

**“From Whence the Rivers Come, Thither They Return Again”: The Testing of Faith in  
Elie Wiesel’s *Night***

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Countless causes have been championed in the name of religion and God, allowing the unscrupulous to manipulate, to incite, and to cajole the credulous for their own political or economic gains. For example, Adolf Hitler applied selective interpretation of Bible teachings to an economically exhausted German nation when he claimed in his political autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, that by ridding the nation of its “subhumans,” he was “acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord” (65). What ensued was the systematic slaughter of approximately eleven million human beings. Gypsies, homosexuals, the physically and mentally infirm, women and children were among those exterminated during the execution of the Nazis’ “Final Solution”— a merciless campaign of ethnic cleansing. Of those killed, over half were Jews, and had Hitler achieved his ultimate goal, the Jewish race would now be annihilated (Kishlansky, Geary, O’Brien 928). Elie Wiesel’s haunting narrative *Night* is an account of the horrors of the Holocaust as witnessed by a devout Jewish adolescent and the resulting turmoil the boy experiences when the all-knowing compassionate God of his childhood appears, to him, to have abandoned His people to the inhumanity of their persecutors. When confronted by hatred of such mammoth proportion, when experiencing cruelty which to this day remains beyond belief, when seemingly abandoned, by both society and Deity, what then happens to faith? Can one’s faith in God survive? Elie Wiesel is testimony that it can; for although the butchery that he witnessed during the Nazis’ extermination program stole his innocence, ultimately the program would be denied his faith.

In the decades that have followed the Holocaust, some people, while recoiling from the atrocities committed upon the defenseless, have struggled to comprehend the apparent passivity with which the Jews appeared to resign themselves to their fate. One simple, but credible answer can be found in Wiesel's original title for his memoir, *And the World Remained Silent*. Any hope of salvation diminishes with the realization that the rest of civilization is apparently blind to their plight, for there can be no possibility of the Jews escaping their belligerent tormentor when there is nowhere to escape to. However, of equal importance must be the "Jewish experience of God," whereby "God is not merely the Mighty One, but also the one who knows what suffering is, who suffers with his people and does not leave them alone in their suffering" (Faber 263). Heije Faber suggests that the Jewish relationship with God mirrors that of the patient with his doctor: "The more helpless he feels, the more 'power' he believes the doctor to have" (266). Wiesel would seem to refute these statements. In *Night*, as Eliezer witnesses thousands of prisoners united in praise he asks, in irony,

How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, and watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in the furnaces? Praised be Thy Holy Name, for having chosen us to be slaughtered on Thine altar? (67)

Initially, it would appear that Eliezer concurs with Faber, for he both acknowledges God's power to decide who is to suffer and His presence in witnessing the Jews suffering. But as he recalls the punishments God wrought on Adam and Noah and others who angered Him, he challenges God to, "Look at these men whom You have betrayed, allowing them to be tortured, slaughtered, gassed, and burned, what do they do? They pray before You! They praise Your name!" (Wiesel *Night* 68). For Eliezer, God seems undeserving of such reverence and the image of an ambivalent

God pales in comparison to the prisoners' devotion. He concludes that: "Yes, man is stronger, greater than God" (Wiesel *Night* 67).

However, despite Eliezer's doubts, the complete trust of the majority of God's chosen people in their Creator is still apparent even as the nightmare of transportation begins, and the Jews of Sighet are transferred to the ghetto. Though the scale of the atrocities is yet to be revealed, as they arrive at their first destination, they fall to the ground and cry out: "Oh God, Master of the Universe, in your infinite compassion, have mercy on us" (Wiesel *Night* 20). Though confused and terrified, they are still secure in their belief that their omnipotent God will not desert them. This sentiment is severely tested when transportation ends at Auschwitz, where from the depths of disillusionment, one man confides: "I have more faith in Hitler than in anyone else. He alone has kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people" (Wiesel *Night* 81). At Auschwitz the degradation and torture of the powerless culminates in the mass extermination of human beings so horrific that it was described by a "German official" as "murder by assembly line" (Kishlansky, Geary, O'Brien 928). It is in the midst of this barbaric maltreatment, as a dignified and gentle people are forced to witness the prolonged hanging of the pipel, [a beautiful young boy in "service" (Wiesel *Night* 63)] that a prisoner utters the anguished question: "Where is merciful God, where is He?" (Wiesel *Night* 64). But it seems there will be no mercy, and the prayers of the desperate remain unanswered.

