

November 10 2005

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Well, let us study. What should the subject be? On one hand it could be an anniversary, a sad anniversary, the Kristallnacht. It happened in early November 6, 7, 8, 9, when hatred was the name of destiny. And it was state-sponsored, state-organized, synagogues were burned, shops ransacked, Jews arrested. A few months later a ship called St. Louis with a German captain, German crew, landed in Cuba, was refused entry, and the refugees were here [00:01:00] almost in America, but almost, and the ship was sent back. A thousand plus Jewish men, women, and children. Should we discuss that?

Or should we discuss another anniversary? The death of a great leader, the murder of a great Jew, by another Jew, Yitzhak Rabin, November ten years ago. Maybe we should give you the context and the context tonight will be community. What do events mean to a community, any event that happens within that community or far away from it? A preliminary admission, I hope that you will understand that tonight [00:02:00] we shall speak about Hillel, Hillel the Ancient, and one of his sayings, *Al tifrosh min hatzibur*, which means he said, "Never separate

yourself from the community." I like Hillel. Those who passionately study Talmudic literature like Hillel, the Talmud itself likes him. With the exception of eighteen instances, the School of Hillel wins all the debates against the rigorous School of Shammai. Later perhaps, if time permits, we will see why Hillel was so liked and why I like him.

But when Hillel teaches us not to separate ourselves from community, it is taking the easy side. More often than not, it is the right thing to do. So, a few words about the very concept of community. Surely it's a theme that [00:03:00] sociologically and psychologically it is both timeless and molded over time. And it beckons us today with an intensity steeped in our individual faiths. Where does it begin, this community, where a human being is supposed to grow, live, and be fulfilled? Is it limited to the family, tribe, or nation, and how is it to be defined, as a privilege? An obligation received or acquired by virtue of birth, religion, or ideology? If this is the case, is it possible to leave this community, break ties with it, abandon it to belong, for example, to another more glorious, more safe, more rich, or perhaps more exciting, but more authentic? What is a community? A framework, a language, an atmosphere, a culture, or simply a loose connection, vague,

but nevertheless important, a solemnity [00:04:00] to solitude and its demons.

And once I became a member of this community, what would be its obligations to me, and mine to it? From a strictly legal standpoint it's simple, the community is there to protect me, and I, for my part, must be there to give it the means of this protection. As an individual I must sacrifice some of what I own and in dire circumstances all that I am. If my community's in danger, I must leave my family, my work, my bed, my customs, and my destiny to defend it. In other words, I thoroughly belong to my community. Is it good to belong? Not always in every situation. Not so long ago, we shall speak to it later, the national community here and there [00:05:00] betrayed itself by betraying some of its members, delivering them to the enemy, to death. Family itself became a source of danger. Because some young people did not want to abandon their families they didn't escape into the forest or mountains, and died. Those who did, survived.

During that time it was necessary to think of one's self, even if it brought shame later. But this wasn't true for those who had been tricked -- (background noise) (laughter) This wasn't

true for those who had been tricked inside that shadowy world, only those who saw in another not an enemy or stranger, but an ally, a friend, for whom one feels responsible. Only they had a greater chance of survival everywhere, even in the worst places. [00:06:00] Usually, when times are stable, working for one's own good at the expense of the community is selfish and immoral. It's the first time in forty years that these sounds are being heard in this august hall. (background noise) (laughter) And to think that in really here you heard the most beautiful music in the world. (laughter)

So, is working for the community, unselfishly participating in its causes necessarily the path to follow always? Is it even possible for people aside from mystics and ascetics often in religious orders who are the exceptions confirming the rule? And if you push the question to its limits and beyond, imagining that a community goes astray, [00:07:00] that its political leaders bring it too far down the road of racist, religious, or ethic discrimination. Imagine that it adopts an unjust or immoral political stance, even if not inhumane towards minorities. Am I not obliged to leave, to renounce that community and eventually align myself with its adversaries against it, perhaps to save its soul? You see that the subject has striking relevance today. It did for my generation and has

remained so for years. Just think of the victims in the massacres in Rwanda, or the famished orphans in the Sudan, or the mourning families of Bosnia, or the families of those who were killed yesterday in Amman, and we realize how much [00:08:00] this issue still affects us.

