Elie Wiesel Faith 92nd Street Y — Elie Wiesel Archive

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) We shall begin with a Hasidic story. "The celebration was at its height. It seemed as if it would never come to an end. The Hasidim were dancing, vertically, as if not moving from their place, but forcing the rhythm down into the earth. What did it matter if the walls gave way except to show that no enclosure was large enough to contain their fervor? They sang; and the song gave them life and caused the sap to well up in them and bind them together. Ten times, fifty times, they repeated the same phrase taken from the Psalms or some other portion of Scripture, and every time the fire would be renewed again with primordial passion: yes, once God and man were one, [00:01:00] then their unity was broken; ever since they have sought each other, pursued each other, and before each other have proclaimed themselves invincible. As long as the song and dance go on, they are.

The Hasidim sang. The song burst their chests and lit a thousand flames in their eyes. "If I could sing," said the celebrated Pinchas of Koretz, "I would force God to leave his throne, and to come down among us to be at our side."

The hall was stifling as if God filled it; he was the interval that separated the words and then brought them together into prayer or melody; he was the Hasid listening with closed eyes or his companion who was clapping his hands as if to applaud a victory. He was there, let that suffice; he is there and that surely sufficed. [00:02:00] Let the Angel of Death arrive if he chose and he would be disposed of forever. But he did not dare to come; he hid himself, awaiting his hour, for the angel of death is patient and knows that his hour will come.

At the far end of the room, facing the door, the Rebbe surrounded by his court, presided over the table of honor. A royal person of the line of David, he joined past glory with future promise. All those present feared and admired him and pledged him fidelity without limit, limning the forces which converged in his person and which he alone could put to use. With a single look he could destroy buildings and raise them up again. With a word he could deny the power of fate and substitute his own for it. Hatzadik gozer v'Hakadosh Baruch Hu m'kayaym, says the Talmud. "The righteous decree and the Holy One, blessed be he, obeys." If the Rebbe had willed it, he could alter the course of history. But the Rebbe sat silent. [00:03:00] His disciples sang louder and louder as if to provoke Him to action, but He remained unprovoked. The hand of the Lord

must not be forced; let Him act when he will, choosing the hour and the instrument. We offer Him only His freedom. If He exacts of His people a million children, it is because, in truth, He requires them to exalt His name (may it be blessed) and His power, for He is all of life as He is all of death. If He needs rivers of blood, let Him be pitied, for it is only that He lacks imagination. For man, the infinite is God; for God, the infinite is man . . .

The Rebbe's person gave off a pure, almost feminine melancholy, coupled with an irresistible power which first troubled men's souls and then, with a single word or gesture, calmed them. With him, combat could only be solitary. Burdens he set upon himself, while ease and comfort he desired and obtained for others. [00:04:00] He seemed to pursue his soul to mountain tops which he insisted be high and inaccessible. The Hasidim followed him with radiant confidence. For in his footsteps they were sure of reaching a serenity stripped of pride, where cause and effect would be enjoyed not in death but in eternity, where the sum of the facts would be transformed into plenitude. Let him walk first; liberation was at hand! And so they danced with joy, their hands almost touching the vaults of the universe.

This story is actually a novel, but it's built around the Lubavitcher Rebbe z"l, a Farbrengen, the first Farbrengen, the Rebbe of Lubavitch in 770 Eastern Parkway. And that description which I gave is really something that I felt. The greatness, the intensity, the beauty [00:05:00] of having all of these Hasidim together, singing for and with the Rebbe was extraordinary, for it was an act of faith. And therefore faith then became hope.

And I had a very special relationship with the Rebbe. Although, whenever I would meet him for the very first time, we had a ritual. I would always begin, "Rebbe, I am not a Lubavitcher Hasid. I am a Vizhnitzer Hasid." And then, once we had that behind us, we could continue. But first you should know where I stand.

And so, one day it was, I was in Brooklyn for Simchat Torah. It was before I was married, I could go around. (laughter) And for Simchat Torah, I came, it was very very special. Thousands and thousands of Hasidim were there, and it was raining. [00:06:00] I was standing in the door, I had as sometimes a terrible headache, and I wear a, I had a beret. I looked like James Bond in a Hasidic shtiebel. The only one without a beard, and the only one without the caftan. I didn't look Lubavitch, maybe

Vizhnitzer, but not Lubavitch. And then, all of a sudden, the Rebbe who's sitting at the table, he saw me. He winked I should come closer. But I felt so out of place, I tried to hide in myself. And the Rebbe said again, I made myself even smaller. Then he gave a kind of order and, all of a sudden, I was picked up. And, like a character in Chagall's painting, literally they pushed over their shoulders, over their heads, and I found myself on the table, standing, [00:07:00] facing him.

