

Elie Wiesel In the Talmud: The Martyrdom of Rabbi Hananiah Ben

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) And it came to pass that the old and revered master Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon, like many of his companions, was caught by Roman soldiers and sentenced to die on the stake for teaching Torah in public. Wrapped in the holy scrolls, he listened to his disciples who surrounded him now as they had surrounded him every day when he explained to them the beauty and the mysteries of God's word. They watched him helplessly as he endured pain and agony, his skin and then his flesh singed by fire. Suddenly, one of the students turned to him and asked, [00:01:00] what you do see? Tell us, Rebbe, what do you see? And the old, venerable teacher, probably a moment or two before losing consciousness, answered, "*G'vilin nisrafin*, the scrolls are burning. I see them burning, but *ha-otiyot porkhot baavir*, the letters, the letters are stronger than the fire." They are indestructible, untouched, unharmed. They are flying up to heaven, maybe, they are returning to heaven.

This legend is well known. It is traditionally read as part of the Yom Kippur liturgy in every synagogue. *Eleh Ezkerah*, These I Shall Remember, is the name of that particular litany, which

describes poetically and [00:02:00] precisely with imagination, but also with fervor, the martyrdom of 10 sages who chose to live and die for *Kiddush Hashem*, the sanctification of God's name.

As a child, I used to love these readings and I used to love that poem. I loved the way these teachers, our ancestors, defied and accepted death. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel and Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef, Chutzpit the Interpreter, Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha the High Priest, of whom it is said that he uttered the ineffable name to ascend the heavens and inquire whether it was still possible to revoke the decree, and he was told, too late. Permission had already been granted to the enemy to kill the spiritual leaders of our immortal people. [00:03:00]

And so one after the other in different times and different ways, but united in that prayer, they were handed over to the executioner. And on Yom Kippur during the wholesome, solemn, majestic service of the Avodah, we would weep over their tragedy, which filled us not only with sadness but also with pride.

I was especially moved -- I was moved by and proud of Rabbi Haninah, or in other sources Hananiah, the same, Ben Teradyon.

His personal, poignant response to Rome's collective violence appealed to me. It appealed to the Jew in me, to the Jewish child in all of us. The spirit is stronger than its enemy, the fire of Torah is stronger than fire. One may and one can die [00:04:00] for truth, but truth never dies. This is what every Jew learned or should learn from the teacher, our teacher, Rabbi Haninah son of Teradyon. And his lesson is necessary, if not vital, to the understanding of our own existence and survival. That is why we repeat the story of his plight year after year, generation after generation, with increasing empathy and fervor. Thanks to him, we have accepted the fact that while the killer may kill and often does, his victims outlive him in our collective memory. And therefore, whenever Jews were persecuted, we consoled ourselves with the martyr's solemn statement, *G'vilin nisrafin*, only the scrolls are burning. Only our homes, only our lives can be destroyed. Our soul [00:05:00], our reason of being in history, remains beyond, beyond anyone's reach.

But then as always, in the course of intellectual inquiry, I developed a resistance to the text which we must do if we want to study text. We must question it, and in questioning it, I stumbled upon difficulties. I loved the master, but still, the story troubled me. And at one point, I was offended, hurt, by

the disciples. There stood Rabbi Haninah, literally, physically on fire, and all they could say is "What do you see?" Meaning perhaps, how do you see? Why does it matter? The fact is, [00:06:00] that they were asking him a question. Is that all they could think of? Had they become newspaper reporters all of a sudden? Was that the time and the place for interviews? What were they going to ask him next during that improvised press conference? His opinion of Rome's foreign policy, (laughter) or of the latest spectacle involving the leading gladiator's or lions of the day? Sorry, but I was angered by such a lack of compassion from devoted disciples for their dying teacher, and I would expect something else of disciples.

But some of you may already know our system and our method. What does one do when one experiences serious difficulties with an ancient text, abandon it? *Chas v'chalila*, quite the opposite. You go back to it, and so I did. [00:07:00] And I started my quest all over again, searching for more layers and for more dimensions, for other possible openings. And in the end, I was rewarded and found myself reconciled with the legend and all its participants once more. Should I tell you how? Not yet.

First, let us open once more our parentheses as in years past during our Talmudic encounters and make a few preliminary remarks. One, it is gratifying to know that these meetings are preceded by other meetings, and they too are increasingly attended, always better. Last week, Reb Lavey Derby had 60 students, today he had 150, *kein yirbu*. I hope next week, 300. [00:08:00] Maybe a special greeting should again go out to our friends in Harrisburg if they are still there. A special -- after all, a special thanks to you that are here, because I would probably think that all you want to think about these days is the elections. But maybe you are here because you don't want to think of the elections. (laughter)

The main point is about a man who was my teacher, and a teacher of his entire generation. If tonight's Talmudic discourse is dedicated to the memory of Rabbeinu Shaul Lieberman, *zichrono livracha*, it is because to me and to many of us, he personified the depths and the scope of what Jewish learning must be. Above all, Jewish learning must be [00:09:00] an act of generosity. It must be shared. Moses in heaven could have kept the law to himself, he did not. Every one of us received the Torah on loan, and we must give it back to others.

How can a disciple, a pupil, a student, pay back his teacher? There is only one way: in teaching what he received. And Rabbi Lieberman was my teacher and my friend, a friend of my family for seventeen years, and it is his teachings that, in this place, I have been trying to share with you. Before I met him, I thought I knew Talmud. Then I discovered, I didn't know. Better yet, I discovered that one can love the study of Talmud. He taught me that one can study Talmud with a smile.

And, [00:10:00] why not say something very personal but true? Teachers can be missed every day. When I know something, I remember him because thanks to him, I know it. And when I don't know, do I miss him. And so often, I need some reference, some source, some resource. I need an explanation of some passage, and there is nobody I could call. I call friends, I call my friend Yossi, my other friend David Halivni, he's in the seminary. There are not many people we can call. So, we go back to the books and once more we study.

