

**Elie Wiesel In the Talmud: Shimon the Just, Shimon ben Shatakh,
and Other Sages**

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Talmud means study, and study implies memory. I study in order to remember. I cannot study if I do not remember. Aletheia in Greek means truth. And what is truth? Truth is a thing or a series of things that one cannot forget. Talmud is something that, if you study it, you won't forget it, nor will you forget. Until now, we used to concentrate on the second Thursday every year on one or two masters, explore their life stories, and learn from their teachings. Tonight our approach will be a different one. [00:01:00] Since this may very well be our last Talmudic encounter, I feel it would be important to fill in some missing spaces, some missing pages and meet some colorful, obscure masters that we have sinfully neglected throughout these years.

Some are more picturesque than others, more imaginative than others. Here and there you may meet one who is mentioned only once or twice in the Mishna concerning a vague Halakhic point or an anecdote attributed to him, as we shall see later. That doesn't mean that they were less important. All were

significant. The Talmud is a mosaic. All its components are essential to its fabric and to its artistic value. So, let us enter the Talmudic [00:02:00] gallery and visit those teachers and disciples who enriched it with their wisdom and experience. We shall tell stories about them, only stories.

We shall begin with a master named Shimon, not Rabbi Shimon, simply Shimon. Shimon HaTzadik, the Just. Why haven't we talked about him before? A human link between two eras, two chapters, he was the last survivor of the Anshei Knesset HaGedolah, the great assembly, and the first sage of the rabbinic period. He remains the only master in the entire Talmud to be called Tzadik. And yet, what remains of his teaching? One saying. Quote, "These are the three things that sustain the world: study [00:03:00] of Torah, service in the Temple, and charity." Admit it, as a spiritual or intellectual legacy, this doesn't amount to much.

Still, one feels great respect for him in the Talmud. Is it because he was both the last and the first? Because two generations could relate to him and seek his guidance? Much is known about his personality. He was admired for his piety as well as for his leadership qualities. His pedagogical impact was directed not only towards his two sons, Shimmi and Chonyo,

but towards his entire generation. He is said to have been endowed with supernatural powers which he on occasion used. For instance, during his 40-year tenure as high priest, the first since the return of Ezra [00:04:00] and Nehemiah from Babylonian exile, he witnessed miraculous events.

On Yom Kippur it was the high priest's duty to bring two goats as offerings, one carrying Israel's prayers to God and one to bear the load of Israel's sins and serve as *sair lazazel*, or scapegoat. But which one should be sent where? Usually the decision was left to a kind of lottery or fate. And, we are told, that under Shimon the Just, it was always the goat on his right that was the lucky one. And that was as good sign, because the right is always, not politically but religiously, a good sign. (laughter)

After his death, it was the opposite. [00:05:00] Something else. As long as Shimon the Just was officiating, the thread that bound the scapegoat would become white, thus offering proof that God had forgiven Israel's sins. After his death, the phenomenon would occur only from time to time.

Once he heard a celestial voice in the sanctuary saying, "The enemy's effort has already collapsed." That day the commander

in chief of the assaulting forces lost his life. So we see that his role in military battles occasionally was decisive. Listen, Shimon HaTzadik, Shimon the Just, was a contemporary of Alexander the Great to whom he remains linked in legend. They met when Shimon the Just went before [00:06:00] Alexander to intercede on behalf of Jerusalem. Such intercession was needed because the Kuti'im, Israel's ancestral enemies, had extracted from Alexander permission to destroy the Temple of Jerusalem.

When Shimon heard this he donned his official robes and marched all night long to meet the emperor. He was accompanied by dignitaries of his community who carried flaming torches to light the way. Alexander saw the Jewish convoy from afar and asked the Kuti'im, who are they? And their answer was, oh, Jewish rebels. Soon after sunrise the two groups stood face to face. And as soon as Alexander's gaze fell on Shimon, the high priest, he left [00:07:00] his golden carriage and kneeled before him exclaiming, "Blessed be the God of Shimon the Just."

Astounded, the enemies of Israel asked, how can a conqueror like you humble himself before a Jew? And Alexander replied, and I quote him, "During all my military victories, it is his face that appeared before my eyes." Naturally, the Temple of Jerusalem was spared while that of the Kuti'im, the enemy's on

the Mount Gerizim was destroyed. Alexander died, surely you remember, at the age of 33, the same age that was Herod's when he died.

Another legend, this one more disturbing than the last. We are told that Shimon the Just knew when his [00:08:00] hour to die would come. He had foreseen it, and he informed his close friends who wanted him to explain how he knew. His answer? And I quote him again, "Usually on the day of atonement I see an old man dressed in white who accompanies me inside the sanctuary. And then we leave together. This year he was there, but he was dressed in black. And this year he stayed behind." Shimon died seven days later.

His sons, Shimmi and Chonyo, their places is less glorious in Talmudic literature. Envious, jealous, they dishonored their father's heritage. One of them fled to Alexandria where he officiated as high priest [00:09:00] at the ritual at the local gigantic temple where ritual offerings were brought just as they were done in Jerusalem. Are we, because of the sons, to love the father less? We have said so often throughout our annual encounters. Let us repeat it for the last time. The Talmud does not believe in flattery or coverups. Its commitment to truth is obsessive, all-pervasive.

