

2012 05 30 Elie Wiesel The Greatness of Rabbi Eliezer ben
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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Well, it happened 2,000 years ago, more or less. A question. We are going to talk about a Talmudic figure, one of the great ones, something that happened to him. And it's a story. And the question actually is what is the story about, the one that you are going to hear? The obstinate position of a great master in a matter which really does seem unimportant, or is it about his becoming a victim of an equally obstinate majority whose behavior towards him is shockingly harsh, lacking the bear minimal [00:01:00] of compassion towards a distinguished colleague? This is a strange tale. And I admit that it has troubled me for years. For let's admit it, it is also about humiliation.

Was it a dream? Rabbi Hananel believed so. But it's a legend. On that day in the celebrated academy of Yavneh the debate centered around the question whether an oven made by a certain Akhnai was to be considered ritually pure or not. The oven was of a special kind, built in a special way, and Rabbi Eliezer, [00:02:00] son of Hyrcanus, saw no reason not to consider it pure, whereas all the other sages invoked many reasons to treat

it as impure. So alone Rabbi Eliezer fought for his ideas and brought forth all the most extraordinary arguments in the world. But his colleagues rejected them all.

When his rational arguments failed, he naturally turned to the supernatural and exclaimed, "If the law agrees with me, may this carob tree prove it," whereupon the carob tree gently was torn out by its roots and suddenly blown a distance of 100 or [00:03:00] 400 cubits. The sages were unimpressed. "The carob tree is no proof," they said. "All right," said Rabbi Eliezer. "If the law is as I see it, may this nearby stream of water prove it, whereupon the stream of water turned and flowed backwards." Still unimpressed, the sages commented, a stream of water proves nothing.

At this point Rabbi Eliezer could not repress his annoyance. "If the law is the way I interpret it, let the walls of this house of study prove it." And so they did. They began to topple. "What are you doing," scolded them, the old Rabbi Yehoshua, son of Hananiah? "If scholars are debating a question of law, what business [00:04:00] is it of yours?" Embarrassed, the walls did not fall down out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua. But they did not straighten up out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer. By then Rabbi Eliezer had reached the limits of his patience.

And you can almost hear him cry out in exasperation, "If the law is according to my interpretation, let heaven prove it." And heaven did. A voice was saying, "Why do you torment Rabbi Eliezer? Why do you make his life miserable? Don't you know that he is always right?" (laughter) Whereupon Rabbi Yehoshua rose to his feet, and on behalf of his colleagues told the celestial intruder not to interfere. (laughter) And they said "The Torah is not in heaven. [00:05:00] It was given once and for all at Sinai. It belongs to man, and we do not listen to voices from heaven. Moreover, the Torah tells us *'acharei rabim l'hatot'*, which means we are duty bound to abide by the rule of the majority." And that must have been and was the end of the discussion.

But the next move was a practical one. All the legal opinions related to purification matters issued in the name of Rabbi Eliezer were declared invalid and thrown into the fire. Then there followed a vote to excommunicate him. Well, well, well. Let's stop for a second and examine the story so far. What do we learn from it? [00:06:00] Firstly, the Jews loved to argue already then, also that their debates were passionate and stormy and endless. When one begins it never ends. And what is more amazing, they didn't argue over the quality of the oven but over

its purity and that both sides were stubborn and never conceded defeat.

We also learn that Rabbi Eliezer was even more unyielding than his colleagues. He never gave in, not even after being outvoted, not even after being excommunicated. But then on another level the legend contained some disturbing questions about everybody. Let's start with our visitor tonight, Rabbi Eliezer. [00:07:00] Why was he so stubborn? Didn't he know the law about the majority rule? If all the others decreed an oven to be impure, why didn't he join them? After all, they must have had some good arguments on their side. Furthermore, what was his purpose?

What was he really up to when in the midst of a logical and reasonable and rational debate he sudden resorted to tricks? Surely his opponents were right as rejecting them as legal or scholarly proof. We fail to understand his behavior. Nor do we understand heaven. Why did heaven interfere in the debate? And why did it scold the revered sages for disagreeing [00:08:00] with Rabbi Eliezer? What about the famous Talmudic principle of freedom of belief and freedom of speech? The sages' behavior too eludes our comprehension.

If the heavenly voice criticizes them for being unduly harsh with their illustrious colleague there must be something to it. But when -- why do they torment poor Rabbi Eliezer? Is it because, quote, "He was always right?" Oh, when someone is always right this person is unbearable. Who can stand such a person? Then if he was right with regard to all issues, why did the majority go beyond the present debate and nullify all its previous [00:09:00] decisions on the issue of purification? Granted, he, Rabbi Eliezer, was wrong this time about the oven, he still could have been right on other aspects, couldn't he?

Then why were they declared wrong in their totality? And worst of all, really, why was the famous and great Rabbi Eliezer excommunicated? Simply because he held views that deferred from those of the academic religious establishment? Of course we intend to explore these themes, these questions tonight within the framework of our past encounters here with Talmudic masters. That has always been our task since we began, to study together, to explore together, ancient [00:10:00] tales, really treasures. And we listen. What is the Talmud if not the art of listening? To listen means to try and understand the opponent's view.

To listen means that effort of identification with someone else. To listen meant to be tolerant, respectful, patient, and open-

minded. No tradition shows as much tolerance and understanding for believers in other traditions or even to nonbelievers as the Talmud, the Talmudic tradition. In a way, one might view the unique masterwork that is the Talmud as an appeal to human and divine tolerance. The house of Shammai and the [00:11:00] house of Hillel, Abbaye and Rava, Rav and Shmuel, there is astonishing mutual respect between majority and minority. And all views are scrupulously recorded, all opinions transmitted.

