

Elie Wiesel Contemporary Experience: Longing for Home, Today

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) What follows is a meditation by a Jewish man on a subject common to all members of the human family: the meaning and the implications of everyone's natural longing for home. Surely, even those who do not read scripture in the text know that the Bible begins with a bet, a B. It begins with a bet, not with an alef, because we meant to discover that the beginning belongs to God, not to us. The greatest scholar must realize that faced with scripture, he or she hasn't even begun. [00:01:00] But why a bet? Why not a gimel or a yod? Because, I believe, bet means a house. And thus, we are told, that the book of books is a shelter, a dwelling place, a refuge, a place in which men and women laugh and weep, read and write, work and sleep, a place in which people love one another before they start quarreling, or the other way around. In other words, it is a home.

In the Bible, as in life, the home precedes everything else. It precedes even life itself. First, God created the world. Adam and Eve came later. The home, [00:02:00] every home, is unique, as is the human being who is called upon to live in it. It is

possible that man or woman come from dust to return to dust, come from nowhere to go nowhere, but we are born somewhere at a precise time and a particular place not of our choosing. But wherever that place is, it becomes home. Therein lies one of the mysteries of human existence. To be means to admit our limits in space as well as in everything else.

But when does a house turn into a home? When we move in? When we furnish it, [00:03:00] sleep in it, eat in it, play in it? What is it that makes a bunch of stones and wood into an enchanted place from which one may escape to return later, be it in dreams, a disabused adult, if not a wise old man? And furthermore, furthermore, what really do we know about the nature, almost the legal, theological nature of a home? Whom does it belong to? To the person who lives in it? To the person who built it? To the person who remembers it? But then a home, perhaps, is like life. To whom does life belong?

According to Rabbi Akiva, life belongs to God alone, *chayecha kodmim*, [00:04:00] and we have no right, therefore, to waste it away. What is a home? In Talmudic literature the question is quite simple. *Bayit*, says the Talmud, the house is a woman. It is the woman that transforms man into husband and house into home. It is she who creates the ambiance and conditions of

family life which constitute the principal components of the home. Usually it is to meet his wife that a man comes home from the office or from school or from a baseball game. That is perhaps true only in the Talmud. (laughter)

But what if the man is not married? Then he meets his mother. (laughter) [00:05:00] And we may guess how a Jewish mother welcomes her son, nu? So beautifully, so tenderly, and stubbornly she will say, when will you get married? There is another interpretation of the Talmudic saying, and I like that. *Bayit ze isha* means "a house is a woman" refers not to the wife but to the mother. Her womb is the house for her children and remains so until the end. If we are to believe King Solomon, whose expertise in the field is beyond dispute, for a married man, home is a center of happiness or malediction, *matzah isha matzah tov, motzei ani -mar mimavet*.

You know all this. You heard it in the sermons under the chuppah usually. When, under what circumstances [00:06:00] does paradise become hell? When does the refuge of home become a prison? Furthermore, what is worse, really, to be a prisoner in prison or a prisoner at home? Where is one's yearning for freedom endowed with more grace? Above all, how is one to explain the profound nostalgia that at times one feels for home?

Such a desire is inevitably unfulfilled and remains so, for as the good old Thomas Wolfe said, probably here at the Y, when he gave lectures at the Y, you can't go home again.

In other words, once we leave home, it is for good. And yet, although the longing we refer to in our discussion tonight lies beyond the concrete, tangible world, it is real and lasting.

[00:07:00] It can remain submerged for relatively brief or long periods of time, but it never fails to surface. It is because one wishes to plunge into a universe still intact and friendly and / or rediscover an innocence that has been lost, even shamed. Is that why we long for once upon a time? Are there other reasons for our longing for the past, for home?

Naturally, longing implies distance. But then, one can stay at home and still feel distance from an object, a place, an image, a memory, a human being one loves or one loves no more.

As has been the custom for so many years, for, in fact, 28 years, *b'gimatriya koach*, we need *koach* here. As has been the custom for this fourth session, [00:08:00] let us open parenthesis and look at what has happened in the world around us since our last series last year. Some events were packed with drama, others with cynicism or with humor. In politics we understand the meaning of what we say of God in our daily

prayers. *Mashpil gayim u'magbia shefalim*, God humbles the vain and elevates the humble. But *shefalim* does not really mean humbled. The word should be *anavim*. *Shefalim* has a somewhat negative connotation. *Anavah* is a compliment, *shiflut* is not.

Why then is the word used in the prayer? Perhaps God, for once, had politics in mind. In politics, as we have seen it a week ago, those who were up are down, and those [00:09:00] who were very down are up. But then, no one is perfect. In the field of foreign and religious affairs things have happened. The Vatican has established diplomatic relations with Israel at last. Good. But soon after the pope strangely, inexplicably, bestowed a knighthood on Kurt Waldheim. Why did he do that? Why now? Wasn't he concerned that his first gesture would be interpreted as weakened by the second?

Why Waldheim? We have forgotten him, thank God. Difficult to understand, but then, it's not new. It is said that access to certain Jewish documents in the Vatican archives is still denied to Jewish [00:10:00] scholars. Is this true? If so, for what reason? And how long will it last? Another perplexing element in the Vatican's attitude towards Jews, that dates back to 40, 50 years ago, why has there been inside the Vatican an international network helping Nazi war criminals escape justice

and find refuge in South America whereas there has been no such network to help their victims during the war?