We learn not only that certain children were less than dignified but that their celebrated fathers were also not without shortcomings. Of course, this does not prevent us from admiring Moses or from loving David. Our ancestors were great in spite of their weaknesses. Their greatness lies in their humanity. Even their vulnerability makes us love them. And we love them. We shall continue to [00:10:00] love them. But then, we love all the sages in the Talmud, even those who lose. Sometimes we love them because they have lost. Somebody should love them.

But what have they lost? An argument, a vote? Shammai lost almost in all the debates with Hillel. Do we love him less than Hillel? What would Hillel have been without Shammai? Or Reb Yohannan without Reish Lakish, or Rabbi Yehoshua without Rabbi Eliezer? And what would we be without all of them or any of them? The Talmud is a whole, reflected in every one of its fragments. Start anywhere at any page, and you will be drawn into a universe filled with light and melody, a universe filled with fervent [00:11:00] sages and their sometime colorful disciples whose spirit of camaraderie and tolerance will make you want to know them better. Start with one, any one, and you will come to love his friend, even his rival.

Hillel used to say *umay'idakh zil g'mor*, and for the rest, go and study. We are the disciples of Hillel, and we paraphrase his injunction. And we do not say go and study. We say come in and study. (laughter) (applause) [00:12:00]

So we have evoked one Shimon, Shimon HaTzadik, the Just. Why not meet the other? Shimon ben Shatakh. But first, let us once more define the goals we have established for these encounters. It was and it is to study together. Talmud really means study, means real study. To study the Talmud means to study study, to study the values and principles [00:13:00] inherent in study, the illuminated horizons pushed back by study. *V'hagita ba yomam va'laila*, you shall study Torah day and night, is a commandment written in the book of Joshua, a commandment that applies to Talmud as well. The emphasis is everywhere on study as a remedy for evil just as prayer is a remedy for misfortune.

With prayer we may move God to intervene in history but not in scholarly debates. There the scholar's word is heavier than the heaven's. When it comes to matters of Halakha, of the law, the prophets have nothing to say. Only masters who know the law may intervene. The master's [00:14:00] judgment alone carries weight. A masterwork unequalled in Jewish memory, the two and a

half million words of the Talmud cover all aspects of human endeavor.

Literature and jurisprudence, medicine and geometry, geography and astronomy, parables and fables, problems of the individual in society, questions related to the stranger, meditations on the meaning of life, interpretations of the law, psychological analysis, and cultural conflicts, *hafokh ba vahafokh ba, d'khola va*, turn the pages, said one sage. Turn them well, for everything is in them. But for me, Talmud is something else besides. It is an unforgettable song [00:15:00] the song of my childhood. I remember an image, an old tutor, *zayde the melamed* with a black beard.

I remember him and his pupils in a small, dimly-lit room somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains. Sitting around the long table, we follow him beyond oceans and mountains to Babylonia, to the Galilee, and to Pumbedita, and then to Jerusalem. And there we listen to the stormy debates between the disciples of Shammai, who are eternally angry, and those of Hillel, who are known for their kindness, and to the dramatic clashes between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua. We surround Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef and Rabbi Haninah [00:16:00] ben Teradion in agony. With

my friends, we study -- no, we sing the laws concerning the prohibition for Shabbat.

For instance, *ein madlikim*, one must not light candles on Shabbat. Why? Because to light a candle is work, and one must not work on the Sabbath. One must not put out candles either. But -- there is always a but in Talmudic texts (laughter) -- if I put out the candle because I am afraid of the enemy, or if I watch over a sick person who is unable to fall asleep, then the prohibition is lifted. Everything is permitted to save lives. And I can still hear the old melamed, I can still see the dark faced teacher. I see [00:17:00] his finger on the page. I hear his sing-song as he explains, look, children, our enemies are wrong. The Torah has not been given to us to make our lives unbearable, just the opposite. Thanks to it, life is bearable.

What is true of Torah is even more true of the Talmud, which, written in Aramaic, is its multifaceted commentary. To understand the Jews' attachment to the Talmud one ought to read Rabbi Yechiel of Paris, which he composed while witnessing the public burning of the Talmud. And the man who gave the order, King Louis IX, is, for reasons that I cannot comprehend, still referred to as St. Louis. [00:18:00]

When exile becomes harsher, too harsh, it is in the Talmud that the Jew finds consolation and hope. Outside in the marketplaces of Eastern Europe, the killers, in their thirst for Jewish blood, sharpened their knives while a few steps from them in small and narrow houses of prayer and study, masters and disciples, children and their grandparents, tried to answer the urgent question of how the high priest was dressed on Yom Kippur. (laughter) It is so urgent that even in the Talmud, in *Masechet Yoma*, it's almost told funnily. Listen to the text in the Talmud.

kaytzad hilbisha? asks one sage in the Talmud, meaning what garments did Moses put on his brother Aaron and his sons for their priestly service? [00:19:00] and another sage answers, what kind of question is this? It happened long ago, why should it be of importance to us now? Past precedents do not make laws. But, said the first sage, the question refers not to the past but to the future, to the end of time. When the Messiah will come, the high priest will have to know how to dress.

