

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: The Vision of Ezekiel

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Elie Wiesel:

The story is in the name itself. Yechezkel. The strength of God, or strengthened by God, or strengthening God. The strength received from God. The strength given to God. Whichever direction you turn, the name suggests strength. Now the question, of course, is, was the prophet really so strong? If so, we understand why his contemporaries disliked him -- and they did. But another question arises: why is he not too popular in Talmudic literature? Whether compared to Isaiah or Jeremiah [00:01:00], it is rarely in his favor. And yet, no prophet was endowed with such vision, no other vision was as extreme. No man has shed such light on the future, for no other light was as forceful in tearing darkness apart. But then, no one had ever seen such darkness, the total darkness that precedes the breaking of dawn. It is enough to follow his gaze to be carried by the hope it conjures. Look when he orders you to do so and you will be rewarded by the conviction that hope is forever founded and forever justified. Listen to his words, to his voice, and you will feel strong -- stronger than death, more powerful than evil.

Ezekiel. Who has not heard of this intriguing, puzzling, mystifying [00:02:00] but passionate speaker, whose visions of dark horror and striking beauty have left an impact on innumerable generations? No messenger has hurt us more, and none has offered us such healing medication. When he is harsh, he seems pitiless. When he is kind, his graciousness spills over. In his outbursts of extreme severity, he declares his own nation ugly and repugnant. But then, all of a sudden, he recovers his compassion, and everything and everybody radiates sunshine and serenity. He oscillates between the shame of sin and the grandeur of salvation. For him, there is nothing in between. Ezekiel, the man of extremes. He goes from the ecstasy of the merkava to the terror of war, [00:03:00] and what follows, the dry bones. Let us read together: "And I looked, and behold, a whirlwind came out of the North. A great cloud, and a fire unfolding itself. And a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof, as the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire, also out of the midst thereof, came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of Man, and everyone had four faces, and everyone had four wings."

What follows is known, but rarely understood. In fact, the entire mystical merkava -- Hekhalot literature -- dealing with this celestial [00:04:00] chariot stems from Ezekiel's description of his first oneiric, fantastic hallucination in his book. What are those human and animal creatures, both monstrous and divine? What are they? What have they done when they erupted in our small, orderly, or not-so-orderly planet? What do these extraterrestrial beings try to achieve in our midst? What is the purpose of their visit? And again I quote, "Their feet were straight feet, and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot. And they had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides, and they, too, had their faces and their wings, and their wings were joined one to another." You have studied it, and you admit it, [00:05:00] that the text reads like a feverish dream, if not a nightmare. All those human and inhuman masks mingled and intertwined. Fragmented images, halting sentences, deafening shouts, and soft whispers. Words and silences are being used to describe something that lies beyond description. A realm where heaven and earth merge onto one element combining fire and crystal, fear and joy. The first and last memory of man facing his destiny.

Again I quote, "The likeness of man, the likeness of lions and eagles, the likeness of the firmament, the likeness of the

throne." Has Ezekiel seen -- really seen -- all that? Has God really chosen to show him all that [00:06:00] he usually conceals from other people? If so, why? Why then? Why him? What made him so special? All these questions, raised usually with regard to prophecy and prophets, the element of compulsion in the assignment, the unpredictability of the prophet's responses, are even more varied as they pertain to Ezekiel. What had he done to deserve to speak in God's name, and why are his words burning with so much anger, followed by words fraught with such fear, followed by words filled with so much affection? There are in his book and his vocabulary themes, subjects, expressions that can be found nowhere else. And these themes, and these subjects, [00:07:00] make him contemporary -- for instance, he is the only one who, quote, "eats his words." He mentions heart transplants. He is transplanting hearts of flesh instead of stone. The poetic term ben adam, son of man, is used with such frequency that it almost becomes his surname. Also, he is the first prophet to speak of the synagogue as a mikdash me'at, a miniature, temporary temple, but a temple. Has he seen the real one? Only in his imagination, but his description of Jerusalem, far away from Jerusalem, is so real, so factual, so true, that it is a literary jewel in itself. So Ezekiel, surely the prophet of imagination. More than his contemporary

Jeremiah, he imagined both exile and redemption [00:08:00] in ways that made them both intangible.

But then, when you re-read them, they are concrete and tangible. And more important, for us, he was the first to speak of kiddush ha-shem, a theme which we shall explore next week in greater depth. He was the first one to speak of Israel's privilege, and awesome obligation at times, to sanctify the Lord's name. No wonder, then, that his narrative seizes you with such force. Through years of events and turbulent wanderings, it is his tale that we follow from agony to agony to rebirth. He speaks to us -- to us, too -- for more than his contemporaries, we have witnessed the frailty of social structures, and the irresistible power of dreams. For once upon a time, some of us did indeed see a [00:09:00] desert covered with dry bones. And yes, we could testify to man's power and ability to begin again. No generation could understand Ezekiel as well, as profoundly, as ours-- just read the text. But at this point in our studies, let us follow our own tradition, and open parentheses for some preliminary remarks. This tradition is eighteen years old. Why break it now?

Eighteen years. Does anyone here remember the beginning? I do. The most gratifying aspect of these encounters, the variety and

the quality of the audience, Jews and Christians, young and less young, (laughter) students and former students. Some met here, others meet only here. Some got married here. No one divorced. [00:10:00] (laughter) Eighteen years -- almost a lifetime. But what was true eighteen years ago still is. Our primary objective remains study. Study of text, and passion of study. Study has been compared to both water and fire, and yes, if approached with intensity, the Torah encourages contradiction. It stimulates and appeases at the same time. Study is a quest for knowledge as much as a weapon against apathy. Thunder and lightning and silence accompany the revelation at Sinai, and all three await anyone ready to delve into scripture and its commentaries that link us to others -- so many others before us. To open a text, to question it, is an adventure in itself. How do we call that kind of study? We call it midrash. What is midrash? [00:11:00] The root of midrash is darosh, to interpret. Better yet, to inquire. To search. To seek. To investigate. And better yet, to demand.