Still, maybe teshuva is a positive factor. And so the rapprochement between Christians and Jews, I believe, it is an encouraging phenomenon in our history, and I believe that those in the Christian community who are our friends ought to be thanked, encouraged, strengthened, because they are, for the moment, a minority among their peers [00:11:00] as we are a minority among many people. And therefore, it has to continue to develop and be strengthened. We must build new bridges with the surrounding society. As must, we must also, I believe, work for the hope that has been generated in the Middle East.

Will the peace process last? I hope so. If it lasts, that means that less funerals will take place on all sides. It's enough. I think that both sides are tired. That's why they decided to have peace. They were tired. The 30 Year War ended because both sides were tired. I force myself to believe that Hamas terrorism and the jihad murder will not prevail. But isn't it funny? [00:12:00] One could almost come to the conclusion that Jews who go to schul on Shabbos should say a *Mi Sheberach* for Yasser Arafat, that he should be healthy? And

because for better or for worse, the Israeli government considers him the only valid interlocutor.

And yet, did he deserve the highest accolade in the world? Isn't he the one who ordered the massacre of Israeli Olympic athletes in Munich and the massacre of Jewish children, Ma'alot, and so many Jews all over the world in Antwerp and Vienna and everywhere? Why? His past seems to have been forgotten. People forget so quickly. How many communities, newspapers, and television networks remembered last week that November 9 was the anniversary not only of the [00:13:00] fall of the Berlin Wall but also of the Crystal Night? In a few weeks the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of the camps will be commemorated in Auschwitz and later in Buchenwald.

I've been at Normandy on June 6. I was very moved by what I saw, old veterans that came back to see their young brothers who died when they were 18 and 19. There were crosses. There were Magen Davids. And I thought, look, they died simply because they wanted to save Europe from fascism, from Nazism, from Hitler's domination. Well, what will happen after 1995, after the fiftieth anniversary [00:14:00] of the Allied victory over the Third Reich? Who will lead the valiant and noble battle for

memory? Who will take part in it? When I think of that I am worried because for us, home is memory.

What is more distressing, to be thrown out from home or to be expelled from memory? Both are bad. But equally bad is to be cut off the possibility of study. Learning is also a home. Learning is what keeps us attached to our ancestral home. And therefore, at any and every occasion, we must repeat the ancient call *Ishut* centuries and centuries ago at Usha during the Hadrian decrees. I [00:15:00] love that call because it expresses and reflects my passion for study, which I tried to share with my students, my readers, and with my friends here. *Kol shelamad sheyavo l'lamayd, v'shelo lamad sheyavo l'lilmad*, those who studied, come and teach. And those who did not, come and study. But, well, what are we waiting for? If the doors are closed, break them down. (laughter) [00:16:00]

Ancient Greek philosophers used to say man needs three years to learn to speak and 70 to keep silent. (laughter) It takes many years to get adjusted to a home, and it takes a second to leave it. Longing implies estrangement, but when does longing occur? It can occur anytime. Like Kafka's character, one awakens in a strange place, discovers oneself estranged from something or someone or some culture or some language [00:17:00] or some

habit. Thus, it is only natural to think of home with a genuine, painful sense of longing. Still, the question we ask in the beginning remains open. What is home?

Let's phrase it differently or at least turn it around. What is the opposite of home? Being a stranger? Well, maybe this is the time to introduce into our exploration a new term which we have not used yet: exile. Being a stranger in exile is the opposite of living at home. And similarly, longing means to be in exile and yearn for redemption, which in the Jewish tradition is interpreted as returning home. In exile distances constantly grow and [00:18:00] the distantiation, à la Brecht, or the estrangement deepens. The unfortunate lot of the exiled is that he or she is always kept at a distance and considered a stranger, an intruder by all others.

Albert Camus's Meursault, *The Stranger*, goes further. In the novel he is present at his mother's funeral but not really. He sees and observes everything as through a curtain. At the end, he no longer belongs to the person he is. He has exiled himself from himself. Exile is a theme that has preoccupied philosophers since the dawn of critical thought. And today I believe it is more timely than ever. Isn't the twentieth

century the age of the expatriate, [00:19:00] the refugee, the stateless, in our own town, the homeless, and the wanderer?

An anecdote. In German occupied Europe two refugees stand in a long line before a foreign consulate of a neutral nation. And they talk about, where do you want to go? They said, anywhere. "Are you here for a visa?" "Yes." "Where to?" "I don't know. South Africa, if they let me in. South America, if I can go." "And you?" "Also Argentina" "Why Argentina?" "I don't know." They both entered the consulate. One comes out. "Did you get a visa?" "Yes." "Where are you going?" "I am going to a place called Tierra del Fuego." And the first one said, "But that's far." "Far?" replies the first man, "Far from where?"

[00:20:00]

After the liberation of Europe 50 years ago a new species of human beings appeared in special camps for so-called displaced persons. Shifting between a past of fire and ashes and a future of sealed gates, yesterday's prisoners and survivors of unprecedented tragedies, rejected by all civilized nations with the sole exception of the State of Israel, dwelled in a state of utter humiliation: displaced persons. Their official name suited them well. Orphans of hope and serenity, burdened with

wounded memories, these homeless men and women were indeed displaced.

