

Elie Wiesel In the Talmud: Two Friends in Danger - Shimon Ben

Azzai and Shimon Ben Zoma

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) This ancient legend is disturbing and frightening. You know it, or at least you know the mystery surrounding it. A project full of faith and fervor has turned out badly. Three of the participants have met a tragic fate. Only the fourth has emerged unscathed only to find himself condemned to the worst of tortures later on. Let us remember. *"Arbaah nikhne'su bapardes"*. There were four sages who were friends as well who entered the orchard of secret knowledge. *Ben Azzai hatzitz v'met*. [00:01:00]. Ben Azai looked and lost his life. *Ben Zoma hatzitz v'nifga*. Ben Zoma looked and lost his mind. *Elisha ben Abuyah katzitz b'n'tuiot*. Elisha, son of Abuyah lost his faith. And only Rabbi Akiva was lucky. He entered in peace and left in peace.

This, in a few simple but evocative words, is the gist of what happened then. Four men, among the most learned and illustrious in the history of Jewish thought, launched a mysterious adventure, probably a mystical one, and found themselves separated in the end. This story, usually told as a warning to

the unwary of perils that lie ahead when one undertakes certain journeys [00:02:00] and investigations, tells us watch out.

Watch out. Do not tread on forbidden ground. Do not attempt to scale inaccessible heights. Do not let yourself be lured by what lies beyond, or else you may regret it.

Better to prepare yourself by study, prayer, fasting, obedience to the laws, and good deeds. God does not expect man to join him in heaven. God wants man to remain human, more and more human, on earth. When we analyze the text more closely we find here the four basic and eternal responses to what we call today extreme situations. That is to say madness, heresy, true faith, and death. Four possible attitudes which answer the immediate need of human beings [00:03:00] to transcend themselves. Four different consequences of the mystical quest for the absolute. Why such diversity? To show us the infinite variety of human perceptions and expressions.

Let us imagine three individuals walking through a dense and beautiful forest. The lumberjack thinks of the job ahead of him, to fell how many trees for what deal. The business man calculates the profits that sale will bring. As for the third one, he looks at the sky above the trees. He listens to the rustling of the wind in the leaves, and writes a poem. In other

words, three men can pass through the same place at the same moment, live the same experience, but what they derived from it depends on their nature. [00:04:00]

In the last analysis they had not seen the same thing, for they have not perceived it the same way. And so "*Arbaah nikhne'su bapardes*". There were four to enter the orchard of forbidden knowledge. They had taken the decision together. Was their motivation the same? The experience affected them in different ways. It changed their lives but for different reasons and different results. And we learn the outcome, the outcome of the adventure that had begun in ecstasy and hope. It came to nothing. The four friends split up, defeated. Except, of course, Rabbi Akiva. He got out *b'shalom*, in peace. I think he got out as he went in, as a man of peace.

Some of you may remember we talked about Rabbi Akiva here several years ago, and I tried in the beginning to convey [00:05:00] my own reaction to him. I said that his calm perturbed me. His serenity bothered me. They left me perplexed. How could he, as they say, keep his cool? How could he remain so peaceful in the face of an event which had crushed his friends? Is it possible that the illustrious sage and humanist Rabbi Akiva was insensitive to what had happened to

them? If so I much prefer the anger of Ben Abuyah, the melancholy of Ben Azzai, and the distress of Ben Zoma.

We have also tried to evoke the baffling faith of Ben Abuyah, whom the Talmud, with uncharacteristic intolerance, calls *acher*, depriving him of his name. How do we explain his heresy? How do we explain, [00:06:00] how do we understand his collaboration with a Roman enemy, with the oppressor? Is it conceivable that the companion of Rabbi Akiva, is it conceivable that the teacher of Rabbi Meir could have allowed himself to be seduced by Roman luxury, by Roman power, perhaps? What could he possibly have seen in the Pardes that made him break the loyalty, the bonds of loyalty to his people and the tradition of his forefathers?

We have tried, with the available texts, to get to know him better, to understand him or at least his viewpoint. As for the other two, Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, they are waiting still for us to take an interest in their faith. I do not remember why I chose other sages of Jerusalem and Babylon. Rabbi Zeira and his captivating innocence, [00:07:00] Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his awesome taste for solitude, Rabbi Hanina and his prayers. The Talmud is, after all, an entity. You plunge into its immensity like into a wondrous universe where everything is a sign. Everything suggests a problem.

No sooner have you answered one question when you must confront 10 others resulting from the answer. At first glance the stories, the sayings, the references, the hints, the laws the outburst may seem confusing. They should not be. The Talmud is an edifice. Everything within its structure is connected. Every legend has its justification. Every word is in its place. Once you have been grasped by its rhythm and its logic, the discipline of Talmudic thought, you will no longer wish to let go. [00:08:00] The study of Talmud is a passion. To study is a passion. It is also a celebration of words and the evolution, of a past that refuses to die, of a faith that will not abdicate.

You lose all notions of time. Distant generations meet within the space of a sentence. Centuries are united in one breath. Sages enter passionate discourse, though they belong to different eras. Within the Talmudic dialogue we live in another time, the time of the eternal present. And to study Talmud therefore is to love it. And to love Talmud is to make it live, as the Talmud makes us live.

