

December 7, 1999

Elie Wiesel:

Mai Hanukkah, says the Talmud, is a tractate of Shabbat, which means why Hanukkah but also what is Hanukkah? Hanukkah, as all of us know, is the festival of lights. But then, if it is the festival of lights, why have we chosen this theme for Hanukkah? Darkness? Hanukkah is against darkness. Now there were two reasons. One, when the decision was made many, many months Rabbi Woznica and I simply did not consult the Jewish calendar.

Two, and this is the second reason, a [00:01:00] passage in the Zohar, the book of mystical splendor, says that *zman d'sharui bachashaycha*, whoever dwells in darkness *mistakeil b'orah* looks at the light. And so Hanukkah maybe is for those who are in darkness or are afraid of darkness and therefore look at the candles. And if the candles could tell stories, they would be here.

Hanukkah therefore means to look for light, in the temple when it was possible and in ourselves, especially when the area of

darkness is so dense in our very being. In biblical literature one book contains extraordinary darkness. It is the Ecclesiast. Even more than the Book of Job, which is filled with suffering, the Ecclesiastes is depressing. *hevel havalim hakol hevel* [00:02:00] says King Solomon. Everything is vanity. Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity. But if everything is vanity, why work? Why speak? Why write? Why have children? Why live? Why hang on to life?

There were two holidays, as we know, that are actually dedicated to gratitude. These are two holidays only for gratitude. One is Hanukkah. And the other one is Purim. Hanukkah, why? Because Antiochus Epiphanes had decreed that the Jewish religion should be abolished. And then the Maccabees came, and they fought, and they won, and there were very few. They vanquish the strong, the mighty, the powerful, and therefore we have to thank God [00:03:00] for that miracle.

Purim was almost the same. Haman decided, and he managed to convince Ahasueros, King Ahasueros, that the Jewish will be exterminated, all man, woman, and child. And Haman was going to do it if he had the approval of the king. And then God came with the help of Esther and her uncle Mordecai, and not a single Jew died. As a result, again, we declared Purim.

Now, question. Hanukkah, who was in danger? The Jewish soul, the Jewish spirit, the Jewish faith, the Jewish commitment to Torah. Purim, it was a physical threat. Physically we were threatened now. Hanukkah we have the Maccabees who took up the arms and fought [00:04:00] the regime. Purim, what they did, they prayed. They proclaimed a day of fasting ordered by Queen Esther. It should have been a different attitude. They should have Hanukkah they should have fasted, and Purim they should have fought. Go argue with Jewish logic.

But there is a reason for that. It's a very beautiful reason. And the reason is that there was a covenant made between the Jewish people and the God of Israel. Meaning God is supposed to protect his people. In exchange, our people is supposed to protect his law, the Torah. And so when the Torah was in danger we took up arms. But when we were in danger we fasted, and we [00:05:00] said to God, where are you? Do your part. And therefore we have both Hanukkah and Purim, and both really deal with gratitude. It's called *hoda'yah*. That's why we say a prayer *al hanisim v'al hapurchan*, we thank you for the miracles.

This century gives us reasons to do both. We thank, we must thank, history, God, destiny, ourselves for the good things that

happened in this century. But then at the same time we must say there were other occasions where gratitude was not precisely the term that one would use in our response to what happened to us.

And so we go back to the Ecclesiast. For everything its season says the Ecclesiast, [00:06:00] and for every activity under heaven its time; a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time for silence and a time for speech; a time to love and a time to hate.

For those of you who know Hebrew and who know the Ecclesiastes by heart I need not to point out that grammatically this passage contains at least one error. And I'm referring to the verse *Ayt s'fod v'ayt r'kod*, a time to mourn and a time to dance. A letter is missing, the lamed. All other verses are with the lamed. *Ayt laledet v'ayt lamut, ayt lin'toa ayt la'akor*, . Here we have *ayt s'for* [00:07:00] without the lamed *ayt r'kod* without the lamed, only here.

And the very great master of the good name, the founder of the Hassidic movement, the Besht, said, "A time will come when the tragedy will be of such magnitude that time itself will be in

mourning. But then there will be a time when the joy of a privileged generation will be so profound that time itself will be dancing." And in this century, which is about to leave us in a few days, we have known both eras, and all of us are still dazzled, oscillating between the one and the other.

So of course I like King Solomon. He is called the wisest of all men. In truth, his wisdom, though legendary, may be [00:08:00] questioned in some circles. After all, isn't he supposed to have had a thousand wives? When did he find time to write books? Three volumes have been attributed to him. Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs, he composed when he was young, in love. In his maturity he wrote Proverbs, Mishley. Qoheleth, the Ecclesiastes, was his last work. He wrote it when he was already old, and according to legend, destitute.