Their entire beings were in exile. Their language itself, filled with pain and anguish, was displaced. There were certain words they couldn't use, and there others [00:21:00] who became part of their vocabulary. And whenever they spoke their words fell onto deaf ears and upon indifferent hearts. As for the present, it's enough to read newspapers and watch television news to realize that the reports and images we have just seen simply have emerged from biblical narratives. In truth, this century, the last of a millennium, is marked by displacement, or more precisely, by displacements on the scale of continents.

It began with the Armenians, Kurds, Muslims, Hindus, Bosnians, Rwandans, political and economic refugees, victims of religious persecutions, ethnic cleansing and racial oppression. Never before have so many human beings fled from so many homes. On different level, society seems to be disappointed in the planet [00:22:00] earth, and thus is sending emissaries and scouts into space as well as into the depths of the oceans. Speaking of getting away from home, that is far. Judging from the general tendency of our contemporaries, they seem to be everywhere, except home.

In one of his films, Charlie Chaplin asks a little girl where she lives. "Nowhere," she answers. "Here, there, anywhere." "Anywhere?" says Chaplin. "Good, that's near the place where I am going." (laughter) "Daddy, I want to go home, please." Now, who hasn't heard, here or anywhere, these familiar words once and 12 times 12 times from children [00:23:00] who in their boredom wanted to annoy their parents who finally are having a good time playing cards with their neighbors. Home? Where is home? For children the question may sound silly. They know that home is not simply a geographical location, a number on a house.

Children know things that adults have already forgotten. They know where home begins, inside certain gates, and where it ends, outside familiar doors. It ends where fear begins. It ends where adventure begins. Children know that beyond home lies the frontier and the unknown. For adults who love to complicate things, the problem is somewhat more complex. To some, home means an infinite capacity to [00:24:00] dream. To others it is a peculiar attraction to nightmares. Why do some nurture a desire to flee home and others to return to it? And is their path the same? Is the road of departure identical to that of return?

Why is home a safe refuge to some and hell to others? Let's insist on what we stated earlier. The opposite of home is not a prison, which may eventually become home. We have seen that. Those who are in hospitals will tell you if they stayed long enough in a hospital room, they are afraid to leave the room and go home. They would rather stay there. It became a kind of new home. And the same is true, as I have been told, in prison. The same was actually true even during the war. In those sealed wagons, the cattle cars, [00:25:00] after a day or two, those who were inside were praying to God to stay there and not to be shipped elsewhere. It became their home.

So the opposite really is exile, on a very high level and on a very concrete level exile. More than prison, exile suggests uncertainty, anguish, solitude, suspicion, hunger, thirst, and a constant feeling of abandonment and, subsequently, guilt. Exile remains part of the human condition, and that we know since the origins of creation. After Adam and Eve, all their descendants were exiled from a woman's womb into a cold and indifferent world. Were Adam and Eve luckier than us? Granted, Adam was taken from God's vision and Eve from Adam's rib. [00:26:00] So what? Did that make them happier?

I feel sorry for them. Born adults, they were deprived of their childhood. For their children things have been and will be forever different. To be born to life, they, we need the fathers and mothers who in due course were there to guide us, protect us, spoil, and reprimand us, but still being with us. Parents and offsprings all have the same beginning and the same end. And at one point or another all are compelled to experience some form of exile. At birth the infant's first breath is an outcry, a protest against being expelled, exiled from the warmest of surroundings into a world that could surely go on without that little intruder. [00:27:00]

The infant is no longer protected. It is still loved but not as before. Neither boy nor girl will ever again be as loved as they were one minute earlier. For the outside world they will be strangers condemned to an endless series of uprootings. What does the child feel when he or she is for the first time taken to school? Who will ever resolve their fear of separation? What do they think about as they bite their lips so as not to burst into tears? Don't they tell themselves they are being sent into exile by their own parents except, luckily, they don't know the word exile yet.

Barely had they made friends then they must separate again, for a new school has been found for them. New friendships are forged. They don't last long. A further exile is awaiting them at high school and [00:28:00] college where, irony of ironies, some professor is giving a course on exile. The children's room at home has been occupied by others, or perhaps made into a study. Have we left out military service and marriage or the first of many job changes? Isn't unemployment a sad and degrading form of exile, as is homelessness? At the end, all mortals find a last exile or a last home. What do they call it? A resting place in the grave.

Is history then nothing but a journey from exile to exile? Social exile, criminal exile, political exile, religious exile, the first exiled persons, they were mentioned already. Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise for having been too curious. Their eldest son Cain was next in line. Having slain [00:29:00] his brother Abel, of whom he was jealous, he was sentenced to eternal wandering. The first man to be exiled for redemptive reasons was Abraham. God did him a favor, great favor, by ordering him to leave home and go to Canaan. And his journey will last to the end of time.

The first exiled youngster who made a career in a foreign land? Joseph, who was also the first biblical man to suffer from a woman who was too much in love with him. Who was the first political refugee? Moses. He could have stayed in Egypt but chose to flee into the desert and then go back home. Both Joseph and Moses have something in common. While they were away they seem not to have missed home too much. Neither seems to have thought of their families, who in Egypt faced troubles of various sorts. [00:30:00] Eventually both were reunited with their families. Where? In Egypt.

