

Elie Wiesel:

"I am four years old, or maybe five. It is a Sabbath afternoon. Mother is lying down in the next room. I'd asked her to read to me from the book she had by her side, but she has one of her frequent headaches, so I asked my father to tell me a story. But just then, there is a knock at the door. 'Go see who it is,' says my father, reluctantly glancing up from the journal he is keeping.

A stranger's at the door. 'May I come in?' he asks. A big, bearded man, broad across the shoulders, with sad eyes, there is something disturbing about him. His gaze seems heavy with secrets, and glows with a pale and holy fire. 'Who is there?' my father asks, and I reply, 'I don't know.' [00:01:00] 'Call me a wanderer,' the stranger says. 'A wandering man who is worn out and hungry.' 'Who do you want to see?' I ask. And he says to me, 'You.'

'Who is it, a beggar?' my father asks. 'Tell him to come in.' No matter what the hour, my father would never deny his home to a stranger seeking a meal or a night's shelter, and surely not

on the Sabbath. The stranger comes in at a slow, but unhesitating, pace. Father stands to greet him, and leads him to the kitchen. He shows the stranger where to wash his hands before reciting the usual prayer, offers him a seat, and sets before him a plate of cholent and challah. But the stranger doesn't touch it. 'You are not hungry?' my father says. 'Oh yes, I am hungry, and I am thirsty, but not for food,' he says. 'Then, what is it you want?' [00:02:00] 'I want words,' he said. 'I want faces. I travel the world looking for people's stories.'

And I, I am enchanted by the stranger's voice. It is a voice of a storyteller. It envelops my soul. He continues, 'I came here today to put you to the test, to measure your hospitality, and I can tell you that what I have seen pleases me.' With that, he gets to his feet and strides to the door. 'Don't tell me you are the prophet Elijah,' says my father. 'No, I am no prophet.' The stranger smiles down at me. 'I told you, I am just a wanderer, a crazy wanderer.'

Ever since that encounter, I have loved vagabonds with their sacks full of tales of princes, who became what they are for love of freedom and solitude. [00:03:00] I delight in madmen. I love to see their crazed, melancholy eyes, and to hear their

bewitching voices, which arouse in me forbidden images and desires. Or rather, it's not the madness itself I love, but those it possesses. Those whose souls it claims, as if to show them the limits of their possibilities, and then make them determined to go further, to push themselves beyond those limits. It's second nature with me. Some collect paintings, others love horses. Me, I am attracted to madmen.

Some fear them, and so put them away where no one can hear them cry out. I find some madmen entertaining, but others do indeed frighten me, as if they know that a man is just a restless and mysterious shadow of a dream, [00:04:00] and that dream may be God's. I have to confess that I enjoy their company. I want to see through their eyes the world die each night, only to be reborn with dawn. To pursue their thoughts as if they were wild horses, to hear them laugh and make others laugh. To intoxicate myself without wine, and to dream with my eyes open."

This is the beginning of a novel called *The Time of the Uprooted*, and tonight I shall read some passages and comment on them, which is a new undertaking. This is almost the 40th year that I am at this hall, at this table, sitting in the same chair, and occasionally drinking the same water. (laughter) And, it is something which I've always done, [00:05:00] the

fourth lecture in the year is more modern, not Bible, or Talmud, or Hasidism. But this is something special, because each lecture, when I give here a lecture, it takes me at least two months to prepare. This one took me five years. To write a book takes longer than to do the study, the research, and try to mold a story into a destiny, the destiny of at least a character that lived three or 2000 years ago.

The story unfolds somewhere in New York, at the end of the last century. Gamaliel, who is the main protagonist of the story, a ghostwriter for famous authors in France, is its main protagonist, and his stories is his life. Who is the woman in the hospital? There is a woman in the hospital that claimed, whatever she did, only in Hungarian, and therefore, [00:06:00] nobody understood her. So he, Gamaliel, was summoned to her bedside, simply because he also speaks Hungarian. And you know, Hungarian is a language only Hungarians love (laughter) and understand.

The only language which really, which is somehow useless to all other people (laughter), therefore, by the way, in Hollywood, the first Hollywood producers and geniuses came from Hungary. When the pictures were silent pictures. (laughter)

While waiting for the visit, Gamaliel tries to imagine, who could she be? His mother? Certainly not, she had been deported and never returned. A cabaret singer? And that singer is almost a saint, 'cause she offered him refuge in Budapest during the war. [00:07:00] But so many years have passed since their last meeting. And while waiting, Gamaliel is searching his memory for women he had befriended. The one he married in Paris left him, their two daughters, abandoned by him, hate him. Now, who did he love? This story has many more, many more love stories than all my other novels put together. And I even made one description of a woman who is -- the most beautiful ones, I think she was 40, and I said that 40 and still admirably beautiful, and one, at least one reader said, "Oy mister, a woman of 40 is always admirable." I agree.

Anyway, he is searching, and then, of course, the question is, whom did he really love? There was a young Moroccan girl, and he met her on a boat going to Israel. [00:08:00] An innocent, platonic encounter, which remained with him. But what about those who are waiting for him, to be met by him? What about those who are waiting here, outside? Outside, for the doors to open.

