

Elie Wiesel The State of World Jewry

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Elie Wiesel:

The great Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard one day noticed a poster in a window saying "Laundry." So, he went home, brought all of his dirty shirts, and gave them to the employee.

"Sorry," said the employee, "I cannot help you." "Why not?" asked the philosopher. "Aren't you doing laundry?" "No," said the employee. "We are selling posters." (laughter) [00:01:00]

What are we, Jews, selling? What are we, Jews, offering? What are we, Jews, sharing? And, who are we, Jews, today, in a world which is so un-Jewish? What has been the lesson that we received? What is the lesson that we shall try to share with others? In other words, as Rabbi Woznica said, "Let us try to make a *Cheshbon Ha'nefesh*, taking stock, and see where are we today." Actually, for centuries, people have been asking the question, "What is the meaning of history? Where does it lead us? Is it made up of continuity? Repetitions? Contradictions? Has it any [00:02:00] other significance than the eschatological?"

When it comes to Jewish history, which fascinates the Jews as well as their friends, and enemies, things grow at the same time simpler and more complex. We know the grand climax: the Messianic adventure. But we do not know the path that leads to it. Sufferings that crush or liberate. Incarceration in a spiritual or cultural ghetto. Is it a reaching out towards universality that others, so many others, would like to see but not share? Is the state of Israel the answer? The only answer, to everything?

Shaw said that difference between questions and answers is that answers change; questions do not. The questions that face us this year, [00:03:00] in diaspora and, I think, beyond diaspora, even in Israel, are the very same questions that have haunted our predecessors, our ancestors. In a sense, therefore, Shlomo HaMelech, King Solomon, in his book *Kohelet*, in the *Ecclesiastes*, is right. One generation passes away and another generation cometh, and there is no new thing under the sun. The actors change, but the events remain the same. The cycle remains the same. The words remain the same, except that the distance between them changes. But so do the traps, and the challenges. Hatred of the Jew has not disappeared. Neither Auschwitz, nor Israel, has reduced it. The mystery of Jewish survival, of Jewish memory, remains undiminished.

[00:04:00] Dostoevsky said that "Man does not choose, but oscillates, between good and evil." For the Jew it's a bit different. The Jew does not choose, but oscillates, between hope and despair. And there, the wisest of kings, again, Solomon, we always come back to him, said it clearly: whatever we may declare has already been uttered. In other words, whatever a writer can tell you about the state of the Jewish people today, has surely been made known to you already by those that preceded him on this stage. That must not stop us from drawing a balance sheet. But in doing so, we must enlarge our vision and our field of vision.

So let us cast a long glance at our political and social environment, the better to assess what is happening in the Jewish world, we must see [00:05:00] what most worries the world in general. Certainly there is an intrinsic bond between the two. If in the Scripture, God so strictly enjoins the children of Israel, barely liberated from slavery, to keep their distance from the native populations, not to follow their customs, and not to let themselves be blinded by the charms of their gods, it is because both dangers existed already then. And they still exist today.

In modern terms, they are called mixed marriage, or cultural assimilation. These problems, as we see, are not new. And we will touch on them again, perhaps, if time permits. As early as the time of the Maccabees, the Jewish people had to face such problems, such challenges, such dangers. Judas Maccabeus was fighting against [00:06:00] the interior enemy more than the exterior. The *mityavnim*, the so-called Hellenistic Jews, those who took too much pleasure in the delight of Greek Assyrian culture, who chose sports too much, physical exercise. Who chose the harmony of the body over the harmony of the spirit. Those *mityavnim* were the danger that Maccabee and his brothers and their father have fought so valiantly. Does it mean that those Jews then should have rejected whatever came from outside? That only what happened within the Jewish community, within the Jewish people, within the Jewish endeavors, mattered? Counted? Nothing else?

Rabbeinu Saul Lieberman, *zichrono livracha*, whom we have quoted here, usually when I speak while sitting, [00:07:00] he has said that though the Talmud was originally intended to isolate us from surrounding culture, it influenced them and was influenced by them. Can one study any tractate of the Talmud today without occasional reference to ancient Greek and Latin history and vocabulary? There are so many Greek words and so many concepts

that came from the others that we had to confront, occasionally fight, but also absorb, that we know now that there was, if not a symbiosis, there was a contact, there was a connection in antiquity between the Jewish people and others.

The essential point is the Jewish tradition stresses a freedom of conscience. That means a Jew is he or she who chooses himself or herself to be Jewish. In other words, since we live with other people, [00:08:00] since we dwell among so many nations, and since we draw from our inner strength although other traditions are there to lure us, that means that a Jew is free and remains free in all of his or her undertakings.

