

Elie Wiesel Open Heart

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive May 9, 2013

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) This is the forty-seventh year that I am giving these lectures at the Y. Many of you haven't been born then. Forty-seventh year, usually these are lectures about the Bible, Talmud, Hasidism, and modern contemporary things, which means we took a character, either of the Bible or the Talmud or of Hasidic movement, and we did what we call in French *explication de texte*, only text. Tonight we make it different. Tonight the subject is not Moses. It's not Rabbi Akiva. It's not Rabbi Zusya. It's me. (laughter)

Why? Why? I have to tell you why. [00:01:00] Actually, it is easier to speak on someone else's pain, of someone else's anguish. The French philosopher Pascal said *Le Moi est haïssable*, which means the I, the self, is too well-hidden, always obscure. When I speak of myself, who am I, the one who speaks or the one I am addressing?

Only God knows the answer. Only He can say I. Therefore, confessions usually are within the domain of theology more than

psychology. Perhaps that's why the term, biblical term, *Anochi*, I, is so rarely used in Scripture. Generally there is more fiction in autobiography [00:02:00] and more autobiography in fiction. Where is the line separating them?

Such questions are not here to discourage the patient, and I am that patient, or I was, but to help him or her in their endeavor. Their effort must aim at telling the truth and nothing else. But then, don't we know that truth with a capital T remains unattainable always? The emphasis therefore is on the effort. One must try. And that must be sufficient, at least for the moment.

But I wonder, suppose the same heart surgeon who opened my heart were to write his autobiography? What would he say about our common experience? He has done [00:03:00] so many. Why would he remember an individual one, mine?

So tonight we shall talk about something that we have all in common: illness. Who among us has never complained about physical or psychological pain and torment? The source of our joy and strength is always that of our weakness, granted the soul is important and even central to our psyche, to our very being. But without the body which contains it, what would a

human being be? If the soul, the *nefesh*, the *neshamah*, is God's gift, is it also true of this physical vessel?

Some people say in the Talmudic texts that, yes, [00:04:00] the body is as sacred as the soul. And therefore we are not supposed to hurt the body. The fact is, what we believe is "*U'vacharta bachayyim*" says the text, you shall choose life. And in my interpretation you shall choose the living, but choose life. What is good for life is good. What is not good for life is evil. And therefore says, of course, the Bible, which comments on everything, is the body is sacred, especially someone else's, but also yours.

In the Jewish tradition, *bikur cholim*, visiting the patient on his or her sick bed is among the 10 most important social commandments. And they are limitless, *ein lahem shiur*. If you don't believe this [00:05:00] just ask the patient that is close to you. Therefore in the Talmud we learn that the visitor of an ill person takes away a great part of his or her illness.

Does this apply to physicians as well? Well, I have never studied medicine. At times I wish I had. Just to relieve another person's aches, to be able to reduce them, perhaps even

to eliminate them, to bring a comfort and peace to those who need them, is there anything worthier than that, more beautiful?

So the volume, the little volume that I wrote and published on the subject deals with my own experience, and its title is simple and true, *Open Heart*. At times in past decades, in this very place, I often try [00:06:00] to speak to you on various themes with an open heart, meaning to reveal as much as possible that that moved me to do something, to fight for something, or just to study and teach on a given topic.

Always be honest, sincere, and therefore with an open heart. But I never thought that the expression "open heart" had not only a moral significance but also a pragmatic, a realistic, and a medical one linked to discourse but surgery. But it happened. So June 16, and I remember very well that the gastroenterologist, [00:07:00] after performing an endoscopy on me, says I am surprised, he said. I said, what, my stomach? He said no. For some time acid reflux has been my own nightmare. My longtime general practitioner also feels it has contributed to the various health problem that I suffered from.

And therefore I had to go to him. And then, coming back from Jerusalem, literally three days later, after he gave me an

endoscopy he simply said to me, and then he called my doctor saying no, neither the stomach nor esophagus is Elie's problem. It's certainly the heart. Ominous words inducing fear and the promise of more pain [00:08:00] or worse.

So I'll tell you the story of that night, of that evening. But of course before, keeping our tradition alive, if there are still people at the door who are waiting to get in, just come in.

