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Elie Wiesel Archive

Elie Wiesel:

(audience applause) In the beginning, the tale is not about Jews. God created heaven and earth, the sun and the moon, plants and trees, and all the creatures living in the air and in the sea. It is only afterwards, on the sixth day, that he created men and women, to whom the entire universe was destined to belong. As one French philosopher said, "What a pity that the creation of man came so late, when the Creator must have been a bit tired." (laughter) In Talmudic literature, the sequence of events possesses its own logic. Its own beauty. Our sages believe that because man followed all [00:01:00] other creatures, he was meant to be guest of honor, the crown jewel of his creation. Before inviting a guest to come and stay with you, there must be a place, in this case, a palace. Where he and his children could dwell and prosper, simply as human beings, and part of the human family.

And Adam and Eve were those guests. Were they Jewish? No, they were not. Nor were their children, Cain and Abel. Noah wasn't Jewish either. In the Biblical text, the story of creation is totally devoid of any Jewish reference. Actually, before

Abraham and Sarah appeared on the stage, none of the characters were Jewish. Some were good in the eyes of God and to their fellow humans; others were not. There were among them just men and women, who were blessed with longevity, and wicked people, who perished at a young age, and the other way around. [00:02:00] All were pagans, and yet, they occupy a place, a rightful place, in creation.

Thus, students of Scripture, especially Jewish students, are entitled to question the source of our religious and national memory. Why are we told these stories? Why does the destiny of primitive pagans concern us at all? Why didn't the Almighty make things easier for us, and for himself? He could have decreed right from the start that the first man and the first woman were Jews. As all their descendants would be. Thus, the world we inherited would have been theirs, and ours, for all time.

Why did history have to wait centuries upon centuries before discovering its first Jews? Was it because God sought to protect his people from vicious anti-Semitic attacks? [00:03:00] So we could not be accused in all languages, in all situations, of -- forever wanting to be the first? Or was it God's attempt to tell his people, beware of misplaced vanity.

You are not the only ones in my world. Others have preceded you, and some may even accompany you on the long road towards redemption. But then, God would remind other nations that it was through his people, the people of Abraham, that he has revealed himself to the world. It is through his people, the people of Moses, that he has given the law. It is through his people, the people of David and Isaiah, Sarah and Ruth, that his will is to be fulfilled. And so, the Bible written by Moses, a Jew, speaks also of the lives of men and women who were pagans till the end. [00:04:00] Their story too is worth remembering. In other words, they too were part of Jewish history.

So tonight, we intend to deal with several case histories. Major figures in Scripture. All played essential parts in the drama of our people. What has been our tradition's attitude towards them? Once we answer that question, we may discover what Jews felt, and perhaps still do, towards non-Jews in general. But a few preliminary remarks are in order. First, it is important to note that pagans are not considered to be strangers in the Bible. They are part of its texture. Without them, the Biblical narrative would not be the tale of endless defiance and confrontation between individuals and communities that it is. Ishmael and Esau belonged to the family of Israel itself. As for Jethro, he is [00:05:00] different. But he's

never seen as an outsider. How could Moses' father-in-law be an outsider? We owe him so much. We owe him Moses' personal and judicial welfare.

Years ago in this very hall, we had occasion to examine the three Biblical categories of stranger, and discussed their Talmudic interpretations. The *Ger*, or as we call him, the *Ger Tzedek*, is a convert to justice or a convert moved by justice. And the Talmud ranks him and her among the highest members of the community. We are commanded to love this kind of convert. *"V'ahavta et ha-Ger"*. Below the Ger stands the Nochri, from the word *"nichar,"* meaning far away. A distance. He is almost one of us. He works with us, lives among us, but remains different. [00:06:00] Different from us by his religion. Nevertheless, we are duty-bound to show the *Nochri* respect and affection. But then, there is the *Zar*. The hostile stranger. Who remains in our midst with a soul intent of harming us. What makes this stranger so dangerous is that he is one of us. He is Jewish. In the Bible, his role is infinitely worse than that of the gentiles, or the heathens. And we must keep away from him, for he incarnates hatred.

What was true some 33 years ago, when we began these annual encounters -- then, there were four, now it's one -- remains so

tonight. We gather here to study together, and in doing so, to celebrate a passion for learning [00:07:00] which is as old as Jewish memory itself. Few endeavors are as sacred and as glorified by our tradition. To teach, which means to study, has a higher priority than the construction of the temple in Jerusalem. Who are our aristocrats? The answer was given by the late Louis Finkelstein, z"l. Our aristocrats are the scholars. Whatever we do must be linked to learning. There must be a voice within us, asking day after day, *V'Torah, mah t'hei aleha?"* and what about Torah? If we go on with our work, and we forget the learning, who are we?

