

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: Daniel in the Lion's Den

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Elie Wiesel:

This story, beautiful and disturbing -- is about children, Jewish children. Their fate, majestic and tragic at the same time will sound familiar to us. Exile, separation, suffering, longing, endurance, fidelity. It has everything, even ferocious lions. Not Jewish of course. (audience laughter)

Right from the beginning we sense danger. These Jewish children are not in their homeland, not in Judea. We meet them on foreign soil, in foreign lands faraway. Uprooted by a [00:01:00] powerful enemy, transposed into Babylonia by a relentless army. They are seen taking compulsory courses in assimilation.

The text says so, let's read it, shall we? And I quote: "And the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his eunuchs to take a few of the children of Israel from royal stock or nobility. Young boys devoid of corporal faults, handsome, talented and well-bred, educated and intelligent. Able to serve in the Royal Palace and

to whom the culture and language of the Chaldeans would be taught.”

Apparently, such was the custom then. The victor seized the illustrious children of vanquished nations. [00:02:00] In all wars as we know, it is always the children who lose. Grown-ups fight with each other and it is the children who die. The lucky ones are deported, as were Daniel and his three special friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

They became in a way Babylonians in spite of themselves. It was in spite of themselves that they visited the royal court and remained there. It was in spite of themselves that they became heroes of whom Jewish history remains proud. Far from their families, far from their people, they had to confront events in which the lives of kings and their nations were at stake. Poor Jewish children tossed about by history, [00:03:00] innocent Jewish children attached to their faith, to their memory.

How many were there? Many without a doubt. Daniel was the most celebrated among them, perhaps because he was the best student in the class. But something very strange will strike us as we unfold his story. Daniel, who in a way is included in the list of prophets was not a prophet. The Talmud nor the text never

refer to him as a prophet. We know on the other hand, that he was gifted. And we know that because we learn what he does. And we also know that whatever he does, he does it well. We realize that in every circumstance, in every situation he is resourceful.

[00:04:00] But then, is this surprising? Jewish children have always managed well in the diaspora. Aren't they to be found in the most prestigious schools everywhere? Don't they excel in the humanities as well as in diplomacy, business, and science? Even in prophecy? Interestingly, Daniel displays a special talent for the subject of interpreting dreams. Is it surprising? Joseph before him, and Freud after him. (laughter) Didn't they chart the course? Can a Jew live without dreams? Can a Jew live without interfering in other people's dreams? (audience laughter)

Still, Daniel remains a special case. He is [00:05:00] always the first in every category. He recruits his relations at the highest level. He's chief of a department here, a sector there, he knows influential people. But again, what he misses -- what we miss reading about him is that he was a prophet. And yet he knows everyone, he understands everything, he penetrates all

secrecy, even foresees the future. Besides, he knows how to please, especially please people who have influence.

But then the title given to him is Daniel, "*ish chamudot*." Not Daniel, "*HaNavi*," but "*ish chamudot*." "Daniel, the beloved one." But since he's loved, how does he manage to find himself [00:06:00] in the lion's den? Does he want to prove that he is loved by them too? A good question; there exists an answer that is not any less good. But let's be patient, no anticipating allowed.

The Book of Daniel is also a story, and every story has its written space. Furthermore, since we are on the subject of questions, of course we shall raise another one. Who was Daniel? What was his legal qualifications, his ambitions? Never mind Dan Quayle's. (audience laughter) So who was he when he was not running? A political chief of his exiled people like Ezra or Nehemiah?

[00:07:00] In Talmudic literature he -- but here too let's not go too quickly. Let's cling to suspense, for the moment let us simply say that Daniel is portrayed in all the sources as a combination of a sage, a visionary, a scholar, a seer, a

psychologist, a specialist in the interpretation of whatever happens. We of course like his visions, mystical in essence, they refer to a grandiose messianic denouement. And as we read his visions, and as we reread them we feel hope. Great, exquisite hope. Yes, he seems to tell us all suffering has an end, all ordeals have a meaning. Yes, in the end, the enemy will be brought to his knees. Yes, God will be, God is on the side of the victim.

[00:08:00] Often during our exile we read the Book of Daniel to console ourselves. Half is in Aramaic, therefore incomprehensible to the average reader, too bad. Two thousand years ago and more it was the only section that was accessible. At that time, you see, Aramaic was the *lingua franca*, the common language among Jews and Gentiles as well. It was utilized, we are told, in all the Middle East, even in Europe, and the Mediterranean countries up to the Himalayas.

But why then is the book written in two languages? Only to give salaries to the translator? I am prejudiced. But if you wanted to make it popular, even then, [00:09:00] we could have published it entirely in Aramaic. Strange. But everything is strange in this work, study it and you will realize that it

presents more than a few chronological difficulties. And as many philosophical and mathematical enigmas.

Occasionally, we are not sure for misuse of metaphors whether it has to do with Nebuchadnezzar, or with Nabonidus, with Cyrus, or Thaddeus, Antiochus the Second, or Antiochus the Fourth. In the meantime, we let ourselves be swept away by the wonderful tale. So much so that we no longer even try to analyze it.

Experts in biblical criticism do it, that's their business.

Even they are not sure whether the Book of Daniel is the work of a single author or four. [00:10:00] And whether he or they lived at a time of Nebuchadnezzar or Antiochus Epiphanes. There are those who claim that in fact there existed a pious man, there existed a man named Daniel, but he was another. But then, did Daniel foresee the events or did he learn about them afterwards? Daniel therefore a historian? A visionary historian? Wouldn't the two attributes be incompatible?

