

Elie Wiesel Jeremiah and His Lamentations

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Some prophets speak to our mind, others to our heart, still others to our imagination and/or memory. Jeremiah combines all three. Jeremiah actually is a very special one. Special because he is the only one who had foreseen the catastrophe, lived the catastrophe, and remembered the catastrophe and written [00:01:00] about it. Three hundred plays by Euripides and Sophocles were forgotten. The books of the prophets were not. And among them is that of Jeremiah.

One of the great, very great moralists and visionaries, preachers of all times. When he's sad, no one's sadness is greater than his, when he is not, one wonders, why isn't he? Unlike Isaiah, whose words of consolation "*Nachamu, nachamu ami*", be comforted my people. He's not known for his power to transform distress into joy, fear into love. On the ninth day of the month of Av, remembering the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, it is his words we recite [00:02:00] in those appropriate litanies.

Years, many years have passed since we evoke here in this very hall his life and destiny, his sorrow and lamentations. Just as we accompany him on the ruins of Jerusalem, destroyed by the Babylonian armies, he walks with us as we rediscover our own. Now, why do we come back to him? I remember. A few decades ago, in the late '70s, on a mission to Poland I arrive in Warsaw on the eve of Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of Av, which is, for us, a day of mourning, of remembering the destruction.

Naturally I went to the great synagogue in the Nozyk Street. I had read a lot about it. It was the only one that survived the hateful, cruelty of German occupation [00:03:00] whose principal target always and everywhere was first to set fire to Jewish places of worship and study. They have done so in my own birthplace, Sighet. The *groys shul*, the great synagogue of my country burned and burned for long days and nights days after our departure. But the world famous Nozyk shul of Warsaw, which in pre-war years attracted famous cantors and enthusiastic congregants, remained nearly intact.

So I went there at sunset not knowing whether I would find a minyan or a quorum of 10 for the Eicha service. I did. Around 50 old men actually were there and also two Americans [00:04:00], and I was one of them. Once upon a time the minyan,

the service there would have attracted more than a thousand worshippers. Following the tradition of mourning, the benches were turned over. We prayed *Maariv*, and seated on an overturned chair. I was asked to recite the first chapter, or *Eicha*, or lamentation, which strangely enough I knew almost by heart. "*Eicha yashvah vadad ha-ir rabati am hayitah k'almanah*"—the entire prayer is in this tone, tonality and melody.

And I tried, [00:05:00] but for some reason I couldn't utter the first word of the first verse of this litany in that synagogue. They were waiting for me to begin, and I couldn't. I just couldn't. And maybe it is because I felt how lonely, neglected in isolation is the city, the holy city now a widow, a translation of the chapter of Jeremiah.

And then a voice in me said no, Jeremiah, you are wrong. Jerusalem today, a deserted place? I know Jerusalem. Marion and I visited it more than any other place under the sun. It is a marvelous, joyous, creative, and happy city with its Yeshivot and marketplaces, its learned young scholars and their [00:06:00] old masters, attractive girls and smiling soldiers and adolescents. How can I repeat Jeremiah's description of its dark destruction? How can I repeat Jeremiah's description of extinguished life, perturbed happiness and infinite mourning

when the present so contradicts the past with such force and such truth and such joy and such happiness and such glory? I remained silent a few long minutes. And these, the last Jews that I met in Warsaw then, they were waiting. And I said to myself, I cannot continue, not now. [00:07:00] Let's wait a bit longer.

Yes, friends, our great prophets, God's messengers, were uniquely gifted with uniquely great powers. They transcended time and space, thought and sentiment, reality and hope. They spoke not only about their time but also about ours. Do I sound as if I chose to contradict Jeremiah? I wouldn't dare. I simply tried to expand his reach beyond his own territory and era. His prophecy of real events that he had himself personally witnessed and endured was ultimately in the realm of the absolute, meant for us all. Jeremiah did not only speak for his generation [00:08:00] but for all generations.

Still a question remains open. Why? So many trials and tragedy and such suffering in our history. There wasn't a century in the last two thousand years or more without somewhere becoming— a place becoming a source and a center of Jewish fear, of Jewish sorrow. An answer, I don't have an answer except I have a

story. It's a Hasidic story told by Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, one of the very great Hasidic masters.

And he said once, as I was studying our sacred texts in the Talmud, I stumbled upon a question and could not find an answer. For days [00:09:00] and days I was unable to continue. I prayed harder and harder asking for heavenly intervention which did not come. Then I heard that the holy Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the master of the good name, came into town. I went to his afternoon service. He was in the middle of Shemoneh Esreh, of the 18, the parts of prayer. And at the end he looked at me. He saw me. And I saw him. And I knew the question remained a question. But I must continue.

We shall return to Jeremiah, but first there are latecomers outside probably, and they have their own [00:10:00] rights. They too are part of Jeremiah's audience. Let them come in.