Like most raised within the Orthodox Jewish community, Eliezer's boyhood was centered on family life and faith. Yet Wiesel states in a later memoir, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, that he "never really knew" the father he so adored (3), and he also recalls his envy at his father's preoccupation with the more needy in the community—to the extent, ironically, that he "would have given anything for a tiny taste of misery" so as to gain his father's attention (5). Such

feelings of rejection and abandonment at a crucial age led to Eliezer's zealous application to his religious studies, where, in a perhaps unconscious attempt to fill the void left by his father's preoccupation with others, he turned to faith and became so "deeply observant" that, despite being advised he was too young to venture "into the world of mysticism," he defied his father to study Kabbalah with Moishe the Beadle. Moishe instructs Eliezer: "Man asks and God replies. But we don't understand His replies," (Wiesel *Night* 5). Eric Hoffer voices a similar sentiment in *The True Believer*, where he asserts that, "in order to be effective a doctrine must not be understood, but has rather to be believed in. We can be certain only about things we do not understand" (80-1). However, Moishe's sentiments could be viewed as prophetic—when Eliezer's world shatters beyond recognition, his conflict begins, as he struggles to reconcile his belief in the benevolent God of his childhood with the seemingly uncaring God of his present.

There is an inherent sense of loss accompanying the disillusionment in a belief one has devoted mind and soul to; it is a death of belief, and of one's perception of truth. Hoffer claims, "The devout are always urged to seek the absolute truth with their hearts and not their minds" (81). This view is reiterated by Martin Buber who states, "God is like the friend we trusted and loved," therefore should we feel He misleads us, "we are faced with an existential dilemma, which unresolved, becomes the source of what I have coined an 'agonism in faith.' What is the truth?" (qtd. in Forman 1). For Eliezer, it seems man's capacity for cruelty is matched only by God's indifference. Layer by layer, he begins to lose faith—in humanity, in God, in himself. When all around is madness, when safety and decency and trust are gone, when even God is "gone," all that remains is the primal instinct for survival. With this realization, Eliezer now wrestles new demons—the misery of conscience, guilt, and anger. As he battles the anger that he feels towards his father for his father's frailty, and his dependency, he also faces his anger at

God, for His absence. Eliezer asks: “Why should I sanctify His name? The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent” (Wiesel *Night* 33). It is not only God he rails against but himself, as to his shame, for his self-preservation, he ignores his father’s dying cry. When he awakens to find his father has been removed to the crematorium, Eliezer must not only acknowledge that it is possible his father may have been alive when he was taken, but also that he had “called out to me and I had not answered” (Wiesel *Night* 112). Just like God.

For many there will come a time in which they will question faith; possibly the death of a child, perhaps a natural disaster, whereby the suffering of the innocent, and its reason, seems beyond the capacity of comprehension. Faith, by its very definition, “complete trust or confidence” (*Oxford American* 521), is surely tested when the mere mortal deems the results of such events to be unnecessary and cruel. In such times of extreme crisis, it is the devout, those who believe and accept, who offer up all responsibility for their being to their God that would appear to suffer most. What becomes of the faithful when their Creator appears to forsake them? For those committed individuals who aspire to love and respect their Creator above all others, who submit completely and unquestioningly to their doctrine, and whose trust in Him is implicit, unanswered prayer must feel like betrayal on such a level that for some, there may be no way back. Perhaps then the only possible way to “keep faith” in the face of such (perceived) rejection, is to reason that the events are indeed part of a “Higher” plan for mankind. Even so, some will find difficulty in accepting the Deist theory of God as some sort of Divine clockmaker who, having “constructed the elaborate mechanism, wound it, and gave the pendulum its first swing,” is thus seemingly content to sit back and watch as the “clock” works itself (Kishlansky, Geary, O’Brien 613). When Akiba Drummer tells his audience, “And if He punishes us mercilessly, it is a sign that he loves us that much more” (Wiesel *Night* 45), he is attempting to justify God’s

actions, or lack of action by claiming, perversely, that God is testing His followers to make them stronger. For the faithful there can be no other plausible explanation for God's absence—He is beyond reproach, His purpose cannot be queried – He is The Almighty, The Omnipotent One, and it is not for the mere mortal to question His intent. Be that as it may, man may still seek to find reason, and, if unable to comprehend God's plan, will find faith truly tested. Akiba Drumer affirms this when he confides to Eliezer, “Man is too insignificant, too limited, to even try to comprehend God's mysterious ways” (Wiesel *Night* 76). Yet it is human nature to seek answers, and as the genocide continues, Akiba Drumer discovers that despite his devotion, he is unable to accept that the horrors of the Holocaust could be perceived as a divine test of faith, and he asks Eliezer, “How can I believe, how can anyone believe in this God of Mercy?” (Wiesel *Night* 77). In the face of such harsh reality, his faith crumbles and he states, “It is over. God is no longer with us” (Wiesel *Night* 76). As he loses his faith in his Creator, Akiba Drumer loses the will to live.

