

Why Care? 92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive

November 21, 2002

Elie Wiesel:

Why care? How can one not care? How can one not care for the fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters of those who were murdered today in the most recent bus attack by fanatic suicide killers in Jerusalem? You see it on the screen and your heart breaks. Mothers weeping, people in despair, how could it happen? How can one go on with daily activities as if today's tragedy is but an episode quickly forgotten? If we were to observe a moment of silence for each and every Jew who lost his or her life [00:01:00] in the last month, how long would we have to be quiet this evening just to show that we care?

What is the meaning of caring? Caring means a readiness or willingness to interfere and indeed to intervene in someone else's life, shield it from possible mishaps and unavoidable misfortune. Does it mean that one can, one must play God? Rather it means to recognize the humanity of the other, forever frail, vulnerable, and threatened by falling victim to loneliness and despair. In more ways than one, [00:02:00] living in society implies interference. Parents, teachers, elected rulers who govern organized structures, friends,

enemies, isn't the very presence of another a living symbol of intervention? You are, therefore I exist. Oh yes, these days the obligation to care, thus to intervene, seems more urgent than ever. How many fires have ravaged cities and communities on how many continents? But some near or far, through only the power of the media, relentlessly compel us to look and be aware. We may not turn our gaze away with impunity. In other words, [00:03:00] in this age of instant communication, ignorance is no longer an excuse, but then it never really was.

Geographical distances seem to have vanished altogether. When children starve in Somalia or Sudan, we know about it. As we do when women weep over the massacre of their parents, husbands, and children anywhere in the world. In the very real and concrete sense, the transformation from the unknown to the known is immediate and tangible. And so, the pain of orphans, the injustice done to innocent men and women are of concern to us. And implicate us, all of us, simply because we know what the word responsibility means. [00:04:00] For ultimately we are all responsible for one another. And as a teacher of mine in Paris would say, "We are all responsible for one another, but I more so." Isn't the biblical commandment "Thou shall not stand idly by" the very touchstone of all endeavors for human rights? "When I am slapped in the face," said Franz Kafka, "it is

humanity itself that falls to the ground.” Josef K.’s absurd death foretold that of multitudes. To allow the racists to humiliate, the tormenter to torture, and the assassin to murder, would mean to surrender our freedom, our sovereignty, and our honor, to their brutal laws and ideas.

If there is in the human being an area [00:05:00] which remains inhuman, it is not his or her taste for cruelty, sadism, but their choice to avoid involvement to decide not to care. In other words, simply the lack of compassion. In *The Plague*, a great novel of the 20th Century, Albert Camus raises a question, whether one can become a saint without God. And his answer, because he was an agnostic, is yes. But his position is as valid as the opponents. A religious person may say that a religious person can become a saint because of God. In our common religious texts, we are called [00:06:00] upon to love our neighbor, or our fellow men, or women, as we love ourselves. Or as it reads in Hebrew, “*V’ahavta L’reiakha kamokha, ani Adoshem*” meaning you shall love your friend, or your colleague, or your companion, as you love yourself, I am the Lord. But I would humbly and respectfully like to move the comma. And I would say like this, “*V’ahavta L’reiakha, kamokha ani Adoshem.*” which means you shall love your companion, your friend, your neighbor, “*kamokha ani Adoshem*” what you are I am. Which means

we are turning the famous *Imitatio Dei* around, and we say it is not a human being [00:07:00] who would imitate God's attributes and be merciful like Him, and forgiving like Him, and kind like Him, and generous like Him, and just like Him, but the other way around. It is God who will follow his creature's ways. I, your Lord, will behave towards you the way you behave towards my other children.

Remember the Prophet Zechariah, quoting the Lord, speaking to his people, "Do you really think I care about what you eat or refrain from eating? Improve your manners towards the other, towards each other, that is what matters to me." And since I care so much about the tradition established in this house some 36, 37 years ago, I think I should open some brackets.

[00:08:00] Usually the first of our annual encounters was devoted to study. We used to take a text from the Bible and study. This year it's different simply because it is the only one. Two, we shall explore the topic of caring, for it is urgent. I intend to illustrate some ideas with examples taken from my books or more precisely perhaps from the latest one, just published by Knopf called *The Judges*. We shall see how some stories about the past actually deal more with the present. But following the same tradition I must emphasize an important point. In order to open a text, we must first open the doors.

