

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Whenever people gather to study, the place becomes a sanctuary. And all those inside are like ancient priests in the service of something that transcends place and time. Study in the Jewish tradition implies repetition. Actually, the word "Mishnah" means repetition. And so, let us enter the enchanted world of ancient masters and see what they have to tell us today. Again and again, we cannot avoid recalling the episode, strange episode, of the pagan who approached the old master Hillel with a peculiar request. [00:01:00] "Teach me the entire Torah," he said, "while I am standing on one foot."

Actually, he had tried it already -- on Shammai, Hillel's traditional adversary and colleague, who chased him away in anger. How can we not understand Shammai? How dare a stranger come to him with such a childish and revolting idea? To be taught the entire Torah, with its vast amount of laws and interpretations, while standing on one foot? "Out of my sight," he said. Still, the pagan wasn't discouraged. No luck with one master, he turned to another one. And with Hillel, he was more fortunate. And Hillel's answer is well known. "*Ma she'anu*

lakh, whatever is [00:02:00] detestable to you, do not do to someone else." Which is a variation of *v'ahavta l'rayakha kamokha*, the Biblical injunction ordering us to love our fellow man or neighbor as we love ourselves.

Hillel's answer apparently satisfied his visitor. But it doesn't satisfy us. Isn't it a bit too simplistic, too facile? What? Is learning really so easy that one need only to be an acrobat to acquire instant knowledge? Is it conceivable that the study of Torah is nothing but a game? Well, hold your breath. (laughs) Characteristically, we often forget that Hillel's answer, as given before, [00:03:00] is incomplete. It is only the first half of the answer. The second half reads as follows. *U'may'itakh zil g'mor*, which has two translations. One, and all the rest is commentary. Two, go now and study. You want to play games, go ahead, but go study. But study where? Anywhere. In choosing a residence, one must favor a city where there are learned people. In seeking company, one ought to single out that of persons endowed with a passion for learning. What is heaven to the scholar, people asked? And the answer in the Talmud was, a celestial yeshiva, an academy. With the Messiah [00:04:00] as teacher. If it's simply an academy, I wonder, whether they have problems with tenure and (laughter) promotion.

But the fact is, they are learning up there, too. When must one learn? Anytime. To begin as a child. And never to stop. To learn for what purpose? To gain wealth or acquire possessions or a diploma? The highest degree of learning, we are told, is what we call Torah Lishmah, which means we have to study for its own sake. The joy of learning is in learning. And there is so much joy in study that one is not supposed to engage in it in periods of mourning, such as Tisha B'Av, when we commemorate the destruction of the temple, [00:05:00] when we mourn. Or the seven days of mourning when one loses a parent or a sibling. The reward of learning? More learning.

It is said of the great and celebrated Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, the master of the good name, known as the Besht, that one day he tried hard to accelerate the coming of the Messiah. So desperately had he tried that he almost succeeded. But scared, Satan appeared before the celestial tribunal and complained. "Isn't it forbidden to hasten redemption prematurely?" The Besht was punished. His punishment, he was deprived of his mystical powers and lost his place in paradise. And this should have saddened him. Instead, he rejoiced. "From now on," he said, "master of the universe, I shall serve [00:06:00] you for

your own sake, not mine. I shall pray and fulfill all your commandments without expecting any reward.”

But that applies not only to faith and worship, but to study as well. You say, alef, A, then you say B, and then you continue, and you repeat. It never ends. Talmudic law prescribes everyone’s inalienable right to study. Even to someone who is condemned to exile. The Talmud says *golim talmid golim rabo imo*, which means, when a disciple is sentenced to go into exile, his teacher must accompany him. Why? Because one may be forced to live a life without freedom, but not without study.

[00:07:00] There is a sage called Rabbi Yehoshua, son of Gamla, who is mentioned only once in the entire Talmudic literature. Only once. Not related to a law that he espoused or commented upon, but simply because he established schools all over the country, in every city, in every village. And for this, he is remembered.

I do not know of any religious or secular tradition that extols study with more insistence and as totally as ours does. The Talmudic law goes far, so far as declaring that a learned illegitimate son who is excluded from the community for generations has precedence over an ignorant high priest, whose role [00:08:00] is nevertheless central to the practice of

religion. We know that ancient Greece emphasized beauty. In ancient Rome, power was glorified. But in ancient Judea, it is knowledge that was celebrated. In Greece, they also wanted to learn and to teach, we have Plato and Socrates and Pythagoras. But there, learning was reserved only to the elite. Whereas in Judea, whereas in the Jewish tradition, every human being, everyone is part of the elite, when it comes to study.

The highest praise a person could get in our tradition is to be called not handsome or famous, [00:09:00] but Talmid Chacham, which means a wise student, or the student of a wise man. The most glorious title? Rav, or rebbe. Teacher. And more specifically, moreinu or rabbeinu, which is our teacher, our master. Moses was a great political leader, an inspired spokesman, a master of prophets, a legislator, a military commander. Still, generations of teachers and pupils, interpreters and commentators, remember him to this day as Moshe Rabbeinu, our teacher, Moses. But in a way, on different levels, aren't we all both teachers to and students of each other? In my town, people used to admonish those whose vanity was too palpable. [00:10:00] Remember, don't be so vain. There is and there will always be someone who knows more than you, at least in one area. It also means, therefore, that there is and will be someone who is bound to be able to teach me something I

don't know. Therefore, I love strangers. Therefore, I love beggars. Because the beggars are princes.

