

2004 10 14 American Jewry at 350: A Vision for the Future

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) A remarkable chapter of Jewish life in America, its trials and tribulations, its constant desire to undertake a quasi-prophetic vision to spread dreams of Messianic waiting and redemption, while establishing a poorly defined diaspora, with new horizons. A chapter filled with human anxiety and Jewish hope, inspiring moral commitment and occasional moral disappointment. This is what I suggest we explore tonight, as we celebrate the 350th anniversary of the arrival of the first group of 23 Jews to what is now New York, an event that, as you can see on the [00:01:00] program, Mark Podwal illustrated with his usual -- or unusual -- talent: a biblical ship that brings homeless Jews on eagles' wings on history to a new home. I confess that this chapter is amazing, because when I began studying it in depth for this evening, I realized how exceptional it is. After all, what is the story about? Twenty three Jews who were expelled from Recife in Brazil, where they came, from Portugal and Spain, to avoid and to evade the Inquisition. Nevertheless, there were 500, or 1500 and 500 were to be expelled, and they left, which means it was not a voluntary trip to America -- which later became America. And

look what [00:02:00] occurred. What they have done. Twenty three people -- what they have done in around 350 years. Well, I think that this story is so beautiful that it's worthy of being retold. But in general, I always ask myself, how does one create a community? How does one build a village, a town, a city, or a nation? Now, normally we know what happened -- in America, surely. A person or a family somehow left their environment, and they went and went and went, and at one point they simply built, they took a tent out, and they slept in the tent, or they built a barrack. Then another person joined them, and another person; it became a family, and more families, and all of a sudden, it was a village. Normally, [00:03:00] this is what happened. But we Jews are an abnormal people (laughs), and therefore, it wasn't normal, because we never left individually, in times of crisis and drama. It was always a group, a community that left one place in order to rebuild itself in another. And this is actually what we see that happened here, but the question is, what does it take for a community, for a new community, to be created -- to be born?

Now, the fact is that the decision was, then, in the seventeenth century, to move. It was a very dramatic century. On one hand, we had the Sabbatean movement, 1648 -- 1616 -- 1660. Sabbatean movement, which was a cause [00:04:00] of great, great trauma;

of great, great tragedy; of a debacle. It was a spiritual disaster. At the same time, we had 1648 Khmelnytsky pogroms. The Cossacks then went from village to village, city to city, killing and killing and killing Jews. A hundred thousand Jews then were massacred by the Khmelnytsky hordes. And so then, we had, of course, the Jews who were in Brazil, and wanted to leave and find other places. That was the place, therefore, that this story is being situated.

Now, it began with a simple story -- a fairy tale. The story of an extraordinary man, passionately involved with maps and oceans, drawn to faraway lands, unknown to him or to his contemporaries. Correction: it all began on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1654, with a dramatic story about [00:05:00] a mistaken destination willed by destiny. The secret dream, perhaps, rooted in melancholy events in the history of a nation people, too long dispersed, and too often oppressed, eternally longing for a homeland. Was it nothing but an overwhelming desire of that adventurer and sea-intoxicated traveler to find a refuge for future multitudes of uprooted men and women, unwanted by nations and persecuted by religious communities in most areas of the planet? Did I name the hero of our story? Christopher Columbus. Who hasn't heard of his exploits? Who hasn't admired both his audacity and imaginative powers? If we are here on

this soil, in this blessed country, it is thanks to his vision of worlds waiting to be visited, and his decision to go and return with exalting discoveries and victories. Was he simply [00:06:00] a professional sailor and explorer? He was more than that. Just a loyal servant of the devout King Ferdinand and Queen Isabelle of Spain, who risked his life for the honor and glory of his country? Is that the only reason for his leaving behind his family, and friends, so as to lead his expedition to the uncharted territories of his exalted fantasy? Who was he?

Innumerable stories and legends circulate about him. What is clear is that had he not discovered America, Jews would not have gone to Brazil, and from there, 350 years ago, to New Amsterdam. And we would not have celebrated tonight their arrival at this place. There would have been no Y. (laughter)

Naturally, we shall discuss its far-reaching impact on our lives now, and on Jewish history in general. But for the moment, let's stop at [00:07:00] just one episode -- or more precisely, on one aspect of his departure. The date according to the Jewish calendar remains beyond dispute: it happened on the ninth day of Av, 1492, when Spanish Jews were ordered by the church-dominated royal court to convert to Christianity, or go into exile. When the last Jews left the country, they crossed