Legend and lore, jurisdiction and science, philosophy and history, all these domains exist in the Talmud, and all receive fair and equal treatment. Aggadah and Halakhah go together. They do not seek to polarize Jewish experience. One is never sacrificed at the expense of the other. How strange that this masterwork of the Jewish tradition, this call to human generosity, to intellectual purity, met with such extreme [00:12:00] hostility outside? The Bible was not burned. The Talmud was. The Bible was violated, but the Talmud was despised, hated, even assaulted.

What was it in the Talmud that so antagonized so many people throughout so many centuries and so many places? And why was it resented by scholars and scientists who spoke with pride of their emancipation? A, quote, "Talmudic mind," unquote, is to

this day a bad word in many circles, not necessarily gentile. The Talmud to me, to us, is an adventure of words, words that were sent out some 2,000 years ago on a long journey, a journey we have followed everywhere. The interplay between people and words is what the [00:13:00] Talmud is all about. So what really did happen when the Temple was destroyed and its worshippers exiled or killed?

The very survival of our people was at stake. It was then that the old Rabbi Yochanan son of Zakkai decided that the road would be long and harsh and often unbearable, and that therefore we needed some remedy, some hidden resource for the road. The Talmud offered a refuge to the wanderer, a beacon to the dreamer, a dream to the hungry beggar in quest of faith. You open a treatise and you are carried far away to one of the learned academies in Palestine or Babylon. And though the problems relate to a bygone era, they do concern us all the time. The distant past and the invisible present, the fiery [00:14:00] temple and the silent meditation of its high priest.

Another time we told tales of Yochanan ben Zakkai, but tonight we shall retell stories by and about the greatest disciple he ever had: Rabbi Eliezer son of Hyrcanus whose surname was Rabbi Eliezer Hagadol the great. But then if he was so great, so why

was he shamed? Why were his colleagues forbidden to come near him to the point that it was really embarrassing to me? In truth, I fail to understand. Isn't the entire riches and nobility of the Talmud based on dialogue or words of respect for the other side? [00:15:00] Haven't we been asked to study and teach the lessons of the intellectually fascinating quarrels between the students of Hillel, the moderate, and Shammai the extremist? Also to emphasize that they remained good and loyal friends, even when they fervently and eloquently defending their own opposing views on almost every subject in the book.

For what reason then does Rabbi Eliezer son of Hyrcanus represent an exception to the rule? We shall try to look for answers and open the text maybe to find more questions. But first, let's be kinder to some late-comers and open the doors.

Everybody is here, good. [00:16:00] Well, let me repeat my puzzlement, if not my disappointment. Why was Rabbi Eliezer the great humiliated? That the august academy had the right to disagree with its leading member and even overrule his decision I can understand and perhaps even justify. But why the humiliation? What about the right to be different, even to be wrong? What about intellectual honesty? What about moral integrity? Is it so terrible, so sinful for an individual to

have opinions of his own and stick to them? Why hasn't the academy chosen to act in this case [00:17:00] as in questions related to capital punishment? Because humiliation has to do very much with the problem of capital punishment. We, in our tradition, believe that to humiliate another person is something almost equal to murder. Why? Why?

Who was Rabbi Eliezer son of Hyrcanus? Not too much is known about his early childhood. Only one story or one type of story illustrates his ignorance. And also, later on, he starts to acknowledge and for his being a bachelor. Being the son of a well-to-do-father, he could afford to stay away from books, and for a while he did. Most [00:18:00] source mention his age, 22 or 28, as a turning point in his life when he chose to leave home and join the study group somewhere. Until then he was practically illiterate. Like his brothers, he helped his father in the fields, but he was not happy, and he showed it. He could not work without shedding tears.

"Why are you crying?" his father would ask him. "Is it because you are ploughing here and you would rather go there? Go there." Still Eliezer kept on crying. Again Hyrcanus wanted to know why. Finally his son told him. "I want to go and study." Hyrcanus was flabbergasted. "What? You? At 22? Go, marry a

nice Jewish girl, have children, let them study." [00:19:00]

From this episode we learn much about the character of both the father and the son. Evidently Hyrcanus was a good father, as good as he was an efficient employer. While he did not wish his son to spend years on vague academic careers, he refused to let them become idle play boys. They had to work.

The son obviously was shy, and timorous, otherwise he would not have waited so long to explore the charm and complexities of both Torah and married life. That he did wait until the age of 22 or 28 to start his formal education seems to me less astonishing than the fact that he still was a bachelor at that time. But don't feel too sorry for him, not yet. He eventually ran away from home, [00:20:00] became famous, and married Ima Shalom, the sister of the president. How did it all happen? One day Eliezer, penniless and hungry, came to the school of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. He sat down in tears.

He was always crying. "Why are you crying?" asked the old master. "Because," said the new student, "because I want to study Torah." "Have you ever learned anything before?" "No," said Eliezer. So the revered master began teaching him the Shema Yisrael, Hear, O, Israel, and two laws a day. What teacher did not know was that his pupil had nothing to eat.

Legend has it that he fed himself with earth until he exhaled bad odors. And they became so bad that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai sent his other students to investigate [00:21:00] the matter. And they reported back to him "Eliezer has not eaten for over eight days."

"Eliezer, Eliezer," commented the old sage, "just as I smelled your bad breath, the whole world will smell your fresh and sweet breath of Torah from your mouth." And Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai gave him a fellowship that paid for his food and lodging. Eliezer stayed with him three years and became a success. Thanks to his prodigious memory, he rapidly skipped from one level of knowledge to the next and mastered them all until he was accepted in the immediate entourage of the teacher who favored him over many other students. But in the meantime, as we say here, back at the ranch, Hyrcanus had made some bad business deals, lost all his money, but made some more gains all over [00:22:00] again.