Having said this, let us open parenthesis for some preliminary remarks, very few. One, [00:09:00] this reading too is

dedicated to the memory of a great and extraordinary teacher whose work has become a pillar for Talmudic learning. Rabbeinu Shaul Lieberman, *zichrono livracha*. For 17 unforgettable years he has been guiding me through the dazzling streets and rivers of the Talmudic sea and world. And whatever I try to offer I received from him. He taught me the joy of learning. He taught me the obligation of sharing that joy. If ever one may say that a student is missing his teacher, I will say it. I miss him [00:10:00] every day, each time I open a Talmudic treatise.

First, for technical reasons and for practical reasons, when he was around it was so easy. If I needed to clear a passage, to understand a difficult *sugya*, all I had to do is wait until our next meeting or pick up the phone. Now it takes me five hours to find where I made a mistake. Two, it's the person. It is the face behind the words. And words have a face. One more remark. The Pardes, we should know, is a forbidden ground. True, it deals with knowledge, but that knowledge, unlike the Talmud, [00:11:00] is accessible to the initiated only. And we know already that it is often perilous to enter the Pardes.

But we also know that the Y is a less dangerous place. And anyone who desires may join us, even the late comers.

(laughter)

What do we know about Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma? They were young, devoted, fervent, learned, enthusiastic, and passionately involved in mystical explorations. Both are puzzling and tragic characters. And that is more or less all we know [00:12:00] about them. About their two companions, Rabbi Akiva and the son of Abayah, the opposite poles, there is much detailed information of their private and public lives. Ben Azai, Ben Zoma, often their first names are omitted. Perhaps because they were both called Shimon. Actually, in the vast Talmudic literature there are few men about whom we have so few biographical data, as if the authors of the Talmud had been too embarrassed to let us get acquainted with them.

They were almost certainly victims. That we know from the end. But victims, whose victims? Of the Pardes? Of their own curiosity? Of their thirst for danger? Let us begin with Shimon ben Azzai. We know that he was born in the Galilee [00:13:00] in the second century of our era, but he died at an unspecified age. Some sources offer hints that he may have died a very young man before he reached the age of 20. But there are other sources, one of them being the *Baal HaTosafot al haTorah*, and he believes that he must have been in the late forties when he died. We also know that his parents were poor.

We know that much because according to one version Rabbi Akiva's daughter supposedly urged him to dedicate himself to study and let her support him. That was the first case in recorded history, Jewish or non-Jewish, when a beautiful girl decided to work and let her fiancé or her husband study. (laughter) Is this [00:14:00] why he deeply respects women and why he is actually very much in favor of their right to study Torah? In this instance he disagrees with both Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua who decreed that a father should never teach Torah to his daughters. For reasons, I prefer not to know them. (laughter)

But he, Ben Azzai, said quite the opposite, a father is obliged, is duty bound to teach Torah to his daughter. A disciple of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, whom he often quotes, and of Rabbi Akiva, whose friend and accomplice he becomes, he seems outspoken and hot tempered. Having lost some arguments, he exclaimed, and I quote, "It is easier to rule [00:15:00] over the whole world than to convince scholars." He studied Greek. He studied other secular sciences. He studied nature. At his death the sages proclaimed, and I quote, "With him we have lost the last of the diligent scholars." Diligence was his trademark, his signature, his distinctive mark.

Endowed with a sharp, he impressed his peers. Much later Abaye spoke of his sharp insight, his *charifut*, and compared it to that of Ben Azzai. And I quote him, "I am the Ben Azzai of my time," he said. The problem is that his opponent, the eternal Rava who always disagreed with Abaye, disagreed with him in this instance too for Abbaye said the same thing about -- Rava said the same thing about himself. They vied [00:16:00] for his mantle. Upon arriving in Babylon the famous Rav used exactly the same expression. I am the ben Azzai of my time. And yet, strange as it may sound, Ben Azzai is not a rabbi.

The president of the academy refused to ordain him. And his case bears a strange resemblance to that of his friend Shimon Ben Zoma who also did not receive the rabbinic ordination. Everyone sang their praises. Compliments are cheap. They were among the four young scholars who interpreted before the sages because they knew that much, but they were not ordained rabbis. The Talmud acknowledges more than once that they deserved to be, but they were not. And the question is why were they not considered rabbis? [00:17:00] Were they any less learned than the others, less pious perhaps, less motivated? Was Ben Azzai less inspired by Torah than other students? And the other question is, why did Rabbi Akiva, his close friend and father-

in-law besides, not do anything for him? Precisely because he was his father-in-law? No nepotism in the Talmud? Let us talk briefly about this family relationship between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai.

It is mentioned in a story that deals with Rabbi Akiva's own marriage. And I am sure you remember it. Rachel, the disowned daughter of the wealthy Jerusalemite Kalba Savua, saw her husband Akiva go off to study for 12 years. On the day of his return Rabbi Akiva overheard a neighbor remarking to Rahel, "How long will you [00:18:00] keep living like a widow, separated from your husband?" And she answered, "If he listened to me he'd leave for 12 more years." And so Rabbi Akiva left.
(laughter) This time with her permission.

I'm sure that you remember in parenthesis when he came back -- this is one of the most beautiful passages in the Talmud -- he came back, he brought her a present. He brought her a tiara, and the tiara is called in the Talmud *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*. That's the first time *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav* is mentioned in the Talmud. It's the tiara that he brought her. And the Talmud says something very beautiful, that very often we should say, I think, about our own wives. He said -- he was surrounded by thousands and thousands of disciples. So much that she, his

wife, couldn't come close to him. When he saw her [00:19:00] he told them, please, let her come near because, he said, "*shelachem v'sheli shelah hu.*". Whatever is yours and mine belongs to her. This is the most beautiful compliment not only a Talmudic sage but any person who is wise enough should give to those who deserve.

