

Y Elie Wiesel Archive

DAVID WOZNICA: Good evening. I said that in my introduction that there's so many parts to you, Professor Wiesel, teacher, survivor, writer, philosopher, humanitarian, and I want to explore as many of those parts of you as is possible. In a few weeks you, along with millions of Jews around the United States, are going to be celebrating Passover. You're going to be, along with us, recounting the miracles, the manna from heaven, the 10 plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, miracle after miracle. Are there miracles today?

ELIE WIESEL: Sure. One is taking place right now. Instead of staying home and watch Oscars you are here. (laughter) [00:01:00] If you ask the question seriously I believe every moment can be a miracle, human miracles, miracles performed by human beings simply because of his or her humanity. Each spark of humanity is a miracle. And these are the miracles that we should appreciate more. We are a people not only of miracles but of appreciation of miracles, which means we are the people of gratitude. We are always grateful.

DAVID WOZNICA: Elie, you said this is the third or fourth time you and I have appeared on this state, and I asked you something I think 10 and a half years ago the first time that you and I had a dialogue together. I don't remember your answer to it, so I want to return to it because it was something that is a focus of my own life. Do you view the existence of the Jewish people today as [00:02:00] miraculous? Do you think God has had a hand in our continued existence?

ELIE WIESEL: I think it was Abarbanel or Judah HaLevi who said if you want proof of God's existence look at the Jewish people. Normally, logically, sociologically, historically -- (phone rings) That's not a miracle. (laughter) Normally our people could have, should have disappeared long ago. There wasn't a method that has not been used to get rid of us. Somehow we disturb people. At one point or another they invent all kinds of excuses or pretexts, but the fact is we disturb too many people. We always have, from the very beginning. We disturbed Pharaoh in Egypt and then Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and Titus in -- and all the Caesars [00:03:00] in Rome. Why? Small people. Why do we disturb so many people? Let them answer. Why should we answer.

DAVID WOZNICA: But do you have a sense of why we disturb so many people?

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, we always disturb because we are -- I think we are the ferment in history. Whenever there is a group of a person that believe that they have a quiet, a certainty about anything or a theory about anything, here we come, and we destroy the theory. That goes from the very beginning to this day. I'll give you an example for instance. An anti-Semite doesn't need reasons to hate Jews. He doesn't even need Jews to hate Jews. (laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: No, it's true.

ELIE WIESEL: Absolutely. Some of them hate us because we are rich, others because we are poor. Some hate us because we are nationalistic, others because we are cosmopolitan. Some hate us because we believe in God, others because we don't believe in God, or in their God. So it's there. It's a fact. It's a metaphysical fact. Whenever you open any page in Jewish history [00:04:00] you must deal with it metaphysically, not only historically.

DAVID WOZNICA: I've often thought that people who've said to me if only we could have faith like our ancestors had faith, like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and then I recall the fact that the minute the Israelites ran into some problems in the desert they immediately turned against

Moses. They immediately turned against God. Despite having seen so many miracles they nevertheless turned them against Moses and say it would have been better had we died in Egypt. So this question of faith today, our ancestors didn't have so much faith.

ELIE WIESEL: Maybe they got adjusted and accustomed to the miracles. When the miracles themselves became every day events that means they lost the sense of wonder. And that is something which we should think about. Our generation too, if we remember, [00:05:00] we Jews at least, if we remember that it took less than one generation from the worst in our history to attain three years later the renaissance of a Jewish sovereign state on its ancestral homeland, it is mindboggling. And yet it happened. Was it a miracle? If you believe then it's a miracle. If not it's also a miracle but a different kind of miracle, what we've done. But the fact is every moment was a wonder, and we should not lose that sense of admiration or of adoration. Problem is that we live in a society today that we lost the sense of adoration. The language, my God, the language has become so vulgar. If I don't go to the movies, forgive me, Oscar, (laughter) if I don't go to the movies I cannot stand the language. Last year, the summer occasionally we go out to movies because I

work hard [00:06:00] and in the evening occasionally we go. And I cannot tell you. I took a notebook. There wasn't a sentence without an obscenity, not one sentence in the whole film without one word or two words of obscenity. What does it mean? Does it mean that these young people or these old people love to use these words because these words are so beautiful? We lost our attitude towards language, our respect for language, our respect for one another. These are serious problems, of course. And that goes to Jews and non-Jews as well.

DAVID WOZNICA: You mentioned your work. My sense is that the majority of your work is spent writing.

ELIE WIESEL: And teaching.

DAVID WOZNICA: And teaching.

ELIE WIESEL: And even more so study. I'm a good student.
(laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: There is a theme that seems to run regularly through your work of father and son. [00:07:00] Can you talk about that a little bit?

ELIE WIESEL: Well, the father-son relationship it's true is a dominant theme in my work because I happen to believe that the most important event after the event of Sinai was the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. That moment, that moment has fascinated all the philosophers in the middle ages, and

to this day we are confronted by that mystery, by that intense, powerful but disturbing mystery, father and son. And the father is going to kill his son. Why? What about the son? Why don't we know more about Isaac? We know everything about Abraham, not about Isaac. He accepted. He was a consenting victim. So since then I feel that it is a relationship which is so complex and so delicate and at the same time [00:08:00] to me so noble. Literature, especially the twentieth century literature, always dealt with father-son quarreling, the rebellion. The son has to rebel against the father. I didn't have that because of what happened, but I didn't have that. When I think of my father nothing but tenderness fills me, and yet I also feel that we have not really fulfilled, we have not accomplished our destiny, I as a son and he as a father. And therefore in my work I always come back to that. And then of course the worst novel that I wrote about that was in -- the most tragic novel was in the *Forgotten* where I describe an Alzheimer patient. And to me this is a curse. It's not only a disease it's a curse. It is the cancer of identity, a cancer of the soul, a cancer of the mind. The person is still a person [00:09:00] except empty of his or her being. And I compared it to a book. Every day you tear out a page and another page and another page, and then there are no

more pages left. And yet the covers are there. And I wrote -- when I wrote the novel I kept it for a few years because I didn't want to leave it on a note of despair. I feel I have no right to bring more despair to the reader. There is enough despair in the world and in some of my books. Until I found somehow a way out between the father and the son, that the father is -- and the son, they are accomplishing something unique, a transfusion of memory. Just as there is a blood transfusion there is a transfusion of memory, and the father is giving the son everything that he had lived and remembered, which means 3,000 years [00:10:00] of memories.

DAVID WOZNICA: I'm smiling because my father and mother are watching this in Los Angeles, and I'm wondering is the difference between father and son and mother and son or mother and daughter, how the relationships differ and how -- it's not to suggest that the relationship between mother and son or mother and daughter is necessarily any less deep but somehow you see them as different between father and mother?

ELIE WIESEL: For psychologists of course. They made a career of that. (laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: Right.

ELIE WIESEL: [What people's complex are, or not?]. Look, it's -- in our tradition we spoke about *kibud av v'em*. You must honor your father and mother, not even say you must love your father and mother.

DAVID WOZNICA: Right.

ELIE WIESEL: You must honor, you must respect your father and mother. And it says "*l'maan ya'arikhun yamekha*", which is very beautiful, one of the very few times that [00:11:00] the reward is being given. What does it mean? It means really that if you live in peace with your parents then you will live longer. It's not a matter of miracles there or of a divine reward. You yourself give yourself the reward of longevity.