In Egypt Jewish exile was of a collective nature. It was to last beyond Egypt. As a form of punishment tradition also ascribes some positive traits to exile. Talmudic sages maintain that in exile Jews had opportunities to teach others the lessons of Torah, the lessons of God, the virtues of life and its values. Now, is this why the people of Israel, had to endure so many exiles? The Babylonian exile took place even before the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem. The king and his children, the valiant princes of Judea followed several decades later.

Jeremiah narrates the end of the last king Zedekiah, Tzidkiyahu. His tormentors killed his sons before his eyes. They gauged out

his eyes. Then they [00:31:00] blinded him so that he would never stop seeing their death in his burning memory. The second fall of Jerusalem created a mass deportation of a larger magnitude. Titus brought the heroic Judean warriors into captivity to Rome where jubilant crowds mocked and insulted them in the streets. Chased from Jerusalem from the Galilee, Jewish refugees, poor and martyred, dispersed to the four corners of Europe. They settled here and there trying to start normal lives.

It wasn't easy. So what? Whoever claimed that to be Jewish is easy? Here today, elsewhere tomorrow, and the chronicles of Jewish martyrology are books, actually, of tribulations. There is hardly a place in Europe where Jews have not been for a while. In other words, there is hardly a place in Europe from which Jews had not been chased. At times, [00:32:00] not only communities but entire cities are condemned to wandering. Take the Hasidic experience and the Hasidic geography, the Ger and Vizhnitz, Lubavitch and Bratslav, Sanz and Bobov, Satmar and Sadigur, are no longer in Poland, Romania, and Hungary or the Ukraine. They are in Jerusalem or in Bnei Brak or Brooklyn.

Is home then a concept linked to space, or is it also anchored in time? Is home related only to the question where, not when?

If time is the only factor, then we are all, so to speak, homeless, for time is perpetually in motion. But then, couldn't it be said that we move in life in taking our home with us? However, physical exile is not the only one the Jewish people had to endure. [00:33:00] Still at home in the Promised Land, the children of Israel lived under pressure from foreign powers to exile their souls. The Jewish soul somehow exerts a strange attraction over many political and spiritual rulers, or so it seems. Assyrians, Greeks, Persians, Romans, and later on Muslims, Christians all sought them to appropriate it, as if they could not live without dominating the Jewish soul.

And they tried all methods, all means. They used force and seduction, threats and promises, riches and deprivation, more often than not in vain. The Jewish soul was and is determined to remain Jewish rather than allow itself to be exiled into other souls. Must we recall Hadrian's cruel edicts? Whoever practiced the Jewish religion was sentenced to death.

[00:34:00] To observe the laws of Shabbat, to circumcise one's son, to teach or study Torah meant to risk torture and capital punishment. The tears of Rabbi Yishmael, the melancholy laughter of Rabbi Akiva, the last words of Rabbi Hananiah ben Teradion, in the Promised Land of Judea the foreign occupants

were at the service of death, whereas the Jewish soul remained faithful to God, to whom the home all of souls.

Things did not change much with the passing of years. In exile Jews were constantly exposed to pressures aimed at uprooting their faith, their souls, their memory. Fidelity meant death. Conversion or assimilation was rewarded with life during the crusades or the jihads. And with successful careers in subsequent centuries in Italy or Austria-Hungary, didn't Heine say that conversion was an entry ticket to society? [00:35:00] No, I believe that what we call the Jewish soul is open to only one influence and knows only one home, Jerusalem.

There is a mysterious relationship and a mysterious longing for and to Jerusalem. And the relationship between Jerusalem and exile is perplexing but uplifting. Is exile necessarily an unavoidably evil? Socrates thought so. At Socrates' infamous trial he was given a choice. We forget that very often. And the choice was exile or death. And he chose death. But to some people death is exile. Is the opposite also true? To experience a disappointment in love, a betrayal [00:36:00] of friendship, a bankruptcy, an injustice, all those can lead to a decision that life is not worth living.

A father realizing that he is unable to feed his family or to love or be loved by his children or a writer unable to discover the proper words to express his or her despair or an adolescent unable to find a goal for his effort, what they all have in common is the belief that salvation may come by exiling life or exiling themselves from life. Oh, how did Nietzsche put it? He said madness is a consequence not of certainty but of uncertainty. And Nietzsche knew quite a lot about exile, madness, and suicide. [00:37:00] Exile means breaking with family, friends, acquaintances, surroundings, culture, language and work.

Exile means beginning again elsewhere, an existence filled with ambitious, anxiety, and occasional reward in the midst of new friends or new adversaries and new impossibilities. Except for romantic expatriates who worship literature, maybe their own, the effect of exile on its protagonists is basically negative. Jewish prophets were deprived of their powers outside the holy land. *Ayn haShekhina shora ele be-Yisrael* says the Talmud. The *Shekhinah* dwells in Israel alone or in the people of Israel alone, Ezekiel an exception that proves the rule.

Generally, in ancient times exile was considered a malediction, a punishment, and still is. One left home for a city of refuge

in those times [00:38:00] only when one committed an involuntary manslaughter. Why? Because it was involuntary, so he had to escape the avenger's wrath. The culprit was ordered to stay away from home in exile until, until, until the death of the high priest. Hence, we are told, that the mother of the high priest would be a frequent visitor in the cities of refuge offering their residents food and clothes and candy to keep them happy so they would not pray for changing places, for the death of her son, which would bring them freedom.

