

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive

(applause)

TED KOPPEL: Good evening. My name is Ted Koppel. I believe you know my friend Elie Wiesel. (applause) I'd like you for a moment to imagine a long beach stretching in front of you. It's a beautiful morning, not too long after sunrise. The sun is sparkling on the waves, which are kind of choppy, and the beach is deserted except for two figures walking along the edge of the water. As they come [00:01:00] closer you recognize that one of them is an older woman and the other one is a small child, maybe two or three years old. The woman is holding the child by the hand, but at one point the little boy slips away and runs about 20 yards down the beach. And then he steps into the water and is picked up by an errant wave and swept out to sea. The old woman looks around desperately for help. She is frantic. She doesn't know what to do. She doesn't know where to turn. The little boy is now about 150 yards out at sea. [00:02:00] And finally in desperation she looks up toward heaven, and she pleads with the almighty. God, she says, you know how desperately I love that little boy. Don't let anything happen to him. I beg you, please,

return him safely to me. And as miraculously as the little boy was swept out to sea, another wave picks him up, carries him gently in, and drops him giggling with laughter at his grandmother's feet. She is trembling with emotion. She kisses the little boy 20 times on his head. And then she looks up toward heaven, and she says, "He had a hat!" (laughter) [00:03:00] I like that joke, Elie, because it summarizes so much of our relationship with the Almighty, doesn't it? When we are in desperate need we turn to God. And when things are going along all right we become a little more demanding. I like that joke because it contains within it a lot of things that you and I can talk about. First of all, prayers of petition, how do you feel about prayers of petition? How do you feel about praying to God for a particular result?

ELIE WIESEL: First [00:04:00] of all, I think I ought to explain to you why we are her. Usually I am alone. But I felt for 60-odd years I have been here something was missing occasionally. And I asked my friend Ted to come and help me fill it with words. We have been friends for many, many years.

TED KOPPEL: Elie, let me do something. I think that microphone is a little bit too close.

ELIE WIESEL: Now you know who knows anything about microphones, not me. Is it good? I don't know.

TED KOPPEL: I think it's fine?

ELIE WIESEL: Can you hear me? So when we decided to have this conversation it's because really I have been here for, I don't -- more than 60 years, and I felt what can I do [00:05:00] better is to invite my friend and have a conversation. It should -- can you hear me? I was afraid of that.

TED KOPPEL: Yeah. (laughter) It was working fine until I messed with it, wasn't it?

ELIE WIESEL: How about now? Can you hear me now? Perfect. So this is not an interview. It's a conversation between two friends. Believe me, it's totally unrehearsed. So we don't know what we are going to say to each other, but we do because we have known each other for so many years, so I know more or less really where Ted comes from, his passion and also his memories. And now on when we -- [00:06:00] on the telephone we spoke about what are we going to talk about, I wanted to say well, everything, naturally. But then we said God. I like that. After all, I am sure that for the 60-odd years that I have been here I spoke a lot about God. Why? Because I spoke about the Bible. I spoke about the Talmud. I spoke about Hasidism.

I spoke about mysticism. But each time is God. Where is God? There was a marvelous story. A Hasidic master asked his child. He said, "Can you tell me -- if you tell me where God is, I will give you a coin. And the child said, "Dad, if you tell me where God is not, I'll give you two coins." [00:07:00] God is God, which means God is. If you believe in God, if you don't, then of course the conversation is a different meaning.

TED KOPPEL: Elie, I'm not going to let you get away that easily. You have endured so much during the course of your lifetime that the question of whether you believe in prayers of petition is not a trivial question. And your answer is not a trivial answer. I know that.

ELIE WIESEL: No. That I prayed even there. I remember there with my father we managed to organize almost every day where we worked a kind of [00:08:00] minyan, a kind of quorum to say our prayers. One day somebody sneaked in or smuggled in a pair of tefillin, or phylacteries for I don't know how many portions of bread. And we stood in line, my father and I. We got up early, stood in line just to wear the tefillin and say our prayers. If I could pray there does it mean that the prayers were received? Of course not. They were not. Father died.

TED KOPPEL: We're here to talk about God. And I need to follow up what you just told me by saying if God was not -- [00:09:00] you can't say wasn't listening, but if God was not responding to the prayers of you and your father and the millions of others in the camps, if God was not moved to intervene at a time like that, how can we believe that God ever responds to a prayer of petition?

ELIE WIESEL: Not necessarily, no. Sometimes you pray not because of the result but because of the prayer itself. Our prayers are very beautiful, lively, and sometimes absurd, again. There, there in Auschwitz I could say -- I said a prayer in the morning, *Ahavah Rabbah*, [00:10:00] oh God, you have loved us with great love. But come on. There? You loved us with great love, but we said it.

TED KOPPEL: Why? Why did you say it? Did you say it because it was so much a part of your upbringing? Did you say it because you had been taught to say it from earliest childhood on? Did there never come in the camps, Elie -- you and I have talked about this many times before -- moments of doubt?

ELIE WIESEL: Doubt, no, questions, yes.

TED KOPPEL: What questions?

