

Elie Wiesel Building a Moral Society

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive March 4, 1993

David Woznica:

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Rabbi David Woznica, director of the Bronfman Center for Jewish Life here at the 92nd Street Y, and I'd like to welcome you to the inaugural evening of this series, our forum on contemporary values. In your hand is a brochure describing the programs in Jewish life here at the 92nd Street Y, everything from lectures and classes, seminars and programs on a whole host of issues. I hope you'll join us, including the next two parts of this series with Rabbi Harold Kushner next Thursday night and then on the thirtieth of March with Police Chief Reuben Greenberg from Charleston, South Carolina. Also, index cards will be passed out for your questions, and we look forward to them.

Before I introduce our distinguished guest this evening, I just want to take a moment to introduce my [00:01:00] co-moderator for this series, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, who I am very pleased to be working with. Rabbi Telushkin is an author that is known to many of you. He has written on a diversity of areas of Jewish life, most recently his books *Jewish Literacy* and *Jewish*

Humor, and he also coauthored the screenplay of the movie *The Quarrel*. (applause)

Elie Wiesel certainly needs no introduction to any audience in the United States, and after a quarter of a century of speaking from this stage, a stage which seems to be transformed from a stage into an inviting classroom when he speaks, he needs no introduction at the 92nd Street Y. But I would like to take just a moment to remind us about a man who has reminded us of so much.

He is a Nobel Peace Prize winner and Boston University [00:02:00] professor and has worked on behalf of oppressed people for much of his adult life. His firsthand witnessing of the Holocaust has led him to use his talents as an author, teacher, and storyteller to defend human rights and peace throughout the world. His work has earned him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States Congressional Gold Medal, and the Medal of Liberty award, the rank of Grand Officer in the French Legion of Honor, and in 1986, the Nobel Peace Prize. He has written more than 30 books, for which he has won numerous distinguished awards. A native of Sighet, Transylvania, Elie and his family were deported by the Nazis when he was 15 years old. His mother and younger sister perished there; his two

older sisters survived. He and his father were later deported to Buchenwald.

Three months after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, he [00:03:00] established the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity to advance the cause of human rights and peace throughout the world. The foundation's first major project was an international conference of Nobel laureates convened jointly by Mr. Wiesel and French president Mitterrand. Seventy-five laureates from five countries met in Paris to discuss Facing the 21st Century: Threats and Promises. This was followed by a series of conferences on The Anatomy of Hate, cosponsored by Boston University; a conference with Haifa University; conferences in Oslo and in Moscow; and recently in New York, a conference on The Anatomy of Hate: Saving Our Children, cosponsored with Governor Cuomo. He lives here in New York with his wife and his son, and we are honored to have you open this series this evening. (applause) [00:04:00]

I'll start off with a simple question: Since our topic is Building a Moral Society, I'd like you to imagine, if you can, that a new post were created, Moral Advisor to the President, and that you were the appointee. Assuming that you accepted,

what would be the first issues that you would choose to speak about with President Clinton?

Elie Wiesel:

I think I wouldn't last long there, anyway. (laughter) I wouldn't last long with any president. I have a good background in that. I give advice -- unsolicited -- and the presidents don't listen, either here or anywhere, by the way. (laughter)

Well, suppose if I could speak and the president could listen, I would try to humanize, to humanize whatever [00:05:00] endeavors the administration would undertake. It must have a human face. When I travel anywhere, to a city, the city to me has a face. It's always one face. When I teach, I see a face in front of me. And I would advise the president that he should have a face, a face -- we take it, really, from our tradition. What I like about it is, remember, not long ago we read in the Bible, *Yosef HaTzaddik*, Joseph. Joseph was in Egypt, in Israel -- let me see -- in the Jewish land. His brothers sold him and tortured him, tormented him. In Egypt, he made a career, and at one point he made such a career that he almost forgot who he was. At that point, says Rashi, as you remember, he saw *ebuk yokno shel aviv*, he saw the face of his father, and he was about, [00:06:00] really about, to give up his Jewishness. It

was the face of his father. So I would say to the president, "Look for a face." And then you will discover, of course, which face, but. (laughter)

David Woznica:

Which face? (laughter)

Elie Wiesel:

I would listen first.

Joseph Telushkin:

Talking of the issues of the faces -- because one of the issues that we're thinking of today is what is going on in Bosnia. Now, I know you have written recently about it; you have visited the area. I want to pursue two things: what you think can be done -- because it parallels horrors of this century -- but even before then, I think you can do something even more directly educative to this audience. You know that part of the world so much better than we do. I'd venture to guess I'm not alone in not understanding exactly what's going on there. I know I put you on the spot -- I don't know if you understand "exactly" -- but what are the divisions [00:07:00] there in the (inaudible), and what did you find, and what can be done?

Elie Wiesel:

The early question, the first question, is easier to answer. It's a complex situation, which is not new. The divisions are ethnic, religious, and political, and economical and so forth. However, the hatred which is there, which I found there, I have not seen anywhere since 1945 -- anywhere. A modern war, as we know, is a faceless war. Somewhere there is a pilot or here there is a gunner, and he presses a button, and a hundred people die or a thousand people die. He doesn't know who they are, he never saw them, doesn't know their family, nothing -- press the button. In Yugoslavia, former Yugoslavia, people who know each other kill each other. It's more than a civil war; it's a kind of religious war, it's a fratricide. [00:08:00] People who are so angry because of memory. To me, it was particularly distressing because I believe in memory. I, as a Jew, believe that one of the most important lessons in history or in our religion is memory. I believe memory brings people together. I believe memory has a redemptive quality. There, it's the opposite: because they remember that they hate each other, because they remember what was done. One person says to me, "What, you want me to speak to that person? He raped my mother." The other one said, "He killed my sister." It goes on. That memory is there, and it's so strong.

Now, I went there really because of my Jewishness. I felt that as a Jew -- always as a Jew -- I had to be there and bear witness and see what is happening. Also, there's a Jewish community there. We arrived on a Friday afternoon, and my conditions then were that I don't want any dinners, [00:09:00] I don't want cocktails, I don't want nothing, just go and see the prisoners and come back. Little did I know. We arrived on a Friday, went to a press conference with the president, and after the press conference, the president was -- I think, compared to the others, I think better -- took me by my arm and led me to a door. I didn't know where the door led. And he opened the door, and there I was in the middle of a state dinner in my honor. It must be the entire diplomatic corps, parliamentary people there. What do you do? So, luckily -- you know, luckily, my Jewishness helps me -- and it was Friday afternoon, late afternoon, so we came to my place, to my seat, opposite the president. I asked for attention, and they thought I was going to bring a toast. I said, "Mr. President, I am a Jew. It's Friday evening. I have to go to shul." (laughter) [00:10:00] Which I did. (laughter) I left everybody and went to shul. And there is a small community. There's a chief rabbi -- poor man, 80, 85 years old -- and then I had dinner with him. A real Shabbat dinner, the kosher Shabbat dinner with him. But once you enter there, you are caught by their logic, you are caught

by their policy. Their target is not your target; their goal is not your goal.

