we intend to explore tonight, and in doing so we shall follow in the footsteps of generations of teachers and disciples whose lives were permeated by the burning desire to gain access to hidden knowledge by questioning its

acknowledged and only visible repository: the Torah and its glorious, [00:04:00] dazzling commentaries, the Talmud.

As you know, the Talmud is comparable to a seed, a Yam Hatalmud. It's an ocean. You plunge into it to discover its colorful universe. You study one verse, and you stay with it, and it stays with you for pages and pages, for years and centuries. Mishnah and Gemara, halachah and aggadah, history and jurisprudence, astronomy and gastronomy, geometry and etymology, no other nation, no other culture has produced such a monumental work of art and ideas. Thousands of scholars have contributed to the undertaking. They created their own schools, developed their own methods, and acquired their own style.

A sentence by Shammai is unmistakably his own. A parable by Rabbi Akiva bears his imprint as an opinion [00:05:00] of Hillel bears his signature. The study of the Talmud is therefore a personal involvement with its various enchanting and sometimes annoying but never annoyed characters. The beauty of Rabbi Yohanan, the strength of Reish Lakish, the piety of Rabbi Hanina ben Dossa, the eternal disputes between Abaye and Rava, the majesty of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi the prince, and the erudition of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurcanus. Would I be the Jew I am, the writer I am were it not for my meeting them day after day on their

territory within the pages of the Babylonian or Palestinian Talmud?

To study Talmud means to provoke encounters between master and pupil, Yavneh and Pumpedita, Volozhin and Vizhnitz, Minsk and Brooklyn. [00:06:00] But furthermore, even more important, real encounters between soul and mind, between Shabbat and *chol* and weekends, Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek and Latin and Yiddish.

Though universal in its approach and application, the Talmud is deeply and exclusively Jewish. Whereas the Bible has been claimed by at least two other world religions as basis for their mission, the Talmud was left to the Jewish tradition alone, except that as a result of being rightly viewed as part of the core of Jewish tradition it was victimized along with the Jews.

Our enemies in the dark ages never attacked the Bible, but they did burn the Talmud. And there is a passage in the Talmud in the Midrash, which is marvelously explicit about it. And I quote, "When the Almighty gave the Torah to Moses He [00:07:00] foresaw the day when other nations will say we are Israel. We are the Jewish people for we too abide by thy law, although it is written in Greek. And then God will say," says the Talmud, "No, only those who have knowledge of my mystery are My

children. And what is my mystery? The Mishnah, the oral tradition, the Talmud.”

But then why indeed has the Talmud fared so poorly with other creeds and nations? Because of its laws? Because of its stories? As a creative response to national persecution the Talmud helped us resist persecution. Is that why our enemies sought to destroy it, to destroy the shield? They never succeeded. In spite of crises and catastrophes in the midst of collective and individual torment, Jews remained loyal to the study of Talmud, which means [00:08:00] to study, to the study of literature, the literature of literature, the philosophy of philosophy, the sap, the vision, the soul of our very existence.

Will I ever state enough with enough enthusiasm and fervor my profound conviction that had it not been for the Talmud our people, our faith, our memories would not have survived exile? I can never repay my teachers what I owe them. And the greatest of them all, *Moreinu v'Rabbeinu* Shaul Lieberman, *zichrono livracha*, is no longer with us, no longer with me to guide my curiosity, to open gates and correct my conceptions and misconceptions, as throughout the years, I would prepare material for our encounters [00:09:00] here. Some of you knew

it, but not all of you, how much his help was felt in these meetings.

He would come here, and people would come not to see me but to see him come here. And in the beginning, some 16 years ago, knowing that he was in the audience, of course I worked harder, much harder. And I thought that I invented some *chiddush*, that I made a discovery, an important discovery. And after the lecture he simply said to me, "Come and see me tomorrow."

(laughter)

And I came next day to his study. And he said, "You made a *chiddush* last night. You are proud of it." I said, "Well."

(laughter) He picked out [00:10:00] an old book of the thirteenth or the fourteenth century, and he opened it, and there was my *chiddush*. (laughter) And he thought that I would be upset, quite the opposite. I was very pleased that I was going in the footsteps of others.

He came back another time, and he did the same thing to me. Each time I had the *chiddush*, it wasn't mine. And each time I liked it more. And then I became his talmid, his student in the most profound sense of the word. We became very close, personally as well. He knew that I would get married before I

did. (laughter) And he performed, of course, the *chuppah v'kiddushin*.

And year after year, week after week we would study. And there is so much that I have learned. The methodology in the Talmud, the fervor in learning, the [00:11:00] commitment to truth while learning, that you don't play with ideas, you don't play with words. It's too serious. Words that survived for 2,000 years in the Talmud and 3,000 years and more in scripture, you don't play with these words.

Your commitment to them is like a commitment to living people who go on living. And so I went on learning, and I hadn't published anything, fiction or nonfiction, without first showing my work to him. And he read French beautifully, so he even corrected my French.

Then a few months ago I was teaching at Yale, and twice a week I would come study with him, and one morning, just before Pesach, I went to study with him, and then we tried to say goodbye. [00:12:00] He was going to Israel the same afternoon. And we couldn't part. I had a feeling it was the last time.

Later did I understand why. I remember I came home. I said to my wife, "You know, he's very old," I said. "He's very old." And yet he was so clear. He was so lucid. He had the Talmud at the tip of his finger, and not only the Talmud but the Greek, the Latin culture, everything. And yet I felt something, and later I understood why. I realized that his desk, which was always messy, the messiest desk I've ever seen, it was clear. Somehow it was in order. It was absolutely clean. And while I saw the clean desk I remembered that a few years earlier [00:13:00] I came to see a man about whom I shall speak a little bit next week, Abraham Joshua Heschel, *zichrono livracha*, the same thing: the desk was clear.

