

The Value of Memory – Yom Kippur 5777

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I never met Elie Wiesel, but I came close once. In the synagogue where I grew up, Ahavath Achim in Atlanta (AA), Wiesel was the first speaker for the prestigious Eizenstat lecture series. My sister was in second grade at the time, and her class had been reading books from the Value Tales series – which, if you know it, was a series by Ann Donegan Johnson of biographies that were linked to values education (There was *The Value of Saving* about Ben Franklin, *The Value of Believing in Yourself* about Louis Pasteur, *The Value of Determination* about Helen Keller, and about 40 others). In any case, my sister's incredibly creative teacher guided the class in writing its own book, *The Value of Remembering*, about Elie Wiesel. And they arranged for my sister to present the book. Neither I nor anyone else from my family was invited. But on my parents' mantle, there is this picture of my sister presenting a book authored by second graders to Elie Wiesel.

That was 1988. My first introduction to Elie Wiesel came a little earlier. Months before he was to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, Wiesel was invited to throw out the first pitch at the 1986 World Series. (That's what I remember from that Series ... besides the ball rolling under Bill Buckner's legs in Game 6). And Wiesel opened his lecture with a story about that. When he had gotten the call from Baseball Commissioner Peter Ueberoth, Wiesel had never heard of the World Series. The offer was to throw the first pitch at Game 1, to be played on Saturday night, October 18. Wiesel declined because that was the second night of Sukkot (even though Ueberoth asked if maybe he could get special dispensation from a rabbi). Wiesel's son Elisha was terribly upset. But the commissioner soon called back and offered instead that Wiesel could throw out the first pitch at Game 2. "You mean there are two games?" Wiesel asked. But he had to decline again for fear that he wouldn't get to Shea Stadium in time after the holiday. Ueberoth arranged a police escort to pick him up at his Manhattan apartment and get him to the game.

So that's my personal connection to Elie Wiesel. I never met him, but my sister did. And I learned from him that for some people Sukkot is even more important than the World Series. Contrary to the old joke: no – you can't record Kol Nidre.

Well not just the Jewish world, but the entire world suffered a deep loss this summer when Elie Wiesel died at age 87. In the words of his obituary from the New York Times, "There may have been better chroniclers who evoked the hellish minutiae of the German death machine. There were arguably more illuminating philosophers. But no single figure was able to combine Mr. Wiesel's moral urgency with his magnetism, which emanated from his deeply lined face and eyes as unrelievable melancholy."

Words from *Night*, the book that first brought Wiesel prominence, underscore his life's mission, his sacred responsibility to bear witness:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never.”

Never. The words allude to a commandment in Deuteronomy: “*Zakhor*, Remember what Amalek did to you after you left Egypt – how, undeterred by God, they surprised you on the march when you were famished and weary and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Never forget, *lo tishkach*.”

Remember, do not forget. That is our task in this hour. *Yizkor*. We remember loved ones who influenced us, some who lived long lives and others whose lives were cut short. We remember martyrs and leaders who inspired us from a distance through their words and deeds. And this year in particular, we remember a great poet who taught the world what memory really means.

There is no Hebrew word for History – *historia* doesn’t count. The Bible doesn’t concern itself with history, which is why it doesn’t matter much that its account of creation is different from the scientific story of evolution. Instead of history, the Bible uses *zakhor*, remember – *v’zakharta*, *zekher*, *zikaron*, *yizkor*, *zokher*, and *zikhronot*. Judaism doesn’t do history; Judaism does memory. And to quote Avram Infeld, a former Director of Hillel International, there is a difference: “History means knowing what happened in the past. Memory means asking yourself: what does that which happened in the past have to do with who I am today?”

And the other biblical word for history is Midrash. We want to translate it as “old wives tales” but it really means to investigate, to search, to find meaning, to make moral sense of events.

