

Elie Wiesel The Solitude of God

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Elie Wiesel:

The key word is memory, and with your permission, I would like to begin with a legend and conclude with a legend.

The first is a legend from the Midrash that tells us that King Solomon, the wisest man on earth, had in his possession a very special ring, and that ring was endowed with very special powers. When he was sad, it made him happy, and when he was happy, it made him sad. And the following inscription was engraved on that ring: *Gam zeh ya'avor*, "This too shall pass."

[00:01:00]

A Russian Jew told me that a great Yiddish poet, Itzik Feffer, would never be seen without a ring on his finger. It brought him luck, he explained, but he refused to tell the meaning of the three Hebrew letters that formed a strange word on the ring: gimel, zayin, yud, or as he called them, "gezy." And of course, by now, you understood, you, the meaning of those three letters. They were the initials that helped King Solomon go beyond his happiness and beyond his sorrow, *Gam zeh ya'avor*, "This too shall pass." And I wonder whether Itzik Feffer, the fervent

Jewish communist and admirer of Stalin, had his ring on when Stalin's executioner shot him in the neck August the twelfth, [00:02:00] 1952.

Sadness and joy -- are they compatible? Do they exclude one another? Philo of Alexandria said, "It is well in wealth to remember your poverty; in distinction, your insignificance; in peace, the dangers of war on land, the storms of the sea; in cities, the life of loneliness." He too understood, of course, that the true meaning of whatever we call Jewish existence is linked to memory. And so we have triumph and defeat, oppression and resistance to oppression. History for us is a bottomless vessel. Few events are recorded; few names are remembered. Where are the thoughts to be found before they enter my mind, wander the great Maggid [00:03:00] of Mezritch? And I would much rather like to find out where they go after they leave my mind. Ideas that were conceived but not expressed, or poorly expressed, images that were captured but not put down on paper, messages that were meant to be given but were not delivered -- where are they? Our tradition commends us to remember, for it is enriched by our remembrance. But what about events and discoveries that die for the persons who kept them in their hearts and who did not succeed to catch the eye of the chronicler or the witness? Those are disturbing questions that

cannot be answered but that ought not to discourage us from searching for answers and from keeping alive those fragments of memory that at least we can remember. Yes, memory is [00:04:00] they key word in all our endeavors. A Jew who remembers is Jewish; a Jew who does not is an incomplete person.

Memory was our ancestors' obsessions too. Abram and Sarah, as we remember, aspire to turn their dreams and their trials into memories destined for their descendants and heirs. That is why Sarah objected to Ishmael's being Abram's heir. We mentioned that excessive concern over husband's inheritance, and we found it strange -- Sarah, we said, a materialist? No. She meant Abram's spiritual inheritance, his true legacy. She wanted Isaac, not Ishmael, to pass it on to future generations.

From the late Dr. Lieberman, whom we often mention here, I heard an anecdote that you surely know, but still it had many endings. [00:05:00] It is a Jewish boy, a chain-smoker, who could not help, and he needed to smoke, he said, even on Shabbat. So he went to his room and lit a cigarette. Naturally, at that precise moment, a door opened. Shocked, his father waited for an explanation, and the young student said, "Father, I forgot." "What did you forget?" "I forgot it is Shabbat." The other version is a little bit funnier. He said, "I forgot to close

the door." (laughter) A third version -- this is Lieberman's -- is "I forgot that I am a Jew."

And the three versions are connected. Our Forgetfulness is as contagious as memory, and as aggressive. If we do not actively remember, we increase the area and the power of anti-memory, of nothingness. problem, of course, is that we have too much to remember -- too much is happening [00:06:00] too fast. Only three years separated Auschwitz from Israel. How did our people manage to bridge those two events without losing its sense of reality? Had an individual person gone so fast from such despair to such exultation, he or she would have been mentally unbalanced. The density of this generation's events, their pace, their power of evocation, cannot but baffle our imagination and challenge it. A normal person would be unable to take that much sorrow and that much joy in one lifetime. So many wars, burials, victories, losses, funerals, celebrations. The Sinai Campaign, the Six-Day War, the liberation of Jerusalem, the War of Attrition, the Jewish renaissance in Russia, the ingathering of Falashas, the Yom Kippur War, the first direct meeting between [00:07:00] Egypt and Israel, the peace treaty with Sadat. So much has happened in one generation. Was it too much?

