

Elie Wiesel Modern Tales: Commitment to History

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive November 19 1981

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) I remember the first evening we had at the Y, and tonight I shall try actually to refer to that evening more than once. Legend has it that when the great Jewish/French actress Sarah Bernhardt was young, she lived in a flat on the first floor. When she was old she lived in the same house but on the tenth floor, and there was no elevator. (laughter) They asked her why. And she said, "Because I want people, when they come to see me, they should have palpitations." (laughter)

[00:01:00] In this case it's a little bit different; the more we advance in years, the more I have palpitations because it's getting to be more and more difficult to find things to say and not to repeat them. Those of you who have been here with us for 15 years -- 15 times 4, 60 -- 60 encounters, or lessons, or *shiurim*, know that it's not easy. On this fourth Thursday usually what we do is we tell a few stories, we recapitulate what we have said, and we try to add a few elements, a few more questions, some answers. And also we read from a work in progress. It is here that I have read first pages from *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, *The Oath*, *Souls on Fire*, *Messengers*, and of course *The Testament*. [00:02:00]

Tonight I'm going to read from Luria. "I owe this letter unto my grandfather," says the person who writes, "who himself inherited it from his uncle, a strange man who no one took seriously. This uncle had been told a story by his maternal grandfather, Rabbi Issachar, a true Kabbalist, who had attributed it to his master, Rabbi Ephraim, who was said to possess the powers of the Maharal, but who refused to use them for the fear of blundering. And also because, he claimed, that the Lord, Blessed be his Name, ought to save our people without intermediaries. And now you would like to hear the story of the Golem, wouldn't you? Well, I liked him, and I was not the only one. We all loved him. To us he was a savior, a mute and unhappy savior, that is what he was. Nobody understood the Golem because nobody [00:03:00] could live at his level. Do you know any people who live only for others, who devote every breath, every flutter of an eyelid, every inch of their being to a single sacred purpose, to protect the life, the sleep, and the future of one's community? He was said to be a fool, I know. They said he was stupid, retarded, I don't agree. He was a saint.

May I burn in hell if I'm lying, what I'm saying is the truth. As a member of the *Chevra Kadisha*, the Holy Brotherhood, I know

the fragility of life and the power of death. I know that they are separated by the most tenuous thread. Is it the same for what is true and what is false? You don't lie to gravediggers, and you cannot make them lie. So, listen to me carefully, I declare under oath that Yossel, the Mute, as he was called, the Golem, the Leymener Golem, the Golem made of clay, created by the great and famous Rabbi Yehudah Leib of Prague, blessed by his memory, [00:04:00] deserves to be remembered by our people, our persecuted and assassinated, and yet immortal people. And we owe it to him that his fate be evoked lovingly and with gratitude. You must understand, if I tell you that the Golem, through his duties as well as through his achievements, was a fully accomplished being, it is because we miss him. More than ever we could use his presence and perhaps even his mystery. As usual, the year promises to be one of punishment. I feel it in every cell of my body, I have lived through too many ordeals not to be able to predict what the future has in store. Of course I have faith in God, I would not be a Jew if I moved in nothingness. But neither would I be a Jew if I were not afraid, I am used to it. What can I say, I read the signs, and I know how to interrupt them. [00:05:00]

On the face of death, on the table of purification, I sometimes read not the past, but what the past breeds. Sometimes I know

that there are men who enter death because they choose to escape the wretched earth, which at first bears us, and then devours us. If only the Golem was still among us, I would sleep more peacefully. So, tell me, why did the Maharal take him from us? Did he really believe that the era of suffering and injustice had been abolished forever? That we no longer needed a protector, a shield? Tell me, please. The Maharal who knew everything, didn't he know that exile after him would become harder than before, even more cruel, that the burden would become heavier, more bloody? He could have left us his Golem; he should have, what did he fear? A mass movement that would have turned the Golem into an idol? He was mute, our Yossel the Mute, he wouldn't have dreamed [00:06:00] of turning us away from the path that leads to God, on the contrary. But why did he have to return to dust? Certainly all men are mortal, but the Golem was different, you know that. If you want my opinion the Golem made of clay was immortal, as immortal as the hatred he was asked to fight. Today, as yesterday, someone must stand between that hatred and us. Could the Golem come back to life? Only he could prevent blood from spilling, only he could disarm the murderers and conquer evil. He was a savior, I am telling you."