Now, of course you may ask, why a novel, why this novel? Why does one write? Why did I write? I've done nothing in my life except teaching and writing, and the teacher in me is a writer, and the writer in me is a teacher. And each time I say to myself, maybe it's still not what I really wanted to say, but I said it. And truth is, that in this place, for the last 40 years, what I tried to avoid was the introductions [00:09:00] and the question period. (laughs) The introductions, because sometimes the introduction is longer than the lecture. I had a friend who was a very, very great man. His name was Meyer Weisgal. Meyer Weisgal was Chaim Weizmann's best friend, and assistant, and they worked together all the time, all those years. Weisgal actually built, created, the Weizmann Institute for his friend Chaim Weizmann, who became the first president of Israel. And he told me a true story about himself. He came to a fundraising dinner, somewhere, and the person who was introducing him went on, and on, and on, and on, and on. Finally, he sat next to him, he pulled him by his sleeve, he said, "Sir, stop." And the man said, "I want to. I don't know how." (laughter)

I had a kind of story, somewhere, in another city, [00:10:00] a true story. I came to a place, also to give a lecture, not for fundraising, a lecture. And that evening, they wanted to honor

their own people, they honored 15 people. They got 15 plaques. To read them would take an hour. And finally, they began at 6:00. My turn came at 11:45. (laughs) So I got up, and simply said, "Oy," and sat down. (applause) And that was the best lecture I ever gave. (laughter)

So, why does one write, really? Because one writes, because they have no choice. Students of mine, when they want -- I don't teach creative writing, but when they come to my classes on philosophy and literature, or humanities, and we speak about writing, I say to them what I say to myself. If you can't go on without writing, don't. It's only when you have no choice, [00:11:00] you really feel you must do it, that something in you, somebody in you, wants you to write, go ahead. If not, don't. Do other things. There are so many things to do. Because when you write, you have a problem. Why should you write this book, and how do you write it, and what is the subject, and what are the characters? And then once it's written, then what about the publisher? And once the publisher publishes, you have a problem with the readers. You know, sometimes I get such strange compliments. Here at the Y, occasionally. People afterwards come up to me, you know, and they say, "You know, I -- your books are so special, I cannot go to sleep without them." (laughs, laughter) Or, the other

strange (laughs) compliments I get, somebody comes, says, "You know, my wife cannot -- she loves your books." It's not "I love your book," "my wife loves your books." (laughter)

So, in truth, (laughs) the best stories are what [00:12:00] Groucho Marx -- he got a book from S.J. Perelman, who are all of you too young to remember. He was one of the great -- he was the Bernard Shaw of America. And when he got the book, he wrote him. He said, "Mr. Perelman, thank you for sending me the book. You know, I have it in my hand and I must tell you, when I have it, I cannot -- I cannot stop laughing. And one day I'll read it." (laughter)

So, but naturally, in my writing, I always -- my roots aren't in Jewish faith, in Jewish tradition. The Bible, the Talmud, Midrash, whatever I do, I draw from those sources. In his Ecclesiastes, King Solomon speaks of the many seasons in one's life. "*Eit laledet v'eit lamut*, there is a time to be born and a time to die. *eit lata'at v'eit la'akor natua*, a time to seed and a time to reap. *eit laharog v'eit lirpo*, a time to kill and a time to heal. [00:13:00] A time to weep and a time to love, a time to seek and a time to lose, a time to be silent and a time to speak. A time to love, a time to hate. And, a time to lament, a time to dance. *Eit s'fod v'eit r'kod*."

The difference here, the *lamed*, the L, in the word, is missing. It doesn't translate. A time to lament, the "to" is missing, but simply, "a time lament." And a very celebrated Hasidic master, the founder of the Hasidic movement, the Besht, explained, "There can be a time when it itself is lamenting. A time, itself, is dancing." And, at least, I belong to a generation that has witnessed and experienced such times. During the torment in those years, together with all of us, time was lamenting. [00:14:00] And, later on, during the liberation of Jerusalem, together with all of us, time was dancing. And the question, of course, is, could the same be said of time being uprooted?

In this novel, everything and everybody is uprooted. Is today Monday? Maybe it's Tuesday. But no, it's Thursday. As if it matters. The wanderer can't seem to wake up, which is unlike him. And so it was with Isaac, and Job, when they were full of years, as scripture tells us. In his dream, he had just seen his father. He stands solemnly for a long moment, and then father and son embrace. He awakes with a start, then falls back into heavy, oppressive slumber. No more father. Talk to him. [00:15:00] He doesn't answer. Stretch out a hand. He turns away. With effort, he opens his eyes. He knows he's alone,

that he should get up, that he has a long and trying day ahead, but he can't seem to place the day in his exile's life. Does it belong to his future? To his past? His soul is lost in the fog, and is taking him to some terrifying place of the damned.

Somewhere, an old woman, ravaged in body and memory, is waiting for him, watching for him. Perhaps to punish him for misdeeds long forgotten, for promises carelessly tossed aside. Who is she? A beauty he dreamed of as a boy but could not hold onto? One of his daughters, stricken in her mind and lost in the depths of time? He searches his memory. Their dark faces circle around him and seem about to close in and suffocate him.