That morning I had in my office a delegation of Iranian dissidents. I like dissidents. (laughter) Especially when they come from dictatorships. And they were there. All of them, their life was threatened. And therefore I tried to help them in any way I can. It's not much, but I try. And a telephone came from my doctor, who is also a cardiologist. He said he didn't want to frighten me. So he said look, we forgot a few tests. You must come to the hospital now. I said I cannot. It was 8:00 in the morning, and I have here this delegation. It's so --

He said look, I'm your doctor. I tell you, you must come now. [00:09:00] I said, David, I'm terribly sorry, but these people are important. They think that their life is threatened, and

they think that I can help them, and I cannot not. We began arguing, and I'm very good at that. (laughter) So finally we made a deal. I'm good at that too. So the deal was -- that was 8:00 in the morning. At 12:00, which by the way was silly on my part, okay, so after they left, and strangely enough, because my wife was with me, and I never go to a doctor with her, but somehow she said I'll go with you.

And the moment we arrived at Lenox Hill Hospital. They already were waiting for me at the door and literally whisked me inside. Now, in a civilized society, to have a broken heart is not necessarily a [00:10:00] sign of illness. It is not frightening, nor is it ill-advised, but it suggests melancholy sad, depression, but also empathy. If you read a story told by someone who suffered a lot, what do you say? Ah, you break my heart. And you say it because it's consoling. It's human. You try to help with few words to say I empathize. I am with you.

But I never thought that these words, you break my heart, really meant something. So at times on a regular day while doing our work or reading our newspapers we hear of a sudden horror, a certain disaster that struck a distant relative, a good friend, a close relative. The pain you feel is so great, so profound, [00:11:00] so total that you stop thinking and even feeling.

You are overcome with grief that usually your only comment is my heart is broken.

Well, that is what many of us felt when learning of what happened, by the way, in Boston, my academic home. Really, in Boston, the greatest academic center in the world. Every person in the street is either a student or a teacher, and I teach at Boston University, so I know Boston very well. In Boston, psychologists and journalists, of social commentators and students, political leaders and citizens, as always on such occasions, glued to their television and radio stations, began breathing heavier with total disbelief.

Within days, if not hours, we heard everything about the [00:12:00] tragedy there, a general sense of intellectual paralysis invaded society on all its level. Soon we knew everything how it happened. The journalists are good at that. But we don't know why. And by the way, we still don't.

Why should two young brothers, reasonably intelligent, apparently one even a good student, educated, these two who lived enough weeks and months and years in America should have learned to admire its social and human greatness. Why should actually they use their energy to abuse America's freedom and

commit mass paralysis and murder? Why did they hate us? What has America done to them to illicit such destructive and murderous passions? [00:13:00] What evil spirit motivated them to such a degree? What was their real goal? They reportedly planned to continue to commit the same crime in Times Square, but why in God's name, why?

I spoke some journalists, and I suggested, actually, was a suggestion that I'm -- I'm good at that. Nobody listens. (laughter) That the president should actually call a conference of psychologists, of social scientists, of intellectuals, but the best in the land, the best for a three-day conference behind closed doors without press, just what is happening? What is happening to our society? So much violence, so much.

Recently, what we hear about Cleveland, a guy kept, for 10 years, three [00:14:00] women. For 10 years. I don't understand it. What is happening to our society? So I suggested, they reported it in the press, that the president should do that after, you know. It couldn't hurt, surely not. We can only come up with something. We must understand. Before knowing what to do we must understand what happened.

So I was in the hospital. I spent the whole week there. The week in the hospital, one of the longest in my life, each hour of pain and anguish had its part of miracle and had its own meaning. On one hand it could be remembered as profound self-interrogation aimed at the past and its origins. On the other, as a quest for the meaning of suffering, does it have [00:15:00] a future? What is its past? What are the origins?

And I realized that this journey taught me much about man's limits and a way to overcome them. First I understood that sickness has an effect not only on the patient but also on the surroundings. The good become better, the bad worse. True friends become more devoted whereas the others vanish from the stage.

I realized that the old man and woman in my native city Sighet in the Carpathian were right to implore the heavens. And I heard them utter those prayers to implore the heavens to spare them the suffering that they could bear. Ultimately, if lucky or perhaps unlucky, the human being, though weak and helpless, [00:16:00] knows how to find in himself or herself the force that makes them invulnerable and powerful. And all this we learn on a hospital bed.