As for voluntary exile, for the sole purpose of travel it was not viewed favorably by the masters and teachers in Palestine. One could leave the Galilee or the academy in Jerusalem for Babylon [00:39:00] only to study or teach there. Today one might add poetry, music, and painting to the list of special exemptions. Really because had Homer, allegedly blind, chosen to stay home, would he have the opportunity to savor the intellectual and poetic riches of the Iliad? Had Alexander the Great not taken with him on his campaign a young philosopher named Aristotle, would Greek philosophy have been exposed to Oriental and Jewish thought?

Can we imagine Spinoza in Spain rather than Amsterdam, Heinrich Heine locked in Germany, Mozart bound to Austria, James Joyce

and Samuel Beckett permanently attached to Ireland? For poets, novelists, and social observers who often travel so as to reflect on what they see and hear, to reflect is already [00:40:00] to travel. And they travel in time as well as in thought and in space. In other words, their thought of their fantasy carries them, exiles them, to imaginary shores while staying anchored in their familiar scenery, which they love or hate.

Only mystics draw their strength from exile. Yet even they experience nostalgia. Even they hope one day to return home. But what is home for them? God, always God, God everywhere. For mystics, nothing is worse than to be away from God. As for God, he too is exiled by himself from himself. Kabbalist texts stand by this affirmation. God's statement, *imo anochi be-tzarah* [00:41:00] I share its, meaning the people of Israel's, distress is interpreted as follows. When the people of Israel entered exile in Egypt, God accompanied them there, as he is with them wherever they are.

And so, the concept of *galut haShekhina*, the exile of God or of God's presence, is part of Jewish mysticism. But how can God, who is infinite and everywhere, be away? Away from whom, from where? Well, we do not know where he is when he is away. But

we do know that when this happens, he too is nostalgic. The *Shekhinah* too aspires to go home and be united with God. In simple terms, exile, above all, means really separation. Separation not only from a place but from a human being, means [00:42:00] to go into exile. And when nostalgia intervenes, it is in order to return to that place, to that human being.

There is no nostalgia without separation. Yet, according to Hasidim, distance implies danger, for it leads to estrangement. Do not go too far away from your origins, say Hasidic masters. Lost in the forest, the traveler must shout louder and louder so as to be heard far away. A prince who has lived in exile too long, says the great Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, runs the risk of forgetting his princely condition. And that is the catastrophe. And therein lies the danger of separation or of exile: forgetfulness. To leave in order to return [00:43:00] is both useful and creative. To leave and forget to come back is neither.

Forgetfulness by definition is never creative, nor is it instructive. He who forgets to come back has forgotten the home he or she came from and where he or she is going. Ultimately, one might say that the opposite of home is not distance but forgetfulness. Who forgets, forgets everything, including the

roads leading homeward. Forgetting marks the end of human experience and of longing too. One forgets too long. As long as memory is awake and functioning it is active. As long as it is active it penetrates the depths of our consciousness. It reveals hidden experiences, vanished faces one wishes to see and touch again, suppressed events one would like to relive with the passion of our youth. [00:44:00]

Like everybody else, I carry with me a nostalgia, a longing that grows deeper and more pervasive with each passing day. Like everybody else, I am searching for the path I must follow if I want to return to the place I left eternities ago. And that place is still home to me. It is the town of my childhood. It is my childhood. Since I left it, more precisely, since I was forced to leave it, I have not stopped dreaming of returning. Strange, when I am not there I want to go back. The moment I am there I want to leave. I am panicking. But the house, which was mine, no longer is.

It remains far, far away on the other side of oceans and mountains, perhaps on the other side of life. That's how it is. Nostalgia can create heartwarming links in [00:45:00] time, but concretely, geographically they are heartbreaking. It is because you wish to go back in the past and the present keeps in

imprisoned. Is it fear that opposes nostalgia? Fear of being disappointed? Fear of discovering that your village or your home do not live up to the image you have kept of them in your memory? Fear that the mountains in your childhood are actually hills and that the huge river is not so huge after all?

That the forest, which in your childhood seemed so big, so dense, so frightening and so mysterious, is nothing but a few pine trees you can buy very cheap? I have dealt with the theme of longing, its ironies and torments, in many of my works. Twenty years after the last Jew was driven out of Sighet, my town, I decided to [00:46:00] return there, just to see once more the small Carpathian city where I had discovered the face of poverty and the magic of friendship, where I had lived years of anguish but also of happiness. I failed to recognize it. Because it had changed? Quite the opposite. Because it had not changed.

Petrified, resigned, condemned to evolve outside time, it lived only in the memory of those it had expelled from its territory. I found once again its gray houses, rendered sad, so sad by the approaching twilight, the park, the churches, the movie house. It is because it remained so faithful to its image that the town seemed strange to me. Because of its resemblance to itself, it

betrayed itself. Here, life continued as before, except that most of its inhabitants, the Jews, had been deported to [00:47:00] places in Silesia where they were robbed of their lives.

Recently I was together with a close friend to Bendzin, his city. And I watched him as he watched Bendzin. And I had a feeling I was in my town because we had the same impression. Everything was the same, except the Jews weren't there. I remember in 1944 in the ghetto people tried to hang on to a fragment of hope, in spite of logic. They said to one another, it's inconceivable, after all, that the Hungarians would send us all away. How could a town go on functioning without its physicians and businessmen, without its watchmakers and tailors? The town needs us. Society needs us. It is in its own interest to keep us here.

