Simon Wiesenthal and "The Sunflower"
Sin, Forgiveness and Retribution

Parashat Ki Tavo, 5777

Summary of "The Sunflower"

Put yourself in the position of a prisoner in a concentration camp. A dying Nazi soldier asks for your forgiveness. What would you do? In The Sunflower, Simon Wiesenthal raises that question for readers to wrestle with, and they have been passionately doing so ever since.

As a young man imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, Wiesenthal was taken one day from his labor brigade to a hospital at the request of Karl, a mortally wounded Nazi soldier. Tormented by the crimes in which he had participated, including the murder of a family with a small child, the SS man wanted to confess to--and if possible, receive absolution from--a Jew. Wiesenthal, left the room in silence, but remained intrigued by the issues the man's request raised about the limits and possibilities of forgiveness. Must we, can we, forgive the repentant criminal, no matter how heinous the crime? Can we forgive crimes committed against others? What do we owe the victims? Twenty-five years after the Holocaust, Wiesenthal asked leading intellectuals what they would have done in his place. Collected into one volume, their responses became one of the most enduring documents of Holocaust literature and a touchstone of interfaith dialogue. This new edition of The Sunflower, issued in honor of the twentieth anniversary of its publication in the United States, brings together the voices of a new generation of thinkers, including Robert Coles, Matthew Fox, Arthur Hertzberg, Harold Kushner, Dith Pran, the Dalai Lama, Dennis Prager, Tzvetan Todorov, and Harry Wu. Their answers reflect the teachings of their diverse beliefs, and remind us that Wiesenthal's question is not limited only to events of the past.

Quotes from Wiesenthal:

"Survival is a privilege which entails obligations. I am forever asking myself what I can do for those who have not survived. The answer I have found for myself (and which need not necessarily be the answer for every survivor) is: I want to be their mouthpiece, I want to keep their memory alive, to make sure the dead live on in that memory"

"The combination of hatred and technology is the greatest danger threatening mankind."

The schools would fail through their silence, the Church through its forgiveness, and the home through the denial and silence of the parents. The new generation has to hear what the older generation refuses to tell it.
(Quoted in the introduction to The Sunflower)

The only value of nearly five decades of my work is a warning to the murderers of tomorrow, that they will never rest.
(Quoted in an interview in The Jerusalem Post International Edition, February 5, 1994)

"I don't think there is any other solution than constantly coming to terms with the past, and learning from it. There is no point in minimizing guilt in order to make it easier for sons and daughters to bear the failure of their fathers and grandfathers, their mothers and grandmothers"

Wiesenthal was often asked to explain his motives for becoming a Nazi hunter. According to Clyde Farnsworth in the New York Times Magazine (February 2, 1964), Wiesenthal once spent the Sabbath at the home of a former Mauthausen inmate, now a well-to-do jewelry manufacturer. After dinner his host said, "Simon, if you had gone back to building houses, you'd be a millionaire. Why didn't you?" "You're a religious man," replied Wiesenthal. "You believe in God and life after death. I also believe. When we come to the other world and meet the millions of Jews who died in the camps and they ask us, 'What have you done?', there will be many answers. You will say, 'I became a jeweler', Another will say, I have smuggled coffee and American cigarettes', Another will say, 'I built houses', But I will say, 'I didn't forget you'."

Discussion Questions:

IF YOU WERE WIESENTHAL, WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE?

1) Is it possible to "move on" if you are constantly harping on a victimized past? Isn't there a danger of falling into the pit of self-pity or interminable anger? Using Wiesenthal and "Arami Oved Avi" (p.1141, 26:5-10) as examples, what are the positive reasons for looking back.

2) See 28:64-65 (p. 1156) "And among the nations you shall have no repose." Is this a punishment or a prophecy – a result of sin or simply a fact of the Jewish condition?

3) Bereisheet Rabba (commenting on the dove of the Noah story that returned to the ark because it found "no rest for the sole of her foot." "If it had found a resting place it never would have returned....thus, if the Jewish people had found a resting place in the nations they never would have returned (to Eretz Yisrael). Is this true? Does this justify Jewish suffering in the Diaspora as necessary, even if it wasn't a punishment?

4) "In his confession there was true repentance," writes Wiesenthal (p. 53). Not all of the commentators agree with him. Many of them think Karl was angling for "cheap grace," and that his remorse exists only because he finds himself facing death. Which point of view do you agree with? Do you think, with literary critic Tzvetan Todorov (p. 251), that the very fact of Karl's expressing remorse makes him exceptional, and therefore deserving of respect?

