

Rabbi Sidney M. Helbraun
Temple Beth-El
Northbrook Illinois
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Rosh Hashanah Day – Elie Wiesel – The Power of Stories

Earlier this year, on July 2nd, an 88-year-old man took his final breath. That he would live beyond the age of 15, when his family, along with the rest of the Jews in the town Sighet, Hungary were rounded up by the Nazis, was by no means assured. But this young man survived.

Although he will always be remembered for his writing on the Holocaust, most certainly for the personal account he shared in his book Night, rather being defined by the Holocaust, one could say that he lived in opposition to it. For rather than leaving its mark on him, the Holocaust became the tool Elie Wiesel used to leave his imprint on the world.

Slowly but surely, in the years after liberation, Wiesel rose from the ashes, to take on the mantle of a premiere moral authority of our age. Wiesel raised his voice: championing the rights of Jews in the Soviet Union, Ethiopia and Israel; campaigning against oppression in South Africa and Nicaragua; calling for recognition of the Turkish genocide against the Armenians; and crying out for the nations of the world to intervene against genocides in Bosnia and Sudan.

Wiesel used his moral authority to call out Presidents and Popes for their seeming indifference to humanity's plight. And as the decades passed, his constant, unwavering voice earned him the respect and admiration of the world. So much so, that when he received the Noble Peace Prize in 1986, he was acclaimed as a "messenger to mankind... delivering a message of peace, atonement and dignity" to the world.

This summer I decided to read some of Wiesel's writing. Rather than a book on the Holocaust, I selected a slim volume called Souls on Fire, which recounts the lives of the great Hasidic masters who Wiesel learned about on his grandfather's knee. As I read these stories, I found they answered a question I didn't know I had.

By his nature, Wiesel was a small, quiet man; not loud, brash or flamboyant; not one who appeared to seek after fame. But if this was so, then where had his powerful, insistent voice come from? Where did his call to protect the downtrodden, defend the

poor, care for the helpless; his inability to let others turn a blind eye to suffering; from where did this come?

Perhaps it was always within him, a spark that was kindled by the flames. But this did not appear to be his nature. To me, it seemed more likely that Wiesel's strength came from God, for he spoke with the voice of a prophet. Yet time and again, he claimed to be agnostic. But in the pages of Souls on Fire I uncovered the source of his passion. He inherited it from his ancestors, from his Avot; specifically, from the stories he was told by his grandfather.

In his introduction Wiesel writes: "My father, an enlightened spirit, believed in man. My grandfather, a fervent Hasid, believed in God. The one taught me to speak, the other to sing."

The depth of Wiesel's love for his father is legendary. It was because of this love, his need to look after him in the camp, that Wiesel survived. But it doesn't seem possible that Wiesel inherited his voice from a father who believed in the goodness of man. Not after the Holocaust.

It's far more likely that Wiesel's passion arose from the Hasidic tales told by his grandfather, which explored, not only the Rebbe's faith in God, but also the brokenness of man. Rather than enlightened, the Hasidic Rebbe saw humanity as it is; he saw the great, deep flaws and imperfections of our species. And if this was the case during their lifetime, before the Holocaust, then how much the more so would this worldview have resonated with Wiesel in its aftermath.

Yes, it was the stories told by Dodye Feig, Wiesel's grandfather, that gave him the ability to "sing"; to call out for justice and righteousness, and speak with the voice of a prophet, even when he no longer believed in God. Memories from his childhood bound Wiesel to the world of the Hassidic masters who spent their lives in God's courtyard. And the stories he recorded in this book became the source he drew from whenever his heart needed to sing.

For a few moments I want to share some of these anecdotes and stories with you. Not only do they open a window of understanding into an extraordinary soul, not only do they speak to the essence of this High Holiday season, they also pose an essential challenge for us as Jews. Listen as I share some of the "Jewish music" that Wiesel's grandfather implanted in his soul.

I'll begin with a teaching from the Baal Shem Tov about the nature of God. He said:

“Sometimes God seems very removed from man – why? It is the father’s duty to teach his son to walk. To accomplish this, he moves forward and backward without warning, at the risk of letting the child stumble and fall.” (p. 71) According to the Baal Shem, rather than a judge sitting upon a throne, God is a parent who allows his children to stumble and fall, because that’s the only way that we will ever learn to walk on our own. Our missteps, our pain, these are not signs of God’s absence. Rather, like a parent, God feels our pain and cries with us. For a parent, more important than avoiding pain, is the need to teach our children to walk on their own. God is not absent from our lives. God is a present partner who moves back and forth, as if in a dance. And it is this active relationship, a give and take between Parent and child, which lies at the heart of these next two stories.

