

Remembering Elie Wiesel As a Lens For The Week That Was

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Last Shabbat, the Jewish people and the world lost one of our generation's most important voices of conscience, Elie Wiesel.* As the week began, I thought that this was what we should talk about on Shabbat. Everyone knows that Elie Wiesel was a survivor of the Shoah, a writer whose words awakened people around the world for the first time to what happened during the Holocaust, and an activist against genocide in today's world. So I figured we could look into some of the nuances of his work and try to learn something from him to guide us about where we are in our own society.

About forty people gathered here on Tuesday evening to remember Elie Wiesel. I said that night that it was as though we ourselves were sitting shiva. And therefore we could only each say what we were feeling in the moment, and no one could tell someone else or all of us what meaning or lesson we could apply from his life to what's been happening now. That day would come, I said, and I would try to do that on Shabbat – today.

As it happened, the day Elie Wiesel died was also the day when a white-supremacist, neo-Nazi group was given one of the biggest megaphones in America for an anti-Semitic slur it had published earlier. For several days, that was one story that dominated the political news. It seemed like we should talk about that, and where anti-Semitism fits into the picture of division by religion and race that is so alive right now in our country.

And then came the killings in Baton Rouge of Alton Sterling and in St. Paul of Philando Castile, two African-Americans shot by white policemen, and the killing by a black man of five white officers in Dallas -- Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Lorne Ahrens, and Michael Smith.

It is hard to look anywhere from the middle of grief. I was in tears last night when we davvened to ourselves the last paragraph of Aleinu:

על כן נקוה לך ה' אלוהינו לראות מהרה בתפארת עוזך
להעביר גילולים מן הארץ והאלילים כרות יכרתון
לתקן עולם במלכות שדי וכל בני בשר יקראו בשמך

* Read an obituary at http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/world/europe/elie-wiesel-auschwitz-survivor-and-nobel-peace-prize-winner-dies-at-87.html?_r=0

*Al ken n'kaveh l'cha, Adonai Elohaynu, lir'ot m'hayra b'tiferet uzecha
L'haavir gilulim min haaretz, v'ha-elilim karot yikaraytun
l'taken olam b'malchut Shaddai, v'chol b'nai vasar yik'r'u vish'mecha...*

Because of this we have hope toward You, Adonai our God, that soon we will see the full splendor of Your might, wiping from the earth the illusions that some are worshipping, destroying for all time their smaller gods, so the power of Your just rule can repair the world, and all people will call together through Your name.

The heart breaks when we seem so far from that, despite all we try to do to make it so.

But my friend Rabbi Josh Feigelson wrote Friday that, in light of the week that was, Shabbat itself is an act of defiance. It's where we come to remind ourselves that this Aleinu vision persists through the tears, and we are not foolish to speak it, even through our questions of why, and how long will this take. So I want to turn back to where the week began, to Elie Wiesel. Because he was not only a survivor, giving testimony to what happened. And he was not only an activist – though *dayenu*, it would have been enough had he been either of those things. He had something to teach about how to keep saying and enacting *al ken n'kaveh*, because of this we have hope, in the constant shadow of the Shoah.

So I want to pick out a couple things from his writing and speaking, with far less nuance than I had hoped to, and relate them to the challenges we are facing now.

The first thing about Elie Wiesel's writing is detail – saying things right.

In an interview with Terri Gross almost thirty years ago that was replayed yesterday on the radio,* Wiesel said that he began writing *Night* on precisely the tenth anniversary of his liberation from Buchenwald – April 11, 1955. “I decided to wait for 10 years - not to speak about it, not to use language related to these experiences until I knew that the words were true words.”

This was one of the challenges Wiesel defined and struggled with as a writer about the Shoah. From his first writings, he identified the concentration camps as the “kingdom of night” – a parallel universe, he said at least once – and he didn't know if any of the words we use in this world could possibly say what happened in the Shoah. So he chose words carefully. He knew that each word, each rhythm, each combination has a

* <http://www.npr.org/2016/07/08/485237688/fresh-air-remembers-elie-wiesel-holocaust-survivor-and-nobel-peace-laureate>

particular effect on the reader or listener. Liliane read for us on Tuesday from an essay he wrote in French about this – how easy it is to speak in clichés, to settle for a word that is the same old story when there is in fact something unique that has to be said.

And I think that is one lesson we need today. If we're going to speak about skin color in our country, about crime and law enforcement, about Islam, we owe it to each other to know what we're talking about. We owe it especially to those who are different from us, whether we're trying to act in solidarity or, especially, when we are criticizing.