Often we have the feeling that history's trying to tell us something, perhaps to give us some warnings, but we are unable to decipher them. And so the question remains: What is the sense of history today? Aren't we but a spasm in history, a tear in the ocean, an experience of eternity? Where do we stand in our itinerary? Are we heading towards new perils or to old ones? Are we equipped to handle them, to cope with them? One generation ago -- 40 years ago -- American Jewry did not do all it could or should have done for European Jews. Of course that was much more true of the leaders of America -- Roosevelt and his government, who didn't do enough [00:08:00] -- but it is more painful for us when we think of American Jewry. As Rabbi Haskel Lookstein states in his remarkable book called *Were We Our Brothers' Keepers?*, the American Jewish community failed to conquer its internal divisions in order to heed the call of Jewish history and do the impossible for the sake of doomed Jews in ghettos and camps. And he says, "The Final Solution may have been *unstoppable* by American Jewry, but it should have been *unbearable* for them. And it wasn't." Still, we do not pass judgment. No one has the right to pass judgment on a people, and surely not of an ancient people such as the Jewish people. And those who in the UN, there to do so, of them we may say "*Gam zeh ya'avov*," "That too

shall pass." What remains, what is eternal in the present? We shall speak about that later.

For the moment, as we are about to [00:09:00] take leave from one another for another year, I would like to thank Rabbi Lavey Derby for his teaching on Thursday afternoon to hundreds of good students, and I would like to thank you for being his students and helping me study further. We shall meet again, I hope, next year, for the twentieth time, and we shall continue our exploration of the sources of Jewish inspiration. And next year, also, we shall tell more tales, but there is one I must tell already now.

What have we to tell you really now? I'll tell you what. It's a story about many people; I heard it about even Adlai Stevenson, but I prefer it to be a story about a famous unnamed itinerant maggid, or preacher, who one day turned to his audience and said, "The purpose of my being here is to speak; the purpose of your [00:10:00] being here is to listen. Now, let us hope we both finish at the same time." (laughter)

But, by now you have noticed, there must be those that did not begin at the same time, and they are waiting, and so are we.

(applause)

(break in audio)

What have we learned this year? From Abram and Sarah we have learned that everything in Jewish history is connected. We have also learned that they were human beings. Ishmael and Hagar were victims of an injustice, divine or human or both, and all we can do now is remember it [00:11:00] and admit it, and if possible now, correct it.

Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma teach us the limits of our knowledge, though not of our quest for knowledge. Had the four sages remained united inside the *pardes*, the orchard of forbidden learning, they may have fared better. A knowledge that separates is dangerous, for it removes us from the source and the goal. From the Shpoler Zeide, we must learn the Hassidic lesson, the general lesson, that all things human ought to be measured in human terms. A just man is defined by his behavior towards his fellow man and women and not by his attitudes towards God.

Through all these characters, we have tried to reenter three periods in Jewish history [00:12:00] and see how, in what manner, to what degree, they may have an effect on our

generation: Abraham or the moral minority; Ben Azzai, the humanist in the inhuman society; the Hassidic master, or the ability to help the helpless with a simple word, a simple gesture or smile. Life is made of moments, not years. Isn't this what we have learned from our studying together?

