

April 4, 2000

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) As a child, as an adolescent, as a student, there was always a question that we used to ask. And the question is *mai ka mashma lan*, what does it mean? This is an expression that accompanies and inspires all Talmudic and biblical learning. Without it the text would not be what it is, a source of spiritual riches and intellectual stimulant. A sage quotes a biblical thought and another rises to question him on its meaning. At times the lecturer himself, whether elucidating a matter of law, or an aspect of legend, is asking the question *mai ka mashma lan*, what does it really mean? [00:01:00] Of course all this presupposes a postulate that everything under and above the sun has a meaning, at times a hidden meaning. And it is given to us, human beings, to unravel and decipher it.

Some thinkers, religious moralists mainly, would go as far as stating that that is precisely our principal goal in life, a quest for meaning and to confer meaning upon what might appear to be a meaningless universe. The formula *mai ka mashma lan* [00:01:36] for those of you who know Hebrew, has only one verb in it, *mashma*, but it comes from *mashma'ut*, which in Hebrew

means meaning. It derives from *shamo*, hearing, listening. In other words we must listen. Listen to our teachers, to our friends, and to the text before us. [00:02:00] Do you hear me means do you understand me, do you know what I mean. God's creation speaks to us. More precisely, God speaks to us through His creation. And so, mountains and hills, trees and grass blades, birds and clouds, speak to us each in its own language. Whether in silence or in words, we are forever engaged in a dialogue with transcendence.

If words belong to time, as Carlyle wants us to believe, silence belongs to eternity. Occasionally we grasp the importance of facts and events, but not necessarily their meaning. Just as it is possible for us to hear the words, and the music, and their colorful silence together, and it takes time, [00:03:00] and energy, and knowledge to understand the sequence and what the sequences give at the end. Only rarely is the meaning offered to us simultaneously with all that by which it is enveloped. Do all things, all events, all actions have meaning? Let us say that they have an intent, a goal, but there is a difference between goal and meaning. The goal is connected to my acts, to my actions. Whereas the meaning transcends them. Also, the question of course is meaning intrinsically a reflection of life, a result of life, a part of life? In other words, of the

living, the human beings, and out with intelligence and conscious, is there meaning without humanity, without human beings, does the cosmos have a meaning, must life [00:04:00] have a meaning? And if yes, by whom, and by what is it articulated, and how long does it last? Does it change with the passing of time, or with the change of language, which is its soul vehicle? Do new words change the meaning of the experience, or does it wait for newer ones? Still, on a different level, does history have a meaning?

Oscar Wilde once stood before the Niagara Falls, and to the people who were with him, he said, "I would be much more impressed if the waters would flow backward." (laughter) Not history. History does not flow backwards. History forever flows forward. And so, can one conceive a meaning outside history? Is it possible that the meaning of history could survive [00:05:00] history itself? And what if history and life had no meaning? Some anarchists and existentialists say so. And they have been denounced by moralists and pragmatists alike. So, the question is why do a meaningless endeavor, a meaningless project, a meaningless life have such a bad reputation? Some believe that life has its own meaning. Is death then the end, the downfall, the ultimate abdication of all meaning?

There is a very beautiful Ancient Greek legend of King Pyrrhus, who one day summoned his trusted advisor Cineas to help him solve his urgent problem. "I am bored, my friend," he told him, "I have everything, power, fortunes, riches, women, all my desires are fulfilled, I want nothing. What should I do with my life?" Cineas, who was a wise man, said nothing. [00:06:00]

But after a long silence the King exclaimed, "I know what I'm going to do to occupy me. I'm going to make war." "War?" asked Cineas, "Against whom?" "Oh, I don't know," said the King.

"Perhaps against our Spartan neighbors. Granted they haven't done anything bad recently, but I'm aware I must do something."

"And then," asked Cineas. "What would you do then, Your Majesty?" "Then I will go and fight the others." "Who?" "The Egyptians." "And then what will you do after you have defeated the Egyptians?" "I will go to challenge the Babylonians." "And then?" "The Persians." "And then?" "Oh, then the Assyrians." "And then?" "Then," said the King, "I will come home to rest."

"Majesty," said Cineas with great respect, "If you are going away only to come back, why not stay here?" [00:07:00]

(laughter)

We do not know whether the King answered and what he said. But we do know that the advisor's questions are sound and well-founded. In other words, what is the purpose, what is the

meaning of you going away if there is nothing then above and beyond it? Well, we could continue this inquiry until we meet again, and still remain wandering in philosophical deserts. Essential questions have no answers. Today's answer becomes tomorrow's question. Answers are all temporary, questions are eternal. At best, essential questions become their own answers. There is quest in question. Is that quest also a quest, unavoidably relentless for meaning, irrevocably invasive?

Last fall, for the thirty-second year that we were here, we explored the themes of [00:08:00] darkness and struggle, which have accompanied this student's writings throughout his formative years. Why so much darkness in the world and in the human heart? What does move seemingly decent men and women, good fathers and husbands, to invest their energies in murdering children and their parents? What's the meaning of all that? Why such massive assault on the innocence of normal human beings? Why blind aggression, why senseless violence in the land in a century when culture and civilization claimed to have reached unsurpassed heights? And faced with such tumultuous darkness, and its inevitable fallout, how does one shape one's struggle for renewed faith in humanity and its creator?

