

Y Elie Wiesel Archive

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) This is an excerpt from an address given by Yitzhak Rabin. "It is strange to note to what extent Israel's fighters do not feel joy. They seem closed to joy. Some try to show gaiety, but their heart is not in it. Others do not even feel like trying, for they have seen not only glory but the suffering that goes [00:01:00] with it. They have seen their closest comrades fall bloodied and maimed. But that isn't all. The price paid by the enemy also weights upon our soldiers. Conditioned by its past, the Jewish people has never been able to feel a conqueror's pride or a victor's exaltation."

These words are part of a chapter about Jerusalem to be published in the memoir *All Rivers Run to the Sea*. Yitzhak Rabin spoke them on a sunny day in June 1967 at a ceremony in Jerusalem on Mount Scopus. Yitzhak Rabin then was the hero [00:02:00] who had brought Israel triumph, pride, and an extraordinary feeling of security. Under his supreme command, Israel's soldiers and officers had just won an unprecedented victory over three Arab armies. It's then that I met Yitzhak Rabin. Levi Eshkol was prime minister, and I came to Israel

during the Six Day War, and Eshkol one day says, why don't you go and meet the *ramatkal*, the chief of staff?

I heard many things about him. I heard about his shyness. I heard about his extraordinary political, analytical mind and also [00:03:00] about his glorious past. I came to see him. I ascertained that all the rumors about his shyness were correct. He was shy. But he didn't know that I too was shy, and so therefore, we sat a long time looking at one another (laughter) quietly, with great sympathy for one another, hoping that one of us will speak. (laughter) It wasn't I. I wasn't going to begin a discussion or a conversation in the presence of the commander in chief. And he probably felt since I am not speaking, why should he? (laughter)

There is a marvelous anecdote about his shyness that when he got married to Leah. He was then again a young commander, popular everywhere, and everybody [00:04:00] came to the wedding from Ben-Gurion down. And he felt uncomfortable because too many people were there. He had to smile, to shake hands. So he turned, under the chuppah, he turned to Leah, and he said Leah, I am telling you, this is the last time I'm marrying you. (laughter) He had said it without thinking it was humorous, and yet he laughed occasionally.

My wife and I, Marion, we knew him well. We saw him often in Jerusalem when he was prime minister the first time, here often. And in fact, we saw him 10 days before he was killed. It was Erev Shabbat, and the Israeli ambassador had given a Shabbat dinner in [00:05:00] his honor. There were some 60, 70 people. And the ambassador and Rabin, they wanted me to introduce him. So after the dinner I introduced him, and I reminded him of that speech, which was some speech. In 1967 when the whole world was in euphoria, the Jewish world was in euphoria. And he spoke philosophically, morally, humorly about the pain of the victor, that he realized that a Jewish soldier cannot simply kill, not even the enemy, and be happy about it.

He spoke about it, and that's when I understood that Rabin, one day, will also bring peace for Israel. [00:06:00] What happened now? In Israel the headlines were *ma kara lanu*, what happened to us? Everybody was asking that question. What happened to us? Why could a young Jew decide one day to kill another Jew? And not simply a Jew, the prime minister, a man elected by the people. And not some prime minister, a prime minister who had credentials, who had the consciousness, the awareness, the conviction that he made decisions that would affect the entire Jewish people everywhere.

Why did he do it? How did he bring himself to do it? It happened on Shabbat afternoon [00:07:00] here, Motza'ei Shabbat there. And I'm sure you, like me, were under shock. And I confess to you that the shock is still here. It's very hard to shake myself out of that nightmare. I still don't understand what happened, how it could have happened, from all viewpoints about the negligence of the Shin Bet, the security. How come 100 security agents were there, and yet one man simply said I am a driver. They didn't check. And he could go just like that and kill.

And, and, and I don't understand. That evening the telephone, of course, as in many places probably with you, didn't stop ringing from all over the world and especially from Israel. Next day [00:08:00] I was invited by President Clinton to go with him on his Air Force One to Israel. I must tell you that I was ready to accept it for the good reason and for a bad reason. The bad reason being that I had already been once invited by a president of the United States to join him on Air Force One. That was President Reagan. When he wanted to go to Bitburg. (laughter) It's incredible, but he thought that by bribing me with Air Force One, not only would I stop him from going, I would go with him. (laughter) I didn't.

So here came the other, President Clinton's invitation, and we went. It was very, very special, very special because the president was deeply, deeply moved by that tragedy. [00:09:00] He had a special relationship with Rabin. He saw in him a kind of father figure. He had such a respect for the man who won so many wars so gloriously. And therefore, there was never a misunderstanding between them. There was never any pressure on Rabin from Clinton or from Clinton on anyone in Israel. And the entire route, we were only -- all the staff was there, but we were two private citizens there on the plane. And we hardly slept, and we talked about Rabin, only about Rabin.

And they worked on the speech that the president gave. It was a great speech. Then we came to Israel. Right away we went to the Knesset. There I saw Leah Rabin, wept. A funeral, 60 heads of state [00:10:00] and I was wondering, why? Why did they all come? And I came to a certain conclusion. Perhaps they came because this hour was our weakest hour, and we needed -- they felt that we need some assurance that we are not alone. And therefore they came, not only for political reasons. Simply, that was our weakest hour. To see a Jew, in addition, a religious Jew, killed, they felt that we would go through such a trauma that we needed their presence.

However, our sense of loneliness was not diminished. I felt terribly alone, terribly troubled by that tragedy. And then when we heard the granddaughter, my God, you know, we wept [00:11:00] like children, like children. What is it about all that? What should have been done? I said it today somewhere. I would have liked to see the chief rabbinate proclaim a *ta'anit tzibbur*, a day of fasting and contrition. Not that we are guilty. I don't believe that we are guilty. There are those who preached hatred. They will share their responsibility in the eyes of God, but we should never, never use this tragedy and this crime by this cowardly man to indict the religious Jewish community. It's not the fault of the religious Jewish community. It's the fault of fanatics.

