

1996 11 07 Elie Wiesel Tales of Today -Words of  
Remorse and Hope 92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive

Elie Wiesel:

Well, as you imagine, tonight is a special night. And therefore there are many surprises. Since it's the thirtieth anniversary it's a kind of recapitulation of things that I have already done here or before. "In the beginning there was belief, senseless belief, and faith, empty faith and illusion, dangerous illusion. We believed in God, had faith in man, and lived with illusion that there is in every one of us, a sacred spark of the holy fire of the Shekhinah, that every one of us carries in his eyes and in his soul the image of God. And that was the source, if not the cause of all our misfortunes," unquote.

These words were written in Yiddish in 1954 as the opening of [00:01:00] *Un di velt hot geshvign*. The book was published in its original version exactly 40 years ago in Buenos Aires and ended as follows: "I looked at myself in the mirror. A skeleton stared back at me. Nothing but skin and bone, I was the image of myself after death. It was at that instant the will to live awakened within me. Without knowing why I raised my fist and shattered the glass along with the image it held. I lost consciousness. After I got better, I stayed in bed for several

days jotting down notes for the work that you, the reader, now hold in your hands.

"But today, 10 years after Buchenwald I realize that the world forgets. Germany's a sovereign state. The German army has reborn. Ilse Koch, the sadist of Buchenwald, is a happy wife and mother. [00:02:00] War criminals stroll in the streets of Hamburg and Munich. The past has been erased, buried. Germans and anti-Semites tell the world that the story of six million Jewish victims is but a myth. And the world, in its naivety, will believe it, if not today then tomorrow or the next day. So it occurred to me that it might be useful to publish in book form these notes taken down about Buchenwald.

"I am not so naïve as to believe that this work will change the course of history or shake the conscience of humanity. Books no longer command the power they once did. Those who yesterday held their tongues will keep their silence tomorrow. That is why 10 years after Buchenwald I ask myself the question, was it right to break that mirror?" Again, these words were written 10 years after and published in 1956. Words of remorse.

[00:03:00] Was the witness wrong in offering his testimony to anonymous readers?

Piotr Rawicz, a great French Jewish writer of Polish origin, said that when he finished his first novel, one of the greatest, really, of the post-war years, he felt the taste of ashes in his mouth. He later committed suicide. Could man live without words, without language, without any possibility of communicating his despair or joy with silence alone? Wouldn't he then become a prisoner of his own memory? Where then would his hope to be found? Is there hope for someone deprived of language?

These questions must preoccupy writers and readers alike. They need one another as teachers need pupils to find fulfillment in their work. Silence may be a valid option for mystics and poets alone, not for witnesses. They must testify. That is their role, and that is their destiny. But then for some, with regard to [00:04:00] the unique experience of at least one generation, a question remains: since silence is forbidden and talk impossible, where does our duty lie? This question, which dominates much of my own writing, has accompanied many of our encounters in this hall for so many years.

Quoting ancient philosophers, my teacher and friend, HaRav Shaul Lieberman, zichrono livracha, often said it takes three years to learn to talk and 70 to keep quiet. (laughter) What was the

purpose of our encounters here? To study together the texts that generations of scholars and spiritual leaders have left us throughout the generations. And if I succeeded in communicating here a bit of my all-consuming passion for learning, *dayenu*. I always believed in learning. Since my childhood, [00:05:00] my adolescence, and even later, it never stopped. And what I have done here, what I have tried to do here for 30 years, is precisely that, to give you that passion and share it with you and take it from you so that together our study would create more passion and more study.

Later we shall evoke what we learn this year in the field of biblical study, Talmudic issues, and Hasidic tales. We have always done it. We have always done it at the fourth encounter is a kind of recapitulation of the three previous ones to show what I have learned from others. I am not innovating. I am only receiving and sharing with you what I received from others from our predecessors. But this is a special evening, and allow me to say, therefore how much I owe the Y and its leaders. I met you, [00:06:00] Bronfman and Lisa, our good friends, Sol Adler, who was the overall director and the organizer, the administrator of this enterprise.

A young colleague, learned, erudite, educated, and very passionate, Rabbi David Woznica, their assistants, they made me feel at home here. I can do what I want, say what I want, and even what they don't want. (laughter) I would like to thank a young mother here and an exceptional editor, Eileen Smith. And of course how can I not mention a young, wise, yet intrepid man from whom I'm learning more than I'm ready to admit, my son Elisha and his always beautiful and gracious mother, my wife Marion, who is part of all my endeavors and all my dreams.