At this point, as always, allow me to stop for a few preliminary remarks. One, as every year since 1966, our purpose in meeting at the Y remains simple for it responds to a certain logic. Whenever descendants of Abraham and Moses gather anywhere they must engage in eternally renewed desire to learn. Whatever the place, the topic, and/or the occasion, direct or indirect study must be part of the experience. With some luck, study may even be the experience. Two, if we chose for tonight the theme of community, it is not because of its immediate appeal, but also because of its [00:09:00] timelessness, the community and its social boundaries, its challenges and perils, its lofty aspirations, and the unavoidable obstacles it meets in attaining those goals have forever hounded all individual Jews eager to know more and more about their identity. Three, a community without scholars and without respect for scholars is poor, and condemned to spiritual poverty. The thirst for knowledge transcends social positions and age. Rabbi Akiva began studying when he was forty. He was late, so what? So are his distant

disciples. Even when all gates are closed, we are told those of learning remain open, and if they are not, they must be, just look, [00:10:00] they are open.

The opposite of community is loneliness. The person who doesn't belong to a community is alone. To live alone today on the fringes like a hermit, voluntarily deaf to peoples' prayers and pain, far from those who suffer. In other words, to exclude ones' self from the idea of a collective group, the entire human family then is impoverished, but it also means that if somebody chooses not to belong to it is to condemn one's self to a walled-in existence. Within the community another person is never a barrier but rather an outstretched hand. What is a Jewish community? It is more than the sum of its members. It is participation, not the numbers, that counts. A *minyan*, a quorum of ten, has the same rights [00:11:00] and the same obligations, as a flourishing community of a hundred-thousand.

In our tradition, several terms refer to a community, *Beit Yaacov*, the House of Jacob, or of Israel, *edah*, as in ed, which means witness or testimony, in other words a gathering of men and women with diverse backgrounds, professions, and points of view, who all share the testimony which they bear. There's also *kibbutz* from the word gathering, a group that unites with a

common purpose. And then the word that is our subject actually of the evening, thanks to Hillel, *tzibur* from the word *litzbor*, to gather. And these three letters, which is tzaddik, bet, resh, rearranged make *batzar*, in distress. It is in distress [00:12:00] that the individual must cling to his or her community, to sustain it and be sustained by it. In this relationship of one person to others, the image of a group, the mission of a nation, the destiny of a people is forged. We find this image in Talmudic literature when the Jewish people find themselves in misfortune and despair, they should not say to themselves, quote, "I will stay home, eat and drink, and keep busy or take care of myself like before as if what is happening does not concern nor affect me." One should never say that. Because whoever separates himself or herself from his or her suffering community will not know the joy at the time of its deliverance that is the Talmudic saying, to be Jewish is to participate in the community's life in all its stages, though through both good and bad.

In the same Midrashic passage, [00:13:00] Moses has cited an example. To encourage Israel in battle, says the Bible, Moses keeps his arms raised, but tires from it. When those close to him see that he's exhausted, they have him sit down on the large rock, that is the text. "What?" exclaims the Talmud, "There is

no chair or cushion for Moses, old Moses to sit down comfortably?" "Not exactly," responds the text, "there are comfortable places to sit, and Moses could sit down if he wanted to, but Moses wants none of them." He says, "Since the people are living in distress, I too will live that way." And the text continues, therefore, quote, "Whoever joins the community in its sadness will also take part in its joy."

Yet this begs another [00:14:00] question, what happens when a whole community is guilty of some sinful conduct? A very unlikely hypothesis, but there is an instance in the Bible of an *Ir Hanidachat*, an entire town in sin. It's punishment, collective destruction. But for me, I don't believe in collective guilt, or a collective punishment, I have problems with it. And therefore, when I have a problem, I open the Talmud, and there I am reassured. The Talmud says that this kind of town never existed, which is all right, it's possible. But it also says, and never will exist in the future. Never? But what about Sodom? Sodom is part of pre-history, well before Mount Sinai as an example, but not as a foreshadowing.

[00:15:00] The laws of the Torah do not apply yet. But what about in the future? What if a charismatic dictator professes hate and evil to his people, to hate all other people or a people? There will always be at least one person, a righteous

gentile, who opposes. And thanks to this person, all the others will be saved.