So, this is the story, in the translation of Anne Borchartd, about the Golem of whom you know so much. No Jewish child in Eastern Europe remained unmoved or unimpressed by this extraordinary man, created or invented by the legendary Maharal of Prague, with the sole purpose of saving Jews from blood libel. We all heard stories upon stories [00:07:00] about his adventures, triumphs, ingenious solutions to tragic situations. I remember as a child I was fond of him, and afraid of him, and afraid for him. The idea to write or rather rewrite his story was not mine, but that of a great artist, Mark Podwal. I've admired his work in many books, and one day he came to me with the idea that he should do the drawings for a book for which I would do the text. And I liked that *shidduch* and it was a good match because he, with his keen eye of the artist, has a way of seeing what nobody else can see. And therefore, if you want to see what he sees, some of his drawings of the Maharal and other things are in the hall. Soon, next year I hope, you will be able to see it in book form. [00:08:00]

In my long and exhaustive research on the Golem, I was disturbed by the uniformity, if not by the monotony of the stories. Somehow they always sounded the same. There is always a Christian child being lost or killed and hidden somewhere in a Jewish house, so as to allow the enemies to accuse the entire

Jewish community of ritual murder or blood libel. And then the community turns to the Maharal and he in turn sends the Golem on his usual and unusual mission, to discover the body, identify the killer, and confound the accuser. It never failed. Then I understood that it could not be otherwise. What is Jewish history if not a repetition of actions undertaken by enemies to destroy it and us? Their arguments manifest an astonishing lack of originality. What Haman said in Shushan, Pharaoh had already said much earlier. Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, Chrysostomus, Luther, Torquemada, Hitler, Stalin, they repeated [00:09:00] the same accusations. The Jews were too Jewish or not enough, too rich or too poor, too clever or too foolish, too nationalistic and at the same time, too universalist. They hated us for remaining loyal to our tradition and for repudiating it. Who was hated with more passion by the Nazis and by Beria: The assimilated Jews or the pious ones? Strange but true, our will to survive in a hostile world is equaled only by its own drive to expel us from organized existence. At least if the enemies would use some imagination, but they don't. They are satisfied to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors, which they did in the time of Maharal's reign in Prague. The blood libels were no new accusation. They had already provoked and justified many pogroms elsewhere.

The Maharal's response, according to legend, was innovative. He had imagination. But then this is true of more than one period [00:10:00] in our history. Whenever the enemies emerged with their old attacks on us, we tried to find always a new response. In other words, Judaism is not a history of persecution, it is a history of responses to persecution. What was the Talmud of Rabbi Zeira, that we studied two weeks ago, if not a response to the destruction of Jerusalem and its sovereignty? What was the Old Rabbi's Hasidism, if not a response to his memories of Khmelnytsky? The Golem was the Maharal's response. Now, why was the legend attributed to him? Why not to the Besht or the Ari Hakadosh? You study the Maharal's work and you realize that the Golem legend is out of character. The Maharal told Talmudic interpretation and commentary, *halachah* and law, *niglah* and *nistar*. He was a teacher, a scholar, a thinker, a leader, a spokesman, not a miracle maker. [00:11:00] There is absolutely nothing in his work that as far as relates to the Golem. And yet, he is supposed to have been his author and creator. Why?

Many have asked the question, few have come up with an answer, but everybody knows the story. And so, as we are about to conclude yet another series of our annual encounters, we shall retell the story, and some others as well. But I think I should open some parentheses, and this time I would to thank, really,

Joan Jacobson, whose grace and beauty have enriched whatever is taking place in this hall. I also would like to thank Dr. Jarenovsky for his *bracha*. And you all for your creative presence. And since we refer to custom, of course, we must remember that there is some customs which you are expecting now. And you wonder, how is he going to do it? (laughter) Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz, one of our favorite masters, used to say, "It's very strange that it's written in the Aseret Hadibrot, the Ten Commandments, the commandment *lo tignov*, don't steal, and many, many people have written many, many commentaries on what the true meaning could be *lo tignov*, don't steal. And yet, it is so simple, don't steal means don't steal. Which means if you want to open the doors, open them." (laughter)

I wonder whether any one of you remembers the first biblical portrait [00:13:00] we tried to draw here. Was it Abraham? Was it Adam? No, it was Job. The first time we tried to explore the beauty, the grandeur, the mystery, the humanity of scripture, was through Job. I tried to rehabilitate him. "No," I said then, "he did not submit, no, he did not yield. He did not accept resignation. His silence when confronting God's question was an act of rebellion on his part," I said. And you remember from reading scriptures, at the end of his life he's rewarded with new fortunes, and children, and honors. Still,

says scripture, he died, and the expression is *zaken usvayamim*, old and satiated with years, satiated. Which, of course, usually people take as a compliment, as a reward. [00:14:00] He was so old that he lived long. For me it was a clue. *Seva yamim*, the expression *seva yamim*, satiated, I took it for being fed up with life. By then he had gained a clear idea of what one may or may not expect from one's fellow man, from life, from destiny. He knew that there are times when the game is lost from the outset, one cannot win. And then if you check the Bible, you will see there are very few ancestors about whom the expression is being used. The other one is, or before him, is Itzhak, Isaac. He, too, died *seva yamim* satiated with life, fed up. Because he, too, understood what we now understand. And yet, I believe that Job chose to protest, to rebel, [00:15:00] in code, so that his message would reach out generations later, and it did. If he gave in so quickly and declared himself guilty, I said then it was because he wanted us to guess that it was not true. The story has a happy end unworthy of Job and he knew it. And so, he died therefore satiated with life.