We can't just get by with generalities. The fewer people we know personally who are different – by color or religion or sexual orientation or anything – the more we have to get to know more people, or read their words, and not just words about them written by someone else. Think about it – if you met someone who only knew about the Shoah from fiction written by non-Jews, and they tried to engage you and tell you what lessons to learn, you would feel insulted and belittled, and you wouldn't even be able to speak with such a person.

We need to know what is, and what it really feels like, before we can jump to conclusions, or toward solutions.

The second thing I would pick out from Wiesel is an attitude about what it means to be Jews, to be forever the survivor people.

When he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, he said in his acceptance speech:*

I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe.

Of course, since I am a Jew profoundly rooted in my peoples' memory and tradition, my first response is to Jewish fears, Jewish needs, Jewish crises. For I belong to a traumatized generation, one that experienced the abandonment and solitude of our people. It would be unnatural for me not to make Jewish priorities my own: Israel, Soviet Jewry, Jews in Arab lands ... But there are others as important to me. Apartheid is, in my view, as abhorrent as anti-Semitism. To me,

* https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-acceptance_en.html

Andrei Sakharov's isolation is as much of a disgrace as Josef Biegun's imprisonment. As is the denial of Solidarity and its leader Lech Walesa's right to dissent. And Nelson Mandela's interminable imprisonment.

The first couple times I read these words, they seemed almost bland to me, like words that could have been said by anyone, maybe by everyone. But I see how carefully Wiesel described how our attention develops: from our persecution as Jews, to the targeting of others in the same way and the same place as Jews, then widening out to the parallels for others who are not us and not in the places we are.

Because he lived this, he could say it. At the dedication of the US Holocaust Museum, Wiesel lingered over his testimony about the Jews. Then he challenged the president of the United States, sitting right there, to take action to stop the slaughter of Bosnians.*

And the lesson, I have come to realize, is that we as Jews shouldn't choose between speaking out against anti-Semitism and speaking out against all other forms of bigotry and hate. There are, at times, more than one center of the universe, and this is one of those times. If this week became the week about race, it was also the week about anti-Semitism. We can't be strong in solidarity with others, if we don't keep fighting against anti-Semitism, even if when it feels at times as if we are doing that alone.

And this will in turn strengthen our ability to be partners, full engaged in all the fights against all kinds of bigotry. Wiesel's charges about Bosnia and Darfur were strengthened because of his relentless focus on the Shoah. The more we understand the Shoah, the more we will be impelled to take notice of everything on all levels of the pyramid of hate.^

And if we need any more motivation, in this week when we are overwhelmed not only by this country but the world, we can look to something Wiesel said about the moment of his liberation from Buchenwald.

At the end of *Night*, he described eating so much that he became sick, and looking at himself in the mirror and seeing a corpse.

* <https://www.ushmm.org/research/ask-a-research-question/frequently-asked-questions/wiesel>

^ The pyramid of hate is a graphic designed by the Anti-Defamation League, to describe the continuum from bias to genocide: <http://www.adl.org/assets/pdf/education-outreach/Pyramid-of-Hate.pdf>

But he said something different in a speech one time before an audience of young people at Xavier University.* The last question, from someone who had read *Night*, was this: "Can you describe how you felt when you were liberated from the concentration camp by the American army?" In the course of his answer, Wiesel mentioned that an American soldier gave him a sandwich. He asked what type of sandwich it was, and the soldier told him: a ham sandwich.

Wiesel said: "Now if I would have had that offered to me in the camp, just moments before the liberation, I would have been permitted and even obligated to eat it to save my life. But now that I was free – and I had a choice – I chose not to eat the ham sandwich and wait for kosher food."

This story is not about ham versus kosher. What it says to me is this: There is a line that divides between a situation where you can do nothing – when you are essentially a corpse – and a situation where you have a choice to act or do nothing. The line can be located precisely. Elie Wiesel found it, the precise instant he was liberated from the kingdom of night. His freedom meant that moral responsibility was immediate.

No matter how paralyzed we feel at times, we all know which side of the line we are privileged and blessed to live on. We have no excuse not to speak out or act, to squander our moral possibility, whether we choose the small scale of interactions and relationships, or join in communal or political action.

Elie Wiesel wore that responsibility heavily in his life. And because of that, *al ken n'kaveh* – because of this we have hope that soon we will see the full splendor of God's might, wiping from the earth the illusions that some are worshipping, destroying for all time their smaller gods, so the power of God's just rule can repair the world, and all people will call together through Your name.

Shabbat Shalom.

* I learned of this from Rabbi Benjamin Samuels of congregation Shaarei Tefillah in Newton, Massachusetts, who shared it in an e-mail to his community. He cited as his source Rabbi Chanan Balk of Cincinnati.