

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

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**Elie Wiesel:**

(applause) Tonight, again, let us tell tales. Tales about ancient masters and their timeless teaching. Tales of wonder and wisdom, anguish and redemption. They have enriched our lives and nurtured our dreams. It is thanks to the humanity they affirm that our passion for humanity has been kept alive.

So, let us tell tales. That is more or less all that we intend to do, all that we can do. Take a story, an event, a legend. Explore them. Analyze them. And see where they lead us. Well, we know where. Back to Judea. To Jerusalem. To the Galilee. To Sinai. [00:01:00] Let us begin. But before that, I am asked to issue a plea. The plea being, please do not tape. Don't even tape the plea I am just making. (laughter) It's against the rules of the Y, and mine.

Now, legend has it that one day, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi -- Rabbi Joshua, son of Levi -- met the prophet Elijah at the entrance to the cave where the celebrated Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Eleazar had been hiding from the Romans

for 13 years. Seizing the opportunity, the old sage put a question to the prophet, and when [00:02:00] the old sage asked questions, they were never simple. "When will the Messiah come?" he demanded. Nothing less. And the prophet surprisingly said, "Don't ask me. Go ask him." "But," said Rabbi Yehoshua, "where will I find him?" "Oh," said the prophet, "at the gates of Rome." Some sources say that he actually said the gates of Caesarea, or Antioch.

"But," said Rabbi Yehoshua, "how will I recognize him?" Again, two versions exist of the prophet's answer. According to the first, he offered him a guide. According to the second, he gave him guidelines. And he said, "He can be found at the gates of Rome, among the sickest of the sick beggars [00:03:00] at the entrance to the city." "But how will I identify him?" asked Rabbi Yehoshua, son of Levi. "Oh, that will be easy," answered the prophet, for whom everything seemed easy. "Watch the beggars," he said. "All of them remove their bandages, and then, tie them. All at once. Not he. He removes and ties each bandage one after the other, thinking that he might at any moment be summoned to bring deliverance to his people, and therefore, he must not be delayed."

The old sage hurried to Rome, identified the Messiah among the beggars, and ran towards him to greet him. "Peace unto thee, *shalom*, my teacher and master, *mori v'rabbi*," he called him. And the Messiah answered, "Peace unto thee." [00:04:00] Said the master, "When will the master come? When will you come?" "Today," answered the Messiah. So the old sage returned home. Again, he met the prophet, who wanted to know, "How did it go? Have you seen him?" "Yes." "What did he say?" "He greeted me." "How did he greet you?" "He said, 'Peace unto you, son of Levi.'" "Oh," said the prophet. "That's good. That means that both of you are assured a place in the world to come, both you and your father. But what else did he say?"

And Rabbi Yehoshua said, "He lied to me." "How did he lie to you? How could the Messiah tell a lie?" "He said he would come today, and he did not." "Oh, you didn't understand him," said the prophet. "When he said 'today,' [00:05:00] *hayom*, he was referring to the Biblical verse, *Hayom im b'korit yishma'un*. Today, if you listen to my laws, you obey my laws, you listen to me." End of tale. (laughter)

I find it captivating, even enchanting, but a little bit disturbing and puzzling. First of all, how come that the prophet has to ask questions? Doesn't he know? (laughter) And

why is it important for us to know where the sage and the prophet had their meeting? What is the connection between a simple answer to a greeting, and a person's share in the world to come? And why did Elijah dispatch Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi so far away, to Rome? Isn't he a little bit adventurous, to send this -- after all, this Jewish scholar, [00:06:00] among the pagans, beyond the ocean?

Isn't he, too, Elijah, called upon to play an essential part in the ultimate redemption? And then, why did the Messiah himself play a game with the sage? He could not not have been moved by the sincerity of Rabbi Yehoshua, by the pain of Rabbi Yehoshua. After all, for the first time, to meet the Messiah, and the only question he asked was, "When are you coming? We need you. The world needs you." And he played games. "Today."

I also fail to understand Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi himself. How could he so readily accuse the Messiah of lying? Especially he, who had, his entire life, [00:07:00] so vigorously fought against slander. How could he have allowed himself to slander the redeemer? He could have said, "I don't understand him. Maybe I misinterpreted his words." But to say, a liar? He, furthermore, who had so consistently praised the virtue of humility -- how did he not opt to study further or to ask Elijah

to explain to him the Messiah's strange answer, instead of dismissing it outright, as falsehood. How could a Jew, let alone a pious and learned Jew, utter such daring, such blasphemous words?

Well, as always, we shall try to explore these questions tonight, which I am sure some of you have already explored with Rabbi Joseph this afternoon. But tonight, as we shall [00:08:00] enter the Talmudic universe, we shall, as last year and the year before, and the year before, be accompanied by the memory of *Rabbeinu* Shaul Lieberman, *zichrono livracha*, to whom this lecture has always been dedicated. Shaul Lieberman, the great teacher of teachers. Some of us believed that since the Gaon of Vilna, there was no one like him in diaspora. Can I ever thank him enough for what I received from him?

There isn't an area in the field of Talmudic study and inquiry that he has not enriched with his far-reaching scholarship, and intuitive, poetic erudition. In *Bavli*, the Babylonian Talmud, and especially in *Yerushalmi*, the Jerusalem Talmud. He has made us discover treasures of wonder. [00:09:00] His love of Torah, his passion for learning, his emphasis on truth, and authenticity, since our very first encounter, have governed my life as a Jew. It is thanks to him that I understood that there

was joy in learning. I never understood before I met him, why it is forbidden for a man or a woman in mourning to study Torah. It is forbidden. It's a law. And the reason is, the answer is, because when one is in mourning, one should not experience joy, and the study of Torah gives joy.

