Krista Tippett, host: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being.

Ariel Burger: Well, it’s a very timely question, because just this week I reached out to my first-grade rebbe, my first-grade teacher, who was a Hasid, which means he comes from the Hasidic tradition and the same tradition that Elie Wiesel came from. And I grew up with memories of this teacher, who seemed as if he had come from the Old World 200 years ago. He dressed in the traditional Hasidic fashion, with a long coat. He had pe’ahs, the side curls, that literally went down to his ankles, although he wore them, usually, bound up behind his ear. But one time I saw him let his hair down, and I have this vivid image of that. And finally, through a friend, I tracked him down just this week and had a conversation with him. And it was very beautiful, a kind of reunion with one of my first teachers, who really introduced me to the study of bible and the commentaries. And I remember very vividly the first letter that I ever saw, as a six-year-old, in the Chumash — I learned the alphabet before that, but the first time I sat down to learn Chumash, the bible in Hebrew. And I remember that letter like it was today.

And then there was a moment, even earlier than that, when we learned the alphabet. And this was an old-world custom that they had in my school, where they taught us the aleph-bets, the Hebrew alphabet, and then they gave us a sugar cube. And I can taste it. I can taste that sugar cube, and it’s kept me going in many ways, over time.
Tippett: When you speak about words and — Jewish tradition so reverences language and the powers of language, words as making worlds. And I’m so fascinated, I could talk to you for an hour about this. But also, even the spaces between letters and words is as important, also, [laughs] as the letters that you learn. There’s such richness. It’s so layered, that experience.

Burger: And maybe more important; maybe the white space is more important. And if you ever look at a traditional page of an old Jewish text, like an old Hebrew bible with commentaries or an old edition of the Talmud, which is the classic rabbinic work of the oral tradition, there’s text in the middle, and then there are commentaries around the sides, and then there’s space around the edges. And I really believe that — in some ways, of course, the text is most authoritative and most important; it’s closest to Sinai, is what we say. It’s closest to Mount Sinai. It’s closest to the origin. But it’s really the white space around the edges that ultimately is most important, because that’s where we get to write our questions, and we get to expand and grow and evolve a tradition that, without us, would have long since become either dormant and rigid, or would’ve disappeared entirely.

And I think that’s not just true for Jewish text; I think it’s true in general. Creativity is essential, and having a dialogue with the old ideas and the old wisdoms, and bringing them forward with our own voice and our own questions, that, to me, is the engine of Jewish creativity and human survival in many ways.

Tippett: When I pick up your book now, Witness, which is lessons from Elie Wiesel’s classroom — which you wrote from, it sounds like, countless notebooks that you took of your time as his student, and teaching alongside him, to some extent — the discussions that you describe in that classroom about good and evil and how to be moral, and how to engage difference and how to engage serious, complex questions and disagreement, where good and evil are not at all clear, or what to do with that, it all feels so resonant with, I think, the questions we know that are with us, not just in this country, in the United States, but in our world in this young century. And I wonder if, for you also in this time, if that classroom has been present to you, that classroom that formed you, but also the questions that came out of that and the kind of conversation that was possible there.

Burger: This is where I live and what I think about all the time. And the classroom is with me all the time, as it is for many other students of Elie Wiesel. And I think there are so many, not only pieces of content or teachings or stories that are very, very helpful and useful for us right now, but also tools and methods from religious traditions and wisdom traditions more broadly, that we can repurpose or refine or bring back to life or re-contextualize and use in ways that perhaps the authors of these ideas and tools would never have imagined. And so we know that education isn’t a guarantee of moral sensitivity, but he taught us that memory is the ingredient.

And then there’s a lot more from, specifically, from religious traditions that I think we need right now — and not just in a religious context; not just in churches and synagogues and mosques, but in the street and in all of our interpersonal relationships — ideas that we don’t necessarily take seriously, but if we did, I imagine a world that’s very different.