And this is only fitting that as we enter our fortieth year of these annual encounters at the 92nd Street Y, we speak of what they all have in common: a passion for learning together. I know that some of you have been here from the very beginning, and you know that I have tried already a few times to say, "It's enough." (laughter) [00:11:00] At the twenty-fifth anniversary, I said, "It's enough." At the thirtieth, I said, "It's enough." At the thirty-fifth, I said, "It's enough." And I don't say it anymore. Because -- (applause) it's never enough to study. There is no limit to it. "Ta Shema" is an expression frequently used in Talmudic text: come and listen. In the Zohar, the Book of Splendor, the Book of Mysticism, it is "Ta Chazi." Come and see. The mystic sees, the scholar listens.

Distances need not become barriers. The only obstacles that exist, occasionally, are those one finds inside a text. But all can be removed, and we help each other by removing them.

[00:12:00] It is enough to open one's eyes and ears, to read or listen. You have questions? Good. They seem to have no immediate answers? Very good. This may be better. What would the world be, what would life be, without questions, only with

answers? At times, the questions are in the answers, and the other way around. So, the question of course now is, are the doors still locked? Don't worry, they will open. They already are.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Well, the field of Jewish studies has always been all-encompassing: ancient and modern history, poetry and hermeneutics, philosophy and literature. The impact of Jewish thought and vision on non-Jewish thinkers remains [00:13:00] as strong as ever. Why have Jews fascinated so many people throughout so many centuries in so many lands, in so many cultures? Why has the Jewish people been so persistently at the center of attention? Is it because of all the people of antiquity, the people of Israel, is the only one to have survived antiquity? But then, another question arises. How did we achieve that status? By doing what? Following what path? Saying what words? By climbing what mountain? Reading where, for what?

When we speak of the necessary urgency of learning, we always begin with scripture: its laws, its tales, the ethical depth, as well as their literary sensitivity. [00:14:00] The beauty of

the Biblical style, the very first verse, "Bereshit bara Elochim," "In the beginning, God created heaven and Earth." The whole story is already there. In the beginning. What is at the beginning? In philosophy, in theology, what was there before the beginning? Does the beginning have an end? Will there ever be an end to that beginning? As always, therefore, let us turn to scripture. As our sages taught us, *hafokh ba v'hafokh ba kula ba*, turn and turn its pages. Everything you are looking, anywhere, is in it. All the questions a pupil will ever ask his or her teacher, we are told, have already been heard and received by Moses at Sinai.

What is the first question [00:15:00] in the Bible? Raised by whom, addressed to whom? It's in the text. Open Genesis. Adam and Eve seem to have a good time in the Garden of Eden, paradise, with the uninvited serpent as entertainment. Why did they listen to its malicious and seductive advice, rather than to God's injunction? Having sinned, Adam felt the urge to go into hiding. Why? Was he embarrassed, as he discovered Eve's nakedness and his own? No. Was he ashamed? Perhaps. He felt guilty of having disobeyed God's order not to eat from the forbidden tree. Question: why such seemingly arbitrary [00:16:00] prohibition? Why didn't the creator of all human beings in the future want them to acquire knowledge, so as to

distinguish between good and evil? Wasn't that that God later wanted from all of us? To distinguish between good and evil and choose the good. Furthermore, didn't God know that his order would be violated? So, what is the meaning of this episode? Is it possible that it was meant to be a suspense story, with the reader and the entire creation wondering about Adam and Eve, as in a good suspense novel? Will they, yes, or won't they? (laughter) Will they follow God's wish? And suppose they had eaten from the tree of life, and thus become [00:17:00] immortal? And therefore, without sin, they wouldn't have died. But if they didn't die, would we be here now?

Whether Adam was dealing or not with such philosophical considerations is not clear. What is known is that having sinned, he behaved childishly. He ran away from home. When the child misbehaves, he runs away from home. So, he ran away and went into hiding, as if it were possible to hide from God. But then he heard God's voice. And God's voice was actually a philosophical, existential question, the first in the history of monotheistic religions. "Ayeka." Ayeka, where are you? Centuries, eternities later, while in a tsarist jail in Petersburg, the first Rebbe [00:18:00] of Chabad, Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi, was visited by the warden who happened to be a fan of Biblical texts. "I heard," he said, "that you are a

scholar. Is it true?" "Perhaps," answered the rabbinic prisoner. "I am a learner." "If so," said the warden, "explain to me this passage. God asked a question which I fail to understand. Is it conceivable that God didn't know where Adam was?" And the Rebbe answered, "God knew. Adam did not." And Rabbi Shneur Zalman of blessed memory continued, "God's question was not addressed to the first man alone, but to all his descendants. In other words, we are all asked to look into ourselves and decide, Where are we in the world? Where are we [00:19:00] in our own life? What are we doing here with our life, while we have it?" In other words, the interrogation is not related to geography, but to moral psychology and philosophy. It is an appeal to introspection, to self-examination.

