

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) In ancient Judea during the harshest era of Hadrian's suppressive regime sages would often stop children in the street and question them. "Pesok et pesukecha" was the phrase. Tell us, what biblical passage or what verse have you learned today? And from their answer they would be able to decipher the future. On the surface the text makes sense since according to the Talmud, with the destruction of the first temple, prophecy has ended in Jewish history. The reason being, by the way, prophets usually gave distressing reports, [00:01:00] and therefore history felt or God felt that was enough, enough sadness, so no more prophecy. (laughter)

So the prophecy was taken away from the prophets, from the so-called professional inspired prophets, and, believe it or not, given solely to fools and children, which is in itself puzzling. If children and fools can foresee tomorrow's events, doesn't it mean that prophecy still existed then? And perhaps even today? After all, there are enough fools in the world. Except we can conceive prophecy not as an act of prediction but of admonition, which is what happened to a great sage, Elisha ben Abuyah, the

famous Acher. [00:02:00] In his case the pupils' words carried a very personal message which he misinterpreted, and according to tradition it is because of that verse that he lost faith.

I am not fully satisfied with this explanation. Because it ignores a frightening aspect of the story. Wasn't it forbidden by Roman law to study Torah? Weren't both student and teacher exposed to torture, torment, and agonizing execution? How then could old teachers endanger the lives of young children? Except if their exchanges took place not in public but in secret? But we are told they stopped them in the streets. But even then, even if it was done in secret, I believe the objective was not concrete prophecy [00:03:00] about the future, but maybe psychological reassurance over the present.

I believe that the sages simply wish to be sure that there were Jewish children still studying Torah even then in those harsh circumstances. Even then they were remembering what they learned by heart. Thus exemplifying the noble and beautiful links that connect teachers to disciples, and that is of course these links that make up the Talmud. Question: could this happen today? Just imagine an elderly man stopping a boy in the streets of Manhattan and asking him to repeat his Torah lesson story. Would he receive an intelligent [00:04:00] answer?

Wouldn't he be arrested? (laughter) And accused of possible pedophilia? Oh yes, times change.

But the questions remain the same. And the most topical one tonight is, of course, what have we learned here in these magnificent, wise surroundings during our 30-odd years of annual encounters. Why not admit it? With some melancholy I feel that I reached an age when one must conduct some soul-searching, we call it *cheshbon hanefesh*, and examine what one has done with his days and years. The Y has become my intellectual home far away from Boston University, which is my academic anchor. But here it is a kind of yeshiva. It is here [00:05:00] that I try share with audiences young and not so young, Jews and non-Jews what I have received from my teachers and theirs.

Even my imaginary stories, the novels, it is here that I spoke about their secret first. I just published my fiftieth volume in France. It's fiction. And I cannot help asking myself questions about those that preceded it. Have I found the right words always? Later tonight I plan to read excerpts from a new novel to be published soon. It is called -- I will speak about it -- it's called *A Mad Desire to Dance*. It may surprise those who know me. I have never danced in my life (laughter) except on Simchat Torah. As for our learning here, what didn't we do?

We studied scripture, the judges, [00:06:00] the prophets, Talmud sages, Midrash, and Hasidic masters.

Our first biblical scene was Job, and we quoted all the necessary sources and concluded then that Job's protest was not directed at God's injustice but at his apparent indifference. Was there nothing left to add? Yes, there was. And I do intend to return to Job one day, maybe next year, and devote our attention not so much to him, not even to God, but to Satan plays an important role in the book. And he remains a leading protagonist. What happened to him? Where is he? Then we explored the behavior, for instance, of Lot's unnamed wife. She was punished for looking back at her [00:07:00] city Sodom, already engulfed in flames.

For a while I took her side. I took her side because she was curious and because she wanted to know. She wanted to know what it is when a city burns. And I believe that if looking back is dangerous, aren't historians and witnesses faced with constant peril? How can we try to teach each other that we must look back, we must open pages that were written centuries ago if looking back costs so much?