Often, we wonder, what would we today say to our ancestors in scripture? What words would we use addressing Noah leaving the Ark, and Isaac the Akedah? [00:08:00] Other times, we must ask ourselves a different way. What would they say to us? Those who build the Tower of Babel, would they give advice to their descendants, today's astronauts? What would Jeremiah say about the peace process? What would Isaiah say to us, Jews and gentiles, in America? Would he simply recite the first chapter of his prophecy, without changing a word or omitting an argument? But then, it would sound such an indictment, that even the special prosecutor would be jealous of his harshness. Well, these are the preliminary remarks, and we shall of course

close the brackets. And to Jews and gentiles alike, open the doors.

[00:09:00] We shall begin our inquiry tonight with Ishmael, the son of Abraham, but not of Sarah. Why is fate so obstinately against him? He is an exemplary victim, forever deserted by happiness. He knows perfectly well, and if he doesn't, the text reminds him all too often, that he is not the son of his father, not the son his father wanted to have. Why [00:10:00] is he constantly subjected to humiliation? Why is he always treated as an intruder? How is he referred to at home, and in the Bible? The son of the maidservant, not the son of Abraham.

Yet he, too, is linked to a divine promise. And this promise was received from an angel by his mother, Hagar, during her pregnancy. Furthermore, his very name, Ishmael, indicates that God listens to him when he cries, and he cried a lot. Better yet, given by both an angel and by Abraham, his name is the only one linked to God. Ishmael, God has heard or God will hear his outcry of pain. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, their names do not evoke God. And yet, in spite of all these positive signs, Ishmael is, since his early childhood, condemned [00:11:00] to lead a life of suffering and rejection.

The angel goes so far as predicting it to his mother in the desert. "You are with child," said the angel. "You will give birth to a son, and you will call him Yshmael, for God has heard his torment. And he will be a *pere adam*," which means a savage man, never at home. *"yado ba-kol, v'yad kol bo"* he will be a kind of busybody, which could mean anything and everything. It could mean that he will be agile, curious, good with his hands, rather with his mind. But Midrashic commentators reveal in him a hostility which is disturbingly precocious and pervasive. For them, *"yado va-kol v'yad kol bo"*means that he will grow up violent and wicked. And if that's not enough, he will grow up a thief. Quote, "A thief [00:12:00] not of money, but of souls," according to Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish.

Even before he is born, this poor boy is accused of weakness and wickedness, whose nature is as vague as it is unfair. He hasn't yet seen the light of day, yet he is already depicted as antisocial and dangerous. As an adolescent, his public image is no better. He plays with his younger brother, Isaac, what's wrong with that? Two brothers playing. The word used is *"metzachek"*, the two must have played and laughed a lot, so what? But the Talmud uses it against him. The most charitable commentator translates it in economic terms: the two brothers may have had a discussion about their inheritance. Yishmael

arguing that being the older son, his share must be greater than Yitzhak's.

Most interpreters [00:13:00] are more extreme in their approach. They see in the word "*metzachek*" a reflection of all that is false and ugly in human nature. They maintain that Yishmael is wildly jealous of his little brother, their father's favorite, which explains Yishmael's murderous instincts. If he could get away with it, he would kill him. Mocking Abraham's laws and his faith in a unique God, in the presence of Yitzhak, according to a midrash, he tries to corrupt him and seduce him to commit acts of debauchery. A hunter, he often goes into the woods with his bow and arrow. Once, we are told, Sarah surprised him as one of his arrows was sent in the direction of her son. Luckily, he missed. That is when Sarah decided to get rid of him, and of his mother.

Is it improper for us to consider the possibility that there is an injustice [00:14:00] at the heart of this story? Why is tradition so hostile towards the firstborn son of the first of our patriarchs? Why is he so blackened in the eyes of readers of the Bible? Is it because of his descendants? Since when is anyone responsible for what his progeny will do centuries later? Is it Ishmael's fault that a Saddam Hussein will make his

citizens tremble in fear at the brutality of his cruel laws? These questions remain open, and at the risk of shocking you, I feel I must confess my awkward empathy for the next character, whom scripture also seems to treat somewhat unfairly. Esau, Jacob's older brother.

