

Elie Wiesel In Modern Tales: The Fifth Son (2)

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) I had come to Germany, to the small, great town, to pierce the mystery that separated me from my father. I look at myself in this place, and I understand at last. Like him, I do not wish to speak. Like him, I am weary. Come to think of it, he was weary of me. Why? What had I ever done to him? How had I displeased him? He rarely reached out, spoke little, hardly at all -- that is to say, in spurts, in unpredictable and disconcerting ways. And that only of current events and trivia. Did you read in the papers that -- you won't forget to --

Sometimes, when [00:01:00] I urged him on, he would offer me a crumb from his childhood, a scrap from his adolescence, an episode from his student days. But as soon as we broached the forbidden topic of the war, he would clear his throat and appear frightened and intensely weary. "It's late," he would say. Time to go to sleep. To eat. To go into -- for a lecture. To prepare a suddenly urgent file. And then it was pointless to insist. He became withdrawn, my father. Distant. Visibly overcome by a great sadness and unspeakable anguish from long

ago. I would give up immediately and change the subject, vowing to try again. Now I know what frightened him. I know that he felt guilty. [00:02:00] And I also know that he was wrong. Who do I know this from? From myself, that's who. From myself, his son. For we resemble one another. I carry within me his past and his secret; the ancient sages were right. Everything is contained in the I, and it is myself I question in order to understand my father.

Only once did he speak to me seriously. I mean at length, directly, man to man, like two adults. Two partners. On the eve of my bar mitzvah. It was to be celebrated the following day during Shabbat services in the Hasidic house of study, of which we were, though unofficially, members in good standing. Other immigrants and refugees from Davarovsk also attended services there. As for the rabbi, he was the nephew of Rabbi [00:03:00] Aharon Asher of Davarovsk. The arrival of a new member into the community is a joyous and solemn event. Adolescent in the morning, adult in the evening, the boy quickly becomes aware of the duties that link him to the collective fate of Israel. To encourage him, to congratulate him, to make his star shine in the blue sky of a people intoxicated with God and eternity, the community sings for him and drinks with him. But neither my father nor I was in the mood for drinking or singing.

I was thinking of my poor mother, and I felt my eyes growing heavy.

"Are you ready?" my father asked me. Of course I was, as much as any boy my age could be. Ready for the ceremony. Ready for the stages ahead. The blessings? I know them by heart. I had studied the sacred texts and various commentaries at a yeshiva, and I had also learned the melodies [00:04:00] of the biblical readings and the prophetic Haftarah. "Did you prepare a speech?" my father asked. "No," I said. "Long ago," he said, "in the Old Country, boys would seize this opportunity to expound a *chidush*, an original idea, a striking concept, linked to a Talmudic theme. The object for the disciple to prove to his masters that their faith in him was justified. "Not in America," I said. "You know perfectly well, father, in America, the ceremony's incidental. What counts is the festivity. The eating, the drinking." To be honest, I had another reason for not wanting to make a speech. I was afraid that I might lose control, break into sobs. My father understood; he tried to smile. "Do you know," he said, "what the great Rabbi Mendel of Kotsk said? The most beautiful speech is the speech one does not pronounce."

This is the opening of *The Fifth Son*, [00:05:00] soon to be published here in the United States, in the translation of Elisha's mother, Marion Wiesel. And the critic in me prevents me from praising the novel, (laughter) but not from expressing my views on the translation. It is one of the finest I have ever read. (laughter) True, it took her a long time, but it was worth waiting for. There are problems with having a translator at home. You cannot complain. But then, there are virtues, and only the virtues matter.

Good translations are rare. The Talmud says that the day when the Torah was translated into Greek, there was as much darkness as when the Jews in the desert worshipped the golden calf. And only an author who reads his work [00:06:00] in translation can understand and appreciate the metaphor. Sometimes there is so much darkness in his writing that in the original was meant to be clear and sober and simple, though not simplistic, that I understand the Talmud. The Talmud also tells us that when King Ptolemy ordered the 70 sages to come out with the Septuaginta, he locked them into 70 cells. And all by themselves, in total solitude, they had to write -- each of them -- a full translation of the Bible. And when they came out, said the Talmud with great joy, all the versions were identical. Even the mistakes. (laughter) In our circle, they would say, "Big

deal." The 70 sages were in 70 cells. Just imagine if they had been [00:07:00] around one table in a committee. There would be no unanimity.

Well, we are about to take leave from one another until next year. And perhaps we ought to review briefly what we have attempted to learn together during our 1984, soon to be concluded. From Ezekiel, we learned that a Jew is more than in one place, more than in one era, expressing himself or herself in more than one mode. God and God alone is one. His creatures are many. Our oneness is never complete; it is fragmented, broken, dispersed. We are in exile, and exile is in us. Our language yearns for silence, and our silence, a language in itself, needs words to live. We also learned from Ezekiel the dangers inherent in [00:08:00] visions when they catch fire. But we also learned they reward as well.

Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion, what did he teach us? He taught us his passion for learning. Those of us who think that we need an inducive environment, scholarships, grants, good living conditions, to be able to study, you need only to remember Rabbi Haninah. Even on fire, especially on fire, one must not and cannot give up study. As for the Maggid of Kozhnitz, the grace and power of words when they become prayer, this is what we

learned from him. From him too, we learned of man's ability and necessity to help his fellow human, always, lest he drown in dark solitude. And what have we learned from one another? To listen. [00:09:00] To listen to voices that come to us from the other side of time and space. To listen to what they say, and what they conceal. If you listen well, you remember; if you remember well, you give life to memory and to words. We have learned, therefore, to remember together.

And so, tonight, as we are about to read a few pages from *The Fifth Son* and show to you, to myself, what I owe to our masters, because if it were not for them, I wouldn't have written -- not only this novel, but any novel or any book. There is a total influence, not only a partial one, but a total influence, a total impact, that I acknowledge coming from them. We shall do that, but before so, let us open a few customary parentheses. First, I really would like to thank the grand-grand-grandson of Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, [00:10:00] Rabbi Lavey Derby, for the instruction that he has offered to so many of you and us for the last four weeks. I hope he will continue; I hope that the number of students will increase more and more. All I can regret that those who are in Harrisburg now weren't here to be with him.

This is the eighteenth year that we are having these encounters, and 18 is chai, but it's a very, very long chai. I tried to remember all the events that happened since we met here for the first time, some of us, and my mind is -- is simply too crowded. The '67 war, the War of Attrition, the '73 war, the Russian renaissance and all the upheavals in Russia, upheavals in other countries. The peace mission [00:11:00] of Sadat, with Sadat, the killing of Sadat. So many events. In other words, more and more, I believe that we do live in biblical times. The era is a biblical era. And every sentence contains generations. And we shall talk about generations later. Last year, I have asked those of you who are still here to prepare questions during the second and third sessions so that I could try to answer them during the fourth. I forgot this year, so actually I should answer the questions from last year. (laughter) I forgot the questions as well. One remark and one question. The remark is an invitation that after our meeting here, you are all invited [00:12:00] for a l'chaim outside. It is appropriate, chai for l'chaim, and do not worry, the champagne is kosher. And the last question that actually you do have and so do I, is when will the door be opened? (pauses)

The origin of the novel is in the Haggadah, and we shall discuss the Haggadah a little bit later. But on a different level

[00:13:00] of personal experience, the origin of the novel is in a story, and the story is a story in itself. A student, one of the best I have ever had, came to see me when I was still teaching at City College. And I remember him, he looked forlorn and needed help. "My father," he said, "my father was married. His wife and their children were killed. My mother," he said, "my mother was married. Her husband and their children were killed. They met after the war. They got married. They had a son, me. And whenever they look at me, I know that it is not me they are seeing." And the young student, one of the brightest I have ever had, began crying. [00:14:00] I understood, I tried to understand the young student, I tried to understand the parents. But I knew very well that it is impossible for anyone to be that student unless anyone or everyone knows that it is difficult and it is impossible not to be that student, if that student wants you to be he or she.

In a letter to my publisher, Jim, and my beautiful editor, Eileen, I tried to explain what I was going to do. I said, in the Passover Haggadah, we are told of four sons. The first knows the question. The second rebels against it. The third is unaffected by it. The fourth doesn't even know the question. And I imagine the fifth son, the one who is not there.

[00:15:00] So, what is the story? Somewhere in Eastern Europe,

there lived a man named Reuven Tamiroff. He and his wife lived through the war, but never spoke about their experiences in their new home, Brooklyn. At least not to their son. Reuven is silent, his wife insane. Is it because survivors rarely open themselves up to their children? Reuven's son, who has no name in the beginning, discovers that there is something else in his father's past that torments him. He, his father, and his friends from the ghetto, had executed an SS officer shortly after the war. Later, later, the son also discovers that his father [00:16:00] and his mother had had another son, called Ariel. And Ariel was executed by that SS officer, nicknamed "the angel," whom the father later had killed.

The time of the story is the '60s, the late '60s. Some of you are young enough to remember the campus rebellions, the social upheavals, the fall of taboos and customs, drug temptations, the quick pace of serious events. At one point, Reuven's son discovers accidentally that the angel is still alive. And his father's remorse, therefore, is for nothing. The Jewish survivors, he learned, proved to be [00:17:00] poor avengers. The killer is more resistant than his victims. And so, the son decides to do what his father was unable to do, to kill the killer. And he goes to Germany, to face the angel, 30 years later. In parentheses, there is here in this hall tonight one

young man who is going next week to Paraguay, to meet or to try to meet people in power and obtain from them the extradition of Mengele. Mengele, Josef Mengele, was the one who, as you know, had killed many children. Two hundred thousand Jews.

The young man in my book is no longer the son he thought he had been. At the end, he assumes the identity of his dead [00:18:00] brother and he calls himself by his name, Ariel. So, the novel is about many encounters. Father and son, victim and executioner, past and present, passion and law, brother and brother. Oh, there are several secondary characters in the narrative: a merchant of shadows named Simha, a tough guy named Bontchek, a beautiful young girl in love with Ariel called Lisa, a Hasidic rabbi. To me, the novel signifies a departure from my familiar scenery. For the first time, the emphasis is no longer on the survivor, but on his children. What are they to do with their parents' memories? What can they do to alleviate the burden of a father or of a mother who still speak to a dead son, [00:19:00] who write letters to dead children? The most brutal shock for the son, for Reuven's son, is when he discovered that his father's letters were addressed not to him, but to his dead brother. It is in their name, as their messenger, that the son sets out on his journey to Germany. Will he complete his father's gesture? Is vengeance possible? Is justice

obtainable? To remember means to accept pain, and yet, to forget is surely not the answer. What, then, is the answer? But then, my novel is not about answers. My novel is a story. I'll give you a few excerpts.