So lying in bed I remember, as I write it in this story, waiting for relief, for sleep, one learns a lot about everything in life. Past and future are often mysteriously intertwined for sickness is not necessarily physical alone. It can also be mental, psychological, and why not say it, philosophical, metaphysical. Is it because it brings us closer to death? Death is meant to be forever close. One may say, as ancients said it, that one is born with his or her [00:17:00] death.

So to wake up and remain and live in a horizontal position is to see life and the world from a different angle and even a different light. In pain, time is no longer the same. Its measurement becomes personal. A minute is more than an hour, and an hour seems eternal. To the patient who dwells in his or her living hell, their body becomes an enemy who knows how and where to send his arrows.

And, my favorite expression, and yet, and yet, as we arrived to the hospital a team of specialists were waiting for me in the emergency room. The very first blood test instantly revealed the gravity of my condition. There's a [00:18:00] definite risk of heart attack, they said. The doctor's exchanged incomprehensible comments in their own jargon. Their conclusion

was quick and ambiguous and unanimous. An immediate procedure is required. There can be no delay.

I hope, says to me, one of them, that actually it will be simple, a standard. But he also said we may have to intervene in a more radical way. We will know very soon. I am drowsy. I fight against sleep by trying not to follow the brief, professional exchanges in the operating room. Actually, I don't understand a word. About an hour later I hear the surgeon saying I am so sorry. I don't have good news for you. Your condition is such that the insertion of a stent, which we have done for your wife and so many, many others, won't [00:19:00] suffice. You have five blocked arteries, and you require immediate open heart surgery.

Okay, I am shaken. That's what they wanted, then they succeeded. (laughter) Sure, I know that these days open heart surgeries are regularly performed the world over. Doctor Christiaan Barnard's face appears before me. I had met the famous surgeon at the conference in Haifa, and we had engaged in a long dialogue on medical ethics comparing Judaic and Christian points of view.

I had looked at his hands then, wondering how many human beings owe them their survival. But now the words open heart surgery are meant for me. And they fill me with dread. You are lucky, he says, one doctor. A colleague of mine, an expert in this type of surgery, [00:20:00] happens to be at the hospital right now. I've spoken to him, and he's ready to operate on you. Doctor, I said, have you told my wife? No, they said. We haven't told anybody.

In a moment they have talked to Marion and to my son, Elisha. And the fact that my beloved son is already at the hospital doesn't surprise me. Since his earliest childhood he has always made me proud. I said what do they think? They agree, we have no choice. The decision is yours alone. I said, do I have a choice? They said no. (laughter)

So one of the doctors said shall we go? The nurses are ready to push the gurney towards the operating room. I steal a glance at the woman with whom I have shared my life and my son. As a door opens, I look one [00:21:00] last time at our son, the fine young man who has justified and continues to justify my life and who endows it with meaning and hereafter, through the fears, the dark, and the future I thought, a thought awakens a deeper concern, a deeper sorrow. Shall I see them again?

Reflections while in the hospital. A prayer to the Almighty, for the High Holy Day services. *Al tashlicheini le'et zikenah..* Oh Lord, do not throw me away when I grow old. I remember when I studied the text. What is its meaning, God throwing away? It's not nice. (laughter) And I remember as a child in the synagogue, whenever we reached this prayer the women in their gallery began weeping aloud as if with a broken heart.

[00:22:00]

At this *pasuk*, at this verse, nothing else, not about the lamentations, about Jerusalem, not about the sins that they commit, nothing. This sentence, they were crying. I never understood why. They didn't cry for sustenance, riches, love, or peace. They prayed not to be thrown away when growing old, not to be alone, not to become an object, as in throwing away an object. Young and reasonably healthy, I didn't understand that prayer. But now, living in the blessed country which America would like to be, I do.

What's so wrong in being old? In my little town, Sighet, old people were not only respected, they were also loved. But not only love but also respected. I loved my grandfather.

[00:23:00] I was attached to him with all my heart. Twice a

year he would come on visits. And on those days and evenings I must say my life had special magnificent and luminous area around it. To me they were holy days. His being there was a holy day. Every moment counted. Every word had meaning. Every Hasidic tale, and in each my memory and my imagination, every smile from him was a gift, a caress. I learned so much from him with him.

