

(applause)

MARVIN KALB: Elie, Elie, when you called a couple of months ago and you invited me to come here tonight for a conversation, and I said, "What do you want to talk about?" And you said, "Whatever you want." I said, "Whatever I want?" "Whatever you want." So thinking about it, and what I would like to talk about is the simple subject of freedom. I'd like to talk about the word, the concept, where it probably got started, where was it written that it's a good idea that people should be free? And I end up thinking, because this has been on my mind for a while, that if you go back to the first commandment, which I am very impressed by and think [00:01:00] about a lot, "I'm the Lord thy God who brought thee forth out of Egypt out of the house of bondage, and thou shalt have no other god before me." And I've always have the feeling that what God was saying was that I have introduced you to a path. I've put you on a path, bondage behind you, freedom ahead of you, and that is so important that you're entitled to only one God. And I'm wondering, what is your take on that first commandment and the concept of freedom?

ELIE WIESEL: The first commandment, of course, is the basis of our faith. What does God say? I am your God. I am your God. And then he continues. Let there be no other god for you. But for us, of course, the word *Anokhi* [00:01:59], and [00:02:00] actually, our sages tell us Moses, when he had to give the 10 Commandments, couldn't say all the 10 Commandments. He couldn't give the first commandment. All he could say is to echo God's word *Anokhi* [00:02:12]. The rest was a kind of voice coming from heaven. He was so impressed, so taken by it, so moved, overwhelmed to speak like God. And therefore, you know, the word we have in Hebrew, in the Bible too, two words for I. One is *Ani*, [00:02:31], and the other one's *Anokhi* [00:02:33]. With God it's only *Anokhi* [00:02:37]. It's not the same words. God cannot say *Ani* [00:02:41]. I cannot say *Anokhi* [00:02:42]. Only a poet can say that, bombastically, but only God can say that. God's language is -- we are spending centuries and centuries of research and learning to understand God's language and how many hundreds [00:03:00] and thousands of books have been written on that, commentaries on his language. Why does God use language? After all, God has other means. God is all powerful. It's not for His sake. It's for ours.

MARVIN KALB: But if it be for ours, and that first commandment of 10 relates -- if I'm right -- to the theory of freedom, the concept of freedom, are you aware in your own studies of a time prior to the drafting of the 10 Commandments when the idea of freedom was talked about? Why is it regarded as sort of the opposite of bondage? Why is it a positive thought?

ELIE WIESEL: The people of Israel, which, by the way, is to this day an amazing phenomenon, we are the only people of antiquity to have survived antiquity. Why? Why? And has to do, really, with our relationship [00:04:00] to language, to memory, and to the Bible, which is our passport, passport to humanity, passport to eternity. That's our passport. And what is the Bible? The first five books are stories. All the others are laws, but the first five books are stories, adventurous stories, good for Hollywood, and Hollywood is misusing, naturally. But what a story. And even then it begins with a bet, with a B, our sages tell us. Why not with alef, with an A? If it's in the beginning, use at least -- be logical, use an alef, (laughs) an A. And the answer is we cannot even begin, only God can. Whew. Therefore, the first sentence, you have any idea how many commentaries have been written on the very first sentence, *Bereshit bara Elokim* [00:04:56]?

We have no idea. [00:05:00] I'm a student of the Bible, the beauty in all that. So, in the beginning God created heaven and earth. First of all, that must settle it. We are here because God created heaven and earth. But our sages come and say, why did he do that? Why does God need all these games there? And more so, why did he create Adam, man? And the Talmudic sources are rich, rich. There were quarrels in angels, among the angels. The good angels say to God, ah, great, great man. He will do good. The bad angel said, Mr. God, what are you doing? (laughter) Really, don't you know that he's going to be a thief and a [thing?], come on. So God chose to listen to the ones but not to the others. But ultimately, it's a story of a choice, of freedom.

MARVIN KALB: But when you get into the analysis, [00:06:00] and Jews are excellent at analyzing words, when you get into the analysis, and a lot of this is written down now, what did the scholars of later years make of the concept of freedom?

ELIE WIESEL: It's already there. Even in the Bible we speak of freedom, of course. How does Jewish history begin its story? In Egypt. We were slaves. We were supposed to be 400 years, but God escaped, merciful, and reduced it to 210, and it began there. Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob, of course, was our ancestors, but the ancestors of humanity as we see it. But Egypt formed us, shaped us. Literature on that period also is amazing. We are supposed to believe that the Jews there, even in Egypt [00:07:00] as slaves under the cruel pharaoh, observed certain laws of the Bible, which hasn't been written. Sabbath, for instance, they observed the Sabbath. Second, they spoke Hebrew. (laughs) Come on, can you imagine? Who were the teachers that were -- Hebrew teachers. They spoke Hebrew among themselves. The language was as eternal as the Jewish people. But that is the beauty of the Talmud, and I'm a student of the Talmud, and I love the Talmud, the beauty there, the imagination in that. And therefore, when it comes to Egypt, of course, what did the Jews do in Egypt? They were slaves working very, very hard. And luckily, luckily, Aaron had a sister called Miriam. And one day she went just for a walk near the sea, and she heard a child cry. [00:08:00] She looked. Ah, there was a baby in a crib or something. That's how Jewish history begins, crying, tears of a child. So Miriam says, what? And she says something very beautiful, ah, he cries, he must be a Jew (laughter) *m'yaldai ha'ivriem*, he must be Jewish. In the beginning I didn't like that. The Jew is

he who cries? No. I think a Jew is he who sings. Come on, why cry? But the child cries.

MARVIN KALB: But one now, looking back, we're looking back more than 2,000 years.

ELIE WIESEL: Yeah. More, 3,000 years.

MARVIN KALB: Three thousand.

ELIE WIESEL: Egypt, 3,500 years.

MARVIN KALB: In your own mind, what are the one or two legacies of Judaism that people all over the world today still deal with perhaps without even knowing the origin?

