

2009 10 22 Elie Wiesel Satan The Image and Concept in Ancient
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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Question: why Satan? Why here? What is Satan doing at the Y? (laughter) Now, the choice was either he being here, speaking about me, (laughter) or me speaking about him. But then, what is he doing in all ancient texts, Jewish, Christian, Muslim? Why was he invented? For what purpose? And more precisely, why did the creator of worlds invent him right there, at the beginning? For how long? What is his role, in theology, in philosophy, in history? Is Satan's history [00:01:00] at the root of human memory? Could God's creation exist without the personage whose aim is to destroy it?

From the purely human angle, Satan is part of life. If he represents temptation, could life exist without its carousing arrow? If he incarnates evil, pure evil, is his place implacably forever connected to good? To selflessness? To generosity, to holiness, to nobility? Is he condemned to be wicked, since God is not? What is Satan's role in imagination? In memory? In our quest for truth, serenity, and hope? Is he present only to disturb us? [00:02:00] Can we fantasize about the charm of Satan because we can never envisage the radiance of

the Almighty? Since Satan exists in the realm of concrete reality, as he is in the creative universe of literature, does he suggest his unavoidable necessity? Can one live without him, somewhere?

Is it possible that it is so, because of Satan's destructive message, one can, with some measure of luck, come closer to God's appeal? Do we need Satan to come closer to God? Do we need suffering and evil to appreciate joy and kindness? In other words, wouldn't it be arrogant, yet utterly naïve, and blasphemous, [00:03:00] to declare Satan God's adversary, rather than man's competitor? Furthermore, since something of Satan can be and or is in everyone, what about Satan himself? Who is Satan's Satan? (laughter)

Is it possible that the whole world could be ruled by Satan? It's possible. At least, in the twentieth century, we have seen evidence that certain parts of the world, at least, were ruled by a Satanic figure. But then, who is he? Where is he? What is his age, his appearance, his strength, his weakness? What and whom does he represent? [00:04:00] How is one to describe him? As a source of vanity? Of fear and terror? The father figure of evil, of destruction. Some sages see him as an eternal seducer. Others call him master of deceit. Death, said

Rabbi Shimon, son of Lakish, in the Talmud. "Satan, the evil incarnation, is also the angel of death. They are all one and the same. Satan brings death. Satan celebrates death, justifies death. Death of feeling and death of thought. Clearly he is the cause of pain, anguish, and agony. Wherever there is war, [00:05:00] he is in it or sometimes the cause of it. Where there is evil, it wears his seal. Whoever hates strengthens his name."

"Chaos and pandemonium are his work," says Milton. "He is wherever human beings dwell alone, or in society." In other words, he remains their mortal enemy since the beginning of time. He was present, therefore, at creation. With him around, no one is safe or immune. He is to be found in the visions of imagination of human beings, as reflected in both ancient and modern texts, dealing with the thirst of knowledge. To acquire a quest for faith. To deserve. Christian, Muslim, [00:06:00] Jewish, Muslim, and agnostic references exist in abundance. John Milton, Blake, Daniel Defoe, and Goethe, Dante, brought him in the magic universe of poetry, and literature, as a symbol of limitless vanity and gratuitous cruelty.

Originally, the name means "adversary." Opponent. Prosecutor, whose aim is to hurt, threat, threaten, and humiliate what is

noble and pure, individually or collectively, in men and women alike. In the Vulgate, he is called Lucifer. In Latin, he is *Diabolos*. In French, *le Diable*. In the New Testament, he tried to pervert Jesus, and fails. [00:07:00] But he uses Judas as an agent to denounce him to the Romans. He is very present in Quran. Certain chapters find him -- like the chapter about Joseph and his brothers. He's there. In Quran, he's quoted. Why there?

Some sources identify him with the various activities of the evil spirit in us. What would the world be without him? What would life and human nature be without man's inner struggle, or spiritual challenge, sometimes dominated by him? Certainly, rather uneventful life would be. Boring. In Scripture, no major character is faultless. [00:08:00] No life without drama. Even candidates for sainthood need something of Satan to attain it, by resisting him with more or less determination. Again, in the Quran, he is called *Shaitan* or *Iblis*, and views him as one of the genes of demons that were born of fire.