The theme of Daniel has inspired many writers and artists. In the fourteenth century, Chaucer used it in a monk's tale. Three centuries later, Calderon turned it into theater. *La cena del rey Baltasar*. Byron, Heine and Goethe were taken by the

subject. Goethe, as a matter of fact did not succeed in completing his project. [00:11:00] His rough draft remained a rough draft. In music, it was Handel especially who did it justice. In painting there were many: Delacroix, Tintoretto, Rubens, and of course as always, Rembrandt.

We shall study the character in his entirety. As we follow the text, both the text in the Bible and its commentaries in the Talmud and Midrash, we shall try to clarify, to penetrate the mystery that surrounds the main character, Daniel.

But before doing that of course, you will allow me to open our customary parenthesis. Occasionally I asked myself whether there isn't among you someone who comes here only for the parenthesis. (audience laughter) Firstly, as we are about to inaugurate our twenty-second annual series of collective study, let us [00:12:00] stop at the number. Twenty-second, twenty-two years, that's a very long time. I don't know about you, but I grew older.

Twenty-two years in our tormented, turbulent times, we sadly must acknowledge that there are some marriages who didn't last 22 years. And yet we are all here, always thirsty for

knowledge. And the main emphasis of course is the beauty in that knowledge. In the Talmud we are told that always "*potchim b'shevcha shel akhsaniyah*" "One must always praise the host." And let me tonight praise our host once more. It is a very special place, The Y is. But this year it is more special.

Usually [00:13:00] we have seen in the last 22 years, people come and go. This year you have a combination of -- well, I'll give you a commercial. You have a new director, Sol Adler who speaks a magnificent Polische Yiddish. In the Y, that's something. (audience applause) Amos Hirshbein, who has been here for many years, but his music is Yiddish. But then his Yiddish is music. I'm sure you know his father's work. Peretz Hirshbein was one of the very, very great Yiddish writers and playwrights, novelists, the giants of Yiddish literature.

And this year you have a new director of humanities, a very close friend of ours. Who is a brilliant novelist, Danny Stern. So to be here for 22 years, [00:14:00] 22 is a magic number because there are only 22 letters in the alphabet. So maybe this is a sign that since there is no twenty-third letter we should stop -- but we say that every year. (audience laughter)

What is the aim of these encounters? It is to thoroughly, thoroughly examine together ancient sources and texts. So as to discover in them a meaning that goes beyond them. And to meet those who invented them and study them. There is in study a call to joy as much as to memory. It is irresistible. To learn is to accept that past and future generations are linked to one another. The words of Moses, the tears of Jeremiah, the prayers of David, and the visions of Ezekiel and Daniel [00:15:00] weigh upon ours. We would be wrong to detach them one from the other. The "Anochi" uttered by God at Sinai cuts across all the "I"s uttered by men till the end of time. So his word, God's word, is in all words. It is to find its true sovereignty that the student studies, and the storyteller tells his tale.

Secondly, in these parentheses, we must always refer to current affairs. I already have. The current affairs are sad, I really prefer to study Daniel. (audience applause) I cannot not tell you how distressed [00:16:00] some of us are at the situation. The level of the debates. My God, it's not even nice. Everybody, they all lack class, let alone sincerity. I wish, I wish we could really find a real presidential candidate.

I'm told that in a certain modern book of apocrypha, we are told that the two presidential candidates wanted to know the results of the elections. So naturally, they came to our hero, to Daniel. And he looked at them and then smiled. And he said, may the best man win. At which point both candidates shouted with fear, "No!" (audience laughter) [00:17:00] On the other hand, look how lucky the Russians are. (laughter) Gorbachev was elected president, there are no televised debates. They are so lucky.

Thirdly, by following Daniel as far as his distant dwelling place we hope to obtain from him his presence in ours. Thus all the stories, prayers, and promises form a link from one exile to another. A poetic link that thrills the soul and tears away the darkness that envelops us.

[00:18:00] Fourthly, you have studied here this afternoon, some of you have, with your teacher the Book of Daniel, and I was told that more questions remained than answers. Well, more questions will come up soon. Thirdly and lastly, while Daniel's problem was how to get out of the lion's den, we have another problem. Our problem of course, annually illustrated is the

problem of the late-comers who want to enter a closed door, but which in their honor will open immediately.

[00:19:00] In the third years of the reign of Jehoiakim, King of Judea, Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylonia marched against Jerusalem and besieged her. Thus begins the story which takes on an air of historical truth. At once difficulties arise; for the historians who like to play with dates, [00:20:00] but don't like dates to play with them. Now some suggest that the king actually was called not Jehoiakhim, but Jehoiachin. Others that the third year had to be a printing error, that one had to read it as the third month. Others insinuate that the word revolt should replace reign.

In short, the biblical critics enjoy themselves thoroughly in showing that this work was not written as the rabbinic tradition has it during the last year of Nebuchadnezzar reign, and the first years of Cyrus. That is to say, between 545 -- 535 before the Common Era. Furthermore, they point to the anti-Jewish nature of the persecutions as corresponding to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes [00:21:00] rather than to that of Nebuchadnezzar.

But first, let's analyze the story itself. Dramatic, overwhelming, stimulating. One's soul is searched and scorched as well as one's fantasy. It revolves around two principal characters in the beginning, Daniel and the king. If the king's identity is subject to controversy, Daniel's is no less so, but never mind. Both Nebuchadnezzar and Antiochus actually are anchored in the history of their people and ours. Except we remember them better, we know them, we can place them, we can date them, we remember their cruel triumphs, and their just defeats.

Whereas Daniel remains totally unknown. [00:22:00] He comes from nowhere, and goes nowhere. No trace of him before his appearance on the stage, no trace of him afterwards. Of what family is he the illustrious son? To which lineage should he be attached? Since by definition he has to belong to the illustrious families, to the nobility in Judea. Otherwise they wouldn't have taken him to the Chaldean city. So where did he come from?

