

Elie Wiesel In Modern Times: Fifty Years After - The Lessons of

Kristallnacht 92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive November 11,

1988

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Well, now that the elections are over we can be serious again. (laughter) (applause) Some of you had a problem, I heard, whether being with me or with my portrait on television. (laughs) I shall read to you. "*Vayehi erev, vayehi boker.*" It was night. It was day. And it came to pass in those days that terror denied all languages and frontiers It became a universe of its own. In those days it imprisoned and mutilated [00:01:00] its victims and their dreams and then reduced them to ashes. It deprived human beings of the sun, the heart of happiness and the soul of salvation.

"In those days, it ruled in the high and the low places. Its reign seemed eternal. There was Hava who wanted to escape. She was prepared to leave her home, her neighbors, and the familiar streets of her town, Kreinsdorf, somewhere in Germany or Hanover or Berlin or Frankfurt or Dusseldorf. 'Let us leave,' she begged her husband. 'Let us leave, Baruch.' 'Not yet,' he answered her. They did not know, they could not know, that in the eyes of the enemy their fate was already sealed. In those

days it was the enemy [00:02:00] who held the book of life and death open before him. In those days it was he who inscribed therein the names in letters of black fire or in letters of white fire.

“‘What good is haste?’ asked Baruch, the husband. ‘We have time. Our children go to school here. Our possessions tie us to the land. And our friends do not dream of running away. What right do we have to separate ourselves from our community?’ ‘But I am afraid,’ said Hava. ‘That’s all. I am afraid, and that suffices.’ ‘I am also afraid,’ said the husband. ‘So what? We have been afraid for 2,000 years. As long as a Jew is alive and as long as he is a Jew, he is filled with fear. [00:03:00] Is that reason enough for him to leave everything and to rush unto the unknown?’ *Vayehi erev vayehi boker* - Night came and then dawn.

“And the days passed, and so did the nights. Baruch was not only called Baruch. Hava had other names as well. Everywhere in Germany the same anguished debate divided parents and children in Jewish homes. And none of them could possibly suspect that somewhere in some office in Berlin the argument had already been resolved. ‘For the love of our daughter, who is expecting a baby, for the love of our son, who intends to serve

God, let us leave. Let us leave while it is still possible,' said Hava, who elsewhere was also called Leah, or Shaindel, or Rose or Faigele. [00:04:00]

"'Where would you like to go?' answered the husband Baruch whose name was also Zelig or Sigmund or Yaakov or Leon. 'We are known here. Anywhere else we would just be unwanted strangers.' They were both right, but they could not know this. *Vayehi erev vayehi boker.*

And there was night. And there was day."

Thus begins a tale I call *The Six Days of Destruction*. It's a book, a prayer, marvelously illustrated by the marvelous Mark Podwal. Its aim is to reflect on the human and theological implications of an event that to some of us remains shielded in mystery. What happened? Why were demonic forces in humanity allowed to rule and reign [00:05:00] and do evil with practical impunity? The tragedy of European Jewry is an event that parallels with creation itself. It was as though the almighty Creator Himself had handed over the universe to the destroyer. And so the stories in the tale follow the pace and the logical of quasi-biblical anxiety.

Days followed one another. *Vayehi erev vayehi boker*. Nights followed one another. Then man no longer could distinguish between days and nights. Darkness had descended on the world, engaged in the unmaking of creation in the destruction of whatever humanity had sought to accomplish [00:06:00] in its recorded history. Naturally, innumerable questions arise. Why did it happen? Was universal conscience asleep, atrophied? Where was man when his or her world was corrupted, distorted, twisted, and eventually reduced to ruins? And where was God, the Shomer Yisrael, the Guardian of the people of Israel?

This last question has hounded some of us for years and years. And it is still open. And it hurts like an open, burning wound. Later tonight we shall read a passage from *Twilight* dealing with this painful and disturbing aspect of the tragedy. In the Talmud occasionally we find an expression *b'maya saka Kadosh Baruch Hu* while things happen down below, [00:07:00] what did God do? What did He, blessed be He, do when His people was the chosen prey of the enemy, His enemy and ours? But for the moment, as we are about to conclude yet another series of our annual encounters with Jewish tales and memories, let us this year for the last time conform to our own tradition and open parentheses.

Many things happened since last year. Last year I think during our last and fourth encounter we spoke about people in Moscow who were about to leave, and we wanted to be there. And at least one person from this audience went, Marion Wiesel, my wife, to see Slepak in Vienna. [00:08:00] I remember we also spoke then about Sakharov because I always spoke about Sakharov. He is a man of courage and integrity, and the fact that he was in jail or in exile disturbed all of us. So when we were in Russia we spoke about Sakharov day and night, just as much as we spoke about the refuseniks.