We have also ascertained the need for questioning. We have questioned the text, we have questioned the answers, and sometimes we even questioned the questions. Everything in Jewish history is a question mark. Remember the Hassidic anecdote about the beggar who came for the third time to the same man for a loan? [00:13:00] "Why me?" asked the rich man, and the beggar lifted his eyes to heaven and said, "And why me?" (laughter)

Why have we been chosen for so many exiles, so many trials, and why are they so harsh? Why the suspicion and the hate that Jews often must confront and overcome? What is it about the Jews that they elicit so much antagonism? Is it because we refuse to adjust, to abdicate our inner sovereignty, our memory, perhaps? Is it because we give others a bad conscience? Is it because we always manage to invent problems to other people's solutions? (laughter) Is it simply because of our stubbornness, because we

refuse to leave the stage of history? Because we are the only people [00:14:00] of antiquity to have survived antiquity?

Mark Twain wrote, "If statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race." That was then; today the figure is infinitely smaller. "Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he's heard of, has always been heard of.... The Egyptian, the Babylonian, the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed and made a vast noise, and they are gone.... The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was.... All things are mortal but the Jew; all forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?" Strangely enough, Tolstoy wrote almost a similar text expressing the same [00:15:00] amazement: What is it that gives the Jewish people such a dimension of eternity? Perhaps Mark Twain is right to some extent, but we don't know it. Poor PR. Maybe even poor businessmen we are. If we could get royalties for the Bible, (laughter) I don't think that Israel would need a loan from America, but the other way around. (laughter)

In eighteenth-century Frankfurt, a Jewish jeweler named Oppenheimer once remarked, and I quote him, "Who is a good businessman? To sell a pearl that you own to someone who wants it, that is something any fool can do, but to sell a pearl that you do not own to someone who does not want it, that is business." (laughter) [00:16:00] In our country, in our society, in our civilization, that is called commercials. (laughter) Ideas, objects, entertainment, politics, economic programs, toothpaste and Alka-Seltzer, whether you want it or not, you'll buy it. Have you noticed the bestsellers in recent years? They're either cookbooks or books about dieting. (laughter) Half of the programs are meant to keep you awake, and the other half put you to sleep.

But then, we Jews have always suffered from the distorted image we projected around us. Some people resent our noisiness, and yet as a people we have, until recently -- until 1948, when Israel became, fortunately, a state -- and what a state, a state of which we are proud -- but until then, we almost always prefer to remain invisible and inaudible and secretive. [00:17:00] Isn't it the Jewish tradition that introduced the whisper in history, even in religion? The *kol d'mama daka*, the small voice, is profoundly appreciated in our culture. God speaks in a small voice, and God listens to small voices, and they are

mightier than thunder, and less spectacular. If eternity has a voice, I believe it is the voice of silence.

Our generation perhaps one day will be judged not only by its deeds but also by its language, which means by its attitude towards language, which means by its attitude towards people, for that is what language is all about, people. Their yearning to reach an invisible God, to communicate with wanderers and strangers, to see to it that fathers and sons not be strangers to one another, that Cain and Abel be brothers and not enemies. The key word, therefore, [00:18:00] is communication and faith. Language is based on an act of faith. Unless I believe that what I wish to say can be said and understood, would I speak at all?

Language may very well emerge to be what constitutes the fabric of society, if not the mattress of history altogether. Before attacking people, one denigrates their language. Before assaulting a community, one debases its cultural identity. War, like everything else, begins with words, and we are all its victims, even God.

Listen to a parable told by the great maggid Rebbe Yechiel Michel of Zlotshov: Once upon a time there was a king who

married off his only daughter. His love for her was so great that it touched and encompassed all those who had seen her.

[00:19:00] Because of this love for her, he loved all his subjects. And when the day of her wedding arrived, the king invited all his countrymen to the festive meal that was to last, as is supposed to last in tradition, an entire week in his royal palace. Hundreds of thousands of men and women and children took to the road. Those who arrived the first day experienced a joy that they never knew existed, but on the third day, Satan, jealous, sent an enemy force into the palace and killed the princess. Heartbroken, the king withdrew into his chambers to weep over his loss. Those who saw him shared in his grief, but outside, at the other end of the palace or the city, there were still hundreds and thousands of guests who had not heard of the tragedy, and so [00:20:00] while the king was mourning the death of his daughter and the death of his joy, they, the uninformed guests, unaware of what happened, were still dancing and rejoicing.