So what I saw is, I must tell you, terrifying. Mainly in Sarajevo. Sarajevo, which is a city, the saddest city in the world today. There must be many sad cities in India these days, but the saddest city, because it's lifeless. It's under siege. And I believe, by the way, that siege, belaying siege, is a crime. It is criminal, because they wage war [00:11:00] not against military but against a civilian population. So you see children in the street, and they have nowhere to go. You see a store, a shoemaker without shoes, a grocery without groceries. The shell is there, often bombed. And you don't want to do that. After Sarajevo, in Sarajevo, the president there, Izetbegović, and I saw him too. So one Jew asked to speak, and he said, "Please, you must help us." In Belgrade, another Jew asked, "You must help us." I thought they wanted me to help them as Jews. Not at all. The Serbian Jews said, "Help us Serbs"; the Bosnian Jews said, "Help us Bosnians." The hatred has permeated that community too. So what to do? If [00:12:00] Clinton had somebody here, I would ask him to say I believe really only the dramatic, spectacular gesture, which I tried to explain in a piece last week in the *New York Times*, it would be so beautiful if the first foreign policy gesture coming from the

president would be to have a summit meeting in Sarajevo with many of the world leaders, and they would summon the five presidents of former Yugoslavia, and they would tell them what Carter told Sadat and Begin: "You are not leaving this place until a solution is found." It would be irresistible; they'd have to do something. So, see, this is what I would tell President Clinton if I were the advisor for 24 hours.

David Woznica:

That gets into the issue of military intervention a little bit, and I'm wondering if you see anything in the Jewish [00:13:00] tradition that can guide us on such an issue. We have often been critical of the United States for having not intervened on behalf of the Jews, on behalf of the world, 50 years ago. Is there anything in our tradition which can guide us as to when we might intervene or not intervene militarily in other parts of the world today?

Elie Wiesel:

Well, number one, of course there is the law in the Bible, *lo ta'amod al dam rei'echa*. You shall not stand idly by if people are killed, I think as Jews -- as human beings, but to me it's the same thing as a Jew. I believe a Jew is human as a Jew, and non-Jews may say the same thing about their condition. But we

have to follow that. If people are killed, children are massacred and starved, we cannot intervene? I must tell you, when Begin brought -- he was the first to bring boat people, to save [00:14:00] boat people and bring them to Israel -- I was very proud of Begin and of Israel then, that Israel was the first to see that refugees need help, and we Jews should help them, and he brought them to Israel. The same thing now -- I think there are 82 Bosnians who came to Israel. It's a gesture. It is a gesture. Now, what we should do, should we intervene militarily, that's the question. But I am not a military man. I never had a gun in my hand. I spoke to military people, to the UN people there, generals and so forth, and the opinions are divided. The main question is: Can one do it without beginning a new Vietnam? I'll tell you why. Under Tito, they were afraid of Russian aggression, so what they did under Tito, they dug caves under the mountains -- it's a mountainous area -- and filled those caves with weapons. [00:15:00] They have enough weapons there for years. But to start waging war there is not an easy thing. However, if a decision is made, I think they could do it. On the other hand, bombing certain positions would be easier. What is clear that they should stop it somehow. It's not good for the world, because it's only the beginning of a chapter. The next step will be Kosovo, which means you may

have the entire NATO involved in that war. You may have Europe at war. How to do it?

Joseph Telushkin:

You know what I think also comes as a shock? The realization that they are these phenomenally deep hatreds that no one really outside of these areas knew about. Did anybody predict -- I don't recall reading any articles that the breakup of communism was going to lead [00:16:00] to this sort of deep-seated, vicious hatreds. How much time is needed for a hatred to take off like that? I'm thinking. Everybody knew that there was anti-Semitism in Germany prior to 1933, but had somebody visited Germany in '36, '37, they'd probably come back and report, "You cannot believe the depth of hatred against the Jews," and yet how does it come about? That's what I'm wondering. Because 10 years earlier, people would not have reported that depth of hatred against the Jews.

Elie Wiesel:

Well, whatever happened to Eastern Europe in 1989, actually, was a defeat for all the intelligence services in the world. Not a single intelligence service could foresee what happened -- which, by the way, shows something to me. It means that they're all useless. (laughter) The KGB, the CIA -- nobody -- not even

the Mossad, which is probably the best -- they didn't know what was coming, and [00:17:00] it came as a surprise. Why as a surprise? Because they couldn't foresee Gorbachev's coup, they couldn't perceive Yeltsin's emergence. Nothing was foreseen; it came as a shock to everybody. Hatred was there, except under Tito. Tito suppressed everything else, so he suppressed that too. The same is true in Russia, what used to be the Soviet Union. The hatred for Jews, for each other, was there, but anyone who dared hate freely would go to jail, would be killed. Now, when the lid was off, everything came up. My problem with them is -- and I said it to all these people -- I said, "Look, what you are doing now, you are moving us to doubt democracy," which means under Tito, everything was all right. Many people were in jail, but -- not right for them (laughs) -- but everything was okay; there was no war. Now, under democracy, [00:18:00] there's war. Does it mean that the democracy failed? Would you prefer a benevolent dictatorship? No, I believe, personally, as I'm sure you do, that there is no substitute for democracy. It is still, with all of its flaws, the best, the most human, and the most civilized form of society that we can invent or imagine.

Joseph Telushkin:

And yet, I find it very appropriate that you were there with your message for yet another reason, because why do the intelligence services fail and why do a lot of the predictions fail? Because they think in terms of power blocks and other things, and I think the message you convey, and I think the message we feel Judaism conveys, is that the only significant issue is how to be a better person. It's interesting to me that Jews are not more obsessed, as a rule, with that issue, I mean, because we are the ones who suffered when society goes bad. And it's ultimately people who have the power and who are decent will not exercise it in an immoral, and people who don't have great power will [00:19:00] exercise it in an immoral way, and I wonder if that lesson is going to be picked up. It seems tragically not. I know for years I remember thinking if communism would end in Russia, there is no question that that act immediately would propel the world morally higher. First of all, as a Jew I'd be happy because I felt things in the Middle East would improve greatly, and then it would seem all over the world, there would be this great liberation. And I think it's one of the saddest things that the demise of communism in Russia so far does not seem to have made the world a much brighter place.

