

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: Solomon and His Sons

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Well, tonight it's different. Maybe we shall begin at the end. Once is not a sin, is it? Let us say right away that King Solomon is puzzling. You never know with him. Is he strong or weak, hungry for power or for wisdom? Is he too pious or not pious enough? Does he overflow with joy or with sadness? AS a character he is hard to grasp. [00:01:00] Yet, at first sight he appears homogeneous, made of one piece. The image he sends forth to us in the text is that of a joyous and serene sovereign. So many writings, so many stories tell us about his taste for happiness.

Was there anywhere a more content, more powerful or wiser man? A mere mention of his name and people smile. He seems blessed by God. He is an informed statesman, a great diplomat, a master of international diplomacy, an ambitious politician, a keen psychologist. Everything he undertakes is a success. More than that, women like him. [00:02:00] (laughter) And he likes them. Many important people belong to his entourage. He is lucky and original too. He is the son of a king and yet asserts himself as a king in his own right. He carves out an identity for

himself and does not live in the shadow of his father, the great conqueror.

He, for his own part, shies away from the glories of war. When God, in a dream, asks him about his wishes, he knows what to answer in order to move Him. "Grant me knowledge", he says. "Grant me knowledge that I might be able to distinguish right from wrong." That's all? Is Solomon that humble? Is he satisfied with so little? God rewards him for it. "I shall give you," says God, "I shall give you an [00:03:00] understanding and a wise heart. No one before will have been like you, nor will anyone ever be like you." A consequence? He's less colorful than his father. His life unfolds like a novel, not an epic poem. David wrote one book. He wrote three.

Didn't he receive the unique honor and rare privilege of building the Temple which was to be God's dwelling place on earth? And also, wasn't his reign glorified as the rein of peace, social tranquility, and enjoyment? Solomon, Shlomo in Hebrew, his name is derived from *shalom* and means peace, the man of peace, and therefore of inner peace as well. His name also means *Shalem*, a whole, an intact being, a whole person, [00:04:00] no cracks, no blots. And yet, we'll find out later.

The story is more complex than it appears at first, as is the man. Otherwise, he would be boring as well as annoying.

Then as much as now, it would be impossible to be passionately interested in someone who knows everything and owns anything he wants, gets anything he desires, and dominates whoever stands before him. Hence the ambiguous attitude of our sages in the Talmudic literature towards him. On one hand, he is glorified, but on the other he is shown as someone overwhelmed by his weaknesses, and there are many. Some of them are so embarrassing for a son, the son of David, that they appear baffling. [00:05:00] Well, that is the problem that we will try to tackle tonight.

How could a great man, a great Jew, as unusual a king as David have sons, not Solomon, but how could he have sons who, for the most part, disgraced him? Anything is possible says the Talmud. A righteous man can be the father or the son of a righteous man just as he can perfectly well be the son or the father of a wicked man. In the Bible too? Well, yes, in the Bible too. After all, all its heroes are human. Parents cannot be held responsible for what their children become, and the other way around. (laughter) [00:06:00] If they follow, whoever they are, the wrong path, whose fault is it? God's?

In theology too the problem presents itself in sharp terms. If we turn away from virtues, are we the only ones to bear the blame? Now, what about the father? To put it in a different way, where in time does human responsibility stop? To what extent does the past of some people weigh on that of others? We shall try to analyze these questions later. First of all, let us follow our tradition and open a few parentheses. First, I must confess that I envy Solomon. I envy him and his contemporaries. How did they manage to live in peace? What? A Jewish state without enemies? (laughter) [00:07:00]

A Jewish state without troubles? A Jewish state without slander from the international community? Without condemnation, with no nation eager to conquer Jerusalem or at least to submit it to outside judgment? I cannot fail to mention, be it in passing, recent events. The shocking haste of so many world leaders to blame and censor and humiliate Israel, we shall speak about that four weeks from now when we have the usual state of the month of October or November in mind. But what we may say already now, that is that we need Solomon today more than ever. Secondly, I must repeat what I have been saying here for 23 years. This is the twenty-fourth.

As we are about to begin our annual encounters, their aim [00:08:00] has been for us to study together stories and legends which we shared. I know you have been -- some of you have been studying this afternoon with Rabbi Paul Joseph, and I hope you will come more and more to study more in order to prepare yourselves and us for these sessions. Other people have monuments, monuments of stone. The Jewish people has different monuments. Ours are to be found in language, in language that, from generation to generation, fathers and sons, master and disciples, have been passing on as a message of fervor and of life.

To us, the spoken word is what the museum, an alien institution, represents for other's cultures and civilizations. Exploring its depth means going back to the source. It means remembering. It also means [00:09:00] allowing memory to transcend itself thoroughly. The Bible, which is always the subject of our first encounter, narrates the past. But we understand its content in the present, and inversely, thanks to the Bible, we have a better understanding of current events. Admittedly, our society, which loves the rich and the powerful so as to be able to hate them afterwards, (laughter) has not yet produced a docudrama made for television and entitled King Solomon and Women. (laughter)

But that will come. (laughter) Actually, I may be behind the times. It may have come already, and I don't know it. How fortunate I am. (laughter) And finally, some of the characters in the Bible are so timeless that they remain topical, especially matters of education. [00:10:00] In other words, if you are having difficulties with your children, God forbid, cheer up. You are not alone. Our ancestors went through that before you. And their problems, believe me, were infinitely more serious, as we shall see later. And therefore, it is my pleasure tonight to invite you to meet several biblical fathers and sons, David and Solomon, who in turn became fathers and empathize, I hope you will, empathize with them.