Another remark is about our subject tonight. We shall delve into the vast treasures of Talmudic and Midrashic literatures, and therein examine the figure of Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon. And through him perhaps, [00:11:00] we could come closer to the subject, to the idea, to the problem, to the thematic of

martyrdom. Who is a martyr and why martyrs? Why does God want us to be martyrs, and how long?

The last remark is about the importance of custom. There exists an anecdote about a violent quarrel that broke out in a Beit Midrash, somewhere in Eastern Europe, on whether or not to include certain piyyutim, or prayers, on the High Holidays, and they came to blows. In desperation, the congregation turned to a renowned scholar for a ruling. And they asked, "What has been the custom in such cases?" they wanted to know. And he answered, "The custom has been to quarrel." (laughter)

Well, for years it has been the custom here for some people to arrive late, (laughter) and for us to be lenient and allow them inside. [00:12:00] So why change Jewish customs? (pause)

As every work of art, the Talmud is a concentric circle. Sometimes we start from the heart and we reach outside. On the other hand, we can also start from the outside and reach inside. In other words, it's always the same story that we discuss, it's always the same story that we learn. The story is the relationship between God and man, [00:13:00] between God and his people, and between man and his or her fellow human beings. All the rest is commentary.

So let us start all over again from the beginning and study the same story you just heard, and we will see all the possibilities involved in that study. We shall study the cast of characters and see how every participant has a face, a name, a destiny and how they all are integrated in this extraordinary mosaic of a legend, and beyond that, of the legend of legends.

So, let us now start the story again, but repeat it in its entirety, and we shall get a different picture of the event. The cast of characters. Naturally, Rabbi Haninah Ben Teradyon. We know where he was. He was [00:14:00] on a public place, public square, maybe a marketplace. We know who was with him, the disciples, but we also know who his disciples were. Especially we know, as you shall see, that one of them was his daughter. We know who was responsible, in a way, for him being there. We know the executioner. We know about every one of them, quite a lot, but we don't know much as we shall see about him.

First, the story. It exists in a variety of versions with minor differences. All agree that the old master was arrested for teaching Torah in public, but while some maintain that he was denounced, others say that he was found teaching by Roman

leaders returning from a funeral, but we know from which funeral. [00:15:00]

All versions describe his agony in more or less the same manner. First, they seized and wrapped him in the scrolls of the Torah. Why? Because they found him teaching the Torah. He didn't teach by heart, he taught with the Torah in his lap. So, the Romans placed dry wood around him and lit the pyre. Furthermore, to prevent him from dying too quickly and to extend the agony, they placed on his chest woolen cloths soaked in water. At that point, we are told that one of his disciples, who was his daughter, began to weep and beat her face with her fists shouting, "Woe unto me father that I see you suffering like this." And he answered her, "Do not weep, my daughter. Were I alone to perish in fire, [00:16:00] I would find it unbearable, but I die together with the Torah. He who will demand justice for the Torah, will do so for me too." According to another version he replied somewhat differently. "Why do you weep?" he asked his daughter. "The Torah is fire, and fire cannot be burned by fire." Then his disciples asked him what he saw, and he answered, "*G'vilin nisrafin*, only the parchments can be burned, so don't worry."

Actually, the story should end here with this climactic and unforgettable line. As the last line you cannot find anything better, but it continues. It continues with the disciples offering a suggestion. And they say to the master -- [00:17:00] at this point we know already it's not his daughter but one of his disciples, an anonymous disciple. And his disciple says, "Rabbi, teacher, why don't you open your mouth and swallow the flames and thus hasten your death?" And he replies, "It's against the law. My life is not mine. It belongs to God and only God may shorten it even by a minute."

Their dialogue was then interrupted by the executioner, by the Roman soldier. In the text he's called either Constinar or Questionar, and in a third source is even simply called Centurion. And the executioner intervenes in the debate and he said, "Master, if I hasten your death, will you promise me eternal life?" [00:18:00] "Yes," said the old teacher, "I do." The executioner didn't believe him, and he said, "Swear it," and the old teacher did. And so, the executioner quickened the flames, removed the wet cloth from his victim's chest, and Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon died right away.

The story's finished? Still not finished, because then we learn that he, Rabbi Haninah, was followed by the Roman soldier who

jumped into the flames. Is that the end of the story? Still not the end of the story, for a heavenly voice was heard proclaiming that both Rabbi Haninah and the executioner had been chosen for life in the world to come. Is this the denouement, the conclusion of the story? No, it is the end of the event, but not the story, [00:19:00] for the story concludes with the comment Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, Rabbi Yehudah the Prince, made later. And the Talmud says as always with the concise, condensed sentence, *Bakhah Rabi*, Rabbi Yehudah wept and said, "Vayesh koneh olamo b'shaah achat, some people can win eternal life in one hour while others need many years."

Is that why he wept? Was Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, the author of the Mishnah, jealous of the executioner? Of course not. Rabbi Yehudah, I believe, wept for another reason. Perhaps he found it strange that the victim and his executioner could endure the same fate. Perhaps he found it strange that a Jewish sage was helped by his enemy rather by God. Maybe he wept over the event itself, for it shows the [00:20:00] crucial role Kiddush Hashem plays in Jewish history.

But at this point, let us start analyzing the characters, and let us turn to the principal character. What do we really know about Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon? His origins are obscure. All

we know is that his father was called Teradyon, but we don't even know the meaning of that name. And that, you should know, is strange but not all so strange as we may think. There are certain words or names that are transmitted from generation to generation and we repeat them, sometimes even daily or 10 times a day, and we don't know why. For instance, does any one of you know where the word "to daven" comes from? I don't, and I believe nobody does. It doesn't matter, as long as we daven! (laughter) [00:21:00]

Teradyon is probably a Greek name, again, we don't know from where. It can come from Terad?, it can come from Terada?, which means a fool. It can also come from Teodoryon, which means the gift of God. That he was called Teradyon means he must have been somehow close to the Greek or to the Roman circles then, but it also means that his father, meaning the father of Teradyon, was a little bit assimilated because he gave his son a Greek name.