Remember, in the desert, the Jew could choose between Korach and Moses. Korach was a good Jew. He even went farther than the Jewish concept of *tallit*. He had a *tallit shekula techelet* -- he wanted to have the better *tallit*, you know. It happens Jews always want better. (laughter)

In Babylonian exile, the Jew had a choice of following Ezra and Nehemiah to Judaea, to Jerusalem, or staying behind at home amid the ancient oppressors. [00:09:00] In 1492, in Spain, the royal councilor Abraham Senior converted with his whole family, while the royal councilor Don Yitzhak Abarbanel preferred to exile himself in fidelity to his faith and his people. So therefore,

again, the emphasis is on choice. *Uvacharta*, you must choose. Choose life over death, good over evil, choose to be part of your community, rather than be part of no community. A philosopher has said once in Europe, that "When people stop believing in God, it is not then that they believe in nothing, but then they believe in anything." So it is possible of course, to choose anything between the anything, or among the anything. [00:10:00] However, when the choice is a Jewish choice, it is a possibility to live with the others, even for the others, but from within, as a Jew. I believe, therefore, that every day, every day, a Jew can choose himself as Jewish.

There was an exception. And the exception was, of course, the latest malediction, the latest catastrophe, of this century and I think the greatest of all centuries, the era of *night*, when a Jew had no choice. When a Jew was Jewish because the enemy decided who is a Jew and not because the Jew decided who is a Jew, and therefore, the Jew was condemned and killed, not for his choice, but for the choice of the enemy himself. [00:11:00] So, it's true that Moshe or Yaakov or Ezra or anyone today, born in Manhattan or Brooklyn or Paris or Amsterdam, born to Jewish parents, grew up in a Jewish milieu, is Jewish. Because he or she was born in that family in that time, which he did not choose. However, every day, a Jew gets up in the morning, I

believe a Jew chooses himself, defines himself, as a Jew. So the choice is not an outside choice; it's an inner choice. If you are religious, the moment you say the first blessing, you are Jewish. If you are not -- but who isn't -- (laughter) -- after all, it's not really a matter of will, whether you want it or not you are. Even in not wanting, you are doing what Jews do. (laughter)

[00:12:00] However, the main idea is that the choice should come from within. Jean-Paul Sartre, the great French philosopher, actually admitted it before he died, at the end of his life, he made a mistake. He had written a book in 1947, in English it's called "A Portrait of the Anti-Semite." And in fact, it's a very bad book. Because he said that a Jew is he or she who is seen by the anti-Semite as a Jew. In other words, he deprived a Jew of his -- of our inner qualities. It is because the anti-Semite saw us as Jewish, that we were Jewish. And then he realized, at the end of his life, that he made a mistake, because in giving that definition, he actually said that we had nothing to give. It was a reaction to, a response to, rather than a creative affirmation from within. The theory, which was enunciated, really, with goodwill -- Sartre had goodwill. He was always wrong, (laughter) but he had goodwill. [00:13:00] The difference between Jean-Paul Sartre and Camus is that Camus

was always right on every issue, and Sartre was always wrong on every issue. However, he was a great polemicist, and that's why he prevailed. But he was also honest enough to realize, and to say, to admit it publicly, that he was wrong about Jews.

Now, if one is to believe Sartre of 1947, without the anti-Semites, the Jew would stop being Jewish. Absolutely. Which is something which two other ideologists have also enunciated. One was communism. Communism at the beginning really meant the universality of the human species, and in communism it was very simple: anti-Semitism will disappear because the Jewish people will disappear. Thank you. (laughter) [00:14:00] Now, the other idea came from no other than -- it's hard to believe -- Dr. Theodor Herzl. Dr. Theodor Herzl, assimilated Jew, wanted to stop Jewish suffering, which I understand and applaud. But he came from such an assimilated family that he realized -- he said, look, Jews are persecuted because they are Jewish. Let them stop being Jewish and it will be finished. How? So he had an idea. He said, how about converting the whole Jewish people to Christianity? Then it's finished. He even said that he, when he was entertaining this silly idea -- he was ready to lead the *cortege*. He was ready to lead all the Jews to the Vatican, so this would have a mass conversion. Again, even Herzl realized that that was not a Jewish answer to the problem.

[00:15:00] And so, he became a Zionist, which is better.

(laughter)

And we have learned something from all three. We have learned that it is not because the anti-Semite is there that the Jew is Jewish, but the other way around. The anti-Semite is there because the Jew is Jewish. Does it mean that anti-Semitism is here to stay? Just as the Jewish people are the only one of antiquity that survived antiquity, their enemies formed the oldest group prejudice in history. No other hate is as old, no other hate has such a past, as the hate of the Jew. So, what should we do then about such hate? So that hate has already preoccupied Jews in the Roman time. [00:16:00] When we study today the Greek philosophers, the Greek historians, and the Roman philosophers, and the Roman historians, you will see that anti-Semitism was there. Cicero the Great was an anti-Semite. And so were most of his colleagues. They were convinced then, believe it or not, Cicero was convinced that the Jews controlled the court system. That the chief judge was a Jew, and everybody was a Jew, except he was wrong. Naturally, today, anti-Semites are convinced that we control not only the court system, that we control all systems. In Yiddish, I would say *Halevai valt es emes geven*. (laughter) But I wish it were true. I accept it.