But first, let's not forget those parents and children who are not in the Bible but are here waiting outside for a more immediate invitation. (applause) [00:11:00]

Why David? Why Solomon? And the answer is, why not? They have everything that a novelist needs, intrigue, plots, joy, sadness, ambition, and even suspense. Now, we have chosen them as a particular case study tonight because through that case study we might be able to seize its wider implications. What kind of relationship [00:12:00] did these great man in the Bible have

with their own offspring? And here we have an easy and immediate answer: in many cases, a disastrous one. Let's admit it, biblical parents were often lucky with God but unlucky with their sons.

In fact, the closer they came to God, the more removed they seemed from their children. Incidentally, not so in the Talmud where we encounter few quarrels, few conflicts among sons of famous fathers, but more about this next week. The Talmud does speak of *tzar gidul banim*, the pain of bringing up children. Was it always like that? Probably. The father of Abraham must have been upset with his son, who all of a sudden had a strange, weird [00:13:00] idea of proclaiming that God is one. As for the father, capital F, can we imagine what his children have been doing to him since the very beginning, (laughter) Adam and Eve in the paradise?

Kol yamav makhovim, the words in Ecclesiastes meaning that all man's days are pain and torment is in the Midrash Kohelet, in the Midrashic commentary on the book, on the Ecclesiastes referred not to man but to God himself. Which parent does not have problems with education, education for his or her children? Since the problem seems hopeless at times, efforts have been made lately to change not the solution but the problem. Today's

youth are convinced that it is their right and their duty to bring up their parents. [00:14:00] (laughter) Is Uncle Freud correct once more?

Is it possible, is it true that often, if not always, a son's wish is to destroy and kill his father, or at least the father figure that dominates his adolescence? Was it Oscar Wilde who said that children begin by loving their parents, then they judge them, rarely if ever do they forgive them? Let us take a first example, the first human failing, the first human family, the first family in history, the children of Adam and Eve. Cain and Abel, as they became the murderer and the victim of one another, could only make their unhappy parents more unhappy. Was that the reason for their behavior?

Is it possible that Cain, at any rate, wanted to punish his parents for bringing him into [00:15:00] an imperfect world? All right, they were not Jewish. (laughter) So what? Isaac was, and how are we to explain Jacob cheating him? Jacob was Jewish. How are we to understand his son's behavior towards him? One slept in his bed, so to speak, another became intimate with a prostitute, and all were partners in crime plotting to do away with their father's favorite child, Joseph. Moses' sons seem pale and uninspired, hardly leaving a mark, whereas Aaron's

sons, Nadav and Avihu, die in some obscure [00:16:00] accident which many puzzled commentators have tried to elucidate.

They went unauthorized into the sacred tent and died in the ensuing blaze. One source accuses them of being intoxicated. Another one charges them with starting an impure fire in the purest place in the desert. A third commentator goes further. According to him, the two sons were jealous of their famous father and of their glorious uncle whose functions they wanted to usurp. So, supposedly they walked through the camp saying over and over again to anyone who cared to hear, how much longer will these old men rule over us? How much longer will they stay here? Let them go already and make room for us!

What? The very sons of the first high priest, the founder of the line uttering such [00:17:00] insolent words as if they were some envious politicians or some dissatisfied employees eager for promotions? King Saul too had problems with his children, Michal and Yonatan. He suspected them of liking his former protégé and subsequent rival and successor David better than him, David, who was to become the most glorious of Jewish kings and whose sons are even more of a disappointment. David had 18. Six were born in Hebron, 12 in Jerusalem. Four at least brought him serious trouble.

Amnon, the oldest one, fell in love with his half-sister, the beautiful and dazzling Tamar. He seduces [00:18:00] her and then repudiated and humiliated her. The biblical texts shows him to be monstrously cunning and cruel. Look at the scenario, for it is one and a poor one. First, he pretends not to feel well. He is sick, so sick that he desperately needs company. No, he needs a nurse. Send Tamar, he asks his father. She and she alone could really take care of him. Tamar, gentle and kind, falls into the trap. She is nice and affectionate. How could she not be? Her brother is ill, isn't he?

So she prepares his favorite dish, and she feeds him, tries to make him feel better. And then, all of a sudden, Amnon, her [00:19:00] half-brother, but still a brother, is starting to make advances to her. Naturally, she retreats, but he is no longer sick. He pursues her. Courageously, she pushes him back. He is insistent, persistent, and stronger than she. Still she says no. Then, changing tactics, Amnon tells her of his love for her. You know the kind, disinterested, pure, unique, all-consuming, ever-lasting. (laughter) Well, he speaks the way an arrogant youngster speaks when trying to be humble in order to conquer an innocent girl.

