

**Elie Wiesel In the Talmud: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah**

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**Elie Wiesel:**

(applause) In honor of tonight's debate, (laughter) which apparently is of no interest to you, (laughter) (applause) we shall study another debate. The story is known, and we have analyzed it in this place years and years ago. It illustrates the right to argue, to question, to refute, to debate, to dissent. What would Talmudic study be without that right? Here, two great masters oppose one another. We have already encountered one [00:01:00] years ago, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus -- Rav Eliezer, son of Hyrcanus. It is time for us to meet his rival and friend, Rabbi Yehoshua, son of Hananiah. Both were highly respected members of the celebrated academy at Yavneh, whose president was Rabban Gamliel. Rabbi Yehoshua served as Av Beit Din, or head of the tribunal -- that is to say, number two.

Now, may I take you back to a day -- a very special day -- when teachers and students were deeply involved in a stormy controversy, centered around a complicated question: whether an oven -- broken, but rebuilt by a certain Akhnai -- was to be considered ritually pure or [00:02:00] impure. Rabbi Eliezer considered it pure, whereas all the other sages pronounced it

impure. Though alone, Rabbi Eliezer fought for his viewpoint, and, quote, "offered all the answers in the world," which his colleagues gently but unanimously rejected. When his rational arguments failed, he quite naturally turned to the supernatural, and exclaimed, and I quote him, "If the law agrees with me, may this carob tree prove it." Whereupon, we are told, the carob tree was torn out by its roots, and blown a distance of a hundred or four hundred cubits away. Something like that had never happened at the academy. Still, the sages, were unimpressed. [00:03:00] (laughter)

Maybe they didn't like dramatics, but the fact is, they said a carob tree constitutes no proof. "Alright," said Rabbi Eliezer, "if the law supports my view, may this stream of water prove it," whereupon the stream of water turned and began flowing backwards. (laughter) Still unimpressed, (laughter) and unmoved, and surely unconvinced, the sages commented, "The stream of water proves nothing."

At this point, Rabbi Eliezer could not suppress his annoyance. "If the law corroborates my position," he said, "let the walls of this house of study prove it." And so they did. They began to topple. Did they really? Rabbi Hananel [00:04:00] maintains that the whole scene took place in a dream of one of the

participants. Anyway, the sages realized they were in danger, and were saved only thanks to the intervention of Rabbi Eliezer's old adversary and friend, our hero tonight, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, who scolded the walls. "What are you doing?", he said to the walls. "If scholars are debating a question of law, it's none of your business to interfere." (laughter) Embarrassed, the walls did not fall down, out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua, but they did not straighten up, out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer. (laughter) That may explain, also, the Tower of Pisa. (laughter)

Now, by then, Rabbi Eliezer, poor Rabbi Eliezer, had reached the limits of [00:05:00] his patience, and he cried out in exasperation: "If the law is according my interpretation, let heaven itself prove it!" And heaven did. A celestial voice was heard saying, "Why do you torment Rabbi Eliezer? Don't you know that he is always right?" Whereupon, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, our hero tonight, rose to his feet, and on behalf of his colleagues, instructed the celestial intruder not to interfere. (laughter) And he said, "*Ha-Torah, lo ba-shamayim hi,*" the Torah is not in heaven. Since it was given to us at Sinai, we no longer listen to the voices from heaven. The Torah orders us to abide by the rule of the majority. And that is

what we are duty-bound to do. [00:06:00] And that was the end of the debate.

The majority was against Rabbi Eliezer. Its decision was law. It should have also been the end of the incident. It was not. The sages, in their vindictiveness, declared null and void all the legal opinions that had been issued in the name of Rabbi Eliezer in matters related to purity and impurity. Whatever he declared pure, became impure. And whatever he had declared impure became pure. And all were thrown into the fire.

Now the question that we should ask is valid. Why such radicalism? Wait, that's not all! For having resisted the majority, Rabbi Eliezer subsequently was excommunicated. And again, we should [00:07:00] ask, why such harshness? What about the First Amendment? (laughter) What about freedom of expression? In the Talmud, after all, which symbolizes the right of the minority to be heard. What about academic freedom, and what about conscience and its prerogatives? Everything in this episode sounds puzzling, particularly the heavenly intervention. Didn't God know beforehand that it would be useless?

But nothing on a human level is as intriguing as the attitude of Rabbi Eliezer's adversary, Rabbi Yehoshua, son of Hananiah. Why was he so critical of his learned opponent, whom he continued to hold in high esteem, as we shall see later? What provoked his outburst against the heavenly voice? [00:08:00] He, as we shall see later -- Rabbi Yehoshua, who was always shy, always modest, always withdrawn, always accepting whatever was said by the president in his presence. So why did he initiate, or at least condone, the excommunication of a very great scholar -- one of the greatest of his generation?

I am not sure answers to all these questions are available. Not enough is known about Rabbi Yehoshua as a person to explain everything he did or said. What we can do, though, is to review the story from his viewpoint. We may in the process discover a fascinating character, whose life and work appeal to the heart and soul of those of us who have searched, and are searching, for anchors, tangible and [00:09:00] intangible, during ancient and modern trials and upheavals.