Recently while rereading the story of the weekly parsha, or the portion of scripture, I stopped for a moment. I had not realized before that actually Lot's wife was innocent. Her punishment was unjust. Indeed, when you study [00:08:00] the text the angel's prohibition was directed at her husband alone in singular, tabit, al tabit , don't look. Al tabit literally is to him, not to her. So what do we want from her? If the prohibition was not directed at her she had all the right to do what she did. Then why was she punished? Again, we have to return to her one day. She's waiting in the desert as a pillar of salt. (laughter)

Then I devoted three sessions to the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. Each time I felt that it wasn't enough. Each time I felt that more could be found in more sources about either the father or the son. But even now [00:09:00] I keep on discovering new material, meaning new questions related to what happened or didn't at Mount Moriah. Are we sufficiently aware of the fact that afterwards, after the event itself Abraham and Isaac never talked again, that Abraham and Sarah and their son were never together again? Sarah died in Hebron, and Abraham came to her funeral from Be'er Sheva.

And Isaac, he came from somewhere. We are told a yeshiva. A source even suggests that he had died. A passage from the sublime litanies of the High Holy Days speaks of his ashes, which means the Midrash, with its imaginary genius, so [00:10:00] disturbing, actually offers us an option to think that God's intervention came too late. Listen to a legend in the Midrash. At one point before or during the act itself, already on the altar, Isaac turns to his father and says, please, burn me well, and put my ashes in a box, and then place it at the door of my mother so each time she would go to her room she would remember me and weep.

Our general comment, ours too is an Akedah generation. But if the first witnessed the father leaving the son behind, [00:11:00] ours saw the son surviving the father. And all these themes are both ancient and contemporary. I love searching for them in old texts and relevant sources, a plea by Jeremiah, a song by Homer, a smile by Shakespeare, a statement by Spinoza, a question by Erasmus, a story by the Besht. Yes, all these themes and others, many others, occupy central places in my work and in my life. What they all have in common is a quest for meaning, commitment to memory, and a passion for questioning, sharing, and learning together.

All this requires [00:12:00] patience. You cannot turn the pages too fast. You cannot skip passages. Patience is a virtue, impatience is not. But then what about those friends outside who are impatiently waiting for the gates to open? Everywhere, what we try to find is actually the secret place, the secret place in a text, the secret place in a story, the unsaid, which is more important than what is said. In general philosophy, in literature, in poetry, I am intrigued by the fact that Nietzsche, the great author of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and so forth, he actually fell sick in 1889 in Turin, Italy.

And from that moment on he hasn't written a single [00:13:00] line until he died in 1900. What happened to him in those 11 years? What did he want to write and didn't? What went through his mind? Simple madness that led to suicide, what was it? I want to know that one of his followers, Adorno, a great philosopher in Germany, in post-war Germany, when he said that to let suffering speak is the condition of truth, but what language is the language of suffering? Is the language of the victimizer the same as the language of the victim?

Why did Victor Hugo become a prophet all of a sudden, and a poor one at that, when he said that the nineteenth century, he said about his own, is great, but the twentieth [00:14:00] century

will be happy. Some prophecy! Why did Nikolai Gogol, the playwright, the Russian playwright, when he went to Jerusalem and came back from Jerusalem, why did he burn the second volume of his play, of his play called *The Dead Souls*? Why did Baudelaire say that Satan's greatest victory is to convince us that he doesn't exist? Pindar the philosopher, the ancient philosopher said man is nothing but a dream of a shadow. But in Talmud we read life is a shadow. But of what? A house? A tree? And the Talmud simply says no, we are a shadow of a bird in flight.

So what about current affairs? Except for [00:15:00] the economic situation, in some areas things bring joy, in others pride. Politically racism has received its final blow with the election of a black president. Leave political affinities aside, but I cannot forget what I saw and felt in the late '50s when visiting the South. Not only did I see racism at work but I saw it being the law. And for the first time in my life I felt shame. I was never ashamed for being Jewish. But there was shame in me in the South for being white. Therefore, later on Marion and I went to South Africa in 1975 just to see apartheid at work and denounce it in the Sowetos and so forth. [00:16:00] Oh yes, now we realize that history has changed and human mentality as well, and thank God for that.