Why care? Why must one care for one's fellow human being
[00:09:00] when he or she is in pain, a prisoner of destiny, or
a victim of circumstances? Why ought anyone expect from me a
gift or a promise, why should I give anyone of my time, energy,
and money to assist unknown persons living or dying in faraway
lands under distant skies, speaking alien tongues, and following
strange customs? Why and in the name of what must one share
their suffering, their plight, and sacrifice whatever is
required to alleviate it? But then I may go further and ask why
should I care really whether Abraham wanted or not to sacrifice
his son. Why should I care whether *l'havdil* Homer was blind or
not when he wrote *The Iliad*? Whether Romeo and Juliet were
really in love with each other, or perhaps they just pretended?
[00:10:00] Why should I care whether Mephisto had a point in
offering Faustus knowledge rather than anything else? Why?
Well, these questions, both past and present, seem pertinent
only to those who look for reasons not to care.

In general, people who dwell under a democratic regime, ruled by
law, and motivated by compassion do care. Religious morality,
cultural idealism, political ethos, and simple humanism must
motivate a citizen to respond to a natural desire to do good.
To help the weak, the sick, the aged, the defeated, the

forgotten, the minorities, in other words the helpless, those who need a [00:11:00] presence, those who need a person to say that what Paul Celan used to say, "A handshake may become a poem in itself." In the Bible you find the beautiful commandment, which I always love, it's about "Thou shall not stand idly by." I repeat it again and again. If your neighbor, your associate, or simply your contemporary is being persecuted, victimized, you cannot be an indifferent onlooker. Isn't this again the kind principle, the basic principle, that inspired the universally accepted secular religion, which we call human rights today?

More than 2000 organizations, associations, committees, and groups working for the idea and [00:12:00] practice of human rights exist today on five continents. In the 30s there may have been twenty, thirty, no more. Some are known and wealthy, the others small and poor, but all are important. And all are praiseworthy. They do what in many cases their governments fail to do. Their achievements often signify official failures. They care because they believe that their elected officials do not. They feel that they must fulfill their moral obligations as citizens of their country or of the world simply because the chosen leaders do not use their power, or their situation, or their means to fight poverty, disease, and vanquish hatred. But what about the individual person? The student? The parent?

[00:13:00] Or simply the merchant, the customer, the socialist minded physician, what do these people, men and women who do not belong to any organization, what can they do, why should they care? And if they care, what would it mean? Since they did not ask to be born, nor did I, to enter this world irrevocably doomed by its own imperfections, why should we not worry about our own welfare, and about our own future exclusively?

Of course, sometimes we may extend privileges, a certain degree of compassion to close family, friends, and distant relatives. But why should a total stranger benefit from them? Actually there is an answer, and again, even this answer is in the Bible which deals with human interrelations [00:14:00] more than with connections with God. The Bible has strange laws which occasionally today, especially, seem funny. The Bible says that if I notice someone or his donkey carrying a heavy load, it is my duty to help them. Well, why do we have in the text, the commandment already quoted "*Lo Ta'amod Al Dam Reiakha*" thou shall not stand idly by. Why does it end with the word *Ki Ani Adoshem*, for I am the Lord? Well, it may have several meanings. One is you must be sensitive to each other for I am your common Creator and Ruler. You are all equally worthy in My eyes, and therefore you cannot stand idly by. Two, you must help each other for your own sake, for I know your virtues as well as your

limitations. [00:15:00] Today it is your neighbor who needs you, tomorrow you may need him or her. Three, you must feel for one another "*Ki Ani Adoshem*", for I am your Lord. You are all created in My image. If you feel for another you feel for Me. And just I am concerned with your well-being, you must be with that of people in distress. In other words, we are supposed, if not required, to believe that the Creator of the world cares for its inhabitants, He is involved in their affairs, listens to their pleas, and is concerned with the ways they conduct themselves in adversity, or distress, or joy. That is the moral philosophy of monotheistic faith. God does not hide on an Olympus from His children. God is no stranger to His creation. [00:16:00] He is just and compassionate. When a child cries, God is moved by his tears. With some exceptions. We know that when a widow is heartbroken God sends messengers to console her. When the innocent suffer, God is on their side. When a just person passes away, He sheds tears into the grand ocean and their sound reverberates from one corner of the world to the other.