Of all the great prophets, and we have spoken about all of them here in the last 40-odd years, Jeremiah is the one who goes farther in arguing with God on behalf of his people. Naturally, like most of them, he admonishes his Jewish contemporaries, urging them to improve their ways, to abandon facile answers and immoral behavior. In other words to be worthy of their

tradition and their mission of faith, faith in God and faith in his creation and surely faith of their ancestors.

But when faced with their tragic destiny leading to [00:11:00] the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, Jeremiah is unable to hold back his pain, which at times yields to tormented anger as if to remind the Creator of being of not being present to his supreme and noble creation which Israel represents. And there are passages there. Today we read these litanies during Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of Av, which again reminds us of the destruction of both temples.

At one point "*Ratzachta v'lo chamalta*," Jeremiah screams, addressing God. And he doesn't say "*bishmei*", which means [00:12:00] your people are killed. He said "*Ratzachta*", you killed them. You had no pity. "*Haragta v'lo chamalta*." You murdered them and killed them. You, not they, you.

No other prophet has ever dared to implicate God in what murderers have done sometimes in His name. Now, others, then and even later, centuries and centuries later, some witnesses there to question God's role and/or presence during the worst of all disasters, [00:13:00] the worst of all crimes committed against the Jewish people in the darkest hours of history. But

no one went as far as speaking of God's participation in them. Some of them questioned his silence, his presence or absence, his justice or injustice, but never, never have they dared to say, God, you did it. Not you let them do it, you did it. Where did Jeremiah find the courage, the inordinate courage and audacity to go that far in his protest?

Now you understand, surely, why I love him. A story: And it came to pass that when Jerusalem was destroyed [00:14:00] God entered the burning sanctuary. He saw it in flames and began to weep. God wept. And he said to Jeremiah, who stood nearby, "Why are you, Jeremiah, not weeping? I am like the father whose only son died on the way of his wedding during the ceremony, and you, Jeremiah, feel no pain, neither for the father nor the son? Go, go Jeremiah. Go wake the fathers of my people, wake up Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses. Wake him too. Tell them I wish to see them. I need them because they know how to weep."

Jeremiah was recalcitrant. Moses, he argued, cannot be found since nobody knows where he's buried, nobody but you. "All right," said God, "go to the [00:15:00] banks of the river Jordan and shout, 'Son of Amram, son of Amram, rise and see your children and theirs being slain by their enemies.' Do what I

say. He will hear. He will understand. He will come to be with me," says God.

Now really, what did I just say? Tell our fathers and forefathers that they knew, they know how to weep. We didn't? The descendants of Abraham and Jacob didn't? And so Jeremiah went first to the *Ma'arat HaMachpela*, the cave that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are resting and gave them the message that God wanted to see them. "Why?" they asked. "Why on this day of all days?" And the prophet, probably embarrassed by the terrifying content of [00:16:00] his message, evaded the question and said "I do not know." Which surely was not true. He knew. Of course he knew. God had told him the reason.

But he was fearful, says the Midrash. He was afraid the patriarchs would hold him responsible for the catastrophe he had witnessed. He felt the same apprehension as he addresses Moses, who also wished to know, what has happened in the world, to the world? Why am I suddenly called upon to appear before God? And again Jeremiah answered "I do not know."

Moses then turned to the angels, who told him Jerusalem is on fire. The Temple is in ruins. And in an outburst of anger Moses cursed the sun. "Why didn't you remain [00:17:00] dark



and thus prevent the enemy from slaughtering my people?" "I had no choice," said the sun. Having heard his angry words, the three patriarchs turned to him and wondered aloud, "Why are you shouting, Moses?" "You don't know?" he answered. "Aren't you aware of what is happening to your descendants?" And he told them, whereupon they tore their clothes in mourning.

"Why are you punishing your people?" Abraham asked God. "They have sinned," said God. "They have transgressed against the commandments of the Torah." "I demand proof," said Abraham. "Let the Torah come forth and be my witness," said God. And we know from the Midrash that at that moment they all came, and they testified. [00:18:00] And God then, of course, had to act and punish the sinners.

Well, what about Jeremiah? He knows the story. He knows the prayer. He knows what to do and what to say to his people and to God. Why didn't he prevent God's punishment? After all, he knew. He was probably the only one under the sun who knew what was going to happen? Hadn't he devoted long years of work and effort to warning people of oncoming dangers? If there existed a man, one man in Judah in the world who could have said to others and himself this horror, this massacres are not my doing, it was he. Then why such reticence on his part to [00:19:00]

confront his forebears? How is one to comprehend his weakness? If anyone had the right to question and pass judgment it was he. Then why was he afraid to tell the truth and give an authentic report to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob who anyway were used to shedding tears at the time when they were already useless?

