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CELEBRATING A STORYTELLER: ELIE WIESEL

This article presents several general perspectives concerning the reception of Elie Wiesel's work and public activity as well as the way they are viewed by those who study his biography and by the general public. At his eightieth anniversary, Wiesel continues to fascinate, to challenge, and to inspire the most diverse range of feelings. Apart from this, one thing is sure: the contemporary world has been significantly marked by his work and activity.

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Elie Wiesel has turned 80. With characteristic modesty, he always describes himself as a simple storyteller.¹ But we cannot disregard the numerous other ways in which he has been recognized. Biographers have held up Wiesel alongside the most prominent biblical characters; have credited him with the gifts of prophecy and divine science; and have called him the keeper of the secret of restoring of the human condition. I would like to discuss a few of the titles with which others have honored Wiesel.²

Egil Aarvik, in his Nobel presentation speech, called Wiesel

“an only son of Abraham, an Isaac who once again escaped a sacrificial death on Mount Moriah.”³

In similar fashion, Holocaust scholar Simon P. Sibelman says:

Elie Wiesel is a modern day *navi*, a prophet. I do not mean to suggest he offers to humanity prophecies that serve as windows to the future. ... Wiesel represents a continuation of the Jewish prophetic tradition.⁴

One of the most complex descriptions of Wiesel's work, which is also the closest to Wiesel's self-assessments, labels him a messenger. In biographer Robert McAfee Brown's opinion, Wiesel is a messenger in a variety of ways: speaking for victims as well as for divine providence, acting as a messenger to humanity who reveals and offers himself as a measure of authenticity. Wiesel exemplifies at least four kinds of messengers:

1) „he is a messenger from dead. He speaks on their behalf, so they may be herad and so they will not be forgotten”; 2) „he feels an obligation to be a messenger from dead, but also a messenger for the

living. The task of such a messenger is to warn of consequences and to affirm possibilities”; 3) „in addition to being a messenger from the dead and a messenger for the living, Wiesel is also a messenger to heaven. Clearly to be a messenger to heaven means being charged with the exalted task of taking human messages into the divine presence and demanding a hearing. It can also mean the less agreeable task of contending with God, of holding God accountable for what has gone wrong in a world that is presumable under divine control.”; 4) „the messenger has at least one more function. He must be also a messenger for the self, his own self and other selves. He must attain authenticity in his own inner being if he is to speak authentically for others.”⁵

After unpacking and exploring the opinions of several notable figures in Jewish thought, Michael Berenbaum concludes that Wiesel is among the great contemporary theologians who, using the special tools of literature, develops ideas similar to those of addressed by traditional theologians.⁶

Today, Wiesel is so widely acclaimed that we do not need to resort to any tricks to emphasize his importance, in the context of Jewish thought in particular or of Western thought in general. In fact, it is safe to say that he is generally acknowledged to be one of the most important creative thinkers inside the Jewish tradition. If Jewish philosophy is seen as the place where Judaism meets philosophy, where philosophy restores tradition, and where philosophical reflection is itself remodeled in the spirit of tradition, then Wiesel’s stories about humanity and God certainly fit into the category of philosophy. It is true that Wiesel chooses a different mode of expression than that of systematic reflection, of the conceptual analysis typical of philosophy, but the themes he explores in his stories belong to much as the constructs that he develops in his work are often categorized as theology.

When dealing with a profound problem about the quality of life and the human condition, Wiesel always tells us a story in which the lessons are defined by the individual reader’s capacity for participation in the meanings and means of action inside a tradition. An example:

There is a marvelous anecdote in Hasidic literature that recounts how a young student came to Rebbe Mendel of Kotzk and said, “Master, I am terribly disappointed in God.” “Why?” “I’ll tell you why,” said the student. “It took him six days to create the

world, and look at it. It's terrible." So the master said, "Tell me, could you do better?" And the student, not knowing why, said, "Yes." And the master said, "In that case, then, what are you waiting for? Start doing it!"

This story tells us that each person has the duty to overcome indifference and to act to improve the present state of the world. While it is an illusion, according to Wiesel, that evil can be totally eradicated, it is in each person's power to respect another person's dignity.

Wiesel is the model of such an attitude of active involvement. He is convinced that the betterment of humanity must begin with each of us. Following the spirit of such an impulse towards action and personal engagement, he has always attempted to sound an alarm concerning the danger of indifference. This obsession about showing us that our own personal indifference was the factor that permitted the great horrors of contemporary humanity made Wiesel a beloved though controversial character. My intention here is to remind the reader that there are two attitudes that one can have vis-à-vis Wiesel's activity and thinking in the two communities to which he belongs: Romanian diaspora and Jewish community.

In Romanian society, one can find a trend that views Wiesel's activity pertaining to revealing the dimensions of the Holocaust in the Romanian framework as exaggerated and the cause of damage to Romania's image. Despite the evidences from the *Report of the International Commission for Studying Holocaust in Romania*, that view includes a range of discourse that extends from the accusation of exaggerating some real historical data to the extreme of the total denial of the Holocaust in Romania. However, there are also in Romanian society those who speak about Wiesel as a Romanian who received a Nobel Prize and see him as a symbol of the unconquerable human spirit. He is seen as a symbol of the way in which, through the escape from passivity, each of us can discover our own humanity.

