

2004 04 01 Elie Wiesel Exile and Redemption

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Since we are before Passover, of course the topic is adequate. Exile and redemption. In all fairness, it is easier to speak about exile. Exile, we know. Redemption, we don't. But that exile and redemption are almost organically interconnected, can be seen by their names. *Galut*, or exile, and *geulah*, which means redemption. Both have the letters *gimel* and *lamed* in them. They read, *gal*, which means a wave. Waves come and go. So do the experiences of exile and [00:01:00] waiting for redemption. Neither lasts eternally, unless we deal with the very ultimate redemption, which of course, will transcend time and reality.

Now, what is exile? When does it begin, and how does it end? And how are we to define redemption? And what is their connection? Exile can be experienced both individually and collectively. Physically and spiritually. Politically, too much. And religiously. Intellectually, and mystically. Tradition tells us that from the very beginning, the people of Israel were meant to endure four agonizingly painful, all-enveloping exiles. And tonight, we intend to touch on the

first, [00:02:00] Pharaoh's Egypt, and the last, I hope, the contemporary one.

Incidentally, surely you remember that from a purely individual viewpoint, exile remains part of the human condition. Freudians tell us, as do Jungians, each in his way or for his or her own reasons, that exile is at the origin of the human condition. When the child is expelled from the mother's womb. In other words, we are literally thrust into a world which we have not known, and which did neither want nor expect us. A world that could do very well without us. For all practical purposes, we arrive in the world as intruders, and or, strangers. Hence, the sense of loss that consciously or subconsciously accompanies us [00:03:00] throughout our entire existence, from home to kindergarten, to school, to college, forever leaving a world behind. Forever going to new surroundings. To new homes. Until the last address, which, appropriately, is called "resting place." (laughter)

Life, then, according to the Talmudic concept, is a corridor. While we cross it, we feel like wanderers, relentlessly searching for repairing the split between who we are and who we want to be. Like Kafka's protagonist, we so desire to enter the castle. But, when the gates close, we realize that it is too

late. The concept -- the idea of exile -- are profoundly rooted in Jewish memory. [00:04:00] The first human beings to endure exile were the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, when they were expelled from paradise. They were followed by Cain, who having killed his younger brother, was condemned to feel nowhere at home. He became a city-builder, and therefore, there is Cain in every driver. You are at the wheel, and you are no longer the same person. (laughter)

Later, many centuries later, for Abraham to become God's first ally and messenger, he had to leave his father's home. The same may be said of his grandson. For Jacob to become Israel, he had to exile himself. Exile in Egypt was harsh. It took place before our people had been known as a nation. We were just a tribe. Were the Hebrews too successful? [00:05:00] One of them did manage to attain the exalted position of deputy to Pharaoh, or vice president. When both died, troubles began. And we are told, in the Torah, in Exodus, that "*Vayakam melech chadash,*" a new king arrived, "*asher lo yada et Yosef,*" he did not know Joseph, and what Joseph has done for Egypt. So, the descendants of Jacob turned into slaves. Harsh labor. Oppression. Daily persecutions and humiliations. The enemy's wish was to start a process which would lead to the total extinction of Israel. And

of course, you remember, again, the book tells us, all male children had to be drowned in the Nile.

[00:06:00] The first national exile occurred several decades before and after the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem. It was caused by the Victorian Babylonian armies, who deported Judaeans princes, warriors, and notables to their capital. And these, by the way, these families created a new community in Babylon. Rome's legions did the same. Visitors to Italy's capital in Rome can still see engraved on the stones of Titus' Arch of Triumph, the image of Judaeans prisoners of war in chains, with the inscription *Judaea Capta*, captive Judaea, the Judaea no longer is a free country.

The Crusades produced a different kind of exile. Another attempt by the church [00:07:00] to force conversion on the Jews. In other words, to make them exile themselves from one faith, their faith, to another. And in most cases, it failed. Jews, particularly in the Rhine provinces, chose suicide, so as to sanctify God's name rather than yield to apostasy. Three books of methodology contain descriptions -- marvelous, vivid descriptions, literally jewels -- descriptions of their suffering, and their resistance, that one cannot read without heartbreak and pride. Traditionally, exile is considered a

punishment. On that level, the process seems simple and logical. *"U'mipnei chataeinu galinu meiartzeinu.* Israel was punished because it sinned.

The first time, too? In Egypt? [00:08:00] How could Israel have committed sins, since it became a people only after it left Egypt, at Sinai? Not only that, what kind of sins could it have committed, since the Torah was given to them much later?

Furthermore, aren't the Jews or the Hebrews in Egypt praised in Talmudic sources, for their various forms of loyalty to their ancestors, and ours, by remaining faithful to their names, and their language? Why, then, did the Jews in Egypt deserve to be slaves in a strange land?