In a way, one must feel sorry for him. I see him -- [00:15:00] I visualize him alone, and lonely, always alone. Bitter and distressed. Except for his old father who is blind and helpless, nobody likes him. And least of all, his mother, Rebecca. Her suspicion of him is mixed with animosity, one imagines her always plotting against him. No wonder he is seldom at home. He prefers to be far away from her, to wander in the woods. That is his kingdom, the forest. There, his solitude is less unbearable.

One wonders, why does Rebecca, a good Jewish mother, dislike her older son so much? Even before she gave birth to him, she resented him. Quoting Talmudic sages, Rashi explains, "While pregnant with her twins, she felt each one move when passing different locations. When she was near a house of study, it was Jacob who moved. [00:16:00] Wanting to come out and go and study. Esau did the same, only when she was near a temple of idol worshippers. In other words, they began struggling, even

when they were in their mother's womb. Intrigued, Rebecca went to consult Shem, the head of the celebrated yeshiva bearing his name. And his explanation was clear: each of the twins will found a nation, and the two will be unable to live together. One will ascend only when the other will descend. The rise of the one will mean the other's decline. That is why Isaac's deeply pious spouse favored her younger son. And God, too. Doesn't the text declare, quote, that "The older will be servant of the younger."

Poor Esau. Like Ishmael, he is a prenatal victim, maligned, persecuted, [00:17:00] and sentenced to an accursed destiny. Whatever he does, whether good or bad, is negatively interpreted. Take the incident of his birthright. Imagine him that day, he's hungry, the text says it. Terribly hungry. In fact, he's starving. As for his brother Jacob, he is at home cooking a stew of lentils. "I am tired," says Esau to his brother. "Give me some of your red stuff." "Alright," answers Jacob. "At a certain price. And the price is your rights as firstborn." What could Esau do? He accepts, he's hungry.

Now, a good man should willingly share his meal with his starving brother. Why then is Jacob setting conditions, and why is he asking an exorbitant price? Esau eats and drinks to

diminish his hunger and thirst, [00:18:00] but what does the Midrash say about him? You won't believe it. The Midrash says, *"Hikhnis imo kat shel pritizim "*, he had brought a group of young hooligans to drink with. We may wonder aloud, where in the world does the midrash find even a trace of proof that Esau was not alone at that moment, that he found hooligans? Where do we find a trace that he organized a party, a fiesta? Why are the commentators so hard on him? Not one negative word is uttered about Jacob's business tactics. (laughter) All criticism is directed at Esau, why? Listen.

Said Rabbi Yochanan, "On that day, when he bought a plate of lentils to assuage his hunger, Esau [00:19:00] committed five sins. He raped a girl who had already been engaged to another man. He killed a man. He denied God's existence. He ridiculed the resurrection of the dead and gave up his rights as firstborn." Really? All that in one day? (laughter) Where did Rabbi Yochanan learn about it? On what factual basis did he bring these charges? In general, Esau seems to be a target for slander. For instance, while Jacob stayed home studying, *ish tam yoshev ohelim*, Esau was *ish yodea tzayid*. He loved to go hunting. The word *tzayid* literally means hunting. So what? Is hunting forbidden in the Bible? But for Talmudic commentators, *tzayid* has a different meaning. For them, it means that he was

[00:20:00] deceitful, lying to his father to please him, hypocritically pretending to be excessively pious.

But still. Isn't Jacob more shrewd than he? Hasn't he cheated Esau of his firstborn rights? Hasn't he taken advantage of Esau's hunger? Hasn't he trapped him? Worse, hasn't Jacob usurped Esau's identity when he appeared before his blind father dressed with Esau's clothes, so as to receive the blessings that were lawfully meant for Esau? Had Esau not been starving, would he have done a thing that surely displeased his father? Actually, it was Esau's mother who was responsible, always the mother. If not, open Freud. It was her idea to stage the entire scene. It was [00:21:00] she who masterminded the plot to deprive Esau of what was rightly his. Jacob only followed the instructions. What to wear, and when, what to say, and how. Manipulated by Rebecca, Jacob deceived both his father and his brother.

