

1996 10 10 Elie Wiesel God in the Bible The Fascination with  
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Elie Wiesel:

(audience applause) What is God doing in the Bible? With your permission, I would like to start at the end. Ask any child, and he will tell you that God is a tale. Every tale is, in some mysterious way, about God, too. Without Him, there is no tale. Without Him, the tale has no tale. When we speak of God, or rather, for the quest of God, how can one help but recall Rabbi Levi Yitchok of Berditchev, the stubborn defender of the Jewish people, demanding [00:01:00] of the Almighty to alleviate its suffering in exile? How can one help but remember his beautiful heartbreaking song, "Reboyne-sheloylem," "Master of the Universe, Ikh vil dir a dudele zingen "Master of the Universe, I shall sing a song for you. Ayey emtzo'eka? Where can I find you? V'ayey lo emtzo'eka? Where can I not find you?"

But then, we might ask -- why look for him, since he is everywhere? For me, this question is valid only when turned around. Why not look for him, since he is everywhere? And so, the question becomes an answer in itself. But what if one looks and looks and finds no one? Must we go on looking, or look

elsewhere? Where? Or should we stop looking altogether? A story.

[00:02:00] A man walked through the forest, imploring God to speak to him. He prayed at dawn, fasted during the day, wept at midnight, all the time hoping to hear God's voice. It was summer. The birds were chirping, the trees blossoming. He should have been happy, but he wasn't. It was God's voice he was burning to hear, not the birds. One night, a storm erupted. He was overcome by fear. The entire forest seemed transformed by thunder and lightning. Now, he thought, now, it will happen. It didn't. Nature quieted down, and the seeker fell asleep.

In his dream, an old man, a wanderer, spoke to him. "You seem sad. What is the reason for your sadness?" "I will tell you," answered the dreamer. "Since childhood I have studied God's words and lived with them and by them. [00:03:00] But I have never heard his voice. He speaks to everyone. Why doesn't he speak to me?" And the wanderer said, "How do you know that he hasn't spoken to you?" "Well, I didn't hear him." "Are you sure? Have you ever heard the chirping of birds? Were you moved? How can you be certain that that wasn't God's voice?" The dreamer was now wondering whether he was in a dream. The wanderer continued, "And the thunder, have you heard the

thunder?" "Yes, I have." "Has it occurred to you that that might have been God's voice, too?" "No, it hasn't." "And what about the voice you hear right now? How can you be sure whose it is?" The dreamer awoke with a smile. His melancholy left with his dream.

Naturally, the dreamer was or became a believer. For a believer, God is [00:04:00] and therefore is everywhere, in every being. In every sight, in every sound. For a non-believer, it is the absence of God that fills the universe. And yet, even the non-believer is compelled to admit that there is one place from which God cannot be removed, and that is in the Bible. There isn't a book so inspired, so dominated by God, as the Book of Books. Some thinkers may imagine man or the cosmos without God, but not the Bible. Remove God from scripture, and there is no scripture.

*Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve'et ha'aretz*, God is right there at the beginning of all things, in the beginning God created heaven and earth. Is God the beginning? The seventy sages Ptolemy commissioned to translate the Bible into Greek, [00:05:00] although they lived and worked in solitary cells, changed the first verse into *Elohim bara bereshit*, God in the beginning created heaven and earth. The reason? So as not to

lend credence to heretics who might claim that there was or is a God named Bereshit. Beginning is a word, not a name. And incidentally, in yeshiva circles, to which I belonged, we were not really impressed with the fact that seventy sages who spent days and nights in solitary cells came out with the same translation. We said, big deal. (laughter) To be isolated, not to have to argue, and they came out with the same translation? Nothing surprising. Put them around a table. (laughter)

[00:06:00] Let them form a committee.

Usually, we refer to God as Hashem, the name. But he has many names in the Bible: Elokim, Kel, Adonai, YHVH, the Tetragram. Because of this multiplicity, certain critics of religious history maintain that the Torah was written not by God, *kavyachol*, not even by his faithful servant Moses. But by several different authors at various points in time. Do they accuse God or Moses of retroactive plagiarism? We do not intend to go into that debate tonight. Tonight, we shall remain within the realm of our topic, which is God's presence, or God's place, in Scripture. For we believe that just as everything about life is revealed in life, [00:07:00] everything about God is to be found in both his Torah, which is the story of his silence and his word, and in those who study it.

And so, we are about to begin our thirtieth annual encounters and pilgrimages. And explore our fascination with Jewish tales and so, according to tradition, allow me to open our customary parentheses and indulge in some preliminary remarks.