Within the normal community, of course, all are responsible for one, and one for all. Just as an individual must protect the communities, so too the community must defend each of its members. And this is true for the simple and seemingly trivial cases as well as for more serious, even dramatic situations. An example, when we recite the *Amidah Prayer* at the synagogue, it is customary to await the Rabbi before repeating the prayers out loud. [00:16:00] If certain members of the congregation are slower, the cantor does not wait. During this same service, however, if there is one single man who is still reciting the eighteen benedictions, the whole congregation must wait for him. It is in rabbinic law. We wait for the lone person so that no one feels isolated, rejected, excluded. Another example taken from the Jerusalem Talmud, as codified by Maimonides, for it touches on an obviously more dramatic situation. If pagans, says the text, if pagans or malevolent foreigners ordered a group of women that they should offer one among them and so that they could take advantage of her, or else have the entire group suffer the same [00:17:00] fate, it is better that all the women be violated, and that no lone soul be delivered to the attackers.

How can we interpret such a bold law if not by the care of our sages? To place priority on the dignity of the individual. A community that sacrifices the honor of one of its members to protect itself would no longer have its own honor intact. It is also true for more pragmatic reasons. At the moment one yields one single person, the enemy will demand a second, and a third, and further on. The same law applies to a situation when human life is in question. If men marching along a road are told of some -- a community besieged, give us one of your men for us to kill or else we will kill you all, it is preferable, says the text, [00:18:00] that they let themselves all be killed rather than have a single soul surrender to the enemy. But in both cases the law allows special dispensation. The Jerusalem Talmud says, "If the enemy designates its victim by name, if he is identified, the decision is different. Then the group could or should obey and not die."

The text quotes the case of a certain fugitive from the Romans. Says Reish Lakish, a famous sage who used to be a gladiator, became a great scholar, and he says, "This exception applies only if the fugitive committed a crime worthy of capital punishment, as was the case with a certain Sheva ben Bichri, otherwise he must be protected by the community. His usual

adversary, his brother in law, Rabbi Yochanan, does not agree. [00:19:00] "Identification in itself," he says, "even if it is not linked to a crime is sufficient reason." In other words, the responsibility and protection of the community with regards to individual members are not without bounds. A story.

So, by the Romans for unquestionably subversive activities, a certain Ula ben Kushav was taken by Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who of course offered him shelter. The Romans then laid siege upon the city lot and threatened to destroy the entire town if the fugitive was not surrendered to them. Faced with this threat, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi explained to his harbored guest that the law was against him. Since the Romans sought him specifically for a particular crime against the state, the community had no choice but to cooperate. So, Ula ben Kushav decided [00:20:00] to voluntarily give himself up to the Roman authorities. On that day, the Prophet Elijah stopped visiting Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, although he used to visit him a lot. The Rabbi waited one day, one week, in vain. Filled with remorse he began to fast to beg heaven with such grief and fervor that the prophet finally appeared. "Why did you make me languish for so long?" the sage asked the prophet. His reply was cold and bitter, "I do not associate with informers." Rabbi Joshua, the sage, exclaimed, "Did I violate the law? Didn't I conform fully to the law?"

And the prophet agreed, "Yes, you did indeed adhere to the law, but a Hassid, a pious and charitable Jew, [00:21:00] must go beyond the law and protect a fugitive."

That being said, why this departure from the law which facilitated the Romans' task of identifying their target? It was enough for them to know whom they want, and they would get him, because the fugitive knowing he was sought after, and understanding the consequences of his actions on the community, should have avoided putting it in danger. Even guilty, the individual cannot free himself from his or her responsibility to the community. So, now it's important to ask ourselves, not without difficulty, about the application of this law through the ages, and especially in our more or less recent history. And it preoccupies me quite a lot. During the Crusades, before the imminent approach of armed [00:22:00] fanatic mobs, thirsty for Jewish blood, the Jews in the Rheine provinces gathered in synagogue courtyards rather than taking up arms or fleeing. Instead of separating to improve their chances, they insisted more than ever on uniting, on sticking together even in death. And many of them committed collective suicide.

The same things happened during the pogroms of Bohdan Khmelnytsky in the Ukraine. While the perpetrators sharpened

their knives in the town square, the Jews sheltered themselves in the elated learning of the Talmud in the houses of prayer and studied. Individuals' safety yielded to communal salvation or collective suicide. And consider, of course, the most cruel of our trials, still so present in our memories. The Jewish officials in the ghettos actually obeyed this precept when they were forced to draw up the lists for the transports. [00:23:00] In certain places, though not many, they went to ask their rabbis what to do. The reply? Had the community protected its dual members? As I always preferred not to judge those, who like all of us, were marked by the enemy, and had lived through the murder of a third of our people, I will say nothing. God is God, and he alone knows, and he calls everything.

