

December 16, 1999

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Tonight the topic is struggle. And for the last few weeks I've been struggling with a trend in the United States and all over the world. A trend that emphasized so much our fear of the change of the century. The centennials, millennials, we Jews should not be concerned. (laughter) After all we have a different calendar. Our calendar we are now 5760, so 2000 years. (laughter) (applause) We have been there before and we are still here. So, the world will still be here. [00:01:00] "Life, as we know, is one long struggle in the dark." And this is what a Roman philosopher said, and he wasn't too original. Who doesn't know that to live is to pursue a tireless and endless struggle? Good against evil, love against hate, hope against despair. Creation itself says the Talmud was preceded by a fierce struggle between the angels of peace and the angels of justice, the angels of truth and the angels of compassion. Some argued with God, "Why create man? He will ultimately engage in deceit and practice falsehood and bloodshed."

So, God was thinking. Luckily we had the other angels, the angels of kindness and trust, and they prevailed. [00:02:00]

Otherwise none of us would be here tonight. Yet the angels did not give up, they were stubborn. When Moses ascended into heaven to receive the Torah, the law, they tried to persuade God not to hand it over to him. "Don't you know," they said, "Don't you know that human beings are weak? So weak that seduced by evil they will betray your word and violate its sacredness." Again, they were defeated. And they were defeated really because at one point God said to Moses, "Who will guarantee to me that your people and mine will obey the law?" And Moses said, "The children, they are our guarantors." Thanks to the children we, the parents, are here.

Well, if angels keep on struggling why should human beings be spared? The first human conflict ended in murder. Cain and Abel were brothers [00:03:00] and one became the other's victim or assassin. We should have learned a lesson from that tragedy. We should have learned that whoever kills, kills his brother. And this outgoing century has proven the opposite, there was no end to civil wars, fratricidal wars on various continents. And so, struggle is part of history in all fields of social, religious, and political, and economical endeavor, to struggle is human. It all depends on the motives and the goal. What is the struggle all about? That is the question. Generally people fight for conquests and power, they don't realize that conquest

is futile and power temporary. The struggle for power may at times be immoral, whereas a struggle against power is not.

Milan Kundera, the Czech-French novelist, believed that the struggle against power [00:04:00] is the struggle of memory against forgetting. (phone ringing) You forgot to turn it off. (laughter) On the other hand, Emile Zola writes, "I am little concerned with beauty or perfection, all I care about is life, the struggle, intensity." And he said with great naiveté, "I am at ease in my generation." So, perhaps we should talk about ours. Last week we spoke about darkness. Tonight we shall attempt to explore its consequences, what happened once it has dissipated. After the war some of us discovered the world and in a time in which we were made to witness the Akedah, the binding of Isaac in reverse. It was Abraham who had been sacrificed. [00:05:00] Isaac came down from Mount Moriah alone, an orphan.

In my work, the post-war period occupies a larger place than the war experiences themselves. Once my own testimony was given, I felt it was my duty to turn my attention to the life and work of survivors. I wanted to know, and the world to know, the nature of their struggle. What have they done with their memories of suffering and solitude? How did they manage to overcome their

justified fears of the other and get married, and have children, and become valuable members of their communities? How did they manage to not see an enemy in every passerby, a threat in officialdom, a peril in Christianity? [00:06:00] Some went back to their homes in Eastern Europe hoping to find relatives. Instead they encountered hostile neighbors who occupied their houses and refused to give them back to their legitimate owners. At times the new occupants greeted the Jews with hateful outcries, "What? You are not dead?" So, the Jewish survivors left their former cities and towns, crossed borders into occupied Germany, and moved into DP camps. Some were lucky to get American visas, some went illegally to Palestine, some became communists. Others simply had families, had businesses, and did whatever they could to justify their own hope in their own future. And the struggle continued.

But there was a struggle inside darkness too. [00:07:00] The partisans in the forests, the underground fighters in the ghettos, the resistance groups in the camps. In Warsaw, Mordechai Anielewicz led the ghetto uprising against what was then the mightiest army in Europe. And I always like to remind the French that the uprising in Warsaw lasted longer than the war between Germany and France in 1940. And yet, France had then two million soldiers and officers under the flag, 5000

tanks, it had thousands of airplanes, and Mordechai Anielewicz and his gallant comrades in arms had nothing. But they fought. For six or seven long weeks they fought. [00:08:00] The darkness surrounded them, but they fought the darkness within the darkness. There were revolts in other places, Sobibor, Treblinka, even Birkenau. And these heroic and desperate struggles will be remembered till the end of time like everything else. Therefore, the struggle is a struggle, again, as Kundela said, for memory. Memory has its own archeology, its own language, its own gates. One must struggle to open the gates of memory lest they remain locked. But some doors can be opened even without a struggle, for those who are waiting.