And he said, "Reb Eliezer, this is how you behave in Vizhnitz? You don't even say to greet the Rebbe?" I say, "Rebbe, but we are not in Vizhnitz, we are in Lubavitch." He said, "Then do what we do in Lubavitch." I said, "What do you do in Lubavitch?" He said, "We drink *l'chaim*." I said, "In Vizhnitz, too." So he poured a glass of vodka this size. And this is vodka, too, but I won't drink it. (laughter) And he said, "Well, say *l'chaim*." I said, "Rebbe, in Vizhnitz, we don't do it alone. The Rebbe also drinks." He said, "Here, too." We said the *bracha*, he drank the whole glass, so did I. With all the antihistamines I had in my body, I remember that -- of all places -- I remember that people used to say [00:08:00] it would -- *l'havdil* Galileo, that, when he died, he said, "It is turning." He didn't mean the planet, he meant his head. My head was turning. And then he said, "I imagine that in

Vizhnitz, that's enough." I said, "In Vizhnitz, it's only the beginning." He said, "In Lubavitch, too." Another glass, drink again, *l'chaim*, *l'chaim*. Then he said, "Well, now, that's it." I said, "Rebbe -- "I didn't know what I was saying. I said, "Rebbe, really." He said, "Okay, what would you like me to bless you with? What *bracha* do you need?" I said, "In Vizhnitz, the Rebbe knows." And he said, "All right. I will bless you with a new beginning." Which was so clever. It could have meant another glass, which it meant. [00:09:00] It could have meant a new beginning in our discussions about faith, about Ha*Kadosh Baruch Hu*. He meant many things. Also, Simchat Torah was my birthday, in case you don't know, you should know. He drank, and I drank and passed out. I literally passed out. And the same way I came in, you know? (laughter) And I found myself, I woke up, I was outside on the grass, I came to. And, a few steps away, there was a young rabbi, and around him, a hundred or two hundred Hasidim, and he explained to them the mystical implications of our dialogue. Since I didn't have any mystical implications, I was very curious what he was saying about it. [00:10:00]

But, of course, the main object of this story is that we had with the Lubavitcher Rebbe mainly, many, many discussions about faith. Many, and I shall, of course, read some more, and then

we shall discuss it. What does it mean to have faith today? What does it mean for a Jew to have faith? What does it mean for a Jew not to have faith? Can a Jew not have faith? Is it possible for a Jew not to have any relationship with God? Is it possible to be a Jewish atheist? I remember, in my little town, they used to say, "Even atheists have a shul." Whether God was there is for them to answer, but they didn't. So we shall discuss all that today, because this is a very special evening, and I'll tell you later why.

But first, there are some who believe that, even when they come late, they can come in. So they are late, let them come in. [00:11:00] (90 second pause in presentation during seating) [00:12:00]

Having explored, in recent weeks, the themes of darkness, struggle, and meaning, it is incumbent upon us to bring them to the logical and/or theological conclusion, which may be articulated as a question. Do they all lead to hope or despair, heresy or faith? To conclude tonight our series, we must touch on hope and faith. It won't hurt us to seek some consolation and joy in a world that needs them. [00:13:00] Both play an important role in life. What would the future be without them? If Sisyphus could have committed suicide, would he have chosen

to stay glued to his rock? To renounce that it's the possible surprises of human existence, would mean to say, "I no longer wish to prolong a past that unavoidably leads to the abyss." Yes, for Sisyphus, his misfortune was to know that his future, in its totality, will be identical to his past. He is unhappy because he is deprived of hope, thus of faith.

Is our generation different? At the outset of our series, we spoke about why people cannot have faith, nor hope. Today what is our situation? What is our attitude? Do we have faith in whom, in what? In progress? Is it because simply we go faster to so many places that we are better off? [00:14:00] Is it that we know so much about the planet that, here on the earth, people become better to one another and to themselves? Is it that, because knowledge has been acquired at such a price, wars mainly, that we are at peace with what is beyond us, above us, or in us? Did humanity really make progress?

In the nineteenth century, people were convinced that the twentieth will be a very great century. Actually it is Victor Hugo, the great poet and novelist who said it. He said, "Oh, yes," he said, "the nineteenth century was a beautiful one, but the twentieth will be a great one." Oh yes, it was great in many things, both good, but also good and evil. The progress

made in the twentieth century in evil will be probably a source of anguish for so many generations to come. Look at today, after all. [00:15:00] We believed only a few decades ago that it was possible to stop certain wars, but we didn't. Stop certain bloodshed, but we didn't. Stop evil, but we didn't and we don't. What about Kosovo? What about Rwanda? What about what's happening today in so many parts of the world? On every continent there are still people who fight each other, who hate each other.

And, as always, children pay the price. From this very place, in this place, at this table, I used to say so often, what we are doing to our children. The children who are in the world, but they're all our children. We allow them to be victims. Adults fight and they die. Adults hate each other, and children pay the price. Again, let me repeat what you say, what you must know already. There isn't a moment that passes without a child dying somewhere, somewhere [00:16:00] from starvation, violence, famine, disease. What can we do about it? We can do many, many things, but we don't.