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, I asked, where are you? Why don't you -- and absolutely, sure, but no doubt. No doubt because

alone I had the right to doubt and despair. [00:11:00] But when I thought of those I come to be their descendant, my father and my grandfather and his grandfather, and his. I had no right, thinking of them. If I thought of myself, I'd give up. But when I thought of those that I belonged to, I thought, I cannot stop. I cannot be the one, the last in a chain to stop praying. So it's not so much about God. It has to do really with myself and my relationship to my forefathers. God can take care of the world without me. I cannot.

TED KOPPEL: But that's different, isn't it? I mean, that's the old word, tradition. The fact that [00:12:00] your father lived by a certain ethical code which was the same that your grandfather lived by --

ELIE WIESEL: Absolutely.

TED KOPPEL: -- your great grandfather, and there is an enormous importance in that. But that importance continues, and forgive me for saying it, whether or not God exists.

ELIE WIESEL: If somebody comes to me and says look, I used to be a believer, and because of what happened I stopped believing, I understand. But I also those who come and say to me, I used to be a nonbeliever, and because of what happened I am a believer, it's also logical. Whatever

the choice is, it's your choice. If it's a choice of the person who determines his or her relationship to God. And I have no right [00:13:00] to intervene there. Every person is alone with God. God is alone, and man is alone with God. That is prayer. The beauty in prayer is when you speak to God it's only God and you. And the prayers are beautiful. I love prayers. If I could pray there, how can I not pray now? What were the prayers? *Ahavah Rabbah*, oh God, you have loved us with great love. Come on, it's a joke. A joke. In Auschwitz, *Ahavah Rabbah Ahavta*? But we said it. Because my father said it and because my grandparents and theirs. I come from a line of long rabbis, so certainly. I cannot stop it. I don't want to be the last in that chain.

TED KOPPEL: Would you be the last [00:14:00] if you said I believe in everything we have been and everything we have done, but after what happened at Buchenwald, after what happened at Auschwitz, I cannot believe that God intervenes in the affairs of men?

ELIE WIESEL: There is a medieval story, a very beautiful story in Spain during the Inquisition, the expulsion, there was a family who escaped from Spain into Morocco. There was a and, his family, children, his wife in the desert. Sun, hunger, disease. The mother died. So he dug a grave,

buried her, and said Kaddish. [00:15:00] His first child died. Dug a grave, said Kaddish. His last child died. He dug a grave. He turned to God and said, "God, I know you want to test me." And he said Kaddish.

TED KOPPEL: There is or there are ample examples, particularly in Jewish tradition, of those who have argued with God.

ELIE WIESEL: So am I.

TED KOPPEL: Challenged God.

ELIE WIESEL: I wrote about it. I wrote so much about that.

TED KOPPEL: I know that.

ELIE WIESEL: Even against God. (laughs) He can take it. (laughter) Certainly, He can take it. [00:16:00] And I argue with God. Again, I have written so much. I'm surprised that He didn't stop my pen somewhere. (laughter) Maybe he did.

TED KOPPEL: And?

ELIE WIESEL: But always from within the tradition.

TED KOPPEL: Always?

ELIE WIESEL: From within tradition, not from outside.

TED KOPPEL: Is it possible to be a good Jew and not believe in God?



ELIE WIESEL: Yes, sure. Who am I to say who's a good Jew? I love them. If a good Jew, let's say those who go to Israel for instance, in the beginning the *chalutzim*, they were not religious, but the bad Jews? Hey, they left France and England and Romania and Hungary, and they went to Palestine. They were good Jews. Those who go to the army in Israel now and fight for Israel and those who give their lives to work for the poor and for the hungry. Whether they believe in God or not is not my [00:17:00] business. I am not here to be judge. I'm a witness, not a judge. Who am I to judge anyone? I accept if a person does something for the other with grace, with honesty, with decency, without the faith to become fanatic, I'm with that, and I'm for that.

TED KOPPEL: Can we talk a little about the modern world, the world in which we live?

ELIE WIESEL: That's more difficult, but it's okay.

(laughter)

TED KOPPEL: It is more difficult, and it's particularly -- I have to tell you. I mean, Elie and I are dear, dear friends. Once many years ago he did me the great favor of coming down to talk to our staff at *Nightline*, and I picked him up at the airport, and we went out to a hotel where the staff was gathered for a retreat. And on the way there

[00:18:00] I needed gas. And I pulled the car into a gas station and pumped the gas. And when I got in the car Elie was looking at me with enormous admiration. And I said, "What?" And he said, "You know how to do that."

(laughter) I said, "What?" He said, "Pump the gas." Yeah.

ELIE WIESEL: It's true. I don't. Come on. (laughter)

TED KOPPEL: Will Rogers had a wonderful line years ago, the great Oklahoma cowboy humorist. He said, you know, we're all ignorant, just about different things.

ELIE WIESEL: Yeah.

TED KOPPEL: This man is totally ignorant about anything technological. (laughter) However, that technology now, Elie, as you know, has brought the world so [00:19:00] close together. We have the capacity to communicate around the world in a split second. There is more information being transferred around the world at all times than ever before in the history of mankind. Are we moving in the right direction?

ELIE WIESEL: No, because information is information. It doesn't mean that it is knowledge. Between information and knowledge there is a distance.