ELIE WIESEL: Well, first of [00:09:00] all, monotheism.

MARVIN KALB: Monotheism.

ELIE WIESEL: No doubt. Today you have billions of people are monotheistic. In the beginning they were a very small people who believe that. Very, very small, the smallest of all nations. And now, what we have done, really. Because then came Christianity, Islam. They also believe in monotheism, but they did it in something else, but they believe in one God.

MARVIN KALB: What else?

ELIE WIESEL: What they believe in, or what we are doing? I think also the fact that -- the accent on memory.

Memory. I mean, I don't know of many, many religious ways in literature that preach memory the way we do. We insist on memory, always memory. Remember the Sabbath. Remember that you left Egypt. One of the most essential commandments for us is remember that you have left Egypt as a slave. [00:10:00] Which means look, you may have all the beautiful houses in Manhattan or in Paris, remember, you have been a slave. It's a good memory.

MARVIN KALB: Yes. Question that comes to my mind, if you go back to the beginning of the American experience with democracy, what we know when we read so many of the books that have come out in recent years about the founding fathers, these are people who spent a good bit of time with the Bible.

ELIE WIESEL: Bible, yeah, yeah.

MARVIN KALB: And I wonder, and there's probably no evidence for this, but I wondered to what extent the concept of freedom as evolved in the first commandment is linked in some way or another to the first amendment in the United States Constitution. You got 10 Commandments, and you've got 10 amendments to the constitution, the first being a freedom amendment that you are free [00:11:00] to have your own religion. You gather. You can even have a free press and free speech. But freedom was something that

the founding fathers put down first, not self-defense. That came second, but first was the concept of freedom. And it may be too poetic and therefore not true, but when you go from 10 Commandments to 10 amendments and the first being the freedom concept, I want to believe, without the evidence, that there was some connection.

ELIE WIESEL: Freedom's the basis. If I am not free, what's the big deal that I observe the law? If I'm not free to observe the law, and I do, what big -- they make me observe the law. At the same time, we cannot of course see the paradox. [00:12:00] When God speaks of us He says, you have been my servants many times. You have been my -- and we say *Avadim hayyinu l'paroh* [00:12:10], we were slaves to Egypt. But God said you have been my servants. He calls us My servants. Why?

MARVIN KALB: Why indeed?

ELIE WIESEL: Indeed. Wait a second. He says simply My servants, but no one else's. That commandment is against slavery. A human being cannot be a slave, should not be a slave to anyone else. If at all, it's to God. But even then, I believe, should be an act of freedom. My faith to God is an act of freedom.

MARVIN KALB: It's very much in the American tradition. I mean, if you think into the nineteenth

century the American slaves, American blacks would sing negro spirituals which were rooted [00:13:00] directly even in words in the Old Testament. And Franklin Roosevelt, before World War II, talked about the four freedoms. And today this country has gone to war to protect our freedom, but, as in the case with Iraq in 2003, we went to war to try to create freedom in other countries. And President Bush, at that time, very specifically said that his purpose was to build freedom throughout the Middle East. I'm not taking you into politics here.

ELIE WIESEL: I know.

MARVIN KALB: But the concept, the concept of freedom is something that has been with America from the beginning.

ELIE WIESEL: America has been influenced by the Bible, by the Jewish Scripture. It's very simple. It's clear. Anyone who studies American history, the importance [00:14:00] of the Bible among the founding fathers and further on, there's no doubt about it. Look, the Bible is a great book, believe it or not. (laughs) After all, you know, we are the people of the book. You know who called us the people of the book? Muhammad. Maybe because he had a scribe, a scribe called Baruch, and therefore, I have seen a version of the Quran which was hurting because it was (inaudible) was so silly. And Moses's sister is

Miriam, Mary. Jesus's mother, Mary. And I have seen a version of the Quran saying it's the same Miriam 1,500 years apart. (laughs)

MARVIN KALB: Really? (laughs)

ELIE WIESEL: I think they have changed it afterward.

MARVIN KALB: One would imagine that given the importance of the Jewish contribution to [00:15:00] Western civilization that people ought to be standing on mountain tops now and saying, thank you, Jewish people. (laughter) But they're not really saying that, and in many parts of the world, including this country on occasion, there has been rampant anti-Semitism. Why has there been anti-Semitism?

ELIE WIESEL: This is, of course, an urgent question, has been urgent for so long. I would like, really, in truth, the two of us could invite the anti-Semite here. Here, give him a chair, and ask him, why do you hate us? Why should I do his work (laughter) and tell him why he hates me? Tell us. (applause) Because the anti-Semitism is the stupidest, the stupidest [00:16:00] of all racist theories. To say that I am different only because I am Jewish, how stupid can you be? But the stupidity of racism and anti-Semitism, the role of stupidity in human behavior

has not been enough analyzed. That is stupid, and we should do something about it. (laughter)

MARVIN KALB: Elie, Luther is written about as one of the smartest men of his time.

ELIE WIESEL: Except --

MARVIN KALB: Flaming anti-Semite.

ELIE WIESEL: Except, exactly. Look, when you study literature and philosophy and history --

MARVIN KALB: Yeah, but can one -- in discussing the origin of the root of anti-Semitism, do you think about, what? Where do you go back? Is it something that related to Jesus's death? Was it related to a person? Was [00:17:00] it related to a societal need at a certain point to find a scapegoat? What do you think lies at the heart of this hate?

ELIE WIESEL: Believe me, I have attended conferences, I've organized conferences together with my wife Marion on all kinds of issues, including anti-Semitism, bringing experts. I brought psychiatrists, psychologists, everyone from all over to explain to me anti-Semitism. It's hatred. Of course it's hatred. Why?

MARVIN KALB: Why?