[00:07:00] Now, since this is the last of this thirtieth year series I describe actually more about what happened to me after I got married. If you want to know more about her and about my son you will wait until the next volume is published. It came out in Paris, but wait a year until Marion translates it.

When I came here for the first time 30 years ago there were two lecturers on the program, the novelist Jean Shepherd read first from her work in progress, and those who came to applaud her were the majority. And they left after intermission. And I was left with a few friends. And I felt, what a pity. I shouldn't have accepted the invitation. In order to think positively and give myself courage I counted a few friends that made the half empty hall look even larger and emptier. And I thought

[00:08:00] I will not be invited again. Well, that too shall

pass. I remember I entered the stage. I sat down in this very chair. I was supposed to say something, so I read a page from *The Jews of Silence* in French.

Were there French speaking listeners in this audience?

(laughter) What a difference I felt. They would not stay to the end anyway. At least they will have a good excuse for leaving. Then I read a passage from *The Town Beyond the Wall* with improvised commentaries. The audience suffered, so did I. And I wondered, well, when would this torment come to an end? I was eager to finish and get over with. In order to illustrate my taste for silence I told of Beethoven of whom it is said that he composed not only his symphonies but also the silence that followed them. [00:09:00] So I left the stage, for good it thought. And I here I am 30 years later.

In the same volume, which you will read next year, I'm telling of my first lecture, the real lecture, the first paid lecture I ever got. It was after I published *Night, Un di Velt Hot Geshvign* was published later as *La Nuit* in France in '58 and here as *Night* in 1960. And I got a telephone call from a very beautiful voice saying we would like you to come for a lecture on Long Island. She had such a beautiful voice, and at that time I was ready to fall in love with anyone, so I fell in love

with a voice. And she said we shall give you \$100, which for me then was half of my monthly salary, and come and lecture.

I said about what? About your book, she said. Of course we know your book. We love it. [00:10:00] And she said I represent a synagogue somewhere in Long Island, a women's club, men's club. And there will be 500 couples. I, as a student of the Sorbonne was very serious about lecturing. So I decided to prepare a good lecture, worked on it a few months, 30 pages.

(laughter) Everything I knew was there, you know. (laughter) Spinoza and Descartes and l'havdil Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon. After all, I have to speak or a thousand people, 500 women and 500 men. But I was so in love with the voice that it didn't matter.

As they sent a taxi for me, and in the taxi I asked myself, why did they invite me? There must be a case of mistaken identity. I was sure [00:11:00] they didn't mean me. And I decided on the spot to test them. And when I came I met the woman, a beautiful woman, a beautiful voice, I met her husband. (laughter) And they brought me in the hall of that synagogue, and on the days she introduced me, beautifully, you know, only as in America you can hear such introductions. Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky were peanuts. (laughter)

And she said of course you remember, you know, she said, you know we all love your book, and we read it, and we loved it, we adore it. And I invented a new story for it just to see what will happen. And while I was talking I invented a story, it happened in the nineteenth century. Nineteenth century in Paris a young girl fell in love with a boy, and she had a Catholic education, and he wasn't, [00:12:00] and they were in trouble, and they were going to commit suicide. And the question in the book was, I said, should she commit suicide? I spoke, and I was convinced at one point somebody will say, but sir, this is not the book we read. Nobody. (laughter)

So I said to myself, maybe, who knows, maybe they are so timid, you know, they are so respectful that afterwards there will be question and answer period. And somebody will get up. There was a question and answer period. And they all asked me questions about the story I just told. (laughter) Why didn't she commit suicide? And so forth. By that time I forgot what I wanted to say. Somehow I got out of it. And big applause. That's why there are no questions and answers here, as you can imagine. (laughter)



Then she invited me to [00:13:00] the study of the rabbi there to give me the \$100. And I said, lady, I must tell you a story. It's a Hasidic story. And she was respectful and nice. She said please. And I said the story, I'm sure you know it, is about a rebbe who was invited by his Hasid to come into the next village for the circumcision. He was offered to be the sandek, the godfather. So how can he say no? Cannot say not to a bris. So he went. He found the only coachman in town, and the coachman had one *fi'ecke* and with a very, very old horse. So as they left the village they came to a hill.

So the coachman left his place and began pushing. The rebbe saw that the coachman was pushing. How can he be inside when a Jew is pushing? And so he also left, and he also pushed, and they were pushing and pushing and pushing until they arrived to the next village. [00:14:00] When they came to the next place the rebbe said to the coachman, look, I understand why I am here. I was invited for the bris. I understand why you are here. Because you needed the money, but why did you bring the horse?  
(laughter)

Well, I'm telling this story and many other stories in the next volume, but 30 years ago when I spoke the doors were locked from inside to prevent people from leaving. (laughter) Tonight they

are locked to prevent others from entering. And both cases were unfair. This is the hundred twentieth lecture I'm giving here, which means I had to invent 120 formula how to open the door.