A question of the same nature but from a different perspective may be raised with regard to the fourth exile, the cruelest and most far-reaching, which occurred 50 to 60 years ago, in Europe. That exile combined all phases, all aspects, that characterized those that preceded it. [00:09:00] Jews were exiled first from their country, then from their city, then from their homes, from their workplaces, and houses of study and prayer. From their streets, from their rooms, from their identities. And finally, from their human countenance, to become objects, numbers, dust, and ashes. And so again and again, we wonder why. Why such

punishment? For whose sins? And what transgressions? More than a million innocent children perished. They were too young and too pure to even begin doing something sinful. Why were they doomed?

Generally speaking, exile and redemption form a whole. They are intrinsically interwoven. One cannot exist without the other. One is cause, [00:10:00] and or, consequence of the other. However, it would be wrong to view them as a bipolar entity. Rather, they ought to be envisaged as triangular in structure, with redemption as the third element of the equation, redemption being a response to both exile and punishment. And to some of us, this month and this year are endowed with special meaning. As I said 60 years ago, 60 years ago in every Jewish home in Hungary, parents and children prepared themselves to celebrate *Pesach*. And thus began the ultimate tragedy of Hungarian Jewry. We shall recall some of those events later, but first, we intend to study together the dazzling story of Israel's first redemption, which together with my friend Mark Podwal, and helped by his superb illustrations, we tried to recapture in a *Haggadah*. [00:11:00]

Surely you know that it's a script -- a *Haggadah* is a script, a marvelous script, mainly meant to inspire children to ask

questions. And the way it begins is an appeal to our generosity, to our heart. We say, simply, the door is open, come, join us. And there are all kinds of traditions. In one tradition which I love, I heard in Morocco, that -- and in Yemen, apparently too -- that the head of the table actually leaves the room first, and he comes back, like a beggar -- dressed like a beggar, with a bag on his shoulder, and they ask him, "Where do you come from?" And he said, "I come from exile." "Where are you going?" And he says, "I go home." [00:12:00] "Where is home?" "The land of Israel, to Jerusalem." And then we say, "*Kol m'ein d'tzarich leitei v'lichol.*" Whoever is hungry, let him or her join us at the table.

But tonight we paraphrase these somber words by saying, whoever is outside, let him come in. Open the gates to their heart and soul, and take part in our remembering an ancient, yet contemporary tale with fear and joy, agony and compassion. A tale of the harshness of exile, and the waiting for redemption. It's so simple. Just open the door. (applause)

Let's imagine the door has been opened. (laughter) And closed. And we all read the *Haggadah*, [00:13:00] we all wait for Passover. And, again, we remember of course that the exile in Egypt had been foreseen. Everything about it was known, at

least to God. God already told Abraham, "Your descendants will be slaves in a strange land for 400 years." And we are also told that God in His mercy then reduced the sentence to 210 years. Why? Why not? (laughs, laughter)

Actually, God Himself, therefore, is at the beginning and the end of all things we do. All dreams, all hopes, somehow, are linked to God if you are a believer in God. But the question is -- it's a very important question. What is worse, actually? Is it worse -- [00:14:00] is it better to be a stranger at home, or at home in exile? Or is it worse to be at home in exile, or a stranger at home? This question I ask is because when God said to Abraham, "Your children, your descendants will be -- will be strangers -- slaves -- strangers in a land which is not theirs," why the repetition? Strangers means strangers. As if God had wanted to say, look, there is something worse than that, is to be a stranger in one's own home.

But the question then is, about exile, is exile always bad? And only bad? Is there nothing positive, nothing promising, nothing productive, in exile? Would the Talmud be the extraordinary masterwork it is had it not been composed also in Babylon? Weren't most of the *Baalei Tosafot*, the commentators on the Talmud, of the tenth, eleventh, twelfth centuries -- [00:15:00]

where were they? They were in Morocco, and in France, in the Rhine provinces. Not in the land of Israel. And where did Maimonides, the great Maimonides, write his books? In *Eretz Yisrael*? No. He wrote them in exile, and many of them were written in Arabic. He wrote those books when he was away from Jerusalem, as did the Ramban, Nachmanides; the Raavid; Rabbi Yonah of Gerondi; the Kabbalists; the Gaon of Vilna. Would Hasidism have become a great movement, had the Besht lived in Jerusalem, instead of longing for Jerusalem in Brody and Medzhybizh?

