

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Rabbi Nachman said, "Make prayers out of my tales."
His many followers obeyed and went even further, they made tales out of his prayers. As for his distant disciple Franz Kafka, he simply stated, "To write is to pray." Literature and prayer have much in common. Both take everyday words and give them meaning. Both appeal to what is most personal and most transcendent in the human being. Both are rooted in the most obscure and mysterious [00:01:00] zone of our being. Nourished by anguish and fervor, both negate detachment and imitation, and are negated by them. The writer and the worshiper both draw from one source, the source where sound becomes melody, and melody turns into language, which becomes offering. What inspiration is to the writer, *kavanah*, concentration, is to the beseecher. Both are as open as an open wound. (laughter)
(child crying) When children cry it's also a prayer. (laughter)
That's a very strong prayer. I like young listeners, but--
[00:02:00]

So, literature and prayer both are as open as an open wound. Both live tense and privileged moments. If one may assume that man could not live without literature, which is not so sure, one

may equally affirm that neither could he survive without prayer. Except in our society it is becoming increasingly difficult for modern persons to pray. We have conquered space, but have forgotten our prayer. And this is particularly true of young people who need religiosity to enrich and justify their existence. Their religious thirst is greater and more genuine than that of their parents. What they yearn for is not knowledge but devotion. [00:03:00] They seek fervor more than erudition. More and more youngsters, especially of secular background, want to be taught how to pray, in what to believe, and in whom as well.

But why pray? Suppose we know why. The question that follows is, do we know how to pray? And suppose we know how, can we, and must we pray? Is it possible that one must pray for acquiring the ability to pray? In the vast literature of Yiddish humor, we encounter a pious Hasid who tells his brethren in distress, "What are you waiting for to receive help?" In Yiddish you say, farloz zikh nit oyf nissim, zog tehillim which means do not rely on miracles, start reciting psalms. There are innumerable prayers available to us for rain, and for health, for peace, and sustenance. Wherever you turn there is a prayer for what you do, or see, or wish. The only activity that requires no prayer, preparatory prayer is charity, *tzedakah*,

there is no prayer for that. And the reason is simple. Our sages were afraid that if you were to say a prayer, you may say it with such fervor, such enthusiasm, and it would last so long that you would forget for whom to give the charity. So, God says, "I forgive you, give charity without prayers."

Are all people equally entitled to prayers, to all prayers? Is there one prayer for the wealthy and another for the poor? One for the young and another one for the old? [00:05:00] One for the winner and one for the loser? In Jerusalem the following anecdote circulated for some time. Two men stand before the Wailing Wall, a millionaire and a beggar. Both weep and plead with the Almighty to help them. One needs money for the Sabbath meal, just \$100, the other needs a fortune, a million dollars, to save a good business deal. As they both send their pleas to heaven, the wealthy man approaches the beggar, hands him \$100 bill and says, "Don't disturb God. Don't you see he's busy with me?" (laughter) But prayer is important, that we know, because according to Isaiah it begins with words by First Isaiah which says that prayers actually later on in our times would replace [00:06:00] offerings in the Temple. The service that used to be held in the Temple, and there is no more Temple, we tell the story, and the story of the event becomes the event.

But I think at this moment let us pause for a minute and open our customary parentheses, and remind you that for almost forty years, this annual encounter is meant to be a return to the sources, meaning to ancient texts whose message is still impacting our lives. What did we try to do here for almost forty years? Next year will be the fortieth year that we have had these small gatherings. We have tried to find in our religious and cultural traditions not only moral guidelines, but literally beauty as well. To listen to Isaiah, or Jeremiah, or [00:07:00] Amos is in moments of grace being with them in Jerusalem before the destruction of the temple. To hear Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion's celebration of scripture as he was burning on the stake. What he said then, of course, is an appeal to sustenance, to faith, and to fervor. He said, "Gvilin nis" when he was burning he said -- either his daughter or his disciples asked him, "What do you see now?" And he said, "I see *givilin nisrafin* I see that the parchments," because he had the scrolls, the holy scrolls in his arms, "the parchments are burning, but the letters are not consumed. They fly in the air and they are indestructible." And therefore when we think of him, of course, we remember Rome's cruelty, but we also remember Jewish spiritual resistance [00:08:00] to it.

