

Elie Wiesel Contemporary Experience: All Rivers Run to the Sea

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive November 4, 1993

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Last night I saw my father in a dream. His unshaven face remained the same, frozen in the same expression, but his clothes changed constantly. Sometimes he was wearing his shabbat suit, sometimes the striped rags of beings that were damned and doomed. Where did he come from last night? From what landscape had he fled? Whose emissary was he? Did I ask him? I no longer remember. I remember only his sad, resigned heir. He wanted to tell me something. That was clear by the way his lips [00:01:00] moved, but no sound emerged. Suddenly in my sleep -- or was it in his? -- I find myself doubting my senses.

Was this my father? I was no longer sure. Certainly the resemblance was there, but that didn't mean much. In a dream, certainties are no sooner sketched than they tend to mingle and blur. Dawn and twilight, reality and fantasy merged together. And yet, it was indeed my father who appeared before me last night in a dream. Bearer of a message, of a warning, perhaps. My heart pounding, I woke in a sweat. An insane, excruciating thought crossed my mine. He has come for me.

What you have just heard is the opening of a [00:02:00] first book of memoirs to be published in Paris first next year and here a bit later. Its title is a word from the Ecclesiast, *All the Rivers Flow into the Sea and The Sea Is Never Full*. *kol ha'nichalim holchim el hayam v'hayam aynenu malay*. So the first volume will be called *All the Rivers Flow into the Sea* and the second *And the Sea Is Never Full*. I read these lines, and I'm going to read perhaps some more if time permits and your patience does not leave you before we leave each other, because this is a tradition in this place for the last 27 years that the fourth session that we have together is first of all to recapitulate what we have learned until now and to tell you more about what I am doing.

You are a kind of board of trustees in my [00:03:00] (laughs) position as a guest, *ger v'toshav*, a guest in this hall, so I must tell you what I am doing. I'm doing this. Why? I'll tell you later. First, a few parentheses to be opened. Since we are now at the end of the series this year, I would like to thank my friends here who have worked for this series, Amos Hirschbein, the son of Peretz Hirschbein, who was one of the greatest Yiddish writers and playwrights that Yiddish literature ever

had, Rabbi Woznica who is in charge of Jewish education, and of course Sol Adler, who is the director of the Y.

May I also thank Matthew, but I won't give you his name, and [00:04:00] you for coming, coming again or coming for the first time. It is good to be together and to study. I believe in studying in *chavruta*, meaning alone one cannot study. A Jew alone is never alone. A Jew must be with someone in order to feel that he or she belong to each other through tales, through laws, through the study of laws and tales. So for the moment, as we are about to conclude another series of encounters, encounters with ancient Jewish masters and their timeless tales, let's review a few of the lessons we have learned until now.

From the story of Miriam the prophetess we learned that to be close to God and his chosen servants offers no immunity against injustice and pain. Was she right in slandering her brother? Humanly maybe, morally [00:05:00] not at all. Why was Moses not angry with her? Moses understood her frustrations. He felt, perhaps, that she was punished enough by her self-inflicted wounds to her own pride. In her outburst she demanded equality of rights and duties for herself and Aaron. Didn't she understand that a people in critical times needs one leader and

not many? But yet, I like her taste for democracy, but the people of Israel in the desert wasn't ready for it yet.

What do we learn from Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of the high priest? In spite of the negative comments we read, my heart goes out for them. What did they aspire to? An increased sense of holiness. What's wrong with that? Thy [00:06:00] wanted to go beyond their capacities, break the chains that tie human beings to their condition. They thought, as we said, *le'hosif ahavah al ahavah*, push their love for God to the end and beyond. What's wrong with that? Nothing, except they were wrong in separating themselves from their community. Whatever they dreamt of achieving, they could have done it from within the community, from inside the law. To break the law in order to save it is wrong.

As for Samson last week, what lessons did he teach us? First of all, I think it teaches us that silence is man's friend. Had Samson not confided -- forgive me -- in his women, he would have ended his life peacefully. Maybe. [00:07:00] At the end of our last study session we retold the day, the moving day, the heartbreaking day Samson chose to die in an outburst of rage and thunder. And we recalled from the text his last loud outcry, *tamut nafshi im Plishtim*, may my death be the death of the

Philistines, which means if I die, the enemy will die with me. His wish was granted. The temple in Gaza collapsed, and as we know, it buried all who were in it.

Question: since everybody died, how do we know what he said?

(laughter) And the answer is, we mentioned a young boy who let him [00:08:00] into the temple. And I said how deeply moved I was by this adolescent who was Samson's last friend. And I said I wish I could know more about him. I wish I knew his name and his fate, the way he looked, the way he lived, the way he laughed. I also know, and we know it from the text, that Samson liked him. And therefore, Samson spared his life by sending him away. I imagine that the boy didn't go very far.

I think he left the temple of Dagon, of Dagon, which is the god of the Philistines, and I think that from outside he heard Samson because Samson, who was [00:09:00] so strong, so powerful, must have had a powerful voice. He heard Samson say, *tamut nafshi im Plishtim*. And I think that it was he, that little boy, that young adolescent, who told the story. Samson entrusted his last friend with his memory. I am moved by that because some of us, even in this hall, remember a time when older men and women did whatever they could over there to save younger comrades, not only their own children, for all children

became their children, saying to them, you are young. You may live. And therefore we will help you because you will tell the tale.