Columbus on his way to board Santa Maria, one of his ships that took him and his crew on his daring voyage, destination unknown. Was it simple coincidence? In Jewish history -- I deeply believe that -- in Jewish history, there are no coincidences, only encounters, and they become, maybe in retrospect, pre-ordained. [00:08:00] If at the moment they seem deprived of meaning, they receive meaning later, and what is the meaning? Remember, Columbus's aim was to reach not America, but India. Why India? According to one theory, he, the son of Marranos, had heard of a Jewish state, created by the lost ten tribes, that existed and flourished somewhere in India. So, he wanted to go there, and restore a link, a living link between them and their brethren, still enduring exile. In fact, it was Columbus himself who admitted that the goal of his project had some Jewish connection. He wrote to Ferdinand -- King Ferdinand and Queen Isabelle of Spain, quote, "Having expelled the Jews from your dominions, your Highnesses ordered me to proceed [00:09:00] with sufficient armament to the region of India," end quote.

But it is not to them, but to a Marrano, Luis de Santángel, that Columbus first communicated the result of his historic endeavor, which was privately financed by descendants of Jewish converts to Christianity. Strange as it may sound, Columbus's intuition about the Jewish kingdom in India, rooted in bits of

information, was far from being erroneous. There was a kind of Jewish kingdom in Cochin, which is part of India, and it lasted a thousand years. Most of its remnants, now, made Aliyah to Israel in the '50s. We know now so many things about that trip. That Columbus had two sailors who spoke Hebrew. Why did he need [00:10:00] Hebrew-speaking sailors, if he hadn't thought of the ten lost tribes? So he went to India, but disembarked in America. Far away -- not here -- but thanks to him, and thanks to his mistake, exiled Jews from Spain and Portugal did find a haven in Brazil. And the first Jew to arrive in Boston, in 1649, was Solomon Franco. He didn't stay long -- he was chased away. The first Jews to land as a group on American soil -- more precisely, in New Amsterdam, which we already mentioned -- was composed of 23 souls, meaning adults and children. They were expelled from Recife, and they arrived aboard Saint Catrine. Why? They were actually first caught by pirates, who robbed them of all their fortunes -- their money and their belongings. [00:11:00] And the French boat, Saint Catrina, saved them, and they had to come -- they were paid later on -- and they came to New Amsterdam. Peter Stuyvesant, the governor, wasn't too happy with them. He wished he could send them back anywhere, because they were, as he called them, quote, "deceitful, repugnant, hateful enemies of Christ," unquote. Nothing is new in history. (laughter) But his superiors of the

Dutch West India Company in Amsterdam, yielding to the intervention of the influential Jews, overruled him. And thus began a new chapter in Jewish history, both similar to and different from others, fascinating on more than one level. It contains major elements of what some scholars call the mystery of Jewish survival.

But before we continue our journey tonight, let's open our customary parentheses. This [00:12:00] is the thirty-eighth year of our Annual Encounters at the Y. Many events occurred since my first appearance on this stage. I wasn't married yet. (laughter) Our goal remains the same: to study together, and share our passion for learning, our quest for meaning, by bringing past questions and experiences into a present filled with uncertainty. Usually we explore the hidden light in ancient sources. How did John Milton put it? "There are no songs," said he, "comparable to the songs of Zion, no orations equal to those of the prophets, and no politics like those which scripture teaches us." We are told to "hafoch ba ve-hafoch ba, ve-kula ba" -- everything is in the text. The history of one idea, one precept, one law, one story, one word, can link [00:13:00] us to the origins of memory. That is why we have forever emphasized the eternal importance of receiving as faithfully, as eagerly as possible, what masters and disciples

have left centuries and centuries ago for us as guidelines, so we may understand what often seems confused, dark, and bewildering in God's creation. But tonight, we chose to deal with one event, as we said: 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary. And, of course, we know that those 23 Jews found a haven here. Were the gates open? If so, for how many, and for how long? But since we remain -- we must -- optimistic, let us say that our doors are open for the usual latecomers.

For historians, the first arrival of Jewish [00:14:00] refugees to America's shores is a fiesta. No allegory, no fantasy, no imagination, only events and facts. Facts, figures, and memories. Everything has been recorded: where they came from, for what reason they stopped here, the first marriage, the first child, the first rabbi, the first synagogue. We know so much about them that we could see ourselves almost as their contemporaries. Obsessed with memory, the Jewish people have kept alive episodes and events that mark the beginnings of many of its communities in diaspora. The story of the first is a scripture. It began with Joseph, who found himself a refugee in Egypt, followed by his family. Others were to experience a similar fate in Babylon, Rome, the [00:15:00] Rhine provinces, Poland, Russia, Spain, France, Greece, and North Africa. We know the geopolitical and geo-religious conditions of their



migratory destiny. We know by whom they had been deported, and where; and how they rebuilt communal life with memories alone. Like Jacob's children in Egypt, the few became many. They multiplied and prospered, enabling some of their great men and women to occupy high positions in the world of finance, culture, and politics, until another enemy rose, who wanted them totally assimilated, or entirely absent, so as to put an end to their religious or ethnic aspirations. He isolated them in ghettos, burned them as heretics, and/or condemning them to further exile and misery.

