

PARSHAT HA'AZINU
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We Jews are storytellers. Think, for instance, of the Passover Seder. It is all based on an ancient story of the liberation of our people from the slavery and bondage of Egypt. That night we relive it, by word, song, food, and meaningful commentary. In fact, each day we remember the story of the Exodus from Egypt in our liturgy.

We are a people who love to tell stories whether it is in the realm of legend, law, or lore. Our stories remind us of the past and motivate us in the present to create a brighter future. We are a people of history. Over and over again, the Biblical story we are reminded to “Remember,” “do not forget.” And we rehearse the stories of our past each time we listen to the Torah reading, participate in our holiday and Shabbat rituals, or are present at a significant lifecycle event in the presence of our family and our community.

Moses, too, was a story teller and in our Torah reading of this morning he reminds the people of their past even as he asks them to prepare for a future which will be without his leadership as they prepare to cross the Jordan River and enter the Land of Canaan. In his great song he tells the people: “Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past; ask your father, he will inform you, your elders, they will tell you.” Moses reminds the people to listen to the stories of their elders and to learn from them. Only by learning from the past can we transform the future.

On July 2nd of this year, we lost one of the great storytellers of our people. The life of Elie Wiesel was a storybook in and of itself. And each time he wrote a book, delivered a lecture, offered a perspective in the public arena, he added to the story of the Jewish people in the saga of his life. For his generation, those who died during the Shoah, and those who were fortunate enough to survive it, he was their spokesman, a reminder of what had occurred. He was as well a moral leader for all generations.

Eliezer Wiesel was born in Sighet, Hungary on September 30, 1928. He was raised in a very observant family and his love of Hasidism and Jewish religious literature never left him. Unfortunately, his life changed with the Nazi move into Hungary and the deportation en masse of Hungarian Jewry. His family was deported to Birkenau, and the Wiesel men survived in Buna-Monowitz from 1944 to January 1945. They left Auschwitz together with some 66,000 other prisoners on a death march, which he was able to endure, but from which his father never recovered.

In his books we learn of the fate of his mother and sister and the rest of his family. We learned that his father died just before Auschwitz was liberated by the advancing Russian troops. Elie, himself, went to France and eventually became a journalist. He spent some time in Israel, and in 1956 in the United States as a foreign correspondent for the Israeli paper Yediot Ahronot.

But it was when Elie Wiesel opened up to the world the horrors of the Holocaust, that his name became synonymous with being a storyteller. His book *Night* told the story of his experiences in the death camp and, for many people, it was their first experience of learning what went on in *The Kingdom of Death*. Wiesel continued to write and to teach. He wrote books about the Holocaust experience, about the great sages of the Talmud and the Midrash, about Hasidic Masters, and about the predicament of modern Jewry. In one of his most influential books, *The Jews of Silence*, he wrote about his trip to the Former Soviet Union in the mid-1960's. Going behind the Iron Curtain he told the stories of Soviet Jews who were living under physical and spiritual oppression. But we were not sure who were the "Jews of Silence." Were they the Soviet Jews who were not allowed to raise their voices or was it the rest of World Jewry who did not rally to their cause at that time? His voice was crucial at that time waking us all up to their fate.

In time, Wiesel became the conscience of the Jewish people. He was one of those who was the originators of the idea of a Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and he spoke courageously to President Ronald Reagan as the President prepared for a visit to Germany and a commemoration in Bitburg, where members of the SS were buried. He was enthralled with the miracle of the State of Israel and spoke out all over the world about his concerns for its safety and security.

Anyone who heard him speak was mesmerized by his words, his stories, and his teachings. In a soft voice those stories could enter your soul as you sat on the edge of your seat and were attentive to every word. For many years, Wiesel graced this pulpit almost on an annual basis. He was invited by his friend, Rabbi Sam Dresner, of blessed memory, one of my predecessors, and he spoke many times at Moriah Congregation as well. While I was not present at that time, I know those were special moments.