The economic situation was never wonderful in Palestine. And now Eliezer's brothers incited their father to disown him. "Look at Eliezer," they said. "While you were in trouble he abandoned you and us and went to Jerusalem." Hyrcanus thought that their argument had merit and said "All right, I shall go to

Jerusalem and declare publicly that Eliezer, my son, will not receive anything from what I possess after I die." And this he did. He came to Jerusalem either on a Sabbath or on a holiday, just as many dignitaries were gathering to celebrate with Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. We even have a VIP guest list.

A certain Ben Tsitsit Hakesset, another Nakdimon ben Zakkai, and ben Gurion [00:23:00] and Kalba Savua, all prominent merchants as well as other leaders of the community. Hyrcanus was seated next to them in the first row in the very best position to observe the stage. Suddenly Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai turned to Eliezer, a young disciple, or not so young, and invited him to speak in his place. Eliezer refused saying "All I know is what I received from you. How could I give you or anyone else anything?" The old master insisted, as did the other students, and so Eliezer had to submit.

It was his first public lecture. It seems he was in ecstasy and that he said things about mystical discoveries no one had ever heard before. A singular light emanated from his face [00:24:00] and his entire being. All those present forgot where they were and whether it was day or night. They even forgot who they were. Commented Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, "Happy are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that you are their descendant. And he

kissed him on his forehead. "Who is this young scholar?" asked Hyrcanus. They told him. Yours. "What?" he exclaimed. He is mine? In that case, I am the one to be happy that he is my son."

And he went on, "I want you all to know that I came here with one idea, to disown my son Eliezer. Now I have decided that he will inherit all my possessions." Rabbi Eliezer refused saying "I never asked for wealth or any earthly [00:25:00] possessions. All I sought was to acquire Torah learning." The Midrash Tanchuma offers a different version of his initiations to study. Here too Hyrcanus is rich. He has all kinds of business dealings with all kinds of people, which provoked the Roman occupants. They come to arrest him, and he, the father, flees.

As his children, with one exception, go into hiding, instead of going into hiding, Eliezer goes to Jerusalem. And there he joins the school of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. In the meantime, Hyrcanus managed to settle his problems with the authorities, probably bribed some functionaries, and he is again wealthy. And then he begins having troubles at home. And his sons incite him to disown their missing brother. [00:26:00] When you needed him, he wasn't with you, they tell him, now he will come back and claim his share in the inheritance. "Don't worry," Hyrcanus

replied. "I shall disinherit him." "In writing," they said. And Eliezer, therefore, actually was disowned.

Furthermore, the other brother said look, it's not enough. He's in Jerusalem. There is one teacher, Yochanan ben Zakkai who will surely favor him over us. "Really?" he said. "Then I shall go to Jerusalem and declare publicly my decision." Nothing that the old teacher can do. Thus, everything is actually the same except for the middle. Eliezer in both stories begins as an ignorant and ends as a scholar. In Tanchuma he doesn't cry. He doesn't cry all the time, which is, by the way, more in character with him and more to my liking.

Another difference, [00:27:00] in the first version he lectures on mysticism, in the second the topic is more real. He comments on a passage in Scripture, "*Vayihi bimeei Amrafel*", which describes the first war in the Bible and the first punishment for provoking those who make war will perish by war. You may say, a pacifist address? Yes and no. Eliezer, the militant disciple of Shammai, who was always rigorous, was pacifist on his terms. He spoke against Rome's war policies, not against the Jewish resistance to them. What he said to the occupant was, you came to conquer us. You will be defeated.

It may take years, perhaps centuries, but our land will be free gain, Jewish again, for we do not believe in conquest.

[00:28:00] He remained faithful to his teacher Rabbi Yohanan to the end. When the old master decided to be smuggled out of besieged Jerusalem in a coffin, Rab Eliezer was one of the two disciples who carried him through the gates. The other one was his colleague and opponent Rabbi Yehoshua. Together with his teacher and his fellow students he witnessed the siege of the city, the hunger, the fear, the national humiliation, the destruction of the Temple.

He saw foxes roaming in the ruins of the sanctuary. He lived the end of an era, the end of Jewish national independence. After the death of their master Rabbi Eliezer and his friends gave new impetus to the academy [00:29:00] of Yavneh, not too far away, but still independently known. The school was called Kerem B'Yavneh, the vineyard of Yavneh. Why the vineyard? The school is compared to a vineyard because of students who listened to the debate sitting in rows upon rows lined up like the vines in your vineyard. They were all convinced that study and study alone could save the Jewish people from extinction.

Theirs was a passionate yearning for study and knowledge which linked them to ancient memories and inserted their present into

a context of eternity. Every word from every master was well, if only if it was transmitted in the name of their masters. Every opinion, every legend had to be [00:30:00] part of the tradition going back to Sinai. Thus, in hearing Rabbi Eliezer or Rabbi Akiva, students could capture the echo of Sinai and therefore could hand them down further and further to every new generation of students and teachers. And strange as it may sound, they could do this with relative impunity.

At that time the Romans seemed not to mind Jewish study. It was Jewish politics they considered dangerous. So a brief glimpse at the overall situation might be useful. We are at the end of the first century. The temple has been destroyed for some years. The lion of Judah has been defeated. Rome can jubilate and stop worrying. After all, its military [00:31:00] victory seems total and irrevocable. How long can the occupy's fury last? Well, a long time. Though with some breaks, the sanctuary has been razed and its site plowed with the sole purpose of humiliating the Jews.

