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ELIE WIESEL'S MIDRASHIM

"A SEARCH FOR MEANING IN A POST-HOLOCAUST WORLD"

by

**Janet Zylberstein
134053**

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**ELIE WIESEL'S MIDRASHIM
"A Search For Meaning In A Post-Holocaust World"**

submitted by Janet Zylberstein, B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Eugene Rothman, Thesis Supervisor

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MAY 12 1994

date

A B S T R A C T

Elie Wiesel conducts a search for meaning and reconstructs a world-view that takes into account the post-Holocaust reality in which we now live. This paper will examine his midrashic approach in which he revises certain biblical images and/or themes and counters them with new ones. This thesis will examine how these images pervade his work and offer new meaning to life in light of and despite the Holocaust.

This work is dedicated to my father,
Kuba Zylberstein, whose life has sparked
my interest in this field of research
and my need to understand.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	1
DEDICATION	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
INTRODUCTION	4
CHAPTER 1: WIESEL: THE STORYTELLER	9
Wiesel's Background	9
Wiesel's Works	11
CHAPTER TWO: THE NEW COVENANT	16
The Counter-Image of the <i>Akedah</i>	19
The New Covenant	24
a. Witness	25
b. Solidarity	31
c. Sanctification of Life	34
CHAPTER 3: RELATIONS WITH GOD	42
The Counter-Response to Job	48
The Meaning of Struggle	54
CHAPTER 4: MODERN MESSIANISM	62
The Counter-Image: Messiah of the Here and Now	66
The Message of Universal Humanism	73
CONCLUSION	76
APPENDICES	79
APPENDIX A.1: Justifications of God	80
APPENDIX A.2: Wiesel's Concept of God	83
REFERENCES	86

INTRODUCTION

In his works, Elie Wiesel returns to a number of Jewish traditional themes and revises their meaning in light of the Holocaust and its implications for a Jewish cosmology. The Holocaust became a "destructive reversal" of Wiesel's childhood world-view, inciting a search for "meaning in a universe that has no meaning."¹ He focuses on three themes in particular: the covenantal bond as exemplified in the *akedah*² story, relationship with God as epitomized in the Book of Job, and the coming of the Messiah as understood in the Prophetic Writings, and produces a "counter-image" or "counter-theme" in order to make living in a post-Holocaust world not only possible but a moral imperative.

Wiesel's method is midrashic³ in nature. The word Midrash derives from the root *drsh* which in the Bible - and later in rabbinic literature - denotes mainly "to search," "to seek," "to examine," and "to investigate."⁴ *Darosh* both in its nominal and verbal forms is sometimes found in the Dead Sea Sect literature designating a certain method, a special technique of

¹ Dr. Fred L. Downing, "Autobiography Fiction and Faith," Remembering for the Future, Volume II, Oxford, Pergamon Press, p. 1444.

² Standard European-Latin transliteration is used in this text. Hebrew words are italicized except in cases such as "Talmud" where usage is so frequent that they have been incorporated into the English language.

³ Words such as "Midrash", "Bible", "Talmud", "Messiah", etc., are capitalized in noun form only.

⁴ Encyclopedia Judaica, Volume 10, Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House Ltd., c. 1971, pp. 1507-08.

learning things - in *halakhah* and in *aggadah*⁵ - through rigorous study and painstaking, searching inquiry into the verses of the Bible.⁶ The meaning of the term Midrash has broadened over the years to denote a genre of rabbinic literature constituting an anthology and compilation of homilies, consisting of both biblical exegesis and sermons delivered in public and forming a running aggadic commentary on specific books of the Bible.⁷

Through the telling of tales, Wiesel makes direct or subtle allusions to antecedent Jewish texts. In this manner, Wiesel is holding true to the *aggadic* tradition of midrashic exegesis. "Midrashic exegesis does not, on the whole, seek the plain meaning of scripture but more appropriately, the relationship between a biblical idea or theme and the very different social and cultural context of rabbinical Judaism."⁸

Wiesel himself describes Midrash as being to the Bible what imagination is to knowledge. According to him, Midrash does not limit itself to stating the facts and commenting upon them. In his words, "It delves into the very heart and silence of the cast of characters. It examines them from every angle; it follows them into their innermost selves; it goes so far as to imagine

⁵ *Aggadah* refers to those sections of Talmud and Midrash containing homiletic expositions of the Bible, stories, legends, folklore, anecdotes, or maxims. In contradistinction to *halakhah* which denotes those parts of the Talmud concerned with legal matters.

⁶ Encyclopedia Judaica, Volume 10, pp. 1507-08.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John R. Hinnelles, ed., The Penguin Dictionary of Religion, London, Penguin Publishing, p. 213.

the unimaginable."⁹ And just as it was the availability of midrashic techniques which allowed Pharisaic Judaism to survive the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., so too, by his Midrashim and stories, Wiesel bridges the biblical world to that of the modern world - a world scarred by the Event - the Holocaust.

The main focus of this paper is to examine how Wiesel's contemporary commentary reconstitutes Judaism in a post-Holocaust world. Wiesel responds to texts of the past - most notably in his retelling of biblical stories in which he creates a **new or counter- image**. He offers a new resolution of the tale that creates new meaning for the survival of Jewish people.¹⁰

The historical "filter" or lens through which Wiesel tells his tale - tales being a distinctive form of Midrash - is the Holocaust Event. In other words, Wiesel situates the Holocaust within a contemporary and altered Jewish religious consciousness and a new moral world-view. In this manner, he maintains the Jewish tradition of reflecting upon root experiences of Judaism through stories rather than through complicated theological/philosophical argumentation. In his own words,

Through the recent past I find my distant origins, going back to Moses and Abraham. It is in their name too that I communicate my quest. When a Jew prays, he links his prayer to those of David and the Besht. When a Jew despairs, it is Jeremiah's sadness that makes him weep. The Jew's memory draws its strength from that of his people, and beyond it, from humankind.

⁹ Robert M. Brown, Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, pp. 47 & 83.

¹⁰ Through speaking of the Jewish people in particular, Wiesel's message extends to include all humanity. [This universalism will be examined in chapter 4]

For memory is a blessing: it creates bonds rather than destroys them. Bonds between present and past, between individuals and groups. It is because I remember our common beginning that I move closer to my fellow human beings. It is because I refuse to forget that their future is as important as my own. What would the future of man be if it were devoid of memory?¹¹

Ted Estess explains it best when he states that Wiesel "explores the riches of the past in relations to the questions the Holocaust raises in an effort to articulate a meaningful way to live after the Holocaust."¹²

The methodology used in this analysis will be mainly expository in nature. This will consist of illustrating how Wiesel uses the medium of stories to bridge two worlds, how he communicates present experience as continuous with the past and juxtaposes the two to lend depth to interpretation. Emphasis will be placed on traditional themes he uses, how he revises or counters them, and why he does this.

Thus, the structure of each chapter will follow a pattern of: image or theme - biblical in nature, midrashic reinterpretation - the way in which Wiesel counters the traditional image or theme, and finally a concluding message - the new meaning Wiesel's revised story brings to the post-Holocaust world.¹³ In other words, this paper will examine how Wiesel reevaluates the structure and content of the relationship between God and Man - that which is known

¹¹ Wiesel, From the Kingdom of Memory, New York, Summit Publishing, 1990, p. 10.

¹² Downing, "Autobiography Fiction and Faith," p. 1444.

¹³ This structure does not apply to the background or concluding chapters.

traditionally as *Bein Adam La-Makom*.

In Wiesel's work, the *akedah* story is given a midrashic reinterpretation in order to come to terms with the broken covenantal bond between God and Man; the Book of Job is reevaluated in order to question traditional ways of relating to God; and finally, the image of the Messiah extracted from the Prophetic writings is countered with a new interpretation of what the concept calls for in light of the Holocaust Event. Wiesel's reinterpretations produce the possibility of re-creating new meaning for life in a post-Holocaust world. The object of this work is to clarify Wiesel's midrashim and the message of hope they deliver.

CHAPTER 1: WIESEL: THE STORYTELLER

Wiesel's Background

Wiesel was born on September 30, 1928 in the Carpathian Mountain commercial town of Sighet, Roumania.¹⁴ It was not until Passover week of 1944 that Wiesel and his family, among Sighet's 10,000 Jews, were deported by the Nazis and their collaborators. His father, Shlomo Feig, his mother, Sarah, and the youngest of his three sisters, Tziporah, died in concentration camps. Elie and his two other sisters, Hilda and Batya, survived.

Shlomo was a shopkeeper who introduced Wiesel to the works of Freud, while his mother would quote Goethe and Schiller by heart.¹⁵ But it was his grandfather, Dodye Feig, who captivated Elie with his tales of the great hasidic masters. It was he who, in the Spring of 1944, bent down and whispered in the then young Elie's ear: "You are Jewish, your task is to remain Jewish. The rest is up to God."¹⁶ This was the last time Elie was to see his grandfather, but his influence on Elie was to be ever-lasting and ever-present in his writings. Only once, twenty years later, did Elie venture back to his home town perhaps in search of the God-intoxicated child he once was.

¹⁴ Sighet was part of Hungary during the war years, 1940 - 1945.

¹⁵ Samuel G Freedman, "Bearing Witness: The Life and Work of Elie Wiesel," New York Times Magazine, (October 23, 1983) p. 65.

¹⁶ Downing, "Autobiography, Fiction and Faith," p. 1448.

Wiesel himself is a survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. As soon as he was liberated he decided that he would tell the tale, but vowed not to speak a word of his experience before ten years had passed in order to see clearly, "to unite language of man with the silence of the dead."¹⁷ Instead, he began his studies at the Sorbonne in Paris. He became a newspaper correspondent in Paris for an Israeli newspaper, *Ma'ariv*, and from there he moved to New York in 1956 where he was a Professor of Jewish Studies at City College up until 1978. He was then appointed Professor of Humanities at Boston University. In the same year, President Carter appointed him Chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council.¹⁸

It was not until after an interview with François Mauriac, a Nobel laureate and devout Christian, that Wiesel wrote his first novel Night. Mauriac spoke of the suffering of Christ which prompted Wiesel to state that:

Ten years ago I knew hundreds of Jewish children who suffered more than Christ did and no one talks about it.

In response, Mauriac simply said that "You know, you should talk about it."¹⁹ And so began Wiesel's literary journey into the Holocaust world which continues to evolve to this day.

¹⁷ Marc H. Ellis. Towards a Jewish Theology of Religion, New York. Orbis Books, 1987, p. 12.

¹⁸ Freedman, "Bearing Witness," pp. 65-66.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

Wiesel's Works

Night is an autobiographical novel published in 1956. It was condensed from an 800 page memoir into 127 pages of harrowing tales of Wiesel's holocaust experience. Night is Wiesel's first and only novel to focus solely on his concentration camp experience, while all his writings which follow can be considered a commentary, in one form or another, on this first work.²⁰

For example, the next few novels he wrote examine options for survivors: suicide in The Accident, political action in Dawn, madness in The Town Beyond the Wall, faith and friendship in The Gates of the Forest.²¹ In the latter two novels, a distinct change, or more appropriate - development, takes place in his writing. Rather than continue to flee the past, finally a process of confrontation takes place.

Michael, in The Town Beyond The Wall, confronts the past by returning directly to the town from which the deportation to the death camp took place. The process continues in The Gates of The Forest followed by a breakthrough which occurs in A Beggar in Jerusalem, where, in an almost hysteric mystical vision at the Wall in Jerusalem, the Jewish past of the six million

²⁰ Wiesel has written over 35 books to date.

²¹ Freedman, "Bearing Witness," p. 36.

dead 's invoked as a source of power, almost a healing or mending.²² This is not to say that Wiesel offers a resolution or answer to the Jewish past; rather, he offers only questions within the framework of a rich knowledge of midrashic, talmudic and hasidic lore in which the tale is often used as a revelation of spiritual truth.²³

Wiesel chooses to write in French rather than Hebrew or Yiddish. French offers him a stylistic classicism in which the expression of serious emotion and conciseness is possible, unlike the effects of pathos to which Hebrew and Yiddish, according to Wiesel, are inclined.²⁴

While living in Paris, Wiesel came under the influence of many French writers such as Camus and Sartre. Their influence lies more in personal example than in writing style. Just as they did, Wiesel takes on different roles: novelist, essayist, speaker, moral voice.

Wiesel insists on writing out of the particularity of his own Jewishness. It is how, as we shall see, he touches universal chords. In writing about the Jewish condition, according to Robert McAfee Brown, Wiesel writes about the human condition.²⁵ Literature, in the form of

²² Robert McAfee Brown, "The Power of the Tale," [Book Review], Christian Century, Volume 98 (June 3 - 10, 1981) p. 651.

The whole concept of mending (*tikkun*) is dealt with in depth by Emil Fackenheim, particularly in his work entitled, To Mend the World.

²³ Robert Alter, After the Tradition: Essays on Modern Jewish Writing, New York, E.P. Dutton & Company, 1969, pp. 154-155.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 650.

stories, provides the means to accomplish his task. Literature, according to Malraux, is an act of transforming experience into consciousness.²⁶ Wiesel, no doubt, would accede to this definition. In fact, in From the Kingdom of Memory, Wiesel himself explains:

I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life. I knew the story had to be told. Not to transmit an experience is to betray it; this is what Jewish tradition teaches us.²⁷

He continues:

I owe the dead my memory...While writing, I question them as I question myself. I write to understand as much as to be understood. Will I succeed one day?...A million children massacred: I will never understand.²⁸

Wiesel goes on to say that he forces himself to turn away from the realm of the dead, study other periods, explore other destinies and teach other tales: "the Bible and the Talmud, Hasidism and its fervor, the shtetl and its songs, Jerusalem and its echoes; the Russian Jews and their anguish, their awakening, their courage." But in his efforts - and despite them - he does not escape the world of the dead; that realm stays with him always and is ever-present in his writings:

²⁶ Harry J. Cargas, "An Interview with Elie Wiesel", Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Volume 1, No. 1 (1986) p. 7.

