

Elie Wiesel In Modern Tales: The Forgotten

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) The man who speaks is called Malkiel, Malkiel Rosenbaum. "Although my father dwelt in his past and in the past of the world, he lived in his era and reacted to its convulsions. He was concerned by political events, my international develops, hunger in Africa, racial conflicts in Indonesia, religious warfare in Ireland and India, whatever people did to other people affected his own life. When a friend would tell him that as a Jew his sole concern ought to be Israel, [00:01:00] he would answer with irritation, 'God has not created other people so we could turn our back on them.' And yet, he loved Israel with all his heart and soul.

"Why then hasn't he returned there? He wasn't sure. He would say to me, 'Is it cowardice on my part? In Jerusalem I would think too much about your mother, who died there. Every stone and every cloud reminded me of her.' Another time he said, 'I know it is easy and comfortable to love Israel from afar. That may be a paradox. Still, I never avoided paradoxes. When God created man in his image, didn't he contradict himself too? Except that God is alone and free whereas man is always alone

and never free.' Later, when my [00:02:00] father was already ill he dropped a remark which, whenever I think of it, makes me feel like weeping or dying.

"'Soon,' he said. 'Soon I shall envy the prisoner. His body is in prison while his mind is free. With me will be the reverse. My body will remain free whereas --' He did not finish his sentence, but his face reflected so much anguish and so much distress that I would have given anything I possessed to be able to console him, but I could not. Then he said, 'Soon I shall be absent from myself. I shall laugh, I shall weep and will not know why.' And I, his son, am taking his hand and hold it in mine. And I don't know what I am supposed to do."

This is an excerpt from my forthcoming novel whose working title [00:03:00] is *The Forgotten*, in French it's called *L'oublié*. It spans many decades and countries, but the heart of the matter is always Jerusalem because for me in all my work the heart of the matter is always Jerusalem. But you may wonder, what? Another book? (laughter) I think it was Bernard Shaw who wondered, "Why do people spend years writing novels when they can buy one in any book store?" (laughter) But Disraeli, who was also a great novelist, had already answered him before. Disraeli said, "When I want to read a good book, I write it." (laughter)

The problem is that nowadays so many books are being published without ever having been written. (laughter) [00:04:00]

(applause) Maybe this is what King Solomon referred to when he said that at the end of times, as a malediction, there will be too many books. When S. J. Perelman published his first humorous book, a great philosopher, Groucho Marx, wrote him. And he said, Dear S. J. Perelman, from the moment I picked up your book until I laid it down, I was convulsed with laughter. Someday I intend reading it. (laughter)

Well, Perelman didn't know it then, but he must have learned it later because authors must get used to weird compliments. How often do I get letters saying, I take your book with me to bed? [00:05:00] I need it to fall asleep. (laughter) The story of *The Forgotten*, if the title will remain, depending on my good friend Jim Silberman and Ilene Smith, they always have ideas, and I accept them. The story is about a father called Elhanan and his son called Malkiel. Anchored in the past, it unfolds in the present.

Elhanan remembers his native town in the Carpathian Mountains, the outbreak of the war, his wandering in war-torn Europe, his life in DP camps, his discovery of pre-independence Palestine,

his underground combats against the British, his love affair with his wife Talia in Jerusalem, his life as prisoner of war in Jordan. He remembers events and people, words and melodies, [00:06:00] ideas and feelings. He recalls everything until a minor incident occurs. And his life will no longer be the same.

It is Friday evening. He recites the Kiddush and stops in the middle of a sentence. He has a blank. Well, it happens, to many of us. Malkiel, the son, gave him the siddur, the prayer book. And Elhanan finished the blessing over the wine. But that was the beginning of the end. Once the mechanism has been set in motion it could no longer be halted. Elhanan, the hero, is told by his doctor that he is ill, doomed, not physically, mentally. His memory is wounded. It has become a sieve. It has holes. And whatever it has gathered during an entire [00:07:00] lifetime will dissipate in thin air. Call it Alzheimer's.

It is the worst of all mental diseases. In fact, it is not a disease. It is a malediction, incurable, unstoppable, the destruction of one's identity. Someone who suffers from schizophrenia lives in another world. An Alzheimer's victim lives nowhere. A paranoia patient sees enemies everywhere. An Alzheimer's victim sees no one. Here we do not deal with the

exile of the self into another world. We deal with the disappearance of the self. The self is not replaced by another self. The self is dissolved.

In the novel, the main, the main suspense, so to speak, the main [00:08:00] function of the novel, is to expose the relationship between the father and the son, Elhanan and Malkiel. Fathers and sons, this theme has dominated all my tales, all my writings. There exists a mysterious component in their relationship. Accomplices or rivals, friends or foes, bearers of hope or vehicles of resentment, the father represents the past, the son suggests the future. Now, what is longer, the past or the future? The most frequently used word in the Bible is not Hashem, but *ben*, the son.

No wonder that the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, has remained the cornerstone of Jewish faith and the Jewish exploration of faith. [00:09:00] As it has remained, the basic expression for Jewish commitment, all the elements in Jewish history are to be found already in the tragically majestic journey undertaken by Abraham and his son to Mount Moriah. No wonder too that so many interpreters of Islam in the very beginning of the Islam religion chose to eliminate Isaac from the story and replace him with Ishmael. But in our prayers we evoke the God of Abraham,

God of Isaac, and God of Jacob to show us how different patriarchs were from one another.