At Auschwitz, Eliezer also struggles to maintain his faith and reconcile with the God of his youth, of Whom he was certain, Who promised Moses that the children of Israel would “be a special treasure to Me above all people” (Ex. 19:5) and Who wrought the ten plagues to “bring you out from the burdens of the Egyptians” (Exod. 6:7), but Who had not delivered a miracle to save the suffering of the Holocaust. Where was divine intervention? In the sixty or so years that have passed since the Holocaust, Wiesel has continued to question this, and he states in his 1995 memoir, “He should have intervened, or at least expressed Himself” (*All Rivers* 105). His comment is understandable considering his religious doctrine. In the same memoir, he quotes from *The Book of Splendor* that, “No space is devoid of God. God is everywhere”(103). If so, then, as Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in *The Necessity of Atheism*, “could [H]e not convince the

human mind in an instant of the things [H]e wished to make known to it?" Shelley argues that, had God, who was "so well intentioned for mankind" made His "permanent wishes in ineffaceable characters, equally understandable to all the inhabitants of the earth," then "no one would have the audacity to violate [H]is commands, no mortal would dare risk attracting [H]is anger: finally, no man would have the effrontery to impose on [H]is name or to interpret [H]is will according to [H]is own fancy" (43). Perhaps in a personal attempt to justify God's absence, Wiesel remarked in an interview with Harry James Cargas in 1976, "Something happened to God. Certainly something happened to the relations between man and God, man and man, man and himself," and he continued that although he tries to tell the "real story," it will "never be told because maybe only God can tell it" (*Conversations* 59). And so, it would be fair to assess that while Wiesel did, and does, retain his faith, it has emerged damaged. In *And the Sea Is Never Full* he writes, "I never gave up my faith in God. Even over there I went on praying. Yes, my faith was wounded, and still is today." (70). Wiesel recognizes that, while he "would be within [his] rights to give it up" and is able to "invoke six million reasons to justify [his] decision" (*And the Sea is Never Full: Memoirs* 70), still he does not.

It is true to say that Elie Wiesel physically survived the Holocaust. Now a prolific author, he has dedicated his life to the humanities. Having born witness to man as he subjected his fellow man to unimaginable horrors, Wiesel speaks out for the world's oppressed. He is a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and responsible for establishing the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity. In light of a life of such accomplishment, it is reasonable to assume that Wiesel has not lost his hope in humankind's potential for goodness, and that he may then also have made his peace with God. But in *And the Sea Is Never Full* he writes, "Does this mean I have made peace with God? I continue to protest His apparent indifference to the injustices that

savage His creation” (69). As Faber states, “The God-man relationship is a moral one; it’s most important attributes are: call, obedience, guilt, punishment and reconciliation” (267). While Wiesel’s journey to reconcile with God is well documented, as is his quest for a better understanding of God, which threads through his speeches, interviews, and the content of the thirty-nine books he has written since *Night*, he is still searching to justify God’s lack of “action” in the face of man’s destruction. Though he appears to have retained his faith, Wiesel’s God has yet to redeem Himself. In *The True Believer*, Hoffer asserts, “However much the protesting man of words sees himself as the champion of the downtrodden and injured, the grievance which animates him is, with very few exceptions, private and personal” (133). Wiesel himself reinforces this statement. In an interview in 1978 he said, “I rarely speak about God. To God, yes. I protest against Him. I shout at Him” (*Conversations* 87), and in 1999, he was still challenging: “It is because I still believe in God that I argue with Him” (*Sea* 70). In a sermon in 2003, The Reverend Harold Shepherd preached that suffering can “help put things in proper perspective by reminding us of our own mortality and what really matters in life. But, in the end, there is a sense in which suffering is enveloped in mystery” (1). For Wiesel the mystery remains: will he ever reconcile unconditionally with the God who seemingly abandoned him in his time of most need? Despite the declaration that: “He is, and that must be enough for us” (*Night* 104), in truth, only Elie Wiesel knows the answer. And perhaps God.



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