TED KOPPEL: Big difference. In a sense, many of the technological abilities that we have now, this ability to listen in on conversations, to know what people are saying

in their most private moments, to be able to move almost at the speed -- oh, I mean, faster than the [00:20:00] speed of sound, maybe even one day at the speed of light, all these capabilities that we have are what in a more primitive time would have been known as god-like abilities. Are we coming closer to God or further away?

ELIE WIESEL: The guy who went around the world, (laughs) around the globe for the first time, he said -- a Russian.

TED KOPPEL: Yuri Gagarin.

ELIE WIESEL: Gagarin, he came back, and what -- all he had to say, I didn't -- can you imagine? He said, I went around the world. I didn't see God. Big deal. Really, didn't see God. That's Russia. You know, and atheist, atheism was part of their religion. Religion, marvelous, the religion of atheism, perfect. But look, to the believer God is everywhere. To the nonbeliever God is nowhere. [00:21:00] Perfect. You think that I think of the nonbeliever, that he is inferior? Of course not. It is my relationship to my fellow human beings that determines my humanity. That's all. It's not with God. It's only the fanatic who says everything is related to God. No. It's what I think of you, what I do with somebody who in the street needs just a dollar.

TED KOPPEL: Do you believe as literal what you read in the Bible?

ELIE WIESEL: I love the Bible. I love it. I love the Bible and the prophets. I study it all the time. I have written about it enough. Literal. Is it literal? Was it meant to be literal? I don't think so. Of course not. Everything is symbolic. And I am a student [00:22:00] of mysticism, so everything is mystical, which means it's literal but in a strange way.

TED KOPPEL: We have this great paradox in Judaism that we are not supposed to even imagine what God is.

ELIE WIESEL: How can we?

TED KOPPEL: Well, we can try, but we will always fail, right? And we have to fail because there is no defining.

ELIE WIESEL: Because we don't know. Has anyone seen God to tell me what he looks like? Really. But there is something of the divinity in every human being, black or white, young or old, in everything. When we say man is in God's image, that's what it means. There is something of God everywhere. And therefore, when a person is being persecuted, actually [00:23:00] that persecution implies God. God therefore is -- and it's my choice -- either with the persecuted or with the persecutor. And I prefer to believe that God is with the persecuted.

TED KOPPEL: But again, when you say that, Elie, you've lived it. This is not a theoretical exercise for you. And when you say God is with the persecutor, how does that manifest itself?

ELIE WIESEL: We can say, look, there is a saying "*Imo anochi betzarah*" from the Bible, God says I am with you in distress, which means when humanity suffers, God suffers with humanity. Now, some people therefore believe that God is also with those who persecute humanity. I cannot believe that God is with the persecutor. [00:24:00] God is God, and therefore he is with the persecuted, the victim.

TED KOPPEL: Elie, I've got to come back to my original question. The relationship with God to so many people is one of turning to God when you need sustenance, when you need support, when you need help, when you have a problem, when you face an obstacle, and turning to God and quite literally asking for help. Now, you very elegantly evaded my question when I asked you the first two or three times, (laughter) but one of the reasons we remain friends is I never give up, and you never answer me, right? (laughter) [00:25:00] Do you believe that there is any point in praying to God for a particular outcome?

ELIE WIESEL: If that's what the solicitor feels like doing, feels the need to do, let him do it. It's not only

that you say -- the first prayer, the first prayer of a religious Jew is a prayer of gratitude. It's called *Modeh Ani*. I thank you, God, for waking up, just like that, for opening my eyes. So it's a prayer of gratitude. And look, I open my eyes. I'm alive. And then we go on. We thank God for the bread that you give me to eat, for the fruit that I receive, for the friendship [00:26:00] that we have. I thank God for that too. Does it mean that I have no problems? Of course I have problems. I have written a novel about that. In my books against God, against, yes, but that is the marvelous dimension of Jewish belief. We have the right to question God. There are two words for it in the Talmud, one is *chutzpah*, and the other one is *trunyah*, which means ask questions, yes, *chutzpah*, no. Which means speak to God with *chutzpah*, it's not nice. (laughter) Just like that, it's not nice. But with arguments, of course. There were masters, Hasid masters who were known for that, for their way of arguing with God, just like -- that were great religious, pious, mystical, masters. [00:27:00]

TED KOPPEL: Let me suggest that maybe we make a mistake when we envision God as being all powerful, omnipotent, that perhaps God's special relationship with man lies in the fact that He has made or she has made herself

vulnerable and requires the assistance of mankind to be restored.

ELIE WIESEL: Possible. I'm not denying that.

TED KOPPEL: You once talked about it, and you told me that there actually is some -- I mean, when you talk about the spark of divinity that is in each of us, right, what if God has smashed [00:28:00] itself into an infinite number of pieces, and then each of us, when he or she is born, has that little spark of divinity? And what God needs to be restored is for us simply to love each other, is for us simply to be there for each other, and that that would restore? God needs us rather than the other way around.

ELIE WIESEL: I go for that. (laughter)

TED KOPPEL: Well, you'll go with anything, right? I mean --

ELIE WIESEL: I know.

TED KOPPEL: You accept that?

