

Elie Wiesel Modern Tales A Plea for the Survivors

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Once upon a time, in a distant town surrounded by mountains, there lived a small Jewish boy who believed himself capable of seeing good in evil, of discovering dawn within dusk, and in general, of deciphering the symbols, both visible and invisible, lavished upon him by destiny. To him all things seemed simple and miraculous: life and death, love and hatred. On one side were the righteous, on the other the wicked. The just were always handsome and generous, the wicked always ugly and cruel. And God in His heaven kept the accounts in a book only He could consult. In that book, each people had its own page, and the Jewish people had the most beautiful page of all.

[00:01:00]

Naturally, this little boy felt at ease only among his own people, in his own setting. Everything alien frightened me, and alien meant not Muslim or Hindu, but Christian. The priest dressed in black, the woodcutter and his ax, the teacher and his ruler, old peasant women crossing themselves as their husbands uttered oath upon oath, constables looking gruff or merely

preoccupied -- all of them exuded a hostility I understood and considered normal, and therefore, without remedy.

I understood that all these people, young and old, rich and poor, powerful and oppressed, exploiters and exploited, should want my undoing, even my death. True, we inhabited the same [00:02:00] landscape, but that was yet another reason for them to hate me. Such is man's nature: he hates what disturbs him, what eludes him. We depended on the more or less unselfish tolerance of the "others," yet our life followed its own course independently of theirs, a fact they clearly resented. Our determination to maintain and enrich our separate history, our separate society, confused them as much as did that history itself. A living Jew, a believing Jew, proud of his faith, was for them a contradiction, a denial, an aberration. According to their calculations these chosen and accursed people should long ago have ceased to hound a mankind whose salvation was linked to the bloodstained symbol of the cross. [00:03:00] They could not accept the idea of a Jew celebrating his Holy Days with song just as they celebrated their own. That was inadmissible, illogical, and even unjust. And the less they understood us, the more I understood them.

This is a beginning. What I just read is an excerpt from *A Jew Today*, gracefully and beautifully translated by Elisha Wiesel's mother, Marion. Just published here, it is a collection of topical essays and strange dialogues, portraits of the past, and legends of our time, pages from Medieval chroniclers [00:04:00] and modern stories. François Mauriac and Solzhenitsyn, Biafra and the Talmud, Jewish attitudes to war and peace, memory and conscience, exile and redemption, Auschwitz and Jerusalem.

One generation after the event, what do we feel towards those who were connected with it from within and without? What can a Jew today tell Christians who wish to understand or be understood? What can a Jew today say to a Palestinian Arab who speaks to him of his suffering? What are his obligations to his heroic brothers in Russia? What are and must be his commitments to Jerusalem, to Israel, to the center of our history? How does he, a Jew today, relate to the Jews of yesterday? [00:05:00] How can he remember them all, how can he not remember them all? In their shadow, he owes it to them and to himself to be truthful, and ask himself certain questions, has he uttered the right words, formulated the right prayers at the right time? How can he be sure? And what if his memory of silence had yielded, if not contributed, to the silence of memory? You see, once again, this is a writer's way of taking stock, of doing his

Heshbon Hanefesh. A Jew today is a Jew who questions himself, where am I?

You know, Gustav Meyrink said something very beautiful once. He said, "A Jew is not only he or she who is Jewish, that is not enough. [00:06:00] A Jew is he or she who understands why he or she is Jewish, and with whom, and for what." So we ask ourselves the questions where are we in this world, what happened to us or the world, what happened to us on the way from where, and where to? There is one exquisite parable, beautiful anecdote told by Rabbi Henoah of Alexander, and this story has already been later attributed to many non-Hasidic masters, but the origin is Hasidic. There was once a man known for his absentmindedness, so much so that at one point he even forgot that he was absentminded. (laughter) So, his wife told him go to see the Rebbe, it's always the wife sending the husband to the Rebbe. [00:07:00] She doesn't go. (laughter) He came to Rebbe Henoah and Reb Henoah gave him an advice. He said, "You have problems with your memory, take a notebook and write everything down." And the man said, "But Rebbe, I am so absentminded when I get up in the morning I forgot where I put my clothes." He said, "Well, write it down, take a book and write." And he did. So, he promised to obey and forgot the paper. He found it in the evening and decided to put it to use right away. He wrote

down, "My caftan is on the chair, the tallit is on the table, the shirt on the floor, and my kippah on the table, and I, Srul Moshe, Hasid of Alexander, I am in bed. (laughter)

That night he slept well. Next morning as he got up he was exuberant. "Ah," he said, "my Rebbe is really a great man. He knew the answer to all the problems [00:08:00] including mine. Let us see, where is my kippah, on the table, checked. My underwear, on the chair, perfect." And he went through item after item and then, suddenly, after he had finished washing he said, "Last item, I, Srul Moshe, Hasid of Alexander, I am in bed. But I am not in bed, where am I?" (laughter) So, he ran to his Rebbe, he said, "Rebbe, where am I?" (laughter) Well, that is the question we are all asking, where are we. And in this book, as in, I believe in every other book that I have written, I've always tried to find, where am I, what are we doing, to whom, why. This is the basic question a Jew, not only a Jew, but I speak a Jew because I am Jewish, but that goes for everybody else. We must stop from time to time and see life is so short, time is running so fast, and with technology [00:09:00] destroying mans' conscience we must stop and see where is conscience, where is the I of the I.

So, a collection, the volume therefore is meant to be tightly structured. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end, but not in the same order. This book is special to me and to my translator for many reasons. First it contains some of my most personal writings, the *Dialogues*. Also it is an offering to very precious people who belong to our inner landscape. And also it has the same name in the French original and the English version, which is rare. Therefore it is accompanied by special wishes. You see, some books are published but not written, others are written but not read, still others are read but not published. [00:10:00] Well, I hope that a Jew today will establish its own category. *A Jew Today*, why the title? Actually, why not? Let's see, what comes first, the title or the book, the story or the moral of the story? Occasionally they have nothing in common, but to be more precise, occasionally they do. You begin a book, and you hope you go somewhere, to lead the character somewhere. And you end up elsewhere. The subject, the theme, the protagonist, have taken over. It is like the famous Maharal of Prague, the one who allegedly created the golem but who was much wiser than that, much greater than that, he created books.