Another area deals with Jewish-Christian relations. They have never been better or more fruitful. Rooted in the spirit of ecumenism, willed by the popes John XXIII and John Paul II and in America Niebuhr and Tillich, rabbis and priests work together on humanitarian and social projects everywhere, thank God. In truth, they should have immediately included a third partner from Islam and initiate study session together of ancient texts. One day they could study one week the Bible, the next the Quran or the New Testament, but study together as texts. Joint study never hurt anyone, not even one's ego. [00:17:00]

Still, we ask a question, what about history? Where does history go? What does history tell us? Does it have a sense of justice? Years ago I received an invitation from the culture minister of Austria to come to Vienna for a whole day. And that day they will have my books read by all the students in Vienna, and against racism, against anti-Semitism. And I answered I will come. Mr. Minister, I will come. I accept your invitation. I would come one day after Kurt Waldheim leaves. (laughter) Waldheim was, you know, the infamous president of Austria with his infamous past.

And I thought he would say, hey, hey, hey, he's my president. No, the answer came, okay. (laughter) So we came. [00:18:00] Marion and I came to Vienna. And it was an event which really stays with me because it taught me something. There were from 60- to 80,000 young students and from all over Austria who met in Vienna at the Heldenplatz. Those of you who know what it is, the Heldenplatz, the main square. That was the place where Hitler was received in 1938 by hundreds and thousands of Austrians cheering his entrance. And they wanted me to speak from the balcony, from the same balcony Hitler had spoken.

And between Hitler and me no one else had been there. He was my immediate predecessor. And I -- again I was afraid to touch the balcony. (laughs) I didn't want my hand, you know, to be on the same place that he was [00:19:00] there, so I stayed like this. And I began my address saying, I am not sure that history has a sense of justice, but it sure has a sense of humor. (laughter)

I speak about Judea-Christian relations, and we should continue. Is this a time for the new pope to elect Pius XII to sainthood? Actually, the Jew in me refuses to be involved in these polemics. Whether Pius XII will or not be a saint in Catholicism must pose a problem not to Jews but to Catholics. Do they really wish to see in him an example for their children,

a man who knew so much about our tragedy in Europe and in Italy, and did so [00:20:00] little to help Jewish victims? The post-war Vatican established a special section to help SS murders escape justice and go to Latin America or to the Arab countries.

It worked. They smuggled out Barbie. They smuggled out Eichmann. It worked. But remember, there was no such plan, no such section, no such group to save Jews from this very SS group. Had there been one many Jewish lives would have been saved. And that was under Pius XII. He a saint?

Now, I must confess that other Christians, not Catholics, also [00:21:00] worry us, a very special group. Listen carefully please. Are you aware of what the Mormon church has been doing for some years? It is converting posthumously Jews who perished in the Holocaust. Their number has already reached hundreds of thousands. Non-survivors, such a Golda Meir and David Ben-Gurion, have also become Mormons. (laughter) Ernie Michel, a fellow survivor, we were together in Auschwitz, Buna. We were together on the death march to Gleiwitz. He was the first to discover and reveal this sensational story. And that does not let me be in peace.

Oh, Mormons are good and decent people, socially conscious, [00:22:00] doing very good things, and they work hard for their community. Why have they chosen to offend Jewish sensitivity? The Mormons claim that they do it out of love for the Jews. And allegedly they tried to also convert Catholics, but there it doesn't work. The Catholics somehow resisted. But even if they succeeded there is no consolation to us. All I can say is Catholic monks use the same argument, that they do it for us, during the Inquisition. All they wished was to save the Jewish soul. They lit a fire under their victims and wept.

Now really, for centuries the church used all the methods available to its members to force living Jews to convert, and now the Mormons, also [00:23:00] Christians, targeted dead Jews? Don't they realize the pain they inflict on children and grandchildren of our martyrs? Furthermore, why am I so concerned? Why are we, Ernie and I, so concerned? Just imagine 100 years from now, imagine a future Holocaust denier opening Mormon archives, and what would it say? Oh, Hitler didn't kill Jews. He killed Mormons.

And so I fervently hope, for the sake of good relations between all people of faith, that the leaders of the Mormon Church will undo what they have done already to Jewish memory and erase from

their conversion books the names of pious, god-fearing, and religious Jews. But even agnostic men and women who died in Auschwitz, [00:24:00] Majdanek, Sobibor, Treblinka, because they were Jewish. It must stop.

Another case of astonishment. The young people who joined the neo-Nazi party in Germany, don't they know the misfortune, catastrophe, shame, and malediction Nazism brought on their own people in their own land? Their elders could tell them what Germany looked like in 1945, '46, '47, '48, '49. It was simply a place of ruins, ruins. Not a single city was spared. Human ruins. The Germans felt -- the good ones -- felt embarrassed.