Did she believe him? Is she that naïve? He ends up [00:20:00] possessing her. And then, like the worst possible heel, instead of apologizing, instead of caring for her or at least comforting her, in a gesture of sheer revulsion and disgust he quite simply abandons her, throws her out as if she were -- Tamar was to be avenged by Avshalom. Avshalom, who was to kill Amnon or have him killed during a family celebration. A man of honor, Avshalom? A man of passion rather, of all passions, including ambition and envy, so much so that this defender of his sister's honor covets his father's throne. [00:21:00]

While the latter, David, is still in good health, with the complicity of schemers and plotters, and there are always schemers and plotters near power or the seat of power, all of them close to the royal court, he prepares a full-fledged insurrection. On the political level he spreads rebellion among the population. On the military level he organizes a powerful army, more powerful than his father's. Now, how can one explain Avshalom's success with public opinion? Probably one segment of the population was dissatisfied with David for economic reasons, and then also the king was too busy.

The king was busy to listen -- listening to all complaints that came to him. [00:22:00] He was busy passing judgment at all the

trials. And then Avshalom was handsome. Whoever, we are told, whoever would see him would be impressed. His hair mostly made him famous. It was long and braided and fell down to his shoulders. In the end, it will be responsible for his fall. It got stuck in the branches of a tree. Unable to free himself, he will remain hanging there waiting for death. Yoav, the commander in chief of the loyal forces, David's aide-de-camp will himself put an end to his agony.

But how are we to understand Avshalom's animosity -- no, Avshalom's hatred towards his father? It moved him to do things so unbecoming of a Jewish prince that they earned him a [00:23:00] quasi-general aversion in Talmudic literature. He once entered the king's palace and seized his father's wives and concubines. For the psychologist, this demonstrated the normal or abnormal desire of a son to take his father's place in every respect, in every place, and in every way. And if he is unable to do so, he rejects his father and his father's way of life and does everything possible not to resemble him.

All right, let's assume that psychology is not always a bit simplistic, except to psychologists. Is it conceivable that one of the sons of the great King David should behave in such a despicable way? Didn't they teach him anything at home? Didn't

he fear God or at least his outspoken prophet [00:24:00] Nathan? Didn't he think at all about the disastrous consequences of his actions and their implications or of public opinion? Poor David. He vanquished the powerful Goliath but not the lust for power in his sons. He defeated the enemy but could not prevent Avshalom being defeated by his own foolishness.

He ruled over an entire people, but not at home. At home he was rather weak. He reminds me of a story. Speaking of the changes of the weather in March, a teacher asks her pupils, what is it that comes in like a lion and leaves like a lamb? And a beautiful little girl answered, it reminds me of my father.

(laughter) [00:25:00] And yet, David loved his sons. He easily, too easily forgave them all their transgressions, all their evil deeds. Actually, the Talmud blames him for that. He was a great king but not a great father. Not strict enough with his own children. Not assertive enough.

Children are aliens, said Emerson, and we treat them as such. Wrong attitude. Children are our children. Their past is what we offer them, and their future is their gift to us. Thus, a father should know how to affirm his authority. Love must not blind him to the point of exaggerated permissiveness. But then, what father would condemn David? The love of a father, just as

love period, is not always rational. It includes its own portion of the infinite. [00:26:00] Because Avshalom had gone farther than his brothers in his opposition to his father, is this the reason why he appealed to the first romantic novelist in modern Hebrew literature by Avraham Mapu?

It seems that his father loved him most. I repeat, because of his opposition his father loved him. The relationship between David and Avshalom seems more dramatic, more engaging, more engrossing than that which existed between David and any other son and surely between David and Solomon. Avshalom's death left David dejected, bereaved, and unconsolated. Why didn't I die instead of you, Avshalom, my son? Eight times he repeated the words, *Avshalom b'ni, Avshalom b'ni, Avshalom, my son*. His distress and affliction were so deep and so penetrating [00:27:00] that they almost cost him his throne once more.

His aide-de-camp warned him unless he started living again, ruling again, conducting the affairs of the kingdom again, in other words, unless he became normal again, himself again, his people would turn away from him. People don't like morose rulers. They like jokes. (laughter) David so was jolted back to lucidity and found the strength needed to stand up again and exert power. Only his trials did not stop. The fight for the

throne resumed. This time it was led by Adonijah, his fourth son, who probably thought that as a result of the bereavement of his father, his father would be too weak to punish him or to fight him, to oppose him.

He received important help in political and [00:28:00] military circles. Thus, not only did he act as the heir apparent but as the king, going nowhere without an impressive escort made up of horsemen and officers, preceded by 50 runners. Was David informed? Well, if he was, he did not take offense. He did not react. Didn't he know that Adonijah had had himself crowned sovereign, that his friends and accomplices had acclaimed him already with shouts of long live the king? Well, if he didn't know, the prophet Nathan saw to it that he did. First, Nathan went to see Batsebi or Bathsheba, Solomon's mother to offer his help with a plan.

He instructed her to start a quarrel with her husband, which is not so [00:29:00] difficult. (laughter) A very precise script was worked out. Nathan supplied her with all her cues, all the lines. Hadn't the king promised that her son Solomon would succeed him in the throne? Was it right to go back on his word? Did he realize that what Adonijah was doing? Halfway into discussion between husband and wife, Nathan himself was to burst

into the room. He would then say what was troubling him, that God too had elected Solomon, not Adonijah. And confronted by this double diplomatic offensive, the king could only give in.