Now this is -- has always -- in Jewish history, a singular, [00:16:00] singular discovery, that whenever we touch Jewish history, somehow, we reach into historiosophy. There is no history alone. We deal right away with some of its theological aspects, or at least some of its philosophical exercises. With emphasis on detail, Jewish chroniclers felt it important to note that in 1654, Solomon Peterson was the first Jew to marry a Christian in New Amsterdam. Also that Asher Levy was a ritual butcher, a shochet, excused from killing hogs because of his religion. In 1655, three Jews bought the first burial places in the first Jewish cemetery. The Lopez family was the first to acquire social pro-eminence in the [00:17:00] 1770s. Its founder, Aaron Lopez, a former Marrano who escaped from Portugal

to Newport, and remarried according to the Law of Moses and Israel. Doctor Ezra Stiles, later president of Yale, spoke of him as, quote, "the most universally beloved of man he ever knew." His beneficence to his family and the Jewish nation, said Stiles, and the entire world is almost without a parallel. Lopez made him meet the renowned Jewish scholar and Kabbalist Rabbi Chaim Itzchak Carregal, and Stiles was so impressed with the rabbi that he placed his portrait in the Yale gallery of important spiritual figures. And we learn how the community grew larger and larger. In colonial times, it numbered around 1000 to 1500 members. Right away, [00:18:00] its internal problems manifested themselves. How to observe kashrut? There were many views on that. How to arrange communal services on the Sabbath and holidays? How to behave towards renegades, or former Marranos? How to attract rabbis and teachers, and cantors? They had the same problems that we have now.

(laughter)

The first 52-page Sephardi prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur was printed in 1751. Now remember, they arrived in 1654. The rift between Ashkenazim and Sfardim couldn't be ignored. Complaints of mutual discrimination were levelled on both sides. Which tradition should be followed? Usually, in our shtetl, I remember, there were always conflicts -- which piyyut to omit.

And there were always [00:19:00] conflicts. There were quarrels -- sometimes they were violent quarrels, so much they came to a very famous rabbi, and the rabbi said, "What do you mean? Why don't you use tradition?" And they said, "This is our tradition -- to quarrel!" (laughter) In 1718, Yiddish- or German-speaking Ashkenazim became the majority, but the services were conducted according to Sfardi ritual. In New York She'arit Yisra'el, it remains Sephardi to this day. In 1730, the first official synagogue as such was opened in New York, thanks to a fundraising campaign among wealthy Jews in London, Curaçao, and Barbados, and other states. In 1758, a beautiful synagogue was erected in Newport, Rhode Island. It still functions as a historical landmark.

Very fast for those times, a hundred years or so later, Jews became a factor in public [00:20:00] affairs. Jewish life in America reminds some researchers of the highest point of symbiosis that was attained during the Golden Age in Spain, and the Weimar Republic in Germany. Who hasn't learned that both ended in tragedy? And who hasn't had a conviction that in this respect, the Jews of -- the story of Jews in America has been, and will remain, different from the two others? Almost from the very outset, numerous emigrants found this country special. Named only in 1912 as the New World, it became what some called

the Land of Promise, and others, the Goldine Medina, the Land of Gold. And also Galut shel Chesed: an exile of grace and compassion. But politically, and psychologically, the community resembled others in quasi-similar situations. It took sides. To solve the so-called [00:21:00] Jewish question, some chose to let their Jewishness vanish, while others believed in deepening it. Some prestigious family totally disappeared from Jewish history books; others emerged as inspiring mentors and benefactors. During the Revolution in this land, as always, Jews could be found within both camps. And the same was true of the Civil War. Chaim Solomon held the revolutionary cause. Others, in New York and Newport, remained loyal to the mother country. The same conflict prevailed during the Civil War. In the North, Jews opposed slavery with all their heart and soul, their humanism rooted in biblical law, favoring the stranger, and against humiliation. Whereas in the South, Jews were among slaveholders, and slave merchants -- not many, but there were some. In the halls [00:22:00] of Congress, the voice of Judah Benjamin was heard, supporting the legality of slavery! There were rabbis who preached the virtue of abolition, but others, they gave sermons praising the institution of slavery. However, the real debate took place around the problem of excessive integration, bordering with assimilation. With the growth of the Jewish population -- two million at the beginning of the

twentieth century -- and its achievements in various fields of finance and culture, social success turned into a threat. What if the price for the sense of security would be too high? For it would be at the expense of Jewish identity, which would lead to its erosion. And what if a Jewish tradition would be the first victim accorded to Jews?