The noblest of all struggles is a struggle that is linked to learning, [00:09:00] to the passion of learning. To struggle with a text. A text that has been left for us thousands of years ago, and throughout the generations what did we get? Clues, one after the other. Not keys, but just clues. And then we combined them into a bouquet, and thanks to that bouquet we know the beauty of secret knowledge. For instance, I believe that there is much beauty in studying the Hebrew language, the sacred tongue. Why was *L'shon Hakodesh*, why was the Torah written in that language? Why is it sacred? It's sacred really not because God spoke Hebrew when he created the world, also he

understands Yiddish. (laughter) He created the world in Hebrew, [00:10:00] and Hebrew remained the *L'shon Hakodesh* simply because in the Torah, or in Hebrew at that time, no obscenity existed in that language. Only everything was pure, noble, elegant, no obscenity. Today the modern language is different, but we have learned a lot from other languages. Now Hebrew has words in Arabic, and in English, and in French, and in Russian, my god, the Russian.

For instance, every word is philosophy, every word is beautiful. For instance, take the word, which is so important to us because it deals with everyday life, *milchama*, war. Right? *Milchama*, war. It has five letters. Three of them are very special because they are the root of the word. First you have, for instance, the root *malach*, *malach* -- *mem lamed chet* -- which is a kind of navigator or a sailor. [00:11:00] Meaning in war of course you must know where you go, and you must have somebody to lead you. But what is war all about? *Lechem*, bread, economy is very important. Marx was not always an idiot when he spoke about the economic goals of war. Then you have *melach*, which means salt, the salt of life, and the salt for bread, and the salt which gives meaning, and melody, and excitement in a meal. But then comes the word *chalom* also, dreams. That means wars are the result of dreams, dreams of conquest, dreams of

violence, dreams of domination. In addition it can also be during the war you can dream of bread, and salt, and other good things. At the end the last combination should be *hamal* or *hamal*, always the same letters, which means compassion.

[00:12:00] There must be compassion in war. A war which is always brutal, without compassion it would be even more so.

And so, therefore I learn a lot to this day. And I find in learning hope that even those questions that I couldn't solve, my students will, and you are all, therefore, my teachers. The Jewish tradition tells us that it is through study that we may, no, we must, honor the memory of the dead. We study the Mishnah, and in so doing affirm our attachment to those who have preceded us in this quest. Is that why my passion for study continues unabated? Indeed it grows. King Lear is mistaken, one is never too old to learn. To rediscover ancient text is to celebrate [00:13:00] them, to celebrate them in their diversity, their timeless beauty, prophetic, Talmudic, philosophical, poetic, ethical celebrations. One must approach Jewish tradition through its fervor and present it with the help of its illustrious and inspired thinkers.

And therefore, for me, Adam is always representative of the mystery of the beginning. Cain and Abel, the first murder. The

near sacrifice of Isaac, the return of Joseph, the metamorphosis of Moses, the ordeal and triumph of Job. Every chapter requires months of research and years of experience, but we must continue. As a child I read the biblical tales with a mixture of wonder and anguish. I imagined Isaac on the altar, and I wept. I saw *Joseph Prince of Egypt* and I laughed. [00:14:00] Jewish history unfolds in the present. Unlike mythology it affects our life and our role in society. Jupiter is a symbol, but Isaiah is a voice, a conscience. Zeus is dead without having lived, Moses remains alive. His exhortations delivered long ago to a people about to be freed resonate to this day. His law commits us. Without the Jews' memory, his or her determined collective memory, he or she would not be a Jew or would not be.

If Judaism more than any other tradition demonstrates such loyalty to its past, it is because it fulfills a need. Thanks to Abraham whose temerity guides us, thanks to Jacob whose dream intrigues us, our survival prodigious in many ways has maintained its mystery and significance. It is something which we always must remember. If we have the strength and the will to speak out it is because our ancestors [00:15:00] express themselves through every one of us. If the eyes of the world so often seemed fixed on us, it is because we evoke the bygone era

and a density in its destiny that transcends it. *Panim* in Hebrew is used in the plural, man has more than one face, his own and that of Adam. And the Jew is hounded by the beginning more than by the end. His messianic dream is linked to David's kingdom, he feels closer to the prophet Elijah than to his next door neighbor. What is a Jew? Some synthesis vessel, every ordeal endured by his ancestors affects him. He is crushed by their sorrows and invigorated by their triumphs. For they were living creatures, not icons. The most pure, the most righteous among them was subject to moments of ecstasy and despair. And we are told about them. Their holiness defined itself in human terms, that is why the Jew [00:16:00] remembers them, because he sees them at the crossroad of their existence, anxious, exalted, singled out. They are humans, not gods. Their quest informs his own and influences his choices. Jacob's ladder disrupts his nights, Israel's anguish increases his solitude. He knows that to speak of Moses means to follow him into Egypt and out of Egypt. Whosoever refuses to tell his story stays behind.

This is true for all our ancestors and their journeys. But it concerns us, everything does, somewhere a father and his son head for a burning altar. Somewhere a boy knows his father will die before God's well gaze. Somewhere a storyteller remembers and is overwhelmed by an ancient and nameless sadness. He wants

to weep. He has seen Abraham, and he has seen Isaac go towards death, and the angel intent on singing the praise of the Lord did not come to rescue them [00:17:00] from the quiet black night.