To hear a story about a founder of the Hasidic movement, the Besht, is to become part of it. After all, isn't this what we repeat every year at the *Seder*, at the *Seder* meal on Passover, when we read in the *Haggadah* so beautifully illustrated by my friend Mark Podwal that *chayav adam*, all of us, are duty-bound to believe, and to feel, and to experience a memory which tells us that we should act and live as if we left Egypt from bondage to freedom. Whatever happened or happens to one community affects us all both in the past and in the present, both collectively and individually. The Torah was given to Moses, but destined to every man and woman of Jewish faith, and of all faiths. Of course, [00:09:00] which leads us to tonight's subject about prayer. But as always we have to take stock of the last six months since what happened in the world since we last met.

And then we spoke about Jewish contribution to America, the 350th anniversary of the arrival of the first Jews to New York. Many things happened. We had the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the camps, which became a world event. But why, why 60 years later? Why were the 60 years more important, more dramatic, the celebrations, the commemorations, the events, than the 50th anniversary? And then, lately of course, the death of the Pope. Everybody has spoken about it, and if time permits, I will tell

you more about him, but for the moment we should say that I think he will remain [00:10:00] as a great spiritual leader in Jewish history as well. Not only in Christian history, in Jewish history for what he has done. To claim a place with the Jewish faith, which after all was the faith common to three monotheistic religions. He was the first to go to a synagogue. In his testament he thanks the chief rabbi of Rome for inviting him to the synagogue. The first to go to Jerusalem, the first to recognize Israel, the first to commemorate the Holocaust in the Vatican. And the first really to fight anti-Semitism. When we think of his predecessor John XXIII, we are as grateful to him as we are to the other. But when you think of the other Pope, we are not so happy. But we'll see later on.

Anyway, of course, we should speak about Israel. Israel now is a place [00:11:00] of hope. More than--in many, many years we want to believe that things will go better and better, there will be peace between all people there. And the first steps have been made, have been taken, and in general it's less dangerous than it used to be. Less suicide bombers, suicide killers, less attacks, less funerals. So, let's say that we are supposed to believe that *Chodesh Nissan*, the month of *Nissan*, which is the month of the liberation of Egypt, will usher a positive period, a hopeful period in our existence. But all

this has to do with prayers, of course. This is not, tonight's session is not a session for prayers, otherwise we would have started this study session with the words, let us pray. No, [00:12:00] we are here to study prayer. Prayer is an important part of Jewishness for us, for other religions as well, for them. But if so, how are we to define its importance, its weight? Is it psychological, spiritual, mystical, practical? Is prayer possible without melodies? Is music but a form of prayer? Naturally, we shall explore all the avenues leading to prayer. For the moment, suffice it to say that at times we are supposed to pray for the gates of prayer to remain open. Well, here in this hall, they are.

If prayer suggests humility, a discourse on prayer implies the opposite. And therefore, I would rather tell you a story. It's about a man who stumbles in his prayers. [00:13:00] Day after day, every time he's about to say the prayer *ahavah rabbah ahavtanu*, which means You have loved us very much, oh Lord, he must stop. He must. Every word turns into an obstacle. He feels a shadow enveloping his gaze and weighing on his breath. He feels pain and the pain makes him sad, profoundly sad. And the sadness overwhelms him with memories and nostalgic images and tunes, bringing back a vanished world, his childhood and the fervently innocent prayers of that childhood. His pain

increases and for a moment he feels trapped. No matter what he would do, what he would say, it would be almost a lie, a betrayal. Then here again, let's make a brief pause again, [00:14:00] and have a look at the hero of the story. Who is he? Obviously our contemporary. From what proceeded we already know that he's religious and observant, that he says his prayers every day, and also that he says them with concentration, otherwise his problem would not touch us at all. If it does, it is because of his desire to pray in truth, with sincerity, while at the same time being unable to do so. His dialectical situation is such that none of his options seem right. No one has more reasons than he to bow before God and no one has more reasons to turn away from him. As an individual he cannot but praise God's mercy for having survived. [00:15:00] But as member of the most cursed generation in history, he cannot but refuse God such praise.