(laughter) I almost quote him verbatim, "Really," said the second, "But then I understand your question even less. At the end of times, all the dead will be resurrected, and Moses and Aaron will be among them. They will tell us what to do."

(laughter)

But waiting for that time, we were still asking the question, *kaytzad hilbisha*. Reflecting on the beauty of the past helped the Jew to feel stronger as [00:20:00] he awaited the perils of the future. Study helped him transform time into defiance. By transcending the present, one lived in an intemporal time in which words and signs were endowed with the meaning that went beyond them. A banal incident becomes special on a Talmudic page. The routine, the ordinary becomes sacred. Nothing is considered trivial or profane in the Talmud. To deal with so many issues on such a large scale, a great number of scholars were needed, 300 Tannaim, 2,000 Amoraim, together they represent a huge ensemble offering a symphonic work of incomparable beauty and depth. [00:21:00]

One discovers in its inner landscape the splendor of vanished kingdoms, the profound sadness of enlightened scholars, and their exalted students. The Talmud is a vast, turbulent, and yet appeasing ocean that suggests the infinite dimension of life and love of life as well as the mystery of death and the instant preceding death. In years past we have followed Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Eleazar in their cave. We have met Rabbi Akiva, who invented adult Jewish education. (laughter) More than that, he allowed his wife to pay for it. (laughter)

We heard Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai plead with the emperor for Yavneh. [00:22:00] We saw Reish Lakish as he was involved in his adventures as a gladiator. We have heard the quarrels, the intimate quarrels between Rabbi Meir and Bruriah, his super intelligent wife. And we have seen how a problem of minor importance, whether a blind man may serve as a legal *shaliach*, a legal emissary in a matter of divorce, was debated for 400 years in various academies. But above all, we have had opportunities to meet exceptional characters. Elisha ben Abuyah was one of them. What drove him to heresy? What made him an *acher*, the other?

We have examined their individual mentalities [00:23:00] and their particular destinies. We studied their relationships with their children and colleagues, with their neighbors and supplicants and with strangers too and with authority too and with power too. What was the problem with Elisha ben Abuyah? I believe his problem, and I have said it, was really that he was not a good disciple, that he behaved towards Rabbi Meir with arrogance. He did not respect him. And we are commanded not only to respect our teachers but commanded by Maimonides to respect our students. A teacher must respect his students.

We see in most cases in the Talmud [00:24:00] that the teachers, the masters did respect their disciples. We observed all of them as they together struggled to obtain simple answers to complicated questions, or the other way around. All are irreplaceable. Each of their lessons remains part of the Talmud. Take Shimon, the other one, the one who has been waiting backstage to be introduced tonight. We said that his full name is Shimon ben Shatakh. As president of the Sanhedrin, he shared the power with Yehuda -- Rabbi Yehuda ben Tabai. He was king Yannai's brother-in-law.

And here we introduce a different dimension, an added dimension in our excursion and in our analysis, meaning the relationship between the sages [00:25:00] and authority, the royal authority. Shimon was his brother-in-law, and maybe that's why he never stopped arguing with him to the point that at times, fearing the king's anger, he had to hide in the mountains or flee a country.

A story. King Yannai loved military victories, territorial conquests, and the relative comfort and glory of absolute power. Having conquered 60 villages, he invited all the sages to celebrate the event. They were served the best food and wines at tables made of solid gold. The mood was exuberant.

But there was among the guests a man named Eleazar ben Poirā, a shrewd [00:26:00] manipulator who used his skills to incite people against people. So to incite people, especially in authority, against the Pharisees, whom he hated with cold passion. "Look at these sages," he told the king. "They are against you, you know, but they are afraid to show it." "What do you want me to do?" said the king. "Try them," said Eleazar ben Poirā. "Put them to the test. Put the high priest's emblem on your forehead. Let's see what they will say?"

While the king is reflecting on this suggestion, let's open brackets. Then too in the time of Yannai and always the Jewish people were divided, this time between Sadducees and Pharisees. The Sadducees demanded a strict, literal interpretation of biblical texts, thus rejecting [00:27:00] the oral tradition, the rabbinic interpretation, in which the Pharisees very much believed. There was tension between the king and the scholarly community. The sages resented his decision to do something his predecessors, with the exception of his brother Aristobulus had not done for five centuries, since the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians, that is proclaim himself king of Judea.

That wasn't all. Yannai also appointed himself high priest. And the sages didn't appreciate that either. That is why

Eleazar ben Poirā told the king put the high priest's emblem on your forehead. Let's see whether they will accept your priestly authority. And indeed, King Yannai did appear [00:28:00] with the high priest's emblem in public so that the sages could see him. Naturally, they were shocked and probably scared. Then an old scholar, a certain Yehuda ben Gedidiah spoke up. "King Yannai," he said, "Is the royal crown not enough for you? Leave the priestly crown to the children of Aaron."

