

Introduction to
Elie Wiesel:

Selections from Night
in John K Roth &
Michael Berenbaum:

Holocaust, Religious &
Philosophical Implications,

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WELL BEFORE Elie Wiesel was awarded the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, both of the editors of this anthology had written a book on his significance as a thinker. So we find it odd to write a brief introduction to only a small selection of the first of his books. There is more to the man and his work than you will read here—much more. But any reader of Wiesel's work must begin somewhere. It is best to begin with *Night*.

Wiesel only started to write after a decade of self-imposed silence. The result was his first book, *Un di Velt Hot Geshvign* (*And the World Was Silent*). Written in Yiddish, this work was condensed, refined, and intensified (dare we say purified?) into Wiesel's classic memoir published in French as *La Nuit* with an introduction by the distinguished French and Roman Catholic writer, François Mauriac. Of his decade of silence, Wiesel says: "I felt that I needed ten years to collect the words and the silence in them."

According to Wiesel, *Night* is the only book in which he writes about the Holocaust directly. His experience in "the kingdom of night" has cast its shadow on the avalanche of words he has written and spoken since he ended his silence.

What Wiesel uniquely offers is entry into an experience, into the darkness of the Holocaust and the darkness that remains in its aftermath. The sacred mystery of our time may not be the face of God, but of the anti-God and the "evil side of man." Through Wiesel's work and his persona, the non-survivor is offered a glimpse at what was and is no longer, the darkness of unspeakable horror, and of the painful but productive process of regeneration after destruction.

Night, a memoir of the kingdom of darkness, is the story of a young boy reared in the ways of Torah and fascinated by the eternity of Israel. The boy is rudely shocked by history as he is transported from Sighet to Auschwitz, from a world infused with God's presence to a universe apart—a world without God and without humankind. In the following sections, Wiesel first experiences the incongruity between the teachings of Jewish tradition and the experience of Auschwitz. As *Night* unfolds, Wiesel describes how his faith was painfully consumed

by the flames that sent the bodies of the innocent and the young skyward. Wiesel writes of his move from religious rebellion to defiance and from defiance to an encounter with the void—the void of God's absence from history and from the author's personal life, the emptiness where His presence once had been.

Throughout his early work, Wiesel struggles to find meaning in his suffering, to endow his fate and the history of the Jewish people with a transcendent purpose. Only in his fourth work, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, does he succeed. The major character is a young Holocaust survivor who has made his way to Paris after the war. His mentor, the man who teaches him the meaning of survival, is not a Jew with memories of Sinai and Auschwitz, but a Spaniard, who learned of death and love during the Spanish Civil War. From Pedro, the young survivor learns two lessons that have shaped Wiesel's writings ever since. Pedro tells the young man:

You frighten me. You want to eliminate suffering by pushing it to its extreme: to madness. To say 'I suffer therefore I am' is to become the enemy of man. What you must say is 'I suffer, therefore you are.' Camus wrote somewhere that to protest against a universe of unhappiness you had to create happiness. That's an arrow pointing the way: it leads to another human being. And not via absurdity.

Wiesel knows that suffering can shatter men and women or heal them. It can be used to unite people or to divide them. The only way to redeem suffering, and to endow it with meaning, is to treat its memory as a source of healing. In his public career, Wiesel has remained faithful to this insight.

Whether writing about the struggle of Soviet Jewry or of the meaning of the Bible, whether depicting pious Hasidim or alienated young Jews, Wiesel never dwells on suffering. Instead he invokes its memory in order to teach, to rouse from indifference, to urge that more be done, to plead for Jewish pride or human solidarity, to challenge complacency.

Wiesel is a master of the spoken word. He is the premier Jewish orator of our time, a traveling *maggid* appearing in synagogues and universities, on television, and at scholarly forums with a message that is compelling; his demeanor and voice evoke tears and laughter, melancholy and nostalgia.

Wiesel was born in Sighet, Rumania, on Simchat Torah in 1928. When his hometown—it had become part of Hungary in 1940—was occupied by the Germans in the spring of 1944, Wiesel and his family were subsequently deported to Auschwitz. His mother and little sister, Tzipora, were killed there, and Wiesel's father died at Buchenwald. Liberated from Buchenwald in April 1945, Wiesel made France his postwar home, studying at the Sorbonne and working as a journalist for an Israeli newspaper. He came to the United States in 1956 to cover the United Nations and became an American citizen in 1963. Wiesel continues to write in French and his works are translated into English, most often by his wife, Marion. He is currently the Andrew Mellon University Professor of the Humanities at Boston University and has served as chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. Wiesel's awards are too numerous to mention. In addition to the Nobel Peace Prize awarded in 1986, he has been awarded national medals in the United States and France as well as honorary degrees by more than a score of universities on three continents.

As you read his words, you will enter an awesome world. Lawrence Cunningham has described *Night* as the anti-Exodus, the journey from freedom to slavery, from light to darkness, from God to the anti-God. Begin the journey with Wiesel. He has been the guide for so many in this generation.