Does He? Did He? Did He shed tears when His children were condemned to perish in flames? Did He join his suffering with the suffering of those who did not come back? Is it possible to speak about God's pathos as a sublimation [00:17:00] of human

pathos? If so, this I understand. What I do not understand among others is, why does God care about small things in my life or in my behavior? Why does God really care whether human beings are good or not so good, whether they offer him praise or make him sad, whether at times a human being, who is but a speck of dust, lost in the vast boundless cosmos misses a prayer of *mincha*, eats forbidden food, flirts with a beautiful woman, or transgresses a petty law or custom which doesn't hurt anybody anyway? Why does He care? Would a king worry over such foolish or childish misbehavior by an anonymous peasant who wanders around in one of the nameless hamlets of his kingdom?

[00:18:00] Is it that God cares even about futile matters so as to serve as an example to His creatures to say life is made of small things, not necessarily of big things?

My favorite expression is "life is made not of years, but of moments". And is it the reason why God says, look, small things are important, and we know that. How often the look of a person, a word, a gesture, a smile, these things may determine the destiny of a human being, if not of a society. But the same line of questioning, I would say, that I have the right to wonder why does God need so much praise from us? [00:19:00] We go on praising Him three times a day. You cannot eat an apple without praising Him, you cannot eat a piece of chocolate

without praising Him. There are really literally prayers of praise about any situation you can ever imagine. The only one may be the astronaut, I don't know what he does there upstairs. Somebody must give the answer. But it is said, really it is said of Genghis Khan, the worst of all tyrants of his time, had a historian, a writer in his entourage, and his task was actually to flatter him. So, he wrote such flattery that it was too much. And Genghis Khan had the feeling that his historian ridiculed him. It was too much. So, he had him executed.

Well, the Midrash tries to prevent such injustice. So, the Midrash [00:20:00] tells us that God hates flattery. He doesn't? Then what are our prayers? Are they simple statements of humility and nothing else? Is there a prayer that doesn't praise God for his mercy, wisdom, power, intelligence, fairness, and memory? The list seems endless. But on the other hand, we have a prayer which is very beautiful. We say it actually among the *Sheva Brachot*, the seven benedictions under a *chuppah* when a couple gets married. And God said, *hakol bara likhvodo*, God created everything to His glory. And I always wondered, whose glory? God's, or man's, or the human being's? Is it possible, therefore, that God created the human being to elevate him or her to a higher level above reality, [00:21:00] above the present, above the everyday events in life, by thinking of God

who is above time? So, that man could truly try to be worthy of being created in God's image by helping a neighbor, a colleague, a friend, a patient, a fellow student, a pilgrim, a madman, or a beggar, humiliated by society.

In other words, maybe God created us simply so that we should be compassionate with each other, but also with Him. But compassion, what does it mean? If you translate it etymologically is compassion meaning with passion. There is passion in compassion. Which means if you are compassionate, don't do it like that, do it really, with intensity, with your whole being. But is it supposed to be limitless? [00:22:00] Must I be compassionate with the victim? Yes. But what about with the victimizer, the assassin? And what do I do with his small children? They are victims. Of course, not mine, but their parent's, so what am I supposed to do? Of course there is no doubt that God wants us to believe that just as He is unique, we are, every human being is unique. And there are a lot of Midrashim about that, to illustrate the uniqueness of the human being. And therefore, when a human being is killed the whole world dies, when a human being is saved the whole world is saved. [00:23:00] So, on the other--we know that on the other hand that this uniqueness, of course, it gives us the feeling of extraordinary beauty. There is so much beauty in the human

being. Now we know more even. The way that the body works, the harmony of the body, what is needed for me to be able to raise my hands and drink a glass of water, or look at you and speak to you. But all this has meaning only if I am defined by the other, always by the other. Which means I am human because of your humanity. I leave my humanity if I leave yours.

Therefore, we care. [00:24:00] To care therefore is to be human and to be human means to care.