Elie Wiesel:

Well, the difference is that we Jews don't seek power. We are afraid of power; we don't want power. The only power that we want is a moral power -- even better than that, an intellectual power, the power *talmid chacham*, somebody who learns. The learner has power. What power do I have? I know how to use words. [00:20:00] Big deal. But that is the power. We don't want the real titles and positions -- never wanted that. That's why in the Torah we say we don't want kings, because the king represents power. What do we want? We want *Hanavi*, a prophet? Who elects him? Isaiah would fail at any election. Which prophet wouldn't fail? They would all fail. They were all hated by the people they came to prophesy to, and all of them were killed, by the way, sometimes tragically, by the people that they tried to improve. So what do we want, really, is learning. Go and tell Tito, then, or go and tell Milosevic today that, you know, the real power, Mr. Milosevic, is learning. (laughter) No, no. (laughter)

David Woznica:

That's interesting. I think that the only -- you were speaking of power as opposed to learning -- I think that what reflects that is that the only thing that the Jewish people [00:21:00] have ever crowned is the Torah.

Elie Wiesel:

Keter Torah, absolutely. *Keter Torah*. Yeah.

David Woznica:

[Monarch?] kings. Speaking --

Elie Wiesel:

Keter kehunah, also. There's also a crown of *kehunah*, of priesthood.

David Woznica:

Right. Since we're speaking about Judaism in the next generation of Jews -- and obviously it is clear that for far too many Jews, Judaism is perhaps not as central to their lives as we might want it to be -- I'm curious what you might say to a Jew, particularly a young Jew, who did not find Judaism meaningful in his or her life.

Elie Wiesel:

I would try to show the beauty, not even the truth, but the beauty, of Judaism for a Jew -- and I insist on that, always for a Jew. I would try to show to a Jewish boy or girl that there is so much excitement, [00:22:00] so much inspiration, such a richness in the Jewish tradition, in Jewish learning, in Jewish

culture, in Jewish law, that to waste it is silly. I would try to show to that boy and girl that a Jew who is not involved with his or her Jewish memory, which is all-encompassing, because it brings everything together, is mutilated. One cannot be fully human as a Jew if one doesn't know what Jewishness means. So I would take that boy and girl for a week and I would spend time really every day teaching a page here, explaining a law there, tell a story, and then see how all of that fits together. There [00:23:00] is a harmony in Judaism beyond the paradox -- because there are so many contradictions and paradoxes -- there is a harmony which no human being could get away with without seeing the beauty of it.

Joseph Telushkin:

When you say you would insist on it for a Jew, I'm curious. At this point, statistics suggest that over 50 percent of Jews are intermarrying. The future viability of Jewish life in America is going to depend in one respect on encouraging many of the non-Jews who marry Jews to convert to Judaism. Are you comfortable encouraging non-Jews -- I ask you specifically, in a sense, too, because you're so aware of the tragic fate people have often had being Jews -- are you comfortable encouraging non-Jews to convert to Judaism?

Elie Wiesel:

If already, let's say, if there is already a couple, and they are getting married because [00:24:00] he fell in love with her, she fell in love with him, and then they know that they are meant for each other -- because no matter what I say, they will get married -- then I think I would try to show the necessity, not only not to lose but to open ourselves, to open our doors. As you know very well, we don't encourage proselytism, we don't encourage conversion. But in these individual cases -- but there must be individual cases I would say yes.

Joseph Telushkin:

Well, except in a sense it's not individual cases anymore; we're now speaking of hundreds of thousands of Jews in America who we can project over the next decades are going to intermarry. So in a sense it involves a change in historic Jewish policy.

Elie Wiesel:

To me, every problem is an individual problem with a face, an individual face.

Joseph Telushkin:

You see an individual face, right.

Elie Wiesel:

I see the face.

Joseph Telushkin:

You see one couple. (laughter)

Elie Wiesel:

I see the face first of all.

David Woznica:

Was that an invitation that everyone could study with you for the next few weeks? (laughter) [00:25:00] By the way, I think I read that in your classes at Boston University, before a student can enroll in one of your classes, they meet with you ahead of time.

Elie Wiesel:

Most students, or with me or my assistants, but I want to know every student, and I see every student alone at least once a semester. I must confess to you, I am passionately involved with the life of my students. I love them. That's why I don't take sabbaticals. They could do without me; I cannot do without them. (laughter) I really am involved, because there's something... I always wanted to be a teacher. When I was a

child, really -- if you had asked me when I was 10 or 12, "What do you want to do?" I would say, "I want to be a *rosh yeshiva*," which means a teacher. Or a *melamed*, why not? And a writer. I wanted to write commentaries. I didn't think about novels -- who knew about novels? I didn't know about it. I wanted to write commentaries on the Bible and Talmud and so forth.

[00:26:00] And here I am, I'm a teacher and a writer.

David Woznica:

The more you've studied our tradition, have you found areas in which you find yourself in conflict with Judaism, and if so, how do you go about resolving that?

Elie Wiesel:

Oh, naturally. How can you not? We're always in conflict. Life is conflict; art is conflict; literature is conflict. Without conflict, there is nothing. We are meant to live conflicts.

David Woznica:

We do a good job. (laughs)

Elie Wiesel:

We do a good job. (laughter) But somehow, look -- I always come back to this. When I have my troubles, (inaudible). I had problems with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. Surely I had problems. Who didn't? And the only thing I said to myself, "All right, if I have problems with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, what's the fault of Rabbi Akiva? Why should he suffer? Or my readers or my students or something. Why should they suffer? So, again, I come back to the individual person. I say [00:27:00] I owe it to him or to her. And then the conflicts, they remain conflicts. You know the very beautiful story, the stories -- Reb Pinchas'l Koritzer tells a story that once a man came to him and said, "Look, rabbi, rabbi," he said, "I have doubts. I cannot study; I have doubts." So the Koritzer says to him, "All right, start fast twice a week." He came back, "Rabbi, I fast. It doesn't help. I have doubts; I cannot study." So he told him a story. He said, "It happened to me. Once I had doubts and I couldn't study. I had a page of the Talmud before me. I couldn't continue. But then I heard that the Baal Shem Tov, the Master of the Good Name, came into town. I knew where he [00:28:00] stayed. I went there. It was Mincha, so they davened, I davened. And then the Baal Shem Tov finished the Mincha service, the silent Mincha service. He made the three steps backward, and he looked around, and he looked at everybody. I was convinced he looked only at me, but so was everyone else.

