

Elie Wiesel In Modern Tales: The Forgotten (2)

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive October 24, 1991

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Palestine, 1946; the man who talks is Elhanan and he is married to Talia. His son is Malkiel. Elhanan remembers: "I felt the threat everywhere. To wait for Talia when she worked late tested my nerves." Talia was a member of the underground. "To wait for Talia when she worked late was filling me with tension."

"One morning as I watched her drink her coffee completely preoccupied, I felt my heart palpitating as if it would burst. Usually when drinking [00:01:00] I'd laugh at the dark mustache around her mouth, and that would make me laugh. Not now, now I suffered. Talia raised her head: 'Are you in pain?' No, I was not in pain. It was something else, but what it was I could not say."

"On November 29, 1947 an exuberant and profound joy surged through the country. Towns and villages, kibbutzim, north and south -- all applauded the United Nations vote in a delirious whirl. The world had finally acknowledged the validity of

Jewish demands. Praised be thou Lord, who granted us this victory. Everyone burst into song, into dance, into a celebration of history's meaning and a triumph over destiny. A groundswell stirred the Jewish people's memory. Never again the wandering. Never again the exile. Never again the fear."

[00:02:00] "In a burst of happiness Talia kissed her parents and took my arm. 'Let's go make love,' she whispered. 'Now?' I was startled. 'With the whole world looking at [Lake -Success, you want to go to bed?' (laughter) 'Yes,' she said. 'Later, when our children ask us what we were doing... (audience laughter) we can tell them or at least think -- we were making love.'"

"And truly the people of Israel everywhere made love. Not physically, but through the joining of all their memories of the past and their hopes for the future. Every one of them felt at home in history. At last, every one of them meditated upon fate and said, 'amen.' Amen."

What I have just read is an excerpt from my new novel, "The Forgotten," to be published in the spring by Summit in 1992.

[00:03:00] Unlike its predecessors, it deals not with memory, but with loss of memory. The idea of the book came to me

several years ago. One evening as I was reflecting on the direction of my work, or the direction my work has taken me.

I thought: I have written many books, perhaps too many, on many subjects. The Bible and the Talmud, Hasidism and mysticism. Jerusalem and Shamgorod, the Khmelnytsky pogroms of 1648, and the tragedy of the Jewish people that will remain unequalled in recorded history. I have written about communism, about Nazism, about fascism, about Messianism.

What do all these themes have in common? A commitment to our individual and collective memory. I believe that to forget the victims and the killers would mean to betray the first, and strengthen the latter. [00:04:00] I believe that to remember the victims is to save the world from becoming victimized. I believe that memory is a means, perhaps the best, to sensitize people. When memory comes alive one is more awakened by and sensitive to someone else's pain, anguish, and need for comfort. When memory comes alive one may join other people in their joy, in their happiness without feeling guilty.

And then I asked myself; since I have written so much about, and for, and in the cause of memory. What is the opposite of

memory? And the answer was Alzheimer's. So in this tale the hero of mine, Elhanan, a scholar, discovers one day that he is forgetting too many things. It began [00:05:00] on a Friday evening, in the middle of Kiddush, he stopped. He forgot the next sentence. Now, more and more words escape him. Names and faces do not fit. Dates and events no longer coincide. Whatever happens happens outside and vanishes from his consciousness. He doesn't know who other people are. He no longer knows who he is. He's like a book whose pages are being torn out, one by one. At the end none is left inside the cover.

This illness, which is more than a disease; I consider it a malediction. A curse, has in the past affected individuals. But tomorrow it may strike groups as well. [00:06:00] And that will be the ultimate scandal, the ultimate catastrophe. If the human community would become affected by that disease.

There are certain things that I know, but do not understand. There are others that I feel, but do not know. For we live in biblical times, what they all have in common. And what I or you have in common with them is memory. Each event within the context of memory is endowed with meaning. For every word resonates in our memory. And then we ask ourselves, what is

longer? The past or the future? Is there a future to someone who has been deprived of his past? Is there a [00:07:00] destiny to someone who forgot where he came from?

So I shall read to you tonight a few passages from the book. Simply to abide by our tradition, which we have set here for 25 years. The fourth encounter is always an attempt to make you acquainted with something that I have recently written or published.

But I promised you four weeks ago to tell you stories about my own travels this year. Don't worry, I have not forgotten my promise. Nor have I forgotten those who have forgotten the time and the clock. An American comedian once said that all his life he tried to arrive late at a Jewish event and never succeeded. (audience applause) [00:08:00]

Still, the novel is a kind of mosaic, a tapestry. It happens in many places; it happens in the Carpathian Mountains, and then in Palestine, and then in New York. War, wanderings. Europe is aflame, ruins everywhere, camps, more camps, DP camps. A young man and his past, Elhanan and his memories. Childhood memories, adolescence, and then the [00:09:00] discovery of the tragedy,

partisans. Jewish courage, Jewish heroism, Jewish victory. That of friends and comrades, that of the first woman Elhanan loved. Return to his native town, empty of Jews. What about vengeance? And then Palestine and Talia, underground, the fall of Jerusalem, and then the battle. The end of the battle, and then prisoner of war in Jordan.

Elhanan, the hero and his son, Malkiel. In New York Elhanan's sickness. Elhanan knows that he is sick. He knows that he will become an empty shell. Who will remember what his life has been? Malkiel, the son returns to his father's home. It was Romania under Ceausescu, secret police. Where can he go? To a cemetery. There he meets it [00:10:00] a grave digger. And then he meets a woman, an old woman who keeps a secret. And the key to that secret is this wise father. Elhanan wanted him to go back. Can a son redeem his father? Can he live in his place? Can he remember in his stead? This is the theme, and this is the setting.