One more element which I didn't notice then, because the beauty in all this is that when I study in order to be prepared here, I don't stop studying once I give the lecture. I go on studying afterwards, and I come back to Job as I come back to Abraham and

Itzhak many, many times. And very often I find things later, and I always wonder when is going to be the time when I will tell you what I should have told you then. And tonight, because it's a special night, may be the night. I didn't notice then in Job, I didn't notice something which I only noticed now.

[00:16:00] I reread the ending. I quote, "And Job re-became wealthier than before and he was visited by all his brothers, and sisters, and friends." Wait a minute, he had brothers and sisters? He had friends, yes, we know that he had three friends, the famous three friends of whom we are not so proud. But he had more friends? Where were they? Where were they in the beginning when he needed them? But that is the lesson of Job: when he needed his brothers, and sisters, and friends, they were not there. When they came, he no longer needed them. When did they come? When they needed him; when he was, again, rich, and forgiven, and wealthy, and happy. So, Job, as you see, is a tale of human sadness? No, I believe it's a tale of human lucidity. [00:17:00]

The second portrait, I think, was on the *Akedah*. Abraham and Isaac during the offering, the act that almost changed Jewish history, and some of you may know that this theme has permeated all of our encounters here. There was hardly a year without some reference, obscure or not, to that drama involving a father

and his son, both ordered by God to reach for the inhuman by transcending their humanity. And there, too, I tried to show Abraham as a compassionate yet irascible protagonist. I stated my belief that from the beginning, he had known that he would not have gone through with the *Akedah*, he would not kill his son. And therefore it was only a test, a test between him and God. Who will give in first? And the *nisayon*, the test was a double test, and both won. Of course I felt [00:18:00] deeply for Isaac, after all what is our generation if not an *Akedah* in reverse? It was not the father sacrificing his son, but the son sacrificing his father. But then, think of Isaac. You remember Isaac? He was Sarah's boy. While Abraham, as a world statesman, was constantly abroad fighting with kings and nations, Sarah took care of their son at home. Isaac, I am sure, must have wished to be alone with his father, at least once, and finally his dream came true. Father and son were alone. Few words were exchanged. You remember, long silence that lasted almost three days. And suddenly, what did Isaac see? He saw a knife, a knife in his father's hand. Poor Isaac, we said then. His father was trying to prove [00:19:00] something to God but Isaac didn't know it. He was not let into the game. Nobody let him in on the conspiracy. I felt sorry for Isaac and I still do. As for the father, how did he go through with the intermediary motions? Didn't he see his son?

Didn't he notice his fears? Wasn't Abraham touched by Isaac's fear, by Isaac's pain, who didn't know?

And then, only recently did I discover one answer. During the Rosh Hashanah service, I reread the *Akedah*, and I was struck by a passage. You remember after the decree was revoked, Abraham lifted his eyes and, I quote, "*v'hinei ayil achar ne'echaz basvach b'karnav*" "And Abraham saw another ram entangled in the bushes." *Ayil achar* Another ram? [00:20:00] Was there one already there? A first one? No mention of the first ram is to be found in the text. And the explanation, I think, that in his mind, Abraham, who was human after all, imagined Isaac as a ram. He had to, otherwise he couldn't have bound him on the altar. He didn't see his son; he couldn't have bound his son on the altar. He saw a ram, only a ram. And then when he noticed the other one, of course he brought the other one as a burned offering.

And so, we went on year after year. For our first encounters we studied the Bible. And of course, this is to me, this was and will be, a rewarding experience. To take words, to analyze them, and to see what they contain, and to see what clues were left for us [00:21:00] from generations and generations of teachers, and students, and readers, and friends. We felt in

touch with so many of them, that all the dangers of solitude were attenuated. And there is nothing more rewarding for a teacher or for a storyteller than to open a text then enter in it and be shielded by it. What is a text if not a refuge? And in these times of ours we need that kind of refuge. Past and present, the key word has always been encounter. We had our annual encounters. Not only among ourselves, the encounter with the portraits we tried to draw. The encounter with Abraham, the encounter with the Besht, the encounter with Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai in the cave or Rabbi Akiva in the paradise. For what would Jews be and where would they be today were it not for their profound kinship with one another? Without it, [00:22:00] they would be lonely, vulnerable creatures. Thanks to it they are capable of new beginnings. If our voice is heard beyond their realm, if their tale reverberates beyond the spheres of activities because their ties, our ties, transcend time and geographical boundaries. Jews need one another, and when they do, we have to be there. When our adolescents left their home in Eastern Europe, their parents would tell them, remember, be good Jews. That meant remain loyal to the Jewish people. And beyond the Jewish people, remain loyal to humanity, because to us, that is the link to humanity. We cannot remove it. To remove that link would be to remove humanity and ourselves from it. Call it covenant, national conscience, or survival

instinct, such loyalty could be found through centuries of dispersion. Jews always [00:23:00] sought to be together for better or for worse. Sometimes it was bad. But they wanted to be together. And perhaps if they had not been together during the last war, more would have been saved. But it wouldn't have been the same people.