Comments the Talmud, that because of Rachel's generosity and understanding for her husband and his need to learning, his daughter acted the same way with Shimon Ben Azzai. And the Talmud says the daughter took after her mother. In spite of the story and the moral thereof, the facts are not so clear. Except for one thing, there was a relationship or the beginning of one between Ben Azzai and Rabbi Akiva's daughter. But did they marry? Impossible to [00:20:00] ascertain with certainty. One source says yes, but adds that they were also very quickly, very fast, divorced. Another says that they were engaged but that Ben Azzai broke the engagement.

Analyzing the various texts, we get the distinct impression that unwittingly perhaps, in practice though not in theory, Ben Azzai may have been a male chauvinist. For women have any place -- have hardly any place in his existence. They are not part of his inner landscape. Listen to a dialogue in the school of

Rabbi Eliezer the great, Rabbi Eliezer the great, Rabbi Eliezer ha-Gadol. And I quote, "One sage said whoever has no child is like one who is guilty of bloodshed." And who says it? Rabbi Eliezer ha-Gadol himself. But Rabbi Yaakov disagrees [00:21:00] and says whoever has no child is like one who diminishes the image of God for it is written that God created man in his image. Whereupon Ben Azzai pronounces both of them right, and he says whosoever has no child is like one who sheds the blood of man and diminishes the image of God.

Strange, but the sages did not appreciate his role as peacemaker, and they put him in his place. And one of them, probably Rabbi Eleazer ben Azariah, said look who is talking. It's exactly the expression. Look who is talking. (laughter) Look who is commenting on the first commandment, to be fruitful and to multiply, one who has no child himself. And Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah went on, and he said -- and this was harsh -- some speak well [00:22:00] and act well. You speak well, but your deeds contradict your words. Embarrassed, Ben Azzai answered, and it's a heartbreaking answer.

He said "*Mah eh-eseh?*, what can I do? *Nafshi hashkaha baTorah.*" What can I do, he said. My soul is in love with Torah. At this moment you feel sorry for him. Poor Ben Azzai, torn between the

demands of real life and the, to him, irresistible appeal of study. And really his answer is painful. What can I do, he says. It's not my doing. My soul is in love, in love with Torah. And so great is this love that it dominates his entire being. The Torah alone is his life. It gives meaning to his life. One does not argue with the soul. The [00:23:00] soul defies argument. It is reason which loves to argue, not the soul. The soul burns. One must nourish its flame. One must become flame.

But even as he is saying all this he knows that he has no argument. In fact, his arguments turn against him. If he indeed loves the Torah so deeply, if he is so devoted to it, why does he not obey its first commandment that orders man to found a home, a family, to pass life on? *Pru urvu*, says the Torah. Men must be fruitful and multiply. The world is here to be inhabited, to be tended, to be reclaimed, to be redeemed, the tikkun olam for future generations. Isn't it odd that Ben Azzai chooses to reject the first commandment necessary to all the others?

The entire Talmud really with very few exception is so life oriented and so [00:24:00] family oriented that he is strange. I think the only exception that I've found in the Talmud is the

famous discussion that the house of Shammai and the house of Hillel, the disciples of both, I think I quoted it years and years ago, when they had a dialogue, a debate, a stormy debate, what would it have been better, to be born or not to be born? And this urgent debate lasted two and a half years. (laughter) And afterwards they took a vote. Democratically, they took a vote. And lo and behold, the vote was a pessimistic one. Again, one of the very few pessimistic incidents in the Talmud.

And *nimnu v'gamru* they quoted. They took the vote. They counted the vote, and the vote said *No'ach Lo le'Adam*. It's much more comfortable not to be born [00:25:00] than to be born. (laughter) And when Sholem Aleichem read this he had a marvelous comment. He said of course they are right. It's much more comfortable and better not to be born, but who can be that lucky? (laughter) And he went on, and he said one in a million. (laughter)

Ben Azzai is well aware of this attitude in the Talmud, and to proof is that his answer has a second part. And here it is. And he says, and I quote, him, "As for the world," he says, "it will go on, thanks to others." At this point we can imagine his despair. He has not only confessed to a mistake, he has acknowledged that he is incapable of obeying the first

commandment, the easiest of them all. After [00:26:00] all, anyone can give life just as anyone can take it, but not Ben Azzai? Is he incapable of living with a woman and giving her a child?

It is quite possible that he is afraid of women, afraid that they might distract him from study. To him they suggest promiscuity, and he is against it. Anyway, they are time consuming. Listen to the Talmud, and I quote the Talmud again. It's a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful saying because of the language. He said *Nachum ish gam zu lachash l'Rabi Akiva*. Nachum of Gamzu whispered to Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Akiva whispered to Ben Azzai. And Ben Azzai whispered to other disciples warning them that scholars ought not [00:27:00] hang around their wives like roosters. Luckily they whispered.

Still, I must admit that this hypothesis does not satisfy me entirely. Ben Azzai's relationship with his wife disturbs me not on a physical but on a metaphysical level. I have the impression that the key lies in this seemingly minor discussion in the school of Rabbi Eliezer the great. And Ben Azzai is a complex character. His love of Torah, his fascination with mysticism, maybe with death, we discern in him obscure conflicts, tensions, pressures, and we sense in him, especially

at the end, as we shall see, total anguish. *Hatzitz v'met* says the Talmud. He looked and he died.