So, we understand his difficulties in uttering the prayer *ahava raba ahavtanu*, You have loved us, oh God, very much. Each of us may encounter similar inner opposition when saying any prayer. The inhibitions are the same, so are the doubts. Between the words we may try to articulate and their content, there exists a wall or an abyss. Either we lie or the words lie. What we wish to say cannot be said. What we want to offer has been taken

away from us. And yet once upon a time these very words helped us live through the night and wait, and wait for dawn. These very words [00:16:00] helped link us to what constitutes man's truth, if not his immortality. Have we changed, we alone? No, everything has changed. Only the words remain the same. And this is one of the reasons why we find it so painful to use them as though they had betrayed us and themselves. We are repeating today prayers that were uttered by our forefathers and theirs for generations and generations throughout the centuries. Do they have the same meaning? Do they respond to our need to mark a moment in our life? Once upon a time it was so simple, to live meant to implore, to survive, meant to express [00:17:00] gratitude. In the midst of torment and tempest, one knew what to say, and when, and with whom, and how. There was a prayer, as we said, a prayer which kept us who we were in the situation, which was ours. And there was a melody for every prayer, especially if you were a Hasid, as I am.

A certain order prevailed inside exile itself. Certain sentences had to be formed at the given hour, neither earlier nor later, nothing was left to chance, the war between Hasidism and its opponents, the establishment, really had to do with the time for prayer. The Hasidim couldn't care less about time. Eight o'clock, God is not there at nine o'clock after all?

(laughter) Whereas the establishment said, [00:18:00] no, it's written eight, so it must be eight, not eight-o'-one, it's eight. In a world both dismembered and demented, one chose to cling to the *siddur*, the prayer book. Hence to say that which is an order, the words have the same root, order. Lost in geography, in space, Jews oriented themselves in time, making it their refuge, their haven. And prayer lent time its splendor and its depth. What was prayer to them, to us? An encounter with God and with one's self. A moment of grace, of abandonment, of affirmation, of recognition. If art is man's way of saying no, prayer is his or her way of saying yes. Yes to the universe, [00:19:00] yes to its creator, yes to life, yes to its meaning, yes to faith, to hope, to joy, to children, to their innocence, to all the people and their melancholy hope. A beacon to the lost wanderer, Jacob's ladder to the dreamer in search of dreams, a window to the soul, prayer is what is most indispensable in man's passage on earth. Consolation or compensation to some, sublimation to others, prayer also means power and adventure.

What we know is that prayer is what kept communities linked together. Because it communicates its lasting faith in the power of prayer. If the study of Torah has kept us alive, then prayer has kept our hope alive. Prayer was the shortest way to

reach out for answers, to misfortune. It was enough to pray, to pray well for human beings anywhere, to be able to sing, to reconcile themselves with destiny, and to achieve some happiness, some peace either as gift or reward. God loves not only to receive prayers, we are told, but also to recite them according to the Talmud. What are God's prayers? And the Talmud says, "*she-kavash, she-she-shekhbosh ca-asi v'racheim al banai* God's prayer is to himself, "May I contain my anger and have pity on my children." [00:21:00] Thus the history of prayer is as old as the history of humankind. Remember the Talmud. Adam was the first liturgical author. It was he who composed what we say the sound for the Sabbath. He loved the Sabbath. It was his first day in life. He was born on a Friday, so Saturday he discovered a world in peace, no problems, God was happy, he was happy, Eve was happy, they were all happy. (laughter)

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are said to have divided among themselves the three daily services. *Tikkun* meant to be prepared for the reparation of the word. And so, as not to offend the women, one was granted to Rachel and another to Leah. And I remember even in my [00:22:00] childhood, in my adolescence, I would get up at midnight to say *Tikkun Rachel* and *Tikkun Leah*, that was the prayers for the redemptive quality of

messianism. Kings and prophets, philosophers and kabbalists have all sought to be identified, if not remembered, by a prayer. The *Akedah* is a song, the *Kabbalah* the song of that song. What is Hasidism if not one endless prayer offered sometimes in a whisper and other times in a shout? Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who we already quoted, believes that every tree, every leaf, every blade of grass say their own prayers to God. Only the dead don't pray. [00:23:00] Israel's entire destiny was contained in its prayer. Pleas for help and pleas for food, thanks for blessings received and shared, gravity and joy, whispers and lamentations, jubilant outcries and melancholy litanies, all the longings, all the metaphors of Jewish existence are reflected in Jewish prayer.

Israel's very concept of Israel is in its prayer. Whereas Torah came from above, given by God, *tefillah*, or prayer, was composed by man. In matters of Torah, everything has already been said by Moses to Moses, but not *tefillah*, not prayer. As we repeat a certain prayer, we identify with its author and recreate it over and over, and every one of us can and must give birth to his [00:24:00] or her own prayer. Naturally, like everything else in our tradition, prayer exists and vibrates on more than one level. All of Jewish humanism can be illustrated with the Talmudic saying that silence in prayer has been instituted so as

not to embarrass sinners. Nothing is as grave a sin to us as humiliation. No one is allowed to humiliate anyone, be that anyone a sinner of all sinners. Jewish philosophy stresses certain conclusions from prayer, namely that God is not indifferent to what happens to his creation. Jewish literature would be much poorer without the innumerable *piyutim*, the liturgic poems, and so would Jewish history.

