

Elie Wiesel In Modern Tales: Remembering and Forgetting

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive November 16, 1989

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) My name is Malkiel, Malkiel Rosenbaum, to be more precise. I feel I must write it down because of superstition to exorcise fate. Perhaps it is even simpler than that. I wish to prove to myself that I have not yet forgotten my name. Could it happen to me, to me too? Why not? One morning I may pick up my pen and it will refuse to obey me. It will refuse to execute my will for the simple reason that I shall no longer be capable of telling it what I want. [00:01:00] Malkiel Rosenbaum will still exist, but his identity will no longer belong to him.

I am 40 years old. Malkiel Rosenbaum is 40 years old. This, too, I feel I need writing down for myself. I was born in 1948 in Jerusalem. My age is that of the state of Israel -- easy to remember. I am as old and as young as Israel. Forty. Plus three thousand.

So what? Only memory matters. Mine goes overboard at times. That is because it weighs more than my own life; it envelops and protects the memory of my father as well. My father's memory is a sieve. No, not a sieve, an autumn leaf -- fragile, rejected,

full of holes. No, my father's memory is not that [00:02:00] either. It is a ghost. I see it only at midnight. I know one cannot see a memory. I can. I see it as I see the shadow of a shadow which endlessly withdraws, as if to huddle in a corner. Hardly have I noticed it, that it already vanished in an abyss. Then I hear it yell, I hear it moan gently. It is no longer here. And yet I still see it as I see myself. It calls me: Malkiel, Malkiel. I answer, "Do not worry. I shall not leave you." And yet I know one day it will stop calling.

This excerpt is from my latest novel that was recently published in Paris. It is called *L'oublié, The Forgotten*. I'm reading it here tonight, for it has been our custom to include in our [00:03:00] fourth annual encounter a page or two from a work yet to be published.

A few preliminary remarks: Since it is the last lesson this year, I think I should thank some people who are always helpful. Richie Robbins, who is not getting crazy while distributing the tickets; Rabbi Paul Joseph, who very ably is dealing with a pre-lecture study sessions; Amos; and of course Danny, Danny Stern. I also want to thank the engineers who gave me, finally, a good microphone. (laughter, applause) Last week they said, almost said, "Well, the only thing we have to do is to give you like a

White House microphone." So now I feel like in the White House and better. [00:04:00] A small confession: Would you believe me if I told you that last week I had two problems, not only the microphone, but also I had 102 temperature. (laughs; sympathetic sounds from audience) Flu.

Well, the novel is the story of a man named Elhanan, who wakes up one morning in his New York apartment only to discover that, slowly but irrevocably, his memory has been deserting him. Eventually he will learn the name of his disease, the Alzheimer disease, but he will never pronounce it, and that is why, out of respect for my hero, the disease is never mentioned in the book, but it is fully described there -- the anguish, the tragedy, the despair of a man who is compelled to realize the pages of his life are being torn out. Events and episodes, names and faces, are fading away [00:05:00] into nothingness. What is he to do? He knows that what he forgets will forever be forgotten. His childhood in Eastern Europe before the tragedy, his experiences with Jewish partisans, his life in DP camps, his illegal journey to Palestine, his marriage to a beautiful young girl who had come to liberated Europe as an emissary of The Jewish Agency, his joining the Lehi underground, his combat among the defendants of the Old City of Jerusalem, his life as a war prisoner in Jordan -- all this will be erased from history, for

it is being erased from his own memory. No disease is as oppressive as his, nor as demeaning. It is a kind of cancer, the worst of all, for this cancer is devouring the identity of the person. [00:06:00]

The idea was to explore the other side, the dark side of memory. What happens when memory abandons us, or when we abandon memory? In a way, isn't this what has been happening recently in Europe and in our country as well? We are witnessing what we must term as an assault against Jewish memory. On the rise for some time, anti-Semitism is now directed not only against the living but also against the dead. "We are fed up hearing Jews talking about Jewish suffering" is something you read and hear in too many places. An American right-wing columnist writes it in his syndicated column and says it on his television programs. A French Christian intellectual [00:07:00] said it recently in articles and interviews. Mention the Jewishness of the Jewish victims in Europe and you will be criticized if not condemned. "Certain Jews are growing dividends from Auschwitz," quote-unquote, a renowned writer shamelessly declared in Paris. The normalization process that was begun in Germany has invaded other countries as well. What has been a sacred domain is now increasingly desacralized.

