

Elie Wiesel 1/3/90 #131 Page 1

Q: A few years ago when we spoke, you said to me that there's a major question with regard to the Holocaust: If it's like other genocides, then why focus on a particular one? On the other hand, if it's unique, then what general lessons can you learn from it. What is your thinking now on this?

A: I think exactly the same way as I did then and even more so. All the subjects, topics and themes, that were there then, are still here. And what I said then, I repeat now. The event is not like any other tragedy. That doesn't mean that if it were, we shouldn't study it. We should study any tragedy. All tragedies are worthy of our concern and solicit our interest. But this one is different because the victims were different. Never before have so many victims been taken. Never before have so many victims belonged to one people. In Antiquity, there were the Etruscans, Canaanites, and Amalekites, but in modern history we don't have ANY example that could even come close to what happened to the Jewish people. I mean, never before had the killers had such power. Never before had they used all the achievements, triumphs of science, of culture, of psychology to rule their victims and then to kill them. So it was a kind of meeting point between the killer and the victim. This was uniquely different. It was absolute, the absolute victim on the one hand, the absolute killer on the other hand. Everything was crystallized. Now, the other question, of course, is as important. They say because it is unique what lessons can we learn? It is because it is unique that the lesson can be drawn and that lesson is, that ultimately, every tragedy should be viewed as unique- every human being should be viewed as unique. Therefore, every death of every person is, to the family, to those around that person, or to that person before it happened, unique. My death is a unique death. And therefore my life should be unique. That is the lesson. I mean, in those times, the uniqueness of life and death was deprived; that was denied the victims. And once more, this is what the killers have done- I would have preferred to believe then, as I believe now, that every Jew who was killed in every ghetto, was a unique immortal Jew. Every person today is a unique person. After all, to condemn the person to humiliation, suffering and deprivation to death, is in fact to annihilate the uniqueness of that person. And in doing so, I would annihilate my own uniqueness and that of everyone else.

Q: Maybe to some extent those who deny the Holocaust are frightened people.

A: No. I think I would not dignify it with such lofty goals. I really think they are simply vicious.

Q: Just vulgar anti-Semites.

A: They are vicious, and vulgar and anti-Semites. And they hate Jews. Just that. I did not give them any other possibility of ideology. Not at all. They resent

simply the Jewish people because of our history, because of our memory, and even because of our suffering. They envy us our suffering.

Q: You made the argument that the survivors who did do well, later, after the war, were people who came out of a childhood environment before they went to the camps. An environment that was predictable, and they felt they had control over their environment, and that their parents gave them a certain degree of ego. And yet I found a paradoxical argument in going through the literature of “steeled by adversity.” That certain people who didn’t come from happier circumstances were steeled by their experiences. And that they survived the experience in part because of that. I thought of Rabbi Eliyahu, whom you described in Night. The man always had a kind word for everyone- I wondered what his life was like before. And, you know, when I did these interviews, I can’t go back into peoples’ pasts. I mean, if you ask- sit down and ask a person, ‘Was your childhood happy? Did your father hit you?’ You can’t do this. You can’t reinvent it.

A: Nor am I. I learned not to generalize. Whatever you said is true. And the reverse as well. Of course Frankl’s theory was about meaning, that people had to be communists or religious or something, to believe in something. I can prove to you, the opposite as well. I can prove to you that what he says is right. I mean, that the rabbis who maintained their humanity survived. I can also show you rabbis who did not survive. And they were as great believers. And they let themselves go, rather than fight, rather than work. I believe there are no theories. There are no concepts. There are no systems. Therefore, Bettelheim is wrong and Frankl is wrong. They’re all right, but for every theory, I can prove to you the anti-theory. Now, childhood. There were children who came from very good families, strong families, good families, civilized families, and yet...I knew a kapo who came from a non-religious background but he behaved like a religious Jew. And so, everything really, is part of the story, and the story is part of everything. Do you understand? I knew one man in Buchenwald who was there I think, twelve years, and he remained a religious Jew. I’m not sure, that I would have had the strength to remain human. Maybe after five years, if I had had the choice between becoming a kapo and dying, maybe I would have chosen to be a kapo. I hope not. But how can I know?

Q: You can’t. You gave the example yourself. In Night you describe how this Rabbi Eliyahu said, ‘Where’s my son?’.