Immediately the party split. It was over. The two camps, that of the king and that of the sages, separated in anger. Still, Eleazar ben Poirā -- and he's one of those of whom I have said earlier that there is nothing known except one phrase or one incident. And about Eleazar ben Poirā nothing is known except this incident. And he wasn't [00:29:00] satisfied. He poured more oil on the fire. With feigned indignation he turned to his royal host and exclaimed, "King Yannai, an average man must remain calm even when he is offended. He has no choice. But you are no ordinary man. You are king and high priest. How can you be quiet?"

"What should I do?" answered the king? "Destroy them," said Eleazar ben Poirā. "You want me to destroy them?" said the king. "But they are learned men. What will happen to their

learning? They are students and teachers of Torah. What will happen to Torah?" "Never mind," said the instigator. "The Torah is here. She is lying in a corner. Anyone can pick her up and make use of her." In other words, you don't need teachers and sages. Anyone can get a degree. Influenced by his self-appointed advisor, the king gave orders to execute [00:30:00] all the sages. Says the Talmud, from that day on, the world was desolate and deserted until the day when Shimon ben Shatakh appeared and restored the grandeur of Torah.

Were the orders implemented? Were all the sages killed? Probably not, but some must have been. No wonder that King Yannai is not particularly loved in Talmudic memory. He wasn't an appealing character anyway. Driven to hurt those whose knowledge surpassed his own, he persecuted the sages constantly. The luckier ones escaped and went into hiding or left the country. Shimon ben Shatakh's teacher, a master called Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachiah, was among them. He fled to Alexandria. He wasn't alone. A close disciple of this Rabbi [00:31:00] Yehoshua accompanied him there, a young man from Galilee who later acquired a world reputation. I am referring to Yehoshua, or Jesus, or Nazareth.

They stayed in Alexandria for some time until Shimon ben Shatakh, the disciple of Rabbi Yehoshua, yes, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachiah, appealed to his sister Queen Shlomit, who interceded with her husband. And so King Yannai couldn't stand the pleas of his wife and gave in. It was her brother, Shimon ben Shatakh, who informed the fugitives that they had been amnestied. His letter is worth quoting. "This message," he wrote, "is from the holy city of Jerusalem to the sister city Alexandria to tell her my [00:32:00] husband is in your house, and I am alone in mine. How long am I to bear such solitude?" And of course, the metaphor the metaphor was clear. If the master, the teacher is in Alexandria, Jerusalem is alone.

On the way back, master and disciple stayed at an inn in or near Jerusalem. "What a beautiful inn," Rabbi Yehoshua remarked metaphorically, meaning what a beautiful city. "Yes," answered, the disciple, "she is beautiful, but her eyes are tired." And the master resented the disciple's criticism of God's city and sent him away on the spot. Another version suggests a more concrete approach. The master, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachiah praised the city whereas the disciple, Joshua of Nazareth, criticized the lady innkeeper. [00:33:00] That is why Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachiah exploded in anger. "What?" he said.

"You suspect me of looking at beautiful women?" He sent him away.

Incidentally, in other circumstances Rabbi Yehoshua was criticized in the Talmud for not having kept back his disciple with one hand while pushing him away with the other. Still, the master's homecoming was received with warm applause by his contemporaries. Did the people like him because of his learning or because of his courageous attitude or because of his resistance to Yannai? Many stories exist about the conflict between the king and the sages. Particularly Yannai did like his brother-in-law, Shimon ben Shatakh.

One day Shimon ben Shatakh was visited by 300 Nazirians -- Nazirim -- [00:34:00] who, in order to be freed from their vows had to bring three lambs, each to the Temple as offerings. The problem was that they were poor and couldn't afford the price. How could one help them? Shimon ben Shatakh found the legal procedure to grant half of them a dispensation. But what of the remaining 150, which meant 450 lambs? He had an idea. Instead of telling his brother-in-law the king the truth, he told him that 300 Nazirians still needed to purchase offerings. And then he said, we shall share the cost. You give me 450 lambs, and I will take care of the rest. (laughter)

Betrayed by an informer, Shimon ben Shatakh again was forced to run away. [00:35:00] It was only when a delegation of foreign dignitaries asked about him in the royal palace that the king, Yannai, had to bring back the fugitive. What else do we know about him? We know that he was a man of extreme honesty. One day he borrowed a donkey from an Ishmaelite. To their great joy, his disciples discovered the precious jewel hanging from the animal's neck. They showed it to Shimon who said, "I borrowed the donkey, not the jewel." And the jewel was returned to its owner, who exclaimed, "Blessed be the God of Shimon ben Shatakh."