DAVID WOZNICA: I think that's one of Judaism's real geniuses, that it doesn't command us to love our parents because overwhelmingly it seems that the tradition teaches us how to act and not how to feel. And I think one of the reasons is that in the best of parent-child relationships there are moments when you don't necessarily feel love, but you can always honor your parents even if you're not -- you know, when you feel scolded, when you've been scolded by them you may not feel very loving to them, although they've done that scolding out of love to you. But I think Judaism in its infinite wisdom has said to us if you can't feel

love that's one thing, but you can always show the proper honor to family.

ELIE WIESEL: Respect, we need respect after all
[00:12:00] I have one father, one mother, and if I'm here it's because of their strange encounter.

DAVID WOZNICA: Fathers and mothers who are watching this telecast right now have a concern, and that is they're concerned that their children's commitment to Judaism may not be as great as theirs or their own parents. What do you say to the Jew today who doesn't find living a Jewish life particularly compelling?

ELIE WIESEL: You know, there is a very beautiful and popular story about Hillel. You remember when the pagan came and said, teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one leg, and he said, well, do what is -- don't do to others what you want others to do to you. I think it's too easy, but if you take it like that it's very easy. Don't do what -- what that means, if you like something you may do others. If I'm masochist should I make you suffer?

[00:13:00] It is the second part of the story "*v'idakh zil g'mor*" and now go and study. And I would say to that person, go and study. There is so much beauty, so much fervor, so much fire, so much life, so much meaning of life in that sentence. Go and study. And you know, whenever I

study, and I study all the time, I feel I am responding to Hillel, that Hillel says to me, go and study, and I said, yes, Hillel, I'm going to study. And in that link, which crosses some 2,500 years almost, is the beauty of study for a Jew, Jewish matters, Jewish text, really Jewish text.

DAVID WOZNICA: If I can pursue that another step though, the generations which preceded us studied. They felt compelled to study. They saw the beauty and the insights of their tradition, [00:14:00] or maybe they didn't feel they had an option. The 92nd Street Y and other Jewish community centers are bringing in lots of young Jews who I think don't know the beauty of Judaism yet, or their experiences in studying or in some synagogues has been less than satisfying. How is it different for them than, say, the generations which preceded them?

ELIE WIESEL: It's less. We lose a lot. We forget a lot. We go farther and farther away from the source. But the source is there. But I am not, I am not a pessimist. I must tell you. I am not a pessimist. I go around the country the way you do, and since I'm older than you, farther than you, and wherever I go I see young people in the hundreds who want to study. What they don't want is fake study. And what they don't want is hypocrisy. If parents come and say look, what should we do with our

children? [00:15:00] Then something is not with the children but with the parents because nothing, nothing discourages a child more than to realize that his or her parents are hypocrites, that they speak nicely about Judaism but they don't do anything about it. They want very much the children to remain Jewish, and they learn Jew -- they didn't. Hypocrisy is a danger.

DAVID WOZNICA: It's not only hypocritical, I believe hypocritical, I think it's counterproductive. Why would I want my children to love something that I'm not living myself? I also live, I think, with I guess psychologists call it a cognitive dissonance. I read the statistics, and I would be concerned -- concerned's not the right word. I would be pessimistic about Jewish life. Everything that I see makes me extremely optimistic about Jewish life, young people thirsty, wanting to learn the tradition, hearing from people who are passionate about it, seeing, I think, how the tradition speaks to them about how to live their daily life. [00:16:00] And when they do they're so grateful that they're having a chance to learn. There's a part of me that wishes the bar mitzvah were at 23 and not at 13 because just when people can begin to understand the depth of their tradition -- how should I say this? I want children to have beautiful Jewish experiences, but this is

an adult sophisticated religion where -- that challenges the 33- or 43-year-old as profoundly, more so than it does the 13-year-old.

ELIE WIESEL: In other words, you would like a person to be born old and get younger and younger? (laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: I guess so. Let's turn to the Middle East for a moment. We have a new prime minister in Israel. I don't know if you have had his ear in the past. It wouldn't surprise anybody here to think that you might have. But now that prime minister Sharon has taken office, if and when you have the chance to have his ear, what do you want to say to him?

ELIE WIESEL: You think I will tell you what I was going to tell him? (laughter) [00:17:00] Let me tell you, I believe first of all I believe that Israel is a democracy. It's a great democracy. And although Israel is threatened daily Israel performs beautifully as a democratic nation. And if Israel decided that Sharon should be its leader that means Israel knows what it is doing. We are studying, after all the rights of the -- there's a very, very beautiful story once. I think it was with Hillel -- again, Hillel -- that once they forgot what kind of sacrifice to bring at a certain day. They forgot. And Hillel said "*Hanakh lahem l'Yisrael.*". He said they have habits.

Let's see how they behave. Let me trust the Jewish people, and I trust the people of Israel and the Jewish people. I trust the people of Israel. And if they want Sharon because they have reasons [00:18:00] to want Sharon, Barak failed. It's terrible to say Barak failed. Barak lost the elections not because of the right but because of the left. It is the peace camp that abandoned him. They were devastated. Read today, today in the *New York Times* there is an interview in the *Times* magazine, Clyde Haberman interviewing --

DAVID WOZNICA: Dennis Ross?

ELIE WIESEL: -- Dennis Ross.

DAVID WOZNICA: Mm-hmm.

ELIE WIESEL: And Dennis Ross gives you more details even than we knew about what Barak was going to give. He said he was going to give Arafat sovereignty over the Har HaBayit, sovereignty over the Temple Mount in addition to other things. And Arafat said no. Why did he say no? My feeling is simply he doesn't want -- I come to the conclusion with a heavy heart. He simply came to Camp David to say no. He doesn't want peace with Israel. And [00:19:00] for all kinds of reasons. One of the reasons I heard is that he was persuaded by some of his Palestinian intellectual friends that it is not good for Palestinian

history to be recorded that Palestine became a sovereign state around the table, not on the battlefield. So he wants more. And my feeling now is -- here I'm pessimistic. My feeling is it's not a matter of territory but of existence. He and the people like him don't want Israel. So therefore Sharon is there. And I saw him after he came from Washington together with a few friends. And what he said, what I understand he said to the president here is look, there is a red line. And you know me, he said. What I say I mean. My yes is yes. My no is no. And he made it clear. [00:20:00] He made clear, very, very clear that certain things he won't accept. And one thing he shouldn't accept, that there I agree with him totally, not to negotiate under the threat of violence of fire. How can you negotiate with the Palestinians when every single day they are firing on Israeli villages, placing bombs? Last week alone there were a few bombs that luckily, miraculously, were diffused. Had they not been diffused hundreds of people would have been killed. So well, I am pessimistic, and same time I feel that ultimately, ultimately things must settle down because one cannot live, a nation cannot live like that all the time in fear.

DAVID WOZNICA: So let's, since we're looking at a little bit of Arab-Israel relations, let me turn to Jewish-

Christian relations for the moment. The Jewish experience with Christianity, particularly in Europe, was overwhelmingly negative. [00:21:00] And some Jews today continue to harbor some hostility, yet the Jewish experience with Christianity in America I think has been overwhelmingly positive. As we enter the twenty-first century, give me your assessment, if you would, of Jewish-Christian relations and what are the issues which you think should be on the table right now?