He was, as he liked to say, a wandering maggid, going from community to community, from venue to venue, from synagogues and universities, gatherings, demonstrations and conferences, national capitals and political forums, speaking to an ever-changing global audience. His message was, "Remember the Holocaust: remembrance must shape our character and has the capacity to transform the future."

Wiesel represented our modern collective memory. He became a voice for those who needed it and travelled the world to decry any possible genocide against others. His voice moved the "Jews of Silence," all of World Jewry, and we marched and lobbied on behalf of Soviet Jewry. He was extolled by presidents and kings and yet, from what I understand, remained a humble man. In 1986, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and he used the occasion to speak against violence, repression, and racism. The committee described Wiesel as "one of the most important spiritual leaders and guides in an age when violence, repression, and racism continue to characterize the world." In his acceptance speech, Wiesel said, "Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant." He was awarded the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal in 1985 and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, among many other honors. He taught us that "the opposite of love is not hate; it's indifference. The opposite of art is not

ugliness; it's indifference. The opposite of education is not ignorance; it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy; it's indifference. The opposite of life is not death; it's indifference."

Wiesel spoke to all of us in a still small voice which entered our hearts and moved our souls. He was a storyteller and a preacher, par excellence. It is important that we remember his life story and the lessons he taught us concerning love, hate, indifference, respect for others, and our duty to ensure a world of peace and harmony for all.

Like many others, I have my own personal story of Elie Wiesel. In 1986, Congregation Rodfei Zedek, the congregation which I served in Hyde Park, invited Wiesel to come in May of 1987 to deliver a public lecture which would serve as a fundraiser for the congregation. A few weeks after our invitation was accepted, it was announced that Wiesel would be granted the Nobel Peace Prize. Needless to say, we knew we now had a major event here in the City of Chicago. We contacted the mayor's office, our alderman, the police, and all said they would be pleased to help out. All of the politicians, of course, wanted to be seen with Wiesel, as well. Wiesel was picked up at the airport in a limousine with a police escort accompanying him.

That Sunday morning, the day that Wiesel was to speak, I received a call to inform me that my mother's mother, my grandmother, passed away. We immediately made plans to travel to Toronto so that I could officiate at the service. However, we decided to stay for the lecture and leave Sunday night. Around the table in a preliminary dinner, I mentioned to Elie Wiesel that I would be leaving immediately after the lecture for the airport. He expressed his condolences and said to me, that since he was going to the airport as well, he would be pleased to have my family join him in the limousine. We accepted his invitation.

However, we needed to go back to our home, pick up our luggage, and close up the apartment for a few days. He was most gracious allowing us to do so, waiting outside the apartment building in the limo. We immediately found two books of *The Jews of Silence* and brought them to be signed by him to Hadassa and Shira, our girls. Unfortunately, in our moves, we have not been able to find the books. Then we made our way to the airport. Frankly, it is a good thing we went with him. The traffic was so bad, there was no way we would ever had made our flight. Instead, with a police escort we traveled on the shoulders of the Kennedy in order to make it in time. In the limo we had a pleasant conversation in which he engaged our two daughters. I still remember some of the lessons that he taught us.

Elie Wiesel, the master storyteller, is an example of the Jew who struggled with the world in which he lived, and yet made his mark on all of us, and will long be remembered. His story will be told and re-told and his lessons, I hope, will continue to reverberate for generations to come. The book *Night* has been translated into many languages and has been read by millions. The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. continues to be visited by millions of visitors each year. Soviet Jewry is now free.

Elie Wiesel's son, Elisha, was asked: "What is your father's legacy to the world?" His son responded: "The actions he took, the speeches he made, and the words he wrote. In him, we had such an exceptional person share the planet with us. The good news is that we don't have to

guess at his legacy. He left his words behind and, in most cases, they are unambiguous. For people who want to know what my father thought, they don't have to ponder it and wonder what my father would have said. He was a prolific writer, and he wrote about many different circumstances with moral significance.”

As Moses stated to the Israelites: “Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past; ask your father, he will inform you, your elders, they will tell you.”

May the memory of Elie Wiesel always be for a blessing.