Naturally, the prophet was right. David, in the presence of Nathan and his wife, ordered Solomon to be crowned king right away. There we go again. [00:30:00] Poor David. He's still alive. And already his sons are fighting over inheritance. He is still king, and already his sons are coveting his crown. He is still king, and Solomon is already king. And how are we to explain the lack of respect from Adonijah, from Avshalom? How are we to explain the insensitivity of Solomon? How are we to understand their harshness, their possible cynicism, their icy hearts, their total lack of generosity towards their old father?

What were they doing about the Divine commandment enjoining children to honor their parents? How could they even think about ruling over the people of Israel when they were violating the noblest precepts, which are a part of the tradition [00:31:00] of Israel? You may argue that Solomon at least was a credit to his father. After all, it was his father who ordered his coronation. But again, why couldn't he wait? Why didn't he say, father, I'll wait? I'll be the crown prince. This aside, when compared with his brothers, Solomon deserved better grace.

The text does not tell us how he behaved before ascending the throne. There is much afterwards with very little before.

But the text does tell us about his behavior afterwards. He was respectful and devoted to his father's memory. Actually, he also demonstrated a kind of affectionate comprehension towards usurping brother Adonijah, his enemy. He promised to spare his life and did not touch a single hair [00:32:00] on his head, did not punish him, did not humiliate him in any way, quite the opposite. He welcomed him at the palace and sent him away loaded with presents. In other words, as a son, Solomon seems almost perfect. Is that why tradition placed him on such a high pedestal by erecting so many monuments to him?

He was the one to build the Temple. He was the one to inaugurate it. He was the one to allow us, thanks to its parables and proverbs, to draw from the Torah the way one draws from a living fountain, but one deep, too deep, almost inaccessible. He was the one to give his contemporaries a sense of security and happiness. In the collective memory of the Jewish people his portrait arouses love and reverence. He was a judge of incomparable [00:33:00] integrity, an enlightened leader, a guide whose spiritual radiance seemed unprecedented. Popular imagination is in love with him.

He's a perfect king, a perfect son, a perfect man, a perfect husband. Well. His first name, Yedidya, suits him. Yedidya means God's friend. He is God's friend in the text. God is his friend. God talks to him in his dreams. I already said in the beginning God asks him, what do you wish from me? And as he is intelligent, Solomon asks for intelligence. As he's wise, he requests wisdom. And God answers him, you could have asked for wealth and power, but you requested wisdom and knowledge. I shall give them to you, but you will also have wealth and power. His authority as king is [00:34:00] unlimited.

All the kings of the earth rush forward to Jerusalem to see him and to hear him and to pay homage to him. They send their sons to him to be his secretaries and his servants. His word becomes law. His will is done. And it did not go to his head. That is the greatness of Solomon. Listen to the text. From the Bible, from Kings, and I quote, "And God bestowed upon Solomon much wisdom and perception and a generosity of heart as wide as the sand near the ocean. And Solomon's wisdom was greater than that of all the people of Kedem, and it surpassed that of the wisdom of Egypt. And he was smarter and wiser than all men from Eitan HaEzrachi, Heman and Chalkom, and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his name became famous among all [00:35:00] neighboring people.

And he told 3,000 parables and sang 1,0001 songs. And he spoke about trees and beats and fowl and fish. And from all around people came to listen to the wisdom of Solomon," unquote.

Any other person would have succumbed to vanity, not Solomon. Countless legends praise his wisdom as well as his humanity. The case of the two mothers arguing over a child is well known. As a connoisseur of the human soul, he measures well the strength of a mother's love. He knows that no mother would tolerate seeing her child cut in two. He knows a son's love too. He is the only one of all of King David's sons to respect him and to love him with all his heart and soul. In order to shelter his father's body against [00:36:00] the sun, the Midrash tells us, he orders eagles to spread their black wings and give him shade.

Another marvelous Midrash tells us that since his father died on a Shabbat, it was impossible to move him. One is not allowed to move a body on Shabbat, so he put an infant, a baby on his father's body, and therefore they could carry the body into the shade. And the Talmud magnificently comments *tinokh ben yomo*, an infant one day old, because that infant is alive, is more important than King David when he is dead. The order for the eagles, the eagles obey. Who doesn't? [00:37:00] Everybody

obeys, for Solomon understands all languages. He is a master of all disciplines. He knows all cultures.

He's well acquainted with the language of the birds and that of wild beasts. All creatures submit to him. Animals stand in line outside his kitchen to be slaughtered in his honor.

(laughter) The great of this world are prepared to pay anything for an invitation to dinner. Once, after drinking some good wine, he decided to entertain his guests by ordering demons and goblins to play and dance. Thereupon a bird told him of its sorrows. For three months, said the bird, I haven't eaten. I haven't had a drink of water. I haven't slept. That's because I have just been traveling the world over in search of a place that is not under your rule, majesty.

Well, I [00:38:00] found it. It is located in the kingdom of Sheba. There dust is more precious than gold. Money has no value whatsoever -- like New York. (laughter) As for water, the inhabitants draw it from paradise itself. Another thing, that kingdom possesses numerous armies, but they do not know how to fight. You would ask then, why the armies? These armies are under the rule of a woman, their queen. If you will allow me, majesty, I can go back there and bring her to you along with her ministers and her officers. King Solomon agrees. He ties a

letter to the bird's feet with the following words, more or less.

