

Introductory Lecture

Dov Elbaum

What is the best way for me to present myself to you? Where should I begin? Should I tell you about my wife and four daughters, with whom I live in a pleasant, quiet house not far from Tel Aviv? Should I tell you about my life as an author, and talk about the books that I have written for adults and for children? Maybe I should tell you about my most recent children's book, *Yenuka in Vulture Island*, which was in fact inspired by a tale of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, "The Seven Beggars?"

What is the core of my identity? My young family? My work as an author? And as what kind of an author, at that? A "serious" author of adult novels or one who composes playful rhymes for children?

And perhaps it would be best for me to present myself via the educational and cultural center Bina, thanks to which I am here today. Maybe my center of gravity is to be found in my relations with my students at Bina, where I teach young and older adults the ancient writings of Kabbalah and Hassidism; where we work to establish a platform for the study of Jewish sources by Israelis who define themselves as secular and non-halakhic? In the last two years, for example, alongside teaching, I have assembled a group of Israeli intellectuals in order to create a new Jewish-Israeli visionary manifesto, formulated as an interpretation of Israel's Declaration of Independence. This is a project that indeed occupies a large part of both my life and mind, and I consider it to be of tremendous importance.

And if all of these questions aren't enough, I would like to add on to the list yet another activity of mine: many in the United States and in Europe, Israelis mostly, have come to know me in recent years as a host on Israeli TV. In my show, broadcasted on Shabbat evening, I discuss with my guests the current Portion of the Week and its relevance to our times and lives.

I've been preoccupied by all these questions and many others in recent weeks. At a certain point I told myself: "My audience is Jewish, and Jews always want to know who your parents were, where they came from and where were they during the War." So I think it would be best to tell you about my parents, myself and my childhood home. I will begin by reading from my book, *A Walk through the Void*.

Let me first tell you about my mother, who passed away some 18 months ago:

Born into a respectable Jerusalem family, my mother Zipora grew up in the hermetic world of early twentieth century, pre-State Jerusalem. Like a butterfly in its cocoon, the world of her childhood had not yet been breached by the forces of enlightenment and secularization sweeping the West. And so, her early years maintained a certain wholeness, or integrity. Throughout her life, my mother's faith in God was always clear-cut and self-evident, like the white rice she used to cook us. No contemplation necessary: simply pour, sift, transfer into an oiled pot, cover with water, lightly salt, turn on the flame and wait as the rice absorbs the water.

Her parents never taught her the meaning of faith or how she ought to think about God. The only theological topics she would discuss, though she found them boring, were old age and death, wondering aloud on occasion: What is the nature of life after death? What happens in paradise? She wanted to know if she would meet there her family and righteous forebears. She wondered what happened to her mother, who died young? And, most importantly, what awaits her in the final, heavenly judgment?

My father, in contrast, emerged from the ruins of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Born in a small Polish town in the interwar period, from a young age he was exposed to Jewish secularism and enlightenment, to the full spectrum of Jewish Socialist and Communist factions, and to the secular Zionist ideologies that circulated through his town. While still a young boy, his family managed to flee to Palestine, just before the gates of Poland slammed shut. While he had seen different ways of life and thought, my father ultimately chose the Jerusalem Bratzlav Hassidim. His faith included sadness and muted joy; prayer and quiet religious fervor; and messianic hope. The return of the Jews to their ancestral homeland was taken as proof of God's

return to history. But this faith was eroded by life's hardships. He was never able to declare his faith publicly, confidently, without hesitation or qualification. His faith in God was marred by memories of the terrible poverty that he had suffered as a child, which instilled in him a fixation on money and steady employment. My father would pay lip service to the Jewish God who bestows sustenance from the heavens—"Fear the Lord, you, His consecrated ones, for those who fear Him lack nothing" (Psalms 34:10)—but God formed an integral part of my father's thought and life. He was always anxious to make ends meet and, through force of habit, remained troubled even when there was nothing really to worry about anymore. To him, money, and the very term *parnasah* (livelihood), were guarantors of a secure life. He could never fathom why I gave up a comfortable life for a murky dream.

I was born into a shattered and fragmented world; Into the 1970's. I grew up in a new Jerusalem neighborhood, populated mostly by North African Jews who had only recently adopted a secular lifestyle. Most people struggled to eke out a living and could not meaningfully engage the new truths set forth by Israel's founding fathers, in all their European secularist glory. The families in our apartment building were ever apologetic for retaining some of their traditions ("it's only out of respect for mom and dad," they'd say). But in their hearts they admired my family's religious devotion.

The chasm between Israel's secular and religious populations was plainly evident in our neighborhood, which was built after the Six Day War and bordered on an older, more established religious neighborhood. It was as if an invisible barrier separated the two. Few of the residents of the religious neighborhood ventured to the

secular neighborhood to shop, and vice versa. While secretly yearning to join the game, the religious kids watched and shouted insults as the secular kids played soccer. Though I lived in the secular area, I belonged to the religious community. I shopped there, and I knew all of its residents.

I never understood why my secular neighbors could drive to the beach on Shabbat, while I, a fellow Jew, lived so differently. For me, even tearing toilet paper in the bathroom was prohibited on Shabbat. The other kids in the neighborhood thought of orthodoxy almost as a separate race, while I saw it as a way of life they had miraculously managed to avoid by declaring their secularism, unburdening themselves of the yoke of religious observance. When he caught me in a lie once, a secular friend said: “You’re Orthodox, for you that's absolutely forbidden.” My secular friends reacted vigorously to an infraction in a neighborhood soccer game, but blithely dismissed their own religious transgressions. For them, Orthodox Judaism was less a set of rules and more a kind of genetic mutation.