What is Talmud? It has always been, to me, a melody, a memory, a bouquet of memories and stars. A symphony of voices that fill the universe. Talmud, to me, [00:10:00] was an image of a small room, lit by candles. An old *melamed* was pointing his finger, and hundreds and hundreds of children would follow his gaze. *Amar Rabbai*, and Rabbai said, *Amar Rabbi Akiva*, and Rabbi Akiva declared, *Amar Rabbi Yehudah*, and Rabbi Yehudah stated, and Rabbi Shimon objected, and you were carried back by their singsong into an enchanted kingdom where words had meaning, and where everything that existed testified to God's glory.

But then, thanks to Shaul Lieberman, another dimension, ten more dimensions, were offered to those who knew him. I can still hear his voice. In his study, or his home, [00:11:00] or even on my answering machine. He would call simply reminding me, "*V'Torah mataheah leah?*" If we do not study, what will happen to Torah? The Torah needs us, just as we need her. How did Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, our hero tonight, put it? Every day a

heavenly voice is heard at Mount *Horev*, proclaiming, "Woe to humankind, for abandoning the Torah." For a Jew to neglect study means to forget his or her origins. To turn away from what our teachers taught us is to betray them, and ourselves as well. Said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, "Even when a good disciple will say -- and what he will say before his master about scripture -- *Mishnah, Tosefta* -- and legends -- naturally, Moses has already heard at Sinai. [00:12:00] But we hear it again."

Moses -- all of us, through Moses and thanks to Moses, are in touch with the living source of study. A celebration of the past, the study of Talmud is also an affirmation of the future. Open any treatise, and you will be surrounded by dazzling figures, some of whom we had invited in years past, to meet with us here, in this very hall, but whose words, once learned, will continue to reverberate inside your own. Follow the reasoning of any master, and he will lead you to Jerusalem and its mysterious beauty. Listen to any Talmudic tale, and it will show you your own place in it. Like the gates of prayer and tears, those of Torah remain open. As do ours. (laughter)  
[00:13:00] (pause)

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. A striking, colorful personality. Extremely articulate, vocal, always in motion, always in action.

No one could meet him or hear him and remain unaffected. Imagination, piety, [00:14:00] respect for scholars and students, love of God and of Israel. All these virtues and many more can be found in Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. He was a dynamic teacher, a generous friend to his friends, to his pupils as well. Unlike Rabbi Yehudah, the great president, he ordained all his disciples -- at times, without the consent of the president.

His commentaries are often breathtakingly beautiful. His interpretation of Biblical verse is astonishingly audacious. No wonder that he inspired many legends about his various gifts and powers. He saw what was hidden from others. He visited forbidden sites and areas. He not only fought with angels, he vanquished them.

Who was he? [00:15:00] Not much is known about his biography. We know that he was a storyteller, a homiletic genius, a great teacher, and preacher. Of course, an erudite scholar. A mystic? Nothing in the sources indicates that he was dominated, burned, by mysticism. Some Talmudic commentators claim -- and that's all we really know about him -- that his father was, or might have been, the scholar Levi ben Sisi. About this special teacher, a brief story may be useful to know.



Though he was head of his own school, both in Babylonia and Palestine, Levi ben Sisi was never ordained by his teacher, [00:16:00] Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, the president. Nevertheless, Rabbi Yehudah showed him deep affection. He honored him by inviting him to recite benedictions at his son's wedding meal. When people from a certain place called *Simoniah* needed a rabbi, and came to Rabbi Yehudah, and asked him to recommend a candidate, a rabbi who would serve as everything -- not only as teacher, or preacher, but as scribe, and tutor, and everything else -- he suggested only one name: Levi ben Sisi.

Well, when the new rabbi arrived, he was received warmly by the community. They even erected a high platform for him so that he would dominate everyone, and then they began asking him questions on law, or *Halakha*. He was unable to answer. So they thought, "Maybe he is not good in matters of law. But surely he must be excellent in the field of storytelling." So they asked him a few questions [00:17:00] on *Aggadah*, or on legend. Again, he could not answer. So they said, "What about scripture?" Nothing. "Prophets?" Nothing. They asked him a question related to a verse in the Book of Daniel. "Sorry." Levi ben Sisi was incapable of answering any question.

You can imagine the leaders of the congregation. They hurried back to Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, angry. "Is he really the best you can recommend to us? If he is the best (laughs), what about the others?" (laughter) [00:18:00] "I swear to you," answered Rabbi Yehudah, "that his erudition equals mine." He then summoned his disciple, and asked him the very same questions the people of Simoniah had asked. And this time, Levi ben Sisi answered them all. "What happened to you there?" asked Rabbi Yehudah. And this is what the scholar answered. "They put me on a stage. The homage they paid me was too high. It was too much for me. I forgot everything I knew." (laughter) That is the danger of being onstage. (laughter)

Was he really our Rabbi Yehoshua's father? Maybe. Several commentators say no; for them, he was just another Jew, another Levite, named Levi. So we don't really know who his father was with certainty. [00:19:00] We don't know who his mother was. We don't know where he came from. He comes from an obscure background. All we know from him is what we know about him when he was already what he became. We know that he was born in the southern city of Lod, or Lida then. He lived in the first half of the first century of our Common Era, and of course we know that he was a distinguished Palestinian *Amora*, of the transition

period between the *Tannaim* and the *Amoraim*, who actually created the Talmud.

By the time Lida, or Lod, became impoverished, so much so that people there wept, for they had no means to change their clothes for Shabbat and the holy days, he was already an old man. He moved to Tiberias, where he stayed until his death. [00:20:00] And we don't really know much about his death, either, although we know much about other masters, about their lives and their deaths.