But, let's open parenthesis. First, this is the twenty-fifth year in this place. And we-- some of us have had good experiences in those years. I just got one note from one of you, saying that he has been here for 25 years. As I think I

told you last year, there were people who met here and got married. And now their children are here. (audience laughter)

[00:11:00] And some of them are married too. I thank them, I thank you for these 25 years. I thank Omus, Shaul, David, and Richie. For helping, I thank the ushers. I thank my wife, for being my wife.

What have we learned until now? Above all we have learned the exalting qualities of learning. Just as God is "*m'chadesh b'chol yom asher berishit.*" Just as God renews each day, the creation of the world. It is incumbent upon us to learn its secrets every day, anew. Learning means openness, it also means daring. To start again is as challenging as to begin. To begin again means that I realize that I have not reached the limit of the last meaning.

Take the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. The very first

[00:12:00] encounter we have had here 25 years ago dealt with that subject. I thought, "I have exhausted the subject totally, profoundly." I was wrong. Four thousand years of study, and research, and memory, but not sufficient. It will take more, and longer to comprehend every aspect, every face, every word of the tale.

For instance, as I was listening to the story in the Bible every year, and I listen carefully, I was struck by the following.

"When Abraham was instructed by the angel to spare his son." "*Al-tishlach yad'kha el-ha-na'ar*" [00:12:42 - 00:12:44]

We are told that he lifted his eyes and saw in the bushes "*ayil achar*," another ram. Which then he sacrificed in Isaac's place.

On the surface, the story is simple and with a happy end.

[00:13:00] A tragedy has been averted, except for the poor ram, naturally -- everybody's happy. Even the reader ought to be, everything is clear.

Everything? Wait a second, the text speaks of "*ayil achar*," another ram. Does it mean that there were two? How come that no mention was made of the first? And the answer may be given by psychologists alone. I think that for Abraham to bind his son onto the altar and ready him for sacrifice -- he had to imagine him as a ram. Otherwise, he the father could not have gone through with the preparation, no father could. And therefore, when he lifted his eyes he saw the real ram, another ram.

In general, from our Talmud study that we have done for so many

years, [00:14:00] we learned the importance of tolerance, and also the weight of integrity. Cheap flattery could be costly. A disciple is duty-bound to respect his master. But not to reduce the relationship to self-serving praise for the master. Hasidic masters taught us that every human being is worthy of love. Just as every human being is capable, or must be capable of love. For every human being can make a difference in the life of another human being. They shared with us the transcendental dimensions of simple gestures, and words, and stories. And God receives them all, and he alone knows his reaction to them.

What we do know is that since God is God he listens to everyone, and is everywhere present. Present in absence, too? Yes, in absence too. In fanaticism, too? I wish I could answer no. But he [00:15:00] is present, against his will. So to speak, he is present because they, the fanatics force him to be present. The fanatics force God, and bring him down to their level. And I believe that in their midst, in the midst of fanatics, God feels betrayed, an outsider.

And therefore, if we have time I shall read to you something else tonight, at the end. About a topic that has preoccupied

and occupied myself, and a few of my friends and allies. How to fight intolerance, how to fight hatred, how to fight fanaticism. But all these we have learned from ancient, and not-so-ancient texts. That tradition is preserved throughout centuries. Learning means to build bridges between them and us, between then and now. It takes long-- it takes a very long time [00:16:00] to go to the end of a story.

Last week, we spoke of the centrality of Yiddish in Hasidism. A few early masters, and the Hungarian Jewish communities, we said, "it is because they spoke Yiddish and not Hungarian." And here, of course, it's different. Here in America, we know that there are so many Yiddish words in English that many Americans speak Yiddish without knowing it. (audience laughter)

I remember in my early years in America, it was the late '50s. I went with friends of mine on a coast-to-coast tour. From here, from New York to Los Angeles and back, by a car. I didn't know how to drive, so my poor friend drove. In Arizona we saw some description saying, "hundred miles to the next Indian reservation." I wanted to see Indians. I have never seen Indians except in the movies. [00:17:00] I wanted so much to

see an Indian, so I persuaded my friend to go another hundred miles, make a detour.

We came there and there was a reservation, there was a hut. And there was an Indian, a real Indian with feathers. And of course he sold things, all the Indian things. And then he asked us, "where do you come from?" What should my friend say, "from Israel?" What would an Indian know about Israel? So he said, "we come from very far." But I wanted to be clever. And at one point when the Indian gave us his guestbook, this golden book. Indians too have golden books. And he said, "please, could you, since you come from so far. Could you write something in it?" So I wanted to be clever.

And I wrote in Hebrew, at which point he almost broke my shoulder. And he said, "*shalom aleichem!*" (audience laughter) It turns out that he was a Galician Jew. (audience laughter) [00:18:00] Who went to Mexico and couldn't make a living, and he decided, "so why not?" You know? And I felt, America is such a golden country. Even the Indians speak Yiddish.

In the last 25 years, many things happened. Often we mentioned the acceleration of history. Its pace is dazzling. One has the

impression that the twentieth century is determined to purge itself of its accumulated violence, and hatred, and taste for death. In the field of technology and science, tens of decades have been packed into a few years. Unprecedented progress has been recorded by physicians and physicists. But what about morality and philosophy? There, we seem to be [00:19:00] lagging behind.

What then is the meaning of the breathtaking race on one hand, and of the slow-motion, if not the moral retardation of the other? Is history telling us something that we need to know and confront? Are we capable of deciphering its code or capturing its signals? Think of all that happened only in one year. First, the missile war. Then the coup in Moscow, and now peace conference.