He went to Israel. On the plane to Israel, on the plane to Jerusalem he died, *mitat neshika*, between heaven and earth, going to Jerusalem. As a disciple what can I do to pay homage to the memory of my teacher? Unless to continue studying the same volumes and others and listen to his voice, which from now on will reach me from the Talmud, the way we studied it together. The Jewish custom has, as we should say Kaddish *D'Rabbanan, al Yisrael ve'al rabbanan*. We should say it, and perhaps we are saying it in our hearts.

Talmud to me is now a voice, has always been. Talmud to me is many voices: that of children, Jewish children in cheder and adolescence in yeshivot chanting the text and finding in their moody melodies friends of the past and ancestors known and unknown who left Jerusalem but not the dream of Jerusalem. I am not an inhabitant of Jerusalem, but I want Jerusalem to inhabit me, and that is nowhere as possible as in the realm of study.

What is the Talmud if not a haven away from haven, a memory of Jerusalem away from Jerusalem? In Jerusalem there used to be yeshivot, but then all Palestine in those times were full of yeshivot. [00:15:00] And those yeshivot were very special. Some of them were outside yeshivot. And they had their own rituals, about which we have spoken so many times: how they began, how they proceeded.

Some yeshivot, we know, had not only the president and the vice president, the chacham, the sage, the speaker but they also had guards outside not to allow anyone who is a hypocrite. Anyone who is not, as they say, *tocho kiboro*, who is not inside as he or she is outside should not be allowed in. And anyone who is not learned enough, anyone who is not respectful enough of scholars, so those guards were very, very tough. Ours are not. And I am sure they will open the doors. (laughter) [00:16:00]

And it came to pass that Rabbi Yishmael suffered, Rabbi Yishmael died, and he didn't cry. Let us study and analyze this legend. What does it teach us? Firstly [00:17:00] it teaches us something about the enemy. From the legend itself and from the methodology attached to that legend and surrounding that legend we know all the methods that the ancient Romans have used in torturing, in punishing, in executing their enemies and, in those times, the Jews. And we know therefore that the enemy was cruel.

Secondly, we learn that the victim was human. Thirdly we learn that in our tradition there is always a connection between individual suffering and collective suffering. The suffering of Rabbi Yishmael as a person, as a Jew had an impact on the fate, on the destiny, on the condition of humanity. [00:18:00] Fourthly we learn that God cared. Otherwise He wouldn't have said to Rabbi Yishmael don't cry, don't shout. But God cared for whom? For the victim? For the world? For whom did God care?

We shall study this legend through the concentric circle method, and we shall see that our theories, our ideas, our concerns, our memories about methodology that have influenced Jewish history

for at least 2,000 years, if not more, could be already traced back to such a legend and others. Meaning what should a martyr be, say, do? When is a martyr a martyr? What is the obligation a martyr has to face and assume? [00:19:00] Is the martyr always passive? Can a martyr be active? Must one submit to martyrdom? Must one choose martyrdom? Must one rebel against martyrdom and how? By shouting, by fighting, by crying, or like Rabbi Akiva, by laughing?

I mention Rabbi Akiva because at one point you will see we will have to speak about him more. Why? Because Rabbi Akiva was the antithesis to and of Rabbi Yishmael. For the moment we shall analyze the story itself. But let's see who are the characters in the story. We know the identity, and we know the name of the main protagonist, Rabbi Yishmael. We know the enemy, a Roman soldier or a Roman centurion. As for the third protagonist, we don't even say who is he, but we only ask [00:20:00] where was he?

As for Rabbi Yishmael, who was Rabbi Yishmael? And you know, there we already run into difficulties. I am sure that Rabbi Levi Yitzchok who taught a class before our shiur has ran into the same difficulties because in the text we have two Rabbi Yishmaels, and even scholars seem to have confused Rabbi

Yishmael the sage with Rabbi Yishmael the high priest who was his grandfather.

According to the machzor, the liturgy for the High Holy Days, it was the second. According to other sources it was the first. And historians, for once, cannot make up their mind. Some argue that both died tragically as martyrs. Others claim that one, the sage, died a natural death. The general consensus is that [00:21:00] having been the friend of so many martyrs, Rabbi Yishmael, whoever he was, must have shared their fate. After all, in those times it was dangerous just to be Jewish. But to teach and study Torah meant to expose oneself to torture and death.

It is inconceivable that Rabbi Yishmael stopped teaching and studying. In other words, whatever happened to most of his peers, whatever happened to Rabbi Akiva, must have happened to him as well. But then when you study the text you realize that it is easy to confuse the two masters. Both were called Ishmael ben Elisha. Ishmael, what a strange name for pious leaders, scholars, and priests. Can you imagine a Reb Esau in the Talmud? Or a Reb Bileam? True, many Talmudic [00:22:00] sages bear Roman names, Tarfon, Marion, Papius, even Titus but not Moses, Aaron, or Abraham. Too heavy a burden perhaps.

As for Ishmael, the name was indeed used, and this serves as proof, according to Talmudic commentators, that the first Yishmael, the son of Hagar, did repent. Esau did not.

Otherwise we would have found among the Talmudic sages a learned scholar bearing his name.

What do we know about Rabbi Yishmael, son of Elisha? He was a Kohen, a priest. His parents were wealthy. We learn something of his childhood from an episode narrated by the venerable Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania. While on an official visit to Rome he, Rabbi Yehoshua, heard one day about a [00:23:00] Jewish child with beautiful hair, handsome features, and expressive eyes. And this child was in prison or worse, according to another source, in a place of ill repute.

The good rabbi went there, and standing at the door as though speaking to himself quoted aloud a prophetic verse. *mi natan she'nisa l'Yaakov* Who handed me over to the enemy? And from the lips of the child inside back came the second half of the sentence. "Because we have sinned." Deeply impressed and moved, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania exclaimed, and I quote, "I swear that I shall not leave before rescuing this child, even if it means that I will have to raise all the moneys in the world."