Another story involving the first human family is about its two sons, Cain and Abel. What a sordid, morbid, disagreeable story it is. Dominated by petty jealousy, it appeals to what is worst in man. And his hostility with their dark consequences. Was it their fault only? Or really, why did God reject Cain's offerings, while accepting his younger brother's, thus creating an unavoidable [00:20:00] conflict situation between them? Before that, they were good brothers, and all of a sudden, they no longer were good brothers. Was the story there to teach us

today as yesterday, that brothers can become mortal enemies? Or more importantly, that whoever kills, kills his brother? The first death in religious history was murder. For Cain became the first assassin, and Abel the first victim. Question. Why Abel? Why was he chosen to die, just as he was chosen by God to get the offering from Abel? What fault did Abel commit to deserve his tragic fate? And a magnificent answer is offered in the Midrash. Listen to the text. When Cain's offering was rejected, [00:21:00] *vayomer kayin el hevel akhiv*, Cain, his face somber and fallen, turned to his brother Abel and spoke to him. And the text doesn't tell us what he said. We only know that he spoke to him. He possibly needed somebody to pour his heart out to him, complaining about God's unfairness. All we know is that Abel did not respond to his brother's pain. He simply ignored it. He remained silent, indifferent. That is why he was punished. When your brother is in pain, listen to him.

You see, as far as Biblical tales and their Talmudic commentaries are concerned, the past is in the present. Their implications affect our own lives. Take the story of Noah and the floods. I always had problems with [00:22:00] Uncle Noah. Too weak, complacent, passive. Yes, he obeys God's will. But what about his own? He had no will. He never takes any

initiative. God tells him to build an ark, he obeys. God tells him to save his family, he saves it. God tells him to create the first animal circus in the annals of world affairs, (laughter) he does so. But what about people in general? He had neighbors, he may have friends, what happened? The generation was sinful in the eyes of God, who felt the need to start again with a new draft, so to speak. Okay, good. But what about the guiltless? There must have been some guiltless people. And what about the children? By definition, innocent, what about them? Why has [00:23:00] Noah not at least tried to convince the creator of the universe to save the children?

Well, you see, I do have problems with Noah. But the text loves him. Gives him compliments upon compliments, he was a fearful, fearing God -- I don't know why. Well, if the text loves him, so he wins. Wait a minute. Midrashic interpreters are not entirely satisfied with his behavior, and they in a way correct the Biblical text. In one source we learn that after the floods, and when they had already receded, Noah asked God -- all of a sudden, he becomes a moralist. You know, a human rights activist. (laughter) And he says, "Master of the universe, why did you condemn the whole world's inhabitants? Why haven't you shown any [00:24:00] compassion to the innocent?" It's a good question, but God rebuffs him on the spot. "Noah, now you are

asking?" In other words, where were you before? Why so late? Why didn't you plead for good people before it was too late?

Let's stay with him for one more episode. Soon after Noah set foot on dry land, God in his goodness made him a solemn pledge. He says, "Never shall I destroy the universe with floods." When I as a child read it for the first time, my immediate response, one of delight. "What a gift," I said to myself. "Noah can go to sleep quietly. The Almighty judge, king and ruler of the universe, has promised all of us that history will not repeat itself. The catastrophe witnessed by Noah will never occur again." {00:25:00] So, why worry? But you know, again in Mishnah. You read it, I reread the story and began to worry. God said, "I will not destroy the world with water." Why such limitation? (laughter) Why the fine print? Why didn't he simply say, "Noah, I promise you, I will not destroy the world, period." After all, now we know that if the world is threatened, it is because not of floods, but of fire. A new fire. A more gigantic fire, more gigantic than Hiroshima. If not the world, surely parts of it.

In parentheses, hasn't Iran decided to become nuclear? And isn't its president, Ahmadinejad, a pathological case? A hater of Israel, Holocaust denier, hasn't he said publicly, on the

record, [00:26:00] that his wish is to destroy the Jewish state, with all its Jewish inhabitants? That's a danger not only to Israel, it's a danger to the world. So, I reread the Noah story a third time. And only then did I realize its true meaning. God said to man, "I will not destroy the world." The emphasis being on "I." In other words, if the world is to be destroyed, it will not be my doing but yours. Was Sodom inhabited by sinners and criminals alone? Did they have no children? God was willing to save the city if 10 just men lived on its grounds. Weren't these children worthy of similar compassion?

Which brings us, of course, to the eternal problem of God's presence and action in history, the question of [00:27:00] theodicy. Since He is everywhere, how is one to explain evil? Since God is everywhere, He is also in evil? And how is one to explain suffering? How is one to explain natural disasters and man made catastrophes? In the time of absolute uprootedness, or what happened in the last century, where was He? The killers killed, the victims perished, and He was silent. A Midrashic legend tells us that when a just person dies, God sheds two tears that fall into Hayam Hagadol, the ocean, creating such an uproar that reverberates from one corner of the universe to the other. [00:28:00] If so, where were His tears when day after day, night after night, teachers and their pupils, parents and

their children, students, artists, learned and unlearned, happy and unhappy, when they were all led to the darkness of the flames? Is it possible that actually, God did shed tears, but the world didn't listen?

