

Elie Wiesel Ezekiel and His Frightening Visions
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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) I admire Ezekiel. I fear him, but I love him. And I admire him. I admire him because of his extraordinary visions, filled with anguish and death, but also because of his passion for truth and his love of Jerusalem, though he doesn't live there. He's always in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem is in him, but he's not in Jerusalem. He doesn't dwell in the holy city, but the holy city dwells in him with its citizens and their dreams and their past [00:01:00] and their aspirations. But isn't this true of many of us who love his words and are amazed by their imagery? We are in Manhattan but dream of Jerusalem, which remains in our memory with its melancholy exaltation.

A prophet unlike any other, Ezekiel. We could say that about all of them. Each and every one is in his own way endowed with some particular power and style. Here in this place we have spoken about Isaiah, about Jeremiah, about Jonas. They're all so special and so admirable in their way of thinking, of speaking, of trying to save the world or at least change it a little bit.

We have evoked Ezekiel's personality and destiny already
[00:02:00] here some many, many, many years ago. Have we
learned everything about him then? No. I still study him and
still find new areas of his existence and effect. In tales and
portraits of such ancient characters that always remain hidden
aspects, details, episodes. Some prophets deal with the future,
others with the past. All observe the present and respond to
its problems, inequities and desperations.

The princely tone of Isaiah, the lamenting voice of Jeremiah,
the mystical fantasy of Ezekiel. What do they have in common?

[00:03:00] All spoke on behalf of the Almighty, obeying his
orders. Most of his emissaries initially performed their task
against their will. Some were punished, though unjustly.

Moses, the greatest of all, refused to be a prophet, and yet he
was the greatest of all.

Question: Where is Ezekiel today? Whose voice is his? And, if
I may usurp a formula from our political questionnaire, are we
better off today than our forefathers in this time? (laughter)
Is the ethical atmosphere cleaner? Are people deeply more
motivated to follow ethical demands concerning human relations?
Romans had speakers, Greeks philosophers, [00:04:00] but we Jews
had our prophets. The last witnessed the burning of the temple,

and therefore, as a result, prophecy vanished with the destruction of Jerusalem. Why?

You may ask, isn't it unfair to stop there? If ever we needed prophets it's afterwards, prophets of consolation, of comfort, of explanation. But is it because their message then would have been too tragic, too depressing psychologically, perhaps unbearable? A prophet describing the destruction of a temple like Jeremiah, my God, Jeremiah. How often does he say it to God? You killed them.

When we speak [00:05:00] about God we say he allowed the killers to kill. Jeremiah said you did the killing. But all these questions have followed my reading and rereading the drama-filled book of Ezekiel. As always, answers are hard to find. But here we feel obligated to repeat our conviction, what we usually say in the Talmud about *Teku*. Whenever there is a question that has no answer or a painful answer and we don't want to face it we simply say *Teku - Tishbi yavo u'vitaretz kushiyot u'ba'ayot*, which means let's wait for Elijah to come. Let him deal with it. It's an easy way out, but why not take it?

Usually at this moment we speak about waiting for Elijah, waiting for the messiah. Of course a Jew is [00:06:00] someone who is waiting, always waiting. But here in this place, at the Y for so many decades, at this moment and in this place we are waiting for those who are outside and perhaps waiting for the doors to open. We'll wait.

So Ezekiel, a strange prophet. Rashi, Don Yitzchak Abarbanel, and even Spinoza, the great philosopher, were somehow fascinated by Ezekiel's language and its message. But the book as such inspired both admiration and skepticism. Some commentators expressed doubt about its author. Was it Ezekiel alone?

[00:07:00] Were there others who collaborated on the project? Others when further and asked did it exist at all? Is what exists as a book, a volume, the one that we have now in front of us?

On a pragmatic level it is more a collection of essays, prophetic memories and hallucinations. Of his biography we know only essentials, the period when he began preaching his surroundings in Babylon, his visions. And like most if not all his peers, the sixth century prophet Ezekiel, son of Buzi, the priest, was active mainly outside of the land of Israel. His prophecy, conceived in Babylon, spoken in Babylon during the

reign of Tzidkiyahu [00:08:00] who was succeeded by King Jehoiachin, was addressed to the people in Jerusalem from far away. He believed that when Jerusalem is suffering it is because of its sins. So easy, punishment and suffering. Suffering is a punishment because they deserved it, says the prophet.