Rabban Gamaliel, the president of the Sanhedrin, which is the supreme court, has been sentenced to death. But the decree miraculously is abolished. The times are turbulent. The Roman mood changes from week to week, from emperor to emperor. Titus

succeeds Vespasianus and is in turn succeeded by Domitianus. Who is better? Titus is the most cruel as far as Jews are concerned, but in Rome, according to Dius Cassius, he fares better with image makers. The people see in him a more tolerant and human [00:32:00] ruler. When you study the history of the Caesars, every one of them actually died not in bed but a victim. And the great Machiavelli in one of his letters says about them, poor emperor, any emperor, who didn't know that no one has succeeded in killing his successor. (laughter)

A presidential delegation composed Rabban Gamaliel, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, and Reb Eliezer ben Hyrcanus goes to Rome to intercede on behalf of Palestinian Jewry. While they represent no government, no army, no pressure group, they do express the fears and hopes of Israel. And therefore, they embody the dignity of Israel. They are not only emissaries of a defeated nations but also of an eternal people, vanquished [00:33:00] yet invincible. In Rome the delegates discover with astonishment that there are in the city Jewish children knowledgeable in Jewish law and lore, that there is a Jewish community there. It exists and is vibrant.

The visitors are impressed, encouraged. Still, their mission ends in failure. Rome's attitude deteriorates. Its repressive

policies become increasingly harsh. The new emperor Domitianus is even more bloodthirsty than his predecessors. His goal is simply to exterminate all Jews everywhere, and his reasons are religious as well as political and maybe economical. Yavneh is now threatened. The Sanhedrin defers many of its meetings. It has become too dangerous to summon its 71 members all over the country. Consequently, a kind of executive [00:34:00] committee takes over and handles the most urgent affairs.

Its members are Rabban Gamaliel the president, old Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, and our protagonist tonight, Rabbi Eliezer, the two friends who shared so many memories and stories and missions to Rome, to other places, one breaking down the siege or the involuntary situation for Jews to be victims there. They manage to save a certain Rabbi Tzadok. Rabbi Tzadok was an old scholar who had fasted so many years for the sake of Jerusalem that his emaciated body had become transparent. Now the two comrades abruptly split. Who was Rabbi Eliezer's chief [00:35:00] opponent during the famous clash with the majority about Akhnai's oven?

Who ordered the river and the trees and the walls to disobey him? Rabbi Yehoshua son of Hananiah, Rabbi Eliezer's best friend. What happened between them, to them and their friends?

Was it Rabbi Eliezer's character that aroused antagonism? Even particularly among those who love him? So let's see really what kind of person was Rabbi Eliezer? He was a good son. He respected and honored his father. If you wish to know, he said, the meaning of the commandment honor thy father and they mother, listen to the story of a gentile named Dama son of Natina. His mother was insane and would insult and strike him in the presence of his companions, but he never complained. [00:36:00]

All he would say was, enough, dear mother, enough. Once the most precious stone of the high priest's garment was lost. He, Dama, had one like it. So the priest went to him and offered him a large sum of money. He took it and went into an adjoining room to fetch the jewel, but then he found there his father asleep, his foot resting on the chest where he had hidden the jewel. So the son left the room noiselessly and told the priest that he must forget or forgo the large profit. For nothing on earth would he disturb his father. The case being urgent, the priest, thinking that he was bargaining for a higher price, offered him more money. Again he refused to disturb his father.

So they waited until Natina awoke. Only then did Dama go and fetch the jewel. [00:37:00] And the priest handed him the last sum mentioned, and he refused to take it saying, I will not

barter for gold . The satisfaction of having done my duty as a son is more important. Give me what you offered me the first time, and I shall be satisfied.

Also, he was a good brother. He forgave their intrigues and shared the inheritance with them. As a father himself, he was more rigorous. His son Hyrcanus refused to study. As a result, Rabbi Eliezer disowned him, and having learned from experience, assigned his entire fortune not to his other children but to heaven. At school he was an extraordinary teacher. Rabbi Akiva's favorite, the great Rabbi Akiva. He was somewhat stubborn, [00:38:00] which is both virtue and shortcoming, but he didn't like women, not too much, which surely is no virtue. He expressed opinions on women which I don't like. They are not flattering.

He said whoever teaches his daughter Torah is actually indulging in futility. He once explained why. A woman's wisdom, he says, lies in her manual work, you know, in the kitchen, not in books. Well, he also said rather than giving Divrei Torah, words of Torah, to women, burn them. I mean the words, not the women. Why was he so harsh with them? Because of his mother, perhaps? Good old Freud. [00:39:00] We don't even know who she was, though probably she was a loving Jewish mother, unassuming,

self-effacing, in fact, so selfless that she chose to stay outside the Talmud. No mention is made of her in any of the Talmudic treatises or Midrashic legends.

But the Talmud does mention a woman, a famous one at that, who had an impact on him, his wife. Her name was already mentioned, Ima Shalom. And she was not only known because of her husband but also because of her brother. She was President Rabban Gamaliel's sister, bright, sharp, temperamental. She was of the domineering type. Aware of her own importance, she took part in debates, both scholarly and domestic. She was a liberated woman. [00:40:00] And occasionally she discussed in public her intimate, I would even say her very intimate relations with her husband.