(laughter) (applause)

[00:14:55 - 00:16:51] (pause)

Well, what have we learned in this year's session? [00:17:00]  
From Hasidic sources we learned the necessity of creating joy where there is none. That has been a constant advice given us by Jewish tradition. In no other language are there so many words to describe joy as there are in Hebrew. Every bride and every groom heard them if they were capable of hearing, what the Sheva Brachot, one of the seven blessings, benedictions contains gila, vina, ditza, chedva, sasson, and simcha. Why so many? Because joy has many sources and many faces. All are needed to endow Jewish life, which is by definition fragile and tenuous and at the same time so personal and irreplaceable.

From biblical [00:18:00] texts we have learned that God has chosen to enter history and allow man to shape it, and also that one is allowed to question his justice and even his compassion, but not his essence. In other words, throughout Jewish religious history God's existence has never been challenged,

only his occasional love and fairness. Jewish atheism is a modern concept. There is no Hebrew word for it. Epikoros is not Hebrew. The Greek word is Epicurus. The Rizhiner Rebbe used to say those who refuse to believe in God, God really doesn't care that much. Says all right. You don't want to believe in me, it's okay. But I won't give you a word for it. (laughter) [00:19:00]

Even Elisha ben Abuyah, nickname, Acher, the other, never denied God being God. He rebelled simply against his not obeying his own law and against being unjust, especially towards those who serve him by studying and teaching his law. In *All the Rivers Run to the Sea* I try to communicate my own position with regard to faith. And I say that there is a passage in *Night* recounting the hanging of a young Jewish boy. It has given rise to an interpretation bordering on blasphemy. Theorists of the idea that, quote, "God is *kavyachol*, is dead," have used my words unfairly as justification of their rejection of faith.

But if Nietzsche could cry out to the old man in the forest that God *kavyachol*, is dead, the Jew in me cannot. I have never denounced my faith in God. I have risen against his justice, [00:20:00] protested his silence, and sometimes his absence, but my anger rises up within faith and not outside it. I admit that

this is hardly an original position. It is part of Jewish tradition, but in these matters I have never sought originality. On the contrary, I have always aspired to follow in the footsteps of my father and those who went before him. Moreover, the text, the texts cite many occasions when prophets and sages rebelled against the lack of divine interference in human affairs during times of persecution.

Avraham and Moses, Jeremiah and Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev teach us that it is permissible for man to accuse God provided it be done in the name of faith in God. If that hurts, so be it. Sometimes we must accept the pain of faith so as not to lose it. And if that makes the tragedy of the believer more devastating [00:21:00] than that of the nonbeliever, so be it. To proclaim one's faith within the barbed wire of Auschwitz may well represent a double tragedy of the believer and his Creator alike.

What have we learned from Talmudic explorations? We have learned the exquisite beauty of Talmudic dialogue and its intrinsic emphasis on tolerance. When the schools of Shammai and Hillel disagreed on a certain subject a heavenly voice was heard saying *eileh v'eileh divrei Elokim chayim*, meaning both sides are right. Which reminds us, of course, of a Shalom

Aleichem story about a rabbinic judge, a *dayan*, who listened to a plaintiff and was so taken by his argument about the poverty of his family that he told him, of course you are right.

"What?" yelled the other plaintiff. "How can you say that, Rebbe?"

And he told him of his [00:22:00] family troubles, a sick child, a lost child, a sick father, And so in an outburst of pity, the *dayan* said, "You are right too." And the Rebbetzin was present at the hearing couldn't repress her astonishment. "How can both be right?" she said. Her husband looked at her and sighed, "You know what? You are also right." But how is that possible in the case of Shammai and Hillel? If both are right doesn't it mean that both are wrong? No, it does not. If both are wrong both might inspire disrespect.

The opposite is true since both are right and quote, "Their words being the living words of God, *eileh v'eileh divrei Elokim chayim*, they all deserve respect." Isn't that the noble significance of tolerance, that the other side deserves respect, [00:23:00] that the other side may be right, that the other side too may say my words are the words, the living words of God?