My preference goes to this one, though it is with the Book of Job, the saddest of all sacred texts. It illustrates the futility, the vanity of human existence. And yet, and yet, it is given to us to aspire to what is noble in the human being and justify God's faith in his creation._ These are the last two versus of the book, otherwise it would not have entered the canon. [00:09:00]

If this message, therefore, is what concludes the book, well, what does it mean? That there was a change of mood, a change of determination? Well, there is a lesson in that hesitation. And so I actually, for my memoirs, I always searched in Qoheleth. Yes, all the rivers run to the sea, the sea of human experience, the sea of memory, but it's never full. Occasionally it overflows to the point of moving us with fear and trembling to the breaking point.

Some of us have seen too much darkness followed by too much light. After all, three years after the worst of all catastrophes in Jewish history and the state of Israel was born. The sea will never be full of either prayer or anxiety. Remember, the past is in the present, [00:10:00] although the present is not always in the past. Does one wonder, in terms of the absolute, what is longer, the past or the future? But a human being, they long for the absolute and never attain it.

And yet in this century, which brought so much misfortune upon so many nations and communities, there was one element that carried in its elements of the absolute, and one word may describe it: darkness. But the prophet speaks of darkness at noon, *Afera batzohorayim*. It is probably our era he was referring to.

In scripture darkness was one of the 10 plagues that the God of Israel has inflicted upon pharaoh and his people for not letting the Hebrews go and be free. The text emphasizes that for three days the land of Egypt lay in total darkness so that, quote, *lo ra'u ish et achiv*, no one saw his brother, unquote, [00:11:00] commented the celebrated Mendel of Kotsk.

Why does the Bible feel the need to illustrate the plague? Everybody knows that when it is dark people cannot see one another. And his answer was that was the plague, that one did not see one another. We shall talk about it later or next week. For the moment, allow me to open our customary parenthesis.

We are about to begin yet another series of our annual encounters here in this place where the acoustics is generally excellent, as is the atmosphere for collegiality. And so what do we really want to achieve here? Why are we here? So many times have I said well, maybe this is the last time for the series, but each time we try to change a little bit, something. [00:12:00] instead of lecturing this year, of lecturing on biblical, Talmudic, and Hassidic terms, which I have done for more than 30 years, always with joy, always trying to communicate to you my joy, what did I try to accomplish in those

30 years? And I need to tell you that it's possible to study smiling, to give you a little bit of my passion for learning.

But this time, again, Rabbi David Woznica, who is the educational director and indeed the moving spirit of this center for Jewish learning, we decide to do something else, we chose four words. After all, language means words. Four words that each in its own way characterize what I try to transmit in my writings since *Un di velt hot geshvign*, better known as *Night*.

[00:13:00]

Thus, twice this year, and twice in spring, it is a commentary I intend to offer to those of you who will consent to take part in this journey. Oh, I shall read a few passages here and there and try to explain what they meant, what they mean now. Did they go through a metamorphosis? Have things changed? Have the words changed? We shall begin with darkness first. After all, hasn't it preceded creation itself? *v'choshech al p'nei hamayim* says the Bible, first there was darkness. And then don't you think that we ought open the door, be it only to allow the latecomers to join us in our common search for some light.

Everybody speaks about the millennium. From the Jewish perspective [00:14:00] we must recall those who brought light to

their contemporaries and their descendants. Maimonides and Nachmanides, Rashid and Rabbeinu Tam, the Besht, and the Ari Hakadosh, and the Gaon of Vilna. I think we must remember the glory of the religious leaders and their disciples, the influence of the spiritual guides and their teaching, the beauty of Hasidism, the erudition of their opponents, the moral grandeur of the Mussarniks, the fervent melancholy of the mystics. What would our world, our Jewish world and perhaps our world in general be today without their memories, whose custodians we are?

But there was also suffering, agony, anguish. In other words, there were periods of eclipse, of darkness. How did our ancestors deal with [00:15:00] the moral darkness that has engulfed their surroundings? They prayed, and they wrote. Three chronicles of martyrology from medieval times survived the centuries: *Shevet Yehudah*, *V'avein Metzulah*, and *Aymek Habacha*. Occasionally Christian observers themselves offered testimony.