A: That’s right- exactly. So, therefore I cannot generalize. They are all theories that you’re just evoking. I don’t see that they work. But they gained because I would like to believe that, in this case, maybe, we defeated the enemy. Before, the enemy’s purpose really was to see only one, that all the victims looked alike. And therefore these victims were ageless, faceless, nameless, and they had no private individuality. To be an individual there was dangerous. The best way to survive was to plunge into the mass and become anonymous. And not to look at the S.S. men, hoping that if you don’t look at him, he won’t look at you. But it is a

childish game of, not to see him, is to be unseen. And just the opposite happened. In spite of everything, every person responded uniquely. That means there was something unique left in every person to survive the war. And one survived because he prayed, and the other one because he refused to pray. One survived because he was kind, and the other one because he questioned kindness. One survived because he had his father there, and one because he did not have his father there. And, it can go to the infinite.

Q: They have only one theory in sociology that speaks to what you just said. They call it 'symbolic interaction,' which is that every life by definition is unique in every situation.

A: My philosophy is exactly that. Every life is unique, and therefore, in every suffering, as we see, it is unique.

Q: I guess though, that I have to try to explain how people could get up and go to work.

A: You cannot, because look, you yourself know the yeshiva world. You wrote about it. You wrote well. The hasidim, if you ask them these questions, they would look at you as crazy.

Q: Indeed they did.

A: They would say: 'Are you crazy? Come on.' That's nothing. There were so many churbans (destructions). And we are here because God wants us to be here, because we are Jews, and we have to survive, and God said 'we should have children,' and so we have children, and God says, 'they should work,' so we work. What are you talking about? They should talk to the many Jewish communists who became communist after the war, especially those who went back. If you were to have this question with Romania, or Poland let's say, in 1946, Jews would have a good answer. They became communist, because they wanted to change the world, or to change society, and they had a purpose, and the purpose was that since Nazism was destroyed. They wanted to build a new society and so forth. In 1989, I'm not so sure that all the survivors you met, still remember what they felt in 1945, '46.

Q: This is a problem for me. I know it when I'm asking the question.

A: Now they are justifying their behavior. They rationalize it. I came here in 1956, but I also went to Israel. In 1949, when I came for the first time to Israel, I was shocked! Auschwitz was a bad name. They were all taken for smugglers. Even today by the way, you say, 'survivor,' except in our context. It is a very bad thing. 'He is a survivor!' Meaning somebody who is so manipulative that he or she is a survivor. This is somebody in the political field; like, 'He survived three administrations!' In 1945 and '46 and '47, when survivors came here, they didn't

deal with that. There were no theories then. Here in America, they were not liked. And then in 1972, the American Jewish Committee gave me a medal that they generally only give to Supreme Court justices, people like that. I invited a few of my survivor friends to be there. But name me one national organization that has a survivor as it's president? In 'A Jew Today.' I have written a chapter called, "A plea for the Survivors." Read what I say there. They were treated horribly. At best, they were treated with pity. That's all. So therefore, all they wanted maybe was not to be in touch with the others.

Q: Can I ask you a question about that? I had written it down, and you just tempt me because it's right on the subject. I wrote that in 'A Jew Today,' you wrote as follows: "The liberated men and women lead a private existence. They do not join in our celebrations. They do not laugh at our jokes. Their frame of reference is not ours." Now it seems, that you said a moment ago, 'More and more the survivors come out of their private shells.'

A: Oh! This is because there was a change.

Q: That's what I wanted to ask you; was it the "Gatherings?"

A: No. The real change occurred strangely enough, thanks to Carter. When Carter appointed the President's Commission, I came to see him, and I didn't want to accept it at first. I didn't want the position. I- wrote the books not to be a public figure like a president or chairman. That was not my goal in life. And he wasn't used to this. So he said, 'No, to being chairman of the President's Commission?' I said, 'No.' But then survivors began pushing me...'you must accept, you must accept.' I'm glad I did because finally, I came to Carter and he said, 'What do you want? Name your conditions.' I said, 'I want, as the first thing, to have every year- a kind of joint session because then it will give respectability to all the other ceremonies. If the president comes, the senators will come. If the senators come, the governor will come. If the governor comes, the President of the Jewish American Committee will come, or the American Jewish Congress, or whatever organization we have in Jewish life, HIAS and so forth. But the main thing is the President. He accepted. The President's Commission on the Holocaust changed things. It became honorable. But it was also political. I said to him, 'Maybe you will be remembered because of that'. And it gave the survivors respectability. At one point, you know, I decided that no one could be chairman of any committee unless he or she is a survivor. I was under pressure from everybody else. The Poles, the Ukrainians, and the non-survivor Jews. Who lit candles? Survivors have to light, nobody else. Senators? Can you imagine, a survivor is more important than, a senator. That's how I wanted it.