The campaign against Israel has increased momentum in the last year, particularly, of all places, in cartoons. One cartoonist, a Jew, shows Israeli soldiers at the entrance to the Old City of Jerusalem, aiming their rifles at a poor, innocent man on a donkey: Jesus. [00:08:00] Another cartoon depicts armed Israeli soldiers entering an attic where a young girl, Anne Frank, is writing her diary. More? Recently there was a conference in Boston, with a thousand people participating, by an organization called CAMERA, and that organization actually surveys the American press and media in general, and what was brought to our attention there is unbearable. A postcard with the following inscription has been published as a cartoon. Listen. Quote, "Happy Holocaust to the Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza, from your friendly occupying forces," unquote. Still more?

[00:09:00] A cartoon shows Palestinians on a bus, clearly going to Auschwitz, for Auschwitz has been illustrated in the cartoon, and under it, one sentence: Deportations then and now.

What does it all mean? To draw insulting, scandalous analogies between then and now, between SS killers and Israeli soldiers, that's all. To tell the enlightened world, "Look, the victim has become victimizer," thus depriving Israel and the Jewish people of our moral basis. But this is not new. Soviet propaganda has been doing it since 1967 until recently, until

the Gorbachev perestroika era. But Soviet propaganda is one thing, and the free press another. [00:10:00]

I am more and more pessimistic. Are we in danger of losing this battle for remembrance? I'm afraid we may, because of the cheap commercialization and trivialization on one hand, the revisionism on the other, and the desire of some parts of many populations to turn the page and say "Enough." It may happen. But then, God forbid. If that happens, it would bring shame and peril on the Jewish state and the Jewish people, for the strength of Israel lies not only in her gallant soldiers but also in their allegiance to our collective memory. Hasn't the recent past served as shield for the present? Isn't this why our enemies invest all their efforts to denigrate and cheaply dilute the Jewishness of whatever is Jewish? [00:11:00]

Well, I sound pessimistic because I am. One may say about the world today what Bernard Shaw used to say about a magazine in Britain called *Punch*. He used to say, "*Punch* isn't what it used to be, and never was." (laughter) The world isn't what it used to be, and never was. But I have the feeling that we Jews are losing ground. Friends become neutral; neutrals become enemies. And our community is divided, if not split. Does internal division cause tragedy? Not always, not inevitably. But

whenever tragedy struck, it was always accompanied by internal divisions. Is there [00:12:00] no way of achieving unity within our own diversity? There is. The secret, of course, is tolerance, generosity, and in communication. But how do you communicate? May I tell you a legend from a different tradition? Of all places, I must tell it here, tonight, and it is from a Muslim tradition. Listen to the story.

A man named Nasruddin entered the mosque and said to the people, "Do you know what I am going to tell you?" There were shouts, "No, no." So he said, "Then I shall not bother with such a good (inaudible)." (laughter) The following day, he asked the same question again from the pulpit: "Do you know what I am going to tell you?" And the answer was, "Yes, yes." "Then I don't need to tell you," he said, and went out. The third time, when he repeated his question, the people cried, "Some of us do, some of us do not." (laughter) Nasruddin said, "Then let those who do tell those who don't know," (laughter) and he left the building.

Nasruddin was not Jewish. Jewish teachers are kinder. They do not leave; they stay. They even invite those who are not here to come in. (laughter, applause, audience talking) [00:14:00]

And so, as we are about to conclude, not without some measure of melancholy, yet another series of our annual encounters devoted to study and reflection, may I remind you once more of the dominant theme that permeates all these endeavors? Of course it is memory. No people in history has developed remembrance to such a degree of total commitment. Other nations celebrate victories -- so do we -- but which nation commemorates defeats as well? We even recall national or individual tragedies of centuries and centuries ago that were inflicted upon us by great [00:15:00] powers that no longer exist. Where is ancient Babylonia? And yet we remember when ancient Babylonia did what to us. And what happened to ancient Persia, to ancient Rome? Nebuchadnezzar and Titus vanished, except from our collective memory. Islam lost Jerusalem in 1099. Is the Muslim world mourning over it now? Christianity then lost it to Islam. Does the Christian world remember it today? Baghdad was destroyed by the Mongols in 1258. Does today's Iraq as much as think about it? But the Jewish people remembers every catastrophe, every pogrom, every threat, just as it remembers [00:16:00] every act of courage and every miracle. For the Jewish tradition maintains the belief that every gesture is seen somewhere and every word inscribed somewhere. Nothing is ever lost. No memory is lost, for all memories are absorbed by God's memory.