Let's listen to one of such narratives from York with some paraphrasing. And I quote, "And there was among the Jews who found temporary shelter in a fortress an old Jew who was a renowned scholar. And then the crusaders approached the walls, urging them to convert, the old rabbi decreed as follows, 'As

you can all see that is awaiting us, agree with me that for a short life it would not be worthy for us to abandon our holy Torah and chose heresy, which is worse than death. [00:16:00] It is thus incumbent upon us to select the way we die freely. If the creator of the universe wants us to return our life to him, let's do so as free human beings.' And the Jews did precisely that. They slaughtered one another. Those who tried to escape found their deaths in the flames."

In the Rhineland provinces in Germany and those that belong to France the crusaders marched from city to city, from village to village pillaging and killing men, women, and children of the Jewish faith. In some places fathers slaughtered their children, young grooms their brides so as not to fall into the hands of the enemy. They could have saved themselves by accepting baptism, a few did.

But of all the tragedies that befell our people and beyond this to other people the Holocaust remains, to me, a dark ontological event [00:17:00] illuminated only by some fires that still burn in our memory.

An aberration or a consequence of history, it goes beyond it and defies it. The magnitude of the catastrophe, its ultimate

absurdity, the silence of the world, responsibility of the accomplices, the very fact that it happened, that it could have been avoided, all these elements make it into a mystery, almost a metaphysical one, which implies all our endeavors and limits all our aspirations, including our attempt at describing them.

We write not with words but against them. And this is something, of course, which worries us and disturbs us. After all, in those times, during the Crusades, the Inquisition, there were always somehow chroniclers . The story [00:18:00] was told. But what about those stories that were not told? What about those places where people died, suffered, vanished, and there was no one left to tell the story?

But then in our times something of a terrifying nature was done and given. Something was revealed and taken back that we now must face so as not to lose our sanity and humanity. And often I wonder what mystery is greater, the mystery of the killers or dead, of the victims? What is more incomprehensible, the fact that so many human beings became assassins, seeing in murder a kind of vocation, or the fact that so many human beings vanished in their death factories? All I know is that it irrevocably transcends all dimensions of consciousness. Whatever is greater to it must, [00:19:00] in the end, lead to darkness.

We know from Hanukkah story with Hannah and her seven sons, we know so much about that. But really when we compare to what happened to our people in this century we say don't compare. It's not the same. Nothing will ever be the same. And therefore I believe that this century will be remembered not by its technological progress, although it is so great, nor by its scientific triumphs, although they are extraordinary. It will be remembered, ultimately, by the monument which we call Auschwitz. It will be the century of Auschwitz. Because there a threshold has been crossed. Something [00:20:00] was done that has never been done before. Something was done to our people that never, even the worst of our enemies have never undertaken. Something happened there beyond, beyond language, beyond life, beyond history.

In those times, it was like in the dark ages except in those times whatever happened, happened on the level of statehood. It was not a pogrom. It was a scientific plan conceived, implemented on the highest level of government with the whole world looking on.

In those times darkness has invaded all the areas, both secret and tangible, of the human heart. Where does that darkness come

from? Is it a fallout of the primary darkness which preceded what accompanied [00:21:00] creation? Has it affected the creator himself? T.S. Eliot writes somewhere I said to my soul be still and let the dark come upon you, which shall be the darkness of God. But then isn't God the opposite of darkness? Is Giordano Bruno right to claim that light is God's shadow?

In the Proverbs King Solomon says darkness and light are both alike to you, oh lord. But then why must we choose between them? In this century, which is going away, and thank God it's going away, a different kind of darkness claims for our attention. It was a darkness of death. Day after day, hour after hour the killer killed. Children hang on to their parents. Old men and women whispered ancient prayers which together [00:22:00] with the victims fell into the abyss of the flames, and the universe was silent.

Granted there was a war going on, a war that brought honor to the human race, a war against Hitler and his accolades. But the fate of European Jews played almost no role in the strategic planning of the allies. In 1939, Goebbels daily, *Der Stürmer*, published a banner headline "Jews for Sale with No Buyer Around." In '42 several hundred Jewish children could have left occupied France, but they had nowhere to go.

Should you seek reasons to give up on the twentieth century just consider the indifference of the free world towards Hitler's Jewish victims. Naturally that must not alleviate the guilt of the killers and their accomplices. Their crimes must be neither forgiven nor forgotten. I know. I know. Forgiveness has become fashionable. [00:23:00] But they, the killers, don't deserve it.

In 1995 at the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, in Auschwitz I offered to God a prayer that angered some Christians, Catholics for whom forgiveness is part of their faith, and I respect their faith, really, with all my heart. But I said there a kind of address to God in anger. I said God of forgiveness, do not forgive those who created this place. God of mercy, have no mercy on those who killed here Jewish children. Do not forgive the murders nor their accomplices whose word was to kill. Remember, oh God, the nocturnal processions of children, so many children all so wise, so frightened, so beautiful.