Last week, we encountered him in the Book of Job. We shall return to him. But we have met him already, earlier in the tale of the Binding of Isaac, or the *Akedah*. We shall see about it later. But where was he before? If he existed, he was

invisible. When God was considering the creation of man, we hear a discussion among angels. Some favored the project, wagering on his virtues. Others opposed it, invoking his frailties. [00:09:00] Will men and women be wise enough always to choose compassion rather than rigor? Peace, and not war? And Satan had nothing to say on the subject. The angels were arguing, debating, and he was there, silent? He who intervened in so many primary events later, kept mute before and during the first. Why didn't he, like other angels, warn God against what His creatures would do with His creation, because of him? And why didn't he play his part in Adam's and Eve's extraordinary adventure with the serpent, leading to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden?

The great Saul Lieberman z''l quotes a bizarre legend from ancient Slavic sources. Listen. "When Adam and Eve saw the sun set for the first time, [00:10:00] they got scared of the darkness. They worried they will never see light again. Suddenly, Satan appeared before them, and offered them a deal." Satan is always a great dealmaker. (laughter) "If they promised to remain his servants, Satan said, light will be returned to them. They agreed. He asked for a handwritten document, and it read, quote, 'We and our descendants will belong to you. We pledge never to disobey your orders.' End of quote. Satan

disappeared. And next day, the first couple witnessed the new sunrise, and the new sunset, and they realized that they had been Satan's victims, naïve victims. Too late." Obviously they were too young to understand [00:11:00] that true darkness does not come from outside, but from inside, in us. He, Satan, embodied it, and they didn't know it. Their divine father should have warned them, but for skewed reasons, God didn't.

Such cosmic theory of humankind being doomed by Satan, original cheat, does not exist in Jewish sources. But some Midrashic passages do insist that Satan was not entirely absent from creation. The problem exists because he has more than one name. There is the name Samael, and in that version, as we indicated earlier, heavenly angels did try to dissuade the Creator from creating man. They said, "Look at him. He's nothing but dust. How can he possibly do something great and good?" [00:12:00] And God answered, "What you do here above, he will do down below. He will sing my praise." Better yet, He asked them, "Can you name animals? He can, and he will." And so the angels surrendered.

But Samael was not satisfied. He organized a rebellion, and was punished. God threw him and his followers into hell. He wasn't too unhappy, according to Milton. He said -- his famous saying

-- "Better be a master in hell, than a slave in heaven." Some sources believe that unlike other angels, Satan refused to bow before Adam. Also, he is the one who pushed Adam, and Eve, to eat from the forbidden tree. His next important target is, strangely, not Cain or Abel, but Noah, [00:13:00] one of the rare survivors of the floods. Was Satan on his ark? Probably not. His name is omitted from the list of survivors. Why was he rejected? For the simple reason that all those who boarded the ark had to come in pairs. But then, didn't Samael have a wife, Lilith, the queen of the female demons? Didn't she like him? Did she abandon him? Maybe they were afraid of seasickness. (laughter)

The fact is, that they are not mentioned on the guest list. And yet, they did not drown in the floods. Satan was not touched by the oncoming disaster. When God ordered Noach to build an ark, he was mocked by fellow citizens, not by Satan. They just refused to believe that the end of the world would come.

[00:14:00] They laughed, but did not diminish Noach's faith in God's word. Satan appeared onstage afterwards, when the floods receded. Noach left the ark. His first symbolic gesture as first survivor was planting. He wanted to begin again, as if to tell the Almighty, in spite of everything, I have faith in our future.

At which point, Satan appeared before Noah and asked, "What are you planting?" "A vineyard," said Noah. "What is its nature?" Satan wanted to know. "Its fruit," said Noah, "is so special. Whether fresh or dried, it's always sweet. Wine is made from it. It gladdens men's heart." And Satan said, "Take me as your partner. How about planting it together?" And that was the first deal made, again. And Noah said, "Okay, why not?" Interesting, Noah is not curious [00:15:00] about his new associate. He didn't ask for credentials. He's not surprised to see a stranger before him. How could he be sure of his honesty? Why didn't he ask him, "Where were you when we were in the flood, on the ark?"

He should've asked where he came from. Was he, perhaps, an illegal passenger on his ark? That Noah's timing is wrong, we know from his previous or subsequent dialogue with God. The Midrash tells us that when the catastrophe was over, Noah asked God why He did not spare the innocent and the children. And God's answer was perfect. God said, "My dear Noah, now you are asking. Why didn't you raise the question before, when it was still time to save them?" Now, facing Satan, Noah accepts him as a full-fledged partner, [00:16:00] immediately, without any hesitation.