Emancipation caused similar problems in [00:23:00] Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, when Jews profited from their newly received rights, not to build more yeshivot, but to enroll in secular colleges. In 1839, Lazarus Cohen, a teacher of Unsleben in Germany, entrusted Jewish emigrants from his city with the following message, going to America. "Friends," quote, "you are travelling to a land of freedom, where the opportunity will be presented to live without compulsory Jewish education." Remember, 1839. "Resist and withstand this tempting freedom, and do not turn away from the religion of our fathers. Do not throw away your sacred faith for quickly lost earthly pleasures. For your faith brings you consolation and quiet in this life, and will bring you certain happiness in the other life. Do not [00:24:00] tear yourself away from the laws in which your fathers and mothers search for assurance and found it. The promise to remain good Jews must never, and should never, be broken during this trip, nor in your life at home. Nor when you

go to sleep, nor when you rise again. Nor in education of your children." End of quote.

The fears included in this letter were well-founded. In the colonial period, 10 to 15 percent of American Jews intermarried. I am not talking about today. It's much -- well. Granted, hundreds of synagogues were opened in the coming decades. Everywhere people quoted George Washington's letter to the Newport synagogue, in which he pledged that, quote, "that his government will give to bigotry no sanction, and to persecution no assistance." For Jews who came from places of persecution, these were [00:25:00] words, great words, consoling words, healing words! Later, when General Ulysses Grant ordered all Jews expelled from the army, his order was revoked by Lincoln.

But with the years passing, religion lost ground among the young Jews. The conflicts of generations erupted mainly in the first part of the twentieth century, when children of East European immigrants chose to rebel against their parents' ties to their religious past, and opted for anarchist theories: socialism, secular Zionism, Bundism, communism, and atheism. Those were the years when the anti-religious Jewish Daily Forward -- for which I used to work at one time, but much later -- published then articles and ads appealing to its readers to abandon Yom

Kippur services and replace them with festive dinners and balls.

[00:26:00] Those were the years when a warning by Lithuanian sage did not sound out of place. I quote him. "In America," he said, "kosher food is not to be found anywhere. In America," he said, "even the stones are treyf, are (laughter) impure for consumption." In other words, in some ultra-religious circle, people believed that to emigrate to America meant to stop being Jewish. Almost a century ago, in 1907, Yisra'el Friedlander, professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary, delivered an address whose pessimism reflected such apprehension. The lecture was called, "The Problem of Judaism in America," and insisted on the possibility that, quote, "the benefits of freedom for Jews could bring about their de-Judaization." He was mainly concerned with the absence of great minds in the [00:27:00] community. He said, I quote him, "In times gone by, Italy presented one of the finest and brightest phases of Jewish culture. Only two generations ago," he said, "it was still able to produce a personality so profoundly, so deeply, so genuinely Jewish as Shmu'el David Luzzatto, and to present American Jewry in our own generation with a man like Sabato Morais. Now the condition of Judaism in Italy is one of utter stagnation. In France," he continued, "where centuries ago, Talmudic Judaism found its most brilliant expounders, Judaism is but a lifeless and unsuccessful imitation of French Catholicism. In Germany,

we stumble on all sides against indifference and apostasy," he said.

And what about America? His diagnosis is sad. The condition here, he declared, is scarcely different. He admits that there was a [00:28:00] tremendous growth of American Judaism, with its ever-increasing number of congregations and institutions. But these, he said, did not represent an organic growth from within, but the result of great minds that came from the ghettos! In general terms, he believed that American Jews were blind to the fact that the dawn of the Jews is the dusk of Judaism. That the nearer the problem of Jewry reaches its solution, the more complicated and the more dangerous becomes the problem of Judaism. That the more emancipated, prosperous, and successful the Jews become, the more impoverished, defenseless, and threatened becomes Judaism -- the only reason, and the only foundation of their existence.