Q: I think one thing builds on the others. When five survivors start speaking to high school groups, another ten say, 'I can do it too.'

- A: That's how it goes. Also, look, it has an effect on television. All of a sudden the Holocaust became a fashionable thing- to my regret, by the way.
- Q: You mean like Gerald Green?
- A: Yes, the kitch, sentimental soap operas. But it's there! That means that television is asking. But to think that I should allow one of my books to become a TV show- I had, you know, offers. Orson Welles wanted to do Night for the movies. And since then, who didn't! Nothing doing. NONE of my books on the Holocaust can be touched, should become movies or theatres. No way! I don't believe it can be combined. It is something pure. It cannot be treated as, as theatre, OR as a movie or television.
- Q: Is there something though, that you think always remains private?
- A: It remains private, but words are being said and uttered. And more silence is needed to feel that. I wrote so little about the Holocaust, because I wanted to preserve that "zone of silence". But you know, the problem is that the survivors are human, and because they were deprived they like it, which is their prerogative. I'll give you an example. During the Bitberg affair, I wanted the entire council to resign- the President would not have accepted our resignation, and you cannot lose. The President CANNOT afford to have an ENTIRE council to resign. You cannot!
- Q: Yes, it's not like the Jerusalem Post-.
- A: Exactly! You cannot. I said, 'Look, let's resign. At least, in the future history books, there will be one line that at one point, when the President compared the victims to the executioners 'Who lay there,' he said, 'were as much victims as those who were in the concentration camps, how can we not resign?' But most survivors refused.
- Q: They like the limelight.
- A: They like the limelight. And they had all kinds of arguments saying: 'We can do more here.' Nonsense. Nonsense. The moral basis is gone. What do you mean?
- Q: In my opinion, the words that will be remembered is 'Your place is not here!'
- A: They liked it! They liked it! And that's bad, but it's human.
- Q: You know, I've come across this in my work, the whole politics of the survivors' organizations, the societies. One man spent a good deal of time defending himself to me against charges that he was a kapo. He was on an opposition slate in one of the societies. And these people called him a 'kapo'.

- A: I hear...and I don't want to hear. But, you cannot not hear...the sin of hatred...
- Q: I know that a lot of the Hungarian Jews are Hasidim, but why is it that in the survivors' organizations- most of them are Polish. Where are the secular Hungarian survivors like Alex Gross of Atlanta, people like that. Where are they? Why aren't there just as many of them on the boards, and involved?
- A: Hungarian Jews are ultra-hasidic, like the Satmar; they're not involved. Or even not Satmar. Let's say, Menashe Klein. And the secular ones, many don't speak Yiddish. They're assimilated Hungarian Jews. They speak Hungarian. But can you imagine a Hungarian Jew coming to speak Hungarian, in this crowd? (of Polish survivors).
- Q: They wouldn't let him into the card game.
- A: (laughs). What is the reason for it?
- Q: Many Hungarian Jews stayed behind until '56.
- A: It's true.
- Q: People learned about other destructions before the war, Etruscans, Armenians, and yet the Holocaust happened. That being the case, I find myself wondering what good will it do to have these museums and monuments. And if not that, what can you do?-
- A" There was a time when I believed that museums were important because it's the 20th century and image-oriented, museum oriented. Now the question that you ask is 'how come we didn't KNOW what was happening since we read all the books.' I say this event was a unique event. And this cannot compare to anything else. It should relate to everything else, but not be compared to anything else. The truth is that there is much anger that one day will come out. I learned a lot about the American Jewish leadership at that time, about solidarity. What vacation was cancelled then, or simply delayed. You open up the Jewish press at the time, and you will see, "Come to the Catskills." I'll tell the story of an Israeli officer. A major or colonel who came here to do his PhD. On the American Jewish press during the Holocaust. And he lost his mind. He had to be institutionalized. He said, 'I don't understand it. On the front page of the Forwards, you read about the extermination of Jews, and on the second page it says, 'Come to the Catskills.' You have a good comedian and so forth. 'You will enjoy the Catskills.' He said, 'How, how is it possible?' Now he should know that the American press, the non-Jewish press, also reported it: not well, but reported it. All these Jews, when they read about Bialystok, there must have been Jews reading who had family in Bialystok. What happened?
- QL: There's no answer.

