I

Encountering the Holocaust

Elie Wiesel

Elie (Eliezar) Wiesel was born in 1928 in Sighet, Romania/Hungary. Along with his family, he was deported to Auschwitz in 1944 where he lost his mother and sister. Wiesel and his father were forced to march to Buchenwald where his father died months before the camp was liberated. After the war, Wiesel lived in France and Israel, before settling permanently in the United States. It was at this time that he wrote his autobiographical Night, *which in many ways established the Holocaust as a formative event in the twentieth century.* Wiesel *is the Andrew Mellon Professor of Humanities at Boston University and founder of the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity. He served as chairman for the Presidential Commission on the Holocaust which initiated the building of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. In 1986 Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for bringing to the world's attention the importance of the Holocaust and for speaking out against violence, repression, and discrimination.*

On First Hearing the Holocaust Named

I first encountered Elie Wiesel in 1971 in the classroom of Professor Richard Rubenstein. I arrived at my university in Florida the previous year and, for quite different reasons, so had Rubenstein. I went to Tallahassee for financial reasons, and to get away from what I had known growing up. I needed to explore a new geographic and intellectual landscape. But moving from a Jewish neighborhood to the racially segregated Protestant enclave in Tallahassee in 1970 was like entering a different world.

Rubenstein arrived at Florida State having just published his groundbreaking and controversial book, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*. This book gained notoriety, not all of it positive. Indeed, as *After Auschwitz* gained a wider readership, Rubenstein was on the run. Traveling from a Hillel appointment at a university in the Northeastern U.S. where Jews abounded, Rubenstein landed in Tallahassee, part of the deep South, where Jews were few in number.[1]

In Tallahassee, Rubenstein was far from the mainstream of American Jewish life. In those days the city center was dominated by established Protestant churches. As in most cities in the deep South, the color divide was noticeable. One of the first bus boycotts in the South was held in Tallahassee, and those in Black leadership positions had been co-workers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Though the Civil Rights movement had moved Tallahassee toward integration, the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow were very much alive.

Today there are thousands of Jews at the university and Tallahassee is much more cosmopolitan. Back then there were less than a hundred Jews at the university, and probably not many more in the city itself. Yet the university was on the move, with one of the most interesting religious studies departments in the nation, and had asked Rubenstein to join their faculty.

During the years I studied with him, Rubenstein named the mass destruction of Europe's Jews during the Nazi period as the *Holocaust* (or in Hebrew, *Shoah*). Though years had passed since the end of World War II, for the most part the Holocaust had remained unnamed. In my childhood, we knew that something terrible had happened to the Jews of Europe—I had Hebrew School teachers in the 1950s who had arrived in America only some years earlier—but could a catastrophe of such magnitude be named?

World War II had claimed so many lives, and many of my friend's fathers had served in the war. Having been part of the American occupying forces in Germany as the war came to a close, for the rest of his life my father harbored deep suspicions about Germany. As many Jews of his generation, he felt that Germany was prone to militarism and, when given the chance, would remilitarize and embark on still more wars of conquest. Yet, even as we flipped through my father's army scrapbook and listened to his commentary on where he had been and what he had done, the emphasis was on World War II—not on the particular suffering of Jews.

Naming the Holocaust was just beginning to occur during my teenage years, and Rubenstein was on the cutting edge of that naming. It was during one of Rubenstein's lectures that I heard the term *Holocaust* for the first time. At that moment a deep darkness within me surfaced. I was stunned and somehow energized, but I had no idea where it would lead. His naming of the Holocaust made immediate sense to me, and seemed to have significance beyond

me. Rubenstein named the Holocaust as a formative experience for the Jewish people, that though past, was part of the Jewish future.

Rubenstein became my model of a professor who was willing to state the issues on his mind without regard for the personal consequences. Nothing of importance seemed off-limits. He lectured on various themes and personalities, from Max Weber's view of the spirit of capitalism and the Protestant ethic to the existential search of Saint Paul. Not only was his naming of the Holocaust controversial, he also named Paul, seen historically as the great divider of Jews and Christians, as his brother. Both had come to the end of normative Judaism as a religion that could sustain and nourish them.

In naming the Holocaust, Rubenstein saw the end of the Judaism he had inherited and known. This compounded his negative credentials with the Jewish establishment, even as his boldness endeared him to many of his students. I was fascinated by his wide-ranging intellect and his "take no prisoners" approach to the intellectual life.

Rubenstein was prickly and distant, some would say arrogant. Though he allowed everyone their say in class, he announced his conclusions with authority. Even as a freshman I saw that Rubenstein was embattled. In asides during his lectures other prominent names in Jewish life were discussed and they all, even in Rubenstein's accounting, seemed opposed to his views. There I first glimpsed a battle on the Jewish front, perhaps even a civil war, over thoughts Rubenstein was articulating. Little did I know that years later I would be drawn into a similar struggle.

Over the years, I maintained contact with Rubenstein and, though he has mellowed to some extent, he remains as he was then—defiant. Over the years he has negotiated Jewish life, on the one hand being exiled from the Jewish community and, on the other, making peace with it. Time has smoothed the rough edges of his thought and the subversive challenges he posed seem less important now than his overall contribution to Jewish life in naming the Holocaust. As an increasingly conservative political thinker and a strong supporter of the state of Israel, the Jewish community values his holding the line on Israel over his controversial past. It seems that the Jewish community forgives all if Israel is supported uncritically.

Yet unlike some others, Rubenstein's support of Israel and its policies flows from his Machiavellian *real politik*. Though I disagree with aspects of Rubenstein's support for Israeli policies, I admire that he has never sugar-coated them with a liberal gloss. After the Holocaust, in this dog-eat-dog world, Rubenstein believes that Jews need power, pure and simple, and Israel is that power.

Today the Holocaust is mentioned often, and evokes a cascade of associations. Back in 1970, the Holocaust was just being named as an event much broader than its parts. There were few images attached to this event other than

the sheer horror of the slaughter of innocent Jews. Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz* changed that.

The very naming of the Holocaust was controversial because many Jews did not want the event named at all. They feared that in naming the Holocaust, it would become definitive of Jewish identity, and the trajectory of Jews and Judaism would change. Where would that change take Jews individually and as a community? It could be a reckoning with Jewish history and with the majority populations surrounding Jews. After the destruction of Europe's Jewish communities, could Jews afford yet another reckoning with history?

Experiences of destruction are horrible beyond words. In the wake of destruction, survivors pick themselves up and try to rebuild their lives. As a minority, the process of rebuilding is complicated especially when the majority population is of the same stock and religion as those who caused the destruction. Jews in America lived among descendants from Europe who are Christian in belief, the same population and religion of Germans and Europeans who were hostile to Jews and had murdered them. It might be better to rebuild what was left of the Jewish world, keep silent so as not to antagonize the majority population, and hope for the best.

Naming the experience of mass death was complex. Jews could name the experience of the Holocaust within the community, keeping the discussions limited and among Jews only. Or Jews could name the event of mass death as important for Jews and others. The first option would be respected by others and contained within. The second option could be seen as intrusive since the hostility toward Jews that led to the Holocaust had deep religious roots. If Jews named the murder of millions of Jews as the Holocaust, then Jews had to name anti-Semitism as part of Christianity. In doing so, Jews would have to call for revisions in Christianity itself. Throughout their history, Christians had resented Jews precisely because, from their perspective, Jews "intruded" on their beliefs and life of faith. Should Jews intrude once again on Christianity? Could Jews do this without suffering the consequences evident throughout history?

Naming and speaking about the Holocaust are two different matters. If the murder of six million Jews was named but not spoken, the possible consequences would be lessened, the future of Jews less uncertain. To name the Holocaust was to go on the offensive, asserting the value of Jewish life against those who had demeaned it. Though Jewish life in America was far better than it had been in Europe, anti-Semitism existed here as well. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were still quotas for Jewish students in Ivy League universities. Unheard of was the notion of a politically engaged and active Jewish life, with Jewish political candidates and office holders at the national level. When presidential candidate Al Gore chose Senator Joseph Lieberman as his vice-presidential

candidate in 2000, the dream of a Jew becoming a high official in the nation was greeted with enthusiasm by many. When I studied with Rubenstein, few Jews had thought of such a possibility.

Rubenstein was also troubling to the Jewish establishment because he was an ordained rabbi. Through his studies at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, a seminary of the Reform movement, and Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, a seminary of the Conservative movement, Rubenstein earned his rabbinical degree, and subsequently served as a rabbi for several congregations. His writings on the Holocaust made rabbinic service and paid employment in the Jewish community difficult. With criticism of him coming from within the Jewish community, his days with the Jewish establishment were numbered. As a rabbi and a trained theologian, Rubenstein was challenging the community from within the Jewish religious tradition. In questioning what it meant to be a Jew after Auschwitz, he directly criticized Jewish leadership, including those who employed him, for their lack of leadership on this most crucial question. Rubenstein accused them of being cowardly and perhaps complicit, as had been other Jewish leaders throughout Jewish history, who had not faced the central questions before their people.

Whereas previous Jewish leaders failed to recognize the annihilationist policies of the Nazis before it was too late, contemporary Jewish leaders did not want the Holocaust named. Rubenstein broke the rabbinic wall of silence. He aired the community's dirty laundry in public. Before and after the publication of *After Auschwitz*, Rubenstein's words were broadcast widely. Rubenstein was an "up and coming," "go-to" Jew for the media. From the vantage point of the Jewish establishment, there could only be more trouble ahead.

Published in 1966, *After Auschwitz* was comprised of essays previously published in relatively obscure Jewish publications. The book reached a much broader public, partly because of its timing. After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, with Israel's swift and decisive victory, Israel was also named as formative for Jewish life. With *After Auschwitz* and in the wake of the 1967 war, Holocaust consciousness was born.[2]

Holocaust consciousness—or in its religious form, Holocaust Theology—is a way of viewing Jewish history through the lens of anti-Semitism, the Nazis, and historic Jewish vulnerability. For many Jews, Jewish survival and flourishing can only be insured though Jewish empowerment. Jewish empowerment is viewed as embracing and defending the state of Israel. It also means arguing against those who criticize Israel and its policies toward Palestinians.

With the passing years, the Holocaust and the state of Israel have come to define what it means to be an authentic Jew. When Rubenstein began writing, the sense of the Holocaust and Israel as central to Jewish identity was foreign.

Today, the only accepted definition of what it means to be Jewish revolves around remembering the Holocaust and support for Israel.

The questions posed by both the Holocaust and the state of Israel were already present in 1970, and remain so today. In the Holocaust, theological questions are as prominent if not more so than political questions. How the Holocaust could be perpetrated on the Jews of Europe is a question addressed externally to the broader European community and to Christianity in particular. Internally there are questions about Jewish political leadership and how Jews could be so weak and vulnerable that it left the entire the European Jewish community exposed. Yet the further troubling question about God is obvious: Where was God at Auschwitz?