Now, what do they all have in common? A commitment [00:10:00] to memory. Whatever we do, wherever we turn, we stumble upon the biblical injunction against forgetting. We must remember, for without memory our very being is diminished. If we forget, Moses is forgotten. If we forget, we are forgotten. Without memory there could be no culture, no civilization, no humanity, no friendship, no love. Could the Jewish people have survived without our memory of Samson or if Yiftach or Menashe or Moses or Miriam? I don't know. But I do know that since they did exist, they must be remembered.

And so we remember the good and the bad, the old and the young. We remember those who [00:11:00] remember. We remember those who remember who they were and even those who chose to remain on the sidelines of history. We remember even our enemies, who are forgotten by their own descendants. We remember surely those who are our accomplices, our friends, our allies, our fellow students. And you are my witnesses that in this hall of learning we always remember those who most probably forgot the time or were stuck in traffic. (laughter) [00:12:00]

The emphasis here has always been on study, and our goal was to share our passion for study, study of Bible, which is the text of all texts, study of Talmud, of Hassidism, study of all the subjects that have been bequeathed unto us from generations past. In Sanhedrin there is a beautiful and sad story. When Rabbi Eliezer, of whom we have spoke many, many years ago, and of whom we may speak again next year, when Rabbi Eliezer Ha-Gadol, the great Rabbi Eliezer died, his friend and disciple Rabbi Akiva, of whom we have also spoken, wept, lamented, and said, [00:13:00] he used the expression that Elisha, the prophet Elisha had used when watching prophet Elijah, Eliyahu Hanavi, ascending into heaven on a fiery chariot.

And he said *Avi, avi, rechev Yisrael u'farashav*, my father, my father, the chariot of Israel and his horsemen. And Rabbi Akiva continued. And listen to the expression. It's very literally beautiful. He said, which *harbei ma'ot yesh li v'ein li shulchani l'hartzotam*, which means I have many coins but no money changer to sort them out. Comments Rashi, what does it mean, I have many coins? *Harbei sh'eilot yesh li lish'ol v'ein l'mi lish'ol*. I have many [00:14:00] questions to ask, but there is no one I could ask. This is sad because Rabbi Akiva himself was a great sage. It is sad because Reb Eliezer left so

many friends and colleagues and disciples that Rabbi Akiva could have gone and shared his questions with them.

But it also means that Rabbi Akiva was so fond of him, although Rabbi Eliezer had problems, he was almost excommunicated, terrible problems -- which rabbi doesn't, but -- (laughs) but what we like is the expression. I need, said he, I need Reb Eliezer for the questions that I would like to ask him. Well, we have questions too, and we shall speak for the moment about these questions. First of all, really, what should we talk about [00:15:00] next year? Number two, more practical ones. As we leave the twentieth century behind, we stumble upon more and more difficulties, obstacles, questions, some old, others new, and still others all of the above.

Things are moving in the Middle East. Hope has appeared on the horizon. The peace process seems irreversible. And as a result, with all the obscure fear that we have, there will be less funerals in Israel and beyond its borders, and that's good. Naturally, the fanatics under Abu Nidal and Ahmad Jibril will try to use violence and terror to celebrate and wage continued warfare. They must be disavowed and disarmed, and they will be. And lo and behold, who would have believed last year or 10



[00:16:00] years ago or 20 years ago that it will be the Israeli Shin Bet will protect Arafat? (laughter)

Strange as it may sound, there used to be an element of humanity in terrorism. I know it's a contradiction in terms, but at least two stories can be found in Dostoyevsky and Albert Camus. In the beginning of the century terrorist revolutionaries plotted to assassinate the military governor of Petersburg. And the plan was ironclad. They knew the itinerary the official carriage would follow on that Sunday to go from the palace to church. And there were men on every corner waiting with a bomb or with guns. But at the last moment the crown prince and the crown [00:17:00] princess chose to take their children with them. And the attackers simply could not bring themselves to fire at children.

Modern terrorists do not have the same scruples. More often than not in Israel until now, children were their targets and victims. Remember Ma'alot. Now, have we learned from our mistakes? Ireland remains a medieval battlefield. India still endures religious warfare. Five thousand people died in Kashmir in the last three years. The former Soviet Union has yet to learn to live in freedom and democracy. What can, what must be done to save Shevardnadze's Georgia from extinction? What can

and must be done [00:18:00] to stop anti-Semitism in Romania, Hungary, Poland, and other countries in Russia itself for the Pamyat?

What can be done today to improve the human condition and eliminate the ghosts of hatred that have plagued and haunted so many generations during a century filled with violence? Vietnam has changed America just as Afghanistan has transformed the Soviet Union. Both super powers put a stop to ideological or military intervention, but is this the solution to other people's tragedies? Will Somalia's children be condemned to starve and Sarajevo's orphans to bleed to death? What are the obligations of those who do not suffer towards those who do? At what point does [00:19:00] hesitation turn into weakness and weakness into passivity, thus passivity into complicity?

