

Elie Wiesel The State of World Jewry

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) They want to remember them, and if we here take sides, in this crucial issue of memory, Turkish Jews may be subjected to punishment and persecution. Now, what are we to do? Endanger our brethren in the name of truth? Or distort, or forget truth, for the sake of our brethren?

The questions that were valid one generation ago are still valid. But now we have more. But then, we always come back to the metaphysical question, why are we still around? Why are we the only people of antiquity still alive after antiquity? What is the meaning of Jewish suffering, and what is the meaning [00:01:00] of Jewish survival? For those of you who love statistics, listen. At the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, there were four million Jews in the world. In the year 1170, there were only one million, according to Rabbi Binyamin of Tudela, the great traveler who had his own census and statistics. In 1800, we were again four million. In 1939, we were 18 million, and now, between 14 to 16 million. So just imagine, without catastrophes, pogroms, forced conversions, and

voluntary assimilation, our people might have entered into serious competition with China. (laughter)

Again, the question: why are we dispersed among so many nations?

[00:02:00] And since we are dispersed, why do we elicit so much hate in so many quarters? How is one to explain anti-Semitism today? If Auschwitz did not put an end to it, what will?

Again, true, in this country, thanks to its exemplary system of democracy, there are no movements, but only -- there are anti-Semites, but there is no movement that could be called openly anti-Semitic. Or, there are hate groups, but they are marginal. The white supremacists, the Klan, and simple anti-Semites -- Nazi parties here and there. In many respects, still, this country could be considered as what we call in our tradition, a *galut shel chesed*, a charitable exile. A diaspora of clemency comparable only [00:03:00] to the Golden Age in Spain, or to the Weimar era in Germany.

In this country, too, Jews are great achievers in almost every field, be it cultural or political. Jews are important builders, and industrialists, and bankers, writers and publishers, critics and artists. If in Heine's time, a Jew had to convert, if he wanted to acquire an entry ticket to society, today he can remain Jewish and go far and high. Still, though

the analogy with Weimar and the Golden Age may be flattering, it is also disturbing. For both Weimar and the Golden Age ended in catastrophe. Could it happen here? Could Jews conceivably become scapegoats in America, were we to enter into another Depression? [00:04:00] Is it conceivable that American public opinion, one of the most enlightened in the world, could become anti-Jewish?

We live in a world dominated by the image. The image of Israel in the world may, therefore, determine the attitude of the world to Israel, and to Jews. What will the outcome be of the present Iranian arms scandal? Will there be a fallout against Israel? Remember the oil crisis? It increased anti-Semitism in many Western countries, including our own. The Arab governments used their oil to punish Israel and her allies. And Jews [00:05:00] everywhere were hated in the process.

The situation reminds us of the Dürrenmatt play, which I'm sure you remember, the visit of the old lady. The old lady returns to her hometown, and with her money, she corrupts the entire town, and she builds a case -- meaning she makes them build a case against a man who simply, in her youth, had rejected her. And they all condemn him to death. Why? Because she is rich, and they are poor. And because some Arabs hated Israel -- the

leaders hated Israel -- they came to the United Nations, and some ten years ago, with money, they managed to extract from the United Nations, a condemnation of Israel. They could have then obtained anything from the United Nations. They even obtained the shameful visit [00:06:00] of Arafat, and they obtained the obscene resolution comparing Zionism to racism.

And then, we all felt insulted, humiliated. In the eyes of the Arab world, Jews and Israel are one entity. Why did terrorists kill Lebanese Jews, now? You know how many were killed by the Lebanese terrorists, or by the pro-Iranian terrorists? By now, eight of them, eight Lebanese Jews -- I'll give you their names, their names should be remembered. Yehuda Benesti, and his two sons, Avraham and Youssuf. Chaim Halala Cohen. Yitzhak Tarrab. Elie Srour. Henri Mann. And Elie Hallak. They were simply killed by the terrorists [00:07:00] because they were Jewish.

But then, why did other terrorists not make it the same, kill Jews as they stand in the synagogue? And in other houses of worship, in Europe? Why do they single out Jews among hostages? For them, for the outside world, for the enemy, all Jews are responsible for one another. For them, the Jewish people seems united. And the question is, is it?