I remember having once a discussion on television, a live discussion, with a very great French Catholic writer who was a [00:17:00] marvelous man, François Mauriac, to whom I owe so much, and he really was *ohav Yisrael*. But even he -- one day we spoke about Israel, and I am so, of course, so concerned with Israel -- I love Israel, and I always defend Israel. And he said to me, "Why are you worried about Israel? After all, the whole world will be on Israel's side if something should happen," *chas v'chalila* -- he didn't say *chas v'chalila*, but -- (laughter). And he went on, saying, to reassure me, "Look, after all, we have influence in London, we have influence in Washington, influence in Paris, so what are you worried about?" It dawned upon me. I said, "Mr. Mauriac, are you -- you really believe that we dominate the world?" I was shocked. And I continued, "You know what? It's not true. You'll be surprised, it's not true. However, I have a suggestion. Give us the world for one generation." (laughter) "I promise you when we'll give it back, it won't be in worse shape." (laughter)

[00:18:00] Well, the world is not in our hands. The world has been, for the last 2000 years at least, in different hands, and it didn't do so well. Now, anti-Semitism today is a problem that the Jewish community cannot not face. I must tell you my feeling that if our leaders would be leaders, what they should

do now is concentrate on that issue right away, and make it a priority. Because things are happening, and what we see happen is not good. Not only Germany, where I am shocked but not surprised. Since 1985, since the Bitburg affair, it declined -- I mean, the moral situation of Germany declined, and it was [00:19:00] clear that they were heading towards this. To have the neo-Nazis, to have the parades in the streets, and to have young people shout in the streets, "*Deutschland erwache*," "Germany awake!" This is the slogan that existed, that was heard, that reverberated throughout Germany in the time of the pre-Hitler domination of Germany. Now, I don't think that it's possible for Germany to take power again -- I mean, Nazis to take power and establish another system, a cruel system of the Holocaust -- I don't believe that. However, what I do believe, that Germany is facing a tremendous moral problem, and the fact that Germany has not, until now, used all of its resources to deal with that problem, worries me very much.

But then, not only Germany. How about eastern Europe? In Poland, the campaign, the presidential campaign, was full of anti-Jewish innuendo. [00:20:00] In Italy, we learned, one of three persons think as anti-Semites. In America, we heard from a report, millions, 10 or 20, 30, 40 million people would be somehow, in one way or another, ready to accept anti-Semitic

notions. In France we have Le Pen, in Belgium we have the right wing, and in eastern Europe, my god, eastern Europe. What happened in eastern Europe? Communism collapsed. And the question is, what will replace communism? After all, communism was an ideology which had all the facets of a religion. If you study the language of communism, you will see it is a religious vocabulary. About redemption, about fraternity, about social justice, about happiness among nations. [00:21:00] And during the trials, infamous show trials, the interrogators, the judges used a mystical language where the accused had to confess -- where the accused had to redeem himself. Where the accused had to purge himself. The whole concept was a mystical concept. It was a religion. It was, in a way, Messianism, but it was Messianism without God, and therefore, when you deny God, and you eliminate Him from the equation, God has a way of coming back, even uninvited.

And so, communism failed, but the question is, what will replace it? It has inspired, in the beginning, for good motives, for good reasons -- communism has inspired hundreds and millions of people. What are they doing now, without their gods? Will it be nationalism? [00:22:00] It's possible. Will it be religion? It's possible. Will it be religious nationalism? It's possible again. Nationalism we have seen. We have seen in all

the former Soviet Union, which split and became fragmented republics, all these republics suffer from extreme nationalism. And the question is, what will happen to that group of countries if they will become a kind of Yugoslavia? I think the world would be in danger, and then the end of the century will prove to us that the end is like the beginning. Meaning, a conflagration, during which and in which, many people will die for no good reason, and there is never any good reason to die.

[00:23:00] I open a parenthesis. Some of us, friends, and myself, and some other people went to Yugoslavia. I'll tell you why I went, and I must say it. I went because for years, in some of my writings, and on many occasions, I not only criticized, but I blamed and condemned the indifference of the world leaders during 1933--1945, towards the suffering of our people. Good people, like Roosevelt -- we cannot say that he was bad. He was not bad. He was a good person for America. But he was very bad for the Jewish people. When we learned the facts -- I learned the facts later on, I must tell you, for me it was a [00:24:00] terrible disappointment and pain. I had pain about it. Because Roosevelt, I knew his name. In my town, in Sighet where I was a *yeshiva bucher*, I didn't know the name of David Ben-Gurion, *l'havdil*. But I did know the name of Franklin Roosevelt. He was the father image of American Jews.

