

Elie Wiesel In Modern Tales: The Fifth Son

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Elie Wiesel:

(audience applause) The Talmudic story, then a few comments about contemporary issues, and then reading from one book or two. The Talmudic story first. And it came to pass that somewhere in Ancient Judea, a heathen came to visit the old master Shammai, and said, "Please, teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot." True to his angry nature, Shammai threw him out. So, the heathen went to Shammai's opponent, Hillel the Elder, known for his patience and tolerance. "Please," said the heathen, [00:01:00] "give me an instant course in Torah." "No problem," said Hillel. "Learn one important principle. What you don't wish others to do unto you, don't do unto others."

I am sure all of you know this story, because it has entered the history, the collective history of religious ethos in more than one civilization. But let us, for the moment, stop and see, what do we learn from it? First of all, we learn that in those times, it was very easy to gain access to celebrities.

(audience laughs) Two, we learn that the heathen was stubborn. He didn't give up. He was not discouraged by Shammai's refusal.

Three, we learn that the Torah after all [00:02:00] is a matter of human relations. Hillel didn't tell him, you must from now on do something for Hashem, for God, or believe in God, and so forth. He says, "But you don't do unto others, you shouldn't do unto others what they do unto you," and so forth. Meaning, it is a matter of human relations. It is my relationship with my fellow man and woman that matters, and that is Torah. Also, we learn that Torah is the opposite of abstractions. Torah is not a system or a set of abstract concepts. It's something real. It is something concrete. Hate is concrete. Hate is real. And you must reject hate if you want to accept Torah.

But then, there is one other thing that we have learned from [00:03:00] this story. And that is, that we haven't learned it well. How many of you know that the story doesn't end there? I'm sure most of you know that actually, the sentence has a second part. When the heathen came to Hillel, Hillel said, "*man d'sanui lach*, what you don't want others to do unto you, you don't do unto others." Perfect. But then he said, "*umay'idach zil g'mor*." "And now," he said, "go and study." And very conveniently, we forget the second part. (audience laughs)

We always forget second parts when it comes to certain stories in the Talmud. But here in this place, I hope we all agree,

[00:04:00] in this place, we try to read and to fulfill the whole sentence. As a Jew, I cannot accept one part instead of the other, and surely not one part against the other. As a Jew, I value good deeds, but I also love study. Is it a mixture and substance and form? In this case, form itself is close to substance. There exists a special style that the Jew must adhere to when confronting history, or broadening the scope, the area, of memory. Even Talmudic arguments have style. You may support Shammai or Hillel, but you must admit that their debates indicate a distinct literary quality.

And they also emphasize, therefore, [00:05:00] the importance of dialogues. Wars begin when dialogues end. Violence dominates the scene only when it is deserted by language. If the Jewish tradition is so word-oriented, it is because of its distaste for brutal force. That has been true of Ancient Judea when it opposed Ancient Rome. Is it still true of Israel today? With all my heart, I still want to say yes, and I do. Is it Israel's fault that she needs weapons to assure her survival? Isn't it clear that Israel would so much rather rely on her faith and values and principles and traditions of morality? These are questions and we shall return to them [00:06:00] somewhat later.

But as we are about to conclude, not without melancholy, another series of annual encounters and studies, perhaps we should look back at the three sessions we already had. What have we learned this year? From Job, whom we have revisited, we have learned that the learning process does not stop. That is why the midrash says that God spoke to him as a pupil addresses his teacher. Suffering is a question, not an answer. And surely not the only answer. Perhaps Job could have been more subtle, more delicate, and more discrete when referring to his own pain. He could have written a novel in the third person, rather than an autobiography. [00:07:00] Perhaps he was wrong in revealing his own grief, his own private anguish, to outsiders. Had he spoken about and against other people's suffering, not his own, he would have come out much better.

But then, who am I to judge Job? Those who did were rebuked by God, and here, God was right. Job's false friends were so phony that even their arguments were false and unethical. They denied him the right to raise the questions related to his experience. Now, let us analyze the situation. Has Job willed the trial? No. Has he wanted to suffer? No. Has he done anything to justify? No. God made him suffer against his will, and then, when Job was suffering, his false friends used it against him. And his suffering therefore [00:08:00] became something of a

handicap, of an obstacle, that he had to deal with. They, his false friends, resented it to a point of urging him to forget it altogether. So, we have learned that Job is right.

From Rabbi Ishmael, we have learned the art of silence. To break it, says the Talmud, would have provoked the return of the world to its primary chaos. No, not the world. The word. Had Rabbi Ishmael shouted, had he shed tears, the word would have become filled again, as before the beginning, with chaos. To speak could mean victory over chaos, or the opposite.

Justification of chaos. There are words that do not help the human condition, quite the contrary. How did Rabbi Mendel Vorker put it? [00:09:00] The loudest cry is soundless. Rabbi Ishmael's silence remains with us and has become part of our own. And what have we learned from the Apter Rebbe? The obligation to remember. The all-encompassing virtue and command of Ahavat Yisrael. The sense of solidarity we must have and share with both the living and the dead. The true meaning of words, such as generosity and friendship. The terror inherent in humiliation. We have learned from the Apter Rebbe that the Hasidic message concerns us.