Since I have been in Sarajevo last year with some very close friends, I cannot forget its wounds. I have seen the place where a then unknown man named Gavrilo Princip fired at the Austro-Hungarian crown prince. And few -- those few shots that triggered the First World War, causing some 20 million casualties, were somehow reverberating in the air. Now, will the history of the twentieth century be a tale from Sarajevo to Sarajevo? How is it possible that there is still a siege around

Sarajevo? I believe that a siege means a war against civilians, and [00:20:00] therefore, those who are responsible for it should be tried for crimes against humanity.

From a magnificent Hebrew/Yiddish writer Aaron Zeitlin, whom both my wife Marion and I loved, used to come to see him very often, he and his wife. He was the son of Hillel Zeitlin, the legendary Hillel Zeitlin of Warsaw, one of the greatest journalists, polemicists, mystics. He is the one who went to Treblinka wrapped in a tallit with a Zohar under his arm. Aaron Zeitlin had blue eyes, innocent eyes. And the problem was that his wife learned that I loved latkes. (laughs) So whenever we came there we had to eat latkes. But it was so great. And I learned from this man and with this man so much.

And he had [00:21:00] written a poem which is a beautiful theory about Sarajevo. He wrote, the crown prince who was killed was known as a hunter. Hunting was the passion of his life. So one day in heaven the deer decided to do something to stop the massacre of their kinfolk. They constituted a tribunal. A judge was named, a jury sworn in. There was a prosecutor, and the defendant was granted due process. Well, he was given a lawyer. And one after the other, witnesses for the prosecution

appeared before the court and told their tale. They had been murdered by the crown prince just for no reason.

They hadn't done anything to him except he liked hunting. After lengthy [00:22:00] deliberations, the verdict was announced: death, not by hanging but by a kind of firing squad. And Gabriel Princip, who didn't know it, was chosen to act as executioner. So you see, Gabriel Princip killed the crown prince who had killed deer, and as a result, 20 million people died in war. We have said it so often. It bears repetition. There is no chance encounter in history. I always repeated Nikos Kazantzakis' aphorism that he found on an Etruscan tomb. And we used to meet, and we would exchange stories.

I would give him Hasidic stories, and he would give me other stories. All this, by the way, of course, [00:23:00] is part of my memoir. So you read it, if you read it. And what he found on the Etruscan tomb is beautiful. In French it was (French), which means, two clouds meet, and it is not because they meet that there is a spark. They meet so there'll be a spark. In Sarajevo where we were we had met the leaders on both sides, we had met Jews, but before that we were in Belgrade. We went there, actually, for Thanksgiving Day. All of us, we [00:24:00] left the Thanksgiving celebrations to go.

For me it wasn't a big deal. I don't like Turkey. (laughter)

I'm afraid the turkeys too may have a tribunal there.

(laughter) I always thought, really, that there must be somewhere there in heaven, a kingdom for chickens, and what they must be against Jews. If they become anti-Semitic -- (laughter)

In Belgrade we arrived on a Friday afternoon. And, you know, we had made plans and conditions that I said again and again, please, no meals, no cocktails, no receptions. We want to go and see those who suffer but not those who do not suffer. We want to see those who are hungry, not those who are not hungry. And they, of course, promised everything. It's like Arpege, you know. Promise her everything but give her nothing. And they promised, but they didn't give. So we came in the afternoon from the [00:25:00] airport.

We went to the president's palace, and we had a press conference, and we talked, and we talked. And I repeated my request and my please, please, don't use me, and don't give me dinners. Afterwards the president promised. The moment the press conference was over the president took me by his arm and led me to a door. I thought he would lead me outside. The door opened. Lo and behold, we were in the middle of a state dinner.

Parliament, cabinet ministers, diplomatic corps, chandeliers. You know, sometimes I know how to deal with presidents, so we sat down. I asked for attention, and they thought I was going to give a toast.

And I did rather, as I said, Mr. President, I am a Jew. It is Friday afternoon, Friday evening, and a place of a Jew Friday evening is in a synagogue. So I left. (laughter) [00:26:00] (applause) And all of my friends came with me, and there was -- I collect Shabbatot, I collect Sabbaths. This is one of the Sabbaths I collect again. (laughter) I don't think that they have still recovered from their surprise. And we spent a marvelous Shabbat dinner with the chief rabbi and a few Jewish people there in shul.

What is Sarajevo? What is happening, it's fanaticism. The twentieth century was marked and shaped by political fanaticism just as the middle ages were poisoned by religions fanaticism. Fortunately, society has shown its will to resist it. In fighting fanaticism we are fighting not only for human freedom on the planetary scale, but I believe we are fighting for God's honor and God's freedom. As we move towards the twenty-first century we realize more and [00:27:00] more that the planet is

shrinking. Never before have so many people known so much about so many other people.

Our age has distinguished itself with its phenomenal discoveries in the field of communication. Whatever happens anywhere, we know about it everywhere. And so we can no longer claim innocence through ignorance. If cruel policies still oppress people anywhere it is also our fault. If Pamyat and its followers and sympathizers have unashamedly resurrected the specter of anti-Semitism in Russia, is it their fault alone? If the Ustashes are making a kind of comeback in Croatia, is it their fault alone? If in Poland there are swastikas on the walls?