Tolerance is nowadays needed more than ever before. Fanaticism is growing in every religion, in every political sector, in every ethnic community. Extremism, integralism, fundamentalism, prejudice, bigotry, hatred has rarely progressed so fast so far. It has never been more dangerous. What have we done here for 30 years when we study the Talmud together if not mobilizing ideas and memories so as to combat its dark forces? Who is a fanatic? What makes one a fanatic? How does one become a fanatic? In other words, what is fanaticism? It is rooted in excess, excessive allegiance to one's ideal blinds us to other ideals.

Excessive love for one person inundates [00:24:00] us with jealousy. Excessive loyalty to a country may generate chauvinism. A religion turns aggressive when it yields to absolutist trends. A nation is threatening when it decides to dominate through the use of force its neighbor's right to exist in security and happiness and freedom. In the beginning communism was particularly from the social viewpoint of quasi-prophetic inspiration. It went astray on the path of ideological corruption and totalitarian temptation only when it chose fanaticism as an easy and efficient self-defense mechanism.

So racial conflicts, religious animosity, ethnic hostilities, what they all have in common is the fanatic's faith in the moral power of his or her superiority on one side and on the other the moral superiority of his physical power. Violent in its essence, fanaticism is pernicious [00:25:00] and surreptitious. Practicing censorship and exclusionary tactics, the fanatic sees in the other a tool which he will try first to break and then to manipulate and then to humiliate and make the other into a lifeless, faceless object.

Fanaticism is a human disease since the origins of recorded history. Its course can be altered or stopped by human beings alone. Human beings alone are capable of generating it. For they alone are guilty of hatred, of which fanaticism is an indispensable component. Human beings alone may draw its limits, measure its depth, and eventually remove it from their hearts. That fanaticism is a topic theme is clear. We have seen it. We see it. We see it in so many places. We see it in Algeria. We see it [00:26:00] in the former Eastern Bloc where the Pamyat and Zhirinovsky and so many others are still anti-Semitic or racists.

We see it in Rwanda. We saw it in Bosnia. We see it everywhere. Yet the last decade of this turbulent century,

which is also the last decade of the millennium, began rather well. A contagious current of human freedom, orders for freedom, and national liberation ran through countries and continents carrying hope to the hopeless. Glasnost and Perestroika in the Soviet Union, Václav Havel's victory in Czechoslovakia, the courage of the students in Beijing, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the astonishing triumphs of the intellectuals in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and even Albania, the end of dictatorships in Latin America, faced with such an exhilaration of events one had the impression that history was out to purge itself of its nocturnal demons [00:27:00] that had cast a long shadow on what Hannah Arendt called the most violent century ever.

And all of a sudden one progressed towards the twenty-first century with heads high, more confident seeing in destiny an accomplice, an ally rather than a resolute and implacable enemy. But then came the purple dawn of awakening, the bloody repression in Beijing which is still continuing. And then anti-Semitism in Poland, Romania, Hungary, the banalization, the trivialization of Jewish memory on both sides of what used to be the Iron Curtain, the successes of ethnical and social racism in France with Le Pen, in Great Britain, in Belgium, in Austria where Haider got 28 percent of the vote. The miracle lasted but



one summer, it too a victim of fanaticism on an international scale.

I hope, of course, I'll be [00:28:00] forgiven if I elaborate on the issue of anti-Semitism. It is, after all, the oldest group prejudice in history. An anti-Semite is by definition a fanatic. He believes that the Jew is everywhere, always endowed with incommensurate occult powers. He hates the Jew because he thinks the Jew is powerful. He despises him when he is not. In antiquity already Jews had aroused the kind of hate that paid no attention to its contradictory motives. Apion the Greek disliked them, according to Josephus Flavius. He disliked them for belonging to a tribe of lepers, capable and intent of contaminating and hurting their environment.

In other words, he would have preferred them to live outside society away from other people. On the other hand Tacitus the Latin is angry at them for doing precisely that, for, quote, "Being obstinately attached to one another, their mutual attachment being a contrast to the total hatred they show to the rest of the man. [00:29:00] They never eat with a stranger," said he, "nor do they marry non-Jewish women." To be more precise, Tacitus blames the Jews for removing themselves from

their surrounding cultures and groups. How can a Jew dwell at the same time separate from and close to others?

The anti-Semite hates the Jew for what he is and for what he is not. He hates the Jew for being too rich and too poor, too nationalistic and too cosmopolitan, too religious and not religious enough, too universalist and not enough. Look at Marx. Proudhon was his opponent. None of their views could ever be reconciled. When the one published a pamphlet called *The Philosophy of Misery* the other responded with a booklet entitled *The Misery of Philosophy*. (laughter) Yet, when it came to hating and denigrating Jews the words of the one resonated in those of the other.