His file in biblical literature is more than skimpy, and even in Talmudic literature it's rather barren. In fact, in the biblical literature it is almost non-existent. All we know is

what is shown, is what is given. Ezekiel mentions him in passing, [00:23:00] next to Noah and to Job as being among the great, just man, that's all. Now again, the Talmudic sources that usually complete and complement the biblical bareness do not help us much more, but they do help us somewhat.

But we are surprised: this extraordinary character who did so much, who saw so much, who accomplished so much, who anticipated so much. How come that he did not inspire more the authors of legends in the Talmud and the Midrash to come up with some more daring hypotheses and adventures? But read the text in the Bible first and you will see that we don't know enough. Who was his father? Where did he spend his childhood? He came to Babylonia [00:24:00] as an adolescent. Did he have any brothers or sisters? How old was he when torn from his home and transported to Babylonia? Where did he go after his adventures, after his dreams, after his visions?

With its taste for the imaginative the Talmudic legend gives us some better portrait of the individual. He's said to be a priest, and a descendant of David. We would take him for one of the just man. How? Because the Talmud tells us that he lent money to the needy without interest, he gave to the poor,

attended funerals, and danced for and with brides. The text speaks of him in the Bible with a respect that borders [00:25:00] on reverence. He hasn't any faults. Believe it or not, he eats kosher not only at home. (audience laughter)

When he prays, he turns towards Jerusalem. Furthermore, he demonstrates courage in the face of power. He doesn't forget his friends when they need him. He's someone who always knows the right thing to do, the proper thing to say. He knows how to address fierce rulers as well as anonymous callers. He even knows how to appease starving lions. One Midrash tells us that actually while he was there a prophet, Habakkuk -- of whom Reb Levi spoke -- Habakkuk came to feed the lions so they weren't hungry anymore. Very clever, very clever that [00:26:00] Daniel managed to get in touch with Habakkuk before he even knew. Very clever indeed. But better than anyone, he knows how to disarm the anger, if not hate which his king harbors towards Jews.

The Talmud or the Midrash appeals to our imagination. We know about Daniel only what we are told. But what are we told? Let's read. "The King gave the order Ashpenaz, chief of the eunuchs to properly feed the beautiful children of Israel. He assigned to them each day dishes from his table, and the wine

from which he drank. Wishing to take care of them for three years, at the end of which they the children would be in the service of the king."

In other words, the children [00:27:00] could if they so wished take pleasure in their golden exile. They were taken care of, their education was attended to and paid for. Once assimilated or integrated they would be offered important positions at the court or in the administration. Daniel had three friends among the children already quoted: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Perhaps the Babylonians like the immigration officials on Ellis Island were allergic to Hebrew names. Therefore, they hastened to change them to Babylonize them. Daniel became Belteshazzar, Hananiah became Shadrach, Mishael became Meschach, and Azariah became Abednego. Actually, we have the same problem pronouncing their Babylonian names, [00:28:00] but that's life.

In short: "Daniel resolved not to be tainted by the king's dishes and wine." In other words, Daniel was determined to eat kosher. But since the royal court doesn't have a kosher kitchen Daniel tries to convince his guard to let him plan his own menu for himself and for his three friends. What did he want? Vegetables and water. The guard is afraid, "The king will find

your sin." He said. "And he will punish me, he will go for my head."

So Daniel, clever -- proposes a deal. "Let us do as we wish for 10 days, then you will decide what to do." Deal concluded. At the end of 10 days the diet of the four Jewish boys turned out to be a big success. They feel great. They are doing better than the others who [00:29:00] didn't eat kosher. "You see? Dieting is good for you." In other words, a Jew doesn't necessarily have to give up his faith to make it among Gentiles.

Daniel and his three friends made their way. Accepted in the service of the king they found favor in his eyes. "In all the subjects that required wisdom and intelligence, and in which the king questioned them he found them to be 10 times superior to all the magicians, and wise men, and astrologers in his kingdom."

If you will, it is a repetition of the story of Joseph in Egypt and of Mortechai in Persia. Daniel passes the tests and imposes himself as a Jew. He is respected, congratulated, his advice is sought, [00:30:00] as is his consent. He finds himself propelled to the very center of Babylonian history, to the court

of King Nebuchadnezzar. Judging by what we have just read, King Nebuchadnezzar was a rather nasty character. After all, he defeated Judea, burned down the temple, took its most sacred vessels. And deported its most promising youth with the intention of keeping them, thus separating them from their people, their roots and their future.

It is not surprising that a king having done so much evil couldn't sleep well. Maybe he was bothered by his conscience, he's uneasy, says the text. He couldn't sleep. And so because he couldn't sleep he summoned his magicians, [00:31:00] his astrologers, his charmers. And he asked them, "I have a dream," he said to them. "Tell me what it was." One can imagine the bewilderment of the magicians. "If the king doesn't know it, how will we know? Our job is to interpret dreams, not to reveal them."

But the king was stubborn. "I want to be told what my dream was. If not, I will have you executed and your homes demolished." The magicians cry, weep, plead for mercy. It is useless, they are condemned. And all the sages with them are condemned to die. Daniel and his three friends included, it's

always like this. Whenever anyone is persecuted, somehow the Jew is also persecuted for no reason.

[00:32:00] Maybe in that case, King Nebuchadnezzar believed in radical solutions, it's either/or. "All the sages," he said, "are to be either honored or killed." All? Yes, all. The text says so, "They looked for Daniel and his three friends to make them perish like all the others." Why Daniel and the friends? They were no magicians, they had nothing to do with his dreams. But all were condemned, and they were threatened. The story with the elephants.

The implication therefore is that maybe Daniel and the three friends already belong to the intellectual elite of the empire. And so Daniel was arrested. And he asks the chief guard. He said, "Why this mass arrests? Why this mass condemnation?" And the guard tells him the truth, why.