One, no matter how we count, and I count poorly, backward or forward, including or omitting the first appearance in the poetry center, thirty years have passed since I first spoke from this stage. Sitting in the same chair, (laughter) at the same table, and looking at some of the same faces who then, admitted, were a [00:08:00] bit younger. Two, for our first study session then as now, we sought to explore the magic intensity of a Biblical text with its infinite variety of interpretations. We drew portraits of the first family. I do not refer to the one in the White House, but of Adam and Eve, and then of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Job, always relying on those sources handed down to us from generation to generation.

And finally, a warning. This time, our task may prove more difficult. How can we expect to paint a portrait of the one being who will forever remain invisible? I know in the golden age of television, special effects are known to sow even more difficult problems. In the written domain, the endeavor [00:09:00] seems more original. Don't be surprised if a full-

page ad appears in the *New York Times* next week, announcing the dramatic publication of God's first exclusive autobiography.

(laughter) Well, we shall not go that far. Our plan is simply to study together what Scripture tells us about God's design for his people, and all people. So, God in the Bible only? Can one say that God is in one place alone? That he is here, which means not there? That he is inside this hall, but not outside? Even if this were, there may be some latecomers who may use it as an excuse not to come in. They would be wrong. They should come in. [00:10:00]

I am told that there is an echo in the hall. Can you hear me well? Better? Thank you. As I was saying, tonight's inquiry leads us to a series of obstacles, and the first is obvious. Objecting to imagery in all its forms, there cannot be a portrait of God. God does not belong to a museum. [00:11:00] God refuses to be shown. How, then, do we explain the various descriptions given of him in the Torah? Let's study. The first question in scripture is "ayeka." Where are you? It is God who is asking, not Adam. Remember the story, having eaten of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve fled from God and went into hiding somewhere in the Garden of Eden. "Ayeka," where are thou, God wanted to know. Are we permitted to wonder why Adam did not do what we often do, namely, turn the question around? Why didn't

he ask God where he was, while the first living couple yielded to its first culinary temptation?

Adam and Eve's behavior is strange. They are [00:12:00] curious about food, but not about God. They never went as far as to ask him who he was. Let's face it: the situation is somewhat paradoxical. Even when we discuss in the Bible Adam's terror, Cain's defiance, Abraham's trials, and Joseph's temptation, it is God's will and justice that we continuously confront. The Bible speaks more of God's actions than of God himself. As Kafka, one is more often than not unable to speak of God, at best one may speak to God. One cannot lock God inside words or definitions. In a way, it is close to what Augustine says of time: everybody knows what it is, until one has to explain it. And this is particularly true of God, whose first endeavor was to create time. [00:13:00]

In other words, to the extent that it is given to the human being to know God, at least in his appearance, in his eminence, it implies not his essence but his acts. And that even his acts, we know them, but not their outcome. We may grasp them in the present, but not their repercussions for the future. In other words, we know of God only what he wants us to know. Only what he reveals to us. God himself will forever transcend human

comprehension and philosophical formulae. Definitions relate to man alone. Created by God, Adam shapes his own story in which the finite meets the infinite. Once born, the mortal man will forever be linked to his immortal creator. All human memories, be they of darkness or of light, ultimately merge with God's.

Thus, God undergoes changes of character, mood, and attitude, [00:14:00] just as man does and more so. At first, he is homogenous, the all-knowing creator, the all-powerful ruler. He is endowed with many qualities and attributes, so that he seems quite mercurial. Always full of surprises. He wants to be both feared and loved. At times, he is charitable, at others, inflexible. He is capable of rage but also of sudden serenity. When he is angry, the whole world is threatened. When he is forgiving, his offering is pure joy. He is what we all are, but also what we are not. We are not meant to be alone. It's in the Bible. God alone is God. God alone is alone.

In Genesis, God immediately appears as the primary creator, [00:15:00] the origin of history and source of all memory. Without him, nothing would have been possible. As Maimonides formulates it in his 13 Articles of Faith, God is forever the first, which means not only is He the first of all things, He is the first in all things. *Bara* is the second word, but the first

word is in the text, and it means "created." What a mysterious word it is. Rich in significance, suggesting thought, power, domination. God is He who creates. He alone creates, *yesh mi'eyin*. Only He makes presence emerge from emptiness, being out of nothingness, heaven and Earth out of chaos. He is the one who created light [00:16:00] and created darkness. In our prayers, we say, "*yotzer or u-vorei choshekh*", He is the one who created light and also who created darkness.