I think, I believe, the impetus of doing too much is that we don't do anything. Take, for instance, in Rwanda. Last year, almost to the day, April 12, I was invited to deliver the

millennium lecture at the White House. Some of the people here were with me. And I called it "The Peril of Indifference." It was meant to be a long evening. The lecture was an hour or so, then questions and answers. There were people, invited guests, and one of them was a woman from Rwanda. She got up and she said, "Professor Wiesel, I'm --" I think, "-- a doctor from Rwanda. What do you have to tell us [00:17:00] about Rwanda?" And I turned to the president, who was sitting at my right. I said, "Mr. President, this question I think is for you to answer." And he blushed, and he admitted. And I said to him, "Mr. President, 800,000 people were killed there, and we could've saved them. Why didn't we?" Well, he promised that it won't happen again, but he said he went to Rwanda to apologize on behalf of the United States.

What about the 13 Jews who are now on trial in Iran? I cannot tell you enough the depth of my anguish. Not only because they are there, but because we are here, and we don't do enough. We know it already for some time that they are imprisoned, tortured, tormented. And what do we do? Some organizations tried to call [00:18:00] for a demonstration yesterday. I went and I can tell you maybe a hundred, two hundred people, in a city that has how many millions of Jews? What is happening to the Jewish heart, to the human heart? Where are the other

people? Simply to say, "We don't want these victims to be punished even more."

As for children, soon the Jews among us will speak about it, when we will celebrate Passover. I hope you will study the Haggadah, as we all do, if possible from the Haggadah which we published, Mark Podwal and I. But there is there something which I always found disturbing. The tenth plague, *Makat Bechorot*, that night, that night all the children, [00:19:00] all the firstborn were killed. Why? What did they do? What did the children do? They were absolutely innocent. Only because they were Egyptian they had to die? And God said -- it's in Haggadah and it's everywhere "*Ani.* [00:19:20] I killed them. *Llo al y'day shaliach,* [00:19:00] not through a messenger, *v'lo al y'day mal'ach* [00:19:27]- not through an angel. I did it."

And I wondered, why is God so proud of it that He takes credit? And I think it is two reasons. One, He wanted, I think, to save us from our guilt. To say, "Look, they have to die, but it's not your fault, so don't feel guilty about it." But the main thing is, I believe, it's a kind of lesson. "Only I," said God, "Only I can kill children. And you will have a problem with me, but only I can do that. You cannot. [00:20:00] Nobody should

and nobody can." And yet, children die. And then we think of what happened really in our lifetime, but not in the lifetime of the young people here, when, after all, a million and a half Jewish children were killed. And you wonder, how was it possible? Who did it, and why? How can we reconcile so many agonies and so many deaths, within whom we believe?

So I will continue with my discussion with the Rebbe. "The Rebbe sat as if there were heavy weights on his shoulders. Raising and then lowering his bushy eyebrows, he regulated the volume of the singing. At intervals he pounded the table with his fist. Ferocious and irresistible, he demanded greater enthusiasm and abandon. "Don't caress your soul as if it were a body, [00:21:00] feeding on kisses. Beat it without humiliating it; whip it, whip it without diminishing it; drive it out of yourself in order that it may rejoin its source and become one with it in *Heichal HaNeginah*, the sanctuary of melody-- it's there I await you in a secret promise." Delirious, the crowd obeyed, dancing with a vigor that might have seemed desperate. We are alone, yes, but inside this solitude we are brothers, helping one another to go forward without stumbling. Shortly the solitary self will vanish; so forcefully will we invoke God that the shell of time will be shattered, its laws abolished, and God himself will cease to exist as a stranger.

Outside it was still snowing. The pitiless winter had made the city into a ghost. The few passers-by hurried along with lowered hats, fleeing before an enemy who had cut off escape. But in this room no one was thinking of the snow.

Just then [00:22:00] the door opened and a man, wrapped up to the ears, came into the room. He took off his fur-collared coat, threw it into a corner, and was soon lost in the rejoicing crowd. . . .

And, at one point, a Hasid spoke, the hero of my book. And he spoke with as much fervor as if he had known the holiest person in the world, although that person had been dead long ago. When he first met the Rebbe, Gregor, who was the hero of that book, said to the Rebbe, "Has nothing changed?" "Nothing," said the Rebbe. "What about me?" "You haven't changed either." "And Auschwitz? What do you make of Auschwitz?" And the Rebbe said, "Auschwitz proves that nothing has changed, that war goes on. Man is capable of love and hate, [00:23:00] murder and sacrifice. He is Abraham and Isaac together. God Himself hasn't changed."