The subject of political culpability and the absence of God in the Holocaust begged for answers retrospectively, partly out of historical curiosity. More important, however, were answers for the future. What did Jews need to do to alter their weak and vulnerable situation? What could Jews say about God after the Holocaust had ended and Israel had been created?

Rubenstein's inquiries about Jewish life and the human predicament after the Holocaust focused on Auschwitz, a major Nazi death camp located in Poland, where almost a million European Jews were murdered. Partially because of his book, Auschwitz eventually came to symbolize the killing of six million European Jews. Today, Auschwitz as a signifier of the Holocaust is central to Jewish identity and is a rallying call for Jewish survival—*after*. The word, a*fter*, contains layer after layer of soul searching, political queries, and religious examination. What can Jews say about humanity, Christianity, Judaism, the Jewish community, politics and God *after* Auschwitz?

With the almost complete elimination of Jews and Jewish culture from Europe during the Holocaust, the Jewish place in the world radically shifted. Before the Holocaust the center of Jewish population and learning was in Europe. After the Holocaust, the two largest communities of Jews reside in North America and in Israel. After the Holocaust, both America and Israel provided a series of challenges to Jews, indeed to Judaism. In America, Jews live free as citizens and with the respect of the majority non-Jewish population. In Israel, Jews now have a state of their own and in their ancient homeland. As Jews contemplate the horror of the Holocaust, they also have to deal with the complexities of acceptance in America and Jewish power embodied in a state.

Writing the Other Kingdom

In 1993, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. opened to the public. The memorial museum represents the culmination of

the naming of the Holocaust that began to crystallize with the publication of Rubenstein's book. Yet the museum has two competing visions of what the Holocaust was and what it says to us—*after*. One part of the Holocaust museum comes from Rubenstein, the other from Elie Wiesel.

The issues that Rubenstein and Wiesel began to wrestle with in the 1960s and early 1970s mark the museum's exhibits and remain unresolved. Rubenstein is represented in the timeline of the Holocaust and the emphasis on the mass methodical and industrial murder of Europe's Jews. Wiesel is represented in the evocative, silent and almost mystical spaces that surround the rendering of the millions murdered. With Rubenstein, we follow the destruction of Europe's Jews step by step. With Wiesel, the murders remain an unsolved—and irresolvable—rupture in the fabric of the universe.

Rubenstein's timeline is historical and earthly. Wiesel evokes an otherworldly nightmare. Over the years, Rubenstein resolved God's absence by orienting his exploration of the Holocaust to the political. Rubenstein began seeing the Holocaust as a paradigm for what happened to a multitude of peoples before and after the Holocaust. For Rubenstein, the Nazis were anti-Semitic to their core. Their ability to execute their nightmare scenario for Jews, however, was dependent on modernity. It was the ability to mobilize the bureaucracy, social organization, and advanced technology of the German state that gave the Nazis the ability to exterminate Europe's Jews.

Rubenstein describes the process by which the Jews of Germany were eliminated from German society and life itself:

> The process was a highly complex series of acts which started simply with the bureaucratic definition of who was a Jew. Once defined as a Jew, by the German state bureaucracy, a person was progressively deprived of all personal property and citizenship rights. The final step in the process came when he was eliminated altogether. The destruction process required the cooperation of every sector of German society. The bureaucrats drew up the decrees; the churches gave evidence of Aryan descent; the postal authorities carried the messages of definition, expropriation, denaturalization, and deportation; business corporations dismissed their Jewish employees and took over "Aryanized" properties; the railroads carried the victims to their place of execution, a place made available to the Gestapo and the SS by the *Wehrmacht*. To repeat, the operation required and received the participation of every major social, political, and religious institution of the German Reich.[3]

Rubenstein seems detached, warning his readers that to see the Holocaust only through the framework of Jews and Judaism is to miss the point. "On the contrary, we are more likely to understand the Holocaust if we regard it as the

expression of some of the most profound tendencies of Western civilization in the twentieth century."[4]

For Wiesel, any attempt to explain the Holocaust in light of politics or bureaucracy is to miss the larger meaning of the event itself. Such thinking reduces the Holocaust to manageable proportions. So reduced, the Holocaust can then be compared with other events which Wiesel believes trivializes the magnitude of Jewish suffering. Even explaining God's role or negligence in the Holocaust attempts to manage and ultimately trivialize the horror of the destruction of Europe's Jews. That is why Wiesel's contribution to the Holocaust Memorial Museum refuses any specific explanation for the Holocaust. Instead, Wiesel evokes an unremitting void.

Rubenstein's political sensibility represented an evolution in his thinking. Though quickly reached, his evolution represents the initial and highly contested first phase of Holocaust Theology. While Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz* set the tone of the Holocaust debate, it was quickly confronted and overcome by Elie Wiesel in his autobiographical memoir of his time in Auschwitz, *Night*. By 1975, Rubenstein published his more political work, *The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future,* where he argues how the Holocaust was dependent on modernity.

The Cunning of History is an edited version of the much longer book, *The Age of Triage: Fear and Hope in an Overcrowded World*, in which Rubenstein takes his analysis of the Holocaust out of its singular paradigmatic place and further relativizes the Jewish trauma. Instead of anti-Semitism, Rubenstein places the blame for the Holocaust squarely on the "revolution of rationality." The Holocaust becomes a paradigm for the violence and mass death of the twentieth century. Modern advances in bureaucracy, social organization and technology, which bring progress, also bring mass death. What happened to the Jews of Europe happened to others before and after the Holocaust. Rubenstein sees the Holocaust of peoples as part of the future humanity.[5]

Even more disturbing to many Jews, in *The Age of Triage,* Rubenstein detailed his theories of superfluous populations in the age of industrialization and the Enlightenment, and how those populations were dealt with by emerging political and military authorities. As it turns out, they, too, were dispatched to ghetto-like conditions and death before and after the Jews during World War II. He views the fate of the Jews as little different than the fate of the peasants in Europe or how the Irish were treated during the famine. In the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, Jews had become superfluous to the functioning of modernizing societies especially in Eastern Europe. When the migration of superfluous Jews became too much, they were "rationalized" out of existence. Anti-Semitism played its part to be sure, but it was not the only reason for the Holocaust.

As I witnessed Rubenstein's encounter with Elie Wiesel and his subsequent movement toward the more political understanding of the Holocaust, I realized how naïve I was about nuanced distinctions in public discussions on volatile issues. In their encounter, Wiesel emerged the victor. Wiesel's victory was party personal and, more importantly, a sign of where the Jewish community was heading in understanding the Jewish place in the world. It would also leave me torn, since though Rubenstein's teaching was analytically formative for me, Wiesel's sensibility evoked the emotional core of my Jewishness.

I was hardly alone in feeling Wiesel awaken the core of my Jewishness. Most Jews never heard of Rubenstein and, like me, encountered Wiesel through his writing and lecturing. Soon Rubenstein's public spotlight dimmed. Wiesel and those attached to him, including wealthy Jews who contributed millions to establish programs in Holocaust and Jewish Studies, used his symbolic and their financial power to further distance Rubenstein from mainstream Jewish life.

The Question of God—*After*

In *After Auschwitz*, Rubenstein explored the Jewish claims about the God of history. During the Holocaust, where was the God who chose Israel among the nations, guided Israel into the Promised Land, and promised always to be with her? Every Passover, Jews commemorate the Exodus event and are commanded to place themselves there at that saving moment. For Jews the Exodus is past as well as present, for God exists in history then and now. Yet if the God of Israel is in history as a force for good and liberation, what can we say about the presence of God in history when suffering abounds? Why is there suffering, especially the suffering of God's chosen ones?

The traditional explanation for the people Israel's suffering in the world is that Jews have strayed from God. Typically, Israel's straying had to do with worshipping false gods and treating the most vulnerable of the community unjustly. Yet the threat of God's punishment was couched in a form of intimate love. As God's special people, more was expected of Israel, and their disappointing God was more significant. Idolatry and injustice distanced Israel from God.

God's punishment was a form of God's love. You see this vividly in the prophets when the judgment on Israel is being pronounced. The punishment for failing to hear the prophet's warning is exile from the land and, along the way, abominations beyond belief. Right up to the last moment, God's punishment can be avoided if Israel returns to righteous ways. Even after punishment a return to God is still possible but again righteousness has to be pledged and then lived out in individual and communal ways.

In light of the Holocaust, Rubenstein asked how such a God could continue to be worshipped. What could Jews have done to merit the extraordinary

punishment of six million dead, one million of them children? If God were punishing Israel for its infidelities, what were they? Even if Israel's sins were specified by God, could they merit the indiscriminate destruction of Europe's Jews? If the Holocaust was part of God's punishment for Israel's sins, then, in Rubenstein's view, God had become a moral monster. Such a God deserved to be confronted and exiled from Jewish life.

Rubenstein invoked God's covenant as a discussion point since religious Jews believed that the covenant with Israel, originally proposed and accepted at Mt. Sinai, was still in place. The Sinai covenant worked two ways. God and Israel had responsibilities and obligations on both sides. Israel promised to follow God's ways. God promised to guide and protect Israel. As a mutually binding pact, God periodically called out Israel for its sins and Israel periodically challenged God for either being too harsh with the people or being absent at a time of great need. God concentrated on the large and small failures of Israel as well as Israel's return to God's way. Israel challenged God's power and attention span with regard to Israel's suffering presence in the world.

The give and take of the covenantal partners provided room for both parties to speak boldly and address each other. This is portrayed vividly in Jewish canonical books as a series of arguments between God and the people. An example is Abraham who argues with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham is mortified that a just and compassionate God would condemn entire cities for the sins of a few. When Abraham challenges God to spare the righteous, God reconsiders his blanket condemnation. Later Moses argues with God about God's despair regarding Israel and God's desire to jettison Israel for another people. Though God offers to spare Moses, and though Moses also is clearly fed up with the people, Moses lectures God on his responsibilities. In the end Moses sides with the people and offers God an ultimatum—either condemn Israel and Moses together or take a deep breath and reconsider his position. Some arguments with God are lost, while others are won. God overwhelms Abraham with his power and destroys the cities while Moses convinces God to deal with his anger and start again.

Though Rubenstein felt that the covenantal tension between God and Israel broke under the enormity of the Holocaust, he believed that Jews who continued to accept the covenant after the Holocaust had to accept the Holocaust as God's judgment on Israel. Rubenstein knew that those who stayed within the covenant would reconcile the sins of Israel and the Holocaust and ultimately affirm an omnipotent God. Was there any other way for the believing Jew?