One cannot speak about God, said Franz Kafka, who actually proved the opposite. What would theologians do, and philosophers, and religious poets, and moralists, what would all men do, without their belief that it is possible to speak of God? And so they do. They speak of God's grace and charity, of

his truth and justice, of his uniqueness too. But as for myself, I am mainly attracted by his solitude. He cannot not be alone. He cannot not be. And so "The Solitude of God" [00:21:00] that I'm going to read to you is an excerpt from a forthcoming volume entitled *Words from a Stranger*. And, as always, translated with delicate sensitivity by my most personal and inseparable translator, Marion Wiesel, of whom I would say what Rabbi Akiva said of his wife. And this story deals with -- but why say things about a text when you can hear the text itself?

Solitude. Does there exist for man, for the creator of man, for a Jew, a problem more laden with anxiety? At once crushing and necessary, solitude both defines and denies. What would I be without it? What would become of me if there were nothing else on my horizon? Created in God's image, man is as alone as he is, and yet man may and must hope, [00:22:00] he must rise to the challenge, transcend himself until he loses or finds himself in God. Only God is condemned to eternal loneliness; only God is inexorably, irreducibly alone.

But then, as for man, what would man be were he not at the core a living appeal hurtled towards his fellow man to break his own solitude? Let man succeed completely, and he will be

diminished. He would live suspended in time. But then, can he undertake this course knowing my allies in communicating with my contemporaries?

Certainly, like everybody, when thinking of the recent past, I have known anger, and I have raised my voice in protest, and I do not regret it. But over the years, I have come to understand the double-edged nature [00:23:00] of the questioning that modern man endures. Even as I have the right to ask the judge of all man, "Why did you allow Auschwitz to happen?" so has he the right to ask us, "Why have you made a mess of my creation? By what right have you cut down the trees of life and made of them an altar to death?" And all of a sudden, you think of God in his heavenly and luminous loneliness, and you feel like weeping for him and over him, and you weep so much that he too, says the Talmudic tradition, he too begins to weep until your tears and his come together and merge like two melancholy solitudes thirsting for fulfillment.

Listen to what the Midrash tells us: When the Holy One, blessed be he, shall come to free the children of Israel from exile, they [00:24:00] will tell him, "Master of the universe, it is you who dispersed us among the nations when you chased us out of your dwelling, and now, now it is you again who leads us back."

Whereupon the Holy One, blessed be he, answered with this parable: A king chased his spouse out of his palace and brought her back the following day. The queen was puzzled and asked him, "Why did you send me away yesterday if you meant to take me back?" And the king answered, "You must know that I followed you outside the palace. I couldn't bear living in it alone." And the Holy One, blessed be he, told the children of Israel, "As I saw you leaving my house in Jerusalem, I too left it in order to return to it with you."

For God accompanies his children into exile. And this theme dominates Midrashic and mystical thought in Jewish tradition. Just as Israel's solitude [00:25:00] reflects God's, man's suffering extends into that of his creator. Though imposed by God, the punishment transcends those it strikes; it implicates the judge himself. This is how God wished it. The father may show his anger and stress his severity but he will not stay away. He was present at creation, and he remains a part of it. *Let atar panui minei* is the key sentence in Jewish mysticism: "No space is empty of God." He is everywhere, even in suffering, and at the very core of punishment. Israel's sadness is linked to that of the She'hina: together they await redemption. For each, the waiting constitutes a secret dimension of the other. Just as for the children of Israel, the

distress of the She'hina seems intolerable, the She'hina is torn apart by Israel's [00:26:00] torment. Would you call it compassion on a divine scale? It is also solidarity.