ELIE WIESEL: Once I had a conversation on French television. The interviewer was a French theologian. And

at one point he said to me, look, in truth, really, we are now friends, (laughs) why do [00:18:00] we hate you? And I said to him, look, you are doing the hating. You tell me, why do you really hate me? The anti-Semite hates the Jew because he is too rich. Or too poor. (laughter) Too famous or too modest. Too ignorant or too learned. Too successful or too nebech. All the contrary elements exist in the anti-Semite. And they cannot say because I have banks. What about the poor? Because politics? Come on. The anti-Semite hates, I think it's almost hereditary. In history, not in people, in history it's hereditary. Just as it's raining now in the spring and snow in the winter, and the anti-Semite is anti-Semite. [00:19:00] There's always an anti-Semite somewhere. At one point I thought maybe there are some lands, very few. I found one, Japan. I came to Japan. I had a lecture series there. And there I discovered anti-Semitic propaganda. Literally, anti-Semitic in Asia. And I asked. There are no Jews there. So I asked my Japanese neighbors, colleagues, explain to me. "You don't understand," he said. "This is not anti-Semitism as you think it is. Anti-Semitism for you is that we are criticizing, we are blaming you, we are hating you. No, we admire you." Because what does the anti-Semite say? Ah, the Jew is more powerful. He's the richest. We want

to be powerful. We want to be the richest. We want to learn from you. Go no.

MARVIN KALB: Go no. (laughter) [00:20:00] Elie, talk to me about a war that you thought was a good one.

ELIE WIESEL: A war? (laughter)

MARVIN KALB: A war that you thought was a good one.

ELIE WIESEL: Good war, I don't know. A just war, yes.

MARVIN KALB: Hmm?

ELIE WIESEL: A good war, I don't know. A just war I know.

MARVIN KALB: Tell me about a just war.

ELIE WIESEL: A just war against Hitler, no doubt a just war.

MARVIN KALB: Has the US been involved in unjust wars?

ELIE WIESEL: I cannot tell you that. I really don't know. That you know more than I do because you are involved as a journalist more than I, and you met the people who played the roles in all that. I'm against war. I think war is ugly. There is nothing beautiful in war. Can be some noble in war, hero saving other people's lives, but I cannot write, let's say, a song in praise of war. [00:21:00] I cannot. I have written after the Sixth Day

War in Israel I wrote a book *A Beggar in Jerusalem*. But it was the beggar. The emphasis, a beggar in Jerusalem. It's not a heroic -- I wrote about it, not a heroic six days, but the life of a beggar. But there are unnecessary wars, which are stupid. And then, of course, there are necessary wars for those who have to wage them, like Israel's defense of herself against the onslaught in '48 was a just war. Those Arab nations that attacked in 1948 Israel that had 600,000 men, women, and children, that's all. And six or seven Arab nations attacked it whereas Ben-Gurion, David Ben-Gurion. I remember it was [00:22:00] a Friday when he made a speech, and he said I stretch out my hand to our neighbors to accept the Partition Plan. The Partition Plan. I stretch out my hand. Accept it, and we shall live in peace with one another. Had they accepted, Jerusalem would not be Jerusalem today.

MARVIN KALB: Yes.

ELIE WIESEL: And yet, he accepted it. And who will tell us that Ben-Gurion was not a hero or idealist or patriot? Of course not. He thought that is the role of history then, to accept and then build. So that war was a just war. But in general speaking, wars --

MARVIN KALB: But Elie, there have been other wars of a different sort that Israel has fought. Clearly the '56

war was not the '48 war nor the '67 or the '73 or various other excursions.

ELIE WIESEL: No, '67 was. Sixty-seven was. Fifty-six [00:23:00] no, '66, unfortunately, was not an Israeli war.

MARVIN KALB: But '73.

ELIE WIESEL: I think that was, come on.

MARVIN KALB: Because it was Israel was attacked.

ELIE WIESEL: A defense of attack, of course.

MARVIN KALB: And you had to fight back for your self-defense.

ELIE WIESEL: Naturally. Well, come on. I was then at the United Nations. I was a correspondent here. And I remember I heard the Arab League's Ahmad Shukeiri, General Secretary of the Arab League and the other leaders all saying we are going to destroy Israel. Literally word by word, we are going to destroy Israel. At that time, for one week at least or 10 days, we all lived in fear. We Jews in America, I lived in fear. Because I learned to trust the enemy's threats. The only experience I believe has to be learned and evaluated, naturally, but espoused and accepted. Trust the enemy's threats, and he threatened [00:24:00] Israel simply to annihilate Israel, man, woman, and child. I heard it said in the United Nations. So of

course Israel had to defend herself. And I remember I wasn't married yet, and I remember with Marion, I had already then just -- and when he said it on the -- we heard the speeches. I said, I want to be there. So I went to Israel right away to be there when Israel had to fight for its life. And then six days later, of course, Israel won, and how it won. How it won, I don't know. Israel, after all, the Jewish people, look, we have a tradition of learning. Good. Even scientists, okay, they are learners, but warriors? Where did we take the genius that [00:25:00] Israelis had to develop a strategy and fight and take courage and fight and training to defeat six Arab armies? So naturally --

MARVIN KALB: Elie, every nation, including Israel, finds that on occasion it will have to fight in its own self-defense. And there are times when it's questionable as to whether it's a war of self-defense and could be more a war that others, including members of Israeli society, could define as an aggressive war. When Israel feels, as it did seven or eight years ago when it went into Lebanon, that this was a justifiable intrusion because without it there would have been too much of a build-up of [00:26:00] Hezbollah strength. And at a certain point Hezbollah could really do mortal damage to Israel, and so preemptively

you've got to strike. So there are many different kinds of wars. And since we live in a society that is very open to self-criticism, and we, and I think I can speak for both of us when I say that we are certainly sympathetic to what it is that Israel represents, there must be a point at which a nation can say, I have to do what I consider right and in what I consider in my own self-interest, and I don't really care what anybody else thinks. I've got to do what I consider correct. Israel today is under very severe criticism because it does not do [00:27:00] what most of the rest of the world would like it to do. And I'm wondering whether, in your judgment, I can give you my judgment, if you ask, Israel has to listen to the rest of the world and be mindful of what it is that the rest of the world says or else it loses the self-respect or the respect of the rest of the world and perhaps even its own self-respect. What is your gut feeling about that?