Moses' successor was his disciple Joshua, not his sons. King Solomon was not a copy of King David. [00:10:00] Rabbi Eleazar's behavior did not always reflect Rabbi Shimon's. We have tried to explore their problems and their themes in the last three weeks. The successor of the Besht was the Maggid, Dov Ber of Mezeritch, not his son Reb Tzvi Hirsh. Strange as it may sound, one is commanded to honor one's parents, but one's teacher has priority. If I see my father and my teacher carry heavy loads, I am told, according to the law, I must help my teacher first. If my father and my teacher are taken as hostages, prisoners, I must ransom my teacher first, except in a case when my father is also my teacher.

In all my writings it is the quest for learning [00:11:00] and perhaps the quest for my father as well as the desire to pass on that learning and to pass on the love I had for my father that constitute the framework if not the substance. What we received must be communicated. It is not easy? So what? Because it is not that one must try harder. Not to transmit a heritage is to betray it. I know the heritage of my traumatized generation carries on its shoulders a heavy load. At times it may even be

burdensome. Still, we have no right to put it down. Must the son resemble his father? Must he, to acquire an identity, leave him, oppose him?

What is the force that [00:12:00] draws a son away from his father? What makes him succumb to alien temptations? What seductive power incites him to look to the other side? Why should a young boy choose to be separated from his father and thus be responsible for the possible departure of his father elsewhere? But on the other hand, what is the vital link that makes father and son inseparable? When they are together, no force in the world could separate them, and nothing is more beautiful than to see them together. What then is the secret of their togetherness?

I know that I may sound male chauvinistic. But don't worry, one day, one day, I may speak about mothers and daughters. But with your permission, I shall read to you a few more pages [00:13:00] from the novel tonight. But first, for the last time this year, some preliminary remarks. And they have to do with gratitude. At the end of the annual series, gratitude is in order. First, I want to thank Amos Hirschbein. He is the son of Peretz Hirschbein, who, I believe, has to be rediscovered by the Jewish world and the non-Jewish world for he has been and remains one

of the very great Yiddish writers and playwrights and thinkers of more than one generation.

We thank Amos for all that he has done for Jewish education and art on the highest level of excellence. I want to thank Rabbi Paul Joseph for helping prepare some of you, many of you, I hope, for these sessions. I want to thank Deborah Kaplan for working so hard for the technical preparations and Richie for all the problems that he [00:14:00] cannot solve and solves nevertheless. I must thank a very close friend. He is my shul neighbor, Reb Yankev Dienstag, who is a great, great Maimonides scholar. And whenever I need a book, he has two. (laughter) And thank you all, friends, old and new, for your willingness to learn, thus forcing me to learn even harder.

One announcement. After this lecture, again, according to tradition, there will be a reception with champagne, kosher, and I think cheese or cake and whatever you desire, outside. Next year will be the twenty-fifth year since we began our study sessions together. A quarter of a century is even to people my age a milestone, especially [00:15:00] so since next year will, *im yirtzeh hashem*, I hope be the last year. I know I have said it at the tenth anniversary, (laughter) then at the fifteenth, then at the twentieth, but I now mean it. Well, I meant it then

too. (laughter) But don't be upset. Next year is not this year. This year, you don't believe me? Look, the doors are still open. (applause) [00:16:00]

So, as we are about to say farewell to one another, at least for one more year, I suggest we remain faithful to our custom and engage in a kind of *tour de raison* and see the road we have traveled together and evaluate the events that marked the 12 months or more or less. In my personal life an important event was when my son entered, as a freshman, Yale University. I remember my first encounter with Yale, with that prestigious university. It was in the '60s. I was still writing books and I needed money. [00:17:00] So I was a journalist still.

And then one day I received a letter from Yale University offering me a professorship, which I couldn't reject. I accepted right away. I said to myself, how many Jewish boys, how many yeshiva bucherem from Sighet (laughter) received an invitation from Yale? So of course I wrote back. Full professor, also well paid, more than in one month more than I made in a year, and I said right away of course I accept. And we began working on a program. But then I had to go to Paris, a book came out. And all of a sudden I said to myself, I am not ready yet to become a teacher, to tie myself down.

I was still -- I was not married yet. I was traveling. I felt it's not ready. I'm not ready. But how can I say no? After all, how many Jewish boys from Sighet received -- you know.

(laughter) [00:18:00] But then I turned it around. I said, but how many Jewish boys from Sighet rejected an invitation from -- (laughter) (applause) And so I said no, but then, you know, God's ways. At some 10 years later or so I became a professor at Yale.

In general, on the world scene, in the Jewish scene, this has been a turbulent year on every level. The Soviet empire is disintegrating, and I have received a new colleague, Mikhail Gorbachev. (laughter) Does he deserve the honor? I think so. I think so because none of his predecessors has done so much to offer greater freedom to so many, freedom of expression, of religious education and practice, freedom of movement. And yet, [00:19:00] as a Jew I expected something else and something more from him. I have pleaded, when I was in Moscow a few times, I have pleaded with him. I wanted him to address the issue of anti-Semitism personally. He didn't, although for the first time a man, an anti-Semite has been condemned to two or three years of jail, which is the first, the very first time it happened in the history of the Russia and the Soviet Union. But

he has not personally addressed the issue, and I think he should, a broadcast to the nation.