As far as Jews are concerned, the most intelligent and intellectual minds do not hesitate to become irrational.

[00:30:00] And of course today the worst are the revisionists. The word is too elegant. I would suggest another one: liars, swindlers, moral perverts. If once upon a time anti-Semites were envious of the Jewish people's wealth or position, these anti-Semites are envious of its suffering, and thus they say Jews are not the only ones to have suffered. Then they add others have actually suffered more than the Jews. And finally they declare the truth is the Jews who made other people suffer.

And so we have -- we're witnessing recently a slander campaign being waged by some intellectuals against certain Jews whom they accuse of being Judeocentrists, which means only concerned with Jews, and we are being urged not to raise our voices, not to emphasize the Jewishness of the Jewish victims, and in general to de-Judaize Jewish experiences and ideas.

Well, [00:31:00] what are we going to do with these liars? I suggest nothing. We should never grant them the dignity of a debate. We should never do what they want to do because of them. I wouldn't give them that much credit. I won't allow them to govern my life or my education or my work. If we do what we must do, study and teach and remember and share our memories, it's because we want to do it, because we must do it, not because of them but because of us.

But how does one fight fanaticism? How are we to trace its trajectory? What is its substance? To what degree is it tainted by nationalism? Is there a precise line beyond which a conviction is catapulted into fanaticism? If so, would fanaticism really apply to anything which is a bit excessive? Is anyone, man or woman, idealist or pragmatist, young or old, [00:32:00] believer or non-believer constantly in danger of

becoming a fanatic simply by not knowing how far one may go too far? Perhaps there are enough real fanatics around, and we have to cope with, but we must fight them.

We must conclude, therefore, at what fanaticism that the fanatic is an enemy, an enemy of civilization, an enemy of free people, an enemy of the Jewish people. The fanatic avoids true debates, the spirit of dialogue or exchange is alien to the fanatic. He would never submit to its texture, which is one of creative diversity and pluralism. For the fanatic humanity must forever remain split in anger between rulers and slaves, oppressors and oppressed. Convinced that he does not need to wage a battle to win, the fanatic thinks he vanquished his opponent without opening his mouth.

That's [00:33:00] how the fanatic thinks. What the other side may say or believe in is of no meaning to him, and therefore to him a dialogue is an aberration, a useless exercise in niceties and futilities interpreted by him as weakness. The fanatic's discourse is essentially monolithic, locked from within, rejecting any trace of doubt or hesitation, hostile to possible outside influences. All the fanatic knows is to pronounce edicts. He loves monologues. He loves to listen to himself but not to anyone else. He hears and sees himself alone. Satisfied

with himself he dwells in a reductionist universe where he lives alone with himself. He remains the soul object of his only passion.

We have seen, therefore, that fanatics are dangerous. They [00:34:00] may become even more dangerous because the fanatic sees himself ultimately as God. Like him, he wants to be made in his image but in miniature. He wants the whole world to be like him but smaller, below his throne. His vanity blinds him. He is unable to perceive his own limitations. Dominating others, he repudiates the law that protects them. Persuaded that he's the sole possessor of truth, he kills the other so as not to be challenged by the other's own truth. Fanaticism is always destructive.

What then is the answer? Years ago I was convinced that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. But this equation may not be turned around. It cannot be applied to hate or to fanaticism. The opposite of hate is not love, but nor is it indifference. [00:35:00] The opposite of hate is more hate. Once there is hate it stops all extraneous intrusion. Nothing great, nothing good, nothing creative can be drawn or bequeathed from hate. Hate cannot be transcended, and that's how it is, and one cannot do anything about it. Hate feeds hate, nothing

else. How then are we to fight it? By preventing it, by preventing it in time. How could this be done? By correctly interpreting its signals. The signals are to be found in fanaticism.

Whenever fanaticism appears on the horizon may be sure that hate will follow. There is a small frontier between the two. That is our battlefield. What is the remedy? In learning. Education. I know of no other way except education. If there is an answer, education is its [00:36:00] major and principal component. But not everybody's ready to accept this. The fight for memory is weakening. Information has replaced knowledge. Tomorrow will make the fifty-eighth anniversary of the Kristallnacht. Who remembers the burning of hundreds of synagogues, the ransacking of Jewish centers and shops by frenzied mobs in Germany?