ELIE WIESEL: Is this what you think, really, about Israel?

MARVIN KALB: Yeah.

ELIE WIESEL: We should listen to the world? I remember when I was a correspondent to the United Nations. I worked as a journalist for many, many years. One day I remember we were shocked. The news came that Israeli

secret service caught Adolf Eichmann in Buenos Aires, a violation of the Argentine sued, right away protested, sued Israel, the United [00:28:00] Nations Security Council, everywhere. Come on, of course, true, a terrible thing. Israel sent secret service, four official secret service Israelis and to kidnap another person there in Argentine. Should I have said, oh, really, why didn't they ask nicely the Argentinian government? (laughter) I was very, very pleased to hear that. I felt even -- I remember when I had to write about it, and I wrote. I said, I am not always sure that history has a sense of justice, but it surely has a sense of humor.

MARVIN KALB: Ah ha.

ELIE WIESEL: To have Eichmann, Adolf Eichmann be brought to Israel was to me, I can't -- really, marvelous sense of humor. Then I came to cover the Eichmann trial. Every single day I was [00:29:00] there. And at one point I looked at him, looked and looked, always looked at his face. I spoke to people who treated him here. He ate well. He slept well, you know, behaved like a normal human being. But something in his face disturbed me. What disturbed me, that I remembered him. He had come to Sighet, my town, almost to the day, May, April, May 1944, to supervise the last transport of the Jews of Sighet. I

remember all of a sudden a rumor went through the ghetto that two German officers arrived. He was one of them. These two German officers came to the train station, see the last transport leaving Sighet. He was one. And now he's in [00:30:00] Jerusalem. Now tell me, don't you think history has a great sense of humor and justice, after all? But that goes for on the higher level as well. Who am I, really? The person, the Jew that I am, the person that I am. or the writer that I am, even the witness that I am, who am I to judge Israel? After all, we cannot dissociate myself from my past. Who am I? Had there been Israel in 1938 there would have been no Auschwitz.

MARVIN KALB: Yes.

ELIE WIESEL: Why wasn't there? It's not that Israel didn't want to. Israel, the Zionist movement, there was a Zionist movement. The British were against it. Had then Roosevelt, President Roosevelt [00:31:00] mobilized and say, look, these Jews deserve it. Not only that, first they deserve it for historic reasons, then for good reasons. Nobody wants to save the Jews. Give them a land. Let them go there. They didn't. And that happened in our lifetime.

MARVIN KALB: Yes.

ELIE WIESEL: That brings me there for to the point that I can't, I can't really judge. I cannot judge. I try to understand.

MARVIN KALB: Let me share something with you. I know that Ted Koppel was sitting here couple of months ago and talking with you. Ted and I have known each other for a long time, and we have had many, quote, "serious conversations." One of those serious conversations is, could a Holocaust ever happen in the United States? And I share with you now [00:32:00] the two views. Mine, as an American born to, I said no. No, it cannot happen here. And Ted, as somebody born in Europe, and for whom that experience, perhaps, is much closer, said yes, it could happen in America. I still believe I'm right, and I think him wrong, but the concept is one that is worth studying. Because America is a changing society, and when I was a kid, that was many years ago, and it was a different country then. It is a different country today. Has it gotten better? Are we as a nation today better? Do we have more grounds to be proud of what is [00:33:00] that we represent today than perhaps I would have felt if I was 20 years old? The answer is, absolute honesty, I'm not sure, but there is something in the pit of my stomach that says we are really changing. Things can change. And I know

that we have a branch of the Kalb family in London, and quite often in family conversations the senior member of the London group will say, you know, one day we may have to move to America because he feels that anti-Semitism may reach an unacceptable level. But that means, in his mind, that America is untouchable. And is America untouchable? What's your feeling about this?

ELIE WIESEL: So different, really, come.

MARVIN KALB: It's a hard -- I'm [00:34:00] sorry to --

ELIE WIESEL: No, no, no, but of course we go into depth all that. Can it happen again? Sometimes I have written about that period. I try to work with regard to the lessons that we have to learn from there in order to prevent future -- and so forth. Do I think that I do it because I think it could happen again, meaning a Holocaust again? No. I believe almost ideologically that it is a unique experience, a unique Event with a capital E just like the giving of the law at Sinai. It's unique. And therefore, the unicity will save us from that. Because that cannot happen again. Other things happen, have already happened, can happen. Mass murder? [00:35:00] Absolutely, we have seen it. Anti-Semitism, violent anti-Semitism, we have seen it. But what -- we know what

Holocaust meant, really, and I'm embarrassed because I think I am the one who was if not the first but surely among the first to introduce that term into our consciousness about the Holocaust, but it came by accident. I was writing an essay on the Akedah, on the binding of Isaac for the Y, to give lecture here at the Y. And there the expression is that God asked Abraham to bring his son Isaac *l'olah*. ([00:35:38], as a burnt offering. Burned offering, that means fire, burned offering. Is it possible that the six million Jews actually were a kind of *olah* [00:35:51] to God? That God wanted that offering, burned offering? [00:36:00] So that's how the term *olah* [00:36:03]. Does it mean that it can happen again? It cannot happen again. Massacres, we have seen them. Injustice, yes. Racism, yes. We haven't learned. Mankind has not learned much, unfortunately. We are trying to teach, but he hasn't learned. We failed, never learn, but to say that once again there could be a situation in America surely where the Senate and the House would adopt a policy, a law to kill the Jewish people? Come on, really? Now, would a German-Jew, let's say, in the 1920s have said the same thing? Probably some of them did. But nevertheless, I am ready to find my faith in America and say it cannot happen here.

MARVIN KALB: Maybe that is as simply as history doesn't repeat itself?