The young child asks his father, "Father, may I ask you a question?" "Of course." [00:20:00] "My schoolmates, for the most part, have grandparents. I don't. Where are they?" "Dead," says my father. "They are dead." "Why?" "Because they were Jews," says my father. "I don't see the connection." "Neither do I," says my father. About the mother, who is now in an asylum, the son writes: "On the eve of the Jewish New Year, I take the bus to Pokiato, a sleepy little town in the shadows of the Catskill Mountains. I have so much on my mind that I do not read the newspaper I bought at Grand Central Station. I have never taken this trip without anxiety. At the other end lies naked and unconscious pain. My mother. She lives in Pokiato. Anyway, she resides there. The clinic is well-maintained. Clean. Superb comfort and [00:21:00] medical care. Delicious food. Television and games under the supervision of an unusually competent and caring staff. End of commercial.

My mother. Each time, a little smaller, a little more peaceful. Inside her darkness, who is she calling? Her eyes, a faded

blue, see without seeing, glide over me without lingering, without letting me in. People help her to get dressed, to lie down, to walk, to eat. They call her and encourage her, they scold her gently, they lecture, they urge her to behave. I send the nurses away. I want to be alone with her, to speak with her. Perhaps, with a little luck, to make her speak. To pierce the veil, crack the wall, make her feel my presence, my need to learn her secret. I stroke her hands: [00:22:00] they are still as slender, as delicate and smooth as those of a child. I run my hand through her hair, tied into a chignon. I touch her forehead, her sunken cheeks, her eyelids, and I speak to her and speak to her. A ray of sunlight enters stealthily and is reflected in her eyes. I jump. Is it a sign? I fall back disappointed. Still, I tell her, we must not give in. We must not lose hope. Tomorrow evening is the beginning of the New Year's celebration. I shall pray for you; I shall pray for all of us. For the living and for the dead, pray that the dead be at peace at last. Pray that they cease tormenting the living. All these words, did I really say them? My mother did not hear them. Since the age of six, I have been speaking to her and she does not hear me. When I place myself [00:23:00] in front of her, as I do now before leaving her, when I lean over her, she looks at me. But she does not see me. And when she finally does see me, whom does she see?

Saint-Exupéry, the author of *The Little Prince*, said something that could be useful to anyone teaching and studying literature. He said, "One cannot teach how to write. One can only teach how to see." And that used to be true, but it no longer is. What some of us have seen cannot be -- cannot be seen. Cannot even be imagined. The event will forever lie beyond, always beyond. *v'shinantam l'vanecha*, and you shall teach your children [00:24:00] applies to the Torah and to Jewish history. But how does one teach tears and agony to children? How can one teach history when the teaching itself lies beyond history? King Solomon -- one day we should really bring him into our encounters, too; after all, he had a romantic life. King Solomon, the wisest of men, teaches us that there is a time for everything. *Et laledet*, he said, there is a time to be born, *v'et lamut*, a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot the planted. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to weep and a time to love.

But until now, when you study the text, you will see until now, the lamed is always used for every word, *laharok*, *lifrotz*, *livnot*, *liskhok*, and then suddenly, [00:25:00] Solomon omits the lamed. And he says, at the end of the first stanza, he said, "*et s'fod*," without the lamed. "*v'et r'kod*," without the lamed.

And a Hasidic master comments that our ancestor, the King, knew or felt already that our people will be in a situation when time itself will wail. So total and so incommensurate will be our tragedy that time -- (pauses) *et s'fod* -- time will wail. But then, later he promised us, *et r'kod*, time itself will dance, so profound will be our joy. Our generation has witnessed both times. The end of a thousand chapters [00:26:00] was followed by new beginnings. The renaissance of Jewish sovereignty in Israel and the awakening of Jewish communities in Russia. All these events remain mysterious to me.

What remained of Kozhnitz -- I will tell you what remained of Kozhnitz. A few very extraordinary portraits. Photographies from Roman Vishniac. You look into them and you know that life is there, but what kind of life is it? It's life enriched, enhanced, and yet those who lived it are no longer there. What remained of Kozhnitz? I will tell you -- stories about Kozhnitz. Words. And that is maybe the miracle of our history. If we could take any word from any text, sacred, surely, we could [00:27:00] in that word read the entire history of our people. All those who have used that word, all those who have entered that word, all those memories that that word tried to communicate. Every word contains the history of everybody. And that is true, therefore, of the stories as well, the stories of

Kozhnitz. The stories of Kozhnitz are more than of Kozhnitz. It is Mezhyrich, it's Lizensk, it's Berditchev, it's Sanz, it's Vizhnitz.