When the missile war broke out, a friend of mine who always comes with me on my trips, Sigmund and I went to Israel a day before the end of the ultimatum. We wanted to be there when the ultimatum expired. We were almost alone in the Hilton. And we called friends and relatives to reassure them, and to be reassured by them.

And a friend of mine [00:20:00] told us, of course, that we need gas masks. And when Sigmund came with the gas masks, I didn't know what to do with it. And yet we had to try it on. To be almost alone in the Hilton, in Tel Aviv was not a pleasant thing. Then we went to Jerusalem, and the restaurant was closed because nobody was in the hotel. It was a very sad sight when we arrived. Lod was full of people who left, and Israelis resented it. That so many Jews from abroad abandoned them.

I went to see Shamir and Aaron, and they were very quiet. Aaron said to me, "don't be afraid. Don't be afraid." I said, "gas, missiles, gas." He said, "come on." He said, "if it falls on your head, it's not pleasant." (laughter) When we went, [00:21:00] we came with my friend, we went to an airbase. And there it was marvelous thing, to get to see the soldiers, to see they were so sure of themselves. They were so, so quiet.

And the force that they inspired was not only a physical, military force, but a moral, spiritual force. I felt invincible there, really. And they showed us the F-14, 15, 16, I don't even know the difference. And they wanted to take pictures, so they put me in an F-16, believe it or not. And I was only afraid to breathe, because I-- an F16? I could push a button

unwillingly and who knows? What bomb would go where? You know, I hope in the right place.

And then we went to have lunch with the base commander. And all of a sudden I heard at the door, the MP was there. I thought I heard somebody arguing. [00:22:00] And I heard the MP saying, "but Captain, this is only for majors and colonels." And the other one said, "I have to go in." "But why do you want to go in?" Said, "my uncle is there." Now, I have a nephew of whom I'm terribly fond. Son of my sister who was in Canada, and died of cancer. And then he, and his sister, and their father went Aliyah. And this young man finished medicine in Tel Aviv, then joined the army, *tzeva keva*, meaning permanent army. He was a combat physician.

And whenever I go to Israel I love to see, Stevie is his name. Very religious, extremely polite, pleasant. And if you have a nice girl, tell me. (audience laughter) When I come to Israel I call, and we always meet, at least we talk on the telephone. This time I couldn't reach him. I left messages everywhere, [00:23:00] I couldn't reach him. Finally he reached me on the telephone earlier. He said, "Look, uncle," he said. "I cannot see you because it's high alert. High alert, high alert."

And here I heard somebody saying, "It's my uncle." The door opens, Stevie came in. And I was terribly moved, we fell into each other's arms. Nobody knew either, nephew. Somehow I could have gone to any other base, we went to that base. And there he was. I said, "How did you know I was here?" He said, "I saw some television people outside." I said, "What is it?" And they said, "Well, a writer is here." "What kind of writer? "A American writer." (laughter) So he said, "Who is it?" Nobody knew who I was. Somebody did know, "Wiesel?" He said, "That's my uncle." That's how he came in. And it was great. He said to me, "You know what, don't worry. If things happen, we know what to do. And it's going to be a very great victory for us."

A month later, or two months later, he called me up and he said-- [00:24:00] I was in New York already. He said, "Uncle, I must confess to you that I violated the Shabbat. The last Shabbat, I violated it." *Hillul Shabbat*. He said he had to soldier. And he waited a minute's suspense. And he said, "I had to go and bring back the Falashas from Ethiopia." (audience applause)

In the middle of the war I came back to speak for the UJA and the bombs, and then back to Israel. For the missiles. And I

think I had the *zichut* to endure some eight missile attacks. One day I will tell you the whole story. It's funny, too. Anyway. I have a cousin called, Elie and he was a colonel in the army, but now he's out of the army. And I spoke to him from Jerusalem.

And he said to me, "You know," he said. "Come, let's have dinner together." He was in [00:25:00] Bnei Brak. "Let's come to Bnei Brak?. "We'll have dinner together," he says. "And then if there is an alarm, alert -- we will wait for the missiles together. After all, we are cousins." And I love him too. And I said, "Okay, I'll come." The last minute I couldn't come. So I called him up, "I'm sorry, I cannot come, I have to stay in Jerusalem." I thought he was angry because he didn't call back.

Then two months later, he wrote me a letter. He said, "Thank God, you didn't come." He said the following, he said: "Because you didn't come, we didn't stay home. And we went to spend the evening with our children, our married children in Ramat Gan. Had you come I would not be here to write you this letter, nor would you to receive it." Because a missile fell on that house.

And when he came back, he said, "Next morning, there was no house."

So that is therefore, you see, the story of the missiles. Which is now [00:26:00] prehistory. And when I heard a month ago or so, the president saying to Israel that American boys were giving their blood to save Israel -- I felt very bad. Because Israel helped the United States by its-- her restraint, and everybody knew it. Israel could have taken care of herself very well. And had Israel done it I think Saddam Hussein would not parade today, as he does in Baghdad. (audience applause)

All right, then a few months later, God helps. We have another thing. News goes so fast that you don't stop. August this year, at the end of August my wife and I went to France. Because I had promised to give a lecture in Toulouse [00:27:00] on September second. So she says, "you know, you worked so hard. You are so tired, why not rest for two weeks?" I always accept, you know. I said, "Okay."

And we went there for two weeks. A moment-- a day after we arrived, telephone from Élysée, from the Élysée, which is the French Presidential Palace. Saying, "A plane is on the way to

pick you up. And the police commissioner's car is already on its way to pick you up." We were in Nice, we were in the south of France. "You must go to Paris right away." That was the day when the coup occurred in Moscow. Well, why not? I like a private place, especially presidential plane. And took up the plane, went to Paris.