Of course we have here the question of the role of the prophet. Is the prophet powerless? Then why is he a prophet? Why did God make him his spokesman without giving him the authority to change heavenly decrees since the prophet is part of the people and therefore spokesman of the people and spokesman to the people but for the people?

Jeremiah's contradictions, his constant search for himself [00:20:00] in a society which turned away not only from him but from itself, his determined quest for truth in times of falsehood. The word falsehood appears 72 times in Biblical literature, half of them in the Book of Jeremiah. What about his doubts, his tears, his yearning for meaning and silence? Few personalities possess his richness and even fewer his tragic depth. His lyricism remains unmatched, his cult unparalleled. No one is as appealing or as removed.

Jeremiah was forever torn between God and Israel, Israel and other nations, big powers and small powers, between his lost childhood and his unbearable old age, [00:21:00] his perplexing and intriguing. He arouses every passion from extreme hatred to infinite fidelity. He's an outsider and, as such, misunderstood. He is, in short, a survivor, a witness. Of all the prophets, he alone predicted the catastrophe, experienced it, and lived to tell the tale.

Oh, Isaiah is great. Amos is great. Habakkuk is great. They are all great. But none endured and lived his experiences. He alone sounded the alarm before the fire. And after being singed by its flames went on to retell the fire, in so many words, to whoever was ready to listen. Whenever [00:22:00] we are struck by misfortune we turn to him and follow in his footsteps. We use his words to describe our struggles, our pain, and our memories.

Who was Jeremiah? At first he seemed simple, even simplistic. He's a weak man who always cries and always with reason. In fact, he seems to do nothing else. He goes through his whole life shedding tears, and only after we study the text and the character do we realize that his simplicity is deceptive. His personality contains puzzling and mystifying aspects. Just

imagine having made us believe for generations that Jeremiah [00:23:00] indulged in weeping. We discover in the Midrash already quoted that he did not even know when Jerusalem—how to cry when Jerusalem was destroyed. If I didn't know, who will?

Let us read, quote, "the words of Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah, one of the priests of Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin, the words of the Lord came to him in the days of King Josiah, son of Amon of Judah in the thirteenth year of his reign and throughout the days of King Jehoiakim, son of Josiah of Judah until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah, son of Josiah of Judah, when Jerusalem went into exile in the fifth month."

As with every genuine work of art, this opening statement contains [00:24:00] all that is to follow. From the short biographical notice we already learn so much about him. What we don't know we will find later. But if you stop here simply with this short biographical notice, what will we know? We know that Jeremiah -- and we try to imagine him, even to remember him in the streets of the small streets and byroads of Anathoth leading to Jerusalem. And believe me when I in Jerusalem sought the road to Anathoth, I stopped once. I just walked to Anathoth and back. I wanted to walk in his footsteps. And he would do that

every day, day after day, leave Anathoth and go to Jerusalem and speak. [00:25:00]

Why was he chosen by God for this impossible mission of speaking as his messenger? Why wasn't he, after all, a priest performing the duties of the priest, serving the temple and do his daily work so uncomplicated alongside all other priests, bringing sacrifices? It was so simple. Everything was written. Always preoccupied, perhaps dreaming, constantly worried, will he ever be capable of preventing the awesome, implacable event that in God's memory has already taken place? Will he find the words, the tone, the strength, all necessary to fulfil his mission? Was he right to oppose his king's foreign policy leading to war against Babylon? [00:26:00]

But you know, when was his despair greater, before, during, or after the catastrophe? When we read Jeremiah, of course we remember our own era. And we always say to ourselves that the choice is, must be between a wounded faith and a wounding faith. Today especially we understand better this prophet, his dramatic situation, his personal problems, and his multiple challenges and his words. We understand his words. My generation, our generation must understand his words because after all, his tragedy was our tragedy.

But not only is he the perfect witness, he's also the unwilling [00:27:00] survivor. What he saw and endured, the cruelty of the enemy and the suffering of his victims had to be recorded for the benefit of future generations. And what we say about him, isn't it true, of ours? Others were there too, but only he wore the mantle of prophet.

From him, everyone expected words, not silence, prayers but not silence, an outcry but not silence. What would a prophet be if on the altar of truth he chose to sacrifice language altogether? He did not. He did believe in the power of communication. Was he that sure that he could find the proper words for his stories and that he, the prophet, the prophet of the future, [00:28:00] would actually be also the prophet of our past?

Furthermore, read the text, the whole text and the commentaries, and you wonder, what was his life made of afterwards? Was he at peace with himself, with his faith? Did he have doubts? Can a prophet live with doubts? There are moments when I wonder whether he knew, he knew that one day, centuries and eternities later, there will be Jews somewhere far away, far away in time and space who would so deeply identify with him and his predicament and his suffering.

Whenever I think of our era, of the twentieth century's worst tragedies, it is Jeremiah [00:29:00] that comes to mind. His words are here for us to use because he's the one, in a strange way, had lived before us what we were going to live through afterwards. Well, as a prophet he grew and became more celebrated, and most of the celebrated priests of his time and all times, but he remained a victim. Jeremiah is not a hero, a victim.

