

A World Without Elie Wiesel
Erev Yom Kippur, 5777
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I think I was in 8th grade when Mr. Lask, my religious school teacher told our class about the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Many in my generation knew families with Holocaust survivors, and as Wiesel's book became more widely read, we started to hear the survivors' voices. We began to internalize the experience that was the Holocaust of World War II against our people as not a random act of history, but as an attempt to annihilate our people. Adolf Hitler, *imach sh'mo*, may his name be blotted out, made his attitude and plans clear in his book *Mein Kampf*: Germany's problems were traced to the Jews. He thought that if he could solve the Jewish problem, he could make Germany great after the humiliation it suffered as a result of World War I. Elie Wiesel's book *Night*, and his subsequent books, reminded the world that there were real people who were brutally victimized. That book launched Elie Wiesel into a unique place in history as the "victim/survivor-laureate" of the Holocaust. Different than Anne Frank, whose death immortalized her through her diary, Elie Wiesel became the *survivor* who would not be silenced, the one who taught, preached and *nudged* the world into understanding the phrase, "never again."

Elie Wiesel's death on July 2, 2016 symbolized the beginning of an end. Elie Wiesel was a child when he entered the concentration camps of the Nazis, and he gave voice to the unthinkable until his death in his late 80s. Elie Wiesel was a writer, a professor, and a proud Jew. He embraced a values system that he was not shy about sharing. He insisted the world not forget about what was done to our people, and he traveled the world to help ensure that it

would not be denied, trivialized, or softened. He demanded that the world confront an understanding about what scapegoating, hate, and over-simplifying problems at a group's expense can do. He helped the world understand that no space can be given to bigotry or institutional racism. Soon, there will be no living survivors of the Holocaust. On this Yom Kippur, we are challenged to embrace a world without Elie Wiesel by taking up his fight against hatred and indifference.

Elie Wiesel was a Nobel Peace Prize-winning writer. He became famous because of his book written about his travails in a Nazi concentration camp. He became a beloved teacher, and also wrote about his struggles to understand God's role in the world after his experience in the Holocaust. This led him to friendships with other faiths, especially Christianity. There are some who viewed Elie Wiesel's life as a professional survivor with some contempt. They criticized his high-priced speeches and scholar-in-residence stints, his demand for a limousine or a private jet during those visits, and how he took up some causes in the fight against injustice, and not others. (*Why Should Jews Survive*, p. 59).

Yet, Wiesel taught us more about using the authority of experience and the opportunity to influence for the good. I'm glad that Judaism does not have sainthood like Catholicism. All accounts show that Mother Teresa's recent ascent to sainthood was well justified, but most of us have flaws ... and perfection need not be our goal. Elie Wiesel is allowed human flaws, but we can still marvel at his consistency and his skill.

Many of us remember back in April of 1985 when Elie Wiesel received the

Congressional Medal of Honor at the White House on the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. The award ceremony coincided with the imminent departure of President Ronald Reagan, who would leave for Germany, soon to place a wreath at a German military cemetery in Bitburg. Reagan received significant criticism because Nazis were buried in the cemetery he would be visiting. While accepting the award at the White House, Wiesel stated in the presence of President Reagan and Vice President Bush, “I belong to a people that speaks truth to power ... Mr. President, your place is not that place. Your place is with the victims of the SS.” (*Forward*, July 15, 2016, p. 8). Some say this was impolite. Others say it was a remarkable act of *Chutzpah*. Most say it was courageous. We should all agree, it was inspiring.

Elie Wiesel helped us all figure out how to be Jewish in a world that allowed the Holocaust. Philosopher Emil Fackenheim once said, “Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man and his world, and to escape into either cynicism or otherworldliness, lest they cooperate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz.” (Fackenheim, *God’s Presence in History*, 1970, p. 84) Both Wiesel and Fackenheim understood that we Jews are a people, but also a God-based religion. They both struggled and grappled with how to consider God when trying to understand the Holocaust. Both maintained their belief. Elie Wiesel’s struggle to embrace the God of our ancestors also inspires us to remember that God requires our participation in improving the world and not allowing ourselves to be indifferent.

In a beautiful book called, *Six Days to Destruction, Meditations Toward Hope*, Wiesel’s co-author Albert Friedlander wrote, “Elie Wiesel is the voice of the Jew in the Western world. When he speaks to the President in the White House, he is also the conscience of our society. When he teaches and publishes, when he lectures and dreams, he breaks the conspiracy of silence which has become the malady of our time.” (*Six Days*, p. 8) He then quotes Elie Wiesel who wrote:

Watchman, what of the night? So many victims in so many places need help. We need, above all, to be shaken out of our indifference—the greatest source of danger in the world.