At this point, I will give you what I fear. I am worried. What worries me is the inner turmoil of Jewish communities. They have been experiencing turmoil in recent years. I am concerned by their accelerating process of polarization. Fanaticism is [00:08:00] gaining ground in our ways, as does rancor and hatred. Extremism on the right is matched by extremism on the left. Some have turned politics into religion, others have transformed religion into politics. Are we reliving the period of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza again?

I cannot sit at this table without studying. Let's study for the next three minutes, and we shall reread the Talmudic story of what we call the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. In those days, in Jerusalem, there lived a man who decided to arrange a sumptuous dinner. He sent a servant to invite his best friend, Kamtza. Instead, the servant invited his fierce enemy, Bar Kamtza. [00:09:00] When the host saw his enemy in the room, he exploded. "What are you doing here? Your presence is unwanted. Get out."

"Please," said Bar Kamtza, "do not shame me in public. I came because I was invited. I realize it was a mistake. Let me stay, and I will pay for my meal." "No!" shouted the host. "Go!" "Let me stay, and I shall pay for half of all the meals."

"No," said the host. "Allow me to stay, and I shall pay for the entire dinner." "Out!" shouted the host, and Bar Kamtza was ejected.

Of course, he took it badly, and thought of revenge. He said to himself, "There were many scholars present at the dinner, and none came to my defense. That means they believed they were accomplices." And so, he went to see the emperor, and he said, [00:10:00] "The Jews have rebelled against you." "Prove it," said the emperor. "I shall," said Bar Kamtza. "Send them an offering. Let us see whether it will be accepted in the Temple." Meaning, an offering by a non-Jew.

And the emperor gave him a calf for that purpose. But Bar Kamtza secretly wounded its lips, or its eyes, thus making it blemished, impure for sacrifice. In spite of this, most sages were ready to recommend it for sacrifice in the Temple. Only the youngest, a certain Zecharia, son of Abkulas, said, "No, what will people say? That blemished animals are accepted as offerings." So some sages proposed to kill the informer, thus preventing him from reporting back to the emperor. Again, the young scholar Zecharia, [00:11:00] son of Abkulas, voiced opposition. "What will people say?" he said. "That the blemishing of animals is punishable by death." Oh, no. At the

end, nothing was done. Bar Kamtza went to tell the emperor that his honor had been insulted, and the emperor in retaliation attacked Jerusalem and reduced the Temple to ash. And therefore, we are told in the Talmud, because of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, the Temple and Jerusalem were destroyed.

What a depressing story. And what sad characters. They are all to blame. First, the servant. Hadn't he heard well? Hadn't he known his master's feelings toward the friend Kamtza, and his hostile feelings towards his enemy Bar Kamtza? [00:12:00] Or could he have made the mistake on purpose, to embarrass his master? Were employers and employees, class enemies, already there? Secondly, the employer, the host, is to be blamed, too. He is heartless. Granted, Bar Kamtza was his enemy. Still, Bar Kamtza knew it, and yet he came. Maybe he wanted to make peace. Maybe he wanted to ask forgiveness. Why did he offend him in public? But then, does it mean that Bar Kamtza is above reproach? No. Bar Kamtza was the one who raised so many problems.

Once he was asked to leave, he should have shown more dignity. And he should have left right away. Why did he stay when he was unwanted? Furthermore, even if he was angry at the host and the sages, why did he turn to the enemy for justice? Why didn't he

address himself to a Jewish court? Why did he make [00:13:00] the entire people of Israel pay for one man -- for one person's discourteous behavior? And why not admit it?

The sages, too, are far from being innocent. They should have spoken up. That a human being is insulted? Indifference is not the answer. Why didn't they protest? The only honorable person seems to be Zecharia, son of Abkulas. He defends the law and the prestige of the Temple. He does not yield to the emperor, nor is he ready for convenience's sake to have Bar Kamtza killed. But just as we prepare ourselves to praise Zecharia, the Talmud comes and says, it all was his fault. Why? He shouldn't have spoken up. He should have thought of the Jewish community, and made no waves.