Furthermore, what about the stunning renaissance of a sovereign Jewish state in the land of his ancestors? Isn't Israel an answer to what we so poorly and inadequately [00:16:00] called the *Shoah*, or Holocaust? An answer, perhaps, but not a reward. I don't accept that word. What I believe was a kind of third destruction cannot be rewarded. There is no reward. There mustn't be. Perhaps, in 1945, had the Messiah come then, to redeem the whole world, it would have been a response -- the proper response. But he didn't come. And therefore, the death of more than a million children, Jewish children, must remain a burning wound, and a blemish on history, for which no reward can be conceived, let alone suggested. Which allows the question the end of exile as well -- is it a pure, absolute blessing,

pure of anything apprehensive? Why did Rava, the great Talmudic giant, say, "*Yetei v'lo ichmaneih*, oh yes, [00:17:00] I know that the redeemer will come. Let him come. But I don't want to be around when he comes." Is the waiting for a new, different reality better than reality itself? Is there, perhaps, one element missing in redemption: the element of hope? Once the Messiah will be here, you will stop waiting for the Messiah.

Do I need to emphasize that I do not aim here to plead for exile and to take the side of exile, as opposed to redemption, and that we should choose exile? No, no. "*Ani ma'amin b'emunah shleimah*," as Maimonides wants us to say and to repeat, I too believe with all my heart, all my soul, in the coming of the Messiah. "*V'af al pi sheyit'mahmeihah*, and although he will be late in appearing, *achakkeh lo b'chol yom sheyavo.*, [00:18:00] day after day I shall be waiting for him to come." Now, I am sure I have said it earlier, in other lectures, that the grammar in this 12th Article of Faith by Maimonides, is faulty. It should be put in the present, say, "*v'af al pi shemit'mahmeihah*, and although he is late in coming," not that he will be late in coming. Maybe the Rambam, Maimonides, in his marvelous wisdom and sensitivity, wanted to extol for us the grace, the beauty, but also the anguish inherent in waiting. We Jews are still waiting.

We are told that when one is presented before the celestial tribunal, [00:19:00] the fourth question that he is asked is, "Im *Tzapita lishuah*, did you wait for redemption?" And by the way, the first one is not "Did you believe in God?" The first one is, " Ha'im *Nasata v'natata b'emunah*, were you honest in your business dealings?" (laughs) And we are told, therefore, that every place where Israel was exiled, the *Shekhinah*, God's presence, was with them. They were exiled to Egypt, the *Shekhinah* was with them. They were exiled into Babylon, the *Shekhinah* was with them. They were exiled to Rome, the *Shekhinah* was with them. And when they shall return, the *Shekhinah*, as it were, will be with them.

So what is exile? Exile means, actually, a total change. A constant change. Meaning that we travel, [00:20:00] even when we do not. Meaning we look for things that we cannot get. Meaning that we are waiting for someone who doesn't come, who maybe will come the last day, or as Kafka said, the day after. There is also something called, not only the *Galut* ha'*Shekhinah* , meaning that the *Shekhinah* is in exile, but *Galut HaDibur*, the exile of the word, of language. Language has played an important role in civilization, in culture, and of course, therefore, in Jewish culture and in Jewish civilization.

The Creator used language to bring the universe into existence. He used words to create both light and darkness. Language was to become a human gift, but also a punishment.

When the builders of the Tower of Babel needed to be punished for attempting to replace God in the heavens, [00:21:00] and assert its authority, their language suddenly changed. They ceased to understand one another. In other words, language is like a human being, it can be born, just as it can die. It can be healthy, or ill. Rich or poor, generous or cruel. It can inspire love, or hate. What Hitler's Reich has done to the Jewish people, and beyond it, to humanity, included a crime against language. Like everything else, language can be exiled. When that happens, words lose their meaning. When everything is lost, the mystery of the word -- a distance, if not an abyss, emerges between the word and its significance. Exile occurs when some words are displaced, [00:22:00] almost by force, to make room for others.

Examples. Nowadays, we hear political orators speak, not about poor nations, but about underdeveloped nations. Poor is not a good word anymore. Governments are accused not of lying, *chas v'chalila*, (laughter) but of practicing disinformation.

Revolution has been degraded to simple destabilization. A

successful play on Broadway is a hit. Why a violent act, hit? But when you wish to praise someone, or something, just say, "Oh, it's cool." How could language be redeemed? By silence alone? Is silence the answer? Like despair. It is the question. In ancient Greece, it was said that it takes [00:23:00] three years for a child to learn how to speak, and 70 years to acquire the art of silence.