When Jews in the thousands were expelled to far away Babylon, Ezekiel was part of them. Perhaps that is why he appeals so deeply and so powerfully to my generation, and particularly the generation of what we call survivors. No prophet was endowed with such vision. No other vision was so extreme. No man has shed such light on the future, [00:09:00] for no other light was so forceful in tearing darkness apart. But then no one had ever seen such darkness, the total darkness that precedes the breaking of dawn.

Ezekiel, who has not heard of his intriguing and passionate speaker whose visions of horror and beauty have left an impact on innumerable generations. No messenger has hurt us more, none has offered us such confidence. When he is harsh he seems pitiless. When he is kind his generosity spills over. In his worst outburst he declares his own nation ugly and repugnant. But suddenly he recovers his compassion, [00:10:00] and

everything and everyone radiates sunshine and serenity and peace and friendship.

He oscillates constantly between the shame of sin and the grandeur of salvation. For him there is nothing in between. Ezekiel, the man of extremes. He goes from the ecstasy of the chariot, the *merkava*, to the terror of dry bones in the desert.

Let us read together. "And I looked, he said, and behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud and fire unfolding itself, and a brightness was about it. And out of the midst thereof, as the color of ember out of the midst of the fire, also out of the midst thereof came the likeness [00:11:00] of four living creatures. And this was their appearance. They had the likeness of man, and every one had four faces. And every one had four wings."

What are those human and animal creatures, both monstrous and divine, that have appeared on our small, orderly planet? What do these extraterrestrial beings try to achieve in our midst in his vision? What is the purpose of their visit? Again, I quote, "Their feet were straight feet, and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot. And they had the hands of a man under their wings, on their four sides, and they too

had their faces and their wings, [00:12:00] and their wings were joined one to another.”

It reads like a feverish dream, if not a nightmare, all those human and inhuman masks intertwined, fragmented images, halting sentences, deafening shouts and soft whispers. Words and silences are being used to describe that which defies description. A realm where heaven and earth merge into one element combining fire and crystal, fear and joy, the first and last memory of man facing his or her destiny. “The likeness of man,” says he. “The likeness of lions and eagles, the likeness of the firmament, the likeness of the throne.”

Has Ezekiel seen, really seen all [00:13:00] that? Has God really chosen to show him all that he conceals from all others? If so, why? Why Ezekiel? What made him so special? All the questions raised with respect to prophets and prophecy, the element compulsion and the divine mission, the unpredictability of the prophet’s responses are even more valid as they pertain to Ezekiel. What had he done to deserve to speak in God’s name? Why are his words burning with so much anger and then with so much deep affection?

There are, in his book and in his vocabulary, themes, subjects, expressions that can be found nowhere else. For instance, he eats his words. He mentions, quote, "heart [00:14:00] transplants, hearts of flesh instead of stone." The poetic term *ben adam*, son of man, is used with such frequency that it almost becomes his surname. Also, he is the prophet to speak of the synagogue as a *mikdash me'at*, a kind of miniature, temporary temple that we take with us wherever we go.

Has he seen the real one? Only in his imagination. But yet, his description far away from Jerusalem is so real, so vivid that it is a jewel in itself. But he hasn't seen it. Ezekiel, the prophet of imagination? More than his peer Jeremiah he imagined both exile and redemption in ways that made them both [00:15:00] tangible. More important, he was the first to speak of Kiddush HaShem. Kiddush HaShem, the sanctification of the Lord's name, which actually means martyrdom. The first to evoke martyrdom in our collective memory and imagination.

From his exile Ezekiel speaks to all generations, and particularly, I believe, to ours. For more than his own contemporaries we have witnessed the frailty of social structures and the irresistible power of spiritual courage and dreams. For once upon a time some of us did indeed, a deserted

land covered with dry bones, a theme which we shall return to later.

And yes, [00:16:00] we, in our generation, could testify to man's ability to transform memories of tragedy into necessary hope. Indeed no generation can understand Ezekiel as well, as profoundly as ours. Just read the text. *Vayehi bi'shloshim shana* , "And it came to pass in the thirtieth year in the fourth month in the fifth day of the month I was then in exile," says Ezekiel, or among the exiled, "the captives, by the river of Chebar when suddenly the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God."