We, at least those in my generation, we have learned the danger of absence of caring some fifty-odd years ago during the Second World War. The Second World War, we know, was a great war. And there it was a just war. It was clear. A just war that was good and evil, and those who fought evil were good. Churchill, and Roosevelt, and Stalin fought evil. But somehow the parallel war, the war against the Jewish people, was neglected, and now we know it. And that hurts [00:25:00] to this day because somehow they didn't care. Now we know how much the world knew and didn't care. Didn't care. Had Hitler been satisfied with his conquest of Poland in 1939 with the three million Jews there, had he even conducted his massacres in Poland alone, but not waged war against France and Britain, do you think that the world would have cared? It wouldn't. The fact is, when the Germans went in in '39 they began killing and the French Army

didn't move. The British army didn't move. Had they moved they would have actually entered Germany and the war would have ended so much earlier. France had more military equipment, battle equipment, more weapons, more people under the flag, everything was more, they could have won, but they didn't care. [00:26:00]

And so, therefore, we wonder occasionally, and I always do, did the war end in 1945? If so, why are so many youngsters falling today everywhere week after week on battlefields all over the world? One war has ended, but others, many others, have replaced it. Political wars, religious wars, tribal wars, a bizarre combination of Middle Ages and nuclear era. Social conflicts, racial tensions, economic upheavals. Our society has never been as divided, as torn from within. The vocabulary sounds familiar, discrimination and hatred, so much hatred. How is it possible to have so much hatred today without us doing more to vanquish it? Is it possible that the hatred today is a fallout of the hatred of then? Which means [00:27:00] that sometimes it takes more than one generation to feel the effects of a certain disease or of a certain event.

So, the war ended in '45 but who won it? Are all these victims remembered? And what about those of today and tomorrow? How many of us display some awareness of what is threatening us? Do

we care about our own future? I, of course, have learned something. But I have learned mainly against rather than for things to do. I know, for instance, that because of what we have gone through I must be against ignorance, I'm a teacher. That's why I'm a teacher. I believe ignorance is a peril, it destroys, and therefore we must teach, and therefore we must choose our [00:28:00] teachers and celebrate them, and give them the honor they deserve, the gratitude they deserve. I believe, for instance, that I must be against hunger. Maybe it is that I remember hunger, I remember it. And to this day when I eat a piece of bread, it's day after day, I know that I'm eating a piece of bread. And I also know now that other people don't.

Emaciated bodies, swollen bellies, long bony arms pleading for mercy, motionless skeletons. How can one look at these images without losing sleep? And eyes, my God, eyes that pierce your consciousness and tear your heart. How can one run away from them? The eyes of a mother who carries her dead child in her arms not knowing where to go or where to stop. You would think she would keep on going [00:29:00] to the end of the world. The eyes of an old grandfather who probably wonders where creation has gone wrong, and whether it was worthwhile to create a family, to have faith in the future, to transmit misery from generation to generation to wager on mankind. And the eyes of

children, my God, the eyes of children so dark, so immense, so deep, so focused, and yet at the same time so wide and awake. What do they see? Death, nothingness, God? And what if they saw us? All of us in our complacency if not complicity? Our day, our judges. These are words that I wrote about hunger. Whenever I think of my own commitment to certain causes it had to do with children, maybe hungry children. [00:30:00] In the book of Ezekiel the prophet speaks that out of many diseases there's only one disease which has a strange name. He calls this *Cherpat Raav*, the shame of hunger. And I never understood: why should a hungry person feel shame? Isn't it enough that the hungry person is hungry? And then I understood. The shame of hunger does not refer to the hungry person, but to me. To all of us who are not hungry.

Then, of course, there are other woes. Racism, we must fight racism. It's stupid. Not only ugly, it's stupid to believe that one person is better than another, that one community is better than another, or worse than another, it's stupid.

Hatred, which grows like a cancer from cell to cell, from limb to limb, [00:31:00] devouring anything it enters. Oh, I think we should fight comparisons, facile, silly, childish, comfortable comparisons. And of course, humiliation. We must avoid humiliation. There is no excuse for humiliation. A human

being is defined by his or her nobility towards another, never to humiliate. And ultimately indifference. We must fight indifference. What about today?

