Elie Wiesel In Modern Times: A Song for Hope

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Elie Wiesel:

Tonight will be different. You will see why. Tonight I would like to read to you an excerpt from a cantata. It is called "A Song for Hope."

It begins with a narrator who starts, "Was he a madman? Was it all a dream? A memory, perhaps? A strange man appeared in the midst of other men and spoke to them of their suffering and his own, and they did not listen. Then [00:01:00] he spoke to them of the dangers that lay ahead, and they did not listen. He spoke to them of their desperate but impossible hope, and still, they did not listen." Here the choir comes in. "He was a man, an ageless man. His was a voice that called the living to life, and the survivors to faith. He was a dreamer who made others dream."

Narrator again, "Was he a madman? Keeping faith with the death, he fought death, his eyes, heavy with despair, ask for joy. A victim of man, he yearned to being together with man. But they refused to listen." The choir, "They were too sad and too alone, these men and women and children, and children too, and

children most of [00:02:00] all. They were too knowing and too laden with experience to receive his words, and to consider themselves worthy of his consolation."

Narrator, "And so this strange man, this ageless and friendless Jew with the broken heart and an infinite memory had to choose between song and silence. He chose to sing silently. Better yet, he made silence sing."

Choir, "And he sang of the stubborn face of the martyrs in Judea, and of the communities massacred by the crusaders blinded by hate, which they mistook for sublime love. He sang of the wisdom of old men, thirsting for wisdom, and the purity of children hungering for happiness. And he sang and he sang of the beauty of young women, and the piety of their chosen standing [00:03:00] under a flowering arch, ready to celebrate a future, even as the enemy, his sharpened knife at hand, was but waiting for a signal to cut their throats, he sang."

Narrator, "He sang, he sang. He did nothing else. He could do nothing else. Didn't I tell you, he was mad? This man who thought he could communicate, he communicate of his people's sadness and his own. He was mad. He was mad, this man who thought he could rouse man and women so that they could

transcend sadness, but never ignore it. He was mad, this man who tried to sing in silence while nobody listened."

Choir, "And yet, he sang. He sang in spite of every times, in spite of himself. [00:04:00] He thought of Moses crossing the Red Sea, and he sang. He remembered Deborah victorious, and still, he sang. He called upon Jeremiah and invited him to sing in his place, to say what no other could say, that the duty of man, the duty of a Jew is to hold fast to faith, even in the midst of ruins, and to impose joy even when the earth is covered with cemeteries, both visible and invisible."

Narrator, "And then suddenly, from beyond the mountains and the oceans, from beyond the whole world, from beyond centuries, a voice." Choir, "A singular voice, clear and earnest, young, yet ancient, a voice unlike any other was heard. It was Jeremiah. I have foreseen the punishment. I have lived [00:05:00] the disaster. I have told of the disaster of my people, and yet I have also told you that life is sacred, as is man's law. I have seen King Zedekiah in chains, and his princess humiliated. I have seen the priests mutilated and the minstrels struck dumb. I have seen prone in the dust the children of Jerusalem so beautiful, so brave. I have seen the mothers on their knees bent over them crazed with pain. And still, I proclaimed that

life is sacred, and memory immortal. I proclaim that the people of Israel shall live." And the choir comes in. "The suffering of Israel is the question, the question of Israel."

Thus begins the cantata. It was commissioned by the Y to mark the 20th anniversary [00:06:00] of our annual encounters, and the 50th anniversary of its own existence. The music is by the great composer, David Diamond, and the concert will take place, *im yirtzeh hashem*, next spring, as Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Berditchever would say, next spring in Jerusalem with the Messiah attending. (laughter) However, should the Messiah be busy, or should he be late in arriving, the concert will take place here in New York, probably in this very place, thanks to Amos, who has become the organizer of a place that has become one of the most prestigious music centers in New York.

The title is "A Song for Hope." Why? [00:07:00] Actually, I could say why not, but why hope? And why a song? Hope is essential to all human endeavors. It is a main component in history, a main element in literature and religion. *Kaveh el Adoshem*, place your hope in God and God will justify it for you. Therefore, *tikva* and *mikveh* -- hope and source pool. Hope is like a living source. Without it, life would be a desert. Hope

enriches man. Hope beautifies man. Hope strengthens man. Hope strengthens the humanity in man.

If existence is not limited to the present alone, if whatever we do is not irrevocably fixed in its own time frame, then faith [00:08:00] is warranted, for it implies redemption. However, just as hope helped the Jewish people survive its trials and tribulations, it also turned into an obstacle. And we have seen it happen in our own lifetime. Jewish communities were lost one biblical generation ago, because they had placed exaggerated hope on their neighbors, or on society, or on humankind. A bit of realism, thus skepticism, would have saved many lives.