Clearly the story opens in the manner of a chronicle. The style is precise. The chronicler does not want the [00:17:00] reader to be confused. Thus we know what happened and where and when and to whom. *Hayo haya d'var Adoshem el Yekhezkel ben Buzi ha-Kohen*, "The word of God came to Ezekiel, son of Buzi the priest, while being in the land of the Chaldeans by the River Chebar, and the hand of God was laid upon him." And here "*va'ere vehine*", "I look," he says. "I looked, and behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, but do not look, not yet."

We have not finished with the opening statement, which presents certain problems. The story begins in the first person, *va'ani*, and jumps to the third *va'tehi alav* and returns [00:18:00] to the first again *va'ere*, and I looked.

The prophet has just been contacted by God. And he's all shaken by the experience. Most prophets had similar reactions. Prophecy was thrust upon them. Couldn't God speak more gently to his chosen? Apparently not. Prophecy always began with a shock. Is this why Ezekiel suddenly left reality and moved into a world of fantasy?

The historian has been turned into a visionary. Is this why, unlike Jeremiah or Jonah or Moses he did not resist the call? He did not say why me? Leaving time and reason behind, he [00:19:00] looked and saw chariots of fire, strange beasts, and half-human, half-divine creatures. He looked and saw what exists outside or above creation.

Now, how is one to explain the abrupt change? The man who just one passage earlier insists on clarity and precision has allowed his mind to wander so much so that he forgets to tell us something that may be essential, of essential importance. Didn't he say God spoke to him? Then why doesn't he tell us

what God said? No, he does not tell us what he heard because he's too busy describing what he saw. And what he saw is so unreal that some of us who dwell in reality are forbidden to follow his gaze and look and speak about it. [00:20:00]

Listen to the Mishnah and the treatises of Hagigah in the Talmud. *ein dorshin ba'arayot bi'shlosha*, one must not debate with the three students questions about, let's say intimate relations between men and women. Something modern literature, of course, has failed to observe. (laughter) Nor are we to debate mysteries of creation with students, not even two. And the mysteries of the *Merkava be'yachid* [00:20:42], nor the mystery of the chariot, with just one student. Which means one is not supposed, even with a friend, to study the *ma'aseh merkava*. In other words the mystery of the chariot, [00:21:00] the last reference is once again to the visions the prophet Ezekiel had in Babylon in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity.

Now, what we are doing here, perhaps, therefore is unlawful. We are talking about the *merkava*. *Merkava* experiences are forbidden territory, dangerous to outsiders. One cannot approach them with impunity. Why should the mystery of creation, *ma'aseh bereshit*, be considered less perilous than

that of the chariot? Maimonides comments the first is about creation. The second is about its creator. Creation is imminent and therefore perceivable. The creator is not.

The great Gershom Scholem, you know, who made mysticism into a [00:22:00] science, Gershom Scholem quotes ancient texts of the so-called Hekhalot literature, the theory of the palaces in heaven. And they warn us against trespassing mystical frontiers.

I quote, "If a person was unworthy to see the king in his beauty, the angels at the gates disturbed his senses and confused him. And then they said to him, 'Come in,' he entered, but instantly they pressed him and threw him into the fiery lava stream. And at the gate of the sixth of the seven palaces it seemed as though hundreds of thousands and millions of waves of water stormed against him. And yet there was not a drop of water there. But he, the visitor, asked the angels [00:23:00] what is the meaning of these waters? And they began to stone him. 'Wretched, do you not see with your own eyes? Are you perhaps a descendent of those who kiss the golden calf and thus are unworthy to see the king in his beauty and glory?' And they struck him with iron bars and wounded him."

In other words, not only are we not able to understand Ezekiel's chariot visions, we are not even allowed to make them an object of scholarly analysis. Why? What is so special about what Ezekiel saw? And why had he, he alone, permitted to see it? And if we are not permitted, why did he speak?

Who was he? What information is there [00:24:00] about his life and work? We know that he was a priest, that he traveled a lot and spoke a lot, that his command of language was both disturbing and enchanting. What else? We know his mannerisms, his style, his remarkable courage, or was it naivete? In using repetition, examples, the expression son of man, *ben adam*, appears 100 times. Didn't he have an editor? (laughter) The expression *Adoshem, Adoshem, oh Lord, oh Lord*, 200 times, *va'yad'u ki ani Adoshem* and they shall know I am the Lord, 50 times, *Gilulim* or idolatry only 39 times. Why?