And the hero of the book says to the Rebbe with anger, "After what happened to us, how can you believe in God?" And, with an understanding smile on his lips, the Rebbe answered, "How can

you *not* believe in God after what has happened?" And in truth, had the Rebbe's answer been a question alone, I would have accepted it. But I did not accept it as an answer, because there are no answers. There is no answers. And therefore, in my books, in my novels, in my tales, in my essays, in my life, the question of God's presence in history has always preoccupied me. I still don't know. [00:24:00] I don't know why. Somewhere, I believe, and sometimes I keep on believing, that maybe one day I will understand what happened on the level of human beings. But I cannot understand the Creator of those human beings. And, at one point, the Rebbe said to my hero, "What do you want of me?" And his visitor said, "I expect you to leave your chair and sit down on the floor, your forehead covered with ashes. To you everything seems simple, and this simplicity hurts me. To you, every word transmits a spark of eternal truth. Every gesture corresponds to a well-defined inner conviction. [00:25:00] And a total of these words, these gestures you attach to God, depository of all conviction, of all truths. What I expect of you is that you raise your arms to heaven and cry out, 'No. I'll have it no more. I won't accept it, I won't, I won't.'"

Well, there's a discussion going on at that one point. The visitor says to the Rebbe, "I'll tell you a story. It's short

but simple. In a camp, one evening after work, a rabbi called together three of his colleagues and convoked a special court. Standing with his head held high before them, he spoke as follows, 'I intend to convict the creator of the world of murder, for He's destroying His people and the law He gave them from Mount Sinai. I have irrefutable proof [00:26:00] in my hand. Judge without fear, or sorrow, or prejudice. Whatever you have to lose has long since been taken away. The trial proceeded in due legal form, with witnesses for both sides, with pleas and deliberations. And the verdict was guilty.'" And then he said, "Wait, don't say anything. Wait for the end." After all, he had the last word. "On the day after the trial, he turned the sentence against his judges and accusers. They, too, were taken off to the slaughter. And I tell you this -- if their death has no meaning, then it's an insult. And, if it does have a meaning, it's even more so."

The Rebbe aged before him. Years piled upon his shoulders. He was a hundred, a thousand years old. An invisible hand traced a death mask on his face [00:27:00] in which the colors and sorrows of the rainbow mingled and faded out together. He breathed heavily through clenched teeth, without speaking. He lowered his eyelids and, when he raised them again, there was such sorrow in his dry eyes, that the visitor trembled and

wanted to throw himself on the floor and ask his forgiveness. Then he heard the Rebbe say, almost inaudibly, "What do you expect of me? Confirmation of your victory? But what victory? Confession of my defeat? But what defeat? For those who battle at the highest, these words have no meaning, for there is no victors, so what can I give you? Don't answer. I can read your thoughts. They are as open as a bleeding wound. Do you want me to stop praying and start shouting? Is that what you are after?" "Yes," whispered the visitor. Then the mask of death shattered. The Rebbe made the gesture of revolt. [00:28:00] He threw back his head and spoke in a grave hoarse voice, weighing every word, and pausing after every sentence, "Who says that power comes from a shout, an outcry, rather than from a prayer? From anger, rather than compassion? Where do you find certainties when you claim to have denied them? The man who goes singing to death is the brother of the man who goes to death fighting. A song on the lips is worth a dagger in the hand. I take this song and make it mine. Do you know what a song hides? A dagger, an outcry. Appearances have a depth of their own which has nothing to do with a depth. When you come to our celebrations, you will see how we dance, and sing, and rejoice. There is joy, as well as fury, in the Hasid's dancing. It's his way of proclaiming, 'You don't me to dance? Too bad, I'll dance anyhow. You have taken away everything reason for

singing, [00:29:00] but I shall sing. I shall sing of the deceit that walks by day, and the truth that walks by night, yes, and of the silence of dusk as well. You didn't expect my joy, but here it is. Yes, my joy will rise up. It will submerge you.'"

Well, what else can one do but use certain words in order to say what one feels. But the main thing is that we cannot invent any new argument. Oh, I had these problems, and many of us have. The problems of clinging to something, clinging to something which is older than we are. And we know the reasons why we must do that, but we also did know the reasons why we cannot do that, not as before. And so, what we do -- I think some of us at least -- we follow in the footsteps of [00:30:00] our predecessors.

If I have to speak, I use the words of Talmudic masters who had then the same problems when they, too, took God to task. Or in Hasidism, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, one of the very great defenders of the Jewish people, the people of Israel, almost against the God of Israel. For we have learned that it's possible there are two terms to describe one's position or opposition to the ruler of the world. One is called *trumiyah klapei Shamaya*, which means a kind of angry outburst against

heaven. And the other one is called *chutzpah klapei Shamaya,* arrogance, insolence against heaven. The first is permissible, [00:31:00] the other is not. And, to say simply always to God, "What are you doing with your creation? What are you doing with your people? What are you doing to your people, to all creatures who are your creatures? Why are you doing it?" I don't know the answer, but at least we can ask the question. And, once we ask the question, we know that this question actually has been already raised before, centuries before, millennia before. And it's our right and our privilege to repeat them.