He fulfilled his promise and saved the child. And who was that child, asks the Talmud, naively? [00:24:00] Rabbi Yishmael.

Again, from this legend too we may deduct important facts.

Firstly that the old Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania was an excellent fundraiser. (laughter) Secondly that he was a good educator. He knew a good pupil when he saw or heard one. We also learn from this legend that Rabbi Yishmael had been a gifted child with a good memory for Torah and a sharp wit. A stranger quotes the prophets, and he answers immediately.

How could he be sure that the old man addressed himself to him? He couldn't. But he was sure of himself. He had heard a question, and it was up to him to give an answer, the right answer. But there is one question to which we know no answer. How did the young Ishmael [00:25:00] get to Rome? Who brought him there and why and when?

Now, from historians and from Talmudic texts we know that after the defeat of Judea following the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of its sanctuary, innumerable Jewish families were sent away from Roman conquerors to Rome and other places in the empire. There was a time when you couldn't enter a marketplace

for slaves without finding Jewish warriors and princes to be sold.

Rabbi Yishmael was still a child during those tragic events. Why then was he dragged to Rome? Was he put in jail? Why? Are we to believe that not only was he a Talmudic genius but a precocious political activist as well? In the case of another religious rebel and martyr, [00:26:00] Rabbi Hananiah ben Teradion, the father of the famous Bruriah, we know that his entire family was punished. He himself perished in the flames. His wife was beheaded, and one of their daughters, Bruriah's sister, was sent to a house for prostitutes for then Rome practiced collective punishment.

And so it is quite plausible to assume that during the political and military upheavals in Judea Rabbi Yishmael's entire family had been deported to the imperial capital. The child, being handsome and attractive, could easily have ended up in jail or worse.

He was rescued by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hannaniah who rescued his mother, because she too was rescued. And that we know from another story. We know that his mother, at one time, appeared in [00:27:00] Judea, and she appeared in the house of study

complaining to the other sages about her son. You know, a good Jewish mother. (laughter)

What was her complaint? She complained to them that her son, who was already then a respected scholar, did not fulfill the commandment *Kabeid et imecha*, honor thy mother. And the sages were shocked. They said it's impossible, not Rabbi Yishmael, after all. And they asked for an explanation, and she gave them the explanation. She said, you know, I love my son, and every day when he returns from the academy I wash his feet, and I want to drink the water, but he doesn't let me. And the judicial scholars ruled reluctantly against their friend. If that is [00:28:00] what the mother wants from her son, she must get it.

Of his relationship with his father we know much less. In fact, we know nothing. Elisha ha-Kohen, Elisha, what could we say about him? I am sure we could say about him what l'havdil was said about one Mendelsohn, that he was the son of his father and the father of his son. This Elisha was the son of Rabbi Ishmael Kohen Gadol and the father of Rabbi Ishmael the sage.

One source indicates that Elisha owned property in the Galilee, but this piece of information is both vague and out of context. The only element that could be related to it has to do with

young Ishmael's upbringing. If he was so learned a child he clearly had received an early good education, possibly from his [00:29:00] grandfather. But we know that his real teacher was Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, the sage who had rescued him from the Roman jail. But he also studied halachah and Midrash under a very great scholar named Rabbi Nehunya ben HaKannah, to whom many mystical books like the Sefer HaBahir were attributed. And he actually adopted many of his systems of thought and teaching.

We know that Rabbi Ishmael lived at a place named Kfar Aziz near Hebron and became an influential member of the Sanhedrin. But we also know that unlike his friend Rabbi Akiva, who was always involved, he was always involved in communal life, always involved in politics, Rabbi Ishmael stayed out of politics. He was probably small, thin, weak, always [00:30:00] full of suffering because he suffered. His entire life was full of suffering from his childhood in Rome and from everything about his grandfather, father. He was full of drama and pathos.

He must have been quiet, a withdrawn, a kind of introvert. And we know that because he played no role in the famous campus rebellion that occurred in the academy. There was a campus rebellion, we spoke about it, I think two years ago, that

removed Rabban Gamliel as president and replaced him with Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah, a young man who became old overnight.

(laughter)

Did he know about it? Yes, he was there. But he appears to have been neutral. And that is shocking because generally speaking [00:31:00] all his thinking, all the processes of his thought were against neutrality. Last week we spoke about Job. The person who said that Job suffered because he was guilty of neutrality was Rabbi Yishmael. He is the one who said that Job should have spoken up, that in times of crisis you don't remain neutral, you speak up.

Now, in that case why didn't he take sides? We know that the entire academic community was then in upheaval. Can you imagine, to remove Rabban Gamliel from the presidency? And everybody took part. The picture in the Talmud is so descriptive. The sages, their students, their pupils, young and old, everybody participated except Rabbi Ishmael. Why? Why did he [00:32:00] stand on the edge of the crisis?

Is it because he was always on the opposite end, on the opposite side of Rabbi Akiva? Is it because of the fact that Rabbi Akiva was involved that he didn't want to be involved? Or was it his

style, his belief to always oppose his adversary and friend Rabbi Akiva? We don't know. We only know that he did not participate.

We also know other things which are easier to find out, that he was married. But unlike Rabbi Akiva we don't know much about his wife. About Rabbi Akiva so many stories are told and so many beautiful stories. The greatest love stories in the Talmud are about Rabbi Akiva. When he married Rachel and she was the daughter of Kalba Savua, the rich, wealthy person. And some of you [00:33:00] surely know the stories, maybe all of you know them, that she would cut her hair and sell her hair to pay college tuition for her husband. She was the first example of a wife working so that her husband could get a degree. (laughter)

But then he paid her back, as you remember. When he came back with 24,000 students and surrounding him, worshipping him, she, his wife, couldn't come close to him. And suddenly he saw her. And he, of course, pushed everybody aside, and he said, "Let her come." And he said something so beautiful then. He said, *shelochem v'sheli shela*. Whatever you have and whatever I have, it's thanks to her." And then he gave her a present. And from this we learn that when a husband comes from a trip he must bring a present. (laughter) And the present Rabbi Akiva gave

[00:34:00] his wife, you know what it is? It's called "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav." And the song that we know now, the "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav" is really from there. "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav." "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav" actually means a golden tiara. He brought her a golden tiara.