And when I learned later on, studying the documents, that he knew and didn't do anything about it, it was to me a personal defeat because I had placed my faith in a man who didn't deserve it.

But he wasn't alone. Churchill wasn't much better. And all the other leaders -- our friends -- the liberal thinkers, philosophers, politicians -- they were not concerned when Jews were suffering. It's only Jews. Now, people are suffering there, and I don't want history to say that when they suffered, Jews were not concerned. I think we must be concerned. There isn't much we can do, but listen. [00:25:00] I have learned a lesson. If someone whom I love suffers, I would like, as every father and every husband and every friend would do for his son, friend, or wife -- I am ready to suffer in their place, but I can't. Nobody can. Nobody can suffer in the place of someone else. What I can do, is be present to their suffering, at their suffering. That's all I can do. Meaning, when they suffer, I shall be present.

And I feel the same about people who suffer -- children, 'cause children are always the ones who suffer. You know what the war is? The war is when adults fight and children die. A French philosopher said it in a different way. He said, "What is war?"

[00:26:00] It is actually declared and willed by people who knew each other, but fought by people who don't know one another. And those who die don't know one another. Always in the name of those who do know one another. The prime ministers, the generals, they know each other -- they call each other by first name. War is a farce. War is a tragedy. War is blasphemy. And worst of all, a civil war, when people who do know one another, and they kill each other because they know each other. That's why we went to Yugoslavia. And I must tell you, it was a very meaningful and moving and very special journey. Yes, it was dangerous, and believe me that Marion, my wife, didn't like it. And she tried her best, and for once, she didn't succeed. Usually she does.

And we went there, and it was something. [00:27:00] We had a *Kabbalat Shabbat* in shul in Belgrade. It was a very special Shabbat. After all, what are they doing there? Let them leave. Some of them are still there. They wanted to stay. So we came with the chief rabbi there?, and we had a *Kabbalat Shabbat*, a Shabbat service, in their synagogue, a huge, beautiful synagogue, that mainly old people -- we were more guests than they -- maybe 20, 30 people all around, but it was moving. To say Shabbat, that the Shabbat spirit enters the world today, and to sing there before meal, *Shalom Aleichem*, you know, *Shalom*

Aleichem, peace, peace in Yugoslavia? Yes. There, among the angels. But not here, below. Not there, below.

And we went, we visited places, we visited Sarajevo, the main, really -- my impression, the impression that remains with me is Sarajevo. [00:28:00] And not because I looked like Snoopy -- in a helmet, you know, but -- (laughter) I know, I know, after all. But because the whole situation was so surreal, it wasn't real. Nobody moved except in an armored vehicle, and while we were there, there was firing going on. I didn't dare telling, really, (laughs) my wife, about the firing. I didn't even tell her -- maybe she'll learn it tonight -- that we were going to see Karadžić. Karadžić is the president of the Serbian militia, the Serbian republic within Bosnia. So it was he who wanted me to come. We came in armored vehicles, and we were stopped at the checkpoint because the U.N. force, which was performing really great service to humanity by protecting lives, said you cannot go in because they're firing around it. No, he wanted me to come and see him, but his soldiers were firing to prevent me from coming in. [00:29:00] (laughter) And at one point, there was even a mortar shell. And it felt 250 yards from our vehicle. And we didn't know it. And luckily, luckily one of the U.N. majors there saw it, and he came running to the captain who drove our armored vehicle, saying, "Be careful, turn around

because there is a live mortar on the road." Had he not come, I think you would have had a different speaker tonight here.

(laughter)

Now, what have we learned in Sarajevo? We have learned that the words of Jeremiah about Jerusalem, "*Eicha Yashva Badad*," applies to other cities as well. This is the lesson in Jewish history. That whatever happens, happens to us first. Always first the Jews, and then, because of the [00:30:00] particular value, the particular weight of our experience, it spills over. Hegel speaks about the spilling over of intelligence, or of philosophy, is through history. History spills over. It happened at Sinai. We got the law. It spilled over to other nations. And what Jeremiah saw, his vision, spilled over to other cities. And I can imagine, almost, with all, of course, all the mystical differences, that this is what history wanted to teach us. What you do to Jews, somehow, will be done to others.

I thought about it, years ago, up at Warsaw. In 1943, the Warsaw Ghetto was burning, and the youths from Warsaw, boys and girls, would come in April, April 19, 20, 21, they would come to take a stroll [00:31:00] and say to each other words of love, watching the flames consuming the ghetto. Literally watching,

enjoying it. One year later, the whole city of Warsaw was burning, and the Russians on the other side didn't move. And again, I was thinking about that. Whatever happened first to the ghetto happened to the city. Whatever happens to our people first, is doomed to happen to the whole world, and therefore, we should be so careful. Because I believe in saving Jewish lives, we are saving lives. The world's lives, other people's lives. If we celebrate the sanctity of life as we are told in the Torah, that means we are celebrating life everywhere.