- A: That's for right now. I wrote a piece for Commentary magazine. Go and judge other people. But you cannot judge other people, unless you start judging yourself. There is so much anger. Which one day will come out.
- Q: It's very disturbing to me, to hear you say this, because you know when you write, or when you work in anything, that, you know you like to think that you have some kind of purpose, some kind of a goal in mind. And it sounds like what you could say from this, if you can't answer the 'Why' that it's like 40 years later, you learned nothing, you forgot everything.
- A: Well we won't let it be forgotten. But the fact is that the important thing is that you don't know about it. And if I didn't tell you, you wouldn't know about it. But that the Jewish people who were in Europe were abandoned by their own brothers?
- Q: Is it possible that this will happen again?
- A: well, how could it happen? Who will abandon them? Now look, the Russian Jews were abandoned, too. Look, in 1965, when I came back from the Soviet Union, and I went around urging the American Jewish community, the French Jewish community, the British, I went all over the world. And- and all of those Jewish communities were in the free world.
- Q: Well, I read The Jews of Silence and it was very, very clear to me. But what assurance is it to me today? People say: 'Oh we wouldn't let it happen again.' When I look at how Jews are acting. I travel, I'm involved in my own community; I see the same selfishness. I see the same patterns of human nature. Can we hope that by educating people we can bring up a generation of people who will reject that approach?
- A: Because you and I are teaching something. You must believe.
- Q: I say that to myself, but I mean...
- A: That's what we say. In spite of it. And among my favorite words are, 'and yet.' And yet, we have no choice.
- Q: I say, I say to people, 'If I can reach three people in my class.'
- A: One, let's say one. Let's say one is enough.
- Q: One is enough. You know, in 'Night' you asked a question. You asked it in the beginning of the book, and you asked it towards the end of it. How could Jews, you know, the person started saying kaddish, and you said, 'How can Jews bless God's name. What do I have to thank him for.' How are you going to explain the

fact that hundreds of thousands of survivors today still bless God's name after what happened? When you talk to Menashe Klein, for example.

A: Sure. But, you know after the Holocaust I had problems because of it. After the war. Not during. Not during. During the war I went on davening.

Q: I remember what you wrote about Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah.

A: Absolutely. But I davened every day. That was it. Somehow, how, in Buna, that was Auschwitz 3, a pair of tefilin was smuggled in; and Menashe too, we got up every morning and we stood in line just to say the bracha. In Auschwitz, which is crazy. I think about this today and I say, 'It was crazy!' According to the Halacha we didn't have to do it.

Q: And why did you think you did it?

A: Because it was a shelter. I mean it linked me; it was a link to my home, to my childhood. I did it since bar mitzvah and I did it again.

Q: You know, I must tell you something. It is so interesting to hear this. Among the group of Orthodox Jews that I interviewed, I find very few of them, and we're being candid, that really believe in everything, but when I ask them why they do it, they tell me 'It's my community.'

A: During the war,- there was no problem. I had my father there; there was no problem. My crisis occurred much later, actually, in 1948. Until then, I went back to a religious life which was as the one that I had left at home.

Q: The one from the yeshiva?

A: I began studying again Gemorah and Tosafot right away. And, I went on studying. And, what kept me, really, is my passion for study. I NEVER stopped studying. My passion is to go on studying all the time. Even when I had my crisis, about belief and emunah, and so forth. Even then, I always said, 'okay, I'm studying; why is the Gemorah shuldig (guilty)?

Q: You know, the idea that you said before, about uniqueness. I heard on one hand, people say, only the tough ones, those who looked out for number one, survived. I heard this from the survivors, and I heard it from others. I also heard that only those who made friends and cooperated survived. It seems to me that maybe just, from such a broad expanse-.

A: All of them are correct.

Q: Different people have different experiences.