It does fall on us to point out that during that period laws, customs, and principles lost their power and efficiency. It is a fact that those who had the foresight and means to separate from their communities to go hide in the forest with Christian friends, had a better chance of survival than others who remained loyal. Hillel the Elder's precept, *al tifrosh*, do not separate, [00:24:00] resonated even in my small town. And the marvelous and courageous Christian maid, Maria, burst into our home, already part of the ghetto, several nights before the last transport, and begged us to follow her into the mountains where

her cabin was ready for us. My father responded, "A Jew does not separate himself from his community. What happens to others will happen to us as well, our duty is to share their fate." In truth he also said, "Why run away? Let's wait for the war to end."

Many heads of households said the same in my town and in so many other towns. Numerous rabbis could have fled the country or accepted to live far from their own people. Some were offered shelter by priests, by local priests. [00:25:00] Almost all refused. The choice was clear, when the people of Israel suffer, it is necessary to share the torment and die while sanctifying his name. In this way, the relevant text gained a deepened understanding. It has always been this way. When an important event happens, the Jew likes to be together with his brothers and sisters. What about the teaching of Hillel in all of this? The great Hillel, the renowned sage, has not foreseen our dilemmas, and certainly not Birkenau or Treblinka.

But for more ordinary times, he perfectly grasped the sense of what must govern the relationship of a Jew to his community. He's unable to thrive without it or outside of it. I personally have never been able to imagine Jews unless surrounded by other Jews. [00:26:00] In joy as in sadness, the Jew must never be

alone. As I like to say, God alone is alone. The tradition demands us to be part of a group. A *minyan* is necessary not only for marriage, but also for death. In the same way that the person needs other people to be human, the Jew needs other Jews to be Jewish. He or she chooses to define himself or herself not by the hate that we arouse in a hostile stranger, but rather by the faith we inspire in our brothers and sisters. A Jew alone is in danger. Safety comes from the community which envelops and helps us to thrive. Forsaken by our people or in abandoning them the Jew is lost. Attached to them, he or she learns to start anew.

For Jews, therefore, community is a key word. [00:27:00] It indicates the road to follow, secret doors to open, to order ancient and sacred faces to emerge. Meaning lost or kept alive by generations that preceded our own, rituals whose sense avoids us, eludes us. And it is of course a word shimmering with life and primary truth, that community intersects with so many others, all while challenging and enhancing them. What would I be without my community as a Jew? A brittle branch, a nameless wanderer jostled by hostile forces and seduced by foreign enticements. Together we represent a historic power and collective conscience of sorts. Alone, we must make do with our own weakness. [00:28:00] Together we affirm each other, while

alone we are in danger of disappearing. And so, the urgent obligation of an individual is to belong to the community, mold it, and reinforce it, at times inspire it. The Talmud makes it clear that collective prayers are the first received. Praying for others is productive, while praying for one's self may not be. It is in looking at the other that I see myself better, it is in helping the community that the individual acquires a deeper sense of self.

Which is the worse sins for a Jew? To break away from the community of Israel. The worst punishment? To be excluded or banished by this same community. Just as excommunication is the ultimate punishment, joining what we consider Klal Yissrael, the whole of Israel, is the supreme reward. In other words, to be Jewish [00:29:00] for a Jew is to accept Jewish destiny on every level, in all dimensions, in its many depths. But, of course, I always refer any other human being belonging to any other religion or culture, may say the same thing about them. To be Jewish is also fit into the collective memory of the Jewish people. To believe that together we heard the voice of God at Sinai. Together we crossed the desert, together we conquered the land of Canaan, together we built Jerusalem, the city of peace, constructed the temple, together we were pursued by the Babylonians, persecuted and then held by the Persians,

victimized again by the Romans, and then come through all the roads of exile. Together we dreamed and continued to dream of our peoples' redemption, which will be all humanity's as well. Each of us is a stray [00:30:00] twinkle in history. Together we form memory from its beginning to its end. It is a historical fact that in spite of their courage and persistence, the Marranos in Spain, who were forced to convert, ended up collapsing before totally disappearing from the scene. Their distant disciples in the Soviet Union, on the other hand, succeeded in remaining anchored in Jewish history. The difference is that the Marranos acted alone, led their battles in dark basements far from the sight of the inquisitors and separated from their neighbors and friends.