[00:33:00] So Daniel requests to see the king. Saying, "I can answer his question. I can tell him his dream." Of course he needs time to consult his friends, to pray, to receive from heaven the vision that he wanted to receive during the night.

And lo and behold, the king's dream -- he sees it. And he tells the king, and I quote him: "You saw a huge statue of extraordinary splendor. The head was of pure gold, its chest and arms were of silver. Its belly and thighs were of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet part iron, part clay. As you looked on a stone came loose, hit the feet of the statue, and broke them to pieces. Then the whole statue broke, and the wind took it [00:34:00] away without leaving a trace. But the stone which had hit the statue became a large mountain and covered the whole earth."

Admit it, a strange vision, troubling, fascinating. Moreover, perhaps it corresponds to a certain logic. Maybe the king didn't dream. Maybe Daniel was the first to believe in suggestive powers. He was intelligent, Daniel. Perceptive, intuitive, he guesses the king's anxiety; what will become of him tomorrow? What will be the fate of his kingdom? In other words, what is the secret of the future? How can the mystery of time be pierced?

The great conqueror cannot but worry about his conquest. And so Daniel naturally will speak to him of the future. [00:35:00] "The statue," he tells him, "represents your empire. It has

everything. And every color represents a different province, and every material represents a different people. And after you another kingdom will arise, smaller than yours, but then a third and a fourth. And all of them will be destroyed. After that, God will create the kingdom symbolized by the stone in your dream, and that one will live forever."

Did Daniel guess the king's dream? Did he but say words the king hoped to hear? Then, did he soothe his anxiety? The fact is that the king, elated covered Daniel with gifts and honors. And named him commander of the entire province of Babylonia, and first among the sages. Naturally, nepotism having existed already then, [00:36:00] even in Babylonia, so Daniel obtained for his three friends high posts in the administration. They also became heads of provinces. And so all was well, not only for the Jews, for the Gentiles too. Daniel's intelligence saved all the sages, all the magicians, all the charmers from certain death. So, they should have been grateful, right? Well, gratitude was already then a rare virtue. End of chapter, and of a certain phase in the story.

Now, the story or the book direct their attention to the three friends. And the story mentions the ingratitude of the king.

He, the king had a gold statue, a huge gold statue constructed and [00:37:00] ordered all his subjects to prostrate themselves before it. Whoever disobeyed was to be thrown into a fiery furnace. All complied except for Daniel's three friends. The king summoned them, he questioned them, threatened them. They were not frightened.

"But you will perish in the flames," he told them. "And which is the God who will deliver you from my hand?" Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah replied and I quote them: "Our God can deliver us from the fiery furnace." And here comes something exciting and new. "But even if our God does not choose to do so, we want you to know that we shall not worship your idols." A dramatic confrontation between Jewish courage and pagan power.

[00:38:00] This is the first time that the Jews are persecuted for their faith. Until then persecutions have been national, political, military or even economic in character. The tyrant's motivation had been to dominate Israel, so as to reinforce his own power. Let Israel submit and nothing would happen to Israel. That they prayed, hoped, observed the law of Moses had meant nothing to various tyrants. This was different. This was new, without precedent.

Now the tyrant requires total submission from the Jews. Physical submission, spiritual submission, individual and collective submission, submission of thought, abdication of the soul. And, to his surprise [00:39:00] the Jews resisted. They defied the king again. The king said, "If your God is God let him save you." And they replied, "Even if he does not save us, he remains our God." How can one not see this as a prefiguration of countless tests and ordeals to come?

For Jews, persecutions do not necessarily put only God in question. Their faith can change in design, in intensity, but their faith does not die. It does not even follow them in death. Their faith survives death. Here in this case, they themselves physically survived death. Thrown into a burning furnace -- [00:40:00] an angel protected them from the flames. And they survived unharmed. And there are many legends about that angel, about that experience with the fire. Anyway, happy ending. The king recognizes the greatness of their God. The three friends are alive and leave the stage forever. We never hear of them again.

And Daniel, where was he? When everyone had to prostrate himself to the statue? Where was Daniel? Maybe he was in a distant province, it's possible. Maybe he was busy with his visions. The fact is that he himself was not thrown into the flames. But then let's look at the king, Nebuchadnezzar. Rather [00:41:00] unstable, threatening, fanatic, pitiless. All of a sudden he becomes sweet and generous an instant later. Only to change again. Hasn't he learned anything from the preceding events?

The Talmud explains it wasn't his fault, but that of his counselors, of his advisors. You see how history repeats itself. (audience laughter) Jealous of Daniel, they conspired against him and succeeded in inciting the king against the Jewish people. Furthermore, the Talmud describes the reaction of the three friends somewhat differently, by the way. Before replying to the king they consult Daniel. What should they do? But Daniel refuses to answer them. He suggests that they go seek the advice of the prophet Ezekiel, [00:42:00] who tells them to flee.

Their response? "If we run away, how will the name of the Lord be sanctified? *Kiddush Hashem* is an act we must perform in

public. It is in public that we denounce life if it means lies and compromise. If God deserves that we live for him, he equally deserves that we die for him." Thus, in the book of Daniel that the mentality of all future martyrs of the fate. It is in that book that all this is revealed.

Just one small parenthetical commentary. I asked the question about Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Why not Daniel, why not the others? There is one answer in the Midrash. That actually they were chosen as symbols, only they were [00:43:00] ordered by the king to prostrate themselves. And therefore, Daniel was out of the picture.

But in fact when you read the book, and as you know that it's not an easy book. When you read it from the beginning to the end, the book can be divided into two parts. The first consists of action, all the time, action. The second, of visions. In the first part, the king's dreams interpreted by Daniel bear upon the story. In the second part it is Daniel's visions, and they alone implicate the end of the story. And I mean again, visions not prophecies.