What did he want to see? [00:28:00] The Shekhinah, as Rashi says? When did he die? How did he die? In what circumstances? One version suggests that he might have been one of the first victims of Hadrian's persecutions. And indeed in *Eichah Rabbah*, he has the list of the 10 martyrs of the faith. But let us stop for a moment this exploration. After all, I know that Rabbi Lavey Derby and his 200 students, *kein yirbu*, discussed not only Ben Azzai, they also discussed Ben Zoma. Let us turn there for our attention to his partner and friend whose destiny is no less bewildering.

We know even less about Shimon Ben Zoma than we do of Shimon Ben Azai. A disciple of Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hanannah and of Rabbi Akiva, like Shimon Ben Azzai, he [00:29:00] quickly gained the reputation as a scholar like Ben Azzai. We are told the Talmud says that with him died the last of the exegetists of scripture, and further, we are told that whoever sees Ben Zoma in his dream will surely gain access to knowledge. Again, although not a rabbi, he won a debate with his teacher Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hananiah regarding what sacrifice the Nazir, the ascetic, must

offer to God. But who was Ben Zoma? Who was Zoma, the father?
We don't know.

Who was Azzai, the father? We don't know. Where did Shimon Ben Zoma spend his childhood? His adolescence? Did he have brothers, sisters? What were his aspirations, fears? There are few laws bearing his name, few decisions attributed to him.

[00:30:00] Obsessed with Jewish memory, he insisted on the need to incorporate the Exodus story from Egypt in both the evening and morning services. Sage and moralist, he has attributed -- contributed, I'm sorry, a number of simple but useful aphorisms. And some of them are in the program that you have. One teaches the importance of self-control, maybe that is an explanation of his life.

Commenting on a biblical verse he said, and I quote, "Do not glimpse at another man's vineyard. If you did, do not enter it. If you enter, do not look. If you looked, do not touch the grapes. If you did, do not eat them. If you did, then you are lost." (laughter) Another one which you have is "Who is wise? One who [00:31:00] learns from each and every person. Who is strong? One who can dominate his instincts and his passions. Who is rich? One who is satisfied with what he has. Who is honored? One who honors his fellow man."

Following the call of mysticism he joins his companions in their unique adventure in the Pardes. How did he fair? *Hatzitz v'nifga*. He lost his mind. And to explain his misfortune the Talmud quotes a proverb of King Solomon, "You have found honey, don't eat too much of it or you will end up vomiting." In other words, don't look too far. Don't go beyond the fence, and Ben Zoma did go too far. He looked where he should not have. And therefore his mind was shaken. His mind abandoned him.

An intriguing character. Admit it. We are told that as he read in Sefer Bereshit, in the book of Genesis, the verse [00:32:00] "*Vayas Elokim et ha-rakia*" and God made the firmament, Ben Zoma let out a cry that shook all the heavens. What? He said. "Vayas?" God made the skies? Isn't it written that God used language to create the world? Is it that in God's case language is action and in ours as well?

A scrupulous character, Ben Zoma, uncompromising, unyielding, and maybe that is why I find him so appealing. And yet there is something about him that escapes me. It is his tragic fate, madness. A sage in torment, that much we understand. Many sages were tormented. A sage in revolt, that too we understand. Our ancestors, our forefathers, the prophets at times rebelled

[00:33:00] against the injustice in the world and took God to task. But a sage who lost his mind, a sage who is mad? Right from the start Ben Zoma aroused my interest. No, more than that, excitement. Madness and particularly mystical madness is after all present in all my writings.

Is it possible that Ben Zoma, without my noticing it, managed to slip into all the stories? Is it possible that he managed to do so without showing himself except, of course, under one alias or another? Ben Zoma has always belonged to my world, but it took me a long time to become aware of it. Now I am. And that is why I try to know him better. I want to find out whether there was some kind of reciprocity in our secret relationship.

[00:34:00] Granted he belongs to my world, but do I belong to his? Difficult questions, not enough clues. Not enough material in his file. Again, a few anecdotes, a few parables, a few words, not much more. Still, there is one story we can study and remember for later. It tells of an encounter with his master, and the encounter took place towards the end of his life. In fact, it foreshadows his end. And the story is told four times in three different versions.

The first version. One day the old Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hananiah found himself on the steps of the Har HaBayit, the Temple Mount.

Ben Zoma noticed him but did not stop, and so the master addressed him in typical Talmudic style, that is short and incisive. "*Meayin u'l'an Ben Zoma?*" [00:35:00] Where do you come from, and where are you going, Ben Zoma? And the disciples answered, I was meditating, "*Meayin hayyiti*" [sic]. I was meditating on the mystery of creation. Scripture speaks of the waters above and the waters below with almost no separation as it is written in the spirit of God hovered upon the waters. It reminds me of the turtle dove hovering above its young without touching them. Whereupon the master said to his disciples the son of Zoma is still outside.

The second version is slightly different. This time Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hananiah was walking along the road and met Ben Zoma, who did not greet him. There again the master asked his disciple where he was coming from and where he was going, and the disciple spoke of his [00:36:00] meditations about the mystery of the waters at the moment of creation, and the master commented, the son of Zoma is already outside. And we are told that Ben Zoma died shortly thereafter.