Impossible, of course, to speak about exile without mentioning one of its horrible aspects, anti-Semitism. Open or in disguise, it is growing and it becomes increasingly dangerous, and in many quarters, acceptable. In Muslim countries, it is officially sponsored. In Europe, it is not. In fact, it is embarrassing to some governments and certain intellectuals. Profanation of cemeteries, public insults at Jews, anti-Jewish slogans, children in public schools if they are Jewish are being insulted by their classmates. These are frequent occurrences. The latest entry comes from Belgium, I read it today. An important daily, *La Libre Belgique*, [00:24:00] published a huge article attacking the Israeli government for killing the Hamas chief, Sheikh Yassin, and it accuses Israel of, quote, "symbolic genocide of the Palestinian people." Now, naturally, you would say it's anti-Semitic. The problem is that the article was

written by a Jewish professor from Israel, a certain Lev Greenberg of the Ben-Gurion University.

In Greece, a very great musician said recently that the Jewish people are the root of all evil. A great, great -- let's say, a known literary figure of Portugal, José Saramago, a Nobel Prize winner in literature, went to Jenin for the first time in his life, and after a few hours, he said, "Jenin is like Auschwitz." [00:25:00] Often, you see, on the TV screens, demonstrations, in Europe mainly, saying Bush equals Hitler, Sharon equals Hitler. In Greece, numerous cartoons published in many papers are vicious and poisonous. Some show Sharon and Bush in Nazi uniform, with guns firing in every direction. One cartoon shows a woman asking a friend, "Why did the Jewish government murder Sheikh Yassin?" And the friend answers, "Because they get ready for Passover." Another cartoon shows Sharon being welcomed by Satan at the entrance to hell. Yet another one depicts Sharon as the Angel of Death.

Well, usually in the *Haggadah*, we say something, *b'chol dor vador*. In every generation, [00:26:00] "*omdim aleinu l'khaloteinu*", there are people who would like to wipe us out. "*v'Hakadosh Baruch Hu matzileinu mi-yadam.*", and God helps. Oh, do we need His help now. For exile implies

suffering. But can suffering, or the story of suffering, be exiled? As everything else? Is anti-Semitism, to Jews, another form of exile? A social exile, in which we are thrust to stay there and receive humiliations? But it has been, now, a kind of norm. It happens everywhere. It's dangerous. In Europe, I heard, personally, after a lecture here and there, they would come to me and whisper in my ears, asking, "When should we leave?" Not "should we leave," but when, as if to say, "Let's not miss the boat." [00:27:00] In Europe?

Now, of course it's impossible to speak about anti-Semitism without mentioning a film that I hope you have not seen.

(laughs) The Passion of -- The Passion. My wife and I didn't want to see it, we didn't want to go to the movies for that. It's -- I don't know. Not only for money, but even that too. I didn't want him to get my money, (laughs) our money. (laughter) We decided not to go and we didn't, so we got, from the ADL, a DVD. Naturally, I followed, we both followed the controversy in the medias, and my impression -- the film is worse than I thought. The fact that tens of millions of Americans went to see it, and were impressed, and some of them cried, and brought other people, is to me, a Jew, a great disappointment. Don't they see that the film [00:28:00] forces them to negate all the good that Pope John XXIII and John Paul II succeeded in doing by

opening up the church? By negating, by rejecting, any trace of accusation of Jews of deicide.

I don't understand it. On one level, we must say that, that never have Jewish-Christian relations been better as they are now. Rabbis and priests meeting, and it's happening, in our lifetime. And whoever goes to see the film is thrust back to the Middle Ages. Of course, I resented the celebration of violence in the film. And, you know what? I found it boring. (laughter) To see the -- you know, the whipping, and whipping, and whip lashing again and again -- boring. But then, I am a Jew. But I am not bored often. This time, really, I found it boring, and -- [00:29:00] but I also found it repulsive. The way it shows the Jews in Judaea, a hysterical lynching mob dominated by savage hatred, rejoicing over Jesus' death. The argument that the real tormentors are Roman soldiers proves nothing. It's nonsense. Soldiers are soldiers. And in that time, Roman soldiers were not known for their humanity. But who incited them? The Jewish mob, which envelops the devil and embraces, almost, the devil in their midst. The devil is always among Jews, not Romans. And what is probably worse is the end.

From the scene of crucifixion, we go straight to the destruction of the Temple. In other words, the destruction of the *Beit*

HaMikdash was, according to the film and its author, God's punishment for Jesus' death. [00:30:00]

I am not a film critic, and often when I am in a movie house, I feel in exile. (laughter) But I profoundly believe that this film is a disgrace. And it hurts not only our sensitivity, but it should hurt the sensitivity of Christians who believe in dialogue and mutual respect. And, may I say something good about France, the French reviews are all negative. (laughter) They really let him have it. (applause)

But then, after speaking of exile, you must speak of redemption. The celebrated Gaon of -- Rabbi Eliyahu -- of Vilna offered a remarkable response to the question, "What is redemption?" He said, "*Takhlit ha-geulah et geulat ha-emet*, the goal of redemption is the redemption of truth." Which means, truth itself may be in exile. [00:31:00] Truth, too, needs to be redeemed. But what is the exile of truth? It is when falsehood is made to wear the mask of truth. Is it possible? It is.