Furthermore, he did not stop the de-Judaization of the Holocaust in his country. The textbooks still don't mention the Jewishness of the Jewish victims, as Babi Yar still doesn't have the word Jew on its monument. He did not open the KGB files of the Jewish writers and poets that Stalin had executed [00:20:00] in 1952. I think it's a mistake because I would like to know what Peretz Markish said to the executioner before he died. I would like to know what Itzik Feffer said to the judge who condemned him to death. I think their words are part of our history, of Jewish history as well as of Russian history and world history.

I asked one of his close advisors why such reluctance on Gorbachev's part to denounce the traditional hatred of Jews and Judaism? Why has he appointed two renowned anti-Semites to his presidential council? And you have the names in the leaflet you received from the marvelous group Students' Struggle for Soviet Jewry, one of the best that we had, surely the oldest. Why ash he appointed them? And the answer I received is [00:21:00] Gorbachev is afraid of the nationalistic right wing. He doesn't want to antagonize them. And I replied, if he is afraid, why

shouldn't I be? Therefore, much still is to be done in the field of human rights and human rights for Jews in the Soviet Union. And I hope that now, since Gorbachev has become my colleague, he will listen to me better.

Another event is the reunification of Germany, and I must say that I am disturbed, but then I belong to a minority. I always have belonged to a minority but this time even more so. For some reason, nobody spoke up, not even the Jewish leadership, whatever it is. Nobody spoke up. And I don't understand it. After all, the unification of [00:22:00] Germany, the reunification of Germany is the most important event in the post-war history. And there was no debate. We allowed Kohl to do whatever he wanted. With the money he could buy Russia, East Germany. He bought everything.

And somehow people weren't concerned. I don't understand it. I don't understand it because I think it's morally, morally dangerous to the Jewish people, to Jewish memory. Whatever will happen will be at the expense of Jewish memory. Last year when the wall came down, like most of us, I hope, were pleased. Whenever freedom wins a battle, all of us are victorious. And when I saw the young people on both sides the wall drinking champagne and happy and rejoice in freedom, I was touched

[00:23:00] humanly. But then I heard the speeches, and when I heard the speeches that this, today, November 9 -- by the way, it's tomorrow, erev, erev November 9 (laughter) -- that today, they said, this day will enter history I regained my lucidity.

And I wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* which you may have read. And I said they already forgot that November 9 had entered history as the Kristallnacht. Nobody mentioned the Kristallnacht, which means the event in Berlin already overshadowed the Kristallnacht, and I asked what else will they forget? You cannot imagine the response I got in the German press, hatred. Hatred. *Spiegel*, the publisher of the *Spiegel*, a certain Augstein, sheer hatred. And of course anti-Israeli right away. [00:24:00] He said, "Why does Elie Wiesel look at Berlin? Why doesn't he look at Jerusalem?" he said. "The bonebreakers are not in Berlin but in Jerusalem."

Really coming from a Germany publisher it's a little bit audacious and arrogant. But then I don't trust Kohl either. Why? Because Helmut Kohl was the man who engineered Bitburg. He engineered Bitburg for one purpose alone, to whitewash the SS. So now it's clear that he is engaged in a process totally to rewrite history, and that bothers me, disturbs me, pains me. In general, in general, things happened in Eastern Europe that

are good. More countries have become free, and that we
[00:25:00] applaud, but in those very countries anti-Semitism
has risen again, and that is again a cause of concern. There is
something wrong.

Under Stalin, who was the worst anti-Semite in Russia, the
state, when the state decided to be anti-Semitic, everybody was
anti-Semite. But if the state said no, there were no anti-
Semites. Now all the anti-Semites drop their masks. So what
should we do? What can we do? I know we must do something. In
Hungary anti-Semitism. In Romania anti-Semitism. In Poland of
all places anti-Semitism. So democracy has brought the freedom
to those who are against democracy, freedom of hate. People are
free to hate.

And there is one more, one more place, of course. It is
[00:26:00] the Middle East. And there what should be done? A
man who has amassed a vast amount of bacteriological weapons of
chemical warfare has invaded a country and defied world law,
defied civilized society. I am disturbed and worried and
outraged. Why? Because whatever will happen, I am afraid it
will be bad for Israel. If he gets a face-saving formula, which
means he will remain with the mighty, aggressive army, it's bad
for Israel. If he is defeated, the United States will owe so

much [00:27:00] to so many Arab countries that it cannot but be at the expense of Israel.