Well, a few short weeks later proof was offered that the town could go on perfectly well without its Jews. [00:48:00] There disappearance wasn't even noticed. The formerly Jewish houses were lived in. In the streets people seemed busy. It was as if Jews had never dwelled within these walls. Passersby didn't stare at the stranger in their midst. In their eyes I wasn't even a stranger. I was nothing. The longing I then felt, to

reenter life and become a child again, the child I was before childhood was lost. And so I looked and looked for that child, for that adolescent in places that used to be familiar to me.

Of the 30-odd synagogues and houses of study that once upon a time were the pride of our community, only one was still open. The largest one, the main synagogue where my father attended services on Shabbat and the holidays, had been burned down by the Germans. Eyewitnesses reported that the flames could not be extinguished for [00:49:00] days and nights. Apparently most principle synagogues in occupied cities had undergone a similar fate. The enemy saw in the ransacking of holy places a kind of glorious desirable victory. The only open synagogue, we called it the Sephardic shul, was somewhat luckier. It was not destroyed. But what is a synagogue without Jews?

Impoverished and humbled, this last surviving shul seemed to be waiting for ghosts. Its wretched state filled me with sadness. I felt at peace and at home, so to speak, in one place only, in the Jewish cemetery. When I left, the shul, by the way, something strange happened then 20 years later. I couldn't believe my eyes. There were beggars waiting for me outside. Some 30 or 40 beggars, invalids and beggars. And I had a feeling they came out from my [00:50:00] novels. What were they

doing there? I had offered them a roof over their heads in my books because they were homeless, and there they were with outstretched hands.

In the cemetery it was different. There I felt at home. Outside I was in hostile surroundings. Here I felt safe, welcome, and even protected by a great family. It was the first time, actually, I ever visited a cemetery. I was too young before. And yet, the place fascinated me, even as a boy. I imagine the dead chatting with God and his angels or with one another. At times I felt like sneaking in when no one was around, but there was always someone around to order me to go to cheder. Now there was no one to order me to do anything. I walked among tombstones looking for the tombstone of my [00:51:00] grandfather whose name I bear.

I tried to listen to echoes from my youth, stifled by the silence of the dead. I stayed 24 hours in the town of my childhood and left. I thought, it's the last time. It's my last visit. It was not meant to be. There were others, each lasting several hours, never more than a day or a night. Hardly had I arrived when I burned with the need to leave for the last time. It was always like that. Each time it was meant to be the last time, and each time I took the town with me. And so,

my friends, as we are about to conclude yet another series, the twenty-eight series of our annual encounters, perhaps we ought to review the lessons we may have received here this year from each other.

The first remains that of gratitude. I believe [00:52:00] the most important, the most important virtue in the Jewish tradition is in the first morning prayer, Modeh Ani, thanking God for being alive. And these days, especially in big cities, one could say it every hour. (laughter) Anyway, I would like to thank, really, the wise director of education and rabbi, Rabbi Woznica for a few things. For of all, for arranging these programs. You should know that last week he came here with his wife, who was pregnant, very pregnant, and two hours later she was taken to the hospital and gave birth to a beautiful son. Now, thank you, really, for not doing it in the middle of the lecture. (laughter)

I also, of course, thank Sol Adler, who is the head of the Y, and my shul neighbor, Dr. and Reb Yankov Dienstag, [00:53:00] the best research assistant and friend and teacher any person could hope to acquire. What about the lessons? Rashi taught us that neither creation nor knowledge are to be considered completed. As long as we live it is given to us to discover or

rediscover new interpretations. Granted, everything originates at Sinai, but some things remain hidden until a child in cheder, a student in the yeshiva, or the lonely grandfather leaning over a Talmudic treatise stumbles upon a *Chidush*, an invention, and another and another. The last word is not ours. Any commentary on the commentary will bring more commentaries on the commentaries.

What did we learn from Aaron the high priest? Rabbi Nachman Bratslaver's saying applies to him too. The world, said Rabbi Nachman, makes two mistakes. The first mistake [00:54:00] the world makes is that great men can make no mistake. The second mistake the world makes is that having made mistakes, great men are no longer great. Of course, it does not refer to the world of politics. (laughter) From the Akedah, the dramatic tale of a father and his son facing each other in roles chosen for them by God, we have learned that human beings are eternally tested. And in a way it is a theme I have explored in some of my novels.

I am trying to deepen it in a first volume of memoirs just published in Paris and scheduled for publication here by Knopf in the fall of '95. The epigraph is taken from *Kohelet*, and the name too. The first volume ends in '69 when I got married in Jerusalem and is entitled [00:55:00] *All the Rivers Flow Into*

the Sea. And the second, covering the years '69 until now, is called *And the Sea Is Never Full*. Those who know have already noticed I took it, of course, from *Cohélet*. You can always take things from *Cohélet*. even if you take it, it keeps it.

Things I have kept unsaid about my relationship with my mother, my father, my little sister, my grandparents, my teachers, I evoke in this first volume. I also tell of my post-war formative years in children homes in France where I was a choir conductor, and those were the years of my timidity. I was so bashful. And I had beautiful girls in my choir. Imagine a timid, bashful conductor faced with beautiful girls, so many of them. [00:56:00] I speak about that gently. And I speak about my student years at the Sorbonne and my beginning as a journalist.