What is the essential message of the legend? In those days, [00:14:00] before the disaster, no one was innocent, no one was blameless, because there was no unity. Jewish unity was a joke. Jewish solidarity, a memory long forgotten. Jerusalem was destroyed from within before it was destroyed. Naturally, Kamtza and Bar Kamtza are exceptions, as are the times in which they lived. Does it mean that we now face the danger that their contemporaries faced? Of course not. Jerusalem is in no such



danger, Israel is strong, the army is strong, and the whole Jewish people would defend Israel.

Our tradition tells us, furthermore, that there will be no third destruction of Jerusalem. I use an extreme example only to illustrate, and emphasize the point, mainly, the perils inherent in disunity. Does it mean that except for the period of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, [00:15:00] there was always unity within our communities? Again, no. Differences of opinion and interpretations are universally accepted things among the Jews. All Jewish leaders, from Moses to Maimonides to the Besht to Herzl, had to deal with organized opposition, which was either conceptual, pragmatical, theological. Or both, or anything.

Not all Jews were willing for mediation. Nor were all Jews (inaudible) never came. When Ezra and Nehemiah left Babylon for Jerusalem, many exiled Jews chose to stay behind. What is the Talmud, if not one long refutation with the masters and disciples of different schools? Later, much later, during the Inquisition, some Jews chose to convert publicly, and practice their religion in secrecy. Others accepted exile, or death. A certain Rabbi Sheshet converted, [00:16:00] and the entire community followed him into conversion. Later, they repented.

Avraham Shneur, Abraham Senior he was called in Portugal, an influential Jew, responded to the situation in 1492 by espousing Christianity, whereas his colleague and adversary, Don Yitzhak, Rab Abarbanel, my hero -- he was as influential at the same court of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. He preferred to abandon hundreds (inaudible) and preachers, and kept his faith and went into exile. But who remembers Avraham Shneur? Most Marranos disappeared from our collective memory because in even the Jewish community, their extreme behavior deprived them of any possibility of dialogue. Dialogue, yes, from inside, from within, but not from the outside.

The fact is that our people has rarely been as intolerant [00:17:00] towards itself as it is now. And that worries me. Religious versus secular, but then also secular versus secular, and above all, religious versus religious. And that applies to our infinite pain, both to the diaspora and Israel. And I am asking, have we forgotten our tradition of tolerance? Remember, the disciples of Shammai and Hillel disagreed on most issues before them, and yet, they ate at one another's table, attended each other's facilities, and let their children intermarry. In spite of their constant arguments and disagreements, they had respect for one another. For they all, we all, belong to the same people. We follow the same traditions. Not so today.

Respect has yielded to arrogance, [00:18:00] understanding to coercion. A Rabbi Meir today be ostracized by some of his own peers, but not ostracized with his former teacher, the renegade son of Abuyah. I believe that with an increase of rifts and divisions in our ranks, our people is in danger of losing its unity, therefore its coherence, and therefore its sense of peoplehood. And this would be normally morally dangerous, but now we live in abnormal times, and therefore it is abnormally dangerous.

History is running fast, and we don't know where it's going, and we as a people should try to take hold of ourselves. We are a small people. One of the smallest in the world. Vulnerable. Fragile. And we need [00:19:00] to know that we are brothers and sisters. (inaudible) Somehow, politically and sociologically, whenever you go to major communities and you confront major issues, you hear tone that you do not like. The tone of life has changed, not the quality of life.

I'll give you (inaudible), and marvelous tone. Take Russian Jews, whom I love. Why in Russia, they are united? And their sense of solidarity is so inspiring. They offer support

(inaudible) to one another. If anything good or bad happens to one of them, all the others share.

When I wanted to speak -- I remember, one evening, my wife and I wanted to speak to Ida Nudel. And it was in the home of one of the refuseniks. They knew exactly [00:20:00] what she does at every hour of the day and evening. Where she is. How they can reach her. Now, when the same Russian Jews come to Israel, the unity is gone. They have made their own organizations, many organizations. I don't even know what system there is. Mind you, I prefer them in Israel with the divisions than in Russia with the unity.

But the question is, what does it mean? Does it mean that we Jews need outside pressure to stick together, or to remain Jewish? The question of Jewish responses to peril has always stimulated responses, from all kinds of scholars, thinkers, groups. Of course, a religious Jew knows how to respond. A national Jew also knows how to respond, [00:21:00] Zionist. There is also a response called a situational. In 1937, the renowned scholar Alvin Johnson -- I think he was the one who created the New School -- he came out with a three-point plan on how to fight anti-Semitism. Listen. One, to abandon Zionism.