Usually, we know many things about the parents of our sages. We know a lot about Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's father, about Yochai. We know about Hurcanus. We know nothing about Teradyon. What was his occupation? Where did he live? His social standing? All these questions remain unanswered. [00:22:00] All we know

is that Rabbi Haninah himself was a second-century Tanna of the third generation. His teachers, only one name is mentioned, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Rabbi Eliezer son of Hyrcanus. His friends, he had some. One is famous, Rabbi Halafta, the father of the great Rabbi Jose, and the second is mysterious and we shall come back to him later, Rabbi Eleazar ben Parta or ben Perata. And the third one, and we shall return to him later as well, is Rabbi Jose ben Kisma.

Of Rabbi Haninah himself, we know that his life was fraught with tragedy. We know much more about his death than about his life. Strange, but true. The mystical literature, the literature of the Hekhalot, of which we spoke last week, devotes much more space and attention to Rabbi Haninah [00:23:00] and his life than the Talmud itself. One mysterious and puzzling legend in that mystic literature is that at the end, when Rabbi Haninah was burned on the stake, a metamorphosis occurred, a double metamorphosis. He suddenly looked like the emperor, and the emperor suddenly looked like Rabbi Haninah. And the Romans who thought they burned Rabbi Haninah actually burned the emperor. And for six months, the Roman Empire was ruled by Rabbi Haninah.

In the Talmud itself, not much is known. Again, we know a lot about his death and about the death of the people he loved. His

wife was beheaded. One of his daughters placed in a house of ill repute. [00:24:00] One of his two sons was executed by shady accomplices, or by the Romans. And as for Rabbi Haninah, we know how he died. We also know that he was a Rosh Yeshiva, he was a head of a yeshiva, of an academy, in a place called Sikneh or Siknin in Galilee, a village known in the Talmud for other reasons as well. We know that the newly founded Christian sect had meetings there, and we know that the relations between the two communities were not always too peaceful. Rabbi Haninah seems to have accepted to debate with them at times, and we learned this from a cryptic comment in the Talmud which reads, "*mi shenikhnas Rabi Haninah l'minut*", which means, literally, when Rabbi Haninah entered into heresy. And usually this sentence is interpreted that the old master entered heresy [00:25:00] not against his own brothers and their law, but against Rome and its system. Once more this sentence occurs in the Talmud about Rabbi Eliezer.

However, there exists another interpretation given by a very great Talmudic scholar today in Brooklyn, Rav Menashe Hakatan Klein, and that too seems plausible that "*mi shenikhnas Rabi Haninah l'minut*" means when he entered into discussions with heretics. Something most sages objected then because perhaps for altogether practical considerations. Open discussions

were dangerous. Roman spies were everywhere, and for them, this was an ideal place to discover learned Jews and denounce them to the authorities.

Clearly, from the few legends that exist about Rabbi Haninah, we may come to at least one conclusion, the man was an extrovert. Whatever he did, he did in public. [00:26:00] He was fearless in the way he displayed his love for learning and his devotion to teaching. What else do we know? We know that not only was he an extrovert, but he loved movement. He loved physical contact with the things that he loved. For instance, I believe that his *Ahavat Torah*, his love of study, is the love both physical and metaphysical that scholars of Torah nourish for Torah.

And we could almost visualize the old master enveloped in holy scrolls as in a prayer shawl. Granted, at the end the idea was not his but the Romans. They wished to turn him into an example because he studied Torah in public, both he and the scrolls were condemned to perish in public. Little did they know that [00:27:00] what they had intended as an extra punishment would somehow be for him a source of comfort. The fact that he could feel the parchments, that he could sense the scrolls on his body

with his fingers, with his forehead, gave him additional strength.

And Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon in this respect typifies, for some of us, the passion that most Jews, learned and unlearned, believers and non-believers, manifest towards the Sefer Torah, the book, the scrolls of Torah. I'm sure you have seen Hasidim, and not only Hasidim, dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah. You would think a groom and a bride. Are there other books as cherished by human beings? When I am called to a Torah I tremble with fear, [00:28:00] and what if I forgot the blessings? Every encounter with the Torah reaches into my deepest recesses, for the Torah represents more than parchments, more than words. That is why in times of peril, brave young men and women in burning ghettos would risk their lives to save a Sefer Torah. And some of them came from Hashomer Hatzair or worse, but when they saw burning synagogues, when they saw the Sefer Torah in flames, they jumped into the flames trying to save them.

And yet, and yet, how many disciples of Rabbi Haninah, and how many Sifrei Torah were burned by their enemy in his century and ours? I've seen in London and then at Yad Vashem mutilated scrolls, singed by fire, [00:29:00] and miraculously safe for

future testimony, in the hundreds, and the humiliations inflicted upon them hurts and breaks our heart as though they were living beings, but then they are living beings.

Is it possible that Rabbi Haninah found in Torah the joy he could not find in his everyday life? Was Torah a kind of shelter for him, a refuge, a compensation? His passion for study is well known. He is the one who said, "*Sh'nayim sheyosh'vin v'ein beineihen divrei Torah*, two persons who sit together and do not engage in study, *harei zeh*, it is as if they attended a session of clowns." The meaning of it, two persons who do not engage in study ultimately will talk about other things, futile things, and deal with them superficially and live [00:30:00] superficially. If the whole existence is a joke, then everything is a joke, even the words about existence. "Aval," said Rabbi Haninah, "if two persons do engage in study, the Shekhinah will appear in their midst and well in their midst." And later he corrected himself, two, must there be two to attract the Shekhinah? Even one person who learns receives the Shekhinah in visit as a reward.