Surveying the grounds at Auschwitz, Rubenstein was defiant. Whether God actually existed or not was less important to Rubenstein than his inability to affirm such a God—*after*. For Rubenstein there was no way back. The ancient Jewish covenant was irretrievably broken. Rubenstein understood the

reluctance to admit this brokenness but he also felt that in the end such reluctance was self-defeating. Rubenstein's language is forceful in the opening pages of *After Auschwitz*:

> It would have been better had six million Jews not died but they have. We cannot restore the religious world which preceded their demise nor can we ignore the fact that the catastrophe has had and will continue to have an extraordinary influence on Jewish life. Although Jewish history is replete with disaster, none has been so radical in its total impact as the Holocaust. Our images of God, man and the moral order have been permanently impaired. No Jewish theology will possess even a remote degree of relevance to contemporary Jewish life if it ignores the question of God and the death camps. This *is the* question for Jewish theology in our time. Regrettably most attempts at formulating a Jewish theology since World War II seem to have been written as if the two decisive events of our time for Jews, the death camps and the birth of Israel, had not taken place.[6]

Rubenstein was hardly alone in his understanding that something in the relationship between God and the Jewish people had gone terribly wrong. As Rubenstein was writing the essays that became *After Auschwitz*, Elie Wiesel was writing his memoir, *Night*. In *Night* the Jewish universe is turned upside down and God is brought to trial. Because *Night* is a memoir, it is more evocative than Rubenstein's more analytical writing. Still, reading *After Auschwitz* and *Night* together is an overpowering experience. It is difficult to imagine more powerful challenges to God.

There are profound differences in Rubenstein's and Wiesel's backgrounds and experiences, beginning with their birth place and early life. Rubenstein was born and educated in America. Wiesel was born and educated in Hungary. The war years saw these differences widen considerably. Rubenstein spent the Holocaust years studying to be a rabbi in America. Wiesel lived the same years incarcerated in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Rubenstein spent the Holocaust years pensive and brooding about the terrible war in Europe. Wiesel lost most of his family at Auschwitz and Buchenwald and barely survived himself.

After the Holocaust, Rubenstein analyzed the Holocaust and its meaning for Jews and the world. Wiesel saw himself as a witness to the Holocaust event itself. Instead of exploring the theological meaning of the Holocaust directly as Rubenstein did, Wiesel sought a remembrance of the victims of the Holocaust as a solemn duty for all Jews and indeed for all peoples of the world. Wiesel felt that without remembrance the victims of the Holocaust would become a black void in the universe. In remembering them, they could be viewed as martyrs, and thus become the seed of future Jewish life. Rubenstein opposed Wiesel's view of the Holocaust dead as martyrs; this might reopen the question of God.

The distinction drawn between the Holocaust dead as victims or martyrs is important. Rubenstein believed that the murdered Jews of the Holocaust were victims of the Nazis. Wiesel acknowledged them as martyrs. The victim/martyr distinction became emblematic of their different approaches and conclusions regarding the meaning of the Holocaust for the future of Jewish life. This argument became central to the dispute that emerged between them in the 1970s and illustrated a larger dispute within the Jewish community in America and Israel, now enshrined in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.[7]

As a survivor of the Holocaust, Wiesel remained in Europe, with a short stopover in the newly formed state of Israel. Like Rubenstein, Wiesel pondered the meaning of the Holocaust, with his own experience of Auschwitz as the focal point. Yet Wiesel had a problem articulating these memories. It took him years to create a language that described the landscape of Auschwitz. Although Jews in different periods of history have written about suffering, none before had dealt with the experience and magnitude of Holocaust suffering. Wiesel did not oppose Rubenstein's sense that the experience of the Holocaust was a new and different experience of industrial mass death, but he saw it as a *novum* in history visited upon Jews by a hatred that knew no bounds. It took Wiesel years to find how to articulate the Auschwitz experience.

> I knew that the role of the survivor was to testify. Only I did not how. . . . How does one describe the indescribable? How does one use restraint in recreating the fall of mankind and the eclipse of the gods? And, then, how can one be sure that the words, once uttered, will not betray, distort the message they bear? So heavy was my anguish that I made a vow not to speak, not to touch upon the essential for at least ten years. . . . Long enough to unite the language of man with the silence of the dead.[8]

Others writing on the Holocaust experienced a similar conundrum. On the one hand, Holocaust survivors had to create a language that described the Holocaust so that others could understand what no one before in human history had experienced. On the other, they also had a responsibility to be faithful to the dead and to the survivors. To be there at the beginning was a supreme literary challenge surrounded by the reality of mass death. How could the writer describe an experience that was new in human history and be believable to those who had not been there, all the while presenting the story so that survivors could feel that their dead friends and relatives had not been betrayed? The landscape of the Holocaust is familiar to us now because these writers braved the unknown. What once was a vision of transcendent punishment was now an earthly horror. Holocaust historian, Lucy Dawidowicz, described the transposition this way:

> The murder of six million Jews, in its unparalleled scope, devastating effect, and incomprehensible intent, overtook the capacity of man's imagination to conceive of evil . . . eclipsed man's visions of hell. The names of these death factories—and especially the name of Auschwitz—replaced Dante's Nine Circles of Hell as the quintessential epitome of evil, for they were located not in the literary reaches of the medieval religious imagination, but in the political reality of twentieth-century Europe."[9]

Today we are inundated with memoirs and visual images from that time period. Yet if we reflect on the difficulties involved in describing the Holocaust world, we can imagine how daunting it was. Think, for example, of what it was like to live in a concentration camp that was planned and built to dehumanize the Jews brought there. Consider the living conditions that were designed for that express purpose. Then bring thousands of impoverished and dislocated Jews into the camp to live knowing that they are sentenced to die. As thousands around you die, then think of what it is to survive the death of your family members with the knowledge that you too are slated for death. Now tell the story to someone who has never been incarcerated even for a day.

Such a transposition demanded a literary imagination rooted in the reality of mass death. The challenges are clear. Since Auschwitz was unimaginable to those who had never been there, the use of the literary imagination necessarily had to distort the Holocaust experience so the uninitiated could enter the experience the writer was trying to describe. To ease this transition some Holocaust writers began to refer to the Holocaust using inverse metaphors such as "The Holocaust Universe," "The Concentrationary Universe," "Planet Auschwitz" and even as "The Other Kingdom." Transposing what was known with what was unknown helped the writer and reader alike.

The inversion of God's Kingdom in the Other Kingdom might be the most jarring literary illusion in Holocaust literature. Images of God's Kingdom are projections on a human scale; we can only imagine God's Kingdom from our limited human angle. God's Kingdom, however, has never been seen by living human beings. Imagining God's Kingdom then is more or less an exercise in the imagination. So, too, with the Other Kingdom; those who were never there hardly have a clue. Those who dwelled there and survived, live in a double bind. They have lived where we haven't. Now they live among us.

The writer on the Holocaust has to be a bridge between the dead and the living. How do you construct such a bridge? Where does that bridge lead to? Having survived leaves a mark on the survivor. Living among the non-survivors also leaves a mark. The survivor who seeks to tell the tale must take both experiences to heart and with a distance from their own experience seek to tell the tale in way that even the survivor living among non-survivors can relate to.

Writers on the Holocaust faced another haunting problem. Who could speak for the Holocaust dead? What kind of speech honors those who died? Speaking for those who could no longer speak is a moral obligation, akin to a religious commandment. Such a commandment must be obeyed. It can also be betrayed. Who would be the judge of what was said and what was left unsaid?

Since the Holocaust dead were all victims of the Nazis, should they be presented only as victims? In a situation of victimization, people act differently. Some are saints who give up their life for others. Others survive as best they can under the circumstances. Few victims are completely innocent in their behavior. In the Other Kingdom should compromising situations be brought to light? If so, would that shift the blame to the victims themselves or introduce a grey area where judgment became difficult and the chasm between the victims and perpetrators collapsed?

For Wiesel, the survivors took priority. Only those who experienced the death camps could speak in the name of those who perished in the Holocaust. At the same time, the image of the Holocaust dead must not be besmirched.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, few outside of those searching for the meaning of the Holocaust wanted to hear about this other world of death. Citing a need to be silent for some years to absorb the experience of the Holocaust, Wiesel's first and much longer version of *Night* was published in 1956. The present, shortened, and widely read *Night*, was published two years later, but found a readership only a decade later.

As Rubenstein and Wiesel wrote about the Holocaust there were questions as to whether or not there would be an audience for their work. Would the survivors want their experiences recounted and if so would they want to re-experience their travail through the written word? If so, who would they trust to accurately portray their experiences? The experience of each survivor was unique. Could there be a collective portrait of the Holocaust without distorting it? Then there was the question of an audience beyond the survivors. Would people want to read about such horrific experiences? How could the authors make the experience believable to those who were not there? Again the issue of distortion was front and center.

There was also the issue of the hopelessness of the suffering. The memories of the survivors made it difficult for many of them to make their way in the "ordinary" universe of family and employment. Reliving the hopelessness of the Holocaust might make it even more difficult.

Was the public ready to read about a subject that would introduce a sense of despair into their lives? There were few happy endings in the Holocaust and these were shadowed by horror beyond imagining. In tragic literature there are places of redemption, but not in the Holocaust. Could writing on the Holocaust invest itself in literary hope?

In the two versions of *Night*, Wiesel grapples with these issues. While the first, longer version emphasizes Jewish rage at what has happened to the Jews of Europe, the second, shorter version emphasizes the existential crisis of a youthful Jew caught in the Holocaust world. Would a perspective audience identify more with the rage of a Holocaust survivor or with a more introspective exploration of a shattered man?

Wiesel's first version of *Night* is written in Yiddish and was mostly for the survivors of the Holocaust who spoke that language. Whereas the first version emphasized the desire of survivors for revenge, the second version was written in French for a largely non-Jewish audience, and sought sympathy from the outside world.

According to the Jewish scholar Naomi Seidman, Wiesel's second version of *Night* deemphasizes an understandable Jewish rage in favor of the values of acceptance and reconciliation that permeate the Christian culture in Europe and America. This resonates more easily with repentant Christians. Christian reception of *Night* was essential to its finding an audience.

How far could such a Christian audience be pushed on their culpability in the Holocaust without demanding that they relinquish their faith and history? If Christian faith remained important to his audience, didn't Wiesel have to leave room for them to repent and affirm their own heritage? The difficult historical relationship between Jews and Christians had just culminated in the Holocaust. Why widen that gap just when many Christians were on the cusp of understanding and rejecting the anti-Semitism of their past?

Writing on the Holocaust actually precipitated a new, more positive encounter of Jews and Christians. It also served as a means for Christian renewal in the post-Holocaust era and secured Jewish life in America to an unprecedented degree. However, the result of many years of interfaith discussion surrounding the Holocaust did not mean that the terrain of the Holocaust was without danger for the Jewish future. The Holocaust was explosive and had to be managed carefully.