And so, in one place, in one place in one moment, we know from the Talmud that, whenever there is a danger threatening our people, our forefathers, our patriarchs -- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and sometimes Moses, sometimes Jeremiah -- go to heaven, to the heavenly tribunal, and ask for intervention. And, at one point, [00:32:00] I imagined the same three protectors speaking to God.

And it goes like this. In those days, even as the half of the world was being consumed by the black flames of night, three angry old men appeared before the celestial court, asking to be heard. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the three forefathers of the

people consecrated to God by God, were desperate. Their mission had been to roam the byroads near and far, gathering the echoes of Jewish suffering in the world, and make them known to heaven. They wanted to bring it to an end, for their mission overwhelmed and saddened them. Wherever their eyes had wandered, they had beheld agony and humiliation, communities uprooted, families buried alive. Men and women, the children and the sick, the wise and insane, insane with sorrow and silence, the rich and the poor, speaking every tongue, come from every corner of the world, all swept away by the storm. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob [00:33:00] felt guilty, guilty of having seen, guilty of being helpless. This is why they were renouncing their task, and that is why, on this incandescent night, they went back up to heaven and came to speak to God of his people. And then there is a celestial chorus which sings, "*Ani Maamin*, *Ani Maamin*. Fathers of the people, ancestors of Israel, your fate is our fate. To be a Jew is to believe in that which links us, one to the other, and all to Abraham. Night calls dawn, the Jew is that call. Man calls man, the Jew is that call. God awaits man, the Jew is that wait. *Ani Maamin*, *Ani Maamin*." And it goes on because the tragedy was going on, and Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob tried. They tried. Auschwitz, Majdanek, Treblinka, Bełżec, [00:34:00] Ponar, Sobibór, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Chełmno. Nocturnal capitals in a strange kingdom, a bewitched, immense, and

timeless kingdom. The biblical kingdom where death, a sovereign, appropriated God's face as well as his attributes in heaven and on earth, and in the very heart of man. A biblical kingdom for every name of every child was there.

And the story goes on. The torturers go on torturing, the soldiers go on shooting, the victims burn in the cemeteries, rise to the highest palace if not higher. Below there are no more cemeteries. Our cemetery is in heaven. And so, the three patriarchs, in powerful unison, ask God the most human of questions, the most terrifying to why. Why, o Lord, o Father, why?

I must confess that these words are to me so special because we are now [00:35:00] just a few days before Passover. And to us Hungarian Jews, the days of Nisan and Iyar, and the month of Nisan, which is just two weeks before Passover. And then -- until just before Shavuot, so two months -- are very special. Eichmann came in on March 19 to Budapest, and he began right away. All he had was 200 people working for him. And, in less than 10 weeks, 600,000 Jews were deported. Pesach, we were still home. The last holiday that we had at home was Pesach. Shavuot, we were already elsewhere.

And, to this day, those days reverberate. And, of course, with all the questions. Now, the questions are not only about God in heaven, they are also about people. [00:36:00] What about the people who were there and saw everything? Why didn't they move? Why didn't they open their doors? What happened to the human heart, to human kindness, to generosity? What happened to compassion? And that brings me, of course, to something which is very pertinent now. What about our Christian neighbors? At that time, Christianity was tested and, unfortunately, poorly. I mean the result was poor. There were some who did risk their lives, who did whatever they could to save, but there were so few. So few were saved, and so few tried. In my town, our maid, who was a member of the family, a marvelous, marvelous woman called Maria -- I write about her all the time -- and she sneaked into the ghetto, tried to convince us, my father and family, to go with her to the hut in the mountains. The Russians [00:37:00] were 30 kilometers away or less. But how many Marias were there? Very few. Did it change? Do we have a right to say that things changed, that our relationship to Christians have changed, and theirs to us?

And here I think the accompanying theme should be hope. I think it has changed. It's not only because the Pope went to Jerusalem, because I believe that was a good moment, important

moment. He didn't say everything everybody wanted him to say. Well, *dayenu*. Whatever he said, I think *dayenu*, it's enough. A man who really, after all, a man who recognized Israel, established diplomatic relations with Israel, a man who went to shul in Rome, a man who organized a Holocaust commemorative event in the Vatican. And there is something there with what he did, and I think that is good. Who would have thought, until now, [00:38:00] that this could happen?

For two thousand years that we lived together in a Christian world -- not speaking of the Muslim world, but the Christian world -- who would have ever imagined that cardinals would come to take part in Jewish events as they do now, or the Pope himself would speak the way he spoke? Meaning giving up any potential, any ambition, any illusion, of converting the Jewish people. Now he also believes that we have to be respected, just as he wants us to respect his belief. In truth, I believe that never before have the relations between Jews and Christians been as good. So many meetings take place, so many reunions, and so many debates, and so many projects with priests and rabbis. I think it's good. We should be, I think, pleased with the development, which means hope is possible, [00:39:00] and faith now is a simple thing. I, as a Jew, want to remain Jewish, and nothing in the world can change that. Nothing, literally. And

that means that the Pope or anyone else has to respect my desire to be Jewish as a Jew. And therefore, in exchange, I will respect his desire to be Christian, or Catholic, or Protestant, as long as the respect is mutual. And I think it's now possible.

