

Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive

DAVID WOZNICA: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the 92nd Street Y. Tonight is indeed a special night, for a variety of reasons which I will articulate in just a moment. I'm Rabbi David Woznica, director of the Y's Bronfman Center for Jewish Life. Before an opportunity to introduce Professor Wiesel more formally to you. And that indeed makes it special to begin with. Because we don't usually have that opportunity.

I want to share with you a few programs that are coming up, which I think you'll find of particular interest. Rabbi Harold Kushner shall join us on this stage. For an interview on his values. Our forum on contemporary values continues with Rabbi Telushkin and I in dialogue with Harold Kushner. On May fifth, Rabbi Marvin Hier will be here to give us The State of World Jewry Address. Which will be an assessment of the political, social, emotional, spiritual, religious life of Jews here in America [00:01:00] and around the world. We have a program coming up on May fourth, called "Approaching heaven: how to deal

with spiritual questions about life's final chapter." And a variety of summer classes and lectures, which are all available to you in the program, of which you're carrying.

Because tonight is special I'm going to be very brief, but I want to mention two things before I make my introduction.

The first is, there are a group of about 60 men and women, teenagers who are here this evening, as part of the Balfour Project on ethnic identity and tolerance. They come to a series of lectures here at the Y. We're very proud of this program, about ten public, and or private schools are represented.

And they have all, by the way, been reading excerpts from your book in preparation for this evening. And submitted some of the questions, as many of you did as well. I also want to tell you that we're very excited here at the Y because this evening is being broadcast live, literally over the internet [00:02:00] as we speak. All around the world, the words that we are saying right now are being heard. From Moscow to Jerusalem. Although, it's in the middle of the morning there, I just realized. But for those who have trouble sleeping in Jerusalem at this hour.

And the beauty is we have received questions from all over the world. Because we've advertised this on the internet for about three weeks. So you'll be hearing questions from all over the world, as well as questions which you submitted in advance. Because of the internet status we couldn't do anything live, vis-a-vis the audience. But we're very excited, because this gives us an opportunity.

I think one of the great joys and frustrations of the Y, is so often we leave here. If you're an audience member, or sitting up here on the stage thinking, something special happened here and I wish we could share it with others.

This is a chance, we are sharing it with others. So wherever you are around the world, a very special welcome.

How does one introduce Professor Elie Wiesel?

ELIE WIESEL: [00:03:00] Don't. (audience laughter)

DAVID WOZNICA: It's a long way from Sighet, Romania to New York City. And since all of you have a detailed description in your packets that were handed out in the program. Rather than repeat it, I think what I'd like to say is that Professor Wiesel is a writer, a humanitarian, a professor, a voice. He is respected, and you are beloved. You

received the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize. For 20 years had been teaching at Boston University, and for 32 years has been on this stage at the 92nd Street Y. And rather than list all of your accomplishments, I would just like to say there are great men and women, whose greatness is not often recognized until many, many decades beyond. [00:04:00] And every once in a while, very rarely, but every once in a while there is a great man who we recognize in our own generation, Elie Wiesel. (applause)

ELIE WIESEL: In other words, maybe I'm not so great. Some of you may know that this is not the usual manner in which I try to study and learn together with you. Usually I come out alone. Usually, I'm not introduced. Usually, I am not asked questions. Now, "*mah nishtanah?*" (laughter) Why is this Thursday different from all other Thursdays? I hope maybe, since I said "*mah nishtanah,*" there will only be four questions. [00:05:00] Which is all right. (audience laughter) And then I will give the usual answers. *Avadim hayinu l'par'oh b'mitzrayim.* We can continue.

But, of course it is good to hear. I like to hear what, what, what you have to say, the questions that you have. The usual way is that I would come out and take one

character of the Bible, or the Talmud, or the Hasidic masters. And that would be the only subject of the evening. But tonight, since it is an evening of questions in plural, there will be many, many questions and who knows how many characters will appear as links between one question and the other? I haven't seen that. It's totally unrehearsed, I hope you understand that. So I will be as surprised as you. If not by the questions at least, but the answers. (audience laughter) On the other hand, I have written a lot, [00:06:00] and I've studied a lot. And I could say that, what I have done for years with my life; I tried to explore the art of questioning. Which is the most beautiful, the most elegant, and the most enriching way of one's approach to life. Somebody who has no questions is boring. You need questions. And then the questions become not only a way of life, not only a way of study. It is something else.

There is quest in questioning. And I love the word quest, we are all participating in a quest. In ancient times we would quest for truth. The Greeks and the Hebrews, the Jews -- a quest for peace, a quest for meaning, a quest for friendship. Quest is one of the most beautiful words that

I know in human vocabulary. And there is quest in
[00:07:00] question, which means we are in a quest for the
meaning of the question. Some questions are so good that
they don't need answers.

Some questions on the other hand, there is a beautiful,
beautiful saying by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who was one
of my favorite Hasidic masters. He said, "It happens that
the person is asking a question. A hundred years later,
another person is asking another question without knowing
that that question is an answer to the first." So maybe
next year, you will come back and the questions that David
will ask will be answers to tonight's questions. In my
little town, you mentioned it, and there are people here
from my town, from Sighet. We used to say a *cheder yingle*
would come back from *cheder*. The mother would never say,
"Did you have a good answer today?" She would say, "Did
you have a good question today?" It is true, a clever and
intelligent [00:08:00] boy or girl was the one who asked
the questions. On the other hand, if you push it too far.
There was a man I remember, we called him *meshugenah*, a
crazy guy in our in our city, who was actually a *yeshiva*
bucher. He was a very, very great, erudite young student.

And one day he came running to us, he said, "I need somebody, I need some--" "What is it?" I said. He said, "Look, I have a great answer. Who has a good question?" So maybe, this is the time, therefore. It may be -- to usually, but we do usually we stop for a second. To allow those who are not in, to come in and bring their questions. And then we shall continue. Nobody's outside, everybody's inside?