That is true also of the family. There is no doubt that what kept the Jewish people alive for 3,500 years is the texture of the family and the commitment to it. It is the family that was Jewish, that maintained Judaism. The closer the family, the better [00:09:00] it was. However, again, one biblical generation ago, because of the family, many members of that family, of those families, were lost. Because people did not want to leave one another, because children did not want to leave their parents, and parents refused to leave their children. In many cases, both the parents and the children and

the brothers and the sisters were lost. So what has been a strength had become a danger.

And yet -- and yet -- we believe that no individual and no community could live without hope, just as they could not exist without dreams. When there seems to be no hope, there is a least a quest for hope. And that quest itself is strong enough in motivation to affirm life [00:10:00] and its sacredness, and its sacred purpose. Isn't this what we have tried to learn in the course of our last three sessions of even during the last 20 years of our studying together?

You remember the first story was Yiftach and his daughter. The story is a tragedy because Yiftach rejected hope right at the outset. He needed a vow, he needed superstition to get hope for himself, and there was no reason for that. He could have simply gone to battle for the Jewish people, knowing that, when Jews fight for Jews, there is hope. Rav and Shmuel speak to us through the discussions in Talmud because their entire project aimed at inspiring hope for generations and generations to come. As for the rebbes of [00:11:00] Tsanz and Sadigur and their followers, of course they did quarrel, but also they did put an end to their quarrel, and isn't that a cause for rejoicing? Hence the connection between song and hope. Actually, this

cantata could have been called a song of hope, but I prefer a song for hope. And the idea is to praise and extol hope as a necessity and virtue of Jewish experience. Translated by the most gifted and sensitive and beautiful wife I ever had, the words sing by themselves. We shall hopefully find time to hear the entire piece -- we shall see. It all depends on the Messiah. If he comes in the middle, I stop. (laughter) But tonight being special, I feel like reminiscing. I am in a romantic mood. Twenty years deserve a special [00:12:00] mood, a special program, a special surprise, a song, perhaps, why not?

Now, just for preliminary remarks, I do want to thank the Y and its leadership for their hospitality for the last 20 years. I want to thank my young colleague, Rabbi Levi Darby, who has so gracefully and effectively prepared hundreds of students for these lectures in the afternoons. And I would like to thank you for the patience that you manifest, both in being here or in waiting to be here.

Of course, there are reasons always to lose hope. Every day we have enough news in the newspapers or in other media to tell us that something is wrong with the world. I just picked up two news items. One is that, in Europe, there is an organization, of all things, called [00:13:00] L'appel du Christ, the Appeal

of Christ. And that organization is publicly, openly intent of doing only one thing -- to hurt and harm Jews, wherever it could find Jews. These people belonging to that organization, these people did bomb the synagogue in Antwerp a few days ago. And the second item I just picked up is that there was a poll in West Germany about Jews, Hitler in the past, Israel, and Nazism. And what I found is that 7.4 percent of 4,000 students, which is a lot, had been [00:14:00] questioned, answered that probably all the evidence, all the news, about five to six million Jews who had been killed are, quote, "exaggerated." Fifteen percent believe that a people, the German people, that has done so well scientifically, does have the right now not to hear any more about Auschwitz. These are only two items; usually when we speak about topical affairs, about actuality, we find more and more reasons to despair. However, we also have learned never to give in to despair.

So tonight, it's "A Song for Hope." And tonight I maybe tell some stories, re-read [00:15:00] some excerpts that I have read here first before publication. This was a kind of laboratory for me, every novel before publishing it is here that I read from it. Every song I had is here that I tried it out. I remember my first appearance at the Y. I remember I shared the program with a lovely young novelist. We both had strange

audiences -- half came for her, and the other half, or a quarter, came for me. And those who came to hear me expected to hear something about the Besht or Rabbi Akiba, but those that came for her never heard of the Besht, or Rabbi Akiba. Oh yes, it was a strange audience. Fortunately, there was an intermission, so the two groups separated, never to meet again. Wrong attitude, of course, for when we have intermissions, it is for opposite [00:16:00] purposes, to bring people together always, and to get everyone to be part of us always. (applause)

(break in audio)

Twenty years ago, I began with an excerpt from a book that I had just published about Soviet Jewry, *The Jews of Silence*. I remember I began reading it in French, thinking that since there are so [00:17:00] few people in the audience, all of them must know French. (laughter) I won't do it today.

But, since I was in Russia together with a few friends here, three, four weeks ago for Simchat Torah, I already spoke about them and about a trip during our Yiftach encounter, let me repeat what I said then: Their eyes. I must tell you about their eyes. I must begin with that, for their eyes precede all else, and everything is comprehended within them. The rest can

wait. It will only confirm what you already know. But their eyes, their eyes flamed with the kind of irreducible truth which burns and burns, and is not consumed. Shamed into silence before them, you can only bow your head [00:18:00] and accept the judgment. Your only wish now is to see the world as they do. A grown man, a man of wisdom and experience, you are suddenly impotent and terribly impoverished. Those eyes remind you of your childhood, your orphaned state. They cause you to lose all faith in the power of language. Those eyes negate the value of words. They dispose of the need for the speech.