And, miracle of miracles, we just came back, Marion and I, from a meeting with Sakharov. Now, many things happened. The elections in Israel, one cannot -- I don't think I should be silent over what is happening in Israel and never was. Since we met here last year there was the Intifada, a painful, disturbing, sad chapter [00:09:00] in Israel's history. Oh, we have seen all the pictures. What the pictures on television don't show is the other side, the Jewish side. Two weeks ago, just before the elections in Israel, PLO elements have thrown a bomb on an Israeli bus. And I read the story about that bus. I read it and reread it. It still hurts.

A woman, a mother with three children, and when the bomb was thrown a soldier, a sergeant wanted to save the mother. But the mother said, "I cannot. My child is here." So he tried to pull her out. She resisted. "I cannot leave my children." So she was burned together with her children. That doesn't mean [00:10:00] that we only feel for Jewish pain. We feel for all those who have pain. But I have always refused to condemn Israel, and I still do so. I, living here, feel I have no right out of the comfort or the discomfort of my living in diaspora, my talking with you in New York, to become a judge over my people. I cannot do that. (applause)

And so, since last December I think we should -- I should repeat again and again something that I want you to know, that I love Israel, always. There were times when I loved Israel with joy, other times when I loved Israel with [00:11:00] pride. There were times last year when I loved Israel with anguish, but I loved Israel. And I hope that this love is shared. That doesn't mean that we don't want things to change. We want things to change. I hope things will change. With all my heart I hope. And there will be a lessening of tensions, a lessening of hatred, a lessening of violence. We pray for that.

I also pray that there will be a period of less fanaticism in Israel. I would like the religious community in Israel, which has now won a great victory in Israel, to be against fanaticism. I do not believe in fanaticism. I do not believe in extremism, political or religious. I can ask everything and more of [00:12:00] myself. But I must be tolerant with anyone who is not myself. And I would like, therefore -- (applause) I would like that that passion too should be shared.

What have we done here the last three times we met? We opened our series with Daniel, the seer, the visionary, the dreamer and interpreter of dreams who from his distant exile communicated his signals of hope to all Jews who throughout the centuries have been waiting for redemption. True, redemption did not come, but in remembering Daniel we had a taste if not of redemption then at least of the intensity, the creative, often anguished intensity that accompanies redemption.

Then we continued with the great Talmudic master Rabbi [00:13:00] Yehoshua ben Hananiah, whose personal tragedy, as witness and survivor, was intimately linked to our national tragedy. We evoked his gentleness, his moderation, but also and above all, his deep and irrevocable faith in his people, our people. When its honor and future were at stake, Rabbi Yehoshua

went as far as opposing his closest friend, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who remained his friend. Friendship was important and meaningful in Talmudic academies, just as it is not in today's academies. But it is relevant and very much vibrant here at the Y.

And therefore, I would like to thank a new teacher here at the Y. Danny Stern, this afternoon, has met with 400 of you [00:14:00] to teach tonight's session. And I heard without surprise that he was a brilliant and exciting teacher. I would like once more to thank Amos Hirschbein for all the passion that he invests in this house of study, art, learning, and Jewish culture. (applause)

Then for our third session we made attempts of meeting the Ostrovtser Rebbe who passed away 10 years before Kristallnacht. We recalled an episode involving the Vizhnitzer Rebbe, and I tried to tell you that my mother, who wept after seeing him alone, and I asked why did she weep? It had taken me some 20 years to find the answer. And it may take you as long to hear it. (laughter) [00:15:00]

What all our encounters have in common is an emphasis on passion. And passion means compassion, compassion for the dead



and the living, for our people that need it and other people that also need it. True, we cannot be with everybody, nor can we help everybody or even remember everybody, but in assisting our own community we affirm the duty of men and women to assist all communities. In remembering the Jewish victims we tell men and women who belong to other faiths and other ethnics groups to do their duty to remember what happened to their kinsmen.

In linking my destiny to that of my people and my memory to the tradition of my people, I try to illustrate the importance for all individuals [00:16:00] to become part of their communities whose inner relationship must be based on and inspired by mutual tolerance and respect. Kristallnacht, which his more or less the subject or at least half the subject of our session tonight, meant the opposite. Kristallnacht was meant to single out one group, one community, one religion and condemn them, us, to shame, fear, and solitude. All German Jews and later all European Jews became characters in Kafka novels, forever in search of someone to talk to, of someone to rely on, of someone who could open doors. In Kafka's universe, doors never opened, and when they did, it was too late. [00:17:00] But in our universe, it is not. (applause)

Nu? As always, when we are confronted by our collective tragedy, we wonder, what does one do with one's knowledge one acquired from that tragedy? What does one do with one's memories? We are told in the Talmud of a certain *tanna*, a certain sage who could not speak about the destruction of the Temple as long as [00:18:00] there was a man in the audience who was alive when the Temple was destroyed. The Talmud tells us he couldn't speak about it because that man or those men who remember the destruction couldn't take it. They wept too hard.

