Thoughts on the Teachings of Elie Wiesel

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Elie Wiesel (1928-2016) won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. Actually, it was against all odds that he should have been alive, let alone become a powerful voice for world peace. When he was only fifteen years old, he—along with all the Jews in his town of Sighet—was rounded up by the Nazis and shipped to concentration camps where most of them were murdered. His mother and younger sister perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. His father died before war's end. His two older sisters survived. The young Elie Wiesel—a religious, pious young man—was spiritually scarred for life by his traumatic experiences in the hell of Nazism's death camps.

After the war, he was sent to France, along with other orphans. He could not then find words to describe the Holocaust. The pain was too raw and too deep. He found work as a journalist. In the early 1950s he interviewed the Nobel Prize-winning French novelist François Mauriac, who encouraged Wiesel to write about the concentration camps and to bear witness for the millions whose lives were snuffed out by the Nazis and their collaborators. This led to Wiesel writing an extensive work in Yiddish, later edited down and published in French in 1958, and in English in 1960: The Night. That book was widely read and acclaimed; and Wiesel went on to write many more books, win many awards, teach many classes, give thousands of lectures.

Upon moving to the United States in 1955, his career as writer and teacher flourished. He held professorial positions at the City University of New York, Yale University, and Boston University. He received numerous awards for his literary

and human rights activities, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States Congressional Gold Medal and the Medal of Liberty Award. President Jimmy Carter appointed Wiesel chairman of the United State Holocaust Memorial Council in 1978. Shortly after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, he and his wife established The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity.

Elie Wiesel, a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, was not only to be a voice and a memorial for the murdered millions. His life's mission was to serve as a conscience to the world, to remind humanity of the horrors of war and mass murder, to help humanity understand that there should never again be concentration camps, genocide, ruthless and merciless tyranny.

Throughout his life, Elie Wiesel was a religiously observant Jew; but his faith in God—and humanity--was conflicted, sometimes angry; in spite of his grievances, though, he sought to remain optimistic. "I belong to a generation that has often felt abandoned by God and betrayed by mankind. And yet, I believe that we must not give up on either…..There it is: I still believe in man in spite of man" (Open Heart, pp. 72, 73).

Wiesel's approach found expression in his description of biblical Isaac, the son of Abraham who was brought to the mountain to be sacrificed to the Lord. At the last moment, an angel appeared to Abraham and commanded him not to put the knife to Isaac's throat. In Hebrew, the name Isaac (Yitzhak) means: he will laugh. Wiesel asked: "Why was the most tragic of our ancestors named Isaac, a name which evokes and signifies laughter?" And he provided his answer: "As the first survivor, he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter. Isaac, of course, never freed himself from the traumatizing scenes that violated his youth; the holocaust had marked him and continued to haunt him forever. Yet, he remained capable of laughter. And in spite of everything, he did laugh" (Messengers of God, p. 97).

Wiesel's religious worldview was strongly influenced by the Hassidic movement. He wrote much about Hassidic masters and drew heavily on their teachings. A central element of Hassidism was the role of the Rebbe, the rabbi and teacher, who was—and was expected to be—a tzaddik, a truly righteous person who was deemed to have great powers.

The Hassidic movement began with Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760), born in a small town in the Ukraine. The Besht, as he came to be known, brought a message of hope to the poor and oppressed Jews. A man of humble

origins, he taught that the less fortunate were beloved by God, “that every one of them existed in God’s memory, that every one of them played a part in his people’s destiny, each in his way and according to his means” (Souls on Fire, p. 25). The simple, unlearned Jew could serve God through piety, joy, song, love of nature. What God required was a sincere and pious heart. When people criticized the Besht for associating with lowly individuals, he replied: “A small Tzaddik loves small sinners; it takes a great Tzaddik to love great sinners” (Somewhere a Master, p. 65). This was a basic principle of Hassidism: love for our fellow human beings must resemble God’s love; it reaches everyone, great and small.

The Besht’s successor was Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezeritch. He drew hundreds of students and thousands of followers. To the more erudite, he taught the hidden truths of the faith. To the simple, he explained that their mere recital of the Sh’ma Yisrael prayer with proper devotion would make them worthy of redemption. The Maggid inspired loyalty. He was an excellent strategist and administrator and succeeded in spreading Hassidism throughout Eastern Europe. Although the Besht was the first leader of the Hassidic movement, it was Rabbi Dov Baer who established the role of the Hassidic Rebbe as a Tzaddik. “As he saw it, the Tzaddik had to combine the virtues and gifts, as well as fulfill the roles and obligations, of saint, guide and sage. Spokesman for God in His dealings with man, intercessor for man in his dealings with God” (Souls on Fire., p. 66). An essential role of the Tzaddik was to encourage Hassidim never to consider themselves as being useless, abandoned, or neglected by the Almighty.

