

Elie Wiesel In the Talmud: Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai Revisited

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) At the center of the story, there is another story. A story filled with anguish. A story filled with fervor. It takes place in a cave, with two men in it, a father, and his son. Perhaps I ought to make a confession: I am prejudiced. Between the father and the son, I choose both. (laughter) Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and Rabbi Eleazar ben Shimon. A great father, and a great son. Both are celebrated as great masters in the field of both [00:01:00] the hidden and revealed traditions. They were close. Few fathers have been as close to their sons. Few sons have followed their fathers so far. They lived together, studied together, suffered together, were subjected together to fear and torment. They survived together. And yet, they did not die together. Hence, the mystery in their relationship.

We don't know too much about the death of the son. But we do know quite a lot about the way the father died. Listen. Said Rabbi Abba: "When our master felt he was about to return to heaven, he raised his arms in prayer. He seemed elated.

[00:02:00] His faithful disciples were gathered around his bed.

They were his son, Rabbi Eleazar, and Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yose, and Rabbi Hiyya. To Rabbi Yitzchak, who came late, he said, 'You are blessed, for an immense joy is awaiting you today.' Then he turned to all of us and said, 'The hour has come, and I wish to enter the world of truth without shame. Therefore, I shall reveal to you secrets never heard by human ears, for I do not wish to be accused of having failed my mission by keeping them to myself.' Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai spoke in a whisper, and his son repeated his words aloud, for that was the wish of Rabbi Shimon, who said, 'Abba, *yichtov*.' Rabbi Abba will write. 'Eleazar *yeshanen*.' My son [00:03:00] will repeat. 'And the rest of you, will remember.'"

Continued Rabbi Abba, "I put the words we heard on paper. The last one his lips formed was life. Then, he stopped. But I went on writing. I thought there was more to come, but nothing came. I wanted to look, but couldn't. I couldn't lift my head, for there was so much light that I was unable to look into his eyes. There was so much splendor enveloping the house that no one could come near it all day. As for myself, I was lying in the dust, howling with pain. But as the splendor withdrew, I saw that our master, the holy lamp, the saint among saints, had left us. Covered with his tallit, his prayer shawl, [00:04:00] he lay on his right side, a mysterious smile on his face. When

his disciples carried him outside, they witnessed another miracle. His coffin suddenly rose into the air, a cloud of fire preceding it, and a voice was proclaiming, 'Enter and take part in the wedding feast of Rabbi Shimon.'"

This cryptical description, taken from the Zohar, the Book of Splendor, is corroborated nowhere in the Talmud or in Midrashic literature. Hence, it could hardly be accepted as historically accurate. Even the most enthusiastic admirers of the Zohar do not pretend it is of real value to historians, as is the Talmud, for instance. One fact is beyond dispute: [00:05:01] the Zohar does not concern itself with concrete events or facts, but with their substance and symbols. Its tales and parables strive to transcend time and memory. Its realm is the world to come, and not this earthly world. Its images, dazzling and penetrating, could serve as guidelines to theologians, and students in quest of mystical truth, but are useless, so to speak, as terms of reference to chroniclers or journalists.

The main danger, of course, lies in mixing genres. In confusing the two attitudes -- meaning, the Talmudic approach, and the mystical approach. To study Talmud as fiction, totally unrelated to life and human experience, [00:06:00] is as dangerous, and as misleading, as reading the Zohar as a textbook

for applied sciences, or beginners in archeology. Talmud means study. And study implies rationalism, which in turn implies a kind of horizontal approach to the subject. You must follow the development of ideas and arguments, one after the other; one page after the other. And if you listen well, you may solve the problem.

Zohar, by contrast, means splendor, and implies an attitude as one may have towards paintings, or sculptures. What you see, you see all at once; not consecutively. You swim in the Talmud, in the sea of Talmud. [00:07:01] But you plunge into the world of the Zohar. And sometimes, you must close your eyes in order to see. In other words, your inner attitude towards Talmud and Zohar is not the same. If you don't understand the Talmudic passage, you may repeat it 101 times. You will still need a teacher to explain it to you. But, if you repeat a page of Zohar, 26 or 91 times, it will offer itself to you, and become yours. You may still not understand its meaning (laughter), but you will sense its secret. After all, our purpose tonight is not to lecture on kabbalah -- it's almost a contradiction in terms -- but to tell tales, about people, father and son, who were close to the world of kabbalah, and who were, at the origins of that extraordinary movement of [00:08:00] vision, and quest, and expectation. We shall try to study the character of

the relationship between this particular father and this particular son, and see how it withstood the pressure of the times. We will see that there was a difference -- there is a difference -- between father-son relationships in the Talmud, and the father-son relationship as we have seen it last week in the Bible.

But first, as always, a few preliminary remarks. First, thank you to a teacher, Rabbi Paul Joseph, who every Thursday afternoon, when we are here in the evening, he is preceding us in the afternoon to prepare us to these sessions. And I hope that more and more will come to study with him. Then, this study session will again be devoted to the memory of Rabbeinu Shaul Lieberman, [00:09:00] *zichrono livracha*, a man who taught me so much. His words reverberate in mine. I thought of him a day before yesterday, when visiting Kiev and Uman. Maybe, if time permits, little bit more, later.

I think of Shaul Lieberman every day, and always with palpitations, when confronting an obscure passage in Talmudic treatises. Not only did he show me the way to the wonder and depth of its logical and rational structure, he also taught me how to recognize a *ben Torah*. A learned person, or a person devoted to study is different from others, even when he or she

does not learn. I can still hear him say, so often, "Remember, [00:10:00] there are certain things a *ben Torah* does not do. There are certain things a *ben Torah* doesn't say." In other words, study must open you up to ethical values and concerns. If you study, you are protected by study. If you study, you are enriched by study. Thanks to what you read, and what you receive, you will see farther, and feel deeper. And, you will not be as alone as before. What does a *ben Torah* mean? A student of Torah. But a student of Torah means, to be a son of Torah.

