

## Third Place Essay wins \$900

### My Jewish Hero - Elie Wiesel – by Royce Zeisler

The heroes we choose reveal aspects about the self. In the Ubben lecture, Elie Wiesel observes that, when asked to explain their acts of heroism, righteous gentiles reject the label of hero.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, Wiesel marvels, “they did not even understand that they were heroes.” Developing his theme, Wiesel used the example of a Berliner who received acknowledgment from Yad Vashem as a righteous gentile. When she was honored, the woman was surrounded by a crowd of admirers asking why: “Why did you do it? Why did you risk your life?” Finally, after repeated questioning, she straightened and answered, “you want to know why I did it, I’ll tell you why: because of self respect.” Citing this example, Wiesel emphasizes that it is often self-respect that motivates acts of great courage.

What is a Hero? What is a Jewish Hero? What is a personal Hero? Grappling with these questions lead to a deeper understanding of myself and to choosing Elie Wiesel as my Jewish hero. The cultural theorist Joseph Campbell defines the mythological hero in this way:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.<sup>2</sup>

Elie Wiesel would not claim to be a traditional hero. He did not venture forth, instead the world forced itself upon him. Similarly, he would not claim to have won any decisive victories or to have lived through any grand adventures. The Holocaust was a

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<sup>1</sup> Wiesel, Elie "Building a Moral Society," Ubben Lecture Series, September 21, 1989. University of DePauw, 28 Jan. 2007 < <http://www.depauw.edu/news/index.asp?id=17914>>.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell, Joseph. The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Pantheon Books. Princeton University Press 1972) 30.

chronicle of humiliation, pain and suffering. Those who survived were not made into heroes because the Holocaust did not create it only destroyed.

Importantly the holocaust is only one part of Wiesel's life. Another portion begins with the defeat of the Nazi's and the liberation of prisoner A 7713 - a starving 17 year old Jew from a murdered family who was once named Elie Wiesel. When the survivors left the abyss of the Concentration camp, they were left with nothing. But somehow the ones who could go forward were able to build new lives. It was in this new life that Wiesel's heroism was created because by renewing his human life Wiesel had to set out on a journey:

Walking among the dead, one wondered if one was still alive. And yet real despair only seized us later. Afterwards. As we emerged from the nightmare and began to search for meaning.<sup>3</sup>

Wiesel left the pain, humiliation and death of the past behind him and ventured into the future but in order to do this he had to struggle with the forces of meaning and memory. The survivors of the Holocaust were confronted by an absurd world; their great victory was to continue living as humans by rebuilding their lives over. This is what Wiesel insists on when stating, "In a world of absurdity we must invent reason, we must create beauty out of nothingness."<sup>4</sup> There is heroism in moving forward as a human and no longer dwelling in darkness. Wiesel, like the righteous gentiles, insists that his actions were those of an ordinary human being. This is true; his actions are purely human, no more or less, but in an inhuman world human actions are heroic.

When the world discovered the atrocities, many wanted to understand what happened. How? Why? To who? By whom? While many survivors were reluctant to

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<sup>3</sup> Wiesel, Elie "Hope, Despair and Memory" The Nobel Peace Prize 1986, 28 December, 2007. <[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-lecture.html)>

<sup>4</sup> As reported in Friedman, Maurice. Abraham Joshua Heschel and Elie Wiesel: You Are My Witnesses. (Toronto: Collins Publishers, 1987) 248.

speaking, some did come forward to tell their story. There was a belief among those testifying that "if we can make ourselves heard man will change."<sup>5</sup> Wiesel, however, decided not to speak of his experiences in the death camps. How could anyone explain indescribable horror? How can anyone tell six million unfinished tales? Upon arriving in Paris, he threw himself into his studies. He tried to make the Holocaust part of the past. The world moved forward and soon new genocides took place and new atrocities were threatened. Israel was left to defend itself and the cold war threatened another kind of total holocaust. The promise never again began to sound empty. Survivors could not help but ask if they had wasted their time in testifying. Perhaps it was more appropriate to be quiet, after all what had their testimony change?