The idea of Kiddush HaShem, of sanctifying God's name *kiddush haShem b'rabim*, in public has dominated many lives in the Talmud. And that was a Kiddush HaShem. And yet, as [00:36:00] a leader of the Sanhedrin, he could be tough and even pitiless. He was once informed that 80 witches were hiding in a cave near Ashkelon. He waited for a rainy day and gathered 80 vigorous young students. Each one was given a jar containing a clean gown. And he instructed them to carry the jars on their heads, and he said, I quote him, "When you hear my first whistle, put on your gowns. When you hear my second whistle, enter the cave. When you hear my third whistle, let each of you take a witch and

lift her up as high as possible." For contrary to popular fiction, witches cannot fly. The moment they lose contact with the ground, their power is gone. We don't know it, but he did. (laughter)

So [00:37:00] Shimon ben Shatakh and his students came to the cave, and Shimon yelled, "Open, open. I am one of you." From inside astonished voices were heard. "How did you manage to stay dry in such a rain?" "I am telling you," said Shimon ben Shatakh, "I am one of you. I walk between the drops." "What do you want?" asked the witches. "I want to learn and to teach. Show me your power, and I'll show you mine." A witch uttered a word, and fresh bread appeared out of nowhere. Another one used the same method to produce meat. A third one produced vegetables, and a fourth one was responsible for wine.

"And you?" they asked. "What can you do?" "Oh," he said, "I can whistle. I will whistle twice, and you will see 80 young men with dry gowns. And they will dance with you. They will entertain you." And the plan worked. All 80 witches were arrested, [00:38:00] judged, sentenced, and lo and behold, executed the same day even though the law forbids two executions to take place on the same day. When you study the *dinay n'fashot*, the capital punishment and all the questions related

to it in the Talmud, it's extraordinary. The way we were against capital punishment, the difficulties that we had amassed in order to prevent the execution. And even this example, there should never be two executions. Death should not be that victorious.

Says the Talmud, and therefore explained later by Maimonides, how come that Shimon ben Yochai did transgress this law? And the answer is that he had to show an example. [00:39:00] After this incident, two false witnesses accused his son of a capital crime. And the son was condemned. And the father, as president of the Sanhedrin, couldn't but confirm the verdict. And his son did not protest. "Father," he said, "if I am guilty, may my sins survive me. If I am not, may my death erase all my sins and let the crime fall on the heads of the false witnesses." Thereupon the two witnesses confessed that they had lied.

"Father," said the son, "If they a change of heart it's due only to your intervention. I prefer death." Like father, like son. They both sought to serve justice and truth.

Another story. A servant slave of King Yannai, or according to another source, of King Herod, was accused of murder.

[00:40:00] He appeared before the Sanhedrin alone. Since the law stipulates that a slave must be accompanied by his owner, who thus becomes a kind of codefendant, the king was summoned to present himself before the court. He came and sat down. "Stand up," said the president Shimon ben Shatakh. "A defendant must stand when being interrogated by the court." "It's not you but the court that I shall obey," answered the king. "Let the court tell me whether I ought to stand or not."

So the president Shimon ben Shatakh turned to his right and saw his colleagues with their heads lowered. He turned to his left and saw the same thing. "You all pretend to be thinking of something else," Shimon admonished them. "But you very well know that he who reads all secret thoughts will punish you." And he was right. King Yannai [00:41:00] did not spare those who had acted or failed to act in fear. All were slain.

It is sad to admit because he was a Jewish king, but so feared and hated was he that the day of his death was to be declared a national holiday. (laughter) The Yannai, the king, was afraid that death was about to happen. That's why -- listen. When the king fell ill he ordered the imprisonment of 70 spiritual leaders and told the prison warden, when I die, they follow me in death. So the population will not be in a mood of rejoicing.

But his good wife, Shlomit, prevented the massacre. As soon as her royal husband [00:42:00] passed away at the age of 49, she sent his ring with a message to the prison warden.

And I quote her, "Your king had had a dream, and because of it, he decided to free all the imprisoned sages." And it's only after they were all liberated that she announced publicly the death of her husband the king.

Well, let's take leave of the indomitable Shimon ben Shatakh and his power-intoxicated king. For at this point in our discussion, in our excursion, we need someone nicer. (laughter) So let's pay a visit to a master who actually had also problems with Shimon ben Shatakh, but who didn't? They all had problems. The master they're going to meet now is a beautiful person. He is so beautiful that legends [00:43:00] were created around him, about him. His name Honi HaMe'agel, a mysterious sage who was known for his piety and modesty. Honi HaMe'agel enjoyed a unique reputation as someone whose human compassion resulted in God's. When things went badly, in periods of drought, people turned to him for his intercession in heaven.

And once he drew a circle around himself and declared -- and that is the name given to him, HaMe'agel, which means the

circle. *Igul* means a circle. And he said, "Master of the universe, I shall not move from here until you help your children." And drops of rain fell from the sky. Thinking that God had simply wanted to get rid of the sage with a token gesture, his pupils exclaimed, "That's all? [00:44:00] We need water." So Honi HaMe'agel continued, and he said, "Master of the universe, it's not for my sake but for the sake of your children that I am addressing my plea to you." So it began to rain -- no, to pour.

Palestine was then threatened by floods. "Master, do something," the pupils pleaded with Honi HaMe'agel who in turn pleaded with God not to overdo it. (laughter) And everybody was happy, everybody but Shimon ben Shatakh. He was angry at Honi HaMe'agel for having disturbed God and forced his hand. Actually, he told him, I should have excommunicated you, but I cannot do that. Aren't you God's spoiled child? God refuses you nothing. Nothing? Honi HaMe'agel's future proved that God could be harsh even to [00:45:00] his favorite children.