²⁷ Wiesel, From the Kingdom of Memory, p.14.

²⁸ Ibid., P. 16.

But then, the dead never leave me. They have their rightful place even in the works about pre-Holocaust Hasidism or ancient Jerusalem. Even in my Biblical and Midrashic tales, I pursue their presence, mute and motionless. The presence of the dead then beckons so forcefully that it touches even the most removed characters. Thus, they appear on Mount Moriah, where Abraham is about to sacrifice his son, a Holocaust offering to their common God. They appear on Mount Nebo, where Moses confronts solitude and death. And again in the Pardess, the orchard of secret knowledge, where a certain Elisha ben Abuya, seething with anger and pain, decides to repudiate his faith. They appear in Hasidic and Talmudic legends in which victims forever need defending against forces that would crush them. Technically, so to speak, they are of course elsewhere, in time and space, but on a deeper, truer plane, the dead are part of every story, of every scene. They die with Isaac, lament with Jeremiah, they sing with the Besht and, like him, wait for miracles - but alas, they will not come to pass.²⁹

Some critics have actually criticized Wiesel for sacrificing style to substance. In his Times review of The Testament, Jeffrey Burke assailed Wiesel's "tendency to sacrifice the demands of craft to those of conscience." And Edward Grossman, in his review of Biblical Portraits and Legends, states that "From book to book, Wiesel has actually been on a forced march from despair to affirmation." But to Wiesel these are regarded only as compliments because what he demands most from literature is a moral dimension. "Art for art's sake is gone."³⁰ "Also, every novel has its own genre, and the genre must come from the novel itself.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

³⁰ Freedman, "Bearing Witness," p. 36.

It's not that I could give it a form; the content implies its own form." For Wiesel, every novel has its own message, and the form comes from the message, not the other way around. In his words:

Bad art is form without content; good art is content that explodes out of the form.³¹

He holds that no theory or method can be applied to the study of his novels, and that his work does not demand explanation or explication but movement, not analysis of the intellect but the response of the whole being. "In short, it demands presence: it demands you, the voice of your I....For tales, like people, are alive." Through the tale, Wiesel believes that the message is breathed into form.³²

Robert McAfee Brown holds that "if we are to learn from Elie Wiesel, we must listen to stories. His stories." While he has written essays, cited statistics, and has done documentary research, he has nonetheless approached the Holocaust mainly as a teller of tales, his own and those of others. Whether the tales are from the past or the present they all circle around the Event, "uncovering this or that truth, exposing this or that falsehood, celebrating this or that momentary triumph, mourning this or that permanent defeat." Brown continues that, "When he is not writing about the Holocaust, he is writing about nothing else."³³

³¹ David Patterson, The Dialogue and the Dilemma, Wakefield, New Hampshire, Longwood Academic, 1991, p. 189.

³² Ibid., pp. 190-191.

³³ Robert McAfee Brown, Elie Wiesel: Messenger To All Humanity, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, pp. 7 & 21-22.

CHAPTER TWO: THE NEW COVENANT

The first image or theme to consider and which undergoes revision by Wiesel is that of the covenant between God and Man. The symbol of the covenant is one of the most prominent images in Jewish history and has been recorded in and referred to frequently in the Torah. The most notable covenantal event in the Bible occurs on Mount Sinai. Since the time of Moses (1200 B.C.E.) Israel has been in a covenantal community bound to God by a solemn agreement in which He committed Himself to be their God, their Deliverer, and they, in turn, undertook to be His obedient, Chosen people. The Ten Commandments became a national constitution, a covenant between God and Man.³⁴

But the covenant had been conceived and consummated long before the time of Moses. It can be traced back to the times of Noah:

Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.
(Ge. 9:16)

In fact, one can even go to the very beginning, to the creation of the first man Adam, to find the first appearance of a binding relationship between Creator and creation. However,

³⁴ Hinelles, The Penguin Dictionary of Religion, p. 99.

for our purposes, the paradigmatic story of the promise to Abraham that he will have a son by Sarah and that the whole land would belong to his descendants which began an integral binding contractual relationship between God and Man, will be the main focus of this section.

The binding and near sacrifice of Abraham's son Isaac, known as the *akeedah* story, emerged as a model - the testing by God of Man within the covenantal relationship. Abraham trusted God so completely that he was willing to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Isaac, in turn, trusted his father absolutely. Such binding devotion is a reflection in miniature of the binding contract agreement between the Jew and his Lord. Thus the *akedah* was a trial and testimony of the faith of Abraham's fidelity.³⁵

And it came to pass after these things that God did prove Abraham. (Genesis 22)

These covenants, whether Abraham's personal one or Israel's national one, share the belief in the existence of God as a creative and directive force that is ultimately responsible for nature and human history and to Whom all confessed a trust. All covenants carry the implication that God is making available sufficient instruction or guidance (Torah) to show His human partners how to prosper. The general result is a good feeling about Israel's place in the world. Whatever is to happen in nature or in human history is to occur with the knowledge and control of a God who has pledged support, protection and love.³⁶

³⁵ Harry Cargas, Harry James Cargas in Conversation with Elie Wiesel, New York, Paulist Press, 1976, p. 243.

³⁶ John H. Hayes & J. Maxwell Miller, A History of Ancient Israel and Judah, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1986, p. 498.

In rabbinic literature and prayer, the story of Abraham is considered a prototype of *Kiddush Ha-Shem*.³⁷ The readiness to suffer the life of his son in order to sanctify and glorify God's Name provides a model of how Man is expected to respond to God's greatness.³⁸

In the *Zikhronot*,³⁹ there is an appeal to God to remember the *Akedah*:

Remember unto us, O Lord our God, the covenant and the lovingkindness and the oath which Thou swore unto Abraham our Father on Mount Moriah, and consider the binding with which Abraham our father bound his son Isaac on the altar, how he suppressed his compassion in order to perform Thy will with a perfect heart. So may Thy compassion overbear Thine anger against us; in Thy great goodness may Thy great wrath turn aside from Thy people, Thy city, and Thine inheritance.⁴⁰

Wiesel believes that God did not live up to his part of the bargain and counters this traditional covenantal promise and what it means to Jews today in a post-Holocaust world.

³⁷ *Kiddush Ha-Shem* is a doctrine derived from the verse: "and ye shall not profane My holy name; but I will be hallowed among the children of Israel: I am the Lord who hallow you." (Lev. xxii, 32).

God's name, in return for His love and mercy, is to be exalted by those who love Him and they must act in such a manner as to make evident their belief. (Louis Jacobs, *Jewish Values*, London, Vallentine, Mitchell, c. 1960, pp. 75-76)

³⁸ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Volume 2, p. 481.

³⁹ The Remembrance prayers of *Rosh Ha-Shanah*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

The Counter-Image of the *Akedah*

To Wiesel, the story of the Holocaust can be described as a story of reversals: the covenant has been turned upside down:

Something happened a generation ago, to the world, to man.
Something happened to God. Certainly something happened to
the relations between man and God....

During the Holocaust the covenant was broken. To Wiesel, this "breaking of the vessels"⁴¹ or violent shattering of the old order, extreme as it may have been, does not mean that all the former terms of covenantal faith are to be discarded as meaningless; rather, it requires that its meaning be comprehended anew. According to Rosenfeld, much of Wiesel's career as a writer can be understood as a continuing effort to come to terms with the idea of a broken covenant and its classical terms. To face this severe challenge, Wiesel returns to the Bible to what he believes is the one central and perhaps paradigmatic story of the covenantal relationship between God and Man: the *akedah*.⁴² He chooses this story in particular because it is a personal covenant and Wiesel prefers to focus on individuals.⁴³

I try to read Scripture as living history. ...I would like to see
Abraham as my neighbor, if not as my father, Isaac as my brother

⁴¹ The story of night is called *shvirat hakelim* or "the breaking of the vessels" according to the Kabala.

⁴² Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "Reflections on Isaac," Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Volume 1, No. 1, p. 242.

⁴³ The study of Abraham and Isaac relates to a family unit which reflects - in miniature - the national covenantal relation between a Chosen People and their God. Wiesel focuses on this unit because while it does have universal ramifications it also sensitizes the reader to a situation he/she can understand.

or son....If the story of Abraham and Isaac was limited only to their ordeal, we wouldn't have remembered it. But Abraham is alive; Isaac is alive....When I think of Abraham, I think of a father and a son during the Holocaust.⁴⁴

'If Isaac's averted sacrifice had involved only Abraham and his son, their ordeal would have been limited to their own suffering. But it involves us.' Indeed it involves us so much that sometimes the two tales can scarcely be disentangled. The tale of Abraham and his son Isaac walking toward a holocaust, and the tale of Shlomo Wiesel and his son Elie walking toward a holocaust, are the same tale. Save for the outcome.⁴⁵

As already mentioned in the background, Wiesel begins his quest with Night. Regarding creation itself, Wiesel goes so far as to state that: "In the beginning was the Holocaust." While the Bible begins with a sublime retelling of how the world came into being, the story of the Holocaust tells a contrary tale; that is, how the world was nearly overcome by death and destruction.

Night presents numerous pairings of fathers and sons and can be understood as an implicit rewriting of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Although Abraham's willingness to take his only son and offer him up as a sacrifice to God was judged a great scandal by Kant, it was praised as the epitome of faithfulness by Kierkegaard. Such fidelity can be seen as the ultimate human expression of the covenantal relationship and parallels the promise of love and devotion shown between parents and children within the family.

⁴⁴ Rosenfeld, "Reflections on Isaac," p. 243.

⁴⁵ Wiesel's Messengers of God, p. xiii.

The Holocaust, as seen through *Night*, delegitimizes that premise on all levels: instead of fathers and sons caring for and helping one another, *Night* shows them in competition and in complete enmity. For example, Bela Katz, forced into labour at the crematoria as a member of the camp's Sonder-Kommando, "had himself put his father's body into the crematory oven." And the son of Rabbi Eliahu, previously a source of sustaining strength for the older man, intentionally outdistanced his father on the death march to Buchenwald in an effort to save his own life. What we are interested in is how Wiesel relates these tales to the story of the *akedah*?⁴⁶

The story of Abraham and the binding of Isaac refers to a trial of faith and is an extreme effort to verify Abraham's fidelity. This test or *nisah* resulted in Abraham not only certifying his faith but also in his being rewarded for it with special blessings and a renewal of the covenantal promise.

This trial of faith took place at *Adonai-jirah* which translates as "the place where the Lord sees" and "the place where the Lord will provide." God provided a sacrificial ram in Isaac's stead. The place where he did so, Mount Moriah, was the high ground where God revealed Himself or allowed Himself to be seen. Under these conditions - that is, under the watchful and providing eyes of the Lord - it is not impossible to understand how Abraham

⁴⁶ Rosenfeld, "Reflections on Isaac," p. 243.

managed to pass this more than severe test. Abraham knew he could ultimately place his trust in the Lord and thus remained both a protecting father to his son - even as he seemingly sought to slay him - and a dutiful son to His Divine Father.

Wiesel's idea of Man derives mostly from the Bible and its traditional commentaries, which in many ways, show that the love, devotion and respect shared between fathers and sons constitute the human counterpart of the relationship between Man and God. Thus the promise of the covenant is a promise of life, which originates in and is fulfilled through the family bond. For a son to remain faithful to one's father is, in more than just symbolic ways, to remain within the provenance and protection of the covenant.⁴⁷ In these father-son, son-father relationships, the covenant was not only proven but reconfirmed.⁴⁸

Auschwitz, far from being a place where the Lord "sees" and/or "provides" is the counter-image of *Adonai-jirah*. As portrayed in *Night*, the death camps are a place of almost absolute abandonment, where everyone lives and dies for Himself alone. Under such horrid conditions, there is no legitimate testing of fathers and sons but instead a contest between them: "a brutalizing scramble for self-survival," as Wiesel describes it.

You know these flames? These are human beings. Do you know that people are being destroyed here? Do you know that the *akedah* is once more at the heart of Judaism? Abraham and Isaac both go to the altar, and both will be consumed.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 243-244.

Here there are no fathers, no brothers, no friends. ...Here, every man has to fight for himself and not think of any-one else.⁴⁹

Auschwitz was a challenge that neither man nor God could withstand. Night illustrates that the destruction of both through its representation of the double dying of fathers and sons and of the central idea of the familial bond that formerly sustained them. A son abandoned implies the abdication of fatherhood. A father left to die condemns to death something living in the son. As a culminating image of both, a child hanging on the gallows tightens the noose around any lingering faith in the justice and protection of God.

In Night, Wiesel answers the question "where is God? Where is He?" with "Here He is - He is hanging here on the gallows." The contrast with the *akedah* story is dramatic. Whatever trust the young Isaac continued to place in his father, even as he was bound by him to the altar, was matched by Abraham's trust in the providence of God. At *Adonai-jirah*, a place where God could see injustice and provide for its rectification, such faith might be vindicated. At Auschwitz however, a place of distress and blindness, there is no vindication.

The biblical story has a resolution: Isaac survives. At the end of the *akedah* story, Abraham leaves the place of sacrifice and returns home. But he returns home alone. At least the Bible makes no mention of Isaac accompanying him. Where was Isaac? Wiesel ends his story of night with an Isaac surviving the bloody altar but with all father figures dead.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Wiesel's A Jewish Commentary, New York, Random House, 1978, p. 71.