ELIE WIESEL: Absolute -- that God needs man? If you think about the value of the idea itself, of course God doesn't need anyone. God is God. But I may say, because we have -- and the mystical concept [00:29:00] is God is not only. There is something called the Shekhinah, which is a kind of mystical presence of God almost. And we manage in mysticism to divide. God is God, but the

Shekhinah espouses the human condition, which means wherever we are the Shekhinah is with us in exile. And therefore our goal and our task is to restore the Shekhinah to its original throne next to God. And how do we do that? By being human and kind to each other, not to them, to each other. Which means the moment human beings are more human the divinity of God is more exalted. You accept that.

[00:30:00]

TED KOPPEL: We're not doing very well, are we?

ELIE WIESEL: We are doing well.

TED KOPPEL: Hmm?

ELIE WIESEL: We are doing very well.

TED KOPPEL: You think we are, in --

ELIE WIESEL: I mean tonight. (laughter)

TED KOPPEL: No, no, no. Not you and I. They'll be the judge of that. But I mean the human race is not doing very well in terms of achieving --

ELIE WIESEL: Well, the world is not doing well.

TED KOPPEL: Hmm?

ELIE WIESEL: The world is not doing well, really. When you think about the human condition today, it's despairing. Literally, it's despairing. I'm looking for places where there is hope, where there is, I mean, exalted hope. I don't see it.



TED KOPPEL: Elie, you've been studying all your life. You have been considering the human condition and man and woman's relationship to God. You're 85 [00:31:00] years old now.

ELIE WIESEL: Right.

TED KOPPEL: You feel any closer to a solution than you were 50 years ago?

ELIE WIESEL: No. Of course not. You know very well the real questions remain unanswered always. Meaning the questions about humanity, about destiny, about God, about exile, about redemption, and in general what do we do with our life, if we cannot make it into a gift to each other? What are we doing? It could lead to despair. After all, we are all mortal, so why go on? Why have children in [00:32:00] a world that is not very kind to children? Jews in a world that used to be very hostile to Jews and still is in many places? And yet, Jewish parents have children. Do you know that the Talmud tells us that in Egypt, in Egypt actually the Jews were so desperate they decided not to get married again, not to have children? As if to say to God, "Mr. God, if that's what you want, okay. No children." But actually it's Moses' sister Miriam. She is the one actually who managed to convince them, no, no, wait a second, you cannot live like that. So husband, go back

to your wife. But the temptation was there during the first exile, but even the second one [00:33:00] in Judea it happened that the Pharisees, the Pharisees comes from the word *perushim*, the separate. And they actually left their wives not to have children. Then came the sages and decided we cannot. Hey, if everybody will do the same thing there will be no more Jewish people. Send them back to their wives. The wives were happy.

TED KOPPEL: In the thousands of years now, 5,700 years-plus the Jewish religion has existed, have we moved even one inch closer to God?

ELIE WIESEL: Ask him? (laughter) What do I know. I don't know. My question is not that. My question, have we moved [00:34:00] closer to one another? That is a question.

TED KOPPEL: All right. What's your answer?

ELIE WIESEL: Bit by bit. I do believe that it's possible for two human beings to become friends or to get married, have children. I do believe that, that this is possible. It is possible to vanquish destiny, and destiny is rather powerful, but nevertheless it's possible to vanquish. And each time when a young boy falls in love with a young girl it's a kind of slap in the face of destiny saying you don't

want us to get married, we shall get married. GO to hell.  
(laughter) As it should be.

TED KOPPEL: I don't like that answer. No, I don't like that way because --

ELIE WIESEL: But why? It's a defiance. Come on, it's an act of defiance.

TED KOPPEL: Look, I mean, that's been going on for thousands of years. [00:35:00]

ELIE WIESEL: So?

TED KOPPEL: What both of us, I know, find so frustrating is there really is no evidence that we are evolving ethically. Can you honestly say that you think the world is ethically a better place today than it was 100 years ago or 500 years ago or 1,000 years ago?

ELIE WIESEL: Yes and no, really, truly. Yes and no. Yes and no because there have never been so many schools as there are now. There have never been as many philanthropic organizations as there are now. So nevertheless there is what we call in France *prise de conscience*, a kind of awareness of the other person's need. What do you mean, during the Spanish Inquisition it was better? Those times when the pogroms in Russia it was better? Today we don't have the pogroms. Here and there of course anti-Semitism [00:36:00] exists, which is a shame to humanity that anti-

Semites can still be anti-Semites. Hey, of course it's a shame.

TED KOPPEL: You know, we can't measure the progress of civilization only by what's happened to Jews through the years.

ELIE WIESEL: No, but --

TED KOPPEL: And you haven't. You have been a leader in your time in standing up against some of the truly dreadful things that have happened in your lifetime and mine, what happened in Cambodia, what's happening in Congo, what's happened in the, you know, in Yugoslavia. Can we say that we're making progress as a species?

ELIE WIESEL: Species, no, but society, yes. There are more democracies today, after all. Maybe democracy is not absolute, but nevertheless, without it you cannot go on.