This is, if my memory does not choose to fail me now, another year, the thirty-third year as Rabbi Woznica reminds me so gently. [00:09:00] But the system is different, the structure was different. Usually it would mean just to study together with curiosity and fervor. The infinite beauty and depth of our ancient tradition as it has been transmitted through its sacred texts and their dazzling commentaries. What I try to do here with some of you was to communicate if not knowledge, then at least a thirst for knowledge, a passion for learning. For this series this year, which bridged two centuries, I have chosen a different approach. This time all I sought was to offer you four words that at least in part described the turbulence, the upheavals, but also the promises, the greatness as well as the horror of the past century, darkness, struggle, meaning, and faith. [00:10:00] Tonight we should speak about the third word, therefore about meaning. And we shall do so as soon as our doors are open for those who means so well, but they came so late. (laughter)

In a small village somewhere in Southeast Russia, a mother and her son found themselves that morning in their impoverished hut chatting about all kinds of things. The end of the summer, the need to collect wood for the stove, the drinking habits of the father. The mother prepared tea in the samovar that she

inherited from her parents. Suddenly the small boy turned to his mother and said, "Do you know what I will do when I grow up?" "No," said the mother. "What will you do, my child?" [00:11:00] "Oh, Mother," he said, "I think I will do whatever I can to find truth." "Very good, my child," said the mother. "That's an honorable thing to do for a young man who will want to lead a decent life." And she went on preparing the tea. "But mother," said the child, "what does truth look like? I must know. Imagine I go and go and look, I don't know for what. And not only that, worse than that, suppose I find truth and don't know that I found it. So, tell me what does truth look like?"

"Oh, it's very simple, my beloved child," said the mother. "Truth is a woman, a young beautiful woman whose grace irradiates the entire world. She has blue eyes like the color of the sky at dawn, and red lips like cherries in the spring. And when she speaks, [00:12:00] when she speaks it is like a dream because her voice reverberates like the magic sound of the best violin at the village wedding." The son listened intently and kept the image to himself. It became his secret. And weeks went by, months, years. The child grew and became a lad, and the lad an adolescent, and the adolescent a handsome young man. His mother had dreams about him getting married and build a

home, but he had other ideas. One fine morning he said to his mother, "Mother, the time has come for me to fulfill my promise. I want to go and find truth." And she didn't say, "Are you crazy?" She simply looked at him and began to cry. But her tears had no effect on him. He kissed her goodbye, said farewell to his friends, and began walking to the neighboring village, [00:13:00] then to another village, then to a big town and a major city. He saw many people, met many women, but found not what he was looking for.

Not to be discouraged, he continued his journey across seas and mountains until he reached a desert. By then he was already old and tired. At night he laid down in the sand to rest, he needed sleep. And suddenly out of the darkness a human shape appeared. He looked at it and shivered, seized by panic. It was an old woman, the least beautiful he had ever seen. Straw instead of hair, dry lips, dead eyes. "Who are you?" the wanderer yelled with all his strength. [00:14:00] "You are asking me," she said. "Weren't you looking for me all over?" "No," shouted the wanderer, "it cannot be. My mother told me that truth is the most beautiful woman in the world with blue eyes the color of the sky at dawn, lips like cherries, a voice that sings." "What can I do," said the woman, "that's life." (laughter) "But Madam," said the old wanderer, "please understand. I must go



back to my village. My mother is no longer alive, but my friends are. And they are waiting for me to tell them about you. I must tell them I found truth. What should I say?" The old woman waited a long moment and tried to smile, but did not succeed. "Do me and them a favor," she said with a grimace, "tell them a lie." [00:15:00] (laughter)

What is the meaning of this sad tale based on a short story by the Russian novelist Andreyev that one can never attain truth? Or, as a philosopher said, the sage is searching for truth, the fool finds it. But does it mean that in the name of truth one must tell lies? In our tradition we say *midvar sheker tirchak*, you must go away, remove yourself from lies. So, what does one do? We shall tonight tell a few stories, and the stories have to do, of course, with our quest. And the quest is a quest for meaning. What is the meaning of searching for truth, and what is the meaning of telling the truth, and what is the meaning of a life that is spent without [00:16:00] truth? But of course, the problem is further for us Jews, what is the meaning of us being here? What is the meaning of Jewish survival? We are the people of antiquity, the only one that survived antiquity. How did we do it, and why?