Certain tell more than about The Crusades than all the historians' accounts, and contain more artistic poetry than many poetic works. Jewish poetry suffuses prayer and is suffused by it. True prayers are inevitably beautiful and ethical prayers offered on behalf of one's fellow man are granted first, says the Talmud. Those uttered against man are rejected, and perhaps that is the reason why a certain prayer of the 18 benedictions, *v'la-malshinim* was added much later to the service. And we know why. We believe that prayer must involve human beings. Prayer must be said for human beings. [00:26:00] Because Moses prayed at the Red Sea crossing, God admonished him. "My creatures are drowning in the sea and you indulge in prayer." A prayer that is not on behalf of one's community, we are told, is worthless. And that is Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, who was a friend and disciple of the Besht, he said it.

A prayer from which man's fate is absent, his anguish ignored, is not called prayer. Yet, it was also simple and gratifying in those times. Prayer was meant to engage man and God in eternal dialogue. Thanks to prayer we know that God is present, better still, that God is presence. Hence that everything is possible, everything is meaningful. Thanks to prayer, God descends from heaven and [00:27:00] dwells among his creatures, whoever they are, wherever they are. Thanks to prayer, man's soul leaves its dwelling and ascends into heaven. The substance of language and the language of silence, that is prayer. It brings together more than reason and reasoning. It both causes and shapes events. By explaining existence, it gives rhythm and density. Take away prayer from our people and you will have silenced its soul. And of course the prayers about Jerusalem, the prayers for Jerusalem, are the most sublime of all our liturgy because Jerusalem to us is a kind of person, a widow, the *Shekhinah* dwells in Jerusalem. What Victor Hugo says about Paris is much more true of Jerusalem. [00:28:00] Victor Hugo said, "That to destroy Paris is to destroy the human soul." And I believe that surely it would be true of Jerusalem. Whoever was dreaming of destroying Jerusalem actually wanted to destroy the human soul of the universe.

In other traditions, of course, as in ours, prayer responds to a need, to man's need to understand and be understood, to speak and be heard, to sing, to believe, to remember, to share, to dream, and to worship. Prayer stems from the need to go under in order to emerge again more serene than before, atoned and purified. We want to justify good and evil in the present. We need to glorify [00:29:00] ordeals and then weep over them. We cannot hold back too long. At one point we must let go. And we do so in prayer, which then becomes a mode of liberation. It is possible to live without hope, perhaps, not for long. It is possible to live without truth, only with a quest for truth, but not without prayer, which is a quest for both. Prayer then means impulse, movement, inward and outward, movement toward God, movement even more towards our fellow worshipers. And become one with God or God's emanation, and surely with God's creatures. Prayer means being alive, moving [00:30:00] toward life, celebrating the other person's life. For prayer is basically in the fullest sense an act of faith. Faith in God, faith in history, in God as a source of history, and therefore just, and not only almighty and compassionate. Faith in words, faith in faith. Without faith prayer approaches parody. To pray means to be able to measure what one has said, what one lacks, what one is, and what one wishes to be. To accept what one is given and give it back.

Those of us who have are duty-bound to share, and those of us who have much, we are duty-bound to give back. That is what *tzedakah* [00:31:00] means, that is what philanthropy means, that is on what culture is built. So, therefore we believe that without the ability of giving and receiving, and turning the receiving act into another way of giving, without this ability, we are deprived of an essential dimension. To be close to prayer is more punishment than sin, for prayer may contain its own reward. To pray is to break through solitude, break through fear of solitude, prayer is a remedy for solitude, even more than for sadness and torture. Had Elisha ben Abuyah, the one of the four masters who had entered the orchard of forbidden knowledge and lost his faith, had he [00:32:00] entered the *Beth Midrash*, the house of study, had he chosen Jewish prayers even while rejecting Jewish philosophy, his faith would have been less tragic. In another century and on another level it was prayer that saved the great philosopher Franz Rosenzweig from conversion and moved him to return to his people. Rabbah's attitude was not accepted in our tradition. Rabbah in the Talmud says that prayer is *Chayei hayesha*, it is for this world, for the physical world. No. Rabbah is wrong in this respect. It is not part of our physical existence. It is not a fleeting moment because Torah leads to *chayei olam*, [00:33:00] to

eternity, and Torah is in a way the source of all prayers. Both are needed for the Jew to fulfill his or her condition. Without either they would be unbalanced. Rabbah, a sage in the Talmud, was wrong in opposing the two. The material aspect of the existence and the spiritual act of existence both are rooted in the same spiritual vision of what the world is and must be.