ELIE WIESEL: It did, and it does, but [00:37:00] to degrees. There are certain things -- look, we have done terrible things. To this day when I meet at once two Indian or three Indian students, I felt so bad for Indian, Indian tribes. What we have done to these poor Indians, for what? For what reason? But we have done it.

MARVIN KALB: America, an exceptional country.

ELIE WIESEL: Absolutely.

MARVIN KALB: There isn't really another one around, is there?

ELIE WIESEL: Like that? No, I really -- in truth, in history --

MARVIN KALB: No, I think it's unique. I think the entire experience is unique. And if it be -- the next time I see Ted I'm going to tell him that I have a supporter. (laughter) And he won't be able to take me on any longer on that issue. Elie, before we go to questions, and we'll do that [00:38:00] in another couple of minutes, I wanted to ask you two things having to do with leaders in Israel and leaders in the United States. You have seen many of them and have been, indeed, friends of a good many of them. Put yourself back in Israel for a minute. Who was the Israeli,

perhaps the Israeli prime minister who impressed you the most, and tell me why?

ELIE WIESEL: Well, I met David Ben-Gurion as a journalist.

MARVIN KALB: Who?

ELIE WIESEL: Ben-Gurion, he was one of the greatest. I was then a journalist. And I covered him for my paper. I traveled with him all over America, really. From everywhere, then to Canada. And once we came to Canada Friday, so we had to spend the Sabbath there. So we ate at this ambassador. [00:39:00] And, you know, I thought he was tired. He spoke in parliament there. I took him aside. I said, Mr. Prime Minister, you are -- they trouble with your politics. You know what, Mr. Prime Minister, let's go sit down in the corridor. I know you love philosophy. Let's talk about philosophy, Greek philosophy. So we spent a few hours talking about philosophy, and that was, I think, the best conversation once could have with the prime minister, not about politics but about philosophy. Ben-Gurion surely was a remarkable man. Begin was a remarkable man, misunderstood. Begin was a very sensitive, sensitive leader. For him -- he told me once before Israel became a nation, and he was the head of the underground, the Irgun. And the British caught, [00:40:00]

I think, two sergeants or two officers. And they caught hostages and double hostages. And he had to give the order to execute the British, two British majors, because they had killed members of the organization, in revenge, retaliation. He told me he didn't sleep nights, but he had to give the order. I asked myself then, what would I have done?

MARVIN KALB: But you know, the Begin-Ben-Gurion relationship was an extremely contentious relationship. And I'm thinking about especially the blood money argument of 1952 --

ELIE WIESEL: Germany. Germany.

MARVIN KALB: -- whether to take German money. And Begin, of course, took an absolutist position no, we don't take that kind of money. And Ben-Gurion was the rational, pragmatic [00:41:00] leader. We needed the money. We needed the goods. Let's take it.

ELIE WIESEL: I confess you to I was on Begin's side then, not politically, on that I was. At that time I was still a correspondent [00:41:00] in Paris for Yediot Ahronot [00:41:13], and there it was a conference, the first Israeli-German conference was in a place called Wassenaar in Holland, and I came to cover it. We were there, actually, close to the Israeli delegation, German delegation, and four journalists. I was one of them. In the beginning there was tension around the table. The Germans and the Israelis almost couldn't look one another. Slowly the ice melted. They were smiling. They were drink cognac in the -- (laughs) and I realized, you know, that, look, hostility cannot last. There are two nations, Israel and East Germany. I was [00:42:00] against right away. I wrote articles against it. Not against taking the money. It was not -- it wasn't Germany money. It was American money. Even German money came from America. And Israel needed the money.

MARVIN KALB: But that was a good rationalization.
It did come from Germany.

ELIE WIESEL: Sure, but I wrote articles against it.

MARVIN KALB: Tell me about -- you knew Rabin very well.

ELIE WIESEL: Yeah.

MARVIN KALB: Rabin was, of all of the Israeli leader, the one closest to a Palestinian leader in trying to get a deal with the Palestinians with Arafat in the mid-'90s. I'm wondering if you felt that if -- this is the biggest if, in my judgment, in recent Israeli history, but if Rabin had lived, could he have got the deal?

ELIE WIESEL: It's possible because he had such [00:43:00] a reputation. He was actually -- look, he was the victor of the Six Day War. Until then he wasn't known. Again, I came to Israel during the Six Day War, and I met him. We spent hours. See, the problem was he drank all the time. He had a bottle of cognac all the time.

(laughter) While were talking from 11:00 in the evening until 4:00 in the morning, he finished whole bottle of cognac. It had no effect on him. He was as lucid, absolutely as lucid, as clear-minded, everything. I liked him very much. We were very, very close friends. And when he was killed I went to the funeral. I remember I went to

the funeral, and for 24 hours I couldn't utter a word. I was -- I couldn't utter a word. They killed Rabin.

[00:44:00] Rabin was a great man.

MARVIN KALB: A year or so before he was killed he came up to the Kennedy School, and there was a dinner before he was to speak before the students. And at the dinner I felt obliged to tell him that there was a very significant group of pro-Palestinian kids that are going to be in the audience, and he ought to at least be aware of that. He seemed utterly unphased by the news. And he began his speech by saying, more or less, I know there are a lot of you out there who are not going to agree with anything that I say today, but I am the prime minister of Israel, and if you expect me to say anything else, you have my blessing, you can leave right now. Tell me about American presidents. Say, go back to Reagan. Reagan in 1986 [00:45:00] was going off to Bitburg, and you turned to him at the White House, and you said, Mr. President, they are not your people. But he went anyway. Who impressed you the most of all of our presidents from then to now? And you've seen them all. You've talked to them all.