One of the reasons why at one point, of course, I became a teacher is because I wanted to study better and more. Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi said, "More than I have learned from my teachers I have learned from my friends, my colleagues." *u'mitalmidei yoter mikulam* said Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, the founder of the Mishnah. "And I have learned from my students more than from everyone else." So, one day I tell the story which of course these are the stories that are in my second volume of memoirs, *And the Sea is Never Full*, which Marion translated with great talent, grace, and generosity. I'll tell also the story of how from the student [00:18:00] I became a teacher and how I became a speaker. And this is a story from which I've told only once, and I'll tell it only once more because I like it. It's a true story.

Actually I was a journalist when I came to New York. I worked for *Yedioth Ahronoth*, which then was the poorest paper in Israel. Today it is the richest. It became rich when I left it. (laughter) So, the editor then, my boss, was a man Dov

Yudkovsky, and I asked him how are we going to -- my salary was \$160 a month, even then it was not enough. He said, "Don't worry, you'll make speeches." I said, "What do you mean, speeches? Speeches of what?" "Everybody gives lectures and speeches." Well, I didn't know what he meant. And he said, [00:19:00] "You know something, go to the UJA." I had no idea what the UJA was. (laughter) I found a friend, a Yiddish journalist who worked for the UJA and he said, "It's very easy. I'll introduce you to the secretary of the secretary of the secretary, and they deal with speakers." And I came to that secretary and of course, it didn't work. So, nevertheless I went on working. And then 1960, *Night* had just been published in the United States. A few weeks later the Eichmann trial was headline news, and I get a call from the president of a Jewish club on Long Island who invites me to come speak about my book to an audience of some 500 couples. My honorarium? \$100. Half my monthly salary.

As I hesitate she asks, "We have all read your work. We are totally enchanted by it. Come, we need to learn, and you are the one who can teach us." [00:20:00] And she had such a lovely voice. Am I going to fall in love again? I accept. The engagement is for two or three months hence, too bad. I am lonely, let's be patient. At least I'll have time to prepare

myself. We agree on a date, my topic, literature, philosophy, anything. I devote many hours to perfecting my speech in English, the first I shall deliver in America. In my European frame of mind, the lecture demands serious research, reflection, structure, content, style. In the taxi that takes me to Long Island that Sunday, I reread my 30 typed pages, and I add notes in the margins. (laughter) I'm almost ready. Everything is in it, Spinoza and Maimonides, everything I knew was in that lecture. (laughter)

I shall be able to keep on going like that one hour, [00:21:00] perhaps one and a half. Suddenly a wild thought crosses my mind, the woman with the beautiful voluptuous voice surely mistook me for someone else. Why would she invite me, a novice writer, a total unknown? Mile after mile my doubts get stronger. And when I finally arrive at my destination I'm convinced that the audience is expecting someone else. The woman with the beautiful voice does not disappoint me. She's even more beautiful than I imagined, graceful, smiling, warm, she thanks me for coming. I could fall in love with her. At that time I fell in love very quickly, except I didn't know it. I could fall in love with her even more quickly than usual, but she introduces me to her husband. (laughter) An accountant for an important electronics firm. They accompany me [00:22:00]

into the hall. All the women are dazzling, and as expected all have escorts. I am seated at the head table to the right of my hostess. In time I follow her to the podium. She presents me to the public with effusive praise in the American way.

She proclaims that I am a great writer, and then corrects herself immediately, "Great? The greatest of this generation. Not only that, of all generations." In other words, I'm a genius. If one were to believe my presenter one might conclude that the deaths of Shakespeare and Dostoevsky were occasioned by sheer jealousy over my accomplishment. As she went on, "All of us have read and urged others to read your magnificent book. Future generations will echo what I'm saying here. On behalf of all of us, we admire your talent, and we love you for sharing it for us." So, I decided to test them. [00:23:00] Now it's my turn to speak. I thank her awkwardly and launch into a tale improvising as I go along that has no connection whatsoever with my book. I set the action of my book in nineteenth-century France where a Jewish seminarian becomes infatuated with a Christian Mademoiselle Bovary. (laughter) I stress the ethical problems involved. The situation is reminiscent of Corneille's dramas and tragedies. Beauty and passion, religion and heresy. I mix quotations from Seneca and from Racine, and, why not? (laughter) I wait for one member of the audience to stop me, to

tell me that this is not the book he read. (laughter) Nothing happens.

I speak for three-quarters of an hour. Even I have no idea [00:24:00] what I'm saying. (laughter) I hear myself say that the seminarian is on the brink of suicide when he learns that his beloved has fled from the convent somewhere in the countryside. I did that because I didn't know what to do with him, I think that thing got away. The time has come to conclude, for if I don't I might be tempted to call upon the Bible and the sorted medieval mystics , even upon text that have come down from us from the night of time, hence the title of my book. My discourse is rewarded with thunderous applause. I don't know what to make of it. Clearly my intuition had been correct. There was in this hall not a single person who had read my poor little book, the only book that bore my name. Still I urged myself not to be too hasty. They may be shy, or they don't want to offend me, embarrass me. [00:25:00] During the question/answer period, they will surely express their astonishment at the difference between my reading of my book and theirs.