And also [00:25:00] what was his nationality? Was he a Palestinian prophet sent by God to Babylon? Was he a Babylonian immigrant from Palestine who returned to Palestine? Some sources say he was one or the other. Some texts claim he was both. But then others say he was neither. From the text itself we gather that he had been exiled together with his king and the king's court to Babylon. And we know the exact location of his

dwelling, Tel Aviv. It's called Tel Aviv on the River of Chebar.

Babylonian sources tell us that Tel Aviv, or Tel Abib in the text, deferred to ruins from before the floods. In our literature the name fares somewhat better. We are told that Tel Aviv was in ancient times the largest Jewish city in diaspora. [00:26:00] It's population was then 10,000 souls. They spoke Hebrew. And they were prosperous and respected like today. We are also told that they observed Jewish law. Today? (laughter)

As for Ezekiel, we know that he began to prophesy six or seven years before Jerusalem's final tragedy and that he continued for another 12 or 15 years. Was he married? Yes. We know that his wife died in the plague. We know that he saw in her death a prefiguration of the destruction of Jerusalem. So affected was he that for a while he lost his power of speech, suffering from aphasia. [00:27:00]

Did he have brothers, friends, allies? We don't know. We do know that he had enemies. Like most prophets, he constantly provoked anger and hostility. Some of his adversaries ridiculed him by saying who is he anyway to talk the way he does? Isn't he a descendent of that woman of ill repute, you know, Rehab,

the harlot who made Jericho famous? He was her descendent. Like Jeremiah, he used pantomime to promulgate his views and fears. When he warned the people of Gilgal of the coming exile he paraded through the streets carrying a knapsack whilst telling them that they too would become wanderers.

At twilight he would dig a hole in the wall and steal out into the darkness [00:28:00] like a fugitive, a refugee. Like Jeremiah he must have felt that he would not die in the holy land. Jeremiah was buried in Egypt, Ezekiel in Babylon. Iraqi Jews thought they knew the location of his grave and came to pray there, imploring him to intercede on their behalf.

Yes, Ezekiel endured much torment and agony throughout his life. No wonder that God felt the need to repeatedly encourage and comfort him, telling him not to worry, not to heed his critics, not to be hurt by their mockery, to speak up even if his words were to fall on deaf ears, even if his vision were to bring -- to no immediate results. One has the feeling that he [00:29:00] was the first author who had problems with critics. As a prophet he was not free to choose either to speak or remain silent. He was told when to make himself visible and when to remain invisible.

From the book itself we received the script God prepared for his emissary Ezekiel, his order to stay seven days under house arrest. Alone, yes, to illustrate loneliness. The effect on him is obvious. He becomes harsh, demanding, unyielding, a misanthrope. Naturally, Ezekiel became a perfect subject for psychoanalysts. Some experts called him "psychotic", quote, unquote. Others left him as [00:30:00] pathological. One analyst found that our prophet had catatonic periods, which resulted from his paranoia tendencies.

Want to hear more? Here are more diagnosis. Narcissistic, masochistic, conflicts. More, fantasies of castration, unconscious sexual regression, schizophrenia, delusion of persecution, delusion of grandeur. All these, believe me, are in their texts.

His sermons have the quality and the urgency of eyewitness reporting. Mindful of every detail, he tell us what is going on in God's favorite dwelling place. In short, it reminds him of Sodom from which the keyword is *toevah*, abomination, [00:31:00] the physical and moral prostitution, social decadence, intellectual deprivation. One could produce an entire encyclopedia of sin just using Ezekiel's vocabulary. How come that he knew so much? He's particularly severe with the

leaders. We are informed or worry what they are saying, thinking, doing, plotting inside and outside the sanctuary. And there are no good people in the island, no just man left.

He speaks of the elders who, in exasperation, began to wonder whether God had not abandoned his people altogether. That is one of the worst fears prophets had and some Jews had and some Jews had even in our own generation: has God abandoned us? When we speak of a certain [00:32:00] cursed places where Jews were condemned to iniquity, humiliation, and death, we wondered, what about God? Has he abandoned us?

I quote Ezekiel, "And the Glory of God said unto me, son of man, look and see what they are doing in my house to my house. See the great abominations, look well and you will notice even greater. Old leaders and priests now worship idols." Listen to the language, quote "Son of man, have you seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark or in the secret chambers of their imagination? They say so themselves. Anything is permitted for God cannot see. He has [00:33:00] forsaken this land and abandoned its inhabitants." But that is not all. Says God to the prophet, "Look and you'll still see worse." And then, quote, "And then he brought me to the door of the temple's gate and behold, there were women weeping for the idol Tammuz."