But first, as has been our custom, let us open parentheses for a few preliminary remarks. Two men badly need tonight Talmudic courses, as they are readying themselves at this hour (laughter) for their televised duel for presidency. Now which among them

listens to heavenly voices? (laughter) I think 12 years ago, Jimmy Carter said he heard voices. (laughter) He used to say that he spoke to God, which is alright, but he also said that God answered him. (laughs) (laughter) Tonight's candidates both have technical advisors, which amazingly do not include Talmudic scholars. [00:10:00] (laughter) But regrettably so. I think they would have elevated the debate to some height. (laughter)

Two, as in years past, this session of learning is dedicated to the memory of Rabbeinu Shaul Lieberman, z"l. His illumination of the Yerushalmi remains as part of the Yerushalmi. His contribution to our understanding of the Tosefta sets him apart, not only among the Achronim, the latest giants, but among the Rishonim, the earlier ones. One cannot study Talmud today without opening his volumes. Short, concise, erudite, perceptive, and occasionally poetic, his commentary has enriched a vast body of literature, without which our peoples' quest for [00:11:00] meaning would not be the adventure it is. Dr. Lieberman was my teacher, and our friend, for many, many years. And literally, we miss him -- I miss him -- every day.

Three, the purpose of our study has been, and remains, study. Talmud means learning, and to learn Talmud means to learn and learn, and never stop learning. It did not begin with Shimon

ha-Tzaddik -- Shimon the Just -- nor did it end with Rav Ashi and Ravina. Old teachers and their young pupils, all those who enter the dazzling universe of aggadah and halacha, the law and the legend, find themselves in the company of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Chanina ben Dossa, Abbaye and Rava, Reb Yochanan and Resh Lakish. For them and us, the boundaries of time are abolished. [00:12:00] Issues and problems that confronted our ancestors in the second century in Judea strike us with their urgency to this day. What happened then penetrates our own daily preoccupations. Our response to events is affected by innovative decisions made before, during, and after the burning of the Temple. Yavneh and Tziporis, Sura and Pumbedita, belong to the present as much as to the past. The moderation of Hillel HaZaken, Hillel the Elder, is needed now, just as it was needed then.

The visions of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in the cave reflect the anguish and hope of our generation as well. *Hafoch ba ve-hafoch ba* -- there is everything in the Talmud -- and yet everything in it, every day, seems new. Open any page, and you will find yourselves in it. Open any door, [00:13:00] and you will meet a friend. So, let us open doors (laughter) and let friends come in. (applause)

As one may have guessed from studying their relationship, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua were childhood friends. That is certain. We know that they grew up together, studied together with the same masters, [00:14:00] worked together on behalf of the people of Israel, fought together for the survival of the Jewish spirit, and sought to strengthen together the inner spiritual sovereignty of Israel. How, then, is one to understand their tragic differences at the end of their lives?

Both were disciples of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. When the old pacifist master chose to leave Jerusalem, still under siege, they were among his rare confidants. It was they who carried him out of the city in a coffin, to allow him to meet General Vespasianus. Subsequently, Rabbi Yehoshua returned Jerusalem, to help bring out a marvelous character of who we may speak next week: Rabbi Tzadok. Rabbi [00:15:00] Tzadok, who was ill, having fasted 40 years to prevent the catastrophe.

Clearly, Rabbi Yehoshua was the right man for all missions impossible. But who was he? The public figure overshadows the private person. Was he married? Who was his wife? What happened to their children? When did he die? We see him at work, always on stage, forever. Always arguing, debating, questioning, trying to persuade, to convince, to prevail -- or,



eventually, to submit. But where was he born? Who was his father? All we know is that Yehoshua ben Hananiah was a Levite, who officiated at Temple services. We [00:16:00] also know from Dossa ben Harkinas that when Rabbi Yehoshua was an infant, his mother would bring his cradle to the house of study, quote, "So that his ears might become accustomed to the words of Torah." That is what we call today early education. (laughter)

Is this why and how he developed an all-consuming passion for study? "Happy is she who bore him," said his teacher, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who, as a good teacher, never missed an opportunity to praise one of his five favorite disciples, all of whom he had ordained personally.

A story. One day, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah and his friend, Rabbi Yossi HaCohen, went for a walk outside the town where they lived. It was a nice [00:17:00] day. Hot. Too hot. An incandescent sun weighed heavily on the landscape. In spite of his discomfort, Rabbi Yehoshua began studying aloud the mysteries of merkavah, which means God's action in history. And, suddenly, dark clouds covered the sky. A rainbow appeared on the horizon. And angels, as if they were invited guests at a remarkable wedding, came from everywhere, eager to listen to Rabbi Yehoshua's very special discourse. When Rabbi Yossi

HaCohen informed their teacher of the extraordinary gathering, Rabbi Yochanan exclaimed -- and I quote him -- "Happy are you, happy are your parents, as are my own eyes. [00:18:00] I seeth in my dreams," said Rabbi Yochanan. "I see all of us sitting at Sinai, and I hear a voice, urging you to climb higher and higher, until you reach the celestial palace, where we shall walk on precious carpets, leading to the presence of the shekhinah." End of quote.

The story is beautiful and inspiring, for it shows the student's capacity to turn study into ecstasy, and the teacher's warmth towards his student. But -- yes, there is a but -- and we shall return to it later, and we shall see that the story as told in the Talmud allows for some doubts with regard to its protagonist, if we have time.

For the moment, let us add a few more traits to the portrait. We know that Rabbi Yehoshua was an important member of the community, [0019:00] for he was a guest to all the important parties and dinners in Jerusalem. We know that because he was a guest at the circumcision of Elisha ben Abuyah, *Acher* -- the other -- together with *Yekirei Yerushalayim*, with all the VIPs from Jerusalem.