Two versions exist concerning his death. The first links it to a power struggle between two brothers, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus. Hyrcanus' soldiers seized Honi HaMe'agel and tried to force him to pray for them so they would be victorious. He consented to

pray but in his own manner. "Master of the universe," he said, "Have pity on your children, all your children. When some curse the others, don't listen." In their anger, the soldiers killed him. The other version is more picturesque. Commenting on the verse from Tehillim, from Psalms, when we shall return *b'shivat Tzion*, when we shall return or when we have returned from exile to Zion, it shall be or it has been as if in a dream.

Honi [00:46:00] HaMe'agel wondered. The exile then lasted 70 years. How is it possible for a man to sleep all that time and have only one dream? He then took a walk and saw a man planting a carob tree. "How long will it take you?" he said, "For this tree to bear fruit?" "Oh, 70 years," answered the man. "Are you that sure that you will still be here in 70 years?" "No, I am not," answered the man. "I am planting this tree not for myself but for my children." Is it thus possible to dream for our children?

While meditating on the meaning of this encounter, Honi HaMe'agel fell asleep under a tree. When he awoke 70 years later, he saw a man picking the tree's fruit. "Did you plant it?" he asked the man. "No, [00:47:00] it was my grandfather," said the man. Only then did the sage understand what dreaming means, what waiting means.

Actually, there's a Chinese story which comes close to this one. I heard it from a young man named Li Lu who was the deputy commander of the Tiananmen Square uprising. And he told me the story called, in China, moving the mountain. There was a mountain in the front of a house, and the owner of the house began moving the mountain. And they said, are you crazy? How can you move the mountain? And he said, I'll tell you. I will move the mountain away the way the mountain came here, slowly. (laughter)

The story is of Honi HaMe'agel and the Chinese is beautiful, but it doesn't stop there. Now it becomes funny [00:48:00] and tragic. Honi HaMe'agel returned home and asked for Honi HaMe'agel. "Honi who?" people answered. "Honi HaMe'agel? But he died long ago. By the way, his son too passed away some time ago." "But I am Honi HaMe'agel," exclaimed Honi HaMe'agel. People looked at him in disbelief, so he went to the house of study and heard sages quoting his own sayings. He even heard one of them say, "Ugh, if only we could find Honi HaMe'agel who knew the solutions of all the problems."

Unable to contain himself, Honi HaMe'agel said, "I am Honi HaMe'agel." The scholars must have thought that something was

wrong with the man who made such strange claims. It's then that he responded with a brief, cutting sentence. *O hevruta o metuta*, better to die than to live without friends. [00:49:00] Incidentally, this saying, also attributed to Rava, is the only one by him that has been recorded. But more is to be found in Talmudic literature about his long sleep. We are supposed to believe that he slept through the destruction of the Jerusalem and that when he awoke he knew nothing of the recent tragedy that had befallen our nation.

When he introduced himself to people, they shook their shoulders and said, "You, Honi HaMe'agel? Impossible." When Honi entered the Temple, it would instantly illuminate itself. And to prove his identity, he went to the ruins of the Temple, or according to another version, to the Temple itself, and the place would once again become flooded with heavenly light.

There is another master whose stories have always fascinated me as a child. [00:50:00] It is Onkelos the convert. He's also known as Aquilas. He was Hadrian's nephew. Why was he attracted to Judaism? Because of its ethical teachings? Some commentators offer a more romantic and modern hypothesis. He had fallen in love with a beautiful Jewish girl. The rest isn't difficult to imagine. Before converting, Aquilas went to see

his imperial uncle. Their conversation is not without its metaphysical reverberations. You see, in those times it was not proper to discuss serious matters seriously. Allegory dominated all intelligent dialogue.

"Uncle," said Onkelos, "I would like to do business." "Good," said the emperor. "I'll give you whatever you need." "But I also need your advice," said Aquilas. "Whom should I meet? What line should I follow?" [00:51:00] And Hadrian, who must have known the secrets of his Wall Street, said buy cheap and sell high. (laughter) Aquilas proceeded then to Palestine where he stayed some time. Upon his return to Rome, his uncle found him pale, sickly. "What has happened to you?" he asked. "Have you lost your wealth? Have you been hurt by anyone?" "No," said Aquilas. "But you look terrible. I want to know why."

And Aquilas told him the truth. He had converted to the Jewish faith. The emperor was enraged, aghast. "Who encouraged you? Who seduced you? Who pushed you?" "You did," said Aquilas. "Didn't you council me to buy cheap? Well, I looked around. Nothing is cheaper these days than Jewish life. Doesn't it also mean that one day I will rise to greater heights [00:52:00] and sell high?"