And the President said, "you must go to Moscow right away, and bring a personal message to Gorbachev and Yeltsin." So I said, "Mr. President, I am not a Frenchman. How can I serve your emissary? [00:28:00] I'm not French. I'm an American." He said, "Yes, but you are a Nobel laureate, that's above. You should go." I said, "Okay, I'll go. But tell me, where is Gorbachev?" Nobody knew where he was then. He said, "You'll find him." I said: "What do you mean find him? How can I find him?" (laughter) "You'll find him," he said, "you'll find him." I said, "All right."

I took the plane, went back to Nice to see my son and my wife, and say, "Look, I'm going to Russia." They weren't so pleased. (audience laughter) Look, it was dangerous at that time. But, I had to take after all my toothbrush, my tallis and tefillin. We have to do things, we all. I came back to Paris, I realized

that I don't have a visa. So they called up the Russian ambassador who was hiding. Literally, he didn't know how it would turn out. And he wanted to be on the safe side. So they couldn't find him.

They tried [00:29:00] to get, rush to the Consul General -- couldn't find him. Nobody was there. Finally they found one First Secretary, and I spoke to him. And he said, "All right, you want a visa. We know what all the televisions said. You want to go? Of course. But you have to come and fill out papers, and give three pictures." I said-- and then, then I have to ask Moscow. "Are you crazy? I have to leave today." "Oh, today? You cannot leave today." I called again the president, spoke to his staff and the president said, "Go without a visa." (audience laughter)

"Mr. President, they will arrest me." "Don't worry, they won't." I went without a visa. And I must say, for the first time in my life I went without a visa. It's true, in a presidential plane, but without a visa!

Came there, and there was already there. In the morning Yeltsin [00:30:00] was in his parliament, in the Russian

parliament. So I came to the parliament. Wants to see me, I came to see him. And they put me in the parliament, among the members of parliament. Believe it or not, I was sitting next to Slava Rostropovich. He is a Russian, he understands every word. So we both listened to the debate, there was a debate. And since I was like a member of parliament, I could intervene in the vote. (laughter) They were shouting, "Yes! No!" Shouting and then the vote. I could push yes or no, you know. (audience laughter) And then-- the whole day was a dramatic day, full of adventure.

And finally I went to see Gorbachev. He'd just come back a few hours earlier. And when he saw me he was very moved; [00:31:00] he almost cried. He said, "You came for me?" And I said to him, "Mr. President, as a Jew I owe you that much." I said, "Look, you have opened the door of your country for my people. How can I not come here?" He began to cry. On the way back in the nice plane, I was asking myself, "Why was he so moved after all? (inaudible) I'm not the first yeshiva *bucher* he's met, no?" (laughter)

And then I understood. He at that moment was the loneliest man in the world. I've rarely seen a man as lonely. He had just

realized that he had no friends. All of his friends betrayed him. He had no associates. All his subordinates, whom he [00:32:00] raised and elevated, they all abandoned him. He thought he had power, he had no power. He thought he had a god, communism. His god failed him. He had nothing. And in the middle of that nothingness comes a Jewish man, and says, "I am thankful to you, I came to help you." So he was very, very moved. And we had a long discussion, but that is for another time.

When the story of my mission to Moscow was reported in the French media-- and Mitterrand saw to it that it was. A young philosopher sent me a letter reminding me of something that I forgot or didn't know. He reminded me of at least one precedent in history when a Jew was entrusted with a similar task. And here I am sure in this audience, my neighbor and friend Reb Yankev, Dr. Dienstag will give you the source if you want it.

[00:33:00] A certain Jew, a merchant named Isaac from Aix-la-Chapelle was sent in 797 by Emperor Charlemagne to be part of a delegation. Probably as interpreter. Going to see the caliph, Harun al-Rashid in Baghdad. The other members of the delegation were Sigismund and Landfried. These two died on their way back.

And so Isaac, or Isaak was the only one who brought back to Charlemagne the caliph's reply, as well as his presents.

Isaac returned to France in 801, and was received in the spring of 802 by Charlemagne in Aix-la-Chapelle. And if one is to believe the historian and philosopher, Zunz, Isaac used his voyage to establish relations between French rabbis and the [00:34:00] *geonim* in the Orient whose responsa mentioned France only in 850. So you see, I'm only following in footsteps, but I didn't bring back any gifts.

Now, back to Elhanan. No, not yet. I was also in Romania. I went to Romania because the chief rabbi, Dr. Rosen insisted I should go there. Having a fiftieth anniversary or commemoration of the massacre in Iași. And I came there, and we heard terrible things about antisemitism in Romania. Two newspapers are openly, viciously antisemitic. And the articles are vicious. All of them silly, stupid things. That Israel wants to colonize Romania, for instance. That's all Israel needs. (audience laughter) [00:35:00] We don't have enough problems with our colonies, we need another colony. And of course everything is the fault of the Jew, the Jew is the scapegoat, everything.

So in Bucharest there was a ceremony, their event to Iași. In the middle of my address in Iași, a woman in the first row stood up. The Times reported it. And she began screaming in Romanian, "it's not true! Jews were never killed. The whole thing is a lie. Jews are not dead." And so forth. Later we discovered, they told me from Bucharest that she was the daughter of the police commissioner of Iași during the war.

But imagine what's happening there, that they could-- they could stand up for a minute of silence in parliament and honor the memory of Antonescu. Who was Hitler's acolyte, who was a dictator of Romania. He saved some Jews for money at some time, but two or three hundred thousand Jews [00:36:00] were killed in Transnistria because of him and his orders. And they honor his memory.