As for myself, I keep learning. About people and their manners, or lack of manners. About literature and what it is -- meaning.

About Jews. I'm learning about questions of the past,
[00:10:00] that keep on tormenting me to this day. Why so much
hate against so many of us? Anti-Semitism remains the oldest
group prejudice in history. Why? And why such hostility
towards Israel, in so many circles? Israel went into Lebanon
and was condemned for it. Israel left Lebanon, and once again,
she was condemned for it. I believe that more than ever, we
live in critical times. We have lost the name of things and the
taste for truth. More words are being more and more corrupted
by more and more people. Just imagine, Soviet Russia, rewarded,
recently, the Lenin Peace Prize to -- guess. Yasser Arafat.
Next, he will get the Stalin Literary Prize. Why not.

[00:11:00] (audience laughs)

Corruption everywhere, of values, of words, of ideas, of
relations. I don't know what the president who is competing
with us tonight, at this moment, (audience laughs) is saying to
the American nation, but there are so many things I don't
understand. These wars, suddenly these wars, so many
casualties. I don't understand. I don't understand something
else, which hurts me. Israel, generously, humanly, and
normally, naturally, has offered to place at disposal of the
American Army all her hospitals and especially the Rambam
Hospital in Haifa, which is 15 minutes away from the

battlefield. Instead, they brought these wounded soldiers by helicopter to Europe? [00:12:00] I don't understand it. It hurts.

But again, there are so many things in this world, and I don't understand them. There are 40 wars being waged today in the world. 40 declared wars. How long will this go on? What about intolerance, fanaticism? What about people being jailed? What about Sharansky waiting in jail? And Begun, and Ida Nudel. What about those who are being tortured, and what about us? Are we thinking about them? I cannot not think about the fact that tens of thousands of people die of hunger every day. And we in these United States, we live so well. What we throw out would be enough to feed everybody.

It sounds absurd. It sounds absurd that [00:13:00] half of mankind tries to lose weight, while the other starves from hunger. Oh, I know it sounds like a joke, but do you know what the best-sellers are today? Cookbooks and diet books. Yes, there are many questions. Many, many questions. But some of them I received from some of you. I received many. But I cannot complain, I asked for them, didn't I? One is related to Job. Have I changed my perception of the man and his case? No, I still believe that his suffering was unwarranted and his

argumentation valid. Was Job convinced by God's answer? God had offered him none, only questions. And that is why, and this is an answer to one other question, that is why, according to Midrashic sources, God spoke to him as [00:14:00] a pupil.

One of you wondered, hasn't this particular pupil, meaning God, spoken with arrogance? No, I would rather say with passion. And the question I said is this how a pupil speaks, with disrespect? Absolutely not. It's all a matter of style, again. It depends how you say it. You can say, when God says to Job, "*ayfo hayita b'asi shamayim va'aretz* , where were you when I created heaven and earth?" That's arrogance. But you can also say, Where were you? Other questions addressed to me deal, of course, with theodicy . Why do the just men suffer? I don't know. And all I know is that every time a Talmudic sage asks the question, God rebukes him and says, "*shtok, kach alah b'machshavah alai*", be silent." That is how things are.

[00:15:00] In other words, some puzzling experiences can never be solved. Not at our level. Only at the level of God. But we may ask the question.

Someone mentioned that I forgot to speak of Heschel, of Abraham Joshua Heschel's activity in political matters and human rights, I'm sorry. Heschel was a humanist, I said it. He was involved

in the war against Vietnam and for civil rights, which is only normal. After all, he was a Hasid.

One last question I was asked, which is a painful one. What do we do about Israel? We Jews, we live here, why don't we speak of Aliyah? Why don't we speak of going to Israel? And if not us, why not our children? I remember I had once a meeting with then-president Yitzhak Navon [00:16:00] in Jerusalem. And he asked the same question. I remember I told him the following. I said, "If anyone had told me when I was young that I will be alive and see a sovereign, independent, great Jewish state, with all its problems, I wouldn't have believed it. But if anyone had told me that I will be alive, and there will be a Jewish state, and I will not reside in it, I would have believed in it even less." The fact is, here we are. And we are not in Israel. But that, too, is a question. And it must remain a question.