And we had fanatics, and therefore, we should have had, I think, a day of fasting. I want very much to believe that [00:12:00] perhaps at the end of shiva every rabbi in every synagogue will ask the community, his community, to fast. Tonight is another occasion to remember something else. Tonight is the Crystal Night. And you know the rabbis here, and my Rabbi Roth from 5th Avenue. You know, coming today I was wondering. All of a sudden I wrote a letter, and I -- Hebrew. I gave the Hebrew

date, and I signed as always Marcheshvan. Said, why Marcheshvan? Why the bitter month of Cheshvan?

Now I know why. The Crystal Night and the murder of Rabin in Cheshvan. We should remember the Crystal Night too. It was a watershed. It was a beginning [00:13:00] of something worse. Because that's when we realized how lonely, how abandoned the Jewish communities in Europe were. It was possible for a legal, un-legal legal state, for a government elected by the people in Germany to do all that, to ransack hundreds of Jewish stores, burn synagogues, kill Jews. And a few months later, with a memory of the Kristallnacht still present, the St. Louis was turned back from the American shores to Germany. We must remember that too.

I try to speak about all that in the book, for which I'm going to read some pages tonight. But before that just one short parenthesis. This is the end of the twenty-ninth [00:14:00] year. I hope that one more year, next year, if God gives us the possibility to use those years, and then we'll see. (laughter) I want to thank Sol Adler, Rabbi Woznica and their staff for arranging these lectures with such delicacy and devotion, and to you for being here. Thank you. And for those who are not here but outside, come in. (applause) [00:15:00]

The book is structured around a series of dreams that for the few years past I had about my father and not only about my father. Those here who went through our experiences I'm sure will tell you the same thing, that recently we are dreaming a lot about that period, much more than before. Why? I don't know. But we do dream quite a lot. So the beginning is, "Last night I saw my father in a dream. His unshaven face [00:16:00] was the same as ever, its expression frozen, but his clothing changed from moment to moment from his Shabbat suit to the striped rags of the damned and back again.

"Where had he come from? From what landscape had he escaped? Who sent him? I can't recall if I asked. All I remember is how sad he looked and how resigned. I could see, by the way, his lips were moving, that he wanted to tell me something, but no sound came. Then all at once in my sleep, or was it in his, I suddenly doubted my own senses. Was this really my father? I was no longer sure. In dreams all certainties are blurred and dimmed, dawn and dusk, reality and fantasy merge. And yet it was my father who appeared to me last night [00:17:00] bearing a message, or was it a warning?



"I awoke drenched with sweat, my heart pounding. A terrifying idea crossed my mind, that he had come for me. I never really knew my father. It hurts to admit -- it hurts to admit that, but it would hurt him even more if I deluded myself. The truth is, I knew little of the man I loved most in the world, the man whose merest glance could stir me. What was the secret of his inner life? What was he thinking as he stared in silence at some far off, invisible point in space? Why did he conceal his cares and disappointments from me? Because I was too young, or because he thought me incapable of comprehending them?

"I wonder whether other sons face this same problem. Do they know their fathers as someone [00:18:00] other than the authoritarian, omniscient figure who leaves in the morning and returns in the evening bringing bread and wine to the table? As a child and adolescent I saw him rarely, carelessly dressed, often preoccupied but always friendly, he spent the week in his little grocery store where he enjoyed chatting with customers as much as selling them things, and at the community offices where he quietly worked to assist prisoners and refugees threatened with expulsion.

"Shabbat was the only day I spent with him. In Sighet, my town, Shabbat began on Friday afternoon. Shops closed well before

sundown. Stragglers and latecomers, having been admonished by rabbinical emissaries and inspectors, 'Let's go. It's late. Time to close up. Shabbat is coming.' And woe to him who disobeyed. After the ritual bath we would walk to services [00:19:00] dressed for the occasion. Sometimes my father would take my hand, as though to protect me, as we passed the nearby police station or the central prison on the main square. I liked it when he did that. And I like to remember it now.

"I felt reassured, content. Bound to me, he belonged to me. We formed a block, but if a fellow worshiper joined us my suddenly useless hand was returned to me. Did my father have any idea how much that hurt? I felt abandoned, even rejected, and after that it was never the same. I would have loved to have had a real conversation with my father, heart to heart, to have spoken to him openly of things serious and frivolous. But no. At that age everything seemed serious. I would have liked to have told him of my nighttime anguish and of my fear of the dead, who I was sure left their tombs at midnight to [00:20:00] pray in the great synagogue. And heaven help the passerby who failed to head their call to come and recite the customary blessing before the reading of the Torah.

"I would have told my father about my poverty-stricken friends and classmates whose hunger made me feel guilty. I thought of myself as rich and unworthy, naively ascribing great virtue to poverty. Deep down I was jealous of the poor. To paraphrase the great Yiddish humorist Sholem Aleichem, I would have given anything for a tiny taste of misery. (laughter) Yes, I would have loved to have discussed all this with my father. Sometimes I even envied Isaac, who was alone with his father when they climbed Mount Moriah.

"God alone could have known then that there would come a time when he and I, my father and I, would walk together towards a solitude and an altar of another dimension, and that unlike in the Bible [00:21:00] story, only the son would come back, leaving his father behind with the shadows. I admired my father. I feared him. I loved him intensely. He in turn genuinely loved all people, the weak, the needy, even the madmen. He enjoyed listening to them as they laughed, sang, wept, and chattered with birds they alone could see. Beggars were drawn to him, and he never failed to invite them to share our Shabbat meal.

"One of them said to my father, 'The Talmud seeks to convince us that poverty's the lot of the Jews. But how is that possible?

Poverty's ugly. It begets ugliness.' And my father nodded as if to say, you who are poor know better the Talmud what poverty is. If only I could recapture my father's wisdom, my mother's serenity, my little sister's innocent grace. If only I could recapture [00:22:00] the rage of the resistance fighter, the suffering of the mystic dreamer, the solitude of the orphan in a sealed cattle car, the death of each and every one of them. If I only could step out of myself and merge with them.