The Maharal of Prague was one day stopped by his friend, the king, in the street. "Where are you going?" asked the King. "I

don't know," answered the Rebbe. "Impossible," said the King, "I do not believe you." "A pity," said the Rebbe, [00:11:00] "you must believe me, Sire, I do not know where I am going." The King in his anger had him jailed for a day and a night. Next morning he had the Rebbe brought before him in his palace. "Well," he asked, "Have you slept on it? Are you ready to admit?" "Admit what?" "Are you ready to recognize that you lied to me yesterday?" "No, Sire," said the Maharal of Prague. "You still maintain that you didn't know where you were going?" "Yes, Sire, I do. You see, yesterday I left my home thinking I was going to the house of study and prayer and ended up in jail instead." We never know where we are going. Your characters often act the same way. They lead you or mislead you. In my short stories in the book, in the Penitent of the Graveyard or in the Scrolls to Our Immortal, this is precisely what happened. A victor and a scribe have [00:12:00] staged at one point a rebellion against the author and I had to follow. For to be Jewish means to rebel, to rebel too, against injustice, against indifference, indifference to injustice everywhere. A Jew today cannot be Jewish, for instance, unless he protests against the war in Ireland, against the slaughter of Christians in Lebanon, against the oppression of Jews and dissidents in Russia, and against the stupid senseless massacre of civilians in Cambodia by their own deranged, mentally deranged leaders.

Unfortunately we are indifferent. Not even Christians care about what's happening to Christians in Lebanon, only Jews do. As for Ireland, have you read much about the sabotage, the killings that go on day after day? [00:13:00] I wish we had. I want to know. Indifference is no longer a sin, it is a punishment. Also, vulgarity has invaded current affairs. Nazis march in St. Louis, Chicago, San Francisco, it's vulgar. In Germany former SS men proclaimed that they are pleased that is in their official platform, they are pleased that so many concentration camps have been kept as museums. They may be put to use again, quote/unquote they said in their official platform. Have you heard about it? No. In Spain, Petain's former minister of anti-Jewish affairs, Louis Darquier, the so-called French Eichmann, declared in an interview two weeks ago that he has no regrets. "The Jews," he said, "the *métèques*, the strangers, [00:14:00] had to be dealt with and expelled. They were a curse." And then the journalist asked him, "Auschwitz is at Auschwitz." He said, "You are fooled by propaganda. You too," he said, "are being taken in by Jewish propaganda. Auschwitz never existed, no one was killed in Auschwitz." And then he added, he said, "Yes, I heard about gas chambers." And he said, "Believe me," he said to the journalist, "only lice were gassed in Auschwitz." Quote/unquote. What do you do

against vulgarity? What do you do against distortion, against oblivion, against ugliness?

And yet, and yet a Jew today must continue to bear witness. A Jew today must remember and make other people remember. But remember the truth without embellishment, without makeup, without cheap sentimentality. Well, a Jew today has many tasks to perform, [00:15:00] many duties to accomplish for himself and not only for himself. We have said it again and again, when a Jew speaks for Jews, he speaks for mankind. For mankind through the Jews. A Jew today must think of his friends, Jewish or Gentiles, who left late, arrived late, but arrived nevertheless. A Jew today is never a wall, but a door, an open door. Well, let's prove it and open the doors.

In the meantime, another year has passed, and another series. And as we are about to take leave from one another until next year, let us recapitulate the substance and the tone of what we learned until now. For that was the purpose that has been the purpose and shall remain the purpose [00:16:00] of our encounters here, to learn together, to learn with one another, not even from one another. We must learn the sanctity of words, we must learn how to receive what has been given to us from century to century, from generation to generation. I believe

there can be no greater pride for a Jewish father than to hear his son one day get up to the *bema* and read the Torah, read words, stories, laws, that for forty centuries have been repeated by other children and other fathers. There can be no greater joy to a teacher for a teacher than to hear his students open with him together certain words, like one peels a fruit, and find things in those words that were kept [00:17:00] perhaps only for them. Well, from Joshua, our first hero this year, we learned not to be Joshua. We must all follow Moses always in all things. But nowhere is it written that we are to follow Joshua.

From Joshua we have also learned not to overdo things. Even he has not completed his task, no one ever does. How did our fathers in the ethics of our fathers put it? *Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor*. "It is not up to you to complete a task, but you are not free to desist from it. We can begin, whoever ends does something else or maybe the same thing. But we are to begin." From Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish we learn [00:18:00] that words are dangerous. One word alone said by a friend to his friend can destroy lifetime friendships. As for Reb Moshe Leib of Sassov, he taught us to be like a string calling for winds and melodies, always ready to vibrate, to touch and be touched, forever eager to dance, forever eager to alleviate pain and

defeat sadness. Yes, a Jew today is forever learning. And somehow we always learn the same things, because whatever we learn was given to us if not in Jerusalem, but through Jerusalem. A Jew today, a Jew always sings of Jerusalem, a Jew today celebrates Jerusalem, celebrates because of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the secret and the name of his celebration, [00:19:00] and perhaps of his Jewishness. A Jew today cannot but join the eternal Jew who is waiting for him in Jerusalem. Perhaps what we say, *netzach Yisrael*, the eternity of Israel, maybe the eternity of us is called Israel.

"Wherever I go my steps lead me to Jerusalem," said the great Hasidic storyteller Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. As for myself, I can say that whenever I speak, I speak always of Jerusalem. Whatever words I use, I try to move them for Jerusalem. Thanks to Jerusalem, we live in periods of grace, when all dreams become possible, and yet remain dreams. So, therefore, there could possibly be no book written by me without containing at least one chapter about Jerusalem, and this one is called [00:20:00] "A Quest for Jerusalem." The leitmotif is "In the beginning was Jerusalem, in the beginning was Jerusalem."

The sound coming from the mountains a mysterious call, a constantly changing vision of a dazzling landscape, painful silences, joyful silences.

Miraculous city reaching into heaven: I remember Jerusalem as clearly and with as much intensity as I remember the child who cherished Jerusalem. I seemed to have pronounced her name before my own, a melodious name, evocative of a distant, familiar, yet unknown past, a name that suited even as it inspired all, especially with the advent of night and twilight hour where children are afraid to stay alone. Someone would hum a lullaby or teach me a prayer. I would close my eyes and discover a spellbound and spellbinding city, taking form [00:21:00] in a dream where all men were princes, except for a few mad vagabonds and fiery eyed mysterious sages, and I would walk to meet them holding my breath.