So, we continue to ask questions. Even if it means not to have the answers. Even if it means to be rebuked again by God. Ultimately, the dialogue will help other people. Maybe of this generation, maybe of others. But the dialogue is a two-way dialogue. Just as we ask God, [00:17:00] he is asking us. What has he done, we ask? What have we done, he asks? With His and

our world. Granted, evil implies more than humanity. An absolute evil implies absolute intervention. But there can be no evil without human involvement. What have we, human beings, done with humanity? There is another question which nobody asks, so I will. When will the latecomers be allowed to come in? (audience laughs)

[00:18:00] I owe this legend to an old beggar named Shmaike. He was a cripple, yet for some reason, we called him Shmaike the tall one. A strange man. He would remain silent throughout the entire year, and begin to talk only during the week preceding Passover. Then, he would tell only one story, always the same story, which he allegedly inherited from his uncle, an idle bachelor who no one took seriously. This uncle had been told a story by his maternal grandfather, Rebbe Issachar, a true scholar who had attributed it to his master, the famous Rabbi Ephraim, who was said to have possessed the powers of the Maharal, the celebrated wonder rebbe of Prague. But who had refused to use them for fear of blundering. And also because he claimed that the Lord, blessed be his name, ought to save our people without intermediaries. [00:19:00]

Rabbi Ephraim had heard a tale from a gravedigger, Reuven, son of Yaakov, who claimed to have witnessed the numerous miracles

that legend attributes to the Golem, the most fascinating creature in Jewish lore and fantasy. And now, surely you would like to hear the story of the Golem. Let Reuven tell you here and now, I truly liked him. And I was not the only one. We loved him. To us, he was a savior. Though mute and unhappy, a savior is what he was. Nobody understood him, because no one was like him. Do you know anyone who lives only for others, who devotes his every breath, his every thought, every inch of his being, to a single sacred purpose? To protect the life, the security, and the future of the community? He was said to be a fool, I know. They said he was stupid, backward. I don't agree. He was a saint. May I burn [00:20:00] in hell if I am lying. But I am telling you the truth. As a member of the holy brotherhood of chevra kadisha, I know the fragility of life and the power of death. I know they are separated by the most tenuous thread. Is it not the same for what is true and what is false?

So, listen to me carefully. I, Reuven, son of Yaakov, declare under oath, that Yosl the mute, or the Golem made of clay, created in the year 1580 by the great and famous Rabbi Yehuda Loew of Prague, known as the Maharal, blessed be his memory, deserves to be remembered by our people, our persecuted and assassinated and yet immortal people. We owe it to him to evoke

his faith with love and gratitude. What you have heard is the beginning of a new book. [00:21:00] Written for two Jewish children, Elisha Wiesel and Michael Podwal. The colorful and exciting story has been illustrated, and indeed, interpreted, by a very great and sensitive artist, my friend Mark Podwal. Neither of us has ever been to Prague. And yet here we are, with a lot of Jewishchutzpah, inviting you to visit its picturesque Jewish quarters and meet legendary scholars and their pupils, who have been dwelling there for centuries and centuries. I have never been there, but I remember Prague. I remember it from my childhood. In Eastern Europe, we grew up loving the Maharal. And we loved his strong, invincible beadle.

In the shtetl, that you will find in Roman Vishniac's *Vanished World*, one of the great [00:22:00] testimonial documents and pictorial literary works that there is today, in the shtetl, as described by him and by some of us, we needed to think of the Maharal. We needed to remember his strength. We needed miracles. During long winter nights, while reading about the tragedies of our people, crusades and pogroms and more pogroms, I would think, if only the Golem had lived in more than one city. He could have saved more than one community. The Golem caught our fantasy more than living persons. When the Weizmann

Institute in Israel inaugurated its first giant computer, it was named, by Gershom Scholem, no less, Golem I.

But why has the legend been attributed to the Maharal? It doesn't fit him. The Maharal was a scholar. [00:23:00] He was a rationalist and a Kabbalist, and he has written numerous books about Jewish thought and Jewish law. He was never involved in miracle-making. He wasn't a wonder-rebbe. He was never involved in occult sciences. Had the legend been attributed to the Ari Hakadosh, all right. Or to the Besht, yes. To the Maggid of Mezeritch, surely. But why to the Maharal? I don't know. But all I know is that there were many stories, enchanting stories, about the Maharal and the Golem that we were fed with in our childhood.

I remember one story, which is beautiful. One day, he walked in the street, he went to shul, and was stopped by his friend, King Rudolph. "Where are you going?" the king wanted to know. "I don't know," said the Maharal. "What do you mean, you don't know?" "I don't know," said the Maharal. "But where are you going?" "I don't know," said the Maharal. [00:24:00] So, in his anger, the king had his friend jailed. After three days, he brought him before him in his palace, and he said, "Why did you answer me like that?" He said, "Because it's the truth." "What

do you mean, it's the truth? I saw you walking in the street, and you didn't know where you were going?" He said, "It's the truth. Look, majesty. I was in the street walking because I thought I was going to shul. And I ended up in jail." (audience laughs)

I will read to you one more short passage in the middle about the creation of the Golem. On that day, the twentieth day of Adar, 1580, the great Rebbe Loew summoned his two favorite disciples to his studies. His son-in-law, Rabbi Yitzhak Hacoheh, and Rabbi Sasson. After swearing them to secrecy, he told them of his dream, [00:25:00] of the revelation that he had to make a Golem, and his decision. He reassured them when they were unable to suppress the cry of astonishment, "It is not the first time that a Golem would have created," he explained. In the Talmud, a sage named Rava had done it before. But there had been many, many attempts that had failed. The Rabbi Ishamel ben Elisha, with his students, tried to fashion a Golem, the earth swallowed them. Our lawmakers even had had to answer some of the questions raised by the presence of such a creature, a very important one. Could it be included in a minyan? There are books, procedures, formulas, at the disposal of the initiated. "Don't be frightened," the Maharal added. No one will do anything here on earth if it is not commanded from above. We

only translate divine thoughts into human terms. And then he gave them books to study in depth, litanies to repeat with a particular fervor. And he advised them to fast, to remain pure, during seven days and [00:26:00] seven nights.