Thus, whatever an individual does or says, his or her act and word ultimately will affect humanity itself.

Isn't this what we have tried to learn in our sessions this year and in years past? From Ruth, we learned never to give up, always to try again, and above all, to wager on the future. From Rabbi Shimon [Yehoshua] ben Levi, we learned the weight [00:17:00] of mystery, the appeal of mystery in what is revealed, and we also learned that just as we are waiting for redemption, the messiah too is waiting. And from Hasidism we learned that God listens; he listens not only to the celebrated masters but also to their anonymous followers. As for prayer, it was the theme of our study on Rabbi Uri of Strelisk last week.

May I tell you something that happened to me recently? One morning last week as I was davening, but all of a sudden, I was struck by a sentence which preceded the prayer "*Baruch she'amar v'hayah ha'olam,*" which means "Blessed be he who, with his word, created the world." And the sentence which precedes that prayer is a simple sentence [00:18:00] which is *hareini m'zamein et pi l'hodot ul'shabeach* and so forth. And it ends, *tamir vine'ilamb'shem kol Yisrael*. Translation: "I am hereby inviting or readying my lips to praise and thank God Almighty, the unique

and the hidden, in the name of the entire people of Israel.”

And then it struck me -- I have been saying this prayer since the age of three or four, and it struck me only now with its mysterious beauty. Any Jewish boy age three, if he grows up in a religious household, of course, says the same prayer. What does the prayer mean? That a small boy -- forgive me the expression -- is snot-nosed. (laughter) And he [00:19:00] speaks in the name of the entire people of Israel! A three-year-old boy speaks like that in the name of the whole people of Israel. I find it beautiful. But then, isn't this what prayer is all about? Everyone who prays becomes a *Shaliach Tzibbur*, an emissary, a spokesperson.

When we studied Rabbi Shimon [Yehoshua] ben Levi, you may remember, he gave us a description of heaven and description of hell, and I found a modern postscriptum to his description of hell and heaven. And listen: What's heaven? I read in a newspaper heaven is where the police are British, the chefs are French, the mechanics are German, [00:20:00] the lovers are Italian, and the organizers are Swiss. So what's hell? Hell is where the police are German, the chefs are British, (laughter) the mechanics are French, (laughter) the lovers are Swiss, (laughter) and the organizers are Italian. (laughter)

But we spoke about hell, and when we watched last week -- I mentioned it last Thursday already -- what's happening in Eastern Europe, it's a great event, the acceleration, the events. One is moved by all that, of course, [00:21:00] the abdication of the Soviet empire, the total breakdown of the communist system of terror. Of course, one cannot but feel pleased and happy about it, that more people are free. But as a Jew, when I watched Berlin, I had also some different feelings, so I will read to you something which you may read tomorrow in the *New York Times*. (laughter) I used to work in the *Forward*, the *Jewish Daily Forward*. We always used to ask the question, "How does the *New York Times* know what the *Forward* will publish tomorrow?" (laughter) Now you know what the *Times* will publish tomorrow. I wrote it, and I'll read it to you. [00:22:00]

Like most people who abhor imposed separation and oppression, I am happy for the citizens of East Berlin and for those of West Berlin. Watching on television the tens of thousands of young Germans celebrate their newfound freedom was a moving and rewarding experience. Whenever and wherever liberty prevails, people the world over ought to rejoice. The Wall was a disgrace, an abomination, a nightmare. Most of the faces we saw on the screen were young. One couldn't but share their joy and excitement. Their parents and grandparents had placed