"Wait," says God to Ezekiel, "'there is even worse.' And he took me inside the inner court, and between the porch and the alter I saw about 25 men with their backs to the temple worshipping the sun in the temple." And then God uses an expression that reminded Ezekiel and us of Noah and the floods. *ki malu et ha'aretz khamas*, they filled the land with violence, and that [00:34:00] was the worst. As long as people offended heaven, God, in spite of his anger, was willing to wait and forgive. But when they ceased to be human towards one another he had to intervene and punish them.

Few prophets have spoken with such despair. To the inhabitants of Jerusalem he says that they will be defeated. To those in Babylon, he says that their deliverance is not near. Of course, like most prophets, he emphasizes the cycle of sin, punishment, and redemption. But according to him, redemption is far, far away. Redemption seems improbable, if not impossible, and unworthy.

Why does the prophet insist with such fervor on Jewish weaknesses and transgressions? Does he enjoy shaming the Jews, humiliating [00:35:00] them, moving them to despair? One reason may be that knowing of the catastrophe in the making, he wants

the Jewish people to have an explanation at least. He wants to save them from absurdity. Better that they think their plight represents punishment than gratuitous cruelty. Any answer may be better than no answer.

Now we must ask ourselves really, was Israel that bad, that sinful? Open the book of history, and let's turn the pages. Though a vassal state of Babylon, Judea enjoyed internal freedom. After a short reign of some 101 days, King Jehoiachin and his entourage [00:36:00] together with skilled technicians in the thousands had been deported to Babylon, leaving behind a newly appointed king, a weakling named Tzidkiyahu, or Zedekias. Pressured by Egypt and Phoenicia to rebel against Babylon, Zedekias finally gave up his position of comfortable neutrality and allowed his militant advisors to move the nation to war. The enemy emperor Nebuchadnezzar dispatched his army, and thus began the military siege of Jerusalem.

Inside the country, naturally the morale was low. The enemy was mighty and the Jews desperate. They could not comprehend God's ways. Why had he forsaken his people, which under King Yoshiya had shown such force of character and faith by repudiating idolatry and sin [00:37:00] and by undertaking one of the most impressive shows of repentance in history? Despair led to

spiritual corruption. Since God seemed unjust, why should man be just?

Judea's spiritual leaders, the four prophets Jeremiah, Uriah son of Shammash, Habakkuk, and Ezekiel tried hard to change the mood in vain. Uriah was beheaded, Jeremiah jailed, and Ezekiel persecuted and humiliated. And yet in the Gentile world, culture is flourishing.

Athenians build the acropolis and celebrate a philosopher named Thales of Miletus. Aesop's fables, Aeschylus's dramas, and the oracles at Delphi are there. The Chinese enjoy the wisdom of Lao-Tze. The Maya built their temples in Mexico. World history [00:38:00] is moving forward in waves of upheavals, the various emperors forever dissatisfied with what they possess, forever aspiring to enlarge their empires. And somehow Judea is always caught in the middle of their political and strategic designs.

Egypt and Babylon are enemies, but again, both need Judea.

Strange: all the empires of the time seem to need Judea. And eventually all will vanish with the exception of Judea. Of all the people in antiquity, of all the people of antiquity, Jews alone survived. All the others disappeared. The Chaldeans, the Assyrians, the Phoenicians, the Persians, the Egyptians, the

Romans all had to withdraw from Judea and from history. Judea alone [00:39:00] remained in Judea.

Most prophets found it necessary to address themselves to other nations as well as to Judea. Just as Jeremiah was called *navi la-goyim*, prophet to Gentile nation, Ezekiel too could be classified as a prophet to the enemy nations. For not only did he predict the destruction of Israel, he also foretold the doom of Tyre and Egypt. That was his way of emphasizing again and again that suffering is contagious, as is evil itself. When one people is subjected to humiliation, others are bound to follow. And ultimately the destroyer will be destroyed, and the victimizer will be someone else's victims or his own.