From me, King Solomon, peace be with you and your government. Surely you know that God has granted me rule over animals, birds, and demons. All kings from the east to the west come to pay me homage. If you will come too, I shall [00:39:00] cover you with honors. If you refuse, I shall send the wild animals and small demons who are my horsemen and soldiers to strangle all of you in your beds. The bird flies away and arrives in the kingdom of Sheba one morning at the very hour when the queen is leaving her palace to recite her prayers to the sun. Only the sun suddenly seems extinguished.

A host of birds are hiding it with their wings. The frightened queen tears her garments and bursts into tears. Then the messenger bird descends from the sky and delivers the message. Intrigued and scared, the queen consults her advisors, and they all tell her that it is safer to stay home. But she hardly dares to turn down the invitation. [00:40:00] For three years she's on the road. But once she arrives in Jerusalem she falls into the trap that Solomon had placed for her. The king welcomes her in a glass house, and so the royal visitor thinks that he is in a pool.

In order to come near, she thinks she has to enter the water. And she raises a little bit her skirt and involuntarily uncovers her hairy legs. "Your beauty is that of a woman," the king tells her. "But you are hairy like a man," quote-unquote. (laughter) To revenge herself, she asks the king three riddles, but he solves them easily. Dazzled and dumbfounded, the queen of Sheba cries out, quote, "Now I realize that everything that has been said about your wisdom is way below the truth." [00:41:00] And from then on a deep friendship is established between the two sovereigns, one which to provide a living for many a novelist, (laughter) and which was to make many a Broadway producer rich or poor.

As many -- as most Jewish students, I too have been infatuated with Queen of Sheba because we are told so many nice things about her that I felt that we were related. But then I must tell you that in my class at Boston University this year I am teaching a class called, one of them, exile and redemption. And we begin from the beginning, the Jewish tradition, the Greek tradition, and modern literature. And then some of my TAs decided that we also need something very modern. And they invited -- they gave me some books, and they invited a few

members of a [00:42:00] group called the Rastafarians.

(laughter)

All right. They came. And (laughter) and I felt in exile.

(laughter) It's a new religion, but they believe it's very old. They believe that it's thousands and thousands of years old, but the main thing is they are convinced, they believe that Haile Selassie is not only the black messiah but the black God. It so happens that I -- as a journalist I was in Paris when he came once on official visit to Paris, and I have seen him, Haile Selassie. And well, I don't like to downgrade any person, especially since he was a victim during the war of Mussolini's invasion, but one thing is clear, that he wasn't God when he was in power.

Ethiopia was [00:43:00] very cruel regime then. But the main thing is, they believe also that we have something to do with it because Ethiopia now is the Promised Land, and they live mostly in Jamaica, which is exile, Babylon. So they have taken many of our vocabulary -- many words from our vocabulary. And they say that the Queen of Sheba is also an important character in their religion. After all, says the representative of the Rastafarians, after all, the Queen of Sheba is the only wife of

Solomon's that has a name in the Bible. When I heard him speak, you know, I thought something. Maybe I forgot.

So I took, I asked the King James Version and then the Hebrew text to (inaudible). And at the end of the course -- I didn't want to embarrass him during the course, at the end of the course I simply said, you know, I have here the King James [00:44:00] version, and she doesn't have a name. "Oh," he said, "King James took it out." (laughter) Okay. I said, yes, okay, King James, let him defend himself. But in the Bible, in the Bible too she doesn't have a name. He says, well, he said, because the Jews couldn't allow themselves to think that King Solomon slept with a black woman. They took out the name.

I must tell you, (laughter) fortunately King Solomon doesn't know it. It's all right. . Another virtue that we know of King Solomon is when he decides and begins to build the Temple he avails himself of his foreign connections and his knowledge of the [00:45:00] occult and the animal world. That project, we are told, to his credit, the project of the temple is dearer to him and more urgent than building his own palace. He puts more time and more energy into it. His whole kingdom, more than that, the whole world is called up. Hundred and fifty thousand

foreign laborers worked unremittingly under the supervision of 3,000 Jewish foremen.

Twenty thousand slaves are used to carry stones from the quarries to the construction yard. Everyone works night and day in an atmosphere of general enthusiasm. There are no quarrels and no jealousies. No strikes or illnesses slow down the work. Sure, now and then an incident would break up. For example, the workers that the Egyptian pharaoh sends him are destined to die within the coming year. Astrologists have told him so.

[00:46:00] Pharaoh thinks he'll play a trick on the Jewish king. The only thing is Solomon has a gift for prophecy, and he is smarter.

Therefore, he sends back the Egyptians and supplies them with their funeral gowns. And to Pharaoh he writes, quote, "Apparently you are lacking in fabrics. I am sending some to you along with your men." Actually, by a miracle, except for the Egyptians, not one workman became ill. Not one tool was broken while construction lasted. But then came the great and glorious day of inauguration. And this of course is a unique and privileged moment. The Temple in all its splendor is about to be consecrated to God. God will have his sanctuary set up in the City of David.