Unfortunately it's all over Eastern Europe, antisemitism with our Jews in Poland. Where you have open antisemitism and it's painful. Painful and so disappointing. In the Ukraine, do you know that they are establishing, it's true, that lately they have a monument for Babi Yar. But they also have monuments, statues, for Bandera, and for fascist "heroes," quote, unquote.

In Lithuania, you read about it. That they adopted a law almost giving amnesty to war criminals. Meaning even to those who killed Jews, and there were some or many. So it is rather disappointing that Eastern Europe, that now has regained its sovereignty [00:37:00] and freedom -- has abused it.

Luckily, we remember. And Elhanan, the hero of my book doesn't. And because he knows that his memory is fading he is telling everything he remembers to his son, Malkiel. And: "Will you listen to me?" the father asks. 'Of course, I'll listen to you, father.' 'Won't you lose patience?' 'I will listen carefully.' 'And you'll try to remember everything?' 'I'll try.' 'And take everything down?' 'I'll take everything down.' 'Even the most insignificant details?' 'Details are rarely insignificant.'"

"And you won't hold it against me? If I sometimes tell you unpleasant things? Sad things.' 'I won't hold it against you, father.' 'And you won't be disappointed later [00:38:00] when I express myself badly?' 'You have never disappointed me, father.' 'But I have so many things to tell you, so many things.' 'I know.' 'I worry, and worry. Will I have time to tell you everything?' 'Let's hope so, father.'"

“That’s just it, my son. I feel hope deserting me. Flowing out of me.’ ‘You will fight, father. You will fight to hang on to it.’ ‘Will you help me?’ ‘Naturally, I’ll help you always.’ ‘There is not much time.’ ‘No, father, there is not much time, you talk. And I’ll listen.’ ‘All right. I’ll tell you. The beginning and what follows, everything. I’ll tell you everything if God lets me. Are you listening? Try to remember what I tell you, because soon I won’t be able to tell you anything.’”

In his father’s hometown, Malkiel [00:39:00] stands in front of his grandfather’s tombstone. With also his name, was also Malkiel. And so the son of Elhanan, the sick man, speaks to his grandfather. “Grandfather Malkiel, if you can hear me, heed my words. They are meant to be an offering, a prayer. They come from far off. A message of faith from your son, who needs your intercession above. Let his health be restored. Let his past not slip away. Grant him the power to break his solitude, and me the power to bear it. Your son is devoted to you. He told me that so that I would know. So I would remember.’”

"If you can see grandfather, look at me. My father's memories are now mingled with mine. His eyes are in my eyes. His silences born of [00:40:00] dread, frustration, and despair live in my words. My past has opened to his, and so to yours. Your son is still alive. But can one call that living? He's walled-in to the instant, cut off from before and after. He no longer gazes at the heights, and his soul is a prisoner. It would be indecent of me to feel pity for my father. But you, Grandfather Malkiel, take pity on your son. That is what I have come to tell you. That is why I have come so far. If I could gather a minyan I would happily say a prayer for your soul. But there is no minyan. So all I can do is beg you to come to his rescue."

"Elhanan, the father [00:41:00] met Talia. Talia Oren. Twenty years of sun, laughter, a free and savage joy were inscribed on her fine and angular, oriental face. Born of a Yemenite mother and Russian father, she joined the mystery of the Orient to the intellectual pragmatism of the West. Her smile, ironic but gentle. Her eyes dark and glowing. She seemed forever alert, hearing music meant for her alone. Forever meant to rouse men to happiness and love."

"Your mother,' Elhanan said to his son. 'How I loved her. I may have had a premonition. I may have known from the start that I'd have to love her for you, too. Did she suspect during our first few meetings? We saw each other often. She was a year older than I, but seemed younger. I am sure she wanted to protect me, educate me, focus my life. [00:42:00] But she wasn't right for the role of big sister. And she was too clear-eyed not to know that I was in love with her.'"

"Thanks to her I adapted to the communal life of the camp, of the DP camp. I, who since my time in the partisan battalion and then with the partisan army longed only to sleep alone. Eat alone, keep my distance from the groups that inevitably multiplied in the camp. I adjusted to life.'"

"I spent less time thinking of the dead. I never talk to her about them. She would only have scolded me. She loved to do that, show men how immature they are. Make them understand that the past must bury the past. That suffering can and should be eradicated from Jewish existence. That redemption was not by divine work, but by human hope. We listened to her in the DP camp. We never dared contradict her. We feared her anger, but even more her sadness. Because she became melancholy, your

mother did when anyone [00:43:00] contradicted her. To bring back her good humor we were ready to do anything.'"

"And so was I, even more than the others ready for anything. Your mother insisted that I take part in celebrations, discussions, all the group activities in the DP camp. It was not my sort of thing. "Even the beasts of the field don't live alone," she told me. "Have you forgotten the Bible? It's in Genesis, read it again." "*Lo-tov heyot ha-adam l'vado*"

[00:43:24 - 00:43:26]

"It's not good for men to live alone." I loved to see her that way; passionate, fervent. Anger made her even more beautiful. Then when she calmed down, I reminded her that the verse she'd quoted was about Adam before Eve's creation. God wanted Adam to marry. I asked her, "Do you want me to marry too?" "Yes," she said. I asked, "Who?" Dreading the answer. "Me," she said. I was so stunned that she burst into laughter, so did I."

[00:44:00] "After the noon meal on the next *Sabbat*, your mother suggested I come to a Zionist meeting with her. I tried to resist. She took me by the hand and said, "It's no use, Elhanan

Rosenbaum. I want to be with you, and I have to go to that meeting." The auditorium was jammed. The main speaker talked about the underground war that the three resistance groups were fighting against the British occupation. He was an impressive man, in his forties, muscular, square jaw, abrupt gestures. He personified the fighting man's implacable authority.'"