- A: All of them are correct, and all are wrong. I surely was not strong. Logically, you should know, logically, I was the first candidate to die. I was really sick at home. When I was a child, I was one boy and three sisters. One younger, and two older. And therefore, you know, one boy, a religious family. I'd go to big cities only because my mother took me to doctors. I think I learned myself, I was always sick. Second, I'm always frightened, I never did ANYTHING in those years! I was afraid. So, I was the perfect candidate to die- and then there were strong guys, you know, who dared, and who pushed themselves, they didn't survive and I did. Strength doesn't mean anything. The other thing is I was very close to my father. As long as my father was with me in Auschwitz, okay, I helped him, he helped me. In Buchenwald, he was no longer with me. So, between January, and t'bshevat, the end, I was alone. I didn't have a SINGLE friend. I didn't speak to anyone.
- Q: You didn't find anyone that you knew?
- A: I didn't want to find anybody. I didn't know anybody. I didn't find anybody. Because of my father. My father died after that. I remained an orphan- I was numb. I had the feeling that I didn't live. So, you cannot make any theory out of it. I think what you are going to find out, in all of your studies here, is that the sociologists sometimes are wrong. There IS no sociological theory.
- Q: Oh, I think I've already concluded that. They're going to be very unhappy.
- A: Absolutely nothing then. That means you couldn't say "You do this, and then you live." You couldn't. Because it didn't work.
- Q: When I interviewed people, I found that many of the people I spoke to told me 'I survived by luck.'
- A: Absolutely. Not even through a (miracle) I cannot stand the word 'miracle.'
- Q: Because of it's implications?
- A: Very strong implications. Because if it's a miracle for me, why wasn't there a miracle for the others?
- Q: You know what really bothers me, when people tell me, 'Oh, we had the diamonds hidden in the tire and it was a miracle that we survived.' And I'm thinking that people lost their lives and God paid attention to your diamonds? However, I have to say this, that I qualify the 'luck' as taking advantage of circumstances.
- A: No, I didn't.
- Q: Well, I think that this one case where-

A: I didn't.

Q: But you did something. You didn't passively exist.

A: Because of my father. My father did something. Not I. My main thing was not to leave my father. And then he left me. There is no way of explaining anything. Again, for some people it worked. For some people it was the opposite. Some people did do something and because they did, they died.

Q: I've gone over it, I can't tell you, I mean, I spent 80 hours just thinking about it.

A: It defeats all- all systems. It becomes a burden for me, meaning, you cannot say if you do this, you live.

Q: No, what I have to say is this: You can't judge it.

A: You cannot judge. Of course not. You cannot judge. Because, what do you mean, 'those survived,' Always remember, there were a million and a half children. What could they do? And then, tell me, the parents, the parents of children- how about the old people? And the sick people. They never had the opportunity.

Q: Let's say that there's no pattern.

A: No pattern.

Q: How about after having gone through it, by chance?

A: You mean, after the war?

Q: Yes.

A: After the war most people wanted, especially young people, to go back, to what you mentioned. There was a cobbler, and somehow the son had something to do with shoes, and the father was an industrialist, somehow the son will be a doctor and so forth. Go in his footsteps.

Q: A man from Munkatch, his name was Morris Rubin; he lives in Woodmere. He told me 'Every time I give money to a yeshiva, I feel that my parents are still living, because I know that's what they would have wanted me to do.

A: Yes, and that makes sense- I don't even know if I am right. I know that the others are wrong.

- Q: If we talk about after the war, do you see the children of the survivors as a definite group?
- A: Afterwards they will continue as their parents when you take on such luggage.
- Q: I have found tremendous variation among the children. Researchers wanted to research and categorize everybody and say: 'The Concentration Camp Survivor Syndrome' carried on to the second generation.' Doesn't it turn you off?
- A: No, no. Turns me off, sure.
- Q: But I'm hoping-.
- A: And yet, I speak so much about madness. But I speak about mystical madness, not about clinical madness.
- Q: You are in touch with many people who are survivors. Do you find that there's a coming to terms (inaudible).
- A: Yes. They remember their parents.
- Q: Now that the children have grown and they're retired, you find that they tend to think in terms of handing over a legacy.
- A: First of all, I mentioned, you know, even at the bonds dinner, I said I would like to have a fund to publish all of these books. I am serious. I'm going to speak about it.
- Q: Let me just ask you one final question. There were more that I would ask, but-.
- A: We'll continue another time. You'll come back.
- Q: I have to digest it. There are a couple of things that fly in the face of some of the things I was thinking about and I have to go through it. I have to mull it over. You know what I've been doing, and you took a look today at some of the things, is there anything that you think I ought to be focusing on, given the nature of my topic? Because now I am preparing to write, and now I know that I will discard certain things.
- A: My feeling is, that you should restore the dignity of these people, in their own minds. They have not spoken, but they were ashamed. How can a father who is the authority in the eye of a child, the child reads about him and is visualizing, that he is shamed and humiliated living in dirt. Rather we should say that what you have lived through makes you into princes of this world. And the world should look at you like that.

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