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Why war? What makes human beings go to war and kill one another? What makes human beings choose inhumanity in order to affirm their humanity? Later, we shall speak about war and its implications and applications for the present.

For the moment, let us go back to Scripture. In the Parashah, the portion of the week which is *Ki Teitzei*, when you shall go to war, this is what it says. "When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses, chariots, and an army larger than yours, be not afraid of them. For the Lord, your God, is with you. And it shall be that when you come near the battle, that a priest shall come [00:01:00] forward and speak to the people. And he shall say unto them, hear oh Israel, you approach this day unto battle against your enemies. Let not your hearts faint; fear not; do not tremble. Neither be afraid of them. For the Lord, your God, goes with you to save you. And the officers shall speak unto the people, saying, he who has built a new house and has not dedicated it, let him go home . And he who has planted a vineyard and has not eaten of it, let him go back to the vineyard. And he who has betrothed a wife

and has not lived with her, let him go back to his wife. And he, among you, who is fearful and faint-hearted, let them go home."

[00:02:00] Interestingly enough, the Midrash says, look how charitable the law is. In order not to humiliate the coward, we include him among the group of people who have good reasons to go home. Nevertheless, those who go home do so always because that is the law. But remove the theme of war from the Bible and an essential part of our Biblical memory will be missing. Before becoming Abraham, our forefather had to wage war. Moses and Joshua were constantly involved in warfare. Hence the intensity with which Talmudic sages treated issues related to organized violence, which is war. Armed resistance, and war. And [00:03:00] always the reasons for war.

In Scripture, all armed conflicts are considered just wars. Surely the one Joshua had to wage in order to conquer the land of Canaan -- was it true of the subsequent ones as well? Not always. A priori, defensive wars were just, since they were meant to save the very existence of the nation. In other words, suppose an enemy attacked the land of Israel, so as to deprive it of its national sovereignty. Then, it was necessary for the population to rise and go into battle. But what if the enemy is

not out to destroy the Jewish nation as such, but only to oppress it politically, [00:04:00] economically, or even spiritually. What is the law then? Or as in the case of finding ways of resisting Roman persecution, some two thousand years ago, what is the law that must be followed? What is the law that governs conduct if faced with persecution, oppression, and all kinds of threats, some more serious than others? One thing is clear: when we study the sources, we realize that the positions are no longer homogenous. There too, as in all areas of life, pluralism seems in order.

Naturally, our objective has always been for the last 37 years to study [00:05:00] the moral makeup of the intellectual heritage of the Talmud, which to those who love to absorb its multilayered lessons, is more than capable to offer elements for reflection and even possible guidelines for everyday conduct. And that applies to everything, including war and peace. What must the role of the individual be in the community's ethical choices when faced with outside and/or internal convulsions? What is Israel's mission to the world, a world that is out to deny its right to live in peace, without giving up its claim to national independence? When does the goal justify the means? What are, what must be the connection between politics and religion? [00:06:00] Is politics a religion, and what if

religion becomes political? Is collaboration with the enemy permitted? When? How much? How far may one go -- too far? What about suicide? Is suicide an option? And what about martyrdom -- what is its role in trying to move history forward, step by step? And what about underground resistance? Is it always legitimate? Can resistance become terrorism? Is terrorism a form of resistance? The only form, according to the terrorists. Is torture absolutely condemnable? Always? And what about a ticking bomb? [00:07:00] What about a person who is being arrested, and we know, the police knows, the security services know, not only in Israel, but anywhere, that that person knows where a bomb or a suicide killer somewhere is ready to explode, killing who knows how many hundreds or thousands of people? What about preventive war? What are the limits beyond which violence can no longer be considered justified, let alone civilized?

As always, a few preliminary remarks. What we have done here for so many years -- some of you have not even been born when we already studied from this desk with your predecessors in the audience -- our purpose, actually, is always, has always been and remains, to share our [00:08:00] ancient passion for learning. A passion which is as old as the oral tradition of the Jewish people has been. No adventure could be, is, will be,

more fruitful, more stimulating, more exciting. To learn means to offer what we have received. To learn means to be ready to receive more and more, because there is always someone in the past who knew more than I will ever know. Second, I just would like you to know that at the conclusion of this study session, there will be a brief but meaningful ceremony with the participation of my friends, Israel's ambassador, Alon Pinkas, and the chazan Yossi Malovany of the Fifth Avenue Synagogue. [00:09:00] And together, we shall commemorate a tragic, very tragic, depressing, (sighs) perplexing episode in our contemporary history. The eighth anniversary of the death of Yitzhak Rabin, assassinated to my embarrassment, to all our embarrassment, by a young Jewish fanatic. But this -- later. For the moment, as always, we must open the doors and let the latecomers come in. (laughter) Surely you remember what a Jewish comedian once said. He said, I quote him, "All my life, I tried to come to a Jewish affair -- too late and never succeeded." (laughter) [00:10:00] No matter how late we start, here we start sometimes five minutes after the hour, 10 minutes after the hour, there are always latecomers.