ELIE WIESEL: On one hand, I would say that never have the relations been better, never. You have officially the Vatican recognized Israel. Officially the pope visited Jerusalem, went to Yad Vashem, went to the Kotel afterward. Then never have there been so many relations between Jews and Christians, friendly relations. Rabbis and priests meeting, theologians meeting and signing petitions together, a cooperation exists. So that is, I think, now something good, [00:22:00] and we should applaud it. Also, the main thing is I have the feeling, it hasn't been articulated yet, that they have given up the idea that they must convert us. Maybe they became clever. (laughter) They became clever. They tried everything. It didn't work. Why continue, you know? (laughter) They tried seduction. They tried persecution. They tried the

inquisition. What didn't they try? So maybe they gave up after all 2,000 years, you know, it's enough to learn something, and they've learned. (laughter) But I say it in sympathy. I'm not saying it against them. So that is very important. On the other hand, about Jerusalem for instance for have a problem. I learned a few weeks ago, maybe a few months already, that the Vatican in its regard to Jerusalem supports Palestinians.

DAVID WOZNICA: Mm-hmm.

ELIE WIESEL: And I don't understand it because they will have more freedom under the Israeli [00:23:00] sovereignty, which Israel has, than they would have with the Arabs. Nevertheless, one thing should be clear really, that we live in a Christian world. There are a billion Christians, and we are a very small people. You know, we are like -- but I remember only -- I must have said it here on the stage at, you know, at my lectures that in China, I'm told, in China five million Jews is what we call in economy a forgivable mistake. (laughter) It's a comma. It's just a comma. And that, yet, I think we behave, we behave as a very mighty movement.

DAVID WOZNICA: It is remarkable. We are -- what is it -- one-third of one percent of the world population. There are tribes in Africa which outnumber the 13 million Jews in

America. I think there is a tribe called the Ouagadougou in Upper Volta. [00:24:00] There are more Ouagadougou-ens on the planet than Jews. It's an amazing thing. I remember once hearing a friend on a radio show being interviewed, and the caller said the follow: as a gentile I just want to ask you a question. And I stopped dead in my tracks. America is what, 2.5, 3 percent Jewish, 97 percent non-Jewish, and yet we have divided them between us and the other 97 percent, Jew and gentile. As a gentile I believe -- every time someone asks me that question I want to smile a little bit. And the irony is gentiles accept that as a way of defining themselves. The reality is is it doesn't really make sense that this tiny group of people has wielded such great influence. And one of the things we spoke about with Alan Dershowitz and Dennis Prager and Anne Roiphe a few weeks ago on this stage was [00:25:00] it shows you it's not the power of the people, but it's' the power of the idea of Judaism which has revolutionized the world.

ELIE WIESEL: Why speak about the African tribe? I think Israel and Jewish matters occupy more space in the newspapers than China. China. (laughter) So what is it about us that we make such noise? It's -- in truth I don't know. I'm also amazed. I'm amazed at that, that whatever

-- maybe it has to do with history. We speak on behalf not only of the present, we speak on behalf of a tremendous chapter in history. What we have given the world really is to this day it leaves you perplexed. We have given, we have given, and we have given. We haven't stopped giving. And this little people has given so much but then today in physics, you know, that we go to the small. [00:26:00] The power is in the small, not in the big. An atom is so small you can't even see it. Look what it can do.

DAVID WOZNICA: Let's talk about that a little bit. What have we brought to the world? What is that? When you say we've given and given and given, when you look back historically, what have the Jews -- I have my own thoughts, obviously. What have we brought to the world that's so unique?

ELIE WIESEL: We probably have the same ideas. First of all, we brought not only monotheism we brought the sense of responsibility to the individual, that we are responsible for each other, not only for myself. We are responsible for each other. Of course it's easy to say God is God, and since God is God it's God's doing. Yes, but "*asher bara Elokim*" means he created and we do. We must do it. And therefore it is responsibility. We are -- we now are at the center -- not of that impulse, but of the world. And

whatever we do commits the whole world. If I do something good then it's good for [00:27:00] the world, not only me. Something bad, it's bad for the world. As a Jew I go back in the past. If I do something good I think Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and my father and my grandfather I think would be happy. But if I do something bad I bring dishonor to them. And that would annoy me very much. So this sense of the responsibility and then of respect, nowhere do you find such a respect. In ancient mythology, the Greeks and Romans, the gods are joking. It's a joke. They are doing all kinds of things, and it's a farce. With us everything is serious. The moment we entered history there was drama. What a drama. God speaks to his people. The first national liberation movement was the Jewish movement from Egypt.

DAVID WOZNICA: Mm-hmm.

ELIE WIESEL: And the first laws, the laws in the Bible, my God, the laws. After the Ten Commandments we have *Eileh Mishpatim*, the laws about slavery. [00:28:00] That should be our concern about slavery, and what is the law of slavery? Not only I am not supposed to own slave, the slave is not supposed to be a slave. And if a slave decides that he or she wants to remain a slave, that slave

is punished because I am free, but I am not free to give up my freedom.

DAVID WOZNICA: Mm-hmm.

ELIE WIESEL: And that goes for myself and for the "other." I think this is part of what we have given and also this passion for learning, the passion for learning, which is so Jewish that the poorest people in the ghettos in Eastern Europe, the poorest people always managed to save a few rubles or zlotys or pengőos in Hungary to pay for the tutor. What do you mean, not to teach? Impossible. These are only three, but there are more. There are 613 more. (laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: But the study [00:29:00] was of Judaism and of ethics and of values and of ideals. And one of the God -- many people believe that God had spoken to them, many religions. One of the things that I think makes Judaism somewhat unique is that God's central demand of humanity was that they act ethically towards one another even more so than having a belief in God. And that to me -- I don't know if you agree with that assessment or not, Elie, but that was somewhat revolutionary, was it not?

ELIE WIESEL: I don't think that one should go against the other, one should separate from the other. Both of them are -- it is true that of the 613 commandments many of them

deal with human relations, naturally, those with are with God, with God is the given. God is the one who gave the law. If you remove God from the equation then things change.

DAVID WOZNICA: Let's talk about this a little, when we get -- I want to get into your theology and a little bit about you[00:30:00] -- actually, a story I just read about you just comes to mind, and I just -- you described once when you came to the States and ultimately decided to become an American citizen your experience with the immigration office, you had had a serious accident. You mind just sharing the -- your experience with the immigration office? I just thought it was very humorous. I was reading it early this morning, actually.

ELIE WIESEL: It was humorous. For you, what is that?

DAVID WOZNICA: No, I understand, retrospect.