Reuven Tamiroff writes a letter, and he writes to his son. He has written many letters to his dead son. How his son was killed, what happened to Tamiroff, he's actually part in the novel. What happened before, during. He was an assimilated Jew, and how he came to be Jewish. How he married his wife. He loved her, she loved him. [00:28:00] But the two grandparents were not the same, because on one side, you had Jewish grandparents, simple grandparents. On the other hand, you had assimilated Jewish grandparents. And they met only when all Jews met, in the ghetto. Reuven Tamiroff wrote letters. He had no choice, he had no one to talk to, so he wrote letters to his dead son. And this is what he writes.

Outside, it is dark. Inside, it is dark. A thick, tightly pressed crowd is waiting for the gates to open to see the sky and breathe fresh air. The mood is somber. There is an awesome finality to the event. We are old people without a future. Our resignation removes us from this world. Why were we marked for this first convoy to the East? A child's voice, yours, Ariel,

[00:29:00] brings tears to my eyes. What luck, I thought, we are together. Yes, that is the word I heard: luck. And I answer, we are going on a trip together. I love trains, says the child. As for me, it is not the trains I like, it is the railroad stations. I could spend days and days in them without getting bored. I could watch my life unfold, surrounded by travelers rushing about, oblivious to me, of me. Only railroad stations, too, have changed. Too large, too modern. The electric trains too shiny, too efficient, too clean. I prefer steam locomotives. The hissing, the whistling, the white smoke.

You must have been six years old, perhaps a little more, when we were in a station for the first time. It was a small one, I remember, and sunny, I remember that too. A very long, very dark structure adjoining the platforms. People crying, [00:30:00] that's normal. Soon the train will pull in. There will be separation. "Take it easy," someone says, "take it easy." It's useless. People shove, knock against each other, step on each other's toes, insults, prayers, knowing glances. "Lord, have pity on us," someone says. "Lord, have pity on us." A madwoman answers laughing, and I don't know what she said. I only know that she laughed. Voices are raised. "Make her shut up." Oh yes, she should not be laughing. Not here, not now.

And then suddenly, it's evening. The gates open and a man in uniform, very tall, very strong, a giant, comes to inform us that the train has been delayed. It won't arrive until tomorrow. "A good sign," somebody says. "A bad sign," his neighbor answers. "How shall we spend the night here?" a voice asks. There is no room to lie down. Never mind, we'll take turns sleeping. "Not the children," says an old man, and I shall always remember his [00:31:00] voice, though not his face. "The children will sleep in a corner, near the open window." Wrong. The giant orders the window shut. Reuven shouts, "But we will suffocate." Others join in, "We'll suffocate, we'll suffocate." Alright, the giant is kind-hearted. Two small skylights will remain open, but it's forbidden to go near them. Understand? No, I do not understand. Not yet. That night, Ariel, you left us. You were six years old. You are still six years old. You know something? Dead children are lucky. They don't grow up.

For years, I have been intrigued by the problem, by the problem of children. Intrigued is a weak word; I have been fascinated, and that too is a weak word. I have been obsessed with children, still am. [00:32:00] But then, I have been obsessed with everything around them. Their parents as well. I have been intrigued, and here, the word is properly used, intrigued

by the problem of vengeance. Or rather, of absence of vengeance, on the part of my contemporaries. With the exception of a few Nazi hunters, and mainly, really, with some Jews from Israel, then was Palestine, most survivors chose to turn away from the murderers who were walking around free and happy, instead of making them pay for their hideous crimes. When the war ended, Germany lived in fear of Jewish avengers, and their fear was justified. Young partisans and ghetto fighters could have descended upon their enemies and set their homes to fire. Moreover, we know that the testament many martyrs have left behind was *nekomeh*, take vengeance. [00:33:00] Those of us who remember, remember. *Nekomeh*, take vengeance. You found these words engraved on prison walls and cellars.

And yet, nothing happened. Almost nothing. Why not? How is it possible that in Jewish history, in the most tragic era of Jewish history, that element of vengeance was missing? Was it the eternal voice of Jewish morality? Was it the instinctive reaction, the collective reaction of our people not to resort to violence, because violence is degrading? Not to resort to killing, because killing is demeaning? Even if you kill the killer after the war, it is demeaning. Because in a way, you reduce an extraordinary event, a tragedy [00:34:00] of cosmic proportions, to simple killing or hate. Was it that reaction in

us that moved us to choose creativity instead? Or was it perhaps the Zionist message that went through the DP camps like fire, urging all the Jews to devote all energies to the rebuilding of an ancient dream? Whatever the motives, most survivors discarded vengeance as an option and preferred to channel their anger, their sadness, their knowledge into humanist endeavors. And how this metamorphosis occurred is one of the themes of *The Fifth Son*.

I am not embarrassed to say that I believe in -- in ethics. I believe in the principles of ethics that are part and parcel of the Jewish tradition. [00:35:00] The Haggadah is a great story, and one day, we ought again to devote an entire evening to it. What does the Haggadah teach us? The importance of telling stories and raising questions. You know that the seder in its entirety is composed for one purpose alone: to encourage children to ask questions. And what do we do? We answer with stories. I have one that does not figure in the Haggadah. And the question is, why does the text in the Haggadah emphasize all the time, again and again, God's exclusive authorship of the last plague? *Ani v'lo akher*, he said. *Ani v'lo mal'ach, ani v'lo shaliach*, I killed the first-born, says God, again and again. I, not an angel, not a messenger, nobody else, I did it.