I guess the name of the place, I knew it was Jerusalem. Still I could not locate it: did it exist only in the imagination of children, only in the memory of old men?

Destroyed again and again but alive nevertheless, conquered again and again but sovereign nevertheless. The capital of

survival has, if we are to believe ancient legend, two faces, two destinies.

Earthly Jerusalem and heavenly Jerusalem: the one visible, evoking mourning and lamentation, the other intangible, bringing peace and eternity. And the two meet in those who know how to seek inside words, inside memory. But what if one does not know? [00:22:00] "Jerusalem," my grandfather would say, weeping, weeping with his whole being. "Jerusalem," my master would say, laughing, laughing with his whole being.

In a book whose pages were torn and yellow, I had seen a drawing of an immensely high wall before which a few melancholy worshippers stood praying. This is Jerusalem, I was told. From then on I was convinced the place could be found only in books - - and that was where it should be sought.

Books of prayers, books of legends. Promises and memories. Long ago and next year. David and the Messiah. Great nostalgia, true expectation. Exile and homecoming. Point of departure and climax. Jewish history would not be Jewish -- would not be at all -- without this city, the most Jewish of all, the most universal as well.

The child in me loved it more than he loved his [00:23:00] native town. I belonged to it, I roamed its alleys, I lost myself in its shadows. And my own mood reflected its successive glories and desolation. I remember the customs of Jerusalem, the legends of Jerusalem, the songs of Jerusalem.

On the ninth day of Av we wept over the destruction of the Temple. It was a day of fasting and mourning. Distraught, we dressed in rags and walked back and forth. Shoeless, we sat on low stools around the floor reading the realistic descriptions of our national and religious catastrophe contained in the Talmud. Scenes of blood-chilling horror. Kamsa and Bar Kamsa: a story of hate, gratuitous hate. Nevuzaradan, Aspianus, Titus: heralds of desolation and death. Yohanan Ben-Zakkai and his disciples: survival through study, prayer, the word. The massacre of the innocent, the pride [00:24:00] of the invader. Banished from the burning city, the Jews were to live twenty centuries with the memory of its ruins and of its glory. "Jerusalem," said my master, "Jerusalem, God's offering to man, a sanctuary erected by man in honor of God, both are meant to live there in fear, in ecstasy, and in expectation; the most painful of expectations.

A conversation:

"We have rights over Jerusalem," says the Christian. "We have fought for Jerusalem. We have let ourselves be killed for Jerusalem. We were proud to kill for Jerusalem." "We too," says the Muslim. "We have fought for Jerusalem. We were proud to kill for Jerusalem." "True," says the Jew. "As for us, we have built Jerusalem and we have rebuilt it." "Yet though we have [00:25:00] let ourselves be killed for Jerusalem, we were never proud to kill for Jerusalem." I remember my strange first visit to Jerusalem, far away from it. It was night and we just disembarked in a strange and inhuman kingdom. Barbed wire, everywhere barbed wire, and above us, a sky in flames. Surrounding me were travel companions, who like myself were staring, hoping for a sign, a clue. Was there a key to this nightmare? The moaning prisoners, the officers shouting their commands, the barking dogs, the demented cries heard from afar: sounds and sights that evoked no memory, no echo. Meanwhile other travelers were staggering from the overloaded wagons. The crowd was thickening. Men and women and children torn from every land, bearers of every name in Jewish history, representing every facet of destiny -- I saw them converge [00:26:00] on this place, this exalted place of mankind, in the shadow of stakes from another era. And suddenly a shattering thought crossed my mind: this is Jerusalem, this is the hour or redemption. The Messiah had arrived at last, and the children

of Israel were pouring in from everywhere, ending their exile. They were surging forward to welcome him, to thank and to bless him for coming. Gone, the time of torment, gone the time of darkness. The ingathering of the exiles was taking place in front of my eyes. And here was Jerusalem, both earthly and heavenly, opening its door to its inhabitants dead and living, come to glorify her at midnight. And I thought to myself, to the child I was, now I can die, now we can all die happy and at peace, for now we are in Jerusalem, and we all did.

A Jew today, therefore, must link himself to the fate of Jerusalem for that is his fate, and that is his memory. But, on a different level, a Jew today is also, and above all, an anomaly, almost a contradiction in terms. A paradox, an improbability, an impossibility. As I mentioned in the first introductory chapter, as seen by our Christian neighbors then, and what I say of Christians then I really mean only Christians then. I do not believe in collective guilt. I do not believe that Christians today are responsible for their fathers' sins towards us. I believe that we are all defined by what we are doing existentially, [00:28:00] humanly, to one another. But to forget what was done is a sin for me and for them as well. But the Christians then saw in us strangers who had no right to live as Jews or to live at all. And whenever they saw a Jew they

would say, what, we are still here, how come? "What," our enemies say to us, "you have not left the stage yet?" Logically there should be no more Jews left in the world, for what hasn't the enemy under all pretexts, for all motivations done to extinguish the Jewish flame under the sun? There isn't a method of murder or torment that was not used by some enemy at one time against some Jews at one time in one place and occasionally against all Jews in one place. [00:29:00]

They used threats, and murder, and suffering, but they also use seduction, honors, and it didn't work. He killed a Jew, he tortured him, he persecuted him, he jailed him, he drove him to despair or to madness in vain. And then in other times, he offered him titles and fortunes in exchange or assimilation of conversion in vain. The existence of Jews today or yesterday remains a miracle according to Ramban, to Nachmanides. What is it in us that moves us to wish to remain Jewish? And what is it in the enemy that disturbs him about us? That makes him wish to see us disappear? Would he prefer a world without Jews? And, you know, on one hand [00:30:00] I understand occasionally why the enemy hates us so much. We drive him crazy. Our survival drives him insane. We know it, for instance, that Stalin was an anti-Semite for many, many years, but his anti-Semitism became even stronger in 1948 when Golda Meir, who was then ambassador

to Moscow, and she didn't know, nobody really knew that there were Jews in Russia. We saw that there were a few frightened Jews here and there, but the others were either killed by the Germans or assimilated by the Communists.