Tippett: Through the pandemic and all the loss and all the death that we’ve experienced as societies and as a world, it was just so clear that we don’t know how to mourn collectively. And I kept thinking of the word “lamentation” and the rituals of lamentation. And I had a conversation, at some point in 2020, with a group of rabbis, and they were talking about how that ritual in its roots had an impulse to be offered up to the whole
community, to the world around, not merely inside the walls of the synagogue. And that just got my imagination so fired up about what — I even think the word, “lamentation,” in this period we’ve all been through, lands like kind of a relief; like, “Oh, that’s something we could do. That’s something we could learn. That’s something we could do together.”

Burger: That word has great dignity. And I think that’s signaling that we need to honor our grief. And it’s one of the many things I think we run away from. One of the things we’re taught to run away from is grief. There are other things, too; I think we’re taught to run away from great joy, also. And I’m a follower of a great Hasidic master, named Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, who passed away in 1810 and lived in the Ukraine. And he really emphasized the softening of the heart, the biblical verse that says, “Give me a heart of flesh.” And the goal of a lot of the practices in that stream of Jewish mystical thought is to deeply open to experience, whether it’s joy or pain. And ultimately, it’s really about finding the places where weeping and joy can come together or where yearning and delight can come together. It’s not a feeling of happiness; it’s not superficial happiness; it’s not wanting to jump up and down, dancing. It’s grief; it’s sitting in grief. But just the act of acceptance of what’s there ...

Tippett: Letting it be true.

Burger: ... and not resisting, and welcoming and dignifying — I think that comes with a certain kind of joy.

Tippett: You mentioned this language of memory, this notion of memory. It’s a word we all know and hear a lot, and it’s very layered, in terms of what you mean when you say how learning can save us, how memory is in fact the thing that can join knowledge and ethics. So you’re not talking, necessarily, formally about education, and also not just the transmission of information, but what is it about this kind of memory that is transformative.

Burger: I’m really obsessed with the question of the mechanics of moral transformation. How do we not just talk about the ideas of kindness and justice and so on that we wish for, that we aspire to, but to go beyond platitude and cliché and really get in there with what happens at an individual, nervous system level, what happens in a culture, what happens in a group of people, and how do we start to work with that. And I think what professor Wiesel meant by memory was the specific tools, the specific encounters, the specific celebration of questions that can lead to that kind of transformation.

And it’s not just — as you can tell and as you know very well, it’s not just an intellectual experience. And so part of the question is, what do we need to bring to educational moments and encounters, beyond a student’s brain or beyond a teacher’s brain, and beyond the knowledge that they’ve acquired; and how do we do that? How do we bring our hearts and our hands and feet into the learning experience so that we can really encounter something that changes us? And do we want that? Are we open to that? And how do we become more open to that?

And part of it, for me, is just about the very simple thing of paying attention to what we’re yearning for. And I think one of the great, powerful things about this period we’re living through is that there’s a lot of suffering, and there’s a lot of anxiety and a lot of isolation and, really, a lot of darkness, but there’s also, with that, a lot of yearning. Things that we took for granted are no longer there for us. And we can’t see each other’s faces, because we’re all wearing masks. And a lot of people are losing their sense of smell, even if they get a mild case of COVID. And things that we took for granted are suddenly very precious.
And when you start to ask questions out of that yearning — what might the world look like? How do we not go back to the world that was? How do we reimagine?

[music: “The Callow” by Blue Dot Sessions]

Tippett: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being, today with Ariel Burger, who is a rabbi and artist and student of the late, extraordinary Elie Wiesel.

[music: “The Callow” by Blue Dot Sessions]

Something I found that you presented in 2019 — which in some ways is not that long ago, and in other ways feels like another world. But it was at the Jewish Futures Conference. I found this teaching that you did on — and so one of the things you say about Elie Wiesel, it sounds like you all talked a lot about “moral madness” — and boy, does that sound like an apt way to talk about the world at this part, in this century, right now — and that the way to meet that is not necessarily a kind of straightforward sanity. I kept thinking of Heschel and his idea of creative maladjustment. [laughs] And I even just recently was thinking about that, because I came across — do you know the sermon that Martin Luther King, Jr., preached at Temple Israel Hollywood in the ’60s?