And this is a moment of sublime union between the Creator and his creation, of perfect harmony between the God [00:47:00] of Israel and the people of Israel. How could one not be drunk with happiness and pride? How could one fight the joy which is let loose over the history of a nation hungry for history? The king prays with his open hands reaching out towards the sky, and the Midrash comments, this is, as it were, to say, look, master of the universe, I have taken nothing away from the Temple. My prayer is devoid of any personal worry or concern. I am only thinking of the welfare of the community and of your glory.

But suddenly worry sets in. The inauguration encounters a problem. The doors of the temple won't open. It's impossible to bring in the holy ark. Panic-stricken, Solomon recites 24 songs of praise, all in vain. The doors won't even open partly. [00:48:00] Lord, then said Solomon in despair, do it. Help, in memory of your servant David. This time he meets with success. The doors open. And the inauguration will take place. At that hour, the Midrash tells us, David's enemies lost countenance. For the whole nation realized that God had forgiven David his illicit love affair with Batsebi, Bathsheba.

What an admirable man Solomon was, commentators were to say. And I would say, within the framework of our study tonight, what an admirable son Solomon was. He was able to contradict tradition. While tradition maintains that no one can obtain pardon by proxy, David, for his part, obtained [00:49:00] pardon through his son's intercession. How could he possibly not love him? In their relationship, which was quite encouraging, there is, however, a point which might disturb us. When God informs David that not he but Solomon will be the one to build the Temple, how come David doesn't feel grief?

Why does he accept the punishment of God with so much serenity? He doesn't even argue. Could it be because he does not regard it as a punishment at all? Could it be that, on the contrary, he views God's decision as a kindness, a blessing? He views it as a message from God what father-son relations should be. It is as if [00:50:00] God were saying to him, don't worry, David. Your son will go far. You will be proud of him, as I will be. You will have *nachas*, for he will build the Temple to my glory. That's right, David. You are the father of a Temple builder.

Well, people like David's successor and heir, they all like Solomon. And they like him all the time. When he is happy, they don't envy his pride too much. When he's unhappy, they

weep over his fate. But in Midrashic literature our sages are not always proud of Solomon. Rather than only flatter him, they say things about him too, that he is at times too proud, arrogant too, [00:51:00] hungry for power, intolerant. He cannot stand contradiction and thinks he can do anything he wants. That is the greatness of the Talmud, that every judgment is allowed.

What they say about our great ancestors in the name of intellectual integrity, in the name of quest for truth, nobody is perfect, and therefore, nobody is treated like a saint. What they say about Solomon, he imposes heavy taxes in order to finance his big projects. The beginning of his reign is a particularly bloody period. Some influential political adversaries are murdered. A high priest is dismissed from office. The king's court is overloaded with pomp and crowded with courtier or courtesans. True, the country is enjoying an [00:52:00] unusual period of peace, but it has to pay a price for it.

Spiritually, the nation seems to be lacking in strength, in creative energy, in faith too. Foreigners, lured by material prospects, erect their own temples in the land of Judah, or Israel, temples to Astarte of Sidon, Milcom of Ammon, and

Chemosh of Moab. And Solomon allows that? Yes, in the name of tolerance. He doesn't intervene, doesn't forbid anything. One prophet, Ahijah HaShiloni, takes him to task a little, but it is clear that idol worship is the last of the king's worries. Idolatry, he thinks, does not concern Jews. It concerns others. Why quarrel with one's neighbors and their gods? Let everyone do and pray as they please.

Besides, [00:53:00] there are legends told about King Solomon which one which one can qualify as disconcerting, so lacking are they in human warmth. I, for instance, am not sure that I like the story about the two women, or are they -- in the text we say the two prostitutes who came with their children. Of course, logically he was right. Of course, he got what he wanted, to save the relationship between mother and child, but for a single moment, for an instant, didn't he see the pain in the real mother, in the true mother when he was saying I'm going to cut the child in half?

Something else. In order to illustrate his proverb, quote, "I have found one man in a thousand, but I have not found one virtuous woman in a thousand," unquote. He took the liberty [00:54:00] of breaking up a family. Listen. He ordered his servants to find an ideal couple, you know, the couple of the

year. (laughter) And they found it. Husband and wife loved each other dearly and lived in fear of God. Solomon summoned the husband secretly and said to him, if you do as I tell you, I'll make you rich and important. The man inquired as to what he must do to please the king. And Solomon simply said, kill your wife.

Seduced by the king's promises, the husband overcame his shock and accepted the contract. Solomon provided him with a sword and sent him home. But the husband, at the last moment could not strike his wife. As he [00:55:00] watched her sleeping he thought about their children. He thought about them, about the love that binds them, and he decided that nothing in the world was worth the happiness he had known with his family.

Therefore, he reappeared before the king and said to him, sorry, sire. I cannot do it. Thereupon Solomon had the wife summonsed, and he made a similar offer to her.

If she killed her husband, she would become the king's favorite concubine. She too declared herself ready. At night, after putting her husband to sleep with tender and loving caresses, she seized the sword she had received from the king and she was going to do it. But the assassination attempt failed. We do not know the husband's reaction, but we do know that Solomon was

happy. [00:56:00] "You see? Not one woman in a thousand," he said, "is really virtuous." Well, I do not like that legend. (laughter) I do not like that kind of wisdom.