And, lastly, last week, we have studied father-son relationships in the Bible. We found them to be rather disconcerting, if not [00:11:00] discouraging. Some failed as children, and when we study their stories, we don't understand. What about the commandment, '*Kabed et avikha ve-et imekha?*' We are not commanded to love our parents, but to honor them. Most of David's over-ambitious, rebellious sons would serve as poor examples for our youth. They had no respect for their old father. Isn't respect a keyword in religious and social ethics? Respect for the others. Respect for those who agree with us -- that means we should listen to them without disdain -- and respect for those who disagree with us. Respect for those we know, and those we would like to know. I am duty-bound, as you

are, to [00:12:00] respect those who speak to me, and those who hear me, and even those who don't, but who wish to hear me, but cannot -- (laughter) unless we open the doors. (laughter)
(applause)

Nu? (laughter) How can one not admire the father and the son who spend 13 years in a cave [00:13:00] and never quarrel?
(laughter) From this, we learn something. That in the Talmud, fathers and sons usually fare better than in the Bible. In the Talmud, there are few disputes, almost no quarrels; no intrigues, and no plots among children over inheritance, positions, or titles. In the Talmud, children respect their parents. Pupils admire their teachers, and teachers admire their pupils. Often, fathers invoke their sons' fame, rather than the other way around. Power and pursuit of power are not viewed kindly in Talmudic circles. What matters there is piety. Moral behavior. And learning. Learning above all. For learning is the [00:14:00] stuff true aristocracy is made of. Whereas power and wealth may be inherited, knowledge may not. The quest for knowledge is comparable to the search for truth: an individual affair. I can acquire one or the other -- or both -- neither through deals, nor by intrigue, but only through commitment.

Were all masters happy with their sons? Not all. Tensions between them are nevertheless infrequent. A teacher is a father to his pupil. And fathers ought to be their sons' teachers. Rabbi Yishmael, son of Rabbi Yose, spent his entire life praising and quoting his father. He did nothing else.

[00:15:00] Was it because his father, the famous Rabbi Yossi ben Chalafta, was poorly treated by Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi, the Prince of the Patriarch, that he sought to present a more balanced picture of him -- and of Rabbi Yehuda?

Compensation, or over-compensation, is not that new, you know. As for Rabbi Yehuda himself, his scholarship was so great that he actually overshadowed his father, Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, whom he praised for his modesty. Another case involving father-son relations is a, an intriguing one, and a perplexing one. Akavya ben Mehalalel and his son. Not much is known about Akavya, except that he was a disciple of Shamaya and Avtalyon. It was he who said, you remember, "*histakel be-shlosha dvarim, ve-ein ata ba lidei avera.*" Look at three things, [0:16:0] and you will be spared from sin. Know where you come - *meiayin bata* -- where you are going, and before whom you will have to present yourself, to justify your actions in life.

It is known that he opposed his peers in four matters. Reconsider, they told him, and we shall elect you as Av Beit Din -- as president of the tribunal. He refused, explaining, "I prefer to be called an idiot all my life, rather than to be seen one hour as wicked in the eyes of the Almighty." He did not want people to say that it was because of his thirst for power that he reconsidered. But as he was about to die, he told his son, "You, my son, reconsider." The son was astonished. "You want me to change my position," he said, "then why didn't you change yours?" And his father replied, "With me, it was not the same," and he said [00:17:00] something very poetic. "I belonged to a majority." Meaning, to the majority of the dead. "But you receive your authority from me, and I am alone, and my peers are many." Whether the son obeyed or not is not certain.

What about Rabbi Shimon and his son? Were they always together, as they appeared to be? The image projected in Talmudic literature is always the father and son, two saints, always great, always pure. Were they always united in a powerful resistance to tyranny? We shall see that the answer is not clear-cut. What did I say? It isn't? Is it possible that the great Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, was not such a great father after all? And nor was the son, always such a devoted son?

[00:18:00] What was it that caused them to go their separate

ways? The father left society when he entered the cave but not the community of Israel. Is it true of the son as well? After he left the cave, what happened to the son? Did he remain a loyal son of the people? No.

Rabbi Eleazar did try his luck outside the community. Why did he? What was it that moved the son away, though temporarily, from his father's teaching? A taste for adventure? A desire to discover the other side, the dark side of Judaism, by succumbing to the enemy's seductive power? What is happening today is not new in Jewish life. Apparently already then, there were moments when people left our people, and tried [00:19:00] to do something with or for the enemy. Was he, Rabbi Eleazar, one of them?

Let scholars and historians argue whether Rabbi Shimon, the father, was or not the author of the Zohar. Did this beautiful, poetic book, where every word sensitizes you and opens you up to wonder. To the storyteller, the question seems in a way irrelevant. What matters to me is that for many generations, the Zohar has been attributed to him, and I want to know why. Why was he chosen? Why is his name revered in kabbalah more than any other Talmudic master? Why is his yahrzeit, which falls on Lag B'Omer, the thirty-third day of Omer, observed in

Meron even today with thousands and thousands of pilgrims who spend the night singing and dancing, his name on their [00:20:00] lips, and his prayer in their heart? Why? Why was the Ari ha-Kadosh, the holy Ari, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, his avowed follower? Why did Rabbi Chaim Vital, the disciple of all disciples, pay him such tribute/ Why was the entire movement fascinated, inspired by his image?