When her brother prevailed upon most sages to excommunicate her husband she surely must have been torn in her loyalties, but after that, says the Talmud, she did not allow Eliezer to say a certain prayer. She was afraid he might do harm to her brother. And she watched him continuously, tirelessly. But one day a beggar came to the door asking for bread, and she left her husband and went to fetch the beggar a piece of bread. When she returned, she found Rabbi Eliezer on his knees sneaking a deep

prayer. "Stop," she yelled. "Do not kill my brother." Too late.

At that moment the sound of the shofar was heard from the official residents of Rabban Gamaliel announcing the tragic news to the [00:41:00] country. At last, the president had died. "How did you know when I didn't?" Rabbi Eliezer asked his wife. "I heard it from my father, and he heard it from his father," said she. Even when all the gates are closed, one remains open for the victims of injustice. Ima Shalom knew that God would eventually listen to her husband, who was such a victim, but he did not know. He never thought that his words could hurt anyone. He believed in the supernatural but never used it against others.

One of his students once taught in his presence, "Poor wife," Rabbi Eliezer commented to Ima Shalom, "She will soon be a widow." And it came to pass the student dies, "But how did you know?" she wanted to know. "I did not," Said Rav Eliezer. "All I knew was the [00:42:00] rule, which I read about, which I know about, that whoever teaches in the presence of his teacher deserves to die for his impudence." In other words, Rabbi Eliezer did not want it to happen, but he knew that it would. A man of such knowledge and temper keeps people away. He must

have inspired awe and even fear. It was too dangerous to risk displeasing or annoying him.

Once he lectured all day on laws related to holidays. Was he not exciting enough? Probably. For as he spoke he noticed a group of listeners who got up and left. Well, he said, they probably have big barrels of wine at home and are in a hurry to empty them. After a while a second group left. They have smaller barrels, said the lecturer, but they are thirsty. After a while a third group left. Well, said [00:43:00] Rav Eliezer, they have no barrels. They only have bottles, but they do need a drink. After the sixth group had gone he muttered, they have nothing, and yet they are leaving. Poor lecturer.

A true follower of Shammai, we said it already, who was rigorous, he discouraged proselytes from converting to Judaism. He had no patience with them and their problems. Once a woman asked him to convert her. "Tell me about yourself," he said. "Who are you? What have you done?" And she was brief. In Hebrew it sounds much better. She simply said, *B'ni ha-katan mib'ni ha-gadol*. In English, she said to him, my youngest son was conceived through my eldest son. [00:44:00] Here you have a whole novel about incest. His attitude was one of either oh, *yikov ha'din et hahar*, the law must pierce mountains.

If Israel repents, the messiah will come. "But if they don't?" asked his friendly opponent Rabbi Yehoshua. "Then redemption will not come," said he. "Not so," answered Rabbi Yehoshua. "If the Jewish people does not repent, God will send a cruel king, who with his hard decrees will move them to penitence and repentance." For Rabbi Eliezer no half measures are valid. Repentance must be a personal act, not a response to outside pressure. He was critical of Job for having criticized God, whereas Rabbi Yehoshua believed Job only criticized Satan. His approach to Scripture is almost literal.

The dead that were [00:45:00] resurrected in the book of Ezekiel came back to life, according to his outlook. Moreover, they stood on their feet and sang their praise to God, but then they died again. When he was ill and on the threshold of death he was visited by scholars. "Why did you come?" he snapped at them. "What do you want?" "We want to learn from you," they said from a distance. "You want to learn?" he asked. "Then why did you wait so long?" "Because," they said, "We had no time." He looked at them and said, "I wonder whether you will die a natural death." "What about me?" asked his illustrious disciple Rabbi Akiva?" "You," said Rabbi Eliezer, "your death will be more cruel than theirs and mine."

They had not told him the truth. That is [00:46:00] why he was angry. The truth was that they avoided him for the simple reason that they did not dare violate the ban against him. True, students still flocked to his academy in Lydda then, but he was no longer the same. The older and renowned one stayed away, which brings us back to the question, why was he excommunicated the first place? Only because he disagreed with the official line of thinking? Surely there must have been other problems. Well, we know at least one. He seems to have entertained illicit relations with members of a new sect. Christians they were called, who in those early years were persecuted by the Romans even more than the Jews were.

[00:47:00]

Rabbi Eliezer occasionally discussed the interpretation of Torah with the disciple of Jesus named Yaakov from the village of Kesania. Arrested and tortured by the Romans for allegedly being a sympathizer of the dissidents, Rabbi Eliezer was pardoned by the Roman governor only when the old Jew simply said "Look, I believe in the judge." So the Roman took it as a confession and a compliment, and therefore he let him go, whereas Rabbi Eliezer meant the judge of all judges. Strange, he is interrogated by the Roman governor about his possible

heresy, and he the sage, the stern follower of Shammai, chooses ambiguity.

Why didn't he deny the charges? Why didn't he say [00:48:00] what his disciples Rabbi Akiva would have said? "I am a Jew. I believe in the God of Israel and in him alone. Kill me if you wish, but I shall not kill my love for him." Our teacher and master, mine, surely, Shaul Lieberman of blessed memory, the greatest scholar that I have had the privilege of knowing for years, he offered to me once a moving explanation. Had Rabbi Eliezer answered any questions, sooner or later he would have been drawn in a long exchange, and finally he would have been compelled to touch on his excommunication by his own friends and companions.

And to reveal that to the enemy, to the governor, would have been an insult. And therefore he refused to do that. He saw this as an internal Jewish matter of no concern [00:49:00] to the occupant. Another way, today you would say he chose the fifth amendment. No mention is to be found in Talmudic literature that in this respect he aroused suspicion or resentment among his colleagues, not yet. Still, can one be sure that some undercurrent of antagonism did not exist on that account? Incidentally, the only place in the Talmud where the

New Testament is quoted is in a story related to him, or rather, again, to his wife, Ima Shalom.