And here in America, what do we do with old people? We send them to an institution, away. Can you imagine in my little town do that, to send my grandfather or other grandparents just even to a village nearby? Here things are [00:24:00] different. In truth, here, admit it, we don't like old people. Therefore, so much, we've got so many products in the pharmacies, help you to remain young. Okay, remain young, but why discard old people?

At best we sent them to Florida or Arizona. (laughter) Oh, we love them, but from afar. Are we really that disturbed by their presence? Perhaps by their disabilities. Are we afraid to see in them what and who surely we will become one day? They ask for so little, just to remain part of a family, see their grandchildren grow up.

I am going around in this country pleading for them, and I am trying to convince [00:25:00] schools, for instance, to send children to old age homes with a tape recorder. Let them, the old people, tell the young people stories of their life. It could be something so beautiful. It could be for the sociologists, for the philosophers, for the educators to help let them tell their story. And it would help the children. It would help the old. As always, I'm very good in giving advice. (laughter) Which is never accepted.

We are doing so much for children, thank God, but that's not enough. But still, at least we are concerned with their welfare. But what about the old? And I wish I could inspire enough people to change their attitude in this respect and wage a campaign to keep the old people here, not too far away. Keep them [00:26:00] with us, not away from us. Remember younger, younger friends, with God's help, you also, one day, I wish it, you will become old. So I plead for your future as well.

So the above mentioned prayer, *Al tashlicheini le'et zikenah*, is perhaps addressed not to the heavens but to us. And I thought about it really in the hospital when I was there. Where did we go wrong? So what goes through the patient's mind when he wakes up from sleep? He must wonder whether he is still alive. The

fact that he can even think such things doesn't necessarily mean that he is still alive. Perhaps he is not. Perhaps the dead also have thoughts, but not thoughts about pain. [00:27:00] Furthermore, they don't speak, and I did.

I didn't utter clear words, just syllables spoken or not, understandable they were not. But the surgeon understood them. He responded in my ear telling me that I am alive. Because, though wounded, my mind still worked. It worked all the time. I hope, except when the surgery was done.

But it began, I remember, in a few moments before the surgery, in a few moments we'll be ready, announced the voice to me in my ears. Eyes closed, I listened to my heart beating. How much longer? Has the rhythm of the beats slowed down? What about the palpitations? And my thoughts jumped wildly. I am disoriented. Where am I?

Ideas and images follow one another and collide in my burning head [00:28:00] in a frenzied dance. In front of me the cemetery, behind me the garden of my childhood. The future is shrinking. The past is dying. And it all unfolds in a dark void. So I tell myself, I was always told, that the void is

truly empty with nothing inside, no flames, no ashes, no wind, no river, no breath, and no pain and nonsense.

I had not even hoped for it, but suddenly I sensed the presence of the dead. Have they come to take me with them or just to accompany me, or why not, to protect me? Yet long ago I did not protect them. I relived the last moments of our shared existence on the train with my family. And strangely enough, during these days before Shavuot, [00:29:00] before the holy day of Shavuot, that's how it began in my little town in Hungary.

All of a sudden the Germans came in during Chol HaMoed Pesach, Passover. And a few days before Shavuot, then the ghetto. It went so fast, 600,000 Jews from Hungary, 10,000 a day, and the chimneys were functioning. So in the train, in the train they were there, not knowing where we were going. So on the infamous ramp, when we arrived in Birkenau, expressly built for the new Hungarian transports, I see my little sister, Tzipora, so beautiful, [00:30:00] so innocent. I see her from afar clenching my mother's hand, walking with her new red coat to the end.

I see my father at the camp. We were inseparable there. Never had we been so close, so united. Can one die more than once?

One could there. During the Death March, the night of the evacuation from Buna , and then during the nocturnal journey in the snow, there again we were together. I protected him, and he protected me. Our only disagreement, he wanted me to accept a portion of his miserable bread ration, pretending that he was not hungry, and I used the same ploy, each of us wishing to offer the other one more moment of survival. And now I shall meet him again. I shall finally [00:31:00] die. Absurd, is it not? Long ago over there death lay in wait for us at every moment, at every turn. But it is now, eternities later, that it shall have its way, and I feel it.

A voice penetrates my consciousness. We are ready. So was I. They began asking me to count. And I said give me another minute, just a minute. That was just before surgery. The silence around us was unreal. Why? They must be surprised I don't answer. I need a moment, I said, a minute, one minute.