"If only I could hold my memory open, drive it beyond the horizon, keep it alive even after my death. I know it isn't possible, but what of it? In my dreams the impossible is not a Jewish concept." I speak, of course, this time, what I have not done in *Night* I am doing here. I speak more about those who were so close to me. I was afraid of writing about them, of speaking about them, my father, my mother, my little sister. And I speak about here much more than in other writings.

[00:23:00]

I describe an incident with my mother that once we made each other suffer, but the suffering came neither from her nor from me but from our rebbe, Rebbe Yisrael of Vizhnitz, zichrono livracha. When he came to Sighet I was eight years old. As usual, my mother took me with her to seek the rebbe's blessing,

good health for her family, success and respect for the head of the family, good husbands for her daughters, and *Yirat Shamayim*, fear of God for her son. A large crowd thronged the antechamber, spilling out into the corridor and onto the street.

As the daughter of Reb Dodye, my mother did not have to wait in line. She herself, not the gabbai, not the secretary, wrote out her request to the rebbe, who talked with her about countless family [00:24:00] matters as I stood holding my mother's hand, not understanding everything they said, focused as I was on the beaming face of the rebbe whose ahavat Israel, whose love for Israel was legendary. I was captivated by his eyes, his eyebrows, his beard. Suddenly the rebbe told me to approach. He put me on his lap and asked me tenderly about my studies.

I answered it, easy questions, as best as I could, stammering almost incoherent, at which point the rebbe asked my mother to leave us alone. "Good," the rebbe said when she closed the door behind her. "Now we can speak calmly," about everything, the *sidra* of the week, a portion of the Torah, Erev Shabbat, the Rashi commentary, the chapter of Talmud tractate I was studying at the time. We were alone a few minutes, or was it a few hours? At last he kissed me on the forehead and told me to wait outside. "Tell your mother [00:25:00] to come back," he said.

When she reemerged from talking with him, what seemed like days later, I froze. I tried to run to her, but my legs would not obey. She was a changed woman. Violent sobs shook her body. People stared at her in commiseration. The rebbe must have said something terrible, something terrible, something terrifying, some painful things about me. I must have shamed her with my bad behavior or by giving wrong answers to the rebbe's question. "Why are you crying?" I asked. She refused to answer. I repeated my question again and again but in vain. I tried the next day too and the day after, no avail.

All I got were those same tears. I persisted stubbornly, desperate to know what evil I might have done to cause such sorrow. It went on for weeks until finally [00:26:00] I gave up, exhausted. By then she had stopped crying. One day, some 25 years later, I got an urgent phone call in New York from a distant relative who told me that my cousin Anshel Feig was gravely ill. He needed an operation but had refused to sign the consent form until he could see me. Fearing the worst, I jumped in a cab. Anshel, I loved. He owned a fish market on Amsterdam Avenue near 86th Street, close to where we lived.

And whenever I had seen him he was modest and happy, a kippah on his head. He spoke in Manhattan just as he had in Sighet, in song. "Thank you for coming," Anshel said. "Now I need you. I need your blessing. Give me a blessing." "Are you out of your mind?" I asked, trying to hide my concern. "You want me to bless you? You're standing there [00:27:00] is surely a lot stronger than mine." Anshel, in fact, has retained his old Hasidic fervor, carefully observing all the commandments of the Torah, going to synagogue morning and evening, whereas I -- but he insisted.

And the doctor, the relative, pushed me. "What are you waiting for? His life is at stake?" So I took the patient's hand and gave him my *bracha*, my blessing, the same one I had received so often when I was sick as a child. A few days later I went to visit Anshel. The operation had been a success. And I could now speak to him freely. I asked him why he had insisted on receiving my blessing. He did not seem surprised by the question. "Do you remember the last time the Vizhnitzer rebbe visited Sighet?" he said. "Like yesterday," I replied.

But how could I forget? The painful image of my mother's sobbing [00:28:00] surged back. "It's funny," I told Anshel, "but I never found out why she came away from the rebbe in

tears." "I know why," Anshel said with a hint of a smile. "You know," I jumped. Stunned, I felt like grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him, even if it sent him back to the operating room. (laughter) "You know all along and you never told me?" His eyes clouded, and he spoke as in a dream. "I was one of the people waiting in the antechamber to see the rebbe," he said.

"But when I saw your mother crying I left to see her home. You were walking ahead of us, and that was when she swore me to secrecy and told me what Rabbi Yisrael of Vizhnitz, may his memory protect us and be a blessing, had said to her. He said - I won't tell you." (laughter) [00:29:00] It's very simple. Read the book. (laughter)

I am trying to remember if my parents ever quarreled or bickered, if there was ever any tension between them. If so, I have no memory of it. I want to believe that they loved each other and that nothing ever clouded that love. That may be too idealized a memory, but I cling to it nevertheless. In fact, years later an old Hasid in New York, Reb Itzikel Fuchs, told me there had been some gossip when they married because my father had fallen in love with my mother. We weren't supposed to marry



for love. (laughter) Good Jewish families called in the community matchmaker instead.

But one day my father saw a beautiful young girl in a carriage and was so struck by [00:30:00] her that he ran after her in the street, calling out, "Who are you?" Of course, she did not deign to reply. But that evening the driver gave the answer, for money. The girl was the young daughter of Reb Dodye Feig of the village of Bichkev. The following year they were married, and they had four children, three girls and a boy. I was the third after Hilda and Bea. Tzipora was the youngest. The Romanian authorities would not allow certain Jewish names, so her birth certificate lists her as Judith. We nicknamed her Tzipuka. From Tzipora, Tzipuka.