If in Hungary is anti-Semitism, in Romania are anti-Semitic papers, is it their fault alone? [00:28:00] If children starve in Asia, aren't we also to blame for it? If not enough progress has been made in the area of nuclear disarmament, aren't we all going to pay for it? So on the threshold of the twenty-first century we are permitted to declare that diseases and disasters and other forms of evil will no longer be limited geographically or nationally. Whatever might happen to one community will ultimately affect all communities. And this ought to be the essence of education.

Our enemies are perhaps persuaded that they could eliminate a people with impunity, and the world stood by. They were wrong. I believe that in killing Jews they killed more than Jews. I always think about the million or million and a half Jewish children [00:29:00] who were killed. How many Nobel laureates were killed when they were one or two or three? One of them might have discovered a remedy to AIDS, a cure for cancer or for heart diseases. In allowing them to be killed, the world has punished itself. But then, the era we live in is because we are coming so close and because we have those memories of the century, we live in special times. I call it biblical times.

Look, when have Jews had such power in their land? When have Jews attracted so many political candidates who tried to please us, during the election, of course? (laughs) When was [00:30:00] the independence of Israel or the Jewish state so secure? There have never been that many yeshivot and Jewish cultural centers and Jewish studies programs as there are now. When have so many men and women from such a variety of social and intellectual spheres become so interested in things Jewish? Students of historiosophy have always complained that Jews have been misunderstood by others.



In Talmudic times our sages were afraid of the false knowledge gentiles may have of our tradition and culture, and that is why the Talmud, the oral tradition, had in the beginning to remain oral. It was forbidden to write it down. Because the tradition had to be preserved and protected and not fall into the possession of the wrong people. Our sages were afraid that outsiders may receive fragmentary, thus distorted notions [00:31:00] of our spiritual heritage and misuse them against the Jewish people. The fact remains that since antiquity many writers have willingly or unwittingly projected a distorted image of our faith and practice.

Hecataeus of Abdera was the first gentile to write a book about Jews, and it contained many errors. It was transcribed by a disciple of Aristotle named Theophrastus. In that book we read that Moses built the city of Jerusalem, not David, Moses. We also read in that book that Jews celebrate their holidays by looking at the stars. The blood libel, the infamous and dangerous murderous blood libel was invented by Democritus the Greek and Apion from Alexandria. Democritus claims that [00:32:00] once in seven years, Jews would gather in their temple in Jerusalem to sacrifice a stranger to a golden donkey.

Apion maintains that Jews meet once a year to swear solemnly to hate all Greeks. In the middle ages we were accused of poisoning the wells in villages and desecrating Christian altars. And how many good or not so good people are there still around who still sincerely believe, with pain, that we crucified Jesus? There is an anecdote about a Christian boy who had just come home from church on a Sunday in Eastern Europe and attacked a Jewish schoolmate shouting, "You killed our lord." But the Jewish boy said, "But what are you talking about? That happened [00:33:00] 2,000 years ago." "Yes," said the attacker, "But I just found out about it." (laughter)

But in this case the Christian boy proved his gullibility, but the Jewish boy proved his ignorance. It never happened. But the Jewish boy heard in this anecdote's vicious accusations so often that he didn't question their validity. And that is the worst thing that can happen, when we see ourselves with the eyes of the enemy. And this happened often in history, especially again in this century during the worst of times when the enemy would, let's say, drive Jews to starvation and then laugh at them. Look how weak they are. They would beat them up and say look how ugly they are.

Ignorance is timeless. [00:34:00] Ignorance of Jewish matters is boundless, and it hurts. I believe it hurts to see Jewish men or women turn their back to the cultural treasures of our heritage. But then ignorance existed and always existed even in intellectual circles. That Dostoyevsky thought that Jews wear tefillin on both arms, that's not so terrible. Why should he know better? But how many Jewish intellectuals know what is written inside the tefillin? Franz Kafka, in his honesty, wrote one of the great masterpieces in his work, the letter to his father where he is angry at his father for not teaching him Judaism.

And when Kafka began studying it on his own it was late. He was already ill. Why did Sigmund Freud have such an antagonism to Jewish religion? [00:35:00] But then to all religions, let's be fair. He somehow -- couldn't he who loved his wife so much -- Martha, she was a granddaughter of a rabbi, and he loved her. He wrote her 1,500 love letters. Only Freud could do that. (laughter) But he forbade her to observe tradition. She, poor woman, wanted to light Shabbat candles, and he said no. Freud never celebrated Passover. Freud never set foot in a synagogue, but on the other hand, how can one not admire him? He was one of the very great geniuses of this century and of many centuries.

And furthermore, he never converted. He never even flirted with conversion. He was a proud Jew and a great scholar. And when the chips were [00:36:00] down, he chose, of course, to declare his Jewishness open. About Zionism, he was for it, and he said so. But I wonder always. There are scholars who are interested in and fascinated by vanished traditions. They want to discover anything about vanished civilizations. But how come that they are less interested in the only one that has never gone under? I hope you understand me correctly. I am not speaking about religion or practice.

