

Remembering the Six-Day War
2nd Annual Gershon Jacobson Memorial Lecture
Delivered by Dr. Elie Wiesel
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Dear Tzivia, you and your children are close to me, because your husband and your father was close to me.

A few words in Yiddish simply: *tzvay yor, a dor, shoyt tzvay yor, bloiz tzvay yor, es dukht zikh nekhten der levaya; er iz nokh itst mit unz.*

Two years have passed. An eternity. A short eternity.

My late friend Gershon and I were close on many levels. Our relationship was based on trust and was rooted in a profound, all-encompassing love for the people and state of Israel.

When I worked for the *Forword* and he for the *Morgen Journal*, at the United Nations and elsewhere, we never saw each other as competitors. Quite the opposite. We shared information and ideas. In my absence, I chose him to represent *Yediot Achronot*, from which I worked, first from Paris and then in New York.

When I decided to go to the Soviet Union in 1965, it was with Gershon that I worked out my itinerary. It was he who arranged my first visit with the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

When he decided to create *The Algemeiner Journal*, I was at his side. He believed in the importance of addressing Yiddish-speaking readers. He brought them joy; at times tears. When the Jewish people were triumphant, he celebrated for them and with them.

He was always proud of his sons: so full of knowledge, devotion and talent.

I miss Gershon and naturally today's lecture is dedicated to his memory.

Now yes, we shall remember forty years ago.

Actually, it's exactly forty years ago that the Six-Day War ended. The Golan was conquered by Dovid Elazar, and the State of Israel and the Jewish people all over the world were filled with ecstasy, because the central event was not the Golan, nor the Sinai desert. The central event was Jerusalem. So therefore, I shall speak tonight about forty years since the liberation of Jerusalem.

Now you, Reb Simon, mentioned the importance of Yiddish. That is my attitude as well. I have written only one book in Yiddish, the first which you mentioned, including many articles for your paper. Sometimes I say to myself, I published fifty books about

everything – about Chassidism, *Gemara*, the Bible, philosophy, mysticism – in French, but – there is a but – I write in Yiddish. It just comes out in French.

The *niggun* is there. The pace is there. The nostalgia is there. It's Yiddish. It just comes out in French.

The same thing was actually said by Meyer Veisgal about S.Y. Agnon. He said to Agnon: "Actually you write in Yiddish. It just comes out in Hebrew."

So there are many, many Yiddish writers who write in other languages, but truly, they all write in Yiddish.

Now it's forty years. It's a biblical generation; a generation has passed. So then we live in biblical times. The Jews have learned that. We have learned because whatever we do always goes to the extreme. It's either very good or very bad. Never boring. Whatever we undertake has biblical connotations.

Forty years ago I was in Israel. And at the time, literally, every person in Israel, adult and child, agnostic or fervently religious, all believed they were living in biblical times.

The fact is that when the army attacked in Sinai, at many points they used the Bible in order to conquer certain positions. The names were biblical names. All of them. Refidim was a Biblical name, not one simply taken from modern history, but ancient history.

And therefore, those events remained with me to this day. I was at the UN and I remember that three weeks before the war began, I listened to all the speeches. And when we listened and we reported those speeches, fear entered us. I remember Ahmad Shukeiri, the first PLO president (the predecessor to Arafat) who simply said, "Yes, there is going to be war, and we shall throw all the Israelis into the sea and there will be no more problem."

Many of the Arab speakers echoed his words, and there was no one who would speak up for Israel, except one, Arthur Goldberg, the American Ambassador to the UN; and all his fervent Jewishness was invested in his attitude at the UN.

Stories that cannot yet be told about him and his diplomatically helping Israel attain its military victory. He's the only one who would speak up on behalf of Israel. All the others remained silent.

And many of us still remember the feeling we had that this time Israel, *chas v'chalila*, G-d forbid, may lose and that would be the end. We felt it so strongly that a great philosopher in France, Raymond Aron, an assimilated Jew, said that he too was worried. He published an article on the front page of *Le Figaro*, an important daily, saying, "I do not want to survive Israel."