And there were times when I quarreled with my older sisters but never with her. We all loved her madly. My father treated her with especial tenderness, always had time for her. He would play with her, make her laugh, take her wherever she wanted to go. He would hold her on his lap and tell her stories. He pampered her, spoiled her, as did we. Perhaps we sensed [00:31:00] that time was short, that we had to shower her with all the love and all the joys and favors of which she would soon be deprived.

This is about my childhood in my memoirs. And of course, memoirs, people ask, what's the hurry? Why don't you wait a while? It puzzles me. Wait for what, and for how long? I fail to see what age has to do with memory, and furthermore, if I could get from the Ribono shel oylam a written guarantee that I will have another 20 years I would stop the memoirs right away. (laughter) But people say you have plenty of time. But time for what? To let oblivion wipe out the victim's final traces, to explore the planet witnessing is degradation? To write your memoirs is to draw up a balance sheet of your life so far.

Am I ready for [00:32:00] a final reckoning? Memory, after all, may well prove voracious and intrusive. Remembering means to shine a merciless light on faces and events, to say no to the sands that bury words and to forgetfulness and death. Is that not too ambitious? It's been years since I was young, but I would love to rediscover, to recapture if not the anguish and exaltation that I once felt, then at least the road leading to them. Like everyone else, I have sought and sometimes found. Like everyone else, I have loved and ceased to love. I have done good things and bad, laughed out loud and cried in silence.

So I write. What I say is simply, to paraphrase a Talmudic saying, I hope the last page will bring me greater certainty than the first. [00:33:00] Do we write because we are happy or because we are not? A legend of the Midrash says that King Solomon wore a ring with the power to make him happy when he was sad, and sad when he was happy. Why should he want to be sad when he was lucky enough to know happiness? But then Solomon was a Jew and a writer, which is to say, never satisfied.

(laughter) Is the story meant to make us laugh or cry? To cry is to sow, said the Maharal of Prague. To laugh is to reap. And to write is to sow and to reap at the same time.

Yes, last night I saw my father in a dream. The landscape around him was changing, but he was not. He looked at me strangely. I don't know why or for how long. Was he waiting for me to speak to him, to tell him I was happy to see him again? But I wasn't. [00:34:00] Now, I wasn't unhappy. I was -- I don't know what I was. I don't know what I felt. I know that I looked at him, and he looked at me but that our eyes never met. Did he beckon to me? Did he want to take me to a place where only memory remained alive, to our dead town?

I describe therefore, my adolescence in Sighet, my seduction by mysticism. You see, I was a yeshiva bocher, only bent on

studying, so much so that although we had to go to secular schools, we bribed the teachers and the director so I didn't have to go except for the exam. So one month before the exam I studied by heart all [00:35:00] geography, history, and so forth only to forget it one month later and back to study. But I also wanted to study Kabbalah. It's forbidden. You know the Rambam Maimonides, there's an age, an age limit, 30 or some say 40. I wasn't 30, surely not 40. But I wanted to study.

So we were three, three bochurei yeshiva, and we had a teacher, a Kabbalist called Kalman. He appears in many of my novels, Kalman the Kabbalist. And he accepted to teach us. Then what happened was what should have happened. One of us, the son of the Dayan, lost his mind. My father called me. Aren't you afraid? It's dangerous. No, study. The second one lost his mind. I was the third. (laughter) [00:36:00] And curiously enough, had it not been for the Germans arriving into our town, I would have continued, and I'm sure that I too would have followed my two friends.

While they were sick, of course, all the doctors to see him. Nobody knew what happened to him. We had no psychiatrist in Sighet. That's why we were so normal. (laughter) But there was psychiatrist away in Satmar, Kolozsvár, Klausenburg, Budapest.

One came from Budapest. Couldn't find out. Asked everybody, the parents, they didn't know what happened to him. He lost his tongue. He became aphasia -- he got aphasia. And he was so confused that he called up his teacher, a certain professor Olivecrona in Stockholm. [00:37:00] And imagine, the middle of the war, a professor from Stockholm left Sweden and came to our godforsaken village or town to see a yeshiva bocher who lost his mind. (laughter)

He came. He spent the whole week in Sighet, spoke to everybody, including to me, but of course I wouldn't betray my friend to tell him that we wanted actually to bring the messiah. That was our work. We wanted *l'hakhish et ha-ketz*, to bring the Messiah. And we know how. You know, there is a Kabbalah Ma'asit. There is a manual how-to. (laughter) You can do that. I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't betray my friend. So he left. He was terribly upset. He left. The second one (inaudible). Again he came back, Olivecrona came back, spoke to everybody, didn't find out anything, and left.

Many, many years later Marion and I had dinner with a friend, a psychiatrist who had with him a guest from Stockholm.

[00:38:00] She introduced herself, her name, and one of her married names was Olivecrona. I said, do you happen to be

related to that -- "Oh yes, I'm his daughter." "You are Olivecrona's daughter. Do you know," I said, "That I knew your father?" She said, "How come?" I told her, you know, he came to -- she said, "Sighet? I remember." She said, "I remember he came back twice, and he was so upset because he couldn't understand a thing." So I explained to her what he didn't know.

My two friends were among the first to be taken. I, naturally, can tell you more about my town. Why is it that my town still enchants me so? [00:39:00] Is it because in my memory it is entangled with my childhood? In all my novels it serves as background and vantage point. In my fantasy I still see myself in it. I often recreate my town, so like and yet so different from all others, refusing to accept that it ever changed. I strolled through it alongside my characters, who act as scouts, guides, and guardian angels. With their help, evil remains hidden and time suspended.

I wrote *A Town Beyond the Wall* in 1961 before my return to Sighet. I wrote it because at the time that was the only way to bring it back to life. Even when I tell biblical, Talmudic, or Hasidic tales it is from my town that they take flight. It is in the gardens of Sighet that the sages composed the Talmud, in the flickering lights of its candles that I weave legends from

the Midrash, along its two rivers that exiles hand their harps [00:40:00] and weep when they remember Zion. It is in the darkness of its forests that Rabbi Itzhak Lurie and his disciples dream of ultimate redemption. That's how it is, and there is nothing I can do about it.