Well, the question/answer period is upon us, and everybody refers to the outrageous and incoherent tale I have just

invented. Why did the seminarian wait so long before renouncing his love, one said, and why didn't the young woman consider conversion to the Jewish faith, another one said. As I stammer, my hostess accepts three more questions and concludes the session. I follow her into an office where she hands me my due. We are alone, and I use the opportunity to tell her a Hassidic story. Invited by a disciple from a neighboring village to attend a circumcision ceremony, the rabbi hires the only coach in the village to take him there. He and the coachmen begin the journey in high spirits. [00:26:00] The rabbi because he is about to perform a mitzvah, a good deed, and the coachman because he will earn a few zlotys. At the bottom of the first hill the horse haults, exhausted. It was a Jewish horse, weak. (laughter) The coachman dismounts and begins to push the carriage. Of course the rabbi too leaves the carriage and helps push. They push and push until finally they arrive at the Hasid's doorstep.

That is when the rabbi tells the coachman, "There is something I don't understand. I understand why I am here, the Hasid has asked me to participate in this important ceremony. I understand why you are here, you must make a living. But the horse, this poor horse, why did we bring it along?" (laughter) My hostess with the beautiful voice is speechless for a moment.

[00:27:00] Then she confesses, neither she nor any member of her group read my book. But then why did she invite me? Simple mistake. She was confused by a *New York Times* review of two books, mine and another in the same issue. And the other one but I was there. Oh, I had lessons like this a lot.

Once I got (inaudible) in a Catskill resort, a Jewish group awards me some prize, some fifty people queue up to shake my hand and congratulate me. I hear whispers, "He doesn't look like him. He looks different in the movies." (laughter) They had mistaken me for Eli Wallach. (laughter) Flattered, I tell myself, at least we share the same initials. [00:28:00]

(laughter) Not long ago I was walking with a friend of mine on the street and a young couple came across, a boy and a girl, very much in love. And I heard her say to him, "I think it's Elie Wiesel." All of the sudden she came back, because apparently he didn't believe it. She looked at me, went back, and said, "It's not him." (laughter)

So, at some point struggle means to be involved in activities. Of course I chose human rights activities, which to me meant, [00:29:00] first of all, to defend all causes Jewish, but not limited to Jewish causes. Priority, yes, but not limited to. And therefore whatever things happened I tried to be a witness

and go there. Because I believe all those who are now or have been then engaged in the noblest of all causes, that of obtaining human rights for all human beings, including Jews, or especially Jews, but not only Jews, will eventually come to the following conclusion. First we fought for all peoples' right to be equal. Then we fought for their right to be different. But there's one right in the Bill of Human Rights, which I don't accept, and that is the right to be indifferent. And therefore as a Jew I felt I had to be involved in action. [00:30:00]

Because what is more important, ask the Talmud, what is essential? Study or action, *midrash* or *maaseh*? And Europeans are divided, but in the end all the masters agree, study comes first because study incites action.

As a Jew I question myself about the role of the Jewish writer. Is it to make readers spill one more tear into the ocean? What must a writer express, and to what end? Which story should be told and to what audience? Some are convinced that he must devote himself exclusively to his or her writing. That his or her influence and their power derive more from their art than from their deeds. And this may have been a valid notion long ago. Poetry does not prevent the torturer from beating his victims, and the greatest novel in the world remains powerless before a fanatic. [00:31:00] Does the need to act but in what

area, and by what means, and where does one begin? Of course the fight against anti-Semitism remains the priority. It is after all the most ancient collective prejudice in history. It's virulence and capacity to survive remain inexplicable. It is said to be as old as the Jewish people itself. The Talmud detects its first signs at the time of the revelation at Sinai.

Even in antiquity Jews were hated, especially in the higher echelons of society. What did Cicero and Seneca have against the Jews? You want us to believe Flavius Josephus, Apion the Greek reproached the Jews for, "belonging to a tribe of lepers capable if not desirous of contaminating the entire world," quote-unquote. Tacitus is annoyed with the Jews because they [00:32:00] show for each other he says, "An obstinate attachment, an active commiseration in contrast with the implacable hatred they feel for the rest of humankind. Never do they eat with strangers," he says, "never do they lay with foreign women." Apion and Democritus accused them of ritual murder, and since then anti-Semitism has become more modern, though it contains the same irrational arguments. One is only to compare those of Pharaoh's counselors in the Bible to those of Haman in the Book of Esther, Torquemada, of Hitler, and Stalin. Their delusions are the same, all were convinced that

the Jews were always greedy, determined to achieve political and allegiance domination, and thus to control the affairs of the world. They see the Jews everywhere and ascribe to them terrifying mystical powers. At the same time they have contempt for those who appear helpless.