In fact, he became everybody's favorite victim, God's, Israel's, Judah's, Babylon's, and Egypt's as well. There was no joy in his life ever, no pleasant surprises, no warmth, no smiles, nothing but sorrow, anguish, and tears, words of woe and anger, words he was made [00:30:00] to speak against his will. He wanted to speak of other things. He wanted to be a normal person dealing with customary human problems and not with eternity and death. But he had no choice.

And this is clear from the introduction to the book itself. The future prophets started out by refusing to become a prophet, which is not unusual. All his predecessors, since Moses and Isaiah, everyone behaved that way. Prophecy is hardly an evolving profession, being time consuming, perilous, and above

all terribly lonely. One is a prophet only when the spirit of God rests on him or her. When the spirit withdraws the prophet is left alone, alone with his memories [00:31:00] and more vulnerable than before.

Our Jeremiah, still young, declines God's offer and explains why. He cannot accept, he said, the position, "for I cannot speak," quote, unquote. Jeremiah says, "I cannot speak." And he continues. "I cannot speak because I am still a boy." What a peculiar pretext. What has age to do with prophecy or God? But God's answer is also strange. God said, quote, "Do not invoke your youth as an excuse for I have chosen you even before you came into this world." And God continues cryptically, "Do not worry. Go. Go, Moses, go. Go where I am [00:32:00] sending you. Do not fear them. I shall stay with you."

And God's answer is even more obscure than Jeremiah's question. Jeremiah speaks of his youth, and God gives him travel orders. Furthermore, nowhere in this argument does the prophet mention fear. Why then does God bring it up? Moreover, when God says to someone, anyone, do not fear, "*Al tireh avdi Yaakov*" doesn't that mean that he had better be careful, if not afraid?



When Jeremiah says I cannot speak for I am too young he actually means I dare not speak. I am too young for such an assignment. And then God's answer is that a prophet is neither young nor old. He's ageless. He speaks in my name only when I am with him, and when I am with him, he need not fear [00:33:00] them. Them? Whom? The others, all the others, but still Jeremiah is reluctant.

And God must use force with Jeremiah. Without waiting for the boy's decision, the Lord put out his hand, quote, "And touched my mouth, and the Lord said unto me, 'Herewith I put my words into your mouth.'" And that is the beginning of the end of Jeremiah's personal life. The beginning of the initiation into his prophetic mission. He's bound to accept and submit. There is no hiding, no running away, no seeking refuge in anonymity when God chooses to make him his emissary. And from now on Jeremiah's words will no longer be his own. Whatever he says will echo God's voice. [00:34:00]

And yet Jeremiah really was just a boy. Though lacking experience, knowledge, and maturity, he was called upon to teach, to scold, to explain, to command, to govern all those who command and govern. Those who had power had to listen to him. A truly unbearable task. All children dream of being big and

strong. But he dreamt of remaining a child. But God's wish is law. A prophet can and may do anything except refuse. And Jeremiah becomes a prophet even before he knows it. Whether he wants it or not his life will be tied inextricably to that of his people. He lives to regret it.

In the Midrash he tells God explicitly [00:35:00] I do not want to serve you as your prophet. And he explains why. Honestly, I am scared. They have tried to kill all your prophets. They will try to kill me. Later, when already a prophet, he tries to resign. Just give in his resignation. He does not want to be the bearer of terrible tidings to his own people. And to reassure him God says you will be a prophet of doom in other nations, to other nations, not to Israel. He turns to God and exclaims, "Why did you deceive me then?" God answers, "Too late to turn the clock back. Once you acquire prophetic powers you cannot divest yourself of them."

How can you not feel sorry [00:36:00] for the prophet? Poor Jeremiah, opposed by the mighty, hated by the masses, and even deceived by God. Of his reluctance to assume the prophetic mantle he says in the Midrash "I am like the priest whose duty is to deal with an adulteress who he suddenly realizes is his own mother." One source maintains that as a child he said such

things about his own mother to her face. But seeing her distress he corrected himself saying, "I didn't mean you, Mother. I meant Mother Zion."

He's obsessed by Zion. In a poignant Midrashic text the prophet says one day I ascended into Jerusalem and saw a woman on the top of the mountain. [00:37:00] She was resting, black in mourning. Her uncombed hair made her look distraught. I heard her shouting who will console me? And I hear myself lamenting who will console me? I spoke to her and said if you are a woman, talk to me. If you are a ghost, leave me. And she answered. She answered "I am your mother, your mother Zion."