That is one of the few sayings tradition has recorded in his name, and one of the two sayings in the entire Mishnah that mentions the Shekhinah. In Halakhah, few laws are attributed to

him, one of them is touching. We know that Jews are not allowed to wash their faces on Yom Kippur, but the king and queen are exceptions to the rule. [00:31:00] They may wash. Are they above the law? No, not in the Jewish tradition. Unlike other nations, ours demands that our kings too obey the law. In the Roman times, as you know, whenever the emperor died, all his legislation went down with him and the new king had new laws. Not in the Jewish law. In the Jewish tradition, the greater the king and the greater the prophet or the sage, the more he or she must obey the law. "Still," said Rabbi Haninah, "leaders must think of the people and their feelings, and to see their king and queen unclean and untidy, albeit Yom Kippur, could have a demoralizing affect and therefore they may wash, but not their bodies, only their faces."

And this makes us think that Rabbi Haninah probably was something of a [00:32:00] psychologist. He knew people and people knew him. They respected him, they trusted him, that we know for sure. Said Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov, and I quote, "One must not contribute to charity unless Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon serves as treasurer."

So, let's stay with him and his family a little bit longer. We mentioned his two daughters. We know only one, the other we

know but not by name and we know what happened to her because. The one that we know as Bruriah, celebrated Bruriah, the great Bruriah, the unique Bruriah. Bruriah, whose erudition was matched only by her audacity. Scholars avoided her, feeling inevitable embarrassment because she surpassed all of them in knowledge and she wanted them to know it. (laughter) How many times do we find in the Talmud [00:33:00] the expression, "*Yafeh amrah Bruriah?*" Even her father would say that, presidents of academies would say it. Bruriah is right. Her wit, her sharp tongue, inspired numerous legends, and yet she too was engulfed in tragedy as we have learned a few years ago. She lost two sons. Did she, didn't she take her own life? Rashi believes she did. Her husband Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Haninah's son in law, also had a very tragic existence. At the end, he had to flee from his home, and he died abroad.

One of Rabbi Haninah's sons, Shimon, was a scholar but the other one whose name is not recorded apparently went astray, joining some social or political outlaws. And we don't know exactly what happened, all we know is that he was murdered. And some say he was murdered again by the police, by the Romans, and [00:34:00] others say that he was murdered by his own accomplices for revealing their secrets. And we know all this because his body was found and mutilated. And, when that

happened, when he was brought to the cemetery for burial, local dignitaries came to the funeral and wanted to eulogize the dead boy for the sake of his father. But Rabbi Haninah said, "No, not even there should the truth be concealed."

And Rabbi Haninah's entire life, as we see now, was filled with mourning. Many of his peers perished as martyrs, the people of Israel seemed to have been forsaken by the God of Israel. Let's have a look at the context of the situation. Judah, most people still remember the national catastrophe. Rome rules over the land, its policy fluctuates. [00:35:00] Harsh under Domitianus and Traianus, moderate under Hadrian, who at one point offers the Jews the possibility of rebuilding the Temple, but he changes his mind and adopts unprecedented cruel measures against them. His aim is to destroy the Jewishness of the Jew: no Shabbat, no circumcision, no study, no prayer. Jerusalem has been remained Aelia Capitolina, and Jews are forbidden to come near it, except one day a year on Tisha B'av so as to make them weep harder when remembering the destruction of the Temple.

Hadrian's hate has many explanations, one of them being hurt pride. In spite of what he considers to have been a generous attitude towards Jews, they remained faithful to their belief. Some of them continue to resist Rome militarily. Young, heroic

warriors established armed camps in the mountains of Judah and fought the [00:36:00] occupying army with vigor and bravery. Guerilla battles followed one another and culminated in the legendary campaign of Beitar. Rome won, but a terrifying price was paid. When Hadrian sent his message to the Senate in Rome, he omitted the customary sentence, "And the army and I are well." They weren't well.

And Hadrian's vengeance was wicked and murderous. Listen to Dio Cassius's report, and I quote, "Fifty Jewish fortresses and 985 localities were totally destroyed. Five hundred eighty thousand men fell in battle. As for the casualties resulting from starvation, pestilence, and fire, they were innumerable. All of Judea became a desert. Wolves were [00:37:00] turning around desolate cities and devastated villages."

It's interesting because this is corroborated in the Talmud by Rabbi Akiva, by Rabbi Yehoshua, who at one point saw foxes coming out of the ruins of Jerusalem. And they cried except for Rabbi Akiva who smiled, "*shualim halkhu*", foxes were walking around in the place where the sanctuary stood to the glory of God. As for those who survived, many were taken to slave markets and sold for almost nothing, and the same Dio Cassius

says that the Jewish slave then cost less than a portion of hay for a horse's meal.

And yet, the Torah was not stifled. Never has the voice of Torah stopped in the land of Judea. Since ordination was forbidden, and since the inhabitants of villages [00:38:00] permitting ordination were all punished by death, that was the collective punishment imposed by Rome, the old Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba decided to ordain his disciples between two mountains. Surprised by the Romans, he told the young rabbis to run while he remained behind, shielding them with his body which -- listen to the text, and I quote, "Hit by arrows, instantly became like a sieve."

And when our masters realized that Jewish learning was in absolute peril, they issued a call, one of the most inspiring and exalting in history. And listen to it, for it remains valid to this day. And we should repeat it again and again. *Kol shelemad*, whoever studied, *sheyavo v'lilamed* let him come and teach, and whoever did not study, let him come and [00:39:00] study.

And that call echoed throughout the nation. Clandestine schools were created. The more brutal the oppressor, the more fervent

the oppressed, the stronger their resolve. National pride became an obsession. And one sage declared, "If the enemy orders you to tie your sandals with green laces better die, but do not obey him."

How is one to explain Rome's fascination with Jews? Of all the enemies Rome had then, the Jews bothered them the most. Why? Why the Jews? Why always the Jews? Why was it so important for Rome to bring Jews to their knees religiously, emotionally, philosophically? In other lands, the Romans had to face different religions, nationalism, cultures, and defeated or absorbed most of them, but not the Jews. And at one point the Romans couldn't understand, why were the Jews so stubborn?