Listen to one of the most depressing Hasidic stories. Just before the soul of the Besht, the *Baal Shem Tov*, the Master of the Good Name, was about to be sent down to earth, Satan hurried to present himself before the Creator of all the worlds with a

legitimate complaint. "Almighty God," he said, "if the Besht will go down, be among humans, I am lost. Everybody will be influenced by his teaching. What chance do I have against him? Is this what you have in mind? Then, tell me. Do you want to bring the world to an end, and bring the Messiah? Oh, go ahead. But if not, I cannot accept this state of affairs." [00:32:00]

And, admitting that Satan had a point, God told him, "Okay. I cannot annul my decision to send him down below, it's already done. But to reassure you, and compensate you, I will do something that is bound to please you. Together with his soul, the soul of another man will go down. Charismatic like the Besht, he, too, will attract many people. He, too, will preach my truth and his vision to all these people. And he, too, will move my creatures to repentance and compassion. But only you and I will know that he belongs to you and not me." What a sad story. A man who looks and behaves and speaks and thinks and writes like one of the greatest men that we have had? And he belongs to Satan? [00:33:00]

It's a question. Is it possible that truth, too, could be corrupt, and its origins perverted? Oh yes. History has told us that truth can be exiled. Dictators have done precisely that. Caligula and Genghis Khan, Hitler and Stalin, haven't they presented their cult of oppression and death to the

ultimate test, the test of truth? They spoke about truth, their truth. Aren't today's fanatical murderers claiming that they are serving their true God and His true prophet?

What is terrorism? An ultimate aberration of ideology and religion, it has always been philosophically indefensible and morally repulsive, and humanly obscene. For it means the brutal rule of the few over the many. Believers in terror begin by [00:34:00] using it as a means to attain a goal, but at the end, it becomes a goal in itself. And so here and there, small groups of excited militants would decide that they will move history in a different direction, because they simply know better what is good for their people, for all people. But if such arrogant line of thinking is contrary to whatever civilized nations and individuals believe in, suicide terrorism also, just as in warfare, there are red lines that neither side may cross with impunity. In suicide terrorism, its practitioners are doing just that. They call themselves, and their allies call them, martyrs. But the history of martyrdom has taught us that martyrs are those who are willing to die, but not to kill, for their faith. Servants of death, suicide killers, are killers. To claim that they obey God's will is making God their accomplice, [00:35:00] a perverse notion that no religious tradition would ever espouse or condone.

Remember, years ago, only those who were on the battlefield were in peril. Today, we all are, wherever we are, in high towers or the gardens, or in coffee shops. Years ago, only soldiers and policemen were milled by the enemy. Today, everyone is a target. Rich and poor, intellectuals and laborers, dreamers of a peaceful future, a future of moral values, and children, yes, children. We are all on the front line. And everyone may become tomorrow's victim, for our assassin may already wait in his hiding place for the next opportunity to unleash destruction and death. Fanatic cowards. That's what today's terrorists, suicide terrorists, are. They attack people whom they have never met, [00:36:00] at a certain place simply because they happen to be there, at that moment. Their victims had done nothing against these terrorists, and yet these heartless, senseless, soulless aggressors will maim them, slaughter them. They are ready to die in the process. Their death itself is the work of cowards. They do not seek suicide. They seek murder. They are ready to kill themselves in order to better kill others and the more, the better.

And this is almost a punishment, what is happening today, for what happened before. When it happened to Israel, somehow the world did not react with enough outrage. When Israeli mothers

were afraid to send their children to school, when they watched the school bus leaving, they never knew whether they would not get a call. [00:37:00] And whom do these terrorists aim at killing? Never soldiers. Maybe civilians, young people, children. But then, it spread. Hatred always spreads, like a cancer. Whenever you open, today, a newspaper, you read: in Moscow, suicide killers enter the theatre. In Indonesia, in Morocco, in Madrid now. Who will be next? This is what all the security services in the world are wondering, and trying to avoid, of course. Who is next, after Madrid?

For us, the ultimate cruelty in exile, of course, occurred 60 years ago. *Erev Pesach*, 1944. [00:38:00] And all of a sudden, we were in danger. We didn't expect it -- Jews in Hungary, until March 19, 1944, lived in relative security, literally waiting for the end of the war. Being convinced that they would live to see the end of that war. And in a few weeks, 800,000 Jews from the provinces, in a few weeks, it was done with such efficiency, such haste. But with such -- the genius, evil genius, that they managed to do it. And so, our world began shrinking. The land was reduced to a city, and then it all ended. It's remarkable that we didn't know.