I think the reason's different. The master couldn't speak in the presence of people who knew too much. And the confrontation of that imaginary knowledge or inherited knowledge, a knowledge was too much for that master. And yet, knowledge and memory both are meant to bring people together, past and present, present and present. But in our case they set people apart. Those Jews who have been there feel deeply that their knowledge cannot be shared, and they are right. Only he or she, he or she [00:19:00] who was there will ever know what it meant being there. The better we remember the more we realize that an abyss will forever separate our memories from yours.

So what is one doing when one has to communicate knowledge? There exists a Spartan epitaph over the 300 dead at Thermopylae.

Stranger, when you see the Lacedaemonians, tell them we lie here faithful to their orders. What could the epitaph be over the tombstones of our martyrs, our heroes? They have no tombstones. Ours is the first generation deprived of its cemeteries. And yet, not to speak would be wrong, for a mute memory may kill its own [00:20:00] silence. And so we must tell the tale even if we cannot, even if at times we sound like madmen, even if we offer a message of madness. We must continue. We must persevere for ultimately we hope that it will be a message about madness that will cure madness.

Kristallnacht was madness. All mass psychosis is madness. All mob scenes are madness. And so let's see the roots and the scope of that madness. Kristallnacht, let's study the event. The night of crystal, like some other names and terms of the [00:21:00] Holocaust vocabulary, it is unclear who called it by that name. What is certain is that Kristallnacht is a poetic name for a gigantic pogrom. The killers in those times and later somehow loved to use romantic words to simultaneously describe and mask their heinous crimes. Sonderbehandlung, special treatment, meant death. Selection meant immediate death.

Strange, the killers were also fond of beautiful sights for their evil undertakings, as if to prove to the world that beauty and murder, refinement and massacres, do go together. That culture and racial persecution, [00:22:00] culture and extermination are compatible. People who were at Mauthausen tell me that it was a beautiful site. And those who were in Birkenau will tell you it was a beautiful site, as was Treblinka. For some reason they chose the most beautiful places, the most beautiful sceneries, and just there to commit murder.

Now, the Kristallnacht was actually not the beginning of the end but the end of the beginning. It was not the beginning of what we call so poorly the Holocaust. In many ways it had all the characteristics of a classical pogrom. Larger in scope and deeper in intensity, the crusades have brought as much [00:23:00] suffering to Jewish communities in the Rhineland and elsewhere, in France, the province -- excited mobs always follow the kind of routine claiming that the Jews were out to kill gentiles. They, the gentiles, excited by their fanatics, robbed Jewish homes, pillaged Jewish businesses, desecrated Jewish sanctuaries, and killed Jews.

Jews were killed in the streets in Germany. It had happened before. Jews committed suicide. Jews had committed suicide before, often in larger numbers during the crusades. Jewish houses of prayer were destroyed. They had been ransacked and destroyed before. Jews were sent to Dachau and Buchenwald. Those concentration camps had been established mainly for political prisoners. What then was new [00:24:00] in the Kristallnacht? The desire on the part of Hitler and his accolades to get rid of all the Jews, what they called to have *Judenrein*, a land, a country "pure," quote unquote, of Jews.

In forcing them to leave Germany, by all means it was Hitler's way of telling them something that they didn't want to hear. What was it? Your life here in our midst, Hitler told the Jews, for almost 1,000 years, has not only come to an end, it was a mistake, a lapsus which can be corrected. Go, start again elsewhere, anywhere, and in due time it will be as though you had never dwelled on German soil, never contributed to German culture, never shared [00:25:00] in German social experiments. So Kristallnacht was the beginning of this perception that began to set in in the Jewish psyche, adding panic and terror to the sense of insecurity that dominated Jewish life in Germany.

All of a sudden most German Jews wanted to leave, and thus abiding by Hitler's wish. Hitler was not yet opposed to Jewish life elsewhere. For four years Jews could have saved themselves with a visa until America entered the war in December, meaning between November '38 and December '41 it was possible for any German Jew with an American visa to save his life [00:26:00] and the life of his family, but there were no visas. So strange when we read the stories about the German Jews in those years when they began frantic. They wanted to go anywhere. They couldn't.

