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Losing God in the *Night*

The existence of God: an argument that grows with every war, every natural disaster, every scientific study. A world without God is unimaginable to some, and, for others, having no God is the only plausible answer. People are continually going back and forth between the two, changing their minds, never quite sure where they stand. In *Night*, Elie Wiesel shows how his core beliefs are threatened as a fifteen-year-old boy. He claims, “My eyes were open and I was alone--terribly alone in a world without God and without man. Without love or mercy” (Wiesel 50). Even though he says he lost his faith, there is evidence to show he never really lost it. When he does not see a loving, trusting God acting on behalf of the Jews, his belief is broken. However, despite what he wants to believe, God is still there throughout the memoir. Wiesel does not lose his faith in God, even though he believes and wants it to be so.

Wiesel claims he does not believe in God because he sees no justice nor mercy during the Holocaust. He remembers Akiba Drummer, who once had strong religious convictions, saying:

God is no longer with us . . . One has no right to say things like that. I know . . . But what can I do? I’m not a sage, one of the elect, nor a saint. I’m just an ordinary creature of flesh and blood. I’ve got eyes, too, and I can see what they’re doing here. Where is the divine Mercy? Where is God? How can I believe, how could anyone believe, in this merciful God? (Wiesel 56)

Like Drummer, Wiesel does not understand where God is during the Holocaust or why He is

allowing so many people to suffer at the hands of cruel SS officers and kapos. Many Jews stay strong and push themselves forward when all they have left to believe in is God, but when they feel they can no longer trust Him or count on Him, their drive for life disintegrates. For Wiesel, the opposite seems to occur. He does not give up altogether when he gives up on God. He loses God early on in his experience and “struggled with a kind of hatred, not toward the screaming guards but at a silent God” (Willis 172). It is his father, who miraculously never truly gets separated from him, that drives him to survive. He lives, if only to see that his father will not give up and die. He cannot go on believing in a God he has been taught should love and protect him. He cannot continue believing in this Being when he only has bits of bread and soup to eat, when he is sent to work under evil masters, or when he has to prove himself strong and capable enough to pass selections. Alan L. Berger tells us in his review that the presence of Wiesel’s father is the only way he makes it through Auschwitz (285). He does not look to God, he looks to someone he can see, someone he knows and cares for, someone that he is confident would help him if circumstances permitted.

In an interview conducted by Robert Franciosi and Brian Shaffer, Wiesel states, “I think that there is something in human beings that rejects the idea of so much evil. We don’t want to know that people can wield such power, and that so many can be bystanders, or that the leaders of so many people can be so indifferent” (294). Wiesel thinks the same thing of God at age fifteen. Why is He a bystander here? How can He let so much evil go unstopped, unpunished? The only conclusion Wiesel is able to draw, then, is that there can be no God, for God would not let such horrible things happen to so many people. Even as a fellow prisoner asks where God can be during the hanging of an angelic child, “I [Wiesel] heard a voice within me answer him:

‘Where is He? Here He is--He is hanging here on this gallows’” (48). The image of this child is a perfect comparison to Wiesel’s opinion of God. God must be either dead or nonexistent. At least the God Wiesel had grown to love must be, because this is not what he would expect God to allow. Surely God would not suffer innocent children to die. Surely He would show every accused person mercy when such a dark shadow curled over them, waiting to complete their genocide. Berger notes in his review, “It is not God’s existence that he questions. Rather, it is the absence of divine justice that sorely vexes Wiesel” (287), which suggests Wiesel could not deny God as his life continued on after the Holocaust. However, he is still searching for an explanation of God’s silence and so-called justice.

Of course, all Jews placed in concentration camps did not experience the same religious digression as Wiesel. In a conversation with one of his teachers, Lubavitcher Rebbe, “Wiesel asks the Rebbe how he can believe in God after Auschwitz. The Rebbe . . . asks Wiesel how can he not believe in God after Auschwitz” (Berger 291). Hardship and trials can either break a man or bring him closer to God, and Wiesel and the Rebbe represent these two points. Perhaps their experiences with Auschwitz are very different, but the more likely explanation is that their difference in personality, and how well each knows God, leads them to cope with the concentration camps in completely different ways. Where one man finds God, another can easily lose Him. It is not God that changes, but rather it is the individual morphing himself and the relationship he has with God.