Ezekiel came forth with his vision of the dry bones. In the [00:40:00] Jewish tradition, one may not rejoice over an enemy's downfall. The enemy's punishment offers no consolation to the victim. The victims' rehabilitation and victory and redemption must not be linked to other people's suffering. The theme, the purpose, call it the message in Ezekiel's sermons is not victory but repentance. If the sinner repents he will live. If he does not he will die. It is in Ezekiel's book that we find the poignant verse "*va'omar lakh b'damayikh khayi, va'omar lakh b'damayikh khayi,*" and I shall tell you, you shall live in thy

blood. In thy blood you shall live. In thy blood, not to your enemies.

Did Ezekiel succeed? Well, he tried. He tried hard.

[00:41:00] Obeying God's orders to the letter, he went so far as to do supernatural things. While staying in Babylon he flew, quote, unquote, "back and forth to Jerusalem." His specter, the celestial chariot, described events hidden in the future and subjected himself to humiliation and ridicule, never complaining about his own ordeal. When he himself enters the story we are moved.

Jeremiah spoke of captives. Ezekiel referred to refugees, and he became one himself. Suspected by everyone, resented for being on God's side, for knowing too much, for protesting against false prophets and false comfort, whatever he predicted for others ultimately happened to him too. His book is the only one of those of the prophets that almost fell [00:42:00] victim to censorship.

For a while the book of Ezekiel was in danger of not being published. Why such discrimination? Because of his unmitigated criticism of his people? No, others have done that. Then why? Some Talmudic sages maintain that there are passages in Ezekiel

that are in conflict with the Torah. Others reproach him for dealing with forbidden mystical themes. For example, it came to pass that in the house of a teacher a Jewish child opened the Book of Ezekiel and began studying the story of the fire and the chariot. Soon a fire came out of the fire and burned the child down. [00:43:00] So the sages envisaged to suppress the Book of Ezekiel altogether.

Some critics do object to Ezekiel's frankness. They would have preferred him to indulge in some kind of cover-up. About the sins of Jerusalem? No, about the heavenly secrets. He had visions, good for him. But why reveal them to others? He saw the heavenly chariot and these strange creatures. Why did he have to boast about it? Why couldn't they have locked his impressions in his memory for later? The fact that Ezekiel could not resist telling the story, and what a story it was, hurt his image in certain Talmudic circles.

One commentator therefore actually to diminish him, tongue in cheek states, quote, "Oh, [00:44:00] Ezekiel, his visions, any maid servant saw while crossing the Red Sea saw more than what Ezekiel would see later." Any maid servant. What is clear from these stories is the resentment of some towards Ezekiel for having revealed his visions. But then isn't he a prophet? If

not he, who? Isn't the prophet duty-bound not to keep anything to himself? Isn't he an instrument of communication between God and mankind?

Clearly not thinking his life is private, all he has, all he is belongs to both God and his people. His fears and hopes, his joys and depressions, his moments of turmoil and his moments of ecstasy, they are not his alone. [00:45:00] A prophet must have no ego, no individual memory. If he hears a voice he must echo it. If he sees visions he must share them, right? Yes and no.

Yes, as far as the voices are concerned. When God speaks a prophet becomes his vessel. But visions, that is something else. We are told to repeat again and again Shema Yisrael. Listen Israel. We don't say *re'eh Yisrael*, look, Israel. It is the listening. I think we have taught the world the art of listening.

Then why did Ezekiel choose to go beyond his mission? Mind you it was no transgression on his part. God had not told him not to speak of his vision. But why then was his book placed in jeopardy? [00:46:00] We must remember with gratitude, says the Talmud, a certain *Hananya ben Hizkiya*, for were it not for his

intervention the Book of Ezekiel would have gone away from our attention and memory.

Now, who was this Hananiah ben Hezekiah who fought so valiantly for freedom of expression? It is in his home that the sharpest conflicts were confronted and resolved. The 18-point program which was exceptionally adopted as the students of Shammai outvoted those of Hillel. These had been discussed in his attic. He was clearly a man for impossible missions. When some of his colleagues openly complained that the Book of Ezekiel contained passages that contradicted the Torah he ordered for [00:47:00] his attic enough food and candles to last until all discrepancies were clarified, and they were. Characteristically we are not told how the scholar managed to reconcile opposites.

Now, clearly, generally speaking, one senses that Ezekiel disturbed both his contemporaries and their learned descendants. From the fact that his book was to be subjected to quasi censorship, we can deduce that our sages had problems with the author as well. His interpretation of Moses's laws is only one element in the equation. There must have been others. For various hints appear in Midrashic literature, all drawing distinctions between Ezekiel and his colleagues. And when we

[00:48:00] ask why, they will say wait, don't answer. Here the question is more important than the answer.