Shall I explain to them that the practicing Jew, before giving up his soul, if he makes the time to properly prepare [00:32:00] himself must at least recite a short prayer, a kind of act of faith, a prayer he has known since childhood. Too complicated to tell them that countless dying victims, martyrs repeated this prayer before closing their eyes forever. I cannot tell them

that. But I recited to myself *Shema Yisrael*, hear, oh, Israel, *AdoShem Elokeinu*, God is our God, *AdoShem Echad*, God is one and unique. Now I am yours, I say, weakly. Count to 10. Oh, I stopped before I reached seven. Fell asleep, perhaps forever. Am I afraid to die? In the past whenever I thought of death I was not frightened. Hadn't I lived not only with death but in death? Why should I be afraid now?

The pain of the incision wakes me up as well as the surgeon's voice, perceived [00:33:00] through heavy fog. It's over. Everything is fine. You will live. His face, I shall never forget the smile on his face. My surgeon is happy. Yes, happy to have brought back to life a human being he has never met before. He tells me, oh, you know, you have come back from far away. A question. Had I really dreamed during the operation? Had my brain really continued to function while my heart had stopped?

I later learned the exact procedure of bypass surgery, dramatic and impressive on every level. I didn't know, I couldn't know, just how complicated it is, with risks and dangers that defy imagination. For the layman that I am, this surgery is not unlike a walk on the moon. There is a frightening discovery of

the need to temporarily stop the heart, [00:34:00] to replace it with a machine while the surgeon operates.

And he begins by opening the thoracic cage with an incision down the entire length of the sternum and then makes a second incision on the inside of one leg in order to remove a vein that will replace the blocked arteries. I was, quote, coming back from far away, very far away indeed. And I could just as easily have stayed on the other side. I'm overcome with a feeling of gratitude.

I remember the very first feeling I had, the conscious, was gratitude. But then I believe in that. I really believe that the Jew that I am believe in gratitude. We are the people of gratitude. Can I tell you, when I came after the war to France, 1945, children's homes and orphanages, four orphanages, I didn't stop saying thank you. To the educator and to [00:35:00]the friend and to the cook and if I took the bus to the comptroller?, I thank you, thank you. Not only thanking God for me being alive but thanking you for remaining human.

This is gratitude. And that is, by the way, very special -- that we have that sense. Still, having said thank you, doctors, thank you, thank you, that moment, of course, did I think of

thanking God as well? After all, I owe Him that much. But I am not sure that I did. At that precise moment only the surgeon, his messenger, no doubt, moved me to gratitude. So it was, to me, of course, a great, great, great event, experiment, experience.

On the other hand, the Jew that I am who studies the Talmud [00:36:00] and our sources, we learn it is incumbent upon you to live as if you were to die the next day, we are told. And therefore every day must be special. Never wait until the next day. This is the whole idea about it. Every day must maybe, therefore, do something with it.

Have I followed the advice of the Talmudic injunction? You know, the first question the angel asked the dead is, strangely enough, not have you believed in God. The angel asked were you honest in your dealings with others? And then did you truly live waiting for the messiah? So I wonder, when will the angel interrogate me? Because I didn't believe that I was alive yet that soon, immediately. [00:37:00]

Images rise up from ancient midrashic and mystical sources crowding my brain and my memory. In my adolescence at the yeshiva that used to make me tremble. Many texts described the

beyond. A few take place in paradise, most unfold in hell. The sinners and their punishment in the flames, their deafening screams, their unimaginable suffering, which ends only with the arrival of the Sabbath.

Am I in fact already on the other side? If not, would I have been permitted a glimpse into the beyond? I am lying on my hospital bed, but it is hell. My skin is ripping apart. My entire body is aflame. I see myself in hell ruled by cruel, pitiless angels, my head filled with medieval descriptions of unimaginable punishments. [00:38:00] I think I know, I do know, what takes place in these dreadful abysses. Tears and screams fill the subterranean hells. That is the fiery universe inflicted upon sinners. Men hanged by their tongues, women by their breasts. I tried to identify them in vain. Their faces are disfigured, unrecognizable. Is mine among them?

And then my gaze turns to the others, the just. Men and women, they are imploring the Supreme Judge to show mercy to his people in exile. And then, of course, we read, we read, and we read all the good things that will happen when the messiah will come.