⁵⁰ Rosenfeld, "Reflections on Isaac," p. 245.

In his story, Abraham is dead and Isaac is a living corpse - and no one goes home. But yet Wiesel does not give in to despair. In his cantata-poem Ani Maamin, Wiesel describes Isaac as one who lost his sight but continued to see. He portrays Isaac as "the first survivor." And in his Messengers of God, Wiesel illustrates how the *akedah* speaks with new power of hope - a theme that we will come back to in the next chapter. But we are still left with the question: In a world bereft of fathers and sons, without God and without Man, without even a continuing idea of God and of Man, what did Wiesel see the covenant to be in the aftermath of the Holocaust?⁵¹

The New Covenant

While the *akedah* story serves to illuminate aspects of the Holocaust, it is clear to Wiesel that the Holocaust forces us into a revisionary stance towards the Bible, and in this case, the meaning of the covenant between God and Man. According to Wiesel, since God has proven Himself an unreliable partner, the Jewish people must base their self-affirmation on their choice to remain Jews and to assume the past of Jewish history as their own. The threefold elements of this covenant, according to Wiesel, are: **witness, solidarity, and the sanctification of life.**⁵² But what exactly do these elements entail for the future?

⁵¹ Ibid., p.246.

⁵² Maurice Friedman, "Eine Wiesel's Messianism of the Unredeemed," Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought, Volume 38, No. 3 (Summer, 1989) p. 316.

a. Witness

A survivor's testimony is more important than anything that can be written about survivors. It's more important for them, important for the world.⁵³

In response to David Patterson's question, "What is it we should remember?", Wiesel states:

Everything! We have to remember that we can't remember. The only possible salvation of the Jewish people is to remember our whole experience....Memory must not stop. If I were to stop in, let's say, 1944, it would lead to madness. And then I realize that, after all, there was a Jewish life before, and there I find my friends and my teachers, and I go back and find my grandparents, and go back and I find the hasidim, and go back and find the Kabbalists, and I go back - memory must go back until it goes back to the source of memory.⁵⁴

Wiesel's notion of remembrance is inspired by the hasidic emphasis on memory; in Souls of Fire, Wiesel notes that the Baal Shem Tov said that just as oblivion is at the root of exile, so is memory at the root of redemption.⁵⁵ And to Wiesel, memory must be transmitted:

A writer is a messenger, a messenger between the reader and his theme, between one era and another. A writer, therefore, is a historian. A writer is a religious teacher. A writer is a friend of the unknown person who, thanks to the writer, will become known not only to other people but to himself.⁵⁶

⁵³ Freedman, "Bearing Witness," p. 36.

⁵⁴ Wiesel, "We Are All Witnesses," Parabola: The Magazine of Myth and Tradition, Volume 10, No. 2, p. 7713.

⁵⁵ David Patterson, In Dialogue and Dilemma With Elie Wiesel, New Hampshire, Longwood Academic, c. 1991, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Irving Abrahamsen, ed., Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel, Volume 1, New York, Holocaust Library, p. 19.

In simpler words, a writer is a witness.

In The Oath, Azriel, the single survivor of the pogroms of the village of Kolvillag, is not only left with the memories but also with the chronicles his father had taken. He keeps both locked within himself for fifty years in deference to the oath he had sworn to Moshe the Madman who cursed any who dare break it. But when confronted with a young Jewish man who is contemplating suicide, Azriel breaks the oath in order to defeat death. He believes that by transmitting his experiences to the young man, he, in turn, will be compelled to do the same; that is, to become a messenger. "And once a messenger, he has no alternative. He must stay alive until he has transmitted the message."⁵⁷

Wiesel explains that the world knew what was happening in the years between 1933 and 1936 and remained silent. The world knew about the uprising in 1943 and remained silent. The world knew about Auschwitz and Treblinka in 1943-44 and still remained silent. "Silence is no virtue; it is vice twice-compounded: indifference toward the victims, complicity with the executioners."⁵⁸ However, Wiesel is also aware that speech can also betray. And thus the dilemma:

The Event took place, one must speak.

versus,

By its uniqueness the Holocaust defies
literature.

⁵⁷ Brown, Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanities, p. 35.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

The question of "how is one to speak of it and how is one not to speak of it?" is central to the works of Wiesel who sees himself essentially as a witness who must deliver his message.⁵⁹

With regards to this dilemma Wiesel notes that:

Yes, we are concerned, we do try to put the experience into words. But can we? Language is poor and inadequate. The moment it is told, the experience turns to betrayal.⁶⁰

But Wiesel believes, at the same time, that:

...having survived by chance, I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life. I knew the story had to be told. Not to transmit an experience is to betray it.⁶¹

Rather than seeing Wiesel as contradicting himself in his role as witness, one must bear in mind that Wiesel sees memory as doubled edged: "Memory is a kingdom. But memory is also a graveyard." For Wiesel, his memories of his childhood in Sighet and its world in which "God still dwelt and prayer was as natural, and as necessary, as breathing" have transformed into a kingdom of darkness where night rules and where death became the daily expectation rather than the daily exception. And it is not until his fourth book, The Town Beyond the Wall, that we see a character actually beginning to transcend the verdict of the graveyard to begin rebuilding the foundations of a kingdom in which memory could release rather than destroy.⁶² But we are

⁵⁹ Wiesel, One Generation After, New York, Random House, c. 1972, p. 10.

⁶⁰ Wiesel, "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future: A Symposium," Judaism, Volume 16, (1967) p. 294.

⁶¹ Wiesel, "Why I Write," in Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel, ed. by Alvin H. Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1978, p. 201.

⁶² Brown, Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity, pp. 19 & 21.

still left with the question of what these memories mean to Wiesel and to his world-view.

On a visit to Kiev, the site of a massive slaughter of Jews at Babi Yar in 1943, Wiesel addresses this very issue:

Mr. Mayor, the problem for all of us - for you as for us - is: what do we do with our memories? We must deal with them or they will crush us.

To Wiesel, confronting memories not only involves acknowledging their reality and honouring those victimized, but determining to appropriate the memories in the present for the sake of the future:

Those who have died in anonymity must not be remembered in anonymity. Our collective remembrance must save future generations from anonymity.

For Wiesel, to survive is one thing, but it alone is not enough. It is necessary not only to survive but to testify - there is no choice. "The victims elect to become witnesses."⁶³

Wiesel is a witness and can be seen as four different yet interdependent types of messenger, the first of which is a messenger from the dead. He speaks on their behalf in order that they may be heard and not forgotten.⁶⁴ In his article, "Art and Culture After the Holocaust," Wiesel states:

Let us tell tales so as to remember how vulnerable man is when faced with overwhelming evil. Let us tell tales so as not to allow the executioner to have the last word. The last word belongs to the victim. It is up to the witness to capture it, shape it, transmit

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

it and still keep it as a secret, and then communicate that secret to others.⁶⁵

His second role as witness, according to Brown, is that of messenger to the living; in other words, to express that it could happen again but must never happen again. And that it is up to us to watch for the tell-tale signs. Wiesel holds that when people can destroy Jews with impunity, it will not be long before they destroy other people as well: "Whatever happens to the Jews happens to all mankind."⁶⁶ According to Wiesel,

If the role of the writer may once have been to entertain, that of the witness is to disturb, alert, to waken, to warn against indifference to injustice - any injustice - and above all against complacency about any need and any people.⁶⁷

The role of messenger to the living not only entails a warning but also affirms new possibilities. The very decision to witness is an act of faith and therefore, an affirmation of new possibilities in that the witness has faith that his people might listen, that they might be touched, and that words still have the power to transform. Thus Wiesel's mandate is "to impose a human meaning on...fate." It affirms that no matter how crippled by the past we are we need not be completely immobilized by it.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Wiesel, "Art and Culture After the Holocaust," in Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust, ed. by Eva Fleischner, New York, KTAV Publishing House, 1977 p. 402.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 39.

Bosnia and the persecution of its Muslim population is a clear example that "never again" can and has happened yet again while the world stood by.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 39. [Cited from Wiesel's "A Personal Response," p. 36]

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 40.

Wiesel is also a messenger to heaven which means that he demands a hearing from God and contends with Him on behalf of the victims. It also means carrying a message in the opposite direction as well. Although Wiesel would not characterize himself as a "messenger of God," he would insist that his commerce with God consists of posing questions to Him.⁶⁹

Lastly, Brown explains that Wiesel is also a messenger for the self - that is, his own self and other selves. Wiesel believes that first he must attain authenticity in his own inner being if he is to speak authenticity to others. Wiesel is often quoted saying:

In the beginning I thought I could change man. Today I know I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, it is to prevent man from ultimately changing me.

Even with his goal thus reduced, Wiesel is still able to speak across barriers. His obligation to the dead is also an obligation to those who need to hear (the living), and the messenger can fulfil an obligation to himself as link between the two.⁷⁰

To be a messenger to Wiesel does not guarantee a new kingdom, but to fail to be a messenger does guarantee a new graveyard.⁷¹ Thus the reason Wiesel believes so strongly that one must be a witness and messenger "so that **never again** can the world remain silent, so that **never again** will children be thrown alive on the flames, so that **never again** will a people be targeted for extermination simply because they are a people." Thus to bear witness is an

⁶⁹ Wiesel's message of struggling with God will be further discussed in the next chapter.

⁷⁰ Brown, Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity, pp. 41-42.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 20.

essential element of Wiesel's new covenant. But just as equally important is the factor of solidarity.

b. Solidarity

Jewish solidarity with the past is a key principle of Wiesel's world-view. His recognition of the need for interaction between present and past is characteristically hasidic in nature. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, not only stressed Jewish solidarity but also taught that companionship embraces past as well as present; that is, ancestors stand behind contemporaries:

Whatever they did, they did for us. Whatever we do, we do for them. Long ago, in Egypt, every one of us strove for the preservation of the holy tongue, the names of our ancestors and their descendants, and the memory of the Covenant. Every one of us sat at the Prophets' feet to receive their teachings. Every one of us marched through the desert, to Sinai and from Sinai. Every one of us watched the splendor and desolation of Jerusalem. We all followed Reb Yohanan Ben-Zakkai into exile; we all shared his anguish and pride. And that is why we must stay together.⁷²

But the process goes in both directions: not only does the past help us understand the present, but the present helps us understand the past. Wiesel's story does not begin with his own; rather, it conforms with the memory that is the living tradition of his people. To him, the legends he brings back, whether it is the story of Isaac or the writings of the Baal Shem Tov, they live today. Accordingly, Wiesel believes that "all pogroms, the crusades, the persecutions, the massacres by sword, the liquidations by fire - each episode is Abraham leading his son to the altar, to the Holocaust yet once again. He states:

⁷² Wiesel, Four Hasidic Masters, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1978, pp. 7-8.

In Jewish history, all events are linked. Only today, after the whirlwind of fire and blood that was the Holocaust, do we grasp the full range of implications of the murder of one man by his brother, the deeper meanings of a father's questions and disconcerting silences. Only as we tell them now, in the light of certain experiences of life and death, do we understand them.⁷³

Robert McAfee Brown explains that, for Wiesel, the story starts with Auschwitz, the scene of a contemporary Holocaust, but will not be comprehended until it has led back to Mount Moriah, the scene of an ancient potential Holocaust. And that if the story leads to Mount Moriah, it will definitely not end there but will lead us back once again to the contemporary world in which Auschwitz occurred, to the same world but seen differently.⁷⁴

The journey from solitude to solidarity can be seen in the progression of Wiesel's first five novels culminating in his fifth novel, The Gates of the Forest which takes us beyond a world of one-to-one relationships into a world of communal interaction. But it is in A Beggar in Jerusalem, published in 1967-68 that the true culmination of solidarity as an essential element in Wiesel's post-Holocaust world can be seen.

This book, no doubt, is Wiesel's most difficult to comprehend by far. Wiesel himself has described it as "neither novel nor anti-novel, neither fiction nor autobiography, neither poem nor prose. It is all this together." He sets out to write a tale that is "all encompassing, on all levels" and that is what it is. He chooses Jerusalem, a city that has so often been a place of both

⁷³ Wiesel, Messengers of God, pp. xiii-xiv.

⁷⁴ Brown, Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity, p. 12.

human warfare and divine benediction as the setting. What better symbol of the necessity of shared humanity than this city? As Brown notes:

For the Jew, Jerusalem encompasses all time, invades all space, is one place and everywhere, is temporal and eternal.

He continues:

Such statements are descriptions, not contradictions. To be fighting for Jerusalem now is to be standing along-side warriors from the time of King David; to light the candles for Shabbat anywhere in the world is to be lighting to them also in Jerusalem; to describe a six day war means to describe six thousand years of history; to locate the final resting place of six million Jews from all over Europe requires only a tiny patch of land in the Old City in front of the Wall.⁷⁵

Wiesel's writings can be seen as a movement away from fleeing from the past to confronting it and initiating a journey from being solitary to being solidary. Similarly, behind the memories of the irredeemable world of Auschwitz are the memories of a boyhood in Sighet that had earlier provided a fulcrum of meaning. Although Sighet is a lost reality shattered by the Holocaust, it remains a reality that Wiesel constantly seeks to piece back together and reclaim. For Wiesel, although "the flames of Sighet are searing, seeking to revive a people destroyed by other flames, they also contain foretastes of healing, as Wiesel recreates that world

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 89, 99-100.

of his childhood for us."⁷⁶ In Wiesel's words, "The opposite of the past is not the future but the absence of future; the opposite of the future is not the past but the absence of past. The loss of one is equivalent to the sacrifice of the other."⁷⁷

According to Berenbaum's assessment of Wiesel's journey, sanctification no longer leads to the messianic event of redemption but is rather a solidarity act of an individual and/or community designed to momentarily rout the void.⁷⁸

c. Sanctification of Life

Sanctification of life is the third element of the new covenant. According to Ted Estess, Wiesel's works often set forth the choice for human existence in the starkest of terms - life or death - and implicitly confronts his characters with the biblical injunction: "therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live" (Dt 30, 19). Speaking in God's name, Moses commanded his people to choose life. And after Moses, Wiesel believes, nothing was the same again. Wiesel's story is of how men and women have chosen to live. His tale tells not by explanations, but by setting before us life and death. The ultimate lesson is to choose life.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 113.