In other words, what was it in his personality, in his temperament, in his life pattern, that made him in the eyes of tradition, in the fantasy of hundreds and thousands of Jews, into the mystical leader, the mystical authority, the mystical man par excellence? True, he most probably was a kabbalist -- no doubt about it. But certainly not the only one. There were others, some even more renowned than he. Rabbi Yishmael Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, for instance, who had frightening visions in the sanctuary, and we remember them on Yom Kippur [00:21:00] during the fascinating, moving prayer of the Avodah, and the Eleh Ezkara? Or any other of the so-called Dorshei Reshumot, who while they studied were surrounded by heavenly fire? Why weren't they chosen? Or Rabbi Akiva himself, the only master to enter the orchard of mystical truth, the Pardes, and leave it unharmed? Why wasn't he chosen?

That the kabbalist movement had to reach so far back to find a figure to identify with is understandable. Exile and redemption are basic components of mysticism, and never did they so dominate Jewish life as in the early years of the Common Era. All that occurred later had already happened then. The sketchy outline of the environment, cultural and political, may prove useful. It is [00:22:00] easily obtainable from a variety of sources: Flavius; Philo; Cassius; and naturally, *lehavdil*, the Yerushalmi, the Jerusalem Talmud; the Babylonian Talmud, the Bavli; and all the Midrashic volumes. In spite or because of occasional errors and/or contradictions with regard to names and dates, one can, basing oneself on fragments and anecdotes, piece together the main characters and events that shaped the course of those perilous, often chaotic times.

Remember. The Temple is destroyed, and some live with its ruins; others, with its memory. Judea is defeated, but Jewishness is flourishing. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai's theory is justified. Since Jerusalem cannot be destroyed, better save the Jews [00:23:00] who can. And Yavneh will save Jerusalem as well. Yavneh. The living proof that Jews can build on ashes, that Jewish history draws strength from blessings and threats alike. Yavneh, the master plan, the first blueprint for Jewish survival in hostile societies. Others followed. Academies in

Tzippori, in Lod, in Bnei Brak. The Roman occupant thinks he is omnipotent; he is mistaken. The scholars, the tannaim, the rabbis: they hold the real power. Affecting all aspects of life, not only the spiritual and religious.

Naturally, the Romans could kill Jews. But as long as a Jew, any Jew, was alive, he submitted only to rabbinic authority. Which explains why the Talmud is crammed with lengthy discussions of issues that today might seem futile or irrelevant. They had to cover all imaginable areas of human endeavor, and explore all possible situations a Jew could face. This spiritual sovereignty was tolerated, encouraged, or resented by Rome, depending on who was in power. Some emperors were generous; others were wicked. Still others were both. Depending on their mood, their wives' mood, (laughter) their love affairs, the political situation at home, the military situation abroad. The trouble was that Palestine meant trouble to all of them. No Roman emperor, no Roman governor, had many quiet moments to thank the Jews for. Killing them was no solution. They crucified one Jew, and look at the result. (laughter) Converting the Jews to paganism was impossible. They had not observed the covenant so long to begin worshipping idols now.

There were other, more concrete problems facing the emperors. For example, the incredible number of sects making up the fabric of Jewish society. It's not new. The parties in Israel -- there are so many, too many -- actually reflect only the same situation. Jews love parties. (laughter) In all senses of the word (laughs), as they love sects. In those times, one could believe in military -- I didn't say sex. I meant sects. (laughter) [00:26:00] (applause) I heard you, okay (laughs). (laughter) One could believe in military might, and be a Jew. One could reject military might, and still be a Jew. One could be right and arrogant, poor and humble, fanatic and tolerant, power-hungry or saintly, and still be Jewish. And this the Romans could not understand. How could this people be made of so many different social, philosophical, and political communities, each calling itself Jewish?

If that was not enough, there were the Jews abroad. In Egypt, in Cyrene, in Cyprus, and of course in Babylonia, and even in the very heart of the Empire -- in Rome! -- what made them Jewish? [00:27:00] What motivated the Roman Jews to take up arms against Rome? Simply because Rome occupied Judea, so far away? At one point, Traianus promised to rebuild the Temple. Not all Jews expressed gratitude. Some said, what about Jerusalem? One source claims that Hadrian went so far as to

make plans, and put Aquilas the proselyte in charge of the reconstruction work. But nothing materialized.

So, the Jewish people in those years went through powerful upheavals, from extreme hope to extreme disappointment, never sure of what was worse: the hardship of Roman oppression, or the illusion of false redemption. Bar Kokhba's rebellion seems to have been the last upsurge, the last hope. Three years of glorious fighting, of promise. Three years of pride, [00:28:00] that ended in disaster. Hope itself had to go underground. The messianic dream too. The image of a redeemer as warrior was replaced by that of a hidden Messiah, a divine Messiah, come from heaven, and not from the ranks of man. Man's role, his path, would be to wait for him, and call him, 'til he came. Thus began the waiting, and the need grew in urgency.

Having embarked upon a new plan of spiritual annihilation, the Romans now aimed to destroy not so much the Jew himself, but that which gave him his strength and endurance: the Torah. Practicing Jewish law became a capital offense. Nathan the Babylonian describes dialogues [00:29:00] heard in Palestine, and I quote the text:

"Why are they going to execute you?"

"I circumcised my son."

"What have you done to deserve crucifixion?"

"I ate matzah on Passover."

"Inside the academies, guarded by Roman soldiers, we recite the Shema in a whisper," said Rabbi Meir.