I left Sighet, but Sighet refuses to leave me. The closer I come to my native town the farther away I am, the better I know it, the more I strive to discover it. For I do not know it well. I thought I did, but I was wrong. I had a secret life I never suspected. I never knew, for instance, that respected members of the community engaged in smuggling and illegal currency trading, nor that there was a house, let's call it of ill repute in Sighet. According to stories I heard from Sighet's inhabitants after the war, a few of the Jewish working girls spoke a highly literary Yiddish.

How should I have known? One in particular apparently liked to discuss religion with her customers. So [00:41:00] yes, I freely admit that many things escaped my notice. Yet, I loved to look and listen. I was interested in everything. A Hasidic quarrel, I was determined to learn the reasons, ramifications, and stakes. A young Jewish woman converted to marry Hungarian officer, I worried about the tragedy of her shame-struck

parents. Everything aroused my curiosity, a beggar who might be a tzadik, a just man in disguise, an abandoned wife scouring the province for the 100 rabbinical signatures that would allow her to remarry, a rich trader gone bankrupt, a novelist whose book described the turmoil in heaven when the Angel of Death went on strike, an apostate excommunicated by the community.

Not only the people but also the trees, the birds, the clouds interested me. And I was taken most of all with the visionaries, Moishe the madman whose laugh haunted my dreams, Kalman the Kabbalist whose veiled glance darkened mine, Schmukler, the prince [00:42:00] and a friend Itzu with whom I studied the Siddur, the prayer book of Rabbi Yankov Emden, my friend Yerachmiel, with whom I learned modern Hebrew. Of course I remembered them all just as I remember the silent beggar who put his finger to his lips to show me how much he distrusted speech.

And I remember the family of five, or was it seven, dwarves whom people came from far and wide to see in Sighet. And all of whom survived Mengele's selections and tortures in Birkenau. And they went to Israel after the war. My bar mitzvah was celebrated by the Rebbe of Borsha across the street from our house. Called to the Torah, I recited appropriate blessings and



silently read the passage of the prophets. After the service, the faithful were invited to a kiddush. And I can see myself now as Rebbe Haim-Meir'l, successor to the old Pinchasel,

the Borsher Rebbe helped me strap the [00:43:00] phylacteries onto my left arm and forehead for the first time, as the Bible tells us to do. And here I became a responsible adult, a full-fledged member of the community of Israel. A new life began for me. I was now so obsessed with God that I forgot his creation. Was it Ernest Renan, the French historian, who wrote that the Greeks had reason, the Romans power, and the Jews the sense of God? I sought God everywhere, tracking him especially to holy places as though he were hidden there. Was Giordano Bruno right when he said that the light is God's shadow?

I sought God everywhere, the better to love him, to enjoy his gifts, to share his suffering in our exile. In the chapels of tailors and of shoemakers, in the great synagogue of the rich in the houses of study where the poor gathered, I lived for God.

[00:44:00] Already then the role of friendship occupied an important place in my life. I stressed the role of friendship and its place in my life as an essential component of everything I do. I can work only in an atmosphere of understanding. In other words, of friendship. As a journalist I enjoyed the

friendship of my employers. As a teacher I sought the friendship of colleagues.

A single suspicious look could cause a sleepless night. One cold word and I became full of self-doubt. I often felt inferior to others and always to my image of myself or to their image of me, and therefore I had to redeem myself. I was so worried about not being liked that I tried to do everything to be liked. In *The Gates of The Forest* I wrote about friendship. What is a friend? More than a brother, [00:45:00] more than a father, a traveling companion with whom we rebuild the route and strive to conquer the impossible, even if only to sacrifice it later. Friendship stamps a life as deeply as, more deeply than love.

Love can degenerate into obsession, but friendship never means anything but sharing. It is with friends that we share the awakening of desire, the birth of a vision or a fear. It is to friends that we communicate our anguish at the setting of the sun or the lack of order and justice. Is the soul immortal? And if so, why does fear sap our strength? If God exists, since God exists, how can we lay claim to freedom since he is its origin and its end? And what exactly is death? The mere closing of parenthesis? And life? Among philosophers such

questions often ring false, but raised among friends during adolescence they trigger a change of [00:46:00] being.

The glance begins to burn. The everyday gesture strives to reach beyond itself. What is a friend? The person who first makes you aware of your own solitude and his and helps you escape is so that you in turn may help him. It is thanks to him that you can fall silent without shame and unburden yourself without loss of face. And throughout the book, really, the theme of friendship comes back. Then comes a chapter about the darkness. Things that I have not said I try to say here. But after the war it is France, and I describe my coming to France, the way I woke up, what I did, we were [00:47:00] in a children's home of the OSE.

And strange, I really became as religious as before. I had outbursts of anger during, of despair too, but the moment we came to France, in that children's home I really became religious. I got hold of exact of the tractate of Talmud which I had interrupted when leaving Sighet. And what do you mean? We found a mikveh, everything, as in Sighet. Then I discovered one of my sisters, the oldest one. I didn't know that she or even the other one, we remained alive. I knew about my mother

and my little sister but not about the two oldest ones. I thought they too perished.

But one day there were journalists who came to do a story about our -- after all, it's children from Buchenwald. [00:48:00] It was a good story. But I didn't know what the journalists looked like. I never met a journalist before, never read a paper before. There was a journalist who spoke to me in German. I answered him in Yiddish, all kinds of things, and I played chess with a friend. They took pictures. All right. And then three days later or so or four days or a week later I was in the office of the director. And I heard him speak on the telephone mentioning my name, and I thought he procured me the tractate of the Talmud which I needed and a pen and pencil to write my diary.

When he finished I said, "Well, did you get the Talmud?" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I heard you mention my name." He said, "Oh, you are Wiesel?" I said, yes. He said, "I just spoke to your sister." I said, Director, I don't believe it. What do you mean? Must be a mistake. Even if she remained alive, what is she doing in France? If she's in France, how does she know I'm here? He realized that, serious, so he tried to call back [00:49:00] and they told him that the

person called from a public telephone in the post office. And there was no way to get back.