Now, was he wealthy? We don't know. Was his father wealthy? If so, did Rabbi Yehoshua inherit his wealth? We don't think so. For we know that Rabbi Yehoshua was actually poor all his life. In fact, he had to work for a living. You know that most Talmudic masters had trades. One was a shoemaker; everybody had a vocation, had a trade. He was a blacksmith according to one source; a [00:20:00] needle-maker according to another. Whatever his trade, he felt close to the working class, to the poor. Once he even chided his own president, Rabban Gamliel, for not paying enough attention to the poor, to the unfortunate scholars who were unable to make ends meet.

What are other vital statistics about him that we know? That -- we know that he knew astronomy, mathematics, geology, zoology. He predicted the appearance of a comet, and it appeared. It is Rabbi Yehoshua who acknowledged the moment when Ben Zomah was already *mi-bachutz* -- outside. He also had a sense of humor. At that time, whenever Palestinian scholars would come to Alexandria, where there was a great Jewish community, the local scholars would examine, would question the Palestinian ones, [00:21:00] and they would give them all kinds of questions in halacha, in aggadah, some funny. And one question that was put to Rabbi Yehoshua was, what will happen to the *meitei midbar* -- to those Jews who perished in the desert -- after resurrection?

How will they be dressed, and will their clothing will be pure or not pure? It's very important questions. So Rabbi Yehoshua answered, "Look," he said, "when there will be resurrection, Moses, too, will be resurrected. Let him answer the questions."  
(laughter)

So we see that he was actually a very wise man. (laughter) And when he died, people said, "Now the wise council has vanished from the world." And on the day of his death -- and we don't know when [00:22:00] it was -- symbolically, perhaps, a pillar came tumbling down in Tiberias.

Until the destruction of the Temple, Rabbi Yehoshua received the allowance traditionally granted to the Levites. He sang in the Temple choir. His description of the Simchat Beit Hashoeva, the water-drawing ceremony during Sukkot, reads like an entry in a personal diary, or perhaps like a reportage. Listen to an excerpt from the Treaties of Sukkah. Said Rabbi Yehoshua, son of Hananiah, and I quote, "When we used to rejoice at the water-drawing ceremony, we never had time to sleep. How is that possible? I'll tell you. On the morning of the first day of the holiday, everyone rose early to offer the daily morning sacrifice. Then, the Levites sang their hymn. Then, it was time to offer the special holiday [00:23:00] sacrifice. Then,

everyone went to study at the Academy. When we finished there, we quickly went home to partake of the traditional holiday meal. But before the meal was consumed, it was already time to hurry for the Mincha offering, at the conclusion of which we immediately had to attend the festivities of the water-drawing ceremony. We rejoiced, and danced, and danced, until the early morning hours, when all of a sudden, it was time again for the morning sacrifice. Some of us became exceedingly tired, exhausted, and we would lean on someone's shoulder, and nap while remaining standing." End of quote.

It all sounds like a Woodstock Festival. (laughter) *Lehavdil*. (laughs) Still, those [00:24:00] festivities indeed were legendary. Talmudic sages went so far as to state, quote, "Whoever has not witnessed rejoicing then and there, doesn't know what rejoicing means." Everyone participated, even the highest officials in the land, even the most learned personalities in the Academy. It was said about its president, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, that he became so overwhelmed by joy during the ceremony of Beit Hashoeva, that he would do acrobatic feats, like juggling eight flaming torches in the air. Shmuel did the same thing with full cups of wine. Abaye managed to do the same, with eggs. (laughter) Who said a scholar must

necessarily be clumsy? Some Talmudic scholars actually had a knack for attracting [00:25:00] attention.

Rabbi Yehoshua, too -- he attracted attention, for different reasons. He attracted attention, though he was not handsome -- quite the contrary. He was rather unattractive. Various sources stress that point, and illustrate it with an anecdote. One day, a Roman princess met him and was struck by, to put it mildly, his lack of physical beauty. (laughter) Being a princess, she was not shy, and said so. She even went so far as to ask him for an explanation. (laughter) "How is it," she said, "that so much wisdom can be found in such an ugly body?" (laughter) His answer came in the form of a question. "Tell me, Princess," he said. [00:26:00] "Where does your father keep his best wine? In golden vessels? Or in earthen jars? (laughter) Wine gets sour in gold or silver vessels, but keeps well in plain earthen jars."

The answer sounds logical, right? Still, the princess didn't give up. She said, "I know many persons who are both wise and handsome." (laughter) Now, why was she determined to make him feel bad? Whatever her reasons may have been, Rabbi Yehoshua was not perturbed, and he answered calmly. "True," he said.

"But these very persons would most probably be wiser were they less handsome." (laughter)

He always remained calm, even when provoked. [00:27:00] But then, we must come back to our earlier question. If he was always calm, why was he so angry with his best friend, Rabbi Eliezer? And why was he so rude with the heavenly voice?

Let's explore his character, his mentality, his relationship with his friends and teachers, his role in the Academy, and his upheavals. Let's speak of his encounters with Roman emperors, which he had, and their representatives, and there were many. We shall speak perhaps again, if time permits, about his missions to Rome, and Alexandria.

But first, in order to understand the person, we must have another look at the context. The first century of the Common Era had not been kind to the people of Israel. Its upheavals were both external and internal. Essentially had hardly begun when Judea became a province [00:28:00] of Rome. The turbulence in the imperial capital naturally affected events in Jerusalem. Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Vitellius, Titus, Domitian, Nerva, Trajanus -- their thirst for power found its expression in bloodshed. Nerva was a kind man, but his

reign did not last long: two years. His successor, Trajanus, was particularly harsh to the Jews.