We don't know -- we know he was married, but whom did he marry? When? And where did he spend his youth? Was his childhood happy? He must have met Rabbi Yehudah the Prince, for he insisted on following some of his customs. We know that his teachers were Eleazar ha-Kappar and Bar Kappara, who were great disciples of Rabbi Yehudah the Prince. But he was also known to quote decisions and sayings and metaphors and parables by Antigonus ish Sokho, and Oshaya. Though he enjoyed a strong reputation as a man of *Halakha*, of law, his real fame stemmed from his inventiveness in the field of *Aggadah*, or legend.

[00:21:00] There, he surpassed many of his peers with his wit and wisdom, ingenuity. He knew so much and he knew how to turn

a phrase to make it into a story, and to strike your imagination. It is said, also, that he penetrated the most secret and highest of spheres, reporting on the battles -- as we shall see later, the battles that Moses had to fight when he ascended into heaven to receive the law. As we shall see later, he also gave reports on what was happening, what may be still happening, in hell, or in paradise. And of course, we already know, from the story you heard, that he was prophet Elijah's favorite conversation partner.

We know about his life, that he married once, or maybe even twice, it's not sure. We know that [00:22:00] one of his wives was the daughter of a scholar named Rabbi Yossi bar Peters. You should know that some sages in the Talmud acquired Roman names. They had at least one son, Rabbi Joseph, possibly two. And several grandchildren, whom he himself introduced to scriptures. During his long life, he taught in Lida, but also visited other academies, mainly the one in *Tziporis*. Possibly because of his family connection with the Jewish leadership, his son had married the daughter of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi.

He threw himself into communal affairs. At times, he would join delegations to raise funds among Jews in diaspora. Or, he would go to plead for his community before Roman authorities. He once

came to Caesarea, which was then the headquarters of the Roman consul, [00:23:00] or proconsul. He came there with Rabbi Hanina, and when the Roman proconsul saw them, he stood up. When asked by his aides why he stood up before Jews, the proconsul answered, "They look to me like angels." But angels are not necessarily good students. Neither are dignitaries. Said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, "Because of my communal activities and public service, it happened that I almost forgot everything." He said he was so busy being a rabbi that he no longer studied.

Interesting that his obsession was with forgetting. Many of the stories by him and around him have to do with forgetting. He must have been quite wealthy, for when Rabbi Hiyya came to visit his academy, on a simple weekday, [00:24:00] he was served a 24-course meal. (laughter) An astonished Reb Hiyya asked Rabbi Yehoshua's disciples -- he didn't dare ask Rabbi Yehoshua himself -- he said, "If you eat like this during the week, what do you do on the Sabbath?" (laughter) And they replied, "Oh, on the Sabbath, the number of courses is doubled." (laughter)

Later, therefore, when Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi paid back his visit to Rabbi Hiyya, we are told that Reb Hiyya gave his students several gold coins to buy large amounts of food for his

honored guest. Now, really. Did Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi serve 48-course meals on Shabbat? (laughter) There are two possibilities, as always. (laughter) Either he really did, [00:25:00] in which case he loved to exaggerate in matters of gastronomy and hospitality, or he did not, in which case he just loved to exaggerate. (laughter) Period. Whatever the answer, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi had a pronounced taste for exaggerations.

All of his sayings are extreme. For instance, he said, and I quote him, "Whoever says 'Amen' during *Kaddish* may be certain that all evil decrees against him in heaven have been revoked." As we say, *halavai*. (laughter) He also said, "To slander a fellow human being is like violating all the commandments of the Torah." I hope it isn't so. (laughter) He also said, "He who slanders a scholar is sure to be sent [00:26:00] to hell." I hope. (laughter)

He had even more unusual things to say about the importance of study. He said, and I quote him, "You have a headache? Study Torah." (laughter) "Your throat aches? Study Torah."

(laughter) "Your bones hurt? Study Torah. Stomach burns? Study Torah. You feel pain in your entire body? Study Torah."

Also, he said, "Whoever teaches his son or grandson Torah, it is as if he received it himself at Sinai."

Even more daring are those of his sayings that relate to the Almighty. He knows what God did when His children were slaughtered. Listen. And I quote. "When the enemy approached the temple in order to destroy it, the temple was defended by 600,000 angels, ready and eager to protect it. [00:27:00] But then, they noticed that the *Shekhina*, the divine providence itself, was indifferent to the plight of the Jewish people. And so they, too, left."

Another story. "The Holy One, blessed be He," says Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, "summoned His angels and said to them, 'If a human king has a son who died and mourns for him, what is it customary for the king to do?' And they replied, 'He hangs sack cloths over his door.' And He said to them, 'I will do likewise.' And He quoted a prophetic verse, just to illustrate what He was doing. He again asked them, 'What does a human king do [00:28:00] when he is in mourning?' And they replied, 'He extinguishes the lamps.' And He said to them, 'I will do likewise,' and again quoted. 'What else does a human king do?' And they replied, 'He overturns his couch.' And He said to them, 'I will do likewise.' And then He said, 'What else does a

human king do when in mourning?' 'He walks barefoot.' 'What else does he do?' And they replied, 'He rends his purple robes.' 'I will do likewise. What else does a human king do?' And they said, 'He sits in silence.' And He replied, 'I will do likewise.'"

Here, one feels Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's compassion for God, and his infinite compassion for the Jewish people. Like Moses, he always takes its side. The golden calf? [00:29:00] It had to happen, said he. Why? So that God could illustrate the meaning of repentance. Had there been no golden calf, they wouldn't have had to repent. When the Jewish people suffers, said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, God, too, suffers. And all the people in the world suffer. And he went on to say, "The nations of the world only knew that when the Jews commit transgressions, they, too, must endure punishment. They, the Gentiles, the pagans, the heathens, would assign two policemen to every Jew to prevent him from sinning."