And we remember his predecessors. Paul VI came to Israel for 11 hours. He never mentioned the word, the word Israel. As for Pius XII, really, we know what he was. I know what is not being reported. What's not being reported is that there is some priest -- I don't know what rank he has in particular -- just two or three days before the Pope went to Israel, [00:40:00] CBC in Canada interviewed him. And they have a tape -- literally a tape, three hour tape, I think, or two hour tape -- on television. And he spoke about forgiveness, apologies. At one point, this priest, who is responsible for the file of Pius XII -- he's supposed to prepare the canonization of Pius XII -- and he at one point says, "I don't understand all this talk about apologies. After all, the Jews killed Christ, and they never apologized." So they sent a crew to interview me, and I simply said, "This man lives in the fifteenth century. He forgot where he is. This is something for centuries ago. You don't speak like that anymore." As for the canonization of Pius XII, I must tell you what I said on the public then. I said, "Look, I don't

care, personally. It's not my problem, it's your problem. If you Christians, Catholics [00:41:00] want him to be your saint, go ahead. He's not my saint." They stopped it, I think. There were two incidents that I think were avoided. One is the canonization of Pius XII, the other one is Isabella of Spain. Why she should be a saint is beyond me. After all, yes, for expelling the Jews from Spain, maybe, I don't know. Sure. So I think, they stopped that, too.

What will happen now? So good things also happen and, at the same time, so many things that we have not yet come to terms with. And, for us really, the problem is what does one do? What does one do with suffering? What does one do with memory? What does one do in a world that, at times, didn't want us? How often do we have to fight simply the desire, the impulse of our surroundings [00:42:00] to get rid of us, either violently or with seduction? Seduction was a tremendous weapon in their hands. They tried to seduce us. Now I believe that both arms have proved vain. They will not work.

In the same story that I tell about the rabbis who try to sue God, it was a true story. In that story, it brings back things that I learned much later. That was faith, and to this day, I don't remember how, and I don't know the reason. I don't know

the possibility. There was faith even then. Of all the prisoners, of all the victims, the worst one is [00:43:00] -- the worst agony was that of the Sonderkommandos. Some of you, some of us know their role. They were those who were made to burn the corpses, and sometimes they had to do it to their own families. And years and years ago, from here -- from this table which has been here for 33 years -- from this table, I read documents that I discovered. They discovered under the ashes, really, in Birkenau, they discovered diaries by certain Jews in the Sonderkommandos. One of them was called Zalman Gradowski, and the diary is full. Then Zalman Leventhal is half-burned, but even the parts that are not are heart-rending.

And one was written by a man who signed YARA -- [00:44:00] yud, alef, resh, alef. And nobody knew who he was really -- YARA was an acronym -- until, I think, a historian, Ber Mark discovered that there was in the Sonderkommando a *dayan*, rabbinic judge, and his name was Aryeh Leib Langfus. And he realized that YARA means Yehuda Aryeh -- Aryeh Leib -- Regel Arucha Langfus. He is the one who kept a diary. And when you read this diary, I tell you, you go to the depth of your soul, or the depth of your being, to find some spark of faith and hope. The way he writes for someone that -- literally, the quality of these writings. And, what we've found now, even with more conversations that an

Israeli journalist had with living members of the Sonderkommando -- there were very few, because usually they were killed after a few months, until the next group came in -- that there, in the shadow of the flames, some people were simply davening every morning with tallis and tefillin. Some managed to bake matzo in the crematory for Passover. If I hadn't read it, black and white, I wouldn't have believed it. And they had minyan every day. They went on praying. How did they do that? Physically, they say, physically the Germans allowed them to do it, because they said the Germans felt why shouldn't they do it? At least they won't think of rebellion. Although there was a rebellion later on.

But where did they get the strength, the force, the imagination to go on saying all these things? But they did. So there was faith. Was there hope? No, there was no hope. There was no hope because hope was something that was missing there, but faith was there, [00:46:00] and that faith was very strange. To this day, I don't understand it. I don't measure it. At one point, somebody in this story that I tell, asking what kind of *Moshiach* is this, what kind of Messiah is this who demands six million dead before he reveals himself? And a voice from heaven answers, a *bat kol*, "God knows that is enough. God wills that

is enough. God takes, and God gives back. That is enough. God breaks, and God consoles. That is enough."

And, suddenly, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are at a loss, conscious of the futility of their efforts. God chooses to be questioned. The answer is not known, nor will it be. Now, with only those who, from Babi Yar to Treblinka, fled the earth, fled from life, and they are mute like God. [00:47:00] And here they are, crushed more than ever, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, for now it is clear God knows, and remains silent. God knows, so it must be His will. The Jewish people of the black era are doomed by God. The Jewish people of tomorrow will live, live again. Perhaps they may even know glory and joy, and yet the scandal will remain. So why protest? What is the use of shouting if the future corrects nothing? That it is powerless to change the past? What is the use of pleading? The judge is avenger, there is no hope. There is no hope.