⁷⁷ Wiesel, From the Kingdom of Memory, p. 239.

⁷⁸ Friedman, "Elie Wiesel's Messianism of the Unredeemed," p. 316.

[The issue of messianic redemption will be addressed in the fourth chapter]

However, as Wiesel has learned from Moses, that conclusion is always a beginning because it decides nothing specific for the individual reader, including Wiesel himself.⁷⁹

The choice of life is - to Wiesel - a choice of madness itself. A message from The Town Beyond the Wall is that madness is reason enough to live, provided it rebels against the forces that choose death.⁸⁰

Suicide, responding to Moses by choosing life in a way that ends it, was explored in Wiesel's The Accident. One young man doubts that he can endure his Holocaust survival. He believes that the world will not be changed and that the dead cannot be brought back to life, even though they continue to haunt the living, creating feelings of guilt, frustration, anger, and rebellion that make joy and happiness all but impossible. And despite the fact that he has friends, and even a woman who loves him, he steps in front of a moving car: "On the fifth day I at last regained consciousness...I felt alone, abandoned...That I was still alive left me indifferent, or nearly so."⁸¹

It is the discovery that he can still speak which sparks a choice for life, however faint, that cannot be hidden. Then, due to the nurturing and caring of friends and of the doctor who takes death as his personal enemy, life is once again chosen, although the memory of the ashes

⁷⁹ John K. Roth, "Elie Wiesel on Ultimate Reality and Meaning," Ultimate Reality and Meaning, Volume 1, p. 279.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 286.

⁸¹ Wiesel, The Accident, New York, Hill and Wang, 1962, pp. 22-23.

linger. As Wiesel proposes, "the problem is not: to be or not to be. But rather to be and not to be. Life conspires to make us choose it."⁸²

Wiesel deals with this issue of life best in the previously mentioned The Oath. From the setting, we learn only that we are in a city, that it is autumn, and that the time is the late 1960's or early 1970's. The reason for this lack of specific information about time and place is that it implies that, for Wiesel, all places and all times are, in a sense, the same place and time: after the Holocaust. His vocation as a Jewish writer is to reimagine the possibilities for existence, Jewish or not, in this post-Holocaust situation.

Although the Holocaust lurks throughout The Oath, the central characters are not survivors of the Event. Wiesel here deals with the struggles of persons who are "born after the holocaust," who "have inherited the burden but not the mystery" of the atrocities. The character who is so situated is the young man already described in the last section. It is a nameless man whose mother survived the concentration camps. He remembers his mother's memories of the Holocaust and when we meet him in the novel, her past haunts him and he is ready to commit suicide.

The young man wishes to settle his accounts with life in solitude but, for Wiesel, the context in which the issues of life are finally adjudicated must be that of the encounter between persons, and in this particular case, between the young man and Azriel. Azriel, now close to

⁸² Roth, "Elie Wiesel on Ultimate Reality and Meaning," p. 298.

eighty years of age, is a mixture of madman and saint. Although he was not in the death camps, Azriel, if we recall, carries within him the memory of his own holocaust, for he is the sole survivor of a pogrom that killed everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike, in Kolvillag.

Azriel feels that this one meeting is the purpose of his existence: "Have I lived and survived only for this encounter and this challenge? Only to defeat death in this particular case?" He resolves to help the young man "out of gratitude" as much because of a need to save himself as because of a need to deliver the other.⁸³

Azriel tells his young man:

I am not telling you not to despair of man, I only ask you not to offer death one more victim, one more victory....Whether life has a meaning or not, what matters is not to make a gift of it to death.⁸⁴

And so Azriel tells his story in order to save life. He realizes that language, storytelling in particular, binds a person to life, that "one does not commit suicide while speaking or listening," that the oath of silence made by Moshe is itself a type of suicide pact for the community. To choose speech is, for Azriel, - and for Wiesel - to choose life. Azriel is successful and the young man does not commit suicide.

To turn a single human being back toward life is to prevent the destruction of the world, says the Talmud. Do something good and God up there will imitate you; do something evil and suddenly the scale will tip the other way. Let me succeed in diverting death from this boy and we shall win. Such is the nature of

⁸³ Ted L. Estess, Elie Wiesel, New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980, p. 92.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

man...whether he celebrates joy or solitude, he does so on behalf of all men.⁸⁵

But what does affirmation of life entail for Wiesel? According to him, there are three aspects in particular that are essential to the wholeness of the human being, those being the ethical, the aesthetic and the religious aspects of life.

The Holocaust appears to declare an end to what we label the ethical dimension of life. Indeed, in The Oath, Kolvillag fulfils the function of illustrating the inadequacy of a vision that sees only innocence and perfectibility in human beings. All ethical precepts were violated in the pogrom. The Rebbe of that community stated this clearly when he commented, "A Jew must not expect anything from Christians, man must not expect anything from man." But Wiesel believes there is a "saving grace." He points out that there exists a limited degree of goodness from man due to the conscience of man. In his view, conscience separates the living from the dead, the human from the subhuman. This is revealed in Azriel's reflection on the death of a friend: "The last glance cast is still that of a living conscience. The eyes of the dead are empty."⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 93 & 102. [Citation from The Oath]

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 103-04.

By retaining conscience as an essential element of the life he affirms, Wiesel reminds us that we cannot and should not avoid judging our lives. For to him, to escape from judgement by means of indifference or moral relativism is to leave open the possibility of more pogroms, or another holocaust.⁸⁷

Just as critical to Wiesel's vision of life is the aesthetic dimension which he connects to imagination and the future. While it is true that memory without imagination is preferable to imagination without memory, Wiesel believes that a person must have both because they work together. For example, the act of testifying is an act of both memory and imagination in that to bear witness to the past is to imagine and thus re-create that past.

Estess holds that The Oath is as much about resensitizing the young man's conscience as it is about bringing to life his imagination. Further, just as an awakened conscience is the cure of indifference, so too is a revitalized imagination the antidote to despair. While conscience is necessary for action, imagination is necessary for hope, and both are necessary to support a person through a lifetime of action.⁸⁸ Azriel reproaches the young man when he says, "You have not yet lived and already you hate life." The young man hates life because he fails to see alternatives for the future. And Wiesel expresses how, without imagination, people cannot project possibilities in the context of life's necessities. Azriel states:

Make him dream....If I succeed, he is saved. One doesn't kill oneself while dreaming, not even while dreaming to kill oneself.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 106.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 107-08.

According to Estess, the purpose of Azriel's story and Wiesel's novel is to make us dream, to arouse the imagination and evoke visions of another kind of world, to add "what might be" to "what already is."⁸⁹

The last necessary element of Wiesel's concept of life is religion. Wiesel believes that life's mystery and ambiguity demand the religious dimension, because man is too frail, too destructive and misguided to be the object of his own greatest devotion. God is the focus of this dimension which calls for faith, faith that can take on different forms: rebellion and defiance, gratitude and hope. It must be remembered that in Jewish history, God is the source of all life, and to acknowledge God is to acknowledge levels of experience that defy commonsense explanations.

Wiesel's religious vision, for all its defiance and questioning, is similar to that of Hasidism in that it comes to infuse ordinary existence with sacredness. Life is to be protected, enhanced, celebrated and sanctified, because it is given by God: "life is a gift, and not a piece of merchandise." Wiesel explains that life - whether his own or another's - is not at man's disposal.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-09.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Thus the life that Wiesel affirms consists of a conscience, imagination, and worship in God.⁹¹ In response to the question: "why choose life?", Wiesel does not offer a rational explanation based on irrefutable foundations; rather he submits to choose life because suffering and indifference are real, because love is possible, and because the responsibility is put upon us. In simpler words, avoid needless and senseless waste.⁹²

Rather than depending and trusting in God's promise to protect and defend His People, the new covenant, according to Wiesel, bears witness to fulfil the promise of humanity that the Holocaust will be never again, that Man will accomplish this through a shared humanity - shared with the past and the present in order to secure the future, and finally, that the new covenant will sanctify life as the only choice Man has when faced with despair.

In this manner, a new covenantal relationship emerges in light of the Holocaust. The traditional covenant between God and Man - so paradigmatically portrayed in the *Akedah* story - has been replaced by a covenant in which it is Man's responsibility to protect and defend. As already mentioned, sanctification of life includes worship of God, but the way in which one is expected to relate to and with God has changed.

⁹¹ This last element will be further discussed in the next chapter.

⁹² Roth, "Elie Wiesel on Ultimate Reality and Meaning," p. 189.

CHAPTER 3: RELATIONS WITH GOD: THE STRUGGLE

After the Holocaust, according to Wiesel and other religious thinkers, the manner in which one relates to God had to be reevaluated. The images of the Book of Job illuminate Wiesel's response to faith in God in a post-Holocaust world. Wiesel's message, of course, is to question and to struggle with God in order to combat despair. Just as the elements of the New Covenant give meaning to life after the Holocaust, so too, according to Wiesel, does worshipping God through struggle.

The goodness and mercy of God is an essential assumption of the Bible. There are many scriptural examples asserting this representation: "The Lord is good to all and his compassion is over all that he has made." (Ps. 145:9); God is a benevolent God who helps Israel against her enemies (Ex. 14); God protects the innocent and poor (Micah 6); He loves his people as a father loves his children (Jer. 3:19); God is a righteous God who keeps the covenant law (Dan. 9:4); He is consistent and trustworthy in his favour (Ps. 100:5); He is reliable in a lovingkindness that outlasts the mountains (Is. 54:10). God is also merciful, forgiving those who violate the covenant (Ps 86:15), repenting of evil where the people are repentant (Jer. 18:7-8), and mellowing his judgement with mercy (Jer 3:12-14).⁹³

⁹³ Jerry Robins, "Elie Wiesel's Negative Theodicy of God," *Dialog*, Volume 26, p. 132.

But within the Bible itself exists a tension that creates difficulty or conflict with such an image. Jerry Robbins holds that if faith has trouble living with evil, it does not appear that the biblical God does. God is also portrayed as an angry and vengeful God and there are many scriptural examples to substantiate such a representation of the Lord. The psalmist declares, "The Lord reigns, let the peoples tremble!"; (Ps. 99:1); God is so mighty that mere mortals dare not talk back to him or question his actions (Is. 45:9); Any who break the covenant are subject to God's wrath (Jer. 10:10); God is a jealous God (Zeph. 1:15-18) whose anger breaks out as a devouring flame (Is. 10:16-17), a sword for slaughter (Ez. 21:8), a battering ram (Is. 4:5-6), and a cup of poison (Jer. 25:15). God maims (Ez. 23:25), plunders (Is. 10:5), and destroys (Dt. 7:2), including women, children and widows (Ez. 6-9, Jer 15:5-9).⁹⁴

There are many different attempts to justify God and His acts. Three such traditional reasonings are: *Mipnei Hataeinu*, "Because of our Sins," *Hester Panim* - "The Hiding of the Face," and the portrayal of God as Long-Suffering.⁹⁵ Wiesel is more interested in questioning the justice of God rather than proposing possible explanations of His nature.

In his quest, Wiesel returns to the Book of Job to establish his counter response to God's injustice. Justification or supplication have no place within Wiesel's reaction to God. In his interpretation of Job, he attempts to restore individuality and personality to those robbed of it in the Holocaust. Yet by no means does this suggest that Wiesel dismisses God altogether as

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Appendix A.1 offers an explanation of the above-mentioned traditional explanations of God's nature.

Richard Rubenstein does,⁹⁶ but rather that he questions and does not accept God's injustice in light of the Holocaust.

Of the Books of Wisdom in the Bible which wrestle with the individualization of the Law, and not with just the general question of beliefs, Job undoubtedly provides Wiesel with very highly emotional and subjective arguments wrung from a heart saddened by chastening, and from a mind in the turmoil of protesting against a seemingly unjust judgement.⁹⁷ In Wiesel's words,

We know [Job's story] for having lived it....Whenever we attempt to tell our own story, we transmit his.⁹⁸

Job can be seen as the perfect paradigm of the innocent Holocaust victim who has no control over the evils that befalls him, from the loss of his family to his physical suffering, from starvation to overwork and disease. Maurice Friedman posits that the Modern Job begins with the scientific extermination of six million Jews. He holds that this "Job of the gas chambers" is most evident in the works of Wiesel.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Appendix A.2 examines Wiesel's conception of God.

⁹⁷ J.V. Davidson, "Personal Bereavement & Collective Mourning: Aspects of Approaches to Death in Modern Jewish Literature with Special Reference to the Works of I.B. Singer and E. Wiesel," Remembering for the Future, Volume II, p. 1574.

⁹⁸ Wiesel, Messengers of God, pp. 211-12.

⁹⁹ Maurice Friedman, "The Job of Auschwitz," in Responses to Elie Wiesel, edited by Harry James Cargas, New York, Persea Books, 1978, pp. 206-07.