[00:39:00] Some of you may have read my first witness testimony, Night, where I describe Moshe the Beadle. Moshe the Beadle came back in 1941, and he told stories. He was a messenger of tale. Oh, he was like Kafka's messenger who told a tale that nobody wanted to hear it, and therefore, he couldn't deliver it. He said, but we didn't listen. Oh, what hurts me, and I say it everywhere, Hungarian Jewry were the last large Jewish community in occupied Europe. And it could have been saved. It wasn't. It could have been. Now we know, and then we knew.

So, when we think of that, we wonder. We wonder, was that exile an experiment [00:40:00] offering results? What results? Who won? Who won? And the war ended in 1945, and the camps opened, and those who were still alive met. They did not rejoice. There was no dancing in any camp. There was sadness, and sadness, and that sadness has not evaporated. So, we think of the exile of 1944, 45. And it hurts, naturally it hurts. It hurts because all the questions that I have required in my life remain open. They remain open, [00:41:00] but I ask myself, is there a consolation to exile? Yes. When our sages say that the Almighty, blessed be He, accompanies His people into exile, I wonder, did He do that in 1944, too? Is it true that He suffers when we suffer? Is it true that He sheds tears when we weep in pain? In other words, whenever we wonder why God permits human

suffering, we may quickly add that God himself is suffering.
And if He doesn't complain, how can we?

But if this attitude is meant to comfort us, I say I am not comforted, on the contrary, in that case. I don't want Him to suffer but nor do I want our people to suffer. Nor do I want anyone to suffer. [00:42:00] In believing that God accompanies His people into exile, it makes us more open to despair. Our anguish becomes deeper. And we don't know, really, what to do then. Of course, of course, the same Midrashic sources tell us that the *Shekhinah* did not join the judges of our people, nor the ten tribes in their exile, but the *Shekhinah*, God's presence, joined only the *Tinokot Beit Rabban*, the schoolchildren. Schoolchildren. So, the question is, if God accompanied the schoolchildren from the chederim, from the *yeshivot*, how could God in heaven bear the sight of countless Jewish children [00:43:00] perishing at the hands of killers? Is the *hester panim*, the hiding of His face, the answer? Whatever it is, I choose not to accept it. To paraphrase Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, to me, too, it happens, that the question remains a question, but it must continue.

Years ago, years ago I wrote a story about that. It's part of a volume, *Legends of Our Time*, which Altie Karper, at Schocken,

has just re-edited. It's about Passover. And I shall read it to you.

"Like all persecuted Jewish children, I passionately loved the prophet Elijah. The only saint who went up to heaven alive in a chariot of fire, to go on through the centuries as the herald of deliverance. [00:44:00] For no apparent reason, I pictured him as a Yemenite Jew. Tall, somber, unfathomable. A prince, ageless, ruthless, fierce, turning up wherever he is awaited. Forever on the move, defying space and nature's laws.

It is the end which attracts him in all things, for he alone comprehends its mystery. In the course of his fleeting visits, he consoles the old, the orphan, the abandoned widow. He moves across the world, drawing it in his wake. In his eyes, he holds a promise he would like to set free, but he has neither the right nor the power to do so, not yet. In my fantasy, I endowed him with the majestic beauty of Saul, [00:45:00] and the strength of Samson. Let him lift his arm, and our enemies would fling themselves to the ground. Let him shout an order, and the universe would tremble. Time would run faster, so that we might arrive more quickly at the celestial palace, where since the first day of creation, and according to certain mystics, long before that, the Messiah has awaited us.

A Yemenite Jew, I no longer know why, perhaps because I have never seen one. For the child I then was, Yemen was not to be found on any map, but somewhere else in the kingdom of dreams, where all sad children, from every city and every century, join hands to defy coercion, the passing years, death. Later on, I saw the prophet, [00:46:00] and had to admit my error. He was a Jew, to be sure, but he came from no farther away than Poland. Moreover, he had nothing about him of the giant, the legendary hero. Pitiful, stooped-shouldered, he tightened his lips when he looked at you. His movements betrayed his weariness, but his eyes were aflame. One sensed that for him, the past was his only haven.