And of course, there is a question. Don't we know that light is the absence—the presence, whereas darkness is the absence of light? No, we don't. In God's terms, and perhaps in the terms of the poet, darkness has its own substance. It carries God's mark as well. One can create darkness, which is as strong, as powerful, and as creative, perhaps, as light is. So, God has created in the beginning creation itself. How did God accomplish that? We do not know. Later, he does tell us how the world [00:17:00] was created, with the word "*Vayomer*". And he said, "Is language necessary and indispensable to the creative process? No. Creation may occur without words, but there is creation in words. Language can be creative, it can precede and announce creation." First, God said, Let us create light. Then there was light. His intent always precedes the

event. He said, Let us make man and woman, and let them rule over nature, and it happened.

It is as if he had an impulsive desire to hold the human world in his hands. Why did he need that? Does it mean that God, *kavyachol*, became bored with the singing of angels? Absolutely, the question is proper. Why in the world did God [00:18:00] need a world? Our sages tell us why. *Lichvodo*, God needed man to be glorified by man, or according to another interpretation, to bring glory to himself. And I would like to suggest perhaps a third interpretation. And what if *lichvodo* referred not to God, but to man? As if God were to say, All I created was destined to enhance not my glory, but his, man's glory. To enable him to climb higher and higher, from distress to triumph. And look what he is doing with what I gave him.

I know that we could spend the entire evening analyzing the first chapter of Genesis without ever going beyond the sixth day. For instance, we have a problem -- a scientist [00:19:00] would say that we have a problem with numbers. If we believe that the world was created 5,757 years ago. Was it? Are the years really years? An anecdote, which is a true anecdote. A scientist wrote once a letter which I have seen to the late Rebbe of Lubavitch, *zichrono livracha*. Saying to him, Rebbe,

you are a scientist. You studied physics. How can you believe that the world was created 5,757 years ago, when scientific instruments today can prove exactly -- can pinpoint -- we find a fossil that is, let's say, 60 thousand years old. How is it possible? And Lubavitcher Rebbe answered, "Oh, it's very simple. If God could create the world, he could put in the world the 60-thousand-year fossil." (laughter) [00:20:00]

So, we could spend the entire night analyzing the first chapter of Genesis. But we shall not do that. First, because unlike God, on more than one level, our time is limited. Second, because it is prohibited by our sages to delve into *Ma'aseh Bereishit*, probing the secret of the beginning is a forbidden part of mystical inquiry. One must study it alone, and never aloud. Well, unless we plan to remain silent, we better continue our pursuit of God in his own story as narrated in his book. When we study the chapter with Adam and Eve, we feel that he is a proud landowner, giving an important visitor a guided tour of his domain. He shows him his garden with its rivers, its fruit trees, and points particularly at two [00:21:00] that are endowed with special powers.

And since Adam is single, God takes on the role of matchmaker, and introduces him to his charming wife. And then, he offers

them some nutritional advice, of which, of which tree to eat or which to avoid. He pretends surprise when the newlyweds choose to disobey him. In panic, they go underground and God asks Adam the question, quoted earlier, "ayeka," where are you? And strangely, most commentators fail to wonder why God didn't address the same question to Eve. Why only to Adam? Was it simply a matter of divine chivalry? In parentheses, a story, which I have told, but it always bears repeating. This story is again of the Lubavitcher, the first Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad, who was in jail, [00:22:00] and the warden was a Biblical scholar. And he came to the Rabbi, and said, "I read the Bible, and I read the Book of Genesis, and I can't understand, can you explain it to me? When God said to Adam, 'Where are you?' is it possible, is it conceivable, that God didn't know where Adam was?" And the Baal HaTanya, the author of the Tanya, said, "Sir, God knew, Adam didn't." (laughter)

But the next episode shows God witnessing history's first marital quarrel. Adam pointing at Eve, it's her fault, not mine. Eve answering, it isn't mine either, it's the serpent's doing. And all three are punished, and so we follow God as he assumes a new role, as a judge in a family court. At this point, matters of law and order seem to occupy God most.

[00:23:00] Take the story of Cain and Abel, when the older brother commits humankind's first murder. God asks him, "Where is your brother Abel?" Here again, we may wonder aloud. Is it conceivable that God didn't know that Abel was no longer alive? He knew, but then why the interrogation? Was he seeking to entrap the defendant? Let's stop for a moment, we have just retold two episodes of creation. Both are puzzling, and profoundly disturbing. They allow us to suppose that both Adam and Eve, and their sons, could perfectly well think that God was not omniscient.

And let's go one step further. What if they had transgressed the divine commandment only to ascertain whether God was truly God? And what if their actions were intended merely as a test? And this tension between God and man continues to the very end [00:24:00] of the Biblical narration, and beyond. God is everything at one point but homogenous. Granted, God always wins. But what does his triumph, forever temporary, mean? Does it prove his infinite capacity for patience? His ability, perhaps, to start again an adventure whose outcome man never grasps?