If we could now see only one of them again [00:24:00] our heart would break, but the killer's hearts were not broken. So God, God of compassion, have no compassion for those who have none

for Jewish children. Naturally there is no collective guilt. Only the guilty are guilty. Their children are children. But so we turn to all the children of the world and ask them remember the Jewish children who had no friends. And if you remember, as we are trying to do, then there is hope that one day, thanks to our ability to remember, a better world will emerge, a world in which children will be happy. They will be able to smile, sing, and take each other's hand and say look, another dawn, another day, and still another bearing promise for humanity.

It's always the children. What will happen to tomorrow's children? What will happen to the children who are now children and are ready to enter the next [00:25:00] century with a legacy which is ours? And we don't want to make them sad. The last thing in the world I want is to make children sad.

In my first memoir, *Night*, which was translated from the Yiddish and shortened from the Yiddish, there are certain Yiddish passages that are not in the English or the French version or the other versions which were translated from the French. There in Yiddish begins like this: In the beginning there was faith, futile faith, and confidence, vain confidence, and illusion, dangerous illusion. We believed in God, had confidence in man,

and lived with the illusion that in each and every one of us a holy spark of the Shekhinah has been deposited, that each and every one of us carries in his eyes and soul the [00:26:00] reflection of God's image. And that was the source, if not the cause, of all our misfortunes. Thus begins the story told in my first memoir.

It was called *Un di velt hot geshvign, And the World was Silent*. Now why was this text omitted from the French and subsequently in English and other languages? It was not the only one. Other passages have been removed by my first editor and publisher, a great human being and great publisher, Jérôme Lindon, whose father was a prosecutor in Nuremberg. No publisher would have taken the full version. In fact, they rejected even the shorter version, which was a French translation from the Yiddish book.

In the original French version of *All the Rivers Run to the Sea* I quote some of the pages that were left in the Yiddish volume but not in the others. I described, for instance, in the Yiddish version, [00:27:00] my town in its pre-deportation phase, which was marked by the expulsion of so-called foreign Jews from Hungary. And this is what I said: I remember this evil decree brought trouble and anguish to many Jewish families. How could they prove their nationality? Firstly they needed

birth certificates, but who had thought it useful in the years before that to register with the proper authorities the birth of a son before circumcision? And afterwards they forgot. They were busy.

A limited time was granted to the Jews to get hold of the necessary papers. Consequently, on the day of judgment they came in great numbers empty-handed. They were condemned to be deported. I was still young, just bar mitzvah, but the images of their departure into exile remain graven in my memory. Hundreds of Jews arrived in our town with little baggage, worried faces, in tears. The community organized [00:28:00] immediate help. At the station they received money from men, clothing from women, and food from children.

The condemned were locked in a long, black train, a train as if in mourning, which carried them off forever, leaving behind the thick and dirty smoke. The train disappeared. Its passengers were never seen again. Strange rumors ran through the town. They were not too far away. Some were in Galicia. They are satisfied with their fate. No one tried to verify these rumors. We trusted their authenticity. It was more comfortable. Why doubt hypocritically appeasing deports?

No one among us, and least of all I, still young, almost a child, clinging to the rays of life and the sun, try to ask ourselves what in the devil was darker than in our painting of him? And what if the Jews were led to slaughter? [00:29:00] No one among us, and surely not I, still young to possess the sense of reality, could imagine that the day will come, a day darker than others when we too will be going towards the unknown.

The illusion, the accursed illusion has conquered our heart, and days went by, days, weeks, months. In my town the other Jews were forgotten. A quiet and appeasing wind chased all the worries and apprehensions away. The merchants conducted their businesses. The students studied Talmud, the children the Bible and Rashi commentaries. The beggars wandered from house to house to get a bit of food for Shabbat to their families. Life was normal, eternal in Jewish Sighetu. Then the streets were shaken by a rumor. [00:30:00] Moshe has come back. He has returned from over there.

What I described, actually, there in the book, which some of you may have read about Moshe the Beadle, the Beadle whom I loved. I used to spend times with him before he was deported and after when he came back from there. In the beginning he came back, and he told a story, which we refused to believe, even I, that

immediately after they crossed the borders they were taken to Galicia and then how they were killed in Kamianetz-Podolsk. And people felt he must have lost his mind.

But then he said look, I was there. I saw what happened. My family, my wife, my children, they were killed. People said well, he must have seen something, and therefore he is no longer sane. At [00:31:00] the end he stopped talking, except to me because I loved to listen to him. I didn't believe him either. But I listened. I love stories. And he told stories that came from the middle ages, from the dark ages. And then, then we realized that he was not inventing his stories. It was too late.