[00:37:00] So I think any century that you take, the Inquisition century or the Civil War, was it better then? No. Do we make progress? We make progress because we gave democracy a meaning which transcends its own frontiers. We believe democracy is a goal, a goal of society. We cannot imagine a society without democracy. I cannot imagine living in a place which is not in democracy. Of course not. And nevertheless there are still millions if not hundreds of millions of people who live in places that are

not democratic. So does it mean that the world has not improved? But nevertheless, I saw a film with Marion a few days ago about slavery. When I saw it I couldn't believe it. In America? My [00:38:00] country, which really, and I love this country, but I come here like you. I came as a refugee to America, and when I discovered there was slavery, and almost in my own lifetime, slavery, the ultimate humiliation, the ultimate shame inflicted on the other, slavery in this country? And when they show in the film the family that owns slaves, a very good family, a nice family, a father, a good father, a good husband, and it was here. No slavery today.

TED KOPPEL: Oh, you are wrong.

ELIE WIESEL: Maybe. Maybe.

TED KOPPEL: Oh, you are wrong, Elie.

ELIE WIESEL: Maybe.

TED KOPPEL: I fear that there are forms of slavery in this country today, not legal, but they exist. And the conditions of many of the workers who are here [00:39:00] illegally in this country are as dreadful as -- well, yes, there is still slavery.

ELIE WIESEL: In that case we should fight it.

TED KOPPEL: Hm?

ELIE WIESEL: In that case we should fight it.

TED KOPPEL: Of course we should.

ELIE WIESEL: And organize ourselves better, more efficiently to fight it. Why don't we organize a conference against slavery? People would laugh at us. Slavery, today? But come on, really, it's the nineteenth century. But I'm ready to do it. You tell me there is slavery, I am ready to fight it.

TED KOPPEL: We are almost at the point now -- I don't know physically what happens do you, do you come up here and give me some questions? Ah, look at that. (laughter) Thank you. If you could, what question would you like to ask God, [00:40:00] and what question might God ask you?

ELIE WIESEL: I don't know what he would ask me. I know what I would ask Him. One word. Why?

TED KOPPEL: Why? Well, since God can't ask you --

ELIE WIESEL: He can. Maybe He can. Do I hear him?

TED KOPPEL: Elie, it's what I was trying to get at from the very beginning. (laughter) When you ask that question, why, I'm going to interpret, at least until you come in and tell me, no, Ted, that's not what I meant at all.

ELIE WIESEL: No, I meant it.

TED KOPPEL: Why the pain? Why the suffering? Why the hatred? Why the inhumanity? [00:41:00] Why the

unfairness? Why? Why? And why, God, haven't you done anything about it?

ELIE WIESEL: Tell, me if there is hatred in the world, and there is hatred in the world, you want to tell me it's God behind that hatred? It used to be during the religious wars, of course, although even then I am sure that -- I'm convinced all those who believe that they were fighting and killing in the name of God, they were actually insulting God. How do they know that God asked them to do what they were doing? Really, God spoke to them? Whenever they invoked God with their -- even with their flags, no. One thing to me actually is clear, that whatever obligations I have towards God must have an interpretation, [00:42:00] application to my relationship to my fellow human being. If I respect my fellow human being than I speak about God. It's very simple. It's written that thou shall love thy fellow human being, it's called "*V'ahavta l'reiakha kamokha*" in the Bible. You must love your fellow human being. And then comes the end, *Ki Ani AdoShem*, for I am the Lord. Hey, where's the connection? That is the connection. If I betray my fellow human being I betray God.

TED KOPPEL: Interesting question that flows out of that. You and I are now much closer to the end of our lives than we are to the beginning. What are you looking forward to?

What are you expecting on the other side? Do you believe in a life [00:43:00] after death?

ELIE WIESEL: Look, I come from a tradition that believes in life after death.

TED KOPPEL: I'm not asking you about your -- what do you believe? (laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: I come from a tradition that believes -- (laughter) I don't know.

TED KOPPEL: That's a cop out, Elie. It really is.

ELIE WIESEL: No, no, no, no. Come on, what do I know? I don't know.

TED KOPPEL: Well, you can't know. I'm not asking what do you know. I'm asking you what do you believe? What is your instinct? What is, if you want, what is your hope>

ELIE WIESEL: Look, I believe that life does not end with death. Something is happening. Personally, for instance, I feel the presence of my father all the time, although I was there when he died, nevertheless I feel his presence. Same is of course with my mother and my little sister, I [00:44:00] feel their presence. Does it mean that they're really are, but I feel, their presence, which means the dead have their own presence. It's up for me to accept it, and I do. Does it mean that I believe in afterlife? Everything in me wants to believe in it. I hope there is.



I don't know. You can be a good Jew and believe in it, and you can be a good Jew and not believe it. I can give you all the sources for that.

TED KOPPEL: I wasn't asking you as a social scientist.

ELIE WIESEL: No, no, no.

TED KOPPEL: I was asking you just -- you say you feel the presence of your mother, your sister, your father. They were a part of you while they were alive. [00:45:00] It is natural that they would be a part of you after they are dead. But there is this, you know, many of us are raised with this sort of childlike belief that someday we will be reunited. It suggests that the personhood, the individuality, that both draws us together and creates antagonisms here on earth, that will exist in some form in the life hereafter. Do you believe that?

ELIE WIESEL: I want to believe that.