DAVID WOZNICA: [00:09:00] Just a reminder, my friends, that these are questions that both you submitted. I will try to at least read to you the city or country that the questions originate from. And also, rather than just have done this haphazardly, there are basically four different categories that we'll look at. [00:10:00] There were a lot of questions about Kosovo, which I think we need to explore. There were many personal questions, questions of faith, of philosophy. There were many questions about the Holocaust. And some questions about your work as an author, as a writer. So with your permission, I'd like to take the first one. Coming from the United Arab Emirates.

ELIE WIESEL: About my words, I hope. As an author? Not politics?

DAVID WOZNICA: Not yet. The question is, "Can you lend your moral authority to the denouncement of the Serbian brutalities now taking place in Kosovo?"

ELIE WIESEL: Whatever moral authority I have, I think I lent it, I gave it. I believe that what is happening today is scandalous. It is because now we see the images. It's not only the words, we see the images. You see it [00:11:00] on television, or the pictures in the papers. You cannot not be shocked, moved, outraged. To see hundreds and thousands of people, after all. Men, women, and children who are trying to look for one another. Families who are so disrupted, so separated that the children are looking for the parents. Parents don't even find themselves, husbands and wives. And some disappear totally. We don't even know where they were. There is a certain desire on the part of some to say, "Well, this is exactly what happened--" let's say, "--50-odd years ago." I resent that comparison, I'm against analogies. Because once you start making comparisons, you'll remember that comparisons are always two ways, two-way streets. If Milosevic is Hitler, and Hitler was Milosevic. You cannot avoid that. If [00:12:00] Banja Luka, in Bosnia when I went to visit that camp. It was called in the press-- it was called

Auschwitz. If that was Auschwitz? Auschwitz was only there. So I'm very careful with words, I try to be. But there is no doubt that whatever is happening there is an atrocity. It's the rape, the mass rape of women. The mass murder of innocent people, of political prisoners. And then the deportation of hundreds, and thousands of people. How can we accept that? And therefore with a heavy heart, a very heavy heart, because I am against violence. I'm against, I'm not inspired by military tanks, I don't like them. And with a heavy heart, I have to say that I supported the American position, and the NATO position. That means we should try as well as we can not to hit civilians and all human lives. But simply [00:13:00] destroy buildings. I'm not a military strategist ~~of~~ ~~military status~~, I don't know how to do it. But I know one thing, we have to stop it. Otherwise, look, what right do I have? To come to the President of the United States and tell them, "Where were you when we needed you? Why were you silent?" And who, which Jew? Or who, which human being hasn't at one point asked this question, "Why were you silent?" I don't want years from now that people should ask. Our friends, our younger friends should ask us, "Where were you? Why were you silent?" Now, there is

absolutely nothing personal there. Some Serbs are friends of the Jews. Albania, has also a good record by the way. But they are Muslims. But why is it Muslims? Why should I defend them? They are human beings. The children are children. Therefore I did speak, I wrote articles, I went on television, and try as gently as I could to say that this has to stop. [00:14:00]

DAVID WOZNICA: Would you suggest then, if it were militarily advisable, that ground troops be sent in from the United States?

ELIE WIESEL: David, what do I know? What this, really I don't know. I don't know how many tanks are needed. What do I know about helicopters? But, I don't know. On the other hand, I'm honest with you, let's go to the end. Suppose again, the president says, "My fellow Americans, we came to the conclusion, having consulted all the generals from these 19 countries. And we need to send ground troops." And I think, then send ground troops. I don't think that they should stop. We cannot stop. We cannot allow Milosevic to get away with it. I go very far for that. I think that at the end of the story, he should be indicted. He must be indicted for crimes against humanity. What he is doing is-- is intolerable. Human beings cannot

[00:15:00] accept that. Wherever it happens, that cannot occur without us responding in some way to this these atrocities.

DAVID WOZNICA: You made the analogy of-- the concern for making analogies. Is it difficult to suggest or is there a conflict in suggesting the uniqueness of the Holocaust? And therefore people trying to make universal-- learn universal lessons from it?

ELIE WIESEL: Yes, I believe it was a unique tragedy with universal applications. That has been my view from the very beginning. I remember when President Carter appointed me chairman of the Holocaust-- President's Commission on the Holocaust. I didn't want to accept it. I argued with him then. I didn't want it, "It's not for me. I'm a teacher, I'm a writer. I'm not a public figure." And we had long arguments, and conditions. And he said, "What is it?" And I said, "It's a unique tragedy with [00:16:00] universal implications." And I think that's perfect. Which means I would even say that what's happening now, the upheavals in the world. So much hatred, so much violence. And obviously, they have nothing to do with our tragedy. But somehow, maybe it is the fallout of that tragedy. There was so much hatred there, so much suffering there.

So much death there. That the fallout, and sometimes in psychiatry, we call it latency. We need a generation for the fallout to be felt. And this is what's happening now. I hope it's the last convulsion of history, of the century.

DAVID WOZNICA: There was a terrible tragedy this last few days ago in Colorado. A number of people said to me, "Ask Mr. Wiesel about his thoughts." But nobody would give me a question. And the more I thought about it the more I realized that [00:17:00] I didn't know the right questions. We're basically looking for answers. I'm not sure we know the right questions. Can you help us with those questions?

ELIE WIESEL: Do you want the question or the answer?