As Hassidism grew and spread, new Rebbes emerged, each with his own distinctive style. The common denominator, though, was that each had to be a Tzaddik, a righteous person who could connect the people with God, and God with the people. Some Tzaddikim were ascetic and humble; others enjoyed a degree of luxury. Some were compassionate in the extreme, while others were more remote, less personally involved with the individual struggles of their followers. Some were expected to be wonder workers who could perform miracles; others were respected for their insistence on individual responsibility.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (1740-1809) was known for his unlimited love of each Jew, even the most sinful and ignorant among them. The notables of Berdichev chided him for associating with people of inferior rank. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak replied: “When the Messiah will come, God will arrange a feast in his honor, and all our patriarchs and kings, our prophets and sages will of course be invited. As for myself, I shall quietly make my way into one of the last rows and hope not to be noticed. If I am discovered anyway and asked what right I have to

attend, I shall say: Please be merciful with me, for I have been merciful too" (Ibid., p. 99).

A Tzaddik of a later generation, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859), was known for the rigorous demands he made on himself and others. He sought no compromises with truth, no short cuts, no evasions. Wiesel describes him as "the angry saint, the divine rebel. Among the thousands of Hassidic leaders great and small, from the Baal Shem's time to the Holocaust, he is undeniably the most disconcerting, mysterious figure of all. Also the most tragic" (Ibid., p. 231). The Kotzker always seemed to be yearning, to be reaching for something beyond. He once explained that the serpent in the Garden of Eden was punished and had to forever crawl in and eat the dust. It has been asked: why is eating dust a punishment? In fact, this makes it very easy for the serpent to eat without having to search for its sustenance. The Kotzer replied: "That is the worst punishment of all: never to be hungry, never to seek, never to desire anything" (Somewhere a Master, p. 101). The Kotzker spent the last years of his life as a melancholy recluse. Yet, his sharp wisdom and keen erudition made him a sainted figure among his followers, and one of the most quoted Hassidic Rebbes through modern times.

Elie Wiesel was especially drawn to those Tzaddikim who were torn by internal conflict and doubts. Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz (1728-1791) taught that even if some questions are without answers, one must still ask them. Doubts are not necessarily destructive, if they bring one to a Rebbe. One must realize that others have gone through the same sorrow and endured the same anguish. "God is everywhere, even in pain, even in the search for faith" (Ibid., p. 12).

The Tzaddik invariably lives a double life. He must at once be a humble soul, aware of his limitations—and he must be a seemingly perfect person in the eyes of his followers. If he is too humble, he cannot gain their trust. If he thinks he indeed is perfect, then he is a deeply flawed human being. "A saint who knows that he is a saint—isn't. Or more precisely, no longer is. A conscience that is too clear is suspect. To ever be clear, conscience must have overcome doubt. As Rebbe Nahman of Bratzlav put it: No heart is as whole as one that has been broken" (Ibid., p. 59).

Elie Wiesel was drawn to Hassidic masters who were epitomes of religious faith and leadership…and who had their own questions, self-doubts, feelings of melancholy. In spite of personal internal struggles, the Tzaddik had to be available to his followers with a full and loving heart. "Just tell him that you need him and he will receive you. Tell him that you are suffering and he will be your

companion. Tell him you need a presence and he will share your solitude without invading it. This may seem unusual today, but in those days many Hassidic Masters treated their followers in that way, with similar compassion" (Ibid., p. 142).

Wiesel writes nostalgically, especially about the early Tzadikkim of Hassidism. But as the movement grew and expanded, it also lost some of the initial energy and idealism of its founders. Many different and competing groups emerged, each with its own Rebbe/Tzaddik.

To the outside observer, Hassidim appear to be cult-like groups blindly devoted to their charismatic Rebbes; they dress in distinctive garb, follow distinctive customs, and speak primarily in Yiddish rather than the language of the land. Yet, Hassidim are living testimony of the power of survival. Vast numbers of Hassidim perished during the Holocaust. Their communities in Europe were decimated. Yet, the survivors did not lose faith. They rebuilt communities in Israel, the United States and elsewhere; a new generation of Rebbes emerged, attracting thousands of adherents. Elie Wiesel's emotional connection to Hassidism and Hassidim are an expression of his faith in humanity's ability to overcome horrors…and survive with renewed vigor and optimism.

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When it was announced in 1986 that Elie Wiesel won the Nobel Prize, many (including me) supposed it was the prize in literature. After all, he was a famous author of numerous highly acclaimed books. But the prize was not for literature, but for peace.

Apparently the Nobel committee thought that his universal messages relating to peace were more important than his literary production. Some have felt that Wiesel's writing is overly emotional, sometimes pretentious; it tries too hard to appear profound. While his books will be read for many years to come, his role as a conscience for humanity was deemed most significant.

In presenting the Nobel Peace Prize, Egil Aarvik, chair of the Nobel Committee, said this about Wiesel: "His mission is not to gain the world's sympathy for victims or the survivors. His aim is to awaken our conscience. Our indifference to evil makes us partners in the crime. This is the reason for his attack on indifference and his insistence on measures aimed at preventing a new Holocaust. We know that the unimaginable has happened. What are we doing now to prevent its happening again?"

References

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