Let's repeat, because this is probably the crux of the question. Daniel is never a prophet. But doesn't he foresee the future? No, he [00:44:00] interprets the present as a function of the future. He knows how to read and decipher signs. He predicts the eschatological future at the end. But then, how is one to describe him? Again the Talmudic literature speaks of his wisdom, of his righteousness, but not of his prophetic powers.

Now it is true that we praise his wisdom. It is described as superior to all others. That of the pagans, naturally, but also that of the Jews. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, says the Talmud, the three prophets did not see what he saw. But then again, the question is pertinent. If he was so wise, so pious, if he saw more and better than the prophets, if he looked further than they did, [00:45:00] deeper? Why couldn't he be a prophet?

I was bothered by that question for weeks and weeks, and months and months. But let's continue our study. Other dreams await us, other visions too. The characters change, the cast in a way remains the same, for the story remains the same. For their affinity for inspired dreams remain the same. Nebuchadnezzar has a new dream. This one he remembers and he tells it to

everyone. In the first person, I quote him: "I, Nebuchadnezzar live quietly in my house and happily in my palace. I had a dream that frightened me. The thoughts that followed me to bed have filled me with terror." Oh yes, now he no longer needs magicians to reveal his own [00:46:00] dream. He knows it by heart. He only needs them to elucidate its meaning, all are summoned to appear before him, all admit their failure.

Luckily, there is Daniel. Daniel understands, Daniel knows, Daniel listens, Daniel is always there. Bravo Daniel. And Daniel, naturally explains to the king the reason for his anxiety. In point of fact, he says his future is bleak. The tree that the king has seen in his dream symbolizes something, the tree will be cut down. And that means that the empire will be destroyed.

Furthermore, and here comes a story which is worthy of Kafka. Daniel tells the king that he will go through a metamorphosis. That [00:47:00] during seven years or to quote him, "seven ages" he the king will cease to be a man. He will cease to be human. Beast among the beasts, he will dwell in the forest. He will nourish himself with grass and drink dew. And lo and behold, we are told the dream materializes. And it is the king himself who

later tells it in the first person. Now how can one not believe Daniel?

But here we must ask a question. Why is the king being punished in such a cruel way? Certainly he frightened quite a few Jewish citizens with his pagan decrees, but none actually died from them, right? We don't have a single evidence about a Jew [00:48:00] who died then. So why? For scaring people he deserves punishment in kind? And why this particular punishment? An ideal subject for psychologists and psychoanalysts.

Nebuchadnezzar is presented by the Talmud on a strictly moral plane. He sinned from pride, and therefore his punishment will touch his pride. He thought he was superior to other men. He's shown to be inferior now to the lowest, the most deprived among them. Beaten by his own vanity, vanquished, humiliated he tells his story therefore in a tone of penitence, of repentance. And in the end of stunning happiness. He has discovered faith by rediscovering [00:49:00] reason.

It all came to pass the way Daniel had predicted it would. It lasted seven years, but the seven years came to an end. Well,

again the question; if Daniel predicted something so precise why wasn't he a prophet? Naturally, the king does not tell us about his own death. How could he? But amazingly no one else does it either, not even Daniel. Like the others, Nebuchadnezzar disappears at the end of chapter four. I think the book should be called the case of the multiple disappearances.

The next chapter opens with the baffling vision of his successor, [00:50:00] Belshazzar, organizing a last feast. Son or grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, he inherited from him a taste for partying and also for the occult. He too sees strange things. In the middle of a state dinner he sees mysterious fingers writing something on the wall, incomprehensible words, illegible. All the wise men of the court try and fail. The king is on the threshold of despair.

But it is the queen, the only feminine character in the story who saves him. She reminds her husband of Daniel's existence, Daniel's power. They look for him, they find him, and here he is already in the royal palace in front of the king and the court. [00:51:00] Here he is clarifying the enigma. He said, "The words? Easy. *Mene, mene tekel, u-parsin.*" Which means, "count and count, weigh, divide." In other words, God has

counted and weighed your actions, and your kingdom will be divided. Your reign is over.

Extraordinary. Daniel is always bringing bad news. And yet they want to hear him, more and more. Here again the prediction is correct. Forty-seven years after the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonian Empire is crushed. And now it is Belshazzar's turn to disappear and make room for Persia.

[00:52:00] Persia rules, governs the world. Cyrus is good. He rebuilds Jerusalem, did Daniel know him? Did Daniel influence him? No doubt. But actually, his biggest adventure in the book is not with Cyrus, but with Darius. Darius, successor to Cyrus the Great, likes Daniel. He names him, again to a high level post. He's one of the three prime ministers of the entire kingdom of the empire.

Too much success, too much glory for the Jewish refugee. Again he is envied, especially by some politicians, and they strive hard to undermine his influence. How to trap him? The dream solution is discovered. They propose to Darius a law forbidding the country's citizens from addressing their [00:53:00] prayers and supplications to their gods. They may be directed only to

the king, Darius himself. To transgress this law is to expose oneself to the supreme punishment, that of being thrown into the lion's den.

This does not in the least prevent Daniel from living his life as before. In his house where the windows face Jerusalem. In his house he prays three times a day, always turning to Jerusalem. Naturally he is caught praying, he is taken to the king. Daniel does not defend himself. He accepts the consequences of his action. But the king [00:54:00] appears sad, sadder than the defendant himself. Now, why isn't Daniel afraid? In fact, he should be. Of course it's because he has faith in God.