Was he right? Certain facts may prove his point. Little or nothing remained from one-time Alexandria's great schools of Talmud. [00:29:00] Then, in the Talmudic times, Alexandria had, according to Talmudic chronicles, one million Jews, with great sages who competed with the sages of Palestine. Has Christianity survived because it adjusted to modernity, whereas



Judaism survived because it didn't? But what about the times and places where Jews did adjust, did renounce their Jewishness? Among the first to convert in medieval Catholic Spain, it's sad to say, were small communities and their spiritual leaders. What place do they occupy in Jewish history? Which of Moses Mendelssohn's descendants remain Jewish? Can Jewish culture be severed from Jewish tradition? Like Shimon Dubnow, the greatest of Jewish historians, my favorite, Friedlander [00:30:00] believed in the spiritual and cultural power of the Jewish people, and not in its political influence. In spite of his pessimism predicted that America will become world's Jewry's most vibrant center. Together with Achad Ha'Am, Friedlander and Dubnow were cultural Zionists. Both died tragically. Friedlander was murdered in 1920 while on a humanitarian mission in the Ukraine, while Dubnow perished in '41 in the Riga ghetto, murdered by a Gestapo officer, who was his former student in Germany. And one of my great dreams has been and remains to go to Riga, because I have learned a lot about Dubnow, and I know from sources -- good sources -- that he, in the ghetto, was working on the last volume of his history of the Jewish people. And [00:31:00] I'm sure he -- he did somewhere in the ground. And I know where he lived. And I would like to take one day, I'll take a team just to go and find it.

Could secular culture of Jews save them from enemies determined to lead them to destruction? The answer is clear: it did not. Could Jewish culture save them? Could Jewish culture be saved? Will it? By whom? The young historian Jonathan Sarna tells of his own experience, as he first became interested in American Jewish history, and I quote him, "I mentioned my interest to a scholar at the distinguished rabbinical seminary. And he was absolutely appalled. 'American Jewish history,' he wrote, 'I'll tell you all that you need to know about American Jewish history. The Jews came to America, they abandoned their faith, they began to live like Gentiles, and after a generation or two, they intermarried and disappeared.' That, he said, is American Jewish history -- [00:32:00] all the rest is commentary, so don't waste your time. Go and study Talmud." (laughter) I think I know the teacher who told him that.

Obviously, the distinguished scholar was unaware of the extraordinary growth of Talmudic schools that already seemed to flourish in post-war America. Some observers speak of a true Jewish renaissance in the field of learning and culture, in literature and music. Science and art. Politics and academe. Jews have, and had, an impact on the general environment, which is disproportionate to the demographic situation which is ours. Others go as far as maintaining that since antiquity, there were

never as many Jewish schools, with their teachers and students, as there are now in the United States. Not even in ancient Palestine and Babylon have there been as many masters and their disciples studying Torah. [00:33:00] Until the 1950s, Jews encountered grave and often scandalous obstacles to be admitted to the best universities in the country. Professors, chair holders in the Jewish studies were rare. Today, few academic institutions do not offer courses and programs in Jewish history, literature, and religion. Everywhere, classes on Holocaust-related subjects are overcrowded. Israel, Yiddish literature, and medieval poetry have never attracted as many students. In the larger context, even before World War II, American Jews did not fail their people. A strange visionary called Mordechai No'ach, writer and diplomat, gathered a rally in 1824 in Buffalo, and proclaimed the establishment of an Ir Miklat, the city of refuge, named Arararat, for homeless refugees. It didn't take off. [00:34:00] He had three sisters who converted to Christianity. (laughter) But as an idea, it sounded exciting! When the Damascus blood libel inflicted fear and suffering on the Jewish community in Syria and its neighbors, the Jews in America mobilized all their efforts to prevail upon Washington to come to its defense. The same may be said about the reaction to the Beilis Affair in Kiev. When in the '30s, Arabs staged murderous pogroms in Palestine, 25,000

Jews filled Madison Square Garden, offering their solidarity with their victimized brethren. The Balfour Declaration, promising a homeland for the Jewish people, galvanized American Jewry! To be Jewish was no longer an obstacle to success. Literature, music welcomed Jews with honors. Felix Frankfurter was a respected member of the Supreme Court. Bernard Baruch of [00:35:00] Wall Street, and Henry Morgenthau in presidential cabinets. Pluralism was not an empty word, nor was equality.

Was there no discrimination? There was. Shameful racial discrimination towards black people, religious and ethnic disrespect from clubs, hotels, and apartment buildings towards Jews. But compared to my generation, to what it had to endure in Europe, America was a paradise! When I arrived in the United States in 1956, I was surprised to find a vibrant Jewish atmosphere. Religious in Brooklyn, cultural in Manhattan. I thought I understood why George Washington called America the promised land for Jews. Four Jewish dailies papers. Several Yiddish weeklies. Monthly magazines. A number of Yiddish theaters proved the vitality of a culture that was near extinction on the old continent. Yiddish humor invaded [00:36:00] Hollywood! And Broadway! What would really humor be today without the Yiddish -- who later, of course, became very famous, without their Jewish names. They changed their Yiddish