Now, to go further, a small group of Nazi sympathizers [00:25:00] was just condemned to seven years in prison, where? In Israel. What? Nazis in Israel? Don't they know the consequences of Nazism to our people, their people? There are so many things in so many areas that I fail to understand, in our land, here in New York. We witnessed recently a scene of cruelty that cannot but shock and move all what is noble in the human being. On the last Thanksgiving morning Walmart opened its doors to bargain hunters, and they trampled a man to death. And when some people tried to save him, they were pushed aside.

For [00:26:00] what? For a bargain? For a few dollars? People killed and let a human being die?

How can one ignore or forget a tragedy that befell the whole world, especially India? Last week suicide terror has, in an act of unspeakable cruelty and horror, once again stricken innocent people, men, women, and children, holding an entire city hostage. Westerners were singled out, but only Jews were tormented and tortured before being slaughtered in cold blood. Again, we must [00:27:00] feel, of course, compassion with all the victims and their families there, but we must also remember that Jews alone were tortured before they were killed. And to this day no one knows why these people murdered, what they wanted, and why they singled out Jews for special brutality.

Oh, you have seen it on television. The young Rabbi Gavriel and his pregnant wife Rivka, the Holtzbergs, a couple of Chabad emissaries, and they do extraordinary work everywhere, these young people, 3,500 of them and all over the world, wherever people, wherever people need anything Jewish, they are there to give it to them. So they came to India from American and Israel where they had a happy life. And they came [00:28:00] there just to help beggars and wanderers. Israeli soldiers, who after their service go to India -- I don't know why, but they go there

-- and they give them a free meal, a smile, a gesture of compassion and humanity.

And they were assassinated in front of their two-year-old son, Moshe, who was miraculously saved by his Hindu nanny. And whoever saw the child on television at the funeral service, doubly orphaned, weeping, asking again and again for Abba, Ima, Abba Ima, Daddy, Mommy. And whoever saw that could not repress his or her tears. But the tears of the baby must have fallen in a special cup that God Himself holds in His hands, and when it overflows redemption [00:29:00] must be near. Is it?

Of course, when we speak about texts, language is essential. Like everything else we do or say, language is more than the link between people, more than a vehicle to transmit thoughts and memories. It's a desire of the human being to transcend his or her own frail condition. Dwelling in a universe fraught with temptation and peril, by taking the hand of a friend and listening to the tale of a fellow wanderer, language is composed of words but is more than words. It is also the white space separating one word from another, one thought from the next, one person from its neighbor.

Even God needed language to create the world and the beings [00:30:00] in that world. Does language indicate both spoken and written words? They contain a variety of powers. They can destroy or build, inflict pain or offer hope, suggest malediction or generate joy. And we are responsible for their impact. It all depends what we do with them. It is not my only way of addressing God, but the only one to speak to my fellow man. Then as Aesopus said, it can be the best and the worst of things. A Chinese saying wants us to believe that there is in language a dragon that does not shed blood but does commit murder.

As for Kohelet, the ecclesiast, the tongue of the wise man is in his heart, whereas the heart of the fool is in his mouth. Since my childhood I learned to respect [00:31:00] language. Before praying in the house of study or before eating at home I will wash my hands. When a book fell to the ground, I picked it up and kissed it. Profane words contained their own sacred spark. Beware, life and death belong to the tongues. To abuse words is dangerous. May the tale become prayer, said the great Rabbi Nachman of Breslov.

Now, there were times when we felt estranged from language. I felt alienated from their original meaning, hunger, fire,



selection, evacuation, humiliation. Who would really understand what they mean to me and my fellow survivors? If I decided to wait 10 years before writing my first memoir it is because I was not certain that I would find the proper words to communicate [00:32:00] what cannot be communicated, not even among the initiated. Have I found them? I'm not really sure. Some of my colleagues, writers like me, must have entered despair, and they committed suicide. Is it that they understood the frailty and vulnerability of language?

In war or in other extreme situations of conflict and crisis when the humanity of the human being is in jeopardy, language is their first victim. In war it's always language that dies first, is mutilated first, is violated first. The language becomes then in war obscene, indecent, vulgar. What Leibniz calls a society's monument can regrettably [00:33:00] be easily violated, maimed, enslaved, corrupted, and perverted. How? It's simple. The method has been practiced, used, and abused by many tyrants and dictators throughout the last century. Orwell understood it brilliantly. All of a sudden words lost their original meaning to a substitute.