And for many years, [00:36:00] I didn't understand that. Why does God insist on it? Is he proud of it? I think I know the reason. And the reason is to teach us an essential lesson: a lesson in human and national affairs, and conduct. No one may ever kill children, be they the enemy's children, and if at times, in exceptional eras, something like that must happen, then God does it. And God does it in order to tell us, "You can never do it. And you shall never do that." Therefore, the children are my obsession. Because in our time -- let us not say that God killed Jewish children. Jewish children [00:37:00] were killed by human beings in their inhumanity. (sighs) What was human in them, I don't know. Was it their weakness? Was it their fanaticism? I still -- it's too easy to say they were inhuman or dehumanized. It's too easy. These were human beings who grew up like human beings, who went to school, who ate, who drank, who dreamed, studied, prayed, went to church. And they killed more than a million Jewish children.

Therefore, when I see Jewish children today, of course I am -- oh, I am vulnerable. There is nothing they cannot make me do. And they try. (laughter) A few months ago, I attended here a conference of the children of survivors, and that conference was to me a turning point as well. [00:38:00] I had used to meet them individually. Now I met them collectively; there were some

15 hundred of them. And I say what I said again and again: these are the most beautiful children that there exist. They are so kind and so passionate and so involved and so loving. And they could be something else, but they are not. The way they treat their peers, their parents, after a while, it's not easy. And I addressed them. I said to them that they belong to a privileged generation. For it was they that the enemy had sought to destroy. Jewish children were the enemy's obsession. In exterminating living Jews, he wished to prevent children from being born. [00:39:00] He knew how vulnerable we were and are with regard to our children.

Our history begins with a Jewish child, Isaac, being saved. Or Moses being saved. It continues with Jewish children who are not saved. Massacred, buried alive by Pharaoh. All our enemies, Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, Haman, Hitler -- they began with children. They saw in our children the primary target, for children mean innocence and power of innocence. And if there is therefore anyone in our midst who can speak on behalf of innocence, it is the child, and especially the child of parents who lost their childhood. Just as survivors constitute a category apart, so do their children.

[00:40:00] If parents had problems with knowledge, their children had to overcome obstacles related to imagination. The link between them is inevitably tragic. When knowledge becomes imagination, it is as damaging as when imagination assumes the authority of knowledge. And I know, I said then to them and it's true, that the children wanted to know. They wanted so much to alleviate their parents' burdens, and it wasn't easy. In the beginning, they couldn't find the necessary strength to open up their wounds, not to the children. For the children were too close to them. In many cases, they preferred to remain silent. Silent with others as well, because they were afraid that the children might overhear them, understand them, please. Well, we know now that this era is, I think, different now. It changed. [00:41:00] Today, 40 years after the war, and in the Bible, 40 years is a generation, *arba'im shana kut v'dor*, one generation. Now, 40 years later, the parents and the children come together. And the pain is their common pain, and the anguish is their common anguish. But also, I hope, the consolation that they get one from the other will bring them closer one to the other.

One character in my novel is Simha, a dark, somber man. And he has -- he has a specialty. He calls himself, don't laugh, a merchant. Yes, a merchant of shadows. [00:42:00] I know it

sounds childish, but that is what he claims as his occupation. His profession and, believe it or not, his source of income. He buys and sells shadows, recruiting his clients in every imaginable sphere of American society. It seems that the great industrialist was observed visiting him secretly, as was a movie star, and even a corrupt politician. One day, he explained his trade to me. "In America," he said, "everything is for sale, because everything can be bought. Some people cannot live without shadows, so they come looking for me. And I have what they need. Shadows of every kind. Large and small, or big and transparent, strong and tired ones, I even have them in colors."

Surely, I must have been gaping foolishly, because he pretended to be annoyed. "What, you don't understand?" Simha said. "What is there to understand? Business is business. Business is the same [00:43:00] everywhere. Some industries sell light, so surely I have the right to sell shadows, don't you think?" "Of course," I said. "Why should there be dream merchants, image, illusion, happiness, and even death merchants, and no shadow merchants?" I still didn't know whether he was serious. "Makes sense," I said to show I was not entirely unsophisticated. "Oh yes, it makes sense." And then, he explained, "Most people think that shadows follow, precede, or surround beings or objects. The truth is that they also surround words, ideas,

desires, deeds, impulses, and memories. The most exalted faith, the most inspired songs have their share of shadow. God alone has none. And do you know why? God has no shadow because God is a shadow, hence his immortality. For there exists an ancient belief that man is inseparably and irrevocably [00:44:00] linked to his shadow. Who so ever separates himself from it would do well to prepare for the great voyage."

My friend Simha and his darkness, Simha and his problems. Once, one of his clients wanted to sue him, claiming that Simha had sold him defective merchandise. The second-rate, sickly shadow had vanished after only a week. And Simha said, "I offered to exchange it, nothing doing. The client had become attached to his shadow, so help me. He loved it. How can one love a shadow that has disappeared, a dead shadow? People are strange. My client had the audacity to send over a police inspector.