I came across a very moving and charming anecdote that two German Jews were going day after day to consulates. And finally they met in the evening exhausted. And one says to the other, well, where do you want to go? He said, well, I think I'll go to New Zealand. Where do you want to go? He said I think I'll go to the Tierra del Fuego, somewhere in Argentina. And the first one says, but that's far. (laughter) And the second Jew says, [00:27:00] far from where? Far from where? It was far from everywhere. It was far to any Jew.

What else? We also find in this case when we deal with this mass pogrom a new element: while the pogromchiks were shedding Jewish blood, somehow the outside world accepted it. And to us

who, after all, want so much to believe in humanity or in the humanity of society, it is a great disillusionment. You read the newspapers, and you see that reality was there. Every newspaper reported a story of Kristallnacht. And therefore you would have expected something [00:28:00] to happen somewhere. It didn't. As we know that Roosevelt recalled the ambassador, but behind the scenes Germany was reassured that nothing would happen. England was so afraid that Jews will go to Palestine that England, of course, didn't do much either. Nobody did anything.

Now, the Kristallnacht, therefore, must be situated between two important events. The first event was the Evian Conference. And the second one was the St. Louis episode. The Evian Conference was simple. All of a sudden the good nations came to the conclusion that 650,000 Jews will have to leave Germany, and therefore, what will happen to them? Now, logically the Evian Conference was called to help German Jews find new countries. [00:29:00] But in truth the Evian was conference to allow all the member nations of that conference to say we don't want them. Not a single nation said we open our doors for these German Jews, which in the meantime became also Austrian Jews.

And so Hitler then published headlines in the German press:  
650,000 German Jews for sale. Who wants them? Or the hypocrisy  
of the world. Everybody teaches us Germans lessons of morality  
and generosity, but nobody is ready to accept the Jews. Day  
after day. And so actually what the Nazi propaganda was out to  
do was to convince German Jews, look, don't count on anyone, for  
you count for no one. I hope that [00:30:00] I am wrong. But  
my feeling is that German Jews then lived under an illusion.  
They were still convinced that at least the Jewish communities  
in the world will come to their rescue. And it wasn't so.

It wasn't so. I'm ashamed as a Jew and a human being. I'm  
ashamed when I think of that period. Nothing was done. It was  
so easy then at least to comfort German Jews. Nothing was done.  
Well, for the first time in our history Jewish solidarity was  
broken. In the past, whenever Jewish life was threatened,  
whenever Jews were persecuted in one [00:31:00] place, somehow  
they were welcomed in another. They were expelled from Spain,  
they could come to Holland. If they suffered in one country,  
they were welcome in another country. This time all the hearts  
dried up, including the Jewish hearts. And I, who love my  
people with all my heart, I cannot understand.



Why was it that even us who should know better how to be compassionate, at least with our own brothers and sisters and children, I don't understand it. I always ask myself the question since childhood, why is the story of the destruction of the Temple, Kamtza, Bar Kamtza and so forth, in *Masechet Gittin*, in the treatise [00:32:00] of Gittin which deals with divorces?\_ It should have been in the Midrash. It should have been in Sanhedrin. But in Gittin, which is something so technical, how to perform a divorce, which reasons give a divorce, its legality, its validity?

And then I understood. The tragedy, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple actually was a story of divorce, a divorce between one group and another inside the Jewish state because there was too much hatred, *sinat chinam* we are told, gratuitous hatred. And because there was a separation between Jew and Jew and therefore between Jew and God. So the story of a tragedy is a story of divorce. And I'm afraid there was a divorce between [00:33:00] 1933 and 1945, a divorce that occurred between free, happy Jewish communities and those who were doomed to unhappiness and death.

Now let's go back a little bit. Why did it happen? Why Kristallnacht? There is no doubt that Goebbels and the entire

Nazi regime have prepared a contingency plan how to organize that pogrom. Everything was there, the plans were ready. They were waiting for a pretext. And the pretext was offered by a young 17-year-old Jew named Herschel Grynszpan. We discussed Grynszpan, and of course again we have all the problems that later on will face us in the ghettos. We already have them here. What is the limit of the individual responsibility towards collective life, [00:34:00] towards history? Is a young 17-year-old Jew allowed, in his own eyes or in ours, to do something that maybe would endanger other Jews?

Later in the ghettos many young Jews had the same problem. Because they were afraid that in fighting they would endanger the general community of old men and women. Herschel Grynszpan didn't ask himself this question. When he heard about the expulsion of 50,000 Polish Jews from Germany to Poland, he did something. Now, why were they expelled? We speak now about Germany, and Germany is that -- what they did then was criminal, murderous, no doubt. But let's not forget that the Polish government wasn't filled with such tzadikim either. [00:35:00]

The Polish government all of a sudden realized that since Jews in Germany one day will have to be expelled -- where would they go? They were Polish citizens -- they would go to Poland. And

the Polish government didn't want to accept Polish Jews. Paradoxically, until 1938 Polish Jews with Polish passports lived very well in Germany. Abraham Joshua Heschel, z"l, told me that he who was a Polish citizen and lived in Frankfurt lived better in Frankfurt than in Poland because no one would dare then, until then, to touch a foreign citizen. Hitler didn't want to have problems with foreign citizens, even if they were Jewish.