We come back to a topic related to today. I must tell you a funny story. It's funny because it's true, and it's true because it's funny. When I came to America, a few weeks after I arrived--those of you who [00:32:00] were gracious enough to read my first volume of memoirs read it as a story. When I came to America, a few weeks after I arrive, a taxi ran over me on Times Square. And I was severely injured, the ambulance came twenty minutes later, and they brought me to one hospital, and they checked my pockets and realized I was poor, stateless, no insurance, they put me back on the ambulance. The ambulance took me to a second hospital, same thing. To a third hospital, the same thing. Three hospitals rejected me thinking anyway he's going to die. Then they finally came to one fourth hospital, New York Hospital, I give commercial. (laughter) And there was a young physician, a certain Dr. Paul Bronstein, he was a resident orthopedic surgeon. And he didn't check my pockets, and he took me on. I was in a coma for ten days. Then I woke up, I was in a full cast. Pain, my God. [00:33:00] Pain, terrible, you can't imagine, if those of you--terrible pain. Since I had been accredited to The United Nations as a

journalist, I had colleagues who came to see me, they heard about this accident. One of them was a Hungarian Jew called Alexander Zauber, and he was an Israeli editor. He was the editor in chief of a paper called *Iton Meyuchad* which was not an honorable paper, but he had a tremendous sense of humor.

He would come to make me laugh. And he didn't believe me when I said, "Come on, each time I laugh it hurts." (laughter) He went on making me laugh. One day I said to him, "Come on, really, this is not the time to laugh." I said, "Look." He said, "Come on, don't worry, it could have been worse." I said, "What do you mean, worse? Look, I am in a cast, I cannot move. In order for me to move I must call the nurse. If the nurse doesn't come immediately it's hell." "It could be worse." I said, "Look, I had a pen, my pen was broken in the accident [00:34:00] the only pen I had. "It could be worse." Whatever I said, "Could have been worse." I said, "Tell me, what could have been worse?" He said, "It could have been me." (laughter) Well, the moral philosophy of the story is today it's all of us. Whatever happens really to one group happens to all. Whatever happens with the suicide killers in Israel we know now had already happened elsewhere. The *Cole*, our ship, American ship in Yemen, or the French ship in--or even in Moscow now, the nineteen, who

were the nineteen here? Suicide hijackers. We thought Israel alone? No, it's everywhere.

And in a way, [00:35:00] in a way this is actually somehow a reflection of the novel which I just published, and it's strange because my friend who's my marvelous editor told me many, many times, "You know, sometimes words take on a special relationship to the time." It's a philosophical thriller. I wanted to see maybe this one will sell. It doesn't but it doesn't matter. So, I wrote a thriller about five people in a plane and there's a judge who harbors them, they force landing and so forth, and he simply says, "One person will die here under this roof, who will it be?" And slowly everyone has to describe why he or she should not be the one. Which means "*cheshbon nefesh*", meaning a whole examination of one's life takes place. [00:36:00] Why should--this is the question that we all had after the war, those of us who were there. First of all, why them? And then why me? Why did I survive? And therefore, we look for meaning. And there too we look for meaning in that novel. And who are the judges. At the end we realize that we are all each other's judges. And of course, there are characters there which I'm sure speak, which speak, and when you listen to them, of course, you realize that one of them is the judge who represents Mephisto, who represents the evil power, and who represents

death, that means a cult of death. And the five passengers are threatened because one person served the cult of [00:37:00] death. At the end somebody dies.

Now, did the five characters in my book care for one another? Simply because they were strangers until then, but then no longer. They began caring. And the question then becomes is caring then the absolute answer to all of the essential problems in the world? Of course it is not, for its application is far from being simple. No answer is absolute. The opposite of caring is not cruelty, but indifference. The tyrant is not indifferent to his subjects' destiny. Just as the jailer is not to that of his prisoners. Nero and Caligula, Dostoevsky and Dostoevsky's grand inquisitor, and Koestler's Ivanov in [00:38:00] *Darkness at Noon*, Stalin and Lenin, Bakunin and Pol Pot, they were capable of feeling something for their victims, otherwise they wouldn't even be their victims. They acted on behalf of their corrupt ideals and poisoned beliefs. They too wanted a better world either down below or up above, not for themselves only, but for all the others. But they wanted a world fashioned by them, ruled by them, dominated by them. The tyrant's fatal mistake was in considering the other an abstraction. They sacrificed millions for the sake of those yet unborn. But hating is like everything else. It depends on what

one does with it. In other words, what and whom one cares for.