'Listen,' I told him in Yiddish. 'If you don't clear out this minute, I will open my warehouse and unleash my shadows, and they will overrun the town, the country, the continent, [00:45:00] and that will be the end. The end of the world.'"

Another character is Lisa. Lisa is a young girl, and she is in love with the young hero of my book, who is shy, forlorn, he doesn't know how to act, how to behave in situations of love.

And Lisa knows, fortunately. Again, the years are the '60s, and I describe a little bit the years that -- what happened then at the universities and the campuses. What happened then. Suddenly, parents were afraid of their children, teachers of their students. In the movies, it was the criminal, not the policeman, who won our sympathy. In philosophy, philosophy was on its way out. In literature, negation of style was in style. In morality, humanism was a joke. It was enough to pronounce the word [00:46:00] "soul" to send your listeners into spasms of laughter. Sometimes, Lisa and I would visit friends. There was drinking, undressing, lovemaking while reciting the Bhagavad Gita. A mixing of obscenities and prayers, generosity and cruelty, and all this in the name of protest and so-called revolutionary change.

It was pure chaos. The young wished to appear older, the old to remain young, the girls dressed as boys, the boys as savages. As for the savages, they held court and terrorized every masochistic snob in sight. "If this continues," I had said to Lisa, "the Messiah will refuse to come." (laughter) She made a gesture of disdain. "The Messiah? Who is that? Do you think that I should make his acquaintance?" To her way of thinking, he had to be a madman. Therefore, [00:47:00] someone she wanted to meet. Lisa was active in the revolutionary Left and tried

hard to involve me. There were huge rallies. Fiery rhetoric. Demonstrations involving socially oppressed people, the deprived or wretched, the ethnic and sexual minorities.

The battle was in Vietnam, but the frontline cut across the campus. The present was being disfigured, but we were challenging the past, unmasking political maneuvers, denouncing authority. The university no longer taught literature or sociology, but revolution and counterrevolution and even counter-counterrevolution, of the Right or the Left or in between. The students no longer knew how to reconstruct a sentence, formulate a thought, and were proud of it. If a professor happened to voice his displeasure, he was boycotted, treated disrespectfully. Perhaps even told to go back to his scholarly works, his archaic ideas. Next time, he better make sure to be born [00:48:00] into another society, another era.

It would be foolish to deny the influence Lisa had on me, says my hero. She was Rosa Luxemburg, the Pasionaria, my own Joan of Arc. She was leading the masses to the barricades. Watching her in action, I loved her even more. I dimly felt that this movement of revolt she had made her own brought me closer to my father's memory. To the victims' dead memories. It wasn't clear in my mind. I wasn't able to think it through. But I

didn't care. I thought, so what? I'll think about it some other time. Indeed, other priorities had emerged. The March on Washington, the demonstration in front of the White House, and Lisa, Lisa, my number one priority. I loved Lisa. And Lisa loved political strife. The typical modern couple. It was Lisa, too, who introduced me to acid [00:49:00] and I tried to describe, not firsthand, a trip.

At one point, my hero discovers that his father did not really kill, and he decides to go to Germany. In the train, he meets another German woman who talks to him and he doesn't listen. She speaks German. And at one point, they discuss in English about the situation in the world, and anyway, she says, this German woman says, "It has nothing to do with me. I was born later." And my young hero thinks, so was I, and I regret it. What an idea, to be born later. If the writings of the ancients tell the truth, it is God himself who decides the destiny of every soul. If it is He himself who inserts each one individually, carefully into [00:50:00] human time, he has done a poor job with me.

Born after the war, I endured its effects. The children of survivors are almost as traumatized as the survivors themselves. I suffer from an event I have not even experienced. A feeling

of void. From a past that has made history tremble, I have retained only words. War. War, for me, is my mother's closed faces. War for me is my father's weariness. Of course, I have read countless books on the subject, novels in which everything rings false. Essays that are all pretentiousness, films in which facts are embellished and painted and commercialized. None has anything in common with the experiences survivors carry within. (coughs) [00:51:00] War for me is my brother, Ariel, whom I have not known, whom I yearn to know. A false death. A false life. Take your choice.

My heroes in the book of course are Jewish, are always Jewish. My priorities are Jewish, but not exclusively Jewish. Perhaps this is a time to state it once more that belonging to a traumatized generation, I am concerned first, first, with whatever is happening to and with the Jewish people. Israel is in danger, Israel needs us, we should respond to Israel's needs. Russian Jews need us; we must forget almost everything, not forget, but at least put them aside, and help Russian Jews. And they do help us now, more than ever. The reports that we receive from there are frightening. Religious persecutions as in the Middle Ages. [00:52:00] For possessing a mezuzah, people go to jail. For studying, they go to jail, just like in the time of Rabbi Haninah. And they look to us. And I'm desperate,

because the movement is going down. The movement of solidarity with Soviet Jewry is no longer what it used to be, and they know it. Somehow, I don't know why, but somehow, we care less and that is wrong.