He became involved in Israel because of that, and I confess, many of us felt like that. At that time, I was not yet married, and I knew that when the war began I would go there, thinking I would help. My Israeli friends laugh at me or are angry with me that I didn't have that much faith in the Israeli army; but I felt I was going to Israel to do I'm not sure what, stupidly, because I couldn't help, but at least I would be there when terrible things would happen.

The first day was a Monday. The war was already on and Moshe Dayan, who was very clever, ordered a total news blackout. On the Israeli side, there was absolutely no news. All the news reports came from the Arabs.

And they, it's not *v'yechazeik Hashem* ("G-d made them strong"), it's *va'yesamvel*, something happened to them. They were convinced that they were winning the war. But they had lost the war during the first three hours when the entire air force was destroyed. They lost the war. The war was finished.

But they were convinced that they had won it. And the radio reports came in – I heard them – saying, "Beersheba is burning. Tel Aviv is burning."

And then the next day we heard the news. It was a great victory.

I, of course, went to Israel. At that time, all the international airlines had stopped. The only one flying to Israel was El Al from Paris, not from here. There was still an airline called TWA, and I got the last seat on that plane to Paris. I was tired and didn't sleep all night. And here comes a funny story (there has to be something funny in this too...)

I got the last seat literally next to the door. The plane took off, and the stewardess, a very beautiful girl with dark hair, came up to me and said, "I know who you are." And I said to myself, "Really. Come on. I've worked all my life to know who I am and she already knows who I am!"

And she said, "I read your book." And usually I would have said, "Which one?" because she meant it in singular but by then I had already published at least ten books. But she was so beautiful I didn't say anything.

I was treated with cognac, my goodness, how I was treated! And I don't drink, but I had to drink. And at one point when the others were already sleeping, she said to me, "You know, I know your book so well, but there's one chapter in it I don't understand, Mr. Schwarz-Bart."

I became very modest and I said, "Lady, I am not Andre Schwarz-Bart." She said, "Come on. I know you are incognito." And I said, "Lady, I am not." And she said, "Come on!" And she went on treating me so beautifully I felt guilty that I was actually living this lie.

So I said to her, "You know, young lady, I'll tell you why you mistake me for him. Number one, I'm also a writer. Number two, he wrote one book and I wrote a few, but at

least one of them has the same subject. The title of his great, great book is *The Last of the Just*. And third, it actually once happened that either his picture was on my book, or my picture was on his book, and that's where you're making the mistake. And we also resemble each other!"

And she said, "You know, Mr. Schwarz-Bart. I thought I knew everything about you. But what I didn't know is that you have a sense of humor!"

So what could I do anymore? I kept quiet!

Twenty minutes before we arrived in Lod – and it was so emotional to arrive in Israel at a time of war – she came back to me, and this time she was less beautiful for she was somewhat arrogant, and she said, "I don't know who you are." I said, "At last!" She said, "One thing I do know, you are not Andre Schwarz-Bart."

And I was stupid enough to say, "Prove it."

And she said, "I'll prove it to you. He's sitting there." And he was. Andre and I were good friends, very good friends. So I jumped up and he jumped up and we embraced and I said, "What are you doing here?" And he said, "What are *you* doing here?"

We both came to bear witness.

So we came there. I went quickly to Jerusalem. I arrived there one day after Jerusalem was liberated. And I will never forget that day.

You had the feeling that everything in the entire country had stopped. The soldiers stopped fighting, although the war was still going on in the desert and later in the Golan. Everybody was running. Running to Jerusalem. We had the feeling that history was running. Maybe *kavyochol* Himself was running to Jerusalem.

When I came to the Wall – and at that time the Wall was still a small little street, not a piazza like it is today – to see what was happening there is what feeds my imagination to this day.

I would go to the Wall every single day. And I began actually whispering a story that I was going to write. I would whisper it, write it with my lips, and in the evening go to the hotel to write it down.