Nobody did as much to preserve the memory of the Holocaust or to find meaning in man’s senseless inhumanity than Elie Wiesel. His personal mission is poignantly described by one of his characters, a fictional rabbi in a speech before the Nazis were to murder him and the members of his town: “Should one of us manage to escape,” [that rabbi proclaimed], “I want him to look, listen, and remember. ... I want him to become a vessel of truth, a carrier of eternity and fire.”¹

Wiesel’s words are inscribed at the entrance to the Holocaust Museum in Washington: “For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.”

You see, Hitler did not think that the world would remember. He said as much to his Wehrmacht commanders a week before the invasion of Poland, using history as his guide: “Genghis Khan led millions of women and children to slaughter – with premeditation and a happy heart” he said.

¹ *Beggar from Jerusalem*, 73.

“And History sees in him solely the founder of a state. ... Who, after all, speaks to-day of the annihilation of the Armenians?” Hitler believed that the world would remain indifferent, that deafening silence could cover up his brutality.

And for a time it did. But silence, ultimately, is not the way of the Jews. Pharaoh, Haman, Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, the Crusaders, Torquemada – the list of enemies who have tried to destroy us is endless. But they do not succeed. In the words of another of Wiesel’s characters: our “memory is stronger than they are. ... Kill a Jew and you make him immortal; his memory, independently, survives him.”

Zakhor ... lo tishkah, Remember ... Do not forget! A generation goes and a new one takes its place, and we will never abandon our sacred responsibility to bear witness.

Of course memory means more. Growing up, Elie Wiesel received both a secular and an intensive *yeshiva*-style Torah education. He knew the traditions of Midrash and the stories of the Baal Shem Tov and the other Hasidic masters. And for him, the imperative to remember included not just the dispassionate need to chronicle the brutal details of 1933 to 1945, but to do it in a way that preserved and expanded on the rich literary and spiritual traditions that came before. Memory includes a search for meaning in a world forever changed by the events of that period. Wiesel used the tradition as a powerful tool.

He felt a particular affinity towards our patriarch Isaac. The Torah says little about Isaac’s life. His role in the Akedah, which we read on Rosh Hashanah, is limited to one line: “Here are the fire and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” And after the ordeal on the altar has ended, Isaac never speaks to his father again. He mourns his mother, marries, digs some wells, and confuses his twin sons when granting them his final blessing. That is about all the Torah tells us about Isaac.

But for Wiesel, Isaac was so much more significant. Isaac was “the most tragic figure in Jewish history ... the first survivor, the first survivor of the Holocaust.”² “Now, normally,” Wiesel wrote, “Isaac, after this horrible experience, should have become numb, bitter, angry, should have committed suicide, should have sent to the devil all his brothers, all his prayers. However, he was a dreamer, a poet.”³ The tradition is that Isaac composed the Mincha afternoon service.

And how did he do it? The name Isaac, *Yitzchak*, means laughter. His birth is associated with Abraham and Sarah’s laughter in old age. And the laughter is key. Another of Wiesel’s characters, a victorious soldier returning home from the Six Day War, explains:

You think the enemy's troops are afraid of tears? Since when is the world afraid of Jewish tears? It was my rejoicing that pushed them back. I never stopped dancing, even

² *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling*, edited by Rosemary Horowitz (2006), p. 135.

³ *Ibid.*, 135-6.

while eating, even while sleeping. Don't you understand? Had I stopped, had I shed a single tear, we'd have lost the war, everybody knows that.⁴

The philosopher Emil Fackenheim called it the 614th commandment: "Thou shalt not grant Hitler a posthumous victory." Thou shalt not give in to mourning or tragedy. We must preserve our traditions, the laughter, the dancing, the joy, the hope, borne of more than 3,000 years of experience. We must remember our people, remember our traditions, maintain our faith even when it is difficult. In their honor.

I learned an amazing *midrash*⁵ this year about Isaac. You see, in the End of Days, God will approach our patriarchs. God will come to Abraham and complain about us, the Jewish people: "Your children have sinned against Me." And Abraham will answer dispassionately, "Let them be obliterated for the sanctity of Your name." Disappointed, God will approach Jacob with the same indictment, "Your children have sinned against Me," and Jacob will be equally harsh: "Let them be obliterated!"