On another occasion, he said, "If the nations of the world only knew how important the sanctuary in the temple is to them, too, they would do everything in their power to save it from destruction." [00:30:00] But the temple was destroyed. And the sanctuary was profaned. And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi kept on



remembering our national catastrophe. And instead of fasting one day, on *Tisha B'Av*, on the ninth day of *Av*, he fasted the next day, too, because the fires were still burning.

But what is astonishing is not that he fasted two days instead of one, but that he did not fast more than two days. And also that not more of his contemporaries actually followed his example. After all, let's not forget -- if they could no longer see Jerusalem in all its splendor, they could still see its ruins. By that time, the decree forbidding Jews to enter Jerusalem except on *Tisha B'Av* had already been abrogated. First, by Septimius Severus, who wanted to become emperor, and therefore, [00:31:00] he needed the Jewish cooperation and sympathy in fighting his Parthian Wars. And then, 20 years later, by Emperor Caracalla.

Now, there were Jews in Jerusalem. And there was even Jewish life in Jerusalem. How could that be? How could Jews dwell in God's destroyed city without endlessly weeping over their loss? How could Jews anywhere go on with their lives, without remembering their tragedy? How could teachers teach, and students study, and merchants sell, and customers buy, without so many sad memories surrounding them and stifling them and paralyzing them?

Strange. Intellectual life flourished in the land of Israel. That was not true in the rest of the Roman Empire, nor in the rest of the world. [00:32:00] Most of the important events that occurred during the first half of the third century were of political or military nature, except for Diophantus, who in Alexandria proudly produced the first book on algebra. No great cultural achievement can be traced back to that era. Emperors followed one another in violent deaths. Caracalla killed Geta and was succeeded by Heliogabalus, who was succeeded by Alexander Severus. He, in turn, was murdered by Maximinus, who was assassinated by his troops and succeeded by Gordian I, Gordian II, Balbinus, Pupienus, and Gordian III.

Elsewhere, Christians were persecuted. Their martyrs became saints, violence was the law, and bloodshed was its expression. But in the land of Israel, cultural life continued to blossom. [00:33:00] The number of centers of learning grew irresistibly, as did the number of students and teachers, and to me, this is one of the great mysteries in our history. There were so many students who wished to become rabbis, and yet, at that time, they didn't have salaries. (laughter) Rabbis were forbidden to receive salaries. But there were so many of them that the Nasi, the president, decided that all ordinations would require his

personal approval. Why was this necessary? Because in the beginning, every teacher had the right to ordain, and had used it. Until the president, one day, visited a village, and found a student who, though ignorant in matters of *Halakha*, law, acted as rabbi.

So he decided, no more. Was there dissension [00:34:00] on this specific point between the president and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, who was determined to keep his rights and privileges? Some of the commentators believe there was. Still, the president and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi were related, and their relationship was known to be excellent. There is no indication in the sources that they ever really quarreled. But then, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi never quarreled with anyone. Except, of course, over points of law, though the discussions, even then, never degenerated into conflicts. Surely, not personal conflicts.

"Disputes," he said, "can transform a generation and reduce its purity, and make it comparable to the sinful generation of the floods." Peace, among people, peace and hope, was one of his favorite themes. In general, as a person, from the way we learn [00:35:00] about his way of life, we know that he was kind, and compassionate, even towards sinners. He himself declared that

he never used his authority to ban anyone from any of the 24 transgressions that normally warrant excommunication. He once felt he had to place a curse on a Sadducee, or a Min -- a Min was then called a member of the new Christian sect, whom he had judged offensive. He knew exactly when and where to utter the curse so that it be most effective. But when the moment came, he conveniently fell asleep. It is simple. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was unable to curse another human being. "verachamav al kol ma'asav ," he said. [00:36:00] "Just as God is merciful with all His creatures, we must be compassionate towards all people."

But, let us be careful and not make him into a saint. There are no saints in Judaism. Only just men and women. The difference: saints are supposed to be perfect, and no human being is perfect. Just persons aspire to be just. But they also have their foibles and shortcomings. In other words, they are people who, like all other people, occasionally live in contradiction with themselves. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi loved all people, but Jews more so. He was never angry with people. Well, at times, he was. With the enemies of Israel. He once saw [00:37:00] beautiful fruit on beautiful trees, and he sighed. "Oh, trees, trees," he said, "to whom are you offering your exquisite fruit?"

Also to those pagans who cause such suffering to our people?"

He would have wanted the trees to be selective. (laughter)

He also said, "The Almighty stands on Mount Moriah, and sees not only the ruins of the temple, but also those who are responsible for the ruins, and having seen them, he relegates them to the fiery bottom of the abyss that is hell. But whom does the Almighty love most? He loves mainly the scholars, the students, the teachers, and the parents who are scholars, and the parents who are teachers, at least to their children. [00:38:00] We are equally in desperate need to learn," he seems -- or, he may have said. "We need to go on learning." A *Talmid Chacham* is someone who learns until the last day of his life, which is probably what Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi did. And what we remember of him are not only his good deeds, his kind behavior as a person, but above all, we remember his greatness as a teacher.

His strength lay in his extraordinary curiosity. His favorite expression was, "Why? Why this? Why that? Why does the *pasuk*, the verse, say this? Why is Israel compared to an olive?

Because, like olives, Israel grows in all seasons," he says.

"Why does God promise redemption with the paradoxical statement, '*b'ito ahishena* , I shall hasten redemption in due time'?" And he said, "Isn't it either or? If He will hasten the event, then

it will be before its time. If it occurs in its time, it will not be before its time."