Was Esau aware of what was happening? Was Isaac? Isaac must have felt something was wrong, for he questioned Jacob. How come, *ha-kol kol Yaakov*, the voice is Jacob's, *v'hayadayim y'dei Esav*, but the hands are Esau's? When he finally, later, heard Esau's tragic cry, he was seized with terror. *Vayecherad Yitzchak charadah g'dolah*. At that moment, according to Rashi,

he saw hell open under him, commented the ancient Tosofists. Isaac trembled twice in his life. Once, during the Akedah, when he saw his father, knife [00:22:00] in hand, ready to slaughter him, and now. But now, his fear was even greater. For he began doubting his own judgment, wondering what sin he could have committed to make him bless the wrong son. What did he think of Jacob then? From his words, it is clear that he was upset with the way he had cheated him. As for Esau, one understands his despairs. He cried out in pain because suddenly, he realized the magnitude of his tragedy. He was the innocent victim of a family plot. His brother's lie was stronger than his father's truth, too late to rectify the facts. Too late to alter the outcome.

And Esau's response? Will he begin hating his brother? Rebecca thinks so; Scripture does not. The text speaks of Jacob's fear, rather than of Esau's intentions. But for Midrashic commentators, they are evil. [00:23:00] For instance. After a lengthy separation, the two brothers met. Esau embraced Jacob. And both of them wept. Yes, Esau too. Was it because he was moved to see his younger brother again? It would have been natural, but the midrash believes that Esau's tears were false. That his friendly behavior was hypocritical. Why then did he weep? Because he had wanted not to kiss his brother, but to

bite him on the neck. And he couldn't. For meanwhile, God had turned Jacob's neck into ivory. Had Esau lost a few teeth? In any case, he felt pain. That's why he sobbed. Strangely, it was Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, the fierce adversary of all heathen [00:24:00] culture, who gave Esau the benefit of the doubt, saying that he had truly been moved by Jacob's humility.

But in general, Esau is always suspected of the worst. This chapter is complex. But it becomes even more so when we invoke a Halakhah in the name of the same Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, which makes Esau Jacob's implacable and eternal enemy. *Halakhah b'yadua* it's an expression which is very rare in Talmud, *Esav soneh et Yaakov*. It is both reasonable to assume and legal to believe that Esau hates Jacob. Usually, of course, we believe in our interpretations that it doesn't mean that what Esau himself, but about all those who in the future centuries incarnate the enemy. That [00:25:00] the enemy, we must believe, that the enemy hates Jews. Why *halakhah bayadua*, why the double -- and the only interpretation that I know is that the Halakha is to be *bayadua*, which means it is law, the Talmudic law, that we must know of the hatred that we Jews elicit in the enemy. But we believe that the enemy of the Jews is the enemy of all people. The enemy of all that is noble in human beings. Who hates, hates everybody. One starts hating

one person, but then hatred is like a cancer, it continues to grow. It goes from limb to limb, and from people to people.

Now, was he, Esau, inhuman? A great Hasidic master [00:26:00] commented when Esau discovered how cheated he had been by Jacob, he shed two tears. And it is because of these two tears that the Jewish people was destined to shed many more tears throughout its exile. Which means that God himself somehow felt sorry for Esau. Was Esau completely innocent? If so, Jacob was completely guilty. But it is more complex than that. In claiming Isaac's blessings, Jacob has not really lied, since he had acquired them legally from his older brother. But then, why did Isaac favor Esau? Is it that he felt sorry for him, since Jacob was Rebecca's favorite? Did he try to balance the injustice done to the firstborn by his mother? Indeed, this is a troubling chapter. No one emerges from it entirely unscathed. [00:27:00] Still, Jews are descendants of Jacob, not Esau. Jacob was a liar, Esau was a hunter. And so, he was moved by and to violence. Between words and deeds, history has chosen to celebrate the first.

Having said that, Jacob's children were not all saints, either. Far from it. What they did to their own brother, Joseph, was evil. So jealous were they of Jacob's excessive love for him

that they relentlessly plotted to kill him. They threw him into a pit filled with snakes and scorpions. And while he was howling with pain, what did they do? They ate their meal. How is one to comprehend their insensitivity? Their heartlessness. How is one to comprehend the attitude of brothers [00:28:00] towards a brother? He was suffering, he was alone, he was in agony. And they were eating. That is why we are told that there are two days that are marked with a black sign in recorded Jewish history, and this is one of them. And the other one is the report that the scouts brought back from the land of Canaan.

Earlier, a tragedy of a different sort occurred. For understandable yet regrettable reasons, Shimon and Levi, self-appointed avengers of their sister's honor, massacred all the just circumcised males of Nablus. The crime was so savage that on his deathbed, Jacob reprimanded them. Should we now feel sorry for the men of Nablus, their victims? Where were they [00:29:00] when their prince raped Dinah? Have they been blamed? Reprimanded and punished for their crime by their own people? Didn't their indifference make them into accomplices? But then, does it mean that Shimon and Levi were just? Did they conduct a proper investigation of the crime? Did they establish the guilt of some and the innocence of others? They decided on

their own to mete out collective punishment; that is why Jacob castigated them. The punishment did not fit the crime.