In other words, the anti-Semites [00:33:00] hate the Jews because they believe them to be strong, but despise them when they perceive them to be weak. The anti-Semite resents the Jew both for what he is and what he is not. He blames him for being too rich or too poor, too nationalistic or too universal, too devout or too secular, in truth he simply resents the fact that the Jew exists. Thus for a Jew anti-Semitism remains the enemy, but it is not the only one. There are other hatreds, other exclusions, other human communities targeted. There is misery on all continents, hunger, ignorance, intolerance, silence, political prisoners, nuclear proliferation. Which of these challenges requires our immediate intervention? And war, which mankind seems incapable of eliminating or at least restraining more than 50 years after World War II. What is war? A perverse lack of imagination, of memory, [00:34:00] a fascination with the end, with death. How to understand this madness that leaves so many graves in its wake?

And then we always think that maybe Kafka was right. The tragedy of the messenger is not that he cannot deliver a message, but that he has delivered the message and nothing changed. But not so, things have changed. Things have changed for us Jews because we have the State of Israel, Jerusalem is the capital of our history once more, and things have changed because in the Soviet Union there is a new situation, although the dangers are still there. If anyone had told me in '65 that I would see the Jews in Russia go wherever they wanted, and a million of them almost are now [00:35:00] in Israel, I wouldn't have believed it. Now who were they that began? They were young people, and I go on celebrating their courage, I will do so until the end of my life because I have seen them in the beginning.

Before Sakharov, who was a great man, before Solzhenitsyn, before all the dissidents, the first to defy the dictatorship and the power of the KGB, the first to drop the masks and overcome fear, and show their faith in our people and its history, were young Jews, boys and girls in Russia, who I have seen at *Simchat Torah*, or dancing with the Torah in the streets. And when they danced heaven applauded. I was there once later on, and they were still [00:36:00] under communism dictatorship, and I was there that time on official capacity, and Marion was

with me. In one room, dissidents came, and Refuseniks came from all over the country. And in one room one man came up to me, he said, "You know, I published in Samizdat your first book, which I translated into Russian. We distributed hundreds of copies, but I kept one. I knew one day I would meet you." And he gave it to me. And I wanted to embrace him because really what do we know about their courage. For us writers what can happen to us, the worst that can happen is a bad review in a newspaper. For them the worst could be ten years in the Gulag in Siberia and this is what he did.

In another room, another Jew came up to me. The first one was from Tashkent. [00:37:00] He came up and says, "I translated years ago your first book into Russian." And he came I think from Vitebsk or from Kiev. He said, "But I kept one copy, and it's for you, and here it is." So, I have both copies. And all I could do is I took the second one by his arm and introduced him to the first. And without saying anything they understood. And they fell into each other's arms and they wept with joy. These are great moments. And I have said it, I will repeat it, life is made not of years, but of moments. So, these were moments of struggle, but of triumph, when the spirit was strong, and the passion was a flame, and the flame went from person to

person, from heart to heart, from soul to soul, and that flame illuminated exile. [00:38:00]

But then, of course, we use words, but the enemy does not. When language fails, it is replaced by violence. Violence is the language of those who can no longer express themselves with words. Thus violence becomes the essential language of hatred. A product of intolerance, hatred is almost by definition irrational, impulsive. Its dark forces appeal to what is destructive in the human being, its pace is quick, its goal threatening, its movement implacable. Is there, can there be anything positive, anything uplifting in hatred? Is hatred capable of producing anything but hatred? Is intolerance capable of bringing forth anything but more intolerance? In other words, once we are faced with intolerance can we oppose and fight it with anything but intolerance? May one, must one be as [00:39:00] stubborn as our adversary is? May one shout with Saint-Just, the French revolutionary, that there is no freedom for the enemy of freedom? May one hate those who hate?

Intolerance is never static, its aim is to dominate and conquer. Its target is human freedom. An ancient plague rooted in somber and fathomless ground, hate ignores frontiers, and walls, ethnic and religious differences, political systems and social classes,

a human product, it cannot even be stopped by God, man alone can limit its progression. And no people may consider itself immune against its poison, no community is shielded against its arrows, blind and blinding hatred is a dark sun which under a heaven laden with ashes strikes and kills those who forget that all human beings are carriers of grandeur and promise. [00:40:00]

To hate is to deny the other person's humanity. It is to diminish the other person. It is to limit our horizons while reducing those of the other person. It is to see in the other, and then in one's self, not a reason for being proud but an object of disdain and terror. To hate is to choose a simplistic and reductionist facility. It is to dig an abyss where the hater and his victim will fall and die. To hate is to light a fire of conflict in which children will become orphans and old people mad with pain and remorse. In religion hatred hides God's face, in politics hatred destroys mans' freedoms, in science hatred is at the service of death, in literature it distorts truth, and perturbs the meaning of history, while covering beauty itself with a thick layer of blood and ugliness. Pernicious, surreptitious hatred [00:41:00] infiltrates itself in language and the mind so as to disrupt relationships between man and man, people and people, between one community and others.

