

Elie Wiesel In Modern Tales: Jewish Attitudes Toward Justice

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive November 4 1982

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) In the year 1199 the great Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, better known as the Rambam or Maimonides, received a letter from his Hebrew translator Shmuel ibn Tibbon telling him of his desire to leave his native Provence and come to see him. The linguist scholar was then working on a translation of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* and needed to see the old philosopher to discuss with him certain problems he had encountered while transposing Arabic terms into the sacred tongue.

Maimonides' answer was a [00:01:00] polite refusal. Listen, and I quote, "With respect to your wish to come here to see me, I cannot but say how greatly your visit would delight me for I truly long to commune with you and would anticipate our meeting with even greater joy than you. Yet, I must advise you not to expose yourself to the perils of the voyage for beyond seeing me and my doing all I could to honor you, you would not derive any advantage from your visit. Do not expect to be able to confer with me on any scientific subject for even one hour either by day or by night for the following is my daily occupation.

"I dwell at Misera, Fustat, and the Sultan resides at Cairo. These two places are two [00:02:00] Sabbath's day journeys distant from one another. My duties to the Sultan are very heavy. I am obliged to visit him every day early in the morning, and when he or any of his children or any of the inmates of his harem are indisposed, I dare not quit Cairo but must stay during the greater part of the day in the palace. It also frequently happens that one or two royal officers fall sick, and I must attend to their healing. Hence, as a rule, I repair to Cairo," or as it was called then, Qahira, "very early in the day, and even if nothing unusual happens, I do not return to Misera until the afternoon.

"Then I'm almost dying with hunger. I find the antichambre, the waiting rooms, filled with people, both Jews and Gentiles, nobles and common [00:03:00] people, judges and bailiffs, friends and foes, a mixed multitude who await the time of my return. I dismount from my animal, wash my hands, go forth to my patients, and entreat them to bear with me while I partake of some slight refreshment, the only meal I take in the 24 hours. Then I go forth to attend to my patients and write prescriptions and directions for their various ailments. Patients go in and out

until nightfall and sometimes even, I solemnly assure you, until two hours or more in the night.

"I converse with and prescribe for them while lying down from sheer fatigue, and when night falls I am so exhausted that I can scarcely speak. In consequence of this, no Israelite can have any private interview with me except on the Shabbat. [00:04:00] On that day the whole congregation, or at least the majority of the members come to me after the morning service when I instruct them as to their proceedings during the whole week. We study together a little until noon. Then they depart. Some of them return and read with me after the afternoon service until the evening prayers. In this manner I spend that day.

"I have here related to you only a part of what you would see if you were to visit with me. Now, when you have completed for our brethren the translation you have commenced, I beg that you will come to me, but not with the hope of deriving any advantage from your visit as regards your studies for my time is, as I have shown you, excessively occupied," unquote.

From this letter we learn several important lessons. First, [00:05:00] to my great pleasure and to yours, Maimonides had no telephone. (laughter) Had he had one he would have called his

friend. In other words, may Edison forgive me, but his invention cost us innumerable masterpieces. Two, Maimonides knew both Arabic and Hebrew. Why didn't he do the translation himself? Ask me, and I will tell you. And also, would never be his own translator, but then he was less fortunate than a certain novelist I happen to know. (laughter) Maimonides did not have a translator at home. Three, whenever you feel sorry for yourself, whenever you are too busy, burdened with too many obligations, read or reread Maimonides' schedule. If you think you are working hard -- (laughter) [00:06:00]

Four, Maimonides acquaints us with his lifestyle in a way that makes him become our neighbor. We can almost follow him step by step, hear him speak, watch him rest or meditate. In other words, perhaps we ought to include him in our next series. He deserves it. His life is full of drama and tragedy and some measure of mystery. A victim of religious persecution, he was a refugee in many lands. And the question of all questions, why didn't he make Aliyah?

Which means perhaps the time has come to move, in addition to our biblical explorations, into other areas of Jewish creativity and celebrate Jewish philosophy, Jewish poetry, Jewish ethics through their masters and heroes. Saadiah Gaon and Yehuda

Halevi, Don Yitzchak Abarbanel [00:07:00] and Abraham Abulafia, Israel Salanter and Philo. Except that we have not succeeded as yet in exhausting the biblical and the Talmudic sources and resources. We have but scratched the surface, a wealth of ideas, possibilities, and subterranean palaces are still to be touched upon.

Yosif daat, yosif machov means the more we know the more we are hurt. We are hurt because we realize how little we know. Isn't this what we tried to do here together, to go deeper and deeper into the text, into its own dazzling universe so as to come into contact with all those sages and disciples who have chartered the same course centuries and centuries earlier? Hasidim advocated prayer whereas their opponents favored study. As for myself, I see no [00:08:00] difference between the two. Prayer means study. Study implies prayer. And both must be passionate. Both enrich memory. And both are enriched by it.