There is a marvelous commentary of that in the Siftei Chachamim, or Kli Yakar. We know from the text that " *bakina'ani yoshev ha'aretz"*, the surrounding people were strong and they were well-established. When the males were in danger, how come that [00:30:00] the others didn't come to their help? And the answer that the Kli Yakar gives is marvelous. With a sense of humor, tongue in cheek, he says, "What happened to the males? They were circumcised, which means they became Jewish. Who wants to help Jews?" (laughter) In truth, collective guilt and punishment do exist in scripture. They are expressed towards enemies, for example: the Egyptian children, who perished during the Ten Plagues. And also, towards Jews. Often, when they sinned against God or each other, for instance, upon the adoration of the golden calf.

The eternal quarrels, the doubts. On these occasions, divine wrath caused enumerable losses in their ranks. But the fate of one particular tribe was much worse, as is illustrated by the law condemning all Amalekites to death, men, women, and children, to the last. Why? [00:31:00] Because they were the first to attack the Hebrews, who had just left Egypt, physically

exhausted, and spiritually weakened. In their cowardice, they assaulted mainly the old and the sick. That's why they are despised in the Bible. They represent not the strangers, not even the heathens, but the enemy on the level of the absolute. Must one have pity on them? Wait, we are not there yet. We shall talk about them, but we are still in Egypt.

In Egypt, at that time, I believe there, a passionate anti-defamation defender of human rights could easily take on the case of Egypt's Pharaoh. What do we have against him? That he oppressed the Hebrews? They were not the only ones to suffer under his rule. Egypt was full of tribes reduced to slavery. Were the Hebrews more wretched than the others? Not before Moses' reappearance. It was only when the one-time Egyptian prince turned fugitive returned and began mixing in [00:32:00] Egypt's internal affairs that Pharaoh's official policy changed. Is it far-fetched to try to understand him? As a supreme leader of a powerful nation, could he have allowed disorder to destabilize his regime? To God's emissaries, Moses and Aaron, he says, "Go away, you are disturbing the peace. You interfere with people's working habits."
Pharaoh probably though that if he were to yield now, he would end up yielding everywhere. Soon, other tribes would demand the right to live in freedom, and worse, in dignity. And soon,

power would end up in the hands of the rebels. What would Egypt be without its cheap labor? And so, he ordered his taskmasters to be more severe and more brutal than ever. Pharaoh was a harsh leader, true. But when Pharaoh understands the gravity of the situation, he seems ready [00:33:00] and willing to submit to God's will. What happens then? *"Vay'chazeik et-lev Paroh,"* at that moment it is God who hardens Pharaoh's heart. The ensuing suffering is willed by God, and not by Pharaoh.

But then, why is Pharaoh punished? How is one to justify the collective death of all the firstborn in Egypt? Hasn't Pharaoh done teshuvah? Has he not repented? Didn't he tell Moses during the darkness that descended on his country, *"L'chu iv'du et-haShem"* go and serve your God. There again, *"Vay'chazeik et-lev Paroh*", God hardened Pharaoh's heart. And made him refuse to free the children of Israel from bondage. The text omits all doubt. Without God's intervention, Pharaoh would have opened the gates, allowing the Jewish slaves to leave as free men and women, and go to meet their God in the desert. [00:34:00] And countless children would have been saved. (sighs) What a gift that a motivated defense attorney could have done, before a jury with Pharaoh as defendant.

There's one other character in the Bible who would have wanted these attorneys' services as well, and that is Bilaam. A good case could have been made for him, too. Though King Balak hired him to curse the children of Israel, he refused. The king offered him treasures, but he kept on refusing. When finally, he left his home and went to the front line, to observe them, the Jews, the only words that sprang from his lips were blessings. Indeed, they are so beautiful that they have become part of our prayers. "*Mah tovu o'halekha Yaakov,"* how pleasant thy tents are, o Jacob. And how good your dwellings, Israel."