ELIE WIESEL: I came to America, since you know, you may have read it in my memoir, I came as a stateless person. I was -- I lived in France, but I was stateless. I never lived in Israel. I came to Israel in '49 as a war correspondent for a French paper, but I remained stateless. And I came here as a correspondent for an Israeli paper. I was their correspondent in Paris. And a few weeks after I arrived, a taxi ran over me on Times Square. And the

ambulance took me to one hospital, and they checked my pockets, [00:31:00] not me. They checked my pockets, (laughter) and they put me back on the ambulance. And the ambulance had to find a hospital for me. Finally they found me a hospital, and there was a very marvelous man whom I met 10 days later because I was in a coma, Paul Braunstein, and he took care of me. But I was for a whole year wheelchair, crutches. As a stateless person I was supposed to go back to Paris to validate my travel document. I couldn't go. I didn't have the money, and I couldn't travel. So I came to the immigration, and the immigration offices said we'll give you the visa but on what document? I went back to the French consulate. They said you can do it only in France. And I went back and forth, back and forth until final the immigration office says why don't you become resident and then a citizen? I said, how do you do that? And he said I'll teach you, I'll show you. And that's how I really -- I became a -- (laughter) Since then I have a very soft spot for American bureaucracy. (laughter) [00:32:00] I also have a very soft spot for Americans in American uniform. It's true because we were liberated by American troops.

DAVID WOZNICA: Mm-hmm.

ELIE WIESEL: And those of us who were there, we will never forget that to that day. April 11, 1945 and the American army came to Buchenwald, and the way they were -- these tough guys, the way they were weeping, weeping and cursing simply seeing what humanity has done to these children, we were still young. Therefore much later, many, many years later, I was invited to come and give a lecture in West Point. And I belong to West Point as I belong in a Chinese restaurant. (laughter) But I went to West Point thinking this is the occasion for me to come and thank them. And it was very great moment because the commandant organized for me a parade in my honor, which only presidents get. Four thousand five hundred cadets were marching, [00:33:00] and at the beginning the commandant turns to me. He said, "Sir, the parade is yours." I didn't know what to do with it. It's mine. (laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: Let's go back to --

ELIE WIESEL: We have done nothing else. (laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: The Holocaust is the most well documented evil probably in history. Virtually everybody in our viewing audience could give you some sense of what happened to the Jewish people. By the way, you reminded me that I think that Eisenhower insisted that his troops be actually taken through the camps so that people would never forget

the capability of evil that people could do to one another. Few, however, can articulate why Hitler wanted to destroy the Jews. If we were to ask you -- if I were to ask you [00:34:00] that question, why did Hitler, *yimakh shemo*, may his name be erased, want to destroy the Jews, how would you respond?

ELIE WIESEL: David, when it comes to that event all I have is questions, not answers, really not. Recently I read an Israeli historian, Yehuda Bauer. He says that he doesn't agree with me because he can explain the Holocaust. I cannot. I think there's something in all that which to me is unexplainable. Not only why Hitler wanted to kill the Jews, after all Haman wanted to kill the Jews before him and Pharaoh, but something about the whole event that a civilized nation, after all, Germany then was the most civilized, the most educated in Europe, it had the best universities, how is it possible that he was crazy or whatever, a visionary wanted to kill, but why did the people corroborate, [00:35:00] and why did he have -- he almost succeeded. Of all the promises, all the pledges he made to his German people, all of them, the only one that he almost fulfilled is the Jews, killing the Jews, exterminating the Jews.

DAVID WOZNICA: Is there not a lesson for us to be learned, however? And I am frightened of lessons from the Holocaust. I am frightened of the concept that there are lessons. But let me ask you. Nazi Germany was the most technologically advanced, artistically advanced, educationally advanced, the most civilized, as you put it, society of its day, isn't one of the great lessons for us today to understand that one can be all those things but not decent? That there is not necessarily a correlation between great education and moral behavior?

ELIE WIESEL: These words are too weak. Decent, moral behavior, you're talking about mass [00:36:00] murder, the murder of a people, the murder of children. You know, you mentioned earlier that they are going to Pesach, the Haggadah , and I love the Haggadah . It's a beautiful story, successful story. After all we win. (laughter)
However --

DAVID WOZNICA: Do we? We were enslaved for 400 years.

ELIE WIESEL: Yes, but nevertheless we became free. Not 400, by the way, only 210 because there was a -- (laughter)
Anyway, anyway --

DAVID WOZNICA: It seemed like a long time for those who were there. (laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: However, there is in the Haggadah all the time a quote from the Bible that God said what the tenth plague, the tenth plague, which is *makat b'chorot*, that God -- that means that night all the firstborn children were killed. And it bothered me always, why the children?

DAVID WOZNICA: Mm-hmm.

ELIE WIESEL: They were children. And God said all the time I did it, *ani velo acher*. I and not somebody else. I [00:37:00] did it. "*Lo al y'dei malach*", not through an angel, no, but I did it. And I was wondering why is God so proud of this that he wants credit for killing these children? And the only possible, possible explanation I asked for these texts, for these texts is nobody should ever do that. Nobody. And God said look, if I, I in my wisdom, I feel you should do it, I do it. That means only I can do it. No people should do that. No person should do that. And yet these people there did it. A million and a half Jewish children were killed. Killed by whom? By men who had college degrees, who had PhDs in theology, in philosophy, MDs. What was it? I don't understand that. So therefore, decency really is not. One can be a very great intellectual and not be decent. [00:38:00] One can be a great writer and be an anti-Semite. One can be a great writer and be an anti-Semite. Ezra Pound was a great

poet and an anti-Semite. In France Celine, a great novelist, anti-Semite.

DAVID WOZNICA: Mm-hmm.

ELIE WIESEL: But that's something else, between being a person who is not decent or even an anti-Semite and being a mass murderer. It's a very, very long, long stretch.

DAVID WOZNICA: Daniel Goldhagen wrote a book called *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. I interviewed him on this stage about five or six years ago when the book came out. The thesis, of course, is that Germans had a propensity to want to destroy the Jews. Do you accept his --

ELIE WIESEL: It's possible, but that's not an explanation. Again, I don't have the explanation. I don't. Really, believe me, David. I've devoted so many pages in my work to say I don't have an explanation. I don't understand the murder, although the murder somehow could be explained, but I don't understand the whole thing, the victim and God. There is something [00:39:00] there which must remain obscure, and I don't have the right or the strength or the arrogance to say I understand.

DAVID WOZNICA: Let me just very, very gently press on a little bit in this area, just for my own understanding because I think it's such an important question and I hope I'm saying it respectfully. Lucy Dawidowicz wrote a book

years ago called *The War Against the Jews*. And her hypothesis, and it's one that I find some agreement with, is that the Jews hold a certain sense of values that were antithetical to everything that Hitler and the Nazis stood for. And the danger here is if we de-Judaize the angry, if we remove the purpose, if you will, the focus, and I understand that my concern about the suggested pathology that some -- is that we will forget that these people, what they were doing was somehow well thought out, that they wanted to destroy a way of life, a set of ideals precisely because the set of [00:40:00] ideals suggested that human life was so valuable, and everything else that you said that the Jewish people -- that the Jews brought to the world was antithetical to what the Nazis believed and that they made a distinct purpose to destroy the values that we stood for.

ELIE WIESEL: It is not a new theory. The theory has been that we represent the conscience of humanity.

DAVID WOZNICA: Mm-hmm, yeah.

ELIE WIESEL: And a human being's relationship with a conscience is always an antagonistic. If the conscience is too quiet something is wrong. If you are at peace with your conscience something is wrong. Again, this is the disturbing element, and therefore we are supposed to be the

disturbing element, as we spoke about it earlier, and the conscience of the world. It's probably one element of the answer that I don't think it is the answer.