At the same time, there are members of the Jewish community who tend to see in Wiesel's work and activism an attempt to commandeer the entire Jewish discourse on the topic of the Holocaust. On the other hand, there is a strong current that, in the most natural and legitimate way, notes the fact that Wiesel is merely urging the Jews, and non-Jews as well, to leave their passivity, to confess, and to tell the stories of those events that made the attempt to exterminate the entirety of the European Jewish community possible.

Without attempting to nullify the voices of those who disappeared, of those who survived, or of those who are in solidarity with them, Wiesel is a storyteller who urges others to unity behind a common cause that would protect the innocent from abuse. This action implies a double

responsibility, one toward Israel's destiny and a second toward the destiny of all of humanity.

As a storyteller, Wiesel tells stories about people, about the meaning of life, about radical evil, about survival, and about joy and blessing. His stories explore the inexpressible, as with "Prisoner Number A - 7713," the identification number on the child Eliezer's arm in *Night*. Reduced to a mere number, Wiesel discovers that only memory can help him reclaim his humanity. The importance of the name has been discussed extensively in Judaism. It is connected to the name of God, and the significance of man created in God's image and given the power to name things and beings. The importance Wiesel gives the name is apparent in the analysis of some authors who emphasize the special care he takes in naming his characters, a fact that is often evident in the religious meanings of the names he chooses. Wiesel himself confirms the importance he places on naming:

"In Jewish tradition a name evokes a deeper and more respectful attitude.... In other words, our relationship with the name is of a mystical nature; it suggests an imperceptible, mysterious element. Its roots go deep into the unknown.... For in Jewish history a name has its own history and its own memory.... Each name is a call transmitted from generation to generation forcing us to question the meaning of our survival."⁸

Although he repeatedly talks about the impossibility of fully communicating his experience in the death camp, Wiesel, in search of a permanent reconstruction of his own identity, tells the stories of victims and asks questions on his own behalf as well as on the behalf of so many others. "The urgent obligation to bear witness remains constant."⁹

One of the greatest difficulties Wiesel witnesses to is that of confronting the problem of the Holocaust *after* the Holocaust. How can one continue living and believing in human values and yearning for the improvement of the human condition in a universe marked by the experience of absolute evil? His response to this question is a call to common responsibility for all humanity, for each particular individual, and for the individual in relation to community. This means that each individual must be a messenger of authenticity. In this way the Holocaust is no longer just a Jewish problem, or at least not just a problem of Jewish memory. The event speaks of the necessity of cultivating in each person a consciousness of responsibility in the face of terror, violence, and the attempt to use religion or ideology against other individuals or communities. The Holocaust teaches us of the need to overcome indifference and to recognize and respect what is authentic in each person.

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Notes

¹ “Plato was a philosopher. Spinoza was a philosopher. Me, I’m a storyteller,” declares Elie Wiesel in Elie Wiesel and Richard D. Heffner, *Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, Edited by Thomas J. Vinciguerra (New York: Schocken Books, 2001), 28.

² There are a number of biographies, apologetic in tone, that explores Wiesel’s many roles, including: Carol Green, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger from the Holocaust* (Chicago: Childrens Press, 1987); Michael Pariser, *Elie Wiesel: Bearing Witness* (Brookfield, CT: The Millbrook Press, 1994); Caroline Lazo, *Elie Wiesel* (New York: Dillon Press, 1994); Michael A. Schuman, *Elie Wiesel: Voice From the Holocaust* (Hillside, New York: Enslow Publishers, 1994). Some more objective biographies include Ellen Norman Stern, *Elie Wiesel: Witness for Life* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), or Wiesel’s own memoirs: *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, trans. John Rothschild (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1995); *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999).

³ Egil Aarvik, “The Nobel Presentation Speech”, in Elie Wiesel, *The Nobel Peace Prize, 1986* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 4.

⁴ Simon P. Sibelman, *Silence in the Novels of Elie Wiesel* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 2.

⁵ Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity*, revised edition, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 37-42.

⁶ Michael Berenbaum, *The Vision of the Void. Theological Reflections on the Works of Elie Wiesel* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 152.

⁷ Wiesel and Heffner, *Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, 175.

⁸ Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, vol. III, ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 376.

⁹ Elie Wiesel, „Afterword” in *Obliged by Memory: Literature, Religion, Ethics. A collection of essays honoring Elie Wiesel’s Seventieth Birthday*, Eds. Steven T. Katz and Alan Rosen (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 158. “Memory implies more than mentally recovering something that occurred in the past, or something that has been forgotten. The claims of memory impel one to action.... Memory requires one to act in a way that seeks at least a partial tikkun (repair) of the world, while simultaneously asking questions of both the divine and human covenantal partners.” Alan L. Berger, “Transfusing Memory. Second-Generation Postmemory in Elie Wiesel’s *The Forgotten*,” in Katz and Rosen, *Obliged by Memory*, 117–118.