If we forget the Kristallnacht how many more events will be forgotten? Another episode. Sad. It's a sad story that takes place in Poland even today. When several years ago many people spoke up against the presence of a convent in Auschwitz it took the intervention of the pope himself to move the convent to another site. But then some three years ago a few friends and myself, [00:37:00] with my son, we discovered 10 or 12 huge

crosses in Birkenau. They were placed there some 12 years ago by young people, and they meant well probably. But no one, not even the Jewish world, and not in the organized survivor communities, no one raised his or her voice in protest.

Last July I accepted an invitation from the Polish prime minister to attend a ceremony in Kielce commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the bloody massacre that took place there in '46. And this is what I said, "How could they?" I addressed myself to the prime minister and to the government and the people of Kielce. How could they? That question has haunted me for decades. How could citizens, the ordinary citizens [00:38:00] of this seemingly peaceful town commit such heinous crimes, commit them in broad daylight? How could soldiers and policemen allow it to happen?

How could the forces of law and order permit the maiming and butchering of the last remnants of an orphan Jewish community in mourning after having survived in a universe of fear and agony? To pronounce the name Kielce and the next word that comes to your mind and lips is pogrom. True, the killing was perpetrated by hoodlums, but what about the soldiers who took part in them? And what about the others, the onlookers, the bystanders? And where were the solid citizens of the town? How many of them

even tried to stop the massacre? For years some have wondered whether it was possible for the Jew to die in Auschwitz after Auschwitz. Kielce gave us the answer.

"The vicious pogrom with 42 innocent Jewish victims we commemorate today," I said on July 4, "was the answer. What happened in this place [00:39:00] demonstrated that it was possible. What happened in this place showed that normal citizens could be as cruel as the killers of any death camp. If violent pre-war anti-Semitism paved the way for the Holocaust the Kielce pogrom confirmed its purpose. Hence the feelings of frustration, bitterness, dismay and anger that overcame good, compassionate people everywhere. In 1945, after the nightmare had ended, we thought that anti-Semitism has perished in Auschwitz together with its victims.

Kielce proved how wrong we were. Jews had died. Anti-Semitism had not. Hence my despair and that of every Jew. If Auschwitz did not cure this land of anti-Semitism, what could? Auschwitz, Majdanek, Treblinka, Belzec, Chelmno, and Oświęcim were German inventions. Kielce was not. Kielce's murderers were Poles. Their language was Polish. Their hatred was Polish. "I do not believe in [00:40:00] collective guilt, Mr. Prime Minister," I said to him. "In your land, as in every land, there are good



people to which I will always be grateful and bad people who brought pain to Jews and shame to Poles.”

As everywhere else in Poland too there are kind hearted and brutal people, generous and murderous people. How was it possible that the huge, frenzied mob was inspired and allowed to kill and go on killing Jews for an entire day? I find it difficult to believe the many articles in American newspapers which reported there are today many inhabitants of Kielce who denied the unspeakable crime that was committed against Jews here, that there are in this town men and women to whom this solemn ceremony means nothing. Today, Mr. Prime Minister, we ask you as we ask yourself, where is hope to be found? As a member of the human family and a son of the Jewish people I want to know, will the Kielce of today acknowledge and remember the Kielce of yesterday?”

I said that the history of the polish people is filled with [00:41:00] suffering and glory. Be worthy of that history, citizens of Poland. And face the recent past, which is also yours. To forget is to choose dishonor, honor without memory is inconceivable. And I turn to the prime minister, and I said, “Your conduct reassures us. We know your role in the planning of this commemoration. You understand our concerns. You are

sensitive to our anguish. You graciously pledged to me that you would personally handle the painful problem of the dozen or so crosses erected in Birkenau, the site of the largest invisible Jewish cemetery in history, a place where there should be no religious symbols.

"Birkenau is its own eloquent symbol. The chimneys, the ruins of the crematoria, nothing else should be there. And with all due respect to all religions and all believers, the presence of crosses on sacred soil covering multitudes of Jewish victims in Birkenau was and remains [00:42:00] an insult. Those Jewish victims, mostly from Hungary, who were gassed and incinerated there were among the most pious of the pious. My family was among them, my grandfather, my grandmother, uncles, aunts, cousins, my little sister. There can be no justification for placing crosses over their remains.

"Whoever did this may have been inspired by good intentions, but the result is a disaster, a blasphemy. And I feel certain that thanks to you, Mr. Prime Minister, out of respect for the dead the crosses will soon be removed. Such a gesture will be a positive step towards bringing Jews and Poles closer together. Perhaps in the future Kielce could then be remembered not only

as a town identified with cruelty but as a town capable of penitence and compassion and hope.”