And so, as we are about to conclude our encounters for one more year, may I remind you that the fourth evening is usually and traditionally devoted more to storytelling than to study in the accepted sense. I shall read excerpts from *Somewhere A Master*, a book that has just been published here, and from another that will appear next week in Paris called *Paroles d'étranger*, or in

English, *Words from a Stranger*. But before opening the books let's open the doors. [00:09:00]

In his masterwork *Ulysses*, James Joyce imagines an Egyptian high priest in a tone of haughtiness and pride addressing himself to a young Jew named Moses. And I quote, "Why will you Jews not accept our culture, our religion, our language? You are a tribe of nomad herdsman. We are a mighty people. You have no cities, no wealth. Our cities are hives of humanity, and our galleys, [00:10:00] laden with all manner of merchandise, furrow the waters of the known globe. You have but emerged from primitive conditions. We have a literature, a priesthood, an age-long history. You pray to a local and obscure idol. Our temples, majestic and mysterious, are the abodes of Isis and Osiris, of Horace and Amun-Ra. Yours are serfdom, awe, and humbleness. Ours are thunder and the seas. Israel is weak and few are her children. Egypt is powerful and terrible are her arms. Vagrants and day laborers are you called. The world trembles at our name."

Had the young Jew named Moses accepted that realistic [00:11:00] view of life, says Joyce, had he bowed his head and will before that arrogant admonition he would never have brought the chosen people out of their house of bondage, nor would he have followed

the pillar of the cloud by day. He would never have spoken with the eternal amid lightnings on Sinai's mountaintop nor ever have come down with the light of inspiration shining in his countenance and bearing in his arms the tables of the law graven in the language of the outlaw. Joyce felt it. Joyce understood it.

To be Moses, to be a descendent of Moses, a believer in his law means to resist outside temptations of success and glory. *Hakol kol Yaakov* means Yaakov must listen to his own [00:12:00] voice. The power of Jacob is his voice. Does it mean that we ought to ignore or forget other elements in society? We dwell on the same land. We eat the same bread. We are threatened by the same perils. We must be open to outside influences, just as we must share our experiences with others. But in order to offer them what we have, we must have. We must be. Born Jewish, it is only from within my Jewishness that I can contribute to culture.

Should I deny my origins and reject my past and repudiate my people and abdicate my conscience, I would betray more than myself. Had Moses turned away from Jewish history he would have vanished from history. [00:13:00] But then what does it mean to be Jewish? It means to accept Jewish destiny, and that means to

claim kinship with all those who did and do the same. Abraham is our father, David our King, and Moses our teacher. Whatever happened to Jews in Spain remains part of me and my life to this day. Yehuda Halevi spoke for me when he sang of and for Jerusalem. Nachmanides defended me when he defended the Jewish faith in his famous disputation in Barcelona. The Jews whom the Romans exiled 2,000 years ago have much in common with us here, with us everywhere. The fact that we all say Kol Nidre at the same time and recite the Haggadah at the same time has always moved me beyond [00:14:00] description.

Legend has it that Napoleon entered a village somewhere in Russia and heard of Jews who had gathered in their house of worship to weep bitterly. Is it because of me, he wondered? Could it be that they prefer the czar over the French emperor? He went to see them. Indeed they were weeping. "Why are you crying?" he asked them. "We are in mourning," they said. "Why?" he wanted to know. "Because our temple was destroyed." Convinced that it must have been done by one of his soldiers, he asked for his name, rank, and serial number. The Jews shook their heads. "No, sire, you don't understand. Our temple has been destroyed not now but 1,800 years ago, not here but in Jerusalem." "And that is why you are crying now?" said the

emperor in amazement. And that is when he became interested [00:15:00] in the Jewish question.

Napoleon could not understand that Jewish memory was a living memory. He felt challenged, if not threatened by it. And that is why he decided to do everything possible to change the Jewish people by seduction. Only he called it emancipation and/or assimilation. Sadly, it must be noted that in many instances his policies registered a large measure of success. Some Jews used their newly won rights not to be more Jewish but to become less Jewish. Paradoxically, anti-Semitism did increase rather than diminish. The Nazis hated assimilated Jews more than the authentic ones.

Today anti-Semitism is directed against all of us. It is on the rise, and we have said it. It is no longer a mark of shame to spread it like [00:16:00] poison. A young French philosopher recently declared that anti-Semitism will become the new religion of what remains of this century, a century that will be remembered as the most violent, hypocritical and cynical in recorded history. Intellectual anti-Semitism, political anti-Semitism, racial anti-Semitism, economic anti-Semitism, and terrorist anti-Semitism, each and every regime has apparently encouraged or condoned its own brand.

Listen to an example. A prestigious West European television station has been showing a TV version of Thomas Mann's *Confessions of Felix Krull*. Do I have to emphasize that the novel contains absolutely nothing that could ever be construed as anti-Semitic. Thomas Mann was surely not an anti-Semite. He was one of the great humorists and liberal thinkers and writers of his time. And yet, on television there is something that changed. [00:17:00]

In the book there is a prostitute who remains silent throughout the tale. In the film she speaks Yiddish with a French accent or French with a Yiddish accent. Another protagonist, a criminal character in the book, in the book he is called Pierre Jean-Pierre. And in the film he has a Jewish name, and believe it or not, he is shown with a kippah on his head. Why such deliberate falsification? But then the question may be asked in more general terms.