Why did some writings survive throughout the centuries whereas so many others vanished? Why did we endure so many persecutions? How did we manage to survive, and what is the meaning of all that? What is the meaning of the hatred so many nations and groups manifested towards us? Why do certain words have meaning to me and none to others? We always go back to scripture because, after all, this is the oldest text that we have. And there we may ask the same question, [00:17:00] why did God create man, what is the meaning of creation? God could have gone, after all, to the end, to the end of the end which is never the end for God. Why did he create man? So, our sages say, *lichvodo*, for his glory. Now does God need human beings to enhance his stature? Or was it perhaps to alleviate his eternal loneliness? Or was it to prove himself that mistakes can be made on His level too? (laughter)

It is in the Bible, he says, "I made a mistake and I am sorry." He regrets it. His act surely had meaning, but what was it? Is his meaning our meaning? Adam and Eve were happy in paradise. They were at peace with each other and themselves. Until their creator informed them of two trees, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, [00:18:00] and he ordered them not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. It's not clear whether he identified the trees. Any tree could have been the Tree of

Knowledge. The text doesn't say that they knew which one it was. But then, what was the meaning of the prohibition? Wasn't God's intent to inspire all human beings to devote their lives to searching for knowledge? But the entire tradition is a quest for knowledge. They had two sons, Cain and Abel, both brought offerings to God who accepted Abel's, but not his older brother's. What was the reason for such discrimination? The first in history.

In his anger and sadness, Cain killed Abel. What a horrible and sordid tale, what is this meaning? That the first family already was plagued with internal problems? (laughter) Or that brothers can become enemies [00:19:00] because of God? When Moses ascended Mount Nebo on his last journey he was alone, alone with God. God took care of his departure from this world. God's greatest prophet was put to rest by God himself. God performed the last rites. All this is meant as a compliment. But in purely human terms, wouldn't Moses have felt better with his family present? And then why was his tomb so far away? Why has it remained unknown? All these questions and many more figure in Talmudic literature. And some answers as well. There the *mai k'mashma lan*, what's the meaning of that, remains in this case without a response. God may have created man not for His sake, but for man's. *Lichvodo* may mean God created the

world and man so that man or the human being [00:20:00] could achieve and attain an existence of honor.

Anyway, Cain and Abel, of course, we know what happened, and we know why. They may have been wrong, first of all, because they wanted to do what they did alone, they didn't confide in the other. Why didn't Cain tell Abel, look, I'm going to do this, let's do it together? And because they did not do that, because they were selfish, one became the victim and/or the executioner of the other. The same, of course, the same approach can be utilized and used with regard to secular texts. Socrates chose death over exile, what does it come to teach us? That teachers always needed protection against false accusations? Or that for the innocent victim of any injustice exile is more bitter than death? [00:21:00] Why did Plato, the great Plato, in his book *Laws*, actually wanted to adopt a bill or a law which not only prohibited the acceptance of poets in the Republic, but he wanted to accept and to confirm the death sentence of his teacher, Socrates.

What about *Romeo and Juliet*? Is that a story about love? Not about hate? In general at Boston University where I have the honor of teaching, every book that I teach, I always ask the question of my students, "What is the book about? What is the

poem about? What is the story about?" That is, what is the meaning, the hidden meaning, the real meaning? From Pagan Athens to Catholic Italy the place is Campo de' Fiori.

[00:22:00] Large crowds in need of entertainment gather to watch the great Giordano Bruno readying himself to die. And we have so many descriptions of that, that it's amazing that they survived because he was, after all, a great man. We know that he, for instance, the trial lasted seven years. Seven years. Why? Because he was accused of heresy. Why? Because he did not believe in the virginity of Mary. He did not believe that we have only one planet, one world. He believed there were many worlds. Also, he favored Cain over Abel. And what I like, of course, is his great sentence. He said, "Light is God's shadow."

And then at one point he said, "That I shall fall to the ground dead that I know, but what life would be equal to that death." And to his judges [00:23:00] he said, "You issue a sentence against me and that sentence frightens you more than me." The interesting part is the crowd. The crowd came to watch him die in torture, in pain. And there is, of course, a very, very great poet, a Nobel Prize winner, Czeslaw Milosz. Czeslaw Milosz, who in his early years wrote a poem "Campo de' Fiori" not about Giordano Bruno, but about actually the Warsaw Ghetto. The

Warsaw Ghetto April 19 the insurrection began. And the entire German army was fighting the insurrection, a few hundred youngsters without weapon anymore, they resisted the onslaught for eight -- six or eight weeks. The Germans had to bring airplanes, [00:24:00] guns, to burn the entire ghetto house after house after house, cellar after cellar after cellar. And he describes a terrible scene that outside the ghetto young people would come and watch. Young boys and girls who were in love would come and watch. It's good entertainment. So, he compared the two, Campo de' Fiori in Rome and Campo de' Fiori in Warsaw. Which means, actually, sometimes it takes centuries for meaning to catch up with the event.

Well, what about our own century? There are words that meant so much to people and meant something else to others. Take, for instance, communism, which in the beginning was a prophetic message. [00:25:00] I think if I had been then older and in a different place, I think I would have been taken by it. Because when you read a text, early texts, they were beautiful.