Whether Wiesel was conscious of this or not, the final version of *Night* has earned a significant place in the post-Holocaust Christian world. Wiesel may have felt that clearing a way for Holocaust memory by deemphasizing rage was more important to the Jewish future than the rage he and other Jews felt. The harsher version of *Night* might have been rejected by a chastised Christian Europe and Christian America. If Christianity had rejected the Holocaust as a claim on Christian conscience the Holocaust dead might have vanished from the memory of Western civilization.[10]

The second version of *Night* carries a foreword from the French Catholic novelist, Francois Mauriac. Yet in this foreword there is hardly a word about Christian anti-Semitism or about the rage of Holocaust survivors. Instead,

Mauriac writes of Wiesel as a supplicant appealing to the world to recognize the horrors of Jewish suffering. Despite this suffering, Mauriac writes that he retains a traditional belief in the superiority of Christianity and the role of Jews, as God's chosen people. Mauriac ends his foreword recalling his encounter with Wiesel, and sets it in a framework Christians could hear and embrace:

> And I, who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner, whose dark eyes still had the reflection of the angelic sadness which had appeared one day upon the face of the hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Jew, his brother, who may have resembled him—the Crucified, whose Cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine, and that the conformity of the Cross and the suffering of men was in my eyes the key to that impenetrable mystery whereon the faith of his childhood had perished? Zion, however, has risen up again from the crematoria and the charnel houses. The Jewish nation has been resurrected from among the thousands of dead. It is through them that it lives again. . . . If the Eternal is the Eternal, the last word for each one of us belongs to Him. This is what I should have told this Jewish child. But I could only embrace him, weeping.[11]

The Additional Covenant

Wiesel's *Night* languished, as did most writing about the Holocaust, until after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. In the war's wake, sales of *Night* grew significantly. Soon Wiesel emerged as a major spokesperson for Jews and Judaism. Over the years *Night* has sold millions of copies and become required reading in Holocaust courses around the nation.

Wiesel has become an icon of the Holocaust. In recognition of this iconic status, Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. Rubenstein's experience has been quite different. Though academically successful, he has languished on the periphery of Jewish life. While Wiesel is honored internationally, Rubenstein remains in exile.

Wiesel and the reception of *Night* exist in the realm of paradox, if not irony. On the one hand, Wiesel's evocation of his time in Auschwitz is chilling to the bone. His description of the landscape of Auschwitz is so desolate that there seems to be no way back to his—or our—full humanity. Like Rubenstein, Wiesel's memoir questions God so thoroughly that God's displacement and banishment is obvious. *Night* buries Israel's God of history with a literary force compared to which Rubenstein's theoretical constructs can only hint.

The cadence of the Wiesel's initial passage about God sets the stage for the referendum on God:

> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.
> Never shall I forget that smoke.
> Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent blue sky.
> Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.
> Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.
> Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my god and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.
> Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and soul and turned my dreams to ashes.
> Never shall I forget these things, even if I were condemned to live as long as God Himself.
> Never.[12]

The repeated "never" has become part of the litany of Holocaust literature, a slogan taken up in the wake of the 1967 war as well—but Wiesel's "never" is about what Jews can say about God *after*. "After" is already present in Wiesel's experience that first day in Auschwitz. "Never" is also a confrontation with Israel's God. "After" and "never" is forever—"even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself."

Rather than an abandonment of God, however, "never" becomes a difficult life with the God of Israel who, though absent, remains. Though Wiesel's confrontation with God in Auschwitz is personal, a broader communal confrontation is implied. Partly through Wiesel's *Night*, this confrontation is accepted by Jews around the world as our "forever." This means that God continues on and Jews continue on, though in a highly contested covenantal relationship.

On that first day of Auschwitz and forever more, the covenantal power equation shifts with Jews gaining authority and boldness to speak their truth to the chastened though still almighty God. God remains capitalized—*Himself*—even as the young Elie Wiesel puts caution to the wind and hurls accusations at God because of God's indifference. The stakes are even higher for the people of Israel, God's chosen. Such a God deserves to be cursed all the way to heaven.

Can God withstand such a challenge? As in other passages of *Night*, there seems no way back to God and no way forward for God. Yet in Wiesel's other writings since *Night*—indeed perhaps within Wiesel's memoir itself—there is a constant search for other ways to relate to God lest God be lost completely.

If the original covenant has to be readjusted as Wiesel suggests, rather than abandoned as Rubenstein had suggested, what can Jews affirm in this new covenantal configuration? If God is absent in Auschwitz while still being able to be confronted how does this frame the future of Jewish discourse about God?

Michael Berenbaum also encountered Wiesel through Rubenstein in the same years I did. Berenbaum wrote that Wiesel was suggesting an "additional" covenant to Israel's original one. This covenant was forged at Auschwitz so that even though the original covenant was radically chastened in Auschwitz, it still remained a covenant, albeit in an altered form—*after*.[13]

With this additional covenant, though on many levels Wiesel agrees with Rubenstein about God, he also parts company with him. The additional covenant demands that Jews survive and flourish after the Holocaust by means of memory and witness. These replace God's presence, or are a way of lamenting God's absence. Memory and witness defy God's presence that was so ineffectual at Auschwitz, such that after Auschwitz, God can only be remembered in Israel's past.

For Berenbaum, the additional covenant allows Wiesel to partially resolve the tension between God and the Jewish people in the post-Holocaust world. The additional covenant is "no longer between humanity and God or God and Israel, but rather between Israel and its memories of pain and death, God and meaning," Berenbaum writes. "God has proved an unreliable partner in the covenantal bondedness. Therefore, if we are to continue as Jews, our self-affirmation must be based on our choice to remain Jews and to assure the past of Jewish history as our own and in some way implicated in our future." The result is a covenant that speaks of God in the past tense only, as if the mourning that surrounds God can also comfort a mourning people.[14]

Wiesel is daring in his assertion of the additional covenant, perhaps more daring than if he left God behind completely. After all, if God was absent then and pretends to be present now, why not send the absent God away? In Jewish spirituality God can be absent and still present. Wiesel assumes this paradoxical dichotomy of absence and presence.

If God was really somewhere else or nowhere the tension in addressing God would dissipate. Only the proximity of God makes defying God possible. It is the very presence of God throughout *Night* that makes Wiesel's memoir so striking. If there were no additional covenant, or no covenant at all, struggling with God would make little sense.

Embedded in the additional covenant is solidarity, witness and the sanctification of life, as seen through the prism of the Holocaust. Solidarity is first and foremost to be with the Jews who died in the Holocaust and with Jews who are alive today. Also, solidarity with the non-Jewish victims flows from the memory of the Jewish Holocaust dead.

Solidarity in the present is a form of witness to the dead. Through memory and witness the unmarked graves of the Holocaust dead resist becoming a further scandal. The memory of the Holocaust dead in the present is the Jewish—and human—anchor for the drive to sanctify life *after*.

Pervading all of Wiesel's writing is the sense that forgetting the Holocaust dead is worse than a sacrilege. Forgetting would rend the universe in two. Or it would continue and further the tearing that began in the Holocaust. The only way to mend the universe is through remembering the Holocaust dead. Though nothing can bring back their lives or their sacrifice, through memory we can rescue the dead from oblivion. To refuse to remember is to become a bystander again, perhaps even an enabler.

Throughout the additional covenant, the touchstone for Wiesel remains the Holocaust. The rupture of the Holocaust makes speech impossible—and necessary. It is from the memory of the Holocaust that action on behalf of Jews and non-Jews is authentic. Forgetting the Holocaust dead, comparing them to the dead of other atrocities, or living without their memory is abandoning the definitive and ongoing Jewish stake in the world.

Wiesel's concentration on the Jewish dead of the Holocaust is the key to all of Holocaust Theology and the Jewish preoccupation with the Holocaust. Many millions of non-Jews were killed during World War II and millions of non-Jews were killed in the violence that had little or nothing to do with warfare. Jews were not the only ones murdered in the camps either. Yet for Wiesel and for most Holocaust thinkers, the way Jews were singled-out for destruction is crucial. This destruction had the longest history in Europe and was tied to Christianity, the major religion of the West. For most Jews, the Holocaust has a religious significance that was lacking in the persecution of other nationalities.

While Wiesel's solidarity with the Holocaust dead is speaking on their behalf to Jews and the world, it also is a continuing argument with God. This reaches its apex in *The Gates of the Forest*, a novel Wiesel published in 1966. Here, Wiesel replicates a trial he witnessed among the inmates of Auschwitz, as a trial of God for abandoning the Jewish people during their time of greatest need. A survivor of the camps confronts the traditional interpretations of God by demanding that a Hasidic *rebbe* acknowledge that there were such trials with the obvious verdict. The survivor told the *rebbe* a story from his recent past:

> In a concentration camp, one evening after work, a rabbi called together three of his colleagues and convoked a special court. Standing with his head held high before them, he spoke as follows: 'I intend to convict God of murder, for He is destroying His people and the Law He gave them from Mount Sinai. I have irrefutable proof in my hands. Judge without fear or sorrow or prejudice . . .' The trial proceeded in due legal form,

> with witnesses for both sides with pleas and deliberations. The unanimous verdict: 'Guilty.'
>
> . . . After all, He had the last word. On the day after the trial, He turned the sentence against His judges and accusers. They, too, were taken off to the slaughter.[15]

Wiesel later summarized his argument with God and pointed to what a Jew should be: "To be a Jew means to serve God by espousing man's cause, to plead for man while recognizing his need for God. And to opt for the creator *and* His creation, refusing to pit one against the other. Of course man must interrogate God . . . [but] only the Jew knows that he may oppose God as long as he does so in defense of His creation.[16]

Wiesel's unannounced assertion is that the Holocaust represents a contemporary form of Jewish chosenness. As in ancient times, Jews were singled out as witnesses among the nations, during the Holocaust they were again singled out, but for death rather than liberation.

What can this peculiar sense of election mean? Emil Fackenheim, a Jewish philosopher and compatriot of Wiesel, asserts that while the Commanding Voice of Sinai was not heard at Auschwitz, the Commanding Voice of Auschwitz is now heard by post-Holocaust Jews. Fackenheim believes that this makes possible a new 614th commandment of Jewish Law: "The authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another posthumous victory."[17]

If the original covenant and God is now in the past, the memory of the time when God was with the people lives on. Seeing God only through the prism of memory might lead to nostalgia or a paralysis. However, because of the precarious situation of post-Holocaust Jewry, paralysis is not an option. In fact, Fackenheim believes that Jews refused paralysis and actively accepted their responsibility for their own destiny by surviving and banding together for self-defense in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Although neither Wiesel nor Fackenheim speculate about God in the future, the question of God's absence or presence cannot be determined in advance. It is only by keeping the Jewish community alive that a further consideration about God might occur in the future.

Perhaps placing God on trial in the death camps was a way of baiting God into reappearing. Wiesel's writing about the trial keeps the question of God in the forefront. Perhaps Wiesel, and also Fackenheim, find the future of Jewish life impossible without God. In the meantime, only by keeping Jews alive can there come a time when the Commanding Voice of Sinai might be heard again.

There is also the possibility that the Commanding Voice of Auschwitz, while coaxing God to reappear, is also God's stand-in, God's voice, as it were, without God. The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz might be the prophetic

voice appearing at a time when the argument against God is irrefutable. Here the prophetic voice is the voice of the people crying out against the injustice of God and humanity. Rather than be bereft and unable to continue, the prophetic voice of the people carries this complaint with strength and fortitude. It could be that Jews cannot endure the loss of God especially if it means the loss of the prophetic voice which is nourished by God. In the case of the Holocaust, the prophetic voice is in solidarity with the Jewish people over against God. Even if God has become a memory, Jews will not allow the prophetic voice to be stilled. Yet it is important to note that the prophetic voice here is truncated; it speaks almost exclusively of the empowerment of the Jewish people. What happens to others is less important.