To erase the memory of Jerusalem, Hadrian built on its site a new city with a new name: Aelia Capitolina. And Jews for the first time in history were forbidden to live inside its walls. Only once a year, on Tisha b'Av, were they allowed to come nearer and weep over the destruction of their Temple. Judea, too, was renamed: Philistinian Syria -- or, for the first time, the name Palestine. There followed countless persecutions, [00:30:00] aimed to debase or destroy all things Jewish. The academies were closed, their teachers deported or jailed. Study of Torah was considered a capital offense. To ordain rabbis was punishable by death, and both master and graduating pupil were guilty. Worse, the Romans adopted collective punishment. Even ordination ceremony took place somewhere, the nearest city was

wiped out. No wonder kabbalists turned to that period for guidance and reassurance.

Why? Because whatever was to happen in Jewish history has already happened then. How are we to understand the assault on Israel for wanting to remain in Jerusalem, if not within the context of a historical assault on the Jewish people because of its allegiance to Jerusalem? [00:31:00] What is happening now is not new. For hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years, from so many quarters, came attacks -- well-organized, well-financed, well-arranged, well-armed -- to take Jerusalem away from the Jewish people. They didn't succeed then, nor will they succeed now. (applause)

But when we study that chapter in history, we realize that already then, there were different ways of coping with the enemy, or with danger. There were those who opted purely for spiritual resistance. Like a certain Rabbi Yehudah ben Baba, who was the teacher of the five great scholars, and ordained them, paying with his life for that. Others opted for public spiritual [00:32:00] resistance, like Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion. Still others for armed resistance, like Rabbi Akiva and Bar Kokhba. Still others for passive collaboration, like Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma. Or relative collaboration, like the son

of Rabbi Shimon. There were even active collaborators. We shall see about it later. A certain Rabbi Yehuda ben Gerim, who actually was, was supposed to be, an informer.

But already then there was also clandestine resistance, meaning there were patriotic scholars who had to go underground in order to escape Roman police, and its informers. And this is what Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai has done. And, it is supposedly there that he wrote the Zohar, in the cave. It is there that he laid the foundations [00:33:00] for systematic mystical meditation, and sustained messianic hope. Is this the only reason why the Zohar was attributed to him?

No. Was it because of his general ideas? His ideas are usually based on Rabbi Akiva's -- he said so himself. His love of Israel, of Torah, of Eretz Yisrael, bear Akiva's imprint. Then was it because of his suffering, perhaps? Rabbi Akiva suffered more. In fact, any one of the 10 martyrs went through worse torture. There were at that time masters more learned than he, like Meir, and more saintly than he, like Rabbi Tzadok or Rabbi Nachum Ish Gamzu. And even, let's admit it, more daring than he. He was, after all, trying to avoid martyrdom; they didn't. Then why was Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai chosen to be [00:34:00] author of the Zohar?

Not that I mind. On the contrary. I am pleased -- I told you, I am prejudiced. You see, the child in me, yeshiva student in me, the Hasid in me, feels close to Rabbi Shimon. Why? Because he was a great storyteller. His imagination was boundless; his style, pure literature. Short, concise, and evocative. No grandiloquence; no useless words. For these reasons, perhaps, he had difficulties in becoming a rabbi. (laughter) Later, when he did become a rabbi, he opposed the establishment. And then, of course, his taste for solitude could not fail to appeal.

All [00:35:00] this we learn from various midrashim and Talmudic treatises, which present portraits of living persons, live and in color. When we put together the pieces of his portrait, we see that he was born in a wealthy family in Galilee. His father, Yochai, maintained excellent relations with the occupying authorities, so Shimon, the son, ran away from home. He disliked both comfort and the Romans. He then was married, had a son -- Eleazar -- and spent 13 years at Rabbi Akiva's academy, becoming a halakhist, a legal authority of considerable repute.

The beginning of his career is linked -- and this is symbolic -- with successful efforts on behalf of the city of Tiberias, where human bones were discovered, making it unfit to reside in. So

[00:36:00] Rabbi Shimon came, and located the cemetery, thus opening the rest of the city, which was centered to become a great center of Jewish learning. Why is it symbolic? Because Jewish renaissance has often sprung from the very ground where Jews have been killed. The Crusades, the Middle Ages, the pogrom periods, provide a thousand and one examples. Even lately, in our own generation, in the Soviet Union, before perestroika, when Jewish culture was stifled and Jewish religion was imprisoned, young Jews would meet in cemeteries. It is there that they learned Hebrew, or songs, or history. It is there that new life was offered to them, and by them.

Is this why Rabbi Shimon was [00:37:00] chosen? Perhaps. Another reason may be that little is known about his family life. We see him with his son, we imagine him with his father, and his wife is mentioned barely -- only once, in relation to a courageous act on her part to bring them food when they were hiding. Unlike Rabbi Akiva's, whose love affair with his wife Rachel is fully described and glorified in the Talmud, Rabbi Shimon's family life is occulted, and kabbalists, as you may know, tend to believe that man's only love affair should be with the principle of feminine presence, or à la rigueur with the Shekhinah. But not with women, which in that frame of reference, Rabbi Shimon seems more qualified. [00:38:00]

Another reason may be his extreme self-confidence. A self-confidence that in other places, with other people, would border on arrogance. "There are four things," he said, "which the Holy One, blessed be He, abhors, and I dislike them, too."