The Jews who left Spain together remained part of our history. Those who stayed behind seeking individual refuge, and/or salvation, as isolated Marranos, ended up on the stake, or in the church, and were lost to our people. The link of the Jewish person to the Jewish people in its totality is what gives both their vitality. We must feel physically, and not only metaphysically, the agony of Rabbi Akiva, and the ecstasy of the Maggid of Mezeritch. We must follow Rabbi Itzhak Luria to Safed, and Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, his Sephardic friend, to Jerusalem. [00:24:00] We are responsible for the past, just as we are to answer for the present. Once we are made aware of this, our life will become enriched, our devotion contagious. Prose will turn into poetry, anecdotes into events, all imbued with an ancient fire, that of Sinai, that of the Temple, the fire of our dreams and prayers running through every one of our words, every one of our thoughts. Suddenly we see Jewish destiny and its imagination at work. And we realize that we

have all been part of an adventure of historical or meta-historical magnitude. Does it mean that we all make history? It is not given to all of us to make history, but it is given to each and every one of us to be part of history, part of the exciting, stimulating, inspiring, and awesome tale that I believe Judaism and Jewish history to be. [00:25:00] And in that tale, the distant past and the distant future merge. Abraham and the Slobodka student are in constant dialogue, Elijah and the wandering beggars meet in the Ukraine, David and ghetto children share the same anguish and are carried by the same chance. On the stage of Jewish history, all characters are eternally linked and involved with one another. And therefore, you and I, whoever you are, we are linked with them, through them.

Well, tonight, we'll also speak about someone who really didn't live; he wasn't part of Jewish history, but he was part of Jewish legend, the Golem. And strangely enough, I found there is an interest, a renewed interest in the Golem. Why? Is it because it is our version of Superman? Was he a pioneer of modern computers? The first one to be [00:26:00] established, the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot, was given a name by the renowned mystical scholar Gershom Scholem. He accepted to speak at the occasion only under one condition, if he could name it,

and he called it the Golem. Many writers and poets and playwrights have been taken by the subject. The Yiddish poet, Leivick, was the latest in the line. He wrote the marvelous play about the Golem who fell in love with a Rabbi's daughter. Could this happen to a computer? Franz Kafka himself was influenced by the legend. What, then, is the hero of Kafka in any of his novels and stories if not a person who is not free to transgress his master's law? A messenger who is here only to deliver a message, a missionary to perform a mission, and then disappear. Kafka's heroes live in a universe of their own and have nothing in common with their neighbors and fellow passengers. Dominated by others, [00:27:00] humiliated and mutilated by life, oscillating between punishment and atonement, language and meaning, the Golem is more victim than emissary. Who is his prince? The Maharal. Which means they know each other, they understand each other.

In Kafka such a bond would be unthinkable. Kafka's heroes are more tragic than the Maharal's or Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. In the legend of the Golem, we see Jewish destiny and Jewish imagination and fantasy intertwined. Did the Golem really exist? Who cares? The Maharal existed, and that is important. We also know and that also is important that when he lived, the Jews were in danger. They were in danger then as they always

have been. And the Golem speaks of danger as much as of miracle. Of course, some people will tell you that we need threats to get the Golem; we needed the Golem to get a beautiful story. In other words, we need external [00:28:00] stress to respond with creative impulses. We need the enemy to resist him. Not so. We Jews believe in peace more than in anguish of war. The golden age produced our philosophers, poets, and scholars. They served as prime ministers, finance ministers, and even commanders-in-chief of the Christian armies of Spain. Only our enemies want us to think that we need them to be more Jewish. We don't need them, but they need us. What we need is inner strength, inner devotion, to shape our moral imagination. What we need is constant awakening, protest against apathy and insensitivity, the most perilous illnesses and curses of our society. The world is too cynical, it is no longer capable of worshipping in ecstasy, it is not capable anymore of adoration. [00:29:00] And when the world does admire someone, it ends in massacre. Remember Guyana? Look at Khomeini. And I think that to be Jewish is to see and hear, and make use of what you see and hear. No experience must be wasted, no memory lost. And yet, we did lose so much.

I always love the image of the scribe that goes to the ritual bath and purifies himself before transcribing God's ineffable

name. And I see in this a profound attitude towards language, God's ineffable name remains ineffable. Once upon a time the high priests knew it, and some masters knew it, but then the Temple was destroyed, and its glory diminished, and its priests exiled, and no one knows God's name anymore. We call Him there for *Hashem*, the name, the name of the name. [00:30:00] Which means that we realize that some things can be lost. In the sixth century, a German barbarian called Hilarius came to Rome and stole the Jewish treasures that the Romans had captured from Jerusalem and brought to Rome. And in those days they would go to Rome to see them. You know, the special, the ornaments of the high priest, and so forth. And unfortunately, Hilarius took them on a ship, and the ship sank, and the treasures with them. So, all we remember, again, is only the memory of the treasures.