The Russian Jews, however, chose to resist as a group as a part of a community continually trying to move beyond. The Marranos addressed their prayers to God of Israel in hiding and total seclusion and isolation while the Russian Jews gathered as [00:31:00] devoted and courageous crowds in the streets of Moscow before the great synagogue on the Arkhipova Street mere steps from the infamous Lubyanka Prison to shout and sing of fidelity to their people and their past. And I confess to you that when I will appear before the celestial tribunal, and they will ask me, "What did you do?" I'm sure I will tell them, "I

have seen these Jews dancing in the streets. Never will I forget their dancing on Simchat Torah."

Friends, you know, that whoever was there, of course most of you were born afterwards, but whoever remembers the story told by so many others who were there know that the miracle was that the Russian Jews who could have lost half of their members physically to Hitler [00:32:00] and spiritually to Stalin, their grandchildren came back to the source, to the origins. So, I will not forget, of course, my Yom Kippur and Simchat Torah in Moscow, nor will I forget the exaltation, the song, the silent contemplation of crowds before the Wall in Jerusalem in 1967, where the word community took on and thus today, as it always has, a very special, very pure, mystical meaning. When I was there the day after it was liberated, all I had to say was a prayer, with my lips I prayed, my novel, called *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, day after day, night after night. By linking his own memory to that of his people the Jew does not live outside of time, not detached from reality, but rather on a deeper level where all pieces from the past, as well as the future, [00:33:00] are linked. As such, one feels at home in each century, through each ordeal, playing a role in each experience, awakened by each surprise. The more the community's renewed, the more it grows closer to its origins.

The precept of Hillel the Elder must be understood in his wider global sense, *Al tifrosh min hatzibur*, do not separate yourself from your community. And it includes also not only the living but the dead. No matter what happens, I cannot separate myself from my predecessors. I'm unable to part from a community which includes a Moses and Isaiah, a David and Jeremiah, a Hillel and Shammai, Ari HaKadosh, and the Baal Shem Tov. As a young student at a yeshiva in my small town nestled in the Carpathians, I saw Rabbi Akiva, yes, I watched him as he walked smilingly, [00:34:00] strangely among the ruins of the temple. I followed Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai while he, with his son Rabbi Eleazar Lazar, left the cave and they hid from the Romans for thirteen years. I admired Don Yitzchak of Abarbanel, who refusing to convert abandoned his home, his livelihood, his position, his glory given by the kings, at the Spanish court to be exiled with his brothers, carrying no more than a few books and religious objects. They were my masters, my friends, they still are. Being Jewish means waiting to be their heir, not just their successor.

We now come back, as promised, to our dear Hillel the Elder. Why is it that I like him so much? Because he left Babylonia to go to Jerusalem, I did not, I am still in a way in a kind of

Babylonia. Do I like him because he was learned, patient, and tolerant, [00:35:00] and because he forgot nothing, and because he remained a student throughout his life? So am I. Or because he never got angry, even when he was asked shall we say not the most intelligent of questions, a lot of stories are in the Talmud about that. But also because he protects the rights of the opposing minority and never lacks respect for its point of view. It comes to others I must be like Hillel, tolerant, moderate, respectful. As regarding myself, I must be as rigorous as his opponent and adversary Shammai. And here, of course, speaking of our obligation towards a community, we always celebrated the community, and there are stories and stories and stories [00:36:00] about the virtues of communities, even the humor of the community. The Talmud says *Talmidei Chachamim* the scholars bring peace into the world. And my teacher Shaul Lieberman used to say, "This proves that the Talmud had humor. Scholars bring peace, don't we know cases when scholars were quarreling and arguing?"

Then there are also other communities. There was a community which was really humorous. We called them the community of *Khelemer khakhomim*, The Wisemen of Chelm. There are so many stories about that. I remember as a child laughing and laughing, hearing the same stories. One story is that once upon

they found a Shamash, a beadle, for the synagogue. And he was a very good man, they liked him. But then it was winter, the snow was pure, [00:37:00] pure white, and they had a meeting and decided what can we do to protect the purity of the snow since the Shamash has to go from his home to the shul and he will leave his footprints on it. So, they decided the best way is to carry him. (laughter) The other story about that is somebody needed a position, and they gave him the position to be the watchman for Chelm, and then bring news when the Messiah will come. So, the salary was nothing, but they said to him, "It's a lifetime job." Really numerous, numerous stories of Chelm. But again, to show the community even there. And strangely enough, when the enemy came, [00:38:00] he chose Chelm, and in the vicinity of Chelm he built in Chelmno one of the six notorious extermination camps. I'm sure he did it because, because.