And so, tonight we intend to explore several concepts and attitudes of Talmudic masters with regard to warfare and resistance to the enemy in any of their aspects. We have, on

one hand, Elisha ben Abuyah and Rabbi Yehuda ben Gerim. Both of whom, according to some sources, have actually collaborated with the Roman enemy. Then we have Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma, who chose passive resignation. And then, we have Rabbi Akiva, who favored armed rebellion [00:11:00] against the enemy. And ultimately, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who believed that learning remains the best weapon to strengthen the Jewish people's will to survive and survive without giving up its religious faith as well as its dignity. The period we are dealing with is around the destruction of the Temple, before and after. Rome is powerful, and Judea is not. Agrippa the Second is king, as will be Herod, but the ruler is Nero. The capitol is no longer the city of David, but Caesarea, named Neronius.

Like Rome, the Jewish capitol has become politicized as never before. Intrigues, denunciations, plots and conspiracies, and cheap alliances, [00:12:00] and all kinds of machinations and manipulations. They are all part of the nation's social fabric. Even the temple, symbol of its religious autonomy, is not immune. Twice a day, sacrifices are offered on behalf of the emperor. Corruption and favoritism reign everywhere. The priestly caste is torn from within. Ambitions run high: old against young, high priests come and go, appointed and deposed by the king for reasons unrelated to ritual or faith. One is

called Ishmael, the other one Yosef Kabi, Ananus the Second, Yehoshua son of Damneus, Yehoshua son of Gamaliel. Bribery is commonplace in matters of state and clergy alike. The priests bribe the king, who flattered the Roman procurator, who served the emperor.

[00:13:00] Agrippa's first troubles began because of a silly incident. When in Jerusalem, he resided in the place of the Hashmoni'im, outside the temple. So as to see what was going on inside, he built a tower containing a dining room with an impregnable view of the temple. Naturally, the priests objected to his invasion of their privacy and erected a wall blocking the king's view. Eventually, the dispute was brought before the emperor himself, who enjoyed a low-level quarrel such as this, and did whatever he could to encourage such quarrels. And there were many: Sadducees against Pharisees, fanatic militants against fanatic pacifists. The fact that there were 18 thousand unemployed men [00:14:00] made matters worse. Activists exploited the situation and began calling for an armed uprising against Rome. And they themselves were divided among followers of three leaders: Eleazar, Menachem, and Yochanan Gush Halav.

Agrippa tried his best or his worst to defend his policy of collaboration with the occupant, and in one of his addresses to

the nation, he said, and listen. "Your passion for liberty comes too late," he said. "There was a time when you should have strained every nerve to keep the Romans out. That was when Pompeius invaded our country. But our forefathers and their kings, so wealthier and mightier than you, failed to withstand a fraction of the Roman legions. Will you, now, defy the whole Roman Empire? Myriad of other [00:15:00] nations have yielded. Will you alone resist?" And he went on. "What are the troops? What is the armor on which you rely? Where is your fleet to sweep the Roman seas? Where is your treasury to finance your campaigns? Do you really suppose you are going to war just with the Egyptians or Arabs? What allies do you expect to have for this war? Furthermore, if you rebel, you will jeopardize not only yourselves, but every Jewish community in the diaspora. Through the folly of a handful of men, said king, the Jewish king, every city will be drenched with Jewish blood."

This call for resignation and submission -- this apology for political servitude -- though rationally, geopolitically, and pragmatically plausible, received [00:16:00] the response it deserved: the people threw stones at its king. The message was clear: despair never was, never must be, a Jewish answer to adversity. But the king was not the only one to preach despair. Josephus Flavius, whose sources on that period's turbulence at

times remains exclusive, shared his views. The young 26-year-old general was so taken by Rome and its glory and its grandeur and its wealth and its power that he became its spokesman to Jerusalem, instead of being Jerusalem's spokesman to Rome. And he too was covered with insults -- and stones -- by the crowds. Flavius' report on the economic situation of the land is sober and heartbreaking. He said the country suffered from famine; [00:17:00] many sold their possessions for one measure of wheat, if they were rich, of barley, if they were poor. Then they shut themselves into the innermost rooms of their houses and devoured the corn they had obtained. It was a sight to bring tears to our eyes. Children pulled the very morsels their fathers were eating out of their mouths. And what was even more pitiful -- so did the mothers pull the food from the mouths of their infants. The old men who held their food fast were beaten. And if the women hid what they had in their hand, their hair was torn for so doing.

At the same time, let it be noted, the king and his family and his courtesans ate well, lived well. Agrippa spent his time with Rome's procurator, and so did Berenice, [00:18:00] who charmed him with her beauty and her natural gifts, and succeeded in having his son, Titus, fall in love with her. So, that was a time, therefore, that people knew -- those who should have known

knew -- that if Judea fell, it was not only because of Roman's military superiority, but also if not mainly because of internal demoralization. What followed is known. Rome's occupation was brutal and all-encompassing. The fall of Jerusalem and the burning of the temple put an end to Jewish sovereignty, but not to the Jewish dream of recapturing it. Faced with such dramatic circumstances, what was the right thing to do?

A story. One day, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma, [00:19:00] and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai were gathered together with Rabbi Yehuda ben Gerim, or the son of converts, sitting nearby. Said Rabbi Yehuda, "Look how marvelous these Romans are. They have built roads, constructed bridges, and opened spas." Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma kept silent, whereas Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai reacted with vigor. "Whatever the Romans have done," said he, "they have done for themselves, not for us. They needed streets for prostitutes, bridges for tolls, and spas for their physical welfare." Apparently, someone informed the authorities, and the governor issued a decree. Yehuda praised, he shall be elevated; [00:20:00] Yossi kept silent, he shall be exiled; Shimon blamed, he shall die. Consequently, Rabbi Shimon had to go underground together with his son, Rabbi Eliezer, and hide in a mountain cave for 13 years.