[00:16:00] He knows that he's destined for a fateful encounter with a mysterious woman. A turning point? The end of a stage of his life? If so, isn't it time for some kind of *cheshbon hanefesh*, a taking stock, an accounting of his soul, in which he would review the fires he's been through, and the many lives he's led?

He shakes himself awake, gets up, goes to the washbasin, and examines his reflection in the mirror. He sees his yellowish-gray pallor, his sagging features, his dull gaze. He doesn't recognize the man staring back at him. All he's done is to change nightmares. And here, the character speaks. He says,

"My name is Gamaliel. Yes, Gamaliel. And I'll thank you not to ask me why. It's just another name, right? You are given a name, you carry it around, [00:17:00] and if it's too much of a burden, you get rid of it. As for you, dear reader, do I ask you how come you are named William or Morris or Sigmund or Serge or Sergei? Yes, Gamaliel isn't an everyday name, and let me tell you, it has its own story. And it's not one you hear every day either. 'That's true of everybody,' you will say, and so what, if they want, they can tell me the story of their lives. I'll hear them out. Let me add that I am also named Peter. Peter was my childhood. For you, childhood means playing with a ball, rolling a hoop, pony rides in the park, birthdays and holidays, vacations at the shore or in the mountains. My childhood was in a nightclub. It has a story, too. I'll get around to that, just bear with me. Because the story here is that" -- as I said, a cabaret singer, who was more than that, a little bit, [00:18:00] and she was a friend of Gamaliel's mother, and in 1944, when the deportation of Hungarian Jews began in Budapest, this cabaret dancer took him in and she became his protector. And she took him always into the cabaret, she had no choice, so he was with her every evening. And the story is how he lived those evenings.

But for now, let's stick to Gamaliel. "What kind of name? I know. You don't see it very often. Sounds Sephardic. So, how did I get it? You really want to know? I inherited it. Yes, some people inherit houses, or businesses, stamp collections, bank accounts. I inherited my name. My paternal grandfather left it to me. Did I know him? Of course not. He died before I was born, or else I'd have been given another name. But then, how did his parents happen to choose so unusual a name, [00:19:00] one that seems better suited to a tired old man than to a newborn baby? Did they find it in the traditions of their Sephardic ancestors? Those who were expelled from Spain, or perhaps those who stayed on, the Marranos, who pretended to convert but secretly retained their Jewish identity? You can find the first Gamaliel in the Bible. Gamaliel, son of Pedahzur, chief of the tribe of *Menashe*, and in the Larousse encyclopedia, where he is described as 'a Jew and a great luminary,'" quote unquote.

"And of course, in the Talmud, where he is frequently quoted. His grandfather was Hillel the Elder. He lived and thought somewhere in Palestine during the first century, well before the destruction of the Second Temple. Yes, I bear the name of a great leader, known for his wisdom and moderation, universally respected in Israel. He was president of the *Sanhedrin*, and of

a well-known academy. [00:20:00] Nothing was decided without his consent. I would have liked to have known him; actually, that can be done. All I have to do is look in the records of discussions in which he took part. I have been doing that every chance I have gotten since I came to America, which by now is quite a while ago. I like to study, and I love to read. I never tire of reading. I have a lot to catch up. Besides, you could say it's what I do for a living. I write, so I can learn to read, and read, and read."

Now, let's note that Gamaliel, the stranger in this story, is not really a stranger. Like everyone else, he has an identity. He has an address, friends, connections, habits, and yes, he has his quirks and his whims. But the refugee in him is always on the alert, ready to speak the word that will upset all he has taken for granted about the way he lives. [00:21:00] It is said that a man never recovers from torture, that a woman never recovers from rape. The same is true of those who have been uprooted. Once a refugee, always a refugee. He escaped from one place of exile, only to find himself in another. Nowhere is he at home. He never forgets the place he came from. His life is always provisional. Happiness, for him, is a moment, a moment's rest. Love, that is supposed to be eternal? A blink

of the eye. For a man in his situation, at every step, the end seems near.

And now, it's here of course, I drew from my own experiences as a refugee. I came to America as a refugee, a stateless refugee. And I remained it, to this day, I can't speak to people -- when I see a policeman, I am afraid. [00:22:00] I have done nothing wrong, but I am afraid. When I drive occasionally and I have to make a U-turn, believe me, I stop, change places with my wife, and she does the U-turn. (laughter) For a ticket, she will get herself out of the policeman. I surely would not.

Now, is, speaking of, therefore, of this refugee, is the bell about to toll for him? For some time now, Gamaliel has felt himself growing old. "Never" has become the key word. The many adventures he will never undertake, the girls he will never kiss, the children he will never have, the faraway places he will never discover, the cello he will never learn to play, the ecstasy he will never again feel, next to a body that is vibrant with life, without fearing he will fail. The passing years grow heavy. Their weight drags him down. [00:23:00] Gamaliel tires more easily. He's often out of breath. His mind wanders. His need to sleep becomes urgent. He has lived a lot of years. How many does he have left? He wasted an appalling number of them.

Did he bungle his youth? Alexander the Great died at 33, Spinoza at 44. The Baal Shem Tov was 60. Mozart, Pushkin, Rilke, Herzl -- they enriched the world in the course of their short, frenzied lives, but what about Gamaliel himself? Who will carry on his name? What will he leave behind? Just words, and not even the ones he would want to have endured. Vanity of vanities, it's all absurd.