ELIE WIESEL: Listen, Marion laughs at me because I remained a Jewish refugee at heart. When I see a policeman, I tremble. I've never done anything. I don't

even drive anymore. I'm afraid of a ticket more than anything else, so I don't drive. So I'm afraid of authority, of policemen especially. And yet, when I come to the White House I began, for the first time with Carter, and from Carter on I saw every single president to this day. And nothing. I speak to them really. Usually we have a kosher lunch. (laughter) But I remember the first time when I -- [00:46:00] it was Carter still. And I left the White House after this lunch, which I don't eat there, because -- that's kosher. Because when he speaks it's not nice to eat. When he doesn't, I eat, I speak. So I always leave the White House without food. (laughter) But I remember the first time I left the White House alone, and it was -- and in Washington I walked in the streets. I said, what's happening here? I remained a refugee at heart. Secondly, I'm an American citizen, and I have a tremendous love for America, which I -- they gave me a home here. The first time I had da passport in my life was an American passport. And therefore, I respect the presidency and the president, [00:47:00] and here I am. Where do I take the courage to come in the White House and say things to the president? You know, it troubled me. I didn't know why I do that. And the only answer I had is, what else

could I have done? I had to do it. I had to say what I had to say.

MARVIN KALB: Who is the one who impressed you the most?

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, don't ask me that. (laughter)

MARVIN KALB: Who impressed you the least?

(laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: Don't ask me that. No, they all -- look, look, again, I respect the presidency --

MARVIN KALB: I won't take it there. I will ask a couple of questions here because we're at that point where the questioner becomes not me but, in this case, a questioner from Virginia Beach. And it says, hello, Mr. Wiesel, I'm in the eighth grade at Salem Middle School [00:48:00] in Virginia Beach. We've been studying your book *Night*. I was wondering how you kept yourself going when you were forced to run over 40 miles overnight in the snow?

ELIE WIESEL: Well, there I can answer you. Later I cannot, but there I can. I was with my father. So I ran together with him, and I knew if I stop, he will stop, and if I die, he will die.

MARVIN KALB: Yes.

ELIE WIESEL: And therefore, I had to go. But after my father died everything changed.

MARVIN KALB: A question from Norfolk, Virginia. A lot of us take some of the smallest pleasures for granted. When you finally had freedom after the Holocaust, what was the first thing that you did which you weren't able to do for so many years?

ELIE WIESEL: Had a good meal. (laughter)

MARVIN KALB: Do you ever tire of telling your story?

[00:49:00]

ELIE WIESEL: I don't tell my story. I tell other people's stories. I have written only one story, which is *Night*, but I have published 60 books. Sixty books.

MARVIN KALB: When do you sleep, Elie? (laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: Ask Marion. She will tell you. No, I sleep -- look, I lead a normal --

MARVIN KALB: How many hours sleep do you get a night?

ELIE WIESEL: I don't need much really. (laughter)

MARVIN KALB: The question from Framingham, Massachusetts. Why is Israel delegitimized these days throughout the world? Is the reason deeper than just the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

ELIE WIESEL: First, it's not all over the world. Let's not exaggerate, really. There are certain countries that oppose Israel. Others are hostile to Israel, but most of the world is sympathetic to Israel, which is the [00:50:00] reality. Why are those who are anti-Israeli -- we spoke about hatred. Let them explain it. But when they write about it, they would like Israel to become an ideal state. Almost only saints should be there and never commit a sin, never make an error. Israel is a nation, a modern nation with normal human beings. And therefore, whatever exists in other normal societies also exist there. Israel has its own tailors, its own cobblers, its own industrialists, its own writers, and its own poets, its own philosophers, its own shoemakers, and its own miscreants, all of that, but they live together. When you read the Israeli press, really, and I read it usually [00:51:00] on Friday, on Friday, which should be forbidden because it brings me a bad mood for the Sabbath, you know, (laughter) but when you read it, really, it's normal. It's a normal country with the good and the bad and the less bad. It's -- to me it's still a wonder. After 2,000 years, and I always ask the question, where did they take the courage to do that? In 1948 militarism was denounced. Nationalism was discarded, really. Here comes a little people who says

we want our own nation and our homeland. Forget the Arabs, which is also a problem, naturally, but simply, why? Why now? When we go to toward the United Nations there was even a man named Garry Davis who created a universalist movement. He came [00:52:00] to Paris. I was in Paris then. I interviewed him, to abolish all the political movements, to have only one movement, a universalist movement. We are all equal. Beautiful. It's the Bible. Doesn't work like that. And here comes a little nation and says, we can show you that we are going to build a nation. Well, of course, it won't be perfect. There is no perfection in life, but we shall try to be a humanistic and human society.

MARVIN KALB: Well, there's another -- sort of another side to that issue, I think. And it's reflected in this question from Norfolk, Virginia. How is the Jewish concept of freedom reconciled with the plight of Palestinians in the territories occupied by Israel?

ELIE WIESEL: That is the most difficult question that --

MARVIN KALB: Yes.

ELIE WIESEL: -- you've asked me. It's true. It is difficult because it has to do with [00:53:00] everything, with politics and with philosophy and with religion and

history and morality. Morally, morally when I am in Israel and I see an Arab refugee, Palestinian refugee, I should have sympathy for them, and I have, absolutely. A refugee, I used to be a refugee. I remain a refugee at heart. And here's a refugee. And actually, young refugee who hasn't done anything bad, hasn't killed any Jew. He's simply a refugee because he was born in a family. The fact that we still have refugee camps, to me, is something I don't understand. Seventy years later. Where are -- the United Nations, can we create something for them? Look, this is a problem, very sad. It's a very sad problem [00:54:00] for me. But I don't know the solution, and I don't know the alternative. What should Israel do? Open up and say all of them come in? Look, I used to be in the United Nations, listen to Ahmad Shukeiri. Remember Ahmad Shukeiri, PLO leader?

MARVIN KALB: Yep.

ELIE WIESEL: His speeches. We are going to eliminate Israel from the -- how can you accept him in Israel? The Israeli government, all the governments, even the Begin government, the Shamir government, I would have said, we are ready to make peace, if you are ready. They never wanted that. They never accepted to -- a seat around the peace table. Does it mean that all that makes me very

happy? No. The fact that some people suffer because Israel is happy, there's [00:55:00] something wrong, but I don't know the solution.