Some of us belong to a generation that has witnessed a defeat of Nazism and of fascism, but not that of intolerance and fanaticism that characterized them both. How is one to fight intolerance? We know the answer with regard to fascism, it is a political system, a social structure, a triumph of the will, a base for power and conquest. So, it's simple one must not accept its validity, for to accept it would mean to appease it. Conciliation leads to reconciliation. Reconciliation with fascism ought to be considered unthinkable. Fascism is something that must be fought, condemned, repudiated, expelled from civilized society. Intolerance is something more subtle and complex to deal with. [00:42:00] How and by what does one discern intolerance? There must be many answers to this question. I know only one. An idea, a movement, or a person are intolerant when they inspire hatred. Intolerance is the first or second step leading to hatred. And if it is not stopped in time, it will be too late. It is unfortunate but probably true, when hatred is on the march, it is hard to bring it to a halt, for hatred envelopes even those who try to stop it, accept that theirs is of a different kind, the opposite of hate is still hate. To vanquish it there exists only one method, it is to prevent it from coming into being. Hatred is like war, once it is here it is too late already. It has already freed the angel of death and allowed him to broaden the

scope of his kingdom. That is why hatred must be stopped
[00:43:00] like cancer. Hatred is not what we could consider as
an option.

And therefore for me the opposite of hatred has always been
what? It has been a celebration not only of life and humanity,
but of friendship. In probably all of my books, novels or
essays, there is that element to celebrate a friendship. What
is a friend? It is my character Gabriel who in *The Gates of the
Forest* asks himself this question out loud. And he answers,
"More than a father, more than a brother, a traveling companion.
With him you can achieve what seemed impossible even if you must
lose it later. Friendship marks a life more deeply than
anything else. Other endeavors risk degenerating [00:44:00]
into obsession, friendship is never anything but sharing. It is
to a friend that you communicate awakening of desire, the birth
of a vision or a terror, the anguish of seeing the sun
disappear, or of finding that order and justice are no more. Is
the soul immortal? And if so, why are we afraid to die? If God
exists how can we lay claim to freedom since He is its beginning
and its end? What is death? The closing of a parenthesis and
nothing more? What about life?" In the mouth of a philosopher
these questions might have a false ring, but asked by friends
during adolescence they have the power to change. What is a

friend? Someone who for the first time makes you aware of your loneliness and his, and helps you to escape so you in turn can help him. Thanks to him you may remain silent without shame and speak freely [00:45:00] without risk.

So, I speak about friendship, and I had, therefore the saddest moments of my life, except for those that I spoke last week, were when friends disappointed me. Not many, very few. And one of them actually was close, too close. He was the President of France, François Mitterrand, I write about it because I had to tell the truth, or at least part of it. We were very, very good friends. From the beginning we decided, we made a deal never to speak about politics, but only about philosophy, Jewish philosophy, literature, history, the Bible. And it was good, very marvelous relationship. When I was in Paris with my wife or myself alone, I would often go to see him. [00:46:00] When he came to New York he came to see us. Usually we tried to discourage him saying, "It's nothing really, we'll come to the hotel, it's good enough." But why, because when Mitterrand, president of a great power comes the streets are blocked. And if you have two elevators one is blocked. So, you can imagine what our neighbors felt. And Mitterrand goes back to Paris, we stay with the neighbors. So, we said, please, and he said, "No,

no, I don't know what you mean. You come to see me, I come to see you."

And once we had a marvelous story about the first time he came. The vice president in charge of something of the AT&T , the telephone company called. Usually you cannot get to a supervisor, this time -- (laughter) And they said we have to come and install a line. I said, "What kind of line? What do you mean a line?" They said, "We know the President of France is coming, therefore he is a nuclear power, therefore we have to install a special line, a kind of red telephone [00:47:00] between your apartment and the nuclear center." And we were so taken by -- it was crazy, the third world war to begin in my apartment? (laughter) So, when they came to install the phone we decided to put it in our son's room among the toys. And when Mitterrand came, the first thing they did of course, secret service took him to the phone. We were there too and I said, "Mr. President, if this phone rings I will pick it up and I will say wrong number." So, we had a very good relationship.

And then one day, it happened by a strange accident, my first volume of memoirs came out *All the Rivers Run to the Sea*, [00:48:00] and I was a guest at some news program on the French radio. And I heard a person speak about Mitterrand and Petain.

Petain, you know, Marshal Petain was after all at Vichy. I asked him, "What's happening, who is this man?" He says, "Don't you know, he's just published a book where he proves that Mitterrand and Petain," I couldn't believe it because for years we knew each other. We spent hundreds of hours talking. He never mentioned Petain or Vichy. He always said that he was a prisoner of war, and he said, "Three times I tried to escape, twice I failed, but the third time I succeeded, I came to France, I joined the resistance." All that is true except between coming to France and joining the resistance, he went to Vichy, and he served, I think, several months, I think eight months working for the government. Not only that, he received the highest decoration [00:49:00] from Petain, the La Francisque, highest decoration. Couldn't believe it.

Furthermore, the book says that he was a friend of a man named Rene Bousquet. Rene Bousquet was the chief of police of Vichy in Paris responsible for the deportation of all the Jews to Auschwitz. So, just then because my book came out and journalists everywhere, "What do you think of your friend?" "What do you think of your friend?" "What do you think of your friend?" And I said, "We are friends and I owe it to him first to explain it to me." So, I refused to join -- at that time the French press, they massacred Mitterrand. Never have I seen

something like that. Every single paper day after day what they have done is like a lynching, except I didn't want to join the lynch. So, I came back to New York and it was High Holidays, [00:50:00] went back during Sukkot for one day really and we spent 90 minutes together. It was painful, very painful 90 minutes. I began by saying, "Mr. President, you know you remember we discussed very often Hasidism." Because he was interested by Hasidism. I showed him the beauty of Rabbi Nachman's stories, Rabbi Nachman's tales. "Do you remember?" He said, "Yes."