As a child without personal freedom or choice about my way of life, I seethed with a sense of deep injustice. My behavior began to reflect my frustrations, as I began rejecting the moral and social boundaries I had been raised to respect. I beat up my friends, I stole and cheated, and I lied to my parents, to my teachers, and to everyone else around me. I was always a good student, but my teachers complained that my wild misconduct was corrupting my classmates. Finally, my parents decided to send me to a yeshiva at the other end of Jerusalem a year earlier than was customary in our circles.

As you already understand, yeshiva wasn't the last stop on my journey. After several years in which I received the best that *haredi* education can offer, I decided to leave yeshiva and the *haredi* way of life altogether. Why? Did I stop believing in God? Not at all. Did I want to date girls? Probably. But this accounts for only a small part of the complete answer. I made this decision in order to follow a profound desire to live a life of freedom and creativity, in the widest sense possible. That is, I realized that *haredi* society has created for itself a way of life and a halakhic perception that demand total subjugation of its adherents. At age 17 I already knew that I don't want to partake in such a life. My parents went into shock when I told them about my decision, but I knew that I was fighting for my freedom. I left my parents' home, joined the IDF, and shortly thereafter moved to live in Tel Aviv.

In those days I severed any and all ties that I had with Jewish tradition. I had to delve into the new worlds that had opened up before me. I experienced things that my parents couldn't even understand or grasp. I distanced myself from my parents and their world as much as I possibly could. But the deeper I delved into Israeli secular society, as I was slowly making my way up as a writer and a journalist, the more I could see that I made my move a bit too late. About 30 years too late. It occurred to me that this society is in the midst of a deep crisis. A society that, alongside its tremendous achievements in building a country, an economy, and keeping it secure, had lost its compass, its vision, its dream: The dream of establishing in *Erez Ha-Avot*, the land of our biblical Patriarchs, a model society in the spirit of the prophets of Israel, and to be a light unto the nations.

And why did this happen? Why was this spirit lost? Ever so gradually, through a painstaking journalistic investigation that lasted several years, I learned more and more of the extent to which Judaism has been distorted in Israel; the outcome of a

fundamental and drastic division between secular and *haredi* Jews. This separation of ways created hatred, enmity, ignorance and disrespect in both camps. But what I found most devastating was secular society's criminal negligence of its Jewish wellsprings and foundations. Secular Israelis had given up on the Bible, on their ties with tradition, and on the attempt to grow – culturally and spiritually – with, rather than against, their heritage. They seemed to be saying: "We'll leave that to the religious folk. We don't have to deal with it." The blinding disorientation that ensued was inevitable. In the Land of Israel, if you don't hold on to your roots, you cannot understand your present. Your present becomes confusing, and you lose your way. Not surprisingly, some tire of this predicament and abandon their homeland in search of their fortune elsewhere.

This division cost us the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. We continue to pay the price for Israeli leaders' inability to present their citizens with a creative, challenging vision for the future of the State of Israel. With a plan that would re-align the State of Israel with its calling – being a model society and a light unto the nations.

But underneath the surface, below the radar of Israel's current leadership, a highly significant change is underway. Tens of thousands of secular Israelis are once more turning to the study of Jewish heritage; they acquire access to the vast depths of their culture, while rejecting the horrible dichotomy that had been forced upon them in childhood: the imperative to take sides and sever all ties with the "enemy." At the current time Israeli society is recreated anew. I consider myself privileged to be living and acting in an era in which Judaism is undergoing a transformation of a magnitude

that, in my eyes, is comparable with the revolution that the Mishnah and the Talmud brought about after the destruction of the Second Temple.

Returning now to the words with which I opened, I can say that in those years I've seen how the disparate camps that co-habit in my personality, the layers of which my life is made, come together to form a single, clear purpose: Creating a deep connection between Jewish culture and Israelis, irrespective of their choices in relation to halakhah. This connection has and will continue to yield many more significant developments in Jewish culture, and in Israel's ability to walk toward a better future, both domestically and regionally. In this sense, it doesn't really matter what I do: Whether I write books, teach Torah, make a TV show, lead a private life with my family. Everything I do is related to this purpose one way or another. In recent years, I've been feeling how all the worlds I've come from, the different worlds of my parents, the specific education that I had received, my life in the shadow of the deep ruptures in Jewish-Israeli society, point (like Isaiah Berlin's hedgehog) to "one big thing": Forming a rich and meaningful Jewish inheritance for future generations.

This is the reason for my visit. Not only to speak to you, but also to learn from you. I think that American Jews have much to teach their Israeli brethren. I think that in the latter part of the twentieth century, Jewish-American religious thought has made the most significant contribution to Judaism in this era. I think that Israelis have much to learn from you by way of how to build communities that offer freedom and pluralism, while retaining a deep connection with Jewish tradition. I think that Jewish American thinkers have set the most significant spiritual challenges for Jews in our generation.

Thank you for inviting me here. I hope that I will learn from this tour of the U.S as much as I hope to. Thank you for your hospitality and thank you for listening.

Translated from the Hebrew by Orr Scharf