

Remembering Elie Wiesel, z”l

Delivered by Rabbi David Novak July 8, 2016

Including obituary materials quoted from the Forward and the New York Times and other sources

Last Shabbat afternoon the world lost Elie Wiesel, the world’s best-known and perhaps its most influential survivor of the Holocaust. His death reminds us that the world will soon be without those who experienced the Shoah first-hand.

In the Forward Rabbi Michael Berenbaum, himself an expert in the Holocaust, writes that Wiesel explored the Holocaust with religious themes, offering entry into a new way of speaking of God and of humanity, a “language that used the tools of tradition to shatter that very tradition yet also to rebuild it: the Holocaust for Wiesel was “incomprehensible, inexplicable.” Wiesel was a person who was responsible for changing the status of Holocaust survivors from victims and refugees to witnesses with a moral mission, not only to remember the past but transform the future.

He was the “heir of Jeremiah with his message of rebuke, but also of Isaiah with his words of consolation, the embodiment of Ezekiel’s dry bones that have come to life again, the anguished Job of Auschwitz, questioning God and most deeply God’s creation.”

Born in 1928 in Sighet, Romania, but Hungarian in its cultural outlook, Wiesel was deported from Hungary from May to July 1944 along with 437,402 Jews over 54 days and 147 trains. Most were destined to Birkenau.

In Auschwitz and in a nearby labor camp called Buna-Monowitz he worked loading stones onto railway cars. Under the pressures of starvation, cold and daily atrocities he became animal-like. He became so obsessed with getting his plate of soup and crust of bread that he watched guards beat his father with an iron bar while he had “not flickered an eyelid” to help.

In January 1945 as the Russians approached, Wiesel and his father left Auschwitz together with some 66,000 other prisoners on what the Germans called a “forced evacuation” what the Jews experienced as a death march. Elie survived; his father did not. The prisoners were forced to run for miles through high snow. Those who stumbled were crushed in the stampede. After the prisoners were taken by train to another camp, Buchenwald,

Wiesel watched his father succumb to dysentery and starvation and shamefully confessed that he had wished to be relieved of the burden of sustaining him. When his father's body was taken away on Jan. 29, 1945, he could not weep. "I had no more tears," he wrote.

At liberation, Elie was among 400 Jewish children from Buchenwald who were resettled in France just after the war. It was in France that he received his secular education, choosing to write in French. He said, "I owe France my secular education, my language and my career as a writer. . . It was in France that I found compassion and humanity. It was in France that I found generosity and friendship. It was in France that I found compassion and humanity. It was in France that I found the brighter side of humanity."

Wiesel was kinder in his appraisal of the French than many Jews who objected to France's cooperation with the Germans in their deportation of Jewish children and the betrayal of non-citizens and French Jews.

Wiesel's career included both writing and acting as a preeminent Jewish public figure and moral leader. He wrote more than 50 books, including "Night," his first book, a memoir of his months in Auschwitz. It has sold millions of copies, has been featured as an Oprah book recommendation, and is second only to "Diary of Anne Frank" in its use for high school students.

In it he writes:

"Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never."

"One by one, they passed in front of me," he wrote in "Night," "teachers, friends, others, all those I had been afraid of, all those I could have laughed

at, all those I had lived with over the years. They went by, fallen, dragging their packs, dragging their lives, deserting their homes, the years of their childhood, cringing like beaten dogs.”

“Night” recounted a journey of several days spent in an airless cattle car before the narrator and his family arrived in a place they had never heard of: Auschwitz. Wiesel recalled how the smokestacks filled the air with the stench of burning flesh, how babies were burned in a pit, and how a monocled Dr. Josef Mengele decided, with a wave of a bandleader’s baton, who would live and who would die. Mr. Wiesel watched his mother and his sister Tzipora walk off to the right, his mother protectively stroking Tzipora’s hair. “I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever,” he wrote.

An article in Ha’aretz, another Israeli newspaper, notes that an earlier version of “Night” written in Hebrew, has significantly different content that was angrier at God, at the Germans, at the Western countries, and even Jews who he writes “did nothing.” In the aftermath of the Germans’ systematic massacre of Jews, no voice had emerged like Wiesel’s to drive home the enormity of what had happened and how it had changed mankind’s conception of itself and of God. For almost two decades, the traumatized survivors — and American Jews, guilt-ridden that they had not done more to rescue their brethren — seemed frozen in silence.

In his writings he struggles to come to terms with his own suffering and the silence that he was struggling with, for himself, for why more had not been done to stop it by the Western powers and the Jewish people.

In a world of meaninglessness, he tries to create meaning, to speak of suffering not to shatter and destroy but to embrace and empathize.

Many of us remember when President Ronald Reagan was invited by then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl to visit a cemetery in Bitburg, a German military cemetery where members of Hitler’s elite Waffen SS were buried. It was also at that time that Wiesel was to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest civilian honor that Congress bestows. The event was scheduled for April 19, 1985, the 42nd anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and just before President Reagan’s trip. In his face-to-face meeting with the president, Wiesel spoke these words to the president:

“I belong to a people that speaks truth to power. . .Mr. President, your place is not that place. Your place is with the victims of the SS.”

Even though the president visited Bitburg, Wiesel had succeeded with his powerful words to the president.

He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. The Nobel citation said: “Wiesel is a messenger to mankind. His message is one of peace, atonement and human dignity. His belief that the forces fighting evil in the world can be victorious is a hard-won belief.”

Wiesel long grappled with what he called his “dialectical conflict”: the need to recount what he had seen and the futility of explaining an event that defied reason and imagination. In his Nobel speech, he said that what he had done with his life was to try “to keep memory alive” and “to fight those who would forget.” “Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices,” he said.

Central to Mr. Wiesel’s work was reconciling the concept of a benevolent God with the evil of the Holocaust. “Usually we say, ‘God is right,’ or ‘God is just’ — even during the Crusades we said that,” he once observed. “But how can you say that now, with one million children dead?”

Still, he never abandoned faith; indeed, he became more devout as the years passed: “If I have problems with God, why should I blame the Sabbath?” he once said.

By 2009 Wiesel guided newly-elected President Obama on a visit to Buchenwald with the German chancellor and president. There was not even an echo of Bitburg. The world had changed and Wiesel had played a significant role in effecting that change.

Wiesel went on to be a powerful leader in the movement to free Jews in the former Soviet Union. In 1987, he led a march on the National Mall in December, right before a presidential summit. Wiesel marched with hundreds of thousands of American Jews. Wiesel told the crowd: Had such a march occurred during the Holocaust, millions of Jews would have been saved; too many were silent then. We are not silent today.”

He was also deeply associated with the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, an institution that has brought what

happened in the Holocaust to millions of Americans and visitors from around the globe.

For years Wiesel traveled the world on behalf of victims. Wiesel was an ardent defender of Israel. Like many survivors, he remained deeply grateful for its creation.

Mr. Wiesel lived long enough to achieve a particular satisfying redemption. In 2002, he dedicated a museum in his hometown, Sighet, in the very house from which he and his family had been deported to Auschwitz. With uncommon emotion, he told the young Romanians in the crowd, "When you grow up, tell your children that you have seen a Jew in Sighet telling his story."

A child of 15 when he entered what he termed "the King of Night" Wiesel left this world honored by his peers, respected by global leaders and known by men, women and children throughout the world. He was this generation's pre-eminent survivor who used the moral authority of his own experience to plead for others, to arouse compassion, to rally against indifference.