For the Bible is that, too, a book of new beginnings. It is no accident that the tale of Cain's exile is followed by a long

list of his descendants. Such and such gave birth to such and such, who lived to 130 or 420 years. Each verse contains an entire life, of which literally, nothing but names and dates of birth and death have been recorded. One might think that all those people were born only to give life [00:25:00] to other people, who, in turn, will do the same. Until the appearance of Noah, whom God seems to love, since he is destined not only to have a long life, but also to enjoy a rather spectacular survival. And here, for the first time, we discover yet another of God's traits. He is open to remorse, and to sadness. And let us read the text.

When man began to increase on Earth, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw the daughters of man and found them of such beauty that they took wives from those that pleased them. Said the Lord, "My breath shall not abide in man forever, for he too is flesh, even if he lives 120 years. It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim, the giants, the fallen angels, [00:26:00] inhabited the Earth. Married daughters of man, and gave them their children, who were the heroes, the man of renown." This obscure, strange passage at least fills us with wonder, but also with fear, and listen further. "And the Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on Earth, and how every divine plan was nothing but evil. And the Lord regretted that

he had made man on land, and his heart was saddened. Said the Lord, I will blot out from the Earth the man I created together with the animals and birds. I regret that I made them."

Reading this, I cannot help but be incredulous. What? God, disappointed? God, surprised at the consequences of human behavior? Doesn't God know that people are capable [00:27:00] of everything? When dominated by instincts, they did the wrong thing, chose the wrong path, married the wrong spouses, so what? At that time, long before Moses and his Torah and ours as well, there were no laws. No prohibitions. There was no tradition of social or ethical conduct. Why, then, were they punished? In the name of what justice did the Lord decide to nearly erase the human species from the surface of the Earth? We are about to disregard his sense of charity, but then we stumble upon a short sentence. "*V'Noach matzah chein b-einei AdoShem*", and Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord."

Let's review the most significant thing, shall we? We have observed God's imagination in creating [00:28:00] the universe. We have heard his majestic style in conversing with Adam. We have felt his wrath in punishing Cain, and his capacity for remorse during the generation of the floods, *dor haMabul*. When realizing that something had gone wrong with his grandiose early

and earthly endeavors, now we find in him in yet another quality. The supreme being is capable of a change of mind and heart? In other words, he, God, Almighty, can be self-critical. The word "*Vayinacheim*" means both he comforted himself and he was sorry. In passing judgment on his creation, the creator has also judged himself. [00:29:00] But then, instead of irrevocably giving up on humanity, God endows it with yet another virtue: hope. And the story of Noah is one of destruction, but also of salvation. Now, God appears consoled and consoling. By saving one man and his family, he ensures humankind's endless future.

But has God forgotten the others? The innocent victims of the floods? There must have been children. What about them? God forgets nothing. Only we forget. We too quickly turn the pages of our lives, as well as of Biblical history. We follow Noah's survival and forget those who did not survive. We so cherish God's reaffirmation of his faith in his creation that we forget how disturbed we were, [00:30:00] when we read about the world that was destroyed. We prefer to think of God as the friend of all his children, God is good, God is forgiving, God is eternally linked to the very concept of promise and hope. The rainbow symbolizes the end of tragedy, the beginning of a dream. No more collective reprisals, no more cosmic perils. Still, the

euphoric period is short-lived. The *dor haMabul*, the generation of the floods, will soon be followed by the *dor haPalagah*, the generation of Babel. And God reveals again another aspect of his nature, as it were. He then shows that he favors interpreters and translators.

Remember the story, all the peoples of the world decided one day to establish a kind of United Nations, whose goal would be to erect a gigantic Tower of Babel, [00:31:00] ascend to heaven, and become famous. Logically, God should have appreciated this human outburst of international solidarity. Instead, he repudiated it. And since all the idealistic rebels spoke the same tongue, which should have pleased him, he made them speak different languages. That was meant to be their punishment. But what kind of punishment was it? Wasn't it really a blessing? Could culture and civilization exist without their multilingual components? And so, we realize that we have just learned another lesson about God. What man conceives as harshness may in fact turn out to be beneficial to his or her development. God is mysterious, and surprising are his ways.

