

## **Elie Wiesel's Legacy**

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The two most formative courses of my college career were entitled “Evil and Suffering” and “Comparative Religious Ethics.” In these classes, we explored the various responses to evil and suffering in the world and examined those individuals who, inspired by their religious traditions, lived an ethical life of non-violent protest. Among those we studied was an individual whose legacy has significantly shaped who I am as a rabbi: Elie Wiesel, who passed away at the beginning of July two years ago.

While he would never consider himself to be a philosopher or theologian, Elie Wiesel's personal struggle with God and his determination of rejecting indifference have resonated with many. Indeed, Wiesel has been one of the prominent voices of the Holocaust. And, of course, his experiences as a survivor profoundly shaped his understanding of the depths of human cruelty and relationship with God. But he was so much more than just a survivor of the Holocaust. He was a beacon of hope and light for those suffering. He devoted his life to speaking out against intolerance and injustice. He was committed to believing in a world that was not driven by hate. He encouraged all of us to constantly ask questions, not necessarily to find answers, but so that we would remain in dialogue with each other. He taught us what it means to believe in each other, despite the evil that humanity has the power to act upon.

Wiesel insisted that in order for us to prevent a Holocaust from ever occurring again, in order for us to learn from the past so that there can be hope for a better future, we all are obligated to remember. "Without memory, there is no culture," he asserted. He added that, "Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, and no future." For those who were witnesses to the Holocaust, as well as to all of us who are now witnesses of suffering today, he maintained that the ability to share the stories and tell the tales is key to believing in a better world.

And even though he never would compare one tragedy to another, he was determined to give a voice to all of those who suffer from atrocities that dehumanized its victims.

In his 2005 address to the United Nations in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Allied liberation from the Nazi death camps, he said:

"When speaking about that era of darkness, the witness encounters difficulties. His words become obstacles rather than vehicles; he writes not with words but against words. For there are no words to describe what the victims felt when death was the norm and life a miracle. Still, whether you know it or not, his memory is part of yours."

These words are as true today as they were then. These words could easily have been referring to the atrocities our world faces today as they did the Holocaust. For there are no words to describe the reality that death is the norm in our society today. The names of the cities throughout the United States that have fallen victim to racism, discrimination, homophobia, Islamophobia, terrorism, and

the like increase every day. Just as our hearts break, Wiesel's heart would break as well.

Hatred has driven numerous attacks on innocents throughout the world. Wiesel perhaps would have argued that the world has never left darkness. He questioned whether the world truly has learned from the past, and I would argue that as long as hate exists, humanity will remain in unrest.

I have my own struggles with finding the best way of responding to what has become endless cycles of violence and cruelty. And the only conclusion that I seem to draw each time is to choose hope: To believe that one day there will be a better tomorrow. To believe there is good in this world, and that ultimately good can overcome evil. That we can be angry, discouraged, and frustrated, but when we hate, we become the haters as well. As much as I knew intellectually how much impact Elie Wiesel had upon me, his death has been evidence that his belief in humanity has become my own.

Wiesel's last published book, *Open Heart*, was the result of his reflections during his recovery following an emergency open-heart surgery in 2011. He writes about how every moment in our lives represents a new beginning. He asks, "If life is not an offering to the other, what are we doing here on this earth?" Wiesel's continuous belief in humanity is driven by the notion that when we open our hearts to others, we are able to see and experience the world in a way in which we choose to know each other, to listen to their suffering, to want to walk the path of their suffering with them.

Individually, we cannot solve all of the problems found in this world, and we cannot help all those who fall victim to those who are afraid of the Other. But what we can do, what we should do, as Wiesel advocates, is reach out to those who suffer and remind them that they are not alone. That even though our individual cries for help may not have been heard, we choose to hear the cries of others. His response to the turmoil of the world today, then, is that we need to be present for and show up for each other. We must continue to ask the challenging question of why evil persists, and we must believe that the more we ask, and the louder we ask, the more we will be heard. But the first step is to listen to each other. When we listen, as Wiesel taught, we become witnesses as well.

In his remarks on Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, in 2009, Wiesel said:

I know and I speak from experience, that even in the midst of darkness, it is possible to create light and share warmth with one another: that even on the edge of the abyss, it is possible to dream exalted dreams of compassion; that is possible to be free and to strengthen the ideals of freedom, even within prison walls.

May his words inspire us on this night, so that at dawn we may wake up to a sense of hope that in the coming day, we all will open our hearts, minds, and spirits to each other. May it ever be so.

Shabbat Shalom.