Explains Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, with gentle humor and wisdom, "*Zacha*, if Israel be worthy, *ahishena*, then I will hasten redemption. *Lo zacha*, if Israel will remain unworthy of redemption, it would still come, but at its own pace, at its own time." Unable to resist the poetic image, he adds, and I quote him, "If Israel is worthy, the redeemer will appear riding on fiery and golden clouds. If Israel will be unworthy, he will arrive, but riding on a donkey." (laughter) [00:40:00]

It is he, also, who asked, "Why were the *Anshei Knesset HaGedolah*, the members of the Great Commonwealth -- *Shimon haTzaddik*, and his companions -- why were they so special? Because they have restored the divine crown to its rightful place. Moses has proclaimed, '*Hakeil hagadol hagibor ve'hanora*, God is great, mighty, and awesome.' Then came Jeremiah, who said, 'Pagans are dancing in His sanctuary. Where is His awesomeness?' So he stopped using the word awesome. Then came Daniel, who said, 'Pagans have enslaved His children. Where is His might?' So he stopped using the word mighty. But the members of the Great Commonwealth gave deeper meaning to those very words, and they said, 'His might lies in His ability to

contain His anger at the wicked. As for His awesomeness, it is ever-present. [00:41:00] Were it not for the fear of heaven, the nations of the world would have long ago devoured the Jewish people.'"

And when we hear his words, we cannot not think of how valid and topical they remained throughout the centuries, including our own. Except, if the nations of the world did not devour our people in this century, it was not because of fear of heaven.

In his approach to the interpretation of the law, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi combined simplicity and depth, moderation and commitment. He even enjoyed wordplays. What we call in French, *jeu de mots*. His appeal to listeners crossed all social boundaries. His tales were captivating. His aphorisms were endowed with such charm, with such common sense, [00:42:00] that they could not but leave an imprint.

What we know from his teaching is that he was utterly repelled by vulgarity and obscenity. "One need never utter an obscene word," he said. "Look at scripture. Even when it must describe something vulgar, the description is indirect, understated. The scripture uses many words in order not to use an impure word." Incidentally, do you know why ancient Hebrew was called *Lashon*

*Hakodesh?* Sacred tongue. Because it contained no obscene words. But today, modern Hebrew, it's -- (laughter)

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi counseled prudence in matters of communication among others. It is he who said, "*mila besela u'shtika b'trei*, [00:43:00] one word is worth one *sela*" -- a coin of the time -- "but silence is worth twice as much." Speaking of money, he did know its value very well. Again, it is he who with his keen sense of realism, said, "*kesef v'zahav m'taher mamzerim*, with money you can purify even bastards." In other words, money buys everything. He also said, "Whoever is beaten by a snake will thereafter be afraid of a simple string." What was important for him was respect in human relations. "Who is it that we call as a nonbeliever?" he asked, and he said, "A nonbeliever is someone who insults or offends his fellow student in the presence of a teacher."

If Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi so often emphasizes his distaste [00:44:00] for slander in all its forms, it is because slander violates human rights from a distance. So, from what we already know about him, he must have been a monolithic personality, a man of wisdom and charm, universally respected, popular in all circles, at peace with the world and himself. In other words, a very poor subject for a novel. (laughter) No tension, no



conflict, nothing. Too beautiful, too good. But I don't believe that the image is correct. I don't believe he was at peace with the world around him. I don't believe that he had no opponents or enemies. I don't believe that he was liked, or even respected, by everybody.

[00:45:00] Nor do I believe he was always at peace even with himself. I don't think that he had a sense of fulfillment. Oh yes, he was a good father. That we know. A marvelous grandfather. We know that he, every Friday, would listen to his grandchildren recite the *Parshat Hashavua*. He was an exciting teacher, and yet, I have the feeling, from studying the text, that there was something in life, his life, that was not right. Otherwise, I think, he would not have been so preoccupied with dreams. He dealt not with psychoanalysis, only with prayer. He had Biblical references. He had Biblical verses, for all the dreams. Recite the verses, and everything would be all right.

But he also had powers, mystical powers. [00:46:00] So, could he, in spite of his appearance, have been a mystic after all? He performed miracles. That, we know. When a severe drought struck his city, he prayed, and the heavens opened. Rabbi Hanina's intercession for rain has not succeeded in *Tziporis*,

but Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was luckier. And that goes for his visions, too. He had many of them. Listen.

He said -- and he said the following story. And listen to the imagination, the fantasy of the man. He said, when Moses ascended into heaven, he found God weaving crowns of ornaments to the letters in the Torah. Said God, "Moses, do people in your place not greet one another?" Moses answered, "How dare a servant greet his master?" To which God replied, "You could have at least wished me [00:47:00] success in my work."

(laughter)

Another story, by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, on the same subject. When Moses ascended into heaven, the angels felt provoked. And they turned to God and asked, "What is a mortal doing here in our midst?" And God replied, "He came to receive the Torah." "What?" they exclaimed. "You have kept here a treasure for 974 generations before the beginning of creation, and now You want to hand it over to a man of flesh and blood?" God then turned to Moses, and said, "Answer them." And Moses said, "I am scared. With one word, they could destroy me." And God said, "Hold on to my throne, and answer them." Only then did Moses answer.

"Master of the Universe, what is written in the Torah You have chosen to give me?" "I am the God who has delivered you from Egypt. [00:48:00] Tell me, angels, were you in Egypt? Were you enslaved by Pharaoh? What do you need the Torah for? What else does it say in the Torah? It says, 'Thou shalt not worship other gods.' Do you dwell among people who worship other gods? The Torah also commands us to observe the Sabbath. Do you need a Sabbath? Do you need to rest from work? Do you work at all? (laughter) The Torah says, 'Honor thy father and mother.' Do you have parents?" Well, sometimes logic works, even in heaven, and the hostile angels became Moses' best friends. And we got the Torah.

