

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: Isaiah – A Prophetic Tale

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Even before coming tonight, I am sure you have heard that our prophet Isaiah had very serious problems with Jews. I have problems with Isaiah. Let us begin.

*Chazon Yeshayahu ben Amotz asher chazar al Yehudah
v'Yerushalayim biyimay Uziyahu yotham achaz v'Chizkiyahu malchay
Yehudah. This is the vision of Isaiah, the son of Amotz, in the
days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Shim'u shamayim
v'ha'azini eretz ki Adoshem diber. [00:01:00] Hear oh heavens,
and give ear oh earth, Banim gidalti viromamti viheim pashu vi,
I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled
against me.*

So begins the difficult, painful, feverish, and angry message that Isaiah, a great and terrible prophet in Israel, estranged, courageous, exalted man, was instructed to deliver to his people in the name of the Lord. Naturally, we are already struck by its sense of frustration. It is close to despair.

Disillusioned, bitter, no divine emissary has gone so far in his rebukes and charges. They read like an indictment. Nothing is

left out. On his lips, [00:02:00] Jerusalem becomes a kind of Sodom and Gomorrah. And he himself draws the analogy. Listen to him, and I quote him again: *Yada shor konayhu* , "The ox knows his owner, and the ass, his master's crib. But Israel does not know, my people does not consider." *Hoy - goy choteh*, "Woe to the sinful nation. This people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters, they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the holy one of Israel onto anger; they are gone away backward."

But what came over him? What drove this eloquent Jewish prophet and poet to blacken the name of his people so fiercely?

[00:03:00] Is it not a prophet's task to serve also as a defender of Israel?

Sometimes, in Talmudic literature, he is compared to Moses. The one like the other called heaven and earth to witness. But Moses did not always let himself go. Whenever God showed himself too severe, too impatient with the children of Israel, Moses took on another role, hastening to place himself between the children of Israel and the God of Israel. And once he cried out, "If you will not forgive them, *m'chayni na misifr'cha*, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which you have written." Oh yes, Moses used blackmail. [00:04:00] Impelled by an infinite

love for his unfortunate and stiff-necked people, he allowed himself to speak to God in that tone.

Why did Isaiah never do the same? Why didn't he rebel? Why didn't he protest? Why didn't he speak on behalf of his people and say, God, they are not so bad? First of all, compare them to others. Why didn't he? Is it because in a pinch, God could do without an Isaiah, but not a Moses?

Other questions arise from this book, throbbing with beauty and permeated with as much sorrow as hope. Some bear on Isaiah's identity, others on the text attributed to him. Isaiah is so wrapped in enigma that over the centuries, scholars, Jews and non-Jews alike, versed in scientific [00:05:00] criticism of the Bible, have made two, and even three of them, as if one Isaiah alone were not enough to puzzle and fascinate us. According to these experts, the vocabulary, tone, and structure of certain chapters in the early part, as well as their content, differ widely from later passages. So what? So it was not the same man, they say. To which more orthodox thinkers might reply, as Isaiah is only repeating God's words, as all prophets do, why not admit that God was perfectly capable of modifying his attitude and his tone and his language and his arguments between

the first chapter and the fourteenth chapter? God can do whatever He wants. [00:06:00]

Another question. We know how the prophet died. That we know from history. He died in a cruel and tragic manner. We also know why: because he had spoken a few impudent, unjust, unfortunate words. But since when is a prophet responsible for what he says? Isn't he supposed to be speaking from a state of trance, transmitting God's words? If anyone is to be blamed, it's not the prophet. The words are not his. Nevertheless, let's not linger on the aspect of the man and his book in a manner that today would be called deconstructionist. Perhaps we should return to it one day, or tonight if we have time. For the moment, let us, to avoid violating tradition, quickly open a parentheses and [00:07:00] make a few preliminary remarks.

First, the topic is topical, for we need a prophet now, if only to predict the outcome of Tuesday's elections. (audience laughter) We also need him to tell all the candidates to try and climb to a higher level of discourse. Without getting involved in politics, I rarely do, may I express my profound displeasure with the tone of the campaign, with its lack of civility, elegance, integrity, and style. Since when is name-calling part of an election campaign on that level? Is this the lesson

[00:08:00] our leaders are giving the people? Is this the lesson they are giving our youth, that negative propoganda is useful and productive? What they all say about each other, even Isaiah didn't say about his people. But whatever they say does not add to the prestige and the honor of this nation. We deserve better. (applause)

But what worries me most is that one of the three will be our next president. (audience laughter)

Second, I know that you are surprised to see me here tonight. I am too. (applause) I am too. Like you, perhaps [00:09:00] even more than you, I truly believed, last year that we would not meet here again, in this marvelous prestigious, and warm auditorium which has become a kind of home for me, exploring together ancient living texts that speak to us even today. I believe as you doubtless did that 25 years was enough. If God had commanded me to, I would have altered my belief. But I am not a prophet. And we know that nobody is. Since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, there are no more prophets. On the other hand, we may quote Hillel the elder, who said that though we are not prophets, we are all the children of prophets. And even today, the voice from Sinai reaches all humanity through us. We have no right to muffle that voice. It

is the voice of the Torah, [00:10:00] of the law, of instruction, of Jewish civilization. It is a powerful, irresistible call to study. Just as a prophet has no right to reject his prophetic gifts -- if he does, he's liable to get capital punishment -- a teacher has no right not to teach his students. The Talmud says so. *Golim talmid golim rabo imo*. When a student is exiled, his master must follow him into exile. Well, you are not my students. And I do not consider myself your master. But then, we are not truly in exile, not yet. Wait until next Tuesday. (audience laughter) Here, before these texts, we are allies, companions, perhaps even friends, moved by the same desire and the same fervor to broaden our intellectual field [00:11:00] of vision, to deepen our common memory in order to enrich and refine it. That is why we are again here tonight, together.

