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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinion: The church is honoring my father, Elie Wiesel — and his legacy includes unapologetic Zionism

Opinion by Elisha Wiesel

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Elisha Wiesel is the son of Marion and Elie Wiesel.

What would my father have thought of being carved into a church?

Today a likeness of my father — author, activist and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel — is being unveiled in the stonework of the Washington National Cathedral. My family and I are deeply grateful to Dean Randy Hollerith and all the leadership at the cathedral for this profound measure of respect. It is good to see that five years after his passing, my father is still being recognized for his global work for human rights and his singular message of hope amid darkness.

But I wrestled with this honor, and I think he would have done the same.

I feared disconnecting my father from his Jewish identity. Thankfully, clergy not only supported but were passionate about presenting my father during the unveiling as an observant Jew. They even introduced a blemish into the carving to address our concerns with the biblical injunction against graven images.

And I feared letting others articulate his legacy, when I saw it so often incompletely presented, or worse, misunderstood.

My father taught us that language matters, but many grow lazy with it, or twist the most consequential words into attacks. I see people quote my father's admonition against silence in the face of oppression as they scream at others with contempt, self-righteousness and anger. I remind them that he never humiliated or ridiculed.

But the hardest thing for me is when I come across people who invoke his protests, read his books and cry for the dead Jews — then condemn in unforgiving terms the 6 million Jews living in Israel who refuse to depend ever again on others to rescue them. So I remind the world that my father didn't advocate just for the people of Kosovo, Darfur and Cambodia. He also supported Israel and defended her right to exist in peace and security.

My father understood what it meant to live in a world without a Jewish state, and he saw the anti-Zionist movement for what it was: an extension of millennia-old antisemitism, which unfortunately is becoming more common and acceptable today.

In a 1975 speech, he thundered: “[They] tell us that they are not against Jews, only against Zionists. Well, too bad. I shall not permit the enemy to define my identity for me. I will not allow him to tell me who I am. The Nazis, too, wanted that prerogative. ... I shall not allow anyone, and surely not my enemy, to decide for me ... who is and who is not my enemy.”

Today my father is being honored as a friend of the church. But as a child, he would cross the street to avoid one, and the beatings from the worshipers within; on Christmas Eve he knew to stay off the streets altogether. My great-grandmother sang him mournful songs about Jewish communities decimated over outrageous lies that they murdered Christian children to make matzoh with their blood.

How do I help our Christian friends understand that the Jewish people still face blood libels today?

Accusers throw the word “apartheid” at Israel, ignoring that thousands of Arabs serve voluntarily in the Israel Defense Forces and take their oath on a Koran or New Testament, ignoring that this year an Arab political party was kingmaker in forming the Israeli government.

Some celebrities charge Israel with ethnic cleansing, disregarding that as of 2017, the population of Palestinian citizens in Israel is more than nine times as high as it was in 1948. Meanwhile, almost all states in the Arab Middle East are *Judenrein* — “cleansed” of Jews.

American right-wing extremists shoot us with assault rifles in synagogues while reactionary preachers express fury at our support for immigrants and people of color. For our allyship, they see us as poisoning the wells of White America. At the same time, elements of the Christian left condemn Israel in vitriolic terms, without a trace of compassion for the Israeli people facing violence and terrorism. The United Church of Christ's denunciation didn't even mention Hamas.

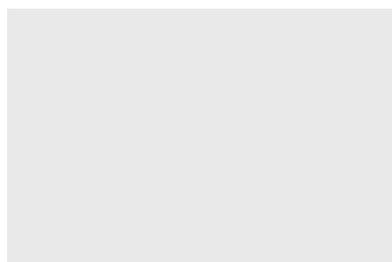
Last year, left-wing extremists spread lies that Israel trained George Floyd's murderer. This past summer, angry mobs in Los Angeles and New York trashed restaurants, searching for Jews to violently attack. “F--- Jews,” they yelled, and “f--- Israel.”

How do I get well-intentioned people to recognize that if they find themselves in any movement that tolerates lies and hatred toward the world's only Jewish state, unless they can challenge and remove the antisemitic poison, that place is not their place?

My father's generation was blessed with Christian allies such as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. who rejected the anti-Israel sentiment that threatened to infect his movement. Perhaps our next generation of allies will come from those who walk through the doors of the Washington National Cathedral and are inspired to ask questions about my father's presence there.

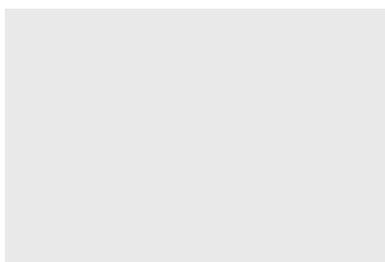
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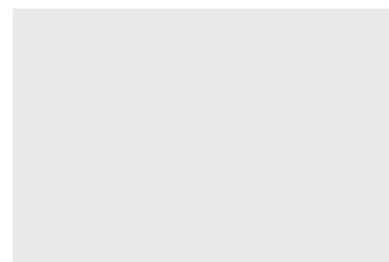
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