But one of them, a former angel, Satan, who had been away, wasn't happy. He appeared afterwards before God and inquired, "Where is the Torah?" "On earth," said God. [00:49:00] Satan went to visit the earth. "Where is the Torah?" "Ask God," said the earth. So Satan went to try his luck with the sea, in vain. The sea pleaded ignorance. The abyss, same answer. Death and nothingness? Still the same answer. "Master of the Universe," cried Satan, "I searched everywhere, and failed to find the Torah. Where is it?"

And God said, "Go ask the son of Amram." Satan then came to Moses. "Where is the Torah that God has given you?" And Moses answered, as a good Jew with a question, "Who am I," he said, "that God should give me the Torah?" At that point, God intervened in the story and said, "Moses, it's not nice." (laughter) "You are a liar." (laughter) "I was telling the truth," said Moses. "How could I imagine myself worthy of receiving Your most precious treasure?" [00:50:00] And so God was pleased with the answer, and He said, "Because you are so humble, the Torah will be called by your name."

Now, listen. God kavyachol, angels, Satan, aren't they part of what is considered a classical mystical vision? So then, was Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi a mystic after all? Even his son, Rabbi Joseph, had mystical experiences. One day, he fainted and died. Somehow, he was brought back to life, and his father asked him, "My son, what did you see up there?" And the son said, "I discovered *Olam Hafuch Raiti*," he said. "I discovered a world in which everything is upside down. Those who are strong and mighty on this earth, are weak and powerless on that." And the father quietly, [00:51:00] hesitantly, said, "And what about us? Did you see us there?" And the son said, "We remain the same." In other words, don't worry Father, they like you, even there. (laughter)

And so, we understand that since he was liked, even in heaven, of course prophet Elijah liked him. So, let us go back to the first story, and talk about their friendship. Theirs was undeniably a beautiful, but stormy, friendship, with ups and downs, crises and adventures, aberrations and reconciliations. Elijah was as close to Rabbi Yehoshua as anyone could get. They would meet on Mount Carmel, or on the road, or near the entrance to Rabbi Yehoshua bar Yochai's cave, and they would discuss endless questions related to study, and anything else.

Now, remember: [00:52:00] Rabbi Yehoshua was not the only who had a relationship with the prophet. Other *tzaddikim* enjoyed similar privileges. They also benefited from what is called *gilui Eliyahu, the revelation of Elijah*. But they saw him once or twice, always for specific reasons, usually to solve their immediate problem, whereas Rabbi Yehoshua saw him many times, just to chat. Furthermore, whereas other *tzaddikim* needed *aliyat neshama*, the ascension of their soul into heaven, in order to meet the prophet, Rabbi Yehoshua pulled the prophet down from heaven, down to earth.

As a result, Rabbi Yehoshua used to tell many stories about the prophet's secret grandeur. In return, the prophet was extremely

fond of Rabbi Yehoshua. When he introduced him to [00:53:00] Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, he called him *gadol hador*, the greatest man of his generation. Whatever Rabbi Yehoshua wanted, Elijah granted him. Once, Rabbi Yehoshua expressed his desire to see a certain rare and precious stone. Listen to how Elijah found a way to satisfy him. He could have given it to him. But Elijah also loved stories. So not only did he give him the stone, he gave him a story.

Said the Talmud, "There was a ship caught in a tempest, and among the passengers, there was a young boy. Elijah appeared before the young boy and said, 'If you promise me to do what I want you to do, I will save the whole ship. And here is my desire. I want you to go to Lida, where Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi resides. Take him outside the city, [00:54:00] to the big cave.' And the boy said, 'But, he's a great man, and I am nobody. He will not follow me.' 'He is a humble man,' answered Elijah. 'He will follow you.' Of course, the ship was saved, and the boy went to Lida, found Rabbi Yehoshua, invited him to follow him to the cave, and once inside, showed him the precious stone, which suddenly shone with such intensity that illuminated the surroundings to the far horizon."

Later, the Talmud commented, "See how humble Rabbi Yehoshua was. A young boy asked him to go with him three miles, and he, the sage, didn't even ask why, and for what purpose." Still, the two friends, the sage and the prophet, did have crises. Their encounters were interrupted at times. [00:55:00] Once, it happened because a man had been devoured by a lion three miles from Rabbi Yehoshua's residence. Elijah was angry. Rabbi Yehoshua should have protected the victim. How could he have known, since the prophet did not warn him of the impending tragedy? Never mind logic. A just man must help and save his fellow man.

On another occasion, a mysterious man named Ula ben Kushav, probably a member of the anti-Roman underground group, came to Rabbi Yehoshua for shelter. The Roman police was after him, and he came to Lida. Naturally, Rabbi Yehoshua took him into his house. Subsequently, Roman soldiers surrounded Lida, and threatened that if the fugitive was not handed over to them right away, they would destroy the entire city.

[00:56:00] Rabbi Yehoshua could have decided on his own. He had the authority. But he preferred to allow the fugitive to reach his own decision, and he simply told him that the law was against him, for it says that if an enemy lay siege to a

community and says, "We shall kill you all, unless you give us one of your own," the community's sacred duty is to resist the threat. Better for everyone to die, than to betray and sacrifice one of your own. You don't sacrifice a Jew.

However, if the enemy names the individual in question, the community may cooperate in his apprehension. So, Ula ben Kushav, himself, agreed to be handed over to the Roman soldiers, [00:57:00] and on that day, Elijah did not appear before Rabbi Yehoshua, nor the next day, nor the next week. Rabbi Yehoshua waited and waited, in vain. From the day of Ula ben Kushav's arrest, he was alone. He felt abandoned, and in his despair, he embarked on a ritual of penance and fasting, until finally, Elijah returned. And Rabbi Yehoshua asked him, "Why did you make me wait so long?" And Elijah's answer was short and chilling. "I do not deal with informers." "But, did I violate the law?" Rabbi Yehoshua cried out. "What I did was in strict conformity with the law, wasn't it?" "Yes, it was," answered Elijah. "But as a pious man, as a Hasid, you should have gone further than the law. Granted, the man had to be handed over. [00:58:00] But why did it have to be by you?"