Also, as this is the twenty-sixth year, a *shinui*, a change is in order. This time the series will consist of two encounters rather than four. After all, I too deserve a kind of sabbatical year, don't I? And so do you. Thirdly, again, let me be specific about our purpose. As in the past, we proposed to capture Isaiah the man by rereading his own words as well as the Talmudic and Midrashic commentaries, and then, it is really quite simple. All Isaiah is in Isaiah. All we have to do is

analyze one another, one or another, of his key ideas to grasp the eternal qualities that make him inflexible and human. And therefore, vulnerable. [00:12:00] Or the other way around, vulnerable, and therefore human, and indomitable. Right there, is a first essential lesson that all prophets embody. Though messengers of God, they remain human. It is human to lose one's temper. It is human to be afraid. It is human to say no. It is even human to change one's mind. It is also human to arrive late. Is that a reason not to open the doors? (applause)

Shall we begin again? [00:13:00] *Chazon Yeshayahu ben-Amotz*, this is the vision of Isaiah when he spoke about Jerusalem. so the vision of Isaiah as we remember him, the son of Amotz, in the days of the Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. This first verse, purely biographical, contains a question that we shall explore later. I'll give it to you now. We know that Isaiah died in the reign of another king, a later king called Menashe, or Manasseh. Why is this king's name censored from the text?

Let's study the verse more closely. [00:14:00] What does the term *chazon* mean? Usually it's translated as vision. But what sort of vision, a waking or a hallucinatory vision? Perhaps a dream. Three words are generally used to designate a prophetic

message: *masa*, or verbal communication, *davar*, or divine word, and *chazon*, vision. According to some Talmudic scholars, only Moses heard God while fully awake. All the other prophets received his words and the message in a dream. In Isaiah's case, the term therefore is *chazon*, he saw.

What did he see? Did he see the words? Would he see the reality they contain or conjure? Did he see the present, the past, the future? [00:15:00] Did he see the state of the union, the state of the nation? Surely his injunction implies a somewhat figurative account of moral decadence in the land and people of Judea. But later on, the vision shifts and evokes a celestial imagery like Ezekiel's. And so it is a true vision that the text will convey to us, a vision so striking, so unusually tangible and concrete that the prophet will suffer the consequences of it. He should not have spoken of that vision. And he will be punished. *Chazon Yeshayahu*.

The second name is the name of the prophet. A prophet's name is more often than not linked to God. Zechariah, or "God remembers." Obadiah, or [00:16:00] "the servant of God." Yeshayahu, or Isaiah, "God has come to his aid," or "God will come to his aid." Yeshayahu, son of Amotz. Amotz appears several times in holy scripture, but is always identified as the

prophet's father. We don't know anything else about him. We know that he was the father of Isaiah, and the brother of King Amaziah. So Yeshayahu was a member of the royal family; he was the king's nephew. Is that why is called "prince of the prophets"?

There is another reason. The reason is that his style is unlike any other: lofty, forceful, authoritarian, majestic. Like all prophets charged with a mission by God himself, he knows that he may say anything in any way. He may permit himself everything. Before [00:17:00] him, powerful kings ought to appear powerless. Mighty rulers better become humble.

But in this case, there is more. It is a prince addressing people, ordinary men and women, not only kings and rulers, but people in their own language, to tell them how evil, destructive, and self-destructive he finds their ways. And when he speaks to the common people, again it is from above, from the palace, visible or invisible, that he informs them of the displeasure they provoke among the celestial spheres. Said Rabbi Levi in the Talmud: "Isaiah could allow himself such blunt talk because he was the king's nephew." And he quoted a proverb of King Solomon: "The rich man is wise in his own conceit";

[00:18:00] in other words, it means the rich man is known by his arrogance.

Like Moses, Isaiah begins his discourse with *Shimu shamayim*, "Hear oh heavens, and give ear oh earth," as if to say, anyway, nobody will listen. At least you, heaven and earth, listen. And therefore, he wants them as witnesses. But these two opening statements, when you study them closely, you will see that they differ slightly. Moses first invokes the earth, and then the heavens. With Isaiah, it's the other way around. Why this variance? And the answer is simple. Moses from the Bible calls the prince, the *adon kol hanevi'im*, the master of all the prophets, not the prince, but the master of the prophets, he was tending always above his people when he spoke of their faults and their duties. So he was from above looking down.