One of her neighbors was a judge with a strong reputation for open-mindedness, or rather open-handedness. He could be bought. Once he had before him a case relating to an inheritance to be divided between brothers and a sister. And he issued one ruling, then reversed himself, quoting first Scripture, [00:50:00] then the New Testament, then Scripture again, depending on whose bribe was the more important. One side gave him a candelabra. The other countered with an expensive donkey, and the donkey won the case. Commented Ima Shalom's brother Rabban Gamaliel, between a donkey and a candle, the donkey is stronger, for after all, he can extinguish the candle. Obviously the Jew's was, forgive me, the best money could buy.

Though a man of unbending principles, Rabbi Eliezer was forgiving in his personal relations with people. He always showed great understanding and compassion, caring for his fellow man more than for himself, protecting someone else's honor as much as his own. Immune to envy and jealousy, he demanded everything from himself and little from anyone else. When his master asked him, what is the most important virtue men should [00:51:00] seek, his answer was "*ayin tovah*", a good eye, to see

everything with a benevolent eye, not to condemn anyone unduly, not to downgrade human beings and not to ridicule their judgment.

His love for the Jewish people was boundless. He was convinced that the ten lost tribes will one day return to their land and their people. Poetically he explained why. Their very darkness will light them the way. At the same time, he said, whoever has bread in his basket and asks, "what shall I eat tomorrow?" proves he lacks faith. Commented Rabbi of Kotzk, because he thinks he has. No one has. His taste for beauty, for elegance, and nobility is expressed in his saying, let men always run away from ugliness, meaning from vulgarity. He [00:52:00] felt that whatever was Jewish was good and whatever was heathen and pagan was bad.

During the war with Rome he sympathized with the zealots. Unlike the majority of sages who were pacifists, he permitted Jews to carry weapons on the Sabbath. He considered them adornments. His emphasis on militancy reflected his pronounced loyalty to the school of Shammai, whose general philosophy espoused, with regard to Halakhah and its interpretation. For instance, he proclaimed his attachment to early traditions and ancient laws whereas his colleagues believed in adjusting them

to contemporary needs. Our ancestors were greater than their descendants, he says again and again.

And thus, he insists again and again on the idea of transmission. Instead of arguing a point he simply would say, but I heard it from my teachers and they from theirs.

[00:53:00] The fact that it was handed down from generation to generation was enough for him to believe in its validity. And once he spent time at the gallery lecturing on the problem of Sukkah. His students asked him 30 questions, 12 he answered. Responding to the other 18 he said, I did not hear anything about them from my teachers. His disciples then asked him, "Rabbi, is it possible that all you ever say is what you have heard?"

And he answered, "In my whole life I have never said anything that I did not hear from my teachers." But then why was he excommunicated? A man of such loyalty to tradition, of such vision and such attachment to truth and the law of Moses. What reason could there have been for expelling him from the living community of Israel? Now, before we get too upset about this [00:54:00] tragedy, let me remind you that this was not an exceptional case as far as social and religious bans were concerned in the Talmudic era. Other sages endured similar

fate, and posterity forgave them with as much eagerness as it forgave Rabbi Eliezer.

Take, for instance, a certain Rabbi Akabia ben Mahalalel, a celebrated sage whose precepts we repeat to this day every morning. One day he opposed the majority on four issues, and Akabia pleaded with him, renounce your views, and we shall elect you president or chairman of a high court. He refused, explaining, I prefer to be called an idiot all my life rather than a wicked person one hour before I die. I don't want people to say that because of high positions I changed my belief. So they excommunicated him. Although according to Rabbi Yehuda there [00:55:00] was not one among the scholarly who could be compared to him in wisdom and fear of heaven.

When his hour came to depart from the world he asked his son whether he remembered the four decisions he had made and clung to? Well, he said, I want you to repudiate them. "But why?" exclaimed the son. "Why didn't you reverse yourself?" "There is a difference between you and me," said the father. "I communicated to many colleagues what I received from many teachers. You will have received this from one, me. And when the one is opposed to the many the many win." Thus, Akabia ben Mahalalel, who lived before our hero, Rabbi Eliezer, offers us

an insight into Talmudic stubbornness, which on the surface cannot but puzzle admirers and critics alike.

Rabbi Eliezer [00:56:00] was alone and knew it. Why did he cling to his minority of one views? Didn't he know that according to Jewish tradition and Jewish law he must yield to the absolute majority? Of course he did, except he did not see himself as a minority, quite the contrary. He considered himself as a spokesman for the majority. Yes, you heard me well. But what majority? Doesn't the text tell us again and again that he was alone? He was, and he was not. That's Talmudic logic for you. More specifically or more poetically, like Akabia ben Mahalalel, Rabbi Eliezer only repeated what had been entrusted to him by his predecessors.

He spoke on their behalf, therefore he was part of them, and they were many. They were in the hundreds, in the thousands [00:57:00] forming an immense chain between him and their first teacher and ours, Moses. He had the majority of the dead, and that conviction that he was not alone, that they were around him, with him, gave him the courage and the strength to single handedly fight a coalition of the other masters. He did not feel outnumbered at all. He felt that he outnumbered them. Thus even from their viewpoint he was right. Since the timeless

majority sided with him, the others may have had more votes, but he had even more.