Talmudic scholars have problems with Ezekiel, who apparently had problems with God. First he was jealous, of whom? Of his fellow prophets. At one point he exclaimed, master of the universe, am I not a priest? Am I not a prophet? Why did Isaiah speak for you in Jerusalem while I must do the same thing here in exile in Babylon? Why he and not me?

Then God too had problems with him. When God asked his prophet *hatikh'yena haatzamot hayeveshot ha'elu* , when he said, prophet, my dear prophet, look at these dry bones. Will these [00:49:00] dry bones come back to life? Ezekiel paused for a while because God paused for a while waiting for an answer. And when finally the answer came, Ezekiel's answer was evasive. Instead of shouting, master of the universe of course they will, they must, for they and we need your miracle, Ezekiel became a politician.
(laughter)

He adopted all of a sudden a noncommittal attitude. He was too skeptical. And that is why, says the Talmud, Ezekiel was condemned to die not in the holy land but in Babylon. Well, another legend is even more disturbing. It came to pass that

[00:50:00] King Nebuchadnezzar ordered all his subjects in all the lands under his rule to worship one of his idols, less they all be executed. Three representatives of the Jewish people were chosen to act on behalf of their people. And they turned to their teacher Daniel for advice. Daniel, in his humility, sent them to Ezekiel, who urged them to reject martyrdom and choose flight instead. They disregarded his suggestion saying they want to die for Kiddush HaShem as martyrs.

Ezekiel persisted in trying to dissuade that option. And when they still refused to listen, he came up with yet another proposal, that they should withhold their decision until he received word from God that he would [00:51:00] save them through a miracle. And God's answer was no. Nevertheless, the three just men refused to escape or to bow to the king's will. And when Ezekiel in despair burst into tears, God at last offered him consolation saying do not worry. They will be saved. I shall save them from the burning furnace.

Why couldn't he have told them so beforehand and spared them their anguish? Only to allow their faith and their martyrdom to appear more glorious. Good for them, but what about Ezekiel? His part in the drama is less enviable than theirs because he's made to sound weak and frightened. However, Talmudic sages

always have their way of balancing reticence by giving praise to the prophet's wide powers.

How? He became [00:52:00] instrumental, we are told, in saving the three just men's lives, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The miracle encompassed more than those that actually concerned early martyrs too we are told were then at that moment resurrected and rejoined the living community of Israel. How (inaudible), I don't know.

Do you know how King Nebuchadnezzar learned of Ezekiel's miracle, believe it or not? He had been drinking. He had a drinking vessel made of the bones of a slain Jew. And he was about to use it and drink from his wine. Then life began to stir in the vessel. And one bone struck him in the face. And a voice was heard proclaiming a friend of this man is right now reviving the dead. Now, did he really? [00:53:00] Did he revive the dead? Talmudic opinions are divided.

Some say yes, he did, and some go so far as identifying those he resurrected, if not by name at least by origin and category. Those Jews, for instance, who in their impatience escaped from Egypt before Moses led the whole people out of bondage. Or those who ironically did not believe in t'chiyat hameitim, the

resurrection of dead, they were now resurrected. Or the young Judeans taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar whose beauty drove Babylonian women mad, under their pressure from their husbands the emperor ordered the young Judeans killed. Now they were brought back, back to life and seduced.

All these possibilities were examined during a heated session of one of the [00:54:00] academies because of some skeptics who dared to state publicly that all that was a figment of Talmudic imagination. *Mashal haya*, they said. It's nothing but a parable. Actually, the debate dealt with larger and more general issues.

What would happen to *tzadikim*, just men in the long run? After they reached paradise, would they die again? Of course here too opinions were divided. Some said yes, they will die, but their death will be painless. And they quoted a case of the dry bones. Those men whom Ezekiel brought back to life died right away. But they didn't suffer. At which point someone got up and said what nonsense. The story was fiction. [00:55:00] And thus went the discussion. Said Rabbi Eliezer, the dead that were resurrected by Ezekiel stood up, praised the Lord, and died. But someone wanted to know the nature. It's the text of the place, said Rabbi Yehoshua. They sat and they sang *Adoshem*

memit ume'chaye. They were singing the Lord causes people to die and to return to life.