A decade passed before Wiesel decided that he could no longer remain silent. It was no longer sufficient to go about one's daily life because there was a new evil. While at first the courage to be silent and remember life was heroic after a decade the courage to speak up and remember the past also became necessary. Wiesel began to understand that it is impossible to explain the unexplainable but to not even try would be to give up on the living. In order to reaffirm his and the world's humanity Wiesel broke his silence with his autobiographical book, *Night*, and wrote the haunting line "I was the accuser and God the accused."<sup>6</sup>

Wiesel came to believe that acknowledging and struggling to convey the Holocaust in a meaningful way was a confirmation of humanity. The Holocaust is a moment of radical deconstruction. It was in that "Kingdom of Night" that humanity regressed into the inhuman and everything - identity, morality, culture, friendship, family,

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<sup>5</sup> Wiesel, Elie, *One Generation After*. (New York: Random House, 1965) 8.

<sup>6</sup> Wiesel, Elie, *Night*. (New York: Avon Books, 1960) 101.

freedom - was destroyed. Wiesel and the world emerged from this destruction but it is forever a part of us. "You can get out of Auschwitz, but Auschwitz can never get out of you."<sup>7</sup> There is no denying the Holocaust, it exists as an inhuman act carried out by humans, a moment where mankind betrayed itself. There were many reasons for one man not to risk speaking - what if people refused to listen? What if the world does not change? However these doubts are hollow because testifying is first and foremost an act of self-respect. It is the act of acknowledging the truth within yourself and within the world. Yes, the future is uncertain and meaning may not exist, but if the future is to have any chance it must be built on the truth within every person's own soul.

Wiesel has argued that to be Jewish is to have the courage to build upon the ruins of what has been destroyed. I agree with him and by examining his example I would like to answer the earlier question: What is a Jewish hero? It is the person who has the courage to be silent and the courage to break the silence and the courage to ask questions when there may be no answers. It is someone with the courage to tell an unfinished tale, thereby, turning its very incompleteness into the ending of a story and the beginning of another.

Wiesel and the righteous gentiles refuse to be called heroes because the traditional hero has some superhuman attribute which places him or her apart from humanity. For these modern heroes this separation is wrong. They insist that their humanity defines them. The cult of the hero brings with it aggrandizement, distortion and pretense. The traditional hero role has no place in Wiesel's philosophy because he acts purely to bring himself closer to his fellow man. Heroic acts unite and connect they do not create others.

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<sup>7</sup> As reported by Aarvik, Egil. "Presentation Speech," The Nobel Peace Prize 1986, 28 December, 2007. <[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/presentation-speech.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/presentation-speech.html)>

Wiesel's writing is guided by his uncompromising self-respect. In Wiesel's office hangs a picture of his childhood home in Hungary. It hangs so that he can be true to himself; both who he was and who he is. In the novel, *The Gates Of The Forest*, the protagonist of the story is a young Jew named Gavriel who changes his name to the Christianized Gregor. As the novel develops the tension and confusion within Gregor grows. It is only when he accepts his true name, his true identity, that he is able to say Kaddish for the dead and start his own life. It is only when Gregor becomes true to himself, that he finally understands that the messiah is not one man, "he's all men."<sup>8</sup>

I believe that we choose our personal heroes as an affirmation of the hero within ourselves. Wiesel's writing is personal and by sharing his intense inner reflections he discloses our common humanity. By sharing his pain and happiness, hopes and fears, he confirms the value in each and every one of us. He confirms the hero in us and in himself. Both in his writing and life, Weisel has spoken the uncompromising message of self-respect and love. He is true to himself and thus he is able to truly give to his reader the gift of himself. It is a gift that we must all accept because it is the gift of humanity, both his and ours, and it is the gift of heroism, both his and ours.

Ultimately, it is the future that we all must face; however, we do not face it alone. We move forward as a community of Jews, of Canadians, of humans and of hope. At the beginning of the essay I wrote that the heroes we choose reveal something about ourselves. As a growing adult I begin to take my place in the world that is unfortunately also home to immorality. Sadly, in the face of evil it is far too easy to hide behind indifference and solitude. By choosing Elie Wiesel as my hero, I am revealing my respect for myself and for my fellow man. I am confirming that, "I believe in God - in spite of

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<sup>8</sup> Wiesel, Elie, *The Gates of the Forest*. (New York: Avon Books, 1967) 223.

God! I believe in Mankind - in spite of Mankind! I believe in the Future - in spite of the Past!”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>As reported by Aarvik, Egil. "Presentation Speech," The Nobel Peace Prize 1986, 28 December, 2007. <[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/presentation-speech.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/presentation-speech.html)>