

Yom Kippur - 12 October 2016

Elie Wiesel and our Mandate to Remember

It was my last year at our Jewish Theological Seminary. In that era, it was the custom for all seniors to study Talmud with Professor Saul Lieberman. Known as "Gadol ha-dor," the greatest scholar of his generation, he was exceptionally intimidating. Although he had a roll book with the names of the students in his class, for whatever reason, he had a penchant for calling on me all-too-often to read aloud the text-at-hand. "Schnitzer," he would say – and, with my knees shaking and my voice quivering – I would tackle the tough Talmudic dialectic. From time to time in our class with Professor Lieberman, we had a guest visitor, who would sit quietly and unobtrusively in the back of the room. Clearly, he was there because he wanted to experience the brilliance of Professor Lieberman. All of us knew who he was because even back then in the 1970's, he was already famous. His name: Elie Wiesel.

Born in 1928 in Sighet, a small town in Transylvania, Elie Wiesel grew up in a deeply traditional Jewish environment. But the Jewish world of Sighet imploded in the spring of 1944 with mass deportations to Auschwitz. Over the course of the ensuing decades, Elie Wiesel became not only the quintessential survivor but our conscience: he taught us how to remember and why to remember.

In a touching tribute in the Washington Post following Elie Wiesel's death in July, Natan Sharansky, once a prisoner in the Soviet Gulag and now Chair of Israel's Jewish Agency, wrote: "Perhaps better than anyone else of our age, Elie Wiesel grasped the terrible power of silence. He understood that the failure to speak out, about both the horrors of the past and the evils of the present, is one of the most effective ways there is to perpetuate suffering and empower those who enlist it."

And Natan Sharansky continues: "Wiesel therefore made it his life's mission to ensure that silence would not prevail. First, he took the courageous and painful step of recounting the Holocaust, bringing it to public attention in a way that no one else before him had done. His harrowing chronicle Night forced readers to confront the most awful of human events, to remember it, to talk about it, to make it part of their daily lives."

In 1965, in his capacity as a journalist for the Israeli newspaper "Haaretz," Elie Wiesel traveled to the Soviet Union, in an effort to better understand the plight of a Jewish community numbering 3 million souls. Again the words of Natan Sharansky: "The book that resulted, the Jews of Silence, was an impassioned appeal to Jews around the world to shed their indifference and speak out for those who could not. 'For the second time in a generation, we are committing the sin of silence?' Wiesel warned – a phenomenon even more troubling to him than the voiceless suffering of Soviet Jews themselves."

Elie Wiesel succeeded in galvanizing our American Jewish community — still suffused in guilt from our cowardice during the 1930's and 1940's – to now recognize the moral imperative of intervening vigorously on behalf of the Jews of the Soviet Union. This time we did remember –

Kol Yisrael Areivim zeh la'zeh –

All Jews are responsible for one another (Shevuot 39a). Throughout the United States, synagogues, federations and other organizations specifically devoted to the cause of Soviet Jewry were at the forefront for years in highlighting the plight of our Mishpacha – our Jewish family in the broadest sense of the term – trapped behind an Iron Curtain. Many of us here today participated in the vigils, the Bar and Bat Mitzvah twinnings, the letter-writing campaigns, the trips to offer solidarity to the refuseniks, the arrests at the Soviet Embassy (I include myself in those ranks) and in that extraordinarily impressive rally in December 1987 here on the Mall in Washington, DC at which both Elie Wiesel and Natan Sharansky spoke to an assembly of 250,000 of us. Today, Jews from the former Soviet Union have forged new lives – more than a million in Israel – hundreds of thousands in the US – 200,000, interestingly enough – in Germany. Just a few weeks ago, we had a Bar Mitzvah here at B'nai Israel of a young man whose parents fled 27 years ago from the former Soviet Union... That revolution on behalf of human rights began because we remembered.

In an interview in the New York Times, Elie Wiesel commented:

"If I survived, it must be for some reason . . . To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time."

Elie Wiesel was willing to speak truth to power. He pleaded with President Reagan not to visit the graves of SS soldiers at Bitburg, Germany. "That place, Mr. President," he said, "is not your place." He was instrumental in the development of our United States Holocaust Memorial Museum here and how vividly I recall his powerful message to all of us at the Museum dedication on a drizzly day in April 1993 – underscoring as he did the abiding purpose of this institution.

Elie Wiesel's humanism was broad and inclusive. "Never Again" was not just a slogan about us, the Jewish people. Wherever persecution, suffering and genocide threatened any of God's children – in Cambodia – Rwanda – Bosnia – Darfur – the list goes on and on – Elie Wiesel raised his voice. He used our Jewish value-system as the springboard for his all-encompassing universalism . . . a strategy as ancient as the Hebrew prophets. He was no less a Jew for doing so in my judgment: he was a better Jew.

If Elie Wiesel has an epitaph, surely it is this . . . "Silence is never the answer . . . the opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference."

So in the spirit of Elie Wiesel, let me challenge you: Is there more that we could do – individually and as a congregation – to bridge the black/white racial divide that continues to roil America?

Is there more that we could do – individually and as a congregation – from our pocket of affluence – to help those struggling right here in our own community with inadequate housing, unemployment and less-than-stellar educational opportunities?

And perhaps most radical of all: Were a Syrian refugee family to knock metaphorically on our Synagogue's door, what would our response be?

I recognize that these are daunting questions – which can leave us squirming in discomfort. But it is critical to remember that over and over again our Torah posits: Remember the poor . . . the widow... the orphan . . . remember that you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Even in the degradation of Auschwitz, Jews tried desperately to stage a Seder of some kind – to remind themselves all-the-more so in that hell – that our Jewish value-system mandates us unequivocally to work for the dignity and freedom for all God's children.

At Yizkor on Yom Kippur our mood is especially poignant, as we remember our loved ones. In truth, no one ever stands alone – for we are all on a vast continuum stretching from past to present to future. But this moment we do have – and the way in which we use it is ours to shape.

Frank Outlaw put it well:

"Watch your thoughts – they become words:
Watch your words – they become actions:
Watch your actions – they become habits:
Watch your habits – they become character:
And watch your character, it becomes your destiny."