Two, to fight for other minorities. Three, not to draw attention. (laughter)

Imagine, this naïve idea was uttered and formulated only 50 years ago. It reminds me of a story, you know, that three people were condemned to death, and the first was asked, whether he accepts? To be mindful, he accepted. The second also accepted. The third one said no. So the second one said, "Troublemaker." (laughter)

Some people think that we make trouble by being Jewish.

[00:22:00] What frightens me even more, I must say it profoundly (inaudible) is the possibility of a rift between Israel and diaspora. The existence itself of a diaspora troubles many Israelis, and understandably so. They want us all to join them in their -- no, in our -- magnificent adventure of rebuilding a country, in an ancient homeland. And therefore, they resent our staying here. Which Jewish tourist has not been asked why he or she does not live in Israel? And the question is valid, coming from them.

And therefore, we are on the defensive. In at least, for historically, philosophically, the diaspora does pose a problem. Had anyone told me as a child, [00:23:00] a Jewish child in the

Carpathian Mountains, that I would live to see the rebirth of a sovereign Jewish state, I would not have believed him. Had anyone told me that I would live to see a Jewish state, but I would not live in it, I would have believed it even less. Admit it. And this applies, ought to apply not only to me, or to Jews such as myself, but all Jews. Rabbis and teachers who pray every day, *v'techezena eineinu, u'v'nei Yerushalayim* -- Zionist leaders, and social workers, journalists, civil servants. All Jews who love their Judaism, and adhere to its tradition, whatever the tradition is. All Jews who aspire to live Jewishly must somehow confront the paradox of their residing far away from Israel. Whereas, they could so easily [00:24:00] go and live there.

Now, do we prefer dream to reality? Prayer to fulfillment? Whatever our answer, it is not a good answer. I accept it, I admit it, but somehow it is rejected by many Israelis. And I feel that should this state of affair grow, the damage in our relations would be serious, if not irreparable. And the result could be splitting our people in two. First-class and second-class Jews. I already heard it in Israel. We were there a few weeks ago, I heard it, I read it in some articles. A good Jew is someone who lives in Israel, no matter who that Jew is. And those of us who are not in Israel, therefore, are not so good

Jews. Well, what does it really mean, if you think about historically and morally and philosophically, that one can measure one's Jewishness according to one's residence?

The following situation could easily develop. [00:25:00] Some Jews here would be rejected by some Jews in Israel on religious grounds. Other Jews would be rejected by other Jews on ideological grounds, and I believe that would bring to all of us a catastrophe.

Now, since the diaspora is so unnatural to Israel, somehow, our attitudes towards Israel are also different. For me, they are natural, they are different. Examples. What do we do with my or our self-imposed and enthusiastically accepted obligation to help Israel? Always. A Jew who does not help Israel in some way is not, cannot be, fully authentically Jewish. Israel's centrality in Jewish life everywhere in diaspora must remain the basis of our behavior and our philosophy. [00:26:00] News reports from Israel are the first I read in the newspaper. Events in Israel matters to us as much as events in our own street. Israel's struggle is our struggle. Israel's wars are our own. We link our destiny to Israel's in a manner that resists both material interest and intellectual affiliation.

But what are the limits of our involvement? Are we allowed to participate in shaping Israel's society, and influence its policy? Tell me, do we have the right, or perhaps, according to some -- even some Israelis, who are in opposition -- do we have the duty to take a position with regard to Israel's domestic or foreign policy issues? Should we, can we, say something about Israel's attitude towards South Africa? Or now, to the Contras? Should we, or must we, or could we, or do we have the right to, say something to Israel, [00:27:00] with Israel, for Israel, about a different attitude towards the Palestinians?

These are problems that we never face. Our generation maybe is the first one to face them, and therefore, we better face them.

[00:27:16 - [00:28:02] (break in video)

-- is not the resurgence of anti-Semitism, nor is it the insidious threat of assimilation. As a people, we have somehow managed to overcome both perils. I am worried not by the outside menace. I am worried by the internal one. I mean, by our disunity. I would call it the most serious danger facing the Jewish people today. We are too fragmented, too split, too self-centered, each in his or her own group.