Throughout *Night* there is a mixture of religious affirmation and defiance. At the beginning of Wiesel's deportation, his entire village is in shock. Nonetheless, the people keep falling back on their tradition, imploring God and uttering prayers. Even in Auschwitz this continues for a time until the situation becomes impossible. In person after person, God becomes more and more distant. In the end there is no discussion at all. Even God's memory seems to have disappeared.

When the question becomes the future, Wiesel, with Fackenheim's aid, seeks an authentic expression to justify the continuance of Jewish life *after*. Both look to the God who was with Israel into a future where God cannot be affirmed as God was in the past. It is here that Jews can survive and sort out a new way of life.

Rubenstein, Wiesel, and Fackenheim all affirm that the covenant is shattered. At stake is the future of the Jewish people. Wiesel and Fackenheim affirm the Jewish future as a form of fidelity to the Holocaust dead which, in turn, is also understood as a form of fidelity to all of Jewish history. Rubenstein sees it another way. There can be no retroactive solidarity with the dead of the Holocaust. They died within the void of God's absence. For Rubenstein, no Commanding Voice of Auschwitz can rescue them.

Though the Jewish understanding of God and the covenant as Jews knew it is past, for Wiesel and Fackenheim the covenant remains, now controlled by Jews themselves. Just as Wiesel sees the covenant as memory and mourning for what was, Fackenheim sees the contemporary response of Jews and the state of Israel to continue Jewish life as a testament to the fact that Jews, with every reason to give up and transfer their loyalties to other communities and ideologies, remain steadfast. Fackenheim uses language with which Wiesel would agree:

> Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are commanded to survive, lest the Jewish people perish . . . to remember the victims of Auschwitz lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair

> of man and his world, and to escape either into cynicism of otherworldliness, lest they cooperate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz. Finally they are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish. . . . A Jew may not respond to Hitler's attempt to destroy Judaism by himself cooperating in its destruction. In ancient times, the unthinkable Jewish sin was idolatry. Today, it is to respond to Hitler by doing his work.[18]

If the memory of God and the ability of Jews to take present responsibility for Jewish life were abandoned, then the Holocaust dead and the whole of Jewish history would be rendered null and void. It is the Jewish refusal to accept this void that so impresses Wiesel and Fackenheim and allows them to articulate a post-Holocaust future for the Jewish people.

Perhaps defiantly, this asserts that out of the incredible darkness, there is the light of Jewish survival. Without Jewish survival the Holocaust dead, indeed all of Jewish history, is consigned to oblivion. If Jews loose even the memory of God's presence, then Hitler wins as well. In banishing the Jews from the world, Hitler sought to rule over others without suffering the bad conscience that he thought Jews evoked. In some sense, Jews operated for Hitler in the same way Jews operated for Christians, as a brake on their claims of empire and truth. In Wiesel and Fackenheim there is a sense that both Hitler and Christianity were correct in their assumptions that without Jews in the world injustice could more easily prevail. For Wiesel and Fackenheim the Jewish presence in the world is less a negation of others than a powerful and sustaining force in the universe for conscience and justice. Severely wounded and almost annihilated, Jewish leaders must first take care of Jewish survival before once again assuming their place in saving others. The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz is one necessary stop on this way to recovery.

Holocaust Martyrdom and the 1967 War

The term *Holocaust dead* refers to an argument in 1970 between Wiesel and Rubenstein, a decisive, intensely personal moment in their relationship. It also has deeply influenced public policy.

In their exchange, Rubenstein spoke about Jews who historically accepted martyrdom when confronted with the demand to convert to another faith. In the Holocaust, however, Jews were killed simply because they were Jews. No conversion was demanded or accepted. Because he could not affirm the covenant after the Holocaust, Rubenstein felt that there was no Jewish future other than the need for defense and security. Why then raise martyrdom as an issue for the future? Wiesel took offense at Rubenstein's closure of the Jewish future.

Instead, Wiesel affirmed the Holocaust dead as martyrs, thus as the seeds of a Jewish future. This confrontation was decisive. Was Jewish life worth continuing? Was the Holocaust the terminus of Jewish life or a clarion call for yet another beginning? If a future was affirmed, what would be the content of Jewish life *after*?

The apprehension was palpable on both sides of the argument. Each man had an anxiety about the other, as if Rubenstein needed Wiesel to make his argument and vice versa. It could be that they were so distant from the other that only one could be relevant. I am sure that both viewed it that that way. Still, I felt there was a meeting ground between them. Each man articulated part of the post-Holocaust Jewish experience and both parts were necessary for a more complete picture of the Jewish future.

In a famous and defining year-long conference on the Holocaust held in 1974 at St. John's Divine Episcopal Cathedral in New York City, Wiesel and Fackenheim were present, but not Rubenstein. Wiesel would not speak at the ongoing conference if Rubenstein spoke at any time during the year. The dispute was bitter and foretold the later Jewish civil war on the question of Israel.

The initial setting for their confrontation was the first International Scholars' Conference on the German Church Struggle and the Holocaust, held in 1970 at Wayne State University. Rubenstein presented his paper, "Some Perspectives on Religious Faith After Auschwitz," and that evening Wiesel was scheduled to deliver his, "The Literature of the Holocaust." However, Wiesel was so angry with Rubenstein's presentation that he changed his subject and proceeded to rebut Rubenstein's main assertions, under what was later published as, "Talking and Writing and Keeping Silent."[19]

At the Scholar's Conference, Rubenstein was in full stride. He began with his own intellectual journey toward the rejection of God's covenant with Israel:

> If the God of the Covenant exists, at Auschwitz my people stood under the most fearsome curse that God has ever inflicted. If the God of history does not exist, then the Cosmos is ultimately absurd in origin and meaningless in purpose. . . . I have had to decide whether to affirm the existence of a God who inflicts Auschwitz on his guilty people or to insist that nothing the Jews did made them more deserving of Auschwitz than any other people, that Auschwitz was in no sense a punishment, and that a God who would or could inflict such punishment does not exist. In other words, I have elected to accept what Camus rightly called the courage of the absurd, the courage to live in a meaningless, purposeless Cosmos rather than believe in a God who inflicts Auschwitz on his people.[20]

After making his decisions about God after the Holocaust, Rubenstein continued his journey for meaning mostly outside Jewish theology. When he accepts Camus' courage of the absurd his language is strong. Yet there is a difference between questioning the presence of God at Auschwitz and arguing that God inflicted Auschwitz on the Jewish people.

Rubenstein addressed the historic options Jews faced with regard to Christian anti-Semitism. Though initially anti-Semitism might seem a deflection from the question at hand, part of Rubenstein's argument was that despite the rejection of God and the covenant being singled out as Jews remained an important issue in the post-Holocaust world. The world continued to be dangerous for Jews. Hence, Rubenstein saw Jewish empowerment, especially in the state of Israel, as crucial for the Jewish future.

Rubenstein's argument about Jewish chosenness was also controversial. In *After Auschwitz*, Rubenstein argued that part of the problem non-Jews had with Jews was exactly the assertion by Jews that they were God's chosen. Asserting chosenness set Jews up for invectives hurled against them and physical assaults on their being. For Rubenstein, the Holocaust spoke clearly about the impossibility of belief in a God of history and yet at the same time it cautioned Jews to jettison this belief in chosenness. Without the God of history there was no longer any basis for such a claim. Besides, it set the Jewish people up for a genocidal attack in the future. If Christians had to take responsibility for their anti-Semitism, Jews had to take responsibility for how their claims functioned in the world against them.

What Rubenstein did not understand was that Jewish theologians would try to preserve the Jewish sense of election even without a clear sense of what could be said about God after the Holocaust. Ironically, the sense of chosenness became even more important for Jews without God. Was this part of the defiance that Wiesel and others showed, asserting a chosenness without God?

Having refused God and chosenness, Rubenstein argued strongly for the importance of the state of Israel. Yet he also argued against a sense of innocence that the state of Israel was innocent or a moral cause. As with his language about the covenant, Rubenstein's words grated many, including Wiesel:

> It might be argued that the same God who delivered the Jews to the ovens also gave them Jerusalem in 1967. When I stood at the Wall for the first time during the summer of 1967, people who knew me came up and asked,
>
> "What do you think now? God has given us all of Jerusalem!"
>
> "God is not on the side of the Jews," I replied, "nor is he against the Arabs. The Jews and the Arabs both love this place and consider it their own. We have a terrible conflict. But, to treat the Arab as *villian* rather

than *enemy* is to misconceive the nature of the conflict. I refuse to say *Gott mit uns* under any circumstances.

The Six Day War, tentative as its conclusions may have been, is no royal road back to the God of History.[21]

Rubenstein's view on Israel and Israel's victory in the 1967 war contrasted sharply with Wiesel's. While Wiesel agreed that the 1967 war was not a return to God or redemption from the Holocaust, he saw the 1967 war as a vindication for the martyrs of the Holocaust and for the entirety of Jewish history.

Wiesel's writing on the 1967 war has the immediacy of one who has entered into an experience and is almost overwhelmed by it. Wiesel begins with a confession: as war became imminent, he did not believe Israel would win. On the contrary, he thought Israel would lose the war, and that this would be the last war of the Jewish people, "the end of our march to eternity." For Wiesel the Israeli experience was much too beautiful to last, but could he live, could the Jewish people continue if Israel disappeared?