Under Domitian, Rome grew suspicious about events in Judea. There is a record of an episode involving two sergeants who came to study with Rabban Gamliel at Usha. They came disguised as converts. But by the end of the story, we are told, they seemed to have become real converts.

Caesar was powerful, [00:29:00] but death was more powerful. Claudius was poisoned by his wife, who in turn was killed by her son, Nero, who then proceeded to eliminate his wife Octavia, in order to marry Poppaea Sabina, who happened to have a soft spot for Judaism and Jews. In Yiddish, you would say, a *shayne mishpocheh*. (laughter) (laughs) A nice family.

Nero loved music, but couldn't care less about urban affairs. (laughter) He claimed to love culture, but not people, and therefore he ended his stormy and erratic existence by committing suicide. But before doing so, he ordered the great Seneca to show him the way. More than his contemporaries, Ovid and Horace, Seneca had a clear understanding of what was happening to his countrymen, and a vision of their national destiny. [00:30:00] As he watched the Jewish slaves filing past



the forum, he came to the conclusion that their morality was superior to that of his own victorious people. And at that moment he realized that the Roman Empire was on its decline.

His observation was correct, as far as he was concerned. But Jewish analysts would only partly agree. Official Jewish morality had sunk to terrifying lows in those times. Under the reign of Herod and his descendants, the Kingdom of Judea was in many aspects nothing but an imitation -- and a pale imitation, at that -- of Rome. Intrigues, quarrels, slander, unbridled ambitions. The state of morality was so poor at all levels of society, there were so many cases pending in the [00:31:00] court involving suspicion of adultery, that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai abolished the ritual dealing with the problem of adultery. He was afraid of the outcome. He also abrogated the ritual of sacrifice whenever innocent blood was shed. Too many animals would have been slaughtered for the atonement of bloodshed.

But why such demoralization in Judea? No doubt, it was linked to the Roman occupation, which had a strongly corrupting effect on many spheres of society. Twenty eight high priests owed their election to Rome, and the House of Herod. Some had obtained it with flattery; others with bribery. The Jewish

population was split into a variety of clans and movements. It was pacifist against [00:32:00] patriot, poor against rich, zealous against moderate, Sadducee against Pharisee. And whenever things went out of control, they all ran to Rome for arbitration.

Some of the rulers -- Jewish rulers -- had grown up in Rome. Agrippa the Second, for example, was close -- too close -- to the imperial court. His sister Berenice, with whom he may or may not have had an incestuous liaison, later had an affair with Titus himself. Titus, who burned the Temple. Actually, the Jewish princess was ready to marry Titus, and he considered marrying her, but his advisors were against what they called the mésalliance. Still, so close were they, that Berenice, though a Jewish princess, [00:33:00] attended the Roman victory parade celebrating the defeat of Judea.

Another famous Jewish personality who fell in love with Rome, if not with the Roman: Yosef, son of Matityahu Hacoheh, better known as Josephus Flavius. This young general and future historian, who had valiantly fought the Romans in the Galilee, became infatuated with the might, with the power, the splendor, the great glory of Rome. And when Titus attacked the Jewish kingdom, it was he, Flavius, who served as his first guide.

More? The great Philo of Alexandria, who will remain as one of the most important scholars and thinkers in our philosophical literature. We all admire and remember [00:34:00] his defense of Judaism. Surely we cannot blame him for his relative's behavior. Still, his nephew converted to paganism, and became first a heathen, and then he became known in Roman history, and ours, as Tiberius, commander of the legion that attacked Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel.

Now, all these individuals, who are contemporaries of our hero, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah -- it is thanks to him and his peers that there are some good things to be said after all about that first century. The Sanhedrin managed to maintain its intellectual prestige, in spite of the social and political upheavals and betrayals. In spite of the intrigues, the Temple remained the center of Judaism. Three million people, [00:35:00] we are told, converged on Jerusalem to celebrate Passover in the year 66 of the Common Era. One million Jews lived in Alexandria. There were Jews in Athens, Rome, Rhodes, Lyon. Louis Finkelstein says that out of every 14 persons in the Roman Empire, one was Jewish. Jews had settled everywhere. Between the Euphrates and the Nile, from the Rhine to the Danube. But wherever they lived, when they recited their

prayers, whenever they dreamed their dreams, they turned towards Jerusalem.

Naturally, there were dreamers in Judea as well. Messianic dreamers. Jesus of Nazareth was not the only one. A man named Theudas [00:36:00] claimed that with his breath, he could destroy a wall, and thus defend his people. He had many followers. Sadly, his claim was a pipe dream. He was killed by the Romans, as were his followers.

But the great and lasting achievements belonged to the scholars and their disciples. To those who saw in learning a remembering, or in practicing the laws of the Torah, a way of life, and an art to survive. Most of them were influenced by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was the first who taught us how to cope with catastrophe. After the Temple, the people of Israel had to live with the memory of the Temple. Far from [00:37:00] Jerusalem, its sons and daughters were reduced to remembering the stories of Jerusalem -- but inside those stories, they found a haven.

Like Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, his disciple, lived before, during, and after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish sovereignty it symbolized. So he must

have been in his late thirties when the tempest of fire swept through the City of God. Did he stay outside, together with his old teacher, when the city was destroyed? Probably. But not sure. I think when he came back to get Tzadok, he may have stayed there, and sent Tzadok away.