I left right away. And next day there were -- or next week, [00:43:00] following weeks there were anti-Semitic articles in the Polish press, mainly against me. Well, I'm ready to accept that. What I don't accept is that it's still there. I cannot understand why we are quiet, why the Jewish people are quiet, why the Jewish leaders are quiet, and why again those who lead the organizations of survivors, I haven't heard a word from them. But there are good things too in our life, good things. Freedom is progressing, and joy is possible in many places. And we think of Israel with everything what is happening still, I believe that peace is possible, will be possible, will continue.

And since it is the three thousandth anniversary of Jerusalem, [00:44:00] may I read tonight a text that some of you have heard if you were here in 1967? When I came back then from the liberated Old City, and I was writing then a novel called *A Beggar in Jerusalem*. And I described my encounter with myself at the wall. "I am the eye that looks at the eye that is looking. I shall look so hard that I shall be blinded. So what? I shall sing. I shall sing with such force that I shall

go mad. So what? I shall dream. I shall dream that I am David, son of Sarah.

"I tell my mother what I have done with her tears and her prayers. I tell her what I have done with my years and my silences and my life. Why so late? I have no strength?

[00:45:00] I could not accept your absence, mother. If I have never written you it's because I have never left you. You were the one who went away, and ever since I see you going away, I see nothing else. For years now you have been leaving me, vanishing into the distance, swallowed by the black and silent tide. But the sky that drowned the fire cannot drown you. You are the fire. You are the sky.

"And this hand which is writing is stretched towards you, and this vision which haunts me is my offering to you. And the silence, it is on your lips, I find it and give it back.

Wandering beggar or prisoner, it's always your voice I seek to set free inside me. And each time I address myself to strangers I am speaking to you. So I contemplate the wall which bears my mother's face. Yes, she had two faces, my mother. One showed the daily sorrows from Sunday to Friday, the *vokherdike*. And the other reflected the serenity of Shabbat, [00:46:00] and now this is the only one she has left.

"The human throng presses towards the wall, nestles against it. I stand aside and look. In a flash I see from one end of the world to the other and further into my deepest self. I see all those who had stood there before me, bent with humility or touched with ecstasy. Here before this very wall kings and prophets, warriors and priests, poets and philosophers, rich and poor, all those who throughout the ages had pleaded everywhere for a little compassion, a little kindness, it was here they came to speak of kindness and compassion. Here in this place a sage of Israel once remarked, 'The stones are souls.'

"It is they who each day rebuild an invisible temple. Still, it is not here that I will find my mother's soul. The soul of my mother found shelter in fire and not in stone. And to think that her own dream had been to come here and pray and meditate and cry. [00:47:00] Well, I shall dream in her place. But an army chaplain who is approaching, Torah in hand like a bridegroom on his wedding day, where have I seen him before? Tears are streaming down his face as he recites a prayer and blows the shofar. And that old Hasid who comes running, where have I seen him before? Dressed in a black kaftan and black felt hat, his prayer shawl under his arm, he hurls himself against the wall as if to smash his head.

"Hypnotized by the stones he feels them, caresses them, and sobs inwardly without shedding a tear. For a moment I observe him as if he were a stone among the stones. Then I see soldiers lifting him up, tossing him into the air. Yelling, 'You must not weep. Not anymore. The time for lamentations is over. We must rejoice, old man. We must [00:48:00] cry our joy to the wall. It needs that joy, and so do we.' One circle is formed, then another. Everyone is dancing. And on a carpet of shoulders the old man is dancing too. He is not afraid of falling or of flying away.

"He's not afraid of anything, and neither are we. Someone breaks into song, and that song fills the square, the city, and the whole country. 'Louder. Louder,' the old man shouts, bouncing back each time with new vigor, greater frenzy. He is in ecstasy, and so are we. Someone near me succumbs to tears. Someone is weeping, and it's not I. Someone is weeping, and it is I. And in my dream, through my tears, I see the old man lift his arms, trying to tear away a scrap of sky, an offering to those who sing [00:49:00] to those who make him tall and proud and invincible.

"I ought to be afraid. I know that. A miracle is too violent, the joy too intense. I cannot believe that it would last forever, but I also know that I am dreaming. I am at the top of a mountain. I trip over a pebble. I fall. I see the abyss growing darker as it approaches. Darker than the dark eye of the tempest. I am afraid. But fear itself is part of the dream. Let it continue. It is still early. The sun hangs seemingly motionless over the stones made sacred by man. A solemn melody of long ago soars over the city and flows down the valley of Josaphat.

"And yet my soul -- don't laugh -- my soul, my soul does not even feel the need or the desire to follow, not [00:50:00] even to escape that which endangers it. From afar I see the dancers set the old man down. They are exhausted. He is not.