But there is a marvelous anecdote which has nothing to do with Daniel. But I cannot not tell it to you. The anecdote is about two men in Africa who stand at a river which they are about to cross. And then they notice the crocodiles looking at them. "You are afraid?" Says one to the other. "Don't you know that God is good and merciful?" "Yes, I do." Says the frightened friend. "I know that God is good. But what if God chooses right now to be good to the crocodiles?"

[00:55:00] How could Daniel know that God wouldn't choose that moment to be nice to the lions? Strange, Daniel wasn't afraid but the king was. His friend, the king. In Talmudic literature we embellish upon the sleepless night that Darius spent, depressed by what he is going to see in the pit. His friend and protégé cut to pieces. Some Midrashic commentators imagine him near the pits, motionless, torn by remorse and anguish.

And then, miracle of miracles. In the morning the pit is opened and Daniel emerges unscathed. The king is happy, Daniel is happy, the Jews are happy, God too is happy. He should be. All citizens of Persia are ordered by the king to respect the God of [00:56:00] Daniel. Daniel, says the text, "Will prosper under the reign of Darius." Is this the reason why Daniel is not called prophet? Because the king liked him too much? Because he was too happy? Must a prophet always be sad? Would happy Jeremiah not have been Jeremiah? Let's note that interestingly, as soon as the word "prosper" is used as related to Daniel, the story once again changes direction.

Up until now the action has turned around kings. It was they who dreamt, they who decided, they who acted. Daniel was only an interpreter of their dreams. Now from the seventh chapter on

it is Daniel who dreams, it is Daniel [00:57:00] who has strange visions. It is he who needs someone else to explain what he feels, what he foresees, what he predicts. Just imagine, Daniel is the bearer of a message for someone else to uncode, to decode, to decipher. And the message is exciting, his visions are hallucinatory. Occasionally Daniel speaks like Ezekiel, expressing himself in a beautiful and feverish language. A poetic if not prophetic mode appealing to imagination and history alike. To the heart as much as to the soul.

He faces the universe. He confronts what is above, beyond men. I, I quote him, "I was looking during my nocturnal vision. And behold, the four winds of the heavens [00:58:00] erupted on the great sea. And four large animals came out of the sea, each different from the other. The first resembled a lion with an eagle's wings. I looked until the moment when its wings were torn off. The second animal resembled a bear. The third, a leopard with four wings of a bird on his back. The fourth animal terrible and hideous had teeth of iron." (Now you know where Jaws came from.)

"Teeth of iron, he ate and smashed and crushed all that exists. (My wife told me actually it's not Jaws, it's in James Bond

there is a man with iron teeth, apparently.) This is an astonishing tale, a staggering vision. In his bed Daniel is transported [00:59:00] to the unreal. He soars through celestial spheres where nothing is ordinary. Who but Daniel is, "the Ancient of Days" seated on an elevated throne more elevated than the others. Is it an angel? Is it God? "His attire was white as snow and the hair on his head was like pure wool. His throne was like flames of fire, a river of fire flowed and gushed before him, thousands served him. Who is the man who stopped in front of the Ancient of Days and marched in front of him? 'I' says Daniel, 'I Daniel, I had a troubled soul. The visions in my head frightened me.'"

Naturally. What men could see all this, absorb all this, [01:00:00] receive all this without being afraid? He would have liked to open up to someone, but he is alone. And here we see the tragedy of Daniel; in whom could he confide? The three friends are no longer there. With whom, with whom could he share his secrets? There is nobody there. He is alone. But who would be able to reassure him?

And then strange, unbelievable. Daniel, because he cannot turn to anyone alive -- he turns to one of the characters in his own

dream. And he said: "Tell me what am I dreaming?" And even stranger, the character doesn't push him away. The character doesn't tell him, "What do you want from me? It's your dream, not mine." The [01:01:00] character responds calmly. "The animals represent kingdoms; those that will fall and those that will remain. The most arrogant will be the most chastised."

Is Daniel any more at peace for this much? Not at all. Even after the dream, awake he feels extremely troubled, pales and remains silent. And from that moment on Daniel does not stop being feverish and delirious. He sees a ram with horns that no animal could resist. The ram is hit by a he-goat. Having become powerful, his horn is bruised. All of a sudden we are led to understand that we have been witnessing a war between East and West, armies of the sky. Stars in the heavens participate in the battle.

Suddenly Daniel hears a saint chatting with another saint, "How long will the sanctuary [01:02:00] and its defenders be trampled down? How much time will pass before the fulfillment of the vision of perpetual sacrifice, the *korban tamid*." And his companion replies, "Listen, two-thousand, three-hundred nights and mornings, then the sanctuary will be cleansed and purified."

His temperature seems to be rising from minute to minute, from dream to dream.

"Someone who appeared to be a man is in front of him. A voice says, 'Gabriel explained the vision to him.'" The angel Gabriel. Daniel falls face down. Gabriel speaks, Gabriel explains. Daniel listens, Daniel understands. Thinks he understands, ends up no longer knowing what he is supposed to understand. All that he knows is that he must keep quiet, and wait. And: "Keep his vision secret [01:03:00] as it relates to a distant time."

The end of the chapter is of particular interest. "I Daniel, was for several days languishing and sick. Then I arose and took care of the king's affairs." What does it mean that after the event, after the hallucination, after the vision, life had to go on? The man who had gone through so many crises, and conflicts, and ordeals and sufferings. The man who had been subjected to so many visions, where he had to maintain the pace of his regular work. His schedule, inspecting, disposing, ordering, speaking to people, listening to their problems. The reality of life surpassed its unreal turbulence.

But all the same one can ask, what did he do during the few days when he was sick [01:04:00] and languishing? Who came to see him? To encourage him? Weren't there any physicians making house calls? Jews making inquiries, a *Bikur Cholim* society? A man, a Jew of his importance, of his standing was absent from his office for several days. And no one troubled himself to come and see whether he was the victim of an accident? And didn't he have a maid? A cook? And what about the angels, what are they doing?