Why did he look pale? The reason is, I'm sure that some of you remember that when we finish one of the five books of Moses, when we finish, what do we say after: *chazak chazak v'nitchazayk*. Be strong and let's be strengthened together. Why do we say that at the end? We say it because our sages tell us that *Hatorah machlisha*, the Torah, the study of Torah or the obedience of Torah weakens us, and therefore, when we come to the end of a book, we are so weak that they have to say *chazak chazak v'nitchazayk*. And because he became Jewish and he studied Torah, he became pale. (laughter) You know, once upon a time, to be pale and sickly was a virtue. (laughter)

In my time [00:53:00] and in my town when a Shadchan, a matchmaker, wanted to sell the groom he would say he's a *lamdan*, he knows Gemara, he studies well, and he's pious, and he is sickly. (laughter)

Legend has it that witnessing the scene of Aquilas and the emperor, one of Hadrian's ministers sided with the nephew, with Aquilas. The emperor slapped him in the face. Humiliated, the minister committed suicide. Another version, Hadrian was informed by his nephew's impending conversation not by Aquilas but by his own spies. And there were many spies in Judea then. So he dispatched soldiers to bring him back from Palestine. But

he forgot to tell them not to engage in conversation with him, and that was his mistake, for Aquilas convinced [00:54:00] them all to stay in the land of the Jews as Jews.

Hadrian then dispatched another company of soldiers. This time he forbade them to talk to Aquilas. But he forgot to order them not to listen (laughter) which they did. And they hear Aquila saying, usually a prince walks, and his servants carry the lantern to help him in the dark. With us Jews it's the opposite. We walk, and God himself carries the lantern, the Torah, to show us the way. Naturally these soldiers also converted. Hadrian sent a third contingent of soldiers to bring back his rebellious nephew. And learning from his past mistakes, he told them neither talk nor listen to him.

They obeyed. But he forgot to tell them not to look.

(laughter) And they observed Aquilas as he kissed the mezuzah [00:55:00] when he left his home, whispering to himself.

Usually the king stays inside while his trusted men guard him from the outside. With us Jews it's different. We stay in our homes, and God, through the mezuzah, stays at the door to protect us. You have guessed it. They too converted.

(laughter)

Fearing the loss of his entire army, (laughter) the desperate emperor stopped sending soldiers to Palestine. Aquilas became the pupil of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, of whom we have spoken in years past, two great masters. Before converting he asked them a question. I understand from reading the Torah that a convert is entitled to receive from God bread and clothing. Is that enough? Don't you think he deserves more? We are giving up something. [00:56:00] Rabbi Eliezer got angry. "What? You demand more than our forefather Jacob who asked for *begged lilbosh u'lechem le'echol?*"

Aquilas was not satisfied. Fortunately, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah was more understanding. And he explained that bread means Torah, without which you could not live. The clothing is the clothing of the sage. And you can become a sage. A convert can become teacher and guide. His daughter may marry a priest. And your grandchildren may even become high priests. Comments the Talmud, without Rabbi Yehoshua's warm attitude, Aquilas might have remained a pagan. And we would have lost a great translator. His translation of scripture was superior to that of Ptolemy's Septuaginta.

The Aramean version of his translation survived centuries and [00:57:00] centuries, and some of us still read it every Friday. *shtayim mikra v'echad targum Onkelos*[00:57:04] And we consider it quasi-sacred. Had he remained pagan and Roman, he might have made a career for himself in Rome. But would he be remembered today? One more story with one more sage.

Rabbi Tarfon, his name is derived from the Greek Tryphon. And I love him. I love his aphorisms. I even love the way he loved his mother, too much. (laughter) They remind me of the ethics of our fathers, which we read on Shabbat afternoons in the summer, the Pirkei Avot. I remember them as I remember the garden where I used to study the Pirkei Avot in my home. "The day is short," said Rabbi Tarfon. "And the workload is heavy. And the workers are lazy. And the employer is demanding." Indeed, I would tell [00:58:00] myself the day is short. There are so many things to do, too many. How could I do everything?

Luckily the same Rabbi Tarfon is here to comfort us. And he said *lo alecha hamelacha ligmor*: it is not up to you to finish your task, nor is it not to take it on. To begin is enough. Then we continue, step by step. It's enough to be able to look up to the summit, even if only to dream about its height. To dream is something. One has no right not to dream.

A strange man, Rabbi Tarfon, extremely wealthy, infinitely humble. We are told that during a period of famine, he married fictitiously 300 women (laughter) only to feed them. When [00:59:00] recalling events from his own past, he allowed Rabbi Akiva to correct him. "Your memory fails you," Rabbi Akiva would tell him. "Yes, it does," agreed Rabbi Tarfon. But other times he was stubborn. "May my children die," he would say, "if I am wrong." And it is said that some of his children did die, so did their mother. As for himself, the circumstances of his death remain obscure.

Kind towards strangers, intransigent towards the new Christians, did he die a martyr's death? His humanism made him oppose capital punishment. "Had I been a member of the Sanhedrin," he declared, "I would have never allowed the defendant to be sentenced to death."

So many masters. So many great figures that actually are awaiting us for discovery in the Talmud. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Halaftha, ordained by the old Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava [01:00:00] who, between two mountains, ordained five of the disciples because the Romans had declared that a community near which an ordination takes place will be destroyed. So he went away from

communities. And when the Romans came, he said *Banai*, my children, *rutzu*, you run. And he remained behind with his body protecting them. And his body became a sieve, pierced by the arrows of the Romans.