Both Stalin and Hitler each in his own way made language their obedient captive. Stalin used a term popular democracy to

describe his satellites in Eastern Europe that were neither popular nor democracy. Hitler and Himmler referred to the extermination of six million Jews as the final solution. To the victims, anti-Semitism and racism were a disease. For the haters, anti-Semitism is a remedy. [00:34:00] To both categories hatred was a reality. How then is one to combat the iniquity of situations provoked by such calamity, if not calamity being comprehended in and expressed in language?

Even in post-war years in many lands language has been cheapened. Governments no longer lie but engage in disinformation. Propaganda is no longer a vulgar word. It is called intoxication. Revolutions, oh no, don't call it like that. Call it destabilization. Third world countries are not poor-- it's not nice to say that -- but underprivileged. How then is the witness to behave and speak as a true witness wishing to restore to words [00:35:00] their purity? And yet, some of us tried. We really did. We had to. To renounce bearing witness because of my hesitations and fears would have meant sterile designation, if not betrayal.

I write because I have no real moral choice. There was nothing else I could do. Have I reconciled myself with language? Not entirely. Often I try to communicate not with but against

words. At times I speak just to say that one cannot speak about certain events for which silence alone is the most appropriate response. Naturally, all that is linked to memory. Now, what is memory? What are its limits, its challenges, its burdens from the ontological viewpoint, is a memory of a young peasant rooted in the same [00:36:00] zone of the subconscious than that of an old sage both enriched with talent and grandeur?

What is imagination's role in memory? And the other way around? Do they help one another, or to the contrary, is one's vigor at the expense of the other? Whatever can be said about memory, its place in culture, education, and civilization is more than central. It is indispensable, irreplaceable. From ancient prophets and philosophers to modern writers, poets, visionaries, and scientists, even scientists, all their validity and success to their allegiance to and the use of memory, their own and that of multitudes of others. What I know is that memory has its own landscape, its own archeology, its own language, [metody?], [00:37:00] and melody and silence.

Silence too is an intrinsic part of memory. The memory of silence is sometimes positive, appealing, and even creative. Thus it can be an option, but the silence of memory cannot and must not. And so 60 years after the events we realize that many

of us, if not all those who enter the world of darkness and death, wanted to be remembered. At the end, that's all they wanted. In some ghettos and even in death camps hundreds of inmates would join in conspiracy and self-sacrifice to enable one messenger to escape and bring the message and tell the tale, always the same, to the free world.

At the end, the wish of doomed victims was no longer to live but to survive [00:38:00] and tell the tale. But that was not possible. The enemy was too cruel, too determined, too powerful, and the outside world too indifferent. To forget them would have meant to have them die again. Thus, in this place extraordinary efforts must be made at least to record and remember names, laments, dreams, agony, tears. Have we succeeded in truly transmitting their memories? Chroniclers and historian, survivors and witnesses have thankfully helped us learn facts. Have they properly been transfused into knowledge?

We know what happened. Will we ever understand why it happened, and why to mainly one people and beyond it some others?

Granted, the enemy of Jews were the enemy of Jews were the enemy of [00:39:00] mankind. But why have we been chosen to be his first and implacable target? Did we really dream our dreams of fire and fear? It is not easy to remember too much, lest one go

insane. And therefore you will see in a moment one of the leitmotifs of the novel I'm going to read from is madness. But the fact is that we don't know. There is so much we don't know. We don't even know what to do with memories.

And this is one of the many questions raised by many people all over. And they all remain unanswered. What does one do with such memories? I remember after the war, if they had asked me what could be the answer to that tragedy, [00:40:00] I would not have said Israel. I would have said the messiah. The only answer I would have accepted would be the redemption of the world, a kind of messianic revolution, the end of all that is evil and cruel in the world. But the messiah is still waiting, and we are waiting for him. So the questions remain, and we ask them again and again and again. Why the cruelty, and why the indifference and why and why and why? And we don't know. Maybe we shouldn't know because we cannot know.

One thing we do know, that in those times those who died with weapons in their hands and those who perished with prayers on their lips had much in common. The martyrs were [00:41:00] heroes, and the heroes themselves were martyrs. And all we can do is think of them and think of them with melancholy and remember that they were alone. They lived alone, prayed alone,

despaired alone, and fought alone, and died alone. Still, whether we know it or not, didn't something in all of us died with them?