Said the Talmud, I quote, "God warned the children of Israel, 'Do not hate one another. Do not be jealous of one another, lest the angels in heaven tell me, "You see, master of the universe, You have given them the law, the Torah, but they have neglected its teachings.'" If true solidarity means the acceptance of pluralism, intolerance leads to the absence of solidarity. [00:29:00]

So, of course, there are priorities that compel us to join action. The safety and the welfare of Israel. Russian Jewry. The fate of Jews in oppressed countries. Remember: there are Jews in oppressed countries. In Iran, in Ethiopia, in Syria. About Jewish education in our own country. Jewish philanthropy. Fighting racism. Involvement in human rights activities. All these are priorities. However, without unity, none of these battles would be successfully fought. Instead of fighting for our people, we would fight one another, and thus, against our people.

How can I not conclude with the example of the recent past? Do you know why so little was done during the war to help European Jews? So little was done because [00:30:00] there was no unity in the American Jewish leadership. There was too much infighting. I read now the books -- I have had them for years,

and I don't understand myself. How could they? How could they be so party-minded, organization-minded? A sense of urgency must permeate us all. A major effort must be undertaken to bring about more unity in our midst. Its disruption would make us forget our past, and there is no danger greater than that. A Jew who remembers, remembers other Jews as well. A Jew who forgets ceases to be Jewish. Disunity would lead to forgetfulness. Thank you. (applause) [00:31:00]

M1: Thank you. Friends, many of you, I'm sure, have questions which you would like to pose at this time. As you've noticed, there are ushers who are distributing and collecting index cards on which you can write your questions. Please do that, and pass them to the aisles, and your questions will be brought to my attention.

[00:32:00] While we're waiting, let me also invite you at the conclusion of our formal program to join us in the Weill Art Gallery, adjacent to the auditorium, for a champagne reception in honor of Elie Wiesel. I'll take the prerogative of the chair in asking you, Elie, the first question. You've talked about the Jewish people, as we asked you to do. But in history, the Jewish people resonated to -- thrived on -- the Jewish religion. The faith of Judaism. In this age of rationality and

modernity, and knowledge of the *Shoah*, belief and faith are scarce commodities. And religious practice seems, [00:33:00] as you suggested, to be almost as political as religious. Can the Jewish people in today's times thrive in the absence of Judaism, or in the diminution of religious commitment?

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, there is enough Jewish commitment -- religious commitment among Jews -- not to worry us on that ground. I rarely speak about religion, as you know. Why? Because it's something so personal. Whether I pray or not -- and I do -- or whether I observe Shabbat or not, again, is something personal. And therefore, I rarely speak about it. What I mainly speak about is about education, about teaching, about study. What I would like to teach is the passion of study. I speak about memory. Now, there are today, I know, many religious communities, and more and more [00:34:00] are being founded, not to worry us too much. But on the other hand, to be frank with you, I must answer you, I cannot imagine the Jewish people without a religious commitment. That does not mean that the entire Jewish people should be committed religiously. It cannot be. A Jew who is not religious, and a Jew who is a little bit religious, a Jew who is totally religious -- all these are Jews, and all together we form the Jewish people.

M1: We have several questions making reference to Cardinal O'Connor's recent visit to Israel. Could you comment on his trip, and perhaps particularly, his reference to the Holocaust as Judaism's greatest gift to mankind, and the comments made in response to his trip [00:35:00] by the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations?

ELIE WIESEL: I have known the Cardinal for some years, even before he was a cardinal, and I think he's a good man. I think he is a man -- a Christian -- very devoted Christian, and therefore, his language is a Christian language. I'm convinced he never thought that he would hurt Jewish sensitivities. Well, he hurt mine too, and I met him before he met the Jewish leaders, and I told him. For a Christian, of course, the greatest gift was God's gift to humankind, Jesus. And for us, it isn't. For us, the language is not the same language. For us, a tragedy is a tragedy. Six million Jews were killed. Every Jew is mutilated by that tragedy, and therefore, I said to him, "Why didn't you use the word 'lesson' instead of 'gift'?" He agreed, by the way. He made no difficulties. He said as a Christian, [00:36:00] he spoke in a Christian language. The problem was that we -- not a problem, it's good -- that we, as Jews, should listen with our Jewish ears, with our Jewish heart. And therefore, it was proper

for us to say what we said. I think the Cardinal understands our pain.