And therefore, I am worried, but I shall speak about Israel a little bit later. Let's open a parenthesis and again say something personal that happened in my personal life. Last week and the week before and the week before I teased you with a trip to Russia. I said that we went to the Soviet Union. Marion, my wife, and I went there actually for a few hours. You can't believe it. On that week, Sunday night I was in Toronto. I had promised a kind of mitzvah lecture for the Israeli Bonds, and I had to go. Monday I went to Paris. I arrived late at night, came to the hotel around 1:00 or 2:00. At 5:00 I was already in the plane in Paris together with my wife going to Kiev. Three-and-a-half-hour ride. [00:28:00]

Then a bus, another three and a half hours. And we went to Uman. The Uman is the grave of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. We stayed there a few hours. Back the same day. Same day back to three and a half hours by bus and three hours to Paris. And next day, Wednesday plane to New York and then -- but I was here. Now, it was a very important, a very important episode in our lives. You are surprised? That means that you are not Hasid of Bratslav. Bratslaver Hasidim would give much of what

they possess to go and spend be it five minutes in the presence of their master and guide. Many of them have risked their lives during Stalin, even during Stalin, smuggling borders with false passports into Russia, into the Ukraine to be in Uman on Rosh [00:29:00] Hashanah or at least for a Shabbat or any other day.

Why? Because the Bratslaver rabbi said whoever comes to my tomb and says the Tikkun HaKlali, the 10 chapters of Psalms in a certain order, he will help him. And therefore they go. Though not being a Bratslaver Hasid -- I'm a Vizhnitzer -- I love Rabbi Nachman. I have written about him. I have studied him. I have told his tales for years and years. And so when a friend called saying that he has a private plane taking him and a group of Bratslaver Hasidim from Paris to Kiev, Marion and I decided to join them. And the journey was meaningful. The morning prayer in the plane sung in the melancholy melodiousness nusach of Bratslav.

The reciting of the Tikkun HaKlali, the lighting of candles at dusk, the silent meditation, the singing, the dancing near the grave, [00:30:00] and then the reluctance of the Hasidim to leave the place, there was much beauty in that experience. And I remember always what Rabbi Nachman's closest disciple called Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov, he's the one who wrote the tales, when

he described the death of Rabbi Nachman he described it with such elegance and such emotion that you cannot read it without being choked with tears. And whenever in my class I teach Rabbi Nachman I end the last class with that description, and we all are choked with tears.

That was my second trip to the Soviet Union this year. Naturally, wherever I went and whenever I go I met Jewish men and women and children in Russia. I believe the greatest miracle in the last [00:31:00] year came from Russia. Thousands and thousands of Jews are leaving day after day, week after week. I think this week there will be 2,000, next week 3,000 people coming from there. The *klita*, the absorption process is smooth and friendly. Who would have dreamed that such a gathering of exiles of such magnitude would take place in our lifetime?

Question is, are we doing enough for them? Are we doing enough for those who are still there? When I was in Moscow I encountered frightened, terrorized Jews, Jews who live in fear. That is why so many feel the urgency to leave. To help them is a first priority. There are others? Well, we Jews can handle many first priorities all at once.

In the international picture the situation in the [00:32:00] United Nations against Israel reminds one of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's disturbing and beautiful play *The Visit of the Old Lady*. With the money she had amassed abroad, the old lady comes back to her native town and corrupts all the citizens. And their metamorphosis is total. They are ready to judge, condemn, and kill an innocent man, their neighbor and friend, simply because she, the old lady, is out to avenge the pain he had inflicted upon her when they were both young. For the sake of preserving a new alliance, an old and reliable ally is on the edge of being sacrificed, at least verbally.

Syria occupies Lebanon, and no one cares. Seven hundred men, women, and children were murdered in [00:33:00] Beirut and no one is bothered by their death. Killers have entered the home of the Chamoun family at dawn and staged a tragedy that belongs to antiquity. They killed a five-year-old child who was hiding under the bed. They killed a seven-year-old child who was trying to find refuge in the room of one of the maids. Then they killed the mother. If they didn't kill a nine-month-old child it's because they couldn't find the child. And nobody cared. Statesmen and diplomats and even newsmen, they have time. Only when Israel is on the agenda, all of a sudden everybody's in a hurry.

So the cycle of violence seems more and more irresistible.

[00:34:00] Will it ever be broken, if so by whom and for how long? Violence and fear breed hatred and the other way around. Hatred breeds fear and violence. I have had a few seminars for the last few years called the anatomy of hatred. I believe that hatred is the key word that at least defines the real problem threatening our society, hatred of all shades, racial hatred, economic hatred, ethnic hatred, religious hatred. And unless we know what it is, unless we know its genesis, its fabric, its texture, we cannot cope with it or with its consequences.

Hatred is dangerous because it distorts memory and because it corrupts language [00:35:00] and everything else. Hatred creates and destroys its own universe while everything is twisted and doomed. I liked to say so many times that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. But that is not true of hate. The opposite of hate is not love. The opposite of hate is hate. For hate produces hate, of the same kind or another kind but nothing else, nothing good. Nothing noble could be derived or obtained from hate. In this respect, hate could be eventually compared to war. Once there is war it is too late.

People die. People kill. People are maimed. And therefore, rather than fight hate in the hater, I think we must [00:36:00] try to prevent it from spreading, from contaminating the innocent or the surroundings. Hatred makes see the other as a stranger, an enemy, an undesirable alien, an object of suspicion and disdain, distorting the other's humanity and reducing it to a subhuman status, ultimately inviting humiliation, persecution, and death.