(laughter) On another occasion, he was more explicit, and I quote him. "My merit is great enough to save mankind from punishment from the day of my birth until now." (laughter) "But should my son Eleazar join me, we might redeem it retroactively from the day of creation." (laughter)

His generosity towards his son, his love for his son, were touching. He was always ready to let him share his dreams, and his powers. His son, but not his father. "I have looked about," he said, "for the b'nei aliyah, those special human beings destined to reach paradise, and they are few indeed. If there be 30, my son [00:39:00] Eleazar and I are among them. If there be three, my son Eleazar and I would be among them. If there are two, they are my son and I. (laughter) But if there be one, it is I." (laughter)

Normally, with other people, you would call such a man an egocentric. (laughter) Mysticism opposes egotism, but not egocentricity, (laughter) only mystics don't display it, and

don't speak about it, and surely not in public, which they manage to reconcile with their genuine humility. They truly do provoke such a reconciliation. They can be both egocentric and humble. As for Rabbi Shimon's words, I tend to see them rather as self-mockery. I think he had a sense of self-depreciation. That is why he shared [00:40:00] his pseudo-auto-glorification with his son, rather than with his father. To show disrespect to one's father is a sin -- even as a joke.

I think that, in fact, he was a man with a sense of humor, in addition of being a man with a sense of mission. A few examples. He said, "It's written that the Egyptians added to the hardships they imposed on the Jews. What does it mean? It means that man had to do women's work, and women, men's work." So what? He said, "it's written that the Jew should not cease to study Torah. Actually, it is enough for him to say Shemah, mornings and evenings, to fulfill the commandment. But one must not say this in the presence of ignorant man. They may abuse it."

He also said, "it's forbidden for a man to be alone with two women. It's permissible only when one of the two [00:41:00] is his wife." And he said why: "for she would keep an eye on him." (laughter) Once he came to visit his master, Rabbi Akiva, in

jail for teaching Torah. He pleaded with him, "Continue to teach me!" And the master refused. Rabbi Shimon threatened, "If you don't teach me, I will tell my father, Yochai, and he will hand you over to the authorities." What a thought. To threaten with jail someone who was in jail? (laughter) Who was in jail precisely for teaching Torah? And what an image! Yochai, the father of Rabbi Shimon, telling the police that Akiva refused to teach his son Torah! In other words, that he refused to violate the Roman law and order.

No, I think he had a sense of humor. Incidentally, this story enables us to ask another question. What was Rabbi Shimon's relationship to his father, [00:42:00] Yochai, who was so close to the Roman authorities? We know that he ran away for 13 years, but did he continue to see him? To respect him?

The end of the story is better yet, and even more beautiful. Rabbi Akiva, replying in the same vein: "My son, more than the calf wants to suckle, the cow wants to suckle." And he hinted at the risks involved. "But Master," the visitor said, "It is not the cow, but the calf who is in danger." And Rabbi Akiva gave into him, and continued to teach him.

Rabbi Shimon was fully aware of the risk he was running. Suspicion was in the air in Judea, so much so that he saw informers everywhere, and there were. "Had I been at Sinai," he once remarked, "I would have urged God to create man with two mouths, [00:43:00] one for Torah, and the other for futile things." He thought for a moment before continuing, "No, it wouldn't work. Man has but one mouth, and what does he do with it? He does so much informing that he imperils the world. What would happen if he had two?" (laughter)

Both he and his master, Akiva, became victims of denunciation. Their relationship was ambiguous, complex. Rabbi Shimon admired Rabbi Akiva, praised him, opposed him -- though rarely -- only to later do penance by fasting until his teeth, we are told, turned black. He did feel bitter about him. Listen. Said Rabbi Abba, the same Rabbi Abba who always tells stories about Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. "In the beginning," he said, "every master nominated or ordained his successors. That was the custom since Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai. Rabbi Akiva nominated Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Shimon, [00:44:00] asking Rabbi Meir to take his seat first, and to become a rabbi first. At that point, Rabbi Shimon's face is said to have become twisted, and to have changed colors.

Now we have a new name! Rabbi Meir. The character and the life of Rabbi Meir were secretive enough, mystifying enough to link him to the impenetrable source and universe of kabbalah. Why wasn't he chosen to be the author of the Zohar? Rabbi Meir was as nationalistic as Rabbi Shimon, as fanatically opposed to the foreign occupant, disliked material gains, and was known as much for his miracles. His survival in popular legend is as evident. He is redeemed in Jewish folklore as Rabbi Meir Baal HaNes, the miracle worker. What Jewish [00:45:00] home in the shtetl kingdom of Eastern Europe didn't have a pushke bearing his name? What Jewish mother didn't fill it with pennies accompanied by prayers before the arrival of Shabbat, especially in times of misfortune?

He possessed all the qualities and qualifications for the role, but didn't get it. So he had shortcomings. What about Rabbi Shimon? Is it possible that he had none? What about Rabbi Shimon's family relations? I repeat, not only was he -- not only was he the father of a Romanophile, he was also the son of a Romanophile. So once again, we stumble upon the puzzling distance between fact and fiction, between two possibilities. We stumble upon the distance between [00:46:00] the man and his image, and once more, we ask ourselves, if Rabbi Shimon disliked the Romans, how come that his son did not?