Well, nobody's perfect. (laughter) Still, the two remained friends, so much so that in the end, they were united by legend



even in the way they cheated death. Like Elijah, Rabbi Yehoshua allegedly entered heaven alive. Why? Because of his love for the sick. That's what the Talmud says. We are told that he alone was willing to treat patients whose mortal diseases were contagious. And because he defied death then, death was powerless against him later.

Many descriptions of this amazing episode exist in Talmudic, Midrashic, and post-Midrashic literature. It generally sounds like this. When Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's last hour arrived, God told the Angel of Death, [00:59:00] go and do his will. This is a euphemism. This is the way to say, go and take his life. When Rabbi Yehoshua noticed the Angel of Death, he said, "I would like to see my place in heaven first." (laughter) And the Angel agreed. "Wait," said Rabbi Yehoshua. "Your sword frightens me. So please, let me keep it for the journey. I'll give it back to you afterwards." The Angel, unsuspecting, agreed, and he took him to a place, high above, from which Rabbi Yehoshua could see paradise. At that point, Rabbi Yehoshua jumped inside. And the Angel caught him by the edge of his garment, urging him to return. Rabbi Yehoshua said, "I swear to you that I am not going to leave this place."

The Angel appealed to God, [01:00:00] who took Rabbi Yehoshua's side. "At least give me back my sword," the Angel pleaded with him. "No," said Rabbi Yehoshua, who, at that moment, wanted to save all people from death. But God intervened again, this time on the side of the Angel, and the heavenly voice was heard, "Give him back the sword. Humankind needs it."

Later, much, much, later, I came across a poem written by the nineteenth-century American poet Longfellow, who was inspired by this extraordinary legend, and he wrote a poem called The Legend of Rabbi ben Levi. And I shall read it to you.

Rabbi ben Levi, on the Sabbath read, a volume of the law, in which it is said, "No men [01:01:00] shall look upon my face and live." And as he read, he prayed that God would give His faithful servant grace with mortal eye, to look upon His face, and yet not to die. Then, fell a sudden shadow on the page, and lifting up his eyes, grown dim with age, he saw the Angel of Death before him stand, holding a naked sword in his right hand. Rabbi ben Levi was a righteous man, yet through his veins, a chilled terror ran. With trembling voice, he said, "What will thou hear?" The Angel answered, "Lo, the time draws near, when thou must die, yet, first, by God's decree, whatever thou ask, shall be granted thee."

Replied the Rabbi, [01:02:00] "Let these leaving eyes first look upon my place in paradise." Then said the Angel, "Come with me and look." Rabbi ben Levi closed the sacred book, and, rising, and uplifting his gray head, "Give me the sword," he to the Angel said, "lest thou should fall upon me by the way." The Angel smiled, and hastened to obey, then led him forth to the celestial town, and set him on the wall, whence, gazing down, Rabbi ben Levi, with his living eyes, might look upon his place in paradise. Then, straight into the city of the Lord, the rebbe leaped with the Death Angel's sword. And through the streets, there swept a sudden breath, of something there unknown, which men called death.

Meanwhile, the Angel stayed without, [01:03:00] and cried, "Come back!" To which the Rabbi's voice replied, "No. In the name of God whom I adore, I swear that hence I will depart no more." Then all the angels cried, "Oh Holy One, see what the son of Levi here has done. The kingdom of heaven, he takes by violence, and in Thy name, refused to go hence." The Lord replied, "My angels, be not wrought. Did he ever, the son of Levi, break his oath? Let him remain, for he with mortal eye shall look upon my face, and yet, not die." Beyond the outer wall, the Angel of Death heard the great voice, and said with

panting breath, "Give back the sword and let me go my way."  
Whereas the Rabbi paused and answered, "Nay. Anguish enough  
already hath it caused among the sons of man." [01:04:00] And  
while he paused, he heard the awful mandate of the Lord,  
resounding through the air, "Give back the sword."

The Rabbi bowed his head in silent prayer, then said he to the  
dreadful Angel, "Swear, no human eye shall look on it again.  
But when thou takest away the souls of man, thyself unseen,  
and with an unseen sword, thou wilt perform the bidding of the  
Lord." The Angel took the sword again, and swore, and walks on  
earth unseen forevermore.

Now, according to another version, the Angel brought an official  
complaint. (laughter) To Rabban Gamaliel, the head of the  
academy and the tribunal, [01:05:00] asking him to order the  
illegal refugee to return. So that he could take care of him.  
And Rabban Gamaliel ruled in favor of Rabbi Yehoshua, and even  
asked him for information on what was going on there, especially  
in hell. Rabbi Gamaliel wanted to know, believe it or not,  
whether there were Jews in hell. (laughter) Rabbi Yehoshua  
wrote a full report, and gave it to the Angel of Death. Poor  
Angel, what a fall, from angel to simple mailman. And this is  
what Rabbi Yehoshua wrote.

"I have measured hell. It is 100 miles long and 50 miles wide. Angels of fire serve as guards. They devour whoever is near them. Hell comprises seven chambers. After all, the sinners are chastised and burned, they come back to life in their previous form, [01:06:00] only to be punished again. This happens seven times during each day and three times during each night." Interestingly enough, Rabbi Yehoshua, in his new role as reporter, tells us whom he saw there, and he gives us names. (laughter) Famous names.