The third version shows us Ben Zoma seated, lost in thought. And it is his master who passes by, and it is he who greets the disciple who does not answer. He greets him a second time. And

still the disciple does not answer. And then the master greets him a third time, and only then does the disciple answer. And he looks and he sounds panic stricken. Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hananiah asks him "*Meayin ha-raglayim?* Where are you legs coming from?" Which means, where do you come from? Where are you at this moment? Or better yet, where are your thoughts coming from? From what source? [00:37:00]

And Ben Zoma replies again *Meayin hayyiti* I was thinking, but without saying what about. And the master called out, I call heaven and earth as witnesses that I shall not budge from here until you have told me the source of your thoughts. Only then did Ben Zoma answer I was meditating about what separated the waters above and the waters below at the time of creation. And Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hananniah commented, Ben Zoma is already gone. And in fact he died several days later.

Let us open parenthesis and say that all these stories, of course, are strange because there was nothing in the answers that warrant such a tragic end.

What did he say? I was thinking. Since when it is difficult, since when is it dangerous, since when is it forbidden to think? We believe that the Jewish tradition is open and liberal. We

believe the Talmud is encouraging [00:38:00] thought. And the more rebellious, the more adventurous the better it is. What's wrong with the answer? And again our teacher Shaul Lieberman, he had one answer, which is beautiful and a little bit difficult. He said there was a mistake in the printing. "me'ayin" -- he always found out these things. (laughter) "meayin" he said, with an ayin means I was meditating. With an aleph, "me'ayin" means from nothingness. And what he answered was I came from nothingness, which is the gnostic answer. At which point his teacher realized that Ben Zoma became agnostic, and therefore he said he's already outside. He is already beyond our reach.

But we can imagine the disciple utterly disoriented. [00:39:00] Pursuing a thought that carried him far away, he neither saw nor heard anybody. He the disciple who was praised as a disciple in the Talmud didn't see his master, didn't hear his master? His revered rabbi stands before him, and he passes him by without taking notice? The rebbe addresses him, and his thoughts are elsewhere? His spirit wanders through time and space. He's outside reality and life. What happened? Let us go back to the adventure in the Pardes, shall we?

His punishment seems harsher than that of his companions. Ben Azzai dies but without suffering, without seeing himself diminished from day to day, without having to experience the decline of his mind, or his reason. One could say that Ben Zoma dies before he died. [00:40:00] How could we not sympathize with his suffering? How can we help feeling sorry for him and his faith?

At this point in our investigation we must turn again to the question which has surely preoccupied us from the start. What did they see, those four companions, as they entered the orchard of forbidden knowledge? What did they glimpse that was so terrifying, that made them suffer grave consequences such as death, madness, apostasy, or less grave but as serious, infallible death? And infallible faith. Some scholars believe that we have -- what we have here is simply a circle of esoteric studies as one commonly found in Judea in those times.

There were many groups, and the four sages had formed a study group dealing with certain lofty and perilous subjects such as the [00:41:00] mystery of the beginning, Ma'aseh Bereshit, the mystery of the Merkavah, Ma'aseh Merkavah, the divine action, God's action in history, or perhaps the Acharit hayamim, the mystery of the end, of the messianic denouement. But such

studies may cause harm to the mind and spirit since their object is beyond our grasp. The student concerned with ethics, the adventure has become concrete and also more immediate meaning to them.

The four friends had tried to understand, I believe, the sense of Jewish suffering which had reached heights unsurpassed at that time. Each year we try to describe this chapter, the anguish, the countless persecutions in order to better understand the subject before us. We try to situate it within a larger context. Should we do the same now? Should we repeat what some here remember from their own reading of the Talmud or [00:42:00] of Jewish history? The second century of our era had brought along cruel measures against the Jewish population of Judea.

The temple was in ruins. Those who remained had a hard time rousing themselves from mourning. Jewish heroes were sold into slavery in the marketplaces of the orient. In Rome the emperors regarded the oppression of the Jewish people as a political priority. And yet up in the mountains Jewish warriors refused to give up. They were preparing to resume the battle for freedom under the military command of Bar Kokhba. While living in anxiety, hiding in caves they tried to invent reasons for

hope. Because of Hadrian's decrees the Jews became a target for impulses of hatred and cruelty.

Whoever taught, whoever studied Torah was condemned to death, as was anyone who observed the Shabbat or had his son circumcised. The land where life had been celebrated [00:43:00] like in no other land was turned into a cemetery for its Jewish citizens. Rome forbade to study? They studied nevertheless. Were the teachers put in prison? They went on teaching inside the prison. At the risk of their lives the masters met with their disciples and taught them to become masters in their turn. In this moment we must, I feel we must always bring it back to modern times, to our own experience.

What I describe here is exactly what is happening today in Russia. Except that in Russia, fortunately, there are no death sentences. But for being a Jew, Sharansky's in jail. For trying to teach a certain Wolowski, is on trial. He went on trial today in a city named Gorky for teaching Judaism to hundreds of Jewish students who want to study in Russia.

[00:44:00] Rarely have we seen history repeat itself as it does now in Russia.