And then Poland said, ah-ha, one day they will have to leave, and they will come us. We don't want them. So they imagined a kind of stratagem, a gimmick how to deprive 50,000 [00:36:00] Jews, Polish citizens, of their citizenship. And the moment that happened, of course Hitler said I don't need them. And a violent, ugly, cruel operation began of expelling these Jews. They came to the border, some of them, most of them in Zbaszyn, a border town. There the Polish soldiers were waiting for them with bayonets. So the Jews were going back and forth, back and forth between the Polish side, the German side, and they remained in the no man's land.

And the suffering was undescrivable. Herschel Grynszpan was a poor boy. He was born in Hanover. His parents lived in Hanover. He was the sixth of six children. His parents were

poor. And he was a Talmud student. And one day he met, in shul, he met an old man who was impressed with his Talmudic [00:37:00] interest, and he said, my son, you will not live here. You shouldn't. Get out. So he went to Belgium where he had an uncle. Then illegally he came to France where he had also an uncle. He was very poor, but his parents were even poorer because he received letters from his parents saying we have nothing. We are here at the border. His sister wrote him a letter a heart-breaking letter. Do something. Can you send us something? He didn't have anything.

So he decided to do something. On November 7 he went to the German embassy, and he asked for the ambassador. Why? He said, I have a very important document to give him. He was all but 17 years old. The ambassador wasn't there. He was received by the third secretary, a certain Ernst vom Rath. He invited him into his study. He [00:38:00] offered him a chair. And the secretary said, well, where is the document? At which point Herschel Grynszpan pulled out his gun and said, this is the document. And he fired five bullets.

Now, there was no police there. At that time they didn't have security in embassies, nothing. He could have ran out and gone into hiding. Instead, he sat down, waited for the police. The

police arrived. One more thing. When he fired he said, this is the document, and this is my answer to the cruelty of your people towards my people. The police arrived. They found a letter in his pocket saying, yes, I am sorry I have done it to his parents. I am so sorry, but I had to do it. Someone had to speak up.

The German government then -- remember it was Chamberlain. After all, it was the appeasement -- began applying pressure [00:39:00] on the French government to have a trial. He got two lawyers, one Jewish lawyer called Isidore Frenkel, whom I knew, and another one, a very great French lawyer, the greatest tenor, as they called him, of the bar, called Edouard Moro-Giafferi, a Corsican, the best lawyer. In America he became a hero, in France too, but here a greater hero. You know, whatever happens happens here more.

And the first thing that happened, there was a woman here, a journalist, a great journalist, Dorothy Thompson. She published articles in his favor, and she raised funds for him, and she got \$40,000 for him. In those times \$40,000 was quite a sum. He didn't want to accept the money. He sent it to the people in Zbaszyn, not only his parents, all the people at the border. Then he got telegrams, naturally, [00:40:00] from American

publishers. They all wanted contracts. (laughter) He didn't want a contract. And the meantime, the French government was preparing a trial.

Now, remember something which I repeated already twice in the last 24 hours. French public opinion was a pacifist public opinion. They didn't want war with Germany. When Daladier, the French foreign minister, or prime minister, came back from Munich where he had signed the shameful pact sacrificing Czechoslovakia. He was met at the airport by thousands and thousands and thousands of people. And he was convinced that the people were waiting for him to lynch him. And it wasn't so. They waited for him to celebrate him.

Even Leon Blum, the great, [00:41:00] the great Jewish statesmen, wrote then an editorial in *Le Populaire*, the official organ of the socialist party, saying we welcome the Munich Pact *avec un large soulagement*, with a cowardly feeling of relief. That means war has been pushed away. Three weeks after Kristallnacht, Herr von Ribbentrop, Hitler's foreign minister, came to Paris to sign a friendship pact with France. And he did.

So and there is Herschel Grynszpan, a man who thought that he defended Jewish honor, and I think he did. I have very strong feelings for Herschel Grynszpan. And they were preparing a [00:42:00] trial. The trial did not take place. It didn't because Germany attacked France. Attacked France in May, and, as you remember, the war was a blitzkrieg. I always like to emphasize that. It took the German Wehrmacht longer to conquer the Warsaw ghetto than it took the German Wehrmacht to conquer France. And therefore, the French government decided to move all the political prisoners from the Paris prisons inside to the south, including Herschel Grynszpan.