Noah pleased him. [00:32:00] But Abraham is close to him. Abraham is his chosen friend and partner. Their relationship offers us a remarkable study in human character, and in God's

responses to those he loves. Abraham, the first believer, the first messenger, the first to fight for his sake, the first ready to sacrifice himself for his glory, and for his truth. Who discovered whom? In Scripture, it is God, who having recognized Abraham's unique qualities, entrusted him with difficult but rewarding missions. Listen to a brief passage dominated by a striking crescendo. "And the Lord said to Abraham, go forth from your land, your native land, and from your father's home. Go to the land that I will show you. I intend to make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great. And you shall be a blessing.

[00:33:00] I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you, and all the families of the Earth shall be blessed or bless themselves by you."

Hearing all these beautiful, poetic statements, how could Abraham hesitate? Naturally, he obeyed. Alone in the immensity of the world, this son of pagan parents, and important, influential parents, he believed in God, and made his belief known. And once more, God reveals a new aspect of his being. With every page, we discover something about God. On one hand, he subjects those he loves to the harshest trials. On the other, he adopts a surprisingly light tone when occasionally playing games with them. The relations between God and Abraham

are both moving and puzzling. [00:34:00] They, too, undergo changes. Rigorous toward Adam and Eve, irascible with Cain, pitiless towards the wicked generation of the floods, God seems infinitely flexible, understanding, even tender, with Abraham, whom he treats not only with kindness but also with humor. Remember their encounter about the sinful city of Sodom. God plans to annihilate it, Abraham to save it.

And listen to their negotiation. Quote, "Abraham came forward to the Lord and said, 'Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there should be 50 tzaddikim, 50 righteous men and women in the city? Would you still wipe out the place and not spare it for the sake of the 50 innocent who are in it? Far be it for you to do such a thing, to bring death upon the righteous [00:35:00] as well as the wicked, so that innocent and guilty are submitted to the same fate. Far be it from you, shall the judge of everybody and everything on Earth not do justice?'" And the Lord answered, "If I find in Sodom 50 tzaddikim, 50 righteous, I will spare the entire place for their sake." Then Abraham spoke again. "I know I dare address you, oh Lord. I who am but dust and ashes. What if the 50 righteous, we lack five? Will you destroy the entire city on account of the five?" And the Lord answered, 'I shall not destroy if I find 45 there.'" But Abraham spoke to him again.

"What if 40 should be found there?" And God replied, "I will not do it for the sake of 40." And Abraham said, "May my words not anger you, but what if 30 should be found there?" Said God, [00:36:00] "I will do nothing if 30 will be found." And Abraham said, "Allow me to continue speaking to the Lord. What if only 20 will be found?" And God answered, "For the sake of 20, I will not destroy it." And Abraham said, "Do not be angry if I speak for the last time. What if only 10 will be found there?" Said God, "I will not destroy it, on account of the 10."

Isn't this something new that we just discovered about God? Doesn't this sound like a conversation overheard on Wall Street? (laughter) In good days. Admitted, this episode is funny. Even hilarious. Did Abraham really think that if there were scores of righteous people in Sodom, God would be unaware of them? Why did he use numbers as an argument? [00:37:00] Since when do numbers have anything to do with justice or compassion? And why did he stop at 10? Would the dooming of nine children or nine just men be any less unjust? In truth, I do not understand Abraham. Nor do I understand God. Why did he play these games with a loyal ally and friend? Didn't he know from the outset the true nature and composition of Sodom's corrupt population? Why did he allow Abraham to plead, when he knew his pleas would be futile? Was this God's idea of a joke? Or did he quite

simply want to teach him something useful? Yes, maybe he wanted to teach Abraham, the father of us all, a very useful thing.

How to bargain before striking a deal. (laughter)

[00:38:00] God's forbearance, in this case, is usually explained by his very special love for Abraham. He allowed him to take certain liberties. But then why did God submit Abraham to so many trials and tribulations? Why did he inflict upon him fear and trembling, in ordering him to bring his son, his only son, the one he loved, Isaac, as an offering on Mount Moriah? Where is God in this tale? With the father or with the son? Is he also with Sarah, the desperate mother, who while kept in darkness during the whole story of the Akedah, is struck down by panic while thinking that she lost both her husband and her son. Why did God, after Moriah, stop talking to Abraham, as he did with Aaron, the High Priest, after the unfortunate incident

[00:39:00] with the golden calf? Why is God so demanding of some, and so forgiving with others? Why does God speak at times, and ceases to speak at others?

Another point which I find difficult to comprehend. He is harshest, always, with his own people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the people of Israel, whom he chose to free from Egyptian bondage, to become his privileged witness.