I am not God's policeman or spokesman. I plead for learning. I plead for a return to the text. I plead for study. I plead [00:37:00] for the study of hidden beauty. Speaking of mysticism, Gershom Scholem once said mystics, mystics were those who centuries ago already knew what we are still to discover. And that applies to prophets and Talmudic sages and Hasidic masters. That is why, for 27 years, some of us have gathered here to study together their fascinating tales filled with a quest for truth and passion.

A great German novelist, German-Jewish novelist, Alfred Kubin, when he fell ill his doctor tried to reassure him saying don't

worry, don't worry. "Doctor," answered Kubin, "Fear is all I was left with. Don't take it away." (laughter) Wrong, curiosity may be a substitute to fear, not only curiosity, the desire to learn, to understand, it's always, always [00:38:00] the question that some of us are asking. What does it mean? In the Talmud we call it *mai ka masme lan*, What does it mean? And any event that occurs, not only personally and not only to the Jewish people, my community, but to the world.

What does it mean? As a Jew I want to understand the role of the Jewish writer. What is it meant to be? A voice? To say what, to whom? To Jews alone, only about Jews? What is our tale, another tear in the ocean, a spasm of eternity, one of God's puzzling experiments? The philosopher Karl Jaspers advised Hannah Arendt to distrust, quote, "The false innocence of the victims," unquote. And unfortunately, she listened to his council and proved it at the Eichmann trial. And today it is the memory of the victim that is in jeopardy. [00:39:00]

When the Israeli supreme court freed John Demjanjuk it may have been a victory for the Israeli law and justice, but it was a defeat for Jewish memory. What does it mean? At least five survivors from Treblinka had identified Demjanjuk as Ivan the Terrible. If they were mistaken and if the supreme court of the

Jewish state said that they were mistaken, people may say one day to other survivors that their memories too are unreliable. Now we know that those who will use this -- but they don't need this pretext. They are doing what they are doing anyway. They are saying what they are saying anyway. There are those who deny that tragedy ever occurred.

Anti-Semitism was irrational, and anti-Semitism [00:40:00] is as timeless, as eternal as we are. So what do we do with the deniers? They are not only enemies of the Jewish people. I believe they are the enemies of truth and decency. They must be fought by all of us. They must be shamed into silence. I have spent a lifetime, if not more, to study these questions. And I have no real answer. What do we do with our experience? How do we go on living at a race, at a pace which is becoming faster and faster? What are we going to say to our children after 2000? [00:41:00] What legacy is this century bequeathing unto our heirs?

I have fought many battles. I try to fight battles against injustice, against ugliness, battles against forgetting. At times destiny yields to human aspirations. For a while many of us fought for minority's right to be equal. Now we fight for their right to be different. But I will never fight for

anyone's right to be indifferent. So now we are at the end, almost at the end of the century, and history is going to judge us for what we are doing with its legacy. [00:42:00]

I began writing my memoirs why? I have written many books. King Solomon would probably say too many. But he was a pessimist. And I also kept a diary. Since the very first day when I arrived in France 1945 June I began writing a diary. And that diary itself underwent many metamorphoses. I began writing it in Yiddish. That was my language. Then I moved to Hebrew because I began writing for an Israeli paper, although I lived in Paris. Then I moved to French, and I still write in French, however, when I need to do write something quickly I write it still in Hebrew. [00:43:00] This is the best stenography language in the world. One word contains 10.

Now, I have written, therefore, so much, and I realized that there are things I haven't said. For instance, in this memoir I felt the need to say things even about a period of which I have written one book, *Night*. The only memoir I've ever written, the only autobiographical narrative I have written is *Night*. All the others are fiction or nonfiction but not about me. And I decided, therefore, that certain things are missing, relationship with my father, my mother, my little sister. There

are things that have not been said, and now I try to say them prudently.

And then I've been involved, after all, in so many [00:44:00] events. At first as a journalist, as a student, and then as a teacher, a writer, the Bitburg affair. How many of you, for instance, know that during the Bitburg affair the pressure on me not, quote, "And not to antagonize," unquote, the president, didn't come from non-Jews? It came from Jewish leaders. The worst pressure came from them. On the contrary, the non-Jewish community was perfect. It's only when it turned out well that all the same leaders called me up and saying, I was with you. I was with you, of course. (laughter)

I can't believe it. There was even a Jewish senator who applied heavy pressure not to antagonize. You know, we have a long agenda, the old story. I hear now the same thing, by the way about we are trying, some of us are trying to help poor Johnathan Pollard. We have to help this man. (applause)

[00:45:00] And we hear, again, we hear people tell -- people told me, don't do it. Don't overdo it, a long agenda.

Nonsense. When we deal with compassion, when we deal with morality, when we deal with Jewish ahavat Israel we cannot wait.



We must do what we have to do and do it sooner rather than later.