Oh, in Scripture, his real mother is not mentioned at all. And except for the name Hilkihah, nothing is said about his father. His entire childhood and adolescence are barely referred to. This is not unusual for biblical portraits but rare for the Midrashic treatment. What was he like as a son, as pupil, as brother? [00:38:00] What he did he do when he had nothing to do? Where did he go when he had nowhere to go? All we know is what he tells us about others, not himself. His sermons, his predictions, his warnings, on stage he captures our total attention. Off stage he is elusive at best. He seems to exist

to illuminate other people's existences rather than to live his own.

Well, of course, in parentheses, what do we know about him? We know that he was born in the year 645 before the Common Era. We know that he began to involve himself in public affairs at the age of 22. He spent more than a decade in prison, Jewish prison. He made enemies and had few loyal friends. He communicated his ideas orderly and [00:39:00] in writing. He was forbidden by God to marry and have children. He remained a bachelor. He died at the age of 60 in exile in Egypt.

And from his preaching and teaching we get an astonishing clear image of the political, religious, and social conditions in contemporary Judah. He's like really a kind of chronicler, a journalist. We are given a behind-the-scene look at the politicians, the profiteers, the weak, the pacifists as well as the champions of hot or cold war, the pro-Egyptians and the pro-Babylonians. We hear their arguments and the outcome. We also get a close view of the customs and visuals of his fellow citizens. What made them run and where? Rare are the prophets who in their moral statements include such an avalanche of documentary [00:40:00] material about their time.

Jeremiah's descriptive talent is both concrete and poetic. Sensitive to detail, he never stops at the surface. He captures the colors of the sky at twilight, the challenging light of the desert, the thirst of the earth, the savagery of man as well as the desire of God to bring his creation closest to him.

Jeremiah always finds the proper term, the precise word to describe a landscape, which to this day one may discover when visiting Anathoth or the hills overlooking Jerusalem at dawn. He's masterful when he communicates the mood of people awaiting war while yearning for peace. He achieves a certain tone where realistic metaphors mix with breathtaking realism to illustrate human frailties and moral decadence. [00:41:00]

Listen, "Even the stork in the sky knows her seasons," he said. "And the turtle dove, swift, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people pay no heed to the law of the lord. The punishment, I will give their wives to others and their fields to strangers. Priests and prophets alike, they all act falsely." And listen, quote, "to the outcry of my poor people from the land far and wide," unquote. Harvest is past. Summer is gone. But we have not been saved. Is there no balm in Gilead? Can no healer be found? [00:42:00] Oh, that my head

were water, my eyes a fountain of tears. Then I would weep day and night for the slain of my poor people.

Even before the tragedies start Jeremiah's eyes behold both its victims and its perpetrators. He observes the principal characters who influence events and those who let themselves be carried by them. Kings and princes, priests and prophets, warriors and singers, he brings them to life before our eyes, the misfortunes of King Jehoiakim, hesitations of King Zedekiah, the boasting of Hananiah, the collective anxiety of crowds. The crowd psychology is all there.

He sets us down in the midst of unfolding dramas. As for Jeremiah himself, we endure his helpless, angry [00:43:00] outbursts, his violent moods as we follow him into his walks and to and from Jerusalem, as we follow his gaze into the white sand beyond the mountains of Moab and the deserts of Judah. Within the old city walls he walks from street to street attracting crowds that await him.

Says the Talmud, oh in those time there were three prophets bringing God's word to the people. Zephaniah visited the houses of study. Huldah sought out the women. And Jeremiah frequented the marketplaces. He was the prophet of the marketplaces. And

yet, though surrounded by people, Jeremiah is alone, always alone, alone with God and at times alone against God.

Wherever he goes he [00:44:00] breeds misfortune. He shatters serenity. Like all prophets before him he's constantly in the opposition, forever fighting the establishment, ridiculing power and those who hold it, emphasizing the fragility of the present, the uncertainty of the future. Listen to him and you will lose all desire to eat, drink, or even raise children.

Jerusalem is still vibrating with life, but he moves among his ruins. For him, the city is already transported, deported far away while Jerusalem is still Jerusalem before the destruction. A man hounded by such vision is never popular. People avoid him, turn away from him. He's a joy killer. He forces us to look at what we refuse to see. No wonder that some Midrashic [00:45:00] commentators claim Jeremiah was persecuted not only by the rulers and princes of Judah but also by its general population. He had no friend, no one supported him. One feared his words, therefore one rejected the person. They called him all kinds of things. They called him false prophet. They called him madman. They pushed him aside, tormented him in public, threw him into the dungeon. In short, they did everything possible to discredit him, to silence him. There

were those who claimed he was a descendent of Rahab, the woman of Jericho made notorious by Joshua's spies, the prostitute. Others went further, saying that he himself lived with a woman who resembled Rahab in her profession, which means [00:46:00] that he was married to a prostitute.

Several sources indicate that even after the destruction, when his prophecy had been proven true, his people resented him. Those men and women in exile objected to his decision to leave them and return to Judah. He was in Babylon. The others, those who stayed behind only to be marched off to Egypt, forced him to join them. But he never returned.