M1: There are several questions about Zionism. Among them, is there a necessity today for a center for Judaism in Jerusalem? Or alternatively, in New York? And are American Jews somehow guilty for not making *Aliyah*?

ELIE WIESEL: I cannot say "guilty" about any Jew. I grew up in tradition of *Ahavat Yisrael*. I love the Jewish people. And I have never condemned any Jew. My role is the role of a witness, not the role of a judge. So, if Jews such as myself -- I can condemn myself, if I want to. I may, but not yet. [00:37:00] (laughter) But, what I feel is simply, we must all feel somehow uneasy about it. I remember a student of mine once came to ask me, "Listen," he said, "I'm a poor student, and I got money from my community to go and study for rabbinate." And he became a rabbi. The day of his ordination, he came to see me. He said, "Now, I would like to go to Israel. But if I go to Israel, actually, I abandon the community who had placed trust in me. What should I do?" And my answer, simply, was, "Listen, whatever you do, do. But if you stay, don't feel good about it. That's all." (laughter) As for the center, oh, there is only really one center. The center is Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a center of Jewish history, and we

may have other centers, but this center must be in Jerusalem, because the center is Jerusalem. [00:38:00]

M1: With reference once again, obliquely, to Cardinal O'Connor's visit, granted that Jewish theology and Catholic theology differ significantly in their views of suffering, witness the Cardinal's comments about the Holocaust, how can Jews and Catholics, and Christians in general, understand better each other's views, and speak sensibly and sensitively to each other's concerns, generally and about the Holocaust?

ELIE WIESEL: Education. Ira, if my grandfather really had known that I would speak one day to a Cardinal, (laughs) believe me, he wouldn't have believed me. (laughter) We speak -- the main thing is, I am not really, I am not worried when the Christian is Christian. I am worried when the Jew is not Jewish.

M1: [00:39:00] We have several questions about divisions within the Jewish community, most making reference to divisions between Orthodoxy and non-Orthodox religious practice. Among them is the question as follows: the polarization between Jews -- for example, between Orthodox and Reform -- appears to be based on irreconcilable differences. For example, patrilineal versus matrilineal descent. How can

these differences be reconciled, and how can we reach the uniformity which you call for?

ELIE WIESEL: Here I could claim the Fifth Amendment, for -- (laughter) but, Ira, you and I participated once in a conference on *Klal Yisrael*, and I believe in *Klal Yisrael*, with all my heart. Meaning, the community of Israel. I have made some suggestions there. [00:40:00] My suggestions, again, are the only ones I can give. I am not a rabbi, but I am a teacher, and a student. I would like to say that study could be the common ground for all Jews, from all denominations, from all sectors. We should somehow emphasize study -- the study of our tradition, of the law, of the past. There is so much beauty in our study. It would bring us together. That is a good beginning.

M1: With respect to Israel, isn't the continuing rule of Israel over one and a quarter million Arabs on the West Bank a serious danger to the morale level of Israel, and to the image of Israel and the Jewish people?

ELIE WIESEL: Danger -- I'm not sure I would use that word, but a problem, it is. We cannot avoid it. It is a problem. I would, of course, if I were [00:41:00] prime minister of Israel, if I were the president of Israel, if I were -- I don't know what, in Israel, who had something to say, I may

have different, different opinions. But all I can say now is that I am confident, I really have hope, that Israel will somehow surmount this problem as well. I'll tell you why I have it. This is something which remains with me. Years ago, many years ago, we watched Sadat's arrival in Jerusalem. Our friends -- two friends, who are here tonight, and my wife, and I -- I remember, it was a Shabbat, and we watched television. You know, we don't watch television that much, surely not in the middle of a Shabbat. But we watched television. And we had tears in our eyes. We had tears. We couldn't believe our own eyes. We looked at each other. Are we dreaming? Sadat in Jerusalem? Begin, Sharon, [00:42:00] what's happening there? Ezer Weizman, of the generals. And what moved me was not only Sadat's coming to Jerusalem. What moved me was that there were thousands of Jews who came to welcome him. Thousands and thousands. Among them, there must have been thousands of orphans and widows who have lost their wives or their husbands, or their fathers, or their children, in the '73 war, which he, Sadat, had engineered. And yet, all of these orphans and widows had overcome their sadness, maybe their anger, their bitterness, and they came to receive Sadat as a brother. If a community is capable of such metamorphosis, I have faith in that community. And



there must be some opportunities -- there will be opportunities. [00:43:00] I am not a politician, I don't know which opportunities. But I know because something has to be done, I know that something will be done, and I know that the Israeli people will be ready for it.