Why have the world press and the world media, with very few exceptions, so distorted the facts about the Middle East since June? Now we know that their exaggerations were false and sinful. We have known it all along. The comparisons with genocide and Holocaust were obscene and repulsive. Now it is

clear [00:18:00] many groups used the situation to vilify Israel and condemn the Jewish people. In accusing Israel of, quote, "Nazi war crimes," unquote, they meant to whitewash the Nazis and thus indirectly side with those morally perverse revisionists who claim that Auschwitz was a myth, a myth invented by Jews to get money.

European newspapers, magazines are full of vicious articles piously wondering whether, quote, "the Jewish people has lost its soul," unquote. Or at least claiming piously that, quote, "The Jewish soul is in danger." Nonsense. One incident does not wipe out the history of an ancient people. One mistake does not alter its physiognomy. In the Talmud we know, and we have a legend about it, that [00:19:00] when a person does *teshuvah*, when a person does penance and repents, all his evil deeds become good. But we never have any hint in any source that the good deeds become evil.

Our dream has remained pure and lofty, just as before. To the 13 Ani Ma'amins recorded and codified by Maimonides, I would add a fourteenth. *Ani ma'amin b'emunah shlaymah b'am Yisrael b'eretz Yisrael* [00:19:39 - 00:19:42]. Compared to others the Jewish people still stands out. Who are our accusers? Who are our judges, the occupiers of Afghanistan, the military rulers of

Poland or the rulers of Cambodia, the bloody [00:20:00] fanatics of Iran? It is simply incredible when one reads what is going on in this world and then to see that these killers have become judges, judges of an ancient people.

I just saw statistics. In '81 alone some 3,000 people were executed in Iran. What is happening in Afghanistan we know. What is happening in Russia we know. Sharansky is dying. My friends, Sharansky is dying. This thought is haunting me. He's dying in prison, and why, why there is no outcry in this land of ours is beyond me. He's dying. Vladimir Slepak is still in jail. Ida Nudel is sick, and so many other dissidents are still oppressed and persecuted. And they, [00:21:00] who keep them in prison, who persecute them, and who move Sharansky to agony are the accusers of Israel.

But then comparisons with other people are wrong. As with masterpieces in literature or in art, in history too, I believe, that the Jewish people must be compared only to itself. Are we worthy of our experience? Are we worthy of our mission? Are we worthy of our ancestors? And these are real questions which we are duty-bound to confront sometimes with courage, at other times with humility.

One thing remains clear, that the Jewish people, the people of Israel, had always felt challenged [00:22:00] metaphysically but not geographically. Israel as a nation in ancient times has never left its boundaries. Its armies, even when they were strong, and at times they were, never conquered other people's territories. If so many ancient empires that at various times defeated Israel have disappeared while Israel is still alive it is perhaps because Israel never was an empire. Israel never sought to occupy anything that belonged to other nations. Israel's concern was with history, history and not political strategy. No other language has as many terms to describe justice as does Hebrew, the holy tongue, *chok, din, mishpat, tzadek*.

Israel's obsession was with justice. Abraham's most poignant phrase is *Hashofet kol-ha'aretz lo ya'aseh mishpat*, is it possible that the judge of all people should commit an injustice? People, culture, society, they may all be judged by their attitude towards justice. That is surely true of the Jewish people whose history began as an act of liberation from slavery, which due to its dehumanizing process represents the ultimate injustice.

Moses became Jewish, or at least he became aware of his Jewishness when he confronted two people, a victim and his victimizer. Moses could have turned away. He could have returned to his palace. Instead he chose to get involved. Faced with injustice, no Jew should remain a passive onlooker. It was the Jew in Moses who acted on behalf of the [00:24:00] victim.

Another example of which we are proud, after receiving the 10 commandments the Jews were given a set of laws. You remember *v'eleh ha-mishpatim*. What was the first law? The first law was a prohibition of slavery. Think about it. We in the United States are so proud of Lincoln, who abolished slavery. Think about it. The Jewish people has done it centuries and centuries and centuries before him. In itself that it remarkable.

Think about it. There was a tribe of former slaves who had just gained its independence. Ask any psychologist here, and he or she will tell you whenever slaves were set free anywhere their most fervent [00:25:00] wish immediately was to own slaves. And here God told Moses who told his people no human being should be owned by another. Human beings are equal and sovereign. They are not free to choose not to be free. Slaves who wish to stay slaves are to be punished. Justice begins, therefore with

absolute respect for the other, with absolute commitment to dignity.

What have we learned here in the last three encounters that we had? From Noah we learned the tragedy of a survivor. Noah survived the catastrophe. He was alone, and he suddenly felt that another one was coming in spite of God's promise. He understood [00:26:00] that although, as we said then, although God will not destroy the world, but man may.

From Rabbi Eleazar Ben Azariah we learn that one can age quickly. He was so young, and he became so old only because he became president. No, because he became aware of his responsibilities. And it is true that one can become white-haired in one night.