What was Satan's next move? He brought a lamb, and slaughtered it over the wine. Then he did the same with a lion, and then with a monkey, and finally with a pig. That was his way of saying that when a man drinks one cup of wine, he acts like a lamb. When he drinks two, he behaves like a lion. When he drinks three, he behaves like a monkey. And he is drunk, like a pig. And Noah? Noah let him do all that, on his plant, without interference. Is it up to teach us that Satan enters our life only when we look away, or when we do not ask questions?

We shall continue our exploration on his motives and methods later. [00:17:00] First, let's touch on our customary preliminary remarks. As we have done in decades past, we shall study texts and sources. Learning has been and remains our primary goal. Is there an endeavor more exciting and more rewarding? Until now, throughout the years, we tried here to meet the great figures of our tradition and culture, who enriched the minds and souls of generations and students, and teachers. And tonight, we intend to look at one protagonist who is their enemy, and ours. Often he uses curiosity as a weapon. But not yet, and not here. There are those among us who are

justifiably curious, even curious about Satan, and therefore, they are so impatient for the doors to open.

[00:18:00] Sages from most religious traditions believe, and want us to believe, that human beings are defined by their body, as well as by their soul. The two belong to two different orders engaged in constant quarrel. Hence, we forever serve as their supreme and sometimes annoying battleground. Can we intelligently, sincerely serve both? If one side wins, if the physical wins, the other, the mental, the spiritual, loses. So when do we rejoice? In Talmudic literature, we are accompanied by two angels: the good and the wicked. And life means to celebrate the one, rather than yield to the other. [00:19:00] Usually, we envisage Satan as the agent whose heavenly-assigned or self-imposed task was, and is, to do everything in his power to influence man to go astray. He's the eternal -- we call it *sitra achra*, the other side. The dark side of light, of beauty, of truth, and life.

He is the impure mind, the evil spirit, the nefarious instinct, the animal urge in all of us. He was there in Egypt to urge Pharaoh to persecute the Hebrews. Worse, he was among the persecutors. He can even be among friends and better yet, he can even try to prove that he is our best friend, but he is not.

His goal [00:20:00] is to separate creation from its Creator, to push us away from the noble aspiration to do something good, something special, something worthy, something which allows the sacred to prevail upon the profane. Said Rabbi Chelbo, "Wherever people are utterly satisfied, Satan is there." Which means, when they need nothing, feel no one else's pain, something is wrong with them, because what happened to them is that they listened to Satan. His voice, which says, "Don't look to the other. Be indifferent to his or her pain or fear."

Said Rabbi Levi, "Whenever people eat and drink instead of studying, or praying, [00:21:00] Satan is present." After all, it is possible that there could be no life without bread and water, or bread and wine? Yes, it is possible, if you are an ascete , but normally, you need bread and you need water. But life is essentially more than that. And Satan is aware of that, too. So he tries to corrupt spirituality as well. Said Rabbi Aha, "If and when just people live in peace in this material world, Satan protests to God, saying, 'Isn't it enough that theirs will be the world to come, the celestial one, the heavenly one in paradise? Must they also benefit from the one below, the terrestrial one?'" Oh yes, Satan knows how to use logic, [00:22:00] even when he invokes fairness.

Said the sages in the name of Rabbi Yose, "One should never give Satan the opportunity to open his mouth." Is it because he is stronger? Wiser? Cleverer? No. It is simply because he makes things easier. When facing a choice, the easiest option is often the one which is wrong. Doesn't Satan exist in the life of a just man, or a *tzadik*? He does. Otherwise, it would be equally too easy for the *tzadik* to be a *tzadik*. What a road without obstacles, a work without silly incidents? Is it possible? Unthinkable. For the just man, the most difficult time is the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur. That day, we are told, the holiest of the year, [00:23:00] Satan presents a complaint to the Almighty Judge.

"Why is it," he asks, "that throughout the entire year you allow me to do my work on everyone else, but not on this just man or this just woman?" And God answers, "You know what? Try them on Yom Kippur. For on that day, no one is perfect. And if someone thinks that he or she is without sin, then their vanity proves that they are not perfect, because that already is a transgression." Example: at the end of the fast and penitence, when all Yom Kippur litanies are done, the usual prayer, the evening prayer *Maariv* is recited. In it, we ask God to forgive our sin. "*S'lach lanu avinu ki chatanu*. Forgive us, for we have sinned." Question: [00:24:00] we have sinned? Aren't we

supposed to believe that our pleas had been received, and all sins erased? How could we possibly have sinned, here, in the synagogue, when we just finished one prayer, and we have recited the next one? And the answer is, to think that is already a sin. (laughter)