unbearable burdens on their shoulders. Many of them grew up wondering, "What did my father do during the war?" and they deserve a chance to begin again, I thought. No one ought to begrudge their exuberance. They are entitled to their day in the sun. No one ought to spoil it. [00:23:00] The fact that it happened in Berlin lent the remarkable event a special meaning. What was 50 years ago history's capital of absolute evil had so suddenly become a symbol of hope. If this is possible, I thought, why despair of seeing a similar occurrence in other areas of the world, the Middle East, for example? Then, as always, emotions gave way to political considerations. Commentators and analysts began asking the obvious questions: What next? Will this unexpected turn of events lead to a reunification of Germany? If so, when? And what will its impact be on the international scene? Will a united, powerful, new Germany manage to break away from the conquest-thirsty demons that dominated old Germany? I cannot hide the fact that the Jew [00:24:00] in me is troubled, even worried. Whenever Germany was too powerful, it fell prey to perilous temptations of ultranationalism. Does it mean that I do not trust Germany's youth? I do. I hope it will have learned the lessons of World War II and will be shielded by that memory. But as long as the old generation is still around, one must be vigilant, on the alert. But remember, reactionary anti-Semitic journals are

still being published in Germany. Former SS men still have their own associations. One of their leaders has been elected to high office in Berlin. The general trend points towards normalization in political awareness and history as well. Remember revisionism and the ensuing battle of the historians? [00:25:00] And Bitburg? Remember Bitburg, and Hans Klein's shocking statement justifying Bitburg, saying that the Waffen SS after all were only good soldiers doing their duty? Remember it? Hans Klein is not just another politician; he's a member of Chancellor Helmut Kohl's cabinet, and its official spokesman. Should this trend go unchecked, will it lead to the normal impulse of turning the page? If so, is the pace of events too fast? Does the acceleration of history suggest danger? In other words, what is happening in Berlin troubles me because of its possible effect not only on the future but also on the past. In fact, the past has already been affected. "November 9 will enter history," is what the mayor of West Berlin declared. Others echoed his [00:26:00] statement in all the media around the globe. They forgot that November 9 had already entered history 51 years earlier as the date marking the Kristallnacht. Everyone else had forgotten it too. The intense joy of the present has overshadowed the past. No one in Berlin, or in our own country, for that matter, made the connection. That is why I am worried. I wonder, what else will be forgotten? Is my

fear unfounded? Is it simply due to my background as a Jew who has been traumatized by what rulers in Berlin had willed and ordered against my people? Also, what should one feel when hearing [00:27:00] Germany's old new anthem, "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles"?

Well, that's my response to the events. (applause)

The problem with our generation, perhaps the world, is that we forgot the connections. We no longer make connections, and I believe profoundly that the Jew is he or she who makes connections. Whatever we do is somehow connected to Sinai, to Jerusalem, to the Bible, to Talmud, somewhere, which means there must be some bearing, some reference point. We are connected; we must connect the present [00:28:00] to some distant or near point in space, in divine space, or in memory, which is human memory. I feel sometimes the connections are good.

Last Shabbat, my wonderful neighbor in shul Reb Yankov Dienstag, showed me something which I didn't even remember. Herzl in his diary wrote in 1897, he said, "Today I founded the Jewish state. If I were to tell this, even my most intimate friends, they would look at me as crazy, but I am convinced 50 years from now they will see that it is reality." Exactly 50 years later, in

1947, [00:29:00] the UN voted the existence of Israel. Herzl in the same diary was very unhappy because Lord Rothschild in England refused to see him, and Herzl needed a Rothschild. He needed money. But Rothschild refused to see him. How strange. Twenty years later, when the foreign secretary of Great Britain Balfour, Lord Balfour, wrote his famous declaration voting for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, to whom did he send the letter? To the same Lord, or Baron de Rothschild. Well, Herzl also tells in his diary that he could have bought Palestine for \$7 million. [00:30:00] The Turks were ready to sell him Palestine for \$7 million, but he couldn't raise the \$7 million.

One last item which I find always amusing and marvelous when I speak about Herzl. We learned that Herzl and Freud lived in the same town, Vienna, in the same time, in the same street, Berggasse, and never met. I always say, fortunately so.

(laughter) Just imagine Dr. Herzl, with his beautiful beard, knocking at the door, ringing the bell, and say, "Dr. Freud, I have a dream." (laughter, applause) [00:31:00]

Much of what we have tried to teach here, to study here, in the last 23 years was always to emphasize certain themes -- certain themes in our tradition, certain themes in literature, and in

Hasidism, or in the Talmud -- and one of the themes is friendship. And I always remember the beautiful story about friendship, and I was convinced that it is a Midrash, so I was looking in the Midrash all over, couldn't find it.