Now, have we always done what we Jews, have we always done what we had to do? No. I say when it came to the last war behind America, American Jews did not stand up to the test. But even today, with all the lessons that we had, last week the President of Iran made an outrageous statement. He said that he wanted actually that Israel should be wiped off the map of the world. There were many protests, in truth, even leaders of the world protested. But the press has not reported [00:39:00] that

immediately 300 volunteers came to an appropriate office, offering themselves as suicide killers. 45,000 people I read in a paper have already registered in that very office that if the time comes they are ready to do it. My God, and this man wants to be a leader of a nuclear nation? So, yesterday we had a demonstration here. The largest Jewish city in the world, there were a few hundred people at that demonstration, including, thank God, for two classes of the Ramaz High School where our son used to go. And I wonder where are the Jews? Why weren't there ten, twenty, thirty thousand just to show that we care?

I was invited, and I spoke, and this is what I said, [00:40:00]
"When the leader of a nation violates all standards of morality and decency by announcing to the whole world his wish to see a nation member of the international community wiped off the map, our immediate response cannot be anything other than anger and outrage. At least he is frank about his dreams. He really wants to see the end of the Jewish state, and thus annihilating all its Jewish inhabitants. Their number, they come close a figure that will forever haunt humankind's memory, six million. Shame on you, President of Iran, shame on you for preaching the murder of hundreds of thousands of Jewish children, their parents, and grandparents, including some who had survived enough tragedies to fill all the pages of the annals of history.

Shame on you, President of Iran, for bringing dishonor to your presidency, and to those who elected you to that office.

[00:41:00] And you want the civilized nations to allow you to obtain nuclear weapons? Shame on you, President of Iran, for your revolting statements and ugly dreams of destruction, filled with hate and nothing else. Moved by dark forces of violence governing your life, who were your teachers, what political figures have you admired so as to emulate them, what books have you read, what mass murderers have you chosen as guides? Shame on you for representing what is vilest and most evil in political power. I hope there will be in your country enough men and women of principle and honor who will oust you from your palace and bring you to justice for threatening the peace of the world. And now," I said, "we are the people of memory, we shall remember you among all those who use similar threats to people."

[00:42:00]

And so, we find ourselves drudging through the news of our day, which brings us also back to Jerusalem, seemingly at the forefront of world events for thousands of years, yet unable to evoke Israel outside of its historic context. This is why it seems useful to propose two simple ideas that in my view express the fundamental elements of Jewish historiosophy for the Jews, and also, while we are at it, for those who are not. Let's

examine the first one. Not everyone is given the opportunity to make history, but it is up to us, to all of us, to participate in it. In other words, only great figures, thinkers, poets, prophets, kings, generals, have the means to act on an event and push it towards the summit or the abyss. But each of us rich or poor, young or old, [00:43:00] already wise or striving to be so, may, if we want, take part, each at his own level and in his own way, and each with emergent hands in his or her own manner.

So, in the Jewish tradition individual effort matters. The law is addressed to the individual. Ever since the revelation at Sinai, God calls to each being, the sages of the town will do the same. Rabbi Tarfon says it in his way, *Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor*, you are certainly not obligated to accomplish the task, but nor are you free to withdraw from it. But if everyone here speaks to us in the singular, we respond actually in the plural. Strangely enough, what a Jew says or does binds all his people. Some heads of state have understood this. Before accepting appointment as Prime Minister in the 30s in France, Leon Blum went to consult the chief rabbi, asking [00:44:00] didn't he risk putting the Jewish community in danger by taking such a solemn office? The great poet and Medieval philosopher Rabbi Yehuda Halevy describes the Jewish people as being the heart of the world. Everything that happens around them affects it. But