But in concrete terms, the four friends of the Pardes symbolized the various mental attitudes between the Jewish community towards Roman occupation. Ben Abuyah represented active collaboration. Rabbi Akiva represented active resistance. Ben Azai represented passive death. And Ben Zoma represented flight into romanticism, meditation, and poetry. And what about the Pardes in all this? It represents their common quest. The task they had taken upon themselves was to search for answers, for an answer at least, to the question why had God chosen to punish his people so severely, [00:45:00] so often in so many places in so many ways? The classic problem of theodicy, no doubt, but one that was more acute than ever before.

In the face of so much suffering, collective and individual, our sages could not possibly have abstained from inquiring into the roles of man and God in all this. How to explain good and evil and their obvious kinship in God's scheme? How to justify the triumph of the godless conqueror and the agony of his victims with their impeccable past? Here and there voices were raised in protest. Yes, in protest against the heaven that permitted the martyrdom of the pious masters. *Zu Torah v'zu sacharah?* Can this be the law? Is this Torah and this the reward?

One sage, as you remember, went so far as to hurl a cry of utter despair at God. "*Mi kamocha baelim AdoShem? Al tikreh 'elim' ki im ilemim.*" [00:46:00] Who is mute as you are, oh God? For you see your children humiliated. "*Sheroeh el bonbanav v'shotek*" You see your children humiliated, and you remain silent. And I believe that our fourfriends wanted to understand, and therefore they turned to mystic contemplation to come to a better understanding, or at least to reach the conclusion that they were unable to understand. Because that too is mysticism, to glimpse the path that opens up beyond comprehension or in its place.

The Talmud appeals to the ear, the Zohar to the eyes. The mystic sees, philosopher listens. Our foursages entered the Pardes to see, to see the truth since they were unable to understand. For [00:47:00] the mysticism the eye may look forward or backward toward the source or toward the goal, toward the beginning or toward deliverance. Rabbi Akiva was looking for the resolution of history in history, redemption. He told himself that suffering was inflicted on man to prepare him for the coming of the messiah. When the people suffered martyrdom it was a sign that collective redemption was near. And maybe that is why he crowned Bar Kokhba messiah.

Elisha ben Abuyah, on the other hand saw no link between suffering and redemption. And that is why he decided to turn away from a history that had established such a link. And in choosing denial he signaled his conclusion that suffering on the level of history is unnecessary and sterile. As to the other two companions, what was it they found in the Pardes? What was [00:48:00] their mental and philosophical attitude towards the punishment inflicted upon their people? I suggest we follow their steps for a while.

Reb Ben Azzai moves us. He must. In his private life he seems so naïve, so innocent, almost defenseless before life and its secrets. We sense that he is both timid and intimidated. When he disagrees with the sage in matters of law, oh, he is courageous. He opposes anybody. But when the subject is personal he expresses himself with deference. Because he's younger, because he has no rabbinic title? No. I think that he is conscious of some flaws in his private life. He knows that he is capable of debating ideas and principle with anyone. [00:49:00] But as soon as his own life is mentioned he feels himself at fault, vulnerable.

Let us listen to a somewhat delicate but typical story. The Talmud tells us of a debate concerning a jealous husband who

before two witnesses warns his wife not to talk to a certain man. However, she and this man are observed entering a hiding place and remaining there long enough to commit a certain sin. The sages argue back and forth. How much time is long enough? (laughter) Each one spoke up according to his own experience. [00:50:00] (laughter) Ben Azzai, as always, took part in the debate and expressed his own opinion.

And the Talmud asks what it considered a logical question. How could Ben Azzai know since he was not married? And that, of course, as always in the Talmud, two possibilities. Either he was married and got divorced, but he was married long enough to know. Or else he knew by divine inspiration, by the grace of God. (laughter) Which somehow leads me to think that Ben Azai must have broken his engagement before marriage. He was not the marrying kind. Married life had no attraction for him. He was intoxicated with God and had no need of anybody. There was no place in his life for another human being except if that human being was a scholar in [00:51:00] Torah.

The sometimes annoying sometimes exasperating routine of married life was not to his liking. He needed ecstasy, continuous, all-pervading, lasting ecstasy, and that he found only in God. One legend depicts him seated, surrounded by his disciples,

discoursing about the secrets of the Torah. And this is a beautiful legend. Suddenly a flame descended from the sky and enveloped the group. And Ben Azzai was asked, did this occur because you studied the mystery of the Merkavah? Did this occur because of your powers? Not at all, he said, no.

That would have explained the fire since God is in the fire too, naturally, but the reason's something else. I pursue quite ordinary studies. I link [00:52:00] the words of the Torah to those of the prophets and those of the prophets to the written words, and it is the words themselves that have started to dance and to rejoice, as they did on the day when lit by the Diving flame the law was given on Sinai. The words are the same, and so are the flames.

Oh, how I would have liked to be there listening to Ben Azzai, watching his words starting to dance in a circle of flames. Isn't this the dream of every writer, every teacher, to find words that will sing and dance, words that will burn? Still, he was refused ordination. Did the scholars consider him too much of a poet or not systematic enough? No footnotes? (laughter) Surely they must have thought him eccentric. Above all [00:53:00] they must have objected to his celibacy. Jewish

tradition expects a master to set an example for his students, and it rejects cynicism as much as it condemns hypocrisy.

Perfect harmony must be maintained between word and action. A master who fails to follow his own precepts does not deserve the title. One cannot love humanity while disliking the people who make it up. One cannot love the Torah while giving some laws preference over others. The Torah is one and indivisible. It is a father's duty to teach it to his son and a man's duty to become a father. That is, he may not choose to be the last of his line. He may not deprive the people of Israel of its future. That is why neither Shimon Ben Azzai nor Shimon Ben Zoma were rabbis.