Prayer and study are both given to us to lift us to higher spheres. They are not mutually exclusive; indeed, they complement one another. What Torah does for the mind, prayer does for the soul. But while man may study and still feel lonely, the same is not true of he or her who prays. [00:34:00] A Jew who prays ties himself or herself to the collective body of Israel. That is why we say *tefilah batzibur* [00:34:08] a collective prayer, collective worship is so stressed in Judaism. The loneliest Jew ceases to be lonely the moment he or she joins a *minyan*, a group of worshippers. The fact that they are saying words that other Jews elsewhere are reciting to commemorate the same occasion is a source of strength, they are no longer alone, their voice is not lost in emptiness. The fact that for centuries and centuries, millions and millions of Jews of all ages, of all conditions, have repeated the same words to express the same anguish and the same gratitude cannot but make us realize that we belong to an immense community [00:35:00] where

we can find not only forerunners but allies as well, companions for the road.

And repeating what Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Shimon said, "When they faced adversity, when they discovered all in learning and joy in Sabbath, the Jew knows that he or she is no longer a stranger in God's creation." Now you will agree that this need pray, to communicate, still exists in contemporary man. And even more than before. It exists not only among Jews but among Gentiles as well. The Russians' adoration of Stalin had a religious quality and even a mystical one. Read or reread the silly and pompous odes to the ruler of the Kremlin who was a murderer. They are not unlike litanies. Read the confessions of his famous victims, the writers, the poets. [00:36:00] They even use religious vocabulary. The Communist regime may have abolished religion, but not prayer. And the moment communism collapsed, all of us--synagogues opened, churches opened. And who came among all people? Those who came first were the young people.

We have witnessed all over the world an awakening of religiosity. I speak about religiosity, I am not speaking of organized religion. That's a topic for itself. Scientists make no secret of their desire to rediscover things spiritual. At

the famous base, scores of physicists studied the Talmud. They are best suited to realize that technology has solved the wrong problems. We walk on the moon, [00:37:00] but no one cares to look. We have conquered space, but not the heart. The distance separating one world from another is greater than the one separating us from us. Men has never fled so fast from so many places. He has never been so alienated, so traumatized. Since a certain event one, or two, or three generations ago, we know that our civilization was bankrupt. It has lost its fervor, its sense of adoration, its ability to worship. In killing Jews, humanity has deprived itself of many, many blessings. Yet the need for prayer is there. Though it is no longer [00:38:00] simple to fill it.

The Talmud says that when the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer were closed. But that applies more to the present than to the distant past. We have known the taste both of ashes and of wine, and both experiences lie beyond words. No lament would be somber enough, no place exalting enough, we have seen what no one before us was privileged to see, the Temple in flames, and the survivors undertaking to rebuild it. In the face of so many tears, so much courage and determination, one feels helpless and humble, too humble to judge or even to react. Like Beckett's heroes, [00:39:00] we cannot but utter primitive disjointed

sounds. What is true in literature is true in liturgy as well. In literature the failure seems total. Among the hundreds of volumes devoted to the two themes that cursed and blessed our generation, none does them justice, which is only natural. The two events by their sheer magnitude transcend imagination and defy perception. No artistic endeavor could even begin to reflect the despair accumulated in the ghettos. And the pride and glory that ensued, no poet, unless he's mad, could even begin to reveal what lies at the core of his madness.