We study and go on studying, hoping to find answers, and more questions and even more enigmas. Instead, with the passing of centuries, the questions become more pertinent, poignant, and agonizingly relevant. Let us stay with Abraham for a while. His episode of the Akedah, the binding of [00:29:00] Isaac, continues to hound and trouble my generation. Obviously, even he, God's friend and ally, the first believer, needed to be tested. Which maybe means that every generation must be tested. The tenth and last test was as father and man of faith. Abraham was asked to bring his son as a living offering. But how could he believe in a God who ordered him to do that? How could he obey such order?

Countless volumes, Jewish and non-Jewish, were written on this subject. Why didn't Abraham consult his wife, Sarah? After all, Isaac was her son, too. Well, Sarah was asleep. And it's clear, the Bible said, the Talmud says, had Sarah not been asleep, [00:30:00] she would have prevented that episode at all. She would have convinced her husband not to go ahead.

Furthermore, why was Isaac so passive? He was already, according to one source, 37 years old. The event of fear and trembling, the expression used by Kierkegaard, that took place on Mount Moriah, was discussed from this place at least twice in the last 40 years and referred to at least 20 times. Just as Sinai marks a turning point in our history, so does the Akedah.

And my perception of the story is a little bit different. What I said here 40 years ago is simple: the test was of a double nature. Just as God tested Abraham, Abraham tested God. God said, "Let's see whether you will do the deed," [00:31:00] and Abraham said, "Let's see if you will want to go through with it." And I have a variety of Midrashic sources and quotations to support my theory. And in the middle of the story, while Isaac was already bound to the altar and the fire was ready and Abraham was preparing the knife, an angel stopped him, and said, "Do not lie thy hand on the lad." And the question asked by Rashi in the Talmud, why an angel and not God? After all, God told him to go through with it. Traditional answer is, only God may order the slaughter of a man. But then, angel, any angel's intervention is enough to stop it. But my approach is a little bit different. If God used the services of the angel, it is because God was embarrassed. Because Abraham won. Embarrassed to acknowledge his own defeat.

In scripture, [00:32:00] the story ends there. Abraham proved his infinite faith to God, in God. Isaac survived his ordeal. And God gave them his grateful blessings and they all lived happily ever after. (laughter) Not so in the Midrash. There, a dramatic change occurs before the end. All of a sudden, Abraham appears in a different role. Until then, he was the obedient servant. He submitted to God's shocking first order but now, he's questioning that order. And he is surely opposing, in the Midrash, the second order by the angel to save Isaac. He, Abraham, who did not ask God, "Why do you wish me to forget my fatherly duties and my fatherly love and kill my own son?" is now ready to [00:33:00] disregard God's desire to spare Isaac.

A remarkable dialogue begins between God and his loyal ally. Abraham is now setting conditions for Isaac's survival, and he said, "Master of the universe, unless you give in, unless you promise me something, I will go ahead." And God said, "What do you want?" And Abraham says, "Oh no, no, wait a second. I could have asked you in the beginning. You want me to kill my son? Didn't you promise that he will be a builder of nations? I didn't ask you that. So therefore, now, I'm saying to you, I'm going ahead unless you do something." "What should I do?" said God. And Abraham said one thing. "I want you that

whenever my people, my descendants will need help, that you will help. If you don't promise that, I will go ahead." Abraham won. [00:34:00] And therefore, we read this story, the Akedah, on Rosh Hashanah, the day of judgment. As if we were to say to God, "Look, remember Abraham. What he obtained from you, a promise that whenever we tell the story, you come to our side, to our aid."

You see, this iconoclastic treasure can be found only in the Talmud. And later, in a Hasidic text, but first, in the Talmud. The Talmud is so iconoclastic. There is no religious tradition that has this kind of attitude toward God, that we can argue with him, we can make deals with him, we can protest against him. And we can actually say to him, "Wait a second, if you don't do that, we won't." (laughter) What do we say always? We say, a person can be a Jew -- of course, I'm Jewish, [00:35:00] I speak about a Jew -- a Jew can be a Jew with God, and maybe against God, but not without God. That must be true of non-Jews as well, but it is for them to say that. A surprising element in the Midrash (pauses) claims that God's intervention came too late. In scripture, the verse of Abraham's descent from Mount Moriah is in singular. Until then, it was in plural. *vayeilkhu shnayhem yakhdav*, they went together, they went together, they went together. And all of a sudden, after the intervention, he

says, *vayashav Avraham el na'arav*, and Abraham returned alone to his servants.

Where was Isaac? Poor Isaac. The story bears his name, *Akedah Yitzhak*, the binding of Isaac -- not the trial of Abraham -- it's Isaac name attached to the story. And yet, not enough [00:36:00] is being said about him. Mention is even made of his complicity, his cooperation with his father until the last moment on the altar. When he asked him to tie him well, so as he would not tremble while the knife would -- but what did he feel? What went through his mind? Wasn't he also tested? Isaac, as a child, as an adolescent, was Sarah's boy, not Abraham's. Abraham was too busy; he was a statesman. Forever away from home and family, fighting battles, and trying to save other people and communities. Naturally, Isaac must have longed for the day he and his father will be alone at last, together.