M1: A few more questions on Israel, and then we'll turn to a few other subjects.

ELIE WIESEL: Oy. (laughter)

M1: You should see these. You will. (laughter) Two controversies regarding Israeli policy -- additional controversies. Do you believe that Israel took a major position on the Contras, or is this administration scapegoating? And why did Israel, or does Israel, sell arms to South Africa, and is that a problem?

ELIE WIESEL: You know, in the Talmud, we have a marvelous way of answering questions that cannot be answered. *Teku*. [00:44:00] Which means, one day, the prophet Elijah will come, and he will answer all the questions. (laughter) Ira, I don't know. I really don't know. I mean, if I know -- I don't even dare to say that I know, because it's so complicated, so complex and obscure. I don't know enough to come out and say I can totally defend Israel. I cannot. I wish I could, I always do, I love to defend Israel. On the other hand, I cannot come out and simply say I condemn

Israel. How can I? I don't know enough. So let us wait until the prophet will come. (laughter)

M1: There are several questions about the *Shoah*, and reactions to it. First, what would you say is the proper age for a child to learn about the *Shoah*, and how can we teach our children its lessons? [00:45:00] And perhaps, on top of that, you might answer the next: what ultimate motives do you ascribe to the revisionist intellectuals who write and lecture denying the Holocaust?

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, the second one's first, because they really - - let's do away with them, they are unworthy even of our attention. They are so ugly, we should discard them. What they are doing is sick. They are sick. Mentally or morally sick, philosophically sick, they are humanly sick. To devote their lives simply to deny something while we are still here, to inflict pain on so many survivors and their children, is sick. Their motives? Surely anti-Semitism at the worst and ugliest level. I think the *Shoah* can be taught to children as well. But they must be ready for it. Don't force children [00:46:00] to study the *Shoah*. Don't force anyone to study the *Shoah*. You must prepare the study. You yourself must be ready for teaching. A teacher who doesn't know how to teach, a teacher who is insensitive to his or her own teaching, can cause disasters in their

teaching. I have seen -- my experience has shown -- that children beginning age nine, ten, know, and they want to know. Usually, they study books about children, or by children, and then they are profoundly moved. I receive at least a hundred letters a month from children, and I answer them all. So, you must know really, when they are ready, and they want you to know then, that they want to know.

M1: A few questions about Soviet Jewry. Given Gorbachev's campaign to portray the Soviet Union [00:47:00] as a more open society, and the recent emigration of several prominent Soviet Jews, is the best way to obtain the emigration of specific individuals the pursuit of political deals and diplomacy? And perhaps related to that, how do you see the relationship between the issue of nuclear disarmament and the plight of Soviet Jews?

ELIE WIESEL: Quiet diplomacy is important, and God knows I have tried it myself at certain times, but it should never replace public outcry. Public pressure is the most important means that we have at our disposal, and we must use it. Meaning journalists should write, and readers should read, and the Russians should know day after day that we are concerned. They tried to link it to disarmament. I have seen it in Russia when I was there. That's what they really try, and they are trying to make

deals. [00:48:00] My suggestion is first of all, they should show their good faith. Meaning, they should allow, mainly, the prisoners to go to Israel and join their families, wherever they are. Vladimir and Masha Slepak, and Ida Nudel, and the others. And then, there are 3,000 active refuseniks, meaning, families -- maybe 12 or 14,000 people at all, 3,000 families -- let the Russian government, Gorbachev's government, allow these 3,000 Jews to go to Israel. They all want to go to Israel. Then, we will know that they are serious. And we may talk about linkage of disarmament, and Star Wars, who knows what. Do we really have power on that? I don't think we do. But at least we will talk.

M1: Back to Jewish unity, the question of who is a Jew? Is it or is it not very important? What is your position?