Burger: No, I don’t think so.

Tippett: He didn’t quote Heschel, but he and Heschel were great friends. And anyway, in this, he called for, he said, “Maybe the world is in need of the formation of a new organization: The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment — men and women who will be as maladjusted as the Prophet Amos, who, in the midst of the injustices of his day would cry out in words that echo across the centuries … as maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln, who had the vision to see that this nation could not survive half slave and half free,” on and on.

So these elements of holy madness that you taught, the first one is truth-telling — you told a story to illustrate that, about a woman walking in the marketplace. Do you know this one I’m talking about? Her teacher called to her and said, “Have you looked at the sky today?” And she looks up for the first time and remembers that she’s made for something more than trading in the marketplace. That’s a different way to talk about the truth, the gravity, and the expansiveness of the truth we’re called to than I think we often debate in our society as truth-telling.

Burger: I think in that story, and in many traditions, truth is really the search for truth. It’s not primarily about facts and data. We need facts and data, and that’s been an endangered species, in many ways, for a while too. But there’s a certain way of opening up to a larger perspective and saying, “I need to reflect, and I need to challenge my assumptions. I need to become aware of my assumptions.” And this is a big part of my own experience as a student. The best things I’ve ever learned were not content. They were some sort of contrast with someone else’s way of thinking that at first seemed really strange to me, that I allowed in, that I allowed to question me. And I, through that process, became aware of my own assumptions and the lens through which I was looking.

And I think a lot about that metaphor of the lens. That story is about looking down or looking up at the sky, and paying attention to material things or paying attention to a bigger perspective, and being reminded of that. And by the way, that’s a specific practice also, in certain Hasidic traditions, is literally to look at the sky every the morning.
Tippett: Really?

Burger: There’s an idea that you receive consciousness from looking at the sky. So I think, on a very simple level, on a psychological level, it reminds you that the world is big. And that gives an important perspective, if I’m worrying about something small or preoccupied with something small. It allows me to go deeper and to reach higher just on a very simple level. There are also mystical levels to that idea, but I like the psychological level.

Tippett: There are mystical levels also, I think — you said a minute ago you’re so interested in how can we get really granular and use all the knowledge we have, even about how our bodies work, to pin these aspirations to action. I feel like some of the things we’re learning scientifically, or maybe that those of us who aren’t scientists are being invited in a new way to take in, is how even — so we say one of the things that feels most reliable is, you look up and the sky is blue, right? But that the sky is not blue; [laughs] that our eyes make color of light. So even that, looking up at the sky, means something different to me now than it did. And it’s a good reality check. It’s like, oh, there’s more possibility and more reality here than my senses automatically tell me.

Burger: Right. There’s a place for simplicity, too, but there’s often a speed — we’re moving with such speed, instead of taking time to really question, how am I seeing this, and how am I perceiving, and how am I hearing, and what am I missing? And who’s missing around the table? And what tools are we missing in our work? And what are we taking for granted? Those are the questions, to me, that lead to, that get at the mechanics of moral transformation. It’s just a starting point. And really, the purpose is not to answer those questions; it’s to really live with those questions for life and to continue to ask, over and over again, and never to really settle into a complacency.

Tippett: I am curious, when you say there are other mystical ways to take that analogy farther — just do that a little bit, the looking up at the sky.

Burger: Well, this goes to fundamental things about God and creation. Many of the mystics, at least in Jewish tradition, because Judaism begins with monotheism, many of the mystics are dealing with the fundamental question of, what’s the relationship between one God and the multiplicity of things, events, colors, tones, people, personalities that we find in the world? How do those things fit together? Why is there difference, if everything is part of one God?