[00:39:00]

The anti-Semite, the racist, the terrorist, the hater will tell you that they persecute, humiliate, torture, and murder because they care for their cause, which in their eyes justifies and sanctifies their means to attain it. Of course which brings us back to the present and its terrorist threats. They cross national frontiers in targeting various political systems, ethnic communities, or people. If today some nations are more in danger than others, tomorrow with terrorists gaining nuclear or biological weapons, we may all be, and we all are already in mortal peril. Do they care? They say they do for themselves too. But then what about the suicide killers? Persuaded of their heavenly reward, their cult really is death. Their parents, teachers, and handlers call them *Shahids* [00:40:00] or martyrs. That is how they refer to themselves. Children and adolescents, as well as young adults, dream of becoming *Shahids*.

But martyrdom is not a new phenomenon in religious history.

Jews had their martyrs, Christians had theirs too. But to us, a martyr is someone who is ready and willing not to kill, but to die for his or her faith. A martyr doesn't kill. And as now, we see on television parents speaking with pride and a kind of

strange happiness about their young martyrs, for they have assassinated children before being killed. One cannot help but be overcome [00:41:00] by immense distress. No cause can justify such murder. For even terrorism, which used to be a romantic adventure, must have its own limits. No one can ever transgress such limits without losing his or her membership in the family of idealistic humanity. Oh, I have studied the history of terrorism for years. I studied it when I wrote *Dawn*, my first novel, and second book. I described there the underground in what was then Palestine. People forget that Palestine always evoked a Jewish life in Palestine. The Jewish army, Jewish brigade of Palestine, the Jewish Agency of Palestine, everything always Palestine and Jewish. And they had three undergrounds. [00:42:00] The enemy was not the Palestinian or the Arab, but the British. Haganah, Irgun, Stern, or Lehi.

And I read when I was in Paris, I read a story that a British military court sentenced two Jewish underground fighters to death for the movement caught two sergeants and threatened that they too would be executed in reprisal. So, in my novel I elevated them to give them a higher rank, a major, and I wanted to describe what is happening to a person who is killing. I couldn't understand it, so I tried to learn. And I studied the

history, well, the psychology of a terrorist, the politics of a terrorist, the theology of a terrorist. And I found something very, very beautiful, that terrorism actually was active at the end of the 19th Century, the beginning of the 20th in France, Italy, and Southeast Russia. [00:43:00] They were called the Revolutionaries, they were called Anarchists, they were called Nihilists. And in St. Petersburg they decided to kill the Grand Duke or the Governor. Everything was ready. Everything. They know next Sunday when he goes to church in his carriage, that man will die. There was no way to save that man because they were waiting for him with every step, with bombs, and--except the last moment he took his children with him. And they couldn't do it. They couldn't kill children. They killed many of the Tsar's representatives, not children.

So Dostoevsky wrote a novel about it, *The Demons*, and Camus wrote a very interesting play called *The Just*. And in that play, one of the heroes who couldn't throw the bomb explained why to his friend. [00:44:00] And he said, "Look, I cannot." He said, "I was fighting despotism, and I was ready to kill the Grand Duke who he represented, but if I were to kill children, I would be equally guilty of despotism and of inhumanity. I cannot do that." These days the suicide killers want to kill children. Always they target young people. Always defenseless

people. And you wonder what is going to happen. Oh, I must say once I began, I'm sure you feel the same, I'm heartbroken. On one hand, there must be an end, there must. [00:45:00] And therefore we must fight to bring that solution sooner and in ways that would not cause more bloodshed. How do you do that? With whom do you talk? When under terror no government ever anywhere should surrender to terror. That is an axiom and I believe in that.

So, what do you do? We tried. I had suggested to people here and everywhere that I meet to prevail upon the Palestinians to declare a three-month moratorium. Literally for three months nothing, no gun shall be fired, surely no terror attack.