Auschwitz and Jerusalem, two mysteries hinting at the same truth, but we are too weak to comprehend such truths. Once upon a time, [00:40:00] artistic imagination preceded reality, now it follows it at a great distance as though ashamed, defeated. And liturgy too, one is overcome by impotence. The existing prayers sound inadequate, or to use a modern teaching, irrelevant, the fact is that in my tradition, in our tradition, no one had come up with a proper litany devoted to the tragedy of all tragedies of the last century, no one. And we don't even know what to say then. Of course, we open the Book of Job and recall some of his laments and protests. We open the Book of Jeremiah and we quote some of his visions, some of his stories. [00:41:00] Now, how is one to proclaim and extol divine justice, divine mercy in an era, the era of Majdanek and Treblinka? How well we understand

the hero of my tale who stumbles while reciting the prayer I have already quoted *ahava raba ahavtanu*, you have loved us very much, oh Lord. What, divine love and Auschwitz? *Chemlah gedolah viteira* mercy, and charity, and kindness, and goodness, and Auschwitz? How can one say these words without turning them into blasphemy? It must be either/or. Either we assume that prayer, though timeless, [00:42:00] is relevant to every person and his or her needs or we see in it an abstraction of the mind, the luxury of the spirit. We Jews naturally believe the former to be true.

How then can we pronounce words that have been denied before our own eyes? A thousand communities uprooted, and God, you loved our people? One million and a half Jewish children massacred, some of them thrown into the flames alive, and you have chosen us among nations? In other words, how is one to pray after what happened. The great philosopher Adorno said that to write poetry after Auschwitz is a barbaric act. [00:43:00] But what about prayer? How is one to address God when His ways seem more obscure than ever? His mercy more hidden than ever. Don't tell us, please, that God had nothing to do with these events. That is a view which runs counter to whatever Jewish faith stands for. God is involved in human destiny, good or bad. To thank Him for Jerusalem and not question Him for Treblinka is

hypocrisy. God is at the beginning as well as at the outcome of all our endeavors. He is the question and He is the answer, hence the treacherous threat confronting us. Just as one cannot conceive of Auschwitz with God, one cannot [00:44:00] comprehend it without God, thus how is one to worship Him, how is one not to worship Him. Is one to pray to him as before as though nothing has happened? Would that not be cowardice? Does God want our cowardice, our weakness, our own self-humiliation?

Here we are again at the very heart of the problem, which seems to disturb me for years. For the non-believer, of course, the whole question seems academic and absurd. That is why the drama of the believer seems more terrifying and his torment more human. Faced with the immense scandal that is creation today [00:45:00] and creation which was defeated, what should be, what could be our position, what can we say? Our options are limited. We could rebel and stop practicing, stop worshiping, and no one would have the right to reprimand us. We could say "Mr. God, stop it, you wanted a world without us, okay, have it your way. And you gave us the law and we tried to obey the law, we tried to study the law, we tried to do what you wanted us to do, even to survive. You prefer without it, go ahead, try."

The Jewish tradition alone among all others allows man to protest against heaven and that is something which we must consider as an option. From Abraham to Moses, from Jeremiah to Levi Yitzchok [00:46:00] of Berditchev, there were many who questioned God and His peculiar presence in history. Wasn't it a disciple of Rabbi Ishmael who exclaimed, and I quote in Hebrew "*Mi kamocha baelim adoshem?*" Who among the gods is like our God? "*Al tikra elim*" says don't say gods with an alef, but *ilemim*, *yud*, same root for both words. Because who can be among gods as our God who is mute while watching His people being persecuted and terminated. You cannot find that in other religions. You find it in ours. Remember a marvelous saying about the (Anshei Knesset Hagedolah) which the Men of the Great Assembly. And it said [00:47:00] Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, Rabbi Yehoshua son of Levi asked, "Why were they called Men of the Great Assembly?" "Because," he answered, "they restored the manner of speaking of God's greatness to its ancient form." Moses said the great God, the mighty, the awesome. Then Jeremiah came and said, heathens are battering at His holy place where are the feelings of all that he said to inspire. So, he did not say that God is awesome. Then Daniel came and said, heathens are enslaving his children, where are his mighty acts. So, he did not say that God was mighty. But then came the men of the great assembly and they restored the sentence, the prayer, the words as Moses had

said them. And simply saying God is great because He is [00:48:00] forbearing towards the wicked. His awesome deeds are in that but for the all--for the holy one, how could a single people remain alive among the heathens? Saying, in other words, they restore the adjectives simply the saying the fact that the Jewish people is alive is proof that God is great. Otherwise, said the sage, the Jewish people would have long ago disappeared amongst so many other nations.