From the text before us, we demand answers, and more answers, and questions, and more questions -- though never in the same order. You open a page, and you discover in it arcane signs and clues left there by generations and generations of teachers, of disciples. Why not add some of your own? Is there a greater

privilege than that? To study is to celebrate study. For to study means to penetrate the depths of our collective being. Of our collective memory. And what is study, if not a celebration of memory?

This year, as we have done last year, [00:12:00] to prepare our study together, a wonderful teacher, a descendent of Rebbe Levi Yitzchok Berditchever, Rabbi Lavey Darby, has had a class. And nothing is more gratifying to us, to John Ruskay, who is the director here, and myself, than to know that even before we study, you study. I know a hundred people have come this afternoon; I hope that 600 will come next week. As we have done in the past, we shall explore scripture through its characters. We shall use Talmudic and Midrashic commentaries, and with some measure of luck, we may enrich our own personal gallery with yet another portrait. After all, we believe that certain words never die. As long as there is a Jewish child thirsty for legends, as long as there is an old Jewish grandfather struggling with his melancholy past, Abraham [00:13:00] and Moses, David and Ezekiel, will continue to live in their words, and ours. The joy and glory of study lies in our ability to enlarge an inner landscape inhabited by sages and poets. And sometimes their joy is even greater because it enlarges not only an inner landscape, but a physical landscape as well, for

tonight, for the eighteenth year, a new thing happened, that this meeting of ours is being, uh -- transmitted, I don't know how, by telephone or by radio, to the Jewish Community Center in Harrisburg. So you see that technology sometimes is useful.

(laughter) It is a joy, for that joy means communication, with sages and poets, judges and scholars, philosophers and dreamers.

And so we intend to meet one of them tonight. Ezekiel: a unique teller of unique [00:14:00] tales. A man whose sense of timing was also unique. He seemed to forever address himself to people who were not there. Which reminds me, what about those latecomers who are not here? (laughter) (applause) (pause)

[00:14:26 - 00:15:01]

Let us study. "Vayehi be-shloshim shanah." "And it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month. I was then in exile, or among the exiled, the captives, by the River of Chebar, when all of a sudden, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God." Clearly, the story opens in the manner of a chronicle. The style is precise. It is the wish of the chronicler that the reader not be confused. And therefore, we know what happened, and where, and when, and to whom. But just in case you needed more information, additional details, and some name recognition, the

chronicle adds that the event occurred during the fifth year of King Yehoiachin's [00:16:00] captivity. And then, hayo haya dvar Adoshem el Yechezke'el, ben Buzi ha-Kohen. The word of God came to Ezekiel, son of Buzi the Priest, while being in the land of the Chaldeans, by the River Chebar. And the hand of God was laid upon him, and ve-eireh, vehine, "And I looked, and behold, a whirlwind came out of the North," and we have already said what happened earlier.

But don't look, not yet. For we have not finished the opening statement, which presents problems. The story begins in the first person, va-ani; jumps to the third, va-yehi alay; and returns to the first person again, ve-eireh, and I looked. Should we conclude from this that poor Ezekiel the Prophet's knowledge of Hebrew grammar was faulty? Should [00:17:00] we conclude that people already then had identity problems? Or maybe that he already wanted to illustrate his own split personality, that the prophet is always both subject and object in his own tale.

The answer probably lies elsewhere. The switch may indicate a certain confusion in the mind of the prophet, which would be only natural. After all, we are at the beginning of the story. The prophet had just been contacted by God, and he's still

shaken from the experience. Most prophets had similar reactions. Prophecy was forced upon them. Couldn't God speak more gently to his chosen? Apparently not. Prophecy always began with a shock. Is this why Ezekiel all of a sudden left reality, and moved into a world of the fantasy? The historian [00:18:00] has been turned into a visionary. Is this why, unlike Jeremiah or Jonah, he did not resist, really, the call? He did not say, "why me?" Leaving time and reason behind, he looked and saw chariots of fire, strange beasts, and half-human, half-divine creatures. He looked and saw what exists outside creation. Now how is one to explain the quick change of pace? The man who just one passage earlier insists on clarity and scientific precision has allowed his mind to wander into delirium, so much so that he forgets to tell us something that may be of essential importance. Didn't he say that God spoke to him? Then why doesn't he tell us what he heard from God? No, he does not tell us what he heard because he's too busy [00:19:00] describing to us what he saw. All of a sudden, he became a reporter. And what he saw is so unreal that those of us who dwell in reality are forbidden to follow his gaze and look, and even more, speak about it. Listen to the Mishnah, in the Treatise of Chagigah: "Ein dorshin ba-arayot be-shloshah." One must not debate with three students questions about intimate

relations between man and women. I hope you appreciate the delicacy of the expression.

Furthermore, "ve-lo bema'aseh bereshit be-shna'im" -- one does not study the mysteries of creation with two students. "Ve-lo ba-merkava ba-yachid." But the mystery of the merkava -- the chariot that Ezekiel saw -- one cannot even study it or [00:20:00] teach it with one student. And the question is, with whom can you study it? And the answer is, don't. (laughter) Poor Ezekiel. He went to such extremes. He saw something so extraordinary, so unique, and we cannot even speak about it. We cannot write a review about his scenery. Merkava experiences are forbidden territory, dangerous to outsiders. One cannot approach them with impunity. Why should a mystery of creation -- be-ma'aseh bereshit -- be considered less perilous than that of the chariot? And Maimonides, who understands everything so well, understands this as well. And his comments is as follows. The first, the ma'aseh bereshit, is about creation. The second is about its Creator. Creation is imminent, [00:21:00] and therefore perceivable. The transcended forces are by definition removed from human perception. We cannot look, and we cannot talk. Gershom Sholem, who studied the merkava mysticism with extraordinary passion and gusto, he quotes ancient texts of the so-called Hekhalot literature -- the palaces, the heavenly

palaces. And these texts warn us against trespassing mystical frontiers, and I quote one of the passages: "If a person was unworthy to see the King in his beauty, the angels at the gates disturbed his senses, and confused him. And when they said to him, "come in," he entered, and instantly they pressed him and threw him into the fiery lava stream. And, at the gate of the sixth of the seven palaces, it seemed as though [00:22:00] hundreds of thousands and millions of waves of water stormed against him. And yet, there was not a drop of water. But he, the visitor, asked the angels, "What is the meaning of these waters?" And they began to stone him. "Wretched! Do you not see with your own eyes? Are you perhaps a descendent of those who kiss the golden calf, and therefore unworthy to see the King in his beauty?" And they struck him with iron bars and wounded him." End of quote.