What do we learn from this story? First of all, that there were among Talmudic sages, many attitudes. On one hand, sympathy for the occupants' police policy; on the other, silence or armed, at least intellectual, opposition. The question is, who was the informer? Hints are indicated in the sources. It must have been Rabbi Yehuda, son of converts. And you wonder, [00:21:00] what? A rabbi, a teacher, an important tanna of the four generation to whom in an earlier period, Rabbi Shimon had sent his son to receive his blessing? He, an informer? Is it possible that already, then, he had been under suspicion, and that's why it is written that nearby, but he was not part of the group that spoke? Did Rabbi Yehuda, the informer, if he indeed was an informer, did he come close, uninvited, only to do some eavesdropping on behalf of the Roman police? A Talmudic source tells us of his end. When Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai emerged from his hiding place, he happened to see Rabbi Yehuda. "What," he exclaimed. "He is still alive?" He looked at him, [00:22:00] and that was the end of the informer. With his look, he executed him.

No, really, was he a collaborator? Was he the only one? No. Elisha ben Abuyah, the great Elisha ben Abuyah, who later becomes a strange heretic, Elisha ben Abuyah also opposed resistance. He too seems to have worked with and for the

occupant, against his own people. Surely you know that his is a strange story. An erudite scholar whose circumcision ceremony had been attended by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, a companion of Rabbi Akiva, a teacher of Rabbi Meir, a master who was at first called Rebbe Elisha ben Abuyah. How could [00:23:00] he turn against the very people, his own, whose Torah had been his passion, whose mystical quest for answers to unanswerable questions led him to join three renowned scholars to enter the orchard of forbidden knowledge, the Pardes? Many stories circulate about this apparent apostasy. Aware of the harsh methods used by Rome against the Jews in Judea, tormented by the difficult problem of theodicy, torn between faith and justice, Elisha rebelled against the creator and his inexplicable ways. In his mind, he was wondering, why should the enemy be given such power, and his victims such suffering? Why should the innocent be punished and the guilty rewarded? Elisha's anger was directed at the heavens, both on the individual and the collective [00:24:00] levels.

A story. One Shabbat afternoon, Elisha ben Abuyah was in the valley of Ginosar when he noticed a man climbing a date tree in order to dislodge a bird's nest. The man left the baby birds and took away the mother, and nothing happened to him. He went

home safe. The same evening, after Shabbat, Elisha saw a young man whom his father sent to climb another date tree, where there was another bird's nest. Obeying his father's instructions, the son freed the mother but took away the baby birds. And when he touched the ground, he was bitten by a snake and died. Well, there is a beautiful law in Scripture -- if you encounter a bird's nest in a tree or on the ground, free the mother and take good care of the little ones. [00:25:00] And this commandment is one of the two; the other one is about honoring one's father and mother, which specifically ensures us a precious reward. Whoever follows them will live a long life. And so, we could easily understand Elisha ben Abuyah's frustration and rage. The first man violated the law, and yet nothing happened to him. Whereas the second, who should have received the reward of life, was gravely, unjustly punished.

So disillusioned, Elisha rejected God's justice. He did not say that God does not exist or that He does pass judgment, and that His justice is faulty. He didn't say that. He simply came to the conclusion that obviously, God does not abide by His own justice. Elisha ben Abuyah became equally distressed and disappointed when he witnessed the cruelty of the Roman occupant. [00:26:00] Personally, he did not suffer from it, but others did. And he was there, as a witness. One day, he saw

the tongue of Rabbi Yehuda Hanachtom -- in his private life, a baker -- dragged through the dust by a dog. And this sight was unbearable to the lover of learning Elisha was. He began to howl, *Zu Torah v'zu s'charah?*, is this the Torah and its reward? He broke with his faith. Variation on the same theme: he saw the tongue not of Rabbi Yehuda Hanachtom, but of Hutzpit Hameturgeman, the revered interpreter, dragged through the dust not by a dog, but a pig. And again, he howled. The tongue was spreading pearls of Torah, here it is desecrated. And that's when he turned to sin. [00:27:00] He became *acher*, a different person, another.

Elsewhere in some of my earlier studies, here, in this place, I was drawn to this tormented master, intrigued by his extraordinary lucidity and intellectual honesty. I had hoped to pay him a posthumous tribute by singling him out as the forerunner of all ancient and contemporary intellectual rebels, who in a universe dominated by inhuman cruelty, dared to question its creator. I even tried to come to his defense. I found reasons to praise his anger, his revolt. Unlike Job but like Abraham, he did not protest against his own suffering, but against someone else's. How could we condemn a scholar whose [00:28:00] compassion for victims places him on their side, be it at the risk of losing his faith in divine justice? Why,

then, the general hostile attitudes towards him? Why did our sages go as far as denying him his identity, his name? Was he the only one in Talmudic literature to question the heavens? It wasn't he who said, *Mi chamokha baelim AdoShem*, who among the Gods is like you, *al tikreh "elim" ela "ilemim"*, which means, who among the Gods is like you, *she-roeh et bon-banav v'shotek* , for you see the plight, the humiliation of your children, and you keep silent. The author of that outcry was not blamed, but Elisha ben Abuyah was. Why?