Was I ever ready for that? Some of the ancient Greek philosophers as well as some Hasidic masters claim to have spent

their lifetime preparing for death. [00:39:00] Well, the Jewish tradition, which is my own, counsels another way. We sanctify life, not death, says the Scripture. That is what man's effort should be directed to, to save the life of any human being, Jew or not, whoever he or she may be. Anyone has the right to transgress, to transgress the strictest laws of the Torah in order to save any other life.

That is what I learned in cheder when I was very young and later in the yeshiva and later still by studying the sacred books. The uniqueness of life, no human being has ever been here before, and no one will ever be. And maybe people like us, but not us. And therefore, to kill a life, really, as the Talmud says, is to destroy the world because who knows [00:40:00] what that life could have produced, what children, what grandchildren or descendants, great doctors, scientists, humanists, poets.

To save life, and therefore actually I envy the doctors occasionally. I so wish I did study medicine just for that. But then, of course, we must accept, although I believe that while we are alive I must consider any life, any moment of that life, as immortal. And yet, we must accept the idea, the reality, that every man is mortal. But Jewish law teaches us

that that is not meant to guide us. It is life that will show us the way, and the choice is never ours.

All decisions are made up in heaven on Rosh Hashanah, the new year. On that day, this is what our prayers affirm, God inscribes in the book of [00:41:00] life all that will happen to us in the year to come, who shall know joy and who shall experience sorrow, who shall become ill and who shall live and who shall die. Evidently, I have prayed poorly, lacking concentration and fervor, otherwise, why would the Lord, by definition just and merciful, punish me in this way, submitting me to the knife of people I had never known before?

Hardly have I formulated this conclusion and I reject it. Would it vary today? How much more varied it would have been then, there, in those years of darkness. Then of course I ask myself other questions. One escape from my childhood adventures in faraway, sometimes exotic places, my first masters, followed by my first moments of adolescent religious ecstasy as I and my [00:42:00] friends at the yeshiva received from our old teacher the keys that open the sacred doors of mystical truth.

We called that *cheshbon hanefesh*, the accounting of the soul, which means introspection. Asking myself there on the hospital

beds, first day and the second, have I performed my duty as a survivor? Have I done enough? Have I transmitted all I was able to? Too much perhaps. Were some of the mystics not punished for having penetrated the secret garden of forbidden knowledge? Have I done that? To begin, of course I attempted to describe the time of darkness, Birkenau, Auschwitz, Buchenwald, the slight volume *Night*, first in Yiddish, *And the World Remained Silent*, *Un di velt hot geshvign*, in which every sentence, every word reflects an experience that defies all comprehension.

Even had every single survivor [00:43:00] consecrated a year of his or her life to testifying the result would probably still have been unsatisfactory. I rarely do read myself, but when I do I come away with a bitter taste in my mouth. I feel the words are not right and that I could have said it better. In my writings about the Event, capital E, did I commit a sin by saying too much, while fully knowing that no person who did not experience the proximity of death there can ever understand what we, the survivors were subjected to from morning till night under silent sky?

Well, all these, of course, are questions that I had to confront. To be sick, what can you do when you are sick

already? Can a person who is not sick understand the one who is, depending on the [00:44:00] sickness? Earlier, many, many years earlier, I had an accident. I wrote afterwards a novel about it called *The Accident*. In French it was called *The Day, Night, Dawn, and Day*. And I was a journalist and went to buy the newspaper, *The New York Times* at the *New York Times* office because that's the difference of seven hours is such that I could take the evening paper, take the news, and send it to my newspaper in Tel Aviv, and I have the secretary of my publisher happened to be -- and she was with me.

And all of a sudden a taxi ran me over and took me to one hospital, the New York Hospital, not the New York Hospital, the Roosevelt Hospital that checked me, and I was too wounded, too much they didn't want me. They put me back on the ambulance. Two more ambulances actually ran me to another hospital.

[00:45:00] They didn't want me. They checked my pockets. I had no money, not much anyway, and they realized I was stateless, and therefore they didn't want me. Only the New York Hospital, the third, finally took me in.

I stayed two -- three months, three full months in bed with a cast from here to, literally, to toes. So I know something about lying in bed. At that time I had problems because I

couldn't move. I was in a cast from here down. So we had to call for a nurse. And they were always next door because there, there was a television, and they had to watch baseball.