names to others, but they did it. Yiddish poets were admired, Yiddish stars applauded. The Forward was the largest daily, and the communist Freiheit, the smallest. Naturally, they fought each other to the bitter end in matters of ideology. The Forward was more Jewish than socialist, and the Freiheit more communist than Jewish. When the bloody Arab hate pogroms erupted in Palestine, Freiheit, the communist Freiheit, condemned the Arab hooligans and their British supporters, but shortly afterwards, ordered by Stalin, it changed its attitudes, both in tone and content. Its headline banner accused, "The Zionist fascists have provoked the Arab uprising." It took many events, many years, for the Jewish communist [00:37:00] writers to show their disappointment in Stalin's antisemitism, and to accept the idea that Jewish solidarity is an essential trait of Jewish destiny. A Jew alone must not be left alone. When Jews were expelled from Spain and Portugal, they were received with open arms by their co-religionists in Greece and Morocco, and in Bulgaria and Italy. When Jews were targeted in the smallest village in Europe, their fear was felt by Jews in Chicago, or Boston, or New York. Has it always been so in our land of freedom and social justice, which was meant to be the world capital of human compassion? Is it so today?

During the last 60-odd years, American Jewry centered its activity-defining identity around two major themes: the Holocaust, and Israel. In other words, a Jew felt himself or herself Jewish by linking their fate to the memory of the dead in Europe [00:38:00], and to the hope of the living in Israel. Let's admit it. In general terms, many Jews in the ghettos, rightly or not, had the painful feeling that American Jews, especially on leadership levels, had let them down. It began with a sad story of the Saint Louis. More than a thousand Jewish refugees were aboard the ship. They had visas to Cuba, but were not allowed to disembark, so the ship was sent back to Germany. But the captain, a German, a good person, knew what the refugees knew -- what was awaiting them in Germany. After all, the event happened several months after the Kristallnacht. Why not leave them in America? The ships spent days and nights not far from American shores, but Roosevelt refused. Have American Jews done enough to make him change his attitude? I don't know. [00:39:00] Have they tried hard enough? I don't know. There are so many things I don't know. More were about, but came later. At times, I am moved to despair, and that's because of what came later. I say this with anguish and sorrow. And I repeat what I must have stated here more than once; namely, that I do not consider myself a judge, but a witness. Only a witness. I try to refrain myself from passing judgment

on others. I do not believe that Jewish leaders in the early '40s, were insensitive to Jewish suffering, and indifferent to what was happening over there, under the silent heavens of Auschwitz and Majdanek. Did they know? And if they did, could they have done more to move the Allies to save more Jews from the unspeakable horrors and death? Historians disagree on the answers, but I read and re-read [00:40:00] letters written in the ghettos. And what I find in them is heartbreaking. I read and re-read the Commander-in-chief of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Mordechai Anielewicz's pathetic appeals to Jewish leaders in London and America, urging them to declare mass demonstrations and hunger strikes. All political and tactical explanations why so little was done, lose their human weight. The fact is that nothing was even tried.

I have asked five American presidents, and countless senators and representatives, why the Allies did not bomb Birkenau. I've asked and asked. They had no answer. But in truth, the same question could have also been addressed with equal poignancy to Jewish leaders of the time: what did they do? Surely not enough. Again, it's only an expression of sadness; [00:41:00] not a judgment. But I have been tormented by this unanswerable questions for many years, but particularly this year, which marks actually the sixtieth anniversary of the extermination of

Hungarian Jewry, which, I will repeat it with my last breath, could have been saved. In fact, of all the large Jewish communities in German-occupied Europe, Hungarian Jewry alone could have been saved. And it wasn't. It could have been saved because it was the last. Because it began days before D-Day, and lasted for weeks after D-Day. Hitler had lost the war; the whole world knew it. The German nation knew it. The Hungarians knew it. The end was near. Allied aircrafts dominated the skies; there was little to stop them from bombing weapons factories and railways, and at that time, 10,000 Jews -- men, women, and children -- were gassed, and burned, daily, in Birkenau alone. Had the railways [00:42:00] been destroyed, it would at least have slowed down the process. Why weren't they? Again, what I can say. I don't understand. My questions remain questions.