Music is what he always regretted. He wishes he had gone to the conservatory. And Paritus the One-Eyed used to say, "When the world starts singing, I start dancing." But not Gamaliel.

[00:24:00] Everyone else is dancing. He has never learned how. The refugee's days are growing few, as are those of the season, and the century is drawing to its close. How many times has he stood at the cliff's edge and wanted to withdraw? But to where? From one abyss to another, whispered the great Hasidic teacher. But he did not say whether he was describing the adventure of our passage through this life, or rather, our search for peace and the ultimate answer. Despair is the refugee's everyday companion, even when he is enjoying himself or entertaining others. He despairs of his work. He despairs of his life.

Was he afraid? Is Gamaliel afraid? Afraid of stirring up the remorse that threatens to kill off any chance he has of

redeeming himself, of fulfilling any promise? [00:25:00] As he walks along the Brooklyn street, hands stuffed in the pockets of his raincoat, Gamaliel is trying to shake off his memories. Let them go hound someone else, under some other sky. His gloomy thoughts turn to the events that are threatening the world at the end of the century, in the name of the Fatherland.

Supposedly civilized countries sent to death young people, who would rather be dancing the frenzied dancing of desire. Under the noble pretext of advancing science, man becomes a slave to machines. There is a risk that those who claim to be honoring their people's past, in fact, may do it discredit. They talk themselves into saying nothing. The gods of hate hide behind slogans of brotherhood. They fool everybody, including themselves.

So the story actually ends with a century. [00:26:00] But somehow, the premonitions out there, the forebodings out there, and my good friends, it's enough to open a newspaper or to watch television to realize how wrong we were at the end of the century, thinking, hoping, that the 21st will be a better one. We thought then that we have learned the lesson. At least that should be certain, we have learned the lesson, the lesson that fanaticism, political or religious fanaticism, is a disaster to faith as well as to anything else. Fanaticism brings hate, and

hate, as you know, is a cancer. It goes from limb to limb. It grows and grows and destroys, destroys the living cells, the living body.

And therefore, we have [00:27:00] invented a new ultimate weapon. Not we, but some people did, and we may become its victims. The suicide terrorist. This is totally new, and therefore, and therefore, we live in fear, in addition to hope. Because in the beginning, years and years and centuries ago, only those who fought on the front line were threatened, killed, or became killers. Only those. During the First World War, civilian populations also suffered, because of the huge guns that had been already invented then. The Second World War, many civilians were killed. Cities were destroyed. People massacred.

Today, every street is the front line. We never know when a bus will blow up, where. In the beginning, we thought, [00:28:00] it's only Jews. And therefore, the world really didn't pay that much attention, was not that moved, when autobuses were blown up, or coffee shops were blown up, in Jerusalem, in Hadera, or in the Galilee. Only Jews. But we have seen that, that whatever happens to the world, has -- had happened already to Jews. Somehow, in good or not so good. God gave the Bible to

the Jewish people, and it was the Bible -- in good, of course -- was taken over by so many -- hundreds of millions of people. I only wish that Moses had been a better economist, because he would have maybe then, somehow, registered a copyright.

(laughter) If we had a copyright, believe me, we wouldn't need any help from anyone, not even from America. We could help America then. [00:29:00] The copyright for hundreds and millions of Bibles, my God. (laughter)

But today, you see, it also happened, therefore, in other things. In violence, in cruelty. And those who were cruel to one people, really, will end up -- have ended up, and will end up, being cruel to others as well. So, therefore, maybe ideas were uprooted, perverted. And therefore, became, not ideals, but on the contrary, they became threats. So about the uprooted, about the exile, the refugees, I say that Adam and Eve, the first to be uprooted, the first exiles, the first stateless ones, driven out of the first family home, their life was beautiful even when it wasn't. Like Adam and Eve, their descendants today wander the earth, fleeing the serpent with its deadly poison. [00:30:00] Others decided their fate. They are no longer free to act, to believe, to choose their places, not even to renounce freedom.

As in ancient Greece, where they were called a *polis*, they are considered harmful, or dangerous, and so they are kept aside from humanity. All of us are like Adam, said a sage in antiquity, not I. Gamaliel says to himself, "No. I am not Adam. Eve is my mother, not my wife. And I want to protect the children, my own and all the others, from the world of my madness. Where are they growing up? In what accursed land, we said, by what enemies? Why so much hatred?"

And what about himself, Gamaliel the exile? He has done no harm, has taken nothing from others. Hasn't seduced their women or led their children astray. Hasn't taken their place in the sun. And yet, why is he so unloved? Why do people he has never met shun the solitary intruder who [00:31:00] carries his past like a load on his shoulders? It's strange. The word "refugee" has lost its biblical meaning. The Bible provides for cities of refuge, where those who kill someone by accident can take shelter from possible avengers. Of course, the refugees are not entirely free of guilt. So, Scripture specifies. They must remain in these cities of asylum until their sin is expiated by the death of the high priest. And that is why, as the Talmud, tongue in cheek, the refugees are so often visited by the mother of the high priest, who brings them clothing and sweets and

fruits, in the hope that if their lives are pleasant enough, they will not pray for her son's death.