Gone is his humor. Gone his sentimentality, and even his elegance. With his people, he is abrupt, unyielding. Why? He had assigned Israel an objective, and it will be attained, at any cost. In order to prove that at times, things must get worse before getting better, he uses a new psychological method, "*Va-y'chazeik et lev Paroh*" and God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, whose cruelty towards the poor Hebrew slaves grew and grew as a result of that.

For God, the goal sanctifies the means. The supreme and ultimate incarnation of the absolute. He demands absolute obedience. The Hebrews complain? Too bad. They will eventually understand. When their faith declines, when they feel inadequate in coping with the enormity of the events, he reprimands them. Poor Moses. Between the wrath of the slaves and God's orders, he himself had difficulty understanding. One day after a particularly painful meeting with Pharaoh, he could hold back no longer. "Oh Lord," he exclaims. "Why are you so harsh with your people? And why did you send me here? Each time I speak to Pharaoh in your name, he torments these people more than before. Why don't you save it?"

[00:41:00] God is never as demanding when dealing with an individual as he is with the community of Israel. On each

occasion, God makes promises to Moses. Promises of a bright future for the Jewish people, and each time, he hardens Pharaoh's spirit. Poor Pharaoh. Now it is not he, but God, who is responsible for the delaying tactics, and yet it is he, Pharaoh, who will be punished. Does the story aim to teach us that when it comes to bringing freedom to slaves and peace to victims, one must never say, God made me wait? In other words, does the story teach us that Pharaoh's mistake was that he did not oppose God's will, when God made his heart become hardened?

What is certain is that as everywhere in the Bible, in Egypt also, God is deeply [00:42:00] involved in the affairs of Israel. And in general, in the amazing progression of human history. His intervention is felt at every step, at every crossroad. He wants his people to worry about details, and at the same time, not to lose sight of the big picture, of the ultimate goal. His main effort is to persuade the former slaves that freedom is to be won every day, and never to be taken for granted. And this applies to their Jewishness as well. If they want to belong to the people of Israel, that is fine with God. But then they must cast off any trace of idolatry, or any desire to assimilate it.

In this respect, he has never been so pitiless. His laws against idolatry are the harshest. For God, no offense can be greater. Nothing escapes [00:43:00] him. Nothing remains without a divine reaction. Before, he could lose patience with some of their attitudes, but he was never jealous. Now, he is. "*Kel kana v'nakeim.*" God is sensitive. He's jealous. And he exacts vengeance. Only he is allowed to exact vengeance. His laws are strict; his decisions instantaneous and cutting. The Bible is full of sins, calling for capital punishment. A man violates the sanctity of the Shabbat, he is executed. Korah and his clan rebel against Moses, an earthquake swallows them. Many men yield to the beauty of pagan women, too many -- 24,000 of them perish in an epidemic. The slightest sin is repressed. [00:44:00] The people complain of not having enough meat? God orders them to eat so much meat that they are disgusted. Ten of the 12 scouts bring back unfavorable reports about the land of Canaan? They did not live to see it.

Who, then, is God in the Bible? A religious visionary? A fanatic? A political leader? A military commander? An administrator? A judge? Or, of the above, and much more -- as always, much more. God is always the unknown. Whatever we know is only part of what we are supposed to know and will never know. Was it the French philosopher Blaise Pascal who calls the

Bible a love affair between the people and the God of Israel?  
[00:45:00] Does he sound naïve? At times, the Bible reads like a war story, a story of wars: between Israel and her neighbors, between Israel and God, between Israel's sons, who believe in their national destiny, and those who don't. There was never unanimity in Israel, nor is there now.

Actually, it was a miracle that the people, so often rebellious, continued to follow the path that comes from God, and that leads to God. When the Prophet claims "*Zacharti lakh chesed ni'urayich*", I shall remember the grace of your youth when you followed me in the desert. Oh, he may be too kind. His statement is not entirely correct. Was it truly love that moved the people of Israel to go with God into the desert? Didn't God need to use a little bit of force? Didn't they accept liberty and truth [00:46:00] under duress? How many times in the Bible were the people and their God, our God, on opposing sides on ethical issues? They were governed by fear, not love. Only a minority led by Moses and Joshua and Kalev ben Yefune. Only that minority feels freely bound to God.

Few were those who transformed their lives into acts of love for God. Nevertheless, there was one moment when all felt close to him. After the crossing of the Red Sea, they joined Moses and

sang a song of gratitude to their divine savior, and God appreciates gratitude. And listen to a midrash. When the people of Israel escaped the Egyptians, they sang his praise. Said God, "I created Adam, and he did not sing my praise. I saved Abraham from the burning furnace, and he did not sing [00:47:00] my praise. I saved Isaac on Mount Moriah, and Jacob from the hands of Esau, and they did not sing my praise." But when the Israelites sang his praise at the Red Sea, God said, "This is what I was waiting for." A song of gratitude is almost by definition a song of love, and the other way around.