5) Eva Fleischner found that almost without exception, her Christian students "come out in favor of forgiveness, while the Jewish students feel that Simon did the right thing by not granting the dying man's wish" (p. 139). Do their differences stem from first-hand experience, or from different notions of sin and repentance, as Dennis Prager suggests? Do you believe, with political theorist Herbert Marcuse, that "the easy forgiving of such crimes perpetuates the very evil it wants to alleviate" (p. 198)? Does this concept also justify the long list of punishments described in Ki Tavo?

6) "I asked myself if it was only the Nazis who had persecuted us. Was it not just as wicked for people to look on quietly and without protest at human beings enduring such shocking humiliation?" (p. 57). Some of the commentators believe that those who were following orders were just as guilty as those who gave them; others, like Dith Pran, draw a moral line between followers and leaders. Would you hold them equally responsible?

7) "Without forgetting there can be no forgiving," says retired Israeli Supreme Court Justice Moshe Bejski (p. 116); the Dalai Lama, on the other hand, believes that one must forgive but not necessarily forget. Do you think it is possible to forgive and not forget? How would you differentiate forgiveness and reconciliation?

8) Wiesenthal's friend Josek tells him that no one can offer forgiveness on behalf of another victim. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "No one can forgive crimes committed against other people" (p. 165). Wiesenthal is not so sure. "Aren't we a single community with the same destiny, and one must answer for the other?" he asks (p. 65). It is a question echoed by the Catholic writer Christopher Hollis when he posits that insofar as Karl's crime was part of "a general campaign of genocide, the author was as much a victim--or likely to be soon a victim--of that campaign as was the child, and, being a sufferer, had therefore the right to forgive" (p. 169). Which point of view do you find more persuasive, Hollis's or Heschel's?

9) Many of the Symposium contributors believe that even as he lay dying, Karl saw the Jews as objects or sub humans, and that his wish to confess to a Jew, any Jew, and a concentration camp prisoner at that, showed that he had learned nothing from his experiences. Do you agree with this?

10) Eugene J. Fisher believes that "we have no right to put Jewish survivors in the impossible moral position of offering forgiveness, implicitly, in the name of the six million. Placing a Jew in this anguished position further victimizes him or her. This, in my reading, was the final sin of the dying Nazi" (pp. 132-33). Literature professor Lawrence L. Langer and writer Primo Levi share this opinion. Do you agree?

11) Jean Amery, Mark Goulden and Cynthia Ozick insist that Karl and the other Nazis should never under any circumstances be forgiven. Do you find their arguments harsh or just?

12) How does collective guilt differ from national guilt? Do you believe that future generations should continue to feel remorse for a previous generation's crimes? Martin E. Marty compares the national guilt visited upon the postwar generation in Germany with our own national guilt for the institution of slavery and the genocide of Native Americans, and questions whether the perpetuation of such feelings is healthy. Do you agree with his position?

Bio of Wiesenthal

Simon Wiesenthal was born on December 31, 1908 in Buczacz, in what is now the Lvov Oblast section of the Ukraine. In 1936, Simon married Cyla Mueller and worked in an architectural office in Lvov. Their life together was happy until 1939 when Germany and Russia signed their "non-aggression" pact and agreed to partition Poland between them. Early in 1942, the Nazi hierarchy formally decided on the "Final Solution" to the "Jewish problem" -- Annihilation. Throughout occupied Europe a terrifying genocide machine was put into operation. In August 1942, Wiesenthal's mother was sent to the Belzec death camp. By September, most of his and his wife's relatives were dead; a total of eighty-nine members of both families perished. Because his wife's blonde hair gave her a chance of passing as an "Aryan," Wiesenthal made a deal with the Polish underground. In return for detailed charts of railroad junction points made by him for use by saboteurs, his wife was provided with false papers identifying her as "Irene Kowalska," a Pole , and spirited out of the camp in the autumn of 1942. She lived in Warsaw for two years and then worked in the Rhineland as a forced laborer, without her true identity ever being discovered. With the help of the deputy director, Wiesenthal himself escaped the Ostbahn camp in October 1943, just before the Germans began liquidating all the inmates. In June 1944, he was recaptured and sent back to Janwska where he would almost certainly have been killed had the German eastern front not collapsed under the advancing Red Army. Knowing they would be sent into combat if they had no prisoners to justify their rear-echelon assignment, the *SS* guards at Janwska decided to keep the few remaining inmates alive. With 34 prisoners out of an original 149,000, the 200 guards joined the general retreat westward, picking up the entire population of the village of Chelmiec along the way to adjust the prisoner-guard ratio.

Very few of the prisoners survived the westward trek through Plaszow, Gross-Rosen and Buchenwald, which ended at Mauthausen in upper Austria. Weighing less than 100 pounds and lying helplessly in a barracks where the stench was so strong that even hardboiled *SS* guards would not enter, Wiesenthal was barely alive when Mauthausen was liberated by an American armored unit on May 5, 1945.