I have known a man who during the war was a correspondent in London, and every evening he would have to send a cable to a newspaper in the United States. And in 1941 or '42 he got the information with what was happening in Europe. And he had a quota, 500 words. And he didn't know what words to choose, what facts to report, [00:27:00] what suffering to communicate. He worked on it all night. In the morning when he finished he said send this cable. He went to wash his hands, and he saw himself

in the mirror. And he who had had dark hair had turned into a white-haired man.

What have we learned from the Izhbitzer Rebbe? That there is more than one way to come close to God, but there is only way one to come close to one's fellow man. And that is the human way. I believe that the Jewish tradition, therefore, is a humanist tradition. And I believe that no culture, no religion can be accepted as valid unless it brings people together.

Malraux used to say a human being equals [00:28:00] nothing, but nothing can equal a human being. That probably is a religious sentence, although he said that he was not religious.

One more thing we have to recapitulate. What is the Jewish attitude to power? Our attitude has always been suspicion. We view power with extreme and understandable suspicion. Power inspires fear, and God alone ought to inspire fear. Men and women should inspire other things, compassion, fervor, friendship. Of course we refer to military or political power, bar Kokhba does not fare well in the Talmud. Yehuda the Maccabee, his fate is even worse. He isn't even mentioned in the Talmud. And David himself is often judged harshly by our sages because they believe that words are more powerful than [00:29:00] weapons.

But then there exists another kind of power which is accepted in the Jewish tradition, the power of the mind, the spirit, the soul. Who gave the Besht his power or the Maggid of Mezritch? All leaders attain greatness when they pleaded for their people, when they used the power given by the people for the people. That is power, to intercede for others, dead or alive, to assist them, to be present with them. The power of the artist lies in his or her ability to be present through pictures, sounds, words, memories to other people both contemporary and not, both known and unknown. And that kind of power the teacher accepts and the artist welcomes.

This is more or less what I try to say also in the French book which is coming out now in Paris, [00:30:00] *Words from a Stranger*. Why words, because we use words, for better or for worse but we use them. Why a stranger? Because we are strangers. Ultimately, as the Rabbi of Medzhybizh used to say, the relationship between God and man is a relationship between two strangers who met accidentally.

In this book I have stories and essays and dialogues. I try to invent a genre, a genre of austere writing, almost disembodied writing, and the only way was to imagine two voices, almost

without bodies, voices speaking one to another. And here is just a short dialogue [00:31:00] as an example. This is between a child and a stranger.

"Tell me a story, stranger."

"Do not look at me, child. Better be blind. It is dangerous to see me. I bring misfortune."

"Tell me a story, stranger, any story. I cannot live without stories."

"Do not listen, child. Better be deaf. It is dangerous to listen to me. My words will hurt you. They will break your heart. Believe me, little one. Go away. Leave me."

"But you interest me."

"Why? Do I remind you of someone?"

"Maybe."

"Your father?"

"Maybe. I forgot what he looked like."

"Your brother then."

"Forgotten. I have forgotten everything, stranger. If I so wish to listen to you it is because I would like to start my memory [00:32:00] anew, just as one starts one's life or one's career anew."

"Would you like me to give you my past? Is that what you want?"

"Yes."

"Even if my past is filled with horror?"

"Nothing frightens me anymore."

"And what if I told you that I am death?"

"I wouldn't believe you."

"Why not?"

"Death is unable to give. It only takes."

"You are so young, child, yet you talk about death like an old man."

"I am old, stranger, older than you, older than my teachers. At his death my father was younger than I am now."

"And what if I told you that I am your father?"

"You are lying."

"And what if I offered you proof?"

"You are a stranger. My father was my father."

"But your father is dead. Why couldn't he come back as a stranger?" [00:33:00]

"The dead do not come back, stranger. We go towards them. They are waiting for us. My father is waiting for me."

"Is it that you wish to join him?"

"I am looking for my father. That's all I know. I am looking for myself around him. We lived together, but not long enough. I miss him."

"Was he strong?"

"Sometimes."

"Wise?"

"Often."

"Generous?"

"Always."

"You see, little one, now you are the one who is telling stories."

"I know. I could not live without stories."

"Told to a stranger?"

"Told by a stranger."

"And what if I told you that --"

"Don't, please."

"I have said too much already."

Of course, in the book I bring back memories, memories from childhood, memories from other times. [00:34:00] I tried to bring back the shtetl with all its charm and all its naivete, with all the people whom I have known, or at least some of them. Why not? I believe that's the only way to give them refuge, to give them a haven. In one essay, "Why I Write", I try to explain that writing to me is correcting injustices. And one way to correct the injustices done to our people is simply to bring them back, not all, but one here, one there.

Oh yes, the shtetl has always been to me a kingdom, a kingdom that I know has vanished. Many things have been resurrected. Many things have been rebuilt. Even things that we have forgotten are now real. But one thing, unfortunately, [00:35:00] one thing that was so Jewish in its tragic and beautiful Jewishness has disappeared forever, and that is the shtetl, the small little village or hamlet from the Dnieper to

the Carpathians where Jews were poor and not so poor, rich and not so rich, and yet they were so alike even when they were not alike; when the young spoke like old and the old spoke like young, and they all had the same stories to tell, and they all had the same *niggun*, the same melody to share.