And now, the novel. As is a tradition here, that the Y has always privilege or the right, or it's my privilege and my right to give a kind of pre-everything. That means a first reading of everything has to be done at the Y. And so that the reading of the book -- it's called, as I said, *A Mad Desire to Dance*, [00:42:00] and it's beautifully translated this time not by Marion, because she's too busy with our foundation, but by special, very special lady, Catherine Temerson. It's beautifully translated. It's to be published by Jonathan Segal at Knopf coming February.

So wait for it, and read it. And when you read it remember Groucho Marx. He received from his friend S. J. Perelman his latest book inscribed very nicely to him, and he answered, thank you for sending me your new book, and I must tell you, I am laughing so hard, I have it in my hand, I cannot put it down. It's so, so special. I am laughing and laughing, and one day I will read it. (laughter) My story is not about that, but it's about love and madness, war and suffering, hope and despair, and mystical nostalgia. Love, yes, almost in [00:43:00] plural.

Doriel, this is the name of my protagonist, falls in love with a woman, one because she speaks Yiddish, another one because she tells stories, still another one because she listens to stories. But he's always in quest of love, to be able to love. And, of course you will not be surprised, the memory, the absence, obsession with memory is there because that is the underlying theme. Its absence is a curse, but is its presence always a blessing? Hegel speaks of the peril in excess of knowledge. Is excess of memory also not too heavy a burden?

So Doriel, the main protagonist, a post-war onetime Jewish Talmud student, is fighting madness, which of course is present as part of the novel's inner landscape. Those of you who know a little bit of my work know that, in [00:44:00] every novel, I have a madman as I have a child and as I have an old man and a beggar. Because these were all categories that were singled out by the enemy as his first targets. They were unwanted in a world, in our world because the enemy took them. And therefore I say, come on, I'll offer you a home. I'll give you a roof over your head. I'll give you names. And I will also give you a destiny.

So like all mystical things, a story can bring joy and sadness, hope and destruction. It all depends on what is this being used for? The motto of the book -- I have two of them. One is the Talmudic story I'm sure all of you know, *Arba Nichnesu L'pardes, Four Wise Men Enter the Orchard of Secret Knowledge*. The son of Azzai looked at the [00:45:00] orchard and lost his life. The son of Zoma looked at the orchard and lost his reason. The Elisha Ben Abuyah looked at the orchard and lost his faith. Only Rabbi Akiva entered in peace and left in peace.

And the second one is an excerpt from Paritus' book called *A Message to a Student Who is Frightened of Becoming Old*. And this is what he says. "Why, young friend, do you say that happiness doesn't exist, that love is only an illusion? If true, why say it? And why say it, since it's true? Long ago you loved a gracious and beautiful woman who lived on the other side of the ocean and mountains, and you suffered from it. Well, in that distant orient, where she hoped to share memorable moments with you, she remains gracious and beautiful. Head lowered [00:46:00] and smiling she's waiting for you, and every time my eyes meet hers I know that love causes madness and happiness.



And this is how it all begins. "She has dark eyes and the smile of a frightened child. I searched for her all my life. Was it she who saved me from the silent death that characterizes resignation to solitude? And from madness in its terminal phase, terminal as we refer to cancer when incurable? Yes, the kind of madness in which one can find refuge, if not salvation?

Madness is what I'll talk to you about-- madness burdened with memories and with eyes like everyone else's, though in my story the eyes [00:47:00] are like those of a smiling child trembling with fear.

"You will ask: Is a madman who knows he's mad really mad? Or: In a mad world, isn't a madman who is aware of his madness the only sane person? But let's not rush ahead. If you had to describe a madman how would you portray him? As a marble-faced stranger? Smiling but without joy, his nerves on edge? When he goes into a trance his limbs move about and all his thoughts collide; time and again, he has electrical discharges, not in his brain but in his soul. Do you like this portrait? Let's continue. How can we talk about madness except by sign the specific language of those who carry it within themselves?