The Book of Job probes the depths of faith in spite of suffering. In the *aggadah*, the personality of Job greatly taxed the minds of Rabbis as is proven by the abundant *aggadot* about him found in both the Jerusalem and the Babylonian Talmuds. But the majority of sages found some commonality in their interpretation of Job; they praised him highly, regarding him as even more righteous than Abraham. His sufferings are usually understood as not punishment but - as in the case of Abraham - a test, a test of faith and righteousness which Job passes.¹⁰⁰ Wiesel believes that, in the end, Job ultimately fails, and offers a new denouement to Job in light of the Holocaust.

The ancient folktale of a patient Job circulated orally among oriental sages in the second millennium B.C.E. and was probably written down in Hebrew at the time of David and Solomon or a century later (about 1000-800 B.C.E.). An anonymous poet of the Exile used it as a setting for the discussion between an impatient Job and his three friends, and the Lord's discourses from the whirlwind. And a later poet contributed Elihu's speeches.¹⁰¹

A tripartite structure of the Book can be distinguished. In the prologue (chapters 1-2), we are informed of Job's exceeding wealth, blessings, and piety, the argument between the Satan (the accusing angel) and the Lord, and the series of catastrophes that befall Job and his response

¹⁰⁰ Encyclopedia Judaica, Volume 10, p. 124.

¹⁰¹ Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, editors, The New Oxford Annotated Bible With The Apocrypha, Expanded Edition, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 613.
For a detailed discussion of the structural analysis of the Book of Job, refer to Robert M. Polzin, Biblical Structuralism: Methods and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, c. 1977.

of steadfast faith. In the next section, the poetic disputation (3-42:6), we find the rationalizations and condoling of Job's three Kedomite friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, and we also find Job's arraignment of God. Finally, in the Epilogue (42:7-17), we observe Elihu's unsuccessful attempt to refute Job's denial of Providence. We also witness the Theophany in which God rebuffs the friends' attempts to justify Him and Job's presumptuousness in expecting an explanation from the Creator of the "unfathomable wonders of the world." It is also here that Job's "cowering surrender" takes place.¹⁰²

The question as to whether or not Job was Jewish has puzzled many scholars, but does not concern Wiesel for the simple reason that:

If Job was not Jewish to begin with, he became Jewish. There was no way he could win in a society where friendship was nonexistent and where to suffer and to expiate had the same meaning¹⁰³

The speeches of Job in the dialogue part are marked by lamentations and invective against God which are unique in the Hebrew Bible for their intensity, acuteness, and their often challenging statements.¹⁰⁴ The function of this lament is a protest which escalates into an accusation. Because Job is conscious of no sin he sees his suffering as unjustified; in verse 27:2, God deprives him of his rights: "As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the

¹⁰² Encyclopedia Judaica, Volume 10, pp. 112-122.

¹⁰³ Wiesel, Messengers of God, p. 221.

¹⁰⁴ Rolf Rendtorff, The Old Testament: An Introduction, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1986, p. 250.

Almighty, who has made my soul bitter." The decisive reason for this is portrayed in many verses in which God Himself no longer observes the right: He destroys the innocent and the guilty (9:22f, 10:14-17, etc).¹⁰⁵

Throughout the Book, Job continues to recognize the power of God and his own subordination to Him. It is for this reason that Job rejects life as God has constituted it and gambles with it. Robert Polzin posits that nowhere in the Book is Job the unbeliever; rather he is the "supreme realist" who rejects not God but life as God has fashioned it for man.¹⁰⁶ It is for this reason that Job challenges God to stand trial (23:3-5; 31:35-37).

The appearance of God out of the whirlwind in the Epilogue radically alters this defiant stance of Job. God's "power-play" does not tell Job anything he does not already know; he is not informed of any possible esoteric reasoning for his suffering. Rather, the impact of God's Self-revealing - rather than anything He says - is enough to produce Job's abject supplication.¹⁰⁷ Job renounces his defiance after the Lord asks, "Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" (40:8). He is satisfied without self-vindication by an experience of immediate communion with God, not unlike that of the great prophets: "Now my eye sees thee" (42:5). Thus instead of justifying Himself, God reveals Himself personally to him and shares

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 252.

¹⁰⁶ Robert M. Polzin, Biblical Structuralism: Methods and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts, pp. 104-05.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

with him the vision of His cosmic responsibilities.¹⁰⁸ This "post-Theophany" response of Job is unacceptable, and indeed contemptible to Wiesel.

The Counter-Response to Job

In light of the Holocaust, Wiesel feels that the Book of Job speaks best when its present meaning is discarded. God's "answers" to Job's sufferings are "vast simplifications" and, to Wiesel, Job's resignation as man was an insult to man. In his Messengers of God, he states that,

He should not have given in so easily. He should have continued to protest, to refuse the handouts...Only he did not. He agreed to go back to living as before.¹⁰⁹

Although he admires the rebellious elements of Job, Wiesel finds unresolved tension between them and Job's final submission. He prefers an unreconciled Job at the end of the Dialogue, rather than the passive and restored Job of the Epilogue. Dedmon states that if we discount the Elihu speeches and those of God beginning at Chapter 32, then certainly we find a Job who is strikingly similar to Wiesel's protagonist. Or if we take Job as an entire literary unity, retaining the denouement, then we might find that the Wieselean hero moves through stages similar to Job's and then becomes finally the antithesis of the restored Job.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ May and Metzger, editors, The New Oxford Annotated Bible With The Apocrypha. p. 613.

¹⁰⁹ Dedmon, "Job as Holocaust Survivor," p. 179.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 180.

In Job we can almost hear the voice of Wiesel crying out for vindication. Job turns upon God with bitter complaint, and rails against the undeserved afflictions which he suffers (16:6-17). He cries out for justice and pleads for an arbiter (17:1-16). And Job appeals to the future, expressing hope in God's ultimate vindication. This "vindication" which eventually transpires infuriates Wiesel.¹¹¹ He notes that "what was for Job an expression of the acceptance of God rankles when it becomes God's self-justification. In its new context the words of Job are an outrage: "The Lord gives. The Lord takes back. May the name of the Lord be blessed." Wiesel is angry at the response of God in the Book of Job and in his Messengers of God he writes:

Actually, God said nothing that Job could interpret as an answer or an explanation or a justification for his ordeals. God did not say: 'You sinned, you did wrong. Nor did he admit his own error. He dealt in generalities, offering nothing but vast simplifications.'¹¹²

Berkovits, in his Faith after the Holocaust, states that if there is no answer to the quest for an understanding of God's silence in the face of Nazi genocide, "it is better to be without it than in the sham of...the humbug of a disbelief encouraged by people who have eaten their fill at the tables of a satiated society." According to him, yes at Auschwitz God was hidden,

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 168.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 176.

but it was in His hiddenness that He was actually present. As hidden God, He is Saviour; in the apparent void He is the redeemer of Israel.¹¹³ Of course, for Wiesel, there is no redemption for the Holocaust and to even propose such an idea is absurd:

Job's individual experience, his personal misfortunes mattered little; what mattered was the context, the overall picture. The concept of suffering was more important than suffering; the question of knowledge was more important than knowledge. God spoke to Job of everything except that which concerned him: He denied his right to Individuality."¹¹⁴

We find similar questioning in Wiesel's "Noah's Warning":

But what wrong was actually committed? There is nothing in the text to inform us. No mention is made of sins or mistakes: all we are told is that the people are sad and depressed. Possibly because of their ancestors Adam and Eve, who had moved God to curse the earth. But then, why should their descendants suffer on their account? They shouldn't but they do; and that is why they are depressed.¹¹⁵

In the protagonist of Wiesel's first five novels - Night, Dawn, The Accident, The Town Beyond the Wall, and The Gates of the Forest - a consistent character based on the model of the earlier Job emerges and then is denied. The protagonist first moves through a well-defined pilgrimage of self-accusation and guilt for having survived his ordeals.¹¹⁶ One can discern the

¹¹³ Cohn-Sherbok, "Jewish Faith and the Holocaust," p. 284.

¹¹⁴ Wiesel, Messengers of God, p. 220.

¹¹⁵ Wiesel, "Noah's Warning," Religion and Literature, Volume 16, No. 1 (1984) p. 6.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 178-79 [As quoted from Wiesel's Messengers of God, p. 221.

many temptations of escape presented to him that were also presented to Job: to deny God, to curse God and die, to acknowledge that he deserved his suffering.

For example, the character of Eliezer in Night personifies the unresolved Job. Eliezer's questions are the questions of Job: "did God not care that his children were being consumed by the fires? Why should I bless his name?" However, after Auschwitz, there is no Theophany, God is left hanging on the gallows, and Eliezer is no longer capable of speaking of either God's goodness or of his ultimate purposes. He is lead into total darkness and no resolution is offered.¹¹⁷

Night, of course, is Wiesel's darkest novel. Throughout his novels, Wiesel's heroes search for and get closer to the gate of escape. However, the greatest difference between Wiesel's protagonist and Job is that although both face a pilgrimage from darkness to spiritual rebirth, Wiesel's hero moves towards it, continually questioning God and remaining in dialogue with Him, while Job gives up his questions and concedes without justice having been served.¹¹⁸

The best example of Wiesel's counter-image of Job can be found in the character of Michael in The Town Beyond the Wall. This novel calls for a combative response to God. The plot of this book unfolds when Michael returns to his native Hungarian city after the war. He does this by means of the black market - the only organization that could get him through the

¹¹⁷ Dedmon, "Job as Holocaust Survivor," p. 179.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 180.

"Iron Curtain." He is arrested by the police and is forced to say "prayers" - that is, he was forced to stand for eight hours at a stretch in front of a wall without moving, eating or drinking.¹¹⁹

The police wished to extract from Michael a confession as to who helped him get into Hungary. Of course, this confession would condemn his friend Pedro to death or at least imprisonment. What the police did not expect was his tenacious loyalty to his friend and his ability to endure by searching inside himself for the sources of memory which were to sustain him.¹²⁰

Wiesel writes that "Michael never ceased resenting Job...That biblical rebel should never have given in. At the last moment he should have reared up, shaken a fist, and with a resounding bellow defied that transcendent, inhuman justice in which suffering has no weight in the balance."¹²¹

But it must also be noted that Michael never stopped worshipping God. After the war and the extermination camps, he went to Paris and lived in utter solitude in order to seek his

¹¹⁹ Maurice Friedman, "Elie Wiesel: The Job of Auschwitz," in Responses to Elie Wiesel, edited by Harry James Cargas, New York, Persea Books, c. 1978, p. 210.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Dedmon, "Job as Holocaust Survivor," p. 177 in Wiesel's The Town Beyond The Wall, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967, p. 52.

God, to track him down. And it was in his determination not to give in so easily as Job and in his insistence that he will be a match for God and will defy his inhuman Justice, that he remains within his dialogue with God.¹²²

Unlike Job, Michael feels that humankind must never allow itself to be intimidated by God, must never yield. "The power of protest must be equal to the voice from the whirlwind and, in the end, protest must emerge....His disappointment with Job is intimately connected with his own fascination with omnipotence, an omnipotence that demands that man resist."¹²³

In light of the Holocaust, Wiesel refuses to deny either the sanctity of the individual or the reality of suffering. And although he praises the initial struggling and arguing of Job, he does not admire the defeated Job and "would prefer that Job transcend his weakness and allow his accusations to define his individuality.

In his counter-image Midrash, Wiesel attempts to restore individuality and personality to those people robbed of it by an overwhelming universe. It is in an unresolved Job that he seeks to teach us to begin again with an affirmation of life despite the overwhelming reality of death and despair.

¹²² Friedman, "Elie Wiesel: The Job of Auschwitz," p. 210.

¹²³ Dedmon, "Job as Holocaust Survivor," p. 177.

The Meaning of Struggle

While it is in Job's suffering that Wiesel's quest to question God's guilt and establish and justify the individual in suffering, it is in the act of struggle that Wiesel finds meaning in his post-Holocaust world vision. Whatever the form the struggle takes on - physical or psychological - it is a battle to overcome the darkness of suffering. Echoing Camus, Wiesel writes: "In a world of absurdity, we must invent reason; we must create beauty out of nothingness...we have to fight murder and absurdity to give meaning to the battle"; in other words, to re-create meaning. Wiesel's novels chart the progress toward this ideal.

A strong motif present in Wiesel's work is that of "re-creation," of beginning again. In his story of struggle, Wiesel incorporates the example of Jacob and his encounter with God to illustrate how "struggling encounters" - in other words, confrontations - can lead to meaning in life. In this manner, Wiesel expands upon his message of struggle embodied in his counter-image Job to find meaning in re-creation in his accounts of confrontations between people.

Jacob ends up wrestling for a lifetime in "one long dark night of the soul." Even when Jacob's thigh was dislocated he continued to struggle. His opponent then tells him:

'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' And he said to him, 'what is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then he said, 'Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.' (Genesis 32: 26-28)

Jacob's new name signifies a new self, a new beginning: "He who strives with God."¹²⁴ In relentlessly wrestling with God and resisting God's demand, Jacob becomes Is:ael, leader of God's people. He identifies himself in God by wrestling with Him. In this way, Jacob - just as the counter-image Job - embodies Wiesel's stance of worshipping God through confrontation with Him, rather than supplication to Him.