The Shabbat of the shtetl, the holidays, even the misery of the shtetl is so unique, and especially, of course, the humor. Let me give you an example. As you know, charity, *tzedakah* is a Jewish virtue. It's always been a Jewish virtue. When you speak about a *mitzvah*, about the command in the Talmud, it always means actually *tzedakah*, charity. And Jews [00:36:00] in Eastern Europe were very charitable, much more than we think here that we are. Because here at least we have, or we think we do. There we didn't. And yet we gave.

One day, the story tells us, a beggar came to a wealthy man who didn't like to give. It also happened there. And the beggar knocked on the door, and a boy opened the door. And the beggar who saw the *mezuzah*, he understood he was Jewish, he said, "Can I speak to your father?" And the young boy understood right away, of course, that it was a beggar who wanted money. He said, "My father is not home." And he closed the door.

When he came back his father was sitting in the room, and he said, "My son, that's not nice. Really it's not nice. How do you treat strangers, beggars? A beggar comes to the door, you wait a little bit, [00:37:00] and then you open the door, and you invite them inside, and you simply sit down. And you ask him would you like tea, a cup of tea? And you give him a cup of tea. And then you say your father isn't home." (laughter)

There are many stories, of course, about those times and those places. Not all can be told, but then all stories are there. It's for us simply to take. One story which I love, it's simply I must retell it because it's a Talmudic story. It has to do with God and with the Talmud, and we have been trying to study the Talmud here for so many years. It is a matronita. There's always a Roman matron, a Roman woman who asks the sages -- they always had very good contacts. The sages somehow managed to see [00:38:00] the most beautiful Roman women in Rome. And they had marvelous dialogues.

And one day the matronita, the matron asked this Jewish sage, saying, "Tell me, what does God do? Isn't he bored? He has created a world. What is he doing since?" So all kinds of answers are being given, great answers. One answer is that he is building ladders, meaning he's building destinies up and

down. People are always going up and down. And the question of course is when have you reached the height and when are you down? When is down down, when is high high?

The other one is even more beautiful, saying that he became a matchmaker. God is a matchmaker. God *mizaveg zivugim*. He brings people together. And the story about it is even more beautiful. It has to do with philosophy, or at least with the philosopher. Surely you know the name of Moses [00:39:00] Mendelssohn, who was a very great Jewish philosopher, the opponent of Kant. Kant, believe it or not, he and Kant together participated in a competition of philosophy. And who won the first prize? The Jew, Mendelssohn.

And Mendelssohn had only one thing about him. He was very ugly. He was terribly ugly, like a caricature, a cartoon of *ostracha*, hunchback, huge nose, very ugly. But then when he got old enough to get married, of course they were looking for the richest girl, for the most beautiful girl, for the most talented girl. Naturally for Mendelssohn only the best.

And they found, I think, an Oppenheimer, who was then a banker, and in those times, you know, they didn't ask. Parents got together, and both parents were happy, one with the money, the

other one with the fame. And they decided [00:40:00] that Mendelssohn will marry the girl. They decided on a date, and before the wedding ceremony itself, as you know, there are two parties. In one room is for the groom and the other one for the bride. So the bride sat with her friends and the groom sat with his friends. What did the groom do? Giving a lecture. He was a philosopher. (laughter)

And then after giving his lecture on philosophy or the commentary on the Bible and the Talmud the time came for him to go and unveil his bride, whom he had never seen. He was brought in into the other room, and he uncovered the veil, and he was dazzled by her beauty. But unfortunately she saw him.

(laughter) And she fainted. [00:41:00] (laughter) People thought, you know, well, she's probably so moved, you know, to see Mendelssohn.

He went back, and he continued to lecture. Well, she came to. She simply turned to her mother, and she said, "Never." Her mother began to scream. "But, my daughter, what are you doing? Everybody's here. What do you mean? We have the caterer, Rabbi --" (laughter) "Never." They called the father, and he be also, "My daughter, it's impossible. How can you do this? All the

families and hundreds of people, the most illustrious guests.
How can you?" "Never."

In the meantime he went on lecturing. Finally he understood that something is wrong. So he turned to his father. He said, "She doesn't want me, right?" His father said, "My son, what can I do, you know? (inaudible) heaven. No, [00:42:00] she doesn't want you." He said, "I understand. Please go and tell her in my name that I accept her decision, except I have one favor to ask of her. I would like to be with her alone for 10 minutes." You know, before the wedding? It's not done. But it was a *Shabbat chok*, as we say, an exceptional case, the rabbis admitted. And she too, she accepted.

So they were brought in in a room, and he said to her, "I understand you, really. I know you don't want me, and why should you. But I wanted to see you because I have a story to tell you, that's all." Okay, tell a story. She sat down, bored, angry. And he said to her, "You know, the Talmud tells us that what does God do since he created the world? He brings people together, *mizaveg zivugim*. [00:43:00] He's matchmaking. Furthermore, therefore when a soul is about to go down from heaven to mankind, a heavenly voice, a *bat kol* is being heard saying, 'This soul will be married to that and that person.'