MARVIN KALB: So your sense is what, that there's not likely in the foreseeable future that we will see a deal between them?

ELIE WIESEL: Look, 70 years, it lasts already 70 years.

MARVIN KALB: So another 70 years?

ELIE WIESEL: No, no, on the other hand that there comes a moment when it cannot go on, and there will be a peace. I am optimistic in the longer end. It cannot go on like that. The young people --

MARVIN KALB: Optimistic in the face not of evidence but just --

ELIE WIESEL: A feeling, just my feeling.

MARVIN KALB: Just your feeling. Hope you're right. Another question from a 13-year-old, Rachel Kaufman. Do you have any friends you are still in contact with from either camp?

ELIE WIESEL: Sure.

MARVIN KALB: Yes?

ELIE WIESEL: Not many, you know. We were 20 or 30 who went to -- after the war to the same -- after Auschwitz

we went to Buchenwald, from Buchenwald either Paris,
[00:56:00] Paris, here. A few of them are still alive, and
we talk about, sure, both here and in Paris, in Israel too.

MARVIN KALB: Do you meet and sort of -- not every
year, something like that?

ELIE WIESEL: Not ev-- we used to. I think for the
twentieth anniversary we had a gathering in Jerusalem. Was
very, very moving. But now we -- telephone a lot.

MARVIN KALB: I would imagine so. Do you think
anything in this world today equates to the Holocaust?

ELIE WIESEL: No. No. Again, I repeat that. There
are other things, terrible things. There are massacres,
false imprisonment, injustices, there are terrible things,
but none of them really should be called Holocaust. That
would cheapen it. Holocaust was about when an entire
parliament in Germany, when the entire people, the entire
society with its scientists and scholars and bankers, they
all actually agreed only on one thing, [00:57:00] how to
kill more Jews. No, that cannot happen again.

MARVIN KALB: This question sort of flows out of your
answer. It's unintentional, but there it is. How has your
religious views changed from the time before the Holocaust
until now? How do you feel about religion now?

ELIE WIESEL: About religion I cannot tell you. I can't -- but my religion I can. I come, as some of you may know and have read some of my books, I come from a very religious family. Our tradition is that we are descendants of the Baal Shem Tov, literally, the family from Baal Shem Tov, the master of the good name, the founder of the Hasidic movement. We are descendants. We are a Hasidic family. I was very pious, very, very pious, studied in the yeshiva. [00:58:00] Peyos until the ghetto when we had to cut it. Then came the war. After the war I came to France, brought by Jewish organization called the OSE, and the first thing that we asked, we were a group of religious youngsters, teenagers, the first thing we asked is not for a good meal but for tefillin. And I got tefillin. And I still wear tefillin, surely.

MARVIN KALB: But I have to press you on that. Between that period of your life and now you have seen so much more. Has any of that tested you to the point [00:59:00] where you question fundamental aspects of your faith?

ELIE WIESEL: Not my faith, but the questions actually were not so new. They were old. Whatever question I can ask I can find already a trace of them in our religious literature. You think that even Ezra didn't

have questions, that Maimonides didn't have questions? Some of them are better than mine, but we believe in questions. There is quest in question. I love that quest. You know, the word *Ke1* [00:59:36] is in the word *she-elah* [00:59:37]. *She-elah* [00:59:39] means a question, the two verbs, the two letters in the middle is God. God is also in the question. And of course I may question God. The prophets did that, and we are following in their footsteps from within. If you believe and you question, [01:00:00] it's okay. If you don't believe, why question?

MARVIN KALB: Turn it around the other way, Elie. Rather than the last 50, 60 years of your life raising questions, have those years reinforced aspects of your faith that you never thought before would be to that level?

ELIE WIESEL: Lately, not during --

MARVIN KALB: No?

ELIE WIESEL: Not really decades. Lately, as with the years, with the years, really under the weight of years they are enforced. They are getting deeper, yeah, which means I want to do what my parents did, what my grandparents did. I want to follow in their footsteps. That is what I really wanted. And that is severe an evidence.

MARVIN KALB: This question takes you in a somewhat different direction toward the front page of [01:01:00] newspapers today.

ELIE WIESEL: What? (laughter)

MARVIN KALB: What are your thoughts about the events in the Ukraine?

ELIE WIESEL: We began talking about it before we came on stage. I am angry.

MARVIN KALB: Angry.

ELIE WIESEL: Very angry, I put it. Absolutely. What is he doing? Because he simply is occupying Crimea because the world let him do it. The Crimeans didn't ask him to come in. What is he doing there? One morning he got up, he said I want Crimea? I don't -- (laughter) Putin, to me, therefore, he is a kind of little, little Stalin, very little, but there is something of Stalin in him to do that. Say, I dare you. And I'm embarrassed to see nobody really protested. America hasn't. [01:02:00] Europe hasn't. He can do whatever he wants.

MARVIN KALB: Yeah, but Elie, what would you have them do?

ELIE WIESEL: At least protest. At least say -- at least make a statement. It's an immoral thing that you have done to occupy a land like that.

MARVIN KALB: Statements have been made by the dozen.

ELIE WIESEL: Not by leaders.

MARVIN KALB: The president has made these statements
time and time --

ELIE WIESEL: On that? On that?

MARVIN KALB: He has --

ELIE WIESEL: On Crimea? No. Tell me. I may be
wrong. I haven't seen it.

MARVIN KALB: No, no, no. He has been explicit in
denouncing the Russian takeover of Crimea.

ELIE WIESEL: The president?

MARVIN KALB: He has called illegitimate, illegal.

ELIE WIESEL: Then I apologize. I haven't seen it.

MARVIN KALB: Yeah. But I think the question comes
up in this next one here. What do you think the US
involvement should be to discourage Russia's president from
acting like Hitler?