And that’s really the driving question for many mystical texts. And so different traditions and schools of thought have developed different bridges between the one and the many. And to me, the most important thing about that — it gets very, very complex, but to me, that’s not the interesting part. The interesting part is, if we assert that there is a oneness underlying all difference, what does that do to our politics? And what does that do to things like conflict and dialogue? And how do we find a way of creating a world in which there’s a sense of unity and a sense of connection, and it’s being practiced with deep respect, deep listening; when I encounter someone who disagrees with me, I’m not just shutting them down or running away. I’m making room for it, because there’s something of God in that position; there’s something for me to learn, in that position, without collapsing all of that into uniformity or conformity. That’s where this mystical stuff gets really important to me.

Tippett: And that word, unity, is out there in our political life right now, and it’s controversial.
I also love this, because this feels connected, to me — you said that one of the virtues, one of the ways to be maladjusted positively is to push against false dichotomies, which are everywhere in this culture, and claim the countercultural both/and paradoxical thinking, and that, you said, perhaps Elie Wiesel’s favorite phrase was “and yet.” And this idea that, even going back to Genesis, that even the idea that “helpmeet” — the word that gets translated as “helpmeet,” even the first couple of Adam and Eve — that there’s an otherness, actually, in the actual language and imagery in that story. You’ve said this: “The first couple are the first friends, the first strangers, and the first to encounter an ‘other.’”

Burger: The first human relationship. And that phrase in the original Hebrew is so paradoxical. It’s really not “helpmeet” — I don’t even know what a “helpmeet” really means.

Tippett: I know; I think that’s the King James version. It was that Eve is just created to become Adam’s helpmeet, is the language a lot of people learned, in church, at least.

Burger: Right; I’ve seen it too, from a young age, but I don’t know what a “meet” is. [laughs] But the original Hebrew is really fascinating, because it’s two words. It’s not one word. And they’re two words that mean, really, the opposite: one is “helper” and one is “against him.” And that’s the real key to understanding this idea of otherness, that really one of the best things that you can do for me, one of the best ways you can help me in my search for truth, which is a never-ending search, and my desire to improve myself and become a better person, is to confront me with your different perspective, your different opinion, your different take on things. And the way that professor Wiesel asked the question is, what does it mean to disagree for the sake of the other?

Tippett: You quote Elie Wiesel saying, “To engage with controversy does not mean to refuse to listen,” which sounds like such a simple sentence, but it’s almost impossible in a lot of the places where we engage otherness, at least in public right now.

Burger: I want to share that I think there are two challenges with otherness, really. One is, we sometimes fall into the trap of not listening, or feeling threatened, or closing ourselves to the other.

But we also make a different mistake, which is to be overly familiar with the other and to think that we already know the other. And one of the things I’ve been thinking about is the way in which light from a distant star arrives at our planet, arrives at the human eye after such a vast period of time. Light takes time to travel. And so, at a very, very micro, nano-scale, the same thing is true when I’m standing two feet away from someone and looking at them. There is some lag, there’s some time lapse between the light from their face reaching my eyes and when it originated in their face, which means there’s a way in which I’m never seeing you. I’m seeing you a moment ago, even though we can’t measure that.

And that means that I’m always a little bit behind, and my ideas about you are always a little bit obsolete, because in that micro, nano-, nano-, nanosecond, you might’ve changed. And you might’ve grown in some way. And to me, that’s pointing us to a great sense of openness to one another, if we could really hold that place of not-knowing.

That’s the other part of otherness, is to really allow ourselves to not know each other and to not say, “OK, I’ve heard this political position a billion times before,” or, “My neighbor or my uncle or the person I’ve had an argument with for Thanksgiving dinners for the last
ten years is gonna be the same this year," but to allow a little bit of space, at least, for
not knowing and the possibility of being surprised.