We know that he died somewhere in Egypt. How? One Midrashic source, he was stoned. True or not, the fact that these stories persisted shows clearly the extraordinary animosity towards him. After all, Jeremiah represented God, the one who punished them. How could [00:47:00] I accept him as a companion, a brother? You think of the loneliness of the messenger, granted Jeremiah tried to convince them that God too is suffering, which by the way is one of the most moving images that one finds in the ancient texts. "*Imo anokhi v'tzarah*", meaning I shall be with you in your distress, is actually God says your distress will be



my distress, and when he said when your people suffer, I, God, also suffer.

Well, nevertheless, God too is in exile. We are told in all the mystical writings that brought them and him no comfort, it only added to their hardship. In a strange way, they could have accepted their own exile [00:48:00] but not God being in exile because they felt their exile is a punishment for their sins. Why should God be? What sins could he have committed?

And there was something else. He reminded them of their own responsibility for their fate. He had warned them, and they had refused to listen. Whenever they looked at him they could not but remember their own shortcomings and blindness. They had to blame someone, and since it could not be the enemy and surely not God, they blamed Jeremiah. He incarnated their guilty conscience, their burnt out memory. Just as in Judah he had tried to make them think of the future. Now in Babylon in defeat he made them remember the past.

If only they had listened to him. If only they had listened to him. But they did not listen. They were [00:49:00] deaf to his warnings. Unwilling to hear, they were running towards catastrophe. If only they had listened to Jeremiah could a

national tragedy have been averted and the destruction of Jerusalem prevented? Aren't all historical events inevitable? Yes and no, a paradox. Not to the prophet. In his mind the events that are yet to occur have already taken place somewhere in God's mind. Consequently they will remain in the realm of fantasy.

All of this, of course, is in the book and the commentaries, and there are so many. Jeremiah, more than any other prophet, is our companion. More than any other prophet he understood [00:50:00] our distress, our powerlessness, our weaknesses, and our destiny. Jeremiah fascinates and stirs us endlessly. But he also disturbs us as well, too unstable, yes, too dramatic, yes, too clairvoyant, yes again. A man who knows so much, who has access to such high sources is not easy to live with. Also he's too serious, too solemn. He never laughs. We have never seen him laugh, never cheers, never utters a sentence which is not appropriate and heaven inspired. How can anyone cope with a man who only repeats what God tells him? Doesn't say "Good morning!"

When all is said and done, we still fail to understand [00:51:00] how we can be so severe, so harsh towards his people. If anyone were to repeat today what he said about Israel then we

would immediately call him an anti-Semite, surely anti-Israeli. God orders him to assume the role of prosecutor, probably because he finds him suitable for it. Jeremiah should protest more frequently and with more vigor and more conviction. He could say, as other spokesmen have done before and after him, "Look at other nations too. Oh lord, are they better than Israel? Are we better than they?"

Oh, some of you know me enough from reading or listening to me, and I belong to Vizhnitz. I'm a Hasid of Vizhnitz, which is part of Rizhin. And the Vizhnitzer Rebbe, Rebbe Yisroel, that's how he was called, the Ahavat Israel, the love of Israel. And therefore my creed, my faith, [00:52:00] is Ahavat Israel. That whatever we do, with every word and with every deed and with every story we tell, every story we read, it is still the love of Israel that should dominate our entire being, which I believe, of course, Jeremiah had too. And we must learn it from him in spite of everything else. A prophet had to love his people even when he admonished them.

So he then was a pacifist. He was against the war of Babylon. A true pacifist. His pacifism has some immediate implications as well. It could not help but weaken the morale of the Jewish nations and its leaders. To have a prophet in its midst, the

people that felt they had to go to war had to hate him because he demoralized the nation. What he demands is surrender to the enemy without a fight, without [00:53:00] any attempt to resist, just to surrender. He advocates, in his speeches, in his sermons, total, unconditional surrender to the enemy, abdication of all that bears the mark of Jewish sovereignty, all capitulation of all the fighting forces, humiliation on the national scale. That's what he wants. That's what the prophet suggests and indeed really wants.

Even if one understands his courageous speeches before the war one must resent them during the war. They surely contributed, therefore, to the defeat. Oh, an example, nevertheless, he knows how to adopt the situation, any situation, to his own vision. And actually he is part [00:54:00] of the people. He remains part of the Jewish people, part of the exiles, part of Jewish history, part of what they live through all the time.

He never tried or asked for a special status for him. He was one just like any other Jew there and any other Hebrew. And he also believed in the diaspora. An example, to the exiled King Jehoiakim in Babylon he writes a letter which can serve a blueprint for Jewish life in the diaspora. And I quote him, quote, "Build homes and dwell in them. Plant orchards and eat

their fruit. Give wives to your sons, husbands to your daughters. Let them have children. [00:55:00] Multiply wherever you are. Do not decrease in numbers, and seek peace for the land in which you live, for if there is peace there, there will be peace everywhere."