A few times the train was bombed, and the prisoners were free to run away. And for reasons that I don't understand, Herschel Grynszpan did not use his freedom. Each time he went to [00:43:00] the local prison voluntarily, and he gave himself up. And the warden of the prison didn't want him. And in certain places the warden said, Mr. Grynszpan, but you are crazy. The Germans will come here. They will find you. Get out. They didn't want him. So he wandered off alone, free, until he came to Toulouse. In Toulouse, instead of going to the Jewish community or to find some Jews in the street or in a synagogue somewhere, he went back to prison, and there the warden accepted him.

The Germans entered Paris. The first order that the newly arrived Gestapo commander had in his pocket was to find Grynszpan. There was no Grynszpan in Paris, but they found Grynszpan thanks to the Vichy government in Toulouse.

[00:44:00] And the Vichy government, in a cowardly, despicable way, handed Grynszpan over to Germany, although he was sub judice, he was still under trial in France. He was brought into Berlin to the Moabit jail and then to Sachsenhausen to a special place where he was treated well because Goebbels wanted to prepare a show trial a la Moscow, a big show trial, Grynszpan showing the Jewish conspiracy trying to eliminate the German government.

And for a year they worked on the show trial. And then all of a sudden, beginning '42, it was postponed indefinitely, and nobody understood why was the trial postponed. Now he says that he killed vom Rath not [00:45:00] because of political reasons but because of homosexual reasons. Grynszpan had a marvelous idea. He all of a sudden said that he killed vom Rath because they had homosexual relations. It was a case of jealousy, and he killed him. And Goebbels said, how can he, Goebbels, allow a Jew to come publicly and say that this dirty Jew had relations with a diplomat, a German diplomat?



And that saved his life for a while. There was no trial. Later on one more document was discovered by a great historian, Michael Marrus. In '43 that he proclaimed a hunger strike, but we don't know why. And then he disappeared. We don't know what happened to Herschel Grynszpan. Probably executed somewhere. [00:46:00] We don't know where. And strangely enough, people forgot Grynszpan until 1961 or '62. I don't remember exactly the date, when Israel had the Eichmann trial. And the trial was a historic trial. Really it was a turning point in the world sensitivity to the tragedy.

Really what Israel does usually in the field of justice is always perfect. The prosecutor wanted to give a historical background to the tragedy. So the first witness for the prosecution was Salo Baron, the great historian who came to speak about Jewish history in Europe. And days--*vayehi erev vayehi boker*- days came, days went, and one day the prosecutor general announced his next witness. And he simply called Zindel [00:47:00] Grynszpan, the father of Herschel Grynszpan. And when he announced the name the entire courtroom jumped up. There was something there. Jumped up. How strange.

In the early '30s the Grynszpan family was invited to go to Palestine. And the father didn't want to go to Palestine for the reasons I mentioned in my story. What am I going to do there? The father and mother were saved, and they went to Palestine. Herschel did not survive.

Now, what happened then in Germany? In Germany we know that Goebbels had given the orders and a pogrom began. The Germans spoke about 167 synagogues. Then they corrected the figure for 267. In fact, there were [00:48:00] twelve hundred -- I think -- forty-one, 1,241 synagogues that were burning the same night. Burning. And we have scenes of unprecedented violence everywhere. Everywhere the synagogues were put on fire first. And then the way -- the first thing they wanted is to get hold of Sifrei Torah, of the holy scrolls and profanate them and desecrate them.

In Baden-Baden they forced a Jewish leader, a rabbi I think, to read from *Mein Kampf* with the niggun of reading the Torah, and so forth. Now, how many German homes opened their doors [00:49:00] for their Jewish neighbors? How many Jewish children were invited by neighbors saying come, stay here? There were a few, very few, and they deserve that we remember them, but they were so few. Why were they so few? I found a few documents

that are very touching of people, mainly reverends, priests who did dare to speak up. I will read to you only one excerpt. There was a man named Julius, Pastor Julius von Jan from Wurttemberg, and that is what -- among others.

It was a long speech. This is what he says publicly to his congregation. "Who would have believed that the murder of [00:50:00] one man in Paris could lead to so many murders here in Germany? Passions run riot and the divine commandments are mocked. Places of worship, which some would regard as holy places, have been burned without restraint. And the strangers' possessions have been plundered and destroyed. Men who have loyally served the German people have been thrown into concentration camps simply because they belong to another race. God may uplift a man or a people to the loftiest honors, but if they close their hearts to God's word they will suddenly be cast into the abyss."