And then," said the Pinchas'l, "I went back to my room and I opened the Talmud again." And he said, "You see the doubts remain doubts, the questions remain questions, but I could continue." So the questions remain questions, but I can continue.

Joseph Telushkin:

I want to ask you something that in a sense combines two issues David raised -- his opening issue, if you were the moral advisor to the president, and the issue of conflict. A lot of people, myself included, when we watch the news or read about it, think of things we would say to the president. I suspect a lot of people, if they actually met the president, [00:29:00] might shy away and not say it. I'm curious, were you -- one of the acts that you've done that received an enormous amount of publicity and was extremely important was your statement to President Reagan before Bitburg. Were you nervous before you did that? What went through your mind? I'm just curious. Because there must have been a combination of emotions.

Elie Wiesel:

I'll tell you something. I am afraid of a policeman more than the president. (laughter) Really. I'm not joking. I'm a refugee at heart. I remain the refugee. When I see a

policeman, my God. When I drive, [lately?], and take my wife, and I have to make a U-turn, I stop and she makes the U-turn. (laughter) When I come back from Europe, you know, I never buy anything -- I don't have time, I don't know what, I don't dare -- I never buy anything, and yet I'm afraid the customs officer will look at me and say, "Ah." (laughter) [00:30:00] The president? Why should I be afraid of the president? (laughter)

Now, on the other hand, look, I knew what was at stake. First of all, what very few people know, that before I gave that address before the Senate, when they gave me the Congressional Gold Medal, I sent him my speech. *Derech Eretz*, you must have respect for the office because he represents the American people. So I spent him my speech with a note: "Mr. President, this is what I'm going to say. There is still time to change." And then I met him before the ceremony and we spoke, and I said to him, "Mr. President, look, you still have time. You will be the hero if after you give me the medal and after my speech you come back and you simply say, 'Okay, I am not going.'" You see, I give him advice. He didn't listen. (laughter) But I felt mainly, really, I felt -- [00:31:00] not afraid, it was not fear -- I felt a responsibility. Because at that moment, it is the Jew in me who spoke, and therefore I felt that whatever I said somehow would imply, involve the Jewish people or Jewish honor.

And for me it's very important; Jewish honor is a very important concept. That was my main... But you know, they didn't understand it? They didn't know what was happening. Because the president read the speech, or at least I think he did, and then (laughter) I made my speech, and they didn't... I don't write *lashon hara*, I didn't write a book about (inaudible) *lashon hara*. But there was a Jewish advisor to the president who was a Jewish advisor to the president, o vey . (laughter) He's the one who tried to prevent me from really speaking, not the president. [00:32:00] And then I finished speaking. Before that, we were supposed to have the ceremony in the East Room, which has three hundred seats, but then the Bitburg affair began and they changed the place for the smallest room in the White House. Thirty people were there, including the Secret Service. They thought they were going to get away with it quickly. Little did they know there was going to be live television and so forth. So once we finished, the chief of staff called me and he said, "Look, on behalf of the president and myself, we want to thank you for the way you spoke, with respect, and therefore you made history today. And we have a suggestion: The president would like you to come with him on Air Force One." I usually use the shuttle, you know. (laughter) Air Force One? And I said, "What for?" He said, "You come with us to Europe." And [00:33:00] naively I thought that means that I convinced the

president. I said, "And then what? Where are you going?" He said, "We go to France, and only you speak and he speaks. Then we go to Portugal; only he speaks and you speak." And each time I said, "And then?" I was only afraid of one thing, that I will have to come back and teach my class in Boston. How would I come back? Would they give me Air Force Two? (laughter)

David Woznica:

A lot of people would have been pleased to see you in Air Force Two. (laughter)

Elie Wiesel:

I said, "And then?" And we went on and on. Then we go Bonn, and then we go to Bergen-Belsen; you speak, he speaks. I said, "And then?" He said, "And then we quickly go to Bitburg." (laughter) I said, "Mr. Regan, I don't want him to go; you want me to go?" (laughter) So how could you be a moral advisor to the president? (laughter)

Joseph Telushkin:

You had remained silent about the Holocaust [00:34:00] for many years until you wrote *Night*, and I believe you credit François Mauriac for its publication. You were a journalist invited to interview him? How did that lead to the publication of *Night*?

Elie Wiesel:

No, it was funnier than that. I was working for an Israeli paper in Paris, then, called the *Yedioth Ahronoth*. It was then the poorest paper in Israel. And when I left it, it became the richest paper in Israel. (laughter) So at that time I was there, and 1954, Mendès France became prime minister of France. And he caught the fantasy of the French people. Later on, he paid for it. The anti-Semites fought him and torpedoed him. But in the beginning, because he said, "I am going to finish the war in Indochina in 100 days." So it was a wager. My editor in Israel said, "You must get an interview [00:35:00] with Mendès France." I was [ready?], but he wasn't. I wrote letters, nothing doing. After all, why should he give an interview to *Yedioth Ahronoth*, the smallest paper, the poorest paper in Israel? And every morning I would get a telegram from my paper, "Nu? What's happening with the interview?" (laughter) So I wrote a letter to Mendès France, "Dear Mr. Prime Minister, If you don't give me an interview, one of two things will happen: either I will be fired or, because of the telegrams, the paper will go broke." (laughter) He answered me a nice letter and he said, "I cannot give you an interview, but if either of these two things happen, tell me; I'll give you a job." (laughter) Then I called up my editor. I said, "Look what happened."

"Oh," he said, "you see? Now you have relations with him.
(laughter) Get an interview." I couldn't.

Then one day I saw François Mauriac at the [00:36:00] reception at the Israeli embassy. And everybody knew that the guru, Mendès France's guru, was François Mauriac. He was his teacher, his moral teacher, really. He's the one who brought him to power. I came up to him. I said, "I would like to see you." He said, "Why?" "Interview." I was thinking I'll come Mauriac to interview Mauriac. At one point I'll say, "How about helping me?" You know, "You are a Catholic. I am a Jew; Mendès France is a Jew. Why shouldn't a Catholic help two Jews to get together?" (laughter) So he said, "Yes, I'll give you..." and we decided when to meet. I came to see Mauriac -- and I knew his work. He was a very, very great writer, and a decent person -- one of the very few writers in France who during the war behaved well. And each question I asked, he would answer with Jesus. He was in love with Jesus. I'm serious; for him, Christianity meant Jesus. Anything [00:37:00] I asked was Jesus. Finally I asked him about Mendès France, what's with Mendès France. "Oh," he said, "like Jesus. Jesus was persecuted; he is persecuted." I did something which I have never done in my life -- never. I was disrespectful. I got up and I said, "Mr. Mauriac" -- or in French I said *Maître* -- "Mr.