Afterwards, they were to immerse themselves in the ritual bath, get dressed, and return to his study at four in the morning with their tallit, shawl, and phylacteries and prayer books. They arrived at the appointed hour, shaking with cold and fear. In the ominous semi-darkness, they saw the Maharal with a finger on his lips. The silence was not to be made impure by words. He then proceeded to speak through gestures. They were to imitate him faithfully, do everything he did. They left the beit din, the courthouse, and found themselves in the dark and threatening street. The Maharal took a deep breath, and raised his cane to indicate a direction.

Wordlessly, they left the silent Jewish Quarter and made their way through the wider streets of the wealthy Christians. They headed toward the woods along the outskirts, near the Vltava River. The Maharal stopped at a certain place, scrutinized the sky, then, leaned his cane [00:27:00] against a tree, and put on his tallis. His disciples did likewise. Around them, within them, the silence became more and more oppressive. Rabbi

Yitzhak Hacoheh and Rabbi Sasson found it difficult to control their emotions. When the Maharal began to recite the first chapter of Genesis, along with commentaries by our old sages, insisting on the interpretation of the Zohar, whispering intensely, he evoked mysteries that man like him had conveyed to one another from generation to generation, from the time of Sinai and even from creation. And beyond the silence, within the silence, the disciples heard voices rising and rising, higher and higher, from heaven to heaven, to become one with the voice. And suddenly, time stopped. The Maharal lit a torch, and handed it to Rabbi Sasson while he took his cane and drew a circle in the mud. Then he turned to his disciples and gave them precise instructions. [00:28:00] Rabbi Yitzhak was to go around the drawing seven times, from right to left starting at the feet, while softly repeating names, which since the beginning of time, no human had the right to pronounce.

Then, it was the turn of Rabbi Sasson. And then, the Maharal's. And then, the torch went out by itself, and in the darkness, the two disciples thought they saw a hand which began to draw a figure of clay. "Breathe," the Maharal said, leaning over the creature that was lying on the ground. And the man of clay began to breathe. "Open your eyes," said the Maharal, and the man of clay opened his eyes. "Sit up," the Maharal said, and

the man of clay rose, slowly, heavily. "Stand," the Maharal told him, and the man of clay, with a jolt, stood up. "I name you Yoseph," said the Maharal. "Your mission on [00:29:00] earth will be to protect the people of Israel from their enemies. Do you understand?" The man of clay did not answer. "Yes, you do understand," the Maharal told him. "But you don't know how to express it. You will not be able to talk, because that is a gift only God, blessed be his name, can give. In every other way, you will be like us, only more powerful. No one will be your match. You will conquer fire and death. As long as we need you, you will be indestructible and immortal."

Yes, I wish we had the Golem. (sighs) In more than one place. I wish we had him, because we needed him in more than one place. Since we remember, and we remember more than our own lives, a great woman called Rachel Varnhagen, the nineteenth century, said something very touching. [00:30:00] She said, "My history begins before my life." And that is true of all of us. Our history begins before our life. And in our history, there is so much pain, and so much anguish, and so much suffering. Somehow, we don't see the way out, but we do see the way in. We don't understand, why have we inspired so much hate, so many passions, in so many people? There were people who had nothing in common except their hatred for Jews. Why? They always suspect that

there is a mystery in us. Most of them believed, some of them still do, that we have a secret power and that we control the world. Nebech. We control the world.

There is a marvelous story, which I heard from the present Israeli ambassador in Washington. He [00:31:00] worked as a director of Israeli Atomic Energy Commission for a while. And he said that many, many foreign diplomats would ask him only one question: "Does Israel have the atom bomb? Does Israel have the atom bomb?" That was the question on their mind. So he told them the following story. He said, in a restaurant there was a customer who called the waiter and said, "Waiter, I'm terribly hot, can you please turn on the air conditioner?" So the waiter said, "Of course." Ten minutes later, the same customer said, "But waiter, now it's really too cold, can you adjust it?" "Of course." Two minutes, now it's too hot. "I will do it." Now it's too hot again, too cold again, for a half hour. And the waiter each time said, "Of course I'm going to fix it." Then, a Jew sat next -- by, he said to the waiter, he said, "My friend, this guy is driving you crazy." He said, "He's driving me crazy? I'm driving him crazy. There is no air conditioner." (audience laughs) [00:32:00] But they always suspect that there is one.