As soon as his health was sufficiently restored, Wiesenthal began gathering and preparing evidence on Nazi atrocities for the War Crimes Section of the United States Army. After the war, he also worked for the Army's Office of Strategic Services and Counter-Intelligence Corps and headed the Jewish Central Committee of the United States Zone of Austria, a relief and welfare organization. Late in 1945, he and his wife, each of whom had believed the other to be dead, were reunited, and in 1946, their daughter Pauline was born.

The evidence supplied by Wiesenthal was utilized in the American zone war crime trials. When his association with the United States Army ended in 1947, Wiesenthal and thirty volunteers opened the Jewish Historical Documentation Center in Linz, Austria, for the purpose of assembling evidence for future trials. But, as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union intensified, both sides lost interest in prosecuting Germans, and Wiesenthal's volunteers, succumbing to frustration, drifted away to more ordinary pursuits. In 1954, the office in Linz was closed and its files were given to the Yad Vashem Archives in Israel, except for one - the dossier on Adolf Eichmann, the inconspicuous technocrat who, as chief of the Gestapo's Jewish Department, had supervised the implementation of the "Final Solution."

While continuing his salaried relief and welfare work, including the running of an occupational training school for Hungarian and other Iron Curtain refugees, Wiesenthal never relaxed in his pursuit of the elusive Eichmann who had disappeared at the time of Germany's defeat in World War II. In 1953, Wiesenthal received information that Eichmann was in Argentina from people who had spoken to him there. He passed this information on to Israel through the Israeli embassy in Vienna and in 1954 also informed Nahum Goldmann, but the FBI had received information that Eichmann was in Damascus, Syria. It was not until 1959 that Israel was informed by Germany that Eichmann was in Buenos Aires living under the alias of Ricardo Klement. He was captured there by Israeli agents and brought to Israel for trial. Eichmann was found guilty of mass murder and executed on May 31, 1961.

Encouraged by the capture of Eichmann, Wiesenthal reopened the Jewish Documentation Center, this time in Vienna, and concentrated exclusively on the hunting of war criminals. One of his high priority cases was Karl Silberbauer, the Gestapo officer who arrested Anne Frank, the fourteen year-old German-Jewish girl who was murdered by the Nazis after hiding in an Amsterdam attic for two years. Dutch neo-Nazi propagandists were fairly successful in their attempts to discredit the authenticity of Anne Frank's famous diary until Wiesenthal located Silberbauer, then a police inspector in Austria, in 1963. "Yes," Silberbauer confessed, when confronted, "I arrested Anne Frank."

In October 1966, sixteen *SS* officers, nine of them found by Wiesenthal, went on trial in Stuttgart, West Germany, for participation in the extermination of Jews in Lvov. High on Wiesenthal's most-wanted list was Franz Stangl, the commandant of the Treblinka and Sobibor concentration camps in Poland. After three years of patient undercover work by Wiesenthal, Stangl was located in Brazil and remanded to West Germany for imprisonment in 1967. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and died in prison.

Wiesenthal's book of memoirs, **The Murderers Among Us**, was published in 1967. During a visit to the United States to promote the book, Wiesenthal announced that he had found Mrs. Hermine Ryan, nee Braunsteiner, a housewife living in Queens, New York. According to the dossier, Mrs. Ryan had supervised the killings of several hundred children at Majdanek. She was extradited to Germany for trial as a war criminal in 1973 and received life imprisonment.

The Jewish Documentation Center in Vienna is a nondescript, sparsely furnished three-room office with a staff of four, including Wiesenthal. Contrary to belief, Wiesenthal does not usually track down the Nazi fugitives himself. His chief task is gathering and analyzing information. In that work he is aided by a vast, informal, international network of friends, colleagues, and sympathizers, including German World War II veterans, appalled by the horrors they witnessed. He has even received tips from former Nazis with grudges against other former Nazis. A special branch of his Vienna office documents the activities of right-wing groups, neo-Nazis and similar organizations.

Painstakingly, Wiesenthal culls every pertinent document and record he can get and listens to the many personal accounts told him by individual survivors. With an architect's structural acumen, a Talmudist's thoroughness, and a brilliant talent for investigative thinking, he pieces together the most obscure, incomplete, and apparently irrelevant and unconnected data to build cases solid enough to stand up in a court of law. The dossiers are then presented to the appropriate authorities. When, as often happens, they fail to take action, whether from indifference, pro-Nazi sentiment, or some other consideration, Wiesenthal goes to the press and other media, for experience has taught him that publicity and an outraged public opinion are powerful weapons.

The work yet to be done is enormous. Germany's war criminal files contain more than 90,000 names, most of them of people who have never been tried. Thousands of former Nazis, not named in any files, are also known to be at large, often in positions of prominence, throughout Germany. Aside from the cases themselves