God was actually hoping that the patriarchs might stand up for us, but they won't. Until God will approach Isaac, silent Isaac, Judaism's first survivor: "Your children have sinned against Me." And Isaac will respond, "What do you mean 'your children'? Why are you calling them *my* children? Ever since they accepted the rules of the Torah they have been *Your* children. And besides, what could they have done that has been so bad." Isaac pleads on our behalf. Isaac protests. Isaac fights back. Isaac sticks up for the ones who cannot speak for themselves. And it is through his protest that Isaac preserves faith in a loving God.

When I learned of Wiesel's passing this summer, I went back to an article he wrote in the New York Times just before Yom Kippur in 1997, my first year in rabbinical school. "Master of the Universe," he began, "let us make up. It is time." There are people who responded to the Holocaust by abandoning God – "How can I believe in a God who would cause that amount of suffering to His chosen people?" There are people who responded by justifying God – The Holocaust was a punishment for secularism, or the Holocaust had to happen in order to bring about the creation of the State of Israel, or the Holocaust is simply the logical result of free choice. But Wiesel rejected both of those approaches.

He could conceive neither of a God who was perfect and beyond reproach nor of a world without God. And so instead, he chose the protest voice of Isaac:

⁴ Beggar

⁵ Shabbat 89b.

Where were You, God of kindness, in Auschwitz? [He wrote.] What was going on in heaven ... while your children were marked for humiliation, isolation and death? ... These questions have been haunting me for more than five decades.

His faith was shaken, it had to be reconsidered. But Wiesel could not abandon God. He concluded: "Let us make up, Master of the Universe. In spite of everything that happened. ... Let us make up: for the child in me, it is unbearable to be divorced from you so long."

Zakhor, lo tishkach, Remember, Do not forget your relationship with God or your reverence for the tradition, even if your world has profoundly changed. To leave it would be to grant Hitler a posthumous victory.

And Memory guides the way we face the future as well. We know the phrase "Never Again," the guiding principle of our generation. But those words do not come from the Torah. They are not found in any traditional Jewish text. According to the Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg, the phrase first appeared on handmade signs put up by inmates at Buchenwald, shortly after the camp had been liberated in 1945.⁶

For Elie Wiesel, "Never again" became the object lesson of memory. "Never Again" drove him to push President Carter to create the United States Holocaust Commission in 1978. "Never Again" was the moral force behind his criticism of President Reagan for his decision to visit and lay a wreath in a cemetery in Bitburg where members of the Waffen SS were buried. "Never Again" was the message to Presidents George H.W. Bush and Clinton in the face of the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, and to George W. Bush on behalf of the victims in Darfur. It pitted Wiesel against President Obama during the leadup to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. And it must be a moral guide as we witness refugee crises today that are affecting the lives of millions of people who are unable to help themselves. Never Again.

Unlike history, memory looks forward to the future. Memories of the past dictate the way we view the world of the present and the positions we take when new crises arise. Remember. Do not forget. We must learn the lessons of history.

Yom Kippur is a day to remember. Yizkor. We remember loved ones, conjuring images in our mind of times shared, feelings created, and lessons learned. And as we remember past deeds, we internalize the values that loved ones have passed on. We pledge *tzedakkah* and acts of kindness, that our memories can make a difference in the lives of others. And especially this year, as we mourn the passing of Elie Wiesel, let us give thanks for the Value of Remembering.

⁶ www.grammarphobia.com

For our loved ones, for the victims of the Holocaust, for generations of martyrs who lived and died for the sanctification of God's name and the perpetuation of the Jewish people, let us pledge to bear witness. Let us reconnect ourselves to the values and stories and joys and traditions and practices of our sacred heritage. Let us strengthen our connections to our people and our land. Let us make good on our sacred promise – Remember; Do not forget – that we may bring hope and goodness and peace to a world very much in need.

Yehei zikhram barukh, May the memories of all those whom we remember today forever be a blessing to ourselves, the Jewish people, and all humankind. Amen.