Rabbi Yose ben Halafta was ordained by old Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava. He dominated his generation with his judicial and esoteric knowledge. Often, we are told, Prophet Elijah would come to visit with him. And I like his poetic images. Just one example, I quote him: "Men look and look and do not know what they see. [01:01:00] For instance, take the planet Earth. It stands on columns, and they stand on water. And the water is in the mountains, which are sustained by air, which stays inside a storm, which God is holding in his arms."

What about Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair and his miracles? Rabbi Hiyya the Great, who was Rabbi Yehuda's close and mischievous disciple, when he exaggerated, Rabbi Yehuda would send him outside. "Go. I think you have been called," as if to say go and see if I am not there. The disciple and future co-editor of the Tosefta would then know not to reappear for 30 days. We are told that his powers were so great that the angel of death could not come near him.

Disguised as a beggar, the Angel of Death came one day to knock at Rabbi Hiyya's door. "Open," ordered the sage to his family. "It's a beggar. He's hungry. Feed [01:02:00] him." And the Angel of Death answered, "You feel sorry for a beggar but not for me? Don't you know what my mission is? Give me your soul so I don't have to take it against your will." And we are told that when rabbi Hiyya died, fiery, incandescent stones fell from heaven.

Rabbi Eleazea ben Shammua, Rabbi Eleazar ben Arach, Rav Chisda, Rav Huna, and hundreds and hundreds of other names, each master is a case apart. Each enriched in his own manner the Talmudic universe. Sometimes without knowing one another except through their learning they challenged and defied one another, contradicted one another only to find themselves reconciled, at peace. How did they manage to make abstraction of all that happened around them, the destruction of the Temple, the sacking [01:03:00] of Jerusalem, the massacres, the individual and national humiliations, the deportations, the executions under the Greeks, the Romans, the Persians?

None of these tragedies stopped, nor did they slow down their work. For Rabbi Yehuda and his colleagues who edited the Mishnah, for Rav Ashi and Ravina who did the same thing for the

Gemara, nothing could insinuate itself between them and their mission, which involved collecting debates and arguments, hesitations and apprehensions and conclusions. Every minute detail had to be included in our people's collective memory and behavior. Attitude towards women, children, madmen, heretics, dreams and their dreams, past and future, everything is there, even sex and humor and fantasy. [01:04:00]

To read Rabbi bar bar Hannah, Rabbah bar bar Hannah's incredible adventures, is to admit that literature's oriental storytellers have had predecessors in our Talmud. Have you heard of the place, quote, "Where heaven and earth catch fire?" unquote. Rabbah bar bar Hannah knew it. He describes it as he describes in full detail a fish so gigantic that to walk on it from end to end would take you three days and three nights.

Indeed, all of them were great, but not all could be summoned here. But then, I repeat, that was not our goal. Our aim was to open the gates to this enchanted orchard just to allow you to sample its fruits, to journey in their company. To follow them is to love them. It is to provoke in us a taste and a passion [01:05:00] for study. And study is everlasting. The Torah has no beginning, but the Talmud has no end. Rav Ashi and Ravina, the fifth century Amoraim, have concluded the compiling of the

Talmud. Rav Ashi was 92 when he did that. But they have not sealed it. Thus allowing us throughout centuries to continue their task. Enriched by new volumes that are being published to this day, the living Talmud keeps many of us alive.

Written in the present, Rabbi Yitzhak says, Rabbi Yohannan declares, Shimon ben Lakish answers, the Talmudic discourse becomes a constant appeal for personal involvement. They did not speak to each other alone. They spoke to us. They speak to us. [01:06:00] For Talmud means exchange and mutual respect. That is to say respect for the other. Talmud means dialogue, dialogue with the living and those who are no longer living. All our interlocuters deserve our respect for they are all our companions and our friends. They mix in our affairs just as they have in those of their contemporaries. Everything was of interest to them. Nothing left them indifferent. I would venture to say that the essence of Talmud is to fight indifference.

In conclusion, my ambition in beginning these Talmudic encounters 25 years ago was not to engage in scholarly monologues but simply to listen to a Jewish child who, lost in his memories, has wanted to recite his love stories [01:07:00] about and with Jerusalem. Talmud to him still means to acquire

the art of dwelling in more than one place while seeing Jerusalem always as his pole. Talmud to him still means to use language as vehicle and weapon to oppose the enmity that exists between two persons or two groups who have different ideas.

Talmud means to accept in the other one's self as a reflection of what the other is. We are all children of the same father. Talmud means to use language as a vehicle, a weapon to oppose death, his and mine. Ultimately, Talmud is the best, the most creative way for me to [01:08:00] undermine and disarm the most seductive and tempting possibility given to a person:

resignation. I have learned from my teacher, to whom this encounter is always dedicated, Rabbeinu Shaul Lieberman, zichrono livracha. I have learned that as long as the Talmud is open, resignation is forbidden because when the Talmud is open our memory is open. Thank you. (applause) [01:09:00]

M:

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