Whatever happens to us touches God; whatever happens to God is of concern to all of us. And we take part in the same adventure and share the same quest, and we suffer for the same reasons and confer the same meaning to our common hope.

Of course, this community of suffering carries its own difficulties. Its impact is ambivalent. Is its purpose to make our human ordeal heavier or less heavy? Does the idea that God too suffers with us -- that is, because of us -- help us endure our pain or, on the contrary, does it add to our burden? On the one hand, we can argue that we have no right to complain, since God too knows pain, but on the other hand, we must admit that one suffering does not cancel the other -- quite the opposite; they are cumulative. Various sufferings, [00:27:00] that is, exist of various origins, and they add up without balancing one another. And so for us, divine suffering is not a consolation, but further suffering. And here, should it not be allowed to ask the heavens, "Master of the universe, is it not enough for us to bear our own pain? Must you add yours?"

In truth, it is not up to us to decide for God. He alone is free to make his choice. As to the thousands of ways he may join his suffering and ours, we can either provoke them or challenge them. We can only try to be, as Dostoyevsky put it, worthy of them. Without understanding? Yes, without understanding. On a certain level of being human in the presence of God, everything is linked to mystery.

We know that God suffers [00:28:00] because he is willing to let it be known. We know that he behaves as one in exile because he consents to give us a vivid description of the exile in which he dwells. Do we know when his word penetrates us and when his silence makes us tremble? We don't even know his name. When Moses asked him his name, God replies, "*Eh'yeh asher eh'yeh*," "I shall be he who shall be." That is to say, I do not define myself in the present; my name itself will be waiting for you in the future. "And from that day," says the prophet, "God shall be one and his name will be one." Does this mean that now in exile, God has no name? Let us say that his ineffable name is separated, disseminated, dispersed, to be found in many places, in many guises. But this ineffable name is unknown to us. It eludes us. We forgot it. It is not [00:29:00] the Tetragram, it is something else. It is the name that the high priest long

ago pronounced once a year, during the Yom Kippur services, in the temple, in the *Kodesh HaKodashim* in the sanctuary in Jerusalem. And since the temple no longer exists and its servants have been massacred, God seems to have withdrawn his name from our memory. But then, how can we speak to him? God needs no name to be present. He's both in our request and its fulfillment. He is both question and answer. He is, for the poor mortals that we are, both schism and bond, pain and recovery, wound and peace, prayer and pardon. He is, and that must suffice.

Still, I admit it often, it does not suffice. When I think of the convulsions endured in our century, the most violent of all, [00:30:00] I find it does not satisfy me. In this context, God's piece, God's role for me are paramount. How could God tolerate that his suffering be exploited in order to inflict more suffering upon us? Must we view the one as justifying the other? I believe that the answer is no, nothing justifies Auschwitz. And were God himself to offer me an answer -- any answer -- I think I would reject it, for Treblinka has killed all answers.

The kingdom of night shall remain in perpetuity one huge interrogation point. One cannot conceive of it with God, but

also not without God. Confronted with a sum of suffering without precedent, he should have acted or expressed himself, and I am ready to [00:31:00] accept that, moved by his eternal compassion, he allowed himself to be overcome with our pain, which he amplified, of course, as only he is capable of doing. But on whose side was he? Only on the side of the victims? Does he not claim to be the father of all man, of Cain as well as of Abel? Is it in that role, the breaking our resistance, that he troubles us? Yes. But then also, in that role, we feel sorry for him. How can one not feel sorry for a father who is present at the massacre of some of his children by his other children? Is there a more devastating pain, a more bitter remorse?

That is the dilemma encountered by the believer: by remaining a spectator, God was trying to tell man something, but what? Why wasn't he clearer? [00:32:00] He could have -- he should have -- terminated the torment of the innocent. Why didn't he do it? And I don't know, and I think that I shall never know.