Tippett: I don’t know; I think the really well-flexed muscles we have are about arguing and
convincing. And I feel like what you model in your relationship with your teacher, Elie
Wiesel, and also just with your life and your passion as a teacher yourself, is this moving
into this place of teaching and learning from each other. That’s where I come back to
Nicholas Christakis, the scientist, the sociologist, is working with how teaching and
learning are these amazing things human beings are able to do, and do with and for each
other.

One of the elements of good maladjustment [laughs] that you’ve mentioned in your
teaching is tenderness; I think you said “an open heart, in spite of everything.” That’s a
very countercultural move, and yet it’s a move that we actually know, are very familiar
with, in life as it is lived.

Burger: I’ve had an image in my mind for the last period of time, that the world is a baby
in our hands, and the baby’s running a fever. And if I were holding a baby, my baby, in my
arms and the baby were running a fever, I would feel two things that don’t always come
together, that I think we need to bring together: One is such a sense of tenderness and
love and openheartedness; and also, such a sense of ferocity and willingness to fight and
do whatever I need to do to get this baby well.

Tippett: What Elie Wiesel also was so wise about is the pragmatism of the open heart. I
think he said to you that “I teach with an open heart, not for moral reasons, but for
pragmatic ones.”

Burger: Yeah, because it opens the students’ hearts.

[Music: “Delamine” by Blue Dot Sessions]

Tippett: After a short break, more with Rabbi Ariel Burger.

[Music: “Delamine” by Blue Dot Sessions]

I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being, today with Rabbi Ariel Burger, taking in a
teological and mystical perspective on life in our time. We’re also experiencing, over our
conversational shoulder, some offerings of the late, extraordinary Elie Wiesel, who was his
teacher.

Tippett: It was really striking to me, when you write about that classroom in which you
were formed with him, the big conversations and heated debates that took place about
good and evil. There was this one moment you recount where this debate had flared, and
if you resist the idea that people are only evil, does that justify evil? Does it explain it
away? And he brought it down to this — I find this so stunning and so helpful, this
almost-a-litmus test for, how do you know you’re not doing that; what’s a basic thing to
hold yourself to? And he said: “The key in all of this is, never allow anyone to be
humiliated in your presence. Whatever has happened in the past, we must deal with those
who are here now.”

Even to walk around with that ethic — never to allow anyone to be humiliated in your
presence — that gives me so much to think about and to work with.
Burger: You’re getting at something really challenging, because Elie Wiesel wouldn’t speak to Holocaust deniers, for example. He was invited to debate Holocaust deniers, and he refused, because he didn’t want to dignify that position with a debate. So there was a line, and there were limits. But I think he saw a world in which people who should be talking to one another are not, and could be, and at the same time, a world in which terrible humiliations are happening right now. And he literally didn’t sleep well at night, because he was so deeply aware of the suffering of people in the world at that moment.

And it was one of the things that he gave his students, was a kind of insomnia. And I always tell people, I’d never wish insomnia on anyone; I want people to have really good, healthy sleep. But at least when we’re awake, we should be insomniacs. When we’re awake, we should be awake. And we should know that right now people are suffering and there’s something we need to do about it, even if it’s something small. So never let someone be — never let anyone be humiliated in your presence is a very powerful starting point, because it means that not only can you not humiliate someone, but you can’t be indifferent. You can’t be a bystander. You can’t allow things to happen — you are implicated in what happens. And that’s really fundamentally, I think, the shift between being a spectator and being a witness.

And no one can live with that all the time, because we’ll just go mad. This is one of the things that — a lot of great spiritual leaders struggled with depression, because they were introjecting people’s suffering all the time. But it’s the kind of thing that we can practice. We can turn it into practices of sensitizing ourselves and feeling more and more implicated, and building our muscle to have that feeling of responsibility, without any despair creeping in. And the more hope we have and the more capacity we have to choose hope, the more we can take responsibility for the world around us.

And that’s why, to me, hope is the first moral choice. It’s the thing that allows us to stay in the game and continue to do this work, which is a lifetime’s work, and more than one lifetime. But if we give up, it’s over. We’re just choosing to allow people to be humiliated all the time, in our immediate presence and by extension in our presence.