We know nothing of what Rabbi Ishmael did to his wife, with his wife, or what she did to him. (laughter) That he was married we know, and that we know because he had two sons. And they died before him. And this we learn from a legend in the Talmud of the sages, many sages who came to comfort him, and who were, they, of course, the greatest: Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Yosef from the Galilee, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah, the new president, and Rabbi Akiva, his friend and opponent.

Said Rabbi Tarfon, and I quote, "Beware, friends, he is a great scholar both in law and parable. I beseech [00:35:00] you not to interrupt one another." And from this of course we learn that they used to interrupt one another. And Rabbi Akiva said, "I shall speak last." They all spoke in praise of the dead, but no clue is offered as to the reason for their death. They perished together, that we know, but of what disease or at the hands of what enemy? Did they belong to the Jewish underground? Did they fall in battle? We don't know.

At a later stage he lost his wife too. He remarried, and he had a daughter and a son with problems of their own. They too were abducted to Rome and taken to live in two different homes. The two Roman masters met one day and spoke of the beauty of their slaves. "I have the most handsome boy in the world," said the first. "And I have a girl whose beauty is unequalled in the universe," said the other. So they decided that [00:36:00] their slaves ought to be married and have children who would be very expensive.

And so the boy and the girl were brought into a room together and left alone in darkness. And the Talmud give us a description, which is heartbreaking. They remained huddled in opposite corners. The boy said, "I am a son of priests and high priests. How can I marry a slave?" And she said, "I am a daughter of priests and high priests. How can I marry a slave?" At daybreak they recognized one another. They broke out in tears and died.

We also know that Rabbi Ishmael had another daughter. We know that because she was still a child when he had passed away. He had a sister, and her son, Rabbi Eleazar, was his favorite nephew. Rabbi Ishmael spent a lot of time [00:37:00] with him,

helping him decipher his dreams, advise him in his studies, and guide him in life.

Rabbi Ishmael was extremely popular with women. When he died they raised a lament throughout the land of Judea, and I quote, "*Bnot Yisrael*, Daughters of Israel weep over our master Ishmael." Why so much affection? He deserved it. He was always on their side.

There is a story in the Mishnah. It happened that a man made a solemn vow never to marry his sister's daughter. The reason? He didn't like her. Why not? She was, well, according to him, she wasn't pretty enough. So she was brought to the house of Rabbi Ishmael, and lo and behold he made her beautiful, so beautiful [00:38:00] that the man didn't recognize her. And when Rabbi Ishmael asked him whether he had vowed not to marry her he said, "No, not this woman." And so Rabbi Ishmael, full of understanding and compassion, released him from his vow, and the two married.

Commented Rabbi Ishmael with tears in his voice, and I quote, "They are beautiful, the daughters of Israel. They really are. And when they are not it is because they are poor." And so we

see Rabbi Ishmael in two new roles: first as a matchmaker and then as an owner of a beauty parlor. (laughter)

He was less lenient and less tolerant with those men who wished to involve themselves in secular Greek studies. When his nephew, his favorite nephew [00:39:00] asked for his permission to do so he refused. But then since he himself knew the Greek language, that we know the Reb Ishmael knew, why would others not be allowed to acquire it?

He made the difference between language and culture. He himself needed Greek to study Talmud, but he did not want his nephew to study Greek with the purpose of discovering Greek literature. He was even harsher with miscreants, the heretics of his time, the minim, the Sadducees, and the new Christians. His nephew, Rabbi Eleazar ben Dama, was bitten by a snake, and he, the uncle, let him die rather than permit a certain Yaakov of Kfar Sikhnin, a place where the new Christians would gather, to try to heal him, as there was a practice then, by invoking the name of a man from Nazareth. "Call him," ben [00:40:00] Dama cried in despair, quoted in the Talmud, "Call him, and I will prove to you, my uncle, I will prove to you from scripture that it is permitted." But Rabbi Yishmael refused to yield. His beloved

nephew died, and Rabbi Ishmael said, "Happy are thou, ben Dama. The doubt did not transgress the words of thy colleagues."

Rabbi Ishmael was older than Rabbi Akiva but as forceful as Rabbi Akiva. He descended from a patrician family of wealth. He had all the virtues and also all the failings of his class, according to the great philosopher of Jewish history Louis Finkelstein. Rabbi Ishmael is described as morose, narrow, chauvinistic, almost reactionary, but also as tender, generous, [00:41:00] candid, direct, imaginative, romantic, and surely determined.

In spite of his friendship with several students and followers of Hillel, he was not one of them, meaning he did not share their plebeian affinities. But he did believe in their pacifism. In this he opposed Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai and Rabbi Akiva. As you know, both of them were militant activists against the Roman occupation.

But then Rabbi Ishmael opposed Rabbi Akiva in almost all matters. According to him, for instance, Torah is to be studied and interpreted as a literary document divinely inspired and written but without hermeneutic complexities. And when Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurcanus, the old sage, did use hermeneutics, the

young pupil Rabbi Ishmael protested. "Rabbi," he said, "Master, what are you doing? You say to the pasuk, [00:42:00] to the verse be silent until I interpret you?" Offended, the old master rebuked him. "You are as unproductive," he said to him, "as a highland palm." And he was proved wrong.