The first, a conversation between two Rebbes: “Do you know who rescinded the celestial decree that would have unleashed catastrophe upon our people?” the Baal Shem asked Rebbe Nachman. “I’ll tell you. Neither I, nor you, nor the sages, nor the great spiritual leaders. Our litanies, our fasting were all in vain. We were saved by a woman, a woman of our people. This is how it happened: She came to the synagogue, tears running down her face, and addressed the Almighty: ‘Master of the Universe, are You or are You not our Father? Why won’t You listen to Your children imploring You? You see, I am a mother. Children I have plenty of: five. And every time they shed a tear it breaks my heart. But You, Father, You have so many more. Every person is Your child, and every one of them is weeping and weeping. Even if Your heart is made of stone, how can You remain indifferent?’ And, the Baal Shem concluded, ‘God decided she was right.’” (p. 42)

The second story: “During Rosh Hashanah services, it was the Grandfather of Shpole’s custom to retire to his room for an hour or two before the blowing of the shofar. Why? To speak to God in a language which is not that of prayer books: ‘Don’t think of man’s sins, I beg of You. Think rather of his good deeds. They are fewer, I agree. But You must admit, they are more precious. Believe me, it isn’t easy to be good in this world. And if I didn’t see with my own two eyes that man, in spite of all obstacles, is capable of kindness, I would not believe it. And so I ask of You: don’t be harsh with Your children; rare as it may be, it is their kindness that should surprise You.’” (p. 45)

In both of these stories there is an acknowledgement that each of us is flawed, that each of us has failed, that each of us, in our own way, is broken. Yet despite it all, we are still God’s children. And when children stand before their parents and do the right thing, when we speak with honesty and integrity, when we open our hearts and admit our shortcomings, a loving Parent forgives our trespasses.

Not only this, but that moment when we reveal ourselves holds hidden potential. Wiesel writes: "One tear, one prayer can change the course of events; one fragment of melody can contain all the joy in the world, and by letting it go free, (it can) influence fate." (p. 24) When we stand in our brokenness before God, we draw forth a spirit of compassion and mercy that has the potential to bring blessings to everyone who seeks God out. One need not be a saint to stand before God, nor a rabbi. The beggar, liar and thief possess every bit of capacity to transform, not only themselves, but to change the fate of the world. There is no voice, no person who cannot stand before the King of Kings. God will listen to all who cry out.

Now tell me, if Wiesel learned as a child that even the lowliest of people can sit in God's courtyard, can there be a doubt that this is where the strength of his voice was born, a voice which called out to Presidents, despots and kings? And if he learned that the power of one broken heart can change the fate of others, is there a question that Wiesel would use his broken heart to try to bring change to the world.

Souls on Fire contains so many beautiful stories; stories about how we treat one another, how to change ourselves, stories about taking responsibility for our actions and for seeing God's hidden hand in every situation. But there is just one more story I want to share with you now, a famous tale about the greatest Hasidic Rebbes.

"It was told that when the Baal Shem Tov, saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished, the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Maggid of Mezritch, had occasion for the same reason to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." Again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, "I do not know how to light the fire. I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient, and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God, "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

I end with this story for two reasons, first because I believe that in the life of Elie Wiesel we can see the transformative power of both the stories we hear and the stories we tell. For Wiesel, the stories he heard on his grandfather's knee helped to shape his engagement with the world. While God may have been absent, the Jewish world of his ancestors, and the faith they exhibited, never failed him. His life's work sprang out from their teachings. His strength of character, his essential humanity was embedded in his soul from the community in which he was raised, the Torah which he studied, and the stories that were a part of his life. Wiesel's life work, not to see the brokenness of man, the brokenness of the world, and give up hope at the immensity of the task. But rather to be motivated by the potential that lies within that brokenness.

According to the Rebbes, none of us is condemned to our fate. There is a new path that we can follow. And Wiesel became the quiet, urgent voice that would help us to find it. Who was he to have the chutzpah to take on this role? Surely he must have thought, am I no more worthy than the beggar, the liar and the thief? If they possess the right to stand before God, than I have the obligation to stand before men. Yes, the stories Wiesel heard on his grandfather's knee planted roots in his soul. The stories were sufficient.

But I told this last story for a second reason, which ties to its narrative arc. There is a troubling aspect to this story, for it suggests that in each successive generation there is a diminishing attachment to the source of our strength. In the beginning there was a place, a fire and a prayer. Then there was just a place and a prayer. And in the end, there was not even a place, just a story. And the story was sufficient.

But what about for us? Do we still have the stories? When our children sit on their grandparent's knee are they taught of our faith and our miracles, are they told of our morals and virtues? Have we kindled a Jewish flame in their soul, rooted in their family, ethics and tradition?

Friends, it's not too late. It's not too late for us to build up, to strengthen ourselves and our community. It's not too late for us to learn. It's not too late for us to share. It's not too late for us to connect with the traditions and values that have sustained our people across the seas of time. It is not a journey of pain, my friends. It is an affirming, joyful path. And I hope in the year to come, you'll take it with me.

I'll give Elie Wiesel the final word. Paraphrasing the Baal Shem Tov he wrote: "Know that eternity is present in every moment; that every table may become an altar and every man or woman a high priest. Know that there is more than one path leading to God, but that the surest goes through joy and not through tears. Know that God does not like

suffering and sadness, and least of all, those that you deliberately inflict upon yourself. God is not that complicated; God is not jealous of your happiness nor of the kindness you show to others. On the contrary: the road to God goes through man. The sleeping child, the mother caressing her, the old man listening to the rustling of the leaves: God is close to each of them, in each of them God is present.” (p. 206)

“My father, an enlightened spirit, believed in man. My grandfather, a fervent Hasid, believed in God. The one taught me to speak, the other to sing. Both loved stories. And when I tell mine, I hear their voices. Whispering from beyond the silenced storm, they are what links the survivor to their memory.”

May this be a year of finding God, of nurturing the Jewish spirit within ourselves and sharing it with the generations to come. May this be a year of telling stories. Amen