And one day it was Rosh Hashanah and Golda went to the synagogue. And somehow Jews in Russia, they know their way around, and they know all the news. In one hour the square was filled with Jews from all over the town. They left their work, they left their offices, they left their schools, and they came to see the first [00:31:00] ambassador of the sovereign state of Israel. Well, some of you were in Russia and you know that the Arkhipova Street is not very far from the Lubyanka, not very far from the headquarters of the GPU -- GPU then, but the KGB today. And according to some people from there, Beria saw the Jews in the street and then he told Stalin, "Look at them, 50 years after the revolution and there are still Jewish patriots, they are still loyal to their people," and that's when they began the persecutions. But I understand Stalin. What didn't he try to do to the Jews? He sent them to camps, he tried to exterminate them. The last decree that Stalin wanted to sign before he died was to deport all the Jews to Siberia, and yet, Jews remained Jews. How can he [00:32:00] not hate the Jew?

Therefore, there is one chapter, as always, about Russian Jews, who are my heroes, but then all Jews are. I wrote a letter to a Russian -- to a young Russian Jew, and more or less this is what I said.

Things have changed since we last met. Some of your friends have already reached their homeland; others are soon to follow. Once open, the gates will not shut again. Nothing will ever be the same as before; either in Russia or outside Russia. We have all changed.

I remember that night in the autumn of 1965 when I first saw you, you and your friends, dancing and singing, openly celebrating your fate and the people of Israel, linking Jewish history to ours. I thought I was dreaming. And I came back the following year to dream once more and take part in your dream, the miraculous dream of strong and healthy [00:33:00] young people rejecting exile and the delusions it begets; the astonishing exalting dream of a community forgotten and rediscovered. Their celebrations will be told and retold in our legends, legends that are filled with accounts of the trials and triumphs of Israel.

It was a dream fraught with anguish too. I was afraid that I might be witnessing an eruption of collective madness. I told myself that one cannot stop the waves, that one cannot halt the march of history. Fear is a war and so is silence. But once the first blow had been struck, nothing is ever the same. Once the wall has been pierced, its shadow becomes less formidable. The highest walls also crumble, and I walked among you, wondering what would happen if one day you set out to organize [00:34:00] your own seminars, to publish your own works, to educate yourself. What would happen if you met more than once a year, more than once a month? What would happen if your demonstrations took place in Red Square, rather than before the old synagogue, and simultaneously in all Soviet cities? What would happen if one day you began to march by the thousands, the tens of thousands, overturning obstacles, tearing down barricades, totally liberated, and not just for one night? From now on everything was possible, and you proved that beyond that any doubt. Do you know what feeling swept over the visitor, me, that Simchat Torah? I felt envious, then I felt proud, and then guilty, and finally I felt humble and grateful. Yes, above all I felt gratitude, for you see, I belong to a generation that has learned to resist dreams, that is afraid of dreams, and thanks to you, [00:35:00] my young Jewish brother in Russia, I can dream again, and for that too I am grateful. You have allowed

me to share your dreams, and on that level, every dream becomes adventure.

There is something strange about Jewish survival. I couldn't understand why the Jews in Russia wanted to remain Jewish, since, especially in the beginning, they didn't even know what it meant. All they knew about Jewishness was the suffering. Nothing of the privileges, nothing of the rich exalting adventure that Judaism is for a Jew. They couldn't know it, they had no books, no teachers. And yet, they came back. The grandchildren of the first communists, the grandchildren of Lenin's companions, the Litvinovs, the Yakirs, the grandchildren re-became Jewish [00:36:00] and I found it marvelous. I found not only a sense of justice in history, but a sense of humor in our history, that those old men who wanted to change the world as communists, their grandchildren changed communism by re-becoming Jewish. But I understand therefore those who are not Jewish, who are still communist, who are the enemies of our people, how they cannot stand it. They don't know how to deal with us anymore.

Well, open any newspaper and you'll see that there is something abnormal about us. We are a small people, so small, but do we make news. (laughter) Here we are a small community, a few

million refugees, survivors, always the saving remnant,
[00:37:00] and the world simply cannot get rid of us. We are
always in the middle of history, always at the crossroad of
ideas, events, struggles. You know, a friend of mine came back
from China, he's a social scientist. And he said, "You know,
there's 11 million -- there's 14 million Jews in the world,
three million Jews are in Israel. And there isn't a day without
Israel being in the headlines, front pages." And he said,
"Three million, what is three million? In China three million,
that's a statistical error." (laughter)

Well, to be Jewish today therefore I believe is madness, but
holy madness, creative madness, human madness, meaning madness
to try [00:38:00] to make others human. A Jew today is, in the
final analysis, an adventure in history, and in everything else.
For him nothing is simple, nothing is boring, a Jew is never
boring. Nor is a Jew ever bored. A Jew today is a melody, an
ancient melody with unique reverberations. A Jew today is a
tale, a memory, a plea. A Jew today is a plea, for all our
writings are pleas. Some of you may remember your mothers or
grandmothers in Europe, the most popular form of prayer were
called *techinot*, *techina*, in Yiddish *techines*, pleas. My
grandmother would always have a plea on her lips. Well, we
always have pleas on ours. All our writings are pleas, pleas

for survivors, for their children, [00:39:00] for their friends. All our writings are pleas for survival, not only our own, mankind's. The theme of children has not ceased to haunt me, their innocence, their sadness, their beauty, their melancholy, their knowledge. Our Jewish children in Europe in those days knew more than the oldest of my old teachers. They knew what life is all about, what death meant to the living. Those Jewish children in Eastern Europe knew they were going to be killed and how. And their knowledge drives us into insanity, for the pain is unbearable.

Another category of children that has become an obsession with me, [00:40:00] are the children of survivors. What do they think when they look at their parents or when their parents look at them? There is one, therefore, one chapter that I've devoted to children of survivors. The young man confronting me is one of my best students. His features are drawn, his collar is unbuttoned, he's biting his lips, and his eyes avoid mine. "The hero of your new novel," he says, looking distraught. That was when I published a novel called *The Oath*. "The hero is I. You are surprised? So am I. But you should no longer be surprised by anything. Your protagonist's story is mine. My father is sad and silent, his wife and their children perished [00:41:00] in the camps. My mother is sad and silent, her husband and

their children perished in the camps. After the Liberation my mother and father met and were married, and I am their son -- but every time they look at me, I know it is not me they are seeing." And choking back his sobs he pauses, and then he assumes a fierce, almost savage expression. "It's not me, it's not me they are seeing," he repeats.