He had the votes of those who were heard before them, in the same places and elsewhere, those who echoed Moses' voice and God's at Sinai. He knew that they were right, and therefore, that he was too. [00:58:00] His opponents knew. Even in this view they respected him. Even after his banishment they revered him. Four masters paid him a sick call shortly before his death. Said Rabbi Tarfon, "you are better for Israel than rain. Rain is good for this world alone, whereas Rabbi, you are good both for this world and the world to come." Said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, his friend and adversary and opponent, "you are better for Israel than the sun. The sun is vital for this world alone, whereas you, Rabbi, are vital for this world and the world to come."

Said Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, "you are better for the people of Israel than a father and mother. Parents are useful in this world alone, whereas you, our teacher, our useful and necessary in this world and the world to come." And Akiva said, "you are suffering, but you are transcending suffering." [00:59:00]

Later they were joined by other disciples who wanted to be with each other and with him at his last hour. So they began asking

him questions about purity and impurity. And he answered, again declaring impure what was pure and pure what was not. The last word on his lips was pure.

It took his soul and carried it up to heaven. And once again he was the great Rabbi Eliezer, the unique teacher who distinguished between pure and impure, truth and falsehood, life and death. Exclaimed Rabbi Yehoshua, "*Hutar ha-neder!*, with his death, the ban is lifted." With his passing, the book of Torah, the book of wisdom, have been concealed, says the Talmud. Rabbi Yehoshua kissed the stone on which Rav Eliezer had sat, saying [01:00:00] "This stone is like Mount Sinai, and the man who sat on it is like the ark of the covenant." Rabbi Akiva cried and said, "Father, father, chariot of Israel and its driver, you have left an orphan generation. Who will answer my questions now?"

Four masters tried later to mobilize a session to refute some of his decisions, and they were reprimanded by Rabbi Yehoshua, the same Rabbi Yehoshua who during the debate about the oven of Akhnai led the fight against him. "The lion is dead," said Rabbi Yehoshua. "Let us not argue with the lion now." And so respected was Rabbi Eliezer after his death that legends about him proliferated. Listen to one of them. When Moses ascended

into heaven to receive the law he heard God's voice studying Torah, [01:01:00] and quoting a law in the name of its interpreter, Rabbi Eliezer, Moses could not help but wonder aloud, Master of the universe, all the worlds are yours, all the powers are yours, all creation is yours, and you have nothing better to do than to quote a law given by a man of flesh and blood?

His question deserved an answer, and gave it to him. "Moses, Moses," said God, "one day a great tzaddik will open his discourses with this law, and therefore I have no choice. I must study it now." What an honor. What an honor. God Himself is studying Rabbi Eliezer's book, and He does so even before it was written. The purpose of telling this legend is to show the direct link between Rabbi Eliezer [01:02:00] and God himself. He even bypassed Moses. I wonder that during the debate about the oven God openly took his side. In truth, why did heaven intervene at the debate? Perhaps God felt sorry for Rabbi Eliezer, who was fighting a desperate battle which he could not win.

And here we are touched by God, who chose the side of the loser simply because he did not want him to be alone and alienated. Rav Eliezer asked Him a favor, and God could not say no to him.

God knew that he, Rabbi Eliezer was right. But then if God knew, how come that the others sages did not? So again we must ask the pertinent question that has been troubling and haunting us throughout our journey tonight. Why was he punished for his views, especially since [01:03:00] they reflected God's? Why was he banned from Jewish society? Why was he excommunicated? How could the Rabban Gamaliel and Rabban Rabbi Yehoshua, how could they and their colleagues, including our great Rabbi Akiva, inflict such humiliation upon a friend, a teacher with whom God agreed?

This point a personal confession may be in order. When I started to collect pieces of information about our hero tonight I felt profound sympathy and even empathy with him and his faith. I liked his forceful attitude, his moral courage, his readiness to give up honors and friendships for his convictions, a man who, on account of a trivial question about a fashionable oven, accepted excommunication rather than yield to the majority. He had to be appealing to [01:04:00] the nonconformist I would like to be at times. And may they forgive me, I was somewhat disappointed with his illustrious colleagues.

I thought their action was ill advised, misguided, and for once I could claim the support of a higher authority, the highest.

Didn't he think so? But then I did what I always do when I detect tension in the text. I reread, and I reread. So I reread the sources and reexamined the story after all. After all, the renowned Rabbi Gamaliel, the formidable and compassionate Rabbi Yehoshua, the extraordinary Rabbi Akiva could not be all wrong, especially with God on Rabbi Eliezer's side. But then, why did they expel him from their midst? I explored the tale's layers, [01:05:00] digging deeper and deeper until it dawned upon me why they were not altogether wrong.

Still, what about God? Wasn't he on Rabbi Eliezer's side? Yes, he was. And that is precisely why Rabbi Eliezer was not altogether right. Let's look at the situation again. Rabbi Eliezer was a scholar of unparalleled erudition. Why then did he invoke God's opinion in a discussion with his friends? That was his mistake. They were not arguing about mysticism or poetry or even legends and lore. They argued over a point of law. Other sages disagreed with him, so what? That was their privilege. He should have reasoned with them, drawing on his knowledge and experience.

He should have used filibuster tactics to prevail upon them, seeking [01:06:00] new evidence from different sources, formulating new interpretations hoping to convince one friend

and then another and then another. Isn't that what the Talmud is all about? Had the Tannaim relied on heavenly decrees there would have been no room for debates or study or teaching or any communal life. In short, there would have been no Talmud to begin with. Thus, had Rabbi Eliezer chosen to use his human qualities to convince his friends he would have remained their friend and teacher even though he still would have remained a minority of one.