Listen to a story which has the ring of authenticity, and this is the core of our problem with this father and his son. One day, we are told, Rabbi Eleazar gave the following advice to a police official in charge of catching thieves. "Let us say," he said to him, "you walk into a store at four o'clock, or into an inn. If you see a man with a glass of wine in his hand dozing off, he may be a talmid chacham, a scholar, who rose early to study, or worker who rose early for work. But check. If he is neither, then he is a thief." (laughter) Apparently, it worked. [00:47:00] It worked so well that it came to the attention of the king, or the emperor, or the governor -- in the Talmud's always confused. And the king or the governor inquired, "Who gave that advice?" He was told. Said the king, "If this man is so good, let him do the job." And unbelievable but true, Rabbi Eleazar, son of the illustrious Rabbi Shimon, joined the police, and began catching thieves, which actually in Talmudic literature meant he became a tax collector. (laughter)

He must have been successful, since the revered Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha found it necessary to dispatch a messenger with the question, "Chometz ben yayin," he said to him -- "you, vinegar, son of wine. How long will you go on handing over our [00:48:00] people to the executioner?" Answered Rabbi Eleazar,

"All I do is weed the thorns from the vineyard." The explanation did not satisfy Rabbi Yehoshua, who had the last word, one of the most magnificent in Jewish legend and lore. And he said, and I quote him, "Let the vineyard not worry you. Let the owner come and do away with the thorns." Meaning, no man should appoint himself instrument of God -- especially not of God's wrath. If God wants to punish someone, let Him do so. Alone. Don't be his instrument, his whip.

Later, Rabbi Eleazar repented, and chose extreme suffering. But what made him a policeman in his first place? A talmid chacham a policeman? [00:49:00] A policeman talmid chacham is possible, but the other way, no. What does it mean, really? Doesn't it reflect his father's inadequacy, at least in the field of education, or of discipline, of authority? Is it possible the father was no longer alive? I think so. I think so because had the father still been alive, it would have been the father, and not Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha, who would have opposed his son becoming a policeman. But because the father was no longer there, it was Rabbi Yehoshua who replaced him.

But the question in the first place is an urgent one, a painful one. Why did Rabbi Eleazar choose to collaborate with the enemy? Is it that he wished to resemble his grandfather,

Yochai? Youngsters often do that -- they skip [00:50:00] a generation. It happened in the Soviet Union. I have witnessed it, already in '65. Sons and daughters of fervent communists, important leaders, rebelled against what their parents stood for and returned to the oppressed faith of their grandparents. They rejected communism, repudiated atheism, and fought for human freedom and dignity, and when they were Jewish, they fought for Jewish life, and Jewish honor, and Jewish music, and Jewish literature, and Jewish conscience. They were the ones who paved the way for Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost. They -- those Jewish boys and girls -- before all the other dissidents, had the courage to defy the structure and the police dictatorship of the communist empire.

But could it be [00:51:00] that Rabbi Eleazar had the same motivation, except that in his case, he wanted to resemble his grandfather in the negative way, and became not more Jewish, but less? What happened to Rabbi Eleazar? Didn't he realize that in joining the oppressor, he caused extreme harm to his father's name and reputation? Wait a minute. Is it possible that he knew, and he wanted that? Why? What happened to father and son?

Yes, we know that his son later repented -- he did *t'shuvah*, that much is certain. But why did he do what he did before? Why his attraction to Yochai? You know the old saying, people say that, [00:52:00] why do grandparents and grandchildren get along so well? Because they have the same enemy. (laughter)

Let's go back to Rabbi Shimon. It's customary to think that there are two Rabbi Shimons -- or at least two portraits of him: the one in Talmudic literature, the other in the Zohar. The first is human, profoundly human; the second, quasi-divine. In the Talmud he appears as a forceful personality, with his likes and dislikes, passions and weakness, whims and desires. We are told that during the 13 years spent in Rabbi Akiva's yeshiva in Bnei Brak, he, unlike his comrade, Hananiah ben Achunai, wrote home regularly. He participated in campus activities [00:53:00], and was instrumental in removing Rabban Gamliel from office as president.

They also told that he was not easy to get along with. He was stubborn, unbending. When a man exclaimed to his wife, "I perish if Yehuda and Rabbi Shimon don't taste your food," only Rabbi Yehuda consented to taste it. Rabbi Shimon said, "Let his orphans be orphans," but Shimon will not budge from his place. On another occasion, he paid a sick visit to a man who was

complaining to God. "Pray instead," said Rabbi Shimon, "don't complain."

"So," said that patient, "in that case, may God take my pain, and put it into you." (laughter) "I had that coming," commented Rabbi Shimon. "I should have known better than waste my time for study."

Oversensitive, suspicious, he had few friends in the Talmud. [00:54:00] Rabbi Akiva's sentence, quoted in so many places, indicates that Rabbi Shimon was not too popular with students, nor with his teachers; that is why Rabbi Akiva ordained Rabbi Meir first, and Rabbi Shimon next. He was too extreme, too demanding. He said, a scholar must be vindictive. He also said, "If you see towns uprooted, you should know that the towns were destroyed because the people did not pay their scholars."

What made Rabbi Shimon and his son go underground? Here comes the story of the cave, and it's a great story. It has everything in it; all the elements of tragedy and drama are there. Listen.

One day, Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai, [00:55:00] Rabbi Yossi ben Chalaftah, and Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai were sitting together

with Yehuda -- Rabbi Yehuda, the Son of Converts, ben Geirim -- sitting nearby. Now, the image is to be examined. They were not together, they simply happened to be -- the three of them happened to be together, with Rabbi Yehuda ben Geirim also being there. And then, they began discussing the issues of today; meaning, the Roman occupation of Juda. Said Rabbi Yehuda bar Ilai, "How marvelous these Romans are. They have done so many good things for us. They have built highways and roads, constructed bridges, and opened spas and bathhouses." Rabbi Yossi ben Chalafta listened, kept silent. Rabbi Shimon got angry, and he couldn't take it. [00:56:00] He said, "What? You are praising them? Why are they to be praised? Whatever they have done, they have done for themselves. They needed streets for prostitutes; bridges, for tolls; and spas for their physical welfare."