Benjamin is helpless and confused. Unable to cope with life, unable to work. In his town in Galicia, he had been the director of the best school. Inside the ghetto he had organized evening classes for adults and regular classes for children. But he kept losing his pupils -- the adults after a few [00:42:00] weeks, the children after a few months. At war's end Benjamin turned down offers to teach, and when people tried to persuade him, he'd answer, "I'd rather sweep the streets. I'd rather beg. I'd rather do anything." And one day he explained to me, "Imagine some ten children in the classroom. All hungry. All frightened. Marked by death. I speak to them, and they do not understand. I try again, I quote examples, I insist, I emphasize, I get angry -- still they do not understand. The words and images I have used elude them. I have spoken to them of apple trees. What is an apple tree? And what is nature? Spring? Fields of flowers in bloom? And what does happiness mean? Serenity? And what is a piece of cake? [00:43:00]

Confronted with their questions, I feel wretched, foolish. And I know that they will die without knowing." And Benjamin wearily lowered his gaze, "When words have lost all meaning for children, it is a sure sign of disaster," he says.

Another story: Facing the inmates assembled on the Appellplatz, the two men seemed to be acting out an unreal scene. "Deny your faith and you will eat for an entire week," the German officer is yelling. "No," says the Jew quietly. "Curse your God, curse Him and you will have an easy job." "No," says the Jew quietly. "Repudiate Him, and I will protect you." "Never," says the Jew quietly. "Never? What does that [00:44:00] mean? A minute? In a minute you will die. So, then will you finally obey me?" The inmates hold their breath, some watch the officer, others have eyes only for their comrade. "God means more to you than life," says the officer, "more than I? You asked for it, you fool." He draws his gun, raises his hand, takes aim, and shoots. The bullet enters the inmate's shoulder. He sways and his comrades in the first row see his face twist. And they hear him whisper the ancient call of the martyrs of the faith, *Adoshem hu ha Elokim, Adoshem hu ha Elokim* -- God is God, God alone is God. "You swine, you dirty Jew," screams the officer. "Can't you see I am more powerful than your God? Your life is in my hands, not in his. You need me more than him. Choose me

and you will go the hospital, and you will recover, and you will eat, and you will be happy." "Never," says the Jew, [00:45:00] gasping. The officer examines him at length. He suddenly seems fearful. Then he shoots a second bullet into the man's other shoulder. And a third. And a fourth. And the Jew goes on whispering, "God is God, God is..." The last bullet strikes him in the mouth. "I was there," his son tells me. "I was there, and the scene seems unbelievable to me." "You see," he says, "my father was a hero. But he was not a believer."

Another story: Were all Kapos corrupt? Were all of them sadists? Are they all to be condemned without exception? A young student is asking these questions. Her voice betrays her anguish; the subject seems to tear her apart. "I know, I know that they mistreated their comrades, [00:46:00] but did they have a choice? True they were fed somewhat better, they were a little more secure, but can we blame them? Were they all volunteers, profit seekers? Is there nothing to be said in their defense? For example, did they not try to act as buffer between the executioners and the deportees? Surely they hoped to alleviate their comrades' suffering. Can we really blame them for having compromised more than the others, for having succumbed before the others?" She flares up, stares at us. And

she says, "Is there nothing, nothing at all to be said on behalf of my father?"

And one more story. Joel the Redhead was five years old, and he knew that he must not shout; to shout was dangerous. An unusually clever hiding place had been found for him: under the cave whose entrance, according to the experts, could not be found. Joel was not alone there. With him were his father, [00:47:00] his mother, his older brother Yekutiel, and his Uncle Zanvel, whom he loved because he told him stories. Joel knew many things, but not whether it was day or night outside. In his cave under the cave it was always dark, which increased its value and price according to the ghetto engineers. During the raids, the subterranean inhabitants had learned to communicate silently. Uncle Zanvel told his funny stories without a sound. Joel's father was the first to go, having ventured out to look for water one night. A rifle shot cut him down. A scream was heard. That was all. And in the shelter, Joel succeeded in crying without crying. His mother placed her hand over his mouth when a few days later Yekutiel was arrested. That same evening she, too, was taken. Joel the Redhead knew that he was going to burst with pain, but his Uncle Zanvel's hand was on his mouth. [00:48:00] Zanvel too disappeared, and Joel was left alone in the darkness, his hand covering his mouth. He began to

sob without a sound, scream without a sound, survive without a sound.

And one more short story: She's beautiful and gentle, the young girl tormenting her mother. To hurt her more she speaks to her without anger, in a quiet very tender voice. "Mother," she said, "you were my age, and you knew life, didn't you? You knew what evil man is capable of, didn't you? You saw what I shall never see. You endured more than any human being can tolerate. You understood quickly that life is but a farce and that beautiful statements and grandiloquent [00:49:00] words are not worth a mouthful of breath. Isn't it true you understood? The victory of bestiality, you saw it. The future, a stupid invention, you were my age, mother, when you discovered the harsh and terrible truth about the void and its impact, about evil and its power. And so, mother, I don't understand you. Why did you give birth to me? You who are so intelligent, you knew what the world does to its children, why then did you insist on giving birth? And why did it have to be me, tell me?" Maybe you are aware of it, in the last couple of weeks and months, there is a new crisis among teenagers, college students, [00:50:00] many suicides. And personally I know families of survivors and some children committed suicide. And their indictment of the world is harsh. And children refuse to live

in a world that means the world is doomed, that means something is wrong, basically wrong with those who live in it.

Well, in conclusion I shall read to you a plea for the survivors themselves, but one preliminary remark. What follows was written in 1975. I published it in France a year later in 1976. I insist upon it because when [00:51:00] you will hear it you may think that this was a response to a certain TV program. It was not. Another remark, which is funny and sad, survivors usually are unlucky, and their writings are unlucky too. This plea was purchased by the *New York Times* to be pre-published in its totality; it's huge, some thirty pages. When? The first Sunday in September. (laughter)

"At first glance it seems insane: a plea for the survivors? Now, so many years after the event? For them the war has been over for a long time just as it has for you. The gates of hell are shut. [00:52:00] The executioner's laws abolished. For the survivors, as for everyone else, the nightmare belongs to the night and its mysterious kingdom. Death no longer lies in wait for them. The enemy no longer has a hold on them. The past? Carried away by the dead, entombed in what is already considered ancient history. For what possible reason would the survivors need to be defended?"