I don't know what it is. What is the secret of our survival? Why are we so stubborn about it? Why do we want to survive in a world that doesn't want us so often? Is it mission, a sense of mission. I would call it memory. And it is this sense of memory that keeps us, I think, human, and committed to humanity. And this is why some of us teach, others study, it's the same thing. And I study and teach and write. Writing, to me, is the art of receiving and sharing. What I have been given by my teachers and theirs, I am compelled to pass on. To students and readers and friends. [00:33:00] And sometimes, the three categories are not necessarily separate. That is why, in the last 17 years, we have been studying and teaching.

This year, we were fortunate, because John Ruskay , who is organizing all this, had some new idea to have study sessions before our sessions with Rabbi Levy Yitzchak Darby (inaudible). I hope that next year, more and more will attend those sessions, because these here are part of them. They are the result, the outcome. The fourth evening, usually, is devoted to work in progress, and that is usually to show, first that I work, and sometimes I make progress, but to a new book. This year I have a problem. One book came out in Paris, [00:34:00] called *Paroles d'étranger, Words from a Stranger*. But my translator, I won't even tell you who she is, hasn't translated it yet.

Another book, a novel, came out in Paris. She hasn't translated it yet. But still, I hope she will. And next year, therefore, we will read from *The Fifth Son* and *Paroles d'étranger*, but some of the pages are here. I will read from some excerpts.

The purpose of these readings has been, and still is, to illustrate in immediate terms what I, as a writer, as a student, as a teacher, as a Jew, owe our predecessors. Would I have written *The Trial of God* without my knowledge of Rebbe Yitzhok of Berditchev? Would I have written *Messengers of God* without my study of Talmud? [00:35:00] With the exception of my first and only memoir, all my 24 books could be traced to Midrashic, Hasidic, and even Kabbalistic sources. I do not think it is possible to innovate anything. All I can do in this generation, where imagination goes behind reality, all I can do is repeat. My generation has been deprived of the faculty to create, but it is given the ability, and perhaps the obligation, to recreate. And therefore, this sense of memory, which is beneath every word that I write, is in every novel. It is usually the subject. It is the landscape. It is the scenery, as much as the subject itself, of everything that I write.

In *The Fifth Son*, of course, I speak of the four sons that we know of the Haggadah. One is wise, because he knows both

[00:36:00] the question and the answer. The other is wicked, he knows the answer but he hates it. The third is innocent, he knows that there is a question but not that it concerns him. And the fourth, *she'ayno yodea lish'ol* , doesn't even know that there is a question. So, I decided, maybe there is a fifth one. Why only four? And my fifth hero, the fifth son, is the one who isn't there. He is a son of survivors. This is, for the first time in 25 years, that I decided to write something about the children of survivors. They have always moved me more than I can say it in words. Their parents shatter me, but the children move me. Their tragedy is also unique. They are burdened with knowledge which they must receive in their own way, in their own time. [00:37:00] And what are they to do with that knowledge? How can they speak to their parents, and how can their parents speak to them? Nothing has been more rewarding to me in my work as a teacher than to be the teacher of children of survivors.

Although we were studying other texts, ancient texts, or poetry, or philosophy, nothing connected with modern times or modern tragedies. But somehow, beyond those words, beyond those tales, there was an area of so much pain, of so much wonder, that they were afraid to touch, and therefore I had the privilege to serve as their guide. And from time to time, a parent would come and see me in Boston, and simply say that, you know, I cannot speak

to my children. And then a year later, he would come [00:38:00] and say, "Now I am speaking to my children." Well, this is what I tried to show in this book, because these children are very special. They too didn't know how to deal with our event. Luckily, the last couple of years, they are organizing themselves. They are now together. They are building a movement, all over the country and all over the Western world. A network. And they take their obligations very seriously. That they have to justify their parents' faith in mankind. After all, what could we teach them? All our vehicles have been destroyed. Even our experience [00:39:00] cannot be of great use to them, because it cannot be communicated, not even to them. And yet, now they are responsible for a world that they have not created, that we have created or destroyed for them, against them.

In my book, I try to show a son of a survivor who has not heard his father speak about the experience for many, many, many years. And then he found out that his father had a problem. The problem was his father lived since the war thinking that he, together with a few friends, had killed a German SS officer after the war. And therefore, he didn't know how to handle it. The son later finds out that it was nonsense. The German officer [00:40:00] had not been killed, just wounded. We Jews

are such poor avengers. So, the son goes to Germany, trying to complete his father's work. And he meets the SS man, and that is the story of the book. But I was always troubled and mystified by the fact that we Jews couldn't take vengeance. That after the war, we could have. We even may have had some justification for it. But we didn't. We didn't because -- I don't know, it's not in our memory. It's not in our character. We simply cannot kill, we cannot shed blood. Just -- not like that. What we do is we remember, which means we believe in justice after all, and despite of everything. And we still believe in language, and silence. [00:41:00]

How could I describe my commitment to language? Literature to me is art, and whenever we speak about art and the implications of art, the obligations of art, related to art, I always go back to Hebrew, because after all, it's the sacred tongue. And whenever I have a philosophical problem, I go back to Hebrew. Art in Hebrew means amanut. It comes from where? Let's say it comes, first of all, from the word *imun*, which means trust. I must trust the artist, the artist must trust his work, must trust words. The artist must also trust the reader, or the viewer. That you will see what I want to show. That you will hear the words I use, the same way, the same meaning. Then, there is emunah, faith. Art without faith is impossible. Faith

[00:42:00] in something, in anything, but faith, at least faith in art. Then, a beautiful word, which is *omnah*, a covenant. Art means a covenant, the covenant between the artist and the person who receives the art. Between the subject and the form. Between word and word. Between painting and the story of the painting.