And that day finally arrived, when his father awakened him in the morning. And Isaac must have been happy; now, at last, there will be for the son a bonding experience with his father. (laughter) And for three days and three nights, they hardly spoke [00:37:00] to one another. The text is one of the greatest literary jewels in the Bible. Every word matters, has weight. Every sentence predicts the next. You are drawn to it,

waiting, what will happen at the end. And then, during the long journey, they weren't alone yet -- the servants were present. And that's why my father is silent, Isaac must have thought, because we are not alone. But finally, they were alone. And what does Isaac see? All of sudden, he sees his father with a knife in his hand. I love Rembrandt. Rembrandt has many paintings on Biblical themes, and one of the great paintings is on the Akedah. And the drawings that he prepared for the painting are extraordinary. [00:38:00] At first, he shows almost in the Christian way, influenced by Christianity, Abraham fierce, fierce face with a knife in his hand. He's going to kill. The second drawing, less fierce. The third, the fourth, I think the seventh or eighth, the knife is on the ground, and father and son embrace. That's why I love Rembrandt.

I often thought of my generation that was also marked by its own Akedah. In some ways, the character of our people is forever being shaped by what took place then on Mount Moriah, with one difference. In my time, it was the father who was left behind. There is much to be learned from this tale. We could devote to it more sessions. We could see how it is being treated in Christian sources. [00:39:00] Could Christianity exist without its link to the Biblical history of the Akedah? We also can trace it to the Islamic commentaries, where it is Ishmael, not

Isaac, whom God wants as his living offering. Let us read further in Genesis, Lot and his wife, Sodom and its fate, Jacob and Esau, Jacob and his sons, Joseph and his brothers -- why did they hate him? Why do Jews hate Jews? Why were they ready and willing to get rid of him? That they were jealous, that one could understand. Jacob spoiled Joseph rotten. But why the exclusive cruelty on their part? They threw him in a pit filled with snakes and scorpions. He was screaming with fear, howling with pain. And they, his brothers, Jacob's children, our ancestors, [00:40:00] sat down and had a succulent meal. And it's terrible, the text says it, while he was yowling, his brothers enjoyed a great meal. And when a caravan of Ishmaelites approached, they sold him as a slave.

That day was marked in our tradition as one of the darkest, surpassing in its sin the one when the people of Israel with Aaron, Moses' brother, in their midst, produced the golden calf. As if to teach us that when a person humiliates another person, when a brother is betrayed by his brothers, the transgression is more severely judged than when a person or a group commits sins against God himself. Why is the story told? To teach us that nobody is perfect, not even in the Bible. And that there is no cover-up in its [00:41:00] pages. It's also taught to celebrate Joseph. Not Joseph as a young man in his father's home, not the

viceroy who never sent agents to the land of Canaan just to see whether his father was still alive and well. He could have done it, he never did it. He was away for 22 years in Egypt, and he never bothered to send somebody to the land of Canaan. Is my father alive? The text and its numerous commentaries offer praise to Joseph as a mature statesman in Egypt's royal palace. In the last chapter of Genesis, we see him weeping. Once, when his father dies, the second time, when his brothers tell him a lie. Namely, they told him that before leaving them, before dying, Jacob asked all of them, "Tell Joseph, do not keep a grudge against your brothers who have done you harm." Quote, unquote. In other words, forgive them.

[00:42:00] Well, there is no trace in the text of such an admonition. Quite the opposite. Our sages inform us that from this passage we learn that it is permitted to lie; it is, for the sake of peace. That's what we call today diplomacy.

(laughter) But Joseph didn't see it that way. He was hurt by the very idea that his brothers believed him incapable of forgiveness. When we speak of forgiveness, of course, what about that theme which has become so (pauses) topical to this generation of ours? It is on everyone's agenda. Can we forgive? Should we forgive our enemy, who is our enemy? Take Iraq, what's happening there. Do they forgive each other? They

kill each other. Take Iran, [00:43:00] Afghanistan at war, the world. Why such a lack of forgiveness on everyone's part? As for us Jews, how many times have some of us been asked by students or journalists or friends, "Do you forgive?" Whom? The Germans? Does a political prisoner of the former Soviet Union have to pardon his jailer, and a victim of torture his tormentor? Is there a statute of limitation in the domain of forgiveness? Oh no, yesterday's questions have not been answered today.

But a story which I like, a good story. In the year 2000, a Jewish survivor, a writer, was invited by the German Parliament, the Bundestag, to address its first session in Berlin. The entire political establishment, with the exception of Helmut Kohl, was present. He opened his remarks with the following words. "Look at me and try to see me not the way I look [00:44:00] today, but the way I looked 50 years ago." And then he told them certain things which they needed to hear. At the conclusion, he turned to the German president, Johannes Rau, and said, "Mr. President, Germany, modern Germany, a democracy, has done some good things for Israel and the Jewish people, especially in the field of the financial help to survivors and military and diplomatic assistance to Israel. But there's one thing Germany has never done. It never asked the Jewish people

for forgiveness. Won't you do it now?" Well, you can imagine the reaction of the audience. However, whether it was a consequence or not, one week later, the president of Germany, Johannes Rau, flew to Jerusalem and addressed the Knesset, the Parliament. And officially asked the Jewish people to pardon the Germans for what they had done. [00:45:00] Sometimes words do carry some weight.