He advocates a synthesis, a symbiosis between the land of Israel and the people of Israel. Since you are in the diaspora, he tells his exiled king, do something to give it meaning. Otherwise you will come closer to despair, and despair has no place in Jewish faith, in Jewish history. Why does he insist again and again on the Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babel, being God's emissary? That's what he said.

By placing the Babylonian king under God's authority, Jeremiah seems to be undermining Israel's faith in its own future, its own ability to fight for a future. But that is wrong.

[00:56:00] If Jeremiah invokes God's name, it is because he knows that Israel's suffering is inevitable, and he wants to lend it meaning. Nothing is worse than suffering without meaning. And the meaning has to be found in the suffering itself.

Human, in dealing both with theological concepts and small things, Jeremiah the prophet's decision to turn away from collective tragedy long enough to plot, to acquire a plot, far from petty. It seems far from petty or senseless because it has purpose. Because in that there is a strange text there, a passage where he actually gives an advice. At one he simply asks one of his friends to purchase a plot of [00:57:00] land. That purpose is to teach his contemporaries and their descendants a lesson. There comes a time when one must look away from death and turn away from the dead. One must cling to life, which is made of minutes, not necessarily years and surely not centuries.

One must fight so as not to be overwhelmed by history but to act upon it concretely, simply humanly. In the midst of national catastrophe one must continue to teach and study, bake and sell bread, plant trees, and count on the future. One must not wait for the tragedy to end before building or rebuilding life. One must do it in the very face of tragedy. The city is besieged. People are hungry. Children are afraid. And the prophet is in jail? No matter. He meets with his uncle, negotiates contracts, [00:58:00] pays money, and proclaims "od yikkanu vatim" do not worry, my brothers, many more houses will be rebuilt in this land of destruction.

And of course this, we find, at least two, more than two, 500 years later when in the ghettos there were weddings, in the ghettos, a lot. Immediately there were weddings. And they had children. There were circumcisions, celebrating bar mitzvah in the ghettos. How could really people marry the day before being deported to a death camp? Maybe it is because Jeremiah's voice sounded in their subconscious.

For this urgent [00:59:00] and profoundly stirring lesson alone we cherish Jeremiah. More than most prophets he offers us an example of behavior not before or after but during periods of pressure and peril. Though alone he defines himself in relation to his fellow man, who reject him, though shattered, he does not try to escape the present and seek refuge in the future. He works with the present, on the present. Living in a disorganized, humanized world he forces himself to pick up the broken pieces and dreams of many man's possibilities to create harmony and beauty.

Jeremiah abides by God's law but disputes His justice. He declines the responsibility of moral leadership in the beginning. He does not wish to serve God as prophet. And he says, I want to remain a child. And he becomes [01:00:00] a

prophet only when he thinks he can prevent disaster. Once he realizes he cannot he protests forcefully. Of course, God, you are just and righteous, but I shall quarrel with you. For a prophet to say that, I shall quarrel with you,) "ariv imkha". I have no choice. It is because you are just and your name is true that I must quarrel with you. If only I could go and hide in the desert and stay away from society, from history, from destiny. Only from society? No, from God as well.

Like Jonah he yearns to run, to go underground, to escape a destiny outlined by God. Few prophets have spoken up with such anguish and forcefulness against heavenly injustice or heavenly justice, which is worse. Oh, we criticized him for not [01:01:00] staying with the exiled in Babylon, yes, we did. Others did. Well, he does try. The Midrash describes him seeking out children, embracing and kissing them.

When he finds a group of tormented young men he joins them and wants to share with their pain. When a number of Jews are about to be hanged he tries to hang himself. He wants to die with them but does not succeed. Strangely enough, the enemy won't allow it. General Nebuzaradan tells him I have orders to keep you alive. Jeremiah must stay alive because the enemy does not



want him to die. Even when he suffers he remains alone, separated from his people.

And so he finally decides not to stay with them in Babylon. He knows he's not like them and never will be. He knows that he's condemned to suffer [01:02:00] apart, to die apart. The knowledge that so many of them will perish while he remains an onlooker is unbearable to him. And so he returns to Judah with his memories. And then and there the circle is closed. The prophet of Israel has become the prophet of all nations.

Now he understands and we understand that Israel's destiny affects everyone else's. What happens to Judah will eventually happen to Babylon, then to Rome, and ultimately to the entire world. And so the most Jewish of the Jewish prophets becomes the most universal among them.

On a different level, Jeremiah appeals to us as a writer, a modern chronicler above all. His obsessions are ours and so are his themes. Listen to some example. Doubt and self-doubt, [01:03:00] will he be able to tell a tale that defies language and reason? Will he be worthy of his mission? Will people believe him?