DAVID WOZNICA: There was a plane crash in South America some years ago. I think five people survived this plane [00:41:00] crash. I was thinking of ways of putting this question to you, and I put it in my own frame, and I think it'll be clear. Five people survived. Several hundred died. Had I been one of the people who survived that plane crash I would probably come to some sort of -- I'd be grateful to God and perhaps even maybe conclude that God may have had a hand in my surviving that plane crash. For those of you who survived the Holocaust, and I know you won't -- I wouldn't expect you to speak on behalf of all others, so either personally or more generally, do you somehow believe that God had a hand in your surviving the Holocaust?

ELIE WIESEL: I believe in God. I never stopped believing in God. But I have many questions that I address to God. And occasionally these are angry questions, not about me but about what [00:42:00] I see, what I remember, what has been done to others. To put everything on God's so-called shoulders is too easy. Because after all human beings did commit the crimes. Auschwitz was not something that came

like an anti-*beit mikdash*, an anti-temple that came down in a fire from heaven. It was conceived by people, built by people, implemented by people. On the other hand, to say that God has nothing to do with it is also impossible. God is God, and therefore God is everywhere, hence the question. Personally I don't call my survival a miracle because if God wanted to perform one miracle, He could have performed a few more, and say if some people were worthier, than I, better than I, and I say it with all humility, which is [00:43:00] true. So I don't call it a miracle. I don't call it a miracle. I think therefore somehow -- I have a friend here who comes from my town, should invite him here one day, David Weiss Halivni who is a professor of Talmud in Columbia, and we are very close friends. And then we spoke about it. It was, you know, there are some religious people, ultra-religious fanatics who believe that it's very simple. It is sin and punishment. That means we've committed sins, and therefore -- and even the Lubavitcher Rebbe said something sometime, something terrible. He gave the image, he said if a person goes -- a villager comes to a town and happens to come to a hospital without knowing it and sees in a room on a table there is a man, and around him there are people, and one has a knife and starts cutting him, he would say they are savages.

Little does he know that this man's life is being saved. And he compared, apparently, whatever happened to our people then also [00:44:00] like a surgery. And I cannot take it. I cannot take it. I don't think it's right even to justify that. It cannot. I don't think that the Jewish people sinned to such an extent. What about the children, the old people, the rabbis, the *bechorei yeshivot*? I don't understand it. So therefore with me, when it comes to this, the entire event, I open a question mark.

DAVID WOZNICA: It would also make it very difficult to believe in such a God or to over such a God to -- my own feeling on this a little bit is while on one hand I do want to think that God had a hand in helping those survive, what does it say about that same God who didn't help those who didn't survive? I mean, it's --

ELIE WIESEL: Who am I to argue with their faith? It's, they have faith, and some of them I know their faith is total, and [00:45:00] look, if somebody was very religious before the war and stops being religious as a result of that, I respect that person.

DAVID WOZNICA: Yes.

ELIE WIESEL: If somebody has not been religious and becomes religious, I respect that person. But if somebody was religious before and remained religious afterward, the

same faith, there is something which bothers me.

(laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: If it didn't make them rethink their beliefs?

ELIE WIESEL: Absolutely. You cannot -- how can one? How can one not rethink, even to become more religious? I, when I came to Paris, to France in 1945 I became as religious as I was in 1944 entering Auschwitz, even more so, even more so. The first thing I asked from the children's home, from the orphanage home was to give me the treatise, the Talmudic tractate which I had interrupted, and I brought that tractate to Auschwitz, interrupted. I wanted [00:46:00] to continue exactly on that page. And I did. And I really became very religious after. As a result of that I became religious. And then I had problems and questions. I still have questions, but still it is from inside faith. It's not outside faith. It is because I have faith that I have questions.

DAVID WOZNICA: I will say there was -- one of the students in my classes here at the Y, when we were speaking about God made the point, and the class has 70 people in it, they're overwhelmingly people in their thirties, said to me I can't believe in God after the Holocaust. And I said to them, I hope in a very welcoming way, that's not fair. If

a survivor who goes through the Holocaust can still believe, I in a sense don't have a right not to believe because of that. There are other reasons I suggested to challenge for that individual, his or her belief, but for me, those who I've met who have gone through the Holocaust and have reaffirmed their belief are somewhat inspirational to me, [00:47:00] having lived a relatively blessed life here in the United States. I want to say there are other reasons to challenge my faith. I walk out of a leukemia ward, and I wonder, God, are you there, and if so, why are you doing this? And if I see a sunset my sense is that there is. I also have a sense that when I see somebody do something wonderful for another person that maybe God's hand has worked as well. But for me, those who have a reaffirmed sense of belief having suffered greatly, whether it be the Holocaust or frankly other horrors in their lives, are for me an inspiration.

ELIE WIESEL: In general I believe, that is my personal belief, that in Judaism, it's probably true with other religions as well, a Jew can be -- I wrote it -- Jew can be a good Jew with God or even against God but not without God.

DAVID WOZNICA: I quote you all the time. I think if I'm not quoting you right you remind me, a Jew can love God, a Jew can argue with God, but a Jew can't ignore God.

ELIE WIESEL: And if you do God comes back and [00:48:00] you know. (laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: Elie, you've done so much, so many different things in your life. When you reflect back on the accomplishments that you've had, and I know you well, relatively well, I know you are humble, so I hope I'm asking this appropriately, which of the accomplishments do you take the greatest pride in?

ELIE WIESEL: Well, there are things I haven't done. I always wanted to become something else, you know.

DAVID WOZNICA: What would you do?

ELIE WIESEL: In 19-- when I was in Paris I began -- when I left the orphanage home I had a choice actually between going to the conservatory and become a conductor or study philosophy and literature because I had a choir. I was a choir conductor in those children's homes. And occasionally I still have -- to conduct the ninth symphony. (laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: Would you do it here at the Y if we can arrange it? (laughter) [00:49:00]

ELIE WIESEL: Why weren't you there in -- Look, it's not a question of pride. I have published many books. I have given many lectures. I have taught classes. Before going to Boston I was in New York. I was teaching at City College for many years, and I love it. I love teaching. I love studying. Which means I don't think I would have changed anything that I have done. But to say I'm proud of, let's say I'm more satisfied with, of course, *Night* because it did create something at least in America and some other languages, but also *The Jews of Silence*. It was more visible, more tangible. To *Night* I tried people to remember, to move them to remember, and it's intangible. *The Jews of Silence*, I did [00:50:00] something concrete. I wanted us, our community and outside the community to do something for those people in the Soviet Union who wanted to be Jewish and couldn't and help them. So these two books actually are there, but, you know, two books in over 40 have special destinies. One is *Night*, which in the beginning for many years people read but didn't buy. (laughter) And the other one was *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, which, because it got an important literary prize in France people bought but didn't read. (laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: Wasn't *Night* originally published in a Christian journal, by the way?

ELIE WIESEL: In a Christian journal?

DAVID WOZNICA: *Jubilee* or something?

ELIE WIESEL: I think excerpts from the book.

DAVID WOZNICA: Excerpts from the book, mm-hmm.

ELIE WIESEL: It was published in Yiddish first. I wrote it in Yiddish first. It came out in Yiddish version. It was published in Buenos Aires [00:51:00] and then translated, so.