In other words, not only are we not able to understand Ezekiel's chariot visions, but we are not even allowed to make them an object of scholarly analysis. And what we do tonight, therefore, is absolutely wrong. But the question is, why? What reason could there be? What is so special about the vision that [00:23:00] Ezekiel had that one can only experience it, if at all, in total solitude? Perhaps it has to do with Ezekiel, and therefore I suggest as we always do, let us open the file and

see, who was the man? Who was he? What information is there in our Talmudic and biblical literatures about his life and work? We know that he was a priest -- ben Buzi ha-Kohen. We know that he travelled a lot, and spoke a lot, and we know that his command of language was both disturbing and enchanting. And what else do we know? We know his mannerism. His style. His remarkable courage -- or was it naivete -- in using repetitions. Examples. The expression ben adam, son of man, appears a hundred times. Adoshem adoshem [00:24:00] -- God --200 times. Va-yadu ki ani adoshem -- and they shall know I am the Lord -- 50 times. Gilulim -- idolatry -- only 39 times. What else do we know? We know that-- that we don't know his nationality. Was he a Palestinian prophet, sent by God to Babylon? Was he a Babylon yored from Palestine who returned to Palestine? Some sources say he was one or the other; some texts claim he was both, or neither. From the book itself we gather that he had been exiled together with his king and the king's court to Babylonia, and we know the exact location of his dwelling. He said it: Tel Aviv. On the River Chebar. Babylonian sources tell us that Tel Aviv, or Tel Abib, referred to ruins that remained there from before the [00:25:00] floods. In our literature, naturally, the name fares somewhat better. We are told, therefore, that Tel Aviv used to be then the largest Jewish city in the diaspora. It had the largest Jewish

population, 10,000 souls, and they all spoke Hebrew, they had schools, they all observed Jewish laws, and in general, did well. A midrash tells us of a certain bird-watcher, Chananiyah ben Menachem, who kept 277 different species at home in Jerusalem. And he was so famous that the emperor Nebuchadnezzar himself wanted to meet him -- probably to offer him a job. He dispatched an emissary to Tel Aviv, but Chananiyah ben Menachem refused to go with the emissary, saying, "You forgot that it's Shabbat today. [00:26:00] I don't travel on Shabbat." So, he travelled to Babylonia one day later, and the Emperor gave him a splendid apartment near or inside his palace, to keep an eye on the royal birds. As for Ezekiel, we know that he began to prophesy around six or seven years before Jerusalem's final tragedy, which happened, as you know, in 586 before the Common Era. We also know that after the tragedy, he continued to prophesy for another 15 -- 12 to 15 years. What else do we know? That he was married. We know it because we are given to understand explicitly in the text that his wife died from pestilence in a plague the day -- Jerusalem was destroyed. Although he was far away, he had seen in the death of his wife a prefiguration [00:27:00] of the catastrophe that would befall his entire nation. We know what happened afterwards: that he was so affected by both events, by the death of his wife, and by the destruction of Jerusalem, that for a while, he, the prophet,

lost his power of speech, and suffered, what we would call today, from aphasia.

One cannot, when you study the text, when you read the text aloud, and the commentaries on the text, one cannot but feel empathy and compassion for Ezekiel. He knew too much, and knowledge became a burden to him. How can a man live with such visions? Like most prophets, he must have felt guilty. Guilty for foreseeing the future. If Jerusalem will be destroyed, will it not be his fault? Had he not described the future destruction, [00:28:00] perhaps it wouldn't have occurred. And that is why most prophets were reluctant to accept their divine mission. Did he have brothers, friends, allies? He had enemies. That has been established.

Like most prophets, he was always provoking anger and hostility. Some of his adversaries went so far as to ridicule him, saying, who is he anyway to talk the way he does? And I quote, "Isn't he a descendant of that woman of ill repute -- you know, Rachav, the harlot, who made Jericho famous?" Like Jeremiah, he used pantomime to propagate his views and fears. When he warned that people of Gilgal of the oncoming exile, he paraded through the streets carrying a knapsack -- so telling them that they, too, would become wanderers. At twilight, he would dig a hole in the

wall, and sneak out into the darkness, like a fugitive.

[00:29:00] Like a refugee. Like Jeremiah, he felt the lookout, to warn, to speak. Like Jeremiah, he must have felt that he would not die in the Holy Land. Jeremiah was buried in Egypt, Ezekiel in Babylon. And Iraqi Jews, until 1952, before they left Iraq and went to -- to Israel, they thought that they knew the location of his grave, and often they would come to pray there, imploring him to intercede on their behalf, and many miracles are attributed to that grave. But throughout his life, he endured torment and agony. No wonder that God felt the need to give him encouragement and comfort repeatedly, telling him not to worry, not to mind his critics, not to give in to their mockery, but to speak up, even if his words were to fall on deaf ears, even if his mission were to bring no immediate results. As a prophet, he was not free to speak or remain silent.

[00:30:00] He was told when to make himself visible, and when to remain invisible. Clandestine. From the book itself, he received a script God prepared for His emissary Ezekiel. His order to stay seven days under house arrest, to be alone, to illustrate loneliness. The effect on his character, on his temperament, is obvious. He becomes harsh, demanding, fierce, unbending, unyielding, discouraging human contact. How does he see his fellow man? He sees them in a dream more than in reality. Occasionally, he is instructed to act dumb. Or to be

provocative. He is to prepare a model of what Jerusalem would be like under siege, and he's amazingly accurate, always -- the halls, the gates, the light, the odors, the sounds, the mood. He describes the punishment of the sacred city, its hunger, its pain, its decline. Lying [00:31:00] motionless, he paints the convulsions of a society at war. To symbolize the unclean food people will eat in captivity, he prepares a cake of human or animal excrements. He shaves his head, and lets the wind disperse his hair, to illustrate the fate of the dispersed, rebellious fellow Jews.