Mauriac, 10 years ago I have known hundreds of Jewish children, and they have suffered more than Jesus suffered on the cross, and we don't talk about them." And I left. And I was already at the elevator when I heard him come after me, and he pulled me back. We came back, and in the same room, we sat facing each other, and he began to weep. He wept. And we never [00:38:00] spoke about that period. Not a word. Then I left. He took me to the elevator again, and then he said, "Maybe you are wrong. Maybe you should talk about it." Then my period of silence of 10 years ended. I wrote in Yiddish, *Un di velt hot geshvign*, had it translated in French. I sent him the manuscript. And he personally went from one publisher to another to find a publication, and he did. (inaudible).

David Woznica:

You had also taken a vow of silence in India for a year, had you not?

Elie Wiesel:

That's something else. In India is a different story.

David Woznica:

What was the motivation? Was it literally a vow of silence, or you --

Elie Wiesel:

In India it was silence, yes. For the 10 years that I had in Paris, it was simply silence about this subject, not to discuss it. Even now, I speak so rarely about it because, again, I want to [00:39:00] maintain its purity. But at that time -- that was my main thing: One day I will bear witness, but it must be pure. *Ahavat halashon, sh'mirat halashon*. And in India, it was different. I came to India. At that time, I was taken by the Indian culture very deeply, very deeply. I knew the Upanishads by heart, the Gitas, the Vedas by heart. And there is one practice in India about silence too (inaudible). It didn't last long.

Joseph Telushkin:

The vow of silence about speaking about the Holocaust obviously ended, and you wrote *Night*. And today, I know, the same way Mauriac played such a role in helping to get your manuscript published, I know you have played that role in getting manuscript after manuscript on the Holocaust published. One reason, I suspect is -- a few reasons. One, I suspect, is you feel every [00:40:00] person has a right to have their story recorded. Another, I would guess, because I know it's why I think it's so important, is the fear of the growth of

revisionism. Do you remember the first time you ever came across somebody who denied that the Holocaust had happened?

Elie Wiesel:

I would not be in the same room with such a person. Literally, I would leave. Because --

Joseph Telushkin:

The first time, then, that you heard about it?

Elie Wiesel:

It happened, a question. I was once giving a lecture in a university, and then a question period came, and one question was, "How can you be sure that it's true?" or something. It was not a denier, it was in a question form. Even then, I refused to answer. I would never grant them the dignity of a debate, those revisionists. The problem is that they are getting stronger and stronger and richer and richer. They have much money, I don't know where from. They have much money.

I'll give an example. [00:41:00] I was in New Orleans a few months ago, giving a lecture. I was speaking about philosophy, and outside, they were distributing leaflets that the Holocaust never occurred. While I was getting the Nobel Prize, inside --

it's a ceremony, with all your blasé, it's a very special ceremony. While we were having the ceremony inside, outside there was a demonstration, and the deniers came from all over Europe, again, to demonstrate and to shout and to distribute leaflets that the Holocaust never occurred. They are well organized, and they know what they are doing. So of course I am worried about it. But I believe that the only way for us to answer is to work harder, which means to do it better, to have more courses, and I mean good courses, [00:42:00] and better books and students and teachers. Positively, but not fighting them.

Joseph Telushkin:

Is that going to make the difference? I'm wondering. It seems to me that the Holocaust is probably at this point in time the best documented atrocity in the history of the world. It's frightening about the perversity of anti-Semitism that people would try and deny this. Who do you suspect is the money behind it? The logical place, I would imagine, is somehow rooted in the Arab world, because the denial of the Holocaust leads to the delegitimization of Israel.

Elie Wiesel:

Well, we hear that Qaddafi is behind it, but I don't know.
That's what I heard, is Qaddafi sends the money, anyway.

Now, deep down, I am confident. I don't think that the memory will be wiped out. I think that somehow we Jews have such a commitment to memory that [00:43:00] this event will not be forgotten, and as we all know, this is the most documented and best documented event in -- not only tragedy, event -- in history. Because everybody wrote about it. The victims wrote about it. The dead wrote about it. The killers wrote about it. The neutrals wrote about it, also stood back. Everybody wrote about it. Millions and millions of documents and pictures and photos and films -- it's there. So I'm not afraid that that will be forgotten. I am much more afraid of the banalization, of the trivialization, of the cheapening of that memory.

David Woznica:

I want to shift a little bit to a contemporary issue, although it's not only contemporary. One of the things I love about Judaism is that everywhere that it seems to have touched, it has raised the value of human life to an infinite value. [00:44:00] I never feel that I am in a position to judge the suffering of another human being, but issues have come up lately which force us to confront something. We have a tradition which teaches us

a tremendous reverence for life and also a tradition which clearly has a passion to eliminate human suffering. Getting to the question of the right to die: Is there a time, assuming a patient has willed it, where we can or should turn off life support systems?

Elie Wiesel:

I must say, David, I have not really studied it well enough. I was asked this question by a cardinal, too, who wanted me about abortion, what is the Jewish position? I have not studied it well enough, and I am too responsible with my words. I cannot answer you on that. I am still studying.

David Woznica:

I was recently asked this question, and perhaps you can guide me here. How do you decide, [00:45:00] from a Jewish perspective, where we should put our resources? For example, in teaching a class at the UJA-Federation, many of the people who work there said to me that they're confronted by this question a lot: Should a Jew give all of his or her money to a Jewish tzedakah? Should they divide it? What percentage should go? To what extent should they occupy themselves with Jewish concerns, what percentage with non-Jewish concerns? How do you guide yourself in those issues?

Elie Wiesel:

Well, halachically, it's clear: *an'yay yiv'cha kodmim* , "May the poor of your town come first." I'll tell you what I said -- forgive me for repeating it -- I said it my Nobel address. I said, "Please don't give me your prize under false pretenses. My priority is a Jewish priority. I am first concerned with Jewish fears, Jewish problems, Jewish tragedy, whatever is Jewish, but my [00:46:00] priority is not an exclusive priority. I am also concerned with everybody else if I can. But to tell you that if I have, let's say, first -- if Israel is in danger, let's say, or we need to work for Syrian Jews who are still in prison, so to speak, or Yemen Jews -- you know there are still two thousand Jews in Yemen, and we don't even do anything about it, or not enough, at least. As a Jew, first I try to help them, but that is not in contradiction with what I say; they too are human beings, after all. Okay, they are Jews; they are human beings too. If we wouldn't help them, who would? So we help them. I try to help. I think we should all help. But then we should not exclude the others. Many people need us.