And then, again, a chorus says, "Nothing in heaven, nothing on earth, *Ani Maamin*. Nothing before, nothing after, *Ani Maamin*. Jews must die for the sake of words, sacred words, cursed words, stifled words. You must die without a sound, leave without a prayer, saying Amen. [00:48:00] Amen death, Amen night. The killers kill, the killers laugh, and God is still silent. God

is silent still, Amen. Men stumble, mothers falter, Amen. Amen divine silence, a child is frightened, an old man smiles, but God does not smile at the old man, and God does not share in the child's fear," that angel says. Abraham steps back. God does not recall him. Isaac steps back. God does not recall him. Jacob steps back, and the silence of God is God.

And then a kind of chorus sings, "Amen, Abraham. Amen, Yitzhak. Glory to you, Jacob. May you be blessed, fathers of Israel, for having chosen Israel and spoken for Israel. May you be blessed by Israel." I listen for the voice of Israel, the faith of Israel. Whether [00:49:00] Elijah comes or not, Israel opens her doors and her dreams to him. The prophet needs the Jews more than they need him. Auschwitz has killed Jews, but not their prayer. And so, having spoken, they all withdrew, and the story goes on. But then they think of their children. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob go away heartened by another hope, their children. They leave heaven and do not, cannot see, that they are no longer alone. God accompanies them, weeping, smiling, whispering, "My children have defeated me. They deserve my gratitude." And thus He spoke, and He is speaking still. The word of God continues to be heard, so does the silence of His dead children. *Ani Maamin*, Abraham, despite Treblinka. *Ani Maamin*, Yitzhak, because of Belsen. *Ani Maamin*, Jacob, because

and in spite of Majdanek. Dead in vain, death for not, *Ani Maamin*. Pray, man. Pray to God, against God, for God, *Ani Maamin*. Whether the Messiah comes, *Ani Maamin*. [00:50:00] Or is late in coming, *Ani Maamin*. Whether God is silent or weeps, *Ani Maamin*, *Ani Maamin* for Him, in spite of Him. I believe in you, even against your will, even if you punish me for believing in you. Blessed are the fools who shout their faith. Blessed are the fools who go on laughing, who mock the man who mocks the Jew who helped their brothers singing over and over again, *Ani Maamin*, *Ani Maamin*."

So we say *Ani Maamin*. And, in saying so, we affirm not only our faith, but we also affirm our hope -- that faith is possible, that faith is necessary, that faith is productive, creative. That something comes out of faith, that faith is not sterile. Faith, too, can be contagious. And, therefore, we say then that faith is not only faith in God, but also faith in His creation. One cannot separate one from the other. If I believe, I believe, I believe, and when I believe, and because I believe, I believe in everything. [00:51:00] Which means I believe that, between the creator and his creation, there is a link. And the link is you, I, all of us. Otherwise, why did God create a world? He didn't need it. Do we?

And, once we decide that there is that link which goes back far in time, which means it brings our memory closer to the memory of God Himself, we realize the responsibility that is ours, that every human being is, therefore, responsible for God's creation. And, whatever we do, we do on behalf of so many others. Since I, I'm a Levi, which means I go back to Shevet Levi, to Jacob, the first. And all of you, whether again Jew or not, we go back to the beginning, to the very beginning. And we are responsible then for all the generations that preceded ours until the first. And the responsibility [00:52:00] meant then what it means now -- simply to be more human, in a human or inhuman society. When people need help and we don't offer it, we are responsible for their suffering. If people need freedom and we are not there to offer them that freedom, we are responsible for their imprisonment. That means we become their jailers really. Is this why we are here in this world -- to become jailers of people who are innocent and deserve to be free and love?

And then we think of all the other words in the vocabulary which is ours. I only use four or five to describe a century. But then, all other words are there. Since our attitudes towards words, words have their own memory. [00:53:00] Words bear the trace of those who use them, which means if there were hundreds and thousands, and tens of thousands of men and women who use a

certain word -- and when I use it, too, and you do, in a way we go back through our using it to all those who had used it already, and we become their brother, their sister. We become their ally. We become the person who justifies their faith in their future, which is ours.

Now what does it mean then? It simply means what we have always tried to say here. Breathe, read, remember the words that exist, that existed before us and now are here. These words, once upon a time, were modern. Now they are classic. Once upon a time they were new. Now they are old. But each time we repeat these words, [00:54:00] we give them a new light and a new life, and even a new mission in life.

At the end, we speak of faith and we ask ourselves what should be there for our attitude towards the source of faith for those who believe? I insist on something which, I think, needs to be insisted. When I speak of faith, I do not claim superiority. I am surely not speaking as a triumphalist. I am not saying that only I, or those who believe the way I do, do possess the truth. I simply believe that, for us, for because of what we are, we have our way. That doesn't mean that it is the only one. Anyone who has the same respect for the other and his and her faith, I think, has the same right to speak the way I do.