Since my return, I've often been asked what have I seen in the Soviet Union, what it was I found there? My answer is always the same -- eyes, only eyes, nothing else. Kolkhazy still works, museums, theaters, nothing. Only eyes. Is that all? That is enough. I visited many cities, was shown what a tourist is shown, and have forgotten it all. [00:19:00] But still the eyes, which I cannot forget, pursue me. There is no escaping them. Everything I have I would give them as ransom for my soul. I saw thousands, tens of thousands of eyes, in streets, in hotels, subways, concert halls, in synagogues, especially in synagogues. Wherever I went, they were waiting for me. At times it seemed as though the entire country was filled with nothing but eyes, as if somehow they had assembled there from

every corner of diaspora, and out of ancient scrolls of agony. All kinds of eyes -- all shapes and ages, wide and narrow, lambent and piercing, somber, harassed, Jewish eyes -- reflecting a strange [00:20:00] unmediated reality beyond the bounds of time, and farther than the farthest distance. Past the future, nothing eludes them. Their gaze seems to apprehend the end of every living generation.

God himself must surely possess eyes like these. If only they could speak. But they do speak. They cry out in the language of their own that compels understanding. What did I learn in Russia? A new language. That is all, and that is enough. It is a language easy to learn in a day, at a single meeting, a single visit to a place where Jews assemble, a synagogue. The same eyes accost you in Moscow, and Kiev, in Leningrad, Vilna, and Minsk, and in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia Republic. They all speak the same language, and the story they tell echoes in your mind like a [00:21:00] horrible folk tale from days gone by.

Strange, I have the feeling this book which I have written in 1965 could still serve as a guide for anyone going to Russia. And I believe anyone who can go to Russia should go to Russia. I remember when I came back I was then desperate because, on one

hand, I discovered so much hope, so much fervor, so much faith in Russian Jewry. And there was no way of awakening our own communities. Somehow we didn't want to hear their cry. We didn't want to see their eyes. And then the idea that I had was a simple one. Since they cannot come to us and, at that time, no one ever thought that they would be allowed to leave, why not go to them? And that's how we had an idea, friends of mine, [00:22:00] to send people there, simply to see those Jews and be seen by them, to tell them that they are not forgotten, to tell them that we here remember them. That's all we can do, but that is all we should do always.

I remember the first time on Simchat Torah, it was '65, I discovered -- I wrote about it -- I discovered that extraordinary phenomenon of tens of thousands of youngsters who came from all over Moscow, from all over the land, from all over memory, to be together, to sing together, to sing in Yiddish, () Lomir alle ineynem, ineynem dos Yiddishe folk mikabl ponim zein, "Let us all together welcome the Jewish people." And, at one point, I saw a choir. And, since I'm drawn by choirs, as you know, there was a beautiful choir, a beautiful young girl with dark hair conducting. And she would ask something in Russian and they would answer. [00:23:00] She would say, "Who are we?" They would say, "Yevrey." "What do we want to be?" "Yevrey."

"What shall we be?" "Yevrey." It went on and on. And I believed then, more than ever before, that the expression Netzach Yisrael, the eternity of Israel, is so true. It's so vibrant, and it reflects so well the Jewish aspirations, the Jewish dreams, and Jewish realities, in spite of the fears, and in spite of the despair, that occasionally, more often than not, plague us.

At one point I stopped and I spoke to her. And I said, "Tell me. I see you are so Jewish." She spoke Yiddish a little bit, she learned from her grandfather. I said, "What do you know about Judaism?" She said, "Nothing. How can we know?" At that time they had nothing. They had no books, no schools. They still have no books, no schools, but they didn't have then clandestine schools, which now they do have. [00:24:00] And all she knew, all they could know, was what they read in the newspapers. That the Jewish people is a capitalist people, it's an exploitive people. It's the worst, the worst. You know, what they say in their papers about the Jewish people is so anti-Semitic that it's not even funny. And then I asked her, "Tell me. If that's all you know about Jewishness, why are you coming here?" And she simply said, "That's what they think." I left her, and then she ran after me, and that was the only time a girl ran after me. (laughter) She said, "I owe you an answer.

You asked me why I come here, which means why I want to be Jewish and remain Jewish. I must tell you. I come here because I love to sing," at which point I almost kissed her. [00:25:00]