Not only does Wiesel struggle with the justice and mercy of the Holocaust, but his religious tradition is further stretched because the Nazis torture and disgrace the “chosen people”--threatening their Jewish identity. Wiesel shares his frustration with this situation when

he cries, “Why, but why should I bless Him? In every fiber I rebelled . . . How could I say to Him . . . ‘Praised be Thy Holy Name, Thou Who hast chosen us to be butchered on Thine altar?’” (Wiesel 49). Honestly, his point is valid, and many other prisoners have had this thought. As Jews, they are supposed to obtain God’s kingdom, and they see themselves as God’s favorite. God fights their fights for them, and he brings them to inhabit the best lands. After studying so much of this in the Talmud, it is only natural to wonder why God is not fighting the Nazis for them, why God is letting his “chosen people” be beaten, overworked, raped, and murdered.

Additionally, David Patterson, in his writing on Jewish memory and the Holocaust, shares Wieslaw Kielar’s memory of “the belt buckles of the murderers that read ‘God with us,’ signifying [Sara] Zyskind’s fear that perhaps God has come to hate the Jews” (202). Certainly it would be a shock, believing that God will be there to strike down their enemy, to see those enemies with a wardrobe proclaiming God as their ally. The very God they trust and obey instead punishing them. They would search themselves, confused to be suddenly on the left hand of God. They ask themselves if there is any validity in their enemies’ claiming God as their supporter. Most shocking to Wiesel is the realization that God helps not only the Jews triumph but people all over the world triumph, even people with a sudden hatred for Jews. In Wiesel’s memoir, his neighbor while in the hospital states, “I’ve got more faith in Hitler than in anyone else. He’s the only one who’s kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people” (59). Obviously, from this assertion, there are some who believe like Wiesel. In their eyes, God has given up on them, and He is not keeping the promises He made with them. It is horrible to hear this man admit that it is easier to count on Hitler’s cruel treatment than a loving God. The Holocaust is a lose-lose situation for those with this sentiment. They begin with nothing good to depend on, simply

bracing themselves for Hitler's next order.

From all this, Wiesel comes to another conclusion, that God is in and a part of everything. Wiesel relates, "God is one; He is everywhere. And if He is everywhere, then He is in evil and injustice too . . . God abides not only in the victim but in the executioner as well" (Patterson 201). So God must have either turned against the Jews, or they are only now realizing that God is in every part of the world. He is inside the soul of every man. Wiesel's statement then suggests that people are God's pawns. This does not mean that He forces them to be righteous or unrighteous, because He does not make their choices for them; rather, it means that God decides who He will help gain power over another. He can choose to assist the righteous, or, what comes as a jarring thought, He can choose to assist the wicked.

To this David Patterson adds Emil Fackenheim's thought, "While certain thinkers have found some exhilaration in the idea that God is dead or absent, 'there is no exhilaration but only terror in a God present still--but become an enemy'" (201). This causes one to wonder whether it is better to believe in a God that can suddenly become the enemy, rather than choosing to disregard the existence of God completely. If the foremost, one must confront a life where the greatest power of all is working against them. If the latter, one must face what he thinks is a freer life but is really one without the companionship of a higher being, and ultimately one alone until death and even beyond it. Wiesel's choice between the two is clear when he states, "Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever . . . Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust" (Wiesel 25-26). He says this after witnessing the cremation of a truck load of children, and it affects him deeply. Because of this display, he chooses the lone road, a road without God, because he cannot accept a God

which works against the righteous and the innocent. The death of God is easier to deal with than the betrayal of God.

What Wiesel fails to understand is that horrible things have happened before the Holocaust, even to children and Jews, and they most likely will happen after it as well. Dennis Diamond, in his work on Elie Wiesel, writes, “The Kingdom had been there even before it enveloped its victims with its smokestacks and gas chambers and furnaces, its whips, disease and torment. It always was a threat and it still is. It always was a vision, too unimaginable to describe or believe, and it remains unimaginable” (231). Obviously there is evil in the world that tries to demolish everything that it can; however, people have a tendency to disconnect themselves from these scenarios, especially if they are extreme in any way. They reason that these scenarios will never become reality for them. Sadly, when these situations crash down on them, people are not prepared to stand strong. Their disbelief remains intact, and they refuse to alter their former opinions and ideas. They are figuratively buried from the impact of so much at once.

In contrast to the negative things Wiesel focused on during the Holocaust, there is much in his memoir to suggest that God is there and does not desert the Jews in their despair. A simple way to recognize this is through Wiesel’s inclusion of nature. Benj Mahle writes:

There are subtle suggestions that at least a flicker of faith remains. For as he details the horrors of being perpetrated by men, he consistently contrasts these with benign, even appealing images of nature. Since we frequently perceive nature as a reflection of God, is it not possible to interpret these images as evidence of God’s concern? (83)

Yes, Wiesel feels that God has deserted him and everyone else confined by the Nazis’

concentration camps. This is because he is expecting relief from God to come in the form he chooses. He does not look for the little mercies that God gives. They are usually not the most noticeable things in everyday life, but they are there to lift spirits and give hope in small ways. Wiesel himself shares an everyday occurrence comparable to this mind set. People are always watching something on television, letting it be their teacher on a subject for an hour or two at a time. And at the end of that two hour block of time, they think they are an expert on that subject. Or at least they believe themselves well-informed enough to play the part of the expert on that particular subject if ever it comes up in conversation. (Franciosi 293). But, in all honesty, in such a short amount of time, with no real teachers present to guide them, how can they expect to know everything there is to know? How can they prove that they were taught the most important points on the subject? They have not proved themselves capable of understanding the information, nor proved themselves deserving to receive all of it.

It is the same with God, for He does not tell man the particulars of His plans for things which do not pertain to him, let alone those that do relate to mankind. So Wiesel overlooked some of the precious encouragements God provides during the Holocaust because he is so caught up in the main fray of the conflict.

Another small way that Wiesel shows he has not completely forgotten his God is his continued observation of religious acts, even as he tells himself God is not there. The most prominent example of this from his memoir, states, "And, in spite of myself, a prayer rose in my heart, to that God in whom I no longer believed" (67). Others may claim that he does this because it is habitual. Until this time, he has been studying and praying, wanting to learn more of God and His mysteries. However, his heart and mind are now at a disagreement. A heart and

mind in agreement over a question or statement will not act against what they have decided. If Wiesel truly does not believe in God, in both heart and mind, then he would not pray to Him in earnest.

David Patterson also reports that “Wiesel has said that even in our rebellion we declare our need for God’s support” (205). This is exactly where Wiesel is. He is trying to rebel against God because he cannot understand Him. Yet, his prayers demonstrate the respect he still has for God. Unknowingly, almost unwillingly, he continues to believe in God because he has experienced God’s hand in his life and cannot wholly deny it.

In conjunction with Wiesel’s rebellious support, he also recognizes a withdrawal of God’s presence. He tells himself, “There was no longer any reason why I should fast. I no longer accepted God’s silence . . . In the depths of my heart, I felt a great void” (51). Only when Wiesel chooses not to accept God does he feel this void. God has always been in his heart previous to the Holocaust because he continuously strove to learn of him and increase his faith. Many people experience a similar void with a variety of things. For instance, a husband (or wife) always has a ring on his finger. Seldom does he take it off, and, when he does, he usually remembers to replace it. However, on occasion he will forget to put it back on. Maybe for a short while it will go unnoticed, but he soon notices the empty space around his ring finger. The ring is not there, but he is even more sure of its existence for this very reason. God is something Wiesel grew accustomed to. Only when he rejects God does he receive the greatest confirmation of His existence.

Robert J. Willis asks, “Why the void? If there truly were for him no valid reasons for fasting, then only the habitual pattern identified with his sense of himself was missing. That is

most uncomfortable, but it is not guilt” (173). To return to our ring comparison, if the ring is a simple thing with no great significance, it will not bring near the amount of worry that a spouse feels if that ring is his wedding ring. Of course, a wedding ring is a poor counterpart of God, but knowing His importance to outnumber a wedding ring’s a hundredfold, it is only natural for Wiesel to experience guilt when this void appears.

As well, there is only so much that Wiesel could include and wanted to include in his memoir of the Holocaust. Colin Davis, of Oxford University, says, “Wiesel’s ‘secrets’ are so far beyond words in some cases . . . that they are unknowable even to their keepers” (Ivers 152). It is quite possible that he does not express even half the experience as well and as in depth as he would have hoped. Indeed, Davis also suggests that Wiesel has not included some memories because he does not remember them or recognize them for what they are.

Wiesel says his experiences in the Holocaust reveal God as a different being than he had believed in formerly, and this is surely something to shake faith. Wiesel has reason to question God’s existence because his understanding of God is being questioned. He needs to adjust the knowledge he began with to complement the new, but he has chosen a lifetime of this, stating, “Man is defined by what troubles him, not by what reassures him” (Evans 323). And so Wiesel continues to search the things which trouble him, helping him grow in faith and understanding. He also states, “It would be terrible if only my view were correct . . . we must listen to more than one and therefore their view is theirs and my view is mine” (Franciosi 295). No one sees things from the same point-of-view as another, and no one questions God in the same way. But it is true that man can, and frequently does, try to force himself into an opinion he does not believe because what he does believe does not affect him the way he would hope.

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