I said, "Do you remember Rabbi Nachman said somewhere that the world makes two mistakes. One mistake being that no great man can make a mistake. The second mistake that the world makes is thinking that once the great man made a mistake he's no longer great." It's a good opening. I thought he would say, I am not great. He said, "I made no mistake." [00:51:00] "Mr. President, what do you mean you made no mistake?" "I made no mistake." I said, "But Bousquet wasn't a mistake? Mr. President, God made mistakes. It's in the Bible, I'll show it to you." He said, "Not I." Well, after 90 minutes of very, very painful dialogue, that was the last time I saw him. He wanted to see me again, to travel with him to Berlin and to Moscow, and I refused. And I described this in the second

volume because I felt it is part of my life, and I must speak of triumph. Triumph of learning, triumph of memory that some people have told me how to acquire them. But also of sad moments, and that was a very sad moment.

Then I had another friendship I have described, [00:52:00] it was a friendship with a man which otherwise would not have become my friend. He is Cardinal Lustiger of Paris, they call him the Jewish Archbishop of Paris. And in the beginning when he was Archbishop, he became the most popular man in France. After all the Jewish archbishop he was good with the media, he was perfect, intelligent, and witty every day on the front pages. And he always said, "Yes, I am a Jew." He would even say in French, " un Juif accompli ," "I am a fulfilled Jew." And that bothered me. I didn't know what to do, but it bothered me. What do you mean fulfilled Jew? This is meaning in the first century or second century the Christians said that they are the true Jews, they are the fulfilled Jews, we are not because God had changed. God had chosen them as the Jews and we are no longer. So, the repetition of all that. [00:53:00]

And then, again, I listened to the Bible, Marion says, "Why don't you go speak to him?" I said, "Why should he speak to me?" She said, "Try." So, I called up my publisher in Paris

and said, "Please call up the Archbishop's office and say I would like," I realized he loved publicity because otherwise how are there so many articles in the press. And I thought he wouldn't mind having one more article. So, I said, "Tell him I would like to interview him and write a story about him in *The New York Times*." I hoped the *Times* would accept it, I wasn't sure. (laughter) And ten minutes later the telephone comes back saying, "Oh, he wants very much to meet you, but not for an article, just privately." I went to Paris. He sent his car for me to the hotel, I came there to the Archdiocese, the building was empty, only he and I, and he said so. He said, "We are alone." [00:54:00] I looked at him and my first question was, "Eminence, who are you? Our messenger to them or their messenger to us?" That was the beginning. It lasted six, seven hours. At the end he -- it was a very, very good conversation. At the end he said, "Look I want to see you again because," and he gave me a compliment, he said, "Whatever I know is from you." I said, "This you know from me?" And I said, "Yes, under one condition. You cannot use the expression fulfilled Jew again." "But I'm Jewish," he said. "But not a fulfilled Jew." He promised to never use it again. So, we remain good friends.

[00:55:00]

Then, as you see, the struggle continues. It is the struggle of the witness who tries still to give testimony, the struggle of the writer who tries to find the right words, the struggle of the mind who tries to understand. One of the topics that have always fascinated me and saddened me was that among the writers who dealt with the Holocaust, a very high rate of suicide occurs. The highest of any other social category. Not among musicians, or about -- writers. So, I kept a [00:56:00] folder, documents on deaths. For instance there is a man Beni Virtsberg in Israel, Tadeusz Borowski in Poland, Paul Celan and Piotr Rawicz in Paris, Bruno Bettelheim, and Jerzy Kosiński in the United States, Primo Levi in Italy, the righteous who were part of the shrinking community of Holocaust survivors endured severe hardship, despairing of the written word's power, some chose silence, the silence of death. Was it because as guardians of memory they felt misunderstood, unloved, exiled in the present, guilty of having failed in their task? Were they afraid of having spoken too much, or not enough? In light of the tragedies that continue to tear apart society, did they admit defeat? I knew three of them well and their final acts continue to haunt me.

Primo Levi speaking of experts on the Holocaust said, I quote him, [00:57:00] "They are the thieves of time. They infiltrate

themselves through keyholes and cracks, and cart off our memories without leaving a trace." Why did Primo, my friend Primo, fling himself from the top of a staircase? He whose works finally succeeded in shaking public indifference even outside Italy? From our first meeting in Milan during the '70s we had formed bonds. In a way we were meeting again, having already met over there in Buna Auschwitz 3. I had spent some time in his barracks, I had seen him without seeing him, he had crossed my path without noticing me. Even over there, social differences existed. Now transcending frontiers, we moved forward side by side [00:58:00] as we clung to our links to those who had abandoned us. Was it he or I that said, "Maybe I am dead and don't know it." Like him I was convinced that our experiences isolated us, that people living today or tomorrow could never understand their nature.