Over the years in numerous books, Wiesel has endeavoured to affirm life. The feeling of ending, however, burdens his early protagonists, and their efforts to begin again are largely futile. In The Town Beyond the Wall and The Gates of the Forest, the dynamic necessity of beginning again gathers power and establishes itself against the forces of ending. "We cannot create; we are too weak to create. But we can re-create: we can complete; we can achieve what he [God] began." For Wiesel, the struggle against formlessness and darkness - in other words, despair - goes on every day in the actions people choose and in the words they speak.¹²⁵

One of the most dramatic examples of a new beginning occurs again in The Town Beyond the Wall. Michael is in his prison cell, alone with a young boy who is in a catatonic stupor. This "Silent One," as he is called, is at the end of his struggle - he neither speaks nor acts. Michael himself is engaged in a struggle against madness. At this moment of crisis,

¹²⁴ In antiquity, it was believed that a person's self was concentrated in his name.

¹²⁵ Dedmon, "Job as Holocaust Survivor," p. 177.

Michael hears within himself the voice of his friend Pedro, who says to him: "Recreate the universe. Restore that boy's sanity. Cure him. He'll save you." And then the narrator reports:

Michael welcomed the dawn as a new man. His strength flowed back. He was suddenly responsible for a life that was an inseparable part of the life of mankind. He would fight. He would resume the creation of the world from the void.¹²⁶

The last pages of the novel recount the way in which Michael re-creates a world by reaching out to the young boy. Michael battles against chaos, silence, darkness, and his weapon is language. And finally, after a terrible struggle, the boy responds to Michael. And as Pedro promised, the act of curing the boy saves Michael, for by taking responsibility for the boy - by responding to him - Michael discovers a world for himself.¹²⁷

Here we see a reoccurring pattern of the works of Wiesel emerging. First, two people meet, one of whom has reached an ending. The other calls to him, and through the power of language a new beginning occurs. Wiesel tells this story again and again: how the possibility of the re-creation of a world exists in an encounter between human beings.

Powerful examples of beginning again can also be seen in Wiesel's The Gates of the Forest, both in its structure and in its last scene. Ted Estess points out that the structure of the novel imitates a re-creative motif. The novel has four distinct parts: spring, summer, autumn,

¹²⁶ Ibid. [Cited from Wiesel's The Town Beyond The Wall]

¹²⁷ Ibid.

and winter. He believes that this seasonal motif signals Wiesel's concern for the re-creation of a world, since nature's yearly cycle represents continual rebirth. But the motif functions somewhat ironically in that the novel suggests a difference between the re-creation that occurs in nature and that which occurs in the historical life of a human being.¹²⁸

Estess argues that while the renewal of nature each year is automatic, and it follows a predictable pattern of growth and development, the re-creation of a human life is more uncertain and even more enigmatic than the cycle of the seasons. It reflects less the predictable process of natural growth than it does the struggle against despair and interaction of unexpected events and encounters. Thus, he deduces, that the re-creation of a life depends on the honesty of a person's questioning, the power of his memory, and the scope of his imagination. These three processes of questioning, remembering, and imagining - according to Estess - work together in the re-creation of a human life in the work of Wiesel.

The Gates of the Forest fits into this re-creative motif because, like all Wiesel's stories, it exists in the near and distant past. In the near past, we see a victim and a survivor enduring and going beyond the Holocaust. In the distant past, we see how the protagonist relives a story much older than his own: the suffering of his entire people. The incidents in his life correspond to and reverberate with incidents in the collective story of Jewish experience from ancient times to the present.

¹²⁸ Estess, Elie Wiesel, pp. 63-64.

The last scene of The Gates of the Forest offers two crucial confrontations which illustrate the possibility for beginning again: one between the Rebbe and Gregor, and one between Gregor and Gavriel.

The ending of the novel takes place at a hasidic celebration. It is there that Gregor confronts the Rebbe and accuses God. Again the issue of perspective on time comes into play.¹²⁹ Gregor focuses on his own lifetime, his flight from the Nazis which drove him to hide in the forest, and the Rebbe's vision extends back beyond the beginning of creation. He teaches Gregor that traditional faith can bravely confront the failure of God as it has throughout history. The Rebbe speaks of song and joy, and Gregor counters with lamentation and defiance; the Rebbe speaks of God's judging man, and Gregor of man's judging God. Both sides of this exchange are important in the new beginning that Gregor is to make. And although Gregor does not completely embrace the Rebbe's position in his encounter with him, a prospect for rapprochement with his religious heritage becomes viable; he comes to see that perhaps the Rebbe is more courageous in his faith and affirmation than he is in his despair and negation. The Rebbe insists that life must progress beyond Gregor's negativism:

We can't stop there, that would be too easy, too cowardly....In what direction are we to go? Where is salvation, or at least hope, to be found?¹³⁰

"Crying's no use," the Rebbe says: "You must sing." And as Gregor listens to the Rebbe's stories and watches the hasidic community break into joyful song and dance, his feelings and

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 84.

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 84-86.

imagination slowly awaken; he gradually feels himself becoming the child that he once was.

Dimensions of his old self emerge:

Gregor ceased to struggle. He looked on, listened, and opened himself. The song went through him and transported him far away, to the place where he, who had been killed by the god of war, was awaiting him. So miracles existed.¹³¹

The intellectual struggle disappears in the fervour of the community's religious enthusiasm, and childlike openness miraculously returns to Gregor. Despair and negativism succumb to the greater power of the story and song. Opening himself to higher emotional experience, not his arrival at a satisfactory theological position, enables Gregor to achieve at least partial reconciliation with his religious tradition. From the community he learns that persons can help "one another to go forward without stumbling." He comes to this conclusion through struggle rather than submission. And it is by claiming the Rebbe's questions - if not his answers - as his birthright in the final paragraph of the novel that Gregor comes to a new beginning in traditional prayer:

At the appropriate moments Gregor recited the Kaddish, the solemn affirmation, filled with grandeur and serenity, by which man returns God his crown and his scepter. He recited it slowly, concentrating on every sentence, every word, every syllable of praise. His voice trembled, timid, like that of the orphan suddenly made aware of the relationship between death and eternity, between eternity and the world.¹³²

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

Gregor's voyage has begun anew. And while the Rebbe reintroduces Gregor to his religious heritage, it is in his final meeting with Gavriel that Gregor comes to see new possibilities in his personal and family history. It is in the struggle to regain identity that the process in which his Jewish name, "Gavriel" - "Man of God" - which was passed on to a stranger he had met in the forest while taking on for himself a new identity as "Gregor" - "he who sees" - becomes reversed.¹³³ In this encounter, the reader is never sure who this Gavriel is or if he really exists: Gregor may be hallucinating, or he may be mistaking someone else for the Gavriel he had known years before, or he may be talking to himself. The ambiguous encounter between Gregor and a figure he takes to be Gavriel is, however, "enough to force a new beginning." Gavriel shocks Gregor into a new awareness that human existence must be lived out in relation to people.¹³⁴ Just as the Rebbe revives the voice of eternity within him, the meeting with Gavriel alerts Gregor to possibilities in time. These dimensions join and enrich each other in the self which Gregor is becoming.

This Gavriel compels Gregor to retell again the story of the novel, beginning in Hungary and extending through all the experiences that are recounted in The Gates of the Forest. In this act of retelling the story of his life to Gavriel, Gregor is enabled to claim his life, all dimensions of it, as his life. Gregor realizes that his life, although scarred by horror and loss, has been rich and worthy in many respects. Instances of goodness highlight his story. And when he finally reclaims the name "Gavriel," Gregor affirms his own life. Gregor - "he who

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

sees" - can once again be Gavriel - "man of God." His present is united with his past, and he discovers a new unity within his self. And what is the message of this new Gavriel? It is Wiesel's message about the power of storytelling and the healing gift of personal relationships, struggling against the forces of ending and making a new beginning.¹³⁵

Wiesel does not propose a recreation by God in which all things are made new, but offers a new defiant way of relating to God. To Wiesel - unlike Job - man does have a right to demand answers from God, to struggle with Him through man in order to find Him in his/her search for meaning. Wiesel believes that within encounters between men the possibility for life despite - and in light of - the incomprehensible suffering of the Holocaust can be re-created.

¹³⁵ Ibid, pp. 87-88.

CHAPTER 4: MODERN MESSIANISM

The image of the Messiah is not an easy one to describe in concrete terms. The concept of the Messiah as Deliverer is completely absent from scriptures,¹³⁶ and messianic references within the Prophetic Writings are themselves questionable and subject to much scholarly debate. Therefore, to understand Wiesel's reinterpretation of the messianic image, both Jacob Immanuel Schochet's accumulation of various writings from talmudic and kabalistic scholars, and rabbinic reflections themselves offer some structure to traditional messianic reflections.

The belief in the coming of the Messiah and the messianic redemption is one of the fundamental principles of the Jewish faith - as evolved in the Middle Ages. Schochet turns to the works of Yitzchak Abarbanel and Maimonides¹³⁷ in particular, both of whom provide Prophetic illustrations affirming the ultimacy of messianic redemption.

According to Article Twelve of Maimonides' Principles of the Faith, every Jew must believe in the Messiah, the instrument by which the kingdom of God will be established, who will arise and restore the Kingdom of David to its original state and sovereignty, rebuild the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) in Jerusalem, gather the dispersed of Israel, and that in his days all the laws of the Torah shall be reinstituted as they had been aforesaid.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ The term "Messiah" in the Scriptures refers to an agent of God, "the anointed one."

¹³⁷ Maimonides is also known as Ramban.

¹³⁸ Jacob Immanuel Schochet, Mashiach, New York: S.I.E., 1991, p. 15.

With regard then to exactly what the messianic age will mean to the world, the Messiah was expected to attain for Israel the idyllic blessings described by the Prophets.¹³⁹ As mentioned above, it will entail the restoration of the *Beit Hamikdash* and the ingathering of the exiles of Israel: "God your God, will return your captivity and have compassion on you. If your dispersed be in the utmost end of the Heavens...God will bring you..." (Dt. 30:3-5) It will also signify an end to evil and sin: "In those days and in that time, says God, the iniquity of Israel shall be searched for but it will not be, and the sins of Judah - but they shall not be found." (Jer. 50:20) Awareness and knowledge of God will be opened to us and universal worship of God will prevail: "...the earth shall be full of knowledge of God and the waters cover the sea" (Is. 11:9); the Messiah shall mind the whole world so that all shall serve God in unity: "God shall be King over the entire earth. In that day God shall be one and his Name One." (Zech. 14:9), and the dead will be resurrected: "your dead shall be revived, my corpses shall arise; awaken and sing you who dwell in the dust, for a dew of lights is your dew..." (Is. 26:19) And we will live in blissful utopia: "There will be a life of ease. Our physical needs will be taken care of by others, as it is said, 'Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks and aliens shall be your plowman and your vinedressers.'" (Is. 61:5)¹⁴⁰

As for the personality of the Messiah, Schochet focuses on the kabalistic writings. According to the *Zohar*, the Messiah and the messianic age are the ultimate end for the world, preconceived from the very beginning, for which the world was created. Thus the Messiah

¹³⁹ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Volume 11, p. 1411.

¹⁴⁰ Schochet, *Mashiach*, pp. 22-27.

actually precedes creation. This quality refers, however, to the principle and soul of the Messiah. On the physical level, the Messiah is flesh; he is a human being,¹⁴¹ a regent born in normal fashion of human parents. The only known qualification about his origins is that he is a descendent of King David, through the lineage of his son Solomon.¹⁴² The Kabala alleges that when the Messiah redeems Israel, his unique pre-existing soul - 'stored' in *Gan Eden* from aforetimes - will descend upon the chosen *tzadik*. This mystical conception of the Messiah is based on the idea of *gilgul* and *ibbur* - reincarnation and impregnation. It explains the identification of the Messiah with Moses, when he is called 'the first redeemer and the last redeemer.'¹⁴³ In other words, the Messiah's pre-existing soul shall be embodied by certain *tzadiks* until his final appearance as the Messiah and Redeemer of the world.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ That the Messiah is believed to be fully human is dramatically illustrated by Akiba's knowledge of the rebel leader, Bar Kokhba, as the Messiah. [*Encyclopedia Judaica*, p. 1412]

¹⁴² Schochet, *Mashiach*, pp. 34-35.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁴⁴ The word "Messiah" itself means "anointed" and can refer to a king or a priest. However, the *aggadah* restricts the term to the eschatological king who is called "*malka meshiha*" (king Messiah) in the Targums. [*Encyclopedia Judaica*, p. 1411]

The Counter-Image: Messiah of the Here and Now

Even with this proposed image of the Messiah's nature, we still have not ascertained the means by which to find him. Wiesel counters the traditional apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic eschatology which prescribes ardent waiting for messianic redemption with a new messianism realized here and now through the works of man.

According to apocalyptic rabbinic literature, the Messiah is hidden in heaven,¹⁴⁵ where he pines over the suffering of people and of his own impotence, and is to come forth offering salvation only after certain events have taken place.

During the last decades of Byzantine rule in Palestine (in the last years of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century C.E.), the political upheavals in the Middle East, particularly the constant wars between the Byzantines and the Persians, gave rise to a body of messianic literature which was destined to play a major role in shaping the coming of the Messiah. The most important work which was written at that time was the pseudepigraphical Book of Zurubbal.¹⁴⁶ Since then, an enormous amount of literature developed around this

¹⁴⁵ Earlier Midrash have the Messiah waiting in Rome.

¹⁴⁶ For a detailed explanation of the prescriptions of this Book, see the Encyclopedia Judaica, p. 1413.