Rabbi Ishmael became one of the most productive minds in Talmudic annals. He disagreed with many of his elders, with most of them, with the exception of Rabbi Nehunya ben HaKanah, but so what? His own disciples often disagreed with him. He wanted to provoke dialogue. He wanted to provoke disputation. He wanted to share, to give and to receive, and therefore he believed, as we all do, the Torah does not tolerate flattery. Scholarship is the enemy of flattery, and the other way around, flattery is the enemy of scholarship. If Rabbi Ishmael disagreed, which he often did, [00:43:00] he had the right to say so, and he did. If he opposed Rabbi Akiva, so what? That also means Rabbi Akiva opposed him.

Rabbi Akiva favored the people while Rabbi Ishmael favored the priests, the patricians, and the farmers. Every camp had its champion. Rabbi Ishmael was so identified with his class that the Gemara comments, with tongue in cheek, naturally, "Ishmael the priest favors the priests." Not true. He fought for the

rights of the well-to-do because his opponents so vigorously defended the rights of the poor, and he believed that one opinion alone is never enough.

Rabbi Ishmael believed in discourse, in logic. He believed in language. *HaTorah nitna bil'shon bnei adam*, he said. And this is as important today as it was then. [00:44:00] Scripture speaks in human terms. One must not play with words but seek and accept their meaning according to set rules. To simplify matters he formulated 13 rules which today would be described as linguistic modes and precepts. When two verses seem to contradict one another, he said, you cannot solve the problem by a compromise, however poetic it may be. You must discover a third verse to substantiate one of the views.

"These are the seven things that remain hidden from man," we are told in the name of Rabbi Ishmael in another passage: "The day of our death, the day of consolation -- which means at what point does consolation begin? -- the depths and the scope of the law. Also, man does not [00:45:00] comprehend what makes him worthy, what is going on in the heart of his friend. Man doesn't know when David's kingdom will be restored and when the sinful kingdom will be destroyed," unquote.

But at the end of his life Rabbi Ishmael seems to have changed. A nationalist at heart, he stayed away from the rebels. You remember that Rabbi Akiva supported bar Kokhba and even went so far as crowning him the messiah, so much so that most of the sages ridiculed Rabbi Akiva, who was the greatest of them all. And they said to him, "Akiva, Akiva, *asabim ya'alu b'l'chayech*, grass will grow in your jaw," meaning you will be long dead *ben David lahem*, and the messiah will not have come." And in spite of the ridiculing, [00:46:00] in spite of the laughter, in spite of the sneering, Rabi Akiva went on believing in bar Kokhba. Not Rabbi Ishmael.

Rabbi Akiva's students, we are told that 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva fought in the armies with and under the orders of bar Kokhba. And they were all killed. Not Rabbi Ishmael's. His students were learning, always learning.

But at the end, in a way, he mellowed. He who had allowed his nephew to die rather than be treated by a heretic, by a healer, now permitted Jews to invoke the sanctity of life as a supreme commandment for even greater tragedy had overtaken Jewish life. Martyrdom had become a daily phenomenon. And so urgent was the problem that the sages had to meet at the special meeting at [00:47:00] Lida, and decide to formulate a code establishing

when death is a valid option and when it is not. And the general consensus was that only three transgressions had to be avoided at any cost, even at the price of one's life. And they are adultery, murder, and idolatry.

But Rabbi Yishmael softened the harshness of the laws saying one must refuse idolatry and die but only if the challenge takes place in public. Should the enemy, however, force a person to commit idolatry in private the victim may submit rather than die. *V'chai bahem*, said Rabbi Ishmael. This is the basic principle of Torah. One must live for Torah. One must live in Torah. Torah means life, [00:48:00] not death.

However, at the same time the Talmud also gave other rules. And all these rules are interesting because of what happened later, later in Jewish history, as we shall see. And one of those rules is as follows: true that a person may violate all the laws except those three, however, should a situation arise where national honor is at stake, for instance, a Jew is ordered to shame Torah in public and ordered to do so by the Romans or to violate, to transgress the Shabbat in public or even do something as futile as using green shoe laces instead of red ones, the Jew is duty-bound to resist [00:49:00] and die for Kiddush HaShem, for the sanctification of the name.

And that is the framework for all that happened in Judah during the Hadrian persecutions. Most of the martyrs had been caught and tortured and condemned to die for doing things in public: teaching and studying and ordaining disciples. In subsequent centuries during the religious upheavals in Europe, Kiddush HaShem became so profoundly linked to martyrdom that a special bracha, a benediction had been written for it. Victims would recite it before their voluntary death.

I am sure that you have read the chronicles. It's an extraordinary literary document that you cannot read without tears in your eyes but also with amazement that the [00:50:00] mass suicides that would take place in Mainz, in Worms, in (inaudible). To avoid conversion in the spring of 1096 during the First Crusade, Italian Jews preferred to perish in flames. Quote, "As a *korban oleh*," as pure total burned offerings.

In the Rhineland in France everywhere Jews would gather in synagogue courtyards waiting for the onslaught. First they tried to fight the assassins. Then when all hope seemed to have vanished they recited the benediction *Al Hashchita* or *Al Kiddush HaShem* and began slaughtering one another and die in each other's arms. Mothers would slaughter their children, husbands

their wives, grooms their brides. And we all have it written.
[00:51:00] Occasionally I studied it with students in my
classes, and we cannot even formulate commentaries it is so
breathtaking and shattering.

It took many centuries for the attitude towards Kiddush HaShem
to undergo slight changes. During the last war it was
substituted by some religious leaders in some ghettos by the
injunction of *Kiddush HaChaim*, that being the supreme command.
When the seemingly invincible enemy declared that the entire
Jewish people is to die it was incumbent upon the Jew to resist
the enemy, to resist death, which became the enemy. And *Kiddush
HaChaim* therefore, the sanctification of life, meant Kiddush
HaShem, the sanctification of the name.