He reminds us of the ghetto survivors who return from Ponar and Treblinka to warn his friends, but they were unable to make them pay attention. But he was solitude. No solitude is greater than that of the messenger who is unable to transmit the message. No one is as alone as the prophet whom God chooses to isolate from those he's sent to warn and save.

Despair. Jeremiah's mood often borders on hopelessness.

"Listen, my heart is broken within me. I am like a drunken man. I have become a laughingstock. All these days everyone mocks me. For as often as I speak I have to [01:04:00] cry out and complain of violence and abuse."

He remains a bachelor. Why? Is it only because of God's injunction, he will not want to marry and have children? More likely Jeremiah has little if any faith in mankind. He surely can see no justification for bringing children into a world doomed by its own dark forces. That he must protest against man and his blindness, against God and his silence, the theme of waiting. At the end of the story we read that the prophet asks God the very question he had been asked by leaders of Judah, what were they to do? And God waits 10 days before he answers. Try to imagine those 10 days, and you may feel what Jews felt in their ghetto somewhere in Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

The theme of testimony. Jeremiah does not stop talking, dictating, writing down every dream, [01:05:00] every command, every whisper, every anecdote, every episode, every moan, every outcry. He knows his voice will not carry, and yet he yells, shouts, warns, pleads prays. He has no choice. He must do something with his life. If he survives it must be for a reason. He must do something with every minute, for every minute is a minute of grace. And isn't that true of all of us who went through certain darkness?

The last theme, consolation. Jeremiah stops chastising and begins comforting his people. Therein too lies his singularity. The same prophet who witnessed suffering describes the end of suffering. The chronicle of destruction sings the beginning of consolation. So Jeremiah's the first and most eloquent among Jewish writers, novelist, chroniclers of all times. [01:06:00]

And we still use his vocabulary to describe our experiences. In fact, he is the most quoted among the prophets. His words apply to all circumstances. "*Shalom, shalom, v'eyn shalom*", he says. Everyone speaks of peace, and there is no peace. "*Sh'fokh chamat'kha al-hagoyim*" we say it after the Pesach. And when he says "*lo alman Yisrael*", Israel is still not widowed, abandoned.

Israel lives. And some passages in the book are reflected in so many chronicles of Ringelblum, Dworzecki, and Kaplan. Like them, he never knew whether his writings would see the light of day, whether future generations would know the truth, if anyone would remember him.

Some modern words or expressions gain a new meaning only when used within a biblical context. Listen to [01:07:00] Jeremiah. "I look at the skies, and their light is gone. I look at the mountains, and they are quaking. I look, no man is left, and all the birds of the sky have fled."

Quaking mountains, what did Jeremiah mean to convey? I never understood the meaning of these words until I visited Babi Yar. Eyewitnesses told me there and then when I was there that in September 1941 when the German invaders massacred some 80,000 Jews between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the numbers vary, some say only 30 -- only 30,000, and when they buried them in the ravine near the center of Kiev the ground was shaking for weeks on end. The mountains of corpses made the earth quake. [01:08:00] And there I understood Jeremiah.

As for the birds of the sky, they have fled. Yes, they have fled. I understood prophecy imagery only when I returned to

Auschwitz and Birkenau in the summer of 1979. I was together there with Marion. Then and only then did I remember that during the tempests of fire and silence there were no birds to be seen on the horizon. They had fled the skies above all the death camps. I stood in Birkenau and remembered Jeremiah.

So in conclusion, one day the prophet's faithful friend and scribe, a certain Baruch ben Neriah was arrested and brought before the king, who wanted to read Jeremiah's book. The scene took place in the royal winter palace. The king stood before the fireplace and read Jeremiah's tales and then destroyed them [01:09:00] calmly, systematically. He would read one scroll and throw it into the flames, take the next one and the next, and finally Jeremiah's masterwork for the Jews to ashes. Any other writer would have lost his mind, not Jeremiah. He simply began writing the book all over again.

What are we doing? What are we to do, we writers, we witnesses, we Jews? For over 3,000 years we have been repeating the same story, the story of a solitary prophet who would have given anything, including his life, to be able to tell another kind of tale filled with joy and fervor and hope rather than sorrow and anguish. But he transmitted only what he received, and so do

we. And if God was angry at him [01:10:00] for not weeping, we are not, quote the contrary. We are proud of him.

The world was not worthy of his tears. And perhaps that goes for ours as well. But nevertheless, we cannot now abandon ourselves to him for we have seen, we have seen, excuse me, we have seen wonders, that history itself could correct certain injustices. We have seen the end of the war, the downfall of our enemy nations and armies. And we have seen the rebirth of the Jewish state, the Jewish state in Israel. We have seen Jerusalem in its glory now. So therefore the tears sometimes become [01:11:00] tears of joy. What can one say then? Let the joy remain, together with Jeremiah's. (applause)

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