Thinking this to be the end, Wiesel flew to Israel on the second day of the war as an act of defiance and solidarity. On the plane to Israel, he met an old friend who was motivated by the same conviction: that Jews were heading toward a reenactment of what happened in the Warsaw Ghetto and, like Wiesel, he wanted to be on the inside. "But the tragedy did not occur. We have all been saved. Had Israel lost the war, we would all have been doomed. . . . The Jewish people would have survived for centuries to come, even if Israel had not been established in 1948. But now that Israel does exist, our people is so linked to it that we could not survive its disappearance."[22]

Holocaust imagery is ever present in how Wiesel depicts Israel. Wiesel records in his diary that in the moment of anguish Israel was alone, as before in Europe, "during its night." The indifference of friendly or neutral governments was also the same. The Vatican again remained silent, and the invocation of total war, this time by the Arab governments, was familiar. Israel was a ghetto again, and the war recalled the uprising of the Jewish survivors in Warsaw. "The inhabitants would resist until the end, and the so-called Christian nations, civilized and progressive, faithful to their tradition, would watch and do nothing." And for the Jewish people everything would have to begin again, "except that no longer would we have the strength or desire to begin again.[23] Thus, Israel's victory is seen as a miracle. "The people plunged suddenly into the unreal, outside the realm of time and thought. . . . At times, they seemed to be reliving the trials and triumphs of the Bible; the names and battles had a familiar ring. At other times, they felt themselves thrust into a far away messianic future."[24]

The scene as Wiesel describes it could hardly be more different than Rubenstein's proclamations of the end of God in the Holocaust and that the

1967 war was no royal road back to the God of history. Instead, the entire Jewish community, past and present, is united in Jerusalem, this time to forestall destruction and to experience the miraculous. The enemy is defeated by the sum total of Jewish history. Two thousand years of suffering, longing, and hope are mobilized for the battle, "just as the million of martyrs of the Holocaust were enlisted in the ranks." Like the Biblical pillars of fire, the martyrs of the Holocaust came and shielded their spiritual heirs. And the possibility of Israel's defeat is reversed, for what enemy could ever conquer them?[25]

The passion of Wiesel's writing makes it clear that for him, as for Jews around the world, everything changed with the war. Wiesel describes this period as a watershed: "I became a child again, astonished and vulnerable, threatened by nightmare. . . . Suddenly all Jews had again become children of the Holocaust." The watershed involves a military victory and a religious manifestation to be interpreted, in Wiesel's words, by poets and Kabbalists. Indeed, the details of the war, if they are known in their totality, can hardly describe "the great mystery in which we are encloaked, as if by the command of the Almighty." Religious and secular Jews alike interpret the experience of victory as a religious one, compelling each Jew to "confront his people, his past, and his God." The war was a matter of the survival of the Jewish people. A unity emerged that Wiesel describes movingly: "University students flooded embassies to enlist for the fight; the Hasidim of Williamsburg declared days of fast and prayer; youngsters from assimilated homes organized fund raising drives and joined in protests; millionaires cast aside their businesses and took off for Jerusalem; community leaders went sleepless night after night because of their great efforts and profound anxiety. Never was the Jewish people so united, never so moved and anxious, never so ready and prepared to offer and sacrifice everything it had, its 'might, heart and soul."[26]

For Wiesel, there is another miracle involved in the Israeli victory, and that is the humanity of the Jewish soldiers, who fought without hate. Despite the "poisonous incitement" over Arab radio, the Israeli soldiers exhibited no cruelty toward Arab prisoners of war or toward civilians. "I have seen many armies; none more humble, more humane in its victories. I have seen Israeli paratroopers crying before the Wall. They were sad rather than proud." For Wiesel those soldiers sum up his sense of Israel as a moral victory:

> In the Jewish tradition a victory is never linked to defeat . . . one can be victorious without defeating the enemy. Judaism recognizes only victory over oneself. . . . My pride is that Israel has remained human because it has remained so deeply Jewish. During the Six-Day War the Jewish fighters did not become cruel. They became sad. They acquired a certain maturity, a very moving maturity, which I simply cannot forget. And if

> I feel something towards them, the child-soldier in Israel, it is profound respect.[27]

Though Wiesel is less a systematic thinker than a storyteller, by 1967 he had enunciated the major themes foundational to the Holocaust. First, after the Holocaust, Jews and Jewish history exists in a dialectical tension between the suffering of the Jewish people in Europe and the miracle of empowerment in Israel. Second, the innocence of the Jewish people and the redemptive aspects of Israel is affirmed. Both are tied together in a narrative that ultimately becomes a liturgical rendering of Jewish history and the Jewish future.

For Wiesel, Jews were innocent in the suffering of the Holocaust and innocent in the empowerment in the state of Israel after the Holocaust. This innocence could be seen in the martyrdom of the Holocaust dead and in the creation of Israel in response to their martyrdom. All of Jewish history was at the crossroads after the Holocaust and in the creation of the state of Israel. Who then could oppose any part of this narrative except those who wanted to tear at the edges of, or even destroy, Jewish history? The answer for Wiesel is simple. Only those who hate Jews—anti-Semites—or hate themselves—dispute this miracle of Jewish renaissance.

What is important is that Wiesel is able to articulate these themes in a pre-ideological and pre-theological manner, appealing to the emotive aspects of the experience of the Jewish people and gathering all Jews, regardless of their individual stories, into a collective history. The Holocaust and Israel become vantage points from which a perspective on Jewish singularity and continuity can take shape, and the historical mission of the Jewish people becomes articulate. Wiesel's genius is that this terrain is less definable as a political or religious program than as a formative platform from which Jewish thought and action emanates. Thus the dialectical tension allows Jewish suffering to point to the miracle of Israel's victory, yet not be consumed by it; the redemptive aspects of Israel continually evoke Jewish innocence because of the absolutely unjustified suffering of Jews in Europe. In a sense, Wiesel recreates the rhythms of contemporary Jewish life almost as a liturgy and suggests avenues of Jewish commitment within those rhythms. In Wiesel's world, and by extension in the Jewish world, Jews remain in the throes of suffering even as they are empowered, an innocent people haunted by isolation and abandonment even as redemption beckons.

Remaining in suffering, with its possible return, even as Israel wins its mighty victory, is crucial to Wiesel's narrative arc. Rather than assuming that power and victory in war forecloses suffering once and for all, the opposite is the case. Over the years, as Israel counters threats and deals decisively with them, Wiesel and other Jews are consumed with the vision of another Holocaust. Paradoxically, Israel's military prowess becomes a sign of Jewish vulnerability.

In Wiesel's evocative Jerusalem scene, Jews are once again alone, another Holocaust lurking in the future. Jewish history is replete with reversals, a golden age of peace and flourishing followed by eras where Jews are rejected and have to flee and find safe harbor. Was Israel's victory just another turn of the tables, awaiting yet another turning?

Part of the somberness in Wiesel's rendering of the 1967 war is its liturgical quality. For Wiesel, Israel's victory is more a spiritual than military one. It is seen within the context of the suffering of Jewish history, as a gathering point of Jewish martyrs. Though the martyrs powerfully propelled Israel to victory in 1967, what if the martyrs, like God, become absent? What if the militaries of those who would like to see the state of Israel defeated conduct a surprise attack that catches the martyrs off guard? It seems that such a force to guard the state is limited. Is it therefore to be expected that one day, despite this victory, that Israel will be defeated and another Holocaust will take place?

In contrast, for Rubenstein the concentration on Jewish suffering should end with Israel's military victory in the 1967 war. Though he counsels that Israel's victory is less than definitive, the only way to maintain that power is to think militarily and politically; the liturgy of suffering and innocence is misplaced and dangerous. Even if the victims of the Holocaust are considered martyrs, martyrs in history cannot protect the state. If in the state of Israel, Jews have returned as a power to be reckoned with, those with just grievances will seek to limits Israel's power or displace it altogether. Even if Jewish empowerment must take precedence, Jews cannot expect that the Palestinian Arabs and surrounding Arab governments will celebrate or permanently accept their defeat. They have their own reasons for rejecting Israel, only some of which may be based on their feelings toward Jews.

Rubenstein associates both the end of Judaism and Jewish life and its continuance with anti-Semitism. Jews have a profoundly human need to identify with a community whose symbols, calendar, and rites ground them. Therefore Rubenstein argues strongly for Israel as a place for the protection of those who positively identify themselves as Jews as well as for those who have been identified as Jews and vilified.

For Rubenstein any religious content to Jewishness disappeared after Auschwitz and therefore there is no content-oriented future for the Jewish people. Yet that does not mean that Jews would or should disappear from history. Jews can find contentment in being Jewish simply as Jews who are familiar with Jewishness and are therefore grounded by it. At the same time, the world will not forget the Jewishness of Jews. Rubenstein argues for the assimilation of Jewishness in the world, but he also does not believe that it is possible. Anti-Semitism is too deep in the cultures and religions of the world to allow that.

After citing the example of anti-Semitism in Ferdinand and Isabella's Spain and the three options then presented to Jews—to convert to Christianity, flee, or stay and die as martyrs—Rubenstein expressed his respect for those who accepted martyrdom. However, Rubenstein insists that the Holocaust dead are not comparable:

> By his decision such a man elected martyrdom. His death was freely chosen. It served as a witness both to his love of place and his Jewish faith. This is in stark contrast to what took place in the Nazi death camps. One of Hitler's greatest victories was that he deprived the Jews of *all* opportunity to be martyrs. . . . All Jews were slaughtered without distinction. It must be sadly noted that the pathetic attempts of the Jewish community to see the six million as martyrs is a tragic albeit understandable misperception.[28]

Rubenstein closes his argument about martyrdom with an even more provocative statement: "Unfortunately, Auschwitz can be seen as the first triumph of technological civilization in dealing with what may become a persistent human problem, the problem of the waste disposal of superfluous human beings in an over populated world."[29]

Hearing these words, Wiesel was beside himself. It was one matter to attack or even denigrate God. Wiesel's *Night* is full of such commentary. But when Rubenstein refers to the attempts of the Jewish community to designate the Holocaust dead as martyrs as "pathetic," since they were done away with like "waste disposal," Wiesel saw where Rubenstein was going with his argument. He was disposing of the Holocaust dead as meaningless victims devoid of testimony. Thus Jewish history could be seen as meaningless as well. This challenged the Jewish sense of chosenness and Israel as a miraculous response to the Holocaust. If the Holocaust dead were not Jewish martyrs then the state of Israel could be criticized on political terms. The establishment of such a state could be justified only in relation to suffering in Jewish history. If Israel were criticized on strictly political terms then charges of colonialism and military interventionism would have full play. Besides, if there were no martyrdom that could justify the existence of the state of Israel, and if God's presence could not be affirmed in the present, what reason would there be for continuing on as Jews and sacrificing for a Jewish state?

Sensing this downward spiral of commitment to a Jewish future, Wiesel changed how he presented his Holocaust experience. In ways quite different than in *Night*, Wiesel began to emphasize the remarkable commitment of Jewish leaders to their people and the essential dignity of Jews in the face of death. By doing this Wiesel hoped to retrieve the meaning within and after the

Holocaust. Wiesel's language was as strong as Rubenstein's. It was Wiesel's turn to lecture Rubenstein:

> You say, Dick, that Hitler deprived the Jews of martyrdom. That is not true. Many Jews, especially the rabbis, could have saved their lives . . . and do you know who wanted to save them? The priests. It's not the first time in history that they wanted alibis. The priests came to our rabbis—we had some thirty of them in our center—offering them refuge in a monastery. But, of course, what rabbi would choose it? I think there were two who chose to escape individually, out of at least fifty thousand rabbis in Eastern Europe. . . . All the others preferred voluntarily, knowingly, to go with their Jews. How did these rabbis maintain their Jewishness and their humanity? That is the wonder! [30]

Wiesel continued that the Nazis wanted to exterminate Jews "spiritually" and substitute themselves for God. In spite of this, there were many Jews "who remained human and who remained Jewish and went on praying to God." Once again Wiesel admonished Rubenstein. "And here I will tell you, Dick, that you don't understand *them* when you say that it is more difficult to live today in a world without God," Wiesel continued. "NO! If you want difficulties, choose to live *with* God. Can you compare the tragedy of the believer to that of the nonbeliever? The real tragedy, the real drama, is the drama of the believer."[31]

Night is about the drama of the unraveling believer. Wiesel's memoir is full of stories of those religious Jews, including himself, who increasingly find it difficult to pray and then lose their ability altogether. Wiesel records that in Auschwitz even Talmudic scholars and rabbis ultimately gave up on their faith. If there are heroes in *Night*, they are those who first lose their piety and then lose their faith. Indeed, the heroes of *Night* have either lost their faith or are seen as mentally disturbed by their fellow Jews.