ELIE WIESEL: That I don't like. I don't compare.

MARVIN KALB: You do not compare?

ELIE WIESEL: Of course not. [01:03:00] Nobody can
be compared to Hitler.

MARVIN KALB: Okay.

ELIE WIESEL: It cheapens the whole thing.

MARVIN KALB: I'll take you back to where we were before. Twenty-eight years ago when your Nobel Prize, you addressed the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians and said, "I trust Israel, for I have faith in the Jewish people." Can you address the current and continued stall in the peace talks and if how your faith in the Jewish people has changed over the years?

ELIE WIESEL: My faith in the Jewish people hasn't changed. But I continue above it and around it. My faith in humanity hasn't changed. I have good reasons to lose that faith, at least in humanity, at least in that. Because after all, human beings did it. So how can I respect their humanity? But nevertheless, I don't. We couldn't go on living like that. [01:04:00] So therefore, I say okay. I swallow, and I say, they have done it, but now I try to understand why, and we don't know why, really, you know. We know everything about that period, the how. We know the how. How it happened since '36, '38 and then how it happened during the first years there in the camp and what they have done in the -- we know how but not why. Why did they do it? Why did it happen? The why remains.

MARVIN KALB: It's the biggest question is why, always.

ELIE WIESEL: And I don't know why.

MARVIN KALB: Whatever the issue, why?

ELIE WIESEL: Why, always why?

MARVIN KALB: Another question. How much responsibility do we as a country have to free other nations and peoples globally? I think this may go back to the 2003 war.

ELIE WIESEL: Yeah, but Marvin, you know I have [01:05:00] been involved in so many human rights activities for the last 20, 30 years, naturally. I, a Jew, as an American citizen, I feel I have a duty to help those who don't have these rights. And I went to all kinds of places, naturally, to do that, without much success, but at least I was there to protest and to bear witness.

MARVIN KALB: Yes. Another question here. Forgive me, I have to work my way through this. You have spoken extensively on hatred and your lack of hatred for those who have personally oppressed or imprisoned you. Can you speak to the sense of personal freedom that you are able to obtain from not trapping yourself [01:06:00] in the cycle of hate? Why is the cycle of hate so important to end personally and politically?

ELIE WIESEL: It's an easy solution, usually. It's an easy way out. Hatred is very easy. And I don't think this is the answer. Hatred should never be the answer. If

I see an injustice, I try to fight it with all my heart, with all the means I have at my disposal, mobilizing the friends that I have. It's an injustice. But hatred somehow has never entered the picture. And therefore, I can tell you as an adult person or even in my adolescence, I don't think I have ever had hatred really. Anger, yes. Anger I can have, but not hatred.

MARVIN KALB: What does Elie Wiesel say to I can't, G6 -- oh, [01:07:00] forgive me. What does Elie Wiesel say to God after 120 years? (laughter) Ooh, from the son of Herling number 1048 of Auschwitz.

ELIE WIESEL: You know, we are supposed to ready, at one point, ready ourselves when we appear before the celestial court, celestial tribunal, and answer all kinds of questions. Why did you do that? Why did you do that? Oh, they'll have a lot of questions. And many, many questions I'm sure I will be objectionable, we call it sinful. Who knows what sins I have committed in my life? And there for the only time I will -- when I will listen to all of them, I said, you, Mr. God, where were you then? And I think the accusation, I hope, will be dropped.

[01:08:00]

MARVIN KALB: Elie, I'm finished with the other questions, but I have a final one for you. You have been -
-

ELIE WIESEL: Ominous. Final question's an ominous -
- (laughter)

MARVIN KALB: Oh, this is just a question, not a solution. (laughter) But you have been here for more than 40 years, speaking at the 92nd Street Y, and you've been teaching --

ELIE WIESEL: And writing.

MARVIN KALB: -- for about that period of time. So you've come upon generations of young people passing through your classroom. So I have two questions. One, what do you think you left them with, and what, as you look out now over the young people whom you see in a classroom or just on the street, what is it that you would like to leave with them? What is it that is so important, that grips you so deeply that you'd like to grab each one by the lapel and say, please, [01:09:00] think of this?

ELIE WIESEL: If you ask, I'm sure if you ask any of the students I had, and I had hundreds of them in my life, I'm sure they will answer you that I favor questions. I want to teach them the art of questioning. It means I am not responsible for answers, but for questions I am, and

therefore I want to teach them the questions. It's the most important thing, I think, in life, is to be able to question. A question humanizes. The answers dehumanizes. So therefore, that's what I would like to teach really. And I meet, occasionally, students of mine. It's a joy. For me it's a joy. Recently, recently I had a student came up to me. He came to see me in my office here in New York, and I was so moved. He came, and he asked to see me. I see everyone. "You remember?" [01:10:00] "Yes, of course I remember you." "Well, how?" (inaudible) "Your name." "You remember me, really?" I said, "Of course I remember you. You know, I'll tell you when you were there. I will give my lectures, where you were sitting, there in the corner." "What else do you remember?" I said, "I remember that there was a girl there not very far from you." "How do you know?" "Because one day I saw that you are pushing a flower to her." "She is my wife now." (laughter) "Okay, what can I do for you?" He said, "Nothing." "Then why are you here?" He said, "Because yesterday my wife and I were in bed, Sunday, and the morning (inaudible), and we said to each other, 'Look how happy we are. We have to thank God, how happy we are. Look, we are married. We have children. And we have positions, both of us.'" And then she said, 'But you know, we owe it also a little bit to Professor

Wiesel.'" (laughter) He said, "It's true, naturally."

[01:11:00] So she said, "Why don't we go to thank him?" So they drew a lot of something, who shall come and -- so she came in, sitting. That's why I'm here, for my husband and myself, just one thing, to say thank you. And she left.

MARVIN KALB: So thank you, Elie.

ELIE WIESEL: Thank you.

MARVIN KALB: Thank you very much. (applause)

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