But he said, but she has a message for you. She will wait for you tomorrow at the railway station in Paris, but we were in Normandy. I didn't sleep all night, as you can imagine, and came next day, and there she was. The oldest one was there, and she simply saw my picture in the paper. She had met a Algerian Jew in the DP camp immediately after the war, and she followed him to marry him in Paris. Bea, the next oldest, went back to Sighet thinking maybe I am alive because rumors went around that I wasn't alive. So that's the beginning of my schooling in France. I lived in a children's home. I describe all that.

And then I became a choir director. And choir director as a job is, you know, to make music, and I loved it. [00:50:00] The problem was -- I'll tell you what the problem was. (laughter) As choir conductor I was stupidly and inexcusably severe. My choir attracted quite a few people, the most beautiful girls in the home joint, and suddenly I had more boys than I needed. (laughter) Some of them sang off key but insisted on taking part anyway. And they said just because God gave them tin voices and bad ears, why should they be deprived of singing? One of them put forward a more elegant argument.

He was hopelessly in love with Miriam, a superb blond choir member who did not reciprocate his affection. If only I would let him in the choir, he would have a chance of winning her over. "But you sing completely out of tune," I told him. He replied that he would make the effort of his life that he would learn. "Learn what?" I countered. "It isn't something you [00:51:00] can learn." But he was so crestfallen that I gave in in one condition, that he not sing but only move his lips. (laughter) He promised but occasionally got carried away and forgot, which was near catastrophe.

But he and Miriam saw each other often, and finally the god of love smiled upon them. And believe it or not, he stopped singing offkey. (laughter) As choir conductor in general, except for him, I was more severe. The reason was that in fact I was painfully shy, which I still am. If one of the female singers cast a knowing glance in my direction, I lost my composure. If she smiled at me my heart would pound as if in anticipation of committing a sin. [00:52:00] I blushed when I spoke and when I was spoken to. And so therefore, I raised my voice, striving to affect a stern expression and to project an image of irritability and inflexibility.

I lost my temper easily and reprimanded anyone guilty of the slightest infraction. And yet, and yet I was in love with them. At that time I loved every one of them, consecutively, for one day. And they didn't know it. And when I tried, let's say, to get closer to a girl, I thought that the best way to get closer to a girl and make her love me would be to speak to her about philosophy. (laughter) That poor girl got a lesson in Spinoza and Kant that drove me away very quickly. So I got no one. Only later did I [00:53:00] find out, to my great regret, that some of them, very beautiful ones, also reciprocated but I was so stern and so severe they didn't dare, especially because of Kant and Spinoza. They didn't know Kant and Spinoza. They didn't want to know Kant and Spinoza. (laughter) Nor did I want to know Kant and Spinoza.

But, but so I continued. Bea then, my other sister, left Sighet and went to a DP camp in Germany waiting for a visa, and I have pages of anger. I have already here in the last 29 years, I have already spoken about it here. When I think of the tragedy of the survivors in DP camps I cannot tell you how frustrated I am because on one hand I don't like to utter reproaches [00:54:00] about Jewish people. I want to be a *meilitz yosher*. I want to defend the Jew. But when I think of them it hurts so much. During the war that the American Jewish leadership didn't

do much, if at all, they had an excuse, which is not valid, but they said we didn't know. All right.

In 1945 everybody knew. Everybody. The papers were filled with stories about the camps. And the movies, the Movietone, the newsreels were full of pictures. *Look* magazine had special issues. *Life* magazine special issues, *Time* magazine, *The New York Times*, everybody knew. And yet that Jews who went through the camps were forced to remain in DP camps in terrible conditions, humiliating, so much so that Truman had to appoint a commission to send to the DP camps because [00:55:00] the commission found out that the Germans lived better than the Jews in the camps.

It hurts because the American Jewish community could have done something to facilitate their immigration. They wanted to go to Palestine. They couldn't. But many wanted to come here. The torture they had to endure when they applied for a visa, for an American visa. It's wrong. It hurts, but --

Last night, July 10, 1991, I saw my mother in a dream again. She seemed upset, and I realized that something serious had happened. She motioned me to follow her, then suddenly I saw my father. He was wearing my gray suit. It looked good on him.



We were all there, everyone from before and from now, standing at a river that all at once began to swell, [00:56:00] its level rising from moment to moment. "It's the flood," someone said quite calmly, "It's the flood, but I am not afraid." So I said to myself, it's possible to watch the rising tide and not feel fear.

Just then my father waded into the murky, blood-colored water, and I said to myself, so rivers of blood exist after all. I waited for my father to come back so I could point this out to him, but he stayed beneath the water. I began to shout for help, but everyone was suddenly gone. I don't know how to swim, so I panicked, screaming louder and louder, but I was all alone. I began to search for my father in the waters that now reached my shoulders. And I found him. I don't know what power aided me. All I know is that I managed to save him all by myself. I helped him stretch out on the grass, listen to his breathing. In my dream he was alive, my mother too. She was alive, in my dream.

Then in [00:57:00] 1948 I lived, like you did. The declaration of Israel's independence, I describe it, I was in Paris, what I did. I became a journalist, a Yiddish journalist and worked for a paper, a Yiddish paper that belonged to the Irgun. I didn't

know the difference, Irgun or Haganah, but I became their foreign member of that paper. And I wrote in that paper, worked for it. Then in '49 I was sent by a French paper DeGaulle's paper, to Israel, I describe that too. Came back from Israel as a correspondent of Yedioth Ahronoth, because I realized the best thing in a journalist's life is to be a foreign correspondent. We have no boss.