Undoubtedly he does not wish me to know. There was a time when the darkness that surrounded me provoked my protest and incited me to rebel, but later I felt only sadness, and I still do. And this is, once more, in the tradition both of the Midrash and

Hassidism, that God is not only to be adored and admired and loved and feared; at times, he ought to be pitied.

I remember another Midrashic legend, one more, on divine attitudes towards human suffering. Come and think on a verse from Jeremiah, according to which God said, [00:33:00] "I shall weep in secret," quote-unquote. The Midrash tells us, so poetically, that there exists a place called "secret," and that whenever God is sad, he takes refuge there in order to weep in privacy, the secret of that secret.

Listen to one more legend: When God sees the suffering of his children dispersed among the nations, he sheds two tears into the ocean. As they fall, the tears resound until they can be heard from one end of the world to the other. Oh, I love this legend, and I say to myself that while God has surely shed more than two tears into the ocean, men are probably too cowardly to listen. They have refused to listen. They have not heard.

[00:34:00]

But the solitude of God must not move us to forget or ignore the solitude of some of his children. Whatever we try to learn from the text that we had before us, this year or for the last 19

years, means to prove that in order for man to come closer to God, man must come closer to one another. The only way leading to God is through other human beings. Maybe Seneca was right. I quote him: "When you speak to man," he said, "think that God is listening, and when you speak to God, think that men are listening."

The Jewish tradition emphasizes the virtue of listening. *Sh'ma Yisrael*, "Hear, O Israel," is our essential prayer. [00:35:00] Moses's last song began with *ha-azinu hashamayim*, "Listen, heavens, listen, earth." No other language has as many terms for listening as the Hebrew language has. Listen to the dead who refuse to die and to the living who are unable to live. Listen to the glorious teachers who know the secret of immortality, but listen also to the victims of misfortune and injustice, whose pain and anguish make them aware of how mortal and vulnerable defenseless persons can be.

We must know what is happening around us. We must not only deal with the past, not even with the distant past. We must use that past, leave that past, in order to see the present. Last year was marked by an infinite number of new woes and new trials -- for instance, the increase of torture in a variety of dictatorships. [00:36:00] And torture, in its ultimate face, is

worse than death. In prison, facing the torture, the victim dies more than once. Death for the prisoner could often appear as deliverance. Why don't we act more to abolish that torture, both in some fascist countries who are our allies and in communist countries?

Another woe that confronted us and we confronted it is hunger. Hunger has a face, the face of emaciated, silent, exhausted children. We have seen them in newspapers and on television, and their eyes -- my God, eyes that pierce the coldest of stone hearts. The eyes of a mother carrying her dead child in her arms, not knowing where to go nor where to stop, [00:37:00] and you would think that she would keep on going to the end of the world. And the eyes of an old grandfather who probably wonders where creation had gone wrong, and those of an ageless man who wonders whether it was worthwhile to create a family, to wager on the future, since men and women are condemned to transmit misery from one generation to another: hunger and death, death and starvation, starvation and shame. Scores of men and women die daily even now as I'm speaking here, and those who mourn for them will die the next day, and the others will have no strength left to mourn. Yesterday, some of them may have been proud members of their tribes, bearers of ancient culture and lore, and now they wander among corpses, their own. [00:38:00] Hunger

means shame, for it means humiliation, just as torture does. Hunger means torture. Hunger beyond a certain point reduces the human being, for he or she no longer seeks truth or divine charity, but only bread, thus the shame.

Characteristically, there exists in Hebrew only one disease, one natural disease, linked to shame. We speak of it as *kherpat raav*, the shame of hunger. Shame is associated neither with death nor with pain, only with hunger, but the shame refers not to the hungry person but to those who refuse to feed the hungry persons. For all the woes that threaten and plague society, hunger alone can be curtailed, appeased, and [00:39:00] ultimately vanquished, not by destiny nor by the heavens, but by human beings. Hunger alone can be stopped easily. That is not true of other cataclysms, but it is true of hunger. One gesture of generosity, one act of humanity, may end hunger, at least for one child, for one family, and if we do not offer that gesture, we ought to be ashamed.