One thinks here of Mrs. Schachter, a woman in her fifties, whose husband and two older sons had been deported before her. Wiesel knew the family. Mrs. Schachter's husband was a pious Jew who spent his days studying Jewish texts while she supported the family. Taken in the same railroad car, Wiesel describes her as having "lost her mind," when on third day of the transport she began to shout out her visions of a fire without end, a terrible fire, with huge flames. Confronted with these horrifying outbursts, her railroad car companions sought to calm her down. When despite their entreaties she continued shouting, they bound and gagged her. When she broke free from her constraints and once again cried out she was beaten. Finally, as they pulled up to Auschwitz, a place none had heard of before, she shouted, "The fire, over there!" The fire she envisioned was real. It is the burning bodies that occasions Wiesel's confrontation with God.[32]

An earlier version of Mrs. Schachter is Moishe the Beadle who initiated the young Wiesel into the study of the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah. As a foreigner, Moishe was expelled by the Nazis. There he witnessed the mass killings of Jews across the border into Poland. Moishe was slated for death but was only wounded. Having survived, he found his way back to the village, and warned Wiesel and his fellow Jews of what was going to happen to them. "Jews listen to me! That's all I ask of you. No money. No pity. Just listen to me!" He kept shouting in synagogue, between the prayers at dusk and the evening prayer.[33]

The heroes in *Night* are not typical martyrs at all. Mrs. Schachter, wife of a pious husband, is thought to be mad. Moishe, always an outsider, is thought to want money or pity. In each case their vision and knowledge remains hidden from the population or, if there in plain sight, their vision is beaten down or ignored. Are the Jews who beat Mrs. Schachter and ignore Moishe soon to be victims or later to be lamented as martyrs?

Only a cynic could see the early Wiesel as manipulating the Holocaust to his own advantage. Remember as well that Wiesel's early writing on the Holocaust occurred well before he or the Holocaust had became an icon in Jewish life During the writing of *Night*, Wiesel dwelled in obscurity, as did Rubenstein when he began writing articles that would later be included in *After Auschwitz*. Even at the time of their exchange in 1970, the future of the Holocaust narrative was uncertain. Would such evocations of Jewish suffering and innocence continue to gain ground in the Jewish community and the non-Jewish world? The state of Israel had its detractors as well. It was impossible to know in advance how the story of Israel would play in the decades ahead.

So while there was something primal in Wiesel's discussion of the Holocaust and Israel, there was also something primal in Wiesel's address to Rubenstein. When he is confronted with Rubenstein's disdain for Jewish martyrdom in the Holocaust, Wiesel shifts the balance of his argument as a defiant attempt to keep the world he lived through alive. If that world finally and irrevocably died, what would become of the memories of his father, sister and mother who perished? What would become of the life he knew before deportation? The full and wholesome Jewish world that Wiesel evoked in the opening pages of *Night* still lives on somewhere in Wiesel, the survivor. Would he be able to go on living if his own beginnings were also seen as an illusion?

Trivializing the Holocaust

Though incisive and deep, Rubenstein recognized that the Jewish people as a whole would not recognize their voice in his. Early on, Rubenstein realized that it was Wiesel who spoke for the community.

At a 1991 symposium honoring the pioneering Holocaust historian, Raul Hilberg, Rubenstein recalled his first meeting with Wiesel: "I first met Elie Wiesel on October 3, 1968, when he came to Pittsburg to lecture. . . . I had been deeply moved by reading *Night*, but what struck me most was the enormous spiritual authority he conveyed by his presence. . . . Few if any other Holocaust survivors seemed to convey a comparable authority." Reflecting back on their encounter in Detroit several years later, Rubenstein affirmed the fundamental difference between Wiesel's anguish about God and his own conclusion that the "idea of a God who chooses Israel lacks credibility. Those Jews who come to the latter conclusion are no longer troubled or agonized about God and the Holocaust. They do not demand that God stand in judgment for what he had done to Israel nor do they feel the slightest sense of revolt against God. Rebellion is, after all, an indirect statement of belief. They believe the world is the way it is. They also believe the Jewish problem is how to survive in the world the way it is." In Rubenstein's retrospective view, Wiesel was correct in Detroit and later in his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize: "Of course he was right about the tragedy of the believer in Detroit and in Oslo. I had ceased to believe in the traditional God because I could not stand the incessant inner psychic warfare between what I was expected to believe and preach and what I learned about the Holocaust and the world in which a Holocaust could take place."[34]

Rubenstein's anger had been softened by time. As Rubenstein experienced exile, Wiesel was showered with invitations and honors. By the 1980s, Wiesel was being courted by world leaders as the spokesman for the Holocaust martyrs and others who suffer in the present. Though Wiesel is careful to reserve martyrdom for the Holocaust dead, over time he began to speak out for others, from the boat people of Vietnam to the crisis in Darfur. Wiesel assumed the moral leadership ascribed to him. Indeed, as one biographer noted, his message is to all humanity. Still his primal roots remained Jewish.[35]

Rubenstein's voice had been vanquished as too strong and critical. Realizing this, a month after their encounter in Detroit, Rubenstein left the active service of the rabbinate and began his academic career. A few years later he was on the road again, the road that led him to Tallahassee and our encounter. At the symposium on Raul Hilberg, Rubenstein commented on this transition: "I had made the journey from a religious career within the Jewish community to a scientific career in a publicly supported state university. Judaism and Jewish history continued to be of fundamental interest to me, but it was now my vocation to investigate religion as a humanly produced phenomenon. Insofar as my profession was concerned, my personal belief and practice were now strictly private matters." He went on: "In this new environment, I went through a period of impatience with Wiesel's writings. Why, I asked myself, does he go

to such convoluted and torturous efforts to maintain some kind of relationship with his God when he, of all people, knows about Auschwitz."[36]

To most of the students who came Rubenstein's way, he was an unknown, a teacher who taught the Holocaust at their university. Wiesel's *Night* had led them to the study of the Holocaust. What was Rubenstein to say to them?

One can imagine the inner psychic conflict that Rubenstein experienced when the rejection he expected and acknowledged—the one that sent him into a permanent exile—reached his doorstep there with students who admired his adversary.

I encountered Wiesel through Rubenstein before the adoration had reached its apex. I also encountered Wiesel in person after the adoration was firmly in place. The first time was at a conference on the Holocaust at Oxford University in 1988. Rubenstein was there, in fact we spoke at a session together which featured a discussion of interfaith relations in the post-Holocaust world. True to form, Rubenstein scolded the Christian contingent, some of whom were Germans, for their romantized repentance of anti-Semitism. The repentant Christian delegation was shocked when Rubenstein regaled them about the logic of the Pope Pius XII's reluctance to speak clearly and directly about the suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust. Though the Christians lamented the Pope's silence, Rubenstein counseled them on the logic of the Pope's reluctance. After all, the Pope's constituency was Catholic not Jewish. Why should he risk the future of the Catholic Church for Jews? The Christians were mortified. I was brought back to Rubenstein's classroom where romanticism was outlawed. I smiled inside as the Christians cringed.

There were other awkward though telling moments at the Oxford conference. The non-violent Palestinian uprising had begun in 1987 and the brutal repression of the Palestinians by Israeli armed forces was underway. I was becoming known for speaking out against such abuses and people began to ask if I had anything newly written on the subject that I could offer them. Indeed I had and while sitting next to Rubenstein I passed one copy to the person who first asked me. Soon I was surrounded by others wanting my essay.

I felt shy about this attention, especially with Rubenstein sitting right next to me. I was also hoping that he wouldn't ask me for a copy of my essay. Rubenstein was like a father to me and with his Freudian perspective it was obvious that the son, me, was trying to supplant him, the father. At least he would interpret it that way. Eventually he did ask me and even though I told him it was unimportant and he shouldn't bother with it, he insisted. I remember him reading the title and mouthing the words—"The Occupation is Over: The Palestinian Uprising and the Future of the Jewish People." He wasn't pleased.

When I encountered Wiesel, I did so from a distance. He was constantly surrounded by admirers and when he spoke it was as the featured speaker.

Since only members of the conference were in attendance, there were perhaps a hundred people or so standing as Wiesel spoke.

Wiesel looked a bit uncomfortable as he began to speak. Perhaps it was the lengthy introduction provided by the billionaire businessman Robert Maxwell. Maxwell bankrolled the conference. Judging by the surroundings and through second hand information the cost of the conference was well over a million dollars. Just three years later in 1991, with his business empire in freefall, Maxwell died under mysterious circumstances. His body was flown directly to Israel for immediate burial—without an autopsy. This fed speculation that Maxwell had been an Israeli spy who under the duress of financial collapse threatened to reveal his sources and Israel's undercover operations in the United Kingdom and beyond. The rumor was that he had been murdered by the Israel's intelligence unit, the Mossad.

Whatever, the circumstances of his death, it was soon revealed that Maxwell had stolen money from pension plans and beyond. His sons later stood trial in a case that drew international attention. Though they were eventually acquitted of wrong doing, Maxwell's reputation was sullied.

Well before Maxwell's death, I felt something had gone terribly wrong with his sponsoring such an important Holocaust conference. In his introductory remarks at the conference, Maxwell spoke at great length about his important work of Holocaust commemoration. Midway through, he broke down and started to weep. As a person who fled Czechoslovakia in 1939 and lost most of his family in the Holocaust, Maxwell had succeeded beyond the imagination in the United Kingdom, his adopted homeland. Yet behind the scenes, Maxwell had been known as being ruthless. When he arrived in the United Kingdom, it was rumored that he had even converted to the Anglican faith. Theatre it was. Then I asked myself if theatre had invaded the memory of the Holocaust.

Wiesel stood off by the side as Maxwell spoke and wept. Whether it was intended or not, Wiesel showed no emotion. He did not move to comfort Maxwell. Nor did anyone else come to his aid. When Wiesel was finally accorded his say, he was brief, speaking for ten minutes or less. He spoke as he wrote. The cadences were familiar, evocative, but considering the setting, a bit worn, as if he had delivered more or less the same talk for some years. Then it was over and he was ushered out by friends and officials of the conference. Having heard of Wiesel for so many years, it was interesting to see him in person. His effect on me was limited, however, and even a bit negative. The entire scene depressed me.