What had we seen there? "A miracle," somebody said. Of course it was a miracle. Otherwise how could we have won? The miracle was more psychological than military. The entire country went through a mystical event. It was illogical; there was no logic in it. And yet it happened. Therefore, soldiers, paratroopers, who came from Shomer HaTzair, from Left Wing, atheistic milieus, came to Wall and they cried. They wept!

Why should they weep there? They wept.

So forty years ago we all felt that something happened that we don't understand. That whatever happened would affect our lives forever.

Every day I used to see Levi Eshkol, the Prime Minister, whom I had known from before (I loved that man; he was so quiet, sober, discreet, and he suffered a lot because of politics) and he said to me, "Go and see Yitzchak Rabin, the Commander in Chief of the Army.

So I went to see him. The problem was, he was very timid and so was I. He was so timid that the story is, when he got married to Leah, there were so many people there that he turned to Leah and said, "Leah, this is the last time I am going to marry you."

He was so timid that he didn't speak. And so was I. So I didn't speak. So for many, many long minutes, we didn't speak. And that's how we became good friends.

Later I asked him, "Tell me – what do you think is the effect of the war?"

And he said, "It will take thirty years for the Arabs to overcome their defeat. And it will take thirty years for us to overcome our victory."

He was a great general but a very poor prophet. Six years later: the Yom Kippur War. But until then, what did we know? We all felt like we were in seventh heaven. People loved one another. All of a sudden there was no wall, no difference between religious and non-religious. All of a sudden, people were human. Warm, compassionate, loving.

Forty years later there are people in Israel who say it was a mistake. *There are*. Some of them sit in Parliament and they say, "They should have given up everything right away." The first to say that was Ben Gurion himself who was then out of power. He came to the Old City, turned to the generals, and simply said, "Give everything back except Jerusalem."

The philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz said exactly the same thing: give everything back. Why? Simply because they said that this was the time. And in France, Pierre Mendès France, a former Prime minister, a good Jew, also believed this is the time for Israel to give back all that it had taken, and therefore, they will make peace with the Arabs.

Eshkol was ready. Many people were ready. Except that the Arabs had a meeting in Khartoum, and instead of saying to the Israelis (there were already secret negotiations or at least contact) "Okay, let's try and do something," they came out with a charter which was called the "Three No's." No to Israel's existence. No to negotiation. No to any recognition of Israel. Nothing.

Israel had no choice and they remained.

Nevertheless people in Israel today believe that whatever is happening in Israel today, and I'll be the last to say things here about corruption, scandals, and so forth which I will not speak about because I as a rule have made it almost a *neder* that I will never, never criticize or say anything bad about Israel outside of Israel. A man with my past, a man with my moral philosophy, believes that I must always be there with Israel, in times of happiness, in times of sorrow; when Israel is dancing when Israel is weeping. I will always be there.

But today there are people who say that maybe it was a mistake. They should have given it back. And not only that, give it back NOW. And things have changed.

Whatever Israel will do, one thing is clear. The event that took place forty years ago still has a lasting effect on the Jewish psyche around the world, and on the soul and spirit of the Israeli people in Israel itself.

Again, the main thing was, of course, Jerusalem. Strangely enough, it happened as a mistake on the part of Jordan. Eshkol, the Prime Minister, had sent three messengers to King Hussein. America tried to prevail upon Hussein. France tried to prevail on Hussein not to enter the war. But Hussein entered the war. From his point of view, that was one of the greatest mistakes of his life. Why?

The Israeli Mossad occasionally broadcasted a taped conversation between Abdul Gamal Nasser, The President of Egypt, and Hussein: Nasser said to Hussein, "My brother Hussein. What are you waiting for? We won the war. Israel is already defeated. And if you don't enter the war now, you will not take part in the victory."

And the idiot believed him. When Nasser said that, there was absolutely no way for the Arabs to win, but he didn't know it; and Nasser didn't know it. He was misled by his own generals who were afraid to tell him the truth.