Now, while some may see it as an adventure story, the Bible is to others a love story. The story of a three-way love affair, between Israel and God, between the Torah and Israel, between the Bible and Israel, and ultimately, between God and the Torah. The midrash claims that it was for the sake of the Torah that God created the world. Without the Torah, there would be no Israel. Before making critical decisions, it is the Torah that God consults. When Moses felt compelled [00:48:00] to use blackmail in order to save his people from God's wrath, following the disastrous affair of the golden calf, he audaciously declared, unless you forgive them, "*m'cheini nah misif'r'kha*". Unless you forgive your people, erase my name from the book. And God bowed to his demand. The Torah is too

important to him. And what would the Book of Moses be without Moses?

What is the Torah? It means study and teaching. It means the practice of mitzvot, it means the faith in God to articulate them. The Torah is more a blueprint for the future than a history of the past. It contains the meaning of life, and the solutions to its problems. "*Hafokeh bah v'hafokeh bah, d'cholah vah*", says the Talmud. Turn and turn the pages of the Torah, turn them again, for everything is in them. [00:49:00] That is why in our prayers we find the expression "*ahavat Torah*," love for Torah, as frequently as "*Yirat Shamayim*," fear of heaven. It is in the Torah that the people of Israel met for the first time the God of Israel, and they continue meeting there to this day.

It is remarkable to note the importance tradition grants the Torah, called, *Torat Chayim*, the love of love, the love of light, *Torat Emet*, the teaching of truth. It contains primary message and ultimate secret. In Talmudic literature, it is compared to a strange medication that cures the just and kills the wicked. It's also compared to wine, and to water, and to fire, and to a double-edged sword. If God chose to hand down the Torah in the desert, it was to alert all the people in the

world so they could come and claim it for themselves. But Israel alone [00:50:00] wanted to receive it. That's why God loves Israel. And that is why Israel clings to the Torah. It is her ideal and idealistic remedy for the exile. When Jews suffer in exile, says the midrash, let them study Torah, and they will not feel exile. But then, isn't it because of the Torah that they are in exile? It's because of the Torah that they are persecuted. Listen to an admirable passage in *Vayikrah Rabbah*, Israel addresses God in these words. "Master of the universe, if we were uncircumcised and idol-worshippers, if we were violating your commandments, your enemies would not hate us, nor would they persecute us the way they do. If we suffer, it is only because of our love for your Torah."

This is a theme that runs through our history. Strange, last week, I was teaching my class [00:51:00] -- a class on imagination and exile -- and among other things, we taught Sholem Aleichem. Laughter in exile as a form of imagination. And we read *Tevye der milchiker*, "Fiddler on the Roof," as a philosophical book. It's not the film, but the book. (laughter) The book is better. And when you read *Tevye der milchiker*, the "Fiddler on the Roof," it's extraordinary. The way he speaks to God, the whole book actually is not only about his daughters, but about he and God. And you have the feeling that he is

actually quoting midrashim. Same thing. When he says, "God, if I were a goy, would you also be so cruel to me?" And at one point, I had a strange feeling that Tevye is the Book of Job with a sense of humor. (laughter)

[00:52:00] But that is why, really, because of our attachment to the Torah, according to our sages, when the persecutions grow unbearable, it is the Torah itself, dressed in mourning, that intercedes in heaven on behalf of the victims, said Rabbi Levi. At Sinai, Israel asked God for two favors. One, to behold his glory. Two, to hear his voice. And both were granted. But then, they grew weak. So weak that they were unable to stand upright. The reason for their weakness? Under the impact of what they saw and heard, their souls in ecstasy left them. But they were saved by the Torah. The Torah said to God, "Oh Lord, would a king on the day his daughter gets married slay all the young men in the palace? The entire world is rejoicing, and [00:53:00] your sons die?" That is when the children of Israel, thanks to the Torah, recovered their souls and their lives.

That's the eternal image. The Torah is the bride, and Israel her groom. Could that link be destroyed? Believers say no. What do non-believers say? Even they must admit its impact on Jewish survival. As a motivating source for education, the

Torah is unsurpassable. Speaking with boundless admiration of Ezra, the scribe, who inaugurated public readings of the Torah, Josephus Flavius states that thanks to him, to Ezra, no people has ever attained such a degree of pedagogy and knowledge. One can say of the Torah what is said about the Ark of the Covenant. It carries those who carry it. Teaching Torah has priority over [00:54:00] the construction of the temple. When Jewish children lack teachers, it is the angel Mattatron who teaches them. Of divine essence, the Torah is timeless. In our benedictions, we say blessed be God, not who gave us, but who gives us the Torah. In other words, it is still being handed down every day, and our task is to receive it. And even more, to know that we are meant to receive it, and from whose hands.