Why? Because I remembered that, in the early sixties, Ben-Gurion came up with the question that provoked storms upon storms in Israel in the Jewish communities, *Mihu Yehidu*, "Who is a Jew?" And they would answer simple answers, and more questions, and more questions. It divided a bit. Who is a Jew? She gave me the answer. A Jew is someone who sings. A Jew is someone who, even when that Jew goes to death camps, sings. A Jew is someone who, three steps away from the Kremlin, three steps away from the Lubyanka, sings. Then I came back, I wrote my book, and her answer carried me for weeks and weeks. I loved her answer. Years later I came to Israel, by then with my wife -- we were married. And I wanted to go to Lydda to receive the first [00:26:00] transport of Russian Jews. At that time it was still a secret, that the Russian insisted it must be secret, and they would arrive only in the morning at four o'clock, and in a special place in Lydda. I would go. I felt like a machatunim, like an in-law, that I did something after all for these people. And sure enough one day I saw the El Al arrive, and the door opened. And, among the people going down, the very beautiful girl with dark hair. I recognized her, but the reverse is not

true. (laughter) After all, she made an impression on me, but I did not make an impression on her. But I kept her hand, and she was convinced I must be a *pakid*, an employee of Sochnut, of the Jewish agency, or something like that. (laughter) But, at one point, she did recognize me for, all of a sudden, she said, "Am I going to sing now?" And I had the feeling that, look, an anecdote becomes a legend [00:27:00] in your own lifetime. How lucky can a generation be that such events become legends in your own lifetime?

This time we met the same Jews. Of course, 250 or so had left. But there are others, hundreds of thousands of them were still waiting, and whose language is language of eyes, but more so, but they speak. Now they have courage. In 1965, we began organizing the first groups, the clandestine groups. Do you know where they met? They would meet in cemeteries. They met in Babi Yar, in cemeteries. Why? That was the place where somehow they could be among Jews, and I found it so significant that somehow the place where the enemy wanted the Jewish people to die, that place was the place where Jews brought Jews back to life. And that's where they studied all of this, and they studied Jewish songs, and Jewish history, and Hebrew, and Yiddish, [00:28:00] and literature.

And now, I think I told you three weeks ago or four weeks ago, that I met in the shule a pretty young girl, nine years old. And she spoke marvelous Hebrew, but perfect Hebrew. Now, for a nine year old child to speak Hebrew, that means there must be teachers who teach her Hebrew. For teachers who teach Hebrew, there must be teachers who teach them Hebrew. And now you know that, to teach Hebrew in Russia, is a criminal offense. You go to jail for that. We met hundreds of refuseniks, hundreds of them. In one house we met 150 or 200 who had come from all over the country. They'd heard that we were coming and they wanted to be there. And one young man came up to me and said, "I have a present for you." And he gave me the present. He said, [00:29:00] "I translated some of your books in Russian." Now, for him to translate my books in Russian, that is mesirat nefesh, he could spend 20 years in jail for that. And he said, "This is for you. This copy is for you." And I was -- you can't imagine what I felt. What do we risk? We writers, if we write a bad book, what can we get? A bad review. All right. But, for them, it's prison camp, you're in Siberia. And yet they go on. In the same room, from a different part of the country, another young man came up to me. And he said, "I have a present for you." And he too gave me a present. He said, "I translated some of your books, the same as that." The same books, and they didn't know one another. And it was my great

joy to bring them together, [00:30:00] and they are now together.

So, you see, there is something about the Jewish people, there is something with the Jewish spirit which makes us wonder about the stupidity of the enemy. Why does the enemy try? Doesn't the enemy know that it's useless? Why do they try? I ask the question in a different way of our Russian authorities. We met some high officials there. I asked them, "Why do you do all that? Why do you invest so many efforts, so much energy, so much time? Millions of man hours you invest in persecuting Jews. Why? What is it for you? What do you get out of it?" You know, sometimes they learn from me. Just I don't have answers, they don't have answers too. But still we should continue asking the questions.

Another evening that I remember here, [00:31:00] which remains with me not because of me but because of the subject, was when I had written a *Shir Hashirim*, a song of songs to Jerusalem. And I still have the feeling that, whatever I do, I write a song of song to Jerusalem. I am like Rabbi Nachman. Rabbi Nachman used to say, "Wherever I go, every step leads me to Jerusalem." And I would say, "What I write, every word leads me to Jerusalem." So it was in 1967, it seems so far away. It seems almost like

in a Biblical pre-history. Israel was at war, but before Israel was at war, three weeks of fear preceded that war. We were in New York, I was still going to the U.N. here and there, and [00:32:00] I remember the speeches we used to hear. The speeches, the Arab and the communist speeches. A representative of the P.L.O. was a man named Ahmad Shukeiri. He was Yasser Arafat's forerunner, and his speeches were simple. He said, "We are going to war with Israel, and then there will be no more Jewish problem." He openly said it, they all said it. They were going to destroy Israel, and there was no one in the U.N. then to stand up and to say, "You cannot say these kind of things. You cannot use that language anymore, at least not now, surely not yet, since we still remember." It went on and on and on.