And ultimately, it comes from the word amen. When you say amen in shul or in church, that's what it means, amen, which means, that's how it is. Which means, to bear witness. We bear witness that yes, Hashem is Hashem, and this is what happened and we don't know why, but we are witnesses, that it happened. So, [00:43:00] therefore in my writing, I try to show this testimony. Naturally, some of the things cannot be said. Will never be said. And yet, those are the things that should be said.

I have written 25 books. The first memoir -- in Yiddish, it was called *Un di velt hot geshvign*, it came out in '55. I shortened it, it came out in '58: *Night*. It came out in Paris, and then, as some of you may have seen, the story of my friend Georges Borchardt, who represented me then and now, and tried to find an American publisher. It was impossible. Simply, people didn't want to hear. People didn't want to know. And I understand

that. The natural thing, the normal thing, is not to know
[00:44:00] things that are painful. We want to forget what
hurts us. And here we come, some of us, and we say, Remember.
Remember pain. Why? Remember agony. Why? Remember death.
Why? 25 years later, things have changed, have they? Has the
world changed? Has mankind become more human? I wonder often,
if Auschwitz did not change humanity, what will? If Treblinka
did not alter human destiny, what will? Has the world changed?
Have I changed?

So, in *Words from a Stranger*, in *Paroles d'étranger*, I have one
text about changing. And I will read it to you. Have I
[00:45:00] changed? Of course. Everyone changes. To live
means to go through a certain time, a certain space. With a
little luck, some traces are left. The traces at the beginning
are not the same as those at the end. Certainly, my tradition
teaches me that the road leads somewhere. And although the
destination remains constant, the stages of the journey change
and renew themselves. Attracted by childhood, the old man will
seek it in a thousand different ways. I am seeking my
childhood. I will always be seeking it. I need it. It is
necessary for me as a point of reference, as a refuge. It
represents for me a world that no longer exists. A sunny and

mysterious kingdom, where beggars were princes in disguise,
[00:46:00] and fools were wise men freed from their constraints.

At that time, in that universe, everything seemed simple.

People were born and died. People hoped and despaired. People invoked love or anguish as an invitation or a barrier. I understood certain things. Not everything. I resigned myself to the idea that for the essential experiences, the quest is itself a victory. Even if it hardly succeeds, it represents a triumph. It was enough for me to know that someone knew the answer. What I myself sought was the question. It was in this way that I viewed man and his place in creation. It was up to man [00:47:00] to question what surrounded him or her, and thus go beyond themselves. It is not by chance, I told myself, that the first question in the Bible is that which God puts to Adam: "Ayecha, where are you?" "What," cried Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, "God didn't know where Adam was?"

No, that's not the way to understand the question. God knew. Adam didn't. That, I thought, is what one must always seek to know. One's role in society. One's place in history. It is one's duty to ask every day, where am I in relation to God? In relation to those that are not here anymore? And to others? Where am I? Am I worthy of my predecessors? Am I worthy of

[00:48:00] Isaiah and Jeremiah? Am I worthy of those whose memory has shaped my own?

And strangely enough, the child in me knew what the adult would not. Yes, in my small town, somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains, I knew where I was. I knew why I was born. I knew why I existed. I existed to glorify God, and to sanctify his word. I existed to link my destiny to that of my people. And the destiny of my people to that of humanity. I existed to do good, and to fight evil. To accomplish [00:49:00] the will of heaven. In short, to fit each of my acts, each of my dreams, each of my prayers, into God's design. I knew that God was at the same time near and far, magnanimous and merciful. I knew that I belonged to his chosen people, people chosen to serve him by suffering, as well as by hope. I knew that I was in exile, and that the exile was total, universal, even cosmic. I knew as well that exile would not last. That it would end. It must end in redemption. I knew so many things about so many subjects. [00:50:00] I knew when to rejoice, and when to lament. I consulted the calendar and everything was there.

Now, I no longer know anything. As in a dusty mirror, I look at my childhood and I wonder if it is mine. I don't recognize myself in the child who studies there with fervor, who says his

prayers. It's because he is surrounded by other children. He walks like them, with them, head bowed and lips tightened. He goes into the night as he is attracted by its shadows. I watch them as they enter an abyss of flames. I see them. I see those children transformed into ashes. I hear their cries turn into [00:51:00] silence, and I no longer know anything. No, I no longer understand anything. Those children have taken away my certainties, and no one will give them back to me, ever. It's not only a matter of questions concerning religious faith. It's a matter of those too, and of all the others. It's a matter of redefining, or at least rethinking, my relations with others and with myself. Have they changed? I think that I can answer yes, without the slightest hesitation. In this perspective, I realize, that they are no longer the same.