Unfortunately, our teacher, Rabbi Shaul Lieberman, z"l, is no longer here, so he couldn't help, and I couldn't find it. Then I found it, and it's not in the Midrash, it's a very late Midrash, but the story is beautiful.

Israel Kosta, a printer and bookseller in the middle of the nineteenth century, relates that [00:32:00] on the site on which the holy temple was built was once the property of two brothers. One had a wife and children; the other did not. They lived together in one house, happy, quiet, and satisfied with the portions which they inherited from their father. Together they worked the fields with the sweat of their brows, and the harvest came. The brothers bound their sheaves and brought them to the threshing floor. There they divided the crops of the field in two parts equally between them and left them. That night, the brother who had no family laid on his bed and thought, I am alone, but my brother has a wife and children. Why should my share be equal to his? And he rose from his bed, went stealthily out to the threshing floor, took from the stocks of his own sheaf and added them to the sheaf of his brother. That

same night, the older brother, the other brother, [00:33:00] turned to his wife and said, "You know, it's not right that we have divided the crop into two equal parts, one for me and one for my brother. He is alone and has no other joy or happiness, only the yield of the field. Therefore come with me, my wife, and we will secretly take from our share and add to his." And they did so. In the morning, the brothers went out into the threshing floor and they wondered that the sheaves were still equal. (laughter) Each one decided to himself to investigate. During the night, each one rose from his bed to repeat his deed, and they met each other in the threshing floor, each with his sheaves in his arms. Thus the mystery was explained, the brothers embraced and kissed each other, and the Lord looked with favor on this threshing floor where the two brothers conceived their good thoughts, and the Children of Israel chose it [00:34:00] for the site of the Beit Hamikdash. (applause)

In the yeshiva world, we know there is what they call the *brisker shita*, the method of brisk. And the shita, actually the method says that not everything one thinks, one says; not everything one says, one writes; not everything one writes, one publishes. (laughter) I tried to conform to that shita, but I will read to you something that I have published -- long, long ago, but it is one of my beautiful stories which I love, and

I'll read it to you because it means something. It means something also to what we are trying to achieve here, meaning to create the connections, [00:35:00] to create the links between us and ourselves, and also between us Jews and the world, and between the world and the Creator of the world.

Traveling through Spain for the first time, I had a strange impression of being in a country I already knew. The sun and the sky, the tormented luster in the eyes, landscapes and faces familiar, seen before. The strollers on the *ramblas* in Barcelona, the passers-by and their children in the back streets of Toledo -- how to distinguish which of them had Jewish blood, which descended from the Marranos? At any moment, I expected Schmuel Hanagid to appear suddenly on some richly [00:36:00] covered portico, or Abraham Ibn Ezra or Don Itzchak Abarbanel, my hero, or the great Yehuda Halevi, those princes and poets of legend who created and sang the golden age of my people. They had long visited my reading and insinuated themselves into my dreams. The period of the Inquisition had exercised a particular appeal to my imagination. I found fascinating those enigmatic priests who, in the name of love and for the sacred glory of a young Jew from Galilee had tortured and subjected to slow deaths those who preferred the father to the son. I envied their victims. For them, the choice was posed in such simple

terms: God or the stake, abjuration [00:37:00] or exile. Many chose exile, but I could never condemn the Marranos, those unhappy converts who secretly, and in the face of danger, remained loyal to the faith of their ancestors. I even admired them, for their weakness and for their defiance. To depart with the community would have been so much easier. To break all ties, more convenient. By deciding to stand their ground on two levels simultaneously, they lived on the razor's edge in the abnegation of each instant. I didn't know it when I arrived in Spain, but someone was awaiting me there.

It was at Saragossa. [00:38:00] Like a good tourist, I was attentively exploring the cathedral when a man approached me and, in French, offered to serve as guide. Why? Why not? He liked foreigners. His price? None. He was not offering his services for money, only for the pleasure of having his town admired. He spoke of Saragossa enthusiastically and eloquently. He commented on everything: history, architecture, customs. Then, over a glass of wine, he transferred his amiability to my person: Where did I come from? Where was I going? Was I married? And did I believe in God? I replied, "I come from far; the road before me will be long." I eluded his other questions. He did not insist. [00:39:00] "So, you travel a great deal," he said politely. "Yes, a great deal," I said.