"He spoke in Yiddish. Talia's Yiddish was not good. So I interpreted for her. It was a fiery speech, slightly demagogic. Short, explosive sentences, simplistic arguments. "The Jewish people were persecuted because they had no state of their own. Scorned everywhere, the Jew was of interest only to his enemies." He said. "If we had had the Jewish state in '39, millions of men and women, your parents, your brothers, your sisters would have been saved.""

"It was like [00:45:00] an oven in the hall. We were drenched in sweat. Unperturbed, the crowd applauded. The speaker, I think his name was Aaron, carried us away. Like him, we had just observed Sabbath in Jerusalem, whose light and silence are like nowhere else in the world. We breed it. The perfume, the gardens in the hills of Galilee gave off. We sang the beauty of the valley of Jezreel, of Emek Yizre'el, and prepared for the

struggle that would join the Jewish people of the Jewish state.'"

"I remember a few of his phrases and expressions: "For the first time in history," he said. "That people would put an end to 2000 years of exile and wandering, and found a sovereign state on the land of their ancestors." Was it the magic of his speech or the strength of our longing? We swayed to a word at once exotic and captivating. We moved through an ancient revolutionary dream. We took part in imaginary operations besides the heroic characters who had nourished our people's legends.'"

[00:46:00] "'If at the end of his speech, Aaron had challenged us to move out now, hundreds of us would have done so. All the more because no other country cared about us at all. Understand this, my son, the survivors' tragedy did not end at their liberation. The world made them feel their inferiority. In a pinch some would have treated us as invalids, but not as equals. "In Palestine," Aaron said. "You will be welcomed not as immigrants, but as brothers returning home after a long absence." Any refugee was susceptible to that kind of argument. And yet I hesitated. First of all, to leave for Palestine meant

choosing illegal immigration and parting from Talia. And then there was something else, I wasn't mature. I mean, intellectually mature. No, I mean, morally mature. That's more exact.'"

"Was I worth redeeming? One afternoon I talked about that with your mother. She flew [00:47:00] into one of her rages. "What is all this idiocy?" She says, "a Jew's place is in history, in his own land. And that's all, that it's to be. It's there that you will find Jewish dignity, nowhere else. Or there you will create it. Don't tell me you would rather rot here, and wallow in the memory of your humiliations. Listen, they are putting together a secret convoy and you are going to be part of it, all right? If not." "If not?" I asked. She broke into subtle laughter. "If not, I'll give you a kiss." Which she did. And she kissed me, full on the lips. It was the first time. "You are leaving," she said. "And you will see, you will be happy in Palestine." I wasn't so sure. So she quickly added a seat with myself. The next morning I registered for the convoy.'"

"One evening in his illness, Elhanan asked his son to sit down opposite him. 'I have great matters to discuss with you, my son.' Malkiel's heart [00:48:00] stopped. Elhanan hastened to

reassure him, "Don't be afraid, we'll fight back. We'll hold out, we'll learn how." And Malkiel thought, 'Father, I admire your courage, your confidence, your way of fighting resignation. But how long did it last?' 'More and more you move awkwardly, more and more your memory slips. But we will fight to the end, even if it's hopeless.' 'And so after hours of talk that evening, you even managed to sum up a philosophical conclusion for both of us. And you father said, "The important thing is to be aware of the present, linked to the past. The moment possesses its own power, its own eternity just as love creates its own absolute. Hoping to conquer time is wanting to be someone else."'

"' "You cannot live in the past and present at once, but you must. Whoever tries to runs the risk of locking himself into abstractions that separate the man from his own self.

[00:49:00] To slip out of the present can be dangerous.

Suddenly man finds himself in an ambiguous universe. In our world strength resides in the act of creating and recreating one's own truth, and one's own divinity." Oh, yes, father. You tried to persuade me that even for you, nothing was truly lost. To live in the moment is better than not to live at all.'"

““It takes no more than a moment,” you told me that night. “To tell your fellow man that you love him. And he saw doing, we have already won a victory over destiny.”` `I remember.’

‘Despite your wariness, despite your fear, you were in a kind of ecstasy. You were talking to persuade yourself as much as to reassure me. You were celebrating the present so as not to retreat from it. “The future,” you said to me. “The future is an illusion, old age a humiliation, and death a defeat. Certainly men can rebel, but it’s only truly bold to shout ‘no!’ In the present, against the future.”`“

““As long [00:50:00] as we can move our lips, we will be telling fate, ‘you challenge my right to live a full life. Well, I will do it anyway. You challenge my happiness under the pretext that it’s futureless. That because it’s severed from its roots, it can never be perfect. Well, I shall taste it anyway.’” And your eyes were shining, father, you were bleeding heart. I was too. And so, my father. You refuse to go under? Me too, Me too.’”

And there are so many stories in that story. So many stories, the story of May 14, 1948. Elhanan speaks to his son: “‘We were all gathered together at my in-laws, where our neighbors had

joined us. Hardly breathing, we listened to David Ben Gurion's speech. Declaring the independence of the Jewish state, [00:51:00] which would bear the name of Israel. Should I be ashamed to confess that I sat there dizzy with tears in my eyes? Talia, too, and the neighbors, and my in-laws.'"

"When old Rabbi Fishman recited the *Shehecheyanu*: "Blessed be thou, our Lord, King of the universe. That thou has let us live to see this day." We all hugged and kissed for a long time. "Our child will be born in a free Jewish state," said your mother. I went to the window.