"So as I was about," he said, "as I was about to leave heaven and come down to earth, I heard a voice saying also that Moses, the son of so and so, will be married to Ms. so and so. Every soul is accompanied by an angel. So I turned to my angel. I said I would like to meet her. And he said it's forbidden. But I was a philosopher already. So I said in that case I am not going. So he said you cannot do that. I said what do you mean? I am free. I'm not going.

"Well, he was afraid to have trouble, so he said okay, I'll show you. And he showed me my future bride. [00:44:00] I must tell you, when I saw her I decided I will stay there. She was so ugly. She was the ugliest of all the ugliest creatures I have seen not only in heaven but in hell. (laughter) And I turned to the angel, I said never. And the angel began to cry. What do you mean, he said? It's God, God's decision. I said God decided for himself but not for me. I am not going. (laughter)

"And the angel began pleading with me. Do you know the punishments that angels get? And he began telling me, because there are punishments for angels. They're being burned in fire and all kinds of rivers of fire. And I felt sorry for him really, you know, he began to cry. When angels cry it hurts.

And I said to him you know what, I, really I understand. You are in a predicament. There's only one thing I can do for you. You know what, I will take [00:45:00] her ugliness on me." And you know something, she believed him. (applause)

There is the value of the storytelling. If you are not married, remember, okay. (laughter) I have in the French book also a chapter about changing. I've always been fascinated by changing. What is happening to a human being? When does one change? Does one change? Am I still the child I used to be? Has Socrates at the end of his life been the same as he has been in the beginning of his life? Any one of us, when do we change, and what does it mean to change? And I've had an essay on that, [00:46:00] about changing, and I've asked, have I changed? Of course. Everyone changes. To live means to go through a certain time, a certain space. With a little luck, some traces are left. The traces are at the beginning, but they are not the same as those at the end.

Certainly my tradition teaches me that the road leads somewhere, and although the destination remains constant, the stages of the journey change and renew themselves. Attracted by childhood, the old man will seek it in a thousand different ways. And I am seeking my childhood. I will always be seeking it. I need it.

It is necessary for me as a point of reference, as a refuge. __It represents for me a world that no longer exists, a sunny and mysterious kingdom where beggars were princes in disguise and fools were wise men freed from their constraints.

At that time in that universe [00:47:00] everything seemed simple. People were born and died, hoped and despaired, invoked love or anguish as an invitation or a barrier. I understood certain things, not everything. I resign myself to the idea that for the essential experiences the quest is itself a victory. Even if it hardly succeeds it represents a triumph. It was enough for me to know that someone knew the answer. What I myself sought was the question.

Contrary to what I could think, my true change took place not during the war but after. During the ordeal I lived in expectation of a miracle or of death. Atrophied, I evolved passively, accepting events without questioning them. Certainly I felt revolt and anger [00:48:00] towards the murderers and their accomplices and also, why not say it, towards the creator of the universe who let them act as they did. I thought that humanity was lost forever and that God himself was not capable or willing of saving it. I asked myself questions which formerly would have made me tremble, on the evil in man, on the

silence of God. But I continued to act as though I still believed.

Friendship in the camp was important to me. I looked for it despite the efforts of the killers to belittle and deny it. I clung to family ties despite the killers who changed them into dangerous mortal traps. As for God, I continued to say my prayers. In the morning I aroused before the others, like so many [00:49:00] others, to wait in line and put on the tefillin. There was one pair of tefillin that we have smuggled into the camp.

It was only later, upon leaving the nightmare, that I underwent a prolonged crisis, painful and anguished, questioning my past certainties. I began to despair of humanity and God. I considered them as enemies of one another, and both as enemies of the Jewish people. I didn't express this aloud, not even in my notes. I studied history, philosophy, psychology. I wanted to understand. The more I learned the less I understood.

I was angry at the Germans. How could they have counted Goethe and Bach as their own and at the same time massacred countless Jewish children? I was angry at [00:50:00] their Hungarian, Polish, Ukrainian, French, and Dutch accomplices. How could

they, in the name of a perverse ideology, have turned against their Jewish neighbors to the point of pillaging their houses and denouncing them?

I was angry at the heads of the Allied countries. How could they have given Hitler the impression, as far as the Jews were concerned, that he could do as he wished? Why hadn't they taken action to save them? Why had they closed all doors to them? Why hadn't they bombed the railroad line to Birkenau, if only to show Himmler that the Allies were not indifferent? I had questions and questions, and I try to explain really there the change that occurred throughout the times when suddenly the questions changed because the tonality of the questions changed because I asked them not only for myself at one point but for some people who lived with me, [00:51:00] in me.

One essay is about writing. Why do I write? Perhaps in order not to go mad, or on the contrary, to touch the bottom of madness. Like Samuel Beckett, the survivor expresses himself as he said it, quote, "All this is par the course." Out of desperation because there is no other way. There are easier occupations, far more pleasant ones. But for the survivor, writing is not a profession but a mission. Camus calls it an honor. As Camus puts it, I entered literature through worship.