Tippett: I heard you talking about bearing witness, in the course of 2020, and I’ve been thinking about that phrase ever since, that it’s a wonderful piece of religious language that is just distinctive. It’s additive to other ways that we speak and think and mobilize ourselves in a purely secular sense.

Burger: The word, “witness,” appears in different contexts, in very different ways; and obviously in a legal context. But also, in meditation, we talk about witnessing your own thinking, that hairsbreadth of distance where you can reflect on your own thought process and begin to work with it consciously. That’s a shift to being a witness of your own mind. There are other contexts, as well; the religious context you were talking about. And I think it’s a very fruitful, rich word that I continue to find nooks and crannies hiding in it.

Tippett: I think it’s the kind of language that we can mull over and carry around, and that it shifts something. And it’s challenging in a good way, if nothing else. It shifts you out of a default mindset, that numbing that you talked about.

Burger: The word “lamentation” is like that too, I think. It challenges you in some way to reframe something.

Tippett: So is the language of redemption. It’s religious language.
And I think there’s this language of the “silent majority,” which was used in Germany, and it was used in the ’60s, and it’s been used in American politics now. But I’ve always felt like there’s also this silent majority of, I believe, of goodness; of generativity. And I think this language of witness, of moving from being a spectator to being a witness to a kind of more visible, courageous orientation — this is wonderful language to think about mobilizing that.

Burger: I think about that a lot. When memory is transmitted, it makes witnesses. Witnesses are activated people who now are telling other people’s stories. And what is a community, if not a group of people who tell one another’s stories? So if we have the capacity to encourage, inspire, empower people to do that more — and not necessarily in a large, shiny way; it could be very humble; it could be small and modest; very often it needs to happen more within a family or within a small community — it’s an orientation, if we can support that orientation and cultivate it. What I love about this, it’s not a specific ideology. It’s not didactic. It’s really moral education without moralizing. It’s just helping people to open and cultivate openness and thoughtfulness, rigorous thought, accountability, working for justice, listening, vulnerability, listening for those soul whispers — these are some of the ingredients that I see here.

But there’s one practical thing I want to share. After the storming of the Capitol, we had a meeting of something called the Witness Café, which emerged from our advisory group that was testing the approach of applying some of these ideas to moral education of leaders, of young leaders. And we created this opportunity for people to just hang out together, because they were wanting more time, unscripted time together. So we now meet every other week.

And for the first time, there was a real sense of tension, in reaction to what was happening, what had happened in the Capitol on January 6. And it became really apparent that we’ve got real political diversity in this group. We’ve got progressives and conservatives, and they’ve created some friendships and connections, but there’s tension here. And we had this very powerful moment — people were talking back and forth; it was getting heated. It was still very respectful, but heated, and we had five minutes left. And everyone turned to me as the host, to close this out, and nothing was resolved. So I thought, what would professor Wiesel do?

So I don’t know what he would do, for sure, but this is what came to me. I said, “First of all, I’m really happy that we’re surfacing these differences, because one of my concerns with building anything is that we’re going to create another echo chamber. And that’s not the goal here. We could talk about this for another four hours, but we have four minutes now. So let’s sing.” And we sang. We sang a Hasidic melody, a wordless melody, a beautiful melody, for the last four minutes. And I think this is one of the directions that I want to explore more.

Rebbe Nachman said that when two people speak at the same time, it’s dissonant; it’s cacophony. But when two people sing together, it can be harmony. So for me, this is about, how do we go beyond our familiar, comfortable, narrow set of tools and styles — language and other kinds of tools that we use to address these issues of difference — to go to all the other tools that we have in our treasure chest that we just don’t use? We have to use our treasures. If there’s one thing I’m clear about, we need to expand our repertoire, because what got us into this mess is not gonna get us out.