And I confess to you, for the only time in my life, that I doubted. I was not convinced. I was not sure whether Israel would manage to win that war, since I know nothing about wars. And I remember it was [00:33:00] June 4, I gave the commencement at the Jewish Theological Seminary. And all the people then who were there, and some of them are no longer here, like my teacher and friend Shaul Lieberman, or Heschel, Spiegel, *she'yitadeh chaim arukhim* Louie Finkelstein. And that was still then still the great center of Jewish learning, and I gave the commencement

address. All of a sudden, I stopped in the middle, and I turned to the students, the graduating students, and I said, "Maybe there will be war tomorrow. Should there be war tomorrow, don't wait. Go to Israel." Next morning, on five o'clock in the morning, the Israeli ambassador to the U.N., Gideon Rafael, woke me up. He said, "How did you know?" I said, "How did I know what?" It was war. Well, of course, I didn't know, but I decided what I gave as an advice to the students I must follow. [00:34:00] So I decide I have to go to Israel, too. Really I was convinced then that Israel, the first day -- you remember Moshe Dayan was so clever, such a great strategist -- that Israel had already won the war. But he kept it a secret, and therefore we have Jerusalem today. Because, until the third day of the war, Hussein was convinced that Tel Aviv was burning, and he was going to get Jerusalem.

So I decided to go to Israel. Many airlines had already stopped. I went to Paris. In Paris, I took the last El Al flight to Tel Aviv. And, since I was the last, I had the last seat. And I sat down, very tired of the tension, I was tired of everything. I was terribly, terribly tired. I wanted to sleep. And then the beautiful stewardess came up and --(laughter) maybe she wasn't. I'm afraid to -- . (laughter) [00:35:00] And she simply smiled at me, and she said, "I know who are." Usually

when somebody says that, I have only one answer, "You know who I am? I don't." (laughter) It takes me years, it'll take me my whole life to find out who am I, and she knows who I am. All right. But she was nice, and I was tired. I let her go. An hour later she came back, and people were sleeping early. It was a very special plane, full of millionaires, and full of generals, who went back. And she came to me, she said, "You know, I love your book." When somebody says that, usually it's enough for me to say, "Which one?" to embarrass the person. But I was kind, I didn't say anything. I said thank you. And she came back and forth. She brought me coffee, and she brought me cognac, and she brought me fruit, chocolate, everything. [00:36:00] And I felt really great, the Messiah must come. If a Jewish writer is treated so well in a Jewish plane --. (laughter) But then she came back and she said, "By the way, there is one thing I don't understand in the third chapter, Mr. Schwarz-Bart." (laughter) No, no. I became very modest, and I said to the stewardess, "Lady, I'm terribly, terribly sorry, but I am not André Schwarz-Bart." She said, "Come on," she said. I said, "I know who I am. I am not." She said, "I know that you are traveling incognito, but I know." I said, "Lady, I am not." And she insisted so much that I felt I have to give her an explanation. [00:37:00] I said, "I understand why you mistake me for my friend. Number one, I am also a writer. Number two,

I also write in French. Number three, his book and some of my books have the same topic. Number four, we have the same publisher in New York, and number five, the same publisher in Paris. Number six, we are very good friends. Number seven, there is a kind of physical resemblance between us. Number eight, it happened, but it shouldn't happen. We say in Yiddish, der *bokher hazetser*, the printer made a mistake, and either published my picture on his book, or his picture on mine." At which point, she said, "Mr. Schwarz-Bart," she says, "I thought I knew everything about you, because you are my hero. I didn't know you have a sense of humor." (laughter) Well, I let it go, [00:38:00] and I felt bad. I felt like I deserved getting my friend's credit if not his credit card. And I went on enjoying everything -- chocolate, cognac, perfect.

Five minutes before landing, we had to ready our seatbelts fastened, and the mood in the plane was, all of a sudden, subdued. Nobody spoke. We entered Israel at war. All of a sudden, I saw her come to me, and she was still smiling, but this time her smile was vicious. She said, "I don't know who you are." I said, "At last." "But one thing," she said, "I do know, you are not André Schwarz-Bart." And I was such an idiot that I said, "Prove it." (laughter) And she said, "With pleasure. André Schwarz-Bart [00:39:00] sits there." I hope

all of you know André Schwarz-Bart. He really is a friend, and I recommend his book, *The Last of the Just*, to you. It's one of the great books of the century. And, yes, he was there, three rows ahead of mine. And he jumped up, and I jumped up, and we embraced. And I said, "What are you doing here?" He said, "What are you doing here?" Of course we both came for the same reason, to bear witness. For he and I believe that, to be a Jew, means to bear witness. Both he and I believe that, to be a writer, means someone who brings words together and then brings people together. After all, people who read the same books have something in common. Those people absorb the word, just as a person who is admiring a beautiful sculpture, [00:40:00] is admiring not only the stone, but is admiring the art of that sculpture, and is being changed by that art, as the person must be changed by those words. And we believe, therefore, that whenever anything happens to the Jewish people, it is our duty to be there and bear witness.

Then I went right away to Jerusalem. And, at that time, the Old City was too old, and the wall was still old. It was a few narrow streets leading to it and, all of a sudden, you lifted your head and you saw the wall. Not like now. Now it's a piazza for tourists, but it was different. And I remember I stood before the wall, and my lips began moving, and I began

writing my novel, *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, then, right then. [00:41:00] And I called it *A Beggar* because, in Jerusalem, we are all beggars, in the best and noblest sense of the word. We are there to receive. There isn't much we can give, for there is only one thing we should give -- ourselves. But there is much to take. We take from Jerusalem the memory of Jerusalem, the beauty of Jerusalem, the suffering of Jerusalem, also the greatness that Jerusalem has demonstrated as a distinct suffering.