(audience laughter) I'll give you the answer first, and I'll help you find the question. Look, the shock is there. To see young people become murderers. When I went, the first time I went to Cambodia, on the border. I went to a refugee camp, in Aranyaprathet. There were a hundred, a hundred fifty thousand refugees. And I spent there a few days, going around, listening. Listening, and trying later on to bear witness. At one point, one of the guides showed me, "See that barrack. That's a very special barrack, look at it." I went to the barrack, and there was some six or eight hundred youngsters, 12 to 14 year old kids. And they

were always separate. [00:18:00] They ate separately, they ~~that~~ marched separately. They were the Khmer Rouge. They were the killers, not the victims. And I said, "I don't know anymore what is worse now. To see these kids as killers or as victims?" What happened there? What did that society do to its children? To turn those children into murderers of their own parents? Of their own friends? Of some strange, crazy philosophy of bringing everything back to zero? To bring history back to zero. That was Pol Pot's philosophy. And how do you do that, by killing? Now here you have two youngsters who come from good families. Good education, apparently the school there is one of the best, one of the eight best high schools in America. What did-- what was happening there? And then I read that they were fascinated with and by Hitler. [00:19:00] And then I realized that Hitler is dead, but he is still killing people. And there I would say something was wrong with the education. Those teachers who taught probably about Hitler somehow didn't manage to pass on: the awe, the terror, the fear, the anguish. The crimes that Hitler's image elicited from society. What he has done to his own people, not only to us. To his own people what he has done. That for generations and generations German children will think, and

I think they will be wrong, by the way, but they will think. "Who knows what our parents have done?" This is Hitler's doing. So what is the question? The question is, where did they go wrong? Not the kids. The parents of the children, or television, or the theater, or the books, where did they go [00:20:00] wrong?

DAVID WOZNICA: Let me turn to the more personal questions, of beliefs, meaning in life. I'll start with an easy one, it comes from one of the members of the audience.

ELIE WIESEL: I'm afraid of easy questions.

DAVID WOZNICA: It's simple: Does God still dialogue with the Jews? (audience laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: I can tell you Jews dialogue with God. Whether God is answering? Since our-- since the beginning of our appearance on the stage of history, we began a dialogue. And maybe, why Moses was a stutterer? It's because God wanted to tell us, "Please," you know, "be careful. Don't talk too much." But we didn't listen, and we still don't listen. I don't mind dialoguing with God, I don't mind that. [00:21:00] It's better than ignoring God. I think it can be a great discovery. That who are we, really? Philosophically, a human, who are we? A speck of dust. A speck of dust, come on. We come from dust, we go to it.

It's really, how long do we live? In a corridor, what is life? And here, a speck of dust is dialoguing with God, the Master of the Universe? It can almost give you a strange complex, of either of inferiority or superiority. But something is happening. And I think a dialogue is going on. Sometimes it's sad, when we deal with collective sadness. Or even with individual tragedy. And other times, now other times we simply express gratitude.

[00:22:00] I remember the first prayer that a Jew is saying in the morning is *Modeh ani lefanecha*. The first words, "I thank you God." Thank you God. And then at the end the dialogue is inspired. For me, inspiring because we always use words that we have inherited. That we have received from our ancestors. We don't invent words. We use Job, we use Jeremiah. They knew how to dialogue, their text. If I could have written one chapter of Job or Jeremiah I would have given up all my books.

DAVID WOZNICA: Someone wrote in, also from the audience, about Jonathan Pollard. The way they phrased the question was to ask you, "What was his present status, and his emotional, physical condition. And considering the political ramifications of his imprisonment, [00:23:00] do you think

he will ever be freed?" By the way, the writer then wrote, "I am your devoted admirer."

ELIE WIESEL: I went to see him twice, once when he was in the maximum security prison in Marion, Illinois. And the second time when he was already in a medium security. I went for the first time with mixed feelings. I think he should not have done what he did. I think Israel should not have employed him, he shouldn't have proposed this. If there is one country in the world where Jews should not spy -- it is America. We call it, in our tradition, almost, *galut shel chesed*. It's a very special exile, which is ours here. It's very special. And I don't think that we should do that. Now, but nevertheless it was before Passover. I remember it was before, [00:24:00] the week before Passover. And I remembered, again my father was involved in communal affairs. And every Saturday, every Shabbat afternoon he would go to the prison to visit with Jewish prisoners. My sisters would go to the hospitals, they would bring fruit and whatever. And we also had an asylum, for insane people. And I would go there.

(laughter) I may have stayed there. And they were all again, why? Because the idea was-- that we inherited, we believed in that-- that no person should be alone. Even

prisoners should not be abandoned. They shouldn't be alone. So that's why my sisters went there, I went there. And here I said, here is Pollard. He may have been wrong, but he tried to help. [00:25:00] He tried, he came to a conclusion that he needed to give Israel certain documents, which Israel needed for security. He was wrong, but he had, I hope, good intentions. What right do we have to have him alone? Alone? So, I wondered. And that's frightening. That prison is frightening. Even as a visitor, you go in, it's frightening. They treated me well. The warden came, I didn't have to go to be searched. But, you know when you hear doors opening. The iron doors with-- my God. And there, Pollard came in. And I said to him first, said, "Pollard, please don't tell me things I shouldn't know. I don't want to." Because always, always, you know -- although the warden said, "Nobody will," you know, "you can speak freely," I didn't trust the warden. I thought, [00:26:00] there must be some microphones there. Said, "Don't tell me." And then we talked, and we talked, and we talked. After a few hours I said, "There is a law. There is a law in the Talmud. A person should never leave his friend without teaching him, without discussing a d'var halakha, a certain halakhic question which pertains to the

law," and so forth. So I said to him, "Let's study. What can I give you? Let's study." "Since it's Passover, let's study the Haggadah," the story of Exodus. And just then I was working on a Haggadah with my friend, Mark Podwal, who was doing the great illustrations, the drawings. And I was preparing the commentaries. So, I said to him, "Look, what a strange story that is. It begins with a drama, almost a cosmic drama. Egypt in turmoil, a people of slaves becoming independent. God bringing us to Sinai. It has, you know, [00:27:00] it has the magnitude of extraordinary events. And how does it end? With a silly story, Had gadya ~~Haggadah~~. A silly, childish story that my father sold a goat and then came that, and then came the cat, and then came the dog, and then came this, and fire. What is this? It begins so great -- and ends like that? Like a joke? I said, "We must understand the meaning of the of the prayer, of the song. What does it teach us? That everything is connected.