King Solomon should not have gone that far. Since he was so clever, he could have found some other way of illustrating his anti-feminist bias. In truth, no one has the right to use human beings to prove a point. Love may, if at all, be tested, but only by its own protagonists. I may try to ascertain whether someone truly loves me but not whether someone loves or betrays someone else. Nothing justifies playing people against people. Furthermore, no one has the right to torment a family by tearing it apart, by shattering its [00:57:00] self-confidence and peace. No, no one, surely not a Jewish king.

Of course, this legend is only a legend, but so are all the others. Some describe his powers, and others depict their limits. Listen. One day he ran into the Angel of Death, who looked depressed. (laughter) Solomon, a true intellectual, wanted to know why. "Ugh," answered the angel, "I'm so sad. I am so sad because I am compelled to take these two black skin men with me." So Solomon, wishing to outsmart him, sent the two men speedily to Luz, which is a special province, a province

where the Angel of Death has no jurisdiction. The next day Solomon met the Angel of Death, who now seemed exuberant.

Again the king wanted to know why. [00:58:00] "I am happy," said the Angel, "because they came exactly where I was waiting for them." Incidentally, some of you surely remember there is a legend which has served as theme for many plays and novels called the encounter in some account. They took it from here. But how come that Solomon did not see through the angel's game? Well, his wisdom was not absolute nor was his piety. That's the only conclusion we must have. When exploring in depth biblical texts and their commentaries, one senses all of a sudden a growing discomfort with the king. All of a sudden we learn that the population is worried, worried and discontent.

The taxes are too heavy. The king has too many horses and too many luxurious carriages. In short, his lifestyle is too sumptuous, certainly too showy. [00:59:00] He has too many wives. The law allows him 18, but he has 1,000, if one is to believe an unbelievable legend. His passion for women does meet with serious objections in Talmudic literature. Our sages resent his marrying an Egyptian princess, Pharaoh's daughter. He married her the night when the construction of the temple was completed. Couldn't he have postponed the wedding? (laughter)

A sage comments, that was the night when far from there Rome was founded. Another sage adds, that night the people of Israel experienced joy, and so did Pharaoh's daughter, and her happiness was greater than that of the people of Israel. That was when up in heaven God decided that one day [01:00:00] the holy city would be destroyed, because of that. Listen to the way one Rabbi Hillel son of Heleni talks about it. And I quote him, "It's like someone arriving in a dirty place and frowning in disgust." That's what God felt.

There is something odd and disturbing about the sages wishing to make events coincide, on the one hand the collective climax in fate and on the other a threat of collective darkness. So Jewish history thought it would please God by building a Temple to him? That was a mistake. God turned away from it. That night, which was to be engraved in letters of gold and fire in God's memory and design, well, that night was also to bring grief and sorrow. Because of whom? Because of Solomon. He was too happy. That is too happy with a woman, too happy with his wife, but a foreign wife. [01:01:00]

He was wrong to mix his blessings. That night they all should have brought him closer to God. That night belonged to God and

the people and not to private pleasure. After all, that was not an ordinary night like any other. Pharaoh's daughter could have and should have waited. Except that she was impatient, says the Midrash. The daughter of Pharaoh was cunning too. A shrewd operator she was, according to the Midrash. Rav Chunia says, and I quote, "That night she performed 80 different dances for Solomon." Some sages go further. According to them, she hired a thousand singers who sang for him.

And each time she would say to him, you see? This is how we worship such-and-such an idol back home. Another commentator hints that Solomon had wished to stop the entertainment, to get up and to open the Temple in time for the 4:00 morning service. But Pharaoh's daughter had spread out a blanket above their bed, a sort of canopy in which diamonds and precious stones were inlaid in the shape of bright stars. Solomon would see them and say to himself, it's still night. There's no need for me to hurry. Then Rabbi Levi says the people of Israel, who had gathered in front of the Temple, grew dejected.

They wanted to go into the Temple and recite the appropriate prayers, but the gates were locked. The keys were kept under Solomon's pillow. And the people were afraid to wake him up. Finally they knocked on the door of the queen mother Bathsheba.

And she went to wake up her son. And she had harsh words for him, very harsh. Only a mother could use such words.

(laughter) Now, was Solomon a bon vivant, a hedonist, a sinner? [01:03:00] Was he the opposite of the wise man he was supposed to be? Was Solomon busy making love to his Egyptian wife at the moment when all of his people were caught up in a religious fervor and surrendering to God? Solomon? A *chacham mikol adam*, the wisest of all man?

Was Solomon asleep even whence the people of Israel were yearning to have their prayers heard? How is one to understand these shortcomings, these ethical failures in a man whose name and work remain connected to that which is more sacred in Jewish history? Some commentators of the Talmud ascribe his indiscretions to his excessive intelligence. He was to be its victim. He thought he could push back any temptation and overcome any moral obstacle. For example, the Torah forbids the king to have too many horses and too many wives so he not run the risk of going astray, but Solomon's reaction?

He said [01:04:00] I shall take that risk. Nothing can happen to me. And nothing will. That was his mistake. Boasting is dangerous, even for a king. Whoever thinks that he or she is smarter than Satan is already offering proof that someone else -

- Satan? -- is smarter. The text states it explicitly, and it's unflattering. I quote, "In his old age, Solomon let his wives get the upper hand," unquote. Commented Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba, and I quote again, because it's tragic. Rabbi Hiyya says, "Solomon would have cleaned sewers to have these words omitted from the Bible." But there is no censorship in the Bible.