Book describing the prescriptions for redemption, those being the end of the Diaspora, the wars of the Messiah, and the final victory as foreshadowing the imminent appearance of the final Messiah.¹⁴⁷

Non-apocalyptic eschatology, particularly referring to the redemption expounded by Maimonides and his followers, regarded the coming of the Messiah as a political deliverance of the Jews from the rule of the Gentiles and was devoid of any apocalyptic elements. Another example of traditional non-apocalyptic redemption is astrological calculations attempting to establish the date of the coming of the Messiah such as those put forth by Abraham bar Hiyya's *Megillat ha-Megillah*.¹⁴⁸

In both the apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic eschatologies, the future is described as an inevitable end of the world as known and the beginning of a new one. In none of these works is there any explanation as to why anything is going to happen, or what a Jew should do in order to help in the majestic task of bringing about this redemption.¹⁴⁹ Rather, both advocate a future redemption that must be awaited. Wiesel opposes this "passively awaited Messiah" with a Messiah of the here and now. It is the means by which the Messiah is to get here that Wiesel reverses.

¹⁴⁷ Encyclopedia Judaica, Volume 11, p. 1413.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 1414.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

Wiesel rejects the idea of waiting for future redemption; Wiesel does not dismiss the image of the Messiah but reverses the roles: Man must be the answer to tragedy and bring about daily blessings rather than the Messiah, and only then - if the Messiah is indeed to come - will it be possible for him to come.

In his "Jews, Myths and Modern Life," Wiesel asks:

Messiah. What is he? A name? Perhaps a utopian dream? A prayer born of a people's melancholy waiting? Those who know do not say; those who say do not know. He is a mystical obsession and suggests the realm of what is forbidden and unapproachable. Living outside of time, he reminds human beings that time is not necessarily their enemy; the future is indeed permeated by anxiety, but anxiety is a vehicle for faith.¹⁵⁰

The Messiah that Wiesel awaited as a boy did not arrive at the crucial juncture of the Holocaust. As a child, Wiesel was deeply immersed in the Kabala, and overtones of kabalistic Messianism and the search for the Messiah run through all of his works. According to Wiesel, the idea of the Messiah is as old as the Exile, for which it is seen as its cure. Further, he explains that the most poignant stories tell of his coming; the most heart-rendering laments speak of his delaying. The Messiah is believed to be Israel's answer to tragedy and the Jewish gift to humanity. Wiesel believes that Man must be the agent of change; it is man's acts that are to counter tragedy here and now. And although Hasidism also prescribes fervent waiting, we shall see that Wiesel incorporates many hasidic principles in his Messianism of the here and now.

¹⁵⁰ Elie Wiesel, "Jews, Myths, and Modern Life," Parabola: The Magazine of Myth and Tradition, Volume 12 (Spring 1987) p. 75.

In The Accident, the hero's kabalistic master teaches him that "the Messiah, called to liberate man, can only be liberated by him....Man - who is nothing but a handful of earth - is capable of reuniting time and its source, and of giving back to God his own image."¹⁵¹ The Hasid feels responsible for their own fate - and redemption. They consider God to be an ally of man, needing man's love; they feel that this love must be in and through man in order not to reduce God to an abstraction. It is through concrete actions, the Hasid believes, man can gather in the dispersed sparks¹⁵² and uplift them to their divine source; every encounter, every meeting between one human being and another, quickens the steps of the Redeemer.

The significance of redemption or *tikkun*, the reparation and restoration of the fallen world and the uplifting of the sparks, is to be concerned not only with oneself but with everything and everyone around one. The hasidic mandate is nothing less than an attempt to tear down everything that separates one person from another - to break down the walls of solitude. They believe that because God is everywhere, the Messiah can wait:

First priority goes to the sick child who needs medicine; or to the desperate mother who needs to be consoled...'The love of God, when it is not linked to the love of the human, leads to idolatry and inhumanity. When you love your friend as you love yourself, God is the third partner.' A Hasid does everything a good Jew does but with one difference - passion.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Friedman, "Elie Wiesel's Messianism of the Unredeemed," pp. 311-12.

¹⁵² This comes from the kabalistic theory of the Gathering of the Sparks, after which the universe itself will be redeemed.

¹⁵³ Wiesel, "Somewhere a Master: Further Hasidic Portraits and Legends," p. 200, in Friedman's "Elie Wiesel's Messianism of the Unredeemed," p. 311.

Thus, in the words of Rebbe Pinhas: "If all men would speak the truth, there would be no further need to bring the Messiah; he would be here already. Just as the Messiah brings truth, truth brings the Messiah."¹⁵⁴ Wiesel finds these humanistic tendencies in the hasidic interpretation of the messianic redemption most appealing.

In The Gates of the Forest, Gregor says to Gavriel: "I would not have the coming of the Messiah depend upon our lack of generosity and pity, even toward Satan....I don't want salvation to come through fire, through cruelty, and through the sacrifices of others." "The Messiah," Gregor's father used to say, "is that which makes man more human, which takes the element of pride out of generosity, which stretches his soul towards others." Wiesel asserts that "if we are sincere, humble, and strong, the Messiah will come - every day, a thousand times a day - for he is not a single human being but all human beings."¹⁵⁵

Wiesel holds that the substance of Judaism is - "to remain human in a world that is inhuman."¹⁵⁶ Maurice Friedman feels that to Wiesel, the Messiah does not dwell above in glory, but below in the suffering and exposure of human beings: "The Word is the history of man; and man is the history of God."

¹⁵⁴ Wiesel, Four Hasidic Masters and Their Struggle Against Melancholy, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1978, p. 19.

¹⁵⁵ Friedman, "Eli Wiesel's Messianism of the Unredeemed," pp. 311-12.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. [Cited From Wiesel's "Toward a Philosophy of Jewish Existence (1968) found in Abrahamson's Against Silence, volume I p. 255]

This is best illustrated in a story Wiesel tells of a hasidic Rebbe who goes up to heaven and knocks at the Messiah's gate, asking why he is taking so long when mankind is expecting him. When the Messiah responds that it is not him they are expecting but good health, riches, serenity, etc., the Rebbe loses patience and cries that if he cannot help men resolve even the smallest of their problems, then he should, indeed, remain in shadow. If he does not understand that he is bread for the hungry, a voice for the old man without heirs, sleep for those who dread the night, then indeed, it is not he for whom mankind is waiting. Upon which the Rebbe returns to earth, gathers his disciples, forbids them to despair, and says: "Now the true waiting begins."¹⁵⁷

In an interview with Harry J. Cargas, Wiesel voices his views on redemption:

The only justice would be if I could bring back, if not six million, at least one person to life. But I cannot. The only other justice I would accept would be, and I mean it very profoundly, very sincerely, the coming of the Messiah.¹⁵⁸

According to Wiesel, there is no divine redemption after the Holocaust: "I'm satisfied with small daily blessings and with helping one person, if I can." It is the here and now that Wiesel is concerned with.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Wiesel, One Generation After, pp. 70-72.

¹⁵⁸ Harry J. Cargas, "An Interview with Elie Wiesel," Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Volume 1, No. 1 (1986) p. 9.

¹⁵⁹ Friedman, "Elie Wiesel's Messianism of the Unredeemed," p. 313.

In The Testament, Reb Mendel the Taciturn tells young Paltiel Kossover that "only man, for whose sake the Messiah is expected, is capable and worthy of making his advent possible." ... "The Messiah, you see, is a mystery between man and himself." If, in the face of the Holocaust we have the right to demand redemption, so too does God.¹⁶⁰

In his cantata-poem, Ani Maamin, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the traditional intercessors for Israel, return to earth to challenge God with their Holocaust reports. The tale is told with extreme emotion and pleading and yet apparently it is not enough to incite God toward intervention, toward either sending or permitting the Messiah to work.¹⁶¹ "Never before have there been such flames," says the Narrator, "And in every one of them it is the vision of the Redeemer that is dying."¹⁶²

In his "The Vision of the Void," Michael Berenbaum is not wrong in noting a progressive humanization of Wiesel's Messianism or that, in Wiesel's later writings, the Messiah loses some of his grandeur in favour of moments of sanctification. Nor is he incorrect in concluding that Auschwitz forced Wiesel to take history with utmost seriousness and thus

¹⁶⁰ Abrahamson, Against Silence, Volume III, p. 315.

¹⁶¹ Roth, "Elie Wiesel on Ultimate Reality and Meaning," p. 295.

¹⁶² Friedman, "Elie Wiesel's Messianism of the Unredeemed, p. 314.

precluded his accepting Messianism as an alternative to facing the Holocaust, which Wiesel himself said would be blasphemy. However, to deduce from this that the image of God has been replaced, for Wiesel, by the human image, is unfounded.¹⁶³

Friedman points out that within the context of Wiesel's work as a whole and, in particular, in the context of Wiesel's Modern Messianism, Berenbaum's conclusion cannot hold, namely that "for Wiesel, to be a Jew after Auschwitz is to hope for a Messiah and to work for a Messiah while knowing full well that the hope is for naught." Wiesel's Modern Messianism is not limited to human relationships alone; yes he does maintain that it does exist through human relationships and manifests itself in them,¹⁶⁴ but nowhere does Wiesel state that God is completely absent. It is Wiesel's emphasis on the here and now of messianic redemption that can lead one to assume that there is no longer any place for the divine. And although Wiesel does not release us from this tension in his, A Jew Today, he concludes:

And yet the day will come - I hope soon - when we shall all understand that suffering can elevate man as well as diminish him. Neither end nor means, it can bring him closer to his truth and his humanity. In the final analysis, it is not given to us to bring suffering to an end - that frequently is beyond us - but we can humanize it. To turn it into dialogue rather than sword depends only on us, on you....Help

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 316.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

us not to despair of you. Or of mankind. And then perhaps, out of our reconciliation, a great hope will be born.¹⁶⁵

Wiesel is trying to communicate to us in his Messianism of the here and now a humanistic approach to life.

The Message of Universal Humanism

Wiesel's Messianism of the here and now calls for a binding agreement between Man and Man. Wiesel sincerely believes that the only hope we have for stopping a second Holocaust lies in the building of a genuine spiritual union among peoples, a union strong enough to withstand that dark attraction to chaos which has so often kept humanity in the shadow of its own violence.¹⁶⁶

In his essay on the biblical Joseph, Wiesel expresses Man's capacity for transformation in order to help his fellow Man. The tale of Joseph is one of a young man who overcomes inner obstacles "not in order to come closer to God, but to his fellow-men. His own brothers." Although Joseph had every reason to hate, instead he "forgives without forgetting." Joseph, like Wiesel, learns that in "working for his people a Jew helps mankind." Joseph, according to Wiesel, was the first to know how to reconcile his love of other nations; he was the first to know how meaningless it is to oppose Judaism to universality. Thus Joseph, who lost his family and was exiled from

¹⁶⁵ Wiesel, A Jew Today, p. 106.

¹⁶⁶ Theodore M. Hesburgh, in the forward to Wiesel's Four Hasidic Masters, pp. xvi-xvii.

his childhood and his homeland "did not despair." Rather, Wiesel writes, "Joseph assumed his destiny and tried to give it meaning from within. He lived his eternal life in the here and now, demonstrating that it is possible for the slave to be prince, for the dreamer to link his past to the future, for the victor to open himself to the supreme passion that is love."¹⁶⁷

The message Wiesel wishes to convey through this humanism is a universal one which calls people to action. James Fowler, in his Stages of Faith, describes Wiesel's universalizing faith as one in which the growing depth of his own particular Jewish traditions have led him to an opening for humanity - what Fowler calls, "a virtual identification with being" - that allows or demands not only an increased identification with Jews but also with all human beings who are in need.¹⁶⁸

Robert McAfee Brown also conveys Wiesel's universal tendencies. He suggests that to Wiesel:

All persons are worthy of infinite respect. All persons, not just Jews, not just survivors of the death camps, but all persons, starting especially with victims, whether in South Africa, the Sohel, [sic] Bangladesh, Cambodia, or Russia -- places where Wiesel has himself gone to carry a message of solidarity and hope.¹⁶⁹

Wiesel, in his decision to be a public activist, exemplifies what it means to be a humanitarian.

In his own words, he states:

¹⁶⁷ Downing, "Autobiography, Fiction and Faith," p. 1453

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 1452.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Think about what happened in Thailand and Cambodia, I went there. Whenever something happens, I go and make it clear I am going as a Jew. I have to be concerned with human problems. Nobody came to help me when I needed help. So I went there.¹⁷⁰

In his call for action, Wiesel is not inciting everyone to become a public activist, rather:

In deciding to get married, to have children, to build on ruins, your parents sought to teach history a lesson: that we are not to give up on life, not to give in to despair. And deep down you have felt the need to justify your parents' absurd and persistent faith in life, in faith itself, in history, in society, in humankind.¹⁷¹

Wiesel may or may not believe that the Messiah will or will not come. He leaves us in tension simply because this is not his concern. His concern is with the here and now, and with daily blessings rather than a future divine redemption; it is how to not only choose life but to make that life meaningful now - to make Man more human. Whether this faith in Man is merited is another question.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1452.

¹⁷¹ Abrahamson, *Against Silence*, Volume III, p. 317. [Cited from Wiesel's "To Our Children," pp. 322-24]

¹⁷² It is a question that Wiesel himself ponders, but nonetheless continues his quest - perhaps despite Man.

CONCLUSION

In Wiesel's writings, the two unreconcilable realities for him -life in Sighet and death in Auschwitz - are bridged by his Midrashic writings. The Holocaust becomes a "destructive reversal" of Wiesel's childhood world-view inciting a search for a "meaning in a universe that has no meaning."¹⁷³ Through midrashic storytelling he conducts this search "in order to re-create the universe which has vanished."¹⁷⁴ His work not only reveals "the denial of death" as Ernest Becker calls it, but also a valiant and prolific human project to reconstruct and restructure meaning on the ruins of a former life-world.¹⁷⁵

Wiesel asserts that the meaning of being Jewish - and therefore human -is "never to give up - never to yield to despair." That affirmation is one of his categorical imperatives, and it is to be applied in one's relation to human persons and God alike, irrespective of the temptations toward despair that they may provoke. Each individual must choose life because suffering and indifference are real, because love is possible and responsibility is put upon us.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Downing, "Autobiography, Fiction and Faith," p. 1444.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 1448-49.