[00:40:00]

In the Sifrei, this incomprehension is expressed in poetic terms. The Romans asked the Jews, and I quote, "Why do you cling to your God? You are more learned than we are, more courageous, more enterprising, more imaginative. Come and join us and you will be stronger than we are and more domineering." In fact, they said, "Be like us, and you will be more than us." And the Jewish answer was, "Do you want to know what we think and feel about our God? We will tell you." And they tried to tell, and the Romans couldn't understand.

Now, does it mean that the entire Jewish community as a whole acted in unanimity the same way? Of course not. That never happened and never will. [00:41:00] What was true then is true now. Like many other nations, and every century, we had occasions to articulate them to three options when we face the enemy. Active resistance, passive resistance, and collaboration. Yes, we had collaborators, and one of them was a famous one, and his name was ben Abuyah, whom we called *Acher*. He was a collaborator, and the Talmud says that he denounced the sages to Rome.

We even have one who was an informer, or at least rumors have it that he was an informer, and his name was Rabbi Yehuda ben Gerim. Then we have most of the sages, actually, who preached active resistance, and we also had some who believed in passive resistance. [00:42:00] And Rabbi Jose ben Kisma, whose life played such an important role in the death of Rabbi Haninah, believed in passive resistance. Not to anger the enemy too much, not to provoke him, not to defy him in a way that would make the situation worse.

But he wasn't the only one. We mentioned earlier that one of his peers of Rabbi Haninah was a certain Rabbi Eleazar ben Parta

or Perata. Well, he wasn't known for his courage either. A story tells us that several of his disciples came to him for advice, and they said, "We got bad news about new persecutions in Tzipporis," where there was also a very big academy. "And what should we do?" they said. "The Romans are starting, and we know terrible things will happen. What should we do? Escape?" And the master was afraid to say, "Yes, escape," and he gave them a few hints, quoting a few [00:43:00] passages from the Bible. And then he himself was caught for teaching Torah together with Rabbi Haninah as we shall see, he denied the charges. He went as far as denying being a rabbi. And yet the Talmud doesn't hold it against him. His title has never been taken away from him, nor from Rabbi Jose ben Kisma.

A story. When Rabbi Jose ben Kisma fell ill, Rabbi Haninah came to visit him. At that time, their relations were still good, friendly, trusting. After all, weren't they on the same side? It was natural, therefore, for Rabbi Haninah to pay his colleague a sick call. Surely *bikur cholim* is an important mitzvah, nobody will deny that. But when Rabbi Jose ben Kisma died, we find no mention of Rabbi Haninah's going to his funeral. [00:44:00] How come? Isn't *halvayat hamet*, to accompany, to pay homage and respect to the dead, as important a commandment as to visit the sick if not more so? He must have

had a reason for not going, and I think that the reason had to do with his sick call.

As a matter of fact, on that occasion, they had an argument. Rabbi Jose had opened the debate, and I quote the text from the Talmud. "Haninah, my brother," he said, "don't you know that this Roman nation has been elevated by heaven to rule over others? It has destroyed God's Temple, and burned its sanctuary, and massacred its pious and best sons, and yet it is still around. And as for you my brother," he said, "I hear. I hear that you sit and study and teach in public with a Sefer Torah in your lap." [00:45:00] Rabbi Haninah, polite -- after all, he came to pay a sick call -- he said, "*Min hashamayim y'rachamu*, heaven will help us." Rabbi Jose got angry and he said, "What? I am talking sense, and you are introducing heaven into the argument? I wonder," he continued, "whether they will not burn you and the Sefer Torah on the stake."

That exchange must have left the visitor troubled. Because of the threat? No. Rabbi Haninah was not easily frightened. More likely his sadness was motivated by his colleague's rationalization of Jewish tragedy. If Jews are being humiliated and slaughtered, it is because God wills it that way, Rabbi Jose ben Kisma had said. God is on the side of Rome, on the side of

Israel's enemy. If Rome is powerful, it's because God gave the Roman's power. And therefore, [00:46:00] Jews according to his view, had neither reason or right to rebel, to resist and oppose the occupant.

And this Rabbi Haninah couldn't understand. A Jewish scholar, a great scholar, a Tanna, a teacher, a Rabbi, should side with Rome? Well, he wasn't siding with Rome, not he. He was simply advocating passive resistance, prudence. And even that attitude, even that attitude, I think displeased Rabbi Haninah because of the argument. If Rabbi Jose ben Kisma had told Rabbi Haninah, "My good friend, my brother, take my advice. You want to teach, teach secretly. Simply, why seek danger?" But he gave the answer, he explained why. [00:47:00] He said, "God is with Rome," and that Rabbi Haninah couldn't accept. If the enemy is cruel, why blame God? If Hadrian's soldiers slaughter Jewish children, why place the responsibility in heaven?

Still, when he was ill, he came to see him. Everybody came to visit Rabbi Jose, but when he died, they abstained from attending the funeral. For two possible reasons: *bikur cholim*, a sick call, could be done in private, in the morning, in the evening, with nobody seeing. But not so *halvayat hamet*.

Funerals are by their nature public events, especially when the

person being buried is a public figure. To attend the funeral is a mitzvah, and perhaps some sages were afraid of fulfilling such a mitzvah in the open.

The other reason sounds more plausible. I think the sages failed to come because they chose to make their position known. [00:48:00] Rabbi Jose ben Kisma was too close to Rome. That is why they did not come. And if you want the proof, we know who did come to the funeral: Roman representatives, Roman officials, Roman dignitaries. The Talmud says that *g'dolei Romi, y'karei Romi*, which means all the VIPs from the military and civil establishment. And when they returned from the cemetery, lo and behold, they encountered Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon. And what was he doing? He was teaching Torah in public.