In life or in history, everything is connected." He told me then something which really moved me very deeply. He said the first year of his imprisonment they kept him in a hospital for [00:28:00] insane, or for a prison for insane. And for a year they kept him naked. That touched me

deeply. That he was sentenced, but humiliated. Why humiliated, naked? I went to see President Bush, he was then president. I said, "Mr. President, I would like to plead on behalf of an unworthy person." And I told him -- without saying what, as I said to him, "Look, he did terrible things. But he already paid his due, he paid his price. And also they kept him naked." "Who is it?" I said, "Pollard." "I don't understand," he said. Said, "I didn't know that the Jewish community cared about him." And that was true then. In the beginning, because Israel was so embarrassed. And the American Jewish leadership didn't want to [00:29:00] hear about it. Now, it's different. At that time they didn't want to hear it. Well, so I began. What can I do? Write letters and so forth. Then I went back to him, together with a friend of mine, Bernie Fishman. Who is one of the best humanitarians that I know in America. And there, Pollard received me with a heartbreaking greeting. He said, "I wanted to see you, because I want you to write my epitaph." What will happen now? I think, my feeling is he will not stay long there. I think that he will be, he will be sent to Israel. When? I cannot tell you, I don't know, simply. If I knew, I wouldn't tell you anyway. (audience laughter) But, I

don't know. But, I think he-- I think it's being solved somehow. Because he almost went back and the intelligence community was against it. But my feeling is, at least it's my hope. [00:30:00] My wish.

DAVID WOZNICA: Someone asked, we spoke about God and Jews dialoguing with God; If you felt you had a personal relationship with God, and if that had ever changed in the course of your life?

ELIE WIESEL: No, I do have, I still have a personal relationship with God, sure. Otherwise, why pray? And not only that really, I imagine philosophers, and I studied philosophy. But philosophers can have an abstract notion of God. In medieval times philosophers tried to prove God, and they proved so hard that they proved against it, you know? Either you believe or you don't. If you don't, you don't. If you do, you do. But it is personal. We say, I and thou. "*Baruch atah.*" You, thou. It is the child in me, and I remain the child from my little town. Well, God? What [00:31:00] do you mean? I didn't visualize, that didn't imagine. But I knew that God is not a person. But for me to be a person -- I must speak to God. And later on I understood that for me to be a person, I must speak to my fellow human being. And in speaking to my fellow human

being, I come closer to God. Which means, it is the other who determines my humanity. If I do something terrible against a friend, I move away from God. If I try to do something good, I come closer to God.

DAVID WOZNICA: A friend of mine gave me a beautiful analogy. We were having dinner, and he has a 13-year-old and a three-year-old. And the younger one needed to use the restroom. And so the 13-year-old took him away from the seats.

[00:32:00] And as they went around the corner, the older one put his arm around the younger one. And the younger one reciprocated. And then they went around the bend out of our sight. And my friend, the father said to me, "There's nothing that gives me greater joy in life than seeing than seeing my children treat each other so beautifully." And then he said, "And that's what I think gives God his greatest joy. When his children treat each other with such beauty, and such decency." What would you say--

ELIE WIESEL: I wonder how much joy he has these times?

DAVID WOZNICA: What would you say to someone-- in my own classes here I often ask our participants, the students to write their own theology. I ask them the question that I asked you. Have your beliefs changed? Many times people write,

"I want to believe, but I can't." And they give a very cogent or rational reason. What might you say to them?

ELIE WIESEL: If one can't, one can't. I wouldn't, no. I would simply say, "Why can't you?" And then [00:33:00] if I were to discuss the reasons, I think with some help I could show that person that the reasons are not good reasons. Because those very reasons should move him to have faith, rather to negate faith. But in general, you don't, one doesn't discuss faith. How can you discuss faith? You know, I always think of Kafka. Kafka says, "One cannot speak of God. At best one can speak to God." Of? How can you discuss of? We are, who are we? He wasn't the first. ~~different~~, Maimonides had already said it.

DAVID WOZNICA: Someone wrote in from the audience, asking if you believe that the Jews were the chosen people? And if so, what were we chosen for?

ELIE WIESEL: I don't, I don't believe that. No, I think every people may be chosen. Okay, it's simple. I don't want us to be triumphalists. [00:34:00] I think we should always be humble. And in choosing this humility one should become the brother, but not the master of somebody else. Now, we received the Torah. Of course, look Shavuot is coming and

we receive the Torah. And that makes us special. But, why us? So the Talmud, you remember, it was so beautiful. The Talmud says that God actually became a peddler. The Talmud, you know is iconoclastic. The greatest iconoclastic religious work in the world, is the Talmud. God became a peddler. And God went from one nation to another saying, "Take it, take it, take it." And they said no. So he came to us, okay. Which is very good. That means we took it. Oh, no, we didn't want it either. We said no. God came, we were the last. [00:35:00] "Take it!" "No." And then God said: "*Shekafah aleichem et hahar k'gigit.*" He lifted up Sinai, and turned it in, like a *coupole*. And he said, "If you receive the law, it's okay. If not, you die here." So, what choice do we have? (audience laughter) So once you say that, it's no longer chosen. Come on then, we were forced. As Jean-Paul Sartre, *l'havdil*, said that, "We are condemned to be free."

DAVID WOZNICA: It is interesting, when I reflect on it. I think,

why God would give such a revolutionary idea to such a weak people. If one had an idea today that we wanted to revolutionize the world we might give it to the Americans, the Chinese, the Russians, the Soviets. And then it occurs

to me, that perhaps [00:36:00] if that idea had significant impact on the world we might attribute it to the power and the strength of the people. By giving it to, forgive me, a group of *shleppers* in the desert, impoverished former slaves. We might learn that it wasn't the Jews to change the world. It was God and Judaism that changed-- it was the idea. The power of the idea, rather than the power of the people.

ELIE WIESEL: Well, you could also say you always begin small. And then you go large.

DAVID WOZNICA: (laughter) Let me share with you a question from one of the students, who was is here for this dinner, from this Balfour Project. Two of which I thought were, these two she wrote. I'm assuming it's she, "How does it feel to at one point in your life, to have suffered so? Then at another point to come before the world and accept the Nobel Peace Prize?"