Although recovered, Daniel continues to have visions. Perhaps he now wants to have visions. He summons them and now it's always a man dressed in linen. Gabriel who "opens his mind" and talks to him. Daniel [01:05:00] changes color. He is seized with panic, he falls face to the ground, he faints often. And now it's no longer animals that he sees. Right now it is clear words that he captures, human words. Gabriel and later another angel, Michael tell him the future. Persia will be conquered by Greece, the world will experience convulsions on a planetary scale. Battles between empires, violent conflicts between great powers, the humiliated will taste triumph, the proud will be humiliated.

Ish chamudot, the beloved one, the name given to Daniel comes from the angel. On more than one occasion the angel pays him that compliment. Because they love you so much we will confide in you terrifying secrets. Or perhaps we [01:06:00] should translate *Ish chamudot*, someone who knows how to love well other people, who loves others more than himself. Never mind the reason, Daniel lives and vibrates, soul and body. All his senses awakened, sharpened, inflamed.

He doesn't miss a single nuance. He doesn't let a single syllable pass him by. For sure he doesn't always understand everything. For instance, there is talk about the king's daughter from the south. Who will approach the king to reestablish harmony, but who is she? Or who is the contemptible man who will take her place? In the end Daniel remains awake and he listens to the angel while awake.

He knows he remembers the future as the future unfolds. Four kings will follow Cyrus, [01:07:00] Alexander the Great will extend his power everywhere, forcing back the horizon. And then he too, Alexander too will be defeated. And then the angel announces the rise of Antiochus Epiphanes, who in a whirlwind will defeat Egypt and other enemies. But at the end of all

these torments which have nothing to do with the Jewish people -
- The Jewish people will be saved.

Daniel knows when, but the angel commands him, "Daniel, you keep these words secret." And now we are coming to the denouement, to the end of the story. Says the angel to Daniel: "Seal the book, many will read the book and knowledge will grow." What? [01:08:00] How can the angel use such a strange language? If the book is sealed how will it be read? And whose knowledge will be increased? By what procedure? It's absurd.

Not at all. The Book of Daniel at this point teaches us a solemn and essential lesson. Mystery must remain secret in order for it to impact on man's destiny. To reveal mystery at inopportune moments is to dissipate its substance. It is only when the secret is whole, sealed -- that knowledge will increase. In other words, Daniel repeats for us what the angel told him. It is forbidden to trivialize certain subjects. It is dangerous [01:09:00] to treat them lightly. All that Daniel is authorized to tell us is know that there is a secret.

And now let's listen to the end of the book, it is worthwhile. In poetry and mystical lyricism it surpasses many other

prophetic texts. And I opened the quotes: "And I, Daniel was looking and here were two other men standing up, one on this side of the river and one on the other side of the river. One of them said to the man dressed in linen who stood above the waters of the river. 'When will these marvels end?' And I heard the man dressed in linen who stood above the waters of the river. He raised his right hand and his left hand towards the sky. And he swore in the name of the one who lived eternally that it would be at some [01:10:00] time in time, and half the time. And that all these things would end when the might of the holy people would be entirely broken. I heard, but I did not understand. And I said, 'Lord, what will the outcome be of these things?'"

"And he replied, 'Go Daniel, as these words will remain secret and sealed, till the end of time, or until the time of the end. Many will be purified, whitened, and purged. The wicked will do evil, and none of the wicked will understand, but the intelligent will understand. From the time when perpetual sacrifice will end and when the devastator's abomination will be set up, there will have past 1290 days. Happy will be the one who waits, and who reaches 1305 days. And you walk towards your

end, you [01:11:00] will rest, and you will stand up for your heritage until the end of days.'"

Let us note in passing, that the vocabulary and imagery of our prayers for the dead-- the *Kel Male Rachamim*-- are inspired by the last chapters of this book: "*V'ta'amod likeitz hayamin.*" They are beautiful. But what do they signify? What do these figures signify? Thousands and thousands of rabbinical and mystical scholars, and commentators have attempted to pierce their secrets. In every exile, in every ghetto.

In the Middle Ages, as well as now there were spiritual guides who in order to console their contemporaries try to mobilize Daniel's predictions. And I remember, in our home too, Daniel was popular. People spent weeks and weeks to figure out the exact combination of his [01:12:00] "time, and time and a half." Some were convinced that they had found it. Redemption was going to arrive at dawn. Daniel said it, didn't he? But look at time multiplied by 1000 and divided by 90. What does that give us? This gave us hope.

So the angel will have won, the secret remains secret.

Furthermore, Daniel himself admitted his ignorance. Why would

we be luckier than Daniel, poor Daniel. Brave Daniel, wise and famous, he wasn't at all embarrassed to say more than once that he didn't understand. His role was only that of messenger, to listen and repeat, to listen and transmit, to listen and to be present. But in fact, what happened to Daniel? [01:13:00] With the book closed again we no longer find a trace of him, he too disappeared. Under what circumstances did he die, where?

A Midrashic source suggests that having retired from his official functions he returned to Judea, and settled in Tiberias. We always say that about people who disappear. We even were told that Job, who didn't exist nevertheless opened a Yeshiva in Tiberias. (audience laughter) But in general, we leave the story unfinished. And here we come back to the beginning. We don't know where he came from, nor where he went. Having survived so many dramatic events, so many threats, so many perils. He disappeared as in the night of history, or in the haze of imagination.

But tell me, hasn't he left any children behind? No, [01:14:00] he wasn't married. I insisted on that many times, that he was alone. He was not married. Now the absence of women in this story -- the only temporarily quick suggestion of the queen--is

striking. No mother, no wife, no daughter. A man without a family, Daniel? Apparently. But isn't it man's first duty? Isn't he ordained to marry, to build a home, to propagate life on Earth? Other prophets married, maybe all prophets married.