My first mentor was a man from Israel called Yosef Chrust. Marvelous man who taught me the elements of journalism. And then I describe my trip to Israel for a few weeks in 1949 as a correspondent for a French paper and then coming back as a correspondent for *Yedioth Ahronoth*. *Yedioth Ahronoth* then was the poorest paper in the country. Now it's the richest. It became rich when I left it. (laughter) And travels and travels and travels. And I describe my arrival in the United States.

Actually, maybe we could call that book, as [00:57:00] all my books, longing for home. I shall read to you a very short excerpt in Paris.

So I'm a journalist in Paris. In the beginning they didn't want anything but Israeli stories. There weren't that many Israeli stories, and since I was paid for every article, there were many days I had nothing to eat. And I was waiting for the day when there will be stories about Israel. But then it changed a little bit, and now I was, in the book, I was really working full time. Israel was in the news more and more often. Government officials came on visits and so did actors, colleagues, and members of the Knesset. Now and then I managed to write articles of general interest about the funeral of Andre Gide, the death of Charles Maurras, the work of Gerard de Nerval.

The Israeli economy was improving, and so was the paper's position. I wrote more on more varied subjects. And then, don't laugh, [00:58:00] there was Miss Israel. Miss Israel who filled my evenings and my daylight hours in the apparent belief that my time belonged to her, just as I myself did belong to her. I guess I should explain. The Miss Israel contests were organized in Israel by La'Isha, Yediot Akhronot's women's

weekly. The lucky winner was awarded not only a crown but also a trip to Paris, (laughter) where she needed a guide, if not a chaperone. And naturally the choice fell on me.

It must be said that I had some experience in the field. A few weeks before Miss Israel was selected the owner of the paper, we called him *HaZaken*, the old man, Yehuda Mozes, z"l, that had asked me to interview Miss Europe. I remember her well, dark, thin, and beautiful in that way some Spanish women have. She [00:59:00] received me in her apartment near the Champs-Elysees. Radiant with grace, her hands poised delicately on her knees, she was delighted to answer my questions. Unfortunately, I didn't have any. (laughter) I had no idea how to interview a beauty queen.

What was I supposed to ask about, her views on German disarmament? (laughter) Her favorite authors, the winner of the Prix Goncourt? I fidgeted, and she waited, serenely at first and then with mounting impatience. I was so confused I couldn't see straight. And in the end I opted for frankness.

"Mademoiselle," I stammered, "I don't know what I am supposed to ask you. Could you give me a little help?" (laughter) She burst into applause as though she had just heard the best joke of her life. "You really don't know?" she said. "Well, that's

the first time [01:00:00] this has ever happened to me. Okay. Take this down."

And she proceeded to tell me what she ate for breakfast, what exercise she did, what diet she followed. And then she cited some figures, and I asked, "Your phone number?" (laughter) A fresh burst of laughter. And this guy claims to be a journalist, in Paris yet? It wasn't my fault. How was I supposed to recognize her measurements? (laughter) I wrote it all down like a good boy and, sweat pearling on my brow, pieced together an article hoping no one would read it, or at least that people wouldn't make too much fun of me. But I wouldn't have this kind of problem with Miss Israel.

I wasn't supposed to write anything about her. She did, however, cause other problems, all of them familiar. The [01:01:00] paper had forgotten to send me the money. An impresario such as myself required to show the young Jewish beauty queen the hospitality due her exalted status. I had to borrow left and right. Unfortunately, the queen was cultured and intelligent, and she wanted to see Paris, not just the Eiffel Tower and the Folies Bergère but the theater, concerts, and so on. My various press cards had never been so useful. Now and then I was treated to glances of envy.

And the truth is, it wasn't so bad being the attentive escort of Israel's most beautiful woman, especially since Miriam, that was her name, had plenty of character and spirit. I got her to talk about her past and her present life, and she liked that, so did I. I always like to listen. But she also wanted explanations about Paris, which I was delighted to provide, improvising endlessly, effortlessly (laughter) with an aplomb that deeply embarrasses me today. [01:02:00] And perhaps this is the moment to confess one of my past faults. At the time, I had a pronounced tendency to make up stories about Paris, stories you won't find any history book. (laughter)

The problem was, I was tired of it all. To many Israeli visitors insisted that I show them Paris, the Louvre and the Place la Concorde, Montmartre, and the Russian cabarets. At first I was a conscientious guide reporting only what I knew, but little by little I realized that my new friends, for whose introduction to Parisian culture I was responsible, were disappointed. They wanted more picturesque stories. The façade of Notre Dame, with its Jews in pointed hats and its blind miserable synagogue was not enough for them, nor was the Palais de Justice, where in 1240, by order of King Louis IX, the first

disputation on Judaism between Rabbi Yechiel of Paris and the convert Nicholas Donin was held.

Did my visitors know that the king and queen [01:03:00] attended the event and that it was the lamented Donin who persuaded Pope Gregory IX and King Louis IX to order the Talmud burned? Oh, we learned that in school, they said. We want to hear about other things. So I began inventing anecdotes, (laughter) anecdotes for every statue, little stories for every square, a memory for every monument. I could spend an hour or a morning rearranging the capitol's past as though I had learned it by heart in nursery school until one day the inevitable finally happened.