He also describes paradise, with its two gates, each guarded by 600,000 angels. "There are 80,000 trees in every corner. In the very center stands the Tree of Life. Its fruits have 500,000 tastes. A *tzaddik* arrives. He's led to a canopy of gold, from which flow four rivers. One of honey, one of oil, one of milk, and one of wine. Paradise, too, is composed of seven chambers. The first is reserved for Rabbi Akiva, and other martyrs of the faith. The seventh, for those who when offended, [01:07:00] did not respond offensively. Those who did not humiliate those who humiliated them."

Still, another text tells us that when Rabbi Yehoshua received his permanent residency status in paradise, who was there to welcome him but his old friend, and ours, prophet Elijah. "*Panuderech le'bar Levi*," exclaimed Elijah. "Make way for the son of Levi." Thus, he led him to the place where Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai sat on a throne made of 13 golden tables. "Are you the son of Levi?" asked Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai. "Yes," said Rabbi Yehoshua. "Was there a rainbow in the sky in your lifetime?" "Yes," said Rabbi Yehoshua. "In that case," said Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, "you are not the son of Levi." Commented the Talmud, "Actually, there was no rainbow in Rabbi Yehoshua's lifetime. [01:08:00] But he was too timid, too shy, to say so."

Now, here we go again. This story cannot not disturb us. What makes the absence of the rainbow so important? And what moves Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai to deny the newcomer's true identity? The first question has been answered in the Talmud. Because the rainbow is a sign of divine protection over the community, its presence is not needed when a *tzaddik* is around. It is he who protects the community. Often, in the Talmud, we find a reference to a *tzaddik* whose contemporaries never saw a rainbow, and that is the sign that he was a *tzaddik*. And therefore, we understand Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's question, and even his

disappointment. In his eyes, Rabbi Yehoshua would not be a true *tzaddik* if his people needed a rainbow for protection.

[01:09:00] What we fail to understand is his answer. "You are not the son of Levi." But who else could he be? Already, earlier, there had been a moment of tension between them. A Midrash tells us that Elijah and Rabbi Yehoshua were walking and discussing a legal point. "You know what," said Elijah, "let's ask Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai." But Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai refused to see Rabbi Yehoshua, or even to be seen by him -- why? Again, because a rainbow appeared in the sky in his lifetime.

All of a sudden, we realize that from the beginning of our encounter with Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, we have a felt the mysterious shadow of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai hovering over us. Why did Elijah and Rabbi Yehoshua frequently meet at the entrance to his cave? [01:10:00] What attracted them there? The mystical connection? But didn't we conclude, somewhat prematurely perhaps, that Rabbi Yehoshua was involved only, or mainly, with *Nigla*, the revealed tradition? And had little to do with the *Torath haNistar*, with the study of mysticism?

And what if we were wrong? And what if our hero had been attracted to it, but dared not admit it in public? His dreams,

his visions of Moses in heaven, his meetings with the Angel of Death, his adventures with Elijah, his miracle-making, his use of fantasy. Do these not constitute a mystical quest?

And so, in conclusion, upon rereading all the existing texts related to him, [01:11:00] I think I discovered a new dimension to his personality. He never went to the end of things. A great *Halakhist* -- most of his decisions prevailed -- he was not satisfied with *Halakha* alone. Though an exponent of *Aggadah*, he distrusted it and opposed it being written down. Speaking of one particular legend, which he must have attributed to extraneous influences, he said, and I quote, "Whoever wrote it will have no share in the world to come. Whoever reads it will be punished. Whoever hears it will receive no reward."

Whatever did not belong to the rational aspect of Judaism was not entirely for him. When someone outside the faith cured his son with an occult formula, he said, "Better die [01:12:00] than live by such occult practices." Since neither *Halakha* nor *Aggadah* fully satisfied him, why shouldn't he have explored the irrational third dimension, the mystical one? Except that he somehow stayed at the brink, on the outside. He did not go in the cave. He remained outside the cave. He was reluctant to penetrate its dazzling universe, filled with wonder but danger.



He stayed, always, on the edge. Is this why Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, to whom the *Zohar* was attributed -- is this why he was angry with him? Is this why he said, "You are not the son of Levi," meaning, you look like him, you talk like him, you behave like him, but the true son of Levi is not you, [01:13:00] because you are not you. Because you don't dare being you.  
(pause)

Thus, we see, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi in a different light, and I think, in a more human light. Elijah befriended him. The Angel of Death obeyed him. Still, he had his share of failures. His life was not only lined with triumphs. He had his share of defeats. And the greatest of them all, he did not succeed in depriving death of its power. Why didn't he disobey the heavenly voice, asking him to return the sword to its owner?

But what did the heavenly voice actually tell him -- that people need the Angel of Death? Does this mean that they need to die? That they want to die? [01:14:00] That for life to go on, some must give up life? My last impression of our hero tonight is that one of his major problems was death, and that is why he needed and loved Elijah. Consciously or not, he wanted to learn from him how to bypass death. How to enter heaven alive. And

that is also why he wanted to meet the Messiah, because the Messiah is meant to vanquish death, forever.

But unfortunately, he has given the sword back. And so, death is still around, and its sword is being used in too many places at once. As for hell, how did Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav put it? "Hell is not over there, beyond life. [01:15:00] Hell is here, in this world. And those who are devoured by its fire do not come back to life again." And now, I see Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi as a sensitive man, drawn to melancholy. Alive, he feared death. In paradise, he could not forget those he had left behind.

His great master was a man called Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, and he quoted him often. He also quoted him, saying, "Why are the prayers of the children of Israel not received in heaven? Because the children of Israel have forgotten the secret of the ineffable name." And my question is, is that all they have forgotten? [01:16:00] One name? One secret? Only one?  
(applause) (pause)

**M1:**

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