So, I remember, I spent weeks and months studying the relevant sources. I wanted to comprehend what I thought [00:29:00] was the painful injustice done to Elisha ben Abuyah. And then, I understood. His peers and their disciples did not mind his theological crisis -- they resented something else, and much worse. They blamed his political and ideological acceptance of the enemy's harsh laws. They blamed his collaboration with Rome. At a time when Jewish education was among the highest priorities in the land, he would go to schools and encourage children to go home, to stop studying, stop learning, and learn manual labor. And the text says, "*zemer yevani lo pasak mipif* ", wherever he went, he was quoting Greek poets, Homer, especially. They were always filled, his pockets were, with agnostic, Christian, and pagan pamphlets, [00:30:00] not Jewish

sources. The others interested him. Often seen in the company of Romans, he is said to have become an informer, an agent provocateur. Even an accessory to police brutality. In fact, he used his halachic knowledge against his fellow Jews by unmasking those who attempted to outwit their tormentors. For instance, it is forbidden to carry a load on Shabbat, but under certain circumstances, two persons are authorized to do the work of one. Then, technically, the sin is less serious. The Romans didn't know this. Elisha did. And so, when he noticed two Jews carrying a beam on Shabbat, he hastened to point them out to the Romans, so using the Torah of Israel against the people of Israel. Could there be a more serious offense? Yes, [00:31:00] murder. And according to some sources, he handed over Talmidei Chachamim, learned scholars, to the Roman police.

Well, that is why he was called *acher*, for this is a lesson we cannot afford to ignore. In the Jewish tradition, in Jewish history, collaboration with the enemy is never an option to be considered. But what about neutrality? Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma, we said, chose silence. He may have tried neutrality. He is the one who refused to praise or blame Rome's public programs. Rabbi Yossi *shatak*; Rabbi Yossi remained silent. Indifferent? No. A sage like him couldn't be indifferent to the suffering of his brethren. But simply, he preferred not to be [00:32:00]

involved. What do we know about him? Oh, he lived in Caesarea, where he probably had his own yeshiva. Not many laws are attributed to him; actually, he's not even mentioned in the Mishnah. But he was known and respected. He disliked disputes. When one broke out between scholars in Tiberias, he voiced his displeasure, and when the quarrel became so violent to the point that the Sefer Torah, the holy scrolls, were torn apart, he said, "I wonder whether this house of study will not be replaced with a pagan temple." And it was.

He used to say, to tell a story about himself, that once, he was walking on the road somewhere and was met by a man who greeted him and said, "Rabbi, where are you from?" And he said, "I answered, 'I come from a city filled with sages and scribes.'" And the stranger said, "Rabbi, come and stay with us, and I shall give you thousands upon thousands of golden coins, precious [00:33:00] stones, and jewels." "And I replied, 'Even if you were to give me all the silver, all the gold, all the precious stones in the world, I would not live in a place except if it is dedicated to the study of Torah.'" But then, paradoxically, how come that he lived in Caesarea, the headquarters of the occupation authorities? Was he closer to Roman officials than to scholars? In truth, he was against the Romans, but he had to cope with reality. And to him, reality

reflected a higher design. If Rome had such power, he thought, it was that God wanted it to dominate.

And here, listen to a tale in the tractate of Avodah Zarah, *Tanu Rabbanan*, this is what our master taught us. When Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma fell ill, Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion came to visit him. Said Rabbi [00:34:00] Yossi, "Haninah, my brother, don't you know that this nation, Rome, was crowned by God? Look, it has destroyed His house and burned His sanctuary and killed His faithful and annihilated the best of His children. And yet, it is still here. And I heard that you study Torah, that you teach Torah, that you gather large crowds around you with a Sefer Torah before you?" In other words, aren't you afraid to risk your life? And Rabbi Haninah answered, "Min *Hashamayim y'rachum*, heaven will have mercy." Said Rabbi Yossi, "Haninah, I am talking to your reason, logic, reality. And you tell me that heaven will have mercy? I wonder whether they will not burn you together with the Sefer Torah," which they did.

[00:35:00] Rabbi Yossi died soon after, and all the dignitaries and notables of the Roman establishment came to his funeral and delivered eulogies. Not rabbinic personalities? If they were there and spoke, it is not recorded in the Talmud. But then, why such friendliness towards him on the part of Rome's envoys?

Hadn't he been exiled by them for being silent earlier? And the answer is simple. They preferred his neutrality, which is another lesson for future generations -- neutrality always helps the aggressor, never the victim. Silence helps the tormentor, not his prisoner. Is this why Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma's place in Talmudic literature is so small -- a few sayings, a few anecdotes, and that's all? Unlike Rabbi Haninah's legacy, which [00:36:00] is still being remembered and studied by children and adults alike. He chose resistance to Rome's anti-Jewish policy and practices. What kind of resistance? Spiritual resistance. Since Rome was out to suppress and uproot Jewish memory and learning, he decided to keep them alive at all costs, at the cost of his life. And the story is, when the Roman dignitaries returned from Rabbi Yossi's funeral, they found Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion teaching Torah in public. They arrested him, sentenced him to death, enveloped him in the holy scrolls of the Torah, and set them on fire. "What do you see?" Rabbi Haninah was asked by his disciples, or according to one source, by his own daughter, Bruriah. And he said, "Gevilin nisrafin , I see the parchments burning, but the letters continue flying in the air." [00:37:00] To him, the Torah remained the best weapon.

