

“The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference. The opposite of beauty is not ugliness, it’s indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it’s indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference between life and death.”<sup>1</sup> These are words of Elie Wiesel, who we lost three months and two days ago. He was a journalist, author, Nobel laureate, and Holocaust survivor. For so many of us his words, his message had meant so much. Through his writing, his advocacy, and his teaching he touched many people personally, leaving an indelible mark on their lives, mine included. In looking back on his life and his work and trying to crystallize his message, one sees that, over and over again, Elie Wiesel returned to the theme of indifference.

Wiesel came to the world’s attention with the publication of *Night*, his first-person account of his experience in Auschwitz. The power of that book rests in the personal nature of the story. It was about a boy, his mother and sisters, and his father. Before *Night*, so much of what the world knew of the Shoah was from newsreel footage or photographs, which showed the scale and magnitude of the Nazis atrocities, but not the stories of the victims. Elie humanized them, reframing the world’s understanding of the number 6,000,000. No longer could we just think about the magnitude of 6 million people; he reminded us to think of a mother or a father, a sister or a brother, of one

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<sup>1</sup> US News and World Report, 27 October 1986.

person, remember them, and then repeat that task again and again and again, six million times. Each person, each life, matters, Wiesel reminded us, in keeping with our tradition's teaching that whoever destroys a life destroys the whole universe, but whoever saves a life saves the whole universe.

Elie Wiesel's message time and time again was to focus us, the reader, on the humanity of his characters, on the person him or herself. Through his storytelling, he arrived at the message for which he will be most notably remembered: that the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. Over the 70 years of his life following the end of World War II he strove to be a champion for the rights of oppressed peoples all over the world. In places where one group would denounce the humanity and the dignity of another, and where the world at large was blinded by its indifference, Wiesel encouraged the world to pay attention, to intervene, to validate the pain of the oppressed. He was an ardent Zionist and recognized the plight of the Palestinian people, while denouncing terrorism. Yet while so much of his genre was depressing, his was a voice of hope, inspiring us all to work for a better world. And he was comfortable reaching out to a variety of audiences to share his message; he sat with kings and presidents, rabbis and the Dalai Lama, even Oprah Winfrey, both in her studio and while visiting Auschwitz together.

He was an intellectual leader who spoke to the common person. The messages he shared with the world were simple and straightforward, but what made them so resonant was the eloquence and persistence with which he shared them. Elie Wiesel stayed “on message” throughout his life. As a journalist and then an author, he used the power of the written word to share that message with the world. So powerful, in fact, were his words, that in 1986 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It is curious, that a man whose primary contribution to the world was the written word, should be chosen for that prize. There is, after all, a Nobel Prize for Literature, to be awarded quote “*to the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction.*”<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that Elie Wiesel would be considered deserving of such an accolade. Yet the Nobel Foundation saw in Wiesel’s work an even greater impact than simply pointing the world in an ideal direction. He used his words to advocate for the good of humanity, to alert the world to the tragedies that were happening out of plain view, and to draw our attention to the need to engage with concerns around the world. He challenged us not to remain indifferent.

For me, the legacy of Elie Wiesel is personal. From the time I first read *Night* in eighth grade, I was intrigued by this man who could share such pain with the world, and as I

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from the Will of Alfred Nobel outlining the various prizes, retrieved from [www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/), accessed 29 September 2016.

learned from my teacher, Mrs. Spak, a man who strove to bring such good to the world.

My choice to study at Boston University as an undergrad was based in part on the opportunity to learn and study with him; he joined the faculty in 1976 and, despite his global personal agenda, taught classes open to undergraduates regularly. And so I found myself in the fall of 2004 in a class entitled *Literary Responses to Oppression*, taught by Professor Elie Wiesel. I have many indelible memories from that experience; the casual entrance he made on that first Monday afternoon into a room of 30 or so students. That he had a wonderfully pedestrian sense of humor, which surprised me only because from the age of 14 I thought of him as anything but pedestrian. I will never forget his brief diatribe against musical theater: Who sings, “I’m dying!” he asked rhetorically. And I’ll never forget the 30 minutes we spent alone together in his office after the semester, rows and rows and rows of books lining the shelves in all directions, but all he wanted to talk about was me; he wanted to know what motivated me to learn with him, and what I hoped to be when I grew up (I was 21 at the time). And as I told him I wanted to be a rabbi, he smiled and said, “If I can help, let me know.”

But the truly meaningful experience I had with him was in the classroom. It was also a little terrifying. The format for the class was that we were assigned one book each week, and he would lead a discussion about it. To help get the class started each week, students

were asked to volunteer to take a turn presenting the work to open the conversation.