Another version tells us that Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon was arrested together with Rabbi Eleazar ben Perata, already mentioned, and Rabbi Haninah said to his companion, "You are lucky," he said. "You were caught [00:49:00] and you were charged with five felonies, and yet, you will be saved. I was accused of only one transgression, the study and teaching of Torah, and I shall not be saved." And indeed, legend has it that dramatic miracles occurred on behalf of Rabbi Eleazar, but not for Rabbi Haninah. Rabbi Haninah was sentenced to die by

fire, his wife to be beheaded, and his daughter to be sent to a house of ill repute. Comments the Talmud, "When they were made to endure their cruel sentences, all three quoted biblical sayings, thus voicing their submission to divine justice."

Because you see, the Talmud is looking for answers in this case. Our sages needed some kind of an explanation for Rabbi Haninah's death, for his entire family's murder. How could one possibly apply to his case the Talmudic saying, "*ein metah v'lo chet*", [00:50:00] that death is never unrelated to sin?

Well, if learned scholars and those they love were allowed to die so tragically it meant that at least in some respect, our perceptions says the Talmud, "Our perception of them must have been wrong." Means perfect men and women are not exposed to such punishment, to die prematurely. And the Talmud gives us a reason why -- other reasons, not Roman reasons, Jewish reasons why they died. Rabbi Haninah, says the Talmud, perished in the flames because of something he had done. What did he do? When he studied, he uttered aloud the ineffable name. He used to say the Shem HaMephorash, which one shouldn't do.

As for his wife, why was she sentenced to death? [00:51:00]

Because she was too passive and complacent towards her husband.

She knew what he was doing, she heard him say when he said it, and she should have stopped him. And she was condemned to die by the sword because she did not stop him.

Now what about the daughter? Why did she get such punishment and such humiliation? And there too the Talmud, never short of imagination, comes up with an answer. And the answer is that as she was walking in the street, she was to have overheard Roman notables say to one another, "Look how beautiful she is." And she was flattered, and at that point she self-consciously began to walk differently to attract more attention, and that is why she deserved her punishment. But, do not worry too much, [00:52:00] she did not stay too long in the red-light district, (laughter) because we know from other sources in the Talmud that Bruriah begged her husband to save her sister and Rabbi Meir somehow did.

But no one saved her parents. The parents were saved only in memory, and we shall always remember them. The psalmist verse, "*V'lo shachakt hatzachak anavim*" [00:52:26], "And God has not forgotten the outcry of the humble," is interpreted in Talmudic literature as follows, "God Almighty does not forget the blood, the Jewish blood shed during the Hadrian persecutions. All the victims are recorded by God himself, and kept in his special

archives. And at the end of time, God will ask other nations, why have you murdered my just men such as Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon? And they will deny the charges and say, oh no, we have not shed their blood. [00:53:00] Then," says the Talmud, "he will open his special book of martyrology and show them, see, all the names are there. And ultimately, faced with such evidence, all the killers will be judged and condemned."

But why martyrdom? Why so many martyrs? What is martyrdom? In Ancient Greece, it meant to bear witness. And the first martyrs in history were Jews who have grown up repeating the biblical injunction, "*Edim atem AdoShem*", you are all God's witnesses. Comments the Talmud, "In the name of God, if you are my witness, I am God, if not..." Among the first martyrs there was a woman, Hannah and her seven sons. She refused to bow to the edict of Antiochus Epiphanes's law, forcing Jews to worship idols. Hannah and her sons died as Jews. [00:54:00]

In the times of Hadrian, the question affected not only individuals, but the community at large. As the decrees became harsher and harsher, our sages felt the need to codify the law related to *Kiddush Hashem*, or martyrdom. The commandment *Yehareg ve'al ya'avur*, which means rather be killed than transgress, applied to three specific sins: idol worship,

adultery, and bloodshed. In other words, if the enemy tells you, "Worship our idols or you shall die," do not worship the idols, better die. And the same is true of adultery. And if the enemy tells you, "Kill or be killed," you may not save your own life at the expense of someone else's.

Talmudic legislators also analyzed collective behavior. If the enemy were to surround the community and ordered it to hand over one of its members, lest everybody be killed, [00:55:00] the community must not yield to the threat. However, should the enemy ask for someone specific, someone the enemy considers guilty, someone who sought shelter within the community thus endangering it gratuitously, then the community may submit and hand over the fugitive. But even then, says one Midrash, even then, God doesn't like it.

In the Midrash, we are constantly reminded of ten martyrs, but actually there were more. Many names are not included in the list, which apparently recorded only the most prestigious and exceptional scholars of the time. However, upon close scrutiny, their deaths strike us as unwarranted even in the context of their time. Not one of them stood accused of adultery, idolatry, or bloodshed. Then why did they choose to die?

Nowhere it is written that if ordered [00:56:00] by the enemy not to study or teach, one must risk one's life for Torah. Then how is one to explain the supreme sacrifice of Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon, and the others? Is it conceivable that they in fact violated the law by broadening its scope? I prefer to believe that whatever they did, they did so in conformity with the law. And I believe therefore that *Limud Torah*, teaching and studying, also implies Kiddush Hashem.

What does it mean? I believe that it was not specified, it was not part of the categories, a fourth category, because it was self-evident. Without *Limud Torah*, without learning, without knowledge, how would anyone [00:57:00] even know about the other three laws never to be transgressed? The only teacher who advocated ignorance -- I mean in matters of Jewish culture and tradition -- was really ben Abuyah, *Acher*, and therefore he became an *Acher*, outsider. Even Rabbi Jose ben Kisma, who preached coexistence with Rome, didn't advise Rabbi Haninah to stop studying. He himself didn't stop studying. He only suggested he should stop studying in public, and most sages did so. Even Rabbi Akiva did so.

When Rabbi Akiva was in jail, and Rabbi Yehoshua Hagarsi came to see him, Rabbi Akiva would teach using stratagems, clandestine

conspiratorial methods. You remember, students would walk in the street and they would simply pretend doing other things and speaking to themselves, and they would say "Who wants to buy [00:58:00] shoelaces? What is the din of halitza, what is the law about a certain situation?" And Rabbi Akiva from his jail would answer.