"What if I told you that within each of us, whether in good health or [00:48:00] bad, there is a hidden zone, a secret

region that opens out onto madness. One misstep, one unfortunate blow of fate, is enough to make us slip or flounder with no hope of ever rising up again." So you see, madness is present, and madness therefore is part of memory. And I say, as always, in many of my books I come to read about the Sabbath. I miss the Sabbath of my childhood. And I say I remember the Shabbat of my childhood. Many years later, even when I was tormented by my illness and tried to forget everything else, the lights of the Sabbath, the seven days still flickered and beckoned in the depths of my memory. The beginning of the Sabbath, the celebration of its peaceful holiness, [00:49:00] time erected into a temple, the child within me remembers nostalgically.

I used to sing, as I returned from the house of prayer with my father. And when I became older we both sang, Shalom aleichem mal'achei ha-sharet mal'achei shalom ), peace be with you, servant angels, angels of peace, and my child's heart used to burst with happiness. But then, but then we cannot even then speak of course of the origins. What is the mystery of the beginning, which is so strong in the Kabballah? What makes it so appealing and so frightening? And my hero says, "Do you really think one can pinpoint the origin of a desire or the fear of seeing this desire die out? [00:50:00] And what if I told

you that the illness is older than I am, would you believe me?  
Better yet: Would you understand me?

In fact, by questioning me about my past, you are forcing me to make a big, exhausting effort, you're making me think out loud, and it's painful. Are you aware of this? You are driving me to entertain doubts about myself, to analyze my thought, open it up, dissect it, go back in time, far back, as far back as possible, to the last frontier, to its inception, hence to human thought in its earliest form, which would be that of the Creator. Is that what you want? And what if I told you that my thought, which you are tracking through me, goes not back and forth in a straight line but in fits and starts;

"it consists of shattered fragments; it burrows a path in a zigzag from one image to another, [00:51:00] from one brain to another, from one existence to another, I'd almost be tempted to say from one planet to another, from galaxy to galaxy, from god to God? So the question is, why do people make fun of madmen? Because they upset people? Didn't Moliere mock the hypochondriac? Doesn't the man who believes he is ill need treatment? Am I way off the beam? I don't think I'm completely irrational. Is being mad being disabled?

"Can one speak of a gangrened mind, of thought beaten to death, of a mutilated, damned soul? Can one be mad in happiness as in misfortune? Can [00:52:00] someone take vows of madness as one takes religious vows, or devotes one's life to poetry? Can a person slip breathlessly into madness with a slow, muffled tread, as if to avoid disturbing some secret demon feigning absence or asceticism? At times I am afraid of shutting my eyes, for I see an unreal world with its dead. I open them again and fear has not left me. Madness may just be a sensation resonant with futility:

as in Franz K.'s castle, we are waiting on the landing, in front of a closed door for something that has already happened and will paradoxically happen too late. Am I insane?" It is an obsession. And he says again, because he speaks [00:53:00] to his analyst, to his psychotherapist, he said, "I know, Doctor, what people are saying. They are saying, oh, 'he's gone mad, poor Doriel's gone mad.' Oh yes, mad, me. And I bring up a question that comes up at all our sessions: What is being mad, Doctor? Between a normal storyteller narrating the story of a madman and a madman describing the death of a normal man, which one would require your treatment, Doctor?"

"If the world tells me I am mad, whereas I know I am not, which one is right? Thus, being mad is what? Starting a story or a sentence and not finishing it? Inventing a life one hasn't lived or loving a woman met in another lifetime? Is it clinging to unsatisfied desires? Having a blazing head and a heart frozen in terror? Living on the fringes of [00:54:00] time in a country where everything is orderly just as others go off to live and dance at the ends of the earth? Yes, I am chained to my madness, to its fury, caught up in its violence. My brain is mush, and my mind is in shreds.

"And what about the soul, the possessed, desecrated soul? Does the madman's soul leave with his reason, or does it become mad too? Can a soul become mad? But then what does this madness consist of? Is it attracted by the black flames of a fire like the ones, during a pogrom, that devour the hearts and bodies of the living and the dead, and even of babies still to be born? And this ailing soul, disconsolate or [00:55:00] raging, how can it be healed without knowing the true nature of its shackles and wounds?"

So, as you see, it's madness, and then isn't all this madness? When you open the newspaper and you read what's happening in this world, and you wonder, isn't it madness? How can people be

in some places so cruel and in others so passive? What is going to happen to this crazy world of ours? When a few people, a few can change our very psyche, what happened the last 20 years is the product of what maybe a few dozen terrorists have done.