[00:19:00] Whereas Isaiah was not on the same rank with Moses. He did not ascend into heaven. He saw what was happening in heaven, but he did not go up to heaven. Therefore, he spoke from here looking up. Their judgment on our ancestors, both accused them of every possible or imaginable sin. But Isaiah went further than Moses. True, Moses was lucky. He was not only a prophet, but he also had power. He had secular power. He was a political -- the political -- a military -- the military leader of a people, what we call the first movement of

national liberation, a people on their way to a country not yet conquered, and a freedom not yet assumed. While Isaiah was constantly [00:20:00] obliged to confront this or that king ruling over the daily life of a nation already established in its territories. And we know their names. Who were the kings that we mentioned earlier? We know mainly Hizkiyahu, Ezekias. He know him best of all. We know him from Isaiah, because of his troubled relationship with Isaiah.

But who was Isaiah? Of course we shall, as we always do, try to open a kind of biographical file. But tonight in the name of personal honesty, if not truth, I feel I must first look at my own. Note, please, that we are still on the first verse, *Chazon Yeshayahu ben-Amotz*, and so forth. The exegetical method we have just adopted in approaching the book of Isaiah, I learned it from a [00:21:00] master whose pedagogical powers I have insufficiently stressed in our encounters throughout the years, here in this place. His name was Shushani, or HaRav Shushani. And his legend is shrouded in a dense and fascinating mystery, and I have spoken about him always lovingly, always admiringly in some of my tales. No one knew where he had come from, or why and where he would disappear for days or weeks. He was fluent in some 30 languages, including Hungarian, just to impress me. (audience laughter) And knew everything by heart. The

Babylonian and Palestinian Talmud, as well as Greek and Roman philosophers, Ugaritic and Akkadian texts, Homer and Shakespeare, and Erasmus and Einstein. He knew nuclear physics better than most atomic [00:22:00] scientists, and Aztec history better than most anthropologists. To put it simply, he was all right. (audience laughter) He frightened me, he puzzled me, he intrigued me. He frightened me because he knew too much, and because I felt a danger coming from him, a danger which I tried to describe a few times in some of my tales that he may have used a Zen Buddhist method. He wanted to destroy the disciple before building him up again. And it lasted for a few years, and really, until I came here and met a man whose influence on me and my tenderness for him, I repeat all the time, HaRav Shaul Lieberman, *zichrono livracha*. Until I met Lieberman, it was his influence that gave me the quest for knowledge which I try to share with you. [00:23:00]

I studied with him in France. I saw him every day. And we used to study six, seven hours each time we met. The first chapter of Isaiah took us six months. The first verse, over a week. But don't worry. (audience laughter) You and I will move a little bit faster.

Isaiah, what do we find in the file? Born probably in Jerusalem during the eighth century before the common era, he seems to have been head of a school of prophets, according to some sources, or perhaps just a school for learning according to others. He was an influential citizen. His public activities cover the period from 740 to 700 before the common era. That much we do know, because the text tells us [00:24:00] clearly in flashback that we read holding our breath. And I open quotes, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphim. Each one had six wings. With two, he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he did fly."

So we know therefore that he experienced that vision in the year when King Uzziah died, that is in 740 before the common era. From then on, he will be involved in the major social and political events of the period, and on the highest and lowest levels. He was everywhere, talking, speaking truth. He refers [00:25:00] to all the people in his prophecies, and we see him often admonishing sovereigns or their ministers, either in their palaces or outside, amid an anxious, curious, and needless population. We find a kind of admiration for him in the text, in the text itself, and in the commentaries. But then upon

rereading certain texts, and reevaluating certain stories, we will find a hesitation, which means, like everybody else, he had his critics.

We know from personal elements that he was married. Prophets could marry. Everybody could marry, actually, in the Jewish religion. He had three sons, whose symbolic names we know; they are given in the text: Emmanuel, Shear-yashuv, and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, they have [00:26:00] all symbolic names. And probably a daughter; we shall see later why we think that he had a daughter. If he had a daughter, unfortunately, her name has been lost to us. In those days, there were still two Jewish kingdoms: Israel and Judea. Why not? Can you imagine a Jewish kingdom without another one? (audience laughter) Both were threatened by the rise of two great powers: Assyria and Babylon. Pekah, the usurper king of Israel, together with King Rezin of Damascus, revolted against the powerful, huge imperial Assyria, and tried to persuade King Ahaz of Judea to join the alliance, join the rebellion. Isaiah, always a pacifist, always wise, counseled Ahaz to refuse. [00:27:00] The rebellion, said Isaiah the pacifist, could only damage our nation, damage our country; we don't need it. In consequence of which, the rebels invaded Judea, and to ward off this peril, because they just entered the land, and they were starting to move towards Jerusalem, Ahaz,

the King of Judea, sent emissaries to ask King Tiglath-Pileser for help, for military help. And in doing so, he became a dependency of Assyria. Upon Ahaz's death, his son, Hizkiyahu, or Ezekias, followed Isaiah's political pacifist line, and remained neutral. But this time it was Egypt that made efforts to [00:28:00] entice Judea into an armed alliance against the same Assyria. Hizkiyahu vacillated, and Isaiah, apparently despairing of his ability to convince him not to do it, not to go into war, started quote, says the text, "walking about barefoot, or altogether half-naked for three years to illustrate the fate awaiting the Egyptians and all the other nations, the allies, after being defeated by the Assyrians. He said they will be poor, hungry, naked, uprooted, beaten."