From the Torah or the Bible, we move to the Nevi'im, the Prophets. Moses, the loneliest man in Jewish history, the unwilling messenger, spokesman, political leader. Either the people plagued him with their troubles or God was angry with him for our people's shortcomings. He had had not a single happy moment in his life. At the end, he saw the promised land from afar. Was it punishment? Some sages believe so, because he hid the rock, because he killed an Egyptian, all kinds of things. Because he hid his identity when he went to Midian, Jethro and he hurt a girl. Who are we to disagree with her? Still, at times I wonder whether God's decision was not rather a reward. As though God saw that Moses suffered enough from his people in his lifetime, why not give him some peace? No, had Moses entered the promised land, [00:46:00] can you imagine the daily recriminations that he would have received from the citizens of a new state? "So better," God said, "come on. I'll do you a

favor. Stay outside." (laughter) For the sake of truth and transparency, I must confess that for a while, I thought it was my chidush, my innovation, my interpretation which is only mine. But later, I traced it back to a Midrashic source, which I must have read when I was a child and it remained in my subconscious. And that source explains why Moses' burial place had to remain unknown: it was meant to protect him. And the Midrash says, otherwise, each time things went wrong, people would come to his grave, troubling him with their endless concerns and frivolous complaints. So, God said, rest in peace. (laughter)

Moses wasn't the [00:47:00] only unhappy prophet in our history. Most of them were. And their words still reverberate in our collective consciousness. What we need, really, today, is a prophetic voice. What we need in America and what we need in the whole world, a prophetic voice. Simply to -- (sighs) to say certain things that must be said, even if they are not heeded and heard. The words of the prophets, therefore, are special. What do the prophets teach us? They had no titles, no official functions, no personal wealth, and no legal protection. All they had was a passion, a burning passion for justice. And their instrument was language. What a language. Language was their tool, their weapon, their trademark, their style, their personality. [00:48:00] Open any page and you will quickly

identify its author. A page of Isaiah is as only Isaiah could have written it, and now we discover pages of Isaiah and Ezekiel and manuscripts of the Dead Sea. So, it's baffling how old texts come back to us after 2,500 years. When they spoke, people listened. Yes, they listened, although prophets rarely sought to please the crowd. Quite the contrary, the role of the prophet was to displease the mighty and the wealthy, as they spoke what I invented, truth to power. I used it when I spoke to Reagan during the Bitburg affair. And you know, some words have a good destiny. It was picked up; books now are being written, truth to power, and it's good.

Still, is it true? Is it power? Truth has its own power, [00:49:00] whereas power without truth is doomed to fail. With words and deeds, the prophet never hesitated to disturb established order and accepted authority. The harshness of Isaiah, the pacifism of Jeremiah, the appeal for hope of Ezekiel, the quest for human compassion of Amos and Habakuk, study them and admire the way they challenge resignation and overcome despair, and the way they go on relentlessly to speak - for justice and compassion. When the age of prophecy came to its end, after the destruction of the first temple, another age also filled with greatness was ushered in: that of the Talmud. And again, the Mishnah says repeat, so I repeat what I have said

here more than once on more than one occasion. Talmud means study. To study Talmud is to study study, is to explore the values and principles inherent in learning, the [00:50:00] luminous horizons pushed back by lessons communicated from one generation of teachers to another. Study implies memory. One studies in order to remember. One learns ancient texts and modern commentaries to keep memory alive. Without memory, study is futile. *Alitheia* in Greek means truth, and what is truth? Things one cannot forget.

And when we study the Talmud, it's in the present. Rabbi Akiva Omer, he says. They are still saying it. And when Ishmael answers in the present, and you have the feeling that you are attending a discussion between four sages who belong to four different generations, and yet they speak to one another. They are already dead, but they speak to one another. So, Jewish study is as old as the Jewish people, if not older. Our sages tell us that the Torah preceded creation; it existed before Sinai. Because God, in creating creation, [00:51:00] consulted it, as an architect consults his plans. And the almighty creator actually is not only the author, but also the student of his own Torah. And I repeat, no culture, no civilization have invested as much energy -- pathos and creative imagination in the teaching of children -- as ours have. During the cruel

years of Hadrian's rule, the children of Israel were the consolation of Israel.

Of course, remember the times Judea was occupied by Rome, and Rome watches the scene suspiciously. When Metianus orders his emissary, Pompeius Longinus, to reinforce discipline. Do Jews want to observe their religion? Let them, he said, as long as their worship and study keep them out of politics. That is what concerns Rome, politics. [00:52:00] The empire is still big and strong, but in the highest circles of power, too many murders are being plotted, and there is uncertainty everywhere. The war of the Jews against Rome proved that the imperial army is not invincible, and today's victors may be defeated by tomorrow's. A great philosopher -- wasn't a friend of Jews, Seneca -- said once, he said that he realized that the decline of Rome is near and inevitable, when the vanquished's morality is superior to the victors. And he meant, I'm sure, when he saw the Jewish prisoners in chains. Then he committed suicide.