Rabbi Meir Kahane is a victim of hate. I have never met him. His ways were not mine. His ideology was alien to my concept of Jewish ahavat Israel, although I'm sure he too had ahavat Israel. But his murder fills me with outrage. [00:37:00] He was killed here in New York because he was a Jew, a good Jew who in his way wanted to help Jews. Is his murder a warning? I hope it will not provoke more hate. I hope it will not provoke more bloodshed for whatever the question, death should never be the answer, anyone's death. (applause)

Now, why is Israel vulnerable again? Why is Israel the target of such hatred? Why is Israel alone once more, the first to be suspected, the first to be blamed always, the first to be condemned [00:38:00] always. Why is Israel treated as a pariah state by many so-called friendly nations? Once again we must

say with pain that Israel is threatened militarily by her enemies and politically by her friends. Why? And how long will it continue to be treated like that? I wish that our own government in the United States would take a more lucid and generous look at Israel.

Israel is a friend, and the way Israel is being treated now, even by our own state department, believe me, is wrong. We don't speak about it because it hurts us. But it is terribly, terribly wrong. As for the Jewish community. [00:39:00] I think we are not mobilized enough to help Israel. And, as always, we have in our midst some Jewish intellectuals here and everywhere who even now seize the opportunity to use their Jewishness in order to attack Israel's policy and honor. And I am offended by these Jewish attackers who forget their Jewishness all their lives.

For some of them Jewishness is a neurosis, a psychosis. But to use their Jewishness to attack other Jews is wrong. When Jerusalem was controlled by others it was a prison for it was inaccessible to Jewish worshippers wishing to pray and weep at the wall. For 19 years [00:40:00] Jerusalem was inaccessible to Jews. Jerusalem became free, free to Jews and non-Jews of all

creeds and faiths only when it was liberated by Israel. And so for Israel, Jerusalem is not negotiable. (applause)

For Jews it represents the origins of Jewish nationhood. What would Jewish history be without the indestructible link to the city of David? Not only does Jerusalem belong to Jewish history, but Jewish history belongs to Jerusalem. A Jew does not go to Jerusalem. A Jew returns to Jerusalem. Hence our right to dwell within its boundaries cannot and never will be curtailed. (applause) [00:41:00] No people, no religion, no tradition have had such a lasting and overpowering attachment to a city. Its memory contains ours.

And so I shall read to you tonight a chapter from *L'oublié*, from *The Forgotten*, that deals with the old quarter of Jerusalem. I'll tell you why. Because I like to describe events or episodes that are marginal. And we heard a lot, we read a lot about Israel's heroism in battle, and it's true. It is marvelous. But somehow the battle in and for the Old City of Jerusalem has escaped us, has eluded us because it's embarrassing because we didn't fare that well in 1948. We lost it. And so I describe the battle in that city, [00:42:00] which means my hero Elhanan, before he loses his entire memory, tries

to remember everything. And he tells his son of his participation in that battle.

For the moment what you must remember, if you may, is the cast of characters for this chapter. We have Elhanan, the father, his wife Talia, who died, Yiftach, a commander in the underground, Itzik, a friend of Elhanan whom he had known in wartime Europe, a young boy Avshalom, who is a fighter in the underground, and of course Malkiel, the son of Elhanan. Remember that this is taking place in '48. The war is continuing on every front, including the Old City, which is besieged by a powerful Jordanian army, the Arab legion, [00:43:00] commanded by a British general, Glubb Pasha.

There are three underground movements still in Jerusalem because Jerusalem was declared by the UN as a kind of corpus separatum, a separate corps, and there it did not belong legally to Israel. So in Israel the underground movements had to dissolve but not in Jerusalem. You had the Haganah. You had the Irgun, the Etzel, and the Lehi, the Stern group.

Elhanan speaks, "Jerusalem in those days, 1948, I remember it well, a blazing climate, exalting and oppressive at the same time. The Old City is under siege by the Jordanian legion. The

Jewish quarter is still fighting but is yielding to exhaustion. They issue hourly calls for help to every headquarters in the Jewish city. We have to move fast if we want to save the city of David. [00:44:00] But it isn't easy. In Jerusalem the three underground movements have maintained their independent ways. Each keeps its own infrastructure, its basis. They collaborate. They incorporate, often successfully, for important objectives.

"All three have followers in the Jewish quarter of the Old City, men and women at the end of their rope. Quote, 'Out of ammunition. Three cartridges per man. A lot of wounded. A lot of dead. It's a matter of days, no, hours,' unquote. These are the messages are being sent every hour to the outside. What can be done? The Israeli army is fighting on all fronts to the north, to the south, and the survival of the fledging state hangs on every shot fired. By what right do we sacrifice the ones rather than the others? Commanding officers are going crazy.

"We have got to do something for the Old City, but what? Mount [00:45:00] a counterattack? With what weapons? For the moment the problem is to save the Jewish fighters in the Jewish quarter or at the very least to send in reinforcements. On May 23rd or 24th I," says Elhanan, "I attend an emergency council of war in

the Lehi camp." He was a member of the Lehi. "There are about 50 of us. Our commanding officer tells us how serious the situation is. If no help breaks through the Jews will have to surrender. We'll need somebody who knows the Old City, the Jewish quarter, maybe somebody who remembers a secret passage.