ELIE WIESEL: [00:37:00] You feel the world is crazy. (laughter) I'm sorry. I think I've said it here, but when I came back from Oslo. If anyone had told, had told me when I was still, let's say, a young *yeshiva bucher*, a student in my town. "What do you think will come first, the Nobel Prize or the Messiah?" What do you think I would

have answered? "The Messiah, naturally, sure." On the other hand, it's true, that it's in one life. In one life to go from, from there. One place one day, and then. You don't-- I would have given up all the prizes in the world. And all the honors in the world for one life. One life, for one person that let's say, would not have been taken away. (audience applause) [00:38:00]

DAVID WOZNICA: In Tuscaloosa County, Tuscaloosa County High School apparently, the whole class has been reading *Night*. We have a lot of questions. They logged on to the internet website. Of which you and I are fairly new at.

DAVID WOZNICA: Can I say that both you and I, Elie is. Well, why don't you say it?

ELIE WIESEL: Yeah, both ignorant, okay.

DAVID WOZNICA: You could have chosen an easier word. But, joking. This tenth grade student writes from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. "How did your experiences change your view of people?"

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, we changed of course. First of all, of relationships. I didn't have a single [00:39:00] non-Jewish friend. I didn't go to school almost, I went only to *cheder* and Yeshiva. And one month before the exams-- because we had compulsory education. Just to learn

quickly: mathematics, geography, geometry, and geography. Learn very quickly, and forgot everything immediately. Just to pass the exam. Then, I was afraid of Christians. I really was afraid of Christians. I would not even go near a church, I would change sidewalks. I was afraid of them. And look, for good reasons. We must say it, for good reasons. Because, we knew. We felt it for generations and generations what the church, the church fathers and later on, the anti-Semitism of the church. Now everybody knows about it. The church changed now, but then it was there. So now, [00:40:00] it's different. It's different. I'm a Jew, and I try to be as much Jew as I can. I mean, study and live Jewishly. But to me, for a Jew to be human -- is to be Jewish. And for a Christian to a human, is to be a Christian. For a Buddhist, it is to be a Buddhist. Again, without any triumphalism. Simply to say that, "We are here, it's a very small place that we are in. And we try to live together and not to kill each other, not to humiliate one another." So it changed, that changed a lot. Now, I go-- I was last weekend, two weeks ago in a University in Chicago. A Jesuit university, Loyola to give a lecture there, so forth. And you know, and it's not only that I came there, but that they invited

me. And that they prepared a kosher meal, and mehadrin min mehadrin as we say. Really, that something had happened, and the world has changed. On the other hand, during [00:41:00] the war, it was only normal for us, let's say. To start seeing in the other, an enemy. Or at least a collaborator of the enemy. Or somebody who doesn't want to be my friend. I was suspicious, I was afraid. And normally I could have stayed like that. And that changed, I do not see in a passerby an enemy with a sword in his-- with a knife in his hand. No. Be he or she Jewish or not, I don't see that. I see it that we are all really-- we can talk, we can use the same language, we have the same gestures. We listen to the same music. And I have my way, he or she has their way. And that mine is not against theirs. [00:42:00] And theirs is not against mine. It's simply my way of accomplishing my condition, of fulfilling my destiny. This is what I learned, a lot. That has changed.

DAVID WOZNICA: There were many questions about the Holocaust. I have to acknowledge my own discomfort with asking questions about the Holocaust. Because as you have said on many occasions, forgive me for paraphrasing, but as I recall, "To talk about it too much can trivialize it." And so, I

ask these questions because they're clearly on the mind of others. I was going to say, "We'll now turn to another subject." And the reality is, it's not another subject. And I don't know exactly how to introduce it, or how long to speak about it. But it is clearly something that we think about, clearly something that we look to you for guidance in. [00:43:00] This one is a combination of the personal-- this question from an audience member. As well as the philosophical. He writes, "In 'Evil and Exile,' you stated that your survival of the Holocaust was pure chance. There was nothing special you did, and nothing particular that kept you alive. Yet you also hold the Jewish belief that God preordains each soul before birth, and watches over it personally. How can you reconcile these beliefs? And do you believe in chance, and or destiny?"

ELIE WIESEL: I am not above contradictions. (audience laughter) Absolutely, I'm not above it. But it's true, it's contradictory. So what? Let's contradict. But it's true. I really believe, believe me it's the truth. I haven't done anything to survive. I was always weak. [00:44:00] When I was a child, I was always so sick and so weak that my parents -- my poor parents would take me from doctor to doctor. I discovered geography through the

doctors. We went from Sighet, we went to Satmar. From Satmar to Klausenburg, Klausenburg to Budapest. Always finding doctors, because I was always sick. I've suffered from migraine headaches, and from this and that, I didn't eat. And for me, I would have been the first candidate to go. But the first part, the first part, I was with my father. And that is what kept me. I knew if I died, he would die. And therefore, I lived. I didn't do anything, which means I never volunteered for anything. I never dared to do anything. I was, I was afraid of being beaten or something. So it's really sheer chance. I mean, what did I do that was, let's say, daring? What? With my father [00:45:00] always. Somebody bought a pair of *tefillin* from somebody who brought it in, of phylacteries. And people would get up, my father. I would get up before everybody else, and go and stand in line to do the, put on *tefillin*, and wear *tefillin*. And say the *Berakhot*. You know very well, this is not one of the commandments for which one has to risk one's life. Why did we do it? I don't know, my father did it. I did it with him. That was the only daring things with it. Otherwise to go and expose oneself? I've never done that. Afterwards, when he died I didn't live. In *Night*, which you are reading there, the

last period is maybe four or five pages. It's four months, January, February, March until April. Because I didn't live. My father wasn't with me. And I was [00:46:00] literally handled by my destiny. Now, and God in all that, you think I know? I don't know. In one of my books there is always a character who says all the time, "And God and all that? Where is God in all that?" I'm asking this question too. I'm asking your question. Where is God in all that? And I don't have the answer. So, do I believe in preordained? Look, I believe both that God knows. God is God. So he knows. Omniscient, he's omnipotent, all of these things. He's more than more than the sum of what we can say about him, naturally. At the same time, we are free. He wants us to be free. So how can we be free? It's an old question in philosophy. And believe me, they haven't given an answer. The only answer was I think, the Maharal of Prague gave a beautiful answer. He said, "Imagine, if you can imagine God simply [00:47:00] having us so close, and so far away. Close for him, but far for us. That we think we are free. But God knows." So his freedom does not act on mine. It's one of those answers, but the truth is there is no answer.