Naturally, Ezekiel became, with the ages -- especially with the modern ages -- a perfect candidate for students and practitioners of psychoanalysis. You would be amazed to read what all of these great scholars had to say about him. Some experts -- I won't even name them -- term his behavior psychotic. Others, more kind, prefer to call it simply pathological. Believe it or not, one of them found that our prophet had, and I quote, "catatonic periods," unquote, [00:32:00] which resulted from his paranoiac tendencies. Want to hear more? Listen to more diagnoses. And I quote, "Narcissistic, masochistic conflicts. Fantasies of castration. Unconscious sexual regression. Schizophrenia. Delusions of persecution. Delusions of grandeur." And so forth, and for

pages and pages. Of course, all these describe the prophet, and prophecy. And he was a great prophet. His sermons have the quality and the urgency of eye-witness reporting, mindful of every detail. He tells us what is going on in God's favoring dwelling place. What is going on in Jerusalem? It reminds him of Sodom. The keyword is to'eva -- abomination. [00:33:00] It appears again and again. Physical and moral prostitution, social decadence, intellectual deprivation -- one could put together an entire encyclopedia of sin, just using Ezekiel's vocabulary of chastising. He's particularly severe with the leaders. We are informed of what they are saying, thinking, doing, plotting inside and outside the sanctuary. Are there no good people in the land? No just men left? He speaks of the elders, who in exasperation began to wonder whether God had not abandoned his people altogether. Listen, and I quote, "And the glory of God said unto me, Son of Man, look and see what they are doing in my house, to my house. See the great abominations; look well and you will notice even greater ones. Old priests worship idols. And listen to the language, and I quote, "Son of Man, have you seen what the ancients of the House of Israel do in the dark, [00:34:00] or in the secret chambers of their imagination? They say to themselves, anything is permitted, for God cannot see us. He has forsaken this land, and abandoned its inhabitants." And in parentheses you must note, this has been

our haunting obsession from the beginning of our history: has God abandoned us? That is what we are afraid of all the time. Not that we abandon him, but that he may abandon us. ___He may be disgusted with his people at one point. And therefore, again and again, this is what bothers all of our ancestors -- that God should not abandon. And here, in this case, you feel that God was ready to do so, because He had it. For that is not all," says God to the prophet, look and you will see even worse. And again I quote, "Then he brought me to the door of the Temple's gate, and behold, there were women weeping for the idol Tammuz." Wait, says God to Ezekiel, there is worse. "And he took me inside the inner court, [00:35:00] and between the porch and the altar, I saw about 25 men, with their back to the Temple, worshiping the sun."

And then God uses an expression that reminded Ezekiel and us of Noach, and the floods: ki-mal'u et ha-aretz chamas, they filled the land with violence. And that was the worst. As long as people offended heaven, God, in spite of his anger, was willing to wait. But when they ceased to be human toward one another, he had to intervene. No prophet has ever spoken with such despair, and of such doom. To the inhabitants of Jerusalem, he says that they will be defeated. And to those in Babylon, he says that their deliverance is not near. Of course, like most

prophets, he emphasizes the cycle of sin, punishment, and redemption. But according to him, redemption is far, far away; while the first two phases are in effect, redemption seems improbable, not [00:36:00] perhaps impossible. So much so that one is allowed to wonder, why does the prophet insist so much on Jewish weaknesses, on Jewish transgressions? Does he enjoy shaming them? One reason, maybe. That knowing of the catastrophe in the making, he wants the Jewish people to have an explanation. He wants to save them from absurdity. Punishment is better than gratuitous cruelty. Any answer is better than no answer. Moreover, the prophet has full power to predict the future; he knows the future because he observes the present. No sin will go unpunished. Collective deprivation must result in collective agony. If his perception is right, if disgust, both real and spiritual, dominates the mood of the story, then tragedy is inevitable. Not immediately -- later. [00:37:00] Much later. As in the case of Jeremiah, it will take two decades before Ezekiel's predictions sometimes come to pass, but then history itself shudders. And now, we must ask ourselves the question, was Israel really that bad? Our ancestors, our great-grandfathers, could they have been that sinful? Open the book of history, and turn the pages, and we will see where we are.

Though a vassal state to Babylon, Judea enjoyed internal freedom. After a short reign of some 100 days, King Jehoiachin, and his entourage together with skilled technicians in the thousands, have been deported to Babylon, leaving behind the newly appointed king, a weakling named Tzidkiyahu, or Tzedekias. Pressured by Egypt and Phoenicia to rebel against Babylon, Tzidkiyahu, or Tzedekias, finally gave up his position of comfortable neutrality, and [00:38:00] allowed his militant advisors to move the nation into war. The enemy emperor Nebuchadnezzar responded with his army, and thus began the military siege of Jerusalem. Inside the country, the morale was low. The enemy was strong, and the Jews desperate. They could not comprehend God's ways. Why had he abandoned his people, which under King Yosiah had shown such force of character, and such faith by repudiating idolatry and sin, and by undertaking one of the most impressive shows of repentance in history? Despair led to spiritual corruption -- since God seemed unjust, why should man be just? Judea's spiritual leaders, the four prophets -- Jeremiah; Uriah, son of Shemaiah; Chabakuk; and Ezekiel -- tried to change the mood, in vain. Uriah was beheaded, Jeremiah jailed, Ezekiel persecuted and humiliated; and yet, in the [00:39:00] gentile world, culture is flourishing. Remember that we are in the sixth century before the Common Era, and that century is marked by greatness.