So I decided, therefore, to write and to publish. And the problem is it's too big. I like short books. So I'll have two volumes in the beginning. And then, if God grants me years, then a third volume, you know, after all, you know. Paul Valery, a very great French poet said one never finishes a poem. One leaves it and then comes back to it. Same thing as me with my books. I never finish them. I leave them, come back.

[00:46:00] Anyway, I'll bring them here to you. So when I began writing, therefore, I said people tell me to write one's memoirs is to make a commitment to conclude a special covenant with the reader.

And that implies a promise, the will to reveal all, not to hold back or distort anything. Tell us, people tell me, are you up to that? Tell us. Do you really believe you have it in you to tell the whole story, to lay it all out, the people who have stood by you and the people who have not, the grandiose projects you were involved in or the other petty intrigues, true friendships and those that burst like soap bubbles, fruitful ventures and disappointments, children dead of hunger, old people blinded by pain? Haven't you yourself written that some

experiences are incommunicable, [00:47:00] that certain events cannot be transmitted in words, that sometimes we have no words to say what we must not be silent about?

Then tell us, people tell me, how will you resolve that contradiction, and have you forgotten your Wittgenstein, that what cannot be said must not be said? One must not even try. Then too, how do you propose writing in a language not yet deciphered to reveal secrets that must be by definition impenetrable? How do you hope to pass along truth which by your own statement exists and which will always exist beyond human understanding? Hassidim used to say of Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk that even when he spoke he was silent. Does there exist a language that contains a different silence, a silence shaped and deepened by the word?

And yet, and yet -- [00:48:00] these are my two favorite words, they apply to all situations, happy or disastrous. Does the sun rise? And yet it will set. Does the night herald sorrow? And yet it too will pass and will never return. What is important is not to chose resignation, not to wallow in a sterile fatalism. A great pessimist, King Solomon put it nicely. *Dor holaych v'dor ba*, one generation passed away, another generation comes, and the earth forever turns, and the sun also rises, and

the sun goes down. What has been will be. Must we then stop time, stop the sun? We must try, but it won't work. Even if it's all for nothing, because it's all for nothing sometimes we must try.

Because death is waiting for us at the end of the road, we must live fully. Because when an event seems meaningless we must confer meaning upon it. [00:49:00] Because the future eludes us, we must create it. All right, we leave moralizing to others. We are still just at the start of our project. Have I properly measured the scope? The task is narrating not the story of my life but the story of my stories. Through them you will perhaps understand the rest a bit better. Some see in their work a commentary on their life. For others it is the contrary. And I set myself always among the others.

So it's a commentary, a modest testimony once removed. And so I describe all this, what I'm going to say, and to paraphrase a Talmudic saying, I say I hope that the last page will afford me more certainty than the first and that I will emerge from it as pure in the simply meaning pure of all baseness, as I was when I entered [00:50:00] upon it. Do I write because we are happy or on the contrary, because we are not? A Midrashic legend tells us that King Solomon wore a ring which had the power to make him

happy when he was sad and sad when he was happy. Question: why would he have wanted to be sad when he had the good luck to know happiness? Answer: Solomon was a Jew and a writer. (laughter) That is, never happy.

Should we laugh or cry at that? To cry is to sow, said the Maharal of Prague. To laugh is to reap. And in writing we do both at once. Of course, there is much in my book about God. After all, I remained, I tried to remain the cheder yingel (Yiddish), the cheder boy or the yeshiva student I was. He is the one who conducts [00:51:00] or governs many of my activities. And therefore, God was so central to my life that whatever I do now I still try to define myself by my attitude towards him and the question he provokes. The Christian religion's historian Ernest Renan once said the Greeks were given reason, the Romans force, and the Jews the sense of God.

Can God be evacuated from history? Communism and Nazism have both tried, and they should never be compared, and both failed. As far as our generation is concerned, God's presence or absence in human endeavors presents more than a metaphysical problem. It is at the core of our constant quest for meaning. Where is God when children suffer or die? Where is God when men and women are [00:52:00] humiliated by other men and other women?

Chesterton said something very clever. He said when people lose faith in God they will not believe in nothing. When they lose faith in God they will believe in everything. But that means something.

If they believe in everything means their faith is thin, but their faith is unstable. What kind of faith would that be? In a play I show the pogrom during the Khmelnytsky period, and one of my characters keeps on asking the question, always the same. And where is God in all that? Where is God in all this? So in my memoir, a short text deals with God and suffering. And I raise the question there. I raised the question about, [00:53:00] about the suffering of God. Maybe God himself in his pathos is part of human suffering. The Midrash tells us that when the holy, blessed be his name, comes to release the children of Israel from their exile, they will say to him, Master of the universe, it is you who scattered us among the nations, driving us from your dwelling place. And now it is you who brings us back?

And then, says the Midrash, the holy, blessed be his name, will answer them in this parable. A king drove his wife from his palace and her return the next morning. Stunned, the queen asked him, "Why did you drive me away yesterday if it was only

to take me back today?" "I want you to know," the king replied, "That I followed you out of the palace. I could not live in it all alone." And thus the holy One, blessed be His name, said to the children of Israel, "Seeing [00:54:00] you leave My dwelling place, I also left it to return to it with you." For God accompanies his children in exile.