Other writers said through anger, through love, and I would say through silence. It was by seeking, by probing silence that I began to discover the perils and power of the word.

I never intended to be a philosopher or a theologian. The only role I sought [00:52:00] was that of witness. I believe that having survived by chance I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life. I knew the story had to be told. Not to transmit an experience is to betray it. And this is what Jewish tradition teaches us. But how to do this? The Zohar says that when Israel is in exile, so is the word. The word has deserted the meaning it was intended to convey. Impossible to make them coincide.

The displacement, the shift is irrevocable. And this was never more true than right after the upheaval. We all knew that we could never, never say what had to be said, that we could never express in words, coherent, intelligible [00:53:00] words our experience of madness on the scale of the absolute. The walk through flaming night, the silence before a selection, the monotonous praying of the condemned, the Kaddish of the dying, the fear and hunger of the sick, the shame and suffering, the hounded eyes, the demented looks and stares. I thought that I would never be able to speak of them, all words seemed

inadequate, (inaudible), foolish, lifeless, whereas I wanted them to be searing. Where was I to discover a fresh vocabulary, a primeval language? I don't know.

But then there was the fear of forgetting. The main obsession of all those who have passed through the universe of the damned was not to forget. The enemy [00:54:00] counted on people's disbelief and forgetfulness. How could one foil this plot? And if memory grew hollow, empty of substance, what would happen to all we had accumulated along the way? Remember, said the father to his son and the son to his friend, gather the names, the faces, the tears. If by miracle you come out of it alive, try to reveal everything, omitting nothing, forgetting nothing. Such was the oath we had all taken. If by some miracle I emerge alive I will devote my life to testifying on behalf of those whose shadow will fall on mine forever and ever.

This is why I write certain things rather than others, to remain faithful. Of course there are times of doubt for the survivor, times when one would give in to weakness or long for comfort. I hear a voice within me telling me to stop mourning the past.

[00:55:00] I too want to sing of love and of its magic. I too want to celebrate the sun and the dawn that heralds the sun. I would like to shout and shout loudly listen, listen well, I too

am capable of victory. Do you hear? I too am open to laughter and joy. I want stride, head high, my face unguarded without having to point to the ashes over there on the horizon, without having to tamper with facts to hide their tragic ugliness. For a man born blind, God himself is blind, but look. I see. I am not blind.

One feels like shouting this, but the shout changes to a murmur. One must make a choice. And the choice is to keep one's roots in memory. And that is why one writes, to remain faithful to memory. [00:56:00] Although, I have not written too much about that period. Of the, too many books, perhaps, that I have written only four or five deal with it. The others are about what I study. I love to study. Surely you believe me. I am not here as a teacher. I am not here as a teacher. I am here as a student, a companion. We are studying together. And nothing is more rewarding to me than when we open a Talmud together and we enter into a tale that has been transmitted to me and to us throughout the generations.

And when we do study we hear the *niggun* of the Talmud, and through that *niggun* there is so much joy that is being communicated and so much hope against hope, so much faith even when there is no reason, no possibility to proclaim that faith.

And this is also why I have written about [00:57:00] Hasidism or the Bible.

So *Somewhere a Master* actually is a -- the second volume of *Souls on Fire*, which some of you, very few of you may know from here because all of these masters, I try to bring them to life here. All of the lectures, all of the encounters with the Besht or his disciples, it's in these volumes. And I have always written about Hasidism with a smile. I always smile, even when it's sad. It's a sad smile, but it's still a smile. Because the stories in the Hasidic literature are so beautiful. They are so fascinating. They are so contagious. They are so timid even when they are outrageous. They are so beautiful that I cannot really not smile when I discover them in the books [00:58:00] or I discover them in my memory, especially since the most tragic figures in Hasidism, and they all were tragic, had, again, a sense of humor.

You remember the Seer of Lublin? The great Seer of Lublin, the visionary, the angry man, the solitary man in Lublin who would see his disciples and followers rarely, only once a week.

Remember the story of the two Hasidim who came from very far away to see him, and finally one was admitted. And when he came out he was beside himself. And his friend said, "Well, tell me,

how was it?" He said, "I can't." He said, "Tell me, how was it? Who is he? What is he?" He said, "Well," he said, "what can I tell you he is?" he said, and he tried to use a metaphor, and he couldn't find anything. So finally he said, "He looks -- he looks -- he looks like an angry lion." And his friend said, "What, an angry lion? Have you seen an angry lion before?"

[00:59:00] (laughter) He said no. "Then how do you know what an angry lion looks like?" He said, "Before I didn't. Now I know." (laughter)

Or the story of Rabbi Boruch of Medzhybizh who received his son one day, Reb Yechiel. He said, "Father, Father, my friends are terrible. I have a friend in school." He was very young, very small. "My friend in school is terrible. We were playing hide and seek, and imagine, the middle of the game, he said, I was hiding, and I was waiting for him to come and look for me, and he didn't." And the Rabbi of Medzhybizh said, "Isn't this a tragedy of God-kavyakhol himself? He is hiding, and He said look, I am hiding, and nobody is even seeking before me."