"Too much, perhaps?" "Perhaps," I said. "What does it gain you?" "Memories," I said, "and friends." "That's all? Why not look for those at home?" "Oh," I said, "for the pleasure of returning, no doubt, with a few words I didn't know before in my luggage." "Which?" "I can't answer that," I said, "not yet. I have no luggage yet." We clinked glasses. I was hoping he would change the subject, but he returned to it. "You must know many languages," he said, "yes?" "Too many," I said. I enumerated them for him: Yiddish, German, Hungarian, French, a bit of English, and Hebrew. "Hebrew?" he asked, pricking up his ears. "*Hebreo*? It exists?" "Oh, it does exist," I said with a laugh. "Difficult language," he said, "huh?" "Not for Jews," I answered. (laughter) [00:40:00] "Oh, I see," he said, "You are a Jew." "They do exist," I said with a laugh. Certain of having blundered, he looked for a way out. Embarrassed, he thought a minute before going on. "How is Hebrew written? Like Arabic?" "Like Arabic," I said, "from right to left." An idea seemed to cross his mind, but he hesitated to share it with me. I encouraged him. "Any more questions? Don't be shy." He said, "May I ask you a favor, a great favor?" "Of course," I said. "Come, come with me." This was unexpected. "With you?" I protested. "Where to? To do what?" "Come. It will take only a few minutes. It may be of importance to me. Please, I beg you, come." There was such insistence in his voice that I

could not say no. Besides, my curiosity [00:41:00] had gotten the upper hand. I knew that Saragossa occupied an important place in Jewish history. It was there that the mystic Abraham Aboulafia was born. It was there that he grew up, the man who had conceived the strange plan to convert to Judaism Pope Nicholas III himself, (laughter) and so bring the messiah. In this town, I felt, anything could happen.

I followed my guide home. His apartment, on the third floor, consisted of only two tiny rooms, poorly furnished. A kerosene lamp lit up a portrait of the Virgin. A crucifix hung opposite. The Spaniard invited me to sit down. "Excuse me," he said, "I'll only be a second." [00:42:00] He disappeared into the other room and returned again after a few minutes. He was holding a fragment of yellowed parchment, which he handed me. "Is this Hebrew?" he said. "Look at it." I took the parchment and slowly, delicately began to open it. And I was immediately overwhelmed by emotion. My eyes clouded. My fingers were trembling, for they were touching a sacred relic, fragment of a testament written centuries before. "Yes," I said in a choked voice, "it is in Hebrew." And I could not control my hand. It trembled. The Spaniard noticed it. "Read it," he ordered. [00:43:00] With considerable effort, I succeeded in deciphering the characters, blurred by the passage of some 400 years. "I,

Moses, son of Abraham, forced to break all ties with my people and my faith, leave these lines to the children of my children and to theirs, in order that on the day when Israel will be able to walk again, its head high under the sun, without fear and without remorse, they will know where their roots lie. Written at Saragossa this ninth day of the month of Av in the year of punishment and exile." "Aloud," cried the Spaniard, impatient, "Read it aloud." [00:44:00] I had to clear my throat. "Yes," I said, "it's a document, a very old document. Let me buy it from you." "No," he said sharply. "I'll give you a good price." "No," he said. "I'll give you my watch." "No," he said. "Stop insisting; the answer is no." "I am sorry." "This object is not for sale, I tell you." I did not understand his behavior. "Don't be angry," I said. "I did not mean to enrage you, but I need it. This is something that belongs to us." And he said, "Don't you be angry, for this parchment has as much value to me." And I said, "No, [00:45:00] for us, Jews, it has a historical and religious value. It's more than a souvenir. It's more like a sign." "For me too," he shouted. I still did not understand. Why had he hardened so suddenly. "For you too? In what way?" He explained briefly. It was a tradition in his family to transmit this object from father to son. It was looked upon as an amulet, the disappearance of which would call down a curse. "I understand," I whispered. "Yes, I