But in caring for the Jewish people, that does not mean that we should not involve ourselves with other communities and other tragedies and other concerns. The boat people, the Biafra, the Cambodian refugees, and now Ethiopia. And yes, I plan to go there on a journey to see. Last January, after I left here, I learned about a tribe in [00:53:00] Honduras, Nicaragua, and I had never heard of it before. The tribe was the Miskito, the Miskito Indians. And I was told that these Miskito Indians are suffering, that they are persecuted. And so, I decided, why not. If I can help, let me go and help. Little did I know that it's not easy. Not it's not easy to help, that surely is not easy. But it's not easy to go there.

First, you have to go to a place called Tegucigalpa, which is the capitol of Honduras. Not only is it difficult to reach, it's difficult to pronounce. (laughter) And going there, you must go to Miami. Miami to Tegucigalpa, and you think that there, you meet them. You don't. From there, a small plane, it was a plane -- I have already taken some small planes in my

life, but this one was even smaller. I thought [00:54:00] of saying the Birkat Hagomel not before or after, but during. And leaving the capitol in this little plane over the mountains, I didn't even tell my son and my wife how dangerous it was, because I didn't want them to know how dangerous it was. And then, finally, you thought, I am there in the jungle. No, you should imagine me in the jungle. (laughter) I am not the type. The food that I don't eat, the waters one shouldn't drink, I am really not the type. You need to be a sportsman for it, not me. Can you believe it, that to go and meet the Miskito Indians, I had to go in a canoe for five hours, back and forth? I cannot even swim.

But I had to go. I felt one has to go, because people there are suffering, and these Miskito [00:55:00] Indians were suffering and I didn't even know anything about what was happening to them. The Sandinistas wanted to clear the border towns, so therefore -- for military reasons, they said -- so therefore, they displaced the Miskitos, and the Miskitos became tools in the hands of two camps. And who suffered? The Miskitos. I tried to help, I'm not sure I did. There are so many tragedies in the world. Forty wars are being waged. Forty today. Thousands and thousands of people are being killed weekly. Hundreds and thousands of children have died of starvation.

Iran is using children to clear minefields. Iraq is using poison gas against the Iranians. Can you imagine if Iraq had managed to produce a nuclear bomb, [00:56:00] if Israel had not bombed that reactor? They would have used it not even against Israel, against Iran.

There is something in this century, something of this generation, which is frightening. The French writer and philosopher Jean Rostand said, "Kill a man and you are a murderer. Kill a million men and you are a conqueror. Kill all men and you are a god." And perhaps this is what motivated many rulers in this century. Not only the Genghis Khans, but the Hitlers, the Stalins. They wanted to become Gods. And in truth, if you read the literature dedicated to them, the literature is a divine literature. The poetry, the litanies, all dedicated to the divinity of Stalin, to the greatness of Stalin. I am ashamed to tell you that even the Jewish communist writers wrote that way. They wrote about Stalin as though [00:57:00] Stalin had been a god. And maybe Stalin wanted to become a god, and therefore he began killing, and killed millions. And this is perhaps what Pol Pot wanted to do in Cambodia. When his children, he had educated children to become killers, I have seen them. And this is what hurt me most, probably, to see those children that had killed probably three

million Cambodians. And may God save us, Pol Pot is still represented in the United Nations. And our government is still recognizing him.

And naturally, how can one not speak about the nuclear menace? Which is here, we must. Last year, again after the Y, after our meetings here, there [00:58:00] was a movie on television, *The Day After*. And there too, television is not my place. Like the jungle, it is a jungle. However, I was persuaded and I accepted, why not. I didn't want to go there because I knew I would be out of place; I don't know anything about the subject. I know nothing about politics, I know nothing about science, nothing about strategy, nothing about bombs, about nuclear bombs. I don't know. So, I told Ted Koppel, I said, "Listen, I really don't know anything." He said, "That's why we want you, because you don't know anything." (laughter) And probably, in the field of not knowing, I was the best qualified. He wanted me there because he thought I would be speaking as a humanist, and one of the most beautiful comments I received later, afterwards, from a young student, was that I was the token human on the program. (laughter) [00:59:00] (applause)

There was something frightening there. I was not frightened so much by the film as by the debate. No, at the debate, some of

you may have watched it -- why should you -- but if you did, you may remember -- why should you -- but then if you do, why not?

(laughter) At one point, when everybody had spoken already, all the specialists had spoken, I said, Ted asked me, "What is your impression of all this?" I said, "I have a strange feeling that the whole world became Jewish." And there was a reaction there, you know, among some panel members there. Who didn't -- instant conversion, right away. (laughter) What did I really mean by that? What I meant was that (pauses) for two thousand years, we, the Jewish people, lived [01:00:00] in constant upheavals, going from exile to exile, from uncertainty to uncertainty. We lived in constant uncertainty.