Except, and here comes the discovery I made. It took me really weeks and months to discover this although it was there. Daniel could not marry. Because he belonged to God? No, because he belonged to the king [01:15:00] who had made him come to Babylonia. The text doesn't say it, but Talmudic commentators don't hide it from us. Daniel and his three friends were castrated, they were eunuchs. A Tosafist goes so far as to say that Daniel did it himself, so as not to have to marry a pagan princess. Most of the commentators leaned towards the theory, according to which the young Hebrews were mutilated by the king's servants.

Mutilated in the flesh Daniel was no longer qualified to serve as God's prophet. Is this the reason why he was only wise and beloved, *Ish chamudot*? [01:16:00] Is this the reason why he was better loved? Because he was incapable of loving? I mean of physically loving, of truly loving as a man loves in order to celebrate life. Suddenly, when we are now aware of his physical

state we better understand the temperament and the nature of the character. Humiliated in his body he gave wings to his spirit. Limited in the present he imagines the future. Tortured by men, he clings to angels. Feeling weak, weakened, he flings himself towards the dizzy heights of the absolute.

Whence his complexity. Humble and pious Jew, he accepts to serve the court. Commenting on the verse of the Song of Songs "*Bikashti et sheahava nafshi*" "I searched [01:17:00] for the being with whom my soul was in love." Two masters are in disagreement. One says this applies to Daniel who went to the royal meal in the palace. The other says the opposite. In fact, this applies to Daniel but he went home to fast. But both say it applies to Daniel, that he was in love.

He was in love, but his love was a frustrated love.

Contradiction? Daniel is a man of contradictions. Not entirely man, not entirely prophet. Not entirely visionary, not entirely emissary, not entirely guide. He's not whole, Daniel. He is a genuine diaspora Jew. Always broken, torn, attracted to two forces at once. He admits to countless sins, but associates them with [01:18:00] all the others. Is it to explain his own pain? To justify that of his people? "This whole calamity came

upon us," says he, "and we did not implore the eternal. We did not turn away from our inequities." He's angry with the people of Israel, that's clear.

But he also questions God, the God of Israel. Listen to the Talmud: "Moses said in his prayers, '*hake! hagadol hagibbor vehanora.*' God, who is great and heroic and mighty and powerful, along came Daniel, who declared, 'Heroic? Who? God? His children are oppressed by strangers. Where is his might? Where is his bravery?' Thus in his prayers," we are told in the Talmud, [01:19:00] "Daniel, Daniel no longer pronounced the word *hagibbor.*" Oh yes.

Daniel dares to rise against God, when it is a question of interceding in favor of tormented Jews. But didn't he say just now that it was the fault of the Jewish people? He said it, he admitted it. But that changes nothing in his attitude, between suffering and logic he makes his choice. Between victims and justice, he opts for victims, be they the victims of God.

In this he conducts himself like the great masters of our people. Since Abraham and until Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, the greatest among the great dared to take the side

of Jews even when it went against God. All including Daniel agreed that God was dwelling in history, that he was no stranger [01:20:00] to creation. That God acts on events. Although his responsibility did not diminish man's it has to be compassionate rather than rigorous. And so we understand Daniel's revolt. Moses had said, "If you do not forgive your people, erase my name from your book." Daniel said, "If you do not save your people, I will cease to praise you."

The one who had decided to pray even at the risk of his life was going now to be silent. And the omission of one word is the presence of silence. He was going to curtail his prayers. The one who had vowed to God's infinite love was going to breach this love to improve the lot of his people. And Midrashic commentary tells us and I quote, "There were two defenders of Israel before God. [01:21:00] Moses and Daniel."

Daniel is also compared to Jacob. Jacob and Moses were the only ones who actually were close to God, and had seen the future. But Jacob and Daniel were the only ones to whom God revealed the mystery of the very end, the mystery of redemption. Jacob was going to share it with his children we are told, but forgot it.

"Nistalkah haShekhinah mimeinu." As for Daniel, orders were given so that he keep the revelation, the secret to himself.

All that remains is a beautiful and disturbing story. Only a moving and uplifting prayer. "*Mi sheanah leDaniel begov haarayot*" He who answered Daniel in the lion's den, we are told in our high holiday liturgy, let him answer us, *ya'aneynu*. But in the text we find no indication of a response. Daniel must have prayed, that is certain. But we are not told that God literally answered him. We are only told that Daniel survived the danger, that he remained alive. Is that God's reply? Would the event and not the language of the event -- be God's language? God does and man speaks. Better still, God is -- and man in order to speak to him knows only words. Fascinating, Daniel. In the very midst of [01:23:00] royal intrigues, of struggles of emperors seeking to dominate the world; he actually was satisfied with the only power given to man, the power of the word.

It is with words that he reassures the emperors, it is with words that he offers hope to generations of exiles. Who will evoke his name and his example. It is with words that he resists God. The angel ordered him to seal the book, and not to

divulge the secret of the ending. He submitted. Too bad, couldn't he have slipped in --sneaked in an allusion here and there between two images? A wink between two utterances to facilitate our task?

Maimonides and his followers consider the Book of Daniel dangerous reading. As for me, I confess [01:24:00] I like it. Because it is beautiful, because it is dangerous? I love it because it is where I meet Daniel, where we all meet Daniel. A book where we find the clues, the hints he has left behind for all of us. Yes, we cannot decipher the secret. But we know that there is a secret. And we know that that knowledge helps us overcome banality, and reject the vulgarity of comfort. That knowledge of the secret endows hope with a name that preceded creation itself. (audience applause) [01:25:00]

M:

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