DAVID WOZNICA: When you look to the future, who do you see as some of the future leaders of Jewry?

ELIE WIESEL: David, you know very well that prophecy is not something which we just suppose. Prophecy has disappeared with the destruction of the First Temple. And it has been given only to the fools and the children. I am not a child.

DAVID WOZNICA: Who would you like to see as the future leaders?

ELIE WIESEL: I'll tell you the category. I would like future leaders, of our people, you mean?

DAVID WOZNICA: Yes.

ELIE WIESEL: Our people, they should learn more. I would like any Jewish person who becomes a leader of his or her community should go to study at least for a month, must go to study and real study to a kind of ulpan, not only about

the language but about Jewish history, Jewish philosophy, Jewish thought, Jewish -- to know what she or she represents, a price --

DAVID WOZNICA: Well, this is an important thing because the reality is to be a lay -- and I don't mean this [00:52:00] disrespectfully, God forbid, to any layperson, but to be a layperson and lead in a lay capacity, many Jewish organizations that isn't a requirement.

ELIE WIESEL: I know. Once I proposed it, and I was shouted down. (laughter) I spoke to some convention of important Jewish organization here, and they were so angry at me. Good, let them be angry. At least they do something.

DAVID WOZNICA: We have email questions from all over North America, I don't know how many hundreds of them, but I have some here. But I want to ask you one last one before I get to them. And that is, I've had the pleasure of being in your home on a number of occasions, but you've also written about this. The first time that I went to your home I had a vision of what I might see. I thought I would see pictures of you and many world leaders on the wall. I thought I would see honorary doctorates of which you've received many dozens, other plaques. And instead [00:53:00] what I found was -- and you write this in your

memoirs as well, although you don't write it this way -- there are books lining the walls. There's only one photo in your study. It's a photo that is on your desk. It's a small photo, and it faces you, as I recall. Can you tell everybody here what that photo is of and why you have it there?

ELIE WIESEL: Well, the photo of course is my son and I, but what I have there the only thing is a picture of my home.

DAVID WOZNICA: That's what I'm speaking.

ELIE WIESEL: The house where I was born. One must know where one comes from. It's in the Talmud, you know, *Da mei-ayin ba-ta*, you should know where you come from. And I always want to remember where I come from. That was the house. We didn't have running water. We weren't rich. But when I was a child I thought we were rich because beggars would come to us, and they never left empty handed. [00:54:00] I thought we were. Little did I know that my father had to borrow money in order to do this, and I want to remember that, where I come from. And then all the leaders, the others really are -- I know the measure. I know very well the measure of all that. Why I can see people and what they want, when they accept to see me, because I see that house.

DAVID WOZNICA: Through the magic of email we've received questions. As I mentioned I want to read -- I want to get to as many of these as I can because it's a nice way for us to incorporate the 30 different sites which are watching this live right now. This one's from Calgary, Canada, the Jewish community center there. The question is which Jew in the twentieth century has influenced you most, and also which gentile?

ELIE WIESEL: Well, for the Jew, except for, of course, my grandfather, my father, my mother, but probably Shaul Lieberman. [00:55:00] He was one -- a very great Talmudic scholar, very great, and for 17 years he taught me. We were -- I think we were closest friends, and I was, I think, his *talmud muvhak*. I was a good disciple, Lieberman. As for the gentiles, the writers. For instance, as a philosopher I was very much influenced by Henri Bergson, who was a French, Jewish philosopher. He won the Nobel prize. He was the only one who never wrote a novel or a poem, but he got the Nobel prize for literature because his style is so beautiful. And they had a problem with him because he lived in a Christian community, and he was attracted to Christianity, and actually he said he would like -- although he didn't convert, never converted, he would like a priest to come and eulogize him. And if a

priest cannot [00:56:00] come he said let a rabbi come.

(laughter) But nevertheless he, as a philosopher he was a great man.

DAVID WOZNICA: This is from the Houston Jewish community center. You took a 10-year, I don't know if it was a vow of silence or not between --

ELIE WIESEL: It was a vow.

DAVID WOZNICA: -- a vow of silence between being liberated and ultimately writing *Night*. The question here is what compelled you to take that 10-year vow of silence?

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, I could have taken more. Ten, why 10? It was easy to say. It's a round figure. But I knew one thing, that I had to find the words. I was not sure I would find the words. Already then in '45 I knew that I would have to say something, to write something, not to publish but to write. And I was afraid that I wouldn't find the language. And to this day I'm not sure I did, by the way. I am saying this seriously. I wrote the book. I cut it and this, but I am not sure I found -- there are no words. That's the problem. There are no words for that.

[00:57:00]

DAVID WOZNICA: Your concern then, I'm asking this, is not so much that the Holocaust might be forgotten but perhaps more so that -- finish my sentence for me.

ELIE WIESEL: Will become trivialized, cheapened, commercialized, all of these, yes, diminished. It's true. I don't think that this will be forgotten. You already said it earlier. This is the most documented tragedy in recorded history. Everybody testified. Children wrote poems or kept diaries. Rabbis wrote prayers or established laws. And the chronicles, the chronicles in the ghettos, even the death camps there were historians. So I don't think it can be forgotten. There are millions of pieces of evidence, millions. So, but the problem is of the -- today you call it universalization. There is a tendency [00:58:00] among many people saying, no, it's too Jewish. Why not make it universal? As if the two were contradictory. They are not. I as a Jew can have, I hope, some universal appeal. But if I give up my Jewishness I would not have any appeal. And this is true of that tragedy as well. And it became so popular that everybody wants somehow to be part of it. That's what worries me.

DAVID WOZNICA: I once learned what I thought was a very good insight that suggested that if you want to see -- people who want to love humanity have it too easy. See how you get along with the person next door to you. How do you treat your own? That the one beautiful insight of love your neighbor as yourself, I am God, is it's easier to get

along with the world, but can you get along with a son of a gun who lives next door to you? That's a real challenge. There's a question from Indianapolis, Indiana asking which texts do you study regularly? [00:59:00]

ELIE WIESEL: Talmud.

DAVID WOZNICA: Talmud text?

ELIE WIESEL: Sure, Talmud every day. Never give up that.

DAVID WOZNICA: Alone or with somebody else?

ELIE WIESEL: I used to it with Lieberman for 17 years. Now I do it alone, but every day I study Talmud.

DAVID WOZNICA: And a follow-up from actually, this question I would have asked was from Philadelphia, a little bit about your formal education and where you received it.

ELIE WIESEL: Formal education first, look, when I was a child I had to go to a secular school as well. It was the law. But I didn't go really. I spent all my life in cheder and the yeshiva, and we would buy -- or how to say -- money, this principal of the school to allow me not to come to school. So I would only go a month before the exams, and I would learn everything quickly by heart and pass the exams and go back to cheder. In Paris I studied at the Sorbonne. I studied literature and [01:00:00] philosophy.

DAVID WOZNICA: There's a 12-year-old boy, this is very moving, I just received it. This is from Cleveland. It says, "Professor Wiesel, I am a 12-year-old boy who will turn into a bar mitzvah a day after Yom HaShoah. This past Friday I put on tefillin. What advice do you have for me or any other bar mitzvah about to accept all of the mitzvot to an adult? I'm not sure it's fully clear. Let me just add to it. You have this 12-year-old boy who is putting on tefillin, presumably just learning for the first time. If you were to suggest more mitzvot for him to begin to inculcate into his life, which ones would you suggest?"