His mistake was to make miracles, to call upon heaven and ask for its opinion and use it in the debate. Talmudic debates, as all debates, are and must be rational, logical. They must take place on a human level. Once [01:07:00] you introduce a supernatural element it dominates the discussion and in effect eliminates the participants. Such an attitude is dangerous, and now we understand Rabbi Eliezer's friends, why they reacted so violently. They were angry not with his views, though they disagreed with them, but with his methods. What did Rabbi Yehoshua say in his outburst?

Lo b'shamayim hi, the Torah not in heaven. In other words, once God gave us the Torah, let's not consult anything else but the Torah, but we have the right to interpret it. The interpretation of the law is our privilege, not God's.

Furthermore, God does not change, but he is in change, for he is in everything men does or does not. Rabbi Eliezer believed that the Torah is above time, whereas his colleagues maintain that it is linked to all [01:08:00] times. True, the Torah is eternal, but that does not mean that it is above the present. It only means that it constitutes the eternal dimension of the present.

And thus, we now realize that the argument over the Akhnai oven reflects a basic, even essential outlook over crucial issues, the place of Torah and the possible limits of its interpretation. Consequently, the sad debate and the participants, they all ended. And then Rabbi Nathan went for a walk in the fields and stumbled upon his favorite source of information, the prophet Elijah. Tell me, said Rabbi Nathan, what did God do while we were arguing? And the prophet said, God, [01:09:00] He smiled. God smiled? He was amused? He may even have laughed.

Comment was *Nitzchuni banai*, my children have defeated me. Yes, God took it personally. Me, he said. They defeated me, not Rav Eliezer but me, since I was on his side and I was the authority he invoked. And this exchange offers two lessons. One, God does not always win. Two, when his children do, He does not lose. He loses only when they do something to and against their

fellow man. The term defeat applies to the decision to excommunicate Rabbi Eliezer. Had they simply overruled his objections, had they declared his position illegal, God [01:10:00] would have smiled with pride and joy. But they felt they had to set an example and ban him from their school, and that is why God spoke of His own defeat.

He was amused, not so his spokesman and defender Rabbi Eliezer. He was angry. And he had every right to be. Not only did they decide to ban him, but they did so in his absence. Were they all afraid of him? Were they embarrassed? The fact is that he was not present when the move was proposed and adopted. "Who will go and inform him?" they asked one another. "I will," said Rabbi Akiva. He felt he would be able to handle the delicate mission. He said, so someone else may be unworthy and say the wrong thing, and thus cause Rabbi Eliezer to destroy the world. [01:11:00]

And so Rabbi Akiva, the loving and faithful disciple, dressed himself in black and went to see his master but did not come close to him, for one is not allowed to approach an excommunicated person. "Akiva, Akiva, what is the matter with you today?" wondered Rabbi Eliezer. And Rabbi Akiva said, "It seems to me," he said with great delicacy, "that your colleagues

have separated themselves from you." Rav Eliezer understood. He tore his clothes and removed his shoes in mourning and sat down on the ground. Tears were flowing from his eyes. So great was his distress that nature itself was affected. All around him the grain went bad and the dough turned sour.

Legend has it that whatever fell under his gaze caught fire. And Rabbi Gamaliel happened to be on a boat. A storm threatened to break it and make it sink with all the [01:12:00] passengers. And this must be related to what we did to Rabbi Eliezer, he said. And he said to God, "Master of the universe, you know as I do that whatever I have done was not for my sake nor for the sake of my ancestors. I have done it only for your sake, your glory in order to avoid conflicting views within Israel." And the storm abated, and now all is clear.

The sages sought to avoid conflicts, disputes, fragmentation. They were not against minority views, nor were they against different opinions. They were against fanatic opinions, and none as fanatic as the one that claims to derive from heaven. Such attitudes inevitably provoke splits. And in those critical times, with the Temple ruins still in everyone's memory, the Jewish people needed unity, a unity of purpose and an awareness

of man's duty and power in order to be [01:13:00] able to dream of renewed glory and sovereignty.

And now, as we are about to take leave of Rabbi Eliezer and his friends, we must rest the point that within the framework of Talmudic memory they have become friends once more. The Jerusalem Talmud emphasizes that as long as Rabbi Eliezer was alive, Rabbi Yehoshua ruled against him. But after his death, the same Rabbi Yehoshua reversed himself and ruled in his adversary's favor. Why am I for Rabbi Eliezer son of Hyrcanus? Because he was right or because every other sage was against him? Just as Rabbi Akiva was the only one to give his support to the rebel leader Bar Kochba, because no one else did, why should one not do the same with Rabbi Eliezer? How can one not be moved by his loneliness [01:14:00] as much as by his audacity?

After his death his reputation has been restored, his name respected, admiration towards an individual scholar, a master who above all believed in the eternal wisdom that as a rule animates and inspires all those who then and now speaks truth to power, both human and divine, both here and higher above in the distant, unattainable admiration. We remember both sides, for this is what the Talmud is. We remember all sides. All sides,

all views deserve to be remembered. So we even remember the relative injustice done to him. We remember because he wants us to remember.

The key to his teaching is not innovation but recreation, which means memory. Listen to the way [01:15:00] he described his own approach to tradition, which means transmission. Quote, "If all the oceans were to become ink and all the trees pens and heaven and earth parchments and all men and women scribes, they still would not be able to write down what I learned from my teachers." Such affection, such love, and such respect for one's teachers are rare among men, even among sages. They alone justified his being called the great Rabbi Eliezer. And of course, they explain why I love him. Was God among his teachers? Possibly. But what is more amazing [01:16:00] and more beautiful is now that we realize what we have read and said, that God was also among Rabbi Eliezer's students.

(applause)

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