Said Rabbi Shimon in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua, "Why does the high priest enter the holy of holies for one special, uniquely unique moment, not clad in garments of gold, befitting his high office, and the solemnity of the occasion?" And the answer is, he wears simple garments so as not to give Satan the pretext and the opportunity of accusing the people of Israel. Only yesterday, he would say, while Moses was in heaven receiving Thy law, [00:25:00] they made for themselves a god of gold, and today they have the gall, the audacity, to serve You, in garments of gold? What do they think, that You forgot the past, the golden calf? Oh yes, Satan is a great debater. And he's looking for great figures as personal targets.

We are told, in the yeshiva world, if you want to find Satan, don't look for him among the sinners, in the market, or on Wall Street. You must look for him in the synagogue, in the yeshiva, among people who are doing the right thing, because there, Satan is jealous. Hasn't the high priest, Aaron, taken part in the

said golden calf affair? But then, it was not entirely his fault, we are told. Satan contributed his own part. [00:26:00] While Moses was in heaven, while the people were waiting for his return, and he was late -- he was the first Jew to be late, by the way. (laughter) Voices were heard saying that Moses was dead. So Satan magically arranged that they saw a coffin-like object hanging in the air, and therefore, the people concluded that their leader was dead, and they panicked. And because they panicked, they lost hope. And when they lost hope, they lost faith. And therefore, they said, "Let's build our own god." The golden calf.

The saintlier the person, the better target he is for Satan. Generations later, it is he who persuaded King David to transgress the heavenly order not to [00:27:00] count the Jewish people, yet, believe it or not, our tradition was against polls, like conducting census. Is it because human beings are not objects? Possible. We are not mathematical figures, either. To dictators, an individual is replaceable. No one is. Their functions or positions may be, but not they. Every human being is unique, and the fact is that David did organize a census, and the people were punished. Twenty-four thousand people lost their lives. David sinned, and they were punished? David was reprimanded. Not enough.

But then, who is greater than our ancestor Abraham? God's first ally, and best friend. The only one whom God asked to bring his beloved son [00:28:00] as a burnt offering. Was he ready to do it? I don't think so, but Satan thought otherwise. And he decided to intervene. His goal was to prevent the sacrifice of Isaac. Because he loved the son so much? No. Because he wished to hurt the father's faith, and so he did everything in his power to prevent Abraham from obeying God's awesome and strange, disturbing order, which on the surface sounds impossibly cruel.

So first, Satan tried to turn against Abraham. When Isaac was born, the happy parents gave a party to celebrate the event. Certain sources say that he invited guests from all over, mainly the notables and celebrities. Then, Satan appeared at the door, disguised as a beggar. Was he envious? Surely, furious. "See?" he said to God. [00:29:00] "I took a walk down below and happened to see Your good friend Abraham rejoicing. You were so kind to him. You gave him a son, his heir, at his age. But he already forgot You. He hasn't even bothered to bring You the smallest, the cheapest offering. Now, really, how ungrateful can a man be?" And then God said, "What are you talking about? If I were to ask him for his son, as an offering, he would

surely give it to me." "Really?" said Satan. "Let's see him do that."

So the *Akedah*, the most sublime, the most worrisome, the most anguished of anguishing episodes in scripture? We owe it to Satan? Let's reread the biblical narrative. Abraham answered, "*Hineini*, here I am, for You, with You. Whatever You want from me, [00:30:00] I'll give You." And of course, Satan didn't like it. Luckily, we have the Midrash, and here is what the Midrash says. "As Abraham journeyed towards Moriah, an old man appeared before him. It was Satan in disguise. And he asked, 'Where are you going?' 'To prayer,' said Abraham. 'With a knife? With firestone and wood? Nobody goes to prayer like that.' 'Well,' Abraham explained, 'we may be delayed a day or two, and we then would have to slaughter a lamb, place it on a fire to feed ourselves. It is best to be prepared.'