And a theme that dominates Midrashic and mystical thought in the Jewish tradition. Just as the solitude of Israel reflects God's solitude, so the suffering of man is implied and amplified in the suffering of their Creator. Even when imposed by God the punishment extends beyond those it strikes. It involves the Judge Himself. And it is God who wishes it so. The Father may manifest Himself in anger and emphasize harshness, but He will never not be there. Present at the creation, God is a part of it. *Let atar panui minay* is the key sentence of the book of the splendor, the Zohar.

God is nowhere absent. No place is empty of God. He is everywhere. He is present even in suffering and at the heart of punishment. [00:55:00] Israel's sadness, therefore, is bound to that of the Shekhinah, and together they await deliverance. The waiting of the one constitutes the secret dimension of the other. Just as the anguish of the Shekhinah seems intolerable

to the children of Israel, so Israel's torment breaks the Shekhinah's heart. And therefore, I tried there to find a way of understanding God's role, God's place, God's power and to reconcile divine justice with what seems to be human injustice.

But of course, ultimately the questions remain questions. And there are certain things I do know but I don't understand.

There are others I feel but don't know. The event that we have lived through this century, each event is endowed with meaning, [00:56:00] but I don't know it. But every word resonates in our memory, and we try to capture it, and the question, of course, is always what is longer, the past or the future? Is there a future to someone who has been deprived of his past?

In my latest novel I describe always again father and son because in the memoir too it's mainly father and son. Since the Akedah, since the binding of Isaac I believe Jewish history and perhaps the human condition turn around that, about the relationship between father and son. And here, and some of you may perhaps remember in *The Forgotten* I describe the father who was losing his memory, and he operated a kind of transfusion of memory into his son. [00:57:00] But at one point his son Malkiel felt a stab of panic as if after a silent quarrel with a

loved one. And he realized that his quest was doomed to failure and had been all along.

And he says to himself, "Forgive me, Father. You will have to forgive me, but I am going to disappoint you. There is no such thing as a memory transfusion. Yours will never become mine. I am a stranger in this town, which used to be yours, a town that you knew so well. All the places you told me about are surely still here, but I don't recognize them. I wasn't here. You told me of a house set in a garden. I cannot find it. You told me that inside past the courtyard was the cheder where your mother took you when you were small. All right, Father, I looked. I searched. And all these houses [00:58:00] are much alike, and so are their courtyards.

"How can I use the images that appeared as you spoke? They are fleeting. They crumble like sand. They don't correspond to anything. And yet I promised to remember in your name and in your place, but I cannot. I cannot relive your life. I cannot see again the child and adolescent that you were. I cannot find traces of you in these falls that saw your birth and your childhood. I can live after you and even for you but not as you. What you felt here when you explored the mystery of daybreak I shall never feel. What you felt when you welcomed



the queen of Sabbath I shall never feel. Then why am I here?  
Why did you ask me to come to the town where you were born?

[00:59:00]

"Why did you make me promise to remember all that you will have forgotten? Why did you show me things that only you can understand? You told me of your own father's generous heart, of your mother's serenity and nobility. I remember your words, but that's all. I'll never be able to say them as you've said them to me. You described Stanislav to me in Galicia. I heard the pain that binds you to Stanislav, but that's all, Father. My pain is only an echo of yours.

"You told me about your adventures among the partisans. I can see your comrades in arms, and I watched them as they rush into battle against the Germans. I hear the cries of the vanquished. I see pride on your friend Itzik's face as he fires. He shouts as he fires. He laughs as he fires. He's a happy man, Isaac, happy to be avenging Jewish honor, happy to be showing that the enemy of the [01:00:00] Jews is not God-like but vulnerable, mortal. I see and understand all that you did and all that you saw. And yet I know that it will be impossible to keep my promise.

"Of course I'll bear witness for you, Father. But my deposition will pale before yours. What shall I do, Father? Your life and memory are indivisible. They cannot survive you, not really. I know that whoever listens to a witness becomes one in turn. You told me that more than once. But we are not witnessing the same events. All I can say is I have heard the witness. Yes, indeed, father, I have heard you. And in this foreign city I still hear you."

And that is really the problem. What do we do with their memories? What are we doing with [01:01:00] ours? If I am seized with anguish it's because I see it slip away. I am absolutely convinced I must share with you also my sad, pessimistic thoughts that when the twenty-first century will come upon us, we shall be in the third millennium, some friends of ours, good people, decent people, generous people, compassionate people, they will tell us, please, give us some respite. We cannot take it. Our children cannot take it.

Give them a possibility to live their lives without the burden of your memories on their shoulders. Once a year we will make something for you. We'll give you a ceremony. But let [01:02:00] them live without it. We cannot. I am not sure we are equipped to answer them because these will be not enemies

but friends who will say that. So nevertheless, we work, and we write, and we must, and we have no choice. In one of the encounters between the father and the son I have to following dialogue. The father Elhanan came from Europe. He went to Jerusalem and came to America.