DAVID WOZNICA: One of the students who is a, whose grandparents were Holocaust survivor, asked me to ask you. Or to tell you that her father, or her-- or she purchases German products. And their hatred for Germans and German culture is so strong. "Is it immoral for her to feel that way? Do you buy German products? Do you hate Germans? And how do you characterize my family's behavior?"

ELIE WIESEL: First, I understand her. [00:48:00] Normally, one should, one could, one should. I don't, I was spared. If I had remained, let's say, in Germany or Buchenwald after liberation for a long time. Or I went to a DP camp, I would have probably also been exposed to that. But, immediately afterwards, as I wrote, I fell sick and I came to France. I was spared. And I threw myself immediately into learning, and that saved me. So I, believe me, I have absolutely no hate for a group. I cannot hate a group. I cannot, never have. Do I hate let's say -- murderers? If I see it, if I would see Eichmann today? Maybe I probably, I would surely feel something against him. But to say, hate Germany or Germans? I don't. But I understand why some do.

DAVID WOZNICA: What if, [00:49:00] remove the hate part of the question for a moment. She's also asking if Germany should

be supported. In other words, by not economically supporting them, by not buying German products. I've often felt that as long as it would bring a tear to the eye of any survivor, that I wouldn't buy a German product. Not for me, but because it might be troubling to them. Is that something that makes sense?

ELIE WIESEL: Makes sense, sure. Why should you humiliate somebody. Why should you hurt somebody? But on the other hand, if you think about it deeply, German products today. A lot of the Germans today, you live in a multinational thing. And it belongs to Americans and Swiss. But still, if the feeling is that if you buy then you hurt? Don't hurt, absolutely not. There are other products, too. Why should you hurt them? I for instance, wouldn't go to a concert where they play Wagner. I wouldn't. And I have an eternal debate with Daniel Barenboim. One of the great conductors. [00:50:00] He loves Wagner, which is good for him. He's a conductor, for conducting, Wagner is good. But Wagner was such a vicious anti-Semite that I wouldn't go. And they tried in Israel to, Daniel, tried to impose Wagner in Israel. And he was so angry when the orchestra, there were survivors in the orchestra and they didn't want to play. So that's, I think he abandoned. But I

understand that. Why hurt somebody? There is Beethoven, there is Bach, Brahms, thank God. We don't need Wagner.

(audience applause)

DAVID WOZNICA: Also one could make the case today, that there are many other countries. That Germany has been a very supportive country towards Israel. There are many other countries which are not supportive, and that a case could be made not to buy some of their products. And indeed, to support Germany. So it's not a fully rational, it's a dignity issue.

ELIE WIESEL: Sure. That's why I understand. [00:51:00] If a survivor, or a family says, "Look, we cannot." Please, go ahead. I love pens, for instance. I love pens. There are good pens, we don't need the Montblanc.

DAVID WOZNICA: Question from the audience, had to do with the lawsuits, the Holocaust lawsuits. "Did you think that they're appropriate? Do you think they'll lead to a new round of antisemitism?"

ELIE WIESEL: Look, anti-Semites don't need that to be anti-Semites. Trust me, they don't need that. I was not involved in it, except marginally. Where at one point they wanted me to become the president of the fund, of the Swiss fund the two hundred million dollars, and so forth. And I

didn't want it, because it's not for me. What do I know about two hundred million dollars? A thousand, I can go. Not two hundred million. And also, really also I didn't know what to do with it. Meaning how can I measure amount, somebody's pain. Somebody was three months, let's say, in Auschwitz. Okay, this amount. This was six months in--

[00:52:00] I didn't feel I could do justice to it. Then last December, there was a conference in Washington of representatives of 44 nations, who were somehow involved in this. And they wanted me to come and speak words. I tried to have. And I asked two questions: "Why so late? Why now? Why not in fort-five, six, seven? Hey, why now? Why did they remember all of a sudden about the paintings here, about properties there? Why now? When so many people have already died?" And I said that, "It is first of all the government's fault. The governments there should have opened up and said, 'Look, take it back.' Number two, because the survivors themselves didn't dare. They didn't dare open up wounds, and ask too much. In Poland, some of them came back, they were thrown out [00:53:00] from their own houses by the new people who lived there. My sister went back to Sighet, and she couldn't go into our house because other people lived there. And she went to live

with some friends. So at that time the survivors didn't have that, what they have now. "Second," I said also, "we forget we speak now about the big money. Show the big money, the big accounts in Switzerland. That 99% of the victims were poor," and I coined a sentence. I said, "The enemy has robbed them of their poverty. It's not only the rich, he robbed the poor of their poverty. These poor people, who would care. Who would come to these places of death, they would bring what? A shirt, a piece of bread. Or at the end, their hair." [00:54:00] I said to those delegates, "Don't think of the millions. Think of that when you speak about money. And I think on the other hand, it's right. Why should Jewish families be deprived of what is theirs?"

DAVID WOZNICA: From Omaha, Nebraska. I feel like Larry King, for some reason. I feel, I need my suspenders. Actually, it's cute to say something funny. Because this person asks, "Did you see the acclaimed film, *Life is Beautiful*? And if so, what did you think of it?"

ELIE WIESEL: I didn't see it. I'm so glad I didn't see it, because wherever I go, they ask me. (laughter) So, I don't know, I'm going to see it. But I haven't seen it yet.