[00:46:00] Then all kinds of other things. But hatred exists there. When you study the textbooks you cannot believe the depth of hatred. Children are being taught to hate, and these textbooks do not speak about hatred for Israel, but hatred for the *Yahudim*, for the Jews. And they poison their minds. The adults, naturally, the Imams in the mosque or on television, Al Jazeera, you read about it I'm sure about the Protocol for the Sages of Zion, on the Egyptian government television. Protocols of the Sages of Zion was, of course, a forgery, which cost so much Jewish blood. And they make a TV series, and this is Egypt, which is at peace with Israel? And you read what other

people are saying, not only Muslims. [00:47:00] In Europe they fired away attacks on Jews. A poet from Oxford who said that all the settlers should be shot. And he said Israel has no right to exist. And now he's teaching, he's a visiting professor at Columbia, and invited to give a lecture at Harvard. What is happening to this world? How do you vanquish hatred?

Years ago, many years ago, I had connections with Palestinians. And it began simply in one of the universities in the Midwest. I came to give a lecture about moral philosophy. And afterwards, a young man got up, and he simply said--he spoke gently, he spoke that he wanted Professor Wiesel to know that I'm a Palestinian and that I came from [00:48:00] Acre, I was born there, now I'm here, I'm stateless here. That's all, he sat down. And because he spoke so gently without hatred, afterwards I spoke to him and we created a link. And I wrote him a letter. And this is what I wrote. "Permit me as a Jew to speak to you of what distresses him about you. Allow this Jew to think aloud in your presence about what stands between us. He does it in good faith, hoping only to ascertain whether bonds might still be formed that would transcend mistrust in spite of the blood that has been shed. I know. Only he who has suffered himself may speak of human suffering. To turn suffering, someone else's suffering into an abstraction is as offensive

[00:49:00] as making it into a tool for propaganda. It is never theory, nor is it caricature, it is as it is in its own core, measurable only against itself. I'm aware of this.

And yet, I ask you not to turn away. My purpose is not to offend you. On the contrary, I should like to convince you of my desire to understand you, to make you understand me. This possibility of an exchange between us is important to me, believe me. It is my wish that it become reality and develop. Perhaps somehow, some way, it may come to be seen as an example. Since your pain is what separates us, let us confront it. I seek neither to evade nor to minimize its impact. Let's examine it. And facing this pain, facing you, I plan to judge myself as well since someone else's [00:50:00] suffering always judges us. Whatever my conclusion or my position, I will be frank and sincere with you and with your adversaries, my brothers. This is a moral obligation, not a political undertaking. I wrote this your attention from the start because I do not understand and I'm wary of politics. Perhaps there is nothing to understand. As a modern esoteric science, politics confuses the facts it is meant to clarify. Does it help to prevent conflicts or incites them? Let us say that it frequently opposes while it conciliates only temporarily.

So, let's leave politics aside or there will be no end to it. Politics is like war, easy to start, but difficult to end. The arguments on both sides are varied, [00:51:00] you for Palestine's Muslim past, I shall speak of the Jewish past that preceded it. You denounce the injustice endured by Arab refugees in '48, I shall do the same, but I shall point out those who truly bear responsibility for it, your own leaders with their incendiary speeches, their virulent fanaticisms. If only they had accepted The United Nations' resolutions on the partition of Palestine, if only if they had not incited the Arab population to mass flight in order to return forthwith as victors, if only they had not attempted to drown the young Jewish nation in blood, if only they had taken into account Jewish suffering, also the Jewish right to also claim its sovereignty of its ancestral land. For thirty years Israel's peace initiatives were ignored, Israel's appeals for mutual recognition were denied, Israel's conciliatory moves were rejected. Words, rhetoric, I resort to them to show [00:52:00] you that if our common problem were exclusively of that order I could accept it. I would know how to deal with it. Even though this is an area in which yours are weighty assets, money, oil, allies from the third world. Israel is alone.

Today it's easy for you to buy anything, arms or votes. How you must despise those suppliers, those clients, those diplomats. You feel that they kneel before the oil god, crawling to be granted your favors. What could my people possibly offer them? No money, no deals, no blocked alliances, only a sense of history, a yearning for justice, and a sense of honor. If it were merely a matter of political or economic advances, I could succeed in convincing myself that this is how it has to be. But what is at stake between us is something else and much more. [00:53:00] And so, I ask you to look at our relations from an exclusively human point of view. As a Jew, I understand that you defend the Arab cause. As an Arab, please understand that I espouse the Jewish cause. I don't expect you to be objective as you must not expect me to be, that would be against nature for both of us. But I urge you to put yourself in my place sometimes. As such, I shall have to put myself in yours sometimes."