Thereupon, Satan dropped his mask and said, 'Poor old man, with your poor old tales. Do you think you can fool me? Don't you know I was present when the order was given?' Abraham did not reply. Satan continued shouting, 'Tell me, old man, have you lost your mind? [00:31:00] Have you emptied your heart of all human feeling? Will you really sacrifice your son, given to you at the age of 100?' 'Yes,' said Abraham, 'I shall.' 'But

tomorrow, fool that you are, tomorrow He will demand more sacrifices, more cruel. Will you be able to perform them, too?' 'I hope so,' replied Abraham. 'I hope to always be able to obey God.' 'But tomorrow, poor mortal, He may accuse you of murder. He who issued the order will accuse you of obeying. He will condemn you for having killed your only son. He will condemn you for having obeyed His order. Such an order. Will you do it, nevertheless?' 'Yes, I shall,' Abraham insisted. 'I shall do it anyway. [00:32:00] I must obey God. That is my desire. That is my destiny.'

Having failed with the father, Satan tried his luck with the son. He appeared before him, disguised as a young boy this time. 'Where are you going?' 'Oh, to study Torah,' answered Isaac. 'Now? Or after your death?' asked Satan. 'What a foolish question,' said Isaac. 'Of course, now. Don't you know that Torah is given only to the living?' And Satan said, 'Poor son of a poor woman. For years and years, she lived in hope and prayer to give birth to you, and now this old man, your own father, has gone mad. Look at him. He's going to kill you.' Isaac would not believe him. Instead, he looked at his father with love. So Satan went on, feigning compassion. 'Yes, you are about to die, believe me. And do you know who will rejoice? Your brother Ishmael. [00:33:00] He will be happy. Your

clothes, your possessions, the gifts meant for you, he will get them all.'

And this argument, so childish, so human, gave Isaac pause. He turned to his father and shyly asked him, 'Look at this person, Father. Look to what he says.' 'Don't pay any attention. His words are empty of meaning,' said Abraham. 'Don't listen.'"

Still, the story does not end there, we are told. "Satan refused to concede defeat. He invented other obstacles. He turned himself into a river. Abraham chased the waves away. Satan changed himself into a cloud, only to be dispersed by Abraham. And finally, Satan had a brilliant idea. He would use the most dangerous weapon of all: truth. He decided to gamble, [00:34:00] to reveal the facts, and declared, 'Abraham, Abraham, this is what I have heard, backstage, up there in heaven. The voice said, ultimately, the lamb will be the offering. The lamb, and not Isaac, do you hear me, old man? You have nothing to fear. Neither does Isaac. Whether you continue or turn back, it will be the same. It is nothing but a game, a simple test. So stop tormenting yourself and taking yourself for a hero -- you are not a hero. Isaac will not die. God doesn't want him to die.'"

Interestingly enough, he spoke to Abraham and he spoke to Isaac. He did not speak to Sarah until then. But at that point, he turned to Sarah. "And there, again, he appeared as an old man, [00:35:00] and he said to her, 'Sarah. Do you know something? I'm going to tell you something.' Sarah was on the roof of her house, waiting for her husband and her son to come back. And here is this man talking to her, and said, 'While you are waiting for her, you are waiting in vain. At this very moment, your husband is killing your son.' In fear, in panic, maybe in despair, Sarah fell from the roof and died." She is the real victim of the story.

But now, we have discovered one of Satan's major characteristics. He is a liar. Yes, but, he lied to God, [00:36:00] he lied to Abraham, he lied to Isaac, and now, he lied to Sarah. A liar who never tells the truth is less dangerous than the liar who, at times, tells the truth. Because it was half-truth. Abraham could have killed Isaac. Half-truth is worse than a lie. So, usually, Satan's work is directed against human beings, which, after all, is understanding and plausible, since that is meant to be his function. What is less comprehensible is his privilege of having unusual access to the Almighty. Yes, he has God's ear.

[00:37:00] Extreme examples: the case of both Abraham and Job. With no other biblical character is the Midrash so concerned about Satan's draw in their trials, as they are with Abraham and Job. In both cases, it is Satan who initiates the endeavor. It is he who suggests that their faith be tested. Now, why should the judge of all judges, the almighty, omniscient, and omnipotent King, listen to Satan's arguments against His creatures? Especially since God knows from the outset that they are vile and baseless? Strange as it may sound, *Zohar*, the mystical Book of Splendor, makes an exception with precisely both Abraham and Job. The text in the portion of *Pinchas* [00:38:00] quotes their stories as examples, that Satan, just like with the high priest, finds it easier and worthier, and more meritorious, to work on the just person, the *tzadik*, than on others. It is because of Abraham, was Abraham, and Job was Job. God's servants and God's friends. That he, somehow, had the power, maybe the authorization, and perhaps, more than that. More than that? The order, given by God, to test them.