And to Rabbi Akiva, too. Except that Rabbi Akiva was not satisfied with words and prayers alone. He understood those who

needed more and something else. He joined Bar Kochba's brave armed struggle for Jewish independence, a move that continues to puzzle students of that period. A dominating character filled with contradictions, especially on the political and mystical levels. He often surprises us today. A follower of Hillel's pacificistic ideas, how could he offer support to a young general, and even declaring him Messiah? A fervent defender of Torah, ready and willing to give his life for its sake, how he send thousands of his students, according to the text, doubtlessly with some exaggeration, 24,000, [00:38:00] how could he send all of them to a certain death on the battlefield? They died during the Sefirah period, why? One extraordinary explanation is, they die because they didn't respect one another. And that too is strange. Rabbi Akiva's students did not respect one another? Well, Rabbi Akiva still is a pillar of our learning and for whatever we want to find in that learning.

He said so many things. He said things about Israel and his love for its singular relationship to God, "Ashreichem *Yisrael*."= What he said about study and its inherent reward, about peace and redemption. Once, he was asked by the heathens, "Why do you Jews insist on remaining Jewish? Look at yourselves, always persecuted, always isolated. Where is your God? Why doesn't he help you? [00:39:00] And why don't you

join us and benefit from our riches and happiness?" And so, Rabbi Akiva explained to them at length God's extraordinary love for his people. And he spoke so beautifully, so convincingly, that they exclaimed, "If that's so, why shouldn't we join your people?" (laughter) And he did not encourage them. And of course, we wonder, why didn't he? Just think about it. The Romans then had no religion and they were looking for a religion. The empire was on its decline. Had the Romans converted to Judaism, we would today be stronger and larger than China. So, it's Rabbi Akiva's fault. It is he who declared, naturally, "*Ve'ahavta le'reiakha kamokha, zeh klal gadol baTorah*", one must love his or [00:40:00] her fellow human being as one loves oneself. It applies not only to Jews, it applies to all human beings. To accept it is to reject hatred and war.

I love Rabbi Akiva. And there are so many things we learn again and again. We know of his romantic love for his wife; there is no more beautiful love story in the Talmud than his story with Rachel, the one who sent him to study at the age of 40. But the question is, was she his first wife? The mother of his son, Yehoshua? It's not certain. Some sources believe that he had married before. If so, did she die or did he divorce her? Other legends maintain that he had actually married a third time. Who? You won't believe it. The wife of the governor,

Turnus Rufus, who fell in love with him [00:41:00] and married him. No wonder that the governor became an anti-Semite.

(laughter) Is his decision to join Bar Kochba also a legend? Have they met at all? If so, what was it about the young insurgent that impressed the old sage to the point of supporting his war policy? Remember the context. The time was 135 of the common era. With the memories of the destruction of the temple 60-odd years still alive, Rome's anti-Jewish decrees maintained Judea into a state of national melancholy. All Jewish symbols of sovereignty and pride were outlawed, except for the study of Torah, which though clandestine, never stopped. And awaiting for the Messiah, which never ceased.

Jewish life seemed somber and depressed, except for the secret military camps where young rebels were determined to fight for the sake [00:42:00] of Israel's name and honor. The insurrection spread like a wildfire. Young warriors gathered in the mountains fought like lions against the Roman legions, who in spite of their superiority in numbers and weapons, repeatedly suffered serious defeats. For the rebels were led by a brilliant, charismatic, intrepid commander, Shimon bar Kochba. Inspired by his courage and patriotism, his men valiantly defended their positions with their lives. They must have been convinced that the spiritual leaders of the country were with

them, but no. They were wrong. Only Rabbi Akiva believed in their cause and in the Messianic dimension of their leader. Most sages were skeptical, if not worse. One of them, Rabbi Yehuda ben Torta, admonished Rabbi Akiva, saying, "Akiva, Akiva, you will long be in your grave and the Messiah will still not be here." Did Rabbi Akiva [00:43:00] really think that Bar Kochba was the long-awaited redeemer? Was he truly in favor of his armed insurrection, which unavoidably ended in catastrophe?

These questions have preoccupied scholars of Jewish history and thought for many generations. Some contemporary thinkers, especially in Israel, condemn Bar Kochba's adventure and call it a costly error. Is then Rabbi Akiva also to be blamed? After all, peace as a supreme ideal has forever been rooted in the Jewish tradition. Isaac and Jacob have never had weapons in their hands. The term "shalom" is among the most frequently used in Scripture. An iron object suggesting violence was never employed by builders of an altar, which according to the Midrash, is meant to bring persons, families, and nations nearer to one another. Long ago, there was [00:44:00] a volume called *Sefer Michamot Adoshem*, the book of God's wars. It was lost. Isaiah and Jeremiah pleaded for non-resistance to aggression. A pacifist to the end, Jeremiah goes as far as advocating outright surrender to the enemy. In the Talmud, the Maccabees are far

from being celebrated. The true hero, says the Midrash, Avot d'Rabbi Natan, is not a warrior, but a student of Torah. Our sages distrust war, and even more, civil war.