In the end, Ezekias disobeyed. He yielded to military pressure from within and without, and revolted against Assyria. And the result was predictable. The new Assyrian sovereign, Sennacherib, [00:29:00] invaded Judea, and laid siege on Jerusalem. Everybody, including the king, lost heart. Everybody except Isaiah. And here we find Isaiah in a marvelous state of metamorphosis. He who had tried to warn the king not to rebel, not to go out in war, not to choose violence, not to join the rebels, but to live in peace, because if not, terrible things will happen, all of a sudden, he turned around, and he

began consoling, comforting, reassuring the king and the nation that don't worry, nothing will happen. Jerusalem will not fall. He asked the king and urged the population not to despair. He, as a prophet, predicted that the capital would be saved. And it was. [00:30:00] Talmudic literature is full of legends about the way that miracle occurred. Because a miracle did occur, sowing death in the ranks of the enemy armies. And simply, Sennacherib's troops either were killed or fled, overnight. The prophet had not been wrong.

Now finally, would the people of Judea take his warning seriously about the future? Unfortunately no. People only listen to prophets afterwards. Now Isaiah predicted catastrophes, and this time too, he was right. In reading him, we understand why prophecy died with the destruction of the Temple. Before that, before the destruction, living in relative happiness and more or less at peace, [00:31:00] the Jewish people were mentally, psychologically capable of coping with the terrible things that the prophets told them. Why? Prophets are prophets; who cares? They had their bread, their vineyard, their safety. Children went to school, came home from school. They laughed, they played. Why pay, pay attention to these premonitions, the verbal prophecies that were so horrifying on the lips of the prophets? After the destruction, they couldn't

cope with those prophecies anymore. For remember that the prophet's mission, at least in the early phase, always was to upset people, disturb them, shake them up, frighten them, flay them, make them aware of their shortcomings, of their sins, and therefore of the punishments awaiting them. Before the destruction of the Temple, [00:32:00] the inhabitants of Judea could stand all that. Afterwards, had they listened, really, they would have fallen into despair.

Therefore, in this context, we understand the reluctance, if not the resistance, that many prophets manifested towards God, when he assigned them their mission to go and frighten their children of Israel. Moses, as you remember, replied in a typically Jewish manner: "Why me? Take my brother." Jeremiah found another excuse. "What do you want from me," he said, "I'm only a child." In other words, go look for a grownup. Jonah fled. In other words, all the prophets really didn't want to be prophets. [00:33:00]

Except Isaiah. He displayed a different attitude. Let's look at the text. Having seen God on his throne and heard the angels thrice crying, "*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*," and the voice that shook the posts of the doors in their foundations, "Then I, Isaiah, said, 'Woe is me, for I am undone, for I am a man of

unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips, for mine eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts.'

Then flew one of the seraphim onto me, having in his hand a live coal, which he had taken with the tongs from off the burning altar. And he laid it upon my mouth and said, 'Lo, this has touched thy lips and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy [00:34:00] sin purged. Also I heard a voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?' 'Then,' said I," says Isaiah, "'Here am I. Send me'"

It's clear. Unlike his peers, his colleagues, Isaiah was a volunteer. And yet he was too intelligent, too lucid not to sense, not to guess the nature of his mission. What was his mission? To reveal to the Jewish people the ugliness, the stupidity, the ignominy of their behavior, to inspire them to get a grip on themselves, to repent, to improve, to live. He knows that God will ask him to say true but disagreeable things to the people. And he is ready. He doesn't even wait for God to suggest it. He himself proposes himself for the task.

And here comes the Midrash which [00:35:00] always gives us a beautiful, poetic illustration of the text, and listen the way the Midrash describes it. "That day," says the Midrash, "the Lord lamented to himself, 'But who can I send? Who will take up

the task I lay upon him? I sent Micah, and they beat him. I sent Zechariah, and they killed him. I sent Jeremiah, and they threw him into a pit. Who shall I send?' And Isaiah, who was there to hear God lamenting to himself, hastened to answer, 'Here I am, send me, I am ready.'"

Why did he do that? Is it possible that he wished and liked to be a martyr? That he took pleasure in suffering? That he was determined to advance his career, perhaps, as prosecutor? That he enjoyed the job which allowed him to chastise the people of Israel, his brothers and sisters? [00:36:00] God, mind you, will reproach him for that. But in the Talmud, in the beginning, our sages seem pleased with him. They withhold no praise. In all things he surpasses the others. They speak only of their own people. But Isaiah encompasses the entire world in his vision. Talmudic sages insist that he was born circumcised, and that he lived 120 years, like Moses. None of the prophets, says the Midrash, understood why they were prophesying. They spoke in the words of a kind of altered state, except for Moses, and Isaiah. None among the prophets, says another Midrash, is greater than Moses or Isaiah. Or even God said, "No one love my children so much than Isaiah." Or again, Isaiah accepted heaven's yoke with a greater joy than the other prophets. And this Midrashic declaration: "All the overwhelming prophecies,

the [00:37:00] terrible prophecies that Jeremiah foresaw for Israel, Isaiah had warded off long before." And more. We are told that all that Ezekiel saw, Isaiah saw. But they were nevertheless difficult. Ezekiel is compared to a villager, excited at the sight of the king. Isaiah is like a city-dweller who happens to see the king. In other words, he sees him so often that he's not impressed.