However, even in the times of Rabbi Ishmael the concept of
Kiddush HaShem, of martyrdom had [00:52:00] certain different
variations and different connotations, and not all linked to
self-sacrifice.

In those times Kiddush HaShem meant to behave better than other
people, to be more moral, more ethical, more generous, more
hospitable. For instance, in the treatise of Bava Kamma there
is a discussion between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael, as

always, about a practical, non-theological issue. The question is are we allowed to steal from non-Jews?

Rabbi Akiva flatly said of course -- not. (laughter) What an idea, he said. Both Jews and non-Jews are protected by the same law, as is their property. However, Rabbi Ishmael maintained -- now, what did he maintain? That it is legitimate [00:53:00] to steal from non-Jews? No, he didn't say that. What he said is that the Torah is binding only on Jews, and therefore pagans cannot enjoy its protection. However, don't jump to conclusions, said Rabbi Ishmael, Jews ought not steal from non-Jews not because it is forbidden but because of Kiddush HaShem.

One can and one must sanctify God's name in small things as well in everyday life in human relations. But naturally in the times of Rabbi Ishmael only the life and death decisions contain drama and tragedy. And there were many such moments during the Roman occupation of Judah. We know of so many scholars and teachers and their students, how they died. We know for instance of [00:54:00] Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava with the way he ordained. He ordained his disciples to become rabbis. And at that time the Romans decided that whoever is ordained and whoever is ordaining will be put to death. In addition to that, the nearest community will be put to death.

And therefore Rabbi Yehuda, what he did is something very beautiful. He chose a place between two mountains, and that's where he ordained his five disciples. The Romans found out, and they began -- it's a true thing -- they began persecuting, running after them. And the disciples escaped. Rabbi Yehuda's body became like a sieve from the arrows. Many Romans refused to understand. What is there so special, so grandiose about your invisible God that you are ready to die for him, they asked. Come, join [00:55:00] us. Partake in our meals. Take part in our celebrations. Be like us and live.

But Jews refused to live like Romans. With Romans, yes, even under Romans, but not like Romans. Listen to a typical dialogue recorded in the Talmud between sages who are being led to execution. "Why will you be beheaded?" "Because I circumcised my son."

Another dialogue. "Why are you going to be burned?" "Because I studied Torah."

Another dialogue. "Why are you being led to be crucified?" "Because I ate matzo on Passover."

Another one was getting 100 lashes. Why? "Because I performed the mitzva of Lulav during Sukkot.

Did God ask for such devotion? Did he ask for so much agony and death from so many of his children? They offered themselves to him nevertheless. [00:56:00] And that is the true meaning of Kiddush HaShem, the ultimate meaning: to offer God something he didn't even wish to receive.

So when the Romans seized Rabbi Ishmael he was not alone. Many of his peers, many of his friends had endured the same fate. We also know that Rabbi Shimon was with him, and he sighed with pain, "Woe to us," said he. "Woe to us for we are to be killed like any simple violator of the Shabbat or idol worshipper or incestuous person or murderer."

And Rabbi Ishmael thought a while and asked, "May I speak?"

"Speak," said Rabbi Shimon. "Perhaps when you sat in your house poor people would come and stand outside, and you would not let them in and give them food, and that is why you are being [00:57:00] led to die." "I swear to heaven," said Rabbi Shimon, "that this was never so for I kept watchmen in front of my house with orders to bring any poor person inside and feed him or her

as graciously as possible. And the poor ate and drank and blessed the name of God."

But Rabbi Ishmael persisted. He always needed a logical answer. He needed something to hold onto. And he said, "Perhaps when you taught upon the temple hill and all the men and women of Judea were there listening to you, you grew vain." For a while they remained silent. Then Rabbi Shimon said, "My brother, Ishmael, a man must be prepared to receive his fate." And each beseeched the executioner to let him die first. "I am a priest, son of a high priest," said Rabbi Ishmael. "Let me not see the death of a friend." And Rabbi Shimon said, "I am a prince, son of a prince. Spare me the sight of seeing my friend die."

[00:58:00] And the executioner made them draw lots. And Rabbi Shimon died first. Sentimental? No, just human.

Rabbi Ishmael was a humanist. He said whenever the term *im* -- alef mem -- if appears in the Bible it means it is voluntary except in three cases involving charity and compassion. There it is not voluntary. It is compulsory. Quote: "The Bible says if there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren, open thy hand to him. Also, if a man has nothing and is unwilling to be supported, give him a loan." And Rabbi Ishmael is explicit. If a man of good family appears and he is ashamed to ask for

alms, you must suggest to him, my son, perhaps you need a loan.

[00:59:00]

When it is said *im talveh*, if you loan money to a brethren, says Rabbi Ishmael, that *im* is rhetorical. It means "if he needs your money." If he needs money and you have money you must give him the money.

Listen to a sublime recommendation. He said, "Do not overburden the camel. Do not place on its back a burden too heavy to carry," unquote, for there are limits to animals' possibilities but also to human possibilities. And there are limits to suffering and to exile as well.

Only knowledge and the thirst for knowledge have no limits.

Hence his love for scholars. I quote, "If you have seen a sage commit a sin during the day do not question his integrity. It's possible that he has repented during the night." (laughter)

Says the Talmud, only possible? [01:00:00] No, he surely repented.

Are scholars above the law? No one is above the law. Are they above suspicion? No one is. But scholars should be given the benefit of the doubt and so should everyone else. In other

words, we are all innocent until proven guilty. The future cannot correct the past but at least it can explain and redeem it. Why did God save the Jews at the Red Sea, at the Red Sea's crossing? Because of Abraham, say some sages. No, because of Noah, say others, or Isaac or Jacob. No, says Rabbi Ishmael, that unique miracle was accomplished not because of the past but because of the future, because of the good things Jews were to do at the temple.