Why? Probably because even a small transgression by a just man -- a smallest transgression -- is endowed with a greater transcendental meaning than a big transgression by someone who is not so just. [00:39:00] With an average person who commits numerous small sins or big sins, each individuality is less

important. But the test continues when the whole world is sinful, and thus condemned to total punishment, God is using Satan to distort his attention from the destruction, and points at Abraham and Job -- this is what the Midrash says. That actually, the test is to save not Abraham and Job -- they would be saved anyway -- to save the world. And while Satan is busy with Abraham and Job, God saves the world from destruction.

But again, really, how are we to grasp the meaning of all that? God is hiding something from Satan? And the world is saved because of Satan, who is busy with Abraham and Job? Admit it. God's relationship with Satan [00:40:00] does seem peculiar, and even perturbing. In the Apocrypha, the devil came, quote, "The devil came wearing the form and brightness of an angel." In secular culture, Satan's appearance is more appealing. The prince of darkness is a gentleman, according to Shakespeare. He has power to assume a pleasing shape. To Voltaire, the occasional atheist, he's the black sheep of the heavenly hosts. Without him, God's image would be pale. "The love of God," he says, "is close to the fear of Satan."

Heine calls him "a handsome and charming man, a diplomat who talks glibly of church and state." Longfellow's description of Lucifer is remarkable. "The son of mystery. And since God

suffers him to be, he, too, is God's minister, and labors for some food by us not understood." [00:41:00] So what does it really mean, God's agent? Satan? What kind of world do we live in, then, where Satan has such power given to him by God? And if he has such power, which, therefore, must be a kind of divine power, what can we do? We are doomed from the very beginning. We have no chance.

Now, do his power and legitimacy not come from heavenly justice? Is his evil not absolute, and not absolutely nefarious? Does it possess sparks of holiness as well? Is there something good in Satan? And Talmudic sages answer in the affirmative. They believe in Satan's power, and consider it dangerous, always. But they say only peace can vanquish him, and they insist, said Rabbi Eleazar, son of Rabbi Eleazar ha-Kappar, [00:42:00] "If all the pagan people and nations of the world were to live in peace, Satan would be powerless against them." Which means, therefore, we need Satan as a challenge.

Satan's heavenly role is, of course, often mentioned in the Talmud. Said Rabbi Yose, "To whom may the angel Michael and Samael -- Michael the friend and Samael the enemy -- be compared? To a defender and a prosecutor before a tribunal, charging the people of Israel. The one speaks and the other

speaks, and when the first finishes what he has to say, and the second finishes what he has to say, if the defender senses that he has prevailed, he praises the judge to move him to accept his plea. And thus, if the prosecutor wishes to speak, Michael, the friend, silences him, saying, 'Let God speak.'" [00:43:00] But all these are games. Is that all Satan, a game? And what is the price that we pay, listening or playing or gambling with Satan?

Earlier, we suggested that Satan may come to us in the disguise of a friend. Can the friend be godlike? Could Satan be His messenger, His instrument, as he was with Job? Goethe's Mephistopheles complains, quote, "Part of that power am I. Least understood, which always wills the bad, and always works for the good." And more negatively, in Milton's Paradise Lost, quote, "The strongest and [00:44:00] the fiercest spirit that fought in heaven now fills up with despair. His trust was with the Eternal to be deemed equal, equal in strength, and rather than less scared -- not to be at all."

Said Rabbi Levi, in the Talmud, "Satan meant well. When he heard how fond God was of Job, he grew worried. And what if Abraham will be forgotten because of Job? That's why he uttered terrible things about Job, so that God remembered Abraham." My

God, really? We need that for God to remember Abraham? His first ally and friend? The first man to proclaim to the whole world, God's uniqueness? Actually, says the Talmud, a story was told by Rav Aha, in the name of Rabbi Yaakov.

Two famous *Amoraim*, in a public lecture, given in a place named Pponya. [00:45:00] When Satan heard about it, he came and kissed his feet in gratitude. Satan, grateful to a Talmudic scholar? A prescient, yet surprising, metaphor? In the Talmud, Satan is rarely, if at all, a human being. In the *baraita* of the seventh century, there's a certain evil character who is the son of Satan, who made love to a stone whose feminine beauty was stunning. But in later stories, he does wear human traits. Listen to a very disquieting Hasidic tale.

When the future Rabbi Israel, the Master of the Good Name, the *Baal Shem Tov*, was about to be born, Satan came running through the heavenly court, breathless. "Master of the universe," he cried, "what are You doing? Sending him [00:46:00] down into the world? Don't You know what will happen? Everybody, from all the four corners of the planet, will come to see and hear him. And the whole world will repent and follow Your laws. And the Messiah will come. Is this what You want to happen now? Has the time arrived for universal redemption? Tell me."