So then was the period of darkness for us. The darkness before or the darkness during. Was it darkness when we didn't believe him, darkness of the mind, darkness of our senses, the darkness of our perception, or afterwards when we entered darkness? Was the darkness in the beginning a preparation for the darkness that followed? And what about the darkness that had really [00:32:00] surrounded us from the outside world when the world didn't want to see us, think about us, worry about us? So therefore, to me, when I say darkness, I meant, of course, I mean, of course, that period, the period where we had all

glimpsed at the abyss. In that period some events were darker than the others. The darkest moment in my life was the death of my father. I describe in some pages the event itself, but even there in Yiddish it is longer.

This is what the Yiddish version says: it's Buchenwald, [00:33:00] and my father is dying. "Eliezer, my son, come. I want to tell you something. You alone, only you, come, don't leave me alone. Eliezer," I heard his voice, seized the meaning of his words, and understood a tragic dimension of the moment, but I stayed put. It was his last wish to have me at his side during his agony, when his soul was about to tear itself away from his tortured body, I have not fulfilled it. I was afraid.

That is why I remained deaf to his moaning. Instead of sacrificing my dirty and rotten life and run to his side, take his hands, reassure him, show him that he was no longer alone, [00:34:00] that he was not abandoned, that I was near him, that I felt his pain, instead of all this I remained where I was and prayed to God for my father to stop calling my name, to stop crying so as not to be beaten by block supervisors. But my father was no longer conscious. His whining and shadowy voice continued to pierce the silence, calling me, me alone.

Then the SS man got angry, came to my father, and hit him on his head. "Shut up, old man, shut up." My father did not feel the blows. I felt them. And yet, I did not react. I let the SS man hit my father. I let my father be alone in his agony. Worse, I was angry at him [00:35:00] because he made noise, because he cried, because he provoked a beating. "Eliezer, Eliezer, come, don't leave me." His voice reached me from so far away from so close by, and I did not move. And I shall never forgive myself for that. I shall never forgive the world for having forced me to remain motionless, for having made me into a different man, for having awakened a demon, the lowest spirit, the most savage instinct in me.

After the appeal, I jumped down from my box and ran to him. He was still breathing but said nothing. His eyes closed, sealed, bathing in sweat, his lips were moving. I was convinced that they whispered something. I leaned over his face so as to better hear and catch his inaudible words, his last, [00:36:00] too late. My father no longer recognized me. I stayed several hours at his side contemplating his face so as to insert it in my heart, to remember it forever, when waves of joy could perhaps try to pull me away, far away from my past.

There was no minyan for me to recite a Kaddish. There was no grave for me to light a candle. There was nothing. His grave was heaven. The candle was I, his son. My Kaddish was and will be all the words that I shall utter, that I shall hear. I was an orphan. His last word was my name, a call, and I did not answer. And that happened the 18th day of the month of Shevat.

When a candle is extinguished the candle remains. Its flame alone disappears, but on the 18th [00:37:00] day of Shevat a candle was extinguished. Both the candle and the flame are gone. But I did not cry. And that is what hurt me most, the inability to cry. My heart has become stone, dried out, the source of tears.

Well, to me, when I say darkness, that was darkness. And some of this darkness, of course, must remain. And I shall speak next week and the week, and then the spring, and what does one do when darkness is so heavy? What does one do with our memories? What does one do with what we consider our life to have been and is? We live now. We don't [00:38:00] live in the past, but the past lives in us._ And so we must work. We must build. We must, we must. Valéry said, Paul Valéry, one must attempt to live. And I say we must attempt desperately to find hope and to offer it, to share it and create joy where there is

none. Because one couldn't live with such memories alone. You cannot. And we must invent love. We must force it to enter our heart. We must, for the sake of our children and our friends and ourselves.

This comes later, but when I speak of that period alone I don't see anything that could outweigh [00:39:00] the darkness, even all the joy in the world, and God knows I'm thankful for the joy that I had afterwards and still have. I have family. I have a wife. I have a son. I have friends. But in truth, one must be truthful with oneself, that darkness is there.

But it's not only an individual darkness, we speak of this world. After all, it happened now. When I was young, in the '30s, I remember I was still in cheder on the Yeshiva. We never spoke about the First World War, although my grandfather fell in that war. He was a medic. And my father was then young enough to be part of it. But at home we never spoke of it, in shul we never spoke of it. I never heard people speak about the First World War although there were many people who had fought in it, suffered from it [00:40:00] for, how many years, 20 years. It was pushed away.