And so, (sighs) we know -- for instance, we know that among the most beautiful prayers that we say, they're always ended "ham'vareikh et amo Yisrael bashalom. It's always that blessing -- that God is giving as a blessing to his people, always, which is peace. [00:45:00] So then, why Rabbi Akiva? If among the four sages who entered the Pardes, the orchard of forbidden knowledge, he alone emerged unscathed, isn't it because only he entered in peace and left in peace? *Nikhnas b'shalom v'yatza b'shalom..* And what if his goal entering the orchard was simply to find peace and introduce it stronger than ever into creation in the name of the creator? Why did he, alone among his peers, take the side of Bar Kochba?

Oh, my feeling is that he felt sorry for the young, patriotic general. What he felt, what would this general think of the rabbis, the religious leaders that let him down? At least there will be one, Akiva himself, [00:46:00] who will support him. Akiva knew that he wasn't the Messiah, but simply out of love, out of sympathy, perhaps, for this young general, he called him the Messiah. And it was a bloody war. The insurrection lasted

three and a half years. In the beginning, Hadrian did not take it seriously. The first reports from the front made him laugh. Later, he stopped laughing. Dio Cassius, the historian, writes -- probably exaggerating a bit -- that 50 Roman fortresses and some nine hundred cities and towns fell into the hands of the rebels, forcing Hadrian's legions to evacuate Judea, Samaria, and the Galilee. For the first time in 60 years, Jews re-became masters of their own land. At the end, Hadrian dispatched there his best general, Julius Severus, with his toughest and best-equipped troops. Bar Kochba lost the war, [00:47:00] Rome punished the rebels with rare brutality, all were killed, and their corpses lying in the streets and in the fields, waiting for permission to be buried. Rabbi Akiva was tortured and killed -- not for having taken part in the insurrection, but for having studied and taught Torah in public. His last words were "Shema Yisrael," hear, oh Israel, God is our God, God is one, and when he uttered "echat," one, his soul left him.

So now we may wonder what he would do, what his behavior would be today, as our people are faced with new threats and perils. With anti-semitism rising all over the world and with the enemies choosing new tactics, what would he do? Would he look for a living, Messianic symbol, for the dream? Would he preach pacifism or compromise? [00:48:00] Let's continue our quest and

examine one last Talmudic sage, who earlier, also had to find a response to the enemy's momentary triumph, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. Unlike the previous masters we examined tonight, his decision was infinitely more urgent, for it had to be made during and not decades after the tragedy. Jerusalem was under siege. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was in the city, which ravaged by famine, was bitterly demoralized. The population was split in various factions -- the Biryonim, the zealots, though patriots, used doubtful tactics. At one point, they burned all the food supplies just to increase the pressure on the population. They had hoped that mad with hunger, people would become mad with hatred towards the enemy. Unavoidably, the hatred [00:49:00] also turned inward. The Talmud is explicit on this. If the First Temple was burned down because of adultery, idolatry, and violence, the second was destroyed because of hatred, gratuitous hatred. People hated one another for no good reason. And Flavius, again, who never missed an opportunity to slander his people, he said, "Never was a generation so wicked."

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai saw the tragedy coming. He knew how to decode the future simply by reading the present, hence his idea: why not save what could be saved? Why not choose realism and stop, or at least limit, the bloodshed before it became too widespread? He began agitating for peace at all costs. To the

fighters, he said, "My children, why do you reduce the city to ruins? Why do you seek to see [00:50:00] the Temple in ashes? After all, what does Vespasian ask of you? A symbolic surrender, one bow and one arrow, nothing else." And he said, "Wise ones, submit to powerful Rome and wait, be patient. Gather inner strength, moral fortitude, and then, who knows, Israel might get a better chance." But his voice went unheeded. So, he made the most fateful decision in his life, and perhaps our people's life as well: to leave the city, to escape, and personally surrender to the enemy and personally negotiate some kind of deal. Let it be noted, he made the decision all by himself. But how did he convince himself to leave the besieged capitol and its inhabitants and run to [00:51:00] negotiate with the enemy? He consulted no one, asked for no one's advice. But wasn't he concerned with public opinion? Wasn't he afraid occasional critics would brand his move as desertion under fire and collaboration? No. Once he made up his mind, he would not be stopped by anything.

And so, remember Talmudic tale, he summoned his nephew, Abba Sakkara, a rebel leader, and asked him, "How long do you intend to murder our people through hunger?" "I am helpless," replied his nephew Abba Sakkara. "If I open my mouth, they'll kill me." "Can you get me out of here?" "No," answered the nephew. "We

have agreed among ourselves that to prevent desertions, no one is to leave the city alive." The old master meditated a moment before inquiring, "What if I left the city dead?" Abba Sakkara understood and gave him useful advice in playacting. [00:52:00] First, be sick. Then, let it be known among friends and pupils. Let them come and visit you. Let the word pass around that your condition has worsened. Let them show concern. Then, let them announce your death. Make sure that two of your most trusted disciples carry your coffin. The direction was simple, the staging perfect, and successful. Some guards did stop the funeral procession and did wish to stab the corpse, just to alleviate their suspicion. But Abba Sakkara dissuaded them, saying, "What will the people say that we stabbed our dead master?"