"One voice raises above the rest. 'I am your man.' I am startled. We are all startled. It's Avshalom. I feel like laughing. This is a man? Hardly. He's not even bar mitzvah yet. 'I used to live in the Jewish quarter,' Avshalom says. 'I know every nook and cranny. I even [00:46:00] remember a secret underground tunnel. My grandfather showed it to me. He was a great kabbalist, my grandfather. He said the messiah would use that tunnel. If you want, I can find it for you.' The commander takes a good look at the boy, bids him come closer, pats his head, and thinks it over in silence.

"Avshalom stands easy, calm, sure of himself and his powers. 'All right,' the commander says, 'Find the tunnel, but --' he breaks off. We hold our breath. Has he changed his mind? No. 'You are not going in alone,' says the commander. 'I want somebody to go with you. Arms shoot up. Everybody volunteers, everybody but me," says Elhanan. "And yet the commander chooses me. Argue with him, it would be unworthy, but I think of Talia,

my wife, of her child, she's pregnant, our child. Have I any right to run this risk? Have I any right to turn it down?

'Don't worry about a thing,' Avshalom tells me. [00:47:00]

'Everything will go just fine. I promise.'

"The commander adds, 'You will leave tonight after midnight. All right?' Avshalom says it's all right, and I look at my watch, 8:00 in the evening. I have time to go home, to kiss Talia, to embrace her parents. Can I do that? The commander grants permission. Talis suspects something but asks no questions, nor do her parents. We make polite conversation, the situation on the various fronts, news from the United Nations, the glorious work of certain rabbis openly violating the Sabbath to work on the city's fortifications. Talia is paler than usual and her father less talkative.

"I want to be alone with Talia and to tell her, 'Talia, darling, if I die, don't wear mourning forever. Do it for our son. He'll want his mother happy.' But I don't say a word. Is it because I have a premonition that matters will turn out otherwise? [00:48:00] I don't know. Our last evening together is punctuated by endless silences. Now and then I take her hand and squeeze it tightly, or I look into her eyes and smile sadly. We say goodbye at midnight. I find myself back in the street,

my heart heavy. I think I will never see her again, meaning I'm going to die. I never do see her again. And yet I'm still alive.

"Little Avshalom takes my hand as we slip towards the Old City. We enter houses, we leave. I am totally confused by all these doors opening and closing. We are in a cellar, in an attack? We seem to be walking across rooftops when we are actually crossing a narrow courtyard. Is fear doing this to me? I am sweating. It runs down my back. Avshalom tugs me along, and I follow him meekly. Ask him to slow down? I'd be ashamed. He might tell his [00:49:00] grandfather the kabbalist, 'Grandfather, you are not going to believe this, but the guy they gave me for a partner says he was tired.'

"No, Avshalom, I won't be saying that. I am not a coward. How long have we been walking in the dark? I have no idea. Avshalom stops suddenly and whispers to me, 'This is the Hurva, the synagogue of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Hasid, half demolished. He advances as far as the ruins and comes back. 'Nobody there,' he says. We continue away. Another abrupt stop. 'This is the prophet Elijah's synagogue.' We listen. We hear noises inside. Avshalom knocks very gently. A voice asks, who is it? Avshalom answers. The door opens. We are welcomed like saviors. They

shake hands with us, clap us on the shoulder, offer us brandy, promise us paradise.

"I understand immediately that we have stumbled [00:50:00] into the Jewish quarter's last line of defense. 'Come closer,' says a voice. It's an officer who wants to debrief us. I cannot see his features in the darkness, but his voice seems familiar. I can't quite place it. He asks precise and incisive questions. Where are the reinforcements? Why the delay? And the medical supplies and the munition? I hear the voices. It penetrates. It nags at my soul. I ransack my memory. That voice must own a face, but it's still dark. Dawn is on the way. It arrives. I see the face. Impossible. Itzik, my wartime comrade from over there in Europe. A hallucination? I shake myself. No, I'm awake all right.

"Itzik gets over his stunned surprise in a hurry. He is an officer and will complete his mission whatever the cost. He'll hold his position to the last man, but he wants to know, he has to know what's happening across the lines in the new city, in the free city? [00:51:00] 'Do they realize how bad it is here?' he asks. 'Do they know the civilians are exhausted and want us to surrender unconditionally?' I force myself to answer they realize everything. They know everything. They are doing their

best. Avshalom says shyly, 'I'll go back the way I came and bring reinforcements in.'

"Itzik is incredulous and asks, 'Do you really know a secret passage?' I confirm it. 'This little Yemenite Jew is extraordinary,' I say. 'I love him like a brother, an older brother.' 'You won't leave before nightfall, Itzik,' orders Avshalom. 'You get some rest. That's an order.' The little Yemenite obeys. He stretches out on a cot and falls asleep in seconds. 'You too,' Itzik tells me. 'Try to sleep. I have things to do.' I slip beneath a blanket but don't sleep a wink. Towards noon I sit in on a meeting of officers and community -- what's left of it -- leaders.

"Some of them insist on resistance to the last man. Others less daring but more [00:52:00] realistic advise a ceasefire. 'We can evacuate the children and the sick,' Itzik tells them.