Another sage then interjected a brief, sweeping remark. All this *emet masha' haya*. All this was a true parable. Don't. Come on, with this nonsense. Ah, then a sage said all this was a true parable, really? How is it possible? If it's true it was not a parable. It's a parable, it's not true. And the answer was *beemet masha' haya*. It was truly a parable.

[00:56:00] (laughter) Ah. I love these Talmudic imaginations.

Would you say that the debate had just exhausted its logical possibilities? That rarely occurs in the Talmud. Rabbi Nechemia had barely finished his linguistic contribution when Rabbi Eliezer, son of Yose the Galilean, made his own opinion known. He opposed the view that the dead were resurrected only to die again right away. "Oh no," said he. "They made Aliyah to Israel, and there they got married and had children." An audacious thought. Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira was more audacious. True, he stated, they made Aliyah, and I am their descendant. And by the way, the tefillin, the phylacteries, that I wear are those I inherited from my grandfather who was one of them.

Obviously [00:57:00] the episode preoccupied them to an astonishing degree. They wanted to understand its meaning with all its implications and his place in the life of Ezekiel and in that of our people. For in the text the story is forcefully and descriptively narrated. It's one of the pinnacles of prophetic literature. Perhaps still unequal in its strange mixture of poetic realism and mystical inspiration, remember the setting, the place where Judea's last King Tzidkiyahu made his last stand against Babylonian armies. That was the setting. The plain is now covered with the mutilated bodies of fallen Jewish warriors. And it is there in the midst of climactic cruelty, desolation, and mourning that Ezekiel had his most glorious and [00:58:00] breathtaking vision.

And now as we come almost to the end we go back to the dry bones. Why? Because his evocation of the so-called resurrection of the dry bones in the desert is his alone. But I believe that this evocation also applies to our own generation. It is something which now we know, now we know happened. We know what happened, and we know that we can go back and bring it into the present.

Before this lecture, outside [00:59:00] was a very moving moment when the leaders of the Y sought out the director and his

assistants actually unveiled a bust that a great sculptor Marc Mellon has made of me. It took us, I think, seven or eight years because I didn't have time. I would give him a half hour here and 10 minutes then, and it lasted seven or eight years, and finally he finished it.

And why, because Y is my cultural home. I have been here more than anywhere, in any yeshiva in the world. That to say generously I don't know why. Maybe rationally they decided they should have it here in this place. And we were there. And when it was unveiled I wondered is there a prayer to say now? Make a *Shehecheyanu* on a sculpture? (laughter)

[01:00:00] Before I accepted it, I went back to the sources. Am I not committing a sin? Not to have God's image, *u'masaycha lo ta'aseh l'cha*. I cannot. Is it forbidden for Jews to make pictures or to make sculptures from the Bible? No.

In the beginning I thought yes, that's why I hesitated and really often didn't come to the sessions with him, but then I realized I didn't read the text well. It's written *elohay masaycha lo ta'aseh l'cha*. A God sculpture you cannot make. A human sculpture, go ahead, which he did. If you have not seen it, when you go out, see it. I think it's nice. (laughter)

Now, the miracle of the dry bones. The miracle of the dry bones becomes a frequent topic. It became a frequent topic in post-war Europe [01:01:00] after liberation, amongst survivors. They, in a very personal way, felt resurrected from the dead. It was and is for them and for some of us an understandable response to their experiences. Didn't they, didn't some of us come back from far, very far, from the land of ghettos, mass graves, and death camps? Didn't we or something in us die there? Didn't everyone leave there some part of his or her life?

At that time, in that place of eternal darkness and silence, we lived not only with the dead, we lived in death. I remember. I belong to a group called [01:02:00] The Buchenwald Children. We were 400 children in Buchenwald at liberation. And then France offered us refuge. We came to France. We were taken by a great organization called OSE. When we arrived they separated us in two groups, those who were religious and the others. So 100 of us were religious. One of them is here tonight with me, Israel Rosenbaum, one of my best, best, best friends.

And when we arrived in France that day I remember an older (inaudible) old, it must have been a few years older, asked for

the Bible. When it was given to him, surrounded by all of us, he began reading the appropriate chapter from the Book of Ezekiel, [01:03:00] the chapter of the dry bones. And someone whispered, is it possible that the prophet had foreseen the concentration camp? No one dared to answer. But then another adolescent raised his hand and said, I will tell you what I think. I think that he, Ezekiel, was there together with us. Thank you. (applause)

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