Meanwhile, the crowd keeps getting larger. Military personnel and officials, celebrities and journalists, all are streaming by in one continuous procession along with rabbis and students gathered from all over the city, from every corner of the land. Men, women, adolescents of every age, every origin, speaking every language, and I see them ascending toward the wall, towards all that remains of their collective longing.

"Just like long ago at Sinai when they were given the Torah, just like a generation ago in the kingdom of night when it was taken back. Once again the exiles are being gathered in. The knot is being knotted. The end is rejoining the beginning. And justifying it. Here it is really man's image that is being transmitted. [00:51:00] And in order to receive it an entire people had begun to march for the third time in its history. It is always the same people. Its march is always the same. The setting too remains unchanged. The characters succeed each other with hallucinating speed like a series of superimposed pictures, each layer more ancient than the one above.

"Scholars, princes, rebels intermingling with rabbis dressed in black, soldiers in full battle gear, they are all there. I see the soldiers, their eyes, their arms laden with gifts and dreams begun eternities ago their marches, that of man determined to make their path and destiny their own. I look at them, and I'm afraid to look, afraid to discover myself among them. I'll pretend not to have seen. I look, and I cannot stop looking. A father lifts his son to his shoulders and tell him to open his eyes wide. A young couple in love holding hands quicken their step. [00:52:00] Two widows slow their down.



"I shake myself. I shake myself and let reality speak. But I don't want reality. I want Jerusalem. I want Jerusalem, and somber and severe, taller and straighter than in life an old man is conversing with a disciple who curiously resembles him. 'Do you know why Jerusalem was saved?' he asked. 'No,' said the disciple, 'Why?' And the old man said, 'Because this time the towns and the villages, large and small alike, by the hundreds and thousands of diaspora and in Israel rose up in its defense.' And to that the preacher was saying in a vibrant voice, 'The messenger who is alive today, the victor of today, would be wrong to forget the dead.'

"Israel defeated its enemies. Do you know why? I'll tell you. Israel won because this time in '67 [00:53:00] its army, its people could deploy six million more names in battle. Today Jerusalem is still here. And we are part of it. And the melody of our melodies, the most beautiful of all, is about Jerusalem because even if we don't live in Jerusalem, Jerusalem lives in us and will live so forever."

Baal HaTanya, the author of the Tanya, the founder of Chabad, once said that when there are questions and you cannot answer them, it's easy. Don't. Simply sing a few songs. I have asked here, I have raised here for the last 30 years many, many

questions. All remained open. I have no answers. With each answer I have a new question, and that too is part of Talmudic study. [00:54:00] So tonight as parting gifts I will give you two melodies. Just as certain stories need to be remembered there are songs that deserve to be redeemed. Nostalgic songs of my childhood, beautiful songs that as a child I learned at the court at the Vizhnitzer Rebbe, z"l, in Grosswardein, or from my grandfather Reb Dodye in his village in Bichkev.

Some were almost forgotten, even by me. And when I remembered them I offered them to a friend, the foremost Jewish choir conductor in America, maybe outside of America too, Matthew Lazar. Maybe some of you remember that 10 years ago for the twentieth anniversary of our encounters we sang Ani Ma'amin here together. But there is another one, and that one was also forgotten, but I remembered it recently, so again I shared it with Matthew Lazar. That one is a very beautiful song. It speaks of hope against hope [00:55:00] of renewed joy drawn from ancient melancholy. And the words are *shebshifleinu zachar lanu ki l'olam chasdo*, which means for he had remembered us in our humiliation, and delivered us from our enemies, *ki l'olam chasdo*, for his grace is everlasting.

I learned that song in Vizhnitz. And since at least once a year the Y becomes Vizhnitz I will sing it for you:

*shebshifleinu zachar lanu ki l'olam chasdo*  
*vayifrikainu mitzareinu ki l'olam chasdo*

[00:55:32 - 00:59:05]

So you see, if I stop writing. . . (applause) (laughs) Thank you.

So I decided when I stop writing I will join the choir and -- (laughs) and write about the choir. (applause) And to finish this, really this anniversary, something that became almost our anthem, the Ani Ma'amin, I don't think there is a song more beautiful than that one, because [01:00:00] of its content and because of its melody and because it sustained us for so many centuries in exile and because it still gives us joy and hope in spite of all other things. We are still believing. We are waiting because we believe *b'emunah shlayma*, with all our heart in the coming of the messiah. And although he is late in coming we are waiting for him to come.

[01:00:25 - 01:08:22] (applause)

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