Maybe he did not physically witness the profanation of the sanctuary, and the slaying of its holy servants, but the tragedy [00:38:00] affected him from near or afar. And it is evident that he was scarred. One day, we are told, he accompanied his teacher, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, to Jerusalem and its surroundings. And suddenly, he began to weep. Rabbi Akiva laughed; he wept. "Woe unto us," he said, "the place where the sins of our people were forgiven has now been destroyed." But his teacher consoled him. "Do not despair," he told him. "Another kind of atonement has been offered to us, and its name is *g'milut chasadim*: charity."

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah surely had moments of despair. How could it have been otherwise? How could he study with his master at Yavneh, teach his young peoples at Bekiin, all those laws [00:39:00] and legends that are so deeply, so intimately linked to the Temple -- the temple which had been so cruelly, so viciously desecrated, and reduced to cinders by a ferocious

enemy -- without being overwhelmed by melancholy? It was not possible. Nor would it have been normal. Still, his attacks of sadness were infrequent. He knew how to fight them. He knew that to yield too readily to sadness is dangerous. He stated his views when he and his friend Rabbi Eliezer heard of certain Pharisees who in their mourning over the destruction of the Temple decided to stop drinking wine and eating meat. "My children, why?", Rabbi Eliezer wanted to know. "Why are you doing this?"

And they answered, "How can we eat meat, when [00:40:00] it is no longer offered on the altar? How can we drink wine, when wine is no longer on the altar?" And Rab Eliezer seems to have been satisfied with the answer. He accepted it. Rabbi Yehoshua did not. "My children," Rabbi Yehoshua said, "you are right. I understand your motivation; I share your sadness. But if we all did as you say, then we should also give up eating bread that is made of flour, for flour is no longer offered on the altar. And if you want to say that one can do without bread by eating fruit, then we should also give up eating fruit, for the offering of the first fruit to the priest is no longer part of our custom. And, we should also give up drinking water, because there is no altar on which to pour water."

Faced with the logic of his argument, the mourners remained silent. They waited for Rabbi Yehoshua to proceed, and [00:41:00] he did. And he said, "Listen, my children. I cannot, and I will not, tell you that you should not mourn at all. That would be impossible. But remember. We must not totally surrender to sorrow. It is necessary to mourn in such a manner that everyone, every man and woman of the community, should be able to bear it. Our mourning must not be allowed to interfere with our peoples' lives."

He was kind, and therefore people listened to him. He was peaceful; he was appeasing. He always knew what to say, and when, and to whom. He tried to deal with insoluble problems, and often succeeded in transforming total despair into a beginning of hope. More lenient than Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua ben [00:42:00] Hananiah offered reassurance to Jews and non-Jews alike. "Gentiles will also have a share in the world to come," he said.

His advice on how to live a good and productive life was addressed to all people. An evil thought, an evil eye, and hatred of the other -- of humankind -- they drive out a man of the world. Also, he said -- and this is perceptive -- he said, I quote him, "A pious fool, a clever, wicked man, an abstaining

woman, and the plague of Phariseeism: those are four categories that damage the world."

This may require an explanation, and he gave it. "What is the plague of the Pharisees?" Answer: those Pharisees who strike their heads against a wall to demonstrate their piety.

[00:43:00] "Who is an abstaining woman?" Answer: one who renounces her husband and the joys of life. "Who is a pious fool?" Answer: one who sees a woman drowning, and chooses not to save her, so as not to touch a woman's body. (laughter)

So you see, Rabbi Yehoshua was understanding, he was moderate, he was lenient. The only person he was intransigent with was his friend, about the strange question about an oven -- pure, impure. No, really. Was that the case important enough to end a friendship that went back years and years? Was it a case important enough to make the nice, the good Rabbi Yehoshua angry?

In all other stories about him and his activities, we find him always ready to [00:44:00] understand the opposing sides. Ready to bow to friends' wishes. Determined to spare his fellow man pain and hardship. We often encounter him abroad, as a member of delegations going to Rome to intercede with the emperor on



behalf of Judea and its grief-stricken population. Was it because he spoke many languages, including Greek? Or because he oriented himself well in Greek culture and sciences?

It may have had something to do with his position in Judea. Few masters enjoyed the kind of respect shown him by scholars and non-scholars alike. As we shall see in a moment, when the president of the Academy offended him, everybody came to his defense. In Rome, Rabbi Yehoshua spent time and energy and money trying to help Jewish prisoners. He is the one who discovered Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, [00:45:00] still an adolescent, was in jail. "I shall not move from here," he said, "until the future scholar is freed," and he kept his words.

Philosophers and statesmen enjoyed debating with him. The topics? You name them: religion, history, natural sciences. They were all astonished by the scope and magnitude of his knowledge. Hadrian himself, before he turned against the Jews, enjoyed conversing with him. Once Hadrian boasted before the Jewish sage -- and I quote him -- "I, Hadrian, am greater than your master Moses. Look," he said, "Moses is dead, but I am alive." (laughter) Rabbi Yehoshua smiled and remarked, "Can you order your citizens not to light fires in their homes for three consecutive days?"

"Of course I can," answered the emperor. The order was given. That night, Hadrian and his guest went for a walk in the streets of the city [00:46:00] of Rome, and the emperor was shocked to discover smoke coming out of a chimney.

"See for yourself, Majesty," said Rabbi Yehoshua. "You are still alive. And you have the police and the military at your disposal. Yet your orders fall on deaf ears. But as our teacher Moses, who died centuries and centuries ago, and he ordered that no fire be lit on the Sabbath, and we have no police. And to this day, no Jew would dream of disobeying him."