Someone we know, Rabbi Yehuda ben Geirim, somehow informed the Roman authorities -- it's possible, yes. The Talmud could have censored the news, really -- a sage an informer, it's not nice. But Jewish tradition has always been against censorship of any kind, at any level. So we learn the results of the denunciation. The governor's proclamation said, *Yehuda ila* -- because Rabbi Yehuda praised Rome, he shall be elevated.

[00:57:00] *Yose shatak* -- Yose was silent. So he shall be

exiled. As for Rabbi Shimon, because he blamed Rome, and condemned Rome, he must be executed.

Any other sage would have accepted to be a martyr. Not Rabbi Shimon. Unlike his master, Rabbi Akiva, who accepted martyrdom with exaltation, Rabbi Shimon preferred to go into hiding and live. Taking his son Eleazar with him, he went and hid first in the house of study. And here we have a magnificent compliment paid to his wife, that while they were hiding, she brought them bread and water. But then, the pressure became too intense, and the danger more acute, and Rabbi Shimon was afraid that they may arrest, they might arrest his wife and torture her. So therefore they decided that they would leave the house of study, [00:58:00] and seek refuge in a cave whose location was unknown -- totally unknown to all the people -- somewhere in the mountains.

Well, the midrash tells some colorful stories about their experiences there. Humorous miracles happened to them. For 12 years, they lived outside society, until the Prophet Elijah came to inform them that the ruthless emperor had died, and so they could return. During those 12 years, how did they live? A carob tree grew all of a sudden, and a spring of water appeared all of a sudden. Now what did Eliyahu ha-Navi, the Prophet,

say? He said, in a beautiful way, he said, "Who will go and tell Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai that the emperor died?"

Now why was it important for Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai to know that? Because according to Roman law, to ancient Roman law, the moment the emperor [00:59:00] died, all the laws were revoked, which means all the sentences were abrogated. And therefore, since the emperor died, he could come out.

So they did come out. They left the cave, and what did father and son see? Life was going on as usual. They hardly believed their eyes. They came from too far -- from a different world, a different reality. They had been alone so long, their inner life was filled with so much hallucination and austere truth, that they couldn't accept that while they had been gone, others remained preoccupied with routine matters. They saw a man laboring in his field, and exclaimed, "How can he neglect his eternal life for earthly gains?" So enraged were they that whatever they looked upon was reduced to ashes. [01:00:00] They met the informer, Rabbi Yehuda, and Rabbi Shimon wondered aloud, "What? He's still around?" And the informer died instantly. Then, a heavenly voice was heard. "Have you left your hiding place only to destroy my world? Go back to your cave." And back they went for another year. When they came out again,

Rabbi Eleazar was still angry, but not his father. And the text says, "Whatever Rabbi Eleazar's eyes wounded, Rabbi Shimon's eyes healed."

Of course, we understand them. There were times, in 1945, when Jewish men and women came out of the darkness, and they realized that while they had been there, the world was going on, [01:01:00] with weddings, Bar Mitzvah celebrations, and card games, and movies, and theater. I think what they felt is what we know that Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Eleazar felt. But therein lay the greatness of Rabbi Shimon. He had to go beyond suffering, for the last year was probably the hardest. When you read the literature of the Soviet dissidents -- great literature, mind you -- you know that all of them will tell you that the first time to be in jail was not so terrible. But then, when they had to go back to jail, that was more terrible.

The hardest year, therefore, for Rabbi Shimon and his son was the last year. Had he remained angry and bitter to the end, he would have been remembered in awe, not in love, and surely not by mystical legend [01:02:00] as a saintly figure whose compassion had mystical, messianic connotations. The last year, I believe, made Rabbi Shimon a different man. It was a year beyond: beyond suffering, beyond fear, beyond solitude. For I

still believe that according to the Jewish tradition, which is mine and ours, suffering confers no privilege on anyone.

Everything depends on what one does with it. If suffering leads to revenge, and resentment, and destruction, it is doomed to sterility. If it becomes an opening towards our fellow man, then it may turn into strength, and it may invite us to discoveries of grace and beauty.

And suddenly, we understand Rabbi Shimon's intrinsic relationship with the universe of Kabbalah, [01:03:00] where man is required to go beyond all limits in order to attain his liberation, and that of creation as a whole. And he who had mocked his master, Rabbi Akiva, for considering the glorious general Bar Kokhba as the Messiah, Rabbi Shimon mocked, "*Asabim yaalu bi-lekheyekha*," he said -- "Ah, grass will grow out of your jaw," he said, "*u'ben David lo yavo*."

Now, when everything seemed lost, he, Rabbi Shimon, joined the messianic movement, meaning, the movement of men and women waiting for the Mashiach, for the Messiah. Waiting actively, creatively, turning awaiting itself into a weapon. Rabbi Shimon's attitude towards individuals changed, too. He helped a childless couple salvage their marriage, and have children. He, the former fugitive, accepted to go to Rome on a political

mission, [01:04:00] to help the Jewish people. He understood the ambiguity of suffering; it pushes man to extremes, and does not necessarily make him better. That is the meaning of his saying that the Shekhina accompanies Israel into exile, and from exile. Israel needs the Shekhina, so as not to succumb to suffering, to the evil in suffering.