Future-minded, future-oriented, human-minded, human-oriented, he was gentle. And in the ethics of our [01:01:00] fathers he is quoted as giving the following advice: "Be kind to all people, even the youngest ones. Welcome them all with gladness and be tolerant to them all." His love for his people was absolute. And for this alone we should love him. I quote him. He said, "All children of Israel are princes," unquote. And often he would add, "May I expiate for them."

He was a humanist advocating involvement in practical, everyday activities. And you shall choose life, according to him, means also you must choose a trade to make a living. There is a time for all things. When you labor, labor. When you study, study. Why is it written in scripture *V'rapei Yirapeh*, he shall heal? Why the repetition? And his answer was and is one exaltation is

addressed to the [01:02:00] physician and the other to God. The repetition allows the physician to heal the sick not relying on heaven but acting on its behalf.

From the legend we deal with tonight we also learn of what was going on in Judea in those years. Remember, Rabbi Ishmael was a young boy when the temple was destroyed and the sanctuary burned down. What remained of Jewish political sovereignty, which though diminished since the year 63, was still real and tangible was now totally lost. Agrippa II, a caricature of a king, was vanishing in the abyss of humiliation. Judea was now less than a vassal state. It was a conquered, vanquished, powerless nation that was made to obey the victor's strangest whims and most cruel laws.

Had Ishmael seen the burning of the temple, or had he lived it from afar, maybe from Rome? He never spoke [01:03:00] about it. Rabbi Akiva did. Others did. Not Rabbi Ishmael. Still he must have been traumatized by the event for he joined the nationalist militant segment of the population. His people's catastrophe did not drive him to despair. His people's despair drove him to compassion.

But then why did he not join bar Kokhba as Rabbi Akiva did? This intriguing question has been posed but may not be valid. What if Rabbi Ishmael died before the upsurge, or at least the emergence of bar Kokhba? Most sources refute such a hypothesis, contending that he was alive and active during the turmoil. The Jewish freedom fighters stirred up in the caves and mountains of Judea. It is quite possible too that his two sons died in battle.

By then Jewish resistance against Rome had lasted for many generations. Since [01:04:00] Pompeius conquered Judah in 63 the land had known no peace. Granted, King Herod and his descendants enjoyed internal autonomy and maintained friendly relations with emperors and their wives, but there were always elements who opposed them and militated for restoration of true sovereignty, which is an internal, spiritual, moral, human sovereignty.

The emperors were varied and colorful. Some were wise. Several were crazy. Most of them were crazy. What did they all have in common? None died a natural death. Vespacianus and Titus, Augustus and Caligula and Hadrian and Trajan, what was their connection with Jewish history? Titus destroyed the temple. Trajan planned to rebuild it. Hadrian erected a pagan temple in

its place. Jerusalem, the heart and soul of the Jewish people, was now considered off limits to all Jews. Only once a year on the ninth day [01:05:00] of Av were they permitted access, probably to make them weep harder over their tragedy.

In the beginning Roman persecutions were strictly political. Caesar could not care less whether Jews observed their religious practices or not as long as they caused no trouble to his regime and paid money. Then Rome realized that religion and nationalism go hand in hand. To eliminate one the conqueror had to suppress the other. When Domitius issued a decree forbidding bodily mutilation, clearly meaning circumcision, the Jews rebelled, and their rebellion had political overtones.

Hadrian then imposed severe punishments for other transgressions. To teach, to study the law was punishable by death. To observe the Sabbath, to recite Shema Israel, to have faith in God, all these were capital offenses. And we know that our masters have [01:06:00] defied these cruel laws.

Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai hid in a cave. Chutzpit Hameturageman was beheaded only for teaching Torah. Now what about Rabbi Ishmael? What was his involvement with the resistance movement? We know so much about

Rabbi Akiva and almost nothing about Rabbi Ishmael. The country went through endless upheavals, and the sages were affected by them. What about Rabbi Ishmael?

Somehow we have the impression that he dwelled in his private residence in Kfar Aziz, near Edom, studying and teaching and taking part in academic debates but not in public life. Unlike Rabbi Akiva, who led a public life and even died a public death, Rabbi Ishmael did everything in private. When he died his outcries were heard by God alone. [01:07:00]

And so you see that the two friends and adversaries were truly different in everything. *v'kol ha'am ro'im et hakolot*, and the entire people saw the voice at Sinai, according to the Bible. Said Rabbi Akiva, they literally saw the voices. But Rabbi Ishmael said they only saw what was visible to them, and they heard what was not visible. They saw the flames at Sinai, and they heard the voices at Sinai. Rabbi Akiva spoke as a poet, Rabbi Ishmael as a rationalist.

When discussing the phenomenon of the manna in the desert the two sages seized the opportunity to disagree again using a verse from Psalms as pretext. Rabbi Akiva explained that the manna

was the bread angels eat in heaven. "What?" retorted Rabbi Yishmael. "Since when do angels eat bread?"

Rabbi Akiva emphasized imagination. Rabbi Ishmael advocated realism. [01:08:00] The first interpreted every word, every letter, every syllable in the Torah whereas the second sought to clarify its greater meaning. For Rabbi Yishmael the spirit of the law was more important than the letter of the law. *Bereshit bara*, and in the beginning God created heaven and earth means, according to Rabbi Ishmael, heaven and earth and not some far-fetched symbolism.

His motto, therefore, was that everything must be simple, and everything received and given must be given and received in human categories, in human terms. Conscious of human frailties, he accepted the human condition. He never boasted of his extreme adherence to his belief. Instead he often admitted giving in to his weaknesses.

Once he debated his friends and colleagues over the question whether it's permitted to move lit candles on Shabbat for reading purposes. [01:09:00] The majority said no, and he said yes, and so he wrote his confession on a piece of paper. I quote, "I, Ishmael, son of Elisha, have moved the candle of

flame to enable me to read on Shabbat. And when the messiah will come I shall bring an offering in the temple to atone for my sin."