Joseph Telushkin:

I'm curious, with the centrality, obviously, of Jewishness in your life and your experiences in the war, had somebody been

speaking to you in the late '40s and you [00:47:00] had been talking about the rise of Israel, would you have assumed at that time in your life that you would end up living in Israel?

Elie Wiesel:

I wanted to go to Israel in 1945, meaning when we were liberated. We were four hundred youngsters, and the American army asked us, "Where do you want to go?" We didn't want to go home, of course; there was nothing, nobody to go home to. So we all said Palestine. And the British didn't give us visas -- a certificate it was called then. Then, I wanted to go.

We came to France, and a few of us got certificates because they had family there. Two of those people you know. It's Rav Lau, new chief rabbi of Israel, and his brother Naphtali Lavie, who was Dayan's advisor. We were together in the same place. The chief rabbi was the youngest; he was six years old then.

[00:48:00] And we came to France together, and then when they learned something that he reminded -- when they learned about the tragedy of Piotrków -- they come from Piotrków, and they lost their parents -- I taught the chief rabbi Kaddish. I taught him how to say Kaddish.

So at that time, we all wanted to go. We couldn't. Then, in 1947 -- I was a student in Paris, then. I lived in a children's home. And we read every day about the struggle in Palestine. So I wanted to go, and I wanted to join the Haganah. I read about Haganah; I want to join Haganah. So I came to the Jewish Agency. I remember the address, 143 Avenue Wagram, and the doorman opened. He said, "What do you want?" I said, "I want to join the Haganah." So he (inaudible; laughter). Then I found a Jewish [00:49:00] paper, Yiddish paper, called *Tsion in kamf*, and it was an illegal -- it's crazy -- it's an illegal paper, because it was a clandestine -- Irgun, I didn't know it, it belonged to Irgun. I didn't know that. And I saw the *Tsion in kamf*, it had the address of the printer. (laughs) So it was clandestine, but it had the address of the printer. That's the law. I wrote a letter to the editor saying, "I'm a student. I would like to do something. Can you help me do something for the Jewish people in Palestine?" The editor called me and he said, "Why not work for us?" So I began writing for that paper in Yiddish. And then I found out it was an Irgun paper. Then Israel became a state. At that point, I could have gone. I didn't. I must tell you, I had my own mysterious problems about why I don't live in Israel. I think any Jews would have such questions. Every Jew should ask himself or herself, "Why don't I live in Israel?" I am one of them. I also [00:50:00] ask

this question. And then I came to Israel as a French correspondent, a war correspondent, for a few weeks, and since then, I go back often.

David Woznica:

The story of your American citizenship comes to mind now. I don't know if it's well known. Could you share the story with us of how you became an American citizen?

Elie Wiesel:

Well, I was in France; I was stateless. I never had a passport in my life. I was stateless in France, and in France -- I'll tell you why. When we crossed the border from Germany to France, the train stopped and the police commissioner spoke to us in French. Nobody understood a word, (laughter) and there was no translator. And all he said is, "Who wants to become a French citizen should raise his hand." Nobody understood it, but there were some of us who always raised their hands, (laughter) so they became French citizens on the spot. In my file, [00:51:00] they wrote, "Refused French citizenship." (laughter) As a result, I couldn't become a citizen, and I had to go to police every year and renew my identity card or something. And believe me, golus is golus (Yiddish), you can't imagine the anguish one goes through.

Then I came to America for one year. Hardly had I arrived in America -- in New York, working for *Yedioth Ahronoth*. I remember, \$160 a month, including expenses. You know, I was so terribly poor then. I must confess to you something, which -- it's Purim, why not tell you a Purim story? It's a true story. I worked at the United Nations. I didn't have money to buy soap, so I stole the soap from the men's room from the United Nations. (laughter)

(break in recording) [00:52:00]

Elie Wiesel:

A society is judged and defined by its attitude towards the weak, the unprotected, the helpless, the sick, the children, the old, and the stranger. A society that does not behave correctly, morally, humanly towards the stranger, that society, you should know, is not moral. There is something wrong with that society.

Joseph Telushkin:

Now, it's interesting, I've found over the years -- I've often asked people at lectures when we're talking, I'll say, you know, there are three loves that are commanded among the 613 laws in

the Torah. People know "love your neighbor," they know "love God"; relatively few Jews are aware is that of course the third commandment [00:53:00]

Elie Wiesel:

Ve-ahavtem et ha-ger.

Joseph Telushkin:

-- is the love of the stranger.

Elie Wiesel:

With one exception, and I said it here at the Y once, at one of my lectures. There are three terms in the Torah that define the stranger. One is, what? One is *ger*, right? Which means a stranger. And *ger* is a good one, a good stranger, because the derivative is *lihitgayer*, ultimately he becomes a *ger tzedek*, a good, a just stranger. Then comes *nochri*, from *naychar*, somebody who is estranged. The first one, we are so gentle, we are so generous, we do everything good for that person. We must, "*Ve-ahavtem et hager*," as you said, "You must love the stranger." *Nochri* is a little bit less but still good. Then comes the third one, which is *zar*, [00:54:00] *zayin resh*. And there we are very harsh. *Zar k'yochal*, such a stranger who eats, let's say, from *zar ki kar* -- is such a stranger who is

coming close to the temple or to the sanctuary, *mot yumat*, that punishment. And I was wondering, Why are we so harsh with the zar? Until it dawned upon me: The ger is a real stranger. The nochri is a stranger. Zar is a Jew who is a stranger, which means those Jews who hate themselves, who hate us as Jews. That is the worst stranger that we face, and there, there is no pity in the Torah about it.

David Woznica:

Actually, I think that 36 times in the Torah, we are reminded to treat the stranger properly because we were strangers --

Elie Wiesel:

Ki gerim hayitem be-eretz mitzrayim, strangers in the land of Egypt.

David Woznica:

And I think the rabbis have a discussion about that [00:55:00] and say why so many times we are reminded of that. And one of the explanations that has always been very insightful that I read was that people, when they are in positions of authority who have been repressed for much of their lives often become an oppressive people as well. And the example that actually one of the students of mine gave to me was a child who had been abused

by their parents. We know that while most children who are abused by their parents do not abuse their own children, there still is a disproportionate amount of abuse from them. And you would think of all people who had suffered, they would be the most sensitive, but quite the contrary, it seems to be. So we're reminded, should we Jews be in a position of authority...