And yet -- they do need to be defended as much as the victims long ago. With one difference: for the victims it is too late.

For the survivors, too, it is getting late. Their number decreases. There are not many left, fewer and fewer. These days they most frequently meet at funerals. Their ranks are thinning rapidly. Surely a matter of age, but there is something else as well. Is it possible to die more than once? Yes, it is. [00:53:00] Those who have come out of Majdanek and Belzec die again and again. Every time they join the silent processions they never really left. In this as well, they constitute a separate doomed, rapidly disappearing species. An isolated and tragically maligned species.

While it is fashionable these days to soothe the sensibilities of all minorities -- ethnic, social, religious, and others -- few seem to worry about offending that particular minority. Its suffering is exploited, distorted, monopolized, embellished, or debased, according to the need of the moment. And the helpless and distraught survivors have no alternative but to submit, let it happen -- and say thank you.

Do you have any idea of how many [00:54:00] survivors die of heart attacks? Or is it despair? Do you have any idea how many resign themselves to sorrow and solitude? Or how many regret having survived?

In London, the Polish writer Michal Zylberberg told me shortly before his death, "It is worse than in 1945." A woman in Oslo echoes his feelings: "In '45," she said, "I had a purpose; it has been turned into ridicule." In Brooklyn, the great Talmudic jurist Rabbi Menashe Klein smiles: "If I had known, in liberated Buchenwald, what the outside world was going to be like, I would have refused to leave."

Some writers and poets chose death: Joseph Wulf in Berlin, Tadeusz Borowski in Poland, Paul Celan in Paris, Benno Werzberg in Israel and others, and others. Their decision condemns society, for it carried [00:55:00] out the task that the killers did not have time to complete.

I speak without bitterness, and even without anger. I feel only sadness. For you, for all of us. Together we have bungled a story unlike any other. An event that by itself should have brought about a greater sense of awareness, an all-encompassing metamorphosis, was reduced to the level of anecdote. As for us,

we were too numb, too weak, and perhaps too timid to object to what was happening before our eyes.

The Holocaust -- I even hesitate now to use the word, for now we must qualify do I mean the show or the event -- The Holocaust no longer evokes the mystery or the forbidden. It no longer arouses fear or trembling, [00:56:00] or even outrage or compassion. For you, it is one calamity among so many others, slightly more morbid than the others. You enter it, you leave it, and you return to your ordinary occupations. You thought yourself capable of imagining the unimaginable; you have seen nothing. You thought yourself capable of discussing the unspeakable; you have understood nothing, you have retained nothing.

You have retained nothing of its blinding truth. You prefer limitation. For you, all these horrors, all these atrocities undoubtedly are terrible but not extraordinary phenomena, possibly the result of mental aberration.

Auschwitz? The decadence of an ideology. Treblinka? To be demystified, demythified. You thought that you could face the agony of a people; you have felt nothing.

One reaches the point [00:57:00] of longing for the days when only a few people dare speak of it; now everybody does. Too much. And too lightly. Without any respect, any reticence. One disinters the dead in order to question, mutilate, or silence them. No matter if it offends the survivors. No matter if it hurts them. Survivors are ordinary men like all the others. And perhaps worse. No need to spare them, to censor oneself when talking to them or about them. The special consideration extended to them yesterday is gone. And if that displeases them, that is their problem. Why do they have to listen, why do they have to watch? Let them go away. If they ask questions, if they make trouble, you will have to still their voice and put them in their place. They are entitled to no privileges; their past no longer protects them.

Oh yes, [00:58:00] more than ever -- or at least as much as ever -- they need to be defended.

Spring 1945. Rescued almost against their will, the survivors realized how old and lonely they were. And how useless. Nothing but frightening ghosts.

They did not know how they had eluded the enemy and cheated death. They knew they had nothing to do with it. The choice

had not been theirs. Intelligence, education, intuition, experience, courage -- nothing had counted. Everything had been arranged by chance, only chance. A step towards the right or the left, a movement begun too early or too late, a change in mood of a particular overseer, and their fate would have been different. In the ghettos the question had been whether it was wiser to hold onto the yellow certificates or, rather, [00:59:00] to the red attestations? Whether to hide in the attics or in the cellars? In the camps, would it have been better to take initiatives and call in sick? Every survivor will tell you that he could easily have stayed *there*, and in a way that is where he still is.

Time does not heal all wounds; there are those that remain painfully open. How can one forget the passion, the violence a simple crust of moldy bread can inspire? Or the near-worship evoked by a slightly better dressed, better nourished, less beaten inmate? How can one repress the memory of the indifference one had felt towards the corpses, one's own corpse? Will you ever know what it is like to wake up under a frozen sky, on a journey toward the unknown, and to record without surprise [01:00:00] that the man in front of you is dead, as is the one before him and the one behind you? And suddenly a thought crosses one's mind: What if I, too, am already dead and

do not know it? And this thought also is registered with indifference.

Will you ever know the nature of a world where, as in Moses' time in the desert, the living and the dead are no longer separate? Will you ever know what a survivor knows?

Tainted, haunted, diminished, gnawed by doubt and remorse, the "liberated" men and women lead a private existence. They stay among themselves, closed and uncommunicative, in a kind of invisible ghetto, relating to the outside world with difficulty. They do not join in our celebrations, they do not laugh at our jokes. Their frame of reference is not ours. [01:01:00] Neither is their vocabulary. Their vocabulary is their code; their memory is their initiation.

You will not find it easy to understand them. Indeed you never did understand them. In spite of appearances, they are not of this world, not of this era. Ask them whether they are happy. No matter what they answer it will not be true. Ask them whether the future tempts them or frightens them. No matter what they answer, that, too, will not be true.

Ask them whether on the day of their liberation they experienced joy. And permit me to answer in their stead. It is a day I

remember as an empty day. Empty of happiness, of feeling, of emotion. Empty of hope. We no longer had the strength even to weep. There were those who recited the *Kaddish* in an absentminded sort of way, addressing an absent God on behalf [01:02:00] of the absent.

We were all absent, the dead and the survivors.