DAVID WOZNICA: Do you have any thoughts, and is it a fair question to ask you--

ELIE WIESEL: All questions are fair.

DAVID WOZNICA: [00:55:00] Is there a reason you haven't seen it?

ELIE WIESEL: The reason is, I am not a moviegoer. Really, that's why I go rarely on television too. I don't like it. I like words, I'm afraid of images. I still belong to the nineteenth century, not to the twentieth century. I was simply thrown into the twentieth century.

DAVID WOZNICA: Via email from Lebanon, Pennsylvania. I rehearsed that introduction for several times. Although this is being heard in Lebanon.

ELIE WIESEL: Pennsylvania.

DAVID WOZNICA: Right. "Do you think there should be restrictions on internet sites promoting anti-Holocaust rhetoric?" And you can more generalize that question. "Do you think there should be restrictions on any kind of dissemination of such material?"

ELIE WIESEL: [00:56:00] This question emerges frequently. Just now, there is a very, very good little college in Connecticut, New London college very, very good one. New Connecticut college. It's a good president, everything is good about it. And all of a sudden a few weeks ago, the

deniers placed an ad for seventy-five dollar they placed an ad, denying the Holocaust and so forth. And they are trying to do it in every college paper. Naturally, some of them asked me before. They didn't in Connecticut. "What should they do?" After all, the First Amendment. And I'm not a lawyer, but my answer is the First Amendment is, it gives us the right to speak. And I cannot deny the deniers the right to say what they have to say. But why should I give them a forum? Why should I, [00:57:00] my paper give them a forum? Let them have their own paper, they have it by the way. They have their own magazines, and papers, and journals, let them. Why should I help them? So I'm against that. On the other hand, in France, and in Germany, I think in other countries in Europe denying the Holocaust is a felony. And one goes to jail for it. The question is, how about America? Should we do the same thing here? Here, the argument is, the First Amendment is so sacred and so powerful that we should not tamper with it. All the lawyers, all the older libertarians and all the human rights lawyers, say don't tamper with the First Amendment. Because the deniers will go up, they will vanish, they will disappear. They won't last long. But the law must remain.

DAVID WOZNICA: Let me shift to the area of your writing. Which was of great interest. [00:58:00] This is from the audience. So you were saying that one of your, is it Sigheter. Is that the proper?

ELIE WIESEL: It's Sighet, yes. There's two ladies here from there.

DAVID WOZNICA: Yes. But is it a Sigheter?

ELIE WIESEL: A Sigheter. Somebody who is from there is called a Sigheter.

DAVID WOZNICA: I have to be careful, because the executive director of the 92nd Street Y lives in Seagate.

ELIE WIESEL: I know.

DAVID WOZNICA: Saul Adler.

ELIE WIESEL: Believe me, it's not the same.

DAVID WOZNICA: Not the same. He writes the following, "As a fellow Sigheter, I would like to tell you we are very proud of your accomplishments." And then he continues, "Why do you use symbols of beggars, madmen? Since I am a Sigheter, they even ask me if we had a lot of beggars. Of course we did. But you must have a special reason for using that metaphor so frequently."

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, I love, I love madmen in general. And they love me, that's my problem. I answer every letter, and I

see them whenever they come to see me. [00:59:00] But then they want to come again, that's the problem. The beggars also -- look, my beggars and my madmen of course are mystical beggars, mystical madmen. It's not, they shouldn't see it as a figurative image of Sighet. We had our beggars, we had our madmen. But they were not mystical. In my case, they are all mystical. A beggar is a wanderer. A messenger who goes from town to town; brings stories, brings words, brings smiles brings mystery. That's the beggar. And of course the beggar is what? The beggar may be prophet Elijah, who is always disguised as a beggar. Or it may be one of the 36 just men, thanks to whom the world exists, who must be unknown. And they live always as wanderers. Where they eat, they don't sleep. Where they sleep, they don't eat. So therefore, I choose these people. And the same thing with the madmen. And there are other reasons as well. The first, among the first to be taken [01:00:00] by the enemy were the madmen. And the children, and the old people. And therefore in all of my novels, I give them a roof over their head. And I give them identity. Since they were the first victims, I want to come and say, "Look, at least I am your friend. People expelled you, people rejected you. Come in." And

therefore I glorify them. They were humiliated by history, by society, by humanity. I owe it to them, to give them back their honor.

DAVID WOZNICA: When you sit down. (audience applause) When you sit down to write, how many novels have you written?

ELIE WIESEL: Like 16; I've written 40 books, and 16 or 17 novels.

DAVID WOZNICA: And I believe that I read, there are 30 books written about you, incidentally. That was a while ago, so, more.

ELIE WIESEL: [01:01:00] They look like novels, it's okay.

DAVID WOZNICA: When you sit down to write, do you know the ending of your story?

ELIE WIESEL: No.

DAVID WOZNICA: How do you do that? You just sit down and?

ELIE WIESEL: I hear a melody. That's how it began. Every book is a melody, I hear a melody. If the melody is there, I write. If it's not there, I write and write and write, and wait for the melody. (laughter) And then the melody comes. Once the melody comes I know the book is there. And then you know, I bring in characters.

DAVID WOZNICA: But you do it in a specific fashion, do you not? Do you start in the morning writing, for example?

ELIE WIESEL: I am a disciplined person. I am very disciplined. I write four hours a day. Sometimes it's not good. Often it's not good. But still, I sit and write four hours a day. I study four hours. Because I'm terribly disciplined.

DAVID WOZNICA: From Marlboro, Maryland. A woman wrote that she's doing a research paper on you, and about your writings. She says, [01:02:00] "I have to come up with a theme that symbolizes all of your works. Can you please help?" (audience laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: Should I write her paper? The theme, there are a few. The principal theme of course is memory. But then, there are so many dissertations that have been written about. One wrote about silence in my novels. Another one wrote about madness in my novels, the third one wrote about God. There's 40 books about me also, the same, always the same theme, *leitmotifs*. But if there is one that concentrates all of them, of course is memory. And commitment to memory, the perils of memory, the dangers of memory. At the same time, the inevitability of seeing memory as the source of our anguish. But also the source of our hope.