Well, today too one can choose rebellion and remain within Judaism. But one's rebellion must be constant, meaning it must be renewed, reexamined, reaffirmed day after day, night after night. One must live one's rebellion and not let it slide into indifference. [00:49:00] One must say again and again, Master of the Universe, I know and you know that it's time to pray, but I will not, do you hear me? I will not. Whoever opts for such attitude and does so with sincerity, well, his no becomes a yes, and his refusal of prayer turns into prayer. One might also continue to pray as before, forcing God to resemble His attributes as the Rabbi of Kotzk, whom Heschel called the Kierkegaard of Hassidism. He said, "We implore God to be our Father. We implore him and implore him until he becomes our Father." He says, "We call God merciful, we force Him to be merciful. But this attitude implies paradoxically the notion

that God [00:50:00] is not merciful. Prayer then becomes a form of protest and defiance. One calls Him loving because He is something else. Because He permitted bloodshed, one extolls His justice. In other words, prayer becomes a means of sanctifying His name in spite of mass graves. And of proclaiming his glory in spite of the flames that consumed night.

When we say *de profundis*, from the depth, we call upon you, I say, in spite of the depth, we shall call for you. In spite of what has been done to our people, we believe in You, we praise You. And the song how can we sing on falling ground, I would say, and how we shall sing on falling ground. The more numerous the trials, the harsher the ordeal, the more powerful the song, and the greater the fervor. One of the most beautiful prayers was recited by a very great man, a Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt, the Master of Apt. And he said, "Master of the Universe, I do not understand what is happening to me. So many men and women, young and old, have to get up early in the morning, run to work, or to school, and work hard and earn little for their sustenance. While I, Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt stay at home having nowhere to go, nothing to do. Men and women come and give me money, so I ask you, God, what did I do wrong? No doubt people think I'm able to help them in their distress, if so, please God, let me help them. Let them say

that I am one of the just, the miracle maker, one who can revoke misfortune, [00:52:00] why should you mind? Are you jealous of the honors given to Abraham Joshua Heschel? Do you really think it is he they're honoring? Who is he anyway, what is he? A broken vessel. But since they come to me, since they consider me their messenger to you, please God, do not chain them. Let me be the stick on which they can lean, a stick, and not a useless branch.

Now, look here, since I, Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt, am provided for and people call me Rabbi, even Tzadik, a just, I ask you, what am I to do with my long days and nights? Do you want me to sit at the table and study Torah and Talmud? You have better scholars than I could ever be. The Kozhnitzer Maggid, for instance, or the Holy Seer of Lublin, each of their innovations, each of their discoveries provoke enthusiasm among the angels. [00:53:00] Do you want me to spend life in prayer? You have cantors so fervent that I could never even follow their footsteps. For instance when Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev opens the prayer book and begins to pray, one hears the angels in heaven shout, "Shh, silence, Rabbi Yitzchok is saying his prayers." But I, who am poor and miserable, who remain always on the same spot, what can I do to spread your glory, and what can I do to reward all those men and women who give me so much

of themselves? I am neither laborer nor merchant, do you want me to walk around as an idle shadow among the living? You know, I have discovered the knack of telling stories, so, I tell stories. And believe me, Master of the Universe, I swear to you, I want you to believe me, I invent nothing, whatever I tell is true, whatever I tell [00:54:00] did really happen. Yes, to me, all the incidents they happened to me. Listen, Master of the Universe, do me a favor, the fools think I make miracles, others think I simply exaggerate, but I say to them, You are the greatest miracle of all, You who are alive, You who listen to each of my words. And so, that is a prayer which we can really repeat."

But the prayers that we repeat again and again are extraordinary. Some have meaning. For instance, we say every Sabbath and at holidays, a prayer we say "*sh'ta'aleinu b'simcha L'artzeinu* bring us back to our land with joy. Why do we emphasize joy? It's clear [00:55:00] that when the whole Jewish people from all exile will be brought back to its homeland there will be joy. No. Now we realize that one can go back because of anti-Semitism, because of persecutions, without joy. And therefore we warn God that whenever we go back, it should be with joy, out of joy. When we pray we see God, of course, as Buber said, I and Thou, a Thou. God is never the other. God

is, and therefore he listens. But the problem of praying to him remains a problem. The problem appears even more disturbing when we discover how it was handled by Jews during the catastrophe, inside the ghettos, within the fiery walls. One of the most poignant mysteries of that period is [00:56:00] contained in the religious response of religious Jews who risked their lives continuing to observe as many commandments of the Torah as possible. Some fasted on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, some refused to eat bread on Passover, some managed never to eat impure or *treif* meat.