In our time, it's the innocent who need refuge. And so, he shakes -- Gamaliel shakes his hand. And studies, [00:32:00] "What is the point of collecting information -- so many sacred and secular texts, when their authors all end up in the potter's field of history? Yet, it's true. I learned about King David's turbulent life of love and war, and his son and successor Solomon's pearls of wisdom, but also the treason of his other sons, Absalom and Adoniyahu. But what use is that to me today? I know that the first translation of the Bible was ordered by Ptolemy, who had 70 scholars locked in cells, each in solitary confinement. And that Diogenes lived like a dog, so he was nicknamed the Cynic. That the Talmud is compared to an ocean deep beyond measure. That Maimonides wrote some of his works in Arabic, and Spinoza wrote in Latin. That Erasmus dedicated his Praise of Folly to Thomas More, who coined the word 'utopia' in 1516, [00:33:00] the place that never was.

That Hölderlin went mad, and closed himself off from the world 36 years before he died. That Goethe hated the Bible, which he considered a trash heap of 'Egypto-Babylonian sodomy,' quote unquote. Oh yes, I made a study of the laws governing the right

of asylum in antiquity, and asceticism in the Middle Ages, so what? Just where did all that get me? There are so many who know more than I do, who understand the world better than I do. I would be truly learned, a great scholar, if I could only retain everything I have learned from those I have known. But then, would I still be me? And isn't all that only words? Words grow old, too. They change their meaning, and their usage. They get sick, yes, words get sick, just as we do. They die of their wounds, and then, they are relegated to the dust of dictionaries. [00:34:00] And where am I in all this?"

So you see, Gamaliel is always thinking and thinking, and because of his background, and mine, he loves learning, as I do. And sometimes, of course, when we study history and our own history, history in the 20th century mainly, we cannot but ask, and wonder, is it possible that man is actually God's mistake? Or His victim? Surely not His enemy. Is it possible that whatever is happening today has been done with language as well? Is it an accident that in Islam, two words are missing from the entire vocabulary? Compromise, and integrity.

A great French writer, Saint-Exupéry, [00:35:00] wrote, "We do not inherit the land of our ancestors, we borrow them from our children." Well, in Jewish history, we do both. But what do we

do, then, with what we have borrowed, either from our children and or, from our ancestors? We know what words are. That words can take root in the reddening sky. We know that they could sink into a cemetery, haunted by malevolent shadows, as in the brain of a madman. Why did Gogol, back from Jerusalem, weep when he had finished his book *The Dead Souls*? Why did Piotr Rawicz tasted ashes as he was writing "The End" on the last page of his novel, *A Blood from the Sky*? Does the writer love [00:36:00] the words he writes, or does he reject them when they part company?

Gamaliel believes, most of the time, that the work has a shadow that accompanies and stretches out from it. And the pain he suffers is inflicted by that shadow, but if he separates the word from its shadow, he will expose it, in all its nakedness, and that is dangerous. Once on display, it will attract too many ears, too many knowing looks. One day, Gamaliel's friend brought to him a sturdy old shopkeeper from Brooklyn. The man kept looking around suspiciously as if he thought every passerby may be an informer. He was more straightforward than anyone Gamaliel had known. He said, "They tell me you know how to write. I don't. [00:37:00] Matter of fact, I hardly know how to read." Not surprising. "My school was the ghetto, the war, the camp. I was a partisan in Russia. In the forest, I saw a

lot, did a lot, fighting the Germans, of course. Also their collaborators. I had my reasons, 12 of them. Twelve members of my family butchered in one morning, right in front of our home. So, please, write my story as best you can, if you can. Write it your way. Of course, put your name on it, I'll pay you well."

And Gamaliel says that it was a tempting offer. He needed money. But though peace can be told in words, war cannot. Words can incite the murderous hatred that is war, but words cannot describe it. In principle, one should not be able to put it into words, [00:38:00] this horror that is a war. This blasphemy that is war, this grotesque agony, this licensed slaughter, this glorified butchery that is war. James Joyce knew, as did Franz Kafka, what it meant, and therefore, neither wrote about the First World War. War kills the dream, along with the dreamer. It blinds the mind's eye so it cannot see the horizon.

Thus it was, that although Gamaliel was moved to write this man's story, he had to tear it up, and he told him by letter, "I do not know how to write your story. I do not know how to revive those haunted faces, those silent voices, who through you, would summon us to hear them tell of their death and,

perhaps, our own. All I can do is tell you that I cannot do it, and shake your hand." [00:39:00] A few years later, he sent the Brooklyn shopkeeper this quotation from a book by French writer Maurice Blanchot, he had just read, and I quote him, "And how can we agree not to know? We read the books about Auschwitz. The last wish of those who were there, their last charge to us, was know what happened here. Never forget. And yet, know that you will never know."

Elsewhere, elsewhere a friend of Gamaliel tells a story. "In the ghetto," he said, "I sometimes doubted not our eventual victory, but our capacity to take part in it. One night, we were informed of the death of Asher Baumgarten, a poet and chronicler. We in the resistance movement used to tell him what was going on behind the walls, and he was to bear witness [00:40:00] to our suffering and our struggle. For history's sake, for we were sure we were soon to die. What Emanuel Ringelblum was doing in Warsaw, we wanted to do in our town, Davarowsk. We counted on Asher. We counted on his objectivity, his talent as a writer, his mission as the carrier of memory. On the day the Germans rounded up the last of the children, the ghetto was in mourning, feeling shame as well as pain. The next night, Asher killed himself. He asked us in his farewell letter to forgive him for giving up, but he wrote, 'I saw the children.