DAVID WOZNICA: You're going to give a major address on hope next week.

ELIE WIESEL: [01:03:00] I'll be in Israel. I'll be speaking about the philosophy of hope.

DAVID WOZNICA: Are you hopeful? Are you hopeful for the next generation?

ELIE WIESEL: In Israel or in general?

DAVID WOZNICA: Both.

ELIE WIESEL: It's difficult to speak about hope now, really. With all this going on. But I force myself. You know, not to choose is also a choice, says Camus, and he's right. And what is the alternative? To give in or to give up? I wouldn't do that. So I invent hope, and I cling to it. But to say that it's coming, that it flows? Normally, I wouldn't say. No, the obstacles are too many. And it's not easy to be hopeful today with our children, young people. And I owe it to them. You know, in my novels, I would never write a novel [01:04:00] that is only dominated by despair. There must be somewhere, a moment of hope. In one of my novels, which was about Alzheimer's, I wrote a novel about Alzheimer's. That was one of my most depressing novels that I have written. Because it's the cancer of identity. The tragedy of the person who no

longer knows me, no longer knows himself or herself. And I compared it to a book. Every day you tear out a page, and another page, and another page, and another page. And no more pages left, only the covers. And that's the Alzheimer patient. And I kept the novel in my desk for a few years, because I felt it. There must be some way out for this. And I found it, I gave it to the publisher.

DAVID WOZNICA: When you reflect back, which are the accomplishments in your Life [01:05:00] that give you the most joy, in which you take the greatest pride?

ELIE WIESEL: If it's personal, it's my family, naturally. You know, there was a woman who worked in Mount Sinai, in maternity. She would go there every day, every day helping those women who needed help. And one day, she went to help a woman who had survived the camps, and who just had a baby. And she saw the woman from the door outside. The woman picked up the baby saying, "Look, world. Look world. I am not the last." That's something. That gives, [01:06:00] of course, hope and joy. And a reason to go on. Practically, I think I have, I'm not proud of it, but I think I have raised the consciousness of our tragedy. For, for a generation at least, or at least I was among those who did it. I think I helped the survivors open up,

and reclaim their place in Jewish life and society. When I began writing you wouldn't find a single survivor who occupied a national position in America. They were kept almost like poor cousins. They would not be offered or given the honors that they deserve. I asked the leaders of our communities, "Tell me, how many dinners did you give simply to thank survivors for being alive? When the prisoners came back, or the hostages came back to America they were celebrated. [01:07:00] Brought to the White House, they were given everything. Survivors didn't get anything. And I then decided, that's when I became chairman of the commission, the council. I took majority of survivors, I gave them all the chairmanships. At one point I did so much, you can't imagine. I couldn't see somebody feel bad because he or she wasn't a chairman. They were more chairman than members there.

DAVID WOZNICA: You remind me. I was in Cleveland recently, speaking at a Jewish leadership conference. And there were 690 people in attendance. And I started off by saying, "There's no such thing as just a Jewish conference. Everybody has a leadership conference, 690 leaders. Every Jew is a Jewish leader. No one's just a Jew! Everybody's a Jewish leader." Who do you admire [01:08:00] in the

world today? Who do you look to? Whether in political life or in general?

ELIE WIESEL: Can we go to the next question?

DAVID WOZNICA: That was my last question.

ELIE WIESEL: It is varied. Really it is difficult, because I have met people who are unknown. Who are not known. Among the famous people? I don't-- there are not that many leaders, political leaders whom I admire. The values are different, the standards are different. I admire teachers, I have tremendous admiration for teachers. And those that I really admire were my teachers. And they died, but they remain my teachers. And will also let's say, my rebbes, my Hasidic masters I admire. I admire Rabbi Akiva. I admire Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai. I admire those people, I admire Plato. But today, who is? Today, somebody. Let's see, who has a moral [01:09:00] voice? That when he or she speaks, the world listens without thinking, "Aha! Maybe he wants something." Show me one. That's the problem. That is in every world, in every society, in every community. And I think, maybe because in our Jewish community the problem is that we lost our great men, our great scholars, our great poets. Our great visionaries. When they were

killed, age one, two, three. And it will take more than a generation for us to bring up a new leadership.

DAVID WOZNICA: My friends, I have an invitation for you. There is a little wine reception, that everybody is invited to in the art gallery, following. That's not for people who are on the internet, by the way. You have to be in attendance. I [01:10:00] will suggest that, if introducing you is difficult, concluding an evening like this is even more difficult. So I decided not to conclude it myself. I decided to read to you a couple of comments of people. Two of many who wrote in, with comments rather than questions. "Tears fell upon your pages, and I often felt that I was really there with you. I'm so glad that you shared your experiences with the world. I know many hearts have been touched by your story." The author is 13 years old. "I have no question. I'm just here to tell Elie," he must, he or she must know you well. It's a first name basis. I think we all feel we know you that way. "I'm just here to tell Elie how much his story has touched me. I had no clue. No clue, [01:11:00] sadly enough, I never have will have anything close to a clue. Unless I had to experience anything like the Holocaust myself. All I can do is to grow up to do everything I can to make sure nothing like

the Holocaust ever happens again. Rock on, Elie."

(audience laughter) "You are an amazing person. Definitely an inspiration. And thank you very much." I will leave you, I think that sums up how we feel. That you have been a man, you know, who has raised so many questions for us over all these years. And even on a night where we look to you for responses, you leave us with more questions. More questions, more doubts. I'm sure people are leaving here tonight with, including those listening all over the country, and all over the world-- with more questions. I think the only thing we know for sure is that we'll reflect on our evenings with you, including this [01:12:00] one with a certainty that we had a very great privilege. Of spending an hour and a few minutes with a very special person. Thank you Mr. Wiesel. (applause)

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