Elie Wiesel:

You know, after the Ten Commandments in the Torah, the next law is *V'eila hamishpatim*. [00:56:00] These are the laws you should *tasim l'fneyhem*, "Do not own slaves." Not only that, a slave who wants to be a slave is to be punished. And now, again, think about it psychologically. As you just said. Any psychologist will tell you, a slave, when that slave is freed, he wants to become an owner of slaves. And here, you have a tribe -- still a tribe. In Egypt, it was a tribe of slaves. Now they are free because God made them free. And right away, Moses says, "No slaves. Wait a second, no slaves." That's very beautiful. I like that. Because what is slavery? Humiliation. And we are against humiliation. That's why a ger, or a stranger, we must respect the stranger. Dignity, not humiliation.

Joseph Telushkin:

An odd question has occurred to me. You have been interviewed [00:57:00] many times and have written in many journals, and there's one American journal that over the years has interviewed virtually all major figures in American life that I don't think you ever appeared in, and I wonder if they've ever asked you -- *Playboy*. (laughter) Have they asked you and if you said no, I'm curious. (laughter)

Elie Wiesel:

Did they ask me? (laughter)

Joseph Telushkin:

I think it's inconceivable that they wouldn't.

Elie Wiesel:

Yes. They are still asking me. (laughter) Something to keep in mind, there's another journal that is worse than that. I didn't know. A man came 10 years ago, called me up, and he worked for NBC, and he wants an interview. I said, "All right, why not?" He came. And then I said, "Where is it for?" And he gave me the name -- I don't want to mention that other magazine -- and I didn't react. I said, "Okay." So he repeated. I said, "All right." And then I got suspicious. I said, "Could you send me an issue of that?" So he sent me [00:58:00] an issue.

(laughter) I had a problem. I didn't know what to do with it.
(laughter) If I put it in the wastebasket, what will my neighbors say? (laughter) So I thought of putting it in the street in a wastebasket. I said, "If somebody beside might see me." So what I did, I put it in all kinds of bags, (laughter) and then when I went -- I took a plane. When I went on the plane, (laughs) I left it somewhere. (laughter) So *Playboy* asked me many times, and even this month they're asking me, but I cannot see myself speak about Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai and the Besht next to certain very beautiful girls. (laughter)

Joseph Telushkin:

Let me ask you a --

Elie Wiesel:

That's not against the magazine. Some people like it, I'm sure.
But I --

Joseph Telushkin:

No, I --

Elie Wiesel:

-- didn't read it. I don't read it.

David Woznica:

I'm going to check my airline up top next time. (laughter)

Joseph Telushkin:

"Elie Wiesel was here," that's right. No, I was curious,
[00:59:00] because I have been amazed over the number of years
the prominent Americans -- in fact, Carter of course ended up
having tsuris from it --

Elie Wiesel:

Lust in his heart.

Joseph Telushkin:

-- but he probably felt he had to do it to show he wasn't so
strait-laced.

Elie Wiesel:

Many Jewish writers do that. Their argument is a good argument.
They said, "Look, we also have serious writers there.
Furthermore," they say, "you reach millions of people." It's
true, I would reach in that magazine alone more than I have
reached in my whole life with my books. (laughter) But I'll
tell you, my problem is I am not looking for numbers. Numbers
never matter to me.

Joseph Telushkin:

Let me ask you on a daily issue, because it's occurred to me -- I wondered what your attitude is. A perplexing moral problem which I find I'm totally inconsistent on. I think David finds the same.

Elie Wiesel:

One thing tell me. How come you know that so many writers for *Playboy*? (laughter; applause)

Joseph Telushkin:

Uh... [01:00:00] (laughter; applause)

David Woznica:

I could give you a dishonest answer.

Joseph Telushkin:

Your wife is here. (laughter)

David Woznica:

Right. I could give you a dishonest answer that has accuracy in it. Did you know that *Playboy* --

Joseph Telushkin:

This is Building a Moral Society.

David Woznica:

-- *Playboy* periodically publishes them as separate books without any pictures. (laughter) I have those books. (laughter)

Joseph Telushkin:

You know, Jimmy Carter -- President --

David Woznica:

Wait, I want to know something. I want to find out how fully honest you are. Prior to that man sending you that publication, you truly had not heard of it or didn't know what it was?

Elie Wiesel:

I knew what it was. That's not the magazine, though.

Joseph Telushkin:

Another magazine, which sounds suspiciously like the top floor of a house. (laughter)

Elie Wiesel:

I must -- I really -- I had no idea what it was.

Joseph Telushkin:

Let me ask you -- okay -- a daily perplexing problem. I find I am utterly inconsistent on the issue of giving to beggars on the street. Any time I [01:01:00] study something in Rambam or in the Gemara, the next day I find I give to a higher percentage. I find I'm inconsistent -- I give to some, I don't give to others, there's no particular logic. I'm more apt, I find, to give to women beggars. Do you have a response? I mean --

Elie Wiesel:

I have the same problem, but I give also because I know that what they say, "We haven't eaten" -- usually it's one person saying, "I haven't eaten today." How can I not? I know very well that that person will go and buy alcohol or something else, but I cannot, I cannot not put my hand in my pocket and give. Not much, but at least [inaudible]. You know, the Talmud, "*yado al elyonav yado al tachtonav*, "Better to have your dollar go out like that than like that." So.

David Woznica:

I'm also curious, going back -- by the way, President Carter was here a few months ago, and he related a very funny story about that [01:02:00] *Playboy* interview, about reflecting the fact

that he lusted in his heart for other women. Apparently he was doing a book signing here in New York about two months ago, and there was a woman who walked up to him as he was -- and I hope I'm relaying this story right, because I heard it secondhand -- but apparently as he was signing her book, she said, "Excuse me, President Carter, if you're lusting, I'm still around."

(laughter)

I want to go to a more serious question. Do you believe in a sense of ultimate justice, and does that in any way impact on your view or your sense of an afterlife?

Elie Wiesel:

Ultimate justice, no, because that is called utopia. As you know, *Utopia* was written by Thomas More, who was a contemporary of Erasmus. *Utopia* means "nowhere"; there is [01:03:00] no such place where only justice exists. No. But the afterlife is a different story. Afterlife is something so personal that one day I do, one day I don't. But I must, because if I say Ani Ma'amin every day, I repeat the Rambam, the Rambam *shlosh esray*, 13 Principles of Faith, you say -- he believes in *chayay ha'maytim*, that means he believes in an afterlife. But to tell you that I know why or something, I don't know.