'There's an underground passage.' No one believes him.

'Avshalom here came in that way yesterday, Elhanan too,' he speaks to me. 'Tell them.' I tell them. And old rabbi says, 'It's possible. Miracles happen.' The community leaders retire to the cellar to talk it over while the soldiers go to battle stations. The Jordanians keep up a continuous fire. Our men answer, trying not to waste ammunition.

"From time to time we hear a shot. 'Yaakov is wounded. Help, quick. *Berachya*, watch out!' Late in the afternoon two rabbis are authorized to seek an audience with the Jordanian commanding officer. They ask permission to bury our dead. By both Jewish and Quranic law, the dead must not spend the night within walls. Permission granted. I hear the rabbis chanting the lamentations. I think, if I die now, they will also chant for me. [00:53:00] Avshalom is waking up. I contemplate him in the gloom. Will my son be like him? I hope so. Tough, reliable Avshalom, I admire his courage as much as his wisdom.

"And I know that in the Old City children are heroic. They tell the story of a 12-year-old boy who managed to set up and fire the only heavy machine gun the defenders had. Without boys and girls, intrepid messengers fleet as the wind, the quarter would long since have fallen into enemy hands. I have heard that a boy of 10 saved his commanding officer by dragging him through the rubble of a field hospital to another field hospital, after which he hurried back to his position in the lines. Even in the time of the Talmud they were boasting about the intelligence, the courage, and the passion of Jerusalem's children. Today in [00:54:00] this war without hope no poet could create a language rich enough to sing their praises.

"Avshalom, Avshalom, only King David deserves to say how proud we are of you. Only he could give voice to the anguish that grips me as I watch him prepare to move out. 'Can I leave now?' At midnight a success. Avshalom goes back to sleep. And I feel a need to watch over him and a need to pray God to watch over all these boys, friends, all those children defying death itself. 'I'm going with him,' I said. 'All right.' We seem to have said all there is to say. Nothing to do now but wait. Some of us are dozing, others daydreaming.

"It will soon be midnight. Avshalom is saying his prayers. The prayer of *maariv*, yes, and the one he prays to his grandfather. 'Guide us now as you guided us yesterday.' [00:55:00] We say goodbye to all, soldiers and civilians. Children are crying, and the wounded are moaning. We promise them all we'll be back before dawn. Itzik nods in silence. Cautiously Avshalom opens the door and slips out. I follow him. No, I tell myself I'm going to follow him. I don't follow him. A shot has just shattered the night. Someone cries, 'No! No!' Who was it? Avshalom? No, Avshalom did not cry. Avshalom never speaks again.

"We drag little Avshalom into the synagogue that bears the prophet Elijah's name, and I feel like screaming, 'Elijah, prophet of consolation, why don't you come now to console us? And who will console Avshalom's parents? Because Avshalom is dead.' [00:56:00] The bullet struck his heart, the heart that sang in silent yearning for the Messiah. Tomorrow he will be returned to the earth, and I will hear the rabbi's lamentations. And now there is no more now, no more tomorrow either. The secret passage, there is no more passage. There is no one to fetch reinforcements, no one to open the way for help.

"'Battle stations,' says the commanding officer. The legionnaires may be mounting a night attack. I see Itzik reaching for his weapon and heading for the doorway. Follow him? What good would that do? The night passes without further incident. I watch over Avshalom's body. I recite Psalms. I know many of them by heart. At dawn I fall asleep. In a dream I see [00:57:00] Satan applauding himself. I wake to the sound of heavy firing. Bullets tattoo our walls. Before nightfall we bury little Avshalom."

This is only one passage of the battle for Jerusalem. I lead my characters to the very end when Jerusalem had to abdicate. And all the men were taken prisoners of war to Jordan and Elhanan

with them. I used to go to Jerusalem between 1949, the first time I came to Israel as a journalist. I will go to Jerusalem the moment I would arrive in Israel. [00:58:00] And I would go right away to the tower of Notre Dame or the YMCA, simply to look at the Old City. And I would stay there hours and hours just looking at the Old City. Strange as it may sound, Israelis didn't speak about the Old City.

The song "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav" actually was composed and was taken over as a kind of new anthem only a few days or weeks before the '67 war. And if it was so successive, so popular it's because it evoked some secret longing that until then had remained too secret. Elhanan, my hero, will get more and more [00:59:00] dissolved in his own being. His memory will fade more and more. And then he will forget all his experiences, including the ones in Jerusalem, just as he will forget Jerusalem. He will forget Jerusalem since he will forget everything else. Page after page the book of his life will be erased.

And compared to him, Job's tragedy seems almost futile, for Job remembers everything. What then could be, what then is Elhanan's answer to forgetfulness? What is the remedy to his malediction? He begins talking, reminiscing. And his son

Malkiel, who listens, will remember for him in his place. In conclusion, [01:00:00] this is the relationship that I would like to see established between a father and a son, that the son would become the repository of all that his father didn't have, all that his father no longer has.