Take note though that [00:54:00] Ben Azzai was not unhappy. Something of a fatalist, he accepted his situation, and he said, and I quote him, "Everything happens in due time. Man is called upon to take his place, wherever that place is. Whatever place is given, it's his. Everything comes from above. We receive only what is coming to us, and the same holds true for countries," he says. "None can take another's place. There exists a level when everything comes back into balance. Here is some useful advice he gives his readers. He says do not ascend the tribune of honor. On the contrary, you would do well to

come down a few steps. It is better that people should ask you to get up rather than to get down.

Of course it didn't happen that he showed disappointment. He was human, after all, and he was aware of his qualities. One day he explained [00:55:00] and he exclaimed, I quote him, "All those sages," he said, "are no more to me than the skin of a head of garlic, except for Rabbi Akiva." Rabbi Akiva was his master and his friend, and he loved and he admired him. Once he went after him all the way to the toilet to find out how a *ben Torah*, a student of Torah, ought to behave in strictest privacy. He and Ben Zoma were truly the perfect disciples. It may well be that it is better to be a perfect disciple than an imperfect master.

It so happens that there exists a law which refers to their superior qualities as disciples. This is the beauty of the Talmud. When the law, the halakhah, and the legend, the aggadah, are always so intertwined. Listen, this law deals with questions concerning marriage. And you must know, again, that Talmud urges man into [00:56:00] marriage, and marriage is made very easy, too easy, perhaps. For instance, when a man says to a woman, *harey at mekudeshet li, b'taba'at zo, k'dat Moshe*

v'Yisrael. then it's even if nothing happens he may be his wife if there are two witnesses. Now, what happens?

If he says to a woman *Harey at mekudeshet li*, you are consecrated unto me, *al menat she-ani tzaddik* because I am a tzadik. What happens? You know what happens? She becomes his wife. The Talmud says she becomes his wife even though the man who said it is known as a *rosha*, as a wicked man, as a sinner, as the greatest of the sinners. Why? The Talmud says, and this is beautiful too, *shema nikhnas hilkhu teshuvah v'lo po."*

Maybe he had a thought of repentance. (laughter) [00:57:00]

Well, well, by the same token, says the Talmud, when a man says to a young girl, you are my wife, *al menat she-ani talmid*, because I am a disciple, that's enough again to make the marriage valid.

And the Talmud adds, for a candidate to rightfully bear the title of disciple there is no need to be as learned as Shimon Ben Azzai and Shimon Ben Zoma. Anyone can be a student, can be a disciple, so therefore these propositions are very dangerous. Rashi comments here these two sages were bachelors and never received their ordination. Nevertheless, says Rashi, in matters of knowledge of Torah they had no equal. They were especially well versed in Midrash. Their aphorisms convey spiritual

wisdom, moral strength. Ben Azzai says to man, do not despise anything or anyone for each being has his [00:58:00] hour and each thing has its place. All that exists was created by God. All that exists bears witness for God.

And further, he said, hurry and fulfill all the commandments, even those you consider of minor importance. *Kalah v'chamurah*. They all come by the same right from God. They all lead you to God, and further he said, the reward for a good deed, a mitzvah, is a mitzvah itself. One good deed leads to another whereas a bad one is the result of another bad one. And I like in particular his interpretation of the biblical commandment love thy neighbor. It actually means *V'ahavta l'reiakha kamokha*. Love thy fellow man like yourself. And here Ben Azzai disagrees, as he rarely does, with his master Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Akiva puts this verse as at the top of the ethics:
V'ahavta l'reiakha kamokha, ze klal gadol b'Torah, says Rabbi Akiva. To love one's fellow man. Ben Azzai says [00:59:00] that this time he says I must disagree with my master. Why? Because he knows another verse which he places higher, and this is the Sefer Toldot Adam. This is the book of man's origins. Why? And he says, suppose a human being dislikes himself, inflicts suffering and humiliation upon himself? Somebody who

seeks to destroy himself, ought he to do likewise to his fellow man? (laughter) No, says Ben Azzai.

The important thing, the essential one, is for all of us to know that we all have the same origin, the same ancestors, that we are all children of the same father. Here is the universality of Torah. Here is the humanism that imbues the tradition of a persecuted people. To say that Ben Azzai formulated this thought, this principle at the time when his brothers and sisters were being massacred, tormented, [01:00:00] oppressed by the Roman conqueror is to recognize how exalted a vision he had of the Jewish and human condition. To say that they too are human beings in spite of suffering, in spite of persecutions, he envisioned a radiant future because he reminded man of their common past.

In other words, we all were to remember the source of our experiences. We could go with stronger faith towards the future, if only man wanted to remember. But it seems they do not. The world could be beautiful and hospitable, but it is not. Is this what Ben Azzai discovered in the Pardes? That it is too late? That man refuses to live happily under the sign of truth? Is this the discovery that killed him? Is this the despair he faced when he entered [01:01:00] the forbidden

orchard? Is it the same despair that pushed Ben Zoma into madness?

At the end of his life Ben Azzai became melancholy. Listen to his sobering advice, and I quote him, "Whoever remembers these four things will be saved from sin," he says. "Where does man come from? From darkness. Where is he going? To darkness. By whom shall he be judged? By the creator of the universe who knows everything and owns everything and can be neither flattered nor cheated. Where does man go? To hell and nothingness."