I speak, of course, as a student of Jewish culture and as someone who claims to be a son of the Jewish people, and I believe, therefore, that we as Jews must do whatever we can to curtail the injustice that affects other people, not only our own. [00:40:00] Some of you who have been here for years, I

hope you know how committed I am to the Jewish people. It's my whole life. *Ahavat Yisrael* is what governs my life, but we cannot limit it. It would be self-defeating; it would distort our own principles; it would poison our love; it would be too inward. We must use that tradition of compassion that we have inherited for all victims. Apartheid in South Africa -- how can we accept the fact that entire communities are humiliated only because of their skin? I was there with my wife and my son from ten years ago exactly, and I remember that I felt then, for the first time in my life, ashamed, simply that I did not belong then to the victims. What should we do about the oppression in Soviet Russia? [00:41:00] Innumerable men and women, the Sharanskys, the Slepaks, the Ida Nudels, and Sakharov. What should we do about them who are imprisoned only because of their beliefs?

Last week, some of you may have seen, I have published in the *New York Times* an appeal to President Reagan on behalf of some refuseniks, and especially on behalf of a certain Volvovsky. I have done it with the gracious acceptance of the *Times* editor simply to save that man, thinking that if we make his name known, he would be shielded. Next day, he was sentenced to three years simply for praying, for worshipping, for studying Jewish history and law.

What should [00:42:00] we do about Central America, where the poverty of the poor is exploited and manipulated by both sides? What should we do about the drug addicts, the teenage suicides, the terror, the new international disease, the terror. What should we do about the ultimate terror, the nuclear one? We cannot say it's not a Jewish issue; it is a Jewish issue. It is a human issue and therefore a Jewish issue. Has the planet ever been more threatened than it is now? Will the nuclear summit bring us a message of hope? I wish President Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev would not go to Geneva; I wish they will go to Hiroshima instead. What a statement that would be: the first nuclear summit taking place in Hiroshima, to see what it is, to live through such a devastation. Geneva is too beautiful, too peaceful. They should go to Hiroshima, and it would capture the imagination of the entire world. But you know, my record as travel advisor to the White House.... (laughter, applause)

And since this is our last meeting this year -- we always do it every year -- I will tell you a story about recent events, and I will tell you something which I have not told since the event itself, about Bitburg. As soon as the president went to Bitburg, I stopped the debate. I had tried to maintain the debate on the level of dignity and Jewish honor, and [00:44:00]

I fought, I fought every step. But the moment he went there, I stopped, because I felt it was useless to continue an acrimonious debate. It would have become acrimonious, at least on their side. Also, I am not a politician and I don't need this kind of visibility. But may I tell you now what I think happened really? It happened by sheer accident. I am convinced that they didn't even want to go there; they didn't even know that it existed. I'll tell you how it happened.

I was thinking about it in relation to the book of Job. Do you remember how Job began? After all, we have spoken about poor Job already twice in this series. The first lecture was about Job here, 19 years ago. It begins like a Kafka story. You know, Kafka begins a novel like *The Trial* that one day, Josef K got up in the morning, and he said good morning [00:45:00] to the concierge, and she didn't answer. Maybe she was busy. Maybe she didn't hear. Maybe she didn't sleep well. But he says, "Ah, she doesn't answer. That means something is wrong with me. That means I must have done something wrong. That means I am guilty. If I am guilty, I'll be judged. If I'll be judged, I'll be sentenced. If I'll be sentenced, I'll be killed." So it begins like that, and at the end of the book, he is killed. (laughter) Now, how was Job? Job, I can almost visualize -- forgive me for imagining this scene, but from the