ELIE WIESEL: First of all I would say since you chose tefillin as the first mitzvah, learn more about it. Learn what it is. Why should we do it, and what are the four *parshiyot*, the four chapters in the tefillin? Why were they put there? Learn that, and from that [01:01:00] you will go further. Then maybe you'll do Shabbat, but learn. The emphasis is learn. Go on learning. *Zil gamor*, learn.

DAVID WOZNICA: This is -- there are two questions here from New Haven, and I'm going to phrase them both to you because I think they're thoughtful. If you could ask God one question what would it be? And what do you think God's first question will be for you?

ELIE WIESEL: That I know.

DAVID WOZNICA: That you know? Right.

ELIE WIESEL: Sure.

DAVID WOZNICA: Right. *Nasata v'natata b'emunah?*

ELIE WIESEL: *Nasata v'natata b'emunah?* The Talmud says it. You know, the first question God asks when you come there is *Nasata b'emunah?* Were you honest in your dealings? The second one is good. *Tzafita l'yeshua?*, did you wait for redemption?

DAVID WOZNICA: *Asakta bifriyah ur'viah?*, did you engage in procreation?

ELIE WIESEL: That's later. That's later, but first, did you -- what I would ask God, may I only one or two?

(laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: I think this person just wanted to limited it to one, but we can [01:02:00] -- as many as you would like.

ELIE WIESEL: I would say why? Why? And then how long?

DAVID WOZNICA: Why?

ELIE WIESEL: I mean, why so late? Or what -- why? Why are we suffering? And why so -- why do so many people suffer, and how long did it last? Why? You can do anything. Bring -- hasten redemption. Let humanity become human.

DAVID WOZNICA: What does that mean? Would you -- do you want God to intervene in human affairs?

ELIE WIESEL: Oh yes, absolutely. (laughter) More, more so. Look, I'm sure that if -- I believe that God is God, and therefore He intervenes. God is present to His creation. God is not absent from His creation. Question is, are we aware of it? God speaks. Do we listen? But otherwise I would totally [01:03:00] misunderstand our tradition and our faith. But I do believe that God is here, and because we believe that there are certain things we cannot do. There are certain things you cannot do since God is God.

DAVID WOZNICA: Mm-hmm.

ELIE WIESEL: But then I want him to do His part.

DAVID WOZNICA: So there are three entities that the tradition teaches us we're to love, to love the stranger, to love the neighbor, and to love God.

ELIE WIESEL: Hey, Torah, you forgot Torah. *V'ahavta Torah. Study Torah.*

DAVID WOZNICA: Three out of four, I mean. (laughter) Then is loving God among the more difficult or the easiest?

ELIE WIESEL: What does it mean to love God? "*B'khol l'vav'kha uv'khol-naf'sh'kha uv'khol-m'odekha .*" You say it, you must also say it a few times a day. What does it

mean to love God? Does it mean that you cannot fear God? What about *yirat Hashem, yirat Shamayim*? [01:04:00] I feel that you can love God through your love of your fellow human being. If you are hurting your fellow human being, if you are inhuman to your fellow man, then you hurt God. After all, that fellow man is also born *b'tzelem*, in God's image. So I would not separate these three loves. Those who do are fanatics. To this day when I study medieval literature I can't understand it, the Inquisition. There were priests who in the name of their love of God killed people, burned them on the stake in the name of love, love of God, they killed human beings, and the way they killed them, they tortured them. I had once, I had to teach a course on suffering, and [01:05:00] a handbook of the inquisitor, you wouldn't believe it. It was there, how to torture the prisoner, the Jew who was accused of -- the marrano, meaning who was secretly Jewish, but he was Christian, how to torture in the name of God. Be the way, the pope apologized for the Inquisition, which is good. Again, I think things are -- things have happened in --

DAVID WOZNICA: Actually, and this is an important thing, I think, for the Jewish community though, particularly from when someone like you makes the point of emphasizing it. I sometimes wonder. I think we need to be mindful of the

steps that Christianity, particularly that the church has taken in the last 40 years, both the Vatican too and with the popes, apology to both understand it in the context of the horrors that have happened to the [01:06:00] Jewish people and, God forbid, not to minimize that but to also understand that it is the step that is being taken in a very positive direction towards the Jewish community. And sometimes I think we have a knee jerk reaction to Christianity which isn't always fair, given the steps. Because ultimately if we don't acknowledge the steps that are taken it becomes counterproductive, both for the Jewish people and in a sense it's unfair to the church, with the understanding that it needs to be put in the context of the horrors that have actually been taken place. So I think your point coming from you is particularly important.

ELIE WIESEL: But it's important to remember.

DAVID WOZNICA: Absolutely.

ELIE WIESEL: The past, you cannot just forget the Crusades, for instance. You compare the Crusades as they are related to this day in the Catholic encyclopedia and the way they are described in the Jewish encyclopedia. It's not the same event.

DAVID WOZNICA: Right.

ELIE WIESEL: For them it's a great days of glory. For us days of bitterness, [01:07:00] of massacres, of killing.

DAVID WOZNICA: It's a question from the Memphis Jewish community center and also from Vancouver. They both ask, what should Judaism do, and what would you say to the younger generation that is intermarrying and moving away from Judaism?

ELIE WIESEL: What can I tell them? What can I tell them? Any person today is responsible, we said it in the beginning, for the other. And therefore we are responsible for our people. Whatever I do must commit my people, must influence somehow my people, and is it good for people if they are intermarrying and therefore they get away from our people? Maybe they can solve their personal problems. They love each other. It's very tough to tell a young student who said, look, I'm in love with this girl. She's not Jewish, but we love each other. It's very hard, [01:08:00] but therefore you must, if he comes to ask and if you are his or her rabbi or advisor or guide, you must tell what it means. It's not something that -- I think we should encourage, certainly not.

DAVID WOZNICA: Do you think part of it is -- my sense is that intermarriage is not the problem. It's the result of the problem. By the time someone comes to you, and of

course when you've fallen in love with someone who's of another faith, at that point it's very, very difficult because love is a very powerful emotion, as it should be. But my sense is the problem is that all too often Judaism is not central to that person to begin with. Part of the reason is because we haven't brought enough beauty and power and passion and shown them the reason to take Judaism seriously to begin with. If their experiences with Judaism [01:09:00] have been more positive, if they -- and this is -- obviously there are exceptions to this rule, people who have had these things, but overwhelmingly I think that part of the problem is those of us in Jewish education, and those are my shoulders too, we haven't shown them why Judaism needs to be important to their lives to begin with. If we could, and we could give them experiences which were memorable and where they could see how Judaism could affect their lives and indeed shape their lives in a positive way then they would want to share their life with someone who felt similarly. The problem is, I think, all too often we have failed with all good intentions of showing those things about Judaism to begin with.

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, naturally, but these are all individual. I would not really make general rules about it except that I don't think it's good for Jews that it would get away

from us. If it happens, it's happened occasionally in my students, then I would simply say, I say look, [01:10:00] the other person must understand the very special circumstances of the Jewish people, and therefore the other person must convert to Judaism. Although we are against conversion, we try not to encourage conversion, we don't like it, but there are exceptions. And this should be an exception. But always again not make a rule of it because it would encourage again intermarriage. We are not. But we should be human in thinking this person said look, we love each other. If you love each other so much, if you love him or her, then you must help. And the only way to help, the best way to help is learn, start learning everything and then become Jewish.