As for Ben Zoma, throughout his days he often spoke of life with gratitude. He considered himself fortunate compared to Adam. Adam had to work hard to feed and clothe himself. "I," [01:02:00] said he, "I have all I need. Adam had to sow and reap, prepare the dough, bake bread. I have everything here right at hand." Then why did he refuse to get married and establish a home? For the same reasons as his friend Ben Azai? No. No one put the question to him. No doubt because of his mystic bent. A dreamer reserved, secretive, he sought to lose himself in the mystical, in the dark and blinding light of the obscure, and therefore his reward: madness.

The madness of a man who sought to understand that which escapes understanding, who aspired to knowledge that defies knowledge, who neglected the future because the past alone attracted him. Of the four companions it is Ben Zoma who seems to be the most tragic. Did he know that he was losing his mind? Did he struggle to hold on to his [01:03:00] sanity? Did he long for it? Reach for it? These are dangerous questions. And perhaps they're out of place. But let us ask nevertheless. Can we say with absolute certainty that Shimon Ben Azzai and Shimon Ben Zoma did not enter the Pardes looking one for madness and the other for death? Or perhaps for shelter from the victories of the enemy or to protest against them.

Since all around them the universe seemed too real, too crumble, since the wicked were powerful and fortunate while the just lived in fear and trembling, why should the two friends not have chosen to rebel by rejecting voluntarily, consciously, life, logic? [01:04:00] The bond between the two friends is stronger than between them and the two others. We perceive them always together. Does faith in the end separate them? No. The expression *hatzitz v'nifga*, he looked and lost his mind, is usually applied to Ben Azzai, but we also find it in some places describing Ben Zoma's end.

One could say that the Talmud, by varying the text makes a point of the two friends community of faith. They were subjected to the same punishment. Both of them lost what was most precious to them: reason and life. Both of them. And in this they differ from the other two, for they were interested in the esoteric sciences of the beginning. Why? Perhaps to place and measure injustice. Where did it start, they wanted to know. [01:05:00] Why was injustice, why was evil, why was suffering part of creation? So unlike Rabbi Akiva, unlike Ben Abuyah they wanted Ma'aseh Bereshit, the beginning. But it is too dangerous to look too far back.

In this sense even the study of the messianic mystery is less perilous than the exploration of our origins. And Rabbi Akiva had understood this. And so let us once more read the story of the Pardes, and this time let us read it to the end. Do you remember? *Arbaah Nikhne'su baPardes..* They were four to enter the orchard of forbidden knowledge. And Rashi comments they pronounced the sacred name and found themselves in heaven. They found themselves in the upper spheres where the Shekhinah resides. Ben Azzai saw her and died. [01:06:00] Ben Zoma saw her and lost his mind. Ben Abuyah saw her and lost his faith. Rabbi Akiva alone entered in peace and left the orchard in peace.

And one possible explanation is the following. Ben Abuyah was concerned with the present only, and therefore he lost his faith. Rabbi Akiva was interested in the distant future, therefore he was spared. Ben Zoma and Ban Azzai were interested in the beginnings, and that is why they were punished the way they were punished. Rabbi Akiva tried to save them. The legend says so clearly, and I know that you have studied this afternoon the Hekhalot literature so you know what Rabbi Akiva did. Before plunging into the adventure, like a good guide he warned them, and he said, when you see pillars of white marble do not call out [01:07:00] water, water, for God detests falsehood and lies.

A baffling passage, admit it. Why shouldn't they confuse marble with water? Why stifle their imagination? And if white marble were to remind them of water, why not say so aloud? The episode between Ben Zoma and his teacher Rabbi Yehoshua may help us understand Rabbi Akiva's warning. Remember the earlier episode about the disciple meditating on the separation of the waters? What Rabbi Akiva tells them is do not attempt to solve the mystery of that separation. Do not attempt to explain the mystery of the waters, for that is the mystery of creation. Too

many illusions, too many lies, too much falsehoods separate us from the first moment in time.

From the first human gesture, from the first impulse of the first [01:08:00] man from his first look upon creation. It is safer to investigate the distant future and try to decipher it and thus console all those who suffer in solitude and anguish. The beginnings are dangerous. In conclusion, the glorious adventure of the Pardes ended in failure. Each wanted to move too fast. Each forgot that the human framework is both impediment and refuge for man, and whoever breaks it is bound to stumble and fall. Only Rabbi Akiva saved himself. And he was saved by his inner peace.

Nikhnas bashalom He brought peace to the Pardes. *V'tza bashalom*. And he entered with peace, and he left with peace. [01:09:00] He took peace, and with it he left the Pardes. Rabbi Akiva sought peace for his people and for the world, and maybe that is what saved him. Did ben Azzai wish to die? Did Ben Zoma seek madness? Or maybe to the sacrifice of their life and their mind did they succeed in protecting their people, our people, from further suffering? Another question. Thinking of them, do we now here suffer less? The questions remain open, and that is their beauty. The Pardes too remains open, and that

is the power of its spell and its challenge too. Yes. *Arbaah nikhne'su baPardes*. They were four to enter the orchard [01:10:00] of forbidden knowledge, but then why did they lure us along? And why did we choose to remain behind? Excessive prudence? Perhaps. What frightens us is not the whiteness of the waters. What frightens us is the darkness and the familiar appeal of the fire. (applause)

M1:

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