TED KOPPEL: You want to?

ELIE WIESEL: Yeah.

TED KOPPEL: You want that individuality to be replicated somewhere?

ELIE WIESEL: Yeah.

TED KOPPEL: I'm tempted to say, for God sakes, why?

(laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: Simply because [00:46:00] I love them too much.

TED KOPPEL: That's fine as far as it goes. Are the only people in the life hereafter then going to be the people you loved, because there have to be others too?

ELIE WIESEL: I'm sure there are. Look --

TED KOPPEL: Then it just becomes sort of a continuation of this uncertain place that we have here.

ELIE WIESEL: Here we must go back to the sources. In the Bible we don't speak about it. There is no afterlife in the Bible. The concept is being explored only later on in Talmudic commentaries but not in the Bible. Moses dies, he died.

TED KOPPEL: You spoke of the difference of information and knowledge. How does one attain knowledge without having information as a part of knowledge? [00:47:00]

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, it's part of it, yes, but not everything. Information in itself without knowledge, it's only information. Two times two is four. It's okay, good, all right. It's information. But knowledge is more profound, which means the depth of the facts, that is the knowledge.

TED KOPPEL: Seventy million Falun Gong practitioners are being persecuted by the Chinese communist party for their

beliefs. How should Jewish people relate to the Chinese regime in this light? I have to hand it to you, you don't throw easy questions up here, do you? (laughter) Elie, what do you know about Falun Gong?

ELIE WIESEL: What I read occasionally, but look, I am ready to take on China. (laughter) I'm ready. [00:48:00] But the battle that we fight today against fanaticism, against dictatorships still, against violence, we have so many battles. You mentioned Yugoslavia, remember I was there. I went to Yugoslavia for you for *Nightline*.

TED KOPPEL: I know.

ELIE WIESEL: You remember that?

TED KOPPEL: Yeah.

ELIE WIESEL: I will never forget that, that experience because there it was a civil war, usually the belief that people kill each other because they don't know one another. There they knew one another. They were from the same family. Neighbors killed each other because they knew one another. And I remember I would ask them, why do you hate your neighbor? What do you mean, he said? Because 432 years ago his grandfather --

TED KOPPEL: Yeah. [00:49:00] I have a question here to you, and I know the answer.

ELIE WIESEL: Answer it.

TED KOPPEL: What brings you joy?

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, listen, I have joy. First of all, what brings me joy is our grandchildren. We have grandchildren, my wife and I. The love of our life is our grandchildren. I have a grandson. I cannot go on because I'd go on all evening.

TED KOPPEL: No, no, no. (laughter) You know why I want you to go on, because so many people came to know you. I have a grandson sitting out in the audience here today, and his mother certainly believes in prayers of petition because he just turned 16, and so he has his driver's license. [00:50:00] (laughter) But he and his classmates, as he told you backstage, they've just been reading *Night*. And I want you to go on about your grandson a little because where you were 70 years ago and the conditions that you faced and the tragedy that you saw, to see new life, an extension of your family, not just one generation now but two, that must have very special meaning for you.

ELIE WIESEL: Of course it does, naturally it does. Look, my adult life has been with young people. I have been teaching for more than 40 years. I love it. [00:51:00] To live in a world of young, for and of young people, I try to give them everything that I have, that I am so that they could do something with their lives. To be in a classroom

is an extraordinary reward, to be able to give and receive. I have thousands of students in my life, and I must tell you, not one of them disjoined me, not one. So therefore I used also, I used to be a journalist like you, but you're not on the same level, but nevertheless I was a journalist, sure.

TED KOPPEL: That's all right. I haven't done very well as a Nobel Laureate either, so -- (laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: Ready to share it with you.

TED KOPPEL: Ah, perfect. [00:52:00] I am a teacher. And I teach *Night* to my eighth graders. At the end of my unit I ask them to write about what they think is the most lasting theme from *Night*. What theme would you hope lives in them after they finish your memoir?

ELIE WIESEL: Commitment to memory. Just that, commitment to memory. What is *Night*? Memory. It's a memoir, memory. I am defined by my memory. My fear has always been what, if my memory would be too small, too poor to contain everything I want to give, that is the fear really, but we are here in order to give to each other what we have, to leave [00:53:00] something, a trace. Think it was actually Malraux, the great French writer, said once that his dream, he said, was -- his dreams as a young man, as a writer later on, he said is to leave a scar on the surface of the

earth. And I would like to leave a scar on the surface of history, of destiny, a scar, if not more than that. And every story, always a scar. What do my stories say? They ask questions. How is it possible you speak about God? What about humanity? The killers were also human. Why believe in humanity then? The killers had college degrees. The killers had PhDs. To get a PhD in Germany [00:54:00] in those times was not so easy. So it was possible for them to study and teach Kant and Hegel and Schiller in the morning, in the afternoon go and kill Jews? How is it possible? I still don't understand that. So the question that you ask about God, I have more questions about whatever's being done here.

TED KOPPEL: All right, here's an easy one. Do you believe in intelligent life on other planets? (laughter) And just to personalize it for you a little, Elie, what if no one there is Jewish? (laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: Impossible. (laughter)

TED KOPPEL: And the hard part, what if [00:55:00] they can prove there is no God?