Once the emperor told him, "I want to see your God." Rabbi Yehoshua said, "Look into the sun when it is at its zenith, during a Tammuz day, a summer day." When the emperor could not, Rabbi Yehoshua said, "You cannot see one of his servants without getting blind, and you [00:47:00] want to see him?" (laughter)

Rabbi Yehoshua also participated often in disputations with *minim*, as new Christian sects were called. One of the places where the stormy meetings were held was Bei Avidan, where the emperor, too, came to listen -- or even to take sides. Usually a new sect would attract Jews there with the aim of converting

them. Rabbi Yehoshua's role was to hinder their activity. Suddenly he stopped going. "What happened?", wondered the emperor. "Why haven't I seen you recently at Bei Avidan?" And Rabbi Yehoshua gave an allegorical answer, explaining that he was old, too old, to fight the battles of his youth and listen. He said, and I quote him, "My mountain is already covered with snow," meaning, my head is white. "The foot of the mountain is bedecked with ice," meaning, my beard is grey and cold.

[00:48:00] "My dogs no longer bark, nor do my grindstones turn," meaning, my voice is hoarse, and I have difficulty in speaking and eating. "When I walk, it seems as if I search for something I have not lost," meaning, I walk with difficulty, hunched over as if searching for something on the ground.

And yet, there had been times when the whole academic community in Israel was listening to his words with fervor and fire.

There had been times when he never missed an opportunity to take part in scholarly discussions -- not only with his colleagues, but with the president himself. When the law and truth are involved, teachers and students alike have the duty, and the right, to speak their mind, and if need be, oppose their superiors. But they must do so not with arrogance, [00:49:00] but with humility, as Rabbi Yehoshua demonstrated on numerous occasions.

Too much humility, perhaps. Listen. Two witnesses, as required, appeared before the Tribunal, and said that they had seen the new moon on the night of the thirtieth day, but not the next day. "It doesn't matter," declared the president. "They have seen the new moon; that's enough for me. Now we know when to celebrate the new year."

"No," said Rabbi Dosa ben Harcynus, "their testimony sounds faulty. If they failed to notice the new moon on the second night, that means they may not have seen correctly. It is as if they claim to have seen a woman giving birth tonight, and have seen her the next night still with child." Seems logical.

[00:50:00] Rabbi Yehoshua thought so, and said so; whereupon the president, in a rage, sent him an emissary with the following message: "I order you, *b'maklecha, u-b'tarmilcha* -- I order you to appear before me with your cane, and your purse, on the day which according to your calculations, would be Yom Kippur."

Now, we can imagine Rabbi Yehoshua's plight and predicament. He asked Rabbi Dosa what to do. And Rabbi Dosa, son of Harcynus, answered, "You must obey, my friend. If we begin to question the decisions taken by Rabban Gamliel's tribunal, we shall end up questioning all decisions, of all the previous tribunals,

including those of Moses." And Rabbi Yehoshua, in spite of his advanced age, in spite of his high position as number two -- the Av Beit Din! -- rose on [00:51:00] his Yom Kippur, dressed as for a simple weekday, and with his cane and his purse, appeared before the president.

That event must have made the newspapers. (laughter) Crowds must have gathered to observe the spectacle, the drama of the old man showing his obedience to their leader. As for the president, he greeted his visitor warmly; he kissed him on his forehead and said, "Peace unto you, my teacher and my pupil. My teacher, for you are wiser than I; and my pupil, for you have chosen to respect my wishes."

That was very magnanimous, but what about the law? Who was right, according to the law? Rabbi Dosa's view is closer to truth than Rabban Gamliel's. The two witnesses could not on two consecutive nights have seen the moon one night, and not the other. They must have been mistaken. [00:52:00] Which means that their testimony was questionable, which means that Rabbi Dosa was right in suspecting them! And Rabbi Yehoshua was right in supporting him! But then why did the president think otherwise? He was entitled to his opinion -- and it was his opinion that prevailed. But then why was he angry? You may say

the president is entitled to his anger. But why was he angry not with Rabbi Dosa, but with Rabbi Yehoshua? There can be no excuse, especially since both scholars, however reluctantly, immediately submitted to his will. His misplaced anger, by the way, was not forgiven by the people.

Another story of still another incident involving both Rabbi Yehoshua and the president. It involves a calf that had the misfortune of being a first born [00:53:00] -- a bechor -- and therefore, untouchable. It was destined to be sacrificed in the Temple, and could not be used for any other purpose. The only way for the calf to escape that distinction was to break a leg, or wound its lips or eyes -- in other words, only an accident could be a blessing for the calf, or his owner.

As a result, there were many accidents. (laughter) And so the rabbis, who were not born yesterday (laughter), issued a decree: even a wounded bechor could not be slaughtered for consumption, or other commercial use. Then, lo and behold, a certain Rabbi Tzadok, a pious man, revered for his honesty and integrity, happened to have a first-born calf, who happened accidentally to wound its mouth while [00:54:00] eating. Being absolutely certain that this was a bona fide accident, Rabbi Yehoshua

allowed Rabbi Tzadok to free the animal, as any other -- meaning, not as destined for sacrifice.