"The past had seized me by the throat. I remembered my grandfather awaiting the Messiah, convinced that he was already on the way. I remember my father asserting that a messianic promise dwells in each of us. I remembered my mother who-- "Shabbat in a few minutes." [00:52:00] Said Talia's mother. "Let's light the candles." I thought of my mother. I thought of my mother most of all on the Sabbath. I'll never forget her, because I never forget the Sabbath.'"

"Forgive me. I know that in dictating this page, as I say things I no longer believe. How can I say, I'll never forget

when I am plunging into forgetfulness? The day will come, my son. The day will come when I have forgotten everything.' 'Even my mother?' 'Even my mother.' 'The Sabbath, too?' 'Even the Sabbath.' 'What can I do to preserve what keeps me alive? I don't want to forget you, do you hear me mother? I don't want to.'"

"Don't you think that's so?" Talia said, leaning against me. "Think of our child, it will be a boy. And we'll name him for your father." Across from our house, a door opened. [00:53:00] A Hasid appeared. He seemed to have stepped right out of my childhood. Suppose it was my grandfather, I called to him. "Where are you going?" "What a question," said the man. "Where do you suppose a Jew goes on Friday night? To services, of course. Then you haven't heard the news?" "What news?" "We have a Jewish state!" "I heard it." "And you are going off to pray?" Grouchy, he pulled his beard and said, "if we have a Jewish state today, isn't it because the Jews never stopped praying? And now that we have it, you want us to stop praying?"

"I turned to be closer to Talia's warmth. I saw other eyes looking at me through hers. And I wondered, why us? What have

we done to deserve this happiness from history? When for centuries and centuries, history has given us everything but happiness. "Talia," I said, "promise me, I will always remember this hour, this minute." "I promise," Talia said. And yet, a day would come. [00:54:00] A day would come.'"

"In the Old City of Jerusalem, when they were fighting, Elhanan too was fighting. And there was a young Yemenite boy. A Yemenite boy who knew a secret way through an underground tunnel. How to bring food, ammunition to the tired and fatigued, heroic fighters inside the Old City. 'It would soon be midnight, Avshalom, that was the young man's name, was saying his prayers.' 'The prayer of *maariv*?' 'Yes, and the one he prayed to his grandfather. "Guide us now as you guided us yesterday." We said goodbye to all, soldiers and civilians alike. Children were crying, and the wounded were moaning. We promised them all we'd be back before dawn.'"

"Itzhak, his friend nodded in silence. Cautiously, [00:55:00] Avshalom opened the door and slipped out. I followed him, "no" I told myself. I was going to follow him. I didn't follow him. A shot had just shattered the night. Someone cried, "no, no." Who was it? Avshalom? Avshalom never spoke again. We dragged

him into the synagogue that bore the name of the prophet Elijah. I felt like screaming, "Elijah prophet of consolation. Why don't you come now to console us? And who will console Avshalom's parents?" Because Avshalom was dead. The bullet struck his heart. The heart that sank in silent longing for the Messiah. Tomorrow his dust would return to dust, and I would hear the rabbi's lamentations. Arranging his burial, and now there was no more now. No more tomorrow either.'"

"The secret passage, there was no more passage. There was no one to bring reinforcements. No one [00:56:00] to open the way for help. "Battle stations," said the commanding officer. The Legioners, the Jordanian soldiers may be mounting a night attack." I saw Itzhak reaching for his weapon and heading for the doorway. Follow him? What good would that do? The night passed without further incident. I watched over my little friend Avshalom's body. I recited psalms, I knew many of them by heart. At dawn I fell asleep. In a dream, I saw my childhood. I woke to the sound of heavy gunfire. Bullets ricocheted off our walls, and before nightfall we buried little Avshalom.'"

Then came the attack. And the Old City capitulated. And he was

taken as prisoner of war into Jordan, together with all the,
[00:57:00] all, all soldiers. While he was in the prison camp,
Talia wrote him a letter. "You have been a prisoner for
exactly one month. The Red Cross tells us not to worry. The
newspapers here don't write about you anymore. My parents,
adorable as always, and even more so do their best to keep up my
spirits. My mother tells me funny stories. Every day, my
father, good civil servant that he is, brings me more
documentation on the laws protecting prisoners of war.

"Believe me," he says. "The whole world is protecting
Elhanan." My mother adds, "and God too, no? Are you saying God
isn't protecting him?" You see how it is. I'm angry with
myself. I should never have let you leave for the Old City. I
should have explained to your commanders that your health didn't
permit it. And that we were expecting a child. I should have,
I should have.'"

"Will you be home in time for the birth of our son? I know it
will be a son. Hurry home, [00:58:00] Elhanan. The doctor says
it won't be long. In your absence I talk to our son. I talk
about you, and all we did together in Europe. Sometimes I burst
out laughing, the look on your face aboard the ship, when I

announced our marriage on the ship. I love you and I want our son to know it. I love him. And I want you to know it. How happy will we be, we three together. What is it that I love about you? Your excessive shyness? The attention you pay to other people's fears and desires? The way you turn aside when certain memories force their way into your mind?"

"You know what? I'm going to surprise you. What I love about you was myself. Don't laugh. I love the image you receive of me. In you, thanks to you I feel purer and more deserving. Because of you I feel closer to God. At breakfast this morning I even said so to my parents. Of course my mother wept, she always weeps. And naturally, my father philosophized. He always philosophizes. "Normally it's [00:59:00] the opposite. Because of God, we feel closer to others. You have always had a spirit of contradiction," he said. After sighing, my mother said innocently, "what do you want from her? To me, her version and yours are the same." She's wonderful, my mother. Her shortcuts are as good as the ablest thinker's eloquence. I must tell you, for example, her comment about the Altalena."