By the way, the Midrashic literature does not speak of several Isaiahs. They quote on one alone; they comment on one alone. How then can we reconcile the accusing, if not vengeful tone of the first part, and the consoling voice of the second within the Talmudic tradition? For our sages, the problem never arose. He who punishes through love, ends by consoling through love. He who predicts [00:38:00] persecutions and oppression cannot fail to predict deliverance and redemption. So no one is harrowing as Isaiah when he rebukes, and no one is as comforting when he consoles, announcing the end of suffering, and the dawn of happier days. We can even go further and say, it is precisely because Isaiah was so depressing that it was given him later in compensation to be so generous, encouraging, and so consoling.

And yet, his destiny is inescapably tragic. He cannot help wondering, for we are wondering for him, if God is not

manipulating him a bit too much. But isn't that true of all prophets, and of all human beings?

A few words about prophecy: what is its essence, its function? Unlike the oracles of antiquity, the prophet is not content merely [00:39:00] to predict the future. For him, an emissary from God, it is the ethical element that prevails, always. The rest is only commentary or consequence. It's simple: to sin is to invite punishment. He knows it, and he wants others to know it. In other words, it's not hard to guess what the future holds for us. All we have to do is to examine our present attitudes. Let an individual or a people repent, and hope is permitted, even inevitable. Without repentance, damnation and sorrow win the day.

The scripture also makes a difference between true and false prophets. And the difference really is that, we find it mainly in the book of Jeremiah, the former, meaning the true prophets are disturbing; the latter, the false prophets are soothing. Those [00:40:00] who promise you rose gardens no matter what, don't believe them. Those who tell you the truth, you should know that sometimes the truth is harsh, when the need for harshness is there. But there is no substitute for truth.

Wherein lies the true power of the prophet? First of all, a prophet does not run for election. That's his strength; he does not need a popular vote. His true strength derives from his true moral convictions, and from his true courage and persistence in confronting all the others who are against morality. He doesn't represent any political group, nor is he the representative of any social clique. More often than not, he is alone, alone against [00:41:00] kings, governments, the well-to-do, the self-important, the liars, the deceivers, alone against the entire nation. Anyone at any time may strike at him or humiliate him, and some have done just that. Nevertheless, nothing, neither seduction nor threat, can sway him. He never flatters, never aims to please; a prophet is he or she who displeases. A prophet is an enemy to all complacency, bearer of truths and memory, and nothing and no one can make him say what he will not say. Or silence him. Should he fall silent, his silence itself bears witness.

What did the prophet try to teach his contemporaries and ours? That man, servant to God alone is sovereign, that man need fear no authority in [00:42:00] expressing himself freely. Self-censorship is still censorship. Submission to God alone is acceptable. A slave who wishes to remain a slave is to be punished according to the Torah. And Jean-Paul Sartre's

statement that man is condemned to be free was preceded by the biblical commandment that man must define himself by and within his freedom to choose and to make choices. As a member of the human family, I am free, and so are you. But I am not free to renounce my freedom, nor are you. And so the prophet is also a teacher of the law, not only its guardian. And nevertheless, the prophet must acknowledge his limitations.

Even in this area, tradition insists of the separation of powers. Listen to Halakhah, the law. Imagine a debate [00:43:00] between a sage and a prophet about a legal point. It is the sage's interpretation, not the prophets, that prevails. It is the sage's position that makes law, not the prophets. The prophet may say to the end of time, look, I have had a dream, or I was awake and I saw God telling me that my point is true. Nonsense. The sage has a position, has a statement, and his words carry weight, not the prophet's.

But although he is God's messenger, the prophet must also be careful in speaking to his people. He must not go too far in his admonitions. Exaggeration is forbidden and dangerous even if it comes from [00:44:00] God himself. For what can he do if it is God who tells him to be excessive? Isn't it God himself who dictates to his emissary and spokesman, the ideas to

formulate, and the words to say? How can we hold the prophet responsible?

And suddenly we detect in the commentaries a note of suspicion towards our glorified prophet. Why? If he was punished, there must have been a reason. So all of a sudden you feel that our sages try to find a reason. And therefore, there is a kind of distantiation a la Brecht. They reproach him, for example, for not going in person to King Ezekias. But, in a moment of crisis, let himself be represented by assistants.

Let's see this incident in historical [00:45:00] context. Because it was dangerously divided, as we said earlier, Judea was going through a difficult and trying period, a certain Ravsheka, an influential Jewish figure, tried to seize the throne. Having failed, he went over to the invader, Sennacherib from Assyria, who sent him back to his own country at the head of a powerful army, to prevail among the people and the leaders of Jerusalem to submit to Assyria. He came to demoralize the nation. "Do not resist," said Rabshakeh, the Jewish "collaborator" with the Assyrians, kept on that theme, "don't resist for it is useless, your battle is lost in advance. Heaven itself will not come to your aid."