And I describe further on the arguments as convincingly as possible, as personally as possible, and then at the end I say, "Don't hold it against me, but I cannot escape a comparison. I will not attempt to measure your distress, nor will I [00:54:00] tell you that ours is greater, I mean that of my generation, when I was your age. This kind of scorekeeping is out of place

and odious. And I will tell you this, I do feel responsible for what happened to you, but not for what you chose to do as a result of what happened to you. I feel responsible for your sorrow, but not for the way you use it, for in its name you have massacred innocent people, slaughtered children from Munich to Merlot, from Lot to Antebi, from hijacking to hijacking, from ambush to ambush you have spread terror among unarmed civilians and thrown into mourning families already too often visited by death. You will tell me that all of these acts have been the work of your extremist comrades, not yours, but they acted on your [00:55:00] behalf, with your approval, since you did not raise your voice to reason with them. You will tell me that it's your tragedy which incited them to murder. By murdering they debased their tragedy, they betrayed it. Suffering is often unjust, but it never justifies murder."

And I conclude the letter saying, "and yet the day will come, I hope soon, when we shall all understand that suffering can elevate human beings as well as diminish them. Neither end nor means it can bring us closer to our truth and our humanity. And the final analysis, it is not given to us to bring suffering to an end, that frequently is beyond us, but we can humanize it. To turn it into dialogue rather than sword depends only on us, on you, on us. Will we succeed? I yearn for this with all my

heart. Help us help you. [00:56:00] And your right to the future, to happiness, will become one of our immediate priorities. Help us not to despair of you or of mankind. And then, perhaps, out of our reconciliation a great hope will be born." This was written in 1974. I could have written it today.

My good friends, why am I so worried? Because we don't know what will happen, the uncertainty, and also we know what terrible things could happen if they began. Take Iraq, we are involved in war with Iraq. I think that Saddam Hussein is a murderer. I think we should have condemned Saddam Hussein much before the present time. When he killed his own [00:57:00] people in the late 80s, he should have been indicted for crimes against humanity. I appeared before the foreign relations committee of the Senate and urged the committee then to do that. But in the beginning Iraq was an ally because he was an enemy of Iran. Iran was the enemy, so we let him get away with it. Now we must not. Simply because he possesses weapons of such destructive power that I'm afraid even to give you more details on it. That I have friends who are Nobel laureates in chemistry and biology and for years, for a few years, I can tell you we work and then I lose sleep of the possibilities. He must be disarmed, there is no doubt about it. But we know, if and when

we attack Iraq, Iraq attacks Israel, with non-conventional weapons, you cannot imagine or you can imagine the consequences. What are they? What is a moral thing to do? What should one do? What can one do?

I'll tell you what we can do. I don't know how, but I'll tell you to conclude the evening a story, which some of you know. It's a beautiful Hasidic story which somehow illustrates the task of a writer today, the task of a teacher today, the task of a human being who still believes in humanity today. The story is, surely you guessed it, by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the great storyteller. He said that one day the king saw in the stars that the next harvest will be cursed, that anyone eating from it will go mad. [00:59:00] Two versions, the first version is he called his best friend, he said when the time comes, we too shall eat from the cursed grain. But I will put a sign on your forehead, and you on mine, and whenever I will look at you, or you will look at me, we will say to each other, we are mad. The other version is nicer, more pertinent. The other version is that the king said, I'm going to build a granary and store in the granary the healthy grain. I will lock it, give the key to you, and when the time comes and all of us will have to eat from the cursed harvest, and all of us will lose our sanity, me included, you alone will be sane. [01:00:00] But you will have

to go around the world, my empire, from city to city, from street to street, from house to house, you will simply shout with all your might, "Men and women, don't forget, you are mad." This we must shout now to the whole world. If we are not pulling the alarm, the train may run to an abyss.

I don't want to end here on a sad note. It's not so terrible to imagine, provided you know why. Also, I believe, we can stop it with words, with hope. Thank you. (applause)

END OF VIDEO FILE