Somehow, in Rabbi Shimon's later period, we come across most themes that hound the kabbalistic universe. The excessive importance of the self: any person can save the world, or destroy it. He quotes a parable: imagine a ship with many passengers. Suddenly, one of them begins making a hole in the floor, and the others protest, naturally. But he says, "Why do you object? I am digging under my seat." (laughter)

The ability -- nay, the necessity -- to transform curses into blessings, [01:05:00] darkness into light, is a mystical concept. The link between human saintliness and God's, and finally, the liberation of man as part of the liberation of the Creator himself, and his creation, is another mystical concept. No other Talmudic sage has assigned such powers to man -- or in his words, to Israel, symbol and epitome of man. According to Rabbi Shimon, God told Israel of their pact, binding both sides. "My Torah is in your hands, while your life is in mine. If you

keep and protect what is mine, I shall keep and protect what is yours." But that works both ways. And Rabbi Shimon, with unusual candor and courage, said so. And he said, "It is written, '*ki eidim atem laAdoshem*' -- 'you are my witnesses,' said the Lord." Said Rabbi Shimon, "If you are my witnesses, I am [01:06:00] the Lord. If you are not my witnesses, I am not the Lord."

In other words, God, *keviyachol*, needs man, needs Israel, just as we need God. Isn't that what kabbalah is all about? Is that why the Zohar was ascribed to him? Perhaps. What is certain is that the changes he underwent bring him closer to us, to our generation and its experiences. True, Rabbi Akiva suffered more than he; his agony surpasses that of Rabbi Shimon. But Rabbi Akiva was not alone. Even in his death, he wasn't alone. He was not condemned to live underground, meaning outside of the Jewish community, outside history, as was his disciple. Rabbi Shimon had to endure far more than his master, for he survived his own ordeal. When he and his son left their prison cave for the first time, [01:07:00] they felt that our generations, what our generations felt. Like Rabbi Shimon, sometimes many of us felt the world wasn't worthy of survival. And yet -- and yet -- we must make it worthy.

Now, when we study the two characters, and the events that were part of their lives, we hear in the text, not in the Zohar but in the midrash, in the Talmudic literature, that of the two, Rabbi Eleazar was the angriest. Yes, Rabbi Eleazar destroyed, because he was angry. Why was he so angry? Could it be that Rabbi Eleazar was so disappointed in Judea's inhabitants, that in his outrage, he chose or accepted to chastise them, if only to teach them a lesson? Or was it a belated [01:08:00] rebellion against his father's Judeo-centrist philosophy? And to affirm his own independence? Psychologically, such an explanation would sound valid. But then, Judaism deals with metaphysics more than with psychology. And in the domain of metaphysics, one cannot do without questions, but one could do without answers.

The fact is that within the Talmudic tradition, father and son are reconciled. And both are not only remembered, but also revered. Rabbi Eleazar's place in Talmud is not less secure than that of his great, illustrious father. Our love for his father may seem greater, but we love him, too. After all, remember: he did join his father when he had gone into hiding. Why did he do [01:09:00] that? Rabbi Eleazar was not sought by the police. He wasn't even present at the conversation among the four sages. His life and liberty were not threatened. He

could have gone on living, studying, dreaming. But he chose to remain with his father. He could not tolerate the idea that his father would suffer alone, and alone endure hunger, and thirst, and fear. At that moment, his father's fate was to him more important than anything else in the world.

I think of Rabbi Eleazar fondly because I recall a time when I was with my father, away from home. We were not alone, no one really was, then and there, and yet we were. All of us were. More [01:10:00] than ever. And because we were alone as never before, we grew close to one another as never before. Before, I would hardly see him. He was busy in the store, or working for the community, and I was busy in cheder or yeshiva, or the beit midrash. I used to see him on Shabbat. Now I saw him all the time. And at last, we could talk, and talk, and talk. And then he alone mattered to me. And I alone mattered to him. I was essential to his life, as he was to mine, because he alone represented all that I had. And I alone represented all that he had. But unlike [01:11:00] Rabbi Eleazar and his father, I left the cave, alone.

What do we learn from our story tonight? The lesson is given to us by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, whose tomb in Uman near Kiev I have visited this week, a day before yesterday. I may tell you

more about it next week, when we study Hasidism together. If -- I must tell you -- if I could go and come back, it is -- I must say it publicly -- because of one man here in this audience, who was generous enough to put at my disposal his means, extraordinary means of communication. I won't embarrass him; I won't tell you who it is. Also, if I tell you, you'll ask him for more favors. (laughter) [01:12:00]

Rabbi Nachman said, people mistakenly believe that great men cannot make a mistake, or misbehave. Also, they mistakenly believe that even though they made mistakes, or misbehaved, they stop being great. Moses made mistakes, and remained Moses. David misbehaved, and remained David. It is possible to make mistakes, because it is imperative to remain human. And this, therefore, is true of Rabbi Eleazar as well. In spite of his brief, deplorable relationship with the Roman authorities, which in truth has many reasons, or has no reason -- it may even have to do with something that happened between him and his father in [01:13:00] the cave! But we have no text about it. We have no source illuminating that incident. We don't know. We do know that it happened. But we also know that his life didn't end there. And therefore, because he re-became himself, his place in the Talmud is secure, and in the Zohar, glorified.

In conclusion, another tale -- the last tonight. We are told that Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Eleazar left the cave, it was on a Friday afternoon. They encountered an old man carrying two myrtles. "What for?," they asked him. "Oh, it's for Shabbat," he replied. "Why two?," they wondered. "Oh, because the commandment of Shabbat is twofold," he said. "Shabbat, Shabbat is to be remembered, and observed." And thanks to that old man and his [01:14:00] gift to Shabbat, Rabbi Shimon and his son could reconcile themselves with the world. And why not, with each other?

And thanks to this story, we may be ready to go to Meron next Lag B'Omer, and sing the glory of the sage whose tales made Jews dance and rejoice, and above all, dream impossible dreams of man and God united, and Israel and its history united, and Israel and Jerusalem united, in the hope for redemption. United in ecstasy, and no longer in despair. (applause)

M:

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