There were a few, and whoever spoke up ended up in a concentration camp. But the others did not speak up. And therefore, in every city in Germany, the synagogue was burned. Must have been an [00:51:00] eerie picture, these synagogues burning. In Stuttgart during that night a 29-year-old teacher, the name is Felix David, committed suicide. Ruth, his young

wife, committed suicide. Their two babies, Benjamin and Gideon, were found dead next to their parents. Was it fear, disgust, protest? Was it their way of spitting Germany into the face? Everywhere the Nazi tormentors tried to show their inventiveness, their fantasy in torturing their Jewish victims.

In Baden-Baden again, all the Jews were marched to the synagogue behind the star of David with a poster saying God, do not abandon us. In general, the support of the population was there. There was [00:52:00] looting, much looting, so much so that the Himmler and Goring were upset. Too much looting was going on. And then after it was all over, some 800 Jews were killed, 30,000 were taken to the concentration camps, and fear descended upon an entire community.

Immediately afterwards, November 11, there was a high-level meeting. Goring, who was the marshal, the *marishal*, Marshal Goring, the number two man after Hitler, and Goebbels and Heydrich, and many other people had a meeting to analyze Kristallnacht. Now, what -- you would have maybe thought they were discussing the political fallout of Kristallnacht, or maybe they were discussing, [00:53:00] who knows, the moral aspect of Kristallnacht. Not at all. Economy, money. All they wanted to know is, how are they going to deal with the insurance

companies? Since most of these Jewish homes and business were insured, they will have to be paid. In that case, what's the big deal? What was then the reason for the whole exercise?

And they spent three hours on that level to discuss how are they going to deceive the Jews and deprive them of their insurance money. Later on there was a theory, and I think the theory's sound, that there was an economic factor in killing Jews.

Hitler and the Nazis, they wanted Jewish wealth. And the SS had an entire economic department. [00:54:00] Finally, they came up with a "funny," quote, unquote, a funny answer to the question. They imposed a fine of a billion mark, at that time it was \$400 million, on the Jewish community to pay for the damage done by the SS to them.

Because the glass that was broken came from Belgium, and only Belgium produced such glass. So Himmler said the Jews have to pay for the broken glass. And later on, of course from a different level, the same thing was done to Jews in Greece. When the Jews left Greece they had to pay for their one-way ticket to Auschwitz. So what does one do with our memories? What does one do with so much cynical, cool, [00:55:00] dehumanized cruelty?

Now, there was, of course, one more aspect. And the aspect is the one that I hinted at in the beginning. And what about God? What about God? Many of these Jewish victims, especially the rabbis, we are told they were in jail. And in jail they continued to say their prayers. In jail they refused to eat *trayf*. There was something about that, there was something that somehow, whether we want it or not it involved theological questions. And where was God?

All these questions actually apply not only to Kristallnacht, it applies even more so to the Holocaust when it began four years later. The indifference of bystanders, the [00:56:00] perversion of the killers, the solitude of the victims, the tremendous, infinite solitude of the victims, forgotten by the whole world, abandoned by God, and the apparent silence, therefore, of the cosmos to their suffering. Question always was, why didn't at least God stop the killer, since human beings did not?

I dealt with these questions in many of my books. One recent passage may seem particularly relevant to these questions. So I will read to you one page from a novel. I reread it with true delight. I found the translation so sensitive, so masterful that I said to myself, [00:57:00] had I not been married, I

would surely marry the translator. (laughter) So I called up Ileana, who is working with us, and Jim, who is our publisher. And I said, tell me, who is the translator? And they gave me her name, and lo and behold, she was married. But she still is, to me. (applause)

So here we are at the end of our excursion. It is a story of a man who is looking for a friend in an insane institution. And there he meets people who believe they are biblical characters. Last year I read Cain and Abel, Abraham. Finally at the end he meets [00:58:00] even someone who thinks he is the Messiah. And finally he thinks that he meets someone who thinks that he is God-Kavyakhon Himself. So my hero, whose name is Raphael, the last evening of his stay in that institution goes out in the garden, and he sees a man, and he sits down next to him. And he hears that man speak.

“‘Look,’ says the man. His voice is resonant and melodious, tinged with sadness. ‘Look,’ says the man. ‘Day and night are in mortal combat. Since creation that have been at a stalemate. Why do they fight? They alone understand their struggle.’ He does not introduce himself. He doesn’t have to. Now that he has spoken I know who he is, says my hero, Raphael. [00:59:00] In his presence I feel alone. Yet this solitude is not a

burden. I am alone as he is alone. I am alone because he is alone. I feel like speaking to him. I, who have been so intent on listening, now feel the need to reach into myself and beyond.