[00:32:00] But, there are forces that move against life. And I am afraid of these forces. We are coming now to the end of the century, which will be the end of a century and the end of a millennium. Again, the only people that speaks in terms of more than one millennium is the Jewish people. Christianity speaks of one millennium, because it never had more. The other -- the ancient modern civilizations -- the Oriental civilizations, the Oriental people don't think in these terms. Only we speak about the millennium, the millennia. And I'm afraid because whenever we come to a turning point in dates, in the calendar, who knows what forces are unleashed? Usually, it's a kind of history quake, just as there is an earthquake, and therefore, from the bowels of history, all the demons resurface [00:33:00] and threaten the future. We see these demons even in our own city.

I must tell you that I don't understand what's happening. I know the reasons for what is happening, I know that the two communities, what we call the black, or the African-American on one side, the Jews on the other, are now at loggerheads. I know that the Jews have reasons for answering the way they do in Brooklyn. I hope you know that -- "*Al tifrosh min hatzibur*," I am never far from our Jewish community. I am always part of it. And I accept whatever the Jewish community is, I am part of it. But as a Jew, therefore, who is so much involved with Jewish life -- I mean whatever is Jewish -- I tell you, I am worried.

I am worried because the tone has reached terrible heights.

[00:34:00] We have adopted a violent language. It's dangerous. Where are we going from here? If we continue like that, what will be the next step? That there is racism? Yes. That there are enemies? Yes, of course we have enemies. When didn't we have enemies? Where didn't we have enemies? Even places that we are not, we have enemies. Go to Japan. Really, go to Japan with a poor -- no, not so poor. Find the Jews out there, some are rich, doesn't matter. Matters to them, it's all right.

(laughter)

However, books, anti-Semitic books, are sold in the millions. In the millions. Poland has no Jews. Five thousand. Fifteen thousand. Anti-Semitism without Jews. However, here in the United States, especially here in New York, I think we should have our own [00:35:00] *chesbon ha-nefesh*. What are we doing? That doesn't mean we shouldn't speak up. I am for speaking up. I am against silence, when the Jewish dignity is offended, when Jewish honor is offended, when the Jewish life is threatened, of course we should speak up. But with style. With style. I think in a civilized manner, not to shout like that. Simply, it's dangerous, in addition to the fact that I don't think that it's helpful.

What about Israel? I think, of all the places in the world, Israel today is better than anywhere. Who would have thought? Three years ago, we thought, eastern Europe, bravo. You know, you wanted to applaud. It's said about Toscanini, Toscanini was traveling in America with [00:36:00] his orchestra, and one morning, in the Rocky Mountains, the train stopped because he wanted to walk. He took a walk in the mountains, and he saw the beautiful Rocky Mountains, but he stood there for an hour or two, and people didn't dare to come closer to him. They saw him, he was so concentrated, and all of a sudden, as he was looking at the beauty of the mountain, he began applauding. He

applauded God for creating the mountains. And we wanted to applaud history three years ago. Look! It's great. Democracy prevailed. Now we see what happened to democracy. We see that democracy has not solved social problems, democracy has not given a better feeling of life and of destiny to the people. It created more walls, more frontiers, more hatred. So what are we to do? I don't believe there is a substitute for democracy. And yet, democracy doesn't work. There.

But still, we were very happy [00:37:00] three years ago about the -- eastern Europe, and very unhappy about Israel and the Middle East. There, nothing moved. Now, it's just the other way around. If there is one place in the world where there is hope, it's the Middle East. Inside Israel, I hope that Israel is doing well -- will do well, especially because we are going to get more money, and it will help. And also, the Russian Jews are coming in, I think they are now better equipped than before. The *Aliyah*, of the Ethiopian Jews, I think will do better -- is doing well. Children will learn in the new centers that we are establishing there. So it's better. Much, much better.

The problem, I think, will be that at the end of the century, Israel will also have to follow history. And see, it must.

[00:38:00] What is the new vision for the year 2001? Young

people will come in, and I would like to know, I would like to think, that those young leaders will be Jews, not only Israelis.

What about our own community? I know the statistics. Now I understand why, in the Jewish tradition, we don't count. We don't count because statistics are bad. If I am to believe the statistics, then -- then really, we should, we should give up. Or raise our hands and say, *[inaudible]*" What more than 53 percent of intermarriage, and then integration, and then assimilation. Who will remain? *Shearei ha-pleitah*, a few men and women of the saving remnant. But I don't believe that. I don't believe it because I am convinced that we have strength, [00:39:00] we have inner forces, that will keep us true to ourselves. The young people are coming back. They want to learn, they want to remember, and they want to follow in the footsteps of their grandparents and great-great-great-grandparents. It's not easy; why should it be easy?