this goes for the individual Jew in relation to his people as well. All that happens to the people of Israel radiates to each of us members. Moses discovers that he is Jewish when he comes to the aid of a Jewish slave beaten by an Egyptian soldier. And the Sfat Emet said that the miracle of this crossing of the Red Sea happened not only to the sea, but also in the heart of every person. The destruction of the temple had been felt not just by the inhabitants of Jerusalem but by Jews everywhere during that time and until now. The connection between the physical and social, spiritual, metaphysical, has a name, solidarity. It transcends [00:45:00] place and defies time. When Judea was waging war against the Roman Empire, the Jews of the diaspora mobilized as far as Rome and Crimea to bring their support. When the Catholic couple Ferdinand and Isabelle expelled Spanish Jews in 1492, the Jewish communities in Greece, Italy, and North Africa, Bulgaria, were there to welcome them. Abandoning a Jew was considered to be a serious sin.

And I must say, unfortunately I must say, that we were abandoned during the last trial. We were. And when I think of it, I come always to the conclusion I don't understand it. I simply don't understand. But we were. We were betrayed by humankind, abandoned by God, and somehow forgotten by our [00:46:00] own people. And then we remain the universe of paper, and that's

pretty much what the great Jewish novelist and poet Chaim Grade calls the grief stricken Jewish world of Eastern Europe which survived the most bloody and murderous tragedies. The tempest of fire and ashes that swept through the Jewish communities in Europe by the Germans, didn't leave cemeteries in its wake. There were no cemeteries. But books remained, nothing but books. Documents, albums, memoirs, chronicles, diaries, prayers, poems, what remains are sheets and sheets of paper from a rich and glorious past, enriched by the descendants of learned and humble rabbis, solitary thinkers, dreamers and truth seekers, merchants known for their wealth and anonymous beggars for their mystery. And because the enemy did not just [00:47:00] wipe out individuals, the goal was also to demolish our social structures, our economic, religious, and civil foundations, our schools, our institutions, our bookstores, our workshops, our synagogues, our cultural centers, in other words our communities.

Some of them had existed for centuries. Mine in Sighet goes back to 1770, others went back even farther back in history. Communities large and small, flourishing and diseased, well-known spiritual sites and villages barely scraping by. How did they survive the Crusades, pogroms, various persecutions, epidemics, curses brought on by history of man? Was it their

faith in God that helped them keep alive? Or the mission in which they felt themselves invested? All were condemned to disappear by Berlin, then the world capital of hate for all things Jewish. [00:48:00] One thing to learn the expanse of unprecedented crimes committed against the Jewish people in Europe, it is also necessary to discover what these people, what the life of these people were before the catastrophe.

And so, we wonder, we wonder, how did the community remain the community, or were there many communities but altogether they formed a community? Anti-Semitism is still here because somehow anti-Semites are also a community. All those who hate Jews hate everybody else, but they hate us more. Always more so. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the Sages of Zion, a forgery, crazy, stupid, totally stupid, is still popular in so many places, especially in Islamic centers. I know that some people went to Saudi Arabia, and if they were important people [00:49:00] they got the luxurious editions of the Protocols. Simple tourists got simple books. But why should they spread such simple, false, stupid lies? I don't know. But they are there. Is it that they want to split our community? I don't think they managed, they never will. However, however, a community is formed, of course, by individuals, and that includes strangers. Who are the strangers? The word stranger

has three terms, one is *ger*, a convert, usually we say convert to justice, a just convert, and we embrace that convert. We embrace that convert to the point that we are forbidden to remind that convert of his or her past, they are our brothers, they all were descendants of our ancestors.

Then comes the word *nokhri*, [00:50:00] a stranger who does not convert, but remains a stranger. And then comes the term *zar*, who is the stranger in our midst, a Jew who is a stranger to his people. And of course these strangers who come from our midst hurt. When they turn against our people, then they know where to hurt. In Medieval times, when the church forced Jews and -- mainly forced Jews to accept disputations with Christians, they always chose on the other side, a convert, a convert from Judaism to Christianity. It was always a rabbi and a convert. And of course the convert knew where to hit, where to hurt, and hurt well. And it hurts. So, therefore we must say that our community is not a community of saints, [00:51:00] there is no such thing. Nobody is a saint. All we can do is we try to become more human.

What about Israel? The community of Israel, of course, is to mean the entire community. The community of Israel and diaspora should not be one against the other, but one with the other.