During the tempest of fire, the victims were naïve enough to feel certain that the so-called civilized world knew nothing of their plight. If the killers could kill freely, it was only because the Allies were not informed.

"If only the Allies knew," people said to one another in the ghettos and in the camps. If only Roosevelt knew. If only Churchill knew. If only the Pope knew. If only the American Jews knew, and the English, the Palestinian, the Swedish, the Swiss Jews, if only they knew. The victims steadfastly believed that when they knew the situation would change immediately. There was logic in their reasoning. Hitler and Himmler were operating the death factories without any interference because the Allies were not informed. If only [01:03:00] the Allies were to know of Auschwitz, Auschwitz would cease to exist.

They were wrong. The proof is definite, irrefutable. People knew -- and kept silent. People knew -- and did nothing. Fortunately, the survivors found out only after the liberation. Their so-called defenders on the outside did not even have the excuse of ignorance. Do you know that not one military plan was changed by any army simply to liberate the camp one day before it was scheduled on the map? And they knew. One merely has to consult the newspapers and magazines of the period: it was all there, it is all there.

From late 1942, they printed detailed plans [01:04:00] of the Final Solution. The names Treblinka and Auschwitz were known in New York and Stockholm much earlier than in Bialystok, Bedzin, and Sighet. Three days after the start of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, *The New York Times* gave full coverage to the rebellion. It was all there, the Germans' onslaught, the spectators' glee, and the rebels' bravery. And the suicides and the fires. Covered also were the liquidation of other ghettos, the Babi Yar Massacre, the gas chambers. Yes, the free-world press did its duty, but the majority of its readers refused to believe. They knew it all and believed none of it. And those who had risked their own lives and freedom to alert the universal conscience -- those daring inmates who inside Auschwitz had succeeded not only in building a radio transmitter

but in using it, [01:05:00] those nocturnal heroes of the Sonderkommando, whose pages I have read here some years ago, those Sonderkommandos who had succeeded not only in photographing hell but in smuggling the photographs out to Krakow and then to London, and to Washington -- it was all in vain. The Allied governments knew as much if not more than they. It is no longer a secret to anyone that when the Allied leaders were asked to bomb the railroad tracks leading to Birkenau, they unanimously and categorically refused -- and this during a period when in Birkenau alone more than 10,000 Jews were exterminated, day after day.

What do you say? I don't know what do you say to such madness. [01:06:00] How could one, how can one help but wonder what would have happened if? If our brothers had shown more compassion, more initiative, more daring? If a million Jews had demonstrated in front of the White House? If the officials of all Jewish institutions had called for a day of fasting -- just one -- to express their outrage? If Jewish notables had started a hunger strike as the ghetto fighters had requested? And I think of poor Mordechai Anielewicz and his high command, the entire high command together they didn't amount to 120 years, and they took Jewish history on the shoulders without any reference. The last fighter before Anielewicz was Bar Kochba.

[01:07:00] And the world knew, and no one sent even a message of encouragement, let alone weapons, money. If, if, if, what would have happened if the heads of major schools, if rabbis, merchants, artists had decided to make a gesture of solidarity, just one, who knows, the enemy might have desisted. For he was cautious.

A friend, a university friend, one of the most famous professors in America, who was a former Roosevelt advisor, confessed to me, and I quote him, "We were a group of Jewish high officials in Washington and we customarily gathered once a week. Yes, we knew what was happening in the camps. Why didn't we do anything? Because the Jewish political leaders never asked us."

[01:08:00] Well, soon after victory, the survivors discovered the betrayal, the world -- the last letters sent out by Anielewicz contained this word: betrayal. He wrote to his friends to not forget how we were betrayed. So, therefore, after the liberation, when the survivors discovered the truth, there were those -- and among them adolescents -- who deliberately let themselves slide into death. They had no desire to be a part of a society capable of so much hypocrisy.

Well, they didn't know. On the contrary they had felt wanted. To the extent that they could imagine the future, they saw it as

a series of sunny joyous days. [01:09:00] They told themselves that if by some miracle they survived, people would go out of their way to give them back their taste for life. People would refuse them nothing.

They were convinced that to make amends, to clear their conscience, people everywhere would treat them as important visitors, guests of honor. That they would try to console them, heap kindness on them. Appease them. To restore to them, however partially and foolishly, for one day or one night, that which had been taken away from them: their zest for life, their faith in man.

The disappointment came almost at once. As they reentered the world, they found themselves in another kind of exile, another kind of prison. People welcomed them with tears and sobs, then turned away. I don't mean parents or close friends; I speak of officialdom, of the man in the street. I speak of all kinds of men and women who treated [01:10:00] them as one would sick and needy relatives. Or else as specimens to be observed and to be kept apart from the rest of the society by invisible barbed wire. They were disturbing misfits who deserved charity, but nothing else.

True, the French returned to France, and the Italians to Italy. But the great majority, those from Central Europe, the stateless of all descriptions, had no homes, no families to go to. All those broken, trampled men, those exhausted, humiliated women, those lonely adolescents for whom nobody was waiting in their little towns, in their little hamlets without Jews, where could they find refuge? Left to fend for themselves they vegetated for years in camp barracks designated for "displaced persons." From time to time they were exhibited for the purpose of "moving" [01:11:00] certain wealthy visitors or influential committees. They were considered sub-humans. Nobody wanted them. Just as nobody had wanted them before.

The gates of Palestine, still under British mandate, were shut. The Western European governments grudgingly admitted small numbers of refugees. I shall not soon forget my frequent trips to the police station in Paris every time my "residence permit," my student card, or my travel papers needed to be renewed. The United States, as in the '30s, distributed its visas parsimoniously and with shockingly bad grace. To obtain a visa, one was subjected to innumerable examinations and investigations; only healthy candidates, armed with voluminous attestations and certificates, could hope to be admitted.

[01:12:00] Only those who were "normal," robust, productive,

capable of work with affidavits. Or the cousins. And the others? What about the sick, the wretched, the weak, the hopeless -- what was to become of them? Let them go elsewhere said the consuls in their respective languages, citing their respective laws. Let them wait, said the princes, through various intermediaries; not everyone may enter The Castle.