Fraternity, peace among people, and nothing but happiness. And yet, those who know, and I know now as you do now, that communism was a laboratory of deceit, and falsehood, and brutality, and cruelty. In a novel, I describe the tragedy of a former communist, a communist, a Jewish communist, a certain

Paltiel Kossover. And this Paltiel Kossover grew up in the religious background, religious home, studied the prophets. And because of that, he became a communist, a poet, and he loved poetry. Then Stalin became crazy. [00:26:00] Literally he became crazy. And he, who in the '30s staged show trials, show trials during which Lenin's companions were accused of treason and sabotage and killed. In the early '50s, August 12, 1952, an order was given to kill, to execute all the Jewish poets, novelists, playwrights in all the prisons in Russia. And I was taken by that story. I was in Russia for the first time in 1965 when I wrote *The Jews of Silence*, and I was taken by that. I wanted to understand what moved Jewish men and women to become fervent communists. And when Jews are communists, they are really communists. (laughter)

So, I wanted to know that. [00:27:00] And I tried to understand what happened, what happened to this Paltiel Kossover who actually was then executed. And I describe in prison, waiting for execution, he wrote a letter to his son. "Grisha, my son, I am interrupting my testament to write you this letter. When you read it, you will be old enough to understand it and me. But will you read it? Will you receive it? I fear not. Like all the writings of prisoners it will rot in the sacred archives. And yet something in me tells me that a testament is never lost.

Even if nobody reads it, its content is transmitted." In parentheses at that time we believed that those documents, those protocols of the trials, all the documents related to those trials, will forever remain in the [00:28:00] archives of the KGB. But that's why because we believed that the KGB lived forever. Little did we know that one day they would be opened. And now they have been opened. And when we read now we can read, we have access to it, we read the way these interrogations were conducted, the torment, the torture, and the way they forced their prisoners, their inmates, to sign false statements. Including one who was one of the very, very great writers, Isaac Babel, of whom there will be a very important conference next April, April 2001.

But you read it, when I read it, I felt I was really almost in a dream because I found so much about what I wrote about Paltiel Kossover. But he also thought that the archives somehow will remain sealed, but the testament will survive. [00:29:00] "Even if nobody reads it," he says, "his content is transmitted. The call of the dying will be heard. If not today then tomorrow. All our actions are inscribed in the great Book of Creation. That is the very essence of the noble traditional Judaism, and I entrust it to you. I am writing you because I am about to die. When? I don't know. One month from now, perhaps



six, as soon I shall as I have finished this testament? I cannot answer that question. It's night. But I don't know whether the darkness is in my cell or outside, the naked bulb blinds me. The jailor will soon open the peephole, I recognize his step. I'm not afraid of him, I enjoy a certain privilege. I can write as much as I like, and whenever I like, and what I like, I'm a free man.

I try to imagine you in five or ten years, what kind of man will you be when you reach my age, what will you know of the interrogations and tortures that have haunted your father?

[00:30:00] I see you, my son, as I see my father. I see you both as in a dream, and the dream is real. My voice calls yours and his, even if only to tell the world of its ugliness. Even if only to cry out together for help, to mourn together the death of hope, and sing together the death of death. I am your father, Grisha. It is my duty to give you instruction and counsel. Where can I draw them from? I haven't made such a success of my life that I can arrogate to myself the right to guide youth. In spite of my experience with people I don't know how to save them, or awaken them. I even wonder whether they wish to be saved or awakened.

In spite of everything I was able to learn, and I learned a lot. I don't know the answers that will have to be given to the great fundamental questions that concern human beings. The individual facing the future, facing his fellow man, has no chance whatsoever of survival. [00:31:00] All that remains is faith, God. As a source of questioning I would gladly accept him, but what he requires is affirmation of that, I draw the line. And yet, my father and his father believed in God. I envy them. I tell you so you will know, I envy them their pure faith. I, who have never envied anyone anything. Perhaps you will find a way to read my poems. They are a kind of spiritual biography. No, that's too pretentious. A poetic biography? It's not that either. Songs, they are simply songs offered to my father who I had seen in a dream. Among the most recent is one I intend to revise in my mind. Its title is both naïve and ironic. "Life Is a Poem." Life is not a poem. [00:32:00] I don't know what life is. And I shall die without knowing. My father, whose name you bear, knew but he's dead. That's why I can only say to you, remember that he knew what his son does not. I have tried. If I have time, I'll tell you why. Let me at least tell you this. Don't follow the path I took. It does not lead to truth. Truth for a Jew is to dwell among his brothers. Link your destiny to that of your people, otherwise you will surely reach an impasse. Not that I'm ashamed of having believed in the

revolution. It did give hope to the hungry persecuted masses. But seeing what it has become, I no longer believe in it. The great upheavals of history's dramatic accelerations, all things considered [00:33:00] I prefer mystics to politicians.

I'm going to die within a month, a year, and I should like to go on living with you and for you. To have you meet the characters who are sharing my wait in this cell of mine. I must tell you that in my testament I did plead guilty. Yes, guilty. But not to what I take to be the meaning of the charge, on the contrary, guilty of not having lived as my father did. That, my son, is the irony. I lived a communist and I die a Jew. The tempest has swept us, has swept over us, and people are no longer what they were. I have grown up, matured, I walked through the forest and lost my way. It's too late to go back. Life is like that, going back is impossible." [00:34:00]

Naturally it had to do a lot with this century, because this century had so many ideological turbulence, it had such an outburst of cruelty, stupid, absurd cruelty that one wonders what does it mean. We have seen in history that occasionally madness erupts in history. The Crusades were madness, the Inquisition was madness. And maybe the twentieth century too had witnessed that eruption of madness. Communism was madness,

Nazism was madness. And on the other side there were good things, and we shall see that a little bit later. There were good things, of course great things, great human triumphs [00:35:00] that occurred in this century, but how is one to understand the meaning of this century? What does it teach us? What does it give us?