"Oh no," said the Almighty, "redemption is still far away."

"Then stop his soul from descending among Your creatures," said Satan. "Oh, that I cannot do," said God. "Once I gave the order for his soul to leave my special treasure box, it cannot be revoked." "Then what will we do?" asked Satan. And God was thinking and thinking and thinking and then He said, "I'll tell you what. Together with his soul, another will descend and enter a woman's womb. And that soul will have all the attributes of [00:47:00] Rabbi Israel *Baal Shem Tov's* wisdom and piety, compassion and erudition, kindness and intelligence and goodness. But both will be a pair, will be apparently endowed with the same powers. But only you and I will know that the second one belongs to you alone."

Well, hearing this, Satan was satisfied, but I am not. What a terrifying story. Of all the legends, including those about Abraham and Job, this is the most worrisome. Could this really be God's will, to make sure that none of us would ever be able to distinguish who is who? Who is for God, and who is for his common enemy and ours? [00:48:00]

Let's skip centuries and move to contemporary endeavors, in a play called *The Trial of God*. Situated in the middle of the

seventeenth century, 1648, '49, during the Khmelnytsky Pogroms, somewhere in Eastern Europe, God himself, *Kaf Yachol*, is being put on trial. An innkeeper, Berish, serves as prosecutor. A stranger performs as a defense attorney, and both parts are poignant, for they recall into question certain certainties about the limitations of human justice, and the mysterious components of divine compassion. And here is more or less what they were saying.

The innkeeper says, "I, Berish, Jewish innkeeper, at Shamgorod" -- the place that it took place -- "accuse Him of [00:49:00] hostility, cruelty, and indifference. Either He dislikes His chosen people, or He doesn't care about us. Period. But then why has He chosen us? Why not someone else, for a change? Either He knows what's happening to us, or He doesn't wish to know. In both cases, He is, in my view, guilty."

And the defense attorney says, "Guilty, no less, and you reached that conclusion all by yourself? Let's be serious. You, prosecutor, are merely a person, whereas my client" -- how shall I put it -- "is more than that. You wish to indict Him, so be it. But then, give us not your anger, but facts that count."

And Berish gives him facts. What happened in his town, what happened all over [00:50:00] that place in Europe. "And yes," he said, "I'll give you fact. One, you hector at Shamgorod. Last year, Shamgorod was a village with a Jewish community, a Jewish life. Shamgorod had a Jewish past and a Jewish future, Jewish warmth and Jewish songs could be found here in every street, in every house. Go, look for them now. Shamgorod is mute. Its silence -- what is it if not a fact? Three houses of study, demolished, pillaged, the main synagogue burned down, the sacred scrolls profaned. Aren't the ruins facts? Aren't the ashes growing with facts? Over a hundred Jewish families lived here. Now, there is one. And this one is mutilated, maimed, deprived of joy and hope. What is all this to you and Him? What is this, I am asking you?"

[00:51:00] And he said, simply, "Sad." "What did you say?" "Sad. It's sad. I don't dispute the events," said the defense attorney. "But I consider them to be highly irrelevant to the case. I don't deny that blood was shed, and that life was extinguished, but I must question who was to blame for all that? After all, this situation seems to me simple indeed. Men and women and children were massacred by other men. Why involve, why implicate, their father in heaven?"

And at one point, Berish says, "I speak for the victims." And Sam said, "Did the victims tell you? Then how do you know? Since when do you take the killer's word for granted? Since when do you place your faith in the killer rather than in the victims?" [00:52:00] And Berish says, "You would like to hear the victims? So would I. But they do not talk. They cannot come to the witness stand. They are dead. You hear me? The witnesses for the prosecution are dead, all of them. I could call them, summon them a thousand times, and they would not appear before you. They are not accustomed to taking a walk outside, and surely not on Purim. You want to know where they are? At the cemetery, at the bottom of a marked grave. I implore the court to consider their absence as the weightiest of proof, as the happiest of accusations. There are witnesses, your honor, invisible and silent witnesses. Yes, the dead are witnesses, too. That their testimony enter your conscience and your memory. That their premature, unjust deaths turn into an outcry so forceful that it will make the universe tremble with fear and remorse."