I witnessed their cries and their tears, and I no longer have the words to tell it. There it is.' That was the most despairing moment of my life," says Gamaliel's friend.

[00:41:00]

So, what does one do when we have no words? The *Kotzker Rebbe* said that sometimes, words, some words, can communicate the truth. Others cannot. He said, only silence could. But what do we do when silence itself is unable to communicate? What, then, does one do with the testimony one carries, and tries to share it with as many people as possible? Maybe with God himself. Simply, to prevent more suffering. And to curtail the dominion of death.

When Gamaliel was a boy and his father was arrested in Budapest, he accompanied his mother on her visits to the prison. He would wait, sitting quietly on a bench in the park across the street from counterintelligence headquarters, [00:42:00] where the father was tortured. He was terrified by the thought that his mother might never return, and each time she did, he would throw himself into her arms and desperately embrace her. He held back his tears as she did. "Everything is all right," she would always assure him. "Father wants you to know that." The child

wanted to believe her, but with all his heart he wanted to see his father, if only once a month, once a year.

And one day there was a miracle. That morning, his mother returned to take him by the arm. "I have good news for you. You are going to see Papa." "When?" the boy cried out. "Right now, right now, in just a minute." And the boy asked no more questions. This, he would later regret. He should have observed that his mother was more dispirited than usual, depressed, worse than terrorized. What had she learned that morning? The boy would never forget the last time he saw his father. The prisoner was unshaven, emaciated, and his eyes were bright with fever. [00:43:00] He held the boy in his arms, murmuring, "Do you know how much I love you? Will you remember it?" The boy would remember always. He would remember also how his heart ached when he saw his father suddenly grown old and feeble, disoriented. Until then, his father had been a man filled with energy and optimism, a man who knew how to make his way through the labyrinth world in which the unfortunate and the downtrodden dwelled.

But his father said something more to him that day. "Remember, my child, that you are a Jew." That is what his father said to him. That is what his father repeated to him that day in the

prison. The boy didn't know he was clinging to his father for the last time, but he knew now more than ever that he must obey him, must remember his father's words. The father continued softly, and that, too, the child would remember. [00:44:00] "You were born a Jew, my son, and a Jew you must remain. Your mother tells me she had found a wonderful charitable woman who will look after you. You must be respectful to her, and obedient, and grateful. You will use the Christian name that she gives you, but never forget that you carry the name of my own father, Gamaliel. Try not to dishonor it. You will take it back as yours when this ordeal is over. Promise me you won't disown your name. Every name has its story. Promise me. Promise, my child, Gamaliel, that one day, you will tell that story." And the child promised.

As you see, therefore, that the book actually is a lot of stories, one intertwined with the other. And all through the memory, through the vision, through the desperate hope of Gamaliel. [00:45:00] But he was a writer and therefore, he also kept a secret book. In that secret book, he brought together a young mystic, who, together with his disciples and his friends, were working for the coming of the Messiah. And that young mystic met the cardinal archbishop of his town. And they had long dialogues. The young mystic came to ask the cardinal for

one favor: to save the Jews of his town. And that is the secret book inside the book, and those who know the stories of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, one of the greatest storytellers in Hasidism, if not in world literature, know that he wrote always a story within a story within a story within a story. And, as a child, I loved those stories. I still do. I now teach them in my university in Boston. [00:46:00] And therefore, without knowing it, subconsciously really, I am trying to follow him in his footsteps, doing the same thing.

And so, in one word, again, the suspense, of course, is, who is the woman? Who is the woman? Who is the woman who is waiting for him? Who is waiting for him and he has to go, he doesn't know he met her, if he doesn't know who she is. At one point, he tells another story. He said, "I have seen," he says, "I have seen the beggar from the beginning once again. I have seen again that wandering man who had come to our door ages ago, it seemed. This time, it was in the mountain village where we had [00:47:00] found ourselves after crossing the border from Czechoslovakia into Hungary. Did he know that we were about to move out and go to Budapest? Once again, it was on a Sabbath afternoon. Mother was asleep, my father was out. Night would soon fall. I was feeling lonely and sad. Suddenly, the door opened. I started in fright. 'My father isn't home,' I said to

the man standing still in the doorway. 'I know that,' he said. And I recognized the distinctive voice. 'You are the one I have come to see,' he said. 'You like stories. You really love them, don't you?' 'Yes, I do,' I answered softly. 'Yes, I love to hear stories. Yes, always.' 'Very well, then sit down and listen.'

Still standing back to back with his motionless shadow, he told me the story of a Hasid, a humble disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, known as the Besht, from his initials. The disciple was worried about how he would support his family [00:48:00] after the death of the master. 'Oh, that's simple enough,' the Besht had said. 'You will travel the world, telling the story of my deeds.' Of course, the Hasid had no choice but to obey. With his sack on his shoulder, he went on foot from village to village, from one community to the next, from one home to the next, seeking those who were ready to hear him tell of the greatness of the Master of the Good Name. Often, people were too preoccupied. They would turn him away, and go about their business. The best among them would give him a few copper coins as alms, or for their own sins, and he would carefully put these away to take to his wife for Passover.