Actually let's return to etymology. What's the meaning of meaning? To understand it better we may approach the question from a different angle, what is the opposite of meaning? Is it simply meaninglessness? Too pale, too passive a term. The more active one is negation of meaning. This implies that there was a meaning, but we negated. But this implies an act, an endeavor, an initiative directed against meaning. More precisely one can, one may undertake something so as to deprive one's work, its beauty, or its future, of their inherent content or significance. But that suggests that meaning has been there already, and that meaning belongs to the realm of memory.

[00:36:00] Still there is another word which describes the opposite of meaning and it is absurdity. The entire existentialist philosophy is actually imbued with this word, absurdity.

In Kafka's work, absurdity means precisely that. Lack of connection. There is no connection between one word and the other, between one person and the other, between one era and the other. But absurdity also implicates emptiness and total existential emptiness of being. And this theory has its own philosophers and novelists. They do not claim life being absurd. Only something else. Pharaoh's Jewish slaves were forced to do useless labor, Pyrrhus and his childish reasons to engage in warfare, Meursault in Albert Camus novel *The Stranger*. His mother died [00:37:00] and he doesn't remember whether it happened the day before or not. In fact, he doesn't care. At the funeral he sheds no tears. He doesn't feel anything. Between one event and the other there is nothing, no connection. Between one person and the other there is no relation. If the other doesn't exist to anyone, then walled in his or her own solitude a human being is condemned to live a senseless life with no hope for redemption.

In the century we just left behind the human community has been made to endure two totalitarian evils, Nazism and Communism, and I don't compare them, never. Nazism was the paradigmatic phenomenon of cruelty. It brought suffering and death upon multitudes of human beings in their dominions. But did they have meaning? They had goals, even ideals, wrong, dangerous,

repulsive ideals, [00:38:00] but still ideals for which their followers were ready and willing to sacrifice their freedoms and their lives. Nazis wanted to make all Germans into master of the universe, today Germany, tomorrow the world, was their slogan. Communism's aim was to impose by force on the same world its simplistic and deceitful ideology of universal goodness, harmony, and peace. In other words, on the surface of the two ideologies, communism sounded more open, more liberal, more humanistic. Nazi leaders made no secret of their intentions to imprison, torment, and eliminate its adversaries, opponents, and enemies, especially the Jews.

Communism in the early phases of its rule never made such brutal threats. It wanted to be a kind of messianism without God. As we know, the goals of these two movements, but what about their meaning? In more ways than one everything about them was absurd. Hitler ordered the assassination of his most [00:39:00] loyal associates during the Night of Long Knives in 1934. He may have needed them during the war. Stalin willed the execution of his best military commanders in the late '30s, thus weakening the Red Army to a point that in 1941 millions of Soviet officers and soldiers were taken prisoners by the advancing Wehrmacht. It was a debacle. Absurd, indeed absurd. Even more absurd, meaningless, stupid, was Hitler's hatred of

Jews. In 1944, trains carrying Jews to Auschwitz had priority over military convoys going to the Russian front. For both Stalin and Hitler felt they had the right to reduce other nations and their own into their absolute oppression. They considered themselves idols, gods, whose judgement was infallible, and their judgment irrevocable. They felt they were, they embodied [00:40:00] the meaning of history. In fact, they were its satanic spirit.

In his heartbreaking memoir of Treblinka, a carpenter named Jankiel Wiernik, whose testimony appeared actually before the war ended in New York, it was smuggled out into New York. It was published in '44 after the uprising in Treblinka and he escaped. He wrote in his diary or in his memoir as follows, "I almost went insane the day I saw men, women, and children being led into the house of death. I pulled my heart and shed bitter tears of despair. I suffered most when I looked at children accompanied by their mothers who were walking alone and entirely ignorant of the fact that within a few minutes their lives would end in torture. [00:41:00] Their eyes glowed with fear and still more perhaps with amazement. They seemed to formulate questions on their lips, what is this, what for, and why. The shouting, the yelling, the weeping, the cries of misery begging for mercy, for God's vengeance ring in my ear to this day." At

one point later on he said, "I am not sure that I will ever be able to laugh again."

And another, Zalman Gradowski in his memoir about Birkenau said, "I am not sure that one day ever I will be able to cry again."

A fifteen old boy asked his mother question when he arrived in a place of malediction which seemed to exist outside of reality, outside of time. [00:42:00] A place where some people came to kill and others to die. It lasted but a second, and he was separated from his parents, from his sisters, from his own childhood. Another second and he found himself face to face with death, welcoming the multitudes of his people, my people, as if to swallow them up into nothingness. And one thought, a dark obsessive thought flared up in his mind and stayed there for eternities. What does it all mean? It must mean something.