What is the Golem? Is he a substitute for memory? Of course not. The Golem is a beautiful story for the child in every one of us. And in the book, together with Mark Podwal, I retold the stories in my own way. I let the child in me retell those stories. [00:31:00] And somehow I became attached to him. But that's my problem, I became attached to many of my heroes. Last year I read to you from *The Testament* about Paltiel Kossover, the poet. I have worked on that book for 15 years, and the real

reason why I worked so long is because I didn't want to let him go. I fell in love with Paltiel Kossover. And so much so that -- something that you cannot see in the English translation, because it was only in the French -- in the original French the book doesn't end. It ends without ending. There is no comma, there is no period, there is no dot, nothing. Simply the sentence breaks in the middle. Because I couldn't end it. The Golem was a little bit less. I loved the Golem, meaning I loved the stories of the Golem. But while working on them, I began feeling something for him.

I'll give you a few more [00:32:00] pages of that story. "The Golem spent his time sleeping or dreaming in his corner, in the rabbinical tribunal. Strangely enough he didn't eat, he didn't drink, at least not in public. Another thing, he didn't get older. Time left no marks on his body. How did he manage this? No one knew. Everything about him was mysterious and silent. There were rumors that from time to time he seemed melancholy. His mouth would open and close as if he wanted to express something inarticulate. His dark eyes became darker, almost unfathomable. What was he thinking? He seemed to be calling someone; I wonder whom. The Maharal came to visit him. He looked at him with sadness and the Golem shrugged his shoulders as if to indicate his impotence and his exhaustion, more

exactly, his feeling of uselessness. Did he realize that he was no longer needed and there was no longer any threat, that his life no longer counted? After a while the Maharal acquired a habit of spending an hour or two with him, [00:33:00] speaking to him softly. And these meetings took place every Friday afternoon. What did the master discuss with his creature made of clay? It was said that he would tell him the story of Adam, whom the Lord brought into the world on Friday of the first week.

The Maharal also became dejected. Was it his age? His superior wisdom? He studied more than ever, exploring all aspects of Jewish life throughout all the kingdoms in the Holy Land. He spent entire days and nights writing the future and the past, law and legend, messianic dreams and current realities. He even wrote a book about military service. He was interested in everything and had an opinion all his own about everything. He would see fewer people. It was as if he knew that he didn't have much more time. Every moment was precious to him. But then, why did he devote so much time to the Golem? Was it the bond a creator feels for his creation? [00:34:00] Did he feel guilty for having brought him fully grown into this world and thus depriving him of childhood? So, you see, the Maharal, too, suddenly felt something for him."

I'll stop here with the Golem and return to the general overall title of our encounters this year. We said that this year we were talking about tales of commitment. But then a tale is by definition a form of commitment. We take an experience, any experience, a dream, any dream, a smile, and we commit them to words and to memory. To tell tales is in itself an act of faith. Unless I believe that what I want to say can be said, and can be heard, or at least to some degree, I would be unable to compose the first line. Unless I believed that tales are [00:35:00] vehicles and living links amongst human beings everywhere, I would be unable to use words. I think I said it here 15 years ago at the beginning of our sessions, a tale of absurdity is a tale against absurdity. Furthermore, to be Jewish for a Jew means to be committed. An indifferent Jew is not human and therefore not Jewish. All the *mitzvot* are forms of commitment. To reject commitment is to reject more than a framework, more than a project. To reject commitment is to remove oneself from the community, and ultimately from mankind. A father is committed to teach his son, and the son to remember his father. A master is committed to strengthen his Hasid, and the Hasid to justify the hopes [00:36:00] that his master had laid in him. Called Yisrael Areivim Zeh Ba-Zeh and not La-Zeh means we are responsible not only for one another but also in

one another. And to live without commitment to another person, and there is no other commitment possible, it must be to another person, to an idea, to an ideal. To live without commitment to faith is to forget, and therefore be forgotten.

That is why we have put our fifteenth annual series under the sign of commitment. Commitment to beauty? Yes. I believe there is beauty in our tradition. What is it? What exactly is beauty? How do you define it? It cannot be defined. What seems beautiful to one does not necessarily seem attractive to another. It is as personal as one religious conviction. No wonder that it is not included in the divine attributes of God.

[00:37:00] Because of our reticence with regard to Greek philosophy, which emphasizes beauty, abstract beauty, we are ordered not to interrupt study to admire a spectacular tree. Our aim is to obtain justice and truth, not beauty. Perhaps because true and lasting beauty doesn't exist. Remember King Solomon. King Solomon said, "*Sheker hachein v'hevel hayofi isha yirat Adoshem hi tithalal.*" "Grace is false," he said, "and beauty is vain. Only a God-fearing woman is worthy of praise." But in Hasidic circles this passage is interpreted differently. *Sheker hachein* means the trouble is that *sheker* has *chein* and that *hevel* has *yofi*. [00:37:46]. And yet, there is respect for beauty in our tradition. *Yafe amarta, yafe darashta* - What you

said is beautiful [00:38:00] means therefore it is true. And this expression occurs frequently in the Talmud, where the two are taken one for the other, instead of the other. In other words, beauty is good only if and when it is combined to truth. Abstract ideas of beauty are of no interest to us. We are committed to life and to human beings, and to the study of life for human beings. The Jewish tradition negates abstraction. *Lo bashamayim hi* means not only that the Torah is not in heaven, but also that the Torah is not to be turned into heaven, into an abstraction. To do so would mean ultimately to turn human beings into abstractions, and nothing could be more vicious, more sinful, to Jew and non-Jew alike.