You know after, outside the walls, Rabbi Yochanan asked to be led before Vespasian, the future emperor, who wanted to reward him for his dramatic escape. "What are your wishes?" he asked the visitor. "I have three," said Rabbi Yochanan. "Give me Yavneh and its scholars. Keep alive the dynasty [00:53:00] of Rabban Gamaliel. And send physicians to cure Rabbi Tzaddok." Why Yavneh? To give priority to learning. Why the dynasty of Rabban Gamaliel? To maintain living links with the house of David, to which Rabban Gamliel belonged. Why physicians for

Rabbi Tzaddok? Because Rabbi Tzaddok had fasted 40 years to safeguard Jerusalem. Now, he was ill, emaciated, quasi-transparent. And his friend didn't want him to die with Jerusalem. He wanted him to live for Jerusalem. Later, Rabbi Yochanan was criticized by Rabbi Yosef or Rabbi Akiva for having asked too little. "Since you were with the emperor, you should have pleaded for Jerusalem's survival." Probably, Rabbi Yochanan was afraid. Maybe if he requested too much, he would have nothing. [00:54:00] Still, Rabbi Yochanan was never criticized for meeting the Roman general in the first place. Neither then nor now. Such is the unanimous verdict of commentators and students of Jewish history. In escaping from the besieged capitol, in talking with the enemy, and suggesting compromise to end the war, he assured our people's future and its unalienable right to live in peace.

Now, I, of course -- I hope you know I love Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. I love the Talmud. You may now conclude that I could have done the same thing. Years and years ago, before Oslo, there were some of our own people who went to see Arafat, which was against the Israeli law. I was then pressured by some -- let's say presidents -- [00:55:00] that I should go and see Arafat. And one of them got advice from a Jewish friend, saying the president -- whoever that was, not an American -- that the

president could have said to me, "Look, why don't you do what Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai did? He went to see the enemy and we are thankful to him. Why don't you go and see the enemy?" My answer was, I am a student of Rabbi Yochanan, but I am not Rabbi Yochanan. And I didn't go. And I belong to a minority of Jews who have never met Arafat.

At this point, we come closer to the conclusion of our inquiry tonight. It seems to me that we have learned that attitudes towards war and violence and oppression are varied in the Talmud. Some opposed it so much that they appear on the side of the occupant. Others preferred [00:56:00] the position of neutrality. Rabbi Akiva supported those who wanted to fight to the end. What does the Jewish tradition say about war and peace? Peace is always the best option; wars are just when they are just. Not all wars are just. A *milchemet mitzvah*, which is a just war, warrants total mobilization, cancelling all exceptions, all privilege, all derogations. A groom is taken from under the canopy and sent to the army. But what is a just war? We have said it. Actually, much has been written by Jewish, Christian, and secular thinkers and theologians about its definition. To the extent that there is a consensus in our sources at least, it could be formulated briefly as follows. A

just war is a defensive war, when the people's very existence is at stake.

Hence the question [00:57:00] we now must address, and it is simple and urgent. Is the Jewish state today, is Israel today, constantly threatened by terrorists, is it in existential danger? If the answer is no, it compels us to adopt one attitude, one of patience, moderation, and reconciliation. But what if it is yes? In other words now, what is the ultimate objective of Palestinian terror? Is it a one- or a two-state solution? Is it a Palestinian state alongside the Jewish state, or a Palestinian state replacing the Jewish state? I confess that I belong to those who had high hopes for Oslo. I was present at the extraordinary ceremony on September 13, 1993, in the White House. [00:58:00] I was moved by enemies shaking hands and solemnly declaring that peace has a future. Yitzhak Rabin was a close friend, and I accepted his arguments. I said, if Oslo is good for him, it must be good for me too.

But the last time I spent with him, two weeks before his assassination, he told me -- I quote him. "In the beginning, I thought Yasser Arafat was a solution. Now, I realize that he is a problem." Then came the suicide bombers, but I prefer to call suicide killers. Before Israel had been attacked by regular

armies, saboteurs, fedayeen, airline hijackers. Now, they have been succeeded by young men and women who kill themselves in order to maim and kill more and more Jews, mainly civilians, young people and children. They call themselves martyrs, and that's how imams in the mosques and the Arab propaganda call them. But then we Jews [00:59:00] and Christians too know the meaning of martyrdom. A martyr is not somebody who kills for his faith, but somebody who is ready to die for his faith. What to do now? We know the consequences of suicide terror. We see the pictures, our heart breaks. We see the families in the cemeteries, weeping and weeping, and we no longer know what to do.

Often, when I think of our friends in Israel or our families in Israel, that mothers are afraid to send their children to kindergarten, when people never know whether their children will come back from the coffeeshop, when we see those scenes of horror and pain and agony, I, at least I, at times, thank God for a miracle. The miracle is that the Israeli nation, the Israeli people, have never had a [01:00:00] collective nervous breakdown. It would be so simple. It would be so normal. So, what can a people do against blind, hateful, cruel, vicious, and bloodthirsty assassins, who seized with enthusiasm, are ready and eager to kill themselves just to kill more people? Oh,

chronicles have given us figures. Pesach in Netanya. *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* in Haifa. Shabbat in Jerusalem. Weekdays everywhere in the land sanctified by God for peace and tormented by fanatic death-seekers. One of the bus explosions in Jerusalem recently was caused by an imam from Hebron's largest mosque. Instead of teaching wisdom, faith, and prayer, he chose to guide his community to massacres of young men and women, whose hearts were open to fervor and hope. What [01:01:00] does one do?