[00:56:00] They conditioned us to give up our right to privacy. Twenty years ago, if anyone had dared to open my suitcase or search me taking a plane I would be insulted, and today we give in right away. Please, take off your shoes, take off your shoes. Your jacket. Take off your jacket. I'm glad they stop there. But we would do it.

All this because of a few terrorists, and they always -- as always, it began in Israel. The first suicide murderers acted in Israel. At that time really people didn't care much. It's only Jews, as always. Only Jews, so go on. We are used to it, Jews to be victims. But now it's the whole world, everywhere. At even in Muslim countries, in Morocco, in all kinds of Muslim cities. Now it's in India, [00:57:00] Pakistan, Iraq. Where will it stop? How can we stop it? Few years ago we had a summit meeting in New York, which we organized together with the prime minister of Norway, Bondevik.

It was called Fighting Terrorism for Humanity. We had 20 or 22 heads of states. And the question really was that, how to fight

terrorism for humanity. And all of them admitted their helplessness. If a person wants to die, what can you do? And therefore the only idea I had, I proposed it, and that was the only one that we had, and it's to declare suicide killing a crime against humanity. It wouldn't stop the killer, but it would stop the accomplice because it's a very serious charge. Anyone accused, indicted, charged [00:58:00] with crimes against humanity, there is no statute of limitation. Mandatory extradition, and so forth.

So now we are trying to find legal minds to tell us definitions what makes a killer into a terrorist, what makes a terrorist into a suicide terrorist, what makes a suicide terrorist into a criminal against humanity. But something must be done. In my novel, of course, what we say is, romantically, maybe the answer really is to fall in love again. And my hero is falling in love again and again. Then he's old, and nevertheless, and nevertheless, he falls in love. Falls in love in a bakery, went to buy cake. He loves cake. And he meets a woman there, and the woman tells him, you know, of herself.

It's a banal story, another one, for you see, she said [00:59:00] I did it again. I have just been through a painful, demoralizing breakup. A man I loved, who loved me for a while

but who no longer does. I know things happen. You cry for a while, and then you accept it. He left me because he was tired of me. That's what he told me. He said, I am not blaming you for anything, but I have taken everything from you that you have to give me. And that's all. Be happy, but without me. Farewell. She didn't even have a headache. Just like she told it. Like that.

And nevertheless, it was a meeting, and they met. And here comes almost the end where at one day Doriel went to the cemetery to meditate on his uncle's grave. It's a whole story with his uncle and partisans and -- it is [01:00:00] the anniversary of his death. And then he said, when I finished reciting the appropriate Psalms, I suddenly notice that I am not alone. An old woman with a wrinkled face is standing next to me, wrapped in a black shawl. "Oh, Avrohom, Avrohom. I knew him," she said, the uncle. "I was close to his wife. Gittel. Also dead. Did you know them?" "Yes, I did." "How so?" "I grew up in their house."

"Oh, you are the nephew." "Yes, the nephew. Don't you recognize me?" "I don't like to lie, she said, but. . ." -- "I have changed a lot, I know." She looks at me for a long time. "I am thinking of something else," she says. As for me, I am



recalling my Uncle Avrohom. I miss him. Deep down, he understood, without judging me, what was going on inside me. Convinced that faith was the answer to all predicaments, he suffered from the fact that mine was wounded. But he didn't hold it against me. And I never [01:01:00] betrayed you, Uncle Avrohom, not even in my madness. Sometimes a wounded soul is more open to truth than the others."

And the old woman says, "I'm thinking of another day, in another cemetery," said the old lady. "Do you know that this is not our first encounter?" she says. "Our first encounter was at your parents' funeral in Marseilles. I remember; you were silent. And also, though it was imperceptible, I saw it, and I remember it as though it was yesterday. You were so unhappy that you were smiling. I saw your smile. It broke my heart. It was a smile of a frightened child."

Oh, you think of children today, those who are frightened, they need us. And therefore, what else can we do except write more, tell more, [01:02:00] teach more, study more, and come back again and again and go back to the Bible and go back to the Talmud and to our marvelous Hasidic masters where a world is waiting for us, as we are waiting for its fervor, for its fire, for its deep, deep, deep love of the word and the music and the

melody and the occasional silence. Thank you. (applause)

[01:03:00]

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