When the president heard of the decision, he went into a rage. "What?," he exclaimed, "you practice favoritism? Everybody must abide by the same law." And here again, Rabbi Yehoshua displayed extreme humility, and admitted his error. But the president was not satisfied. In open session, he reprimanded him, and said, "*Yehoshua, amod al raglekha ve-ya'idu b'kha!*" Meaning, stand up, stay on your feet, and let people bear witness against you. And the old master stood like a schoolboy, while Rabban Gamliel delivered the long lecture. The audience reacted angrily, so much that they [00:55:00] began to crumble in discontent, and their protest grew louder and louder, and the president, Rabban Gamliel, was unable to finish the lecture.

Then there was a third incident, related to a question about prayer, which we shall tell in a moment. And for the third time, the president humiliated Rabbi Yehoshua. At that point -- at that point -- the Academy, and the people, took Rabbi Yehoshua aside, and removed the president. The first time, there was a coup d'état in the academic community. But still, astonishing that Rabban Gamliel -- one day we should speak about him exclusively. How could a prince of Torah really be so

heartless? Did he really believe that abstract law was more  
[00:56:00] important than a human being?

But then, for good measure, I must admit that his victim is not much easier to understand. Why is Rabbi Yehoshua so passive? So submissive? He who was the teacher of Rabbi Akiva; a Talmudic giant; the Av Beit Din? How come that he, when confronted with the president, never protests? Doesn't even argue? Why doesn't he? How is one to explain his abrupt turnabouts? He clearly had personal convictions. Didn't he consider them worth defending, worth fighting for? Could it be that he wished to please all sides, and be everybody's friend? First he sided Rabbi Dosa; then he deserted him. He said yes to Rabbi Tzadok, only to change his mind minutes later. He says one thing; then, having heard the [00:57:00] president, having discovered that the president has a different opinion, he doesn't even, didn't even try to debate. He could have said, "Mr. President, thank you for changing my mind." We fail to understand Rabbi Yehoshua. Why didn't he speak up? Did he try to tell us already then that vice presidents never speak up?  
(laughter)

If Rabbi Yehoshua was motivated by weakness, then how come that he attained such height, such a position in the Academy? We



know that intellectually, this must be outspoken. They are duty-bound to defend the honor of Torah! Too much modesty, an exaggerated need to be conciliatory always and with everybody, to be liked and popular, are dangerous traits in a leader.

[00:58:00] From a leader, even from a number two, we expect some measure of leadership. To open new gates, to show new path, and to remain firm!

Now let's really consider Rabbi Yehoshua's apparent weakness of character. Perhaps we should call it flexibility instead?

And/or respect for the high office of the presidency. Perhaps he understood that having lost its sovereignty, the people of Judea needed another institution to symbolize loyalty and authority. He considered that in effect, the president had succeeded the kings and princes of Judea and Israel. And therefore, for a scholar to disobey his leader would adversely affect the office; and therefore, would adversely affect

[00:59:00] the interest of the Jewish people.

Maybe for that reason he chose consistently to avoid open conflicts with the representative, to hold the repository of authority in the academy. It must have been extremely difficult for him to disregard his own views and bow to the president's. He knew for certain that it was Yom Kippur, and yet he went to

see the president. Because the president wanted him to come, as though the day was just another working day. He had clearly decided to go to any length to avoid scandals and dissension, because his primary concern was the collective destiny of his people. And that destiny demanded that he understand not only those who agreed with him, but also those who disagreed. Those who fought him. Those who reprimanded him. [01:00:00] Had the president asked him for his opinion before offering his own, he would have given it. But once he knew what the president thought, he refused to disagree with him, for the president represented Jewish continuity. To question his authority meant to doubt Moses.

In that context, therefore, I believe that we must see Rabbi Yehoshua in a different light. I believe that Rabbi Yehoshua was not a weak man. Now listen to what happened. This is the incident with the prayer. It all began with the disciple -- at this point anonymous; later we found out it was Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai -- who appeared before Rabbi Yehoshua and asked for the ruling on the following question: "Is the *maariv* prayer obligatory or [01:01:00] voluntary?"

"Voluntary, of course," said Rabbi Yehoshua. Strangely, the disciple was not satisfied, and went to solicit the opinion of

Rabban Gamliel himself, who took the opposite position. "The *maariv* prayer," he said, "is compulsory." At that point, the disciple voiced his astonishment. "How is it," he said, "that Rabbi Yehoshua wrote otherwise?"

"Oh," said Rabban Gamliel, "wait. Wait until the scholars gather. Wait for the debaters. They will enjoy this. When they arrive, the president will not open the session with his customary *sha'alu* -- ask questions. The president allowed his single-minded disciple to rise to his feet, and as in a well-staged script, to ask his question for the third time. The *maariv* prayer is at the very last one, voluntary or not. Normally, the question should have been followed by a discussion, but the president obviated any such thing by announcing his decision: the *maariv* prayer is obligatory.

Having enunciated his [01:02:00] point of view, he moved his gaze over the participants, and asked whether anyone disagreed. And only one voice was heard -- that of Rabbi Yehoshua. And he said, "No. No one disagrees." (laughter) Whereupon Rabbi Gamliel, the president, lost his temper. "What?", he asked angrily. "Did you tell a student here earlier that the evening prayer was voluntary? Stand up, Yehoshua, and let the witnesses speak." And the old and venerable teacher among the most

respected of the Academy stood up, and waited for the debate to unfold and be concluded. His defense was peculiar. He confessed right away using an obscure aphorism. He said, "When a living person opposes a dead person, the living person wins. (laughter) But when the witness is also alive, how can the living go on denying?" [01:03:00]

The incident was closed, and Rabban Gamliel resumed his discourse as though nothing had happened, not even bothering to invite his adversary, his number two colleague, to sit down. He just continued to speak, leaving Rabbi Yehoshua to stand. And this inevitably led to a reaction by the other members of the academy. They began to whisper, to fidget, to voice their displeasure, and it didn't take long for the whispers to become outcries. "Enough, enough!", all of them cried. The president was obliged to stop, and from then on, the study session took a dramatic turn. A decision was taken to disavow the regime -- to dismiss president Rabban Gamliel, and to appoint someone else to replace him. [00:01:04]

Everybody, as we see, came to Rabbi Yehoshua's defense. They all had courage. But what about him? Where was his intellectual integrity? Where was his pride? Was he strong only when confronting an equal? His friend, Rabbi Eliezer?