That also applies on a quite different level to what used to -- I used to feel about official passivity towards Russian Jewry, in the early years of our battle for their freedom. I visited the Soviet Union in 1965, and wrote back a personal report on its Jews. I described their fear, their suffering, but also their courage and struggle for hope and dignity. I told a tale of young Jews who in the thousands gathered on Simchat Torah in front of the Great Synagogue on Arkhipova Street, expressing



their allegiance with fervor and song, to the Jewish people and its destiny. I called the book *The Jews of Silence*, but it was misunderstood, and surely misinterpreted. I did not say that [00:43:00] they were -- I said that we were -- the Jews of silence. And I mainly directed my criticism at our leadership. It was impossible to move its members to action. Oh, I remember Rav Abraham Joshua Heschel, my friend and I, would go from conference to conference, from convention to convention, trying to make them aware of what was happening in the Soviet Union, without success. Most leaders had their own priorities, and many excuses for not doing anything. Who came to our demonstrations? Teenagers. At best, their parents brought them by car to our gatherings, and left. In truth, if the situation changed, it was thanks to the children. At one point, they prevailed upon their parents, saying, "Your generation did not do enough for European Jews when they needed you. Let's not repeat their moral mistakes and their historical failures."

In the final [00:44:00] analysis, the renaissance of Russian Jewry will remain one of the most spectacular triumphs in the twentieth century, in its Jewish history. Logically, Russian Jews could have vanished from the stage. They did not. In Israel, they now play central roles in politics, industry, the arts, and the scientists. A million Russian Jews are now in

Israel. If anyone had told me when I was there so many times that I will see that, that I will see the gates open up, would never have believed it. Which, in conclusion, brings us to a second element: Israel. Which also is motivating Jewish existence in America today. How is one to measure a community's commitment to its own passion for a land and a people on the other side of borders and oceans? How is one to explain that a majority of American Jews have not even visited Israel? Not even out of curiosity, to see what a Jewish state [00:45:00] looks like. How do they manage to resist this curiosity, just to see the dream of their parents and grandparents come alive? Just to feel what the Jew feels when he or she walks in the old Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem, filled with prayers from the time of David and Jeremiah? Not so long ago, some leaders in Israel felt what Jews in the ghetto had felt also: that they were let down by American Jews. It happened after the Suez Campaign in 1956. It was a military triumph, and a political defeat. The Eisenhower administration applied inordinate pressure on Israel to give back the Sinai to Egypt. Ben Gurion was convinced that American Jews would rally behind Israel. He was wrong. They did not. His pleas to some of them went unheeded, and the response was polite [00:46:00] but negative. Were they afraid of being accused of double loyalty? Whatever the reason, they must have felt humbled by the test. Their failure was also Ben

Gurion's defeat. It hurt him as much as the first. He then met with Baron Guy de Rothschild of France, and presented him with the stunning proposal to dissolve the Zionist movement altogether, since it proved to be disloyal and useless, and replace it with the worldwide network of associations of friends of Israel. It was an outburst of anger and bitterness on his part, and nothing came of it, thank God.

And today. What is the situation of Jews today in America? Is it still a different country? Say, different from when? Is it still a promised land, or a land of promise for Jews, as it was then? [00:47:00] Well, one thing is clear. That America is less popular and more popular than before, even in lands where America is being hated -- in Europe, or in some countries in Africa, in the Muslim world. Even there, most people would easily give up whatever they had, the little things they had, and just get a visa to America. Which means, from the Jewish viewpoint, it's something that he must ponder. How come that such a great nation -- the American nation -- and such a small nation -- the Jewish nation -- are hated by the same people? Those who hate Jews hate Israel. And those who hate Israel, hate America. In Europe you see all the time, people going around with banners, [00:48:00] hating Sharon and Bush. And the main thing is, they really hate America. I believe, naturally,

that whatever -- whatever we may say about our life here, things are different. Times have changed. American Jews are no longer afraid to speak up against the administration's policy in the Middle East, even when it's unfair to the Jewish state.

Demographically, with the birth rate being what it is, American Jews are getting smaller in number, but not necessarily weaker in influence. We have learned lessons from the forerunners that arrived to settle here 350 years ago. The most important one being that the Jews' principal obligation in society is to remain Jewish. Our priorities must be Jewish, but without at the same time ceasing to be universal. [00:49:00] In other words, they are to be inclusive, but not exclusive. To help another person or community of persons is an ethical commandment, but not if it means to give up my Jewishness. It is the Jew in me that is universal. To relinquish the one or the other is nothing but a mutilative, self-defeating exercise in futility.

This concept has been tried in other countries and societies, but never as fruitfully as here. Now, 350 years ago, of course, there was nothing here. But now, later, young Jewish students are eager to learn where they come from, and for what purpose. They discovered the beauty and the magic enrichment one finds in learning. How did the late, great Louis Finkelstein put it?

Every people has its aristocracy, and we Jews have ours. Our aristocrat [00:50:00] is the scholar. And so with all the challenges still before us, and with all the occasional disappointments and setbacks, we may encounter in attempting at affirming the creative ingredients of our Jewishness as a factor in history, I think, of America and the Jew in America, with less apprehension than hope.