"I must speak to him of the dead who no longer speak, of the ghosts that haunt my sleep, of the memories that plague me. I must tell him what I have never told a soul. But the man speaks first. And the man says, 'This is not how I had imagined my creation. All these creatures that breed because of me, what do they want? That I keep quiet, that I keep out of their lives? But when I remain silent, they reproach me. When I speak they call me [01:00:00] arbitrarily. Those poor earthworms envy me, but why? Because I am invincible? So what? Do they think I like taking the blame for everything?

"As he speaks, I can sense his need to have me hang on his every word. And he continues: 'If only they'd leave me alone. There would be help for the sick, a mother for every orphan, a home for every beggar. There would be peace everywhere, in heaven and on earth. No more bloody wars, no more massacres committed in my name. I repudiate them all.' His words are spoken with such conviction that I allow myself to be carried by their cadence, their logic. I absorb his voice, and it is that voice that speaks through mine. [01:01:00] 'You say that you pity



man, but tell me, where is your pity? How does it manifest itself, and why must it be so sparing? Since you are Almighty, why don't you replace man's baseness with goodness? Why don't you replace his cruel instincts with generosity?'

"A cool breeze rustles the leaves. Raphael's neighbor turns up his collar. 'Who are you?' the man asks him impatiently. 'Who are you, mortal? Who are you, mortal, to question the order of my creation? How dare you ask such momentous questions?' 'I,' says Raphael, 'I would prefer to say nothing, and yet I hear myself speak, and I say I have seen men suffer. I have seen children die. It is in their name that I speak to you. How can you justify their suffering?' [01:02:00] 'I don't have to,' says the man. 'Some men kill, and people say it's my fault. Other men permit the killers to kill. Are you saying that too is my fault?'

"And Raphael says, 'You could have prevented it all from happening.' 'Yes,' says the man, 'I could have. Not only the massacres but all that preceded them. I could have prevented the killer from being born, his accomplice from growing up, mankind from going astray. But can you tell me at what precise moment I should have intervened to keep the children from being thrown into the flames? At the very last moment? Why not

before? When is before? When the idea is conceived? When the order is transmitted? When the hunter sights his prey? Go on, answer. You are putting me [01:03:00] on trial, fine. But a trial involves facts and arguments, not cliches. Since you are so clever, can you tell me what I should have done and when?’

“‘I am dumbfounded,’ says Raphael. I don’t know what to say. Surely if the man seated next to me is God, he knows my answers before I do. But if he’s only a patient who thinks he is God, how can I possibly make him understand that which I myself fail to understand?’ ‘I am not God,’ I say, forcing myself to be calm. ‘I do not have a cosmic view of events. I can only speak of individual cases, tragedies that have affected me, the first victims of the ghetto, the starving children, the frightened old man. Why didn’t you save my parents, my brothers [01:04:00] and sisters? Why didn’t you save my friends? Merciful God, God of love, where were you, and where was your love when under the seal of blood and fire the killers obliterated thousands of Jewish communities?’

“‘As I speak,’ says Raphael, ‘I feel anger and indignation pour out of me. Whether my neighbor is God or not, these are words demanding to be spoken. I have no right to hold them back. But the patient says, ‘You hurt me. You cannot imagine how much you

just hurt me.' 'And,' says Raphael, 'the patient's voice is so sad that I immediately regret my words. As I turn towards him I think I see [01:05:00] tears rolling down the side of his face. I tell myself, this suffering is human, not divine. Here is a madman who believes he is God, and here I am addressing him as if he were.'"

In conclusion, as we conclude this year, these twenty-second years of learning together, may I tell you one more extraordinary Midrash? In the Midrash we learn that when a just man dies, when a just person dies, God, blessed be He, weeps, and two of his tears fall into the great ocean. And when [01:06:00] the tears hit the waters they produce a sound so powerful that it is being heard from one corner of the world to another. I like that legend. And you can even see how it influenced by own page just read. I like to dream of God as compassionate, capable of weeping over the fate of His creatures. But then I ask myself, why didn't we hear the tears 50 years ago?

Is it that weeping over the death of one person is one thing and over six million another? Could it be that His pain and His grief over the destruction of one million Jewish children were so deep, so overpowering that He chose to weep in silence? Or

could it be [01:07:00] that He wept but we didn't hear? Could it be that we didn't hear because we ourselves didn't weep enough? Oh God, God of Abraham and Auschwitz, God of Isaac and Treblinka, God of Jacob and Belzec, let Your tears fall not into the great ocean. Let them fall into our hearts. (applause)

[01:08:00]

**M1:**

Thanks for listening. For more information on 92nd Street Y and all of our programs, please visit us on the web at [92y.org](http://92y.org).

This program is copyright by 92nd Street Y.

E

N

D

O

F

V

I

D

E

O

F

I