And each should see the other as a center. The centrality of the diaspora should be important to the Jews in Israel. To the Jews in diaspora, Israel should be a center or a central team, a central obsession. And therefore when we feel that Israel is in danger, I believe we must help. Thank God that lately hope is not only possible, but I think it's probable. [00:52:00] I think it never has been as good. Strangely enough it is thanks to Ariel Sharon, who everybody in the beginning was afraid of, and the enemies of Israel, including the strangers in the people of Israel, demonized him, painted him as the worst devil, murderer, and they called him names. And now he's the one who had the courage to do what no one else really had tried even to do. Will it help? On the other side, I don't know. On the other side is there the partner? Terrorism is still on, suicide killers are still functioning, killing, often they are prevented, arrested, but sometimes they slip through like in Hadera a few weeks ago.

The change also occurred strangely enough thanks to Arafat, who died. [00:53:00] I was asked then on the television what do I have to say about Arafat's death, and I said, "Usually, in my tradition, we're not supposed to say anything bad about anyone after that person dies." So, the interviewer said, "Can you say anything good about him?" I said, "Yeah, he died." (laughter)

I mentioned that this is the anniversary of Rabin's murder, and of course, when you think about it it's shameful, literally shameful that the fanatic Jew, religious Jew, would kill a man like him. I met him two weeks before he was assassinated here in New York. It was a Shabbat, and after Shabbat I went to see him. And we had a long discussion. And almost the last words when I asked him, "What, what now?" And he said, quote, direct quote. He said, "In the beginning I thought that Arafat was the solution, [00:54:00] now I know that he's the problem." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "The man is corrupt." "What do you mean?" I said again. "What do you mean, corrupt?" He said, "The man is literally corrupt." He said, "All he wants is all the money to go through his pocket." He said, "And he has his own money deposited in all kinds of banks, including our own." He said that he doesn't trust his banks. He said to me, "If you want bank slips, I'll show them to you." The money. Therefore he really was the obstacle. After he died, things will be better. Let's hope. What else can we do?

So, why is this fascination with Israel? We live in biblical times, whatever happens today is not only for Jews, it's really biblical. The tsunamis, even nature, nature is giving us signals, and tsunamis on one hand and New Orleans on the other, and then the new plague that everybody is afraid of, [00:55:00]

the avian flu, what does it tell us? Where did we go wrong? And then, of course, more wars, and still wars, and wars, and wars, and wars, and of course, the suicide bombers, which is a plague threatening the 21st Century. It is a biblical time because events have burnt a dizzying pace. After all, three years after Auschwitz, 600,000 Palestinian Jews had to face six well-armed led armies, few came to join its ranks. The solitude of Israel remains a consistent and constant part of its history. And breaking that solitude is our duty.

Which brings me, of course, to almost a concluding remark. I believe deeply that the life of a person [00:56:00] is not comprised of years but of moments. Moments of happiness and friendship, or moments of anguish and despair. In the end it is the sum of these moments that we remember when closing our eyes. These are the ones that we bring into eternity. And our solidarity with Israel is made much like the weather. We pray for rain in Israel, not here where we live, but far away in Israel. Far from Jerusalem, we live through Jerusalem's celebrations and grief. In other words, we live through the human weather of Jerusalem. So, when I think of Jerusalem I feel overwhelmed with love for its past, with anguish for its future, and also with gratitude for all it has given us, and that it will give us tomorrow. I spoke about the Jewish

solidarity principle, I spoke about our commitment [00:57:00] to our Jewish community. Does it mean we should not think of other communities? Far from it. It is as a Jew that I must transcend my Jewishness and try to see the other communities. And when they need help, we Jews must help them. It is very simple, the Talmud says, the law, *Aniyei Ircha Kodmim*, the priority must be given to the poor people of your town, but that is not exclusive. Priority yes, but it also means including others. When they need us in the Darfur, we must help them. When they need us anywhere, we must help as Jews.

Well, in conclusion therefore, what can and must a community here in America offer the individual Jew? There's a word for it, a quite [00:58:00] beautiful word, very moving. I said it, solidarity. Within the community a Jew feels solidarity with others he doesn't even know. I do not live in Israel, but now I couldn't live without Israel. And Jerusalem, what is Jerusalem for us Jews? I do not live in Jerusalem, oh, I don't, but Jerusalem lives in me. And Jerusalem therefore is an uninterrupted succession of surprise, loyalty, fervor. In a word, Jerusalem is to all of us an eternal offering. Thank you.
(applause)

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