We are about to reach the denouement of the story, and therefore, may I hasten to the defense of our hero tonight? Rabbi Yehoshua was no weakling. He yielded only to the president because the president alone represented the authority of Israel. Was he unfaithful as a friend? No, he was not unfaithful as a friend. True, he and Rabbi Eliezer often disagreed; in fact, they disagreed on every conceivable issue. When Rabbi Eliezer said [01:05:00] that dreams show one's past, Rabbi Yehoshua countered with his own interpretation that they represent the future. When Rabbi Eliezer said that if Israel repents, Israel will be redeemed, Rabbi Yehoshua contradicted him. "What?", he said. "Are you telling me that if Israel does not repent, Israel will not be redeemed? Let me tell you: if Jews do not repent, God will send an enemy like Haman to persecute them, and then they will repent."

Is it because of his lack of firmness? Strange. Today when you open the Talmud, and we study halakha, we realize that no laws are attributed to Rabbi Yehoshua. None are called by his name. And yet, as long as Rabbi Eliezer was alive and excommunicated, the laws were according [01:06:00] to Rabbi Yehoshua, and not Rabbi Eliezer. But when Rabbi Eliezer died, it was Rabbi Yehoshua himself who came to his colleagues and prevailed upon

them to give Rabbi Eliezer back the credit he deserved. And, the laws were again called by his -- Rabbi Eliezer's -- name. And therefore today, they are still called by the name of Rabbi Eliezer, and not Rabbi Yehoshua. And when four sages tried to refute one of Rabbi Eliezer's laws, it was again Rabbi Yehoshua who rebuked them, saying, "Ein meshivim l'ari meit." One does not answer, one does not oppose a lion after he's dead.

But then we are back to our puzzling [01:07:00] question. If he was so loyal to his friend after his death, why was he so harsh with him while he was still alive? Well, we said so. Maybe he realized that in this case, the collective interest was more important than his personal feelings. His main concern was with Jewish survival. As a follower of the School of Hillel, he tried to make life easier for Jews, whose lives were not easy at all. He foresaw the essential role study would play in the survival of his people. Study would be more important, more useful, more reliable than miracles. In his view, therefore, Rabbi Eliezer was wrong only in one thing: in invoking heavenly intervention to [01:08:00] prevail in a point of study.

Study rejects all outside influences. Having been defeated by the majority present, Rabbi Eliezer had no business asking support from heaven. Had the scholars of the academy accepted

the heavenly ruling, it would have set a precedent. Next time, scholars would stop studying altogether, and they would go straight to the heavenly voice, as others went to the Oracle in Delphi. That is why Rabbi Yehoshua was angry. He realized that his friend Rabbi Eliezer did something that was dangerous for the future of scholarship, learning, and Judaism. But once it happened -- once he made his point -- he became humble once more, and he was vindicated.

Actually, even when he [01:09:00] submitted to the president. The deposed president came to Peki'in to apologize to him. At this point, the Talmud picks up the story, and I would like you to listen in conclusion. As Rabban Gamliel -- deposed, defeated -- arrived at the home of Rabbi Yehoshua, he noticed his black walls. "Could it be that you are a blacksmith?", he wondered. And Rabbi Yehoshua, with unusual and uncharacteristic nastiness, replied, "Woe to the generation whose leader you are. Woe to the ship who claims you as its captain, for you do not even know how students of Torah make a living, and what makes them suffer."

"Forgive me," said Rabban Gamliel softly, in vain. His host turned away from him. "Please," insisted Rabban Gamliel, "forgive me. If you cannot forgive me for [01:10:00] my sake,

do it for the sake of my father." Then, and only then, did Rabbi Yehoshua forgive him. But then the incident was closed forever. As a matter of fact, Rabbi Yehoshua immediately began to lobby on behalf of Rabban Gamliel, to bring him back to power. And with Rabbi Yehoshua, all is well, because it always ends well.

Does it mean that he did not rely on miracles at all? He did. In real miracles. In everyday miracles. A story. When Hadrian rescinded his decree, allowing the rebuilding of the Temple, many Jews, in their new despair, were ready to take up arms and once more rise against Rome. The sages were opposed to it. "Who could speak to the people and reason with them?" they argued. In the end, they chose Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, who instead of giving them a public lecture, told them a story. "One day," he said, "the lion almost choked on a bone while devouring his meal. Being the king of the animals, he announced throughout the forest that whoever removed the bone would be magnificently rewarded. A stork appeared, and with his long bill, managed to extract bone. When the stork then asked for its reward, the lion answered, 'You want a reward? Is it not enough that you have been inside the mouth of a lion, and have come out alive?'" (laughter) The lesson: there are times when to be alive is a miracle in itself. (applause) [01:12:00]



**M:**

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