I was at the Place de la Bastille addressing a little group that listened raptly to my description of the days of the revolution. I was in good form. I gave them the names of the officer who first threw open the prison gates and the prisoner who fell to his knees to beg for mercy. In the next cell a princess awaited death. She was ready to die but changed her mind at the sight of the officer, and suddenly, to her friend's outrage, began [01:04:00] to shout of her love of life and the living. I could easily have gone on through the next revolution but for the cry, it sounded like a wounded animal, suddenly emitted by a gentleman unknown to me.

He was, unfortunately, a professional guide. (laughter) And he fell upon me like a hungry wolf. "How dare you, bastard. How dare you tell such lies in my presence, I who know this city, the history of each stone." We slipped away as quickly as possible. "Pay no attention to him," one of my guests hastened to console me. "He is mad." Another corrected, "Oh no, he's just jealous." (laughter) Well, this is more or less the tone of many, many chapters, funny chapters of my memoirs. Well, I long, naturally, for those [01:05:00] years. Who doesn't? Paris, young.

Occasionally, when I speak about the longing for the very real past, from before the war, I discuss the subject of longing with friends who went through the same experiences. Some share my views and my longing for the past, others refuse to go back. Why revisit the hateful, distorted faces of neighbors, they say? Why walk again in streets where their childhood had been humiliated, they ask? What's the use of measuring now the immensity of yesterday's loss? And yet, with the passage of time, more and more survivors do go back to their hometowns, not alone, with their children, for the sake of their children, as if to tell them look, look well. These were the house where your grandparents lived.

Look, and now perhaps [01:06:00] you will understand why at times our eyes grow suddenly dark as they look at you with love or as they looked at you with love as you slept in the crib or played in the garden. Usually the children return from those pilgrimages more shaken than their parents and grandparents. And that is because they have witnessed there a tragic and irrevocable fact. Their parents' homes will forever remain violated in ruins, never to be replaced. Still, that doesn't mean that survivor's children are not able to offer their parents some joy and a certain measure of serenity. Oh, quite the contrary. They alone can do that. Only they justify our faith in the future or in ourselves.

Is there in the world a greater happiness resonant with more hope, than that of a survivor when he or she [01:07:00] embraces a child, a future, which often bears the name of the survivor's father or mother? Where then, what then is the home one is longing for? Is it to be found only in the past, never in the future? Mine belongs to both. In other words, really, constantly shifting from biography to theology, it is both in Sighet and Jerusalem but not simultaneously. When I am in one I long for the other. When I was home, I thought of Jerusalem.

Wherever I go, said Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, my steps lead me to Jerusalem. It was the dream of my dreams, mine.

No city, no landscape nourished my dreams with as much passion, with as much fire. In Sighet I knew Jerusalem better than Sighet. I knew how to go to the temple, [01:08:00] at what time, with whom, when to hear the Levites sing, when to receive the blessings of the priest. I was there in spirit. When I was in Jerusalem, I thought of Sighet. If all my writings represent a celebration of memory, their subtext is a song of songs, of longing for Jerusalem. The only city in the world that has its fiery replica in heaven, the *Yerushalayim shel maalah*. Or on occasion, while visiting Israel I stumble upon journalists wanting to embarrass me by asking, why I do not reside in Jerusalem since I love it so deeply.

It's a painful but valid question. And usually I answer without answering. I say, well, though I do not live in Jerusalem, Jerusalem lives in me. But this question really could be addressed to any Jew who loves Israel, any teacher, [01:09:00] any Zionist, any Jewish leader, any rabbi, anyone. What are we doing here, since we pray for Jerusalem? Having longed for Jerusalem since the beginning of our life in exile, why aren't all diaspora Jews going there? Is it that for my part, I prefer

the longing over reality? Years ago I was asked by a reporter where I felt most at home. And I answered, in Jerusalem, when I am not in Jerusalem.

Well, it's about time to interrupt our pilgrimage to the sources of nostalgia. What can one say in conclusion? That Adam was lucky to have been expelled from paradise, that God's punishment contains its own reward, namely, the ability to long for a paradise lost? Would a paradise be a paradise if it weren't [01:10:00] lost? But what about, really, the longing for the future? Moses did not long for his Egyptian past but for his Jewish future. Messianic redemption implies the distant kingdom of David transformed in hope, hope for a better future, a future when every human being everywhere will feel at home at last, at home in his or her faith, country, and social, ethical environment.

Is that true longing, longing for the humanity in human beings that moves them away from the need to conquer, to dominate, and above all, to humiliate others? I am fond of this kind of longing. But there is another one, a legend. Legend tells us that one day [01:11:00] man spoke to God in this manner: Master of the universe, let's change. You be man, and I will be God. For only one second. And the Master of the universe smiled

gently and asked him, aren't you afraid? No, said man, and you? Well, yes, says God, I am. (laughter) Nevertheless being kind, compassionate, he granted man's desire. And he became a man, and the man took his place and immediately availed himself of his omnipotence.

He refused to revert to his previous state. He wanted to remain God. So neither God nor man was ever again what they seemed to be. Years passed, [01:12:00] centuries, perhaps eternities, and suddenly the drama quickened. The past for one and the present for the other were too heavy to be born. As the liberation of the one was bound to the liberation of the other, they renewed the ancient dialogue whose echoes come to us in the night filled with remorse, pain, and, most of all, with infinite longing. Thank you. (applause) [01:13:00]

M:

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