And so a royal delegation composed -- we have the composition -- composed of a certain Eliakim ben-Hilkiyahu, Shebna who was the scribe of the delegation, and Joach ben-Asaph, the secretary of the delegation, [00:46:00] they went to meet Rabshakeh on the city wall. It's interesting to note that the royal delegation receive instructions from the king to listen, but not to reply, not to engage in a debate or a dialogue. But when King Hizkiyahu received their report, he rent his garments, and he went to the Temple in sackcloth. Why? Why is he afraid of national defeat? He was still in Jerusalem, and Jerusalem was a strong fortress. I think he went in sackcloth because he was depressed. As a Jew, as the king of the Jewish people, he was depressed. He was thinking, how could a Jew like that, an influential Jew, a famous Jew, how could he join the enemy army? That is why he went in sackcloth. And then he dispatched a delegation to the prophet Isaiah [00:47:00] to ask his advice. And Isaiah answered by his own emissaries. He didn't go to the king, but he sent emissaries in return, that the king had no reason to fear, the country was in no danger. As we have said earlier, his vision was accurate, the invader withdrew his troops, and the Kingdom of Judea was safe, that everything was all right.

No, everything was all wrong. Instead of thanking the prophet for his encouragement, the Talmudic sages all of a sudden were annoyed. They were annoyed with the prophet for sending representatives to the meeting with the king. He should have gone himself, they said, immediately. We may add in passing that the same reproach was addressed to the king. He too might have taken the trouble. Unfortunately both men, we are told, seemed to persist in their ill-timed [00:48:00] pride. The king said, "I am king. Me going to him? Let him come to me. After all," they quote precedence, "Didn't the prophet Elijah go to King Ahav?" On the other hand, Isaiah said, "What, me to him? Let him come to me. Didn't Jehoram, the son of Ahav, go to the prophet Elijah?" The crisis was there, the enemy was at the wall, the collaborator was there, demoralizing the people, and these two men, the most important men, the people in the nation, discuss protocol. It's wrong. Naturally it's wrong. If at least King Hizkiyahu were a wicked, arrogant man. But he's not. On the contrary, the text always presents him in a favorable light, a pious Jew, a God-fearing and living by the law Jew. [00:49:00] When things go wrong, what does he do? He prays. He implores heaven. He sends emissaries to the prophet, not to the general of the army. He doesn't trust power. He trusts benign benevolence. Also, he's a most unpretentious king. We are told that during the war against Sennacherib, he pleads with heaven,

and he says, "I cannot pursue the enemy. I cannot even defend myself against him. Be charitable, oh God, and you strike him, and you kill him while I sleep." But he is not so humble as to leave his place and go into the prophet's presence, not even after the crisis. Strange, but tradition does not condemn either of these protagonists. Somehow we feel uneasy about it, we reproach them, but there's no condemnation. Instead, [00:50:00] God intervenes all of a sudden as a diplomatic mediator.

God arranges matters so that the king falls ill. Now He says to his prophet, "Look, *bikur cholim* is a *mitzvah*, you must go and pay a sick call, he is sick, poor man. The law obliges you. Do so." And so it was done. And the scene that follows is astonishing, even in the text. I quote, "In those days was Hizkiyahu sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amotz, came unto him and said unto him, 'Thus said the Lord, set your house in order for you shall die and not live.' Then Hizkiyahu turned his face towards the wall and prayed unto the Lord and said, 'Remember now, O Lord, I beseech thee, [00:51:00] remember how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight.' And Hizkiyahu wept sore." Did Isaiah remain at the sick king's bedside? We don't know. When God assigned him his next mission

to go and revoke the decree, and tell Hizkiyahu that he will live 15 years more, God says to him, *haloch ve'amarta*, meaning go and tell him, which means he wasn't there, but he left him, sick. And he had to come back. We don't even know really how he did it; we only know that Isaiah wasn't happy.

The Midrash, with all its imaginative power, makes an important issue of this story. For various reasons, still matters of protocol, the sages suggest a tension, if not a conflict, in relations between the king and the [00:52:00] prophet. For instance, why does Isaiah repeat himself in his announcement, "You shall die and not live"? According to one Midrashic source, it's because he's firmly informing the king that he will die in this world, and not live in the other. Why such harshness? Incidentally, Hizkiyahu himself calls it to his attention, and we quote the Kohelet-Raba: "Having heard the prophet's verdict or diagnosis, King Hizkiyahu said to Isaiah: 'Isaiah, it is the custom when we visit the sick to say the them, "Heaven will take pity on you, don't worry." If it's a doctor, he will say, you may eat this, but not that, you may drink this, but not that; and even if the doctor says that the sick man is suffering from an incurable disease, he doesn't tell him brutally, "you are going to die," but [00:53:00] tries to cheer him up. You, you come marching in, and you announce

coldly that I am going to die, that I have not long to live. What happened to you? Well,' said the king, 'I will not heed your words. I will not heed your prophecy. I am going to turn not to another doctor, I am going to pray.'"