Here we are more than 50 years and no event in the last 50 years is so present to us as this one. And sometimes I've even worried because it is too present. I am worried because it became too popular. I have been saying it here, reading about it here on this table, maybe to some of you, about my worry that this, which I believe to be a pure event, even a sacred event, is in danger of becoming commercialized, cheapened, trivialized, vandalized, the banality of the story. So what does one do? One must try to use words. Because the others are also using words, images, words, [00:41:00] stories, films, theater, humor. Everything is being used now.

And lately especially there is something very dangerous happening, and especially on the university level. Young scholars who are teaching the Holocaust, they are professors of the Holocaust. And they feel they must do something, say something, create something, publish something. And since there is really nothing left for them to say that hadn't been said already, so try to invent. And the latest trend, really, is to undermine the voracity, the credibility of the survivor's testimonies.

They say that whatever, whatever they say is not entirely true. One of them wrote a book called *Imagining the Holocaust*. I

think this is now the trend, and that is the danger. [00:42:00]
And that too carries its own darkness.

So what really is the solution? What do we do? How does one live with such memories of fire and darkness, with so many fragments of despair? How does one live in a world which witnessed the murder of one million children and remain well? How does one live today in a world, how does one write today, how does one testify in a world that actually doesn't want to hear what we have to say, that prefers something else, something easy, something cheap. It's easier. It's more comfortable to believe like that and to listen to those stories.

So those of us who were there are hounded by those whose lives were turned into ashes, by those whose cemetery was the sky, the terror-stricken families hiding in ghetto cellars. Children running with priceless treasures, a potato or two, a crumb [00:43:00] of bread, endless lines of quiet men and women on their way to mass grave reciting the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, over themselves. Teachers and their pupils, mothers and their infants, rabbis and their followers, rich and poor, learned and illiterate, princes and beggars all pushed inexorably towards death.

Father, says a young boy, is it painful to die? Must I die?
Think of something else, answers the father. Think of tomorrow.
Father, where are we going? And the father, with his finger,
points to the sky. There, don't worry. Someone is waiting for
us.

Well, that was the darkness of this age. Because everybody
somehow was connected to it. Years ago I was in Kiev. I went
to see Babi Yar because in '65 when I was in Russia [00:44:00] I
wrote a chapter Babi Yar, *The Jews of Silence*. In Kiev I
tried, '65, to find my way to the Babi Yar. They refused to
take me there. All the taxi drivers, all the Intourist, they
refused. And finally they showed me a place, a ravine, and I
couldn't imagine that ravine to be Babi Yar. There was nothing
there, absolutely nothing. It was before a monument, nothing.

So I wrote about it. Later on, some eight or nine years ago,
between *aseret y'mai teshuvah*, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom
Kippur in which somehow we had to go on a mission to the
Ukraine. And I met the president of Ukraine. And after, you
know, we were three or four people, and I asked him. I said
look, Mr. President, now I have seen Babi Yar. In the beginning
when I heard about it I thought it must be so far away,
[00:45:00] somewhere far away. It isn't far away. It's part of

Kiev. Now, now I saw what happened. Babi Yar was a ravine, and there was a street leading to it, a narrow street. And every day between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, 10,000 people went through that narrow street just to enter Babi Yar. The guns were firing, every day 10,000.

I said, Mr. President, people lived in those houses. Did anyone open one door, one window, and pulled in a young child simply saying, come on, quickly? If yes, show it. [00:46:00] Nobody did. And then I don't understand it. I said to the president, tell me, how could people sleep in Kiev when they heard the machine guns? Same time, my question is how come that the Jews went there without a sound? What happened to them? Something happened. I don't know what.

Again was it darkness at noon. It had to be daylight because in the evening the Germans stopped shooting, and they left the corpses in Babi Yar. Five, I think five survived. They crawled from under the corpses. And there is one story which I heard in Kiev even at 65 from a woman who lost her mind. I saw her in shul, in the synagogue. She was outside. A man who was naked, because they had to undress, [00:47:00] managed to crawl from under the corpses. And there was nobody there, so he began running. And he came to a nearby village. He knocked at the

door. And a peasant woman opened. And he had the presence of mind to say I am Jesus. I just left the cross, and here I am. Now she, a primitive, good woman, she believed him. She took him in, and she saved him. It took that to survive.