David Woznica:

Then it's in some way, though, attached to an element of faith.

Elie Wiesel:

It's faith, but justice is something else. No, I believe that a society, a just society, is a society that wants to be just.

It's not that it is -- it cannot be. A society is one that has moral aspirations, and it is aspiring to be just. And the same is true of a young person. Look, remember the Seer of Lublin used to say, "I prefer a wicked person who says and knows that he is wicked to a just person who knows [01:04:00] that he is just" -- a tzadik who knows that he is tzadik. Because there is something not only about honesty, about sincerity, but also about aspiration. I want to be better, I want to improve, I know I am not perfect. I know everything I do -- probably most things that I do are not correct. That is a precept which is mine.

Joseph Telushkin:

But it strikes me, I think there might be another reason as well. A mutual friend of ours, Wolf Kelman, alav ha-shalom, used to say to me, "In my life, I've gotten in much more trouble through my *yetzer hatov*, my good instinct, than my *yetzer hara*, my bad instinct, because I can guard against that." But very often, when we do things out of good, a lot of the great evils

that have been done in history have been done by people out of good. Very few people ever said they've acted in the name of evil.

David Woznica:

I think you once said that a Jew may love God, a Jew may fight with God, but a Jew may not [01:05:00] ignore God. Is that...?

Elie Wiesel:

I mean, a Jew can be Jewish with God, against God, but not without God. It's true. Now, many Jews who are atheist, of course, will oppose me, but that means they are against God. But I believe so. God is so powerful throughout Jewish history and so much part of Jewish sensitivity, you cannot ignore it. Even if you think you do, you don't.

David Woznica:

Then how do we instill a sense of Godliness in our Jewish children and in the next generation of Jews?

Elie Wiesel:

By trying to be more human. By trying to be better. By learning. I come back to saying learning, always learn. If you

ask me, really, what a Jewish family should do first, I would say absolutely learning. First of all, learning.

Joseph Telushkin:

And where would you tell people to begin? [01:06:00] With the Torah?

Elie Wiesel:

Anywhere, anywhere. Of course I would begin with Torah for children, and then go to the commentaries. But, you know, we can study one verse of the Torah for a week or for five weeks, just one verse. Take the first verse, "Bereshit bara Elohim." There's enough there for five weeks.

Joseph Telushkin:

Have you felt incursions of God in your own life? I'm thinking of something that came up as we were speaking before we came out here, and you were mentioning to David and I a very unusual incident that had happened to you in India where a fortune teller had stopped you and wanted to prophesy your future. If you could tell it. I mean, it was...

Elie Wiesel:

I'm here for that. I'll tell you. (laughter)

Joseph Telushkin:

I'll tell you this. Your repartee there was so quick, I was impressed. A fortune teller stopped Elie in the street and said, "For five rupees, I'll tell you your future." He said, "I'll give you 10 rupees [01:07:00] if you can tell me my past."
(laughter)

Elie Wiesel:

Nevertheless, about God. Some of you may know what I'm trying to do. I rarely speak about God. Like Kafka, I try to speak to, but not about. But there is something I do believe, at least I do believe, that the Jew in me has faith and will maintain his faith in spite of everything else. Not because of everything else, but in spite of everything else.

David Woznica:

Does that have anything to do with the concept of being chosen?

Elie Wiesel:

You mean the Jewish people chosen?

David Woznica:

Yes.

Elie Wiesel:

I think we say it in our prayers, " *Ata vichartanu mikol ha'amim,*" "You have chosen us." But I do believe that here [01:08:00] we are trying to show something to other people as well, that every human being is chosen, every human being is unique. The enemy tried to reassure itself, himself, that in doing away with us, the Jewish doctors, Jewish writers, is nothing, because nobody, they used to say, is irreplaceable. And I oppose that. No human being is replaceable. You remember, the Talmud says -- what a beautiful image -- which actually, if I paraphrase it, "Since the beginning of time, to the end of time, there will never be another you." You may have children, people who resemble you, people who have certain traits of character which are yours, but never will there be another you.

[01:09:00] When you think about it, maybe this is *b'tzelem Elohim*, the image of God, the uniqueness of the human being, that we are all unique, all of us. Adam was not Jewish, Adam was a human being, and Adam was created in that image, meaning that we must see the center of the universe in every human being.

Joseph Telushkin:

And you know what else that makes me think, that not only when you think of the individuals who've been killed, but the other Talmudic insight on that, where God calls out to Cain, *d'may achicha*, and uses the plural, "the bloods of your brother," why "the bloods"? The bloods of all his descendants. Within 50 years from now, every one of the Jews who perished in the Shoah would no longer be alive, but the cry continues for eternity, because I think, Who would have come out of those people?

David Woznica:

One final question, then, I think, for the evening --

Elie Wiesel:

And then we go to Pesach, the Four Questions of Pesach.

(laughter)

David Woznica:

I have a feeling that we would all be very pleased [01:10:00] to stay here (laughter) until Pesach with you tonight. Have you ever thought of running for political office?

Elie Wiesel:

Sure, for president! (laughter) And you will be my moral advisor. (laughter) Never. I never wanted any position. I

wouldn't get it. They should be crazy to appoint me to anything. What do I know about these things? But I am so afraid of power, really -- not only of other people's power, of my own if I had one. I wouldn't know what to do with it. So I never thought...

David Woznica:

Well, then I have one more final question. (laughter) The truth is, Jews do have power in Israel. How do you feel about American Jews being critical of Israeli policy, and if you feel they shouldn't be public in their criticism, for those who might ask how they should criticize, what do you suggest?

Elie Wiesel:

I can tell you about myself. [01:11:00] What others do, I have no right to criticize them either. I do not tell Israel what to do. I cannot. I don't live there. And I go there for maybe the wrong reasons. When Israel, let's say the Scud missiles, I went there. I was there, I had the Scuds falling. Okay, big deal. I didn't want to put on my gas mask. I'm so cumbersome. I don't know what to do. Therefore I made my decision for myself that all I owe the Jewish people, I owe Israel, is Ahavat Israel. I love Israel -- people of Israel, and I love the state of Israel. But because I do not live in Israel, I put certain

obligations which I must adhere to, meaning even when Israel does things that I don't agree with, then I find ways how to tell [01:12:00] Israeli leaders that I don't agree, and so forth. But I would not write about it in the *New York Times*.

David Woznica:

Thank you. (applause)

M:

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