A variation on the same theme, as fascinating and amusing as the first: After their brief exchange about the medical situation of the king, the king questions the prophet and asks why he has deserved to die prematurely. And the prophet says, "Because you fathered no children." The king made his apologies. "If I have no children," said he, "it's because I knew that my sons would behave badly. They would be wicked. So it was [00:54:00] better not to have any." At this, the prophet is angered. "Who gave you permission," he says, "who instructed you to meddle in God's mysteries? All you had to do your duty, that is to marry and beget children, which is the first mitzvah in the Torah, and leave it to God to do what He thinks proper." "Oh, in that case," said the king, he's looking for the last, for something to help him, "In that case," he said, "Give me your daughter, and I'll marry her." And from this we learn that he had a daughter. (audience laughter) "Too late," said the prophet. He didn't say that my daughter is married already. He simply says, "It's too late, the decree has already been signed." It was then that the sick king turned to prayer, quoting his ancestor

David who said, "Even when the knife is at your throat, you must not lose hope in divine intervention."

So, in any [00:55:00] case, King Hizkiyahu lived for another 15 years. And Isaiah was not happy. A blow to his self-esteem? A refusal to accept the irrational, or a lack of judicial logic in celestial decisions? Is it conceivable that he was so ignorant of the value and importance of *teshuva*, he who called upon the people all his life to do *teshuva*, to repent, is it possible that he judged King Hizkiyahu so completely irredeemable? Is it conforming to the law that a person is unredeemable? Aren't we told that *ad yomoto akhakeh lo* until the day of one's death, one is waiting for repentance, whatever the answer, he began a discussion with God about his hurt pride. He complained before God, he said, "First you tell me to announce his imminent death. And now you change your mind? What do [00:56:00] I look like?" He says, "What do you think of me?"

Let's admit it, in reading and re-reading this legend in all its versions, we remain confused. The dialogue is moving, profoundly human, but it casts a favorable light on the king, and a disconcerting shadow on the prophet. The truth is, the king was right. For after all, Isaiah should not have told him so brutally that he was going to die. Only today are certain

physicians so brutal because they are afraid of malpractice suits. (audience laughter) Too severe, Isaiah. Inflexible, devoid of any trace of feeling, of compassion. He will be punished for it. He will die, as we said earlier, a tragic death. Because of his attitudes to the king? No, not at all. And here comes again the leitmotif [00:57:00] of Isaiah's tale. He will die a tragic death because of his severity towards the people of Israel, a severity that he had to manifest because God had told him so.

In the legend, the story goes in as in a suspense novel. King Hizkiyahu ends up marrying the prophet's daughter. And they have, in some legends, two or three sons. One of their son is Menashe. This Menashe, crowned king while still a boy, 12 years old according to one source, begins to persecute his grandfather, determined to bring him to the brink of death. Why, on what pretext? Perhaps to take revenge for the troubles that the prophet brought to his father. And so he accuses him - he, Menashe, accuses the prophet of heresy, no less.

[00:58:00]

Let's examine the Talmud again. In the treatise of Yevamot we read that Shimon ben Azzai found in the genealogical book in Jerusalem, a sentence saying, quote, "that Menashe killed

Isaiah," unquote. Rava commented, "he accused him, judged him, and had him executed." In other words, everything unfolded according to the law. There was a proper trial, the accused had to appear before a tribunal, and here an indictment consisting of three serious instances proving that the defendant had violated traditional teachings. And Menashe, the king himself, served as prosecutor. Listen to him, "A, your master Moses spoke God's warning, no man shall see me and live, and you claim to have seen God seated on his throne on high. You are against Moses, and you are alive. B, your Moses [00:59:00] said, who is like unto our God who answers all who call upon him anytime, anywhere. And you say, see God there where he may be found, pray to him when he's nigh. Again, you are not saying what Moses said. 3, C, your master Moses said, I will fulfill the number of thy days, meaning the days of a person have already been determined when he was born. And all of a sudden you come and you add 15 years to his life." Daring contradictions, serious charges, going to the fundamental principles of the Jewish religion tradition, rooted in the law and in Moses' vision.

The tribunal asked the accused if he wished to defend himself. No, he did not. To one witness, he seems to have said, as if an aside, "The truth is, I could have explained myself, but I knew

that even if I spoke, Menashe would not have listened. And therefore, if [01:00:00] I had spoken and he would have killed me, it would have been with premeditation, so I wanted to save him from that. And therefore, he didn't speak. But he relied on miracles, and the prophet pronounced a holy name, an immense cedar tree appeared before him, split open, and Isaiah took refuge within the tree. Not at all discouraged, the king had a saw brought to him, and began to saw through the tree. And when they reached the hidden prophet's mouth, he died. For it was by the mouth that he had sinned when he stated that he lived among a people whose lips are unclean.

Well, Menashe's accusations did not weigh in the balance. It's not because [01:01:00] of the charges that he died. They were of no importance. He died, according to our tradition, because he was too severe with our people, his people.

And here we touch upon a theme which has lost none of its immediacy since then. When the people in the State of Israel are in question, just how far can one go too far? Who tells whom when to speak and when to be silent, whom to praise and whom to criticize? For a Jew, the diaspora, the problem takes on redoubled intensity. Does he have the right to interfere in the internal affairs of the Jewish state of which he shares the

joys, but not always the anguish and distress? Can a Jew in diaspora in good conscience declare himself or herself for or against this or that Israeli policy [01:02:00] when he or she is not on the spot to enjoy the blessings or suffer the afflictions of the Israeli people? Some intellectuals say yes, the Jew has that right. They even say he has the duty. And they point to the prophets as examples. Except that all the prophets, save Ezekiel, lived in Israel, and all were reprimanded and punished. Moses himself was punished for being too harsh on his Jewish people. Although in those days, our ancestors are not what we would call today good Jews. Moses did not enter the Holy Land, we are told, because he was too harsh, too critical. He condemned the people of Israel.