Then, one night that he spent in a forest, he lost his meager fortune. Just when he was due to go home the following week. Tears came to his eyes. [00:49:00] And he was still in tears when he came to the synagogue in the neighboring village. Asked what his trouble was, he replied that he made his living by telling people stories about his master, that he had just lost all he had, and here, it was almost Passover, and his family could not afford to celebrate the traditional *Seder* feast. The people of the community empathized with his plight, but being themselves almost as penniless as he, they could give him only a piece of advice. The lord of their village, they said, was rather peculiar. He seldom went out, he was never seen in either the church or the tavern, but he would admit to the castle anyone who could tell him a story. If the story was new to him, the lord would reward the teller handsomely. Let the Hasid try his luck with the lord at his castle.

The lord greeted him by saying, 'They say you have some [00:50:00] worthwhile Jewish tales in that head of yours. Is that right?' 'Yes, it's true,' the disciple replied. 'Then what are you waiting for? Go ahead.' The disciple and servant of the Besht began to tell of his master's troubles, how he would disappear only to reappear in a faraway places. How he conjured up the miracles his master had performed. How he saved

a desperate woman, freed a hapless merchant from prison, rescued a widow, an orphan about to die, a child stolen by evil priests. After each story, the lord of the village would give him a small coin and say, 'Go on.'

So passed that day, and all the next day also. At last, the storyteller fell silent. 'That's all I can remember,' he said. 'Try,' the lord said bleakly. 'Search your memory, go on, make an effort.' 'I did try. There is nothing there.' 'Then try again,' the lord insisted. 'Try harder. You won't regret it.' 'I can't do it,' said the Hasid sadly. Without a word, the lord led him to the gate, [00:51:00] where the disciple suddenly stopped, slapped his forehead, and exclaimed, 'Please forgive me, but it's just come back to me. I remember a young sinner who came to the Besht to ask his help and his advice. He had strayed too far from the right path, from his people. He had broken with his God, and with his people. He had done terrible things, unforgivable things, and now he wanted with all his heart to find the path of righteousness and return. How could he find his way there?

The Besht asked me to leave him alone with the visitor. After a few hours, he called me back. It seems that before leaving, the young penitent had asked the Besht, "How will I know whether my

repentance had been accepted up in heaven?" And the Besht had replied, "You will know it on the day that you will hear this story.'" [00:52:00] And the lord had tears in his eyes as he embraced the disciple, who proceeded home, his pockets stuffed, and celebrated the *Seder* amid the joy of his memories."

Now you wonder why I love stories. How can you not love especially Hasidic stories? And so, we come in the novel, late, later in the novel, we come already to speak about the last encounter. We come and, while waiting, Gamaliel remembered a certain Rabbi Zušya, whom he had met, whom he had met in Morocco and later, in Brooklyn also, a mistake. And Rabbi Zušya said, "To a man born blind, God is blind. [00:53:00] To a sick child, God may be unfair. To the condemned man in prison, God is also a prisoner. On the other hand, to a free person, God is both the source of his or her freedom and its justification. To be free is to be made in God's image. Anyone who tries to place himself between the freedom of God and the freedom of man, between the word of man and the thought of God, is only being false to both man and God."

And also, Rabbi Zušya once cried out, "I no longer understand the creator of humanity. Why did he put us on this earth? Was it to glorify himself? These earthworms, these specks of dust,

able if not eager to corrupt all that is noble in the soul, unfortunate mortals [00:54:00] who need bread, water, and air to survive, how could they, in their wretchedness, bring forth true glory and offer it to God? For what reason should I have to need of them, he could say. And who is the beginning, who is the achievement, and the rebirth of all that is and ever shall be? I no longer understand." And then he said, "I, Zušya, son of Rachel, I say unto thee, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that thy creation is racing to its doom through a land of ashes. If thou dost not see this, if thou sees it and does not intervene, if thou hast forgotten the procession of doom, Jewish children marching through the night to the flames, God of charity, I will tell my prayers to howl, [00:55:00] I no longer have the strength to invoke thy holy name. I will command my mind to close thee out of my thoughts forever."

And then, we come -- I'll give you a last few pages from that. He comes, Gamaliel comes, to the hospital, meets a doctor, a young doctor. And they speak about the cabaret woman, Ilonka. They speak a lot. And the doctor, the young doctor, understands. And Gamaliel was struck by the sadness in her voice, and by the sudden awakening of a desire. He glanced at her. He was moved by her calm beauty in these moments, when they were brought together by a life's ending. He turned and

his gaze settled on her mouth. Her lips were sensual,
[00:56:00] generous, ready to open and give of themselves. A
crazy idea flashed through his mind. "Suppose Ilonka, the
cabaret dancer, came here to die for the sole purpose of helping
me to find the love of this woman, and to welcome her into my
life."