"But I am forgetting. Do you know anything about the depressing and tragic story? Altalena is the name of a ship,

that the Irgun chartered in Europe to transport a thousand armed fighters and a lot of ammunition, which Israel needed believe me. But our Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion claimed that the head of the Irgun, Menachem Begin was in fact mounting a coup. How can we tell if he was right? At any rate, Palmach units shelled the Altalena, and set it afire. The upshot was the 20-odd Irgun fighters, survivors of the death camps were killed by Jewish bullets. In a radio broadcast, a sobbing Begin [01:00:00] ordered his troops not to retaliate. "Anything but a civil war," he said. For his part, Ben Gurion told the Knesset that on the day the Third Temple is reconstructed they would display the cannon that had shelled the Altalena.'"

"`And my mother's comment was, "I weep for the Jews who fired as much as I do for those who fell." My father's comment, a brief and angry, "They are insane."

They are insane. They were insane. But insanity has some good parts to one had to be insane. To dream of Jewish sovereignty in our generation, one had to be insane to think that three years after the worst catastrophe in Jewish history. Three years later on the ruins of life. On the ruins of peace, on the ruins of hope there would be a state, a Jewish state. And so

that insanity is a [01:01:00] good insanity. Sometimes the Jew has to be insane in order to continue believing. And again that insanity is a mystical insanity. But what is dangerous-- it's always been, in ancient times and today --is when we allow ourselves, because of our love for our people. Not to react to the dangers that face us from the outside. When we do not recognize the enemy, the moment he or they become the enemy. The moment we realize that hate is growing.

And those who hate don't even know why. We must do something about it. We cannot simply ignore it. If we do, we pay for it. So therefore it is [01:02:00] insane at that time not to confront the hate. Fanaticism is what feeds hate, and hate is what strengthens fanaticism. To say that fanaticism is dangerous is to express a fear together with a wish of dissipating it.

When does a religion become aggressive? When it is marked by absolutist currents. A nation becomes menacing when it begins to dominate by thought or by force its neighbors right to security and happiness. Prophetically inspired at first, especially in the social plane, communism wandered into the way of ideological corruption and the temptation of totalitarianism

when it chose fanaticism as an easy and efficient means of defense.

And so as I said, my friends and I have devoted past years for organize seminars on fanaticism and hate, and [01:03:00] trying to find the genesis. Trying to find the texture, the fabric of hate in order to disarm it. And in so doing we came to draw a portrait of the fanatic. Who is a fanatic? A fanatic is always alone. Because we are not like him. For a fanatic, there is no dialogue, only a monologue. For he doesn't want to hear our arguments, he knows everything. A fanatic thinks that in order to win a debate he must mute his opponent's desire to speak. A fanatic ultimately is someone who believes that only he knows the truth. And therefore only he is like God, and only he therefore is God. A fanatic ultimately deserves God's place and God's role.

And so, [01:04:00] I could almost say that what we have tried to do here in the last 25 years. Four times for Thursdays in October, November after Simcha Torah. Is first of all to inspire love for study, love for our people, and through it love for humankind. And at the same time to fight those who with

their fanaticism are a threat to us and to everyone. I hope you shall continue to study, and I thank you. (audience applause)

Dan Kaplan:

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in a journey. As we take you back to November of 1967, and Elie Wiesel's first series of "The Fascination with Jewish Tales."

Elie Wiesel:

[01:05:00] I used to like legends and I still do. Because they do give a form of life to Judaism. Just as the Halakhah does. I remember the legends, not all. Mainly, I remember the characters in them. I remember Hillel. And I'm sure you all know Hillel and his legends because they are very short. The most famous one. Someone came to Hillel and said, "teach me the Torah while I stand on one leg." And Hillel said, "what you do not want people to do to you, you do not [01:06:00] to them." Strange, because I do not like to listen to lectures. (audience laughter, applause)

Dan Kaplan:

I'm Dan Kaplan, and I have the great privilege of serving as president of the 92nd Street Y. Elie, many outstanding writers,

musicians, political leaders, and educators have graced this stage during the last 25 years. But none to my knowledge have appeared here each year, and none have meant more to us. All of us have been privileged to hear you. You have touched all of our hearts. We have laughed and [01:07:00] cried, and left this hall richer for the experience.

You have shared with us your life, and the lives of your ancestors. It was six years ago you honored this Y, and all of us by causing your Nobel Prize to be announced at this institution. On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Y, the staff, and the thousands of men and women who have been your loyal audiences these past 25 years. I'm very proud to present to you, a small token of our love and affection. It is a *kiddush* cup fashioned by John Cogswell and Kurt Matzdorf. Both are members of the Y School of Arts. I'm also pleased to announce the establishment of an annual lecture that will be given in your honor at this Y. Each year [01:08:00] this lecture will be delivered by an outstanding writer on Jewish or humanitarian themes.

Last Sunday, the New York Times reviewed your most recent book, "Sages and Dreamers," based on your 25 years of sharing yourself

with us at the Y. The headline of that review is "The prophet of the Y." You have indeed been our prophet, touching our hearts, probing our minds, and challenging all of us to live by high ideals. For that you have all of our love and our gratitude.

My good friend-- (audience applause) my good friend and colleague, David Sachs, who was president of Federation wanted me to also express to you the gratitude, the admiration and the love of the entire Federation network. And he [01:09:00] also asked that I share with you and this audience, a thought from your writings which is of great meaning to him and to all of us.

"The three great lessons of the Holocaust were: Never be a victim. Never be a perpetrator. But never, never be a bystander." Elie, we've given you the gift, and after which, which you may or may not open now. We're asking all of you to join us in the Y art gallery, or the hall of mirrors, so that we may toast you with wine and say how much we love you and appreciate you. (audience 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