¹⁷⁶ Davidson, "Personal Bereavement and Collective Mourning," p. 1576.

The truth of these reasons is not made self-evident by Wiesel. Their validity does not rest on the irrefutable foundations of a fully rational universe, but rather on the remains of a Holocaust Universe. They are largely reasons of refusal, resistance, and rebellion, grounded in and against every power that yields needless, senseless waste.¹⁷⁷

In Wiesel's world, the inverted *Akedah* story in which both fathers and sons go to the altar breaks the covenantal promise between God and Man and renders it no longer a viable option. Man alone must bear witness to the truth, create and maintain solidarity with the past, and sanctifies life in order to make it meaningful. The unresolved Job does not abjectly revere an unjustified God but relates to Him through struggle and confrontation in order to re-create the possibility of living again. And the prescriptions of the Messiah of the here and now invoke Man rather than a divine plan to bring about daily blessings through human action and kindness. Wiesel's message: respond to suffering with love, respond to indifference with protest. According to him, such acts will constitute reasons enough to live hard and to live well. In very simple terms, it is a message of hope.

These elements of his Midrashim promote a world-view in which life must be lived despite God and for God, despite Man and for Man. It is obvious that his prescriptions are not founded in definitive theological explanations. Rather they are founded in provocative questions:

I know...it isn't easy to live always under a question mark. But who says that the essential question has an answer? The essence of man is to be a question, and the essence of the question is to be without answer.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

But to say, 'What is God? What is the world? What is my friend?' is to say that I have someone to talk to, someone to ask a direction of. The depth, the meaning, the very salt of man is his constant desire to ask the question ever deeper within himself, to feel ever more intimately the existence of an unknowable answer.¹⁷⁸

His stories make life not only possible in a post-Holocaust universe, but also worth living:

I know the paths of the soul, overgrown, often know only the night, a very vast and very barren night, without landscapes. And yet I tell you: we'll get out. The most glorious works of man are born of that night.¹⁷⁹

In summation, Wiesel's reevaluation of the structure and content of the relationship between God and Man is particularly clear as he revises the images of the *akedah*, Job, and the Messiah. Both the *akedah* and the Book of Job were tests. In the *akedah*, both God and Abraham pass, and in the Book of Job, both Job and God ultimately fail. Wiesel searches for new meaning in these stories in light of the Holocaust Event - also a test in which both **God** and **Man** fail Israel, and indeed, all humanity. His search manifests itself in the New Messiah of the here and now, representing a post-Holocaust relationship between **Man** and **God** in which - if you like - the roles have been reversed.

¹⁷⁸ Wiesel, The Town Beyond the Wall, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967, p. 176

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A.1:

Justifications of God

Mipnei Hateinu

The concept of *Mipnei Hateinu*, "Because of our Sins," acknowledges that one's misfortunes are due to one's own failings and that we must accept responsibility for them. In other words, it is deserved suffering. This explanation ignores the possibility of a guilty God in any respect and would expect that the doctrine Kiddush HaShem be respected; in other words, that God's name be exalted and to seek His forgiveness. Yet history illustrates otherwise. Undeserved suffering was and is fully realized by biblical and Yalmudic scholars. Today, some believe that the idea that Jewish martyrology through the ages can be explained as divine judgement is absurd. To believe that what happened to European Jewry in our generation was divine punishment for sins committed by them is no longer a viable option. According to Wiesel, it was injustice absolute - an injustice countenanced by God.

Hester Panim

In biblical terminology, we also speak of *Hester Panim*, "The Hiding of the Face," God's hiding of His countenance from suffering. Man may seek God in his tribulation and suffering but cannot find Him. There are two meanings found in the Bible for this representation of God. The first explanation assumes divine judgement and punishment. We find it indicated, for instance, in Deuteronomy:

Then My anger shall be kindled against them on that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them.
(Dt. 31:17-18)

But the Bible also speaks of the Hiding of the Face when human suffering results, not from divine judgement, but from the evil perpetrated by man. Even the innocent may feel himself forsaken because of it. A moving example is the 44th Psalm:

All this is come upon us; yet have we not forgotten Thee. Neither have we been false to Thy covenant. Our heart is not turned back, Neither have our steps declined from Thy path; Though Thou hast

crushed us into a place of jackals, And covered us with the shadow of death. If we had forgotten the name of our God, Or spread forth our hands to a strange god; Would not God search this out? For he knoweth the secrets of the heart. Nay, but for Thy sake are we killed all the day; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Awake, why sleepest Thou, O Lord? Arouse Thyself, cast not off nor evil. Wherefore hidest Thou Thy face, And forgettest our affliction and our oppression?

The Hiding of the Face about which the psalmist complains is altogether different from its meaning found in Deuteronomy. In the latter, it is a manifestation of divine anger and judgement over the wicked. In the psalm it is indifference - God seems to be unconcernedly asleep during the tribulations inflicted by man on his fellow. It will become quite evident that Wiesel incorporates this second aspect of the Hiding of the Face in his works, although he does not accept it - as we shall see Isaiah did - as a valid explanation of God's actions.

For Isaiah, God's self-hiding is an attribute of divine nature; such is God and He is a God who hides Himself. Man may seek Him and He will not be found; man may call to Him and He may not answer. God's hiding of his face in this case, according to Isaiah, is not a response to man, but rather a quality of being assumed by God on his own initiative. "And I will wait for the Lord that hideth His face from the house of Jacob and I will hope for Him."

Isaiah, of course, did not mean to say that God actually does evil. As mentioned above, rejecting Manichean dualism, the prophet maintains that God alone is Creator. He created evil by creating the possibility for evil. He made peace by creating the possibility for it.

According to Berkovits, He had to create the possibility for evil if He was to create the possibility for its opposite, peace, goodness, and love. To him, God can be neither good nor bad, because in terms of his own nature He is incapable of evil. God is the only one who is goodness. But due to His very essence, since He can do no evil, He can do no good either.

To Berkovits then, God is not an ethical being and therefore goodness for Him is neither an ideal, nor a value, but rather existence. In other words, God is perfection. Berkovits believes that with man goodness is axiological and with God, it is ontological. If God did not respect man's freedom to choose his course in personal responsibility, not only would moral good and evil be eradicated from the earth, but man himself would go with them, because, according to him, freedom and responsibility are of the very essence of man; without them man is not human.

Berkovits notes that the Bible assumes not only that God is present in History but that History is the arena for human responsibility and its product. The Rabbis in the Talmud saw the mightiness of the Almighty in that he controls his penchant to judge and to punish and behaves in History as if he were powerless. "God is mighty, for he shackles his omnipotence and becomes 'powerless' so that history may be possible." The question, therefore for Berkovits, is not: "Why

is there undeserved suffering? But, why is there man? He who asks the question about injustice in history really asks: Why a world? Why creation?" This, of course, is far from being a resolution to our problem. Wiesel, no doubt, would see this as nothing less than an attempt to avoid questioning a guilty God.

God as Long-Suffering

In keeping with deep-rooted biblical tradition, the Rabbis in a homily interpreted the Hebrew expression that describes God as "Long-Suffering" as meaning that God is long-suffering in many ways. He is long-suffering with the wicked as well as with the righteous.

The Rabbis held that man prefers to see God as waiting for the sinner to find his way to Him. But man never seems to realize that while God is long-suffering, the wicked are going about their evil on earth and the result is suffering for the innocent. While God waits for the sinner to turn to Him, oppression and persecution and violence reigns among men. Yet there seems to be no alternative. If man is to be, God must be long-suffering with him; God must suffer man. This, the argument contends, is the inescapable paradox of divine providence: while God tolerates the sinner, he must abandon the victim; while he shows forbearance with the wicked, he must turn a deaf ear or blind eye to the violated. This is viewed as the ultimate tragedy of existence: God's very mercy and forbearance. His very love for man, requires the abandonment of some men to a fate that they may well experience as divine indifference to justice and human suffering. Thus this argument asserts that God's hands are tied - He has no choice in the matter of innocent suffering.

[Source: Eliezer Berkovits' Faith & Freedom, pp. 89-105]

APPENDIX A.2:

Wiesel's Concept of God

Not understanding God is not denial of His existence. Wiesel has been heard to say: "If I told you I believed in God, I would be lying; if I told you I did not believe in God, I would be lying." For Wiesel, according to Dan Cohn-Sherbok, the only way he can be for God after Auschwitz is by being against Him - to embrace God without protest would be to vindicate Him and legitimize evil.

Wiesel does not provide any definitive theological answers or explanations about God and belief in Him, and thus does not ease the tension that we, as readers, have come to desire and expect in order to make us more comfortable and satisfy our needs. And he does this for a specific reason, that reason being that he concludes that comfort often leads to indifference - indifference being greatest of all causes of evil.

But before turning to Wiesel's approach, a look at his response to Richard Rubenstein's "God is dead" theory can clearly indicate that despite whatever has changed in Wiesel's faith, he has definitely not given up hope in God's existence, but perhaps only in the way He exists.

God is definitely not dead to Wiesel. According to him,

Those who came out with the so-called God-is-dead theology, not one of them had been in Auschwitz. Those who were there never said it. I have my problems with God, believe me. I have my anger and I have my quarrels and I have my nightmares. But my dispute, my bewilderment, my astonishment is with men."

And here I will tell you, Dick, [reference to Richard Rubenstein] that you don't understand them when you say that it is more difficult to live today in a world without God. NO! If you want difficulties, choose to live with God. Can you compare today the tragedy of the believer to that of the non-believer?! The real tragedy, the real drama, is the drama of the believer.

Jerry Robin, in his essay, "The Negative Theodicy of Elie Wiesel," holds that,

in telling us that evil wins in the end, Wiesel not only gives up on any attempt at a theodicy but goes one step further and blames God for the suffering that plagues the world.

Wiesel may have given up on the faith in the God of his childhood, and he may question Him in anger, but in his wrath he never gives up on a faith consisting of struggle and defiance. In fact, his entire message is not to give up hope. Yes it is true that in Wiesel's, The Trial of God - a play not directly about the Holocaust since it is set three centuries prior to it but one which does touch upon the central theological dilemma posed by the death camps - the chilling, unredeeming ending when Sam, the defendant of God, takes off his mask and reveals himself as the devil, all possible "answers" or "consolations," as Robbins puts it, are negated. But Wiesel also states in A Jew Today:

Master of the Universe, I know what you want - I understand what you are doing. You want despair to overwhelm me. You want me to cease invoking your name to glorify and sanctify it. Well, I tell you! No, no - a thousand times no! You shall not succeed! In spite of me and in spite of you, I shall shout the Kaddish, which is a song of faith, for You and against You. The song you shall not still, God of Israel.

Yes Wiesel is holding God accountable for His actions - or inactions -but he is definitely not giving up on Him or His world.

The same situation can be found in Wiesel's The Testament. In this work, Paltiel is justifiably outraged when he visits Majdanek after the war and he engages in a justifiable quarrel with God, the charge being:

You are a gravedigger, God of my ancestors. You carry Your chosen people into the ground, just as I carried soldiers fallen on the battlefields. Your people no longer exists. You have buried them; others killed them, but it is You who have put them into their invisible unknown tomb. Tell me, did You at least recite the Kaddish? Did You weep for their death?

But there is also another voice, that of David Aboulesia, who unexpectedly reappears at expedient times, claiming that "God is resurrection, not gravedigger; God keeps alive the bond that links Him and you to your people; is that not enough for you? I am alive; you are alive; is that not enough for you?"

Significantly, Paltiel never calls God a murderer but only a gravedigger; rather, it is man who supplies the ammunition that kills. Wiesel asserts to be Jewish is never to give up, never to yield to despair; in the words of Emil Fackenheim, it is up to man not to offer Hitler another posthumous victory. That is why on a Saturday morning, Wiesel is likely to be found in a small hasidic synagogue on the Upper West Side, and, for special celebrations, among the Hasidim in Brooklyn's Crown Heights. And that is why he continues to study Talmud and the *kabala*, the Jewish mystical writings.

Wiesel's experiences did not lead him to atheism, yet he repeatedly casts doubts on the traditional Jewish understanding of God. Wiesel will not - cannot - get a living God out of the picture. The idea of "The Eternal, Lord of the Universe, the All-Powerful and Terrible" who must be hallowed and exalted that Wiesel had learned as a boy to associate with God no longer fits after the Holocaust. At most, the idea of that child can represent only a fragment, an aspect of God. Perhaps the part of God that is dying could be that which can be loved - at least the part that can be loved easily.

In witnessing the death of a child, Wiesel suggests that to be with God is to encounter a silent presence - perhaps beyond good and evil and even beyond love - that gives us life only to leave us alone. God is at the heart of Wiesel's ultimate reality, but it is not clear at all that anything we value lives there ultimately. As one biblical image suggests, "God may well be a consuming fire" (Dt. 4:24).

Thus, for those who are looking for a solution to the theological dilemmas posed by the Holocaust, they will not find it in Wiesel's work; Wiesel's protest against God simply reinforces religious perplexity, rather than easing tensions. His purpose is to rather question God and his justice in order to find meaning in a post-Holocaust world.

[Sources: Dan Cohn-Sherbok's "Jewish Faith and the Holocaust," & Jerry Robins' "The Negative Theodicy of Elie Wiesel"]

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