And so I stood in front of the wall, and then I heard the voice inside me saying, "I am the eye that looks at the eye that is looking. I shall look so hard that I shall be blinded. So what? I shall sing. I shall sing with such force that I shall go mad. So what? I shall dream. [00:42:00] I shall dream that I am David, Song of Solomon. And I tell my mother what I have done with her tears and her prayers. I tell her what I have done with my years, and my silences, and my life. Why so late? I had no strength. I could not accept your absence. If I have never written you, it's because I have never left you. You were the one who went away and, ever since, I see you going away. I see nothing else. For years now, you have been leaving me, vanishing into the distance, swallowed by the black and silent tide. But the sky that drowned the fire cannot drown you. You

are the fire. You are the sky. [00:43:00] And this hand which is writing, it is stretched toward you. And this vision which hounds me, it is my offering to you. And the silence, it is on your lips, I find it and give it back. Wandering beggar, prisoner, it is always your voice I seek to set free inside me. And, each time I address myself to strangers, I am speaking to you. And so I contemplate a wall which bears my mother's face. Yes, she had two faces, my mother. One short daily sorrows from Sunday to Friday, to the vokhendike face. And one other reflecting the serenity of Shabbat, the Shabbas'dicha face. And now, in front of this wall, [00:44:00] this is the only one she has left. A human throng presses towards the wall, nestles against it. And I stand aside and look. In a flash, I see from one end of the world to the other, and further into my deepest self. I see all those who have stood here before me bend with humility or touched with ecstasy. Here, before this very wall, kings and prophets, warriors and priests, poets and philosophers, rich and poor, all those who throughout the ages had pleaded everywhere for a little compassion, a little kindness. It was here they came to speak of it. Here, in this place, a sage of Israel once remarked, "The stones are souls." It is they who each day rebuild an invisible temple. [00:45:00] Still, it is not here that I will find my mother's soul. The soul of my mother found shelter in fire and not in stone. And

to think that her own dream had been to come here and pray, and meditate, and cry. So what? I shall dream in her place. But the army chaplain who is approaching, Torah in hand like a bridegroom on his wedding day, where had I seen him before? Tears are streaming down his face as he recites a prayer and blows the shofar. And that old Hassid who comes running, where have I seen him before? Dressed in a black caftan and black felt hat, his prayer shawl under his arm, he hurls himself against the wall as if to smash his hat. Hypnotized by the stones, he feels them, [00:46:00] caresses them, and sobs inwardly without shedding a tear. For a moment I observe him as if he were a stone among the stones, and then I see soldiers lifting him up, tossing him into the air, yelling, 'You must not weep, not anymore. The time for lamentations is over. We must rejoice, old man, we must cry our joy to the wall. It needs that joy and so do we. We must sing to God, for God needs that song and so do we.' And one circle is formed and another. Everyone is dancing. And, on a carpet of shoulders, the old man is dancing, too. He's not afraid of falling or of flying away. He's not afraid of anything and neither are we. Someone breaks into song, and that song fills the square, the city, and the whole country. "Louder, louder!" the old man shouts, bouncing [00:47:00] back each time with new vigor, greater frenzy. He is in ecstasy and so are we. Someone near me succumbs to tears.

Someone is weeping, and it is not I. Someone is weeping, and it is I. And, in my dream, through my tears, I see the old man lift his arms, trying to tear away a scrap of sky, and offering to those who sing, to those who make him tall, and proud, and invincible. Who is he? I know I ought to be afraid. The miracle is too violent, the joy too intense. It cannot last forever. But I also know that I am dreaming. I am at the top of a mountain, I trip over a pebble, I fall. I see the abyss growing darker as it approaches, darker than the dark eye of the tempest. [00:48:00] I am afraid. But fear itself is part of the dream. Let it continue."

I have also come here to read first my "Ani Maamin." Oh, "Ani Maamin" is the most beautiful song. And, as we know, music has played an important role in the Jewish tradition. The first composer was Adam. He composed a song for the Sabbath, *mizmor shir l'yom haShabbat.* Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob invented the three daily services. Moses, the stutterer, stopped stuttering when he sang at the Red Sea. David is known for his songs as much as for his strategy. "Ah, if I could sing," said Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, I would force the almighty God to leave his place in heaven and join us human beings [00:49:00] here on earth. Much is made of *haychal ha'negina*, the Palace of Melodies, in Kabbalistic and Hassidic literatures. Rabbi

Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the great, great founder of Lubavitch of Chabad, used to say, "When I cannot answer the question, I sing a song."