It was the first night of Passover. Our household, brightly lit, was preparing to celebrate the festival of freedom. My mother and my two older sisters were bustling about the kitchen. The youngest was setting the table. Father had not yet returned from synagogue. I was upset. [00:47:00] We were going to partake of the ritual meal with only just the family, and I would have preferred having a guest, as in preceding years. I recovered my good mood when the door opened and father appeared, accompanied by a poorly dressed, shivering, timid stranger. Father had approached him in the street with the customary

phrase, *'Kol dichfin yeitei v'yeichol*, let him who is hungry come eat with us.' 'I am not hungry,' the stranger had answered. 'That makes no difference,' father said. 'Come along anyway. No one should remain outside on a holiday evening.'

Happy, my little sister set another place. I poured the wine. 'May we begin?' my father asked. 'Everything is ready,' my mother answered. Father blessed the wine, washed his hands, and prepared to tell us, according to custom, [00:48:00] of the exploits of our ancestors, the flight from Egypt, their confrontation with God, and their destiny. 'I am not hungry,' our guest said suddenly, 'but I have something to say to you.' 'Later,' my father answered, a bit surprised. 'I haven't time,' said the guest. 'It's already too late.'

I did not know that this was to be the last Seder, the last Passover meal we would celebrate in my father's house. It was 1944. The German army had just occupied the region. In Budapest, the fascists had seized power. The Eastern front was at Körösmezö, barely 30 kilometers from our home. We could hear the cannon fire, and at night, the sky on the other side of the mountains turned red. We thought that the war was coming to an end, [00:49:00] that liberation was near, that like our ancestors, we were living our last hours in bondage. Jews were

being abused in the streets, they were being humiliated, covered with insults. One rabbi was compelled to sweep the sidewalk. Our dear Hungarian neighbors were shouting, 'Death to the Jews.' But our optimism remained unshakeable. It was simply a question of holding out for a few days, a few weeks. Then, the front would shift, and once again, the God of Abraham would save His people, as always, at the last moment, when all seemed lost.

The *Haggadah*, with its story of the Exodus, confirmed our hope. Is it not written that each Jew must regard himself everywhere, at all times, as having, himself, come out of Egypt? And that for each generation, the miracle will be renewed? [00:50:00] But our guest did not see things that way. Disturbed, his forehead wrinkled. He troubled us. Moody, and irritated, he seemed intent upon irritating us as well. 'Close your books!' he shouted. 'Close your books! All that is ancient history. Listen to me instead.' We politely concealed our impatience. In a trembling voice, he began to describe the sufferings of Israel in the hour of punishment. The massacre of Jewish communities, of Kolomai, then that of Kamenetz-Podolsk. Father let him speak, then resumed the ancient tale, as though nothing had happened.

My little sister asked the traditional Four Questions, which would allow my father, in his answers, to explain the meaning and import of the holiday. Why, and in what way, [00:51:00] is this night different from all other nights? Because we were slaves under Pharaoh, but on this night, God made us free men. Discontent with both the question and the answer, our guest repeated them in his own way. 'Why is this night not different from other nights? Why this continuity of suffering? And why us, always us? And God, why doesn't He intervene? Where is the miracle? What is He waiting for? When is He going to put himself between us and the executioners?'

His unexpected interruptions created a feeling of uneasiness around the table. As soon as one of us opened his mouth, our guest would cut us short. 'You concern yourselves with the past as 3,000 years old, and you turn away from the present. Pharaoh is not dead. Open your eyes and see. [00:52:00] He's destroying our people. Moses is dead, yes, Moses is dead but not Pharaoh. Pharaoh is alive. He's on his way. Soon he'll be at the gates of this city, at the doors of this house. Are you sure you'll be spared?' Then, shrugging his shoulders, he read a few passages from the *Haggadah*, and in his mouth, the words of praise became blasphemies.

Father tried to quiet him, to reassure him. 'Oh, you are downhearted, my friend, but you must not be. Tonight, we begin our holiday with rejoicing, and gratitude.' The guest shot him a burning glance and said, 'Gratitude, did you say? For what? Have you seen children butchered before their mothers' eyes? I have. I have seen them.' 'Later,' said my father. [00:53:00] 'You'll tell us about that later.'

I listened to the guest and kept wondering, 'Who is he? What does he want?' I thought him sick and unhappy, perhaps mad. It wasn't until later that I understood he was the prophet Elijah. And if he bore little resemblance to the Elijah of the Bible, or to the prophet of my dreams, it is because each generation begets a prophet in its own image. In days of old, at the time of the kings, he revealed himself as a wrathful preacher, setting mountains and hearts on fire. Then, repentant, he took to begging in the narrow streets of besieged Jerusalem to emerge later as a student in Babylonia, messenger in Rome, beadle in Mayence, Toledo, or Kiev. Today, he had the appearance and faith of a poor Jewish refugee from Poland, [00:54:00] who had seen, too close and too many times, the triumph of death over man and his prayer. I am still convinced that it was he who was our visitor.

