

Encounters led to Elie Wiesel's dialogue with other faiths | Review
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Elie Wiesel: Teacher, Mentor and Friend. Edited by Alan L. Berger. Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon, 2018. 106 pages. Paperback.

This book is a collection of essays by disciples of Elie Wiesel, who reflect in these essays on how he has transformed their lives.

There are many illuminating essays in this book, and it is hard to choose between them, but I have chosen to focus on the essay by Alan Berger, the professor of Holocaust Studies at FAU and the editor of this book. He has an essay that deals with the question that may people have wondered about: How did a yeshiva bochur from the village of Sighet who lived in a world in which there was no trust between Jews and non-Jews end up talking to presidents and popes and willing to dialogue with sages who lived in Asia as well with sages who lived in the West?

Berger's answer is that Wiesel's willingness to dialogue with members of other faiths was the result of three encounters with non-Jews.

The first was with François Mauriac, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1952. Wiesel was a poor, struggling, unknown journalist when he first came to meet him at his home. Mauriac began by extolling the virtues of Jesus, the son of God, who was unable to save Israel but who saved the world. Wiesel was angered, replying: "Ten years ago, not very many miles from here, I knew Jewish children every one of whom suffered a thousand times more—six million times more – than Jesus did on the cross. And you do not speak of them? Why do you not speak about them?" He turned to leave the room.

Mauriac was shocked, by these words he ran after Wiesel catching him before he could enter the elevator. He brought him back into his apartment and, with tears streaming down his face, begged him to tell his story. One year later, Wiesel sent Mauriac the first draft of "Night," from that moment his life changed. Mauriac found a publisher, and wrote the introduction to this book hereby launching his career. The second person whom Wiesel encountered was Jean-Marie Lustiger, the man who had been hidden as a child by Christians during the Shoah, and who had converted to Christianity. He was now the Archbishop of Paris. Lustiger called himself "a fulfilled Jew," and the question that his existence raised for Wiesel was: How can I, as a Jew, relate to someone who has left Judaism? Wiesel's teacher, Saul Lieberman, said that he would never shake hands with a "meshumad," someone who has destroyed his identity.

Wiesel parted company with his teacher and decided to meet with Lustiger. The two men conversed in private for many hours. While there is no transcript of what they said, from then on, Lustiger, née Aaron, never referred to himself as a fulfilled Jew, and became an active supporter of Israel. Wiesel emerged from that encounter with a new understanding of the purpose of interfaith dialogue. "There must be no pressure to convert from either side, but if there is total

honesty, he said, “the two individuals involved in such an exchange may have much to teach each other.” As he put it: “A Jew’s task is not to convert another to his faith but to help him become who he is.”

The third encounter took place in 1988. There was an ugly dispute over whether the Catholic Church should place crosses at Auschwitz to honor the memory of Christians who had been murdered there. Wiesel tried to explain the difference between what the cross means to Christians and what it means to Jews. “For the Christian, the cross stands for compassion, love and mercy; for the Jew, the cross is a symbol of persecution.” Therefore, he suggested that it would be better not to have crosses or any religious symbol there.

Theresa Swiebocka, deputy director of the Auschwitz Museum, said to Berger that Elie Wiesel does not want to have the crosses at Auschwitz “Because he does not believe in God.” When Dr. Berger repeated this remark to Wiesel, he said: “Tell her that I do not want crosses at Auschwitz – because I do believe in God, and there is no greater desecration of God than what happened at this place.”

These three reports of Elie Wiesel’s conversations with Christians contain much that can nourish the souls of both Christians and Jews. They teach us that our task is not to turn Christians into Jews, but to turn Jews into witnesses who testify to what they have lived through, and who teach Christians to listen and then to respond.

Rabbi Jack Riemer reviews books for this and many other journals in America and abroad.