The second commitment we tried to elaborate on was our commitment to Israel, through Rabbi Zeira and his Talmudic [00:39:00] peers. And this commitment is self-evident. Israel is central to our lives and will remain so. If our enemies don't like it, too bad, we don't like them either. It will be their problem, not ours. To us, Israel is an all-embracing concept, *Yisrael v'oraita v'Hakadosh Baruch Hu achat hu*, the history of Israel, the people of Israel, the God of Israel, the Torah of Israel, they are all linked, and one is committed to the other. What is the covenant if not a mutual commitment on the part of God and his people? And lastly, the Hasidic

commitment to fervor. We have spoken about it each time we explored the life and the work of a Hasidic master. Fervor is an antidote for despair. When everything else fails, we resort to *hitlahavut*, to fervor. Hasidism won because it stressed fervor and ecstasy, [00:40:00] which means total involvement. They could take cleavage with the entire body of Israel, and through it with everybody else, and through everybody else with mankind, and through mankind with the creator of mankind. For true commitment must imply and generate commitment to memory. "What is worse than to be without a future?" we said here a few years ago. "It is to be without a past." We must remember the past if there is to be a future. In remembering the tragedy of the Jewish people, we may save the world from future tragedies. Unfortunately, people forget and the world forgets. Anti-Semitism affects more than its victims; it affects the society in which it lives and breathes. And I don't even know how to explain it anymore, but there is anti-Semitism today everywhere, in Europe, and even in the United States. We spoke about it. [00:41:00] And it's taking on frightening proportions.

Let me give you an example. I found it in an Israeli newspaper which decided one day to publish the harvest of anti-Semitic incidents that occurred during the only month of July 1981, only in one country, in Britain. And listen to the litany. July 1,

vandalism in West End synagogues and in Jewish homes in Edgware. July 4, the Rabbi of West Hackney was beaten up by ten hooligans. July 6, 70 tombstones profaned in Edmonton. July 8, London synagogue window broken, threats against Jews in Manchester. July 9, vandalism in Burwood synagogue. July 10, vandalism in Kenton synagogue. July 11, two young worshippers beaten up in London. Same day, two cemeteries profaned. July 13, [00:42:00] four boys attack Jewish child near Jewish school in London. July 16, stones thrown at Kenton synagogue with swastikas on walls. July 17, synagogue window smashed in London. July 18, Jews attacked in London. July 19, Leeds synagogue window smashed with slogans on the walls, "Jews out, Heil Hitler." July 20, Ku Klux Klan slogans painted on Jewish homes in Finchley. July 22, Jewish student beaten up at Edgware railway station. July 23, Jewish students attacked at bus station in London. July 24, swastikas and pro-PLO slogans in Hampstead. July 24, Jewish children attacked. July 27, stink bomb thrown into Liverpool synagogue. July 28, insults and threats at Jewish community center in Ilford. And all these incidents occurred in one land in one month. I was in Paris yesterday; I came back today. And [00:43:00] I sent an appeal to François Mitterrand, whom I happen to like. We are friends for many years, and I think he's a friend of the Jewish people, suggesting to him that he should call a world conference of

leaders simply to come out with an appeal that something must be done against anti-Semitism. It is no longer a Jewish problem; it never has been. It's a world problem.

During these encounters, what we also did on the fourth evening, we told stories, and we would read books. There are a few stories which I owe you. Some are sad, some are nice. One is sad. We had a gathering of survivors in Israel this year. It was an important event. And the second day, all of them went to kibbutzim of survivors. [00:44:00] And friends and I went to *Lohamei HaGeta'ot*, fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto. The reason, I wanted to meet Antek Zuckerman, who was the last member of the High Command of the Warsaw Ghetto. And I have a profound admiration for all of those Jews who were in the Warsaw Ghetto, those who fought and those who didn't, those who prayed or those who hid. And I wanted to meet Antek. For the last 20 years we have made numerous appointments, which we canceled each time, and suddenly I felt I must meet him. So, we went for five hours to the Kibbutz and I met him. We spoke, and we spoke, and then we had a gathering, and I was supposed to speak. I asked the leaders of the Kibbutz, "Where is Antek?" And they said, "He doesn't feel well. He's inside. He had problems with his leg." [00:45:00] And I said, "Please bring him out." And they brought him out. And I addressed my entire remarks, all of my remarks

to Antek. I said, "Antek *yakir*, my dear Antek." And it was an improvised address only for Antek. It was directly given him, offered him. He died next day.