text, I can visualize the scene. That day, God in heaven decided to have one of his sessions there, and all of his angels came. After all, who could refuse an invitation to God, you know? (laughter) And there was also Satan, and he happened to be there. He wasn't supposed to be there; he had other business to do somewhere else. But he happened to be there, so God saw him. He says, "Hi," [00:46:00] and (laughter) Satan answered "Hi," you know, and God says, "Where do you come from?" "Oh, just around." "Where were you?" "Down below." "How is it?" "Good." (laughter) "Really?" "Really." "Tell me, Satan," says God, "did you happen to meet a friend of mine, you know, one named Job?" "Yes," says Satan. "Don't you think that he's a good man?" At which point Satan is shrewd. You must give him that credit; Satan is not stupid. He understood that God was asking a leading question, that God wanted him to answer in a certain way. And this is, by the way, the injustice in Job. Usually it is Satan who is seducing and inducing. This time it is God who is doing the seduction; God is inducing Satan to speak evil of Job. And he said, "Yes, of course, of course he is good and he is god-fearing. Why? [00:47:00] Because he is rich, and because he has children, and they're all good, and everyone is healthy. But take away his wealth, take away his children, take away his health, then we shall see." So it

begins like a casual conversation between God and Satan, and it ends in tragedy.

I'm convinced that that's how it happened in the White House. Kohl came to see the president, and Kohl at one point said, "Mr. President, you know, a few months ago I happened to be in France, a visit with President Mitterrand, and we had a good idea. You know, former enemies. We went to a cemetery, Verdun." And President Reagan said, "Oh, very nice." And Kohl said (laughter) -- and Kohl said, "It was a great photo opportunity. (laughter) We took each other's hand. [00:48:00] And it was great. It was a very great thing." And the president said, "Oh, yes, very nice." And Kohl said, "Maybe we should do it when you come to Germany too." And the president said, "Why not? Of course." That's how it began. And once it began, it had to follow its course, like in a Greek tragedy. You couldn't stop it. Which means we should be very careful with what we say and with what we don't say and the way we say it.

Was it wrong? I think that, unfortunately, it was a mistake on behalf of our government. It didn't even help Kohl, as you know. I always marvel at the way God chooses to punish sometimes, in an indirect way, but Kohl didn't win the election

that he wanted to win, and it will leave a mark. Still, the worst part of that episode was not really [00:49:00] the going to Bitburg itself -- well, maybe politically he had some reasons -- but what was worse was the equation that he made. The president made an equation a day before Yom HaShoah, the day before the ceremony. I knew about it because a friend of mine, who is a very great newspaperman, called me up. He said, "Do you know what he said?" And I didn't believe him, so he read to me the wires, that the president made an equation between the victims and those soldiers who were, at best, on the side of the killers. That is terrible, meaning it goes against everything that we have tried to do. It goes against memory, against justice. At that point, what can you do except increase that memory and teach more and write more [00:50:00] and speak and share?

Well, another year has passed. Somehow, these years, these series pass faster than before. Nineteen years ago, it was long. I remember the month, the four Thursdays were very long. (laughter) Now it's so quick. I have the feeling I've just begun with Ishmael and Hagar, and here we are already at the end. But what have we learned this year, and what have you learned the years before? First of all, we have learned that after the story is told, the Y is generously offering you

champagne, kosher champagne. Second, as I promised, I will conclude with a story, a beautiful story.

An emperor, long ago, at the beginning of our era, summoned an old Talmudic sage and tried to trap him. And the emperor said to him, "I am told that you are a wise and learned man. Answer my question. I have a bird in my hands, behind my back. Is the bird dead or alive?" And the sage was afraid that because of his answer, the emperor may kill the bird. And so he thought for a while, and he said softly, "Majesty, the answer is in your hands." (laughter)

We have shared, for the last four weeks and for the last nineteen years, many questions, but all the answers, my friends, are in your hands. I thank you. (applause)

M:

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