His humanism is touching since he said sins are not only immoral, they are also unhealthy. Harsh and rigorous on the issue of abortion-- he calls it murder-- he's more lenient than Rabbi Akiva in matters of suicide. Why did God order the children of Israel to build a sanctuary after the incident of the golden calf? he asks. He did so, said Rabbi Ishmael, to prove to them and to the world that he had forgiven them. God is forgiving. God rules with love, not with rigor. He never demands the impossible, not even the possible. [01:10:00]

"Abstaining from sin," says Rabbi Ishmael, "is tantamount to having done good deeds." It's enough to abstain from sin and thus recognize one's link to one's Creator. The worst sin, according to Rabbi Ishmael, is idolatry, therefore, not to commit idolatry is something that already outweighs all other commandments. But then what is idolatry? Idol worshipping? There are thousands of idols available and thousands of ways to worship them.

And Rabbi Ishmael is right in warning us against idolatry. It's possible for human beings to observe all the religious laws and appear to be righteous and even saintly and still be guilty of idol worshipping. Whoever worships a saint is also committing idolatry. Does it mean that he advocated blind faith, [01:11:00] total resignation as expression of faith? No.

It was in his school or in its name that the awesome question was asked and answered, one of the most poignant, daring, audacious questions in the Talmud. *Mi chamocha, ba'elim Adoshem*, who among the gods can be compared to you, oh God? *Al tikray elim ki im ilemim* - Do not read *elim*, gods but *ilemim*, the mute. *Sheroeh b'elbon banav v'shotek*, for He, God, watches and observes how his children are being shamed and tormented and persecuted, *Vishotek*, and he keeps silent!

I submit to you that few have dared articulate a protest more powerful. But then it was a protest not against faith but on behalf of [01:12:00] faith, not against God but for God. God Himself cannot and must not remain silent. For our sake and His He must intervene in history and stop the killers before they are victorious.

In conclusion, from all that we know, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva, on every subject and issue, whether in theory, in practice, chose to lead a different way and take a different path. In their life and in their death they were different. And yet both are the pillars of Talmud. Though they differed in temperament, outlook, philosophy, ideology, methodology, and followed separate intellectual endeavors, their end was the same. Both died as martyrs of the faith. [01:13:00]

But then even then they were different. There is no doubt about Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom whereas Rabbi Ishmael's has been questioned. Rabbi Akiva died in public with people around him, Rabbi Ishmael in private. Many people watched Rabbi Akiva's torment, and they heard him say *Kol yamai*. He was laughing, and they were asking him are you a *michashef*, are you a sorcerer that you don't feel pain? And he said all my life I was waiting for this moment to fulfill the mitzvah *uv'chol nafshecha uv'chol me'odecha*, to give my life for You, and now that I have this mitzvah *shelo akayamena*, should I not fulfill it?

No, Rabbi Ishmael did not smile. Rabbi Ishmael did not laugh. We know that Rabbi Ishmael died weeping, crying. We know that Rabbi Ishmael [01:14:00] cried so hard that even God was afraid.

Now we have another story about his death which is a marvelous story, tragic as well. Suddenly we learn that he was a man of great beauty. Was he the first, the second? But he was a man of great beauty. And we are told that a Roman matron watched him as he walked to his place of execution. So she called the soldiers and said, "Tell him to raise his head. I want to see him. If he raises his head, I shall grant him his life."

But Rabbi Ishmael did not heed her request. When she repeated the same thing a second and a third time he answered, "Shall I forfeit my life in the world to come for an hour of pleasure here?" In anger the matron told the soldiers, "Flay him." And they obeyed. And the text tells us that they began [01:15:00] at his chin and flayed the skin off his face. When they came to his forehead, to the place where the tefillin, the phylacteries are fastened Rabbi Ishmael uttered a piercing scream that shook the earth. And he cried, "*Ribono shel olam*, Master of the universe, where is Your mercy?" And a voice from heaven answered him, "If you accept the suffering it is well. If not, if you utter one more cry, if you shed one more tear, I shall order the world to lapse back into chaos."

And as we heard earlier, Rabbi Ishmael remained silent. The question remains a question: why? Why did he remain silent? Is

this the way to accept martyrdom, in submission? [01:16:00]
Aren't we to rebel against death, all death? Why did he not
tell God, "Master of the universe, I will not be silent. Master
of the universe, if this is the way You want Thy children to
live and learn, if You want to teach us by death the lessons of
life, I want no part of it. Better return the world to chaos
and destruction."

Rabbi Ishmael could have spoken thus. He had every right to.
Jews were suffering, and Rome didn't care. No one cared. Jews
were persecuted, and God was responsible, for God must always be
responsible. As all human beings must accept their
responsibility so must He. We are all co-responsible.

And so Rabbi Ishmael was [01:17:00] entitled to be angry and to
let his anger explode and punish the world of Roman victory in
the process. But Rabbi Ishmael did not invoke that right. And
that is the lesson we draw from his story.

What he told us, what he taught us is as follows: yes, I,
Ishmael ben Elisha, a descendent of high priests and martyr of
the faith could destroy the world. And a world ruled by
cynicism and hatred and indifference deserves to be destroyed,
but I am the son of an ancient people. I am the son of the

Jewish people. Together with my ancestors I stood [01:18:00] at Sinai and heard the word and the voice of God speaking to human society. And therefore I know that to be a Jew is to have all the reasons in the world to be angry and not to choose anger, to have all the reasons in the world to destroy but not to destroy. To be a Jew is to have all the reasons in the world to hate the executioners with passion but not to hate them. To be a Jew is to have all the reasons in the world to mistrust prayer and faith and humanity and power and language and beauty and truth and yet not to. To be a Jew is to continue using words when they heal and silence when it redeems mankind. Thank you.

[01:19:00]

(applause)

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