(laughter) So the only thing I could do then is to install a television in my room, at which point all of them were there.

(laughter) I don't like [00:46:00] baseball. I don't know.

Anyway.

So then I had a friend, a colleague from Israel called, Alexander Zauber, also a Jew from Hungary who was a publisher and that is a chief of a weekly paper in Israel. He came to see me very often, and he had a tremendous sense of humor. And he saw that the best way to cure me is to tell me jokes, not realizing that with every laughter I had such pain. (laughter) He always tried to make me laugh, and the more I pleaded with him, he said oh no, no, he said. Sholem Aleichem said that laughter is good for health. Okay.

And one day I remember he told me this story, which I mentioned in this book of course. He said look, the story is that somebody came to his friend and said look, look at me. He was in a hospital. And says look at me. He said, why, yes. He said, when I told him look, [00:47:00] look, he said it could have been worse. Alexander, I cannot move my hands. It could

have been worse. Alexander, to move any for anything I need a nurse. It could have been worse.

And I went on and on and he went to, it could have been worse. Finally I couldn't take it anymore. I said Alexander, what could have been worse? He said it could have happened to me. (laughter) But it happened to me.

So I, of course, had to write. Why? Because three days after the surgery my doctors began telling me, we want to warn you. It always happens. It never fails. You are going for a long time, maybe a year or two. You are going to be very, very [00:48:00] tired and very depressed. You cannot help it. That's part of it, heart surgery, especially five bypasses. So I don't know how to fight fatigue. But I know how to fight depression.

So right then I began thinking of writing the story of that surgery. That's why I called it *Open Heart*. And to my great -- I write in French, so the book first came out in France. And for the first time I have -- this was my sixtieth book. And it became an instant best seller. I had never had that.

(laughter) So I came to a conclusion: they love me sick.

(laughter)

Well, maybe compassion is all right, but the main thing is, of course, during that week, it was a week that remained, and [00:49:00] as always I write my books with my lips first. And then I transcribe what my lips said. And I wrote it, hoping, of course, it will help those -- which I wish that very few of you or elsewhere will have the same experience that I had. But to help. We are here really to help one another. I believe that morality means to recognize that we are not alone in this world. God alone is alone. The human being is not, must not be. And therefore the worst that can happen to a victim is when the victim feels abandoned and therefore alone, that nobody cares.

Whenever we had to take on [00:50:00] a cause for victims who were in prison or in camps or society or of destiny, always that. One thing I can do. I cannot help them financially. I cannot help them in any other way. But one thing I can, just to make sure that that victim should know that he or she is not alone. And therefore I write, you know, and ask those who work with me in the office, we write so many letters to just to be sure that somebody who suffers should never -- at least that. I cannot help the suffering, but one thing I can, the loneliness, the solitude, which can become a curse, except for poets.

That's a different story. (laughter)

The most meaningful event during that week was my father. Some of you who read my work, [00:51:00] I had a very, very, very strong relationship with my father because my father was what we called an *askan*. He was a community activist. His duty was, in my town, to go and rescue Jews who came in illegally, go to the gendarmerie or to the police and try to free them. And one day he was arrested together with the chief rabbi of Sighet. And when he came back we know that he went through terrible torture, but he never spoke about it. But we were very close inside that place. So in truth my father never left me, nor do my mother and little sister. They have stayed with me, appearing in every one of my tales, [00:52:00] in every one of my dreams, in everything I teach.

After surgery, as I lie on my bed fighting off pain, I review what I have accomplished as a teacher. For the past 44 years I lived among the young, and I fully know that I have received more from them than I have given. If I could teach them one last time, what would I say?

The midrash tells us that there is an academy in heaven and that God himself studies there with our masters, God being the disciple. Really some sources affirm that the messiah is there,

seated at the same table as the masters and their disciples. Question, will they allow me to join them? I am counting on my grandfather, Reb Dodye Feig, the Hasid of Vizhnitz, to intercede for me. For the moment [00:53:00] of joining them has always arrived. I am convinced of it. I feel it.

And once again, therefore I appeal to my memory, the memory of my parents and grandparents, even though none of them ever reached my age. I should like to prolong my life by a few years, by a few months, or at least by a few moments, just for them, for there are so many unfinished projects. A study on asceticism, initiated a long time ago because the concept of accepted, invoked suffering has preoccupied me since the end of the war.