I love singing, I always did. As a journalist, I would drive from my uptown apartment on 103rd Street, near the Gerrer shtiebel, to the United Nations, where I used to work. And, when I was driving, I would hum Vizhnitzer niggunim. And I know, I knew then, it took me two vokhendike shemona esres to reach my office, two Amidah services. When I was in India, I used to surprise friends with Hassidic stories and melodies, for they would find Hassidic stories and Hassidic melodies [00:50:00] very close to their own, for that mysticism has the same source. And my Hassidic stories were useful. We are told that, before the Besht died, he called one of his Hassidim, one of his very close followers, and he said to him, "After I die, all you have to do is go around the world and tell stories about me, and you'll make a living." Well, I tried to tell stories and sing songs, trying to make a living. Sometimes they were useful. In India they were. Once I met a very wealthy man, and he was so surprised to see a young Jew. He hadn't met that many Jews who know so much about Indian mysticism. At that time I was very much in it. And then I told him it was Jewish mysticism, he was flabbergasted to find out that there is so

much beauty in Jewish mysticism that, at one point, he said, "I know that you are [00:51:00] here for study," which was true, "and here it's a huge country. It's very expensive to travel." So he gave me his Visa card. He was the owner of Air India. And he simply said, "Whenever you need to travel, you will get a ticket." And, believe it or not, whenever I was hungry, I took a plane. (laughter)

The most beautiful of all songs is "Ani Maamin." The Rambam's formulation is superb. We say that, with "*ani ma'amin be'emunah shlaymah b'viat haMashiach*." "I believe with all my heart, with all my faith that a Messiah will come." And then he says something strange, he said, "*v'af al pi she'yitmamayha,*" "And although He will be late in coming," "*achakeh lo*," "I shall wait for Him." Grammatically it's wrong. He should say "*af al pi she'mitmamayha*" in the present, [00:52:00] "Although He is late in coming." Maybe Maimonides Rambam knew that the Messiah will be late, and therefore he already prepared us for Him being late. And so we sing, and I composed it in 1972. I called it then "Ani Maamin," a song lost and found again. The great French composer Darius Milhaud wrote the music for it, but the performances were saved by a brilliant young choir conductor, Matti Lazar, whose remarkable contributions to Jewish and liturgical music have won him national and international

reputation, and I wish we could hear him more and more often. This is what I wrote then. It's a long cantata, just to give you the mood. "Ani Maamin, Ani Maamin, we believe, O God, in you first of all, and you above all. And also in Him, [00:53:00] the Messiah. You will send him, Ani Maamin. He will come, Ani Maamin. In spite of us, in spite of Himself, He will come, Ani Maamin. Defying the dawn of the doom, defying the gloom of the cemeteries, defying the gravediggers so numerous, He will come, Ani Maamin. That is our fate, O God. Two words, they cry, just one, Ani Maamin. A fate fraught with danger, yes, and often murderous, yes, but necessary. Be worthy of it, O Lord. Be worthy of us, O Savior, Ani Maamin, Ani Maamin. For you, Ani Maamin, with you, Ani Maamin, in you, Ani Maamin, and against you, Ani Maamin. Ani Maamin, hear us, O God. Hear us."

And then the narrator says, [00:54:00] "In those days, even as the heart of the world was being consumed by the black flames of night, three angry old men appeared before the celestial court, asking to be heard." And I'm trying to show that Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob came to save their people. And they were always interrupted by the chorus, "Ani Maamin, Ani Maamin," says the chorus, "Fathers of the people, ancestors of Israel, your fate is our fate. To be a Jew is to believe. And, that which links us, one to the other, and all to Abraham. Night calls

dawn, the Jew is that call. Man calls man, the Jew is that call. God awaits man, the Jew is that wait. Ani Maamin, Ani Maamin. And Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob began to cry. They said to God, You cannot go on. Look, look at what is happening to your creation. [00:55:00] You cannot go on. You must save your people. And Jacob began to weep," says the narrator, "And so did Abraham and Isaac. And all the angels, all the seraphim from all the heavens joined in their weeping, but not God. He alone remained calm, unmoved, silent." And the chorus, "Ani Maamin, Ani Maamin, God possible and impossible. God present, how can you? God absent, how can you? How can man commit such evil without you, or with you, Ani Maamin? How is one to believe? How is one not to believe? And Abraham says, 'Master of the universe, behold Your work.' Isaac says, 'God of Israel, behold Your people.' And Jacob says, 'Fateful God, behold the torment that bears your seed, and thus the fate of your victims.'" And chorus comes in, "God fateful, Ani Maamin. To a fateful people, Ani Maamin. God of cruelty, Ani Maamin. God of silence, Ani Maamin. [00:56:00] Morning sun, sun of fear, you awaken the beast, and you kill man, Ani Maamin. Heavenly silence, human silence, your breast, the soul crying its hunger, Ani Maamin. Sky in flames, sky of might, the cry goes up, but who will hear? Who will hear and who will listen? Who will understand? Who will it be, Ani Maamin? Ani Maamin."