Now, what should our relationship be then to God? [00:55:00] At one point, at one point, it was always my great friend and teacher Shaul Lieberman, *zichrono livracha*, who gave me an inkling of something which some of you may remember. He asked me once, he said, "Tell me, we study the Bible, we study the Talmud, we study so much. And I believe in it, it's my passion." He said, "Who is the most tragic figure in the Bible?" And I thought must be Isaac. After all, Isaac seeing his father with knife in hand, ready to kill him. He said, "No." "Is it maybe Joseph, who was persecuted by his brothers and almost killed? Sent into slavery." He said, "No." "Is it Moses, the most solitary man in the Bible? Always suffering, always in the middle, between God and people. [00:56:00] Somebody always disliked him. Somebody was always angry at him, always. If it's not God, it's the people. If it's not the people, it's some of the people. If it's not Moses -- he was always poor Moses. We feel so sorry for Moses, really." He said, "No." I said, "Then who is it?" He said, "It is God." The most tragic figure in the Bible is God. He said, "Look, we can see occasionally, read about it, God looking down at His creation, wondering, 'What are they doing with my creation?' He created a beautiful world. The world could be so beautiful, with human beings being friends, not enemies. With fathers and

children being united, and not in opposing camps, without envy, without tragedies. It would be so beautiful. He even gave us the way, a blueprint, for how to behave. 'And look what they are doing again and again.' [00:57:00] They kill and, hardly have they finished killing, another one is killing someone else. They destroyed one city and then the next year they rebuild it, but somewhere else, another city is being -- 'What are they doing to themselves?'" says Lieberman. God is the most tragic figure.

At which point it moved me at one step further, which may sound like arrogant, but it is not. And this is the Hasidic master who said, "Look, after all, at one point, we should feel sorry for our creator and judge as well. We must feel sorry for him. Look, what happened to us is not something that doesn't concern him. It does. And, when he sees his people suffering, he accompanies them into exile. He goes with them. He, too, God, too, is waiting for redemption. He, too, is waiting for the Messiah to come. And the Messiah can come only when [00:58:00] we are worthy of his coming." And he therefore said, "Look, we should feel sorry for God."

And, in one place, there was a kind of trial and, again, then what we find is that, whatever we say about God's place in our

life, is something that only we can say, because our language is limited, only because we don't know really the implications, the repercussions, the reverberations of the words, if they are not ours, if they belong to somebody else.

And so, simply in conclusion, what do we say? We say that we are all waiting. We are waiting. What are we waiting for? We are waiting for a change. [00:59:00] Waiting for liberation on a universal scale. We are waiting to see the end of stories, hoping that the end will be a good end. Hoping that, when everything is said and done, we shall not be ashamed for what of our acts, and for what we have done with what was entrusted to us. Sholem Asch was a Yiddish writer, very controversial because he wrote a lot of books of -- it was Christianity, but he was a great Yiddish writer. And, in one of his books called *Got fun Nekome, The God of Vengeance*, he describes after a pogrom, or after the Crusades, he described in a village, there was a Jew who survived, a former merchant. They had a kind of storekeeper, and nobody was there. His store was destroyed, [01:00:00] his family killed. He was alone. He sat in the street, calling people to come and buy something. And one man came up to him, "What are you selling? You have nothing. What are you selling?" And he said, in Yiddish, "Ikh farkoyf emune." He said, "I am selling faith." Well, where could one buy faith

today?

There is, in conclusion, a very beautiful story about one of the great Hasidic masters, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apt, the great-great grandfather of the Heshel that we knew. And the story is like this. At the moment of his death, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apt opened his eyes, looked at his sons and grandchildren, his disciples and their children, his devoted friends, and all those invisible men and women whom he had loved with all his heart, and he started to weep. [01:01:00] He was gripped by compassion for each one of them, and for all of them together, and he murmured, "And the Messiah, the redeemer, who is still not coming -- when will he come at last? When? We are waiting for him. We are waiting. He is late in coming. Why? Why is he so late?" He stopped to catch his breath, and then continued in an infinitely sorrowful voice, "I remember." When Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev left this world, he promised he would to go to see all our saintly ancestors. He would beg them to do something. He would not leave them in peace until the Messiah would come to save his people. But the angels deceived him. They lifted him from sphere to sphere, ever higher, from sanctuary to sanctuary, revealing to him truths that were both ancient [01:02:00] and unheard of. Lights which were clear and dark at the same time. In his delirium and his

ecstasy, he forgot his promise. Yes, too bad for us. "The Rabbi of Berditchev forgot his promise, but I," said he, "I will not forget, I swear to you. I shall not forget." And my question is, has he kept his promise?

I wish you a *chag kasher v'sameach*, a happy Passover.

(applause)

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