And yet, he is mistrusted. The title of prophet [00:35:00] is denied him. Some sages claim that he was merely a vulgar sorcerer. Generally, he is referred to as *Bilaam HaRasha*, the wicked Bilaam. In some quarters, he is ridiculed for his physical appearance. He's one-legged, and one-eyed. How is one to explain such inelegant behavior towards a handicapped man, who in addition to everything else, refuses to be our enemy? One sage goes as far as affirming that Bilaam's blessings have turned into maledictions, with the exception of those, thank God, dealing with education and study. *"Am l'vadad yishkon"*, for example. These people will be alone and isolated. But tell me, is it good or bad for Israel to live in solitude? Since the answer is ambivalent, why is only the negative interpretation

accepted? Even if Bilaam's intentions were bad, well, since when [00:36:00] is someone judged by his intentions, rather than by his deeds?

These questions have already been raised, with regard to the first Pharaoh of the Bible, the one who met Abraham and his wife, Sarai. It is -- concerting story, it is. There was a famine in the land, and Abraham went down to a neighboring country to escape it. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife, Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are." From this, we learn that husbands should pay compliments to their wives. (laughter) "I know how beautiful a woman you are. If the Egyptians see you and think she is his wife, they will kill me and let you live. So please, say you are my sister." A good and obedient wife, Sarai consented.

Thus, when Abraham entered Egypt, Pharaoh's noblemen praised her beauty to Pharaoh and took her to his royal palace. [00:37:00] Consequently, things went well for Abraham. He was given sheep, oxen, asses, camels, male and female slaves. But God afflicted Pharaoh and his household. They all fell ill, and he was told why. So, Pharaoh summoned Abraham and asked him, "What have you done to me? Why did you say she is your sister when in fact she is your wife? Take her and go." Abraham's answer has not been

recorded in the Biblical text. Though the midrash uses all its literary powers to persuade the reader that nothing happened to Sarah in Pharaoh's palace. But then, why was he punished? Granted, he was drawn to her beauty. What's wrong with that? He hadn't touched her. Why was he afflicted? One commentator does insinuate that he tried to touch her, but then again, why shouldn't he have? Since in his eyes, she was not married? [00:38:00] The answer -- there is an answer -- he, Pharaoh, had no business exploiting the difficult situation of a family of refugees, just to satisfy his personal needs and manly vanity. He had before him a defenseless woman, stricken with both fear and hunger. When didn't he send her back to her brother, with some food for both? He was a ruler without compassion, that is why he was punished.

And so, it is with a sense of joy that one at last discovers in Scripture and its commentaries a gentile who is treated with affection by almost everybody. And his name is Jethro. On the surface, it seems to be a simple, one-dimensional character who impresses us mainly as a family man. His daughters bring home a foreign visitor, and he thinks immediately of his unmarried [00:39:00] daughter, Tzipora. He is kind to his new son-in-law, offering him a position as a shepherd. Later, when Moses returns from Egypt, he knows that actually, his father-in-law

accepted his going to Egypt. His father-in-law has raised no objections. Didn't tell him to stay home with his wife and children. Furthermore, later on, Jethro brings his family to Moses in the desert. Moses had become famous and influential. Jethro goes on to offer him useful advice on how to conduct the affairs of state and helps him establish the judiciary system. Invited by Moses to join the new nation, of course with a high position, he gently refuses, arguing that his duties towards his own family and tribe [00:40:00] oblige him to return to Midian.

Clearly, his behavior is admirable, sincere, and surely beyond reproach. He is there only when needed. He speaks only when asked. What he does, he does without a hidden agenda. He never thinks of using his high position and connections for his own benefit. No one could ever accuse him of nepotism or corruption. Naturally, in Midrashic literature, the man and the attitude towards him are more complex. He is generally shown in a positive light, that is true. After all, Moses himself treats him with high respect. Remember, Moses kneeled before him when they met in the desert. Thus, many sages feel compelled to exaggerate his virtues. Most of them believe he converted to Jewish faith. He is called, for the only time that we find this expression, *Ger Shel Emet*. A true convert, [00:41:00] or a convert to truth.

Is this to distinguish him from all other converts? Perhaps. Everything is done to emphasize his particularity. For instance, he is placed, quote, "under the wings of the *Shechinah*." And he's supposed to have declared, "I have served many idols. There isn't a God whom I have not worshipped, but none can be compared to the God of Israel." To illustrate his singular values and rare moral gifts, he is presented as being opposed to Esau, and naturally, Esau is the loser. Isaac's son is treated less favorably than the in-law Jethro. Better yet, in at least two instances, he obtains a better role than Moses himself.