I think therefore that we may safely state that though not included in the category of vital principles, the study of Torah was viewed by all our masters as a commandment which one must uphold even at the expense, at the risk of one's life. And so, Rabbi Haninah was right. He knew that once Torah was forgotten, everything would be forgotten, for Jewish life would have lost its meaning. Yet he also knew that such a possibility had to be considered. It had happened more than once in our history.

"nishtakha Torah mi yo b'nei Yisrael", is a sentence that appears frequently in our texts and therefore Rabbi Haninah and all the sages said rather [00:59:00] live with Torah, but it also means rather die with and within Torah than without it. And therefore, Rabbi Haninah's behavior is natural as is Rabbi Akiva's and Rabbi Ishmael's.

Now what about the disciples? What kind of foolish questions did they ask of their dying teacher? Why didn't they keep

silent? Why didn't they look away and grant him his ultimate privacy? Shaul Lieberman z"l taught us the difference between the Jewish and the early Christian martyrs. Jewish sages refused to turn their deaths into public demonstrations. When Rabbi Akiva died, the Talmud said he said Shema Yisrael, but the text emphasizes that *otah sha'ah sha'at k'riyat sh'ma otah*, it was the hour [01:00:00] when one was supposed to recite the Shema. Had it not been the hour, he would not have said it, or he would have said something else. And the fact is that all the others did not say Shema Yisrael.

Then why did Rabbi Haninah's disciples engage him in a dialogue? In a conversation? Couldn't they wait quietly, sadly, until the end? Was it proper, was it respectful to speak to him about his pain, or about his inner feelings? Let us look at the scene again, and again examine the protagonist. Who is there? The roman executioner who is doing his work, lighting the fire. Our hero, Rabbi Haninah and his disciples. Where is his wife? Already dead, beheaded. His sons? One is dead. The other, if he is present, he is heartbroken and silent. His daughter? One is already in distress and in exile, and the other, Bruriah? Bruriah is here. Why? Why had she been spared? [01:01:00] Because, as a married woman, she no longer belonged to the household of Rabbi Haninah. Or because she and her husband were

under the so-called protection of a Romanophile named ben Abuyah who everyone knew was her husband's pupil.

Whatever the reasons, the fact remained that Bruriah is present at the father's side, and her behavior here, we must say, is out of character. Those who are familiar with her story know that in times of danger, she was often so strong as to appear insensitive. When her two sons died suddenly on the same day and in the same circumstances together, she hid their bodies from her husband until after Shabbat. And she was known for her coolness, for her composure, for her ability to de-dramatize events and to control her feelings. But here, standing near her father on the public square, she allowed herself to be openly moved [01:02:00] to pain, anguish, and possibly despair. And one text describes her as pounding her head and chest with her fists, the proud woman scholar whose opinions frequently prevailed now was nothing but a bereaved daughter. For once, she didn't care whether or not people were looking at her, whether they approved or disapproved of her emotional outburst. All of that was of no interest to her. At this moment she had to express her emotions the way many human beings do, by shouting, by inflicting physical pain on themselves. And it was her father who stopped her. And now, at this supreme moment,

she became his child again. She was reunited with her father, alone with him as never before.

Out of respect for her and for her father, the other disciples restrained their impulse to interfere. They had not said anything yet. At such [01:03:00] moments outsiders must remain outside. But only if the child decides to ask questions, all anyone can do is listen.

And here, we should study several versions of the event and they are all similar but not identical. One text gives the father the opening line, "Daughter, why do you cry?" Normally, such a question would seem odd. Why shouldn't a daughter cry when witnessing her father's agony and death? In this case, it sounds right. "My daughter," Rabbi Haninah seems to say, "I have never seen you shed a tear. Why are you weeping now?" In other words, she had been exposed to tragedy before and she has always responded with astonishing dignity and calm. Why was she crying now, in the presence of [01:04:00] people, so many people?

And the answer demonstrates her ability to quickly regain her self-composure. "I weep," she said, "Because of the Torah which will be burned with you." In other words, do not ever accuse

her of sentimentality. Bruriah, quickly composed again, had an answer to everything. Let no spectator presume that she is a weakling. Yes, she allowed herself to weep in public, but not because of her father, God forbid, but because of Torah. Then, and I imagine Rabbi Haninah smiling in spite of his pain, Rabbi Haninah answered. And again his answer makes sense, he said, "Do not worry daughter. Torah is fire and fire cannot be burned by fire. And he who will demand justice for Torah will do so for me as well."

Now, there is a text here which is not so known. That at this point in the conversation, [01:05:00] suddenly, having said this, having said that God will also demand justice, *nasa einav hashamaimah*, Rabbi Haninah lifted his eyes up to heaven, and then his disciples asked him, "what do you see?" And now the question makes sense. You look at heaven, what do you read in heaven? What is the meaning of all this? What is the sense of all that is happening to our people? And he answered, "*G'vilin nisrafin*, the scrolls are burning but the letters are not. Physical, tangible things come and go but not spiritual ones. They stay *ba'avir*, suspended between heaven and earth, outside time and beyond human reach. In other words, there is something in us mortals that is [01:06:00] immortal.

And now the dialogue has attained the sublime quality of human nobility. The dying have already vanquished death simply by removing ideas, dreams, values, principles, laws, memories from its domain. Death has no power over the spirit.

Now as we have said earlier, logically, the legend should end there. As a literary or poetic exercise, it couldn't go much further or higher. Rabbi Haninah's vision and his rendering of it are the ultimate, the most striking culmination. It would close the legend perfectly. And yet, all Midrashic versions, all of them, feel the need to continue. And they bring in, first of all, as an active [01:07:00] participant, the Roman executioner, who will now undergo a metamorphosis and become to the old sage and to himself both executioner and redeemer.