I was asked a few months ago by a man named Clifton Fadiman to participate in an anthology inspired by Albert Einstein's words. And I quote Einstein, "Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose," unquote. And some 30 or 40 or 20, I don't know, philosophers and writers were asked to respond to this statement and say actually why are you doing what you are doing. And here is my response. [01:01:00]

My son is today as old as I was when I was plunged into a haunted universe where the story of the human adventure seemed to swing irrevocably between horror and malediction. At that time I was still living with my father. We worked together. We returned to the camp together. We shared bread and soup. We slept together. Never were we so close to one another. We talked a lot to each other, especially in the evenings, but never of death. I believed, I hoped that I would not survive him, not even for one day. Without saying it to him, I thought

I was the last of our line. With him our past would die, with me our future.

We and our companions were the last Jews on earth. Our silent death would be our [01:02:00] testament, I told myself. And that testament would express the ineffable. It would tell of the defeat of hope, the abdication of faith in the human species. Not to trust in man, not to exalt the possibilities of redemption, not to count on his faculty of happiness, that is what would appear in our testimony. For we had seen ideas and dreams fallen into dust. Fraternity and human solidarity, the need for dignity, the thirst for transcendence? It was enough to look at the torturers' grimaces to understand how hollow these words were. A piece of moldy bread was worth all the works of art in the world. A tin of soup aroused ecstasy more than all the divine promises. A moment [01:03:00] of respite possessed more truth than all the heavenly words.

Man? The shadow of a shadow. One insignificant gesture was enough to reduce him to the state of object. The killer killed, and the victims collapsed, and the free and cultivated world kept silent. Worse, often the torturer himself was highly educated. Didn't these turned killers call into question Kant and Bach, Schiller and Goethe, Bosch and Wagner, with whom they

were imbued? In killing the Jews it is humanity itself they assassinated. Is this the reason why I did nothing to stay alive? After the death of my father I no longer felt anything. I was no longer hungry or afraid. I no longer existed for others. I was no longer [01:04:00] myself. I was someone whom the dead had forgotten.

After the liberation, I looked for them to ask forgiveness, forgiveness for staying behind, forgiveness for being spared by blind chance, forgiveness for not following them. It became difficult for me to be close to the living. They didn't understand. Only the dead understood. I implored them to remain at my side. I questioned them. What would they like to see me do and say? To turn away from them meant disowning them, betraying them. Since I could not live with them I was determined to live for them. Today I know already that it is dangerous to grant too much power to the dead. To remember them is one thing. To let oneself be dominated by them is another.

[01:05:00]

"*U'vacharta ba'chayim*," the Bible commands us, which means you will choose life. But it also means you will choose the living. Against the dead? No, for the dead. In opting for the living, in defending their right to dignity, to truth, and also to

sovereignty, human kind remains faithful to those who have preceded us and to have the right to memory. In other words, one must not search for the meaning of life outside of life. Man's goal is man alone. It can be defined by him alone for he alone is able to attain it. Surely memory links us to the dead, but it depends on us whether that memory is living or withered.

Am I wrong to grant too much importance to man? God has wanted it that way. Isn't man his [01:06:00] glorious image and the chosen representative of his creation? How then is one to explain his fall? I don't explain it. Eternities after Auschwitz I still don't understand how Auschwitz was possible, either on the level of man or on the level of God. Well, I shall have to live without understanding. God's silence allows evil. Man's perversion engenders fear. But do remember, Auschwitz did not descend from the heavens. Man conceived it. Man set it up. Man programed it so as to assassinate other human beings there. And they meant it to be for the wellbeing of humanity. God let it happen. So did humanity.

I repeat, I shall [01:07:00] live until the last day of my life without understanding. And yet I have learned some things. I have learned the vulnerability of the human being at the same time as his or her potential for improvement. I have learned

that it takes little to transform a community by corrupting its soul. It takes little to cut off a man from his roots. Would it mean then that man is condemned and his plan lost in advance? Sometimes I think so. Look, the world has retained nothing of the lessons which history has provided.

All these wars which continue to ravage the plan, all these dangers threatening the Jewish people, all these absurd killings in the name of fanatical religions, all these bursts of endless hate, of violence jeopardizing the future, all these children who die of hunger and exhaustion, but I forbid myself despair. [01:08:00] I forbid myself resignation. I think of the killers and I no longer want to belong to their world. But then I think of the victims. I think of the rabbis and their disciples. I think of the Hasidim and their friends, of the children, the Jewish children. I think of them, and with all my being I want to share and to prolong their humanity. The killers fill me with disgust, the victims with compassion.

At the limit, we stumble once more upon Pascal's wager. Despite death, which ultimately does swallow life, we affirm that life is worth living. In spite of the grief, which overwhelms us, we celebrate the love which has preceded it. In spite of the doubts, we affirm God and God's presence. Amidst the [01:09:00]

ruins which surround us, we proclaim our passion to start over again. And in spite of the persecutions, I celebrate the Jewish people that have been subjected to those persecutions.

When I was as old as my son is now I dreamed a lot. Everything seemed to happen in dreams. The extinguished eyes of the beaten victims, the laughter of the torturers, the prayer of the believers moving towards the inflamed altar, my father himself seemed to speak to me and to help me as in a dream. On the threshold of the twenty-first century I ask myself, what will be the dreams of our children tomorrow? We bequeath to them our memory. May they make of it a testament because above all, our past [01:10:00] must never become their future. (applause)

M:

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