[00:49:00]

ELIE WIESEL: Since, really, this is, I know, a very important question. But to me, I can tell you, to me a Jew who links his or her destiny to the destiny of the Jewish people is a Jew. I don't have to go further. (applause)

M1: I'll do it. Please comment on what you perceive to be the effects of the recent Wall Street insider trading scandal (laughter) in light of the Jewish affiliations of many of the main targets. (laughter) Sorry, Elie.

ELIE WIESEL: Ira, if there is one area where I know nothing about, really, (laughter) there are so many, it surely is Wall Street. I don't know, but, you know, I feel that Jewish responsibility [00:50:00] is important. When a Jew does something, he or she commits the Jewish people, and Jewish honor. So of course it's depressing, it's embarrassing. But on the other hand, we should be careful. Meaning, because of that person, we should say that all people on Wall Street are like that? *Chas v'chalila*, we should never -- we should not do what the enemies are doing. All right, we are normal people -- normal, okay, but enough. (laughter) We also have this kind of people, but why don't we think of those that are not like him, that we have the great scholars, and artists, and (inaudible), and bankers, and -- who are good. Why not? All right, we have one. (laughter)

M1: Okay. A final set of questions.

ELIE WIESEL: That's the best thing I heard tonight.

(laughter)

M1: Moving from Jewish security back to the question of faith.

Three questions: [00:51:00] what can be done or should be done so as to eliminate or reduce Jewish vulnerability?

What is your answer to the question, why have the Jews survived? And then the one that you always get, with all

you've been through, do you believe there is a God?

(laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: Nu, nu. Nu, nu. (laughs) When a Jew says, "I believe," his or her belief is a total belief. When we say *Ani Ma'amin*, we mean it. Otherwise, we wouldn't say it. Now, what form that belief takes, really, is for every person to decide, and I am not -- I am not the authority to dictate that behavior, or that attitude, of any Jew.

[00:52:00] So, the answer is, at the end, to the last question, of course, as a Jew, in spite of everything, I believe. In spite of humankind, I believe in humankind. In spite of history, I work for history, not against it. And in spite of so many other things, I must say, I do believe in the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and the God of Israel. Now, what is the mystery of our survival? Is it that belief? Some people say so. Is it the anti-Semites who kept us alive? If they knew, they would die of torture. (laughter) There are so many, so many reasons that would apply, and there is always something unknown. I really believe there is the unknown element. It is the x in the equation. And that is why, [00:53:00] by the way, so many people resent our being alive. They don't understand -- why should we be alive? Logically, we should have given up the whole thing, and said, "God, take it,

take it. You don't want us, all right, be happy without us. You want a world without Jews? Okay, have it your way." Somehow, we cling to it. Take even Europe, you know. Europe has expelled Jews -- almost in every generation, there was a country that expelled Jews. And yet, we cling to Europe. For so many centuries. Why did we stay in Europe? There is something in the Jew that says, "No, we want to stay. We believe in existence. In the most noble and the most powerful way possible, we believe in existence." So, what should I say to you at the conclusion of this evening? There is a key word in my life, in my vocabulary, and that key word is, [00:54:00] really, memory. A Jew is, as I said, someone who remembers. Someone who doesn't cannot be human, therefore, cannot be Jewish. If we remember, our memory is an opening. If we forget, we become a prison. I always think of one of my favorite novelists and writers, Franz Kafka, who in his way, was a theologian of the future. In his novels, there is always a character who is tragic because he tries to deliver a message and cannot. He's always held back by soldiers, or by gatekeepers. He cannot deliver the message, and I always thought, this is probably the most tragic of all people. Someone who cannot deliver the message. And then, I studied deeper, and I came to the

conclusion, there is someone even more tragic. [00:55:00]

Who is it? It is someone who forgot the message.

(laughter) Well, I thought, really, that probably is the most tragic of all people, but then, as I studied Kafka even deeper, I came to the conclusion, no. There is someone more tragic. Who is it? It is someone who forgets to whom to give the message. So here is a man who has the message, doesn't know who to give it to. Is that the end? No. There is someone even more tragic. (laughter) Who is it? It is someone who forgets from whom he received the message. And to be Jewish is to remember from whom we received the message. And that we remember. I thank you. (applause)