So Hussein believed it. Had Hussein not entered the war, all of Jerusalem would still be Jordan. The West Bank would still be Jordan – and then what – would it be better?

Whenever the discussions develop about the other side, we must never forget.

There is a civil war in Gaza now. Israel has nothing to do with that. Just like in Iraq, Israel has nothing to do with the war in Iraq. Surely not. And nevertheless, those who are the enemies of Israel say again and again, falsely, arrogantly, that it's all Israel's fault. If Israel would give up the territories, the war in Iraq would stop? The war in Gaza would stop? Furthermore, what happened? Israel unilaterally withdrew from South Lebanon. Came Hizbollah and established bases to fire hundreds and thousands of rockets, missiles into Israel.

Israel evacuated Gaza, unilaterally, and what happened? Hamas established missile bases in Gaza. So Israel must ask itself the question: What are we to do? How far can we go? What else can we give up? For what? And for whom? And with whom?"

The Palestinians democratically elected the government of Hamas, whose charter publicly, openly, clearly speaks of the destruction of Israel. So forty years later, Israel is again facing challenges and dangers, and what really can we do? I believe that again, whatever we do, we must do it for Israel.

All that is because of Jerusalem. When I came there, among the very first pages I wrote about that is this:

Jerusalem.

The face, visible yet hidden, the sap and the blood of all that makes us live or renounce life.

The spark flashing in the darkness, the murmur rustling through shouts of happiness and joy. A name. A secret. For the exiled, a prayer. For all others, a promise.

Jerusalem.

Seventeen times destroyed yet never erased. The symbol of survival. Jerusalem, the city which miraculously transforms man into pilgrim. No one can enter it and go away unchanged.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslev, the storyteller of Chassidism, liked to say that no matter where he walked, his steps turned toward Jerusalem. As for me, I discovered it in the sacred word, without taking a single step. I saw it then, as I see it now.

Here is the Valley of Yehoshafat, where one day the nations will be judged; the Mount of Olives where one day death will be vanquished. The Citadel, the Fortress of David, with its small turrets and golden domes, where sounds shattered and disappeared. The Gate of Mercy, heavenly bolted, that anyone other than the Messiah tried to pass, and the earth will shake to its foundation.

And higher than the surrounding mountains of Moab and Judea, here is Mount Moriah, which since the beginning of time had lured man in quest of faith and sacrifice. It was here that he first opened his eyes and saw the world that henceforth he would share with death.

It was here that, maddened by loneliness, he began speaking to his Creator and then to himself. It was here that his two sons, our forefathers discovered that which links innocence to murder and fervor to malediction.

It was here that the first believer Abraham erected an altar on which to make an offering of both his past and his future. It was here with the building of the Temple that man proved himself worthy of sanctifying space as G-d had sanctified time.

The city of unshakeable memory, I admit loving it. I even admit loving its hold over me. Distant lands no longer lure me. The seeker is weary of seeking; the explorer, of self-excitement. Beneath the sky in which colors and faces clash, steps in the night reverberate to infinity. One listens spellbound, overwhelmed.

Follow them far enough and you will take by surprise the king lost in a dream, a prophet who reduces life and language to dust.

Why, then, won't you follow them? You are afraid because you are who you are.

This is how I wrote the whole book.

Rabbi Nachman says somewhere that he wanted to turn his prayers into stories. I wanted to turn my stories into prayers. And that was a prayer. And to this day, of all the books I have written, there are certain pages here that I hope will remain, just as prayers remain, beyond the ages, crossing the frontiers of time and human development.

I have seen Jerusalem strangely enough three times. The first time was the darkest of all times. When, in 1944, the Jews of my town, Siget, arrived wherever we arrived, and we didn't know anything about where we were; we had never heard the name of the place.

But all of a sudden I saw people gathering there, from all over the exile. Young and old. Learned and ignorant. Workers, artists, all came, speaking all languages, representing all spheres of human activity. And they were there walking, and in my childish mind – I come from such a religious, Chassidic family I believed in the coming of the Messiah – I wanted that maybe the Messiah has come... maybe... and therefore they all came to greet him. There. My G-d. There.