Or the story of the Kotzker. [01:00:00] One day he asked the Rabbi of Warka. He said everybody tells me that you are a very great master and that your specialty is silence. Tell me, where

have you acquired the art of being silent? And the other didn't answer.

Well, in the afterward, which is in conclusion of this evening, it is only reluctantly that a teller of tales considers leaving these great masters whom we have encountered in their very own capitals of the Hasidic universe. Their hold on him has never been stronger. Such is the power of their legends, their intensity, their beauty stay with you and involve you almost against your will, almost against your better [01:01:00] judgment.

Somewhere a master spoke to one or many of his followers about their fears and doubts and what to do to alleviate them, and his message was heard then and today for their exchange is also about us. There is a curious immediacy to their stories, a timeless application to their saying. The Hasidic story is to be told, not studied. It is to be lived, not analyzed. The anger of Rabbi Baruch, the compassion of Reb Moshe Leib of Sassov, the melancholy visions of Lublin, they teach Hasidim how to live, not how to reflect.

A Hasidic story is about Hasidim more than about their masters. It's about those who retell it as much as those who experienced

it long ago in a time of both physical and spiritual hunger and solitude. Rabbi Pinchas the Koretzer and his wisdom, the Besht and his warmth, [01:02:00] Rabbi Naftali Ropshitzer and his humor, to their followers they appeared as kings, judges, prophets. There are intimations of royalty in their vocabulary, notables are appointed to positions. Rabbis are crowned and ascend thrones. How can the attraction they held for their contemporaries be comprehended today? They were as close to God as to those who were seeking Him.

Though they differed considerably in their outlook, in their lifestyle, their education, some were more learned than others, more renowned than others, they were all endowed with mystical powers. And they used them not to isolate themselves but rather to penetrate and enrich their communities.

There is one word which is a main obsession in Hasidism, and that is friendship. *Dibuk Chaverim* is a key word in the Hasidic vocabulary. For the disciple it is [01:03:00] as important as *Ahavat Yisrael*, love of people, love of people. To follow a certain rabbi means also to relate to his pupils and admirers. A Hasid alone is not a true Hasid. Solitude and Hasidism are incompatible. What was the Hasidic movement in its origins if not a protest against solitude?

The villager left behind his farm, his daily misery and uncertainties and went to spend the high holidays or a simple Shabbat with his master not just to see and hear him and pray and study with him but also to meet his fellow Hasidim. The holy Seer of Lublin, the famous jester of Ropshitz, the sage of Koretz, the wanderer from Zbarazh, yet we must say that all of them somehow strike us because of their melancholy. They were all sad. [01:04:00] Why? Because of the Shechinah who is in *galut*, in exile because of the Jewish people? They were sad, I believe, because they empathized. They felt such compassion for the Hasidim whom they have met. They listened. No one listens better, not even an analyst, than a Hasid when a Hasid listens to his rabbi who listens to him.

And when you listen so well and so much and so deeply, so totally to so many tales of woes, so many tales of distress and suffering, at one point you yourself become contaminated. And all of these rabbis at one point became contaminated. But all of them managed somehow on their own to overcome their melancholy. [01:05:00] You know how? By helping others, by giving hope and offering joy to their Hasidim. So in retelling these tales I realized once more how much I owe these masters, sometimes consciously, sometimes not.

I have incorporated a song, a suite, an obsession of theirs into my own fables and legends. For me the echoes of a vanished kingdom are still reverberating, and I have remained the child who loves to listen. While listening, I see myself with my grandfather at various courts. We laugh with the Rabbi of Ropshitz. We tremble in the presence of the Seer of Lublin. We dance with Reb Moshe Leib of Sassov. Somewhere a master is singing, and we feel compelled to join him and learn his song.

Elsewhere in a novel I imagined a man who one day finds himself sharing a cell [01:06:00] with a mad man. After a while he realizes that slowly, inevitably he too is losing his mind. Having been exposed to madness, he will in time become its victim. And so in order not to go mad he sets out to cure his mad fellow prisoner. And the hero of my tale did not know, could not know that he was only following in the steps of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, Rabbi Mendel of Warka and their peers, whom we have evoked here throughout the years and now in the book.

Did I say that the teller of tales would soon leave his old masters? In truth he will not. I will not. For even if he wanted to he could not. They surely would not willingly recede

into the shadows of his burning memory and mine. More than ever we today need their faith, their fervor. [01:07:00] More than ever we today need to imagine them helping, caring. More than ever we today need to imagine them living.

And so, as Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev used to say, when he would write the engagement document for his daughter. He would say in his document of course the messiah is going to come, and therefore we shall all celebrate the wedding of my daughter in Jerusalem next year. However, should the messiah not come, the wedding will take place in Berditchev.

I am sure the messiah is going to come, and we shall all go to his lectures in Jerusalem next year. However, if in case he is not coming, I hope we shall meet here next year. [01:08:00]
(applause)

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