Now we know at least one thing. We know that except for self-defense, normal people do not love war. Even professional soldiers don't -- especially they don't. War is a product of anger, not love. Wars were being waged only by monarchs and dictators; democracies never waged war. War is, first of all, violence and bloodshed, mutilated corpses, orphaned families, devastated cities and villages, burned down homes. And who knows that better than warriors themselves? Eventually, after the guns fall silent, it is they who emerge on the national scene as peace-seekers, if not peace-makers. And such a man was the late Yitzhak Rabin. [01:02:00] Brilliant tactician and strategist, inspiring commander of his troops -- it was he who made them win the Six Day War -- it is his stunning triumphs that led Israel into a period of extraordinary fervor. It is

(sighs) something which I will always remember. Yitzhak Rabin, when he explained to me why there were no victory parades after the Six Day War, he said, "Because our soldiers are sad, not only because they have lost men -- friends -- but because of the enemy, who also lost friends." This is Yitzhak Rabin. And therefore, to commemorate his death with melancholy and dignity, Israel's [01:03:00] ambassador, consul general Alon Pinkas, who is one of the best spokesmen for Israel in the United States. And our friend, Yossi Malovany, who is one of the best, the greatest, finest chazonim in the world. They will now participate in a commemoration of Rabin's death. And all of us who love Israel will participate with them. Thank you.

(audience applause) [01:04:00]

Alon Pinkas:

About 10 years ago, when the Bronfman Center was opened right here at the 92nd Street Y, one of the opening events was attended a special guest from Israel, Yitzhak Rabin. And I was just reminded of that by Matthew Bronfman, the chairman of the board of the 92nd Street Y, about how proud it was for the Bronfman family to host Yitzhak Rabin right here in this room. And unfortunately, eight years and two days ago, a cataclysmic event happened. And you know, nations go through watershed events and nations go through cataclysmic points of departure,

[01:05:00] after which things are never the same. Some abrupt, brutal, overwhelming disruption in the continuum of history that changes, sometimes radically, the course that a nation set for itself. That any nation sets for itself. And the Rabin assassination, eight years ago, was exactly that kind of a watershed, cataclysmic event in our history. Most of you, many of you, I'm sure, remember with utter clarity where you were on the 22nd of November 1963, when President Kennedy was shot -- this month, in 1963. And while traumatic and disconcerting and shocking as that assassination was, it did not profoundly and comprehensively change America's course. America remained America. It was strong enough to recuperate [01:06:00] from that assassination and to move on towards its own defined destiny.

Yitzhak Rabin's assassination did profoundly, incomprehensibly change the course that Israel set for itself in the early and mid-'90s. And when you think of Yitzhak Rabin, you should always, always remember that it wasn't just the man, the husband, the father, the prime minister that was shot that woeful day in Tel Aviv on the 4th of November 1995. It was, to a large extent, the embodiment of Zionism that was savagely attacked. It was the morality of the prophets that was defamed. And it was everything that we believed in, the essence of this

experiment that we call the state of Israel, that was so tarnished, forever, maybe inexorably. And those three bullets that ripped through Yitzhak Rabin's back, [01:07:00] ripped through the back of the Palmach commander, the liberator of Jerusalem, twice defense minister, and twice prime minister. It wasn't just Yitzhak Rabin. It was the history of the state of Israel from the '30s through the mid-'90s.

And there are many lessons to be learned from that assassination. I think most are self-evident, in those beautiful and enlightening words that we've all heard from Elie Wiesel a few moments ago. But if there's one enduring lesson that we all need to internalize and think over and over again, it's the lesson about Jewish sovereignty and Jewish independence that should never be taken for granted. And Jewish sovereignty and Jewish independence should not be taken for granted not because of external threats, but because our history, unfortunately -- and that too was self-evident in Elie Wiesel's words -- [01:08:00] our history is replete with this awful propensity for self-destruction. With fratricide, with hatred -- *sinat chinam*, as the Talmud calls it -- and Jerusalem fell on this *sinat chinam*, as they called it, as the sages called it. And this fratricide and this intolerance and this inability to come to terms as a nation for two thousand years with the

concepts of sovereignty and independence were to have changed under Yitzhak Rabin, and many others, crisscrossing the political parties. But that Jewish sovereignty, after two thousand years, was severely threatened and severely impaired on the 4th of November 1995. And if there is one lesson that we all need to think about, [01:09:00] is that we should be extremely careful and handle with utmost care this very fragile opportunity that our own history afforded us called Jewish independence.

I would like now to welcome Matthew Bronfman, chairman of the board of the 92nd Street Y, to light a memorial candle. May I please ask that you all stand up for a short moment of silence. (audience rises) Thank you. [01:10:00]

Gilad Harel:

(playing "Kaddish" on the clarinet) [01:11:00 - 01:16:00]

(audience applause)

Cantor Yossi Malovany:

Kindly rise. (audience rises)

*Kel molay rachamim, shochayn bamiromim, ham-tzay m'nucha n'chona
al kanfay Hash'china, b'ma'alot k'doshim u't-horim k'zo-har*

*haraki-a maz'hirim, et nishmat Rosh Memshellet Yisrael Yitzchak
ben Nechemiah v'Rosa Rabin she-halach l-olama, ba-avur shenodvu
tz'dakah b'ad hazkarat nishmato, b'Gan Ayden t'hay m'nuchata;
la-chayn Ba-al Harachamim yas-tire-ha b'sayter k'nafav l'olamim,
v'yitz-ror bitz-ror hacha-yim et nishmato, Hashem Hu na-
chalatah, v'tanu-ach b'shalom al mishkavah. V'nomar: Amayn.*

(Hebrew) [01:16:34 - 01:20:51]

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