So, we know that. It proved also -- the study of the text proves that [00:53:00] the word solidarity had meaning for the disperse Jewish communities. What happened to one appears to have affected them all. What happened in Judea reverberated in Alexandria, in Rome, in Crete, in Rhodes. Jews wanted to remain

Jews, even if it meant to be persecuted. And this is something Rome was unable to comprehend. If to be Jewish meant to suffer, then why not stop being Jewish? Why cling to beliefs and customs that offer no reward? And the less Rome understood, the more oppressive it became. And now it is increasingly dangerous to be a Jew, so much so that the leadership did not dare to convene all the members of the Sanhedrin. Rome would view any such meeting as a revolutionary plot. Delegations were dispatched to Rome to intercede on behalf of Judea. Some succeeded, mostly failed.

In the final analysis, Jewish destiny [00:54:00] was determined by Jews alone. And the future lay in Yavneh, the new academies of Talmud, more than in Rome. And you wonder then, what was happening then? How come that in those four hundred to six hundred years, so much had been achieved when so much was at stake? Study the rules or the cruel ethics of Hadrian, what he has decreed -- at that time. He became the enemy. To circumcise a child meant capital punishment; to observe the Sabbath, capital punishment. There were capital punishment on capital punishment, and Jews, nevertheless, went on to study and teach -- a capital offense, a capital case. And nevertheless, in spite of all that, never has the voice of Torah, the sound of learning, stopped in Judea. Never.

[00:55:00] So, study, therefore, was seen as a remedy for evil, just as prayer was for misfortune. The difference with prayer, we may move God to favorably intervene in human affairs. But not in scholarly debates. The beauty of study is that when it comes to study, the scholar's word is mightier than the heaven's intervention. In matters of law, the prophet's opinion has no impact. The teacher's judgment alone carries weight. How did the late and great, our friend Louis Finkelstein, put it? Jews have no aristocracy. Who is our aristocrat? It is a scholar. It is the scholar who, when he enters the room, people stand up. Scholarship is the measure of erudition and authority. The sage has priority over the king, says the Talmud. It explains why. Because should the sage die, [00:56:00] he is irreplaceable. Should the king die, well, all Jews are worthy of wearing the royal crown.

And some sages, therefore, when you study them, are more vivid than others, more colorful, more imaginative and daring, too. Some prefer the study of legends, while others favor the analysis of laws. All are important and fruitful. All are worthy of our stimulated attention. The Talmud is a mosaic: all of its components are essential to the fabric. Most of its sayings are imbued with wisdom. Some are to be found in the

Christian gospels attributed to Jesus, who was, after all, a pious Jew then and a learned one. And he quoted a lot sayings by Hillel. Others can even be found in the Quran. For instance, you surely remember [00:57:00] from reading or hearing it that whoever saves one human life, it is as if he had saved the whole world. It is in the Talmud, but a few centuries later, you find it in the Quran, the same words. And you see, therefore, the impact of the Talmud on other religions, on other cultures, on other traditions.

And some texts in the Talmud are perplexing. For instance, we are told that all of a sudden, somebody came out with a vision: in Messianic times, said that scholar and that sage, arrogance will increase. Royalty will turn into heresy, with nobody to admonish it. The community house will become a house of ill repute. The young will insult the old, and the old will passively submit to the outrage. That will be the Messianic times; I think we are close to the Messianic times. Some masters, not many, had strange ideas -- about women [00:58:00] studying Torah. The great Rabbi Eliezer, son of Hurcanus, whom I admire, one of the pillars of the Talmud -- and later he was banned, it's a different story. But he simply said whoever teaches his daughter Torah, it is as if he would teach her silliness. No, really. Why? We know and even he knew that

there were great women who were teachers. Another gave this advice. Better burn the words of Torah than let them fall into the hands of a woman. Well, believe me, don't take it seriously. (laughter) Some scholars did like exaggerations. And I can give you exaggerations there, some of them say that -- if there are doctors here, don't get insulted -- one sentence is, *tov she'b'rof'im l'gehinnom*, the best of the doctors should go to hell. No, really. There was no Medicare then or something.

And of course, speaking of women, Bruriah, the great Bruriah, who is my idol, Rabbi Meir's famous, learned wife. She was feared -- not (laughs) -- she was feared by the male scholars. And also respected. From the structure and pedagogical of the Talmud, we learn both the stimulating beauty and the inevitable spirit of respect, which permeates every debate, every encounter, every episode in every tractate, covering all aspects of individual behavior and collective endeavor. The disciples of Shammai and those of his adversary, Hillel, agreed on almost nothing. And yet, they maintained cordial and friendly relations. They ate at each other's table, their children [01:00:00] intermarried. In general, the respect for the minority view was as great in the Talmud as that of the majority.