So that, for me, was a very powerful moment of really unexpected pushing beyond the normal first or second or third thoughts I would normally have about addressing a
moment of conflict. And it was great. And the feedback was, Wow, we were able to really, not just settle back down, but we felt so connected to each other, because we were singing together.

Tippett: I love that! That also gets at the limits of words, the importance of the space we put between the words, in a whole other way. There’s also that line of professor Wiesel that you have at the beginning of one of the chapters in the book, which may be the “Witness” chapter: “How can you sing? How can you not?” What a wonderful paired question for this century. “How can you sing? How can you not?”

Burger: Thank you for reminding me of that. That’s at the beginning of the chapter on song, “Beyond Words.”

Tippett: [laughs] There you go.

Burger: The power of moving beyond the limitations of words, either to music or to the white space, the white space on the page — it really is such a powerful image. And I think that’s the shift. And one of the ways of being creatively maladjusted is to begin to foreground the white space on the page; almost to see things in negative space and see, what do those shapes between the words, between the letters, tell us, and what do we want to create in that space?

[music: “Working from a Park Bench” by Lullatone]

Tippett: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being, today with Ariel Burger, who is a rabbi and artist and student of the late, extraordinary Elie Wiesel.

[music: “Working from a Park Bench” by Lullatone]

Tippett: I just want to ask you, before we wind down, is there other language, are there other particular teachings that have really come to you or that you’re really walking with right now, from deep inside the tradition?

Burger: There are many, [laughs] so we have to be careful. It’s such a tempting question. But I’ll share a couple things, quickly. One is—back to the conversation about theology — I think a lot about the relationship between religion and art, religion and the arts. And there’s a great teaching in my tradition that says God is a painter. “God is a painter,” and it’s a wordplay on a Hebrew word. The original translation is, “There is no rock like our God.” But the rabbis creatively play with that and say, “There’s no painter” — the words are very similar in Hebrew — “There’s no painter like our God.” God is like the greatest painter.

And for me, it’s really that God is a painter who then gave us the paintbrush and said, “Go make something beautiful.” And I think about that; I think about, our job really is to surprise God. And everything we’re talking about, of creative maladjustment and the kind of white space and the radically different ways of engaging with some of these questions that I passionately feel we need to do and we need to make room for, is very much about embracing creativity as a central religious value. Which is not how I grew up, but I think it’s really how I’ve come to experience — that was really what drew me to early Hasidic teaching in the first place, was that you find radical creativity there, but it stayed within the tradition, somehow, really holding the tension between those two things. I think that’s one thing I think about.
And the other is a story that captures the power of, and the questions about, moral activation. My work right now is very much about the mechanics of moral transformation and how to do that in a real way, in a concrete way. And so — do we have time for me to tell you this story?

Tippett: Please do.

Burger: So my son was on a trip, a semester-long program in Israel, and then they traveled to Poland. And they traveled to Poland for, I think, about ten days. And on this program, he made a good friend, a new friend, named Mason. And when they got to Poland, they were touring some of the centers of Jewish life before the war, and they were also going to the camps. And on the third or fourth day of the time in Poland, Mason disappeared for the day with one of the counselors on the program.

And he wouldn’t tell anyone where he was going, and he came back and he wouldn’t tell anyone where he had been. And then he told my son, because they were friends or because my son nooded him a lot to tell him. And this is what he told my son. He said, “My grandparents were survivors. They were married three weeks before the deportation to Auschwitz. And in Auschwitz they were separated, obviously, and he would go every evening to the fence separating the men’s and the women’s sides of the camps, to bring her a crust of bread or an extra potato if he could, or even just to see her.

“Until my grandmother,” he said, “was transferred to a rabbit farm on the outskirts of Auschwitz.” The Nazis were doing experiments on rabbits that had to do with finding a cure for typhus. “And the rabbit farm was run by a Polish man who noticed, pretty early on, that the rabbits were getting better quality food and attention and care than the Jewish slave laborers. So he started to sneak in food for the Jewish slave laborers and the inmates.