There are also funny stories. We had, this year in the White House, we had a very moving ceremony. The council arranged a ceremony in the White House with President Reagan on Yom HaShoah. And the President was moved. He was moved, so moved that he had tears in his eyes. And because he had tears in his eyes, he couldn't read his text, and because he couldn't read his text, he made a blunder. (laughter) He gave a human rights speech, which I liked, but apparently the people in the White House didn't because afterwards, for 48 hours, they tried to explain that he didn't really mean it. [00:46:00] I was touched by the man. Two weeks later, I was studying and the telephone rang, and the secretary said, "Are you Elie Wiesel?" I said, "Yes." And she said, "The President would like to speak to you." And the only answer I could give was, "How did you get my telephone number?" (laughter) I won't tell you what he said.

The third story has to do with *The Testament*. When the book came out, I was in France; and then I went to Geneva for a lecture on Rebbe Akiva. And some of you know already, I spoke about it last year, that the prototype for my Paltiel Kossover

was the Der Nister, who wrote about Rabbi Nachman of Breslov and Peretz Markish, the great Yiddish poet, if not the greatest. And as I was speaking in Geneva on Rebbe Akiva, after the lecture, a young man came up [00:47:00] to me, a nice young man. He said, "I'm a professor here. Tell me, did you know my father?" I said, "No, who are you?" He said, "My name is Shimon Markish, the son of Peretz Markish." He said, "Did you know that there are things about my father in this book which nobody knew except me." Because he lived with him for three years, just the three years before he was taken into arrest and killed. I felt rewarded, terribly rewarded. I have never met Peretz Markish, but I felt so close to him as a friend of old and a friend to be.

For the last couple of weeks, preparing this final encounter this year, I reread my stories. I reread all the transcripts, 60 of them, of all the talks I gave here with you and for you. And when I reread my notes, I realized [00:48:00] I have but rarely touched on the awesome subject -- the subject -- the one that is best communicated in silence, if at all. I was afraid and still am, of mutilating the event, of reducing it to routine, of trivializing it. I had hoped, and still do, to preserve its sacred dimension. I know this is impossible, impractical, doomed to failure. It is the most talked about,

the most exploited issue around. Well, where did we go wrong? I try to understand the verbal pollution now, as I try to understand the refusal to listen, to believe, to comprehend once upon a time, and I don't understand. And yet, that is what we really wanted, to understand. Not to judge, not to indict, not even to blame. All we wanted was to understand, to understand the meaning of it all. When Jews arrived into the [00:49:00] kingdom of night, when they saw the barbed wire, the gathering of exiles under burning skies, when they saw the flames, when they saw the angel of death at work, they did not shout their surprise; they did not even voice their anger. They grew numb. Truth had numbed them. And all they said again and again was, "What's the meaning of all this? What's the meaning of all this?" I still don't know the meaning of all that. Why has the Jewish people been singled out once more? Why have the killers killed without losing their sense of security? Why were they convinced that the free world didn't care? Or worse, that the free world wanted them to do the dirty work for them? And indeed, why didn't the free world care?

A month ago, a liberator's conference in Washington took place and representatives from 15 nations gathered at the invitation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council [00:50:00] at the State Department to compare impressions, to receive our

thanks, and to bear witness to what they had seen when they discovered the universe of death. But there was one question that burned our lips: Why had they come so late? Why hadn't one division commander changed his plans from the Russian side, or the American side, or the British side? One to liberate one camp one day earlier? Thousands of victims were still alive and yet, they were already given up by the Allies. Five years earlier, there were thousands and hundreds of thousands of Jewish children, still playing in the streets of Vilna, and Bialystok, and Sighet, and Warsaw, and Paris, and Amsterdam. They were laughing and singing and learning. They didn't know it, but in some office in Berlin, they were already dead. And the world knew. And the killers knew that the world knew. [00:51:00] Only the victims didn't know. Why not? Questions, questions, and more questions. Did Hakadosh Baruch Hu, the Master of the Universe, really want a world without Jewish children, without yeshivot, without Jews? Is that what he wanted?

I have rarely touched that area in our encounters here. I prefer to tell you wonderful stories about Hasidic masters, explore the beauty of a Biblical passage, and communicate the depth of a Talmudic legend. My secret, a not so secret desire, was to share my passion with you, my passion for learning, for

rediscovering the beauty of our tradition, my passion for all that, in Judaism, aims at humanizing man and his destiny. But then we have to talk, and we have to tell the tale. And our friends here know it, the writers, and the essays, and the teachers, and the witnesses. We have to talk. [00:52:00]

Silence is no answer. For the Jewish people has been serving as antenna, a barometer for mankind. Jews were killed in Auschwitz and humanity was assassinated. In destroying Jews, the killers destroyed more than Jews; they paved the way for the ultimate destruction. I have tried to say it in one book of mine, in *The Oath*, and I'll read it to you; it's one page. At the end of *the Oath*, which began with the pogrom and the fire of the Jewish quarter then spread to the entire town. The town, in consuming itself, was telling a timeless story for the last time, and there was nobody to listen. Yiddel no longer smiles and Avrom no longer thinks. "Whom are we fighting now?" Shaike was asked, but he was already dead. "The books," said my father. "The *Herem*," [00:53:00] said Moshe. "It's my fault, but I was hungry," said Leizer. "Memory," insisted my father, "everything is in memory." "Silence," Moshe corrected him, "everything is in silence." I was stepping back and back, but the distance remained unchanged. The prey of death, the price of life; Kolvillag was burning and I watched it burn. The House of Study, the trees and the walls, whipped by fire and wind. The

cobblestones shattered. The Jewish quarter, the churches and the schools, the store and the warehouses, yellow and red, orange and purple flames escaped from them only to return at once. The shelter and the orphanage, the tavern and the synagogue, joined by a bridge of fire. The cemetery was burning, the police station was burning, the crypts were burning, the library was burning. On that night, man's work yielded to the power and judgement of the fire, and suddenly I understood with every fiber of my being why I was shuddering at this vision of horror. I had just glimpsed the future.