Remember that Athenians then build the Acropolis, and celebrate a philosopher who is the first named Thales of Miletus. Aesop's fables, and Aeschylus's dramas, and the oracles at Delphi, are known and celebrated. The Chinese enjoy the wisdom of Lao Tze. The Mayan build their temples in Mexico, and world history is moving forward in waves of abrupt upheavals. The various emperors, forever dissatisfied with what they possess, forever aspiring to a larger empire, and somehow, Judea is always in the middle of their political and strategical designs. Egypt and Babylon are enemies, and again both need Judea. Strange. All [00:40:00] the gigantic empires of the time seem to need Judea. And eventually, all will vanish, with the exception of Judea. The Chaldeans, the Assyrians, the Phoenicians, the Persians, the Egyptians, the Romans -- what attracted them to Judea? In the end, they all had to withdraw from Judea, and Judea alone remained in Judea. And yet, listening to its prophets, you would have thought that Judea's lot would be worse than that of its enemies. Worse, not entirely. Most prophets found it vital and imperative to address themselves to other nations as well. Just as Jeremiah was called navi la-goyim, a prophet to Gentile nations, Ezekiel, too, could be classified as a prophet to the enemy nations, except strange as it may sound, many of his prophecies against the enemies did not come to pass. There, he

was wrong. [00:41:00] He was right only when he had to prophesy things, terrible things, about his own people.

Now why did he link his prophecy to Israel, and all the nations? That was his way of emphasizing again and again that suffering is contagious, as is evil itself. When one people is subjected to humiliation, others are bound to follow. And ultimately, the destroyer will be destroyed, and the victimizer will feel the taste of being the victim of someone else's whims and wishes. Is this enough to console the victim? I do not think so. And that is why Ezekiel came forth with his vision of the dry bones. In the Jewish ethical tradition, one may not rejoice over an enemy's downfall. The enemy's punishment offers no consolation [00:42:00] to the victim. The victim's rehabilitation and victory, and redemption, must not be linked to other peoples' suffering. The theme, the purpose, call it a message in Ezekiel's healing sermons and metaphors is not victory, but repentance. If the sinner repents, he will live; if he does not, he will die. It is in Ezekiel's book that we find the poignant words that we repeat at every seder during Passover Eve, and for every brit milah. Va-omar lach be-dama'ich chai'i, va-omar lach be-dama'ich chai'i, and I shall tell you, you shall live in thy blood, in thy blood you shall live. Listen well: in thy blood, not in your enemy's blood. At one point, God places

the sinner's fate [00:43:00] on the prophet's shoulders. It is Ezekiel's responsibility to save the sinner. Too heavy a burden, true. So God compromises. Your task, he says, is to try. Speak to the sinner. Teach him. Chastise him. Warn him. If he refuses to be saved, at least you will have saved yourself.

Did Ezekiel succeed? He tried -- he tried hard. Obeying God's orders to the letter, he went so far as to do supernatural things. While staying in Babylon, he flew back and forth to Jerusalem. He inspected the celestial chariot, described events hidden in the future, and subjected himself to humiliation and ridicule, never complaining about his own ordeal. When he himself enters the story, we are moved by that ordeal. Jeremiah spoke of captives. Ezekiel always refers to [00:44:00] refugees, and he became one himself. Always suspected by everyone, resented for being on God's side, for knowing too much, for protesting against false prophets and false comfort, whatever he predicted to others ultimately happened to him, too. And yet -- and yet -- as I said in the beginning, tonight we sense a certain hesitation, a certain reluctance, even a coolness towards him. Not only from his contemporaries, but from later generations as well. One has the feeling that even in Talmudic literature, he is treated like a refugee. His book

is the only one of the prophets that almost fell victim to censorship. Yes, for a while, the Book of Ezekiel was in danger of not being published. Why such discrimination? [00:45:00] Because of his unmitigated criticism of his people? No, others have been as frank, as daring. Why, then? Some Talmudic sages maintain that there are passages in Ezekiel that are in conflict with the Torah, as we shall see later. Others reproach him for dealing with the forbidden mystical theme, the merkava. Listen, and I quote, "It came to pass that in the house of a teacher, a Jewish child opened the book of Ezekiel, and began studying the story of chashmal, of the fire and the chariot. And soon a fire came out of the fire, and burned the child down." And so the sages envisaged to suppress the Book of Ezekiel altogether. Luckily, Chananyah ben Chizkiyahu was there -- we shall talk about him later -- and he, maybe with a sense of humor, saved the situation. He said, if this child is so [00:46:00] clever, do you think it means that all children are? This child could study mysticism. Others won't. And therefore, he saved the book from censorship.

But some critics are harsher and more subtle. They object to Ezekiel's frankness. They would have preferred him to indulge in some kind of cover-up. About the sins of Jerusalem? No. A cover-up about the heavenly secrets. He had visions? Good for

him. But why reveal them to others? He saw the heavenly chariot and its strange creatures? Why did he have to boast about it? Why couldn't he have locked his impressions in his memory for later? For his memoirs? The fact that Ezekiel could not resist telling the story, and what a story it was, somewhat hurt his image in certain influential Talmudic circles. One commentator [00:47:00] states tongue-in-cheek, and I quote, "Any maidservant saw while crossing the Red Sea more than what Ezekiel would see later." A comparison between Ezekiel and the maidservant? Well, that is something he may have shrugged off. But there were other comments, of a more serious nature. Said Raba, and I quote again, "All that Ezekiel saw, Isaiah had seen already."