For remember: the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. The opposite of faith is not arrogance but indifference....And the opposite of peace is indifference to both peace and war—indifference to hunger and persecution, to imprisonment and humiliation, indifference to torture and persecution.” (*Six Days*, p. 8)

We are the people who did not need the Holocaust to occur in order to remember the less fortunate or the stranger among us. Different than when Hitler’s vile writings included the idea, “the existence of our own nation is a thousand times more important to us than that of an alien race.” (as quoted in Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews 1933-1945*, 1975, p. 23), we are taught to remember the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Exodus 23:9 says, “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” In Leviticus’ holiness code we read, “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to

you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I, Adonai, am your God.” (Leviticus 19:33-34) Elie Wiesel heard God’s voice reminding us to consider the “other,” for we all know too well what happens when leaders are afraid of a people. We were enslaved in Egypt, we were decimated in Europe, and we are commanded to remember, but also to act in order to repair this broken world.

We are blessed to live in a wonderful country that has shown unprecedented acceptance of the Jewish people. And while it is true that we have endured our share of anti-Jewish moments since the founding of this country, our freedom to be (or not to be) Jewish has never evolved to the fully accepted position we now enjoy here. Elie Wiesel died a wealthy man, having taken profound advantage of the American dream, even though he lived through the American nightmare of having his wealth invested with Bernie Madoff. But different than some, Elie Wiesel enjoyed the American dream while continuing to grapple with and embrace his Jewishness. His response to the Holocaust was not to fully assimilate, but to accept the gifts of our current situation, while working toward making the world a better place based on his experiences as a victim and survivor, and the values he derived from his Jewishness. His message to the world at large is to not forget, and to keep anti-Semitism at bay. His message to Jews, however was more: Never forget the victims, and don’t be indifferent to victims whoever they may be. No culture can lift itself up at the expense of another people. And while it may work for a while, it doesn’t survive the test of time. His message was formed not just by incarceration in a Nazi camp, but by the religion that so threatened Hitler, that he needed to cleanse the world of us.

We Jews know what it is like to be at the wrong end of a superficial generalization about our faith and people. We also know that since we were freed from Egypt, we were commanded to never fall into the same trap of fear of the stranger. When we remain indifferent at times when non-Jews are the perceived threat, we only invite those oppressors to find us next. And even if we don’t become the next victims, we are not entitled to remain indifferent.

Elie Wiesel helped our people heal, but he helped our country move forward, too. Sadly, our country is still battling racism in many forms, and the American melting pot of diversity seems to threaten some in the majority. Elie Wiesel helped ensure the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s existence as a tribute—not just to the memory of the six million Jews, but in memory of all who died at the hands of the sick and racist approach of Adolf Hitler. When Wiesel feared that an American president would create room in America for excusing Nazism, he spoke loudly and clearly. What would Wiesel say today?

Most years, a group of 10th grade students and I travel to Washington D.C. While we’re there, we visit the Holocaust Museum, and I usually suggest that the students watch the introductory video which talks about the rise of Hitler in Germany. I’ve probably seen this video 20 times over the years, and I’m always struck when the narrator tells us that Hitler was invited into the government after losing the election to von Hindenburg. The “powers-that-be” thought that Hitler would moderate his views after the election, and to try for unity, von Hindenburg named him Chancellor. Then after von Hindenburg’s death in 1934, he ascended to *Fuhrer*. They believed that Hitler’s words during the campaign were used to get elected, and that once in power, he’d be more inclusive or less divisive. Elie Wiesel’s life’s work reminds us that Hitler

did not moderate, and that everyone should have believed Hitler during the campaign.

In 1986, Elie Wiesel received the Nobel Peace Prize. The following is from his acceptance speech on that December day in Oslo:

I remember: it happened yesterday, or eternities ago. A young Jewish boy discovered the Kingdom of Night. I remember his bewilderment, I remember his anguish. It all happened so fast. The ghetto. The deportation. The sealed cattle car. The fiery altar upon which the history of our people and the future of mankind were meant to be sacrificed.

I remember he asked his father, “Can this be true? This is the 20th Century, not the Middle Ages. Who would allow such crimes to be committed? How could the world remain silent?”

And now the boy is turning to me. “Tell me,” he asks, “what have you done with my future, what have you done with your life?” And I tell him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.”

Elie Wiesel emerged from the “Kingdom of Night,” but leaves a world not yet fixed. On this evening of *Kol Nidre*, the night when we’re supposed to do deep soul searching to ask that we be released from vows we could not keep, even though we tried. Indifference is not trying. We are forced to confront a world without a strong beacon who helped us remember in a way to ensure the phrase, “never again.” May we all be inspired by Elie Wiesel’s courage and fortitude to remember the past, by understanding what “Never Again” really means. May we merit a life that has us grow from strength to strength as we stand on his

shoulders. *Zecher Tzaddik Livracha*. May the memory of this righteous man be for an eternal and abiding blessing, Amen.

SOURCES

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