The problem was that all the Israel papers had correspondents except one, the poorest, *Yedioth Ahronoth*. [00:58:00] Very poor, so they were ready to pay me \$20 a month, but I had nothing, so I accepted \$20, in French francs. It was rather difficult. It was good. I traveled a lot, I describe my travels, Spain, Morocco, and so forth, Brazil. In one of my travels back to Paris, I went to see a lady called Rachel Mintz. She was a Yiddish poetess, a real type of the Russian Jewish poetess. She didn't speak. She declaimed. She didn't answer. She recited, you know.

She came to the first children's camp, orphanage camp that we had in France, and she was there because she spoke Yiddish, and we spoke Yiddish. We spoke no French. And every day she would recite for us [00:59:00] Peretz or Sholem Aleichem and so forth. And I liked her. She was an elderly lady, marvelous lady. One

day in Paris she called me up. She said, "I would like to see you." I said, "With pleasure." I came to see her. She lived alone with a samovar on the table, many books around. And we had tea, and then she said, "I have something to ask of you, two things. But you must promise me to say yes."

I was afraid a little bit in the beginning, you know.

(laughter) But then I said, after all, you know, I said, what can happen? I said yes, okay. And she said, "I want to tell you a story, but you promise me not to publish it. Only after my death." And she began telling me her love affair with Nikos Kazantzakis, the man who wrote *Zorba* and so forth. [01:00:00] I never heard of Kazantzakis then. I was involved in existentialism, not in -- Because of her, it was so fascinating what she described. She showed me the letters. I had access, as you say, to everything, to her archives.

It was so special that I began reading Kazantzakis. I knew everything about Kazantzakis, every book of his. I, for instance, learned her influence on him, that he became so interested in Judaism that he wanted almost to convert, so much so on Yom Kippur he fasted. When he wrote a book about an African whore and so forth. He called the book -- the book was called by the name of the main protagonist, and the book was

called *Toda Raba*. It sounds African, but it means thank you in Hebrew. (laughter) And so forth. And therefore, I would come to see her after every trip from everywhere. Is she still alive? [01:01:00]

In 1954 or so I was sent by *Yedioth Ahronoth* to the film festival in Cannes. I am not a movie goer so much. In my family I am the least movie goer. And I follow. When my family goes, I go. Not as often as they do, but I go. In 1954 I was a journalist. I had to see pictures. It was too much. Maybe that's why I don't like films today. I had to see three, four films a day. One day I said, it's enough. I cannot see any more films. And I remember Kazantzakis lives nearby. I took a bus, went to Kazantzakis. I knew where he lived. Knocked on the door. He opened. "What do you want?" I said, "Nothing." (laughter)

Locked the door. He opened it again. "What do you want?" I said, "Nothing." He said, "Come in." (laughter) We sat down. "Who are you?" [01:02:00] I said, "I am a journalist." "From where?" I said, "I live in Paris, but I write for an Israeli paper." "Okay," he said. "Ask. What do you want to know?" I had no questions. I knew everything. (laughter) So he looked at me, and he looked intensely. And his head came close to

mine, so much so almost his forehead touched mine. And he said in a whisper, "You know her, don't you?" (laughter) They hadn't seen one another for 25 years, but he knew that I knew.

Another funny story happened. I went to Brazil on a mission. At that time missionaries were conducting dangerous activities in Israel. And there was a story that they [01:03:00] managed to seduce a few poor Jews, survivors, who were hungry, and bring them to Brazil. So I was told to go to Brazil. I boarded a ship. At that time journalists got free tickets everywhere, a ship. And I wrote about -- okay. Everybody told me in Brazil you must see a man called Assis Chateaubriand. He is the most important man, more important than the president. You must see him. I was ready. He wasn't.

I called the secretaries. I couldn't even go get the secretary of the secretary. Really, a poor journalist from *Yediot Achronot* in Israel, I was so frustrated I didn't get the interview. I came back by plane. And all of a sudden I saw that a man came like a *clochard*, like a bum, came in, and everybody there was respectful. I didn't know who he was. What do you mean, the pilot, the stewardesses, [01:04:00] everybody was around him. I asked the stewardess, "Who is that man?" She said, "Oh, don't you know? Chateaubriand." I said, "Ah." This

is my revenge. We sat next to each other. We went first class then, next to each other.

I took out a Hebrew paper and read. "What is this?" "Hebrew."  
"You read Hebrew?" "Yes." I was very curt. "How do you read?"  
"Mais oui" He realized I don't want to speak. After -- it was a long trip then, some 24 hours, (laughter) I put away the Hebrew paper and took out the French paper. "Oh, you read French?" "Yes." "I also read French." "Okay." (laughter)  
"What do you do in Brazil?" "On a mission." "Diplomat?" "No."  
"Business?" "No." "What did you do?" I said, "I am a journalist." "You are a journalist. I am also a journalist."  
[01:05:00]

He was the owner, I don't know, of 20, 30 newspapers, the most important ones, radio stations, everything. "I'm also a journalist." I said, "Really? Which are your journals?" He gave me *Diario Brasil*, *Estado São Paulo*, all these important papers. I said, "Oh, I know the papers. They are very important. They're yours?" "Yes. I also write in them." "You write in them?" I said, "What is your name?" He says, "Assis Chateaubriand." I say, "Are you related to the French writer Rene Chateaubriand?" He said, "No, doesn't spell the same way."