Another future writer, a bit older than I, Viktor Frankl, in Vienna, also felt attracted to the theme of meaning, but he studied it from a different viewpoint. As a professional psychotherapist he used it for a base for so-called logotherapy. And in his book *Man in Search of Meaning* he says that in the death camps those who found meaning in life, even there, had a better chance to survive. [00:43:00] Well, this may have been true of political prisoners. Maybe communists whose clandestine



organizations helped their friends avoid selections and dangerous commanders, but what about the rabbis who had no connections? What about the children who managed to be inside and to have no relation with internal hierarchy? They had faith, and their faith was based on meaning, and yet, most of them perished. In truth I personally am skeptical when it comes to theorizing on those experiences. Their generalizations are, and must be, misleading. They may cover one area but not others. Whatever is linked to that ontological event defies human understanding and analogies. All we know is that what goes on today still is going on, but not the same. You should never compare.

Today at one time you have Kosovo, and you have Bosnia, and so many other places. [00:44:00] I've been to two refugee camps last June, sent by the President. And I went from one place to another, one camp to another, one tent to another, from one family to another, and came back heartbroken. The men always began telling a story and never finished it. I have not heard one man tell the story of his imprisonment, of the murder of his family, and who finished the story. They all burst out in tears in the middle. At the same time there were children there. And the children, they were laughing and dancing in those camps because thank god that we have now NGOs, we have humanitarian

agencies. Unlike the '30s or the '40s there are 2000 that work for those who need a presence, who need help, [00:45:00] who need compassion. In one place, it was one of the most moving places I saw there. I heard Hebrew songs. There was a camp organized by Israel, the Israeli army, hospital and a camp. And the Israeli teachers taught to these hundreds of Muslim children Hebrew songs. And to hear Muslim children sing with such joy, with such gratitude Hebrew songs was a joy, and that had meaning.

We come now, of course, to the other part, which is stories. Every story has a meaning, otherwise why write it? And the most beautiful of all the stories, of course, are Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. His stories, I call him the forerunner of Kafka. His stories are so special. [00:46:00] And the meaning is a mystical meaning sometimes, and sometimes you don't even find it, and you wait centuries to find it. His most beautiful of tales is a story of seven beggars. I love beggars. I love madmen, I love beggars. In every novel of mine there is always a beggar because I remember the beggars in my town. And the story of the seven beggars, a long story, I'll give you a short synopsis. Once upon a time there was a king that abdicated in favor of his son. The coronation took place amid merriment and exuberance. There was singing in the streets and drinking in

the square. Comedians and musicians, troubadours and jugglers amused the people of the court. Others entertained the crowd from morning to night until the early hours. At the height of the festivities the king turned to his son and said, [00:47:00] "I see in the stars that one day you shall lose your throne. Promise me that you will not let it sadden you. Promise me that you will continue to be of good cheer. Then I will be too, though my gaiety will be of a special kind."

The new king was kind and charitable, he was a patron of the arts, and he encouraged a free exchange of ideas. He wanted his subjects to be happy, if someone wanted money, he made them rich. If someone aspired to honors he helped them attain them. Thus the kingdom gained in wisdom and love what it lost in military power. The warriors forgot their trade and their desire to reap glory by killing or by defying death. And then the king was overcome with sadness and began endlessly questioning himself, "What am I doing in this world? And what is my place in it?" He had changed. Well, in another country a great panic broke out and its inhabitants fled. While crossing a forest two very small children, a boy and a girl, became lost. They cried and cried for they were hungry. [00:48:00] Along came a beggar, a bundle on his back, his eyes empty, expressionless. The children appealed to him and he gave them

some bread. "Where do you come from?" he asked. "We don't know," answered the children. When he wanted to leave they begged him to take them along. He refused. Only then did they realize that he was blind. He left them with a wish, "Be like me."

The next morning, famished, they began to cry again. And the second beggar came to their aid. He was deaf. Like the first he refused to take them along, but also formulated a wish that they be like him. The third day was a stutterer's turn to offer them some bread and his blessing, be like me. The fourth beggar had a twisted neck. The fifth was a hunchback. The sixth had no arms and the seventh no legs. And each wished them to be like him. Then the children left the night and the forest and becoming full-time beggars they visited towns and fairs.

[00:49:00] Wherever they went they roused compassion. And so they made a career and became famous. Where upon it was decided they should marry. The engagement was celebrated on a market day. As for the wedding, it was to take place on the king's birthday in a huge cave decorated with leaves and large stones in place of tables. They would be given what was left of the royal banquet, and all would eat to their hearts' content, and all would sing with joy. But the newlyweds remembered their early years in the forest and regretted the absence of their

first benefactors, the seven beggars with big hearts and furious benedictions.

More than anything they wanted to see them again, just once.

Low and behold there appeared at the entrance of the cave their very first friend, the first beggar. I have come to take part in your celebration, I bring you my present. And he began to tell them a tale, a fable. It is not I who am blind, [00:50:00] it is the world. Moreover I am neither old nor young, I have not started to be. The great eagle has confirmed it to me. The next day, the second day of festivities, the second beggar made his appearance before the newlyweds who silently had evoked his memory. And this is what he told them. I am not deaf, but my ears perceive only the absence in the world, some mourn than the absence of happiness, others rejoice in the absence of misfortune. It is to this absence that I am deaf. Therein lies my strength. The population of the great city of abundance has confirmed it to me.