There is no censorship in the great document filled with passion for justice and saintliness that the [01:05:00] Bible is. For Solomon it was too late. That is the classic expression which stamps every tragedy with its dark seal: too late. Too late to alter the past. Too late to undo what has been done. At the end of his life Solomon realized it. And so he composed Kohelet, the Ecclesiastes, a philosophical work filled with disillusioned skepticism, bitterness, and melancholy. At least one Midrashic source disagrees with this chronology, insisting that Solomon wrote Kohelet not when he was old but when he was young and romantic. It sounds possible, even plausible.

Such is the paradox of human existence and behavior that youngsters at times love to play with death whereas old people enjoy recalling the exuberance of their youth. Still, the first version appears more logical, more natural. At the end of the road, one has a better understanding of one's self. [01:06:00]

So many missed opportunities, false triumphs. Ugh, there is that meeting that I should not have canceled, that word I should not have written, that temptation I was wrong not to resist. If only I could do it all over again. Too late. Too late to go back, other than in your mind. Too late to try and mend a broken heart.

Having lived a long, turbulent life, the author of Kohelet, the Ecclesiast, knew what all aged persons know, namely that everything in life is ephemeral. Everything has an end. This story too? Yes. But wait a minute. One more tale. It deals with a dramatic and bizarre event that almost destroyed King Solomon's self-confidence, [01:07:00] self-respect, and King Solomon's life. Listen. In some strange circumstances an angel, some say Ashmedai, the king of demons, succeeded in stealing King Solomon's kingdom away from him. He sat on his throne, assumed his physical appearance, his features, the expression in his eyes, the intonation of his voice.

He mimicked his way of questioning, of answering, of listening, of eating, of walking, and of sleeping. The nation did not know it, but Ashmedai had become its king. Naturally, this raises some questions. How could so intelligent and so wise a ruler be so careless as to let a stranger, a hostile stranger at that,

come so close, thus enabling him to rob him of the throne which he, Solomon, had inherited from his immortal father, King David? Furthermore, where were his [01:08:00] sons? Where were they when their father was exiled from his own palace? Why didn't they protect him? Were they too fooled by Ashmedai?

Could sons ever mistake someone else believing it's their father? The Midrash first pictures Ashmedai in chains, totally at Solomon's mercy. Lamenting on being a prisoner, he asks Solomon, you already rule over the whole world. Did you have to conquer me too? Yes, Solomon needed him, says the Midrash, not as a prisoner but as a worker. There were certain technical tasks which only Ashmedai could perform. Solomon must have enjoyed watching Satan give his best as a construction worker. He may even have grown fond of him. One day, after the Temple was finished, [01:09:00] the king and his prisoner found themselves alone somewhere indulging in nostalgic meditations, recalling the excitement of the last days.

"Tell me," said Solomon all of a sudden, "Where does your superior strength come from?" "I will show you," answered Ashmedai meekly. "Just free me from my chains and lend me your ring." Succumbing to his curiosities, Solomon freed him from his chains and handed him his ring, which Ashmedai quickly

swallowed only to spit it out far, far away whereupon Solomon moaned a verse from Ecclesiastes, "What remains then of all that man does under the sun?" and also, "All I am left with is my cane. Before I used to rule over Israel. Now all I rule over is my cane."

For three years Solomon was a humbled king, punished for [01:10:00] giving Ashmedai too many powers. He wandered from town to town, from house to house, from one place to another knocking on people's doors and telling them *Ani Shlomo*, I am Solomon. And they all laughed. They made fun of him, fun of him and his hallucinations. They threw him out from their homes, treated him like a crazy beggar. An annoying intruder, he was unwelcome everywhere. Still, he kept on repeating, *Ani Shlomo*, I am Solomon. "You?" people mocked him. "Enough of your nonsense. While you are talking here, King Solomon is seated on his throne there in Jerusalem."

One day he presented himself before the Sanhedrin, the tribunal, the supreme tribunal. And there he provoked astonishment. Some judges felt that there was something odd and disturbing about the man and his unusual *idée fixe*, [01:11:00] his unusual obsession. They opened the discreet inquiry, which uncovered the full magnitude of the coverup and the scandal. With the

help of the ineffable name which Solomon pronounced, Solomon was able now to disarm Ashmedai and to imprison him once more. And the king recovered his throne, his kingdom, his identity, but he was no longer the same person. Now he knew what it was like being someone else.

In conclusion, one last question. Was he a good father? Did he learn something from his own experiences? The Bible reminds us that he had serious problems with his son Rehoboam. Let me paraphrase his words. [01:12:00] Generations come and go. All rivers flow into the ocean, and the thirst for power is never satisfied. What then is the answer? A legend, the last we shall hear tonight. Toward the end of his life, Solomon had a ring made, one that was endowed with strange powers. Whenever he was unhappy, all he had to do was put it on, put the ring on his finger to find joy again.

Whenever he was happy, all he had to do was to put the ring on his finger and find himself unhappy as before. What was its secret? Three words engraved inside the ring, *Gam zeh yaavor*, that too shall pass. What remains of a story after it is finished? Another story. [01:13:00] (applause)

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