And yet, there is a difference between their personalities. Ezekiel could be compared to a villager who happens to come to a city where he saw the king, and he's so impressed! Isaiah is compared to a city person, who is used to seeing the king frequently, even in his own palace, and therefore Isaiah is not seized by such frantic desire to tell about it. What is clear from these stories and many others, is the resentment [00:48:00] in some places towards Ezekiel for having revealed his visions. But then, isn't he a prophet? Isn't the prophet duty-bound not to keep anything to himself? Isn't he but an instrument of

communication between God and mankind? Clearly nothing in this life is private. All he has, all he is, belongs to both God and his people. His fears and hopes, his joys and depressions, his turmoils, his moments of ecstasy -- they are not his alone; a prophet must have no ego, no individual memory. If he hears a voice, he must echo it. If he sees visions, he must share them, right? Yes, and no. Yes, as far as the voices are concerned -- when God speaks, the prophet becomes his vessel. But visions -- that is something else. God rarely says, tell them what you see, but rather, tell them what you hear. Then why did Ezekiel choose to go beyond his mission? Mind you, it was no transgression on [00:49:00] his part; God had not told him not to speak of his visions. But then why was his book inexplicably placed in jeopardy? Says the Talmud, and I quote, "We must remember with gratitude the good Chananyah ben Chizkiyah, for were it not for his intervention, the Book of Ezekiel would have been put away."

I love to study secondary characters in the Talmud as well. And this Chananyah ben Chizkiyah occurs not so frequently, but each time there is a crisis, he is there, and each time, he is there to save that has to be saved. Now who was he? Who was that Chananyah ben Chizkiyah, who fought so valiantly for freedom of expression? It is in his place, in the Garon, in his ethic,

that the sharpest conflicts were confronted and resolved. His place was a kind of headquarters where both [00:50:00] sides, the pacifists and the militant activists in the Talmudic circles would meet to discuss strategy as well as law. The 18-point program, which was exceptionally adopted as the students of Shamai outvoted those of Hillel -- which never happened before -- these 18 points had been discussed earlier in his ethic. He was clearly a man from Mission Impossible. When some of his colleagues openly complained that the book of Ezekiel contained passages that unmistakably contradicted Torah, he ordered enough food, and enough candles to be brought up to his attic, and he did not leave the attic until all discrepancies were clarified. Characteristically, we are not let in on the secret; we are not told how the scholar managed to reconcile opposites. All we are told is that he did. I think he said so, and we [00:51:00] took his word. For instance, in the Torah, it is clearly stated in the name of Moses that poked avon avot al banim -- that God is visiting the iniquities of the father upon his children and his children's children. But, says Rav Yosef ben Chaninah, Ezekiel -- can you imagine -- Ezekiel unashamedly challenged Moses view by flatly declaring, I quote, "Behold, all souls are mine," says the Lord, "just as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son. Only the soul that sins will die." No hereditary sin.

Moses speaks of hereditary guilt! Ezekiel stresses individual responsibility.

Elsewhere, with regard to another matter, we find in the Talmud, not without some exasperation, that *davar zeh mi-torat Moshe lo lamadnu*. We have learned this not from Moses, but from Ezekiel, son of Buzi the priest. [00:52:00] Generally speaking, one senses that Ezekiel made them all feel uncomfortable. He disturbed both his contemporaries and their descendants. And from the fact that his book was almost subject to censorship, means that our sages have problems not only with the book, but also with the author. His interpretation, of course, is lost, is only one element in the equation. There must have been others. Various hints appear here and there in Midrashic literature, all drawing a distinction between him and his colleagues. Efforts are made to explain strange things about him, yet some puzzles remain unexplained, *ad bo Eliyahu* -- until the Prophet Elijah will come and resolve all mysteries.

Talmudic scholars have problems with Ezekiel the person, who apparently had problems with God. Firstly, Ezekiel was jealous. Of whom? [00:53:00] Of his fellow prophets. At one point, he exclaimed, "Master of the Universe, am I not a priest? Am I not a prophet? Why did Isaiah speak for you in Jerusalem, while I must do the same thing here in exile?" The prophet, jealous?

Not nice. But then God, too, had problems with him. When God asked his prophet, *hatichyena ha-atzamot ha-yeveshot ha'eilu* -- will these dry bones come back to life? -- we are told that Ezekiel paused for a while, obviously waiting for an answer that he would receive from God. And since he didn't, he had to answer himself, and his answer was evasive. Instead of shouting, "Yes, I believe, these bones will and must, they must come back to life, for we need your miracle," [00:54:00] Ezekiel became a diplomat, and a politician, and he adopted a noncommittal attitude. He was too skeptical. And that is why, says the Talmud, Ezekiel was condemned to die, not in the Holy Land, but in Babylon. Another legend is even more disturbing. It came to pass that King Nebuchadnezzar ordered all his subjects in all the lands under his rule to worship one of his idols, lest they are all executed. Three representatives are chosen from each nation to act on behalf of their people: Chananyah, Misha'el, and Azariyah represented the Children of Israel. They turned to their teacher Daniel for advice. Daniel in his humility sent them to Ezekiel, who urged them to reject martyrdom, and choose flight instead. They disregarded his suggestion, [00:55:00] saying that they wished to die for Kiddush Ha-Shem, the sanctification of God's name. Still, Ezekiel persisted in trying to dissuade them from becoming martyrs; and when they still refused to listen, he came up with

another proposal -- the gimmick. He said they should wait with their decision until he received word from God that He would save them through a miracle. And he asked God, "Will you save them?" And God said, no. Nevertheless, the three just men refused to escape, and bow to the king's will, and therefore they were ready to die. And then Ezekiel, in despair, burst into tears. God at last offered him consolation, saying, "Don't worry -- don't worry, they will be saved. I shall save them from the burning furnace." Now why couldn't he have said so beforehand? Only to allow their faith and their martyrdom to appear [00:56:00] even more glorious. Good for them.