And the narrator says, "And thus Abraham, proud though despairing, tells what he has seen, and Isaac what he has learned, and Jacob what he had gathered. And on earth the story continues to unfold. And, with each hour, the most blessed and most sickened people of the world numbered 12 times 12 children less. And each one carried away with another fragment of the temple in flames. Flames, never before have there been such flames. And, in every one of them, it is the vision of the redeemer that is dying. Never before has hope been murdered so. The witnesses [00:57:00] testify, and the celestial tribunal listens in silence. The supreme judge say nothing while an entire people enters night. An entire people plunders into the divine abyss, an abyss inhabited by God alone."

And the chorus, "Ani Abraham, Maamin Isaac, Maamin, Jacob. Children, pray. Shout, old man. Our fathers speak and God is silent. Pray, shout, since God does not. Rabbis of Vilna, beggars of Berditchev, students from Slabodka, and Hassidim from Belz, dreamers from Vizhnitz and Saloniki, pray, pray together with Abraham, together with Isaac, as loud as Jacob. Pray, before it is too late. Pray and shout for already it is too late."

Some 15 years later, [00:58:00] I wrote "A Song for Hope." Is it, in a way, a continuation if not an answer to the first? It is. The choir at one point says, "God of Israel, you promised Israel eternity. These, their children, do they know? You know, but is that enough? You don't answer. Is that because there is no answer? But the children of Israel, what should be their answer?" And Jeremiah says, "The children of Israel are the answer of Israel." And Ezekiel says, "The people of Israel carries within itself its own hope." And Jeremiah says, "Remember the exiled of Babylon found their way back to Jerusalem." And Jeremiah says, "Remember, the exiled of Babylon found their way back to Jerusalem." And Ezekiel says, "Remember, the uprooted have found a way to build on the ruins on their palaces." And the choir, [00:59:00] "Let us remember, let us remember the ancient flames, the scars not healed. Let us remember the abandoned havens, the betrayed promises, the violated freedoms. Let us remember what frightens us, what pains us, and that memory will protect us." And the choir, "The lonely child did not remain lonely. The hungry mother will be fed. The frightened old man will be at peace." The narrator, "Such is the voice, far away yet close, that reaches us. It is the voice of a man who yearns to transform his words into a cry and his silence into a song. He's a madman. So what? We need madmen."

And the choir enters, ending, "A song of hope, a song for hope. In an inhuman world, humanity is hope. In a desperate and despairing world, the hope for salvation [01:00:00] is salvation. Listen, Jeremiah. Come closer, Ezekiel. Children of the ghetto, hounded beggars, and tormented women, give us what was denied you -- some respite, some joy. Messianic dreamers, prophetic students, Hassidic disciples, give us what was taken from you -- generosity, humanity, peace. Martyrs and heroes, lost men and women, we refuse to forget you. Prisoners of Zion, of yesterday and today, for us you shall be what Jeremiah and Ezekiel were for you. A summons and reminder, a song of hope, a song for hope, for the answer of Israel are the children of Israel."

So this is the "Ani Maamin," the "Ani Maamin" that we love. And all of you know the melody of "Ani Maamin." What a melody. Jews in the ghettos used to sing it, [01:01:00] Jews in the camps used to sing it. It became a kind of anthem. No remembrance ceremony can be held with "Ani Maamin," and we sing it standing. And yet I remember another melody. In 1942, some of us Hassidim of Vizhnitz, were in Grossvardein, where the Vizhnitzer Rebbe had his court, I think it was Shabbat Shirah, a very special Sabbath. And, that Sabbath, the nephew of the

rabbi, of the rebbe, had just escaped from Poland, from Galicia. And he came telling us terrible stories, but not on the Sabbath. On the Sabbath he taught us, he taught us a new song which we had never known before, called "Ani Maamin." And we loved the song. We loved it because we fell in love with that man, and with his follies. We felt so sorry for him. [01:02:00] We felt that, in loving him, somehow we console him. And then somehow, I don't why, I cannot explain why, somehow we forgot that melody. Not the words. The words we repeat, but we forgot the melody. I even forgot that I forgot the melody. And then, one evening during the Seder, we celebrated Seder with a childhood friend of ours, of mine. And, all of a sudden, in the middle of the Seder, that friend said to me, "Do you know, do you remember the 'Ani Maamin'?" He didn't have to finish. It all came back to me and to him at the same time, and we began singing it at the same time. And so I repeated it to Matti Lazar, who quickly worked out the magnificent choral arrangement. And, you see, now you see what literature is, especially in Jewish history.

In '72 I wrote [01:03:00] "Ani Maamin" and I called it "A Song Lost and Found Again." It was waiting for the proper occasion. First for my son's Bar Mitzvah last year, and then it was waiting for the 20th anniversary. So maybe the surprise will be, I will sing it for you. (applause)

Ani ma'amin

b'emunah sh'leimah

b'viat haMashiach,

ve’af al pi sh'yitmameah,

achakeh lo

behol yom

sheyavo (choir) [01:03:45 - 01:09:56]

(applause)

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