And there is no doubt in my mind that we deal here with a masterwork unequalled in Jewish memory. Its two and a half million words cover all aspects of human endeavor: literature and jurisprudence, medicine and geometry, parables and fables, dreams and desires, problems relating to the individual in society, issues concerning attitudes towards the stranger, meditations on the meaning and purpose of life, psychological evaluations and cultural conflicts, it's all in the Talmud. And for me, it's something else as well, of course. It's an unforgettable song, the song of my lost childhood. I can still hear my old teacher; I see his finger on the page; I hear his sing-song about the discussion between Abaye and [Rabbah Rav Shmuel?], Rav and Shmuel, Rabbi Akiva [01:01:00] and Rabbi Yishmael. I was still a child among his young pupils, and we listened to his admonition. "Look children," he said, "our enemies are wrong. The Torah has not been given to us to make our lives difficult and unbearable. Just the opposite. The Talmud is full of life, a source of beauty to be cherished and love."

Christianity has accepted the Bible. A philosopher in France, the Jewish Bernard Lévy, said that actually, the Bible was kidnapped by the church. (laughter) Well, he was accepted, but

Christianity repudiated the Talmud and sought its destruction. When in the secular society within Christendom, someone was called a Talmudic mind, it was meant as an insult. Oh, he has a Talmudic mind, which means a corrupt mind. To understand the Jews' extraordinary attachment to the Talmud, we ought to read Rabbi Yechiel of Paris in the eleventh century, his heartbreaking litany [01:02:00] which he composed while witnessing the public burning of the Talmud. Place de Grève, it's called in Paris. The man who gave the order, King Louis IX, is strangely still referred to as Saint Louis.

My friends, when exile becomes harsh or too harsh, it is in the Talmud that the Jew finds consolation and hope, and above all, meaning. Outside, in the marketplaces of Central and Eastern Europe, the excited fanatics, thirsty for Jewish blood and tears, sharpened their knives. While a few steps away, in narrow houses of prayer and study, at candlelight, masters and their disciples tried to answer the urgent question of whether it is allowed to light a candle on Shabbat to help a sick person vanquish pain and fear. Or how the high priest was dressed on Yom Kippur when the temple was still around. In general terms, a banal incident stands out as special on a Talmudic [01:03:00] page. Routine attains the level of sacredness. Nothing is considered trivial in the Talmudic universe. A love story is to

be celebrated in the Talmud just as the love of the person and God.

To deal with such a variety and number of issues on such an immense scope throughout six centuries, many scholars were needed. Three hundred tenayim, two thousand amoraim. And together, they represent a gigantic ensemble, offering a symphonic work of incomparable beauty and depth. One discovers in its inner landscape the splendor and nostalgia of vanquished kingdoms, the vistas of heavenly secrets, and the exalting chant of learned seekers of truth. The Talmud remains a turbulent and appeasing ocean that suggests [01:04:00] the infinite qualities of life and love of life, as well as the mystery of death, the blemish of death, the scandal of death, and the instant preceding death. But of course, all the tractates and enumerable commentaries are rooted in the Five Books of Moses and the subsequent work of the judges and the prophets, whose totality are what we call the Tanakh.

Among the 613 laws in the Bible, let us conclude tonight's encounter with two. The first immediately follows the Ten Commandments, it's about slavery. One must neither own slaves nor become or remain a slave. A slave who refuses freedoms to be punished, why? Because as a human being created by God, I am

meant to be free. But I am not free to give up my freedom. But
[01:05:00] how am I to define my freedom? I am not free because
others are not. I am free because others are free. Thus, as
long as someone else is deprived of his or her freedom, mine is
curtailed and blemished.

And the second is almost a consequence of the first. The law is
called *lo ta'amod al dam rayekha*, thou shalt not stand idly by.
And this commandment has governed many years of my life. If
someone falls to the ground, one must help him get up. If
someone is hungry, don't give him a lecture on economy or
ecology, offer him a piece of bread. If someone is wounded in
an accident, don't look in his pocket for his or her ID -- call
for an ambulance. And this applies to mental issues as well.
If someone is melancholy or depressed, take his or her hand. Do
[01:06:00] something, say something to help them overcome their
solitude. God alone is alone; his creatures are not and must
not be. It is this concept of ethos, appealing to what is noble
in the other, that helped shape the character of Jewish culture
and philosophy. But all this is possible only if the passion
for learning continues. Ultimately, to study means to choose
time over space, memory over geography, what is eternal over
what is futile. Far away from Jerusalem, we are able to live in
Jerusalem, if Jerusalem lives in you.

In conclusion, therefore, there exists one other element which shaped the character of the Jew, and the name is solidarity, and the name is again *lo ta'amod*, thou shalt not stand idly by. One of my most moving moments was when I was in Bosnia and during that war, in Macedonia and Albania_in the refugee camps, [01:07:00] and a young woman came up from New York. And she was a doctor. And she said, "I am here, I'll tell you, because of you." She said, "I read" -- what, an article or an interview I gave for *Newsweek* -- "and you quoted a Biblical text, *lo ta'amod al dam rayekha*, thou shalt not stand idly by. So, I closed my practice and came here, because I read that commandment. See? It's enough to study and try to teach and to share. And maybe somewhere far away, a person is saving lives because of that study. Thank you. (applause)

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