In the first episode, Jethro and Moses are discussing wedding plans. A Midianite priest, Jethro agrees to let Moses marry Tzipora on one condition: [00:42:00] their first son must be consecrated to idolatry. And strange as it may sound, Moses does not object. In other words, here, Jethro was more loyal to his pagan faith than Moses was to his Jewish faith. But in the end, nothing of the sort happened. Both of Moses' sons were Jewish. In the second episode, Jethro hears stories of all that happened to the children of Israel in Egypt and afterwards. *"Vayishma Yitro"* says the text. He only heard, but did not see. Still, these rumors made a tremendous impact on

him, hence the importance of hearing in the Jewish tradition. Few other traditions have as many words for listening. Says the midrash, "When the ear hears, the entire body becomes alive [00:43:00]." Also, physicians say hearing is the last of the five senses to leave a dying person.

So, when Jethro heard of all the wonders that the children of Israel experienced, he exclaimed, "Blessed be the Lord for saving you from Pharaoh's bondage." Commented Rabbi Pappos, "It is quite possible that this passage meant to criticize Moses and the six hundred thousand Jews who had left Egypt with him. They were ungrateful." Why were they ungrateful? For in spite of all the miracles God had accomplished for them, for their sake, it took Jethro to bless God and thank him. Why did they wait so long? Gratitude is at the basis of Jewish sensitivity and Jewish [00:44:00] tradition. The first prayer in the morning is *Modeh Ani*, we thank. We are told that even when the Messiah will come, when all prayers will be abolished, only one will remain: the prayer of gratitude.

So, what does this passage mean? Jethro, the pagan, the heathen, is the inventor of gratitude in Jewish history? No wonder that Jethro has many admirers in Talmudic literature. But he does arouse a measure of skepticism in some quarters. Is

it a way of balancing our perception of the man? Quite possible. In Scripture, no one is perfect. Perfection is a goal to which one may aspire, that's all. Maimonides goes farther and says, "Men should not even try to aspire, for God alone is perfect, and who are we, mortals, [00:45:00] thinking that we could be like him?"

Thus, some sages question Jethro's true motives in one thing to be so close to Israel. Was it because of the greatness of the Torah God gave to his people? Or because of the defeat the children of Israel had inflicted on their enemies? First, the Egyptians, and then, the Amalekites. In other words, was Jethro motivated by love or by fear? Was it love for Israel, that he simply wanted to join the winning side? *"Vayichad Yitro"* may easily be interpreted as "he had goosebumps." Was it to impress? To frighten? Nevertheless, the accepted image of him is good, even glorious. When he rejects Moses' invitation to join the people of Israel in a leadership position, he invokes the perfect reason, which is happily quoted in the Talmud. "I shall go home and see those who are close to me, and I shall convert [00:46:00] all of them to the study of Torah."

Actually, says a Midrashic source, Jethro was a friend of the Jews even before meeting Moses, and surely before becoming his

father-in-law. He proved this when he served as royal advisor to Pharaoh in Egypt, together with Bilaam and Job. When Pharaoh was faced with having to resolve the Jewish question, Bilaam suggested rejecting Moses' request to let his people go. Job remained silent. And Jethro alone was on the side of the oppressed. For Bilaam's cruel position, he died a tragic death. For his neutrality, Job was made to suffer. As for Jethro, Pharaoh sentenced him to death. But he managed to escape, and to enter Jewish history for good.

According to Midrashic fantasy, Jethro and Moses had already met when Moses was still a child, a baby. [00:47:00] One day, the boy seized the royal crown from Pharaoh's head and placed it on his own. Shouting that that was *lèse-majesté*, priests and astrologists gave it a somber interpretation. Clearly, the child aspired to one day replace Pharaoh. Hence, they urged him to put the boy to death before it was too late. Fortunately, Jethro was present at the debate, and suggested a more charitable solution, that two plates be placed before the child. One filled with burning coal, and the other with precious jewels. If he seized the jewels, that would mean the priests were right in seeing in that a signal from the gods. If he touched the burning coal, it would simply mean that like most children, he was drawn to shiny objects. Moses was about to

touch the jewels, when Jethro, or the angel Gabriel, kicked him. And Moses picked up a coal and put it in his mouth, a gesture that saved his life, although [00:48:00] it made him into a stutterer.