But, I repeat, [01:03:00] poor Isaiah. He only did what God asked him to do. And when he did so, it's unfair. God punished him; God lost his temper. God even has recourse to an ungodly man for the expression of his mood and his will, for let's be blunt and frank, Menashe is not a good man. The legend confirms the premonitions of his father, Hizkiyahu. We are told that Hizkiyahu and his two young children, Menashe and his brother Rabshakeh, were walking. As a good father, he carried a boy on each shoulder, and he heard them prattling. One said, "This skull is so bald, you could [01:04:00] fry a fish on it." And

the other answered, oh no, I have something better than that. It is so bald, that you could use it as an altar for sacrificing to the idols." In an excess of rage, Hizkiyahu shook himself. The two boys fell to the ground, Rabshakeh died, and Menashe did not. Talmudic fantasy and legend are savage about him. His name itself derives from the word *nasha* which he means "he has forgotten." Yes indeed, Menashe has forgotten his fate, his duty to God, his obligations towards his own people. He's said to have destroyed the altar in the Temple, encouraged idolatry, profaned the Temple, raped his own sister, committed arbitrary murders. He is among those few Jews who will forever be barred from the life to come. It is this man who [01:05:00] preaches Jewish morality to the Jewish prophet? It is this man who defends the honor of Moses, this man who judges the prophet, sentences the prophet? Is that why Isaiah refused to defend himself? Because it was beneath his dignity to engage in a debate with a traitor to God and his people?

And with that, we may return to our question at the very beginning. The first verse of the book mentions four kings, all Isaiah's contemporaries, Uzziah, Ahaz, Jotham, and Hizkiyahu, but there were five, Menashe. Why is he missing from the list? Because he was a bad man? Since when is censorship practiced in our prophetic literature? Jewish history knows other kings no

less impious, and their misdeeds have been preserved. Why should we censor the exhortations that Isaiah doubtless directed at his insolent and rebellious grandson? [01:06:00] That question is not at all discussed in the commentaries. Excessive modesty, uneasiness. It seems to me that we must look for the reason in the prophet's mentality, a proud man, Isaiah. He imposes discipline, but also knows how to discipline himself. He wasn't always in accord with Hizkiyahu, but the latter was a valuable, I would even say honorable interlocutor. Menashe was not. Yet Menashe, this grandson who turned out badly, was his responsibility, Isaiah's responsibility. Wasn't it Isaiah who all but forced Hizkiyahu to marry? He even gave the king his own daughter to wife. And now the young king has disappointed him profoundly, totally, utter disappointment as a king, and as a Jew. Why not suppose that at precisely that [01:07:00] moment, the prophet decided to put an end to his own prophetic career? In other words, if Menashe's name is not included in the first list, in the first verse, it was because Isaiah was no longer a prophet during his grandson's reign.

In conclusion, I think again of my teacher, HaRav Shushani. Without knowing it, we are following his teachings now. Look, we are not very far from the first verse. Poor Isaiah. As a grandfather, he is to be pitied. He only had sadness given to

him by his grandson. He was an unhappy father, an unhappy prophet. And perhaps that is the tragedy of the prophetic condition, caught between the king and God, God and his creatures, duty and compassion. His being must inevitably be torn apart. [01:08:00] So most of the prophets try to evade therefore, the task. They knew they couldn't win. If you do well, you will be punished. If you obey, you will be punished. If you say what God says to say, you'll be punished.

Well Isaiah, what made him be different? Was it that he was prepared to choose God over Israel? He knew that he would not be rewarded. And yet he chose his task, because his love for God was so strong. And now we understand why in Talmudic literature, it is this same Isaiah who accomplishes a dazzling metamorphosis in the second part of the book, bearing his name. There he is the great consoler, unequaled as bearer [01:09:00] of promise." Who can read the chapter *nachamu, nachamu ami*, "be comforted my people," without being swept by melancholy and pride? And caught in a kind of fresh surge of an ancient emotion?

I read it in Moscow in the year 1979. And I shall never forget it. Gathered in a semi-circle, about the bema, Russian Jews young and old repeated each word silently, moving their lips as

if to savor and remember. In Jerusalem, God said in Isaiah's voice, "For Zion's sake I will not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest. And also, I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which [01:10:00] shall never hold their peace, day or night. And again, and I will rejoice in Jerusalem and find joy in my people, and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying. And they shall build houses, and inhabit them. And they shall plant vineyards and eat the fruit of them. And it shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer. And the wolf and the lamb shall feed together side by side, and live in harmony."

What an admirable, peaceful, consoling vision of a world at peace. When we speak of hope and peace anywhere for the people of Israel, and beyond it for humanity, it is always Isaiah to whom we refer. He is the most quoted prophet in the world, Isaiah. The most beautiful, the loneliest, the most sorrowful, [01:11:00] and yet the most confident of prophets. Poor Isaiah, son of Amotz. Like other prophets chosen by God to serve him as spokesman and confidante, he was also his victim. (applause)

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