Let me try to be more specific. For instance, my attitude towards other people, towards Christians, for example. Before the war, my attitude was mistrustful, if not hostile.

[00:52:00] Now, in many cases, it is open and hospitable.

Before the war, I avoided everyone and anyone who came from the other side. That is from anywhere, call it Christianity.

Priests frightened me; I avoided them. So as not to pass them, I would cross the street. I dreaded all contact with them. I feared being kidnapped by them. I feared being baptized by

force. I had heard so many rumors, so many stories of this type. I remember the Golem and the Maharal. I had the impression that I was always in danger. At school, I sat with Christian boys of my age, but we didn't speak to one another. At recess, we [00:53:00] played separated by an invisible wall. I never visited a Christian schoolmate at home. We had nothing in common. Later, as an adolescent, I stayed away from them. I knew them to be capable of anything, of beating me, and they did. Of humiliating me by pulling my peyes, or seizing my kippah, my skullcap. And without the kippah, I felt naked. My dream back then was to live in a Jewish world, completely Jewish, a world where Christians would have scarcely any access. A protected world, a shielded world, ordered according to the laws of Sinai.

It's strange, but awakening in the ghetto, I discovered in myself a feeling of exultation -- after all, we were living among ourselves. I didn't yet know that [00:54:00] it was only a step, the first, towards a small railroad station somewhere in Poland. Contrary to what I could think, my true change took place not in the camps, but after their liberation and mine.

During the ordeal, I lived in expectation. I was always waiting for a miracle, or death. Atrophied, I evolved passively,

accepting events without questioning them. Certainly I felt revolt, and anger, or much anger toward the murderers. Much anger toward their accomplices. And sometimes, a hidden melancholy anger towards the creator, who let those murderers and their accomplices act as they did. I [00:55:00] thought then that humanity was lost forever, and that God himself was neither capable or willing of saving it. I asked myself questions, which formerly would have made me tremble. On the evil in man. On the silence of God. But I continued to act as though I still believed.

Friendship, for instance, in the camp, was important to me. It was important afterwards as well. I looked for it despite the efforts of the killers to belittle and deny it. I clung to family ties, despite the killers who changed them into dangerous, mortal traps. As for God, the God of Israel, I continued to say my prayers, in the morning with many of my neighbors, inmates, companions. [00:56:00] I arose before the others to wait in line and put on the tefillin. It was only later upon leaving the nightmare that I underwent a prolonged crisis, painful and anguished, questioning many things of the past. I began to despair of humanity, and God. I considered them as enemies of one another, and both as enemies of the Jewish people. I didn't express this aloud, not even in my

notes. I studied history, philosophy, psychology. I wanted to understand, and the more I learned, the less I understood. I was angry at the Germans. How could they have counted Goethe and Bach as their own, and at the same time, massacred countless Jewish children? [00:57:00] I was angry at their Hungarian, Polish, Ukrainian, French, and Dutch accomplices. How could they, in the name of a perverse ideology, have turned against their Jewish neighbors to the point of pillaging their houses, and denouncing them to the police, and delivering them to the Angel of Death? I was angry at Pope Pius XII. How could he have kept silent? I was angry at the heads of the Allied countries. How could they have given Hitler the impression that as far as the Jews were concerned, he could do as he wished? Why hadn't they taken action to save them? Why had they closed all the doors to them? Why hadn't they bombed the railroad line to Birkenau, if only to show Himmler that the Allies were not indifferent?

And [00:58:00] why not admit it, I was angry at God, too. At the God of my childhood, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. How could he have abandoned his people at the moment when they needed him? How could he have delivered them up to the killers? How could one explain, how could one justify, the death of one million Jewish children?

For months and months, for years, I lived alone. I mistrusted my fellow humans. I suspected them. I no longer believed in the word, as a vehicle of thought and of life. I shunned love. Aspiring only to silence, aspiring only to madness. Disgusted with the West, I turned towards the East. I was attracted by Hindu [00:59:00] mysticism. I was interested in Sufism. I even began to explore the occult domains of marginal sects here and there in Europe. It's simple: I was looking for something else. I was anxious to venture to the other side of reality, of what constituted the basis of civilization. Meditation counted more for me than action. I drowned myself in contemplation. The appearance of things repulsed me, and that of people even more. If I had been able to settle in an ashram somewhere in India, I would have. But I couldn't. I had seen, under the incandescent sky of India, an immeasurable, unnamable suffering, and I couldn't bear it. In the face of this suffering, [01:00:00] the problem of evil imposed itself on me with a destructive force. I could choose to steel myself to it, or flee. And now, I was not anxious to be an accomplice. Hindu friends would cross the streets, stepping over a crowd of mutilated and sick and hungry people, without even looking at them. But I could not.