The second time was in Russia. I said that I spoke to Gershon a lot about Russia before going there because he was the best, qualified person for me to talk to about it. And I later wrote in my book, *The Jews of Silence*: I described not the silence of the Jews there, but the silence of the Jews here: to their courage, to their obstinacy, to their loyalty to our people.

And I described Simchat Torah; Simchat Torah in Moscow. And all of a sudden, thousands, tens of thousands of young boys and girls came from all over town to sing and dance. While we were dancing with the Torah inside, they were dancing outside – dancing and singing Hebrew songs.

And I had the feeling that that too belongs to the Messianic period. There. What they had done, rediscovering their roots, their memories, although at that time, 1965, there were no Jewish schools there and very few synagogues. I used to meet them in cemeteries. I taught them things that I knew about Judaism including Jewish songs and Jewish stories. In cemeteries!

I didn't speak Russian and had a translator with me at the time, and at one point we stopped with a group to watch a group, a choir conductor, a girl (and I was lucky, again, she was very beautiful) and she was saying something in Russian: "Who are we?" They said "Evrei!! Jew!"

"What do we want to be?"

"Evrei!"

And so forth and so forth, "Evrei!" Each time, "Evrei, Evrei, Evrei."

And they were exuberant.

At one point I asked her, "I see you speak about Jews. Are you Jewish?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Tell me. What do you know about Jews, about Judaism?" She said, "Nothing. All I know is what I read in the newspaper." What did the newspapers say? That the Jewish people are imperialists, hungry for power, false. All the anti-Semitic propaganda was there.

"Then why do you want to be Jewish?" I asked. "I don't know," she answered.

I left her. And then she ran after me (the only time in my life that a girl ran after me) and she pulled me by my sleeve and said, "Sir, I don't know who you are, but you asked me a very good question – why I want to be Jewish? – I'll tell you why: Because I love to sing."

At that point I was ready to embrace her and kiss her. She said something so naïve, so beautiful. A Jew is someone who sings. And you know, we know, what it means. The song, the song, is the language of the soul.

When you are happy, you sing. When you are unhappy, you also sing. You want to sing, you sing. You don't want to sing, you also sing. There is a song for everything. So I felt good.

Years later I was in Israel. And I would go when I was in Israel to the airport.

At that time, the *aliyah* from Russia was secret, clandestine. They would come to the airport, Lod, to a special place and nobody could go there. It was very secret.

But I felt like an in-law there at the wedding. And I would come in the morning at four o'clock. And once I was there when the plane arrived from Vienna and I saw the Jews come down. All the Jews came down and kissed the ground. And then I saw a beautiful girl. And of course I recognized her. She didn't recognize me – I didn't make any impression on her, but she made an impression on me.

So I came and shook her hand, and she thought I was a functionary with the *Sachnut*, the Jewish Agency. But I didn't let go.

At that point she identified me. And she said, "Am I going to sing *now*."

Well, that Simchat Torah for me was powerful. I had the feeling in a way that, as we used to say, *Vilna Yerushalayim d'Lita* (Vilna is the Jerusalem of Lithuania). Jerusalem moves! I had the feeling *Yerushalayim d'Moscow*, Jerusalem was in Moscow.

And of course the third time was the one I described to you.

And therefore, when I think today of Gershon, I remember we spoke about it a lot, because I wrote about that quite a lot: articles and articles in the *Forword* and then in my book.

In conclusion, I'll read for you part of a prayer really that I wrote there standing in front of the *Kottel HaMaaravi*, and it goes like this:

*I heard a voice inside me saying,
I am the eye that looks at the eye that is looking
I shall look so hard that I shall be blinded.
So what?
I shall sing.
I shall sing with such force that I shall go mad.
So what?
I shall dream.
I shall dream that I am David son of Sarah. I tell my mother what I have done with her
tears and her prayers. I tell her what I have done with my years and my silences.
And my life.*

Why so late?