Thus, we learn that at times, it is by giving up gold that one saves one's life. But that is true only in the Bible. (laughter) Practically, we learn from these tales that one may never grant collective innocence nor collective guilt to any community. Every human being deserves to be judged for what he or she stands for. Some are worthy, others not. Whether or not Jethro converted, he is worthy of our respect. All human beings are worthy of respect, because they are all created in God's image. All? The Amalekites, too? Suppose an Amalekite man appeared before a rabbinic court in Brooklyn, expressing his desire to be converted. [00:49:00] On the level of pure Halakhah, the candidate would not leave the court alive. Such is the law. Whoever sees an Amalekite must kill him. But in reality, this could not be carried out, nor would it ever be. The hypothesis of encountering an Amalekite is implausible, impossible, and it has been so for enumerable centuries. More precisely, since the time of King Sennacherib, the Assyrian ruler who defeated King Hezekiah, deported many men, many women, from vanquished nations and the Ten Tribes of Judea as well.

And the mixing of ethnic communities has made it forever impossible to identify an Amalekite. So, don't worry. The law may never be implemented.

In conclusion, since in Scripture, [00:50:00] Esau and Ishmael were human but not wicked, why have they been transfigured in Midrashic imagination? And who are we to impute evil intentions in gentiles today? We are not here to judge, only to bear witness. Self-respect is linked to the respect of others. To show disdain to another is to become victim of one's own arrogance. To humiliate another is to debase ourselves. In our tradition, humiliation is equivalent to murder. Now, what do we say? We believe there's gentiles or heathens or people are not Jews, in general, have all the right to be what they are. All human beings choose what they have become, [00:51:00] what they have been, and they are not only children of their parents, but children of their histories. And after all, it is a matter of responsibility, meaning I am responsible not only for my present but also for my past. With whatever I say and do, I may justify or not the faith of our ancestors in their future. For aren't we precisely that? Their future? But they have the same right to say exactly the same thing as we as Jews say about ourselves.

Does it justify the strains contained in the oldest and most sacred of our text towards gentiles? It's a difficult, even painful way to come up with a plausible answer to this question. I don't have it. What about gentiles? Granted, there are here and there strange, disquieting expressions of suspicion [00:52:00] towards heathens in Talmud. Some are even hostile. Some are offensive. But Talmudic literature is known for its love of paradox and exaggeration. Good and not so good things can be found on the same subject, about the same people. But there's also wisdom and compassion in Talmudic sayings and aphorisms, and here is one important example.

The Babylonian Talmud says, "*Kol hamatzil hanefesh echad*", whoever saves one life, it is as if he had saved the entire world." Conversely, whoever destroyed one life, it is as if he had destroyed the entire world. But in the Jerusalem Talmud, this moral principle is offered with a slight variation. "*Kol hamatzil hanefesh echad m'Yisrael*", whoever saves a Jewish life, it is as if he had saved [00:53:00] the whole world." Why the difference? The first statement is purely, nobly universal. And it teaches the Jew that any life, Jewish or gentile, is precious. Any person, Jewish or gentile, is unique, and therefore worth saving.

When we speak of *pikuach nefesh*, that we may violate many laws in order to save a life, it doesn't say only a Jew. Any person who is in danger, we shall do whatever we can to save him or her. The second is ethnocentric, and it is addressed to those Jews whose faith in universalism may be exaggerated. And therefore, the text says to them, do not forget your own people, because often, too often in our history, there were Jews who in order to attain universality, what did they do? They forgot that they were Jewish. In order to show how great [00:54:00] they are, as human beings, they took care of everybody, everybody but their own Jews. And therefore, it says ""*Kol hamatzil hanefesh echad m'Yisrael"*, don't forget Jews are also human beings."

Why are these stories told? First, because they happened. There is no cover-up in the Bible. The words "*Lo-tisna et-achikha bil'vavekha"*, thou shall not hate your brother in your heart" is an injunction against hypocrisy. If you hate your brother, say so. Don't hide it from him. Open hostility is less dangerous than concealed hatred. There's another explanation. Beginnings are always violent, they mean disruption of an existing order. They mean eruptions in history, and they are necessarily violent. That is why there is so much violence in our Biblical tales. Better lots [00:55:00]

of violence in the beginning than later. And so, these tales of violence are stories against violence, against prejudice, against triumphalism, against fanaticism.

In other words, no one should ever use these tales of those times as means or weapons or arguments to justify one's evil behavior against those who are different from us. Is it too late to imagine ancient and timeless beginnings as warnings? Is it not? No it is not too late. It is not too late to remember that though the tale is not about Jews alone, it is a Jewish tale, for all of us. For we know already that even when the Messiah will come, it doesn't mean that all people will become Jewish. They and we will quite simply [00:56:00] become more human. (audience applause)

M:

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