ELIE WIESEL: If they can prove it, let them come and give me the proof.

TED KOPPEL: The *New York Times* came out with an article saying that 47 percent of non-orthodox Jews are marrying outside their -- I'm sorry --

ELIE WIESEL: Their faith?

TED KOPPEL: Their faith, yes, versus the 17 percent in 1970. So let me say that again. I saw the article. Forty-seven percent of non-orthodox Jews marrying outside their faith versus 17 percent in 1970. Why do you think this is happening? What has happened in the last 30 or 40 years for this drastic increase?

ELIE WIESEL: I don't know. I really don't know. Which means I don't want to say things which I have not really [00:56:00] thought about in depth. And when I hear that, I didn't see the story, but when I hear that it gives me really food for thought. I have to think about it.

TED KOPPEL: Well, and as you know, I'm one of the 17 percent, and we did it 50 years ago, so, you know.

ELIE WIESEL: I know. I know. And did it well.

TED KOPPEL: There's one here. I don't want you to think that -- ah, for Ted Koppel. (laughter) Question, did you really think you could ever get a straight answer to any question from Elie? (applause) Now, you know the only person in this room arrogant enough and knowledgeable

enough to ask that question. Her name is Marion Wiesel.

How long have you two been married?

ELIE WIESEL: Very long.

TED KOPPEL: A very long time. (laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: She remained young. [00:57:00]

TED KOPPEL: Incidentally, speaking of a very long time, and I'm going to do something that I know they don't like doing here, but I, you know, these written questions, I love questions straight from the audience, don't you?

ELIE WIESEL: Sure.

TED KOPPEL: Yeah. This man has been doing this now, coming here, giving lectures for, what did we figure out, 47 years? Forty --

ELIE WIESEL: Sixty, more than 60 years.

TED KOPPEL: More than 60 years?

ELIE WIESEL: I think so.

TED KOPPEL: But you've been doing four lectures a year here for at least 47 years.

ELIE WIESEL: Yeah.

TED KOPPEL: So we're coming pretty close to 200 lectures. And you have the extraordinary privilege, if you'll raise hand and I recognize you, of standing up, and I promise you the one thing I'm very good at is cutting [00:58:00] speeches short. (laughter) So ask a question,



try and ask it quickly, trying and ask it clearly enough so that we can hear you up here. You got a couple of hard-of-hearing old men up here. Who would like to -- yes? Go ahead. Stand up, please. Yes? Go ahead.

AUDIENCE: Like, what gets you, like passionate, like, at this point in your life? And also, like --

TED KOPPEL: No, that's easy. The answer is Marion Wiesel. What --

AUDIENCE: What books do you like reading? You know, like, what author would you [say that inspired you]?

ELIE WIESEL: About passion you heard, about books, I read a lot of books, a lot. Mainly philosophy, it's my field. I love philosophy, theology, or the philosophy of literature. And sometimes in the novel I [00:59:00] will -- in the period of the novels is good, and I read novels, they are not -- I don't think that we have seen a great novel, a great Dostoyevsky. We have not seen that for some time. So the novel as a literary genre is not doing too well. There are good novels, not great novels, a novel that changes one life when you read it. When I read Kafka it changed my life, Dostoyevsky --

TED KOPPEL: What's the last great -- forget about great. You don't want to categorize any recent novels as great. What's the last really good novel that you enjoyed?

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, not the new ones really. I go back. I went back, the Dostoyevsky novels. I love the Dostoyevsky novels.

TED KOPPEL: Do you read new novels at all?

ELIE WIESEL: Yes, sure. I don't want to give names because it would be [01:00:00] an insult to those I don't name.

TED KOPPEL: No, no, of course not.

ELIE WIESEL: But anyway, but I read novels, sure. I used to be a literary critic, believe it or not, for the *New York Times*. (laughter)

TED KOPPEL: Really?

ELIE WIESEL: Sure. I wrote a lot of reviews, a lot of reviews for the *New York Times*.

TED KOPPEL: It's a very difficult thing to do, isn't? I mean, it's difficult because you know as a writer yourself how much passion you've poured into that work. And to criticize something --

ELIE WIESEL: I have not done that.

TED KOPPEL: Yeah, you were probably a --

ELIE WIESEL: If I didn't --

TED KOPPEL: -- kind critic, weren't you?

ELIE WIESEL: I don't think I've written negative reviews. (laughs) I cannot hurt somebody. I just cannot. And the

only thing I did, at one point the *New York Times* called me up to write a review on movies. I am not a moviegoer.

Marion is. She knows. I don't. So it was a movie on the Holocaust. And [01:01:00] it was horrible. I remember we had a private screening. Marion and I went to see it. And it was so bad that I called up the *Times*. I said I'm afraid I cannot do it because I don't have time. I didn't want to hurt the poor guy who did the movie, sorry.

TED KOPPEL: Actually, what Elie really wants to be is a sports columnist. That's a -- (laughter) All right, question? Yes, ma'am? Yes.

AUDIENCE: This is a question I've asked once before from a man who doesn't want to hurt anybody, why did God listen to the devil in the story of Job?