“And then,” Mason told my son, “my grandmother cut her arm on a piece of barbed wire, and the cut became infected. And it wasn’t a serious infection, if you had antibiotics. But of course, if you were a Jew in that place, in that time, there was no way you were going to get antibiotics. So what did this Polish man who was running the rabbit farm do? He cut his own arm open, and he placed his wound on her wound so that he would get the infection that she had, and he became infected. And he went to the Nazis, and he said, ‘I’m one of your best managers. This rabbit farm is very productive. If I die, you’re gonna lose a lot of productivity. I need medicine.’ They gave him medicine, and he shared it with her. And he saved her life.”

So Mason said to my son, he said, “Where was I, when I left the other day and I disappeared? I went to see that Polish man. He’s still alive and living on the outskirts of Warsaw, and I went to say, thank you for my life. Thank you for my life.”

So my son told me this story this year, and it raises a lot of questions about, what does it take to be the kind of person who will share someone else’s wound, in spite of all the pressure to see them as less valuable than a rabbit? What does it take to push against all that pressure and do the right thing, with courage and moral clarity, and to see another person as a person, when everything around you is telling you not to?

And that question is — really, for me, that’s the motivating question right now, because I think that’s — not in those extreme situations alone, but in everyday life, how can we turn to the treasures of all of our human traditions, literatures, practices, to become better at that work? Because that, to me, is the most important thing. That’s the root cause of all
the other challenges and all the questions we’re facing.

Tippett: That’s an incredible story, and it’s a teaching, isn’t it. It’s a teaching.

Burger: It’s a teaching my son gave me.

Tippett: Someplace I saw you writing about the principle of blessing in Jewish thought and life. And I wonder if that would be a good place to close — that’s another one of those words that just — it imparts a sense of dignity and relief, to think about blessing being in the world. So talk about that a little bit for our time, and how you understand that and what that means, to live it.

Burger: Well, that’s the fundamental principle, for me, at least, of all of Jewish tradition, is three words: Be a blessing. Be a blessing. And there’s a way that a human life is a blessing, and in response to that human life, we all say, “Amen.” There’s a kind of witnessing to one another’s blessings, the blessings that we bring.

But what’s so fascinating is that the Hebrew language is very profound, and the word for “blessing” is related for the word — the same letters — it’s etymologically deeply connected to the word for the knees. The knees and the way that you bend your knees —

Tippett: The needs? Oh, your knees.

Burger: The knees — your knees, yeah. Head, shoulders, knees, and toes. [laughs] And the way that knees are what you need to bend, when you carry something heavy. And there’s a way that a blessing is heavy to carry. If someone blesses you, they really see you, and they give their seeing of you to you. There’s a certain sense of responsibility that comes with that. To be witnessed is a responsibility, too, as much as to bear witness. And I think about this a lot, because we’re being asked to carry a lot right now. We’re being asked to carry our own lives; that’s heavy enough, with everything that we’re all going through as individuals, our families, our communities, the world, the suffering of the world and people around the world. We’re asked to carry all of that. It’s hard. It’s daunting.

But a blessing is something that’s heavy, and at the same time, it lifts us up. It’s liberating to live for something bigger than myself. It frees me of my own smallness, my self-consciousness, my anxieties. Compassion is the greatest medicine for anxiety, the greatest medicine for small-mindedness. And so there’s a way that we can be a blessing to each other and bear witness to one another and tell one another stories and really get in there with one another with a lot of openness. And that will lift us up. That’s what a blessing really is.

[music: “Clarence Difference” by Baths]

Tippett: Rabbi Ariel Burger is the author of Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel’s Classroom, and he’s the co-founder and senior scholar of The Witness Institute.


The On Being Project is located on Dakota land. Our lovely theme music is provided and composed by Zoë Keating. And the last voice that you hear singing at the end of our show
is Cameron Kinghorn.

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