They remained silent for a long moment. Gamaliel was waiting,
and waiting. And then, fatigue and the need to forget overcame
him. Suddenly, he felt at peace, and was not even surprised by
it. He reflected without bitterness for once that the death of
others reminds us of our own age, and that he himself was
feeling old. But he'd been old for a long time. A Hebrew poet
said of certain Jews that they are born old. And Gamaliel
[00:57:00] recalled the Jewish journalist who, during the war,
in London, cabled a dispatch about Auschwitz and then, when he
looked in the mirror, saw that his hair had suddenly turned
white.

The story was also told of a young Talmudic sage who became an
old man overnight. It was true that there had been times in his
tumultuous life when Gamaliel had felt momentarily rejuvenated,
usually during certain encounters, but more and more, he had the
feeling that his life was over. Was this true now? The nurse

knocked at the door to inform them that the end of the woman was near. They dashed up to the stairs. The patient was softly sighing. The irregular rise and fall of her chest was barely perceptible. Gamaliel wondered if she was suffering. As if she could read his thoughts, the doctor said gently, "She is not in pain. We did everything [00:58:00] so she would leave in peace."

She motioned to the nurse, who removed the patient's oxygen mask. Her breathing became erratic. Then it ceased. Gamaliel bent over her and studied her faded features, hoping somehow to see the face of the unforgettable Ilonka. He had read somewhere that at the last minute death erases wrinkles and scars, that masks come apart and fall away. But not this time. The features of the nameless old Hungarian remained scarred by her suffering. Gamaliel left a kiss on her forehead. He wanted to say something, but he could not find the words. Do the dead hear what we do not say to them?

He was turning the question over in his mind when he felt the doctor's hand on his shoulder. She whispered to him, [00:59:00] "Come. It's time." Time to do what? he wondered. To live with her, separated from Ilonka? To wait for Death to return for him also? Who would come to mourn his passing? Not his daughters.

All trace of them was lost forever in other words, other times. His friends would come, of course. They would remember. Eve, a certain woman he met, she, too, perhaps, in her fashion, without letting on to Samael. And the doctor--if, meanwhile, she had agreed to marry him? Who knows. And Esther, whom he saw as a grandmother, playing with her 13 grandchildren?

It doesn't matter, he told himself. In the next world, the world said to be of Truth, other witnesses would be called to testify. But his novel, *The Book of Secrets*, which he had embarked on so long ago and had finally managed to organize, to structure--who would complete it? Who would recount [01:00:00] what had happened in the disputation between the blessed mystic, that incarnation of Rabbi Zušya, and the archbishop cardinal Baroni? And who emerged as victor?

Deep inside himself Gamaliel was coming to a melancholy realization. The novel with which he was to illustrate or even justify what he had truly intended to make of his life--his novel would never be completed. Well, what of it? People know that the son of Maimonides, Rabbi Abraham, wrote books that he never finished, and that no one ever found. On the other hand, did not Henry James say that one should never claim fully to

know the human heart? After all, even a failed destiny is still a destiny.

The next day, a Friday, only Gamaliel and Lili, the doctor, accompanied the old woman to the Jewish cemetery. If it is Ilonka, the Christian cabaret dancer, [01:01:00] he thought, "she deserves a place among Jews." Since she had been declared "a deceased person of unknown religion," there was no rabbi present at the interment. But Gamaliel had thought to compose a prayer. "Lord, receive this soul and comfort her, for perhaps she could not be comforted in this life. Grant her the peace that she surely did not know here below. Open to her the gates of love, which perhaps made her suffer too much. You know her. You who know each being who lives and all who die, you know. Tell her that without knowing who she was, we loved her. And that thanks to her, we shall love one another."

And then, and then, he finds among her things something. And because of that, he knows who she was. [01:02:00] I won't tell you. (laughter) All I can say is, we wait, wait until you read. For, to be Jewish means to wait. And the conclusion, of course, a beautiful story, a Hasidic story, a story is that Rabbi Yisrael, Baal Shem Tov, the Besht, one day decided to gather with all of his disciples. That it's enough. Enough, the

Jewish people suffered so much, it's enough, God must bring the Messiah. And in saving the Jews, he will save all people. The Messiah comes for all humanity.

And he knew how to do it. He knew the secrets. The secret of the beginning, as well as the secret of the end. So he and his disciples did what they had to do every morning, before dawn, and every evening, at twilight. What letters to compose, what angels to invoke, [01:03:00] and how many chapters of Psalms to say when, and how -- he knew. And he made an appointment with them. One morning, they will meet in the certain place in the forest, where they will lit a fire, and say a prayer, and then the Messiah will come. They were there, ready, purified, well-equipped to welcome the savior of mankind. But the Besht, the master, was late. They waited an hour, two hours, three hours. He was late.

Finally, when he came, they were upset. They thought it was their fault. They must have done something wrong, for the Messiah not to come. Somehow, it was sabotaged, because of what they had done or not done. Here he assured them. "Don't worry," he said, "don't worry. You have done everything right. It's my fault. I was on my way to come and join you, but at one point, in the street there, the small street, as I [01:04:00]

passed a certain house, I heard a child crying. I looked through the window; there was nobody there. I understood that the mother must have gone either to the forest to collect some wood, to build some fire in the house, or to buy something, or to find some food for the child, but he was crying. I hear a child cry, how can I not come in? So I came in, and waited, and waited with the child. Because you see, my dear students," he said, "when a child cries, the Messiah can wait." Let's wait together. (applause)

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