And listen how the legend continues. Having heard Rabbi Haninah speak about the indestructible letters, his disciples turned to him, and this is the first time they turned to him, after Bruriah. And they ask him, "Why don't you open your mouth? You will swallow the flame and shorten your agony and die faster." Well, here again, first of all, in the beginning, the first reading, you don't understand the disciples. If already we're asking a question, is this the question? Maybe you should ask, what do you expect of us? What do you want us to do? How

should we remember you? No. I believe, that they wanted to give an advice, but some advice. [01:08:00] Did they think that's what their teacher needed?

Now you should know again and this again we learned from Lieberman, that in those times and later too, martyrs, Christian and others, did open their mouths and swallow the flames, and that is why in most religious drawings and paintings, the martyrs are painted with open mouths. In the beginning, I thought that mouths are open because they are screaming with pain, and only then did I understand not at all. They open their mouth to swallow the flames. The possibility of hastening death by swallowing flames was known to all people: It is something that is done instinctively. And since Rabbi Haninah didn't, the students told him, do.

And the answer is very interesting. [01:09:00] Again, what did they say? They say, "Why don't you swallow the flames?" And that means the question is, may a person hasten one's death to avoid lengthy agony? What is the *din*, what is the law, they seem to ask, pertaining to such a situation? And the old master replied, no, one may not. It would still be considered suicide, and suicide is not an option. Jewish law and Jewish tradition oppose suicide. Only the language of the master was more

poetic, because the question, and the situation and with the Romans around, they couldn't study. It was very personal and personalized. And therefore he [01:10:00] simply said, and I quote him, "My soul is not mine. Only its owner may decide when to take it away."

Again, when you study the text, you have problems with the text. From the structural viewpoint, the legend should have begun with the law that one should not commit suicide and concluded with the vision of *G'vilin nisrafin*. Poetically, as a work of literature, it would make more sense. It's easier to start with Halakhah and move to Aggadah. It's easier to start with law and move to legend than the reverse. You start with reality and carry it into fantasy rather than the other way around. Why then the unconventional direction of the narrative?

You must look for the answer in the Talmudic saying. Talmud says, "One must never take leave from a friend without [01:11:00] trading views of some legal, Halakhic matter." When two friends leave each other, they must indulge in Halakhah. And since Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon was about to say farewell to his disciples and friends, they all felt it appropriate to evoke a question of Halakhah. And the one that was on their mind then, in those times, the Hadrian persecutions, the

question that obsessed them all, that haunted them all was whether one is permitted to die before the last moment arrives. Whether one may, in order to avoid unnecessary agony and persecution, commit suicide. And the master ruled, no, the law is no. Life and death are God's domain, not ours. Just as we do not [01:12:00] choose the place or the hour of our birth, we may not choose the hour of our death.

But then you may well ask, was that the time for study? For intellectual discussion? Was that the time for disciples to address questions, however important, to their dying teacher? I told you in the beginning that when I studied this legend, I was disturbed by the disciples' apparent insensitivity. But having reached now the conclusion of our journey, I must tell you that I feel reconciled with the entire cast of characters, even with the Roman centurion or questionar. After all he did attenuate an old Jew's pain. Granted he did what Rabbi Haninah refuse to do, he committed suicide. But, he wasn't Jewish. [01:13:00]
(laughter)

As for the disciples, in order for us to understand their motivation we must try, briefly, and remember Jewish life and law in those years in Palestinian academies, which we are doing year after year here when we meet and we discuss Talmudic

masters. Remember that strict customs and rules governed all the schools. For any study session to begin, the president, accompanied by the head of the tribunal, the Av Beth Din, and the speaker, the Chacham, had to use the magic and indispensable phrase, *sha'alu*, please, ask your questions. Without such permission, the lesson could not begin. If the president did not say *sha'alu*, there was no session.

Now in conclusion, therefore, [01:14:00] just try and imagine the old teacher in agony surrounded by his disciples. They see him diminished, mutilated, unable to control his tears and dominate his pain. Naturally, they love him. Naturally, they could weep for him and possibly with him, or they could leave him alone and go and cry at a distance. But that would have been unworthy of him and them. Pity, for a master? That would have been discourteous, condescending. Who are they to feel pity, to feel sorry for their master? Had they shed tears in his presence over his tragic fate, they would have embarrassed him, even offended him.

And that is why, in an amazing, [01:15:00] sensitive show of solidarity, they chose to stay together. It wasn't easy, but they overcame the difficulties and they chose to ask him questions instead, as though he had said to them *sha'alu*, ask

questions. For doing so, they gave him the feeling that he was still their teacher, and they remained his pupils. And that is the gift, the extraordinary gift they wisely offered him at that supreme moment of solitude, because when we die, that is when we are alone.

The statement that in spite of the enemy and his immediate indisputable victories, in the shadow of death and its inevitable triumph, the relationship [01:16:00] between master and disciples, between man and word, between word and word, between word and memory, remained as fervent, as total as before. True, he was suffering, but they could still discuss suffering. True, he was on the threshold of death, but until the last minute with his last breath, he could still teach them immortal lessons about life and death. And thanks to them and their questions, he could prove to them and to himself that he, until the last minute, was in full possession of his powers. And that he could guide them as before, in the fields of both Halakhah and Aggadah. He remained their teacher. Not because he was their teacher then. They made him their teacher then, [01:17:00] and I submit to you that that was the most glorious moment of his life and theirs.

It is said that when the news of Rabbi Akiva's tragic death reached Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon, he and his friends tore their clothes and began mourning their loss. And we are also told that one sage, curious master called Shmuel ha-Katan, the one who composed the prayer v'Lamal'shinim in the Shemoneh Esrei, he exclaimed, "The death of Rabbi Akiva," he says, "serves as a premonition or a prediction of perilous times that are about to come upon us."

And in truth, perilous times [01:18:00] came upon them. More and more martyrs of the faith died, more and more sages were slaughtered, and more and more Jews were massacred. But I cannot not ask myself, and you, if the death of one man served as a bad omen for humankind, what should one say about the death of thousands and thousands and thousands and millions and six million men, women and children and so many children, children?
(applause)

M:

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