ELIE WIESEL: Job's are different. Here on this stage I have given lectures on Job for so many years. One of my favorite books, actually, because it's -- everything is in it. Job really is [01:02:00] a book of questions, and that's why I like it. It's a book of questions. At the very end it actually ends with a -- only with questions. And the moment God gives the answers the answers sound not so good, but the questions are very powerful. The problem is, my dear good friend, that you know me well enough, I love questions. I don't like answers. So you put me in a

position that asks me questions. I love questions. All my life is questions. There is quest in questions, and therefore I love it, the quest for meaning, the quest for connection, the quest for eternity, always a question. The questions are eternal. The questions remain. There are a very few basic questions. Answers come and go in the hundreds. Every social [01:03:00] philosophy is full of answers. All are wrong. But questions remain. I am determined by my questions, not by my answers. And here is my great friend, and you have forced me to give you answers. In truth, we didn't discuss our coming here. Simply we had an idea to come and be together. My concept of it was on the contrary, that it should be a real conversation, not questions and answers but real conversation of two friends. We meet, we -- wherever we meet it's always an event for us. And do something with it. Questions, well, I don't know the answer. Believe me, I don't the answers. The basic answer, the real answer, the existential answers, I don't know. Why are we here? Do I know? I mean, not here in general. Why are we here on this world? What are we doing? Why are we?

TED KOPPEL: You really know how [01:04:00] to set up the next question, don't you, Elie? (laughter) Question. Yeah, straight back. Go ahead.

AUDIENCE: Can you describe your first thought when you see (inaudible)?

ELIE WIESEL: Well, it was -- I remember we were in bed, Marion and I, and 4:30 in the morning the doorman called. He said, "I don't know what's happening, but there are a lot of journalists downstairs." (laughter) And we were in pajamas. That's what we had heard already rumors, but on Yom Kippur, it happened to be on Yom Kippur, Yom Kippur, a fast, Yom Kippur, I'm in synagogue all [01:05:00] day. And usually between one service and the other I come home to rest a little bit for a half hour. So that afternoon I came home, and downstairs there was a man. He said he wants to speak to me. I said, who are you? He said, I'm a journalist for a Swedish paper. I said, sir, this is Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. Please, this is not for journalism. Not today. He said, I must speak to you. I said, please. And I went up, and he forced himself into the apartment. As we came to the apartment, he had behind his back he had a bouquet of flowers, and he gave the flowers to my wife, to Marion. I said, what is it? He said, because too I am a journalist for a Swedish -- *Dagens Nyheter*, and wanted to know the headline tomorrow is that you received the Nobel Prize. I said, sir, really. It's Yom Kippur. Don't. (laughter) Not now. I said, please,

not now. [01:06:00] And I went back to the synagogue to do my prayers, fasting and davening. And then, and then it happened.

TED KOPPEL: So the answer is your first reaction was not now?

ELIE WIESEL: Not now. (laughter) I said don't talk to me now about it. Also, I didn't believe it. Really. I didn't believe it. So I really felt, come on, Yom Kippur, you know, it's a very special day, very special day for us. We fast, and we pray, very special prayers, very beautiful prayers, and he comes talk to me about something which I didn't believe in. I didn't think it could happen.

TED KOPPEL: Let me ask a follow up question. How has winning the Nobel Peace Prize changed your life?

ELIE WIESEL: It didn't change me. I didn't change my life.

TED KOPPEL: Oh, I know it didn't change, but how did it change your life?

ELIE WIESEL: Simply it changed [01:07:00] because I am busier than before. That's all. More journalists call for interviews and more these kind of things, but basically it didn't change my life. More -- simply more things to do, you know. (laughter)

TED KOPPEL: We've got time for two more questions. Yes?

AUDIENCE: Hi. I've been curious for about 20 years, what was the --

ELIE WIESEL: How old were you then?

AUDIENCE: I was like 11 or 12 when you called out Bill Clinton on the hundredth day of bombing in Sarajevo at the Holocaust Museum. I just, I've always been very curious as to what his response to you was. Because that made you my social hero forever.

ELIE WIESEL: Thank you. He did. I think he did. We spoke right away. He said I promise you I will do something, absolutely, immediately. Clinton is a good man. Immediately said I promise you I'll do something. But then [01:08:00] he said, okay, the same scene he said, are you ready to go there? I said, yes. And I went as his emissary. I was a presidential envoy. And I went there. Clinton's -- he listened right away, and he did immediately.

TED KOPPEL: Last question. Let's go to the very back. Go ahead.

AUDIENCE: Am I the one you're pointing to? (laughter)

TED KOPPEL: You're the one I was pointing to.

AUDIENCE: Thank you. Professor Wiesel, when was the last time you bumped into the Prophet Elijah in this particular world?

ELIE WIESEL: You know, prophet Elijah --

TED KOPPEL: The question was when was the last time you bumped into the prophet Elijah?

ELIE WIESEL: Prophet Elijah, [01:09:00] we are told is never the same. He never wears the same clothes. He does never have the same face. That means unknown and intentionally so that whenever I meet someone I should ask myself, maybe that person is prophet Elijah. Therefore, be careful. (laughter)

TED KOPPEL: Well, that's not a bad note on which to end. (laughter) (applause) Okay.

END OF AUDIO FILE