The third day saw the arrival of the third beggar, the stutterer that said, I don't stutter at all. On the contrary, I am an orator by profession and avocation. But I like to express nothing but perfection. Furthermore, I am a singer and my song contains the wisdom of wisdom. The man of true grace has

confirmed it to me. And he too began [00:51:00] to tell them a story, and listen to the story. In the center of the world there is a mountain, and on this mountain there is a rock, and out of this rock there spouts a spring. Well everything in this world has a heart, even the world has a heart. A heart that is a complete being with the face, hands, legs, eyes, and ears. And this heart is full of fire and anxious to go back to the spring at the other end of the world, at the other side of the abyss. And this heart is doubly unfortunate, the sun pursues and dries it, to survive it contemplates the spring. But the longer it contemplates the spring, the greater its desire. Yet, as soon as it comes closer to the mountain the peak disappears and with it the spring, and then its soul leaves because it lives only in the love it feels for the spring. [00:52:00] And if it were to stop the whole world would be reduced to nothingness. Thus it must remain far away on the other side, protected by a bird, its wings spread wide, condemned to look at the spring knowing that they can never meet.

And so it went. The young couple had the joy of a reunion with the fourth beggar, and the fifth, and the sixth. And every day they listen to another tale. But when Rabbi Nachman reached the sixth day of the wedding week, he stopped. Later he confided to Rabbi Nathan, his friend, that the story of the seventh beggar

would be told only after the coming of the messiah. If I wait for the messiah, it is maybe also for this, I want to hear the story of the seventh beggar. But there was a very, very great Yiddish poet, [00:53:00] a poet, a troubadour, he was a troubadour of Yiddish literature called Itzik Manger. And in his book of poems there is one entitled "To the Bratslaver's Seventh Beggar." In Yiddish it reads beautifully and since all of you know Yiddish, I'll read it to you. (laughter)

*Zibeter betler, farendikt di mayse!*

*Mir zenen di letster herer.*

*Azoy fil yidn hobn zich nisht dervart.*

*Tsu vos-zhe vartstu merer?*

*Zibeter betler, du drimelst, du shvaygst*

*Un di volkns vern shverer --*

*Mir vartn, dertseyl. Tomer vert tsu shpet,*

*ver veln zayn di herer?*

Do you need translation? [00:54:00] Seventh beggar, tell us the end of the tale. We are the last listeners. So many Jews could no longer wait. Why do you? Seventh beggar you sleep, you are silent, and the clouds are getting heavier. We are waiting, tell us the tale lest it becomes too late and then who will be

the listeners. The interesting part is he wrote it years and years before the Holocaust.

Now to conclude, of course, the Jewish tradition is that we read on the seventh day of Shabbat, we read the Torah, we always end with something good. We never end with something bad. So, we read something good. And I shall read something good that happened in the last century. Not only the end of communism, not only the end of Nazism, the defeat of fascism, not only that. [00:55:00] It's also after all, after all, the resurrection of Jewish sovereignty on its ancestral land. And it is about Jerusalem. It's about what happened in that place. What could happen, what happened, and why, and how we saw it. It is probably, of course, one of the miracles that occurred in our lifetime. I shall read just a few lines, a few pages of that, because 1967 many of you hadn't been born then. But 1967 was a special year, we saw both, we saw the danger and we saw the miracle. Three weeks before the Six Day War [00:56:00] we believed in the irrevocable danger, threat, who knows what. At that time, Israel was so alone, so terribly alone, its solitude was so unbearable that many of us, at least I, was pessimistic. And then came the war.



The first day Moshe Dayan was then Defense Minister, he gave orders: total silence first day. And all the information came from Arab stations. And the Arab stations then, of course, they, for strange reasons, they believed that they won the war. There is a cassette which I heard on Israeli radio one Yom Ha'atzmaut years and years ago, and it was simply taken [00:57:00] from, I don't know how they managed, from Nasser's call to King Hussein. On the first day he said, "What are you waiting for? We won the war. Beersheba is burning, Tel Aviv is almost finished, our armies are entering soon Haifa, and what are you waiting for? If you wait you will not participate in the victory. Get in the war." And that's why he went into the war. In spite of the fact that the Prime Minister Eshkol then sent three messengers asking him, pleading with him, begging him not to enter the war. But he did enter the war, and that's how Israel obtained one of the great victories of all times, and Jerusalem is part of that victory. Had Hussein listened to Nasser, Jerusalem would still be there.