And, at the end, the memory. I am terribly afraid when it comes to this subject. There is a word in Greek, in ancient Greek, that is *aletheia*. *Aletheia* in Greek means truth. And it means things that cannot be forgotten. I wonder what are the things in our life, and in our history, that cannot be forgotten.

[00:40:00] I am not so afraid of the memory itself, I am afraid

of the trivialization of that memory. Saying it again and again, I am terribly worried about that. First of all, because if we had known how to communicate the truth, that means the truth of things that cannot be forgotten, the world would have been in a better shape. And I am -- I am forced to believe that we are responsible for our own memory.

Furthermore, just look around you, around ourselves, and you will see that the world does not want to remember. The world wants to prove to us that there are things that can be forgotten, and will be forgotten, in spite of all the efforts now. I am convinced that after the year 2000, good people, decent people, kind people, friendly people, will tell us, "Look, leave us alone. Give us some respite. It's enough. [00:41:00] For years you have gone, continued to tell us about suffering. Look. It's a new millennium. Not only a century, a new millennium. Give our children a chance not to go around with the baggage of suffering and guilt feelings. Give us a chance!" And these will be good people. I'm not speaking about the bad people, whose numbers are increasing, about the revisionists, those who deny the Holocaust. I'm speaking about good people. They will say, "Look, we cannot live like that. If you remember, then -- if you continue with your memories,

then you will only split people apart. You will set them apart. Let us live. Together, come, we will help you."

I'm afraid of that moment, which I'm sure will come. And there, too, what can we do? I think what we can do is simply be what we are, and better. Learn more, study more, remember.

[00:42:00] Because if you don't remember, who will?

In conclusion, my friends, I do have faith in the Jewish community in America. I do have faith in the Jewish community in the whole world. Why? It's simple. If anyone had told us in 1965 that we will meet there a Jewish community, lively, vibrant, determined to maintain its Jewishness, nobody would have believed it. We were convinced -- I was convinced, when I came for the first time to Russia, in 1965, that I will not find Jews there. A few old Jews in a synagogue. Because half of them, surely, have disappeared because of Hitler, killed in Ponar, killed in Minsk, [00:43:00] killed in every place where the Germans had arrived. The other half surely had assimilated under Stalin. So what remains? Nobody would have believed that there is something about *Netzer Yisrael*. Something about the eternity, the taste for eternity, that a Jew has. Not to disappear, not to vanish, and to cling to whatever is Jewish in the Jew. Here we have, look, the children, the grandchildren of

the communist leaders, the companions of Lenin come back to their roots. When you heard that Trotsky's grandson arrived in Israel a few years ago, how could you not make a blessing? Trotsky's grandson, Trotsky who was Jewish but who refused to do anything for Jews. He wanted a revolution, he reversed the revolution.

[00:44:00] There was a man named Yakir, General Yakir, I think he was the brother-in-law of Bialik, who was a communist -- a general in the Red Army. His grandson, Pyotr Yakir, became a dissident and a Jew, so if we were to study now, you will see that the counter-revolution, the new revolution in Russia, was prepared, willed, implemented, by the grandchildren of those Jewish communists who wanted to go away from Judaism in order to save the world. And if we cannot give up, and we didn't give up, on Russian Jewry, why should we give up on American Jewry? Or on French Jewry? Any Jewry? Look, we have been seduced more than once in history. And we did not give in. We have been threatened more than once in history. We did not abdicate.

[00:45:00] And we have gone through more than enough. Upheavals, temptations, persecutions, and metamorphosis. And we remained what we are. Therefore, my last word, now, is a word of hope. If I believe that a people can be united in fear, and

we have been, I also believe that our people must be united in hope. Thank you. (applause) [00:46:00]

Q: I'm sure I reflect everyone's sentiments when I thank you so much for those inspiring words. You seem to have provoked more questions than there can ever be answers to, but let me start with one. Do you think that a rising Islamic fundamentalism poses a new threat to Israel, the diaspora, and western democracy? How significant is this threat? And how can we challenge it?