And so I don't know. How can anyone explain evil of such magnitude? How can anyone comprehend so much pain and anguish? How can one live and still believe in dignity, in goodness? One cannot conceive of Auschwitz with or without God. What about [00:48:00] man? Who can understand the calculated deprivation of the killers, the indifference of the onlookers? What was the Holocaust, an end or a beginning, prefiguration or culmination? Was it a final convulsion of demonic forces in history, a paroxysm of centuries old bigotry and hatred, or on the contrary, a momentous warning of things to come? Turning point or watershed, it produced a mutation on a cosmic level affecting all possible areas of human endeavor.

After Auschwitz the human condition is no longer the same.

After Treblinka nothing will ever be the same. The event has altered man's perception and changed his relationship to God, to his fellow man, and to himself. The unthinkable has become real. [00:49:00] After those times everything seems possible.

Well, this, therefore, is the darkness. We shall talk next week about the joy of the century. There were good things that happened in this century, very good things, some of them extraordinary things that should bring us always into a mood of hope and gratitude, that's why Hanukkah is gratitude. What does one do when we oscillate between so much despair and so much joy?

At the end of my second volume, which was magnificently translated by someone [00:50:00] whom I love, my wife, it's the best translation she ever made, but I say it with every book she does. After all the stories in that book, which we'll talk about another time, I come to a certain conclusion. And this is the conclusion. And yet, it's my favorite expression, and yet, one must wager on the future. To save the life of a single child, no effort is superfluous. To make a tired old man smile is to perform an essential task. To defeat injustice and misfortune, if only for one instant, for a single victim is to invent a new reason to hope. Oh yes, I know it is [00:51:00] not always easy to hope. Also, hope can become a trap whose victims are as unhappy as victims of despair.

I came up against this problem when I was writing *The Forgotten*, which I had trouble finishing. I did not want to leave my young

protagonist Malkiel faced with all the despair. In all my novels I try to open or at least to indicate a path, not towards salvation, but it exists, but towards encounter with the other and also with one's self. In *The Forgotten*, the old hero Elhanan, deprived of his memory and aware of the incredibility of his disease no longer has any hope of human contact. Who could possibly succeed in making him smile one more time?

I saw no solution to the problem and kept the manuscript in a drawer for several months. Then very early one morning, as I was working, I heard my young son in the next room. And suddenly the solution [00:52:00] was clear. I needed to help perform a transfusion of memory. As Elhanan's diminished, Malkiel's would be enriched.

At a certain age one becomes attached to certain words. For a time the word that dominated my life, was 40, 50 years ago, was darkness. Now I love the word transfusion. I dream a lot lately. I know it from my fellow survivors. They dream now more frequently than before about those times. Strangely, in those times, inside those places we used to dream about the good times at home, Shabbat, holidays, food on the table. And now we dream [00:53:00] other dreams about the darkness of those times. I dream about my mother and my little sister. I cry in my

sleep. I try to learn about their last moments. My sister walked with them a few steps more than I did. I wanted to question her about it. I didn't dare. We speak every week but only about her health, her son Sydney, her grandchildren. Yet I would like to know more about her experiences. I don't dare ask. It was the same idea with my other sister who died of cancer.

I know they were together in Kaufering not far from Dachau. When did they leave Birkenau? What cruelties did the Germans inflict on them? And I don't know. I still don't know, that night, everything about that night. In my study you will find no medals, no diplomas. But over the table where I look, where I work there hangs a single photograph. [00:54:00] It shows my parents' home in Sighet. When I look up, that is what I see. And it seems to be telling me, don't forget where you came from.

I am now 71. It's time to take stock again. The century I have lived through has been more violent and more promising than any other, more darkness and more warmth. Mankind has never before proved to be as vulnerable or as generous. Man leaves an expectation. Expectation of what? The Jew in me is waiting for redemption. In waiting for redemption he remembers his enemies. I have fought battles and won some, few in number, too few to

derive pride and confidence from them. Anyway, I don't think I should stop now.

I trouble some people when I raise my voice, others when I don't speak up. There are people, good people, who often make me feel as though I owe [00:55:00] them something. I don't resent it. There are some who understand my itinerary, others never will. I continue to learn, thus to take and give back, to reach out to others, to begin and begin again with every encounter. I have said certain words. I have kept others for future attempts to tell the tale that is waiting. It will always be waiting to be told. And I say to myself that even taking into account my stories and novels, my essays and studies, analysis and reminiscences I know that it is not enough.

Long ago over there, far from the living, we told ourselves over and over that if we were to come out alive we would devote every moment of our lives to denouncing by word and deed the cynicism and silence of mankind towards victims past and future.