understand." History had just closed a circle. It had taken four centuries for the message of Moses, son of Abraham, to reach its destination, [00:46:00] and I was the messenger. I must have had an odd look on my face. "What's going on?" the Spaniard wanted to know. "You say nothing. You conceal your thoughts from me. You offend me. Say something! Just because I won't sell you the amulet, you don't have the right to be angry with me, do you?" Crimson with indignation, with anxiety perhaps, he suddenly looked evil, sinister. Two furrows wrinkled his forehead. Then it was he who was awaiting me here, I thought. I was the bearer of his tikkun, his restoration, and he was not aware of it. I wondered how to disclose it to him. At last, finding no better way, I looked him straight in the eye and I said, "Nothing is going on, nothing. I only want to tell you something that you should know. You are a Jew." [00:47:00] And I repeated the last words, "Yes, you are a Jew, *Judío*, you." He turned pale. He was at a loss for words. He was choking, had to hold himself not to seize me by my throat and throw me out. "*Judío* is an insult! The word evokes the devil in Spain." Then, offended, the Spaniard was going to teach me a lesson for having wounded his honor. But then, abruptly, his anger gave way to amazement. He looked at me as if he were seeing me for the first time, as if I belonged to another century, to a tribe with an unknown language. He was waiting for me to tell him

that it was not true, that I was joking, but I remained silent. Everything had been said a long time ago. [00:48:00] Whatever was to follow would only be commentary.

With difficulty, my host finally regained control of himself and leaned over to me. "Speak," he said. Slowly, stressing every syllable, every word, I began reading the document in Hebrew, then translating it for him. He winced at each of the sentences as though they were so many burdens. "That's all?" he asked when I had finished. "That's all." He squinted, opened his mouth as if gasping for air. For an instant, I was afraid he would faint, but he composed himself, threw his head back to see on the wall behind me the frozen pain of the Virgin. Then he turned towards me again. "No," he said resolutely, "that is not all. Continue." "What else?" I said. [00:49:00] "I have given you a complete translation of the parchment. I have not left out a single word." "Go on, go on, I say. Don't stop in the middle. Go on. I am listening." I translated again, and again, three times. And then I returned to the past and sketched a picture of Spain at the end of the fifteenth century, and Tomás de Torquemada, native of Valladolid, Grand Inquisitor of gracious Queen Isabella the Catholic, transformed the country into a gigantic stake in order to save the Jews by burning them so that the word of Jesus Christ might be heard and known far

and wide, loved and accepted. Soon the Spaniard had tears in his eyes. He had not known this chapter of his history, not that way. [00:50:00] He had not known the Jews had been so intimately linked with the greatness of his country before they were driven out. For him, Jews were part of mythology. He had not known that they do exist. "Go on," he pleaded. "Please, go on. Don't stop."

I had to go back to the sources. The kingdom of Judea, the prophets, the wars, the first temple, the Babylonian diaspora, the Second Temple, the sieges of Jerusalem and Masada, the armed resistance, the Roman occupation, the exile -- the exile -- and the long wait down through the ages, the wait for the messiah, painfully present and painfully distant. I told him of Auschwitz, as well as the renaissance of Israel. All that my memory contained, I shared with him, and he listened to me without interrupting, except to say, [00:51:00] "More, more."

And then I stopped. I had nothing more to add. As always when I talk too much, I felt ill at ease. Suddenly an intruder, I got up. "I have to leave now," I said. "I am late. The car will be waiting for me in front of the cathedral." The Spaniard took me there, his head lowered, listening to his own footsteps. The square was deserted, no car in sight. I reassured my guide

there was no reason to worry; the car would not leave without me. We walked around the building once, twice, and my guide, as before, told me more about the Cathedral of Notre Dame [*sic*] del Pilar. Then, heavy with fatigue, we found inside, seated on a bench, and there, in that quiet half-darkness where nothing seemed to exist anymore, [00:52:00] he begged me to read him one last time the testament that a Jew of Saragossa named Moshe ben Abraham had written long ago, thinking of him.