ELIE WIESEL: The answer is yes. (laughter) How to challenge it is education. Because we are dealing with a fanatic bloc, and the only way to fight fanaticism is not to choose another way of fanaticism, but to choose a way of enlightenment, meaning to show that fanaticism leads to destruction and self-destruction. [00:47:00] That is true of fanatics everywhere, not only in the Islamic world. In the Islamic world it's more dangerous, simply because we don't realize that Islam is on the rise. We don't realize that there is a conversion to Islam which has attained frightening proportions -- to us, but not to them. Why young intellectuals in France, for instance, should convert out of communism or socialism, or Catholicism, to Islam, is something which deserves exploration and scrutiny. But

that is what is happening. Mosques and mosques are being built, mosques and mosques are being built in our own country. So if they are moderate, meaning if they are tolerant, I welcome them. Why not? It's not something that we should fight. Let people believe in what they want to believe. But if they are fanatics, meaning they believe that [00:48:00] only their truth is true, that only they have the right to give the answers to existential problems or to social questions, then I must fight them. I'm afraid, therefore, that the fanatic Islam is getting stronger. It doesn't mean we should organize ourselves as a political group. Politics and religion should never go together. However, we should educate the periphery. We should educate, educate the environment, that means the people where we live. Not only the Jews. The non-Jews, Christians, Buddhists, we should teach them that fanaticism and religion are also incompatible, must be.

Q: To shift to a more speculative topic, how do you think the election of President Clinton will impact relations between American Jews and their communities in the United States, and do you see any difference in our [00:49:00] policies towards Israel?

ELIE WIESEL: I don't know. (laughter)

Q: One thing we know, we'll all find out. I can't tell you how many questions have been raised on the so-called Crown Heights issue. We know you're on the mayor's commission --

ELIE WIESEL: Wait, wait, wait. I am not.

Q: You're not.

ELIE WIESEL: (laughs)

Q: Okay.

ELIE WIESEL: Let me just make some -- a remark on that. The mayor called me, and he came to see me, and is saying, "There is anti-Semitism in New York, will you help?" I said, "I will help anyone who wants to fight anti-Semitism." And I think we all should, Jews and non-Jews. Anti-Semitism must be fought by everybody, and of course first of all by Jews. But while I was away in Paris, somehow, I don't know how, reports appeared in the press saying that I became a commissioner. I want many titles. This is one title I don't want. (laughter)

Q: [00:50:00] Well, commissioner or no, have you some suggestions for the mayor on how we should deal with this problem?

ELIE WIESEL: Suggestions to the mayor?

Q: Yes.

ELIE WIESEL: Not yet. (laughter)

Q: We were hoping you could solve that problem for us. You said you were shocked but not surprised by the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Germany. Last week, Jewish cemeteries were desecrated in Stockholm. You mentioned anti-Semitism in Japan. Do you have any explanation at all why this arises and continues?

ELIE WIESEL: The most shocking, but the most perplexing aspect of the new anti-Semitic movement is the profanation of cemeteries. Why do they attack cemeteries? What do they want from the cemeteries? I understand -- I don't, but I'll say -- [00:51:00] they may have a logic why they don't like living Jews. What do they want from dead Jews? (laughter) But, you know, don't look for rationalism in anti-Semitism. They have their own logic, which is totally crazy, but it's their logic. I think that they understand what they are doing, because we have a certain continuity which is the fabric of history. Chesterton said that the real democracy is the one that takes into account the votes of the dead. Now look, in that case, we are not a minority. Of course, we are a small people. But when we think of all the dead that our people has left here and there in the world, and they, too, have a right to vote, then we speak on quite a large segment of humanity. Since Moses to this day, we have given something. [00:52:00] We

have spoken everywhere. Maybe the anti-Semites know it. They feel it instinctively, and therefore, they are angry, not only at the living -- they are angry at the dead. Which, because, we speak in their name -- and by the way, we -- not always do we do that, I think -- I, for instance, don't like when we speak in the name of the victims of the Holocaust. We have no right to speak for them. Only they should speak. And they speak. But nobody wants to listen.

Q: Do you feel that the Jews have been treated fairly in the courts in the United States? One person raised a question about the Pollard case, for example, about which I know you've spoken.

ELIE WIESEL: I don't know about the courts, because really, I am not that informed, but the Pollard case -- [00:53:00] I do believe Pollard deserves to be freed. And sooner, the better. (applause) And nothing would be more fair than to expect from President Bush to pardon him and to commute his sentence for time served. (applause)

Q: You spoke of the existence and continued existence of Judaism in Soviet Union. Do you see any chance for the survival in Judaism elsewhere in eastern Europe? Hungary, for example?

ELIE WIESEL: Hungary, what I hear is, they still have a hundred thousand Jews in Hungary. Hundred thousand, it's a

lot. It's true that before the war, there were I think -- more, almost a million Jews lived in Hungary. Six hundred thousand were killed during the war. There is tremendous anti-Semitism in Hungary. [00:54:00] I didn't go there, but I heard of people who were beaten up in the street simply because they had worn their *payos*, because they wear beard and *payot*. And now, we know already that even in Parliament, meaning in the political scene, on the political scene, in political life, there are anti-Semites who are openly insulting whatever is Jewish. Will they last? How long? Look, I hope and pray that not a single Jew will suffer anywhere, be it Hungary or Hong Kong. Will it happen? Again, I must hope for them, and not only that, I think if they need our help we should help them. If they want to go to Israel, we should help them doubly. But if they want to stay, we should help them stay. Same thing about Russia. I don't think that we should force people, even to help them, against their will. We should educate them. We should send more educators to Russia, [00:55:00] for instance. Or to Hungary. Better educators, to tell them, look, there is no future for you there. I would send also to Germany, if they need educators. But if they need educators to tell them they should leave, then you should send educators to Germany. But everywhere, where Jews

suffer, where Jews are oppressed, they should rely on our compassion, and even better than that, on our solidarity.