Here, as elsewhere, antisemitism comes and goes, and comes again. It disturbs and frightens me, but it puzzles me even more. It is the oldest group hatred from antiquity to have survived antiquity. When and by what means will it disappear? Whatever it may do to change peoples' image of us, it must not and will not alter our image of ourselves. Oh, yes -- many questions remain questions. I know, we all know, that much is still to be done to justify the hope of our ancestors, 350 years ago. The hope they have invested in their future, which is our present. [00:51:00] But the effort is worthwhile. But what about tomorrow? How are we to anticipate America's Jewish evolution? Naturally, I am not speaking about the next 350 years. I do not invite you to look that far ahead. Instead, I would suggest to explore a simple question which these days does contain a certain urgency. Where, and at what pace, is Jewish history in general, and in America in particular, going? How

are we to measure its direction? Is it still going uphill? Will it be defined by the challenging embodiment of its promise, or by its fears of unthinkable threats and perils? Will America replace Eastern Europe in its new forms of what used to be the kingdom of the shtetl? In other words, we are speaking not about tomorrow, but about the day after. I know the pessimists among us [00:52:00] love to quote statistics. It seems that we are losing ground. Inter-marriage, especially in small urban areas, slow, yet an unstoppable assimilation; general negligence in matters of education; astonishingly few Jews are here ready to do -- commit themselves to action. When I came to America, it had six million Jews. Have we lost a million? Some insensitive theoreticians go as far as calling the process a new Holocaust, which I cannot hear without protesting, implying that there will be a time when we shall become less than minority.

Well, I don't agree with such pessimistic outlook. We Jews seem to distrust and dislike statistics. Admit it -- they almost ruined last night's debate. (laughter) But then, also, Jewish tradition negates both the necessity and the validity of statistics. We simply refuse to [00:53:00] believe in numbers. If we were to rely on the logic of numbers, our people would have long vanished from the surface of history. We did not lack opportunities: at times, seduced by conversion; often opposed

and oppressed; the religious confrontation, seemingly abandoned by God, and of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; vanquished by armies of gigantic empires; exiled to the far corners of the earth. In terms of pure logic, we could have more than once gone under. Wasn't that the message sent to us by history? "Go away, People of Israel. We don't want your gifts, nor your poison. Go, disappear -- slowly, very slowly or dramatically. Die dramatically. Go at your own pace, or at ours, but go." When China's leader Mao Tse-tung heard from a visitor that the Jewish people number only fourteen million, he's supposed to have exclaimed, "What? In this land, thirteen million?" It's accepted as an accountant's mistake. [00:54:00] (laughter) "Only three million in Israel? Give them a hotel," he said. (laughter)

But we are still here. And how did we manage? I'll tell you. My late teacher and friend, Saul Lieberman z"l once gave me the following explanation. It happened during the weeks preceding the Six Day War of 1967. The worldwide Jewish community lived in anguish. Personally, as a correspondent at the United Nations, I was desperate. I listened to the Arab delegates, and the then PLO leader, Ahmed Shukeiri, Yasser Arafat's immediate predecessor, speaking freely about their resolve to throw all the Israelis into the sea, saying that they'll be the end of

Israel, with no one in the United Nations protesting, except for one, Arthur Goldberg. I believed that it could very well happen.

In France, the [00:55:00] great Jewish philosopher Raymond Aron published a front-page editorial in *Le Figaro*, saying, quote, "I do not wish to survive Israel." Unquote. Some of us -- many of us -- shared his feeling. Lieberman did not. His optimism disturbed me. I asked him, "How do you manage to look so cheerful? Aren't you worried?" Listen to his answer. He said, "The master of the universe is like a banker." And he pretended to know much about banking. (laughter) "When the bank invests too much in an enterprise, it can no longer let it go bankrupt." As he said, "God has, for such a long time, invested so much in the Jewish people, that he can no longer withdraw from it." (laughter) And he said, "That's the reason for my faith." Well, it's mine, too. It's mine, too -- my faith, my hope for America, and for America's [00:56:00] Jews as well. And, of course, for Israel. Granted, we know that occasionally under outside or the internal pressure, there were communities that dissolved themselves. But not here. Most communities, old and new, are endowed with what the philosopher Henri Bergson called *élan vital*. Call it faith, awareness, sensitivity, commitment, memory, consciousness. All that to stay above ground, alive,



and creative. And possessed by an irresistible urge from all of us, to invoke hope. Even when it seems frail. And even when there is none. Thank you. (applause) [00:57:00]

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