I remember, I will always remember, the grey dawns over there when hundreds of Jews would line up behind the barracks to wear the tefillin, the phylacteries. I remember, I will always remember the outdoor services for the High Holidays. I remember, I will always remember the ancient words, now distorted, if not demented, praising God for His goodness, for his compassion, for His love of Israel, His chosen people, there, [00:57:00] how could they, how could we say things over there? I don't know how. Perhaps it was our way of indicting the judge of all creation. Our way of protesting against the inhumanity, the helplessness of the human condition. For that may be the depth and the secret of Jewish faith, to turn every gesture into a challenge, every prayer to an appeal, to rebel in

spite of one's belief, to believe in spite of one's rebellion. Never before did God and man confront one another as they did over there. Never before was either tested with such force. Never before has the outcome been as obscure. The great theological protest was enacted there, but it contained no words of heresy. On the contrary, the words were those of acceptance and praise in reciting the courage there [00:58:00] at the edge of the ditches and the altars, those Jews who shouted *Shema Yisrael* listen here, oh Israel, those Jews succeeded in indicting, as it were, more powerfully than ever before. Is this the solution? No, it cannot be. No one would dare today repeat those words and those deeds. No one has the right or the strength to do so. We can only try to be worthy of what they tried to teach us, perhaps to our shame unsuccessfully. Is that the answer? That is the question. Is belief an art or a necessity? An expression of weakness or of strength? I proclaim, with my full faith, that the pious Jew over there was stronger than his predecessors anywhere, stronger than the forces that crushed him or her, [00:59:00] stronger than the forces that tested them. There they made the impossible possible.

And one last example, the celebrated Gaon of Vilna, one of the very, very great scholars of all generations who was

unfortunately a great adversary of the Hasidic movement as well, he said that the law, the biblical law is *v'samachta b'chagekha* that you must rejoice on the holidays, you must, is the most difficult commandment in the Torah. And I could never understand this puzzling remark. Only during the war did I understand. Those of us who in the course of their journey to the end of hope managed to dance on Simchat Torah on the day of the law, the celebration of the law. Those Jews who studied Talmud by heart while carrying stones on their back, those Jews who went on whispering the Sabbath songs [01:00:00] while performing hard labor, they taught us how Jews should behave in the face of adversity. For my contemporaries a few generations ago, that commandment was one commandment that was impossible to observe, yet they observed it.

And so, we return to the poor hero of my sad tale. We left him at the moment when sad and crushed, he felt unable to say God, You have loved us very much. Yet, in the end, he will say it. He will clench his teeth but he will say it. Because other Jews over there said it before him, no matter what he feels he should not be the last in the chain. The adventure that Judaism is should not stop with him or her. And now without his hesitation, his prayer would be an act of complacency. But with his presentation, prayer becomes an act of remembrance.

[01:01:00] And a story as well, for ultimately we all share Rabbi Nachman's aspirations, except that in my case I would like to make tales out of my tales, and prayers out of my prayers with no one knowing the difference, not even myself, least of all myself. That's why I'll read to you a prayer that I composed some time ago. It reads like this, "Oh God, I no longer ask you for either happiness or paradise. All I ask of you is to listen and let me be aware of your listening. I no longer ask you to resolve my questions, only to receive them and make them part of you. I no longer ask of you for either rest or wisdom, I only ask you not to close me to gratitude be it of the most trivial kind, or to surprise, or friendship. Love, love is not yours to give. [01:02:00] As for my enemies, I do not ask you to punish them or even to enlighten them, I only ask you not to lend them your mask and your powers. If you must relinquish one or the other, give them your powers, but not your countenance. Don't allow anyone to kill in your name. Oh, they are modest, very modest, my requests, and humble. I ask you what I might ask a stranger met by chance at twilight in a barren land, I ask you God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to enable me to pronounce these words without betraying the child that transmitted them to me. God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, enable me to forgive you, and enable the child I once was to forgive me too. I no longer ask you for the life of that child,

nor even for his faith. I only beg you to listen to him, and act in such a way [01:03:00] that you and I can listen to him together."

And so, my good friends, in conclusion. Prayer may constitute a double dialogue. When I pray to God it means I am not indifferent to him, nor is He to me. In other words, prayer is also a remedy against indifference. Still, some may ask, how can one pray to God after Auschwitz? The question is valid. However, we seem to forget that some of us prayed to God in Auschwitz, hence the problem which transcends itself into a possible guidance. If I recited prayers to God there, how can I not recite them here? [01:04:00] Thank you. (applause)

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