[00:54:00]

Unfortunately, this is what I believe and this is what is the truth. Unless we remember, we will have no future, and what happened once to our people will happen to all peoples. And therefore, we must remember, for the world's sake as much as for our own. Does it mean that there is no hope? Yes. Does it mean that there is no hope? No. It's both yes and no. Beyond the despair there are certain things we can do. We even can do certain things with the despair. And therefore in conclusion, may I read one more page from *The Town Beyond the Wall*, one of my favorite novels, which is an act, an offering of friendship to a friend. I read it because the very first time I met here, some people -- and I think it was the first year that Joan

Jacobson began serving at the Y -- I read from this novel.

[00:55:00]

At the end of the novel, Michael, the hero of the book, is in a cell with a madman. And Michael says to an invisible friend called Pedro, he said, "You are smiling, Pedro, and I'm going mad. I have no strength left. I am at the end of the line. I cannot do anymore, I am alone. To stay sane, I've got to have someone across from me, otherwise my mind will rot and smell of decay and twist like the serpent that feels the earth and death." Pedro went on smiling. "That's exactly what I want you to do, recreate the universe, restore that boy's sanity, cure him. He will save you. The only valuable protest," Pedro said, "the only valuable attitude is one rooted in the uncertain soil of humanity. Remaining human in spite of all temptations [00:56:00] and humiliations is the only way to hold your own against the other, whatever it may be. You must remain sane. And for you to remain sane is to fight insanity." And so, Michael began fighting the insanity of his cellmate who was already insane. And he talked to him, he talked, and talked, and talked. And he said, "Right at this instant, my little brother, there are couples all over the world who think they are embracing, and some who really are. There are hearts hammering because they want to be beside someone who has just departed,

and in a wild countryside of some country just awakening or just falling asleep, there is a woman, some woman, being stoned for a reason, some reason, and nothing can save her from human beings. And there is a man, some man, being deserted, whatever his desires, and he can expect nothing more from human beings.

[00:57:00]

And yet, I tell you, affection exists. It is created and transmitted like a secret formula from heart to heart and from mouth to ear. I know the path of the soul overgrown often know only the night, a very vast, very barren night without landscapes. And yet, I tell you, we will get out. The most glorious works of man are born of that night. I know, my little brother, it isn't easy to live always under a question mark, but who says that the essential question has an answer? The essence of man is to be a question and the essence of question is to be without answer. But to say what is God, what is the world, what is my friend, is to say that I have someone to talk to, someone to ask a direction of. The depth, the meaning, the very salt of man is his constant desire to ask the question ever deeper within himself, to feel ever more intimately the existence of an unknowable answer. [00:58:00] Man has the right to risk life, his own life. He does not need to submerge himself in destiny in order to maintain his deep significance. He must risk; he

can risk a confrontation with destiny. He must try to seize what he demands, to ask the great questions and ask them again, to look up at another, a friend, and to look up again. If two questions stand face to face, that's at least something. It's at least a victory. What I say to you, pass on to you, my little brother, I learned from a friend, the only one I had. And he's dead or in prison. He taught me the art and the necessity of clinging to humanity, never deserting humanity. It's in humanity itself that we find both our question and the strength to keep it within limits, or on the contrary, to make it universal. To flee to a sort of nirvana, whether through a considered indifference or through a sick apathy, is to oppose humanity in the most absurd, useless, uncomfortable manner possible. [00:59:00] A man is a man only when he is among man. It's harder to remain human than to try to leap beyond humanity. To be indifferent, for whatever reason, is to deny not only the validity of existence, but also its beauty. Betray and you are human; torture your neighbor, you are still human. Evil is human, weakness is human, indifference is not."

And so, I could repeat the same verse today with as much fervor. Whatever we try to do for the last 15 years, really, is not only to teach each other, not only to remember together, but to draw from one another a certain strength, to fight indifference.

Fortunately, we have a collective memory and fortunately, we know how to open certain gates in that memory. And once opened, the memory can give us fire not only to burn but to warm us up [01:00:00] and to light and to point the way. And then, when you enter that memory, you may find stories and stories, so many stories. Stories of solitude against solitude, stories of sadness to fight sadness, but above all, stories of friendship, and joy, and ecstasies. And, I hope, that when we meet again next year, we shall go on telling those stories and more, and more, and more, and even more. Thank you. (applause)

M1:

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