Naturally, the question is, when we speak of God in the Talmud, the question is more poetic and more imaginative. Our sages, for instance, wonder, what is he doing since? He wrote a good book. (laughter) What is he doing since? And the sages, they have all kinds of ideas, all kinds of beautiful ideas. One of them, for instance, says that God is building ladders [00:55:00] that go up and down, whatever happens in life is what God has already tried to foresee. And the beautiful part is, *haKadosh Baruch Hu, m'vazeig z'vugim*, he is a matchmaker, which means he is the one who is responsible for man and woman to meet. And

therefore, if something goes wrong, *chas v'chaliladon't* blame yourself. (laughter)

Our attachment to the Torah, which we feel so strongly on -- especially on two holidays, at least Shavuot, when we receive, and also on Simchat Torah, which is one of my favorite holidays, when we dance with the Torah, when we kiss the Torah, when we love the Torah publicly. And there is something also contemporary, and this is a story, a true story. Having survived the atrocities of the death camps, a Jew returns to his village somewhere in Eastern Europe. [00:56:00] The inhabitants observe him suspiciously. They are afraid he may have come to reclaim his house and his fields. His home is no longer his. Strangers live in it. The head of the family, a peasant, runs up to the attic and comes back with sacred scrolls in his arms. "Take these," says he to the Jew. "They are yours. Your father gave them to me for good keeping. He gave me nothing else, but remember, this Torah, you are getting it from me, not from God. From me, Ivan."

Well, it ain't so. The Torah of Israel binds us to the history of Israel. To the God of Israel. Not to the enemies of Israel. There is something in the Torah that moves even those who do not celebrate its sanctity. When German soldiers burned down

synagogues in Poland, there were young Jews, not all from religious homes, they were from Hashomer [00:57:00] Hatzair. From left-wing Zionist organizations. From communist organizations. Who ran inside the burning synagogues to save the Sifrei Torah, the scrolls, and some paid for it with their lives. For such is the covenant between God, Israel, and the Torah. According to a midrash, God said to the Jews, "You protect the Torah, and I will protect you."

Therefore, before Purim, when the physical existence of the Jewish community in Persia was threatened, Esther and Mordechai fasted instead of taking up arms. They fasted and prayed to remind God of his obligations. But when the Jewish spirit was in peril, during Hanukkah, Jewish warriors took up arms and fought to protect the Torah, again reminding God that they too were faithful to the covenant, in their way. In his 13 Articles of Faith, Maimonides cites God's attributes. He was the first and will [00:58:00] be the last. And that image can be found in the Torah. God is at the beginning of the book as he is at the end. If, at the beginning, he deals with the whole universe, at the end, he is present to Moses as he is about to die. God alone takes charge of his burial. The creator of the world has become a gravedigger.

In conclusion, we have tried to analyze the Biblical texts so as to discern, or perhaps define, God's place and role in -- everything. We raised many questions, and, of course, all remain open. Such is the weakness of man, that all his or her perceptions of God belong to the realm of questions, not answers. Man will never know who God is, nor where he is. Moses pleaded with him, *Hareini na et k'vodekha* show me who you are. And [00:59:00] Moses himself could not obtain from God the authorization to behold his countenance. God is in the Bible only to tell us not that he is at a particular place in a special situation, but simply that he is.

As a Jew, I believe that it is possible to be a Jew with God or against God, but not without God. In other words, atheism is not really Jewish. Though heresy can be. (laughter) In our entire religious literature, we encounter no trace of atheism. The heretic, like Elisha ben Abuyah, denies not God's existence, but only his justice. In truth, the Torah wants us to believe that God is kind and harsh, demanding and forgiving, friendly and authoritarian, pleased and disappointed, [01:00:00] and sad. At times, we are told, God sobs. This is not in the Bible. This is only in the midrash. But, as you know, I love the midrash. A legend. When a just person dies, says the midrash, God weeps. And his tears fall in the great ocean, producing

mighty sounds that reverberate from one end of the world to the other. Oh, I like this legend. It shows the pathos, the compassion of the Almighty. But then, at times, I wonder. Why didn't he weep when six million of his children perished in fire? And then, I thought, perhaps he did. Perhaps he did weep, and his tears fell in the ocean, [01:01:00] and they produced mighty sounds. But perhaps nobody listened. (audience applause)

**M:**

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