For two thousand years, we the Jews lived always, forever, on the threshold of the unknown. We went from one country to another. From one society to another. And we always waited for the door to open and if it did open, we didn't know who we will find there. It was the unknown. For two thousand years, we Jews lived always depending on someone else's whim. A king got up in the morning and felt like it, so he could decide either to give us more rights or less rights. A ruler got up in the morning or the evening, if he slept all day, he could decide to expel or not. Or to invite us in. We were objects of history, [01:01:00] rather than subjects of history. And we were always

dependent on others. And now, the whole world lives in constant uncertainty. On the threshold of the unknown. Depending on the whim of a ruler somewhere. Can anyone guarantee that one day, maybe in our own lifetime, before the century ends, one day, a small nation -- like Iran, which is not a small nation -- may get atomic weapons. Or Gaddafi. Can anyone guarantee that a Gaddafi would not use it? A Khomeini wouldn't use it today?

However, that's not all. As Jews, we have also learned the art of survival. How did Rabbi Haninah put it? *Megilim nisrafim*, oh yes, the parchments were burning. The scrolls are burning. But something remains. [01:02:00] Oh yes, we have lost a lot. A lot of people. A lot of communities. A lot of Kozhnitzers. But something remained. After all, remember, all the people of antiquity died with antiquity. And the only one that managed to remain, although it had lived during the antiquity, was the Jewish people. Why? Why? I know this question has preoccupied many people. Has obsessed many of us. I don't know the real answer, but there are many answers. Some of them are good. I believe we were not the only people that was chased out of its land. Others have been expelled from their homelands. But we were the only people that when we left our homeland two thousand [01:03:00] years ago, we did not take with us our treasures. We took with us only a book. Laws. Memories. Stories. Torah,

the Talmud. And what we have done with these books, what we have done with study, is what kept us -- in other words, we may teach the art of morality, for without it, survival would be meaningless.

Three weeks ago, speaking of Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion, I said, I quoted Talmudic masters that sought to link his martyrdom and that of his family to sins they must have committed. And I quoted then the Talmud saying, "*eyn mita b'lo chet*, no death is unconnected to sin." [01:04:00] I confess, I have problems with that. I belong to a generation that knows how meaningless some tragedies can be. The killing of young idealists or rebels or soldiers or Jews, victims, cannot be motivated, cannot be justified, simply by saying that they had transgressed a sin. I do not believe that. I do not believe that the murder of one million children during the war had anything to do with their committing sins. Now, how does one explain, then, the Talmudic passage, and how does one reconcile it with reality? The unyielding religious thinker says that *eyn mita b'lo chet*, [01:05:00] there is no death without sin. Says the religious philosopher, this is related not necessarily to the victim, but to others as well. Which means *eyn mita b'lot chet* may mean if they died, it's because of someone else's sin. Some people sinned, and children were made to pay the price. And this

position may be more plausible. I find it hard to accept as well, for no sin could warrant such punishment. But then, what is the answer? Whatever the answer, it is the wrong answer.

Now, we have met here for four evenings this year, and we have studied. And we have studied the Bible, we have studied the Talmud, we have studied Hasidism, and we have tried to see how all of their energies, all of their creative [01:06:00] imagination, have been channeled into modern vocabulary, into our own commitment to study. A great philosopher Miguel de Unamuno used to say that a temple is a place where people come to weep together. Not so in our tradition. In our tradition, a temple is where people come to sing together, study together, meditate together, and dream together, and pray together. In our tradition, what people do together is they dream of the past, of the future, and because of the past, they try to build a future. And if they are together, they have a chance. If not, they have no chance. If the Jewish people is united, we have a good chance. If the Jewish people is not united, we are in danger. The Talmud says, why has God [01:07:00] punished the generation of the floods with the floods, but not the generation of the Tower of Babel? Because, says the Talmud, the Tower of Babel was built by people who wanted to be together. That's what they said in the Bible. Let us together build a tower, and

the Talmud says, if there was such a community, they couldn't be that bad.

I believe, therefore, that these times are going to be difficult. Difficult because it's 1984 and although *tav shin mem dalet* is finished, but other years, other years may bring new dangers. Antisemitism is on the rise. Violence is on the rise. Fanaticism is on the rise. And what worries me a lot is those fanatics who use mystical or [01:08:00] pseudo-mystical numerology for their own political purposes. What do I mean by that? I'm sure you know what I mean. The *New York Times* has published an article a few weeks ago on a Sunday that some fundamentalist fanatics have found in Scripture that these are the eschatological times and there will be a situation in which all Jews will be brought to Israel, and then a nuclear war will break out. And there will be many people killed, but -- all the Jews will also be killed -- and only some will remain, for one purpose. What is the purpose? To convert and recognize Jesus. How one can even refute such stupidity, I don't know. But I know one thing. That now I know why [01:09:00] the Talmud has warned us against what we call *khishuvei ha'kaytz*. Not to go into looking for numbers and signs about the coming of the end of times. If we don't do it, they shouldn't do it either. I am

frightened because they do. And they speak about it openly.
And they are in the millions.

Now, what is our answer? Study. And more study. And one of
the fascinating aspects of study is that it continuously
enriches and deepens our collective memory. When we study, then
Ezekiel and Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion and the Maggid of
Kozhnitz meet somewhere. Maybe they meet in our memory.

[01:10:00] And then, they talk not only to us, but also to each
other. And at times, I say to myself, if only we could
inobtrusively, quietly, discretely, listen in to what they are
saying. If only we could. Why not? Perhaps next year.

(laughter) (applause)

M:

Thanks for listening. [01:11:00] For more information on 92nd
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