Convinced that the free world knew nothing of the cursed and evil kingdom where death reigned we encouraged one another. The one among us who would [00:56:00] survive would testify for us all. That's what we felt. He would speak and demand justice on our behalf as our spokesman. He would make certain that our

memory would penetrate out of humanity. He will do nothing else. His days and nights would be devoted to telling the story. He will turn his entire life into a weapon for our collective memory. Thanks to him it would not be lost. And I was no exception.

There were times after the liberation when I saw myself as a messenger carrying only one message, to say no to forgetting, to forgetting the life and death of the community swallowed by night and spit back into the sky in flames. My only goal and obsession was to save them from a second death. I didn't know that I was like Kierkegaard's jester who shouted fire and people thought he was joking.

I saw myself crisscrossing the earth, going from town to town, from country to country [00:57:00] like the madman in Rabbi Nachman's tales, reminding humans of the good and evil they are capable of, making them see the armies of ghosts hovering around and within us. And then I stopped running. Or let's say that I slowed my pace. I study. I teach. I guide my students toward their careers. I observe the passerby to guess their secrets. I am happy. I am sad. I continue to teach, to write, more books, more novels. In short, I try not to die before I die.

Marion and I have founded a home. We have watched our son grow. He fills us with pride and happiness. Together we have tried to do useful things. I was happy and sad, more happy than sad depending when. In 1970 I spoke of my intention to add my testimony.

This is what I wrote [00:58:00] in a book that came out in 1970: And now, teller of tales, turn the page, speak to us of other things. You're mad prophets. You're all men drunk with nostalgic writing. You're possessed. Let them return to their nocturnal enclaves. They have survived their death for more than a quarter of a century. That should suffice. If they refuse to go away at least make them keep quiet. At all costs, by every means, tell them that silence more than language remains the substance and the seal of what was once their universe and that like language it demands to be dehumanized and transmitted.

That was the conclusion of a book called *One Generation After*. A pessimistic assessment, I believed it then. I decided not to speak of it anymore. What about today? Those born at a time the text [00:59:00] was written are now more than 30 years old. They have their whole lives before them. Must we speak to them of whom, of what, of our past to make sure that it will not

become their future, to silence those who deny our past, those who wish to silence us? Indeed I had dreamed of singing of memory and friendship in a world that sadly needed both. Remember, the book commands us, in my tradition memory does not set people apart. On the contrary, it binds them one to the other and all to the origins of our common history. It is because I remember where I come from that I feel close to those I meet on the way. It is because man is capable of transforming his burdens into promises that he lives them fully. And that is why to leave it out the past is worse than to leave it out of future. [01:00:00]

What would our civilization be if it were stripped of its memory, memories more than the sum of images and words, cries and deeds? It is even more than an individual, of collective identity. It is the bond that ties us to the mystery of the beginning. This nebulous place where man's memories reflected in God's. That is why we stubbornly continue to bear witness. And yet, generations later I confess to doubts. Have I failed my commitment? Have I written books? Yes, I have written books, but with a few exceptions they deal with other things.

I have written on diverse subjects, mostly in order not to involve the one that for me has the greatest meaning. I've been

trying for the long time to understand why. Well, like most survivors I tried to invent reasons to live, and the new concept of man in his [01:01:00] insane world and the new language. It's a primary language whose only purpose is to describe all that eludes writing, to cry without opening our mouth, to speak to the dead since they can no longer speak to us.

And so I go on writing and explaining why we must invent reasons for living and for believing in life and for continuing to create links and bonds between person and person, between people, traditions, cultures, traditions. It's our only chance. Should it be at the expense of memory? Oh no. Nothing should be done at the expense of memory. Memory is what keeps us who we are and what we are. [01:02:00] Memories gives us the direction, not only for the past but about the future.

So we shall speak about the joy, about the struggles next week. But let me conclude with one of my very favorite stories. It's not even mine. I'm just retelling it. Some of you may know it.

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and a miracle will be accomplished and the

misfortunate averted. Later with his disciple, the celebrated Maggid of Mezritch had occasion for the same reason to want a seat with heaven.

He would go to the same place in the forest and say master of the [01:03:00] universe, listen. I do not know how to light a fire, but I am still able to say the prayer. And again the miracle would be accomplished. Still later his disciple Moshe-Leib of Sassov, in order to save his people once more he would go into the forest and say I do not know how to light a fire. I do not know the prayer, but I know the place. And this must be sufficient. It was sufficient. And the miracle was accomplished.

But then it fell to the celebrated, great Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God. I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer. I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story. And this must be sufficient. And it was sufficient.

Do we know at least the story? But then, it's Hanukkah, and we know the story of an event that happened 2,500 years ago. And

if we remember that story, how can we even think that we will not know our story? Thank you.

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