What about Ezekiel? His part of the drama is less enviable than theirs. He's made to sound weak. He, Yechezkel, the man of strength, is frightened, a weakling, a coward. Instead of telling the three heroic martyrs to be strong, he wanted them not to be heroes as well, at all. However, Talmudic sages have their way of balancing reticence by giving praise to the prophet's wider powers. How? He became himself instrumental in saving the three just men's lives. How? Listen. Chananyah, Misha'el, and Azariyah, as we know, were about to die in the Babylonian furnace, when Ezekiel, far away, performed the miracle of resurrecting the dry bones. The miracle, says the Talmud, encompassed more than those [00:57:00] directly

concerned. Earlier martyrs too resurrected, and rejoined the living community of Israel. And do you know how Nebuchadnezzar learned of Ezekiel's miracle? Listen again. He had a drinking vessel made of the bones of a slain Jew. And he was about to use it, and drink from its wine, the life began to stir in the vessel, and one bone struck the king in the face. And the voice was heard proclaiming, "A friend of this man, Ezekiel, is right now reviving the dead." Did he? Really? As always, opinions are divided in the Talmud. Some say yes, he did, and some go so far as identifying the resurrected if not by name, at least by origin and category. Those Jews, for instance, who in their impatience [00:58:00] escaped from Egypt before Moses led the whole people out of bondage, died, and therefore, they were now resurrected. Or those who ironically did not believe in tchiyat ha-metim, in resurrection, or the young Judeans, says the Talmud, taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar, and whose beauty drove Babylonian women mad, under pressure from their husbands, the Emperor ordered them killed. But now, they were brought back to life by Ezekiel. And the husbands were afraid. All these possibilities were examined during a heated session of one of the academies, because of some skeptics who dared to state publicly that in their opinion, the entire story of the famous dry bones was nothing but a figment of biblical imagination, or,

to use their language, mashal haya. It was nothing but a parable.

Actually, let's open the text, and you will see the context. The debate dealt with a larger [00:59:00] and more general issue. What would happen to tzaddikim, just men, in the long run? After they reach Paradise, what do they do? Would they die again? Of course, here, too, opinions were divided. Some said yes, they will die, but their death will be painless. And they quoted the case of the dry bones -- those men whom Ezekiel brought back to life died right away, but they didn't suffer. At which point, a panelist got up and said, probably what nonsense. The story was fiction. And thus went the discussion. Said Rabbi Eliezer, "The dead that were resurrected by Ezekiel stood up, praised the Lord, and died." Someone wanted to know the nature, the text of the praise. Said Rabbi Yehoshu'a, they sang, Adoshem memit u-mechayeh. The Lord causes [01:00:00] people to die, and to return to life. The Lord brings them down to the abyss, and then lifts them up to the surface. A third sage then intervened in the debate with the brief, sweeping remark, all this emet mashal hayah. All this was a true parable. Snapped Rabbi Nechemiah, "Really? How is that possible? If it was true, it was not a parable. If it was a

parable, it wasn't true." And the answer? Purely Talmudic.
Be-emet mashal hayah. It was truly a parable. (laughter)

Would you say that thus the debate has exhausted its logical or illogical possibilities? That rarely occurs in the Talmud. Hardly had Rabbi Nechemiah finished his linguistic contribution, that Rabbi Eliezer, son of Reb Yosef the Galilean, made his own opinion known. He opposed the view that the dead resurrected only to die again right away. Why is -- why did they? He said, "Oh no! [01:01:00] I know they remained alive -- and you want to know what happened to them? I will tell you. They made Aliyah. (laughter) They went to the Land of Israel, and they got married, and had children. Well, I'm sure you will think that this idea is audacious. At which point Rabbi Yehudah ben Beteira came out with a more audacious idea, and he said, absolutely true, he says, what my learned colleague says is correct. I know that they made Aliyah, because I am their descendent. (laughter) My grandfather was one of them. And you want proof? The tefillin, the phylacteries that I have, are his. Admit it. One does not know what to admire more in those Talmudic sages -- their imagination, or their sense of humor. What is clear is that the episode preoccupied them [01:02:00] to an astonishing degree. They wanted to understand its meaning, with all its implications, and its place in the life of Ezekiel,

and in that of our people. For in the text, the story is forcefully and descriptively narrated. It is one of the summits of prophetic literature, perhaps still unequalled in its strange mixture of poetic realism and mystical hope. Remember the location, the setting. It is the place where Judea's last king, Tzidkiyahu, made his last stand against Babylonian armies. The plain is now covered with the mutilated bodies of fallen Jewish warriors, and it is there, in the midst of climactic cruelty, desolation, and mourning, [01:03:00] that he has his most glorious and breath-taking vision, which one must read in its entirety. And I quote, "The hand of the Lord was upon me. And the Lord carried me out in a spirit, and set me down in the midst of the valley, and it was full of bones. And he caused me to pass by them, round about, and behold: there were many, many in the open valley. And lo, they were very dry. And he said unto me, 'Son of Man, can these bones live?' And I answered, 'Oh Lord, God, thou knoweth.' And then he said unto me, 'Prophecy over these bones, and say onto them, oh, ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord [01:04:00] God, onto these bones, behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you. And you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.' So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I

prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a commotion. And the bones came together. And flesh came up, bone to its bones, skin covered them above. But there was no breath in them. And then, said He unto me, 'Prophesy onto the breath, prophesy, Son of Man, and say to the breath, thus saith the Lord God. Come from the four winds, o breath, and breathe upon these slain, [01:05:00] that they may live.' And so I prophesied, as he commanded me. And the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great host. And then he said unto me, 'Son of Man, these bones are the whole House of Israel.' Behold, they say, 'our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost. We are clean cut off.' And therefore prophesy and say unto them, 'Thus saith the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, oh my people. And I will bring you into the Land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, and I have opened your graves, and caused you to come up out of your graves, oh my people. And I will put my spirit in you, [01:06:00] and you shall live. And I will place you in your own land, and you shall know that I the Lord have spoken, and performed it, says the Lord.'"

Like all prophets, Ezekiel, who had opened his prophecy with predictions of doom, now closed it with words of consolation. The man who had been sent by God to speak onto mountains and

valleys, objects and human beings, and warn them of things to come, bad things, now felt the need to reassure his people that there would be an end to suffering and to terror. The visionary who had foreseen a time when a third of Jerusalem would perish through famine, a third by the enemy's sword, and a third would be scattered in the wind, now took two [01:07:00] sticks in his hand and kept them together, to show his listeners that both houses of Israel would be united again. Ezekiel in many respects was a prophet like any other serving the Lord with all his heart and soul. Like all of them, he spoke truth to power. And like them, his only power was truth. And he, too, dared argue with heaven for the sake of his community. Like Jeremiah, who has claimed, tzaddik ata ki ariv imcha -- I know that You are just but I must argue with You at times -- Ezekiel, when he saw the punishment was too harsh, he would fall to his knees and shout, "Is this Your will, Almighty God? To exterminate the last remnant of Israel?"