[00:53:00] And again, such huge discussion between the prosecutor and him. And Berish says, "There are moments when death is not the ultimate humiliation. It is when you deny their death, and I remember them. Reb Chaim, the scribe, who

never squashed a fly or an ant, for they, too, are God's living creatures -- I saw him in agony. I want to know who willed his agony. Shmuel the cobbler, who treated strangers as though they were his own children -- I saw his tears, his last tears. I demand an answer. Who was thirsty for his blood? I want to know, why was the beadle, the cantor, murdered, or Reb Monish, the brother? Why was Chava the orphan and her little brother Zishe murdered, [00:54:00] so that they could say thank you and I could say thank you to God? Why should I thank Him?"

And -- prosecutor is great. He says, "What do you know of God, that enables you to denounce Him? You turn your back on Him, then you describe Him? Why? Because you witnessed a pogrom? Think of our ancestors, who throughout centuries mourned over the massacre of their beloved ones, and the ruin of their homes, and yet, they repeated again and again that God's ways are just. Are we worthier than they were? Wiser? Purer? Are we more pious than the rabbis of York? The students of Magenza? More privileged than the dreamers of Saloniki, the just of Prague and Rav Stachowicz?

[00:55:00] Do we possess more rights than they did, over heaven and truth? After the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem, our forefathers wept and proclaimed, *'mipnei m'cha'ateinuit's*

all because of our sins.' Their descendants said the same thing during the Crusades, and the holy wars. The same thing during the pogroms, and now you want to say something else? Does the massacre of Shamgorod weigh more than the burning of the sanctuary? Is the ruin of your homes a more heinous crime than the ransacking of God's city? Does the death of your community imply a greater meaning than the disappearance of the communities of Zhytomyr, Nemyriv, Klosk?, and Berdychiv? Who are you to make comparisons or draw conclusions? Born in dust, you are nothing but dust."

[00:56:00] And the innkeeper says, "If He wanted me to be dust, why hasn't He left me as dust? But I am not dust. I am standing up. I am walking, thinking, wondering, shouting. I am human."

It is, of course, a dialogue. A horrendous dialogue. I know it hurts. The questions hurt. But how can one not speak up? Isn't this what our tradition has taught us, that within faith, one is allowed to question God, provided it is within faith? That one may say to God, "What are You doing, [00:57:00] and why don't we understand? Why did You make us who we are, unable to understand Your ways? What are You doing?" I want to know.

In conclusion, I want you to know that the person who says all these nice things about God is not the right person. In fact, he's the wrong person. Why? Because when Berish, the innkeeper, lost everything, and he weeps, what he needs is not logic. He needs compassion, as does God. So a small footnote, in conclusion: in fact, Satan in the Talmud is pitied. Satan is pitied [00:58:00] in the Talmud. For on occasion, he, too, is to be a victim. He was created to be a victim. The victim of God, of His own manipulations. In the *Akedah*, he is the loser, when God changes the rules of the game. Isaac and Abraham did not lose the test. Satan did.

In the Book of Job, God allows Satan to torture Job, but not to take his life. In other words, God is unfair to him -- we spoke about it last week. After the prologue, he does not return to the stage. He is invisible, embarrassed perhaps, said Rabbi Yitzhak in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, "In truth, the pain of Satan is more poignant, in truth, than that of Job." He compares Satan to a servant, to his order by his master to break open a vessel and save the wine. So Satan emerges as a victim, and he vanishes without leaving a trace in the text. [00:59:00]

Satan, God's victim, then? God's martyr? This is why his shadow could forever be found in the heart of man? I want you

to recall this play, on which I quoted, actually is there only to oppose fanaticism. Beware of those who unconditionally justify someone else's suffering. Job's so-called friends were reprimanded by God -- question of God's justice or compassion is permitted, and sometimes demanded -- provided, again, it is done for the sake of a greater faith.

In other words, no man can be perfect. Not even Satan. No one's deed or thought is absolute, nor is his or her faith. For in certain circumstances, faith itself [01:00:00] can be wounded. Wounded by Satan, perhaps by those who in the past have done it in his name, or in the name of perverse ideologies and poisoned beliefs. Whatever the situation, I favor the art of questioning. But remember, a question of the believer is painful. That of the nonbeliever is absurd.

So who is Satan? I don't know. But I do know that whoever works to separate human beings, whoever allows persons to be victims of destiny or hostages of society, whoever tries to appeal to what is evil in the other, to what is ugly in the other, for whatever reason -- [01:01:00] that person can be neither my ally nor my friend. (pause, applause)

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