As the teaching fellow was taking volunteers, I sheepishly raised my hand about halfway through. By the time he got to me there was only the last day of class' book left: *The Town Beyond the Wall*, by Elie Wiesel. So with my partner Rachel, there I was on that last day, presenting a book report on a book by Elie Wiesel, to a class taught by Elie Wiesel, with Elie Wiesel sitting right there. [MOTION AND MAKE FEARFUL/NERVOUS GRIMACE]. For the record, he complimented me on my presentation. Whew.

Learning with Professor Wiesel opened up my eyes. As a young man, all that I had in my memory was what the history books taught me. I was too young to really understand the Rwandan genocide as it was happening. I had never imagined what it would be like to live under medical quarantine for months at a time. I had never truly considered the vast depth of the indifference that most of Europe showed toward our fellow Jews during the Holocaust. Professor Wiesel taught me about that, challenged me to open my eyes to a world much more complex, and frankly more frightening, than I had ever dared to consider.

*The Town Beyond the Wall* tells the story of Michael, a Holocaust survivor who returns to his hometown in Hungary, across the newly formed Iron Curtain. He returned with a

specific goal in mind: confronting those neighbors of his who stood witness to the liquidation of his town, idly watching the Nazis round up his friends and family to transport them to the camps. Michael vividly shares with the reader the memory of standing in the town square as the Nazis were rounding up the Jewish community and peering through the windows of the houses across the street, and at one point locking eyes with a man. We can only imagine the terror and panic in Michael's eyes at that moment, but through the window all he saw was a blank stare of indifference.

Like all of the fellow residents of the town, that man watched the Nazis confine their Jewish neighbors, and did nothing. He observed acts of degradation, and said nothing. He witnessed the liquidation of the town without any reaction whatsoever. After surviving the horrors of the Shoah Michael returns and confronts that man whose face he saw in the window. “‘You hate me, don't you?’ the man asked. ‘No,’[he] said. ‘I don't hate you.’ A pause; then: ‘I feel contempt for you. That's worse. The man who inspires hatred is still human; but not the man who inspires contempt.’”<sup>3</sup>

What pains him so deeply is the wanton indifference that the Hungarians felt towards their Jewish neighbors. As the professor wrote: “To be indifferent - for whatever reason

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<sup>3</sup> *The Town Beyond the Wall*, 159.

- is to deny not only the validity of existence, but also its beauty. Betray, and you are a man; torture your neighbor, you're still a man. Evil is human, weakness is human; indifference is not.”<sup>4</sup>

The message against indifference is biblical. We are told not to stand idly by the blood of our neighbor, not to let our friend’s, or even our enemy’s cattle wander or topple without us responding to it. When Cain, standing over the body of his brother Abel, asked if he was his brother’s keeper, God’s implied answer was an unequivocal “Yes!” And while this message is thousands of years old, Elie Wiesel framed it in a way, in light of the global crisis of humanity that the Holocaust represents, so that those who previously had been unable to grasp it could recognize the true danger in indifference.

Wiesel was able to capitalize on his fame and influence to help tackle some of the world’s biggest problems: genocide, the pains of war, famine and hunger. After his passing, we can pick up his mantle of standing up against indifference and recognizing the humanity in those around us. Not being indifferent means doing something even if it is risky, even if its controversial. Not being indifferent means challenging yourself to see the world through the eyes of someone you know nothing about. Not being

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<sup>4</sup> *The Town Beyond the Wall*, p. 177.

indifferent may mean consciously detaching yourself from long held and sincerely valued beliefs in order to be a witness instead of a bystander, or even better, a participant.

Edmund Burke wrote that “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.” Let us make this new year 5777 the year in which we refuse to stand idly by, the year we refuse to be indifferent. Let’s be the a voice for those who are not being heard. The beauty of Elie Wiesel’s message about indifference was that it gives each of us the opportunity to have an impact on issues big or small. We may not be able to solve world hunger, but we can buy a guy a meal. We may not be able to save the lives of the millions of refugees fleeing from ISIS in Syria, but we can work with organizations like HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, who are working to support those in need. We may not be able to stop the threat of rising sea levels on our own, but we can work in our community to prepare ourselves for its potentially devastating effects.

I have in my office a piece of Jewish art with a well-know quotation from Rabbi Tarfon: “*Lo Alecha Ham'lacha ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorin l'hivatel mimena*. You are not obligated to complete the task, but nor are you free not to engage with it.”<sup>5</sup> We need not solve all

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<sup>5</sup> Mishnah Avot 2:21

The Legacy of Elie Wiesel  
Sermon for Rosh Hashanah 5777  
Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

of the world's problems, nor can we stand indifferent to their effects. As we enter into this first year after his life, let us let the words and teachings of Elie Wiesel ring out like the sounding of the shofar, waking us from our slumber and inspiring us to bring his messages of the goodness of life and the dignity of all to the world.

I wish you all a Shana Tova, a year of goodness and good work.