Remember, unlike Jeremiah, he had not seen the massacres; he had not witnessed slaughter. The [01:08:00] torment was shown to him only in his vision, in his hallucination. Be he suffered like Jeremiah. Although he lived a tragedy from a distance, he agonized over it as if it were his own. His visions were real to him; the future was present! His exaggerations, both for

good and for bad, offered proof that the impossible in every domain is possible. If the miracle of the resurrection was told by him as a true story, or a story of a certain immutable truth, it was because the chastisement that preceded it had also been told with the emphasis on truth. If the Children of Israel could sin that much, they would be saved by miracles that great. Exaggeration of sin must be matched by exaggeration of divine rescue. And here, Ezekiel disagrees with Jeremiah, who believed in a repentance that would generate redemption. Ezekiel believed in redemption that would come outside of repentance. And that is another reason why [01:09:00] he was so feared in the Talmud. Ezekiel believed that Jews would be redeemed not because they would deserve it -- they couldn't -- but because God would choose to be merciful. That is why he insisted so much on Israel's transgressions, not only for his own time, but for at ours as well. He wanted to declare the subsequent generations [were?] never to give up hope. Even if their sins would make them unworthy of redemption, they would be redeemed -- in other words, he painted his society in such outrageous colors for the simple reason, future generations would be able to think, we could never be as guilty as Ezekiel's contemporaries were, and they were saved -- therefore, hope is permitted. After Ezekiel's generation, all others would only become better.

But then in conclusion, [01:10:00] let us return to our initial worry, if he was so good, so kind, not only with his people, but with us as well, why the hesitation? Why the reservation in Talmudic literature with regard to Ezekiel? What made him so suspicious in the eyes of our ancient masters? What was wrong with him -- or with them? Only because of his fantasy, of his quick changes of mood? Were they too quick, too abrupt, with no transition whatsoever? Is this why Talmudic sages treated his story with so many reservations, because of his literary style? Or was it because of his harsh words for his people? Were they excessively harsh? For this, he would have been forgiven. Perhaps not by God, but by his children. Moses, too, was harsh, and the Jewish people does not hold [01:11:00] it against him.

However, there is a difference between Ezekiel and other prophets. He alone chastised Israel while not living in Israel. When Isaiah and Jeremiah criticized attitudes and customs of Jews in Judea, they were there. Ezekiel was not. Ezekiel voiced his criticism from abroad, and the Talmud did not approve of that. Actually, it's conceivable that all these elements played a role in the situation. Ezekiel was an extremist who did go farther than his peers in all his predictions. Moreover -- and that is the main point -- he, more than all of them,

managed to blur the distinction between life and death, reality and fantasy, language and silence. [01:12:00] And that cannot be done without danger. What do we mean by that? A prophet is God's spokesman. The words that he hears are those that he is duty-bound to communicate. He repeats what God says, nothing else. If God says, be harsh, he must be harsh; if God says, be comforting, he must be comforting. It is the voice that matters; the word, the sound, the sentences, precise thoughts, ideas, principles, ethical injunctions, memories and more memories. Ezekiel echoed God's words, but he did something else. He used his own. To be more specific, he added his own to those he had heard from God. To put it bluntly, he said things that apparently he should have kept to [01:13:00] himself. Which ones, yes, we come back to the ma'aseh merkava. Remember the passage? Va-eireh -- and I have seen. God was kind enough to show him the chariot and its mystical creatures, but nowhere is it mentioned that God told him to tell others that they, too, should see what he had seen. And yet, Ezekiel did not hesitate to reveal everything he had seen, and that was his mistake. He did not understand that there are experiences that cannot be communicated by words. He did not understand the importance of silence, the occasional necessity of silence. We do. And so did many Talmudic sages, particularly those who lived in the time of another churban, the second destruction of

the Temple in Jerusalem. Those were the first to elaborate on Ezekiel's merkava vision. [01:14:00] Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai and his close disciples taught and studied the story and the lessons of the divine celestial chariot, and we are told that whenever they did, a heavenly fire would surround them. To shield them, to protect them, to isolate them from reality, to remind them of the fire of Sinai, perhaps to bring them closer to the fire that consumed the sanctuary in their time, and other living sanctuaries in later generations. Perhaps to teach them the dangers inherent in stories and visions. Perhaps to teach them that some words have the ability to burn and burn. What they have seen, no one would ever see. What they know, no one would understand.

And so Ezekiel, who lived in the time of a catastrophe, but with the Jewish people abroad, crushed by that [01:15:00] situation, punished by that idea that he is not even there when it happened, he should have been more careful. Why wasn't he? Well, prophets are human, and therein lies their grandeur, their sacredness. He lived an experience, he wanted to share it -- even if it was forbidden. The greater the person, the more human the person, and the other way around. Vulnerable? Yes. Weak at times? Yes. Subject to impulses and temptations? Yes again. So what? Ezekiel was too intelligent, too perceptive,

too knowledgeable not to know that it is forbidden to transform one's vision into words. But he was too concerned with his fellow human beings' welfare to deprive them of their right to know. He would pay for it? So what. As messenger, he must deliver the entire message -- [01:16:00] even the parts that could only be seen and not heard. The question is, can the message ever be communicated in its entirety? Can we break away from the fire? Can we communicate a fire?

One final point. If you read the book, but I'm sure you did, you noticed that all the events, and all the prophetic visions in the book, are inserted in their proper calendar. Fourteen dates are indicated to help us place the speaker and his discourse. With one notable exception: the vision of the dry bones. Meaning, the resurrection of our people. That passage [01:17:00] is undated, and we understand why. That vision, that promise, that hope, is not linked to either space or time. That vision, and that consolation, is offered to every generation, for every generation needs it. And ours, more than any before us. Thank you. (applause)

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