Well, of course, people sent them packages and postcards, speakers and philanthropists. Their material needs were taken care of. They were watched over; their rooms were inspected, their menus carefully established. They were treated as beggars, or ill-adjusted children. Their leisure, their demands, their hopes were all programmed. Condescendingly, used clothing, shoes with holes, mended [01:13:00] suits collected from charitable families were distributed among them. No need to give them new shirts, dressed in good condition -- that was the consensus in America -- those poor devils will be content with our leftovers. It occurred to none of those charitable organizers that these were people who had once upon a time been more accustomed to give than to receive, and that they could be offended. They were thought to be without dignity. Worse: incapable of dignity. They were thought to be devoid of taste, insensitive to beauty -- born vagrants. People tossed them alms and turned their backs.

I have it from friends who were there, who were the leaders of Bergen-Belsen after the liberation, do you know that when the lethal epidemic ravaged the liberated camp of Bergen-Belsen, its Jewish leaders had to appeal to German [01:14:00] doctors, some of whom still wore the hated uniform? Not one Jewish doctor in New York, or Zurich, Stockholm, or Tel-Aviv felt it his duty to leave his practice to tend to his brothers in distress. For weeks and weeks the patients saw only doctors whose very presence -- not much earlier -- had inspired them with terror. The war was over for everybody except for the survivors.

What I'm telling you hurts me. I'm not saying it to accuse, the time is gone, we're not accusing, we never have. But only to share. Do you know that not one rabbi offered to leave his pulpit and to go to Bergen-Belsen and to lead the High Holy Day services? [01:15:00] They were swamped with prayer books and ritual objects -- and more or less politely told to shift for themselves. With the exceptions of salaried officials of specialized international organizations, the Jewish Agency, the Joint, the Oorah, nobody felt the need or took the time to be with them and share their joys, as well as their mourning. People took advantage of them for political purposes; expressing indignation on their behalf, using them to influence votes, to

start press campaigns, organize conferences. Obedient and disillusioned, they complied. People made speeches about them - without them.

Do you know that not one survivor was asked to be a member of the special council in charge of the financial reparation negotiations with West Germany, the Claims Conference? Not one survivor was given a chance to air his views on the distribution of funds. [01:16:00] Not one survivor sat on the international council of the famous Claims Conference and for many, many years on the Memorial Foundation. Others expressed themselves on behalf of the dead, not they. Others managed their inheritance; they were not considered qualified even to plead their own cause, in their own behalf. Recluses, outcasts, that was how people saw them. Incompetent all. Misfits, troublemakers, kill-joys, carriers of disease. To be dealt with only with caution. It was perfectly proper to give them sympathy, but from afar. Let them stay in the background, where they could do no harm or attract attention. Tell me, were you afraid or ashamed of them? Did they make you feel guilty, though you were guilty only by omission? Is that why you dreaded their presence? Why you could not look them in the eyes? [01:17:00]

The time may have come to tell you outright what we have been repeating to one another in whispers: that the survivors were considered intruders and treated everywhere without affection, and surely without love. There may have been pity, but no tenderness, and particularly no brotherly warmth, which is what they needed most of all.

How can we not be angry with you for that? How can we not remind you of that? Perhaps one day you will be forgiven for what you did or did not do during the Kingdom of Night, but not for what you did or did not do *after*. During the catastrophe you could invoke attenuating circumstances: you did not know, you refused to believe, you were in the midst of a war. After the catastrophe none of [01:18:00] these excuses were valid. You knew, and what did you do to change? Surely not much towards the survivors. They embodied a yearning, the purest and most beautiful of yearnings, and you ignored them and their feelings.

I shall conclude, it's a long, long essay, but I shall conclude because we have to conclude.

And yet, if you only knew, if you only knew how the survivors felt about you.

At first they felt gratitude, profound, moving gratitude. They blessed you day and night, so grateful were they to you for having lived outside the cursed universe, outside its laws, far from them, far from the abyss. [01:19:00]

They were grateful to you for not having lived through their pain. They were grateful to you for living and for letting them live normal lives: eat, drink, walk, sleep, read, sing, and cry. They did not begrudge you your freedom, your happiness. Quite the opposite. They thanked you for every breath of fresh air. For every affectionate gesture. For every meal proffered or shared. For every friendly word. They never stopped thanking. Thank you, men. Thank you, women. Thank you for smiling, thank you for making us smile. Thank you, forest and clouds. Thank you, bread. Thank you, fruit. Thank you, quiet nights without screams or the sound of guns. Thank you, silence.

You did not know it, you could not guess it, but the survivors [01:20:00] bore you no ill-feeling; they felt neither anger nor envy. On the contrary, they loved you. They loved you for having led a human existence during the catastrophe. Oh yes, they loved you for not having suffered.

And then came the moment of disillusionment. And of remorse. Perhaps it would have been better if they had disclosed nothing, said nothing, if they had wrapped themselves in a protective and cleansing silence. We began to have doubts then and now, these doubts are turning into obsessions. They question every one of their joys, live in perpetual anxiety: are they speaking out so as not to go mad or because they are mad already?

Perhaps Adorno was right after all. After Auschwitz, poetry may no longer be possible. Or literature. [01:21:00] Or friendship. Or hope. Or anything. Majdanek signifies the end. All that remains from the fire is the taste of ashes. Nothing more, nothing else. People will not understand the stammerings of the survivors who thought they had taught mankind its most fiery lesson of survival and morality. They went unheeded. And they were punished for having tried.

For the survivors, the Holocaust continued beyond the Holocaust.

A plea for the survivors? I know, it seems insane. It is not.

Accept the idea that you will never see what they have seen--and go on seeing now, that you will never know the faces that haunt their nights, that you will never hear the cries that rent their

sleep. Accept the idea that you will never penetrate the cursed [01:22:00] and spellbound universe they carry within themselves with unfailing loyalty.

And so, I tell you: You who have not experienced their anguish, you who do not speak their language, you who do not mourn their death, think before you offend them, before you betray them again. Think before you substitute your memory for theirs. Wait until the last survivor, the last witness, has joined the long procession of silent ghosts whose judgment one day will resound and shake the earth and its Creator. Wait.

A plea for the survivors is not only for the survivors, it's for our sanity. The way you treat them is now an indication of your measure of understanding, of your readiness [01:23:00] to enter into a tale which is part of our history, a tale which belongs to all of us, a tale which in spite of everything, must one day generate compassion and not anger, must one day give faith and not despair, and must one day make children, all children, ready for life. Thank you. (applause)

M1:

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