And he said to him, "Why didn't you go back to Jerusalem to live?" "I was afraid," said the father. "Afraid to live there?" "Afraid I wasn't worthy of living there," said the father. "Do you understand? Without your mother who died, how could I awake beneath the same sky that we blessed together every morning? Jerusalem. I can see it now, and I can see us when we first arrived. [01:03:00] I was full of faith in your mother and myself. I turned to her and said I love you. And through her I was declaring my love for Jerusalem." And the son said, "Tell me a memory of Jerusalem."

And the father says, "A blue cloud shot with red, almost incandescent. A silence full of melodious prayers." "Go on." "A beggar." "A beggar?" "Yes." "Not my mother?" "You are right. Your mother is Jerusalem. But when I recall the road to Jerusalem it's always a beggar that I see. He offers to share his meal with me." "And you accept?" "Oh, I accept everything

from Jerusalem," said the father. "Only in Jerusalem can a Jew learn the art of receiving."

And maybe you remember that at the end the story is sad because the father ends in forgetting [01:04:00] in the abyss of oblivion. And he then speaks, and he says, he says, "Is there anything tangible, durable, real left of me at all? I am nothing. I am nothing. More than a shadow and less than a man. But what is man deprived of memory? Not even a shadow. The light is dimming within me, and I don't know if it's night or wariness of the rain. It's exasperating, but my eyes are heavy as their gaze wanders around me, far from me, throwing nameless images.

"Who has stepped between me and the world, between things and their shape? Malkiel, my son, you are in me, but you are somewhere else. You are my life, but you are on the other side of my life. I no longer know what you are looking for. I wonder if I'll still be here when you come back. I mean, I wonder if I'll know it's you. All I know at this moment is that God has punished [01:05:00] me. Ah, my son, I will not rise up against God's will. I have no doubt deserved his punishment, but why this one and not another? I'd have preferred anything,

even death. I'd have preferred death to this agony of memories wrestling and drowning.

"What have I done to be reduced to this? If you hear me, God, answer me. No, I take it back. Forgive me. Answer me so that I can hear you. But even if you answer my question remains. What can I have done as a Jew or as a man to bring down upon me not damnation but obscurity, not death but dissolution? I know only this: I spoke to you my son, but I did not tell you the essential. I am still lucid enough to admit it. There is something important, vital that I especially wanted to pass onto you, [01:06:00] perhaps a kind of testament. And each time I said to myself, that can wait.

"I said to myself this is so essential I won't forget it even if I forget all the rest. But now I have forgotten that too. But I'm trying to remember. I am trying. I must. More than my honor is at stake. My right to survive is at stake. I must not take this essential thing to my grave with me. I must stay on here in this world as an offering or a sign, all that remains of a vanished life. So I try. I turn pages. I dig up graves. I search every corner of my being. Who or what was it about a person, friend, or enemy, an event, a glorious moment, or an

infamous plot? I don't know. I no longer know. There are words I will never be able to speak again.

"I don't even know why I sent you to that remote village where I knew happiness as a child and a youth. What [01:07:00] do I know? I will forget everything. I know that. Nothing is more important to a father than to earn his son's admiration. Have I earned yours? You won't hold it against me too if I desert you along the way? Will you forgive me? Will you? It is not a father's duty to help his son remember, to magnify his past. No, it is. I cannot shake the depressing thought that I have failed you in this respect. In leaving you I bequeath you a black curtain. Is that enough for you to think of me without bitterness?"

And he goes on speaking to his son. And then at the end he simply -- "All that, my son, all that is part of the essential thing but is not all of it. And even this I can tell you only thanks to rare flashes of light that God in his mercy still grants me. People say that before dying a man sees his whole past. Not I. [01:08:00] All I see is bursts and fragments. But perhaps that is because I am not yet going to die, not physically at any rate. Is that why I still cannot recall the essential thing that I want so much to pass on to you? That

doesn't matter, my son. Even as I speak to you I tell myself that you will discover in your own way what my lips cannot say. God cannot be so cruel as to erase everything forever. If he were, he would not be our Father, and nothing would make sense.

"And I who speak to you cannot say more, for --" and that's how the father ends his words to his son, and that is the fear that my generation has. When I speak about forgetting I am not only speaking about forgetting this century. I speak about forgetting [01:09:00] the past, the past in its totality. Who forgets will forget more. He will forget previous centuries, all the generations of scholars and their disciples, the prophets, the scribes. We have so much. What a pity it would be to lose all that.

Years and years ago I used to tell and discuss an ancient Talmudic legend. And the legend was about Jerusalem. It's always at the center of my work and my life and my dreams. Legend is that Titus and his soldiers when they came to Jerusalem and destroyed the city and desecrated the temple [01:10:00] and they put the temple on fire, the young priests, what we call the *pirchei kehuna*, climbed up to the roof of the temple. And they said to God, master of the universe, we realize that we were either incapable or unworthy of your

mission to protect your sanctuary. So we are giving you back the keys to the temple.

And the Talmud says that they threw the keys upward, and a heavenly hand appeared, a fiery hand, and took the keys. And I remember years, 20 years ago already again and again I could repeat, please, my good friends, the keys are still in our hands for the temple is still in our memory. We must never give them back. For to give back the keys [01:11:00] would mean to forget who gave them to us. See you next year. (applause)

**M:**

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