I am not passing judgment. I'm only speaking of myself. And I say of myself, that I looked and felt guilty. And finally, I understood. I am free to choose my suffering, but not that of my fellow humans. Not to see the hungry before me was to accept their [01:01:00] destiny in their place, in their name, for them and even against them, or at least like them. Not to notice their distress was to acquiesce to its logic, indeed, to its justification. Not to cry out against their misery was to make it all the heavier. And because I felt myself too weak to cry out, to offer a hand to so many disfigured men and women and children, and because I refused to understand that a certain situation cannot be changed, I preferred to go away, and I returned to the West. To the West and its necessary ambiguities, which confers to thought its brilliance if not its vigor.

After this, I practiced asceticism in my own way. In my home, in my little world in Paris, [01:02:00] where I cut myself off from the city and from life for weeks on end. I lived in a room which was much more like a prison cell. Large enough for only one, and not even for one. The street noises that reached me were muffled. My horizon became smaller and smaller. I looked only at the Seine River bearing along its foam. I no longer perceived the sky mirrored in it. I drew away from people. No

tie, no liaison came to interrupt my solitude. I lived only in books where my memory tried to rejoin a more immense and ordered memory, and the more I remembered, the more I felt excluded and alone. I felt like a stranger. I had lost my faith in many things, and I had lost my sense of belonging and orientation.

[01:03:00] My faith in life was covered with ashes. My faith in humanity was laughable, childish, sterile. And my faith in God was shaken. Things and words had lost their meaning, their axis.

An image of the Kabbalah described the state of my soul at the time. All of creation had moved from its center, in order to exile itself. Whom was I to lean on? What was I to cling to? I was looking for myself. I was fleeing from myself. And always, there was this taste of failure. This feeling of defeat inside of me. A member of the Sonderkommando of Treblinka asked himself if one day, he would laugh again. Another of Birkenau wondered if one day, he would cry again. I didn't laugh.

[01:04:00] I didn't cry. I was silent. And I knew that never would I know how to translate the silence that I carried within myself.

Again, I found myself living in the ghetto. In a sense, I am still there. It's natural. I can do nothing about it. The

ghetto is in me, in us. It will never leave us. We who were there, men and women, we used to be children there, we are still the prisoners of that ghetto. And yet, there has been a change in our behavior. First of all, we express ourselves. I force myself to share the secret that consumes me. I try to make the ghosts within me speak. Does it mean that the [01:05:00] wound has healed over? It still burns. The scar is there. I still cannot speak of it, but I can speak, and that's a change. A need for communication, for community, perhaps. I evoke memories that precede my own. I sing the song of ancient kingdoms. I describe swallowed up worlds. I exist by what I was as much as I keep silent. To protect my silent universe, I speak of the world of others. To avoid painful subjects, I explore others. Biblical, Talmudic, Hasidic, or contemporary. I evoke Abraham and Isaac so as not to uncover the mystery of my relations with my father. I recount the adventures of the Besht so as not [01:06:00] to dwell on the end of his descendants.

In other words, literature has become for me a way of making you look away. The tales that I retell are never those that I would like to or ought to tell. The problem is, that the essential will never be said or understood. Perhaps I should express my thought more clearly. It is not because I don't speak that you

won't understand me. It is because you won't understand me, that I don't speak.

And that's the problem. And we can do nothing about it. What certain people have lived, you will never live. Happily for you, moreover. Their experience has set them apart. They are neither better nor worse, but different, [01:07:00] more vulnerable, and at the same time, more hardened than you. The slightest arrow wounds them, but death does not frighten them. You look at them and you wonder and they suffer from your look. And yet, they know how to bear the hardest blows, the most bitter disappointments. This is true for both their relations with the rest of humanity and their relations with God. From God, we are awaiting everything, and yet we are aware that everything will scarcely suffice. God himself cannot change the past. Even God cannot negate the fact that the killer has killed six million times. How could he redeem himself? I don't know. I suppose that he cannot. Those who claim that this or that constituted a response [01:08:00] to the event are content and satisfied with very little. I am not.

This is what I thought after the war. And this is what I still think. And yet, I am surprised to feel a forgotten need to recite certain prayers, to sing certain melodies, to plunge into

a certain atmosphere that filled my childhood. Like everyone, I would give everything I own to awaken and see that we are still in 1938, in 1939, in the little town in the Carpathian Mountains, and that I had only dreamed the future. I would give so much to be able to relive a Shabbat in my small town. The whiteness of the tablecloth, the blinking candle flames, the beaming faces around me. The melodious voice of my grandfather, the Hasid [01:09:00] of Vizhnitz, inviting the angels of the Sabbath to accompany him to our home. It pains me even to think of these things. And that is what I miss most. A certain peace, a certain melancholy, that a Shabbat in Sighet offered its children, big and small, young or old, rich and poor. It is this Shabbat that I miss. Its absence recalls to me all else that is gone. What is wrong with our world, the Shabbat is different. What I remember now is, things have changed in the world. And perhaps, the world itself has changed. Have I? Until next year. (audience applause)

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