DAVID WOZNICA: Well, then we should perhaps be as open to those who want to convert to Judaism as I think the rabbis of the Talmud were.

ELIE WIESEL: We must. It's a law. *V'ahavta et ha-ger* again, you must. You must.

DAVID WOZNICA: People don't know that. And I think people often -- many Jews believe that Judaism is not open to conversion, but it's [01:11:00] quite open.

ELIE WIESEL: Once the convert is a convert we have to love the convert more than a simple Jew. We are not even

allowed to remind the convert that he or she has been something else than Jewish.

DAVID WOZNICA: Right. Because it would somehow a suggestion that they're less a Jew than --

ELIE WIESEL: Absolutely.

DAVID WOZNICA: We're not allowed to call -- even refer to the convert as a convert because they're as much a Jew as a person who is born. I mentioned earlier that I had two difficult tasks tonight when I introduced you. The first was introducing you, appropriately. The second is to somehow adequately thank you. And how do I conclude an evening with you? I conclude it with you with your own words. In reading your memoirs, which are absolutely mesmerizing, I want to, if I may, read what you wrote towards the end of [01:12:00] your memoirs. Because my last question to you, and then I -- actually, I do have a question I want to ask you, just part of this. It just occurred to me, and it's a question that came in also from another city, but I was going to ask it. Let me see if I can find it very, very quickly. Because it's something that I had thought of as well, and it's a personal question. And I don't see it here, so forgive me for whoever sent the question in. It's got to do with the children of survivors. And it's a question that I have

also wanted to ask you in private and opted to ask it to you in public because it's a question that doesn't just affect me as a child of a survivor but affects, I think, a lot of us. Other than a few friends and a few people I work with I rarely mention that my father is a survivor, as you know, we've spoken [01:13:00] about this. I'm not sure why. I think partially because I didn't want people to look at me with any sympathy. I didn't suffer or any differently. And yet when I meet other survivor's children there is a bond. We always ask the same questions. Does your father or mother talk about it? My father says little. Were they hiding? Were they in a camp? How does it affect your life? Often we comment to one another that we cry very easily, and we're not sure why. So I will ask the question in my own way that was brought here. Do we have any responsibilities that are special?

ELIE WIESEL: When I was teaching at City College [01:14:00] one day I realized that many of my students, if not most of my students, were children of survivors. Whether I taught Hasidism or philosophy or literature, they were there. And then I understood why. Their parents didn't talk to them. So I became a kind of surrogate father, and the parents came to speak to me about their children. And to them I was a surrogate child. And there

was something very moving about all that, always, because I feel their privileged and special situation of being children of mothers or fathers who had been there. After all, what Hitler wanted was actually these children to be dead before they were born. He didn't want only to kill living Jews, he wanted to kill all Jews, those who were born and those yet [01:15:00] to be born. And therefore between there, the son and the father, is always something very moving. Because the son becomes the father of his father. The son wants to protect his father. The father wants to protect the son by not telling him. And the son wants the father to tell him more and doesn't protect him. And no one is more sensitive to another person's pain as when the son and the father are together. They look at each other, and they want to cry, and they don't. And to see especially at weddings, I love these kind of weddings when the father and mother go and bring their children to the chuppah. It's tears, tears of joy, and these are very special tears. Those tears are probably the ones that God sheds, tears of joy and others. [01:16:00]

DAVID WOZNICA: What's next for Elie Wiesel? I'll quote you, if I may, now that I've lost the page. (laughter) I was so moved I wasn't -- If you don't know I'll tell you what's next for you, it's -- (laughter) it was all here.

This is an example of when everything is going beautifully and you mark the page, and it's no longer there. Page 404, you see? "I have just turned 70. It is time to take stock again. The century I have lived, I have lived through has been more violent and promising than any other. Mankind has never before proved to be as vulnerable or as generous. Man lives in expectation, expectation of what? The Jew in me is waiting for redemption. And waiting for redemption he remembers his enemies. [01:17:00] I have fought battles and won some, few in number, too few to derive pride and confidence from them. Anyway, I don't think I shall stop now. I trouble some people when I raise my voice, others when I don't speak up. There are people, good people, who often make me feel as though I owe them something. I don't resent it. There are some who understand my itinerary, others who never will. I continue to learn thus to take and give back, to reach out to others, to begin and begin again with every encounter. I have said certain words. I have kept others for future attempts to tell the tale that is waiting and will always be waiting to be told, and I say to myself that even taking into account my stories and novels, my essays [01:18:00] and studies, analysis and reminiscences, I know that it is not enough." When I think about the fact that this evening is being brought to Jews

all over North America and that we are spending it with you learning, frankly, some of the deepest parts of your soul, I have a feeling that I should be very optimistic about the future for the Jewish people. Thank you, Elie, for your candor, for your passions, and for yet another extraordinary evening. (applause) [01:19:00] If I could take just a moment, ladies and gentlemen, since this is the last of a three-part series of this Kallah, we began this series two weeks ago tonight with the future of North American Jewry. We heard from Alan Dershowitz, Dennis Prager, and Anne Roiphe. This should be on tape, by the way. This should be being broadcast. So that red light needs to go back on, thank you. This is very important. After hearing the future of North America Jewry we heard from Hillel, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Soloveitchik and Rabbi Heschel, and we conclude this evening with you. My friends, this was a real [01:20:00] experiment that the 92nd Street Y did with the Jewish Community Center's Association. And I'll tell you, we are living in an amazing moment in Jewish history. We have an opportunity to live freely as Jews, one that our ancestors 56 years ago in Eastern Europe literally could not have dreamed of. We have the opportunity to determine our own destiny, not just whether or not we will survive but what we will do with

that survival. Will we influence the world? You know, the Jewish community centers are nondenominational. We're not reconstructionists, reform, Orthodox, or conservative. And I'll tell you, I think the goal for most of us involved in Jewish education here and all over the country is that we want to create serious Jews. What does it mean to be a serious Jew? It means that when we're faced with a dilemma in our lives, whether we take a position on abortion, the question that is raised in our business dealing with another person, or we are looking for [01:21:00] insights into relationships with our parents or our children, that we make our decision not based only on what is written in our local newspaper or what journal we might be reading, but we ask our self the following question, and it's a good litmus test. The question is what does our tradition teach us? Do we turn to 2,000 years of Jewish history, Jewish thinking, do we turn to the Torah, do we turn to the Talmud, do we turn to our tradition to shape our lives? And if we allow our tradition to shape our thoughts, then we will continue to change the world not only with our existence but actually with our Judaism. And that is why I think it's an amazing moment in Jewish history. Because 30 Jewish community centers along with us decided to spend three evenings asking themselves the question, how do I

take Judaism seriously? How can it shape my life, my passions, and my belief? It's a beautiful moment to be grateful [01:22:00] to Professor Wiesel, to the three evenings we have here, and to realize in America what an amazing gift we have of being Jews living in the freedom and to never ever take it for granted. Thank you very much and good evening.

ELIE WIESEL: Thank you, David.

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