I said, "I'm sorry. I never heard of you." (laughter) He said, "What?" I said, "I don't understand. You know, I met many people. I've met senators. I've met editors of news -- your own editors. Nobody's mentioned your name." He became desperate. He called the stewardess. "Can you imagine?" he said. His world crumbled. [01:06:00] He realized that he had lived a false life. He thought he was famous. He wasn't. (laughter) You know, I couldn't -- finally I couldn't take it anymore because he was so upset. He couldn't eat. He couldn't drink. He couldn't sleep. And I couldn't sleep either. (laughter)

So finally when we reached -- we made a stopover in Madrid. I told him the truth. He wanted to embrace me. He wanted to kiss me, to give me a job, anything. Well, afterwards I describe New York, I came to New York, how I became -- how I had an accident in New York. And an ambulance came, took me to one hospital. The hospital checked my pockets, I was in a coma, and realized that I was a refugee without money. They put me back on the ambulance. (laughter) Pirandello wrote a play once *Six Authors in Search of an Author*, here was an ambulance in search of a hospital. (laughter)

Four [01:07:00] hospitals rejected me. Finally, New York Hospital, there was a man named Paul Bronstein, and he was the intern -- he saved me, put me -- I was for a whole year in a hospital, in and out, surgery, surgery, surgery. Well, and so forth and so forth. And then I describe a lot, of course, about my involvement with Soviet Jewry, naturally, how first time in '65 I came back in '66, and there was a story which I never told, that I was almost arrested because I was crazy. I was stupid. I was totally innocent. I came to Russia after already excerpts from my book *The Jews of Silence* had appeared in *Look* magazine here and *Express* in Paris.

And I had already the copy of my French book in my pocket. Because I promised Russian Jews to go back for Simchat, for Yom Kippur and Simchat [01:08:00] Torah. And at one point, the chargé d'affaires Israeli embassies, David told me, listen, go back quickly. You must leave immediately. I said, why? Because they found out who you were. They're going to arrest you. That was one day after Yom Kippur. I said I am staying for Simchat Torah. I stayed, and we had -- read it anyway. (laughter) Why should I tell you? Read it.

Now, at the end, because it is late, at the end we are in 1969. The meantime, I have a chapter on Lubavitcher Rebbe, who was a



friend, my teacher and friend Shaul Lieberman, Heschel, zichronam  
livracha. It's a lot of things, after all, it's a life. It's a  
whole life. And one more. I speak about Rabin too. [01:09:00]

There is a marvelous, beautiful song, a Yiddish song from Frug  
about the *becha*, that the grandchild asks the grandfather zog  
mir zeydeshi. Tell me, Grandfather, is it true that in front of  
God there is a cup, and when Jews suffer the tears flow into  
that cup, and when that cup will run over the messiah will come?  
Is it true? And the grandfather says it is true. Then says the  
child, in that case, how come? What is happening? We are so  
many suffering? So many tears and he hasn't come. Is it that  
the cup has a hole?

There were so many tears [01:10:00] this week in Israel. When  
we heard that granddaughter -- there were a million -- one  
headline in a paper was a million tears. People wept here.  
Everybody wept. So many Jewish tears. I hope that the cup  
there does no longer have a hole.

On April 2, 1969 in the Old City of Jerusalem an ancient  
synagogue, the Ramban, that had been destroyed by Jordan in 1948  
was open for a wedding. Officiating was Saul Liberman, who  
insisted that the local rabbi also be present. After all,

rabbis have to make a living too. Time was of the essence, for it was the eve of Passover, and guests would have to hurry home to prepare for the holiday. Bea and Hilda, my older sisters, were there with their families. There were a few cousins, many friends, and the groom's [01:11:00] mind wandered, seeking others who were absent, for this was a day he had in some ways dreaded, and now he feared being unable to contain his emotions.

He should have been happy at the thought that his parents would have approved of his getting married, especially to the one who had chosen him. In parenthesis, what I read now I owe her. Always when I read in French, what any book that is written in French translated into English, the English, you should know, I owe to Marion.

So, but the groom wasn't happy. As Lieberman recited the seven customary prayers blessing the couple, the groom, overwhelmed by sadness, saw neither his two older sisters nor his nephews nor his cousins nor even his wife to be. He saw himself as a child and then as an adolescent at home far away. He saw his father, his head slightly bent, and his [01:12:00] mother, biting her lip. The night before he thought that he must go and invite them to the wedding. Custom dictates that before his wedding an

orphan go to meditate at the grave of his parents, respectfully requesting the honor of their presence.

But these groom's parents, like millions of others, had no grave of their own. All creation was their cemetery. The people shouted mazel tov, wishing the newlyweds joy, happiness, and peace, showering them with all the good wishes in the lexicon of the living. People shook hands and kissed. One cousin wanted to sing a wedding song, but the groom dissuaded him. Jubilation might offend those who weren't there. Back in New York the Shabbat before, known as Shabbat HaGadol, an aufruf had been improvised in his honor at a small Hasidic shtiebel he attended with his friend Heschel.

In the congregation there were many survivors of the ghettos of Warsaw and [01:13:00] Lodz and of Treblinka. And Heschel had organized, with Reb Leibel Tzivyak, a Gerrer Hasid, everything. When the groom was called to the Torah to recite the appropriate blessings, almond, raisins, and candy began raining down upon him. After the service there was a kiddush where wine, liquors, and cakes were served. Seated at the table, Reb Leibel and Heschel, following tradition, praised the groom. Joyous tunes were sung. There was dancing, frenetic Hasidic dancing of great fervor, and the groom could no longer hold back his tears.

He, who since his liberation had always managed to control himself, now let go. And the more his friends urged him to sing, to dance, the more he sobbed. The Hasidim pretended not to notice. On the wedding day, in accordance with rabbinical law, two witnesses accompanied the newlyweds to the door of their room. On the sixth floor of the King David Hotel, the window overlooking the Old City was open. [01:14:00] Of what does a man dream when he is 40 years old and has made a decision consecrated by the law of Moses to make a home with a woman he loves?

He sees himself as a child clinging to his mother. She murmurs something. Was it something about the messiah? He feels like telling her, "You died, and he didn't come. And even if he does, it will be too late." He walks with his father to Shabbat services and suddenly finds himself in the ranks of a procession towards death. He wishes he could reassure his father, console him. "Don't worry. Your son will try to be a good Jew." But he says nothing. He soundlessly calls to a gravely smiling beautiful little girl and caresses her golden hair. His thoughts scale mountains and hurdle down steep pathways, wander through invisible cemeteries, both seeking and fleeing solitude

and receiving stories already told and those [01:15:00] he has yet to tell. Thank you. (applause)

**M:**

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