Q: You spoke of your recent travels to Bosnia. Is there some special relationship between American Jewry and Yugoslavia? Should we as American Jews be doing something to help with that problem?

ELIE WIESEL: There is no special relationship, not that I know of. But the only relationship is simply between human beings. I think that we Jews should be sensitive to other people's suffering as well. Look, I give you my credo, [00:56:00] and I have said it since my adult life has begun. I believe that as a Jew, I should see anything Jewish as a priority. Jewish concerns, Jewish fears, Jewish hopes, Jewish needs. It's my priority. But not an exclusive priority. After we take care of our Jews, I think we should help others as well. We cannot exclude the other people from our horizon. They are there, and if they need us, we must help them. I know the problem, that after we help them, they turn against us. Well, that's life.

Q: The question is, can Jewish morality, Jewish worldviews, and Jewish ethics be passed on to future generations outside of Orthodox religious practice? [00:57:00]

ELIE WIESEL: Outside the Orthodox Jewish practice? Oy, that is a problem. You cannot, really. You cannot remove our

religious culture, our religious tradition, from what we call Jewish civilization or Jewish culture. You cannot. For for 3500 years, we have created certain things. See, the problem is that -- the *am ha-aretz*, the ignorant intellectuals, who always want to show that they are intellectuals, at the expense of their Jewishness, or of our Jewishness. For instance, if somebody is an expert in a 14th century poet whose name no one ever heard, and it's known to that person only because he or she wanted a doctorate on that subject, it's okay. It's intellectual. But the student who wants to do a dissertation, let's say, on Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, [00:58:00] is not an intellectual in their eyes. Nonsense. I think a Jew who writes about Shimon ben Yochai is a very great intellectual, and therefore, I would say that the moral lessons that Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai left, bequeathed unto us, Rabbi Akiva, Moshe Rabbeinu, Jeremiah, Isaiah -- these are parts of a heritage that do constitute an extraordinary museum. An inner museum. A museum built in time, not in space. A museum built with song. A museum built with the imagery that brings us back always farther and farther to the origins of our people. A kind of mystical quest which moves every person to identify himself or herself with multitudes of sages and disciples, with multitudes of

creative spirits. [00:59:00] What a privilege it is to be a descendant of Isaiah. Really, think about it. A descendant of Isaiah. And when we repeat *chazon Yishiyahu*, that means we are his descendants, and we, therefore, pass on the morality that was his to this generation. Of course you can't. You must, therefore, take, I think, into account, whether you believe -- not just you -- whether the person believes in religion or not, that's his or her choice. But one cannot speak about morality or Jewish morality without knowing what the religious morality is. Then he may reject it, if he so wishes. But not out of ignorance. Ignorance is no morality.

Q: One last question. What do you see as the most important issue facing American Jewry in the next several years?

ELIE WIESEL: How to get into this hall. [01:00:00] (laughter) To come here often. Listen to the concerts, listen to the lectures, and really, my feeling, is to create a community. The difference between the Marranos and the modern Marranos in Russia was what? After all, both were oppressed. Both had to practice Judaism clandestinely. And yet, the Marranos disappeared. They vanished from Jewish history. Except, in some cases, where they came back, but generally they vanished. Whereas the Jewish Marranos in Russia came back. Why? Because the Marrano, almost by definition,

continued to practice Judaism for a while, but alone, in the cellar. And we saw something so beautiful, Marion and I, two days ago. [01:01:00] A *kos shel bracha*, a kind of - - a cup. And in that cup, it looked like a Christian chalice, or calice, whatever it's called. And so, the priest would come, they would think it's a Christian object, a ritual object. But when you opened it, you find everything Jewish in it. You have the little *mezuzah*, the little *Megillah* of Esther, the little cup for Shabbat. Everything was there. In that chalice. But they did it alone. In Russia, when the Jews wanted to affirm their Jewishness, what did they do? On Simchat Torah, they came to the synagogue. In the tens of thousands, singing and dancing, and I have seen them. I think I must have said it here, from this stage, that I will come before the *Beit Din shel maala*, before the Celestial Tribunal, and they will say, "Hey, hey, hey, what did you do out there? What did you do?" I will say, "You know what, I don't know what I have done really. [01:02:00] One thing I can tell you, I saw them dancing. Together." Thank you. (applause)

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