So afterwards, of course, I went in the middle of war and I wrote a novel. [00:58:00] I won't tell you about it because I'm not here to sell books, I'm here to write books. And I remember I went to the kotel, right, I spent a lot of -- it was the day after Jerusalem was liberated and I went a lot of -- I spent

most of my time really there. And my lips were moving and I literally wrote my novel as a prayer. It's called actually *A Beggar in Jerusalem*. See, I like beggars, *A Beggar in Jerusalem*. Just one note, all the texts that I read before, the excerpts, were translated by Marion Wiesel, and I'm sure you heard the melody was there. It was gracious, and great, and powerful. The beggar in Jerusalem, at the end of the story: [00:59:00] Dawn melts into the mist. Heaven and earth embrace before separating. Somewhere, someone sick stirs and moans: the angel has not yet stolen his eyes. A dog barks and the sound reverberates mysteriously in the distance. To console herself, a widow invents a reason to hope. On the ramparts, the guards chat in subdued tones. The city shakes itself awake, opens its shutters and goes about its business. Watchman, what of life? What of victory? Gone the watchman. But I will not answer in his place.

Somewhere a storyteller is bent over a photograph taken by a German, an officer fond of collecting souvenirs. It shows a father and his son in the middle of a human herd, moving towards a ditch where, a moment later, they will be shot. [01:00:00] The father, his left hand on the boy's shoulder, speaks to him gently while his right hand points to the sky. He is probably explaining the battle between love and hatred. 'You see, my

child, we are right now losing that battle.' And since the boy doesn't answer his father continues: 'I want you to know, my son, if gratuitous suffering exists, it is ordained by divine will, whoever kills becomes God. Whoever kills, kills God. Each murder is a suicide, with the Eternal eternally the victim.'

And the survivor in all this? He will end up writing his request, which he will slip between the cracks of the Wall. Addressed to the dead, it will ask them to take pity on a world [01:01:00] which has betrayed and rejected them. Being powerful and vindictive, they can do whatever they please. Ppunish. Or even forgive.

But don't worry. A page has been turned. The beasts in the heart of man have stopped howling, they have stopped bleeding. The curse has been revoked in this place and its reign terminated. To kill or be killed no longer assures glory or saintliness. The warriors have returned to their homes, the dead to their tombs. The orphans are learning to smile again, the victors to weep. Yes, the war is over, and the beggar knows it. He is alone, but that he doesn't know.

The square is getting crowded. The usual strollers, visitors, guides. This way gentleman. Hhurry, ladies, please. For the thousandth time, in every imaginable language, I heard the same explanations recited in the same artificially excited tones:

[01:02:00] 'This is the Mosque of Omar: it is from here that Mohammed and his horse flew to heaven. And here is the Tomb of Christ. Weep, admire, set your camera, smile: thank you. Come on, look as though you are thrilled, moved, impressed: thank you, thank you.'

Her clothes rumpled, her mouth pasty, Malka, his love, ignores the mob around her. She could pretend to look for Katriel, the hero of the story; she doesn't. She could stroke my aching temples and tell me that all wounds heal; she doesn't. And I'm grateful. She knows, as I do, that it would be a waste.

She smiles: 'Do you want me to go away?'

Yes.

Do you want me to come back?

Yes.

She says 'Good,' and stands up. She rearranges her skirt, puts on her kerchief and leaves without looking at me. I watch her make her way through the crowd, determined as if knowing where to go and whom to meet. And I see myself again on the day of our marriage. Only ten people present, a minyan required for the ceremony. [01:03:00] Strangers. On the verge of tears, I had told her, 'Sorry Malka, our guests were not able to come.'

'When your tale will be told you . . .'

one of my characters heard once this, yes, the predictions proved correct. This war

too will have left its mark on the lives of more than one person. Someone died inside me, and I still do not know who. But I do know this: whether Katriel is alive or not is not important. I shall unlearn being jealous of his past or of his innocence. What is important is to continue. It will take time, it will take patience: the beggar knows how to wait.

Yet one of these days he will have to decide, put an end to his waiting, and go away too. But where? Home, of course, but he still doesn't know where that is. A woman is getting ready to welcome him, but he still doesn't know who she is.

[01:04:00] Tomorrow, or the week after, he will finally have to retrace his steps and erase that imprint, but he has forgotten the road back: No one walks it with impunity.

A victor, he? Victory does not prevent suffering from having existed, nor death from having taken its toll. How can one work for the living without by that very act betraying those who are absent? The questions remain open, and no new fact can change them. Of course, the mystery of good is no less disturbing than the mystery of evil. But one does not cancel out the other. Man alone is capable of uniting them by remembering. While accepting ambiguity and the quest arising from it, the beggar at times would like to lose his memory; he cannot. On the contrary: it keeps growing and swelling, storing away events [01:05:00] and faces until the past of others

becomes one with his own. By continued survival, he no longer differentiates between his allies, his ghosts, and his guides, and whether he owes them allegiance. For him everything is a question, including the miracle that keeps him on the surface.

That is why I'm still here on this haunted square, in this city where nothing is lost and nothing dispersed. An indispensable, necessary transition. To catch my breath. To become accustomed to a situation whose newness still makes me dizzy. During this time I don't count the hours or the men. I watch them go by. The beggar in me could detain them, he lets them pass. He could follow them, he lets them pass. Katriel did perhaps exist, and the beggar did not follow him, [01:06:00]

For tales, like people, all have the same beginning."

What is the meaning of this story? Well, now we know that the meaning of my story must be given by you. Thank you.

(applause)

END OF AUDIO FILE