When we turned our gaze inward we saw the same universe. The selections, the commanders, the role calls in the icy wind, the hanging of a young boy, a member of the underground. Yes, he remembered it all as I did. Sometimes he would question me about a sentence of mine he read somewhere. I told him I was a bad interpreter of my writings, I did better commenting on his. Why death, Primo? Tell us what truths about whose life. Did he want to reach the very end of his thoughts, his memories, truly

enter death? I don't remember why, but I called him shortly before his death. A premonition? His voice sounded thick, heavy. "Things are not good," [00:59:00] he said slowly, "not good at all." "What's not good, Primo?" "Oh, the world. The world is not good." And he doesn't know what he's doing in a world that is going so badly. "Are you having problems, Primo?" No, he has no problems. In Italy and elsewhere he's read, admired, honored, but it's going badly. We speak of mutual friends, of his plans, of his son Renzo. I suggest that he come to New York, spend some time with me. He doesn't say no, he doesn't say yes, he doesn't answer, as though he were already elsewhere behind other walls.

To cheer him up I describe to him the success of his works on American campuses. No reaction. "Are you there, Primo? Do you hear me?" Yes, he hears me, but he's no longer there. Well, at one point he simply said to my advice, to my invitation to come, he said, "It's too late." When one hears the words too late, that means it's too late. [01:00:00] It was too late for him. But it's not too late for those who read him. It's not too late for those who go on struggling. Struggling to bring some sense to a meaningless adventure, which could be meaningless only if you want it that way, called our life.

I have therefore just in conclusion decided to read to you about meaning and the struggle for meaning. I describe in one of my novels a young man who went back to his hometown, was arrested by the communist regime, tortured, and he was placed in a cell together with a madman. [01:01:00] And it was very clear that if he stays there long enough, he would be contaminated with the young madman's madness. And so, in order for him to save his own sanity, he had only one way, to try to cure the young madman and bring back his sanity to him. And so, he spoke to him, and spoke to him, and spoke to him, and spoke, and spoke, and spoke. And one day he said to him, "Right at this instant, my young friend, there are couples all over this world who think they are embracing, and some who rarely are. There are hearts hammering because they want to be beside someone who had just departed. And in the wild countryside of some country just awakening or just falling asleep there is a woman, some woman, being stoned for a reason, some reason, nothing can save her from human beings. [01:02:00] And there is a man, some man, being deserted whatever his desires, and he can expect nothing more from human beings. And yet, I tell you, affection exists, it is created and transmitted like a secret formula from heart to heart, from mouth to ear. I know. The path of the soul overgrown often know only the night, a very vast, very barren night without landscapes. And yet, I tell you, we will get out. We will get

out. The most glorious works of man are born of that night. I know, my young friend, it isn't easy to live always under a question mark, but who says that the essential question has an answer? The essence of man is to be a question, and the essence of the question is to be without answer. But to say what is God, what is the world, what is my friend, [01:03:00] is to say that I have someone to talk to, someone to ask a direction of, the depth, the meaning, the very salt of man, is his constant desire to ask the question ever deeper within himself, to feel ever more intimately the existence of an unknowable answer. Man has the right to risk life, his own life, he doesn't need to submerge himself in destiny in order to maintain his deep significance. He must risk, he can risk a confrontation with destiny, he must try to seize what he demands, to ask the great questions, and ask them again, to look up at another, a friend, and to look up again. If two questions stand face to face that's at least something, it's a victory. The question, the demand, the outcry, the sickness in the soul or in the eyes, they never die. But I say to you, what I pass on to you, I learned from a friend, the only one I had. [01:04:00] He's dead or in prison. He taught me the art and the necessity of clinging to humanity, never deserting humanity. The man who tries to be an angel only succeeds in making faces. It's humanity itself that we find both our question and the strength

to keep it within limits, or on the contrary, to make it universal. To flee to a sort of nirvana whether through a considered indifference or through a sick apathy is to oppose humanity in the most absurd, useless, and comfortable manner possible. A man is human only when he is among men. It's harder to remain human than to try to leap beyond humanity. Accept that difficulty, tell yourself even God admits his weakness before the image he has created. To be indifferent for whatever reason is to deny not only the validity of existence, but also its beauty. Betray and you are a man, torture your neighbor and you're still a man, [01:05:00] evil is human, weakness is human, indifference is not. They will probably tell you that it's all only a play. That the actor are in disguise. So what? Jump onto the stage, mingle with the actors, and perform, you too. Don't stay at the window, get out of the nest, but never try to reach the heights by flying away from thirsty children and mothers with milkless breasts. The real heights are like the real depths. You find them at your own level in simple and honest conversation. In glances heavy with existence. One day the ice will break, and you will begin to smile. And for me that will be a proof of our strength, of our pact. Then you will shake yourself and the shadows will fall away from you as the fever [01:06:00] leaves a sick man. You will open your eyes and you will say to yourself, I feel better,

the sickness is gone, I am different. And then you will know the taste of the most genuine of victories. Some struggles are already victories." Thank you. (applause)

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