I also would like to develop the ideas, events in an already published book somewhere, a master of Vizhin finds yesterday's masters, and today's side by side, Moses, who remains our master, Rabbi Akiva, our steadfast friend, and so many others, including Maimonides, Rabbi Bahya ben Paquda, the Baal Shem [00:54:00] Tov, the Gaon of Vilna, Reb Shushani, and Shaul Lieberman, which means I work. I've been working on it for a few years, on a book called *My Teachers and My Friends*. Even in my present state my head is bursting with so many questions.

How does one become a master? How does one simultaneously stimulate and appease the intellectual and spiritual thirst of a young student?

Interestingly, in Hasidism it is the disciple who chooses his master, not the other way around. And there is so much more I'd like to say on other topics, friendship. I devoted a course to it at Boston University, a course that was most of all a celebration, for friendship contains an element of immortality. A broken friendship results in deep sadness, deeper even than how they may feel at end of love.

Probably none of those projects [00:55:00] will become realized if it goes on, if I die. I have had my doubts for some time because sadly my body, which remains an enigma for me, often refuses to cooperate, and has in fact already played a number of tricks on me. For example, as a child, age seven, I suffered from severe migraine headaches, as did my parents and my grandparents. But that has took me from doctor to doctor in Sighet and as far away as Budapest. But no specialist, no medication provided relief. The term genetic was uttered.

And then oddly, my headaches stopped the night of my arrival in Birkenau. The moment I entered Birkenau my headaches vanished.

They returned after liberation when I came to [00:56:00] France. The day I arrived in Ecouis, the first children's home which welcomed us, and we were 400 adolescents, that day headaches came back. And they are still here. No professor of medicine nor neurologist in Paris or in New York or in Jerusalem has ever been able to explain this phenomenon to me. My body decided to be incomprehensible. So like the soul, it remains a mystery.

Oh, what else could I really tell you, what the nurses and -- it was a great thing, when I think about it. To say I was glad that it happened? Of course not. I'm not a masochist. But once it happened I tried to do something with it, as we all have to do. That is the lesson that we are [00:57:00] giving to each other. Avoid pain, yours, and surely your fellow human beings'. But once it's there, do something with it.

So the last question, of course. And God in all that. Am I asking myself the terrible question to chase away my anxiety and my pain? Now that I am confined to the hospital bed, that question arises again, obsesses me as it hounds all I have written. And lover of insoluble philosophical problems that I am, I remain frustrated. A great journalist, a friend in Paris in a televised conversation with me asked me what I would say to God as I stood before Him. I answered in one word: Why?

[00:58:00] And God answer? God's answer? If in His kindness, as we say, He actually communicated His answer, I don't recall it. I wish I knew.

The Talmud tells me Moses is present as Rabbi Akiva gives a lecture on the Bible. And Moses asked God since this master is so erudite, why did you give me the law rather than to him? And God answers harshly be quiet. The language is *Shtok cakh alah*. For such is my will. Sometime later Moses is present as Rabbi Akiva's terrible torture and death at the hands of the Roman soldiers, and he cries out, lord, is this your reward to one who lived his entire life celebrating your law and godly peace? He's answered with the same harshness, be quiet, for such is my will.

What will his answer [00:59:00] be now to make me quiet? And yet, yet I had these questions. But all these questions are still open. But while we explore them we learn. And we learn not only for our own sake but really for the sake of our fellow human beings, whoever they are, in the classroom or at home, with books, with conversations, with help, always remembering what I felt. That after I felt that I was going to live I went back to the person I was before. I asked that the tefillin

should be brought to me, and in the hospital I wear them and
[01:00:00] did what I always did.

In conclusion, just a marvelous little episode. At the beginning of my convalescence in the hospital my grandson Elijah, he was then six, came to pay me a visit. I love him. I hugged him, and I said to him, you know, every time I see you my life becomes a gift. He observed me closely as I speak, and then with a serious face says, Grandpa, you know that I love you, but I see you are in pain. Tell me, if I loved you more, would you be in less pain? I am convinced that God at that moment was smiling as he contemplated his [01:01:00] creation. Thank you. (applause)

END OF AUDIO FILE