Quite often, of course, I find it hard to believe. Few and far between are those who have succeeded in seeing him. The road that leads to him is dark, and dangerous, and the slightest misstep might bring about a loss of one's soul. My rebbe would cheerfully have given his life to catch one glimpse of him, if only for the span of a lightning flash, a single heartbeat. How, then, had I deserved what is refused to so many others? I don't know. But I maintain that the guest was Elijah. Moreover, I have proof of this, soon, I had it afterwards. [00:55:00] Tradition requires that after the meal, before prayers are resumed, a goblet of wine is being offered the prophet Elijah, who that evening, visits all Jewish homes at the same moment, as though to emphasize the indestructibility of their ties with God.

Accordingly, father took the beautiful silver chalice no one ever used and filled it to the brim. Then, he signaled my little sister to go to the door, and asked the illustrious visitor to come taste our wine. He wanted to tell him, you see, we trust you, in spite of our enemies, in spite of the blood that has been shed, joy is not deserting us. We offer you this because we believe in your promise. In silence, aware of the importance of the moment, [00:56:00] we rose to our feet to pay solemn tribute to the prophet, with all the honor and respect

due him. My little sister left the table and started toward the door, when our guest suddenly cried out, 'No, little girl, come back. I'll open the door myself.' Something in his voice made us shudder. We watched him plunge towards the door and open it with a crash. 'Look!' he cried out. 'There is no one there. No one, do you hear me?' Whereupon, he leaped out, and left the door wide open.

Standing, our glasses in our hands, we waited, petrified, for him to come back. My little sister, on the brink of tears, covered her mouth with both hands. Father was the first to get hold of himself. In a gentle voice, he called out after our guest, [00:57:00] 'Where are you, friend? Come back.' Silence. Father repeated his call in a more urgent tone. No reply. My cheeks on fire, I ran outside, sure I would find him on the porch. He was not there. I flew down the steps. He could not be far. But the only footsteps that resounded in the courtyard were my own. The garden, there were many shadows under the trees, but not his. Father, mother, my sisters, and even our old servant, not knowing what to think, came out to join me. Father said, 'I don't understand.' Mother murmured, 'Where can he be hiding? Why?' My sisters and I went out to the street, as far as the corner; no one. I started shouting, 'Hey, friend, where are you?' Several windows opened. 'What's going on?'

[00:58:00] 'Has anyone seen a foreign Jew with a stooped back?'
'No.' Out of breath, we all came together again in the
courtyard. Mother murmured, 'You'd think the earth swallowed
him up.' And Father repeated, 'I don't understand.'

It was then that a sudden thought rushed through my mind, and
became certainty. Mother is mistaken. It is the sky, and not
the earth, that has split open in order to take him in. Useless
to chase after him, he is not here anymore. In his fiery
chariot, he has gone back to his dwelling place, up above, to
inform God what His blessed people are going to live through in
the days to come. 'Friend, come back,' my father shouted one
last time. 'Come back! We'll listen to you.' 'He can't hear
you anymore,' I said. 'He's a long way off by now.' [00:59:00]

Our hearts heavy, we returned to the table and raised our
glasses one more time. We recited the customary blessings, the
psalms, and to finish, we sang *Chad Gadya*, the terrifying song
in which in the name of justice, evil catches evil, death calls
death, until the Angel of Death, of destruction, is turned, has
his throat cut by the Eternal himself, blessed be He. I always
loved this naïve song in which everything seems so simple, so
primitive. The cat and the dog, the water and the fire. First
executioners, then victims. All undergoing the same punishment

within the same scheme. But that evening, the song upset me. I rebelled against the resignation it implied. 'Why does God always act too late? Why didn't He get rid of the Angel of Death before he even committed the first murder?' [01:00:00] Had our guest stayed with us, he is the one who would have asked these questions. In his absence, I took them up on my own.

The ceremony was coming to an end, and we did not dare look at one another. Father raised his glass one last time, and we all repeated after him, 'Next year in Jerusalem.' None of us could know, but this was our last Passover meal as a family.

I saw our guest again a few weeks later. The first convoy was leaving the ghetto; he was in it. He seemed more at ease than his companions, as if he had already taken this route a thousand times. Men, women, and children, all of them carrying bundles on their backs. Blankets, valises. He alone was empty handed.

Today, I know what I did not know then. [01:01:00] At the end of a long journey that was to last four days and three nights, he got out in a small railway station near a peaceful little town, somewhere in Silesia, where his fiery chariot was waiting to carry him up to the heavens. Is that not proof enough that he was the prophet Elijah?"

Chag sameach v'kasher to all of you. (applause)

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