A few years later, I had just come back from India and passed through Jerusalem. I was on my way to the Knesset, where a particularly stormy debate was raging over Israel's policy toward Germany -- to accept compensations or not. At the corner of King George Street, a passerby accosted me, "Wait a minute." His rudeness displeased me. I did not know him. What was more, I had neither time nor the inclination to make his acquaintance, not now and not then. "I beg your pardon," I said. "I am in a hurry." [00:53:00] He grabbed my arm. "Don't go," he said in a pressing tone. "Not yet. I must talk to you." He spoke a halting Hebrew. A tourist, no doubt, or an immigrant recently arrived. A madman, perhaps, a visionary, one of my beggars. The eternal city lacks for none. I tried to break away, but he would not let go. "I have a question to ask you." "Okay, go ahead," I said, "but quickly." "Do you remember me?" Worried

about arriving late, I hurriedly replied that he was surely making a mistake and confusing me with someone else. He pushed me back with a violent gesture. "You are not ashamed?" "Not in the least," I said. "What did you want? My memory is not infallible, and judging from what I see, [00:54:00] neither is yours." I was just about to leave when under his breath, the man pronounced a single word: "Saragossa."

So there I was in Jerusalem, and I stood rooted to the ground, incredulous, incapable of any thought, any movement. Him? Here? Facing me, with me? I was revolving in a world where hallucination seemed the rule. I was witnessing, as if from outside, the meeting of two cities, two timeless eras. And to convince myself that I was not dreaming, I repeated, like him, the same word over and over again: "Saragossa, Saragossa." "Come," said [00:55:00] the man, "I have something to show you."

That afternoon, I thought no longer about the Knesset or the debate, yes compensation, no compensation. No, the debate that was to weigh on the political conscience of the country for so long was that afternoon of little interest to me. I followed the Spaniard home as one follows one's own person in history. Here too, he occupied a modest two-room apartment, but there was nothing on the walls. "Wait," said my host. I sank into an

armchair while he went into the other room. He reappeared immediately, holding a picture frame containing a fragment of yellowed parchment. "Look," the man said, [00:56:00] "I have learned to read."

We spent the rest of the day together. We read the testament together. We drank wine. We talked. He told me about his friends, his work, his first impressions of Israel. I told him about my travels, my discoveries, and I said, "I am ashamed to have forgotten." An indulgent smile lit his face. "Perhaps you too need an amulet like mine. It will keep you from forgetting." "May I buy it from you?" (laughter) "Impossible," he said, "since it's you who gave it back to me."

By that time, it was very late at night. I got up to take leave. It was only when we were about to say goodbye [00:57:00] that my host, shaking my hand, said with mild amusement, "By the way, I have not told you my name." He waited several seconds to enjoy the suspense, while a warm and mischievous light animated his face. "My name is Moshe ben Abraham, Moses, son of Abraham."

See (applause) names come back, and all is possible, as long as there is memory. So what is the danger? The danger is an anti-

memory. "What is redemption?" said [00:58:00] the Besht.

"Only memory." The danger is that it's possible to forget. I think you know already that Isaiah wrote a biography of King Hezekiah. We don't know where it is -- forgotten. There was a sefer called Sefer haYashar; we don't know where it is. There was this book called Sefer Milhamot ha-Shem, the Book of Wars. We don't know where it is. Even God's name, the ineffable name, the Shem HaMephorash. We don't know what it is. We know it existed, because we know from the Talmud that the kohen gadol, the high priest, would learn it all year round, all year long, just preparing himself for the day, for the moment, when he entered the Kodesh HaKodashim. And we also know that it was a standby, and that standby had [00:59:00] therefore to learn the Shem HaMephorash, the ineffable name. But we also note the name is forgotten. What we think is the name is not the name. And if we could forget God's name, are you to tell me that we may not say, with anguish, that it is possible to forget anything else? It is possible. And therefore, one is anguished, but on the other hand, as long as there are good stories, they help memory, and as long as there are books, as long as there are words, as long as there are students and teachers who draw from the same source, the same fervor, the same fire, and the same passion, passion for study and passion for ahavat Yisrael, for the love of our people, and beyond [01:00:00] it, the love of

all people -- but beyond it, not without it. As long as these quests exist, hope is not only necessary, hope is possible.

So, how did Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev say? When he wrote once the tenaim, the engagement document for his daughter, he said -- he wrote and then of course he said, "My daughter and chosen so-and-so are now betrothed. And of course they'll get married next year, *im yirtzeh hashem*, in the month of Shevat in Jerusalem. However, if the messiah will not come, it will take place in Berditchev." (laughter) So if the messiah comes, there will be no more lectures. (laughter) If not, next year.

(applause)

M:

Thanks for listening. For more information on 92nd Street Y and all of our programs, please visit us on the web at 92y.org.

This program is copyright by 92nd Street Y.

END OF AUDIO FILE