*I had no strength mother. I could not accept your absence.
If I have never written you it is because I have never left you.
You were the one who went away and ever since I see you going away, I see nothing else.*

*For years now you have been leaving me.
Vanishing into the distance.
Swallowed by the black and silent tide.
But the sky that drowned the fire cannot drown you.
You are the fire.
You are the sky.
And this vision which haunts me, it is my offering to you.
And the silence. It is on your lips.
I'll find it and give it back.*

*Wandering beggar or prisoner, it is always your voice I seek to set free inside me.
And each time I address myself to strangers, I am speaking to you.*

*So I contemplate the wall which bears my mother's face.
She had two faces, my mother.
One showed the daily sorrow,
The vochedike, from Sunday to Friday.
The other reflected the Shabbosdike, the serenity of the Sabbath.
And now this is the only one she has left, the Sabbath face.*

*A human trunk presses toward the wall, nestles against it and I stand aside and look.
In a flash I see from one end of the world to the other, and further, into my deepest self.*

*I see all those that stood here before me
Bent with humility
Or touched with ecstasy.
Here before this very wall,
Kings and prophets,
Warriors and priests,
Poets and philosophers
Rich and poor.
All those who throughout the ages had pleaded everywhere for a little compassion, a
little kindness.
It was here they came to speak of compassion and kindness.*

Here, in this place, a Sage of Israel once remarked, "The stones are souls,"

It is they who each day they built an invisible Temple.

*Still it is not here that I will find my mother's soul.
The soul of my mother found shelter in fire and not in stone.
And to think that her own dream had been to come here and pray and to meditate and
cry.*

Well, I shall dream in her place.

*But what about that old Chassid who comes running?
Where have I seen him before?
Dressed in a black caftan and black felt hat, his prayer shawl under his arm,
He hurls himself against the wall as if to smash his head, hypnotized by the stones, he
feels them, caresses them and sobs inwardly without shedding a tear.
For a moment, I observe him as if he were a stone among the stones.
Then I see soldiers lifting him up, tossing him into the air, yelling,*

*"You must not weep, not any more. The time for lamentations is over. We must rejoice,
old man, we must cry our joy to the wall. It needs that joy and so do we."*

One circle is formed, then another. Everyone is dancing. And on a carpet of shoulders the old man is dancing too. He's not afraid of falling or flying away; he's not afraid of anything and neither are we.

Someone breaks into song. And that song fills the square. The city. And the whole country. "Louder and louder," the old man shouts, bouncing back each time with new vigor, greater fancy.

He is in ecstasy and so are we. Someone near me succumbs to tears. Someone is weeping and it's not I.

Someone is weeping and it is I.

I ought to be afraid, I know that. The miracle is too violent. The joy too intense; it cannot last forever.

But I also know that I am dreaming.

I am at the top of a mountain.

I trip over a pebble.

I fall.

I see the abyss growing darker as it approaches darker than the dark eye of the tempest.

I am afraid but fear itself is part of the dream.

So my friends, it was a dream forty years ago. But the years go. And the dream remains.

And all our prayers are that the dream, the dream of the Jewish people, and the humanity that it anchors, that dream should continue. And it will. Thank you.

* * *

Simon Jacobson, concluding the evening:

All we can say, *amen v'amen*.

Thank you so much Dr. Wiesel. I speak on behalf on behalf of my father, *bro kara d'avuha*, for you honoring him with your heartfelt words. And now we will show a short video, less than 10 minutes, which you'll see in visual the story the prayer and the song that we just heard. So please, the video.

After the video:

Thank you everyone so much for attending this evening. We look forward to welcome you at future simchas. May we always celebrate together, and embrace the dream that Dr. Wiesel so eloquently expressed, the dream of *Yerushalayim* and *Shuvat Tzion* with all the

Jews from all over the world, together with peace in the entire world. May it be fulfilled in our day. Amen. *Kein yehi ratzon.*

Thank you so much.