Several years later at another Holocaust conference at Oxford University, I heard Wiesel again. This time he was addressing the widely rumored publication of Norman Finkelstein's *The Holocaust Industry* which singled out Wiesel for approbation. Yet as with Rubenstein years earlier, Wiesel never mentioned Finkelstein's name or the title of his book. It was all about the one who was

absent. This of course made Finkelstein even more vividly present. It made me wonder whether Finkelstein was the new Rubenstein cutting at the edges of Holocaust orthodoxy.

In the opening pages of his book, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering,* Norman Finkelstein names Wiesel as one of the primary culprits in the public relations aspect of exploiting Jewish suffering. Finkelstein is harsh, overly so, but his insistence points to the debate over how the Holocaust functions in Jewish life today.

Finkelstein argues that "The Holocaust" is an ideological representation of the Nazi attempt to destroy European Jewry. By representing the destruction of European Jewry in this light, Finkelstein believes Wiesel and other Jews intentionally misrepresent Jewish suffering as a leverage point for Jewish empowerment in America and Israel. With the Holocaust as an ideology, the Jewish community and the policies it supports become off-limits for critical appraisal. Finkelstein writes boldly:

> Like most ideologies, it bears a connection, if tenuous, with reality. The Holocaust is not an arbitrary but rather an internally coherent construct. Its central dogmas sustain significant political and class interests. Indeed, the Holocaust has proven to be an indispensable ideological weapon. Throughout its deployment, one of the world's most formidable military powers, with a horrendous human rights record, has cast itself as a victim state, and the most successful ethnic group in the United States has likewise acquired victim status. Considerable dividends accrue from this specious victimhood—in particular, immunity to criticism, however justified. Those enjoying immunity, I might add, have not escaped the moral corruption that typically attends it. From this perspective, Elie Wiesel's performance as official interpreter of "The Holocaust" is not happenstance. Plainly he did not come to this position on account of his humanitarian commitments or literary talents. Rather, Wiesel plays this leading role because he unerringly articulates a dogma of, and accordingly sustains the interests underpinning, "The Holocaust."[37]

Despite this criticism, Wiesel's words continue to be prized and trumpeted. Today he is feted as a contemporary Jewish mystic whose liturgical cadences provide an element of hope within the ultimate tragedy of the Holocaust. In a difficult and still suffering world, Wiesel's evocation of tragedy and hope was and remains appealing to Jews and non-Jews alike. Yet Finkelstein is only the most well known of Wiesel's public critics; in private there are many others, others who have remarked about Wiesel's propensity for honors and wealth. I blushed when I even heard one important rabbi sing: "There's no business like Shoah business."

Over the years the power of Wiesel's words and images created a Holocaust narrative in the West which others are cautioned against ignoring or criticizing. The Holocaust, which once was a subversive memory of suffering that even many Jews found difficult affirming, has become a mantra. Wiesel's rage toward Germans in the original *Night* and those like Rubenstein who from his point of view misinterpreted the meaning of the Holocaust has turned outward toward critics of Israeli policies toward Palestinians. Many critics of Israeli policies toward the Palestinians have been threatened with the Holocaust images and constructs that Wiesel created and keeps reciting.

Perhaps Wiesel, like Rubenstein, became less provocative over time because of the acceptance of the Holocaust as a formative event and because of the repetition of Holocaust writing and imagery. It may also have to do with the changing image of the state of Israel which Wiesel, like Rubenstein, defends unabashedly.

Over the years, Israel's standing in the world and among some Jews has become increasingly tarnished because of its policies toward the Palestinians. For Wiesel, however, the state of Israel remains a dream and a miraculous response to the Holocaust. Because of Israel's relationship to the Holocaust, Wiesel still believes that Israel like the Holocaust should be off limits for normal discussion and debate.

The next decades saw little change in the views of either man. In the beginning, the naming of the Holocaust was dramatic and subversive. As Wiesel noted after writing *Night*, the world, including Jewry, wanted little to do with Holocaust survivors *per se* even if the Holocaust had become useful as a public relations tool for American Jews and as political leverage for the state of Israel. The Holocaust as a public relations tool troubled Wiesel. Yet the haunting question facing Wiesel is whether he has consciously or unconsciously contributed to that which he criticizes. Too, the question is whether Wiesel has become a prisoner to his own narrative.

From a different perspective, and some years earlier, the Jewish essayist Phillip Lopate also criticized what to him had become "The Holocaust." Once the Holocaust is introduced there are problems: "One instantly saw that the term was part of a polemic . . . the Holocaustians used it like a club to smash back their opponents. . . In my own mind I continue to distinguish, ever so slightly, between the disaster visited upon the Jews and 'the Holocaust.' Sometimes it almost feels that 'the Holocaust' is a corporation headed by Elie Wiesel, who defends his patents with articles in the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday *Times*." Lopate continued: "The Hitler/Holocaust analogy dead-ends all intelligent discourse by intruding a stridently shrill note that forces the mind to withdraw. To challenge the demagogic minefield of pure self-righteousness from an ironic distance almost ensures being misunderstood. The image of the

Holocaust is too overbearing, too hot to tolerate distinctions. In its life as rhetorical figure, the Holocaust is a bully."[38]

Avishai Margalit, an Israeli philosopher, also complained about the constant evocation of the Holocaust. In an article titled "The Kitsch of Israel," Margalit worried that turning Israel into *the* response to the Holocaust, especially for Jews and others who live outside Israel, had the danger of turning flesh and blood Israelis—and Palestinians—into simplified symbolic representations of reality.

Margalit applied this analysis to the new children's room at Yad VaShem, the Israeli Holocaust museum, which features tape-recorded voices of children crying out to their mothers in Yiddish. Margalit remarks that even a "kitschman of genius" like Elie Wiesel would find this hard to surpass. For the tourist to Israel who visits the museum, as well as the mandatory visits by heads of state, this manipulation has the effect of picturing Israelis as perpetual victims and Palestinians as the new Nazis. As Margalit sees it, speaking of the Palestinians in the "same tone" as one talks of Auschwitz is an "important element of turning the Holocaust into kitsch." More than fifty years after the publication of *Night*, has the Holocaust degenerated into an industry, a bully, and kitsch?[39]

I encountered Wiesel through Rubenstein more than forty years ago. Today I teach a course on the Holocaust where my students read *Night* but, perhaps surprisingly,most of the students have already read *Night* by their high school years, in Holocaust courses that are often mandated by the state as part of its core curriculum. Moreover, though the building of the United Sates Holocaust Memorial Museum was financed by private funds, its yearly financing is provided by the United States government. The Holocaust museum is visited by millions of people from around the world, and has become one of the most popular museums, a major tourist site.

Over the years, I have noticed that the students in my Holocaust course are disturbed by the content I teach, especially my discussion of anti-Semitism in the Christian tradition. This makes the Holocaust disturbing to them in a way they had yet to experience. While this might seem an anomaly—how could the Holocaust not be disturbing?—for many young people the Holocaust is a safe harbor where emotions can be vented and hope secured. After all, Jews survived the Holocaust and Israel stands strong and proud among the nations.

As a Jew who believes that Israeli policies toward Palestinians are wrong, I am constantly confronted by "The Holocaust" being used as a political weapon by officials in national Jewish organizations and by local Jewish communities. Often they use Elie Wiesel as their not-so-hidden weapon to deflect or delegitimize criticisms of Israeli policies. Of course, they don't ask Wiesel's permission to use his good name. But on the other hand, Wiesel's virtual silence over the years on the Palestinian issue encourages this use. As a Holocaust icon, Wiesel

has used his power, and others use it as well, to silence criticism on Israel. Has Wiesel himself become kitsch?

Sometimes it is difficult to recognize the primary impetus for speech and what becomes of it over the years. The Holocaust was real and Elie Wiesel's experience of it was as well. Yet clearly there are issues to be sorted out. One of the major differences between Rubenstein and Wiesel was over the moral character of the state of Israel: Rubenstein opts for a *real politik* of power for power's sake, while Wiesel sees Israel as a moral drama of Jewish renewal. This mirrors their differences over the Holocaust dead as victims or martyrs.

After Rubenstein and Wiesel it is hard to separate the Holocaust and Israel but perhaps we should. Yet this separation often is seen as the same kind of blasphemy that once both Rubenstein and Wiesel were accused of, when they demanded that the Holocaust be recognized for the sake of the future of Jewish life.

Still, Wiesel commands center stage in the discussion of the Holocaust. When President Obama traveled to Cairo to promote his opening to the Muslim world in 2009, Wiesel was with him. Traveling from Cairo to Buchenwald where Wiesel spent the last days of the war and his father died, Wiesel spoke about the Holocaust to a worldwide audience. Perhaps this is the summation of Wiesel's life:

> Mr. President, Chancellor Merkel, Bertrand, ladies and gentlemen. As I came here today it was actually a way of coming and visit my father's grave—but he had no grave. His grave is somewhere in the sky. This has become in those years the largest cemetery of the Jewish people.
>
> The day he died was one of the darkest in my life. He became sick, weak, and I was there. I was there when he suffered. I was there when he asked for help, for water. I was there to receive his last words. But I was not there when he called for me, although we were in the same block; he on the upper bed and I on the lower bed. He called my name, and I was too afraid to move. All of us were. And then he died. I was there, but I was not there. . . .
>
> What can I tell him that the world has learned? . . . But the world hasn't learned. When I was liberated in 1945, April 11, by the American army, somehow many of us were convinced that at least one lesson will have been learned—that never again will there be war; that hatred is not an option, that racism is stupid; and the will to conquer other people's minds or territories or aspirations, that will is meaningless.
>
> Paradoxically, I was so hopeful then. Many of us were, although we had the right to give up on humanity, to give up on culture, to give up on

education, to give up on the possibility of living one's life with dignity in a world that has no place for dignity.

We rejected that possibility and we said, no, we must continue believing in a future, because the world has learned. But again, the world hasn't. Had the world learned, there would have been no Cambodia and no Rwanda and no Darfur and no Bosnia.

Will the world ever learn? I think that is why Buchenwald is so important—as important, of course, but differently as Auschwitz. It's important because here the large—the big camp was a kind of international community. People came there from all horizons—political, economic, culture. The first globalization experiments were made in Buchenwald. And all that was meant to diminish the humanity of human beings.

It's enough—enough to go to cemeteries, enough to weep for oceans. It's enough. There must come a moment—a moment of bringing people together. And therefore we say anyone who comes here should go back with that resolution. Memory must bring people together rather than set them apart. Memories here not to sow anger in our hearts, but on the contrary, a sense of solidarity that all those who need us. What else can we do except invoke that memory so that people everywhere who say the 21st century is a century of new beginnings, filled with promise and infinite hope, and at times profound gratitude to all those who believe in our task, which is to improve the human condition.[40]

Now in his eighties, Weisel's words were more or less what they were over four decades ago. The world had changed considerably in that time. The Jewish community and the state of Israel have changed as well. Is Wiesel's message about Jewish martyrdom and hope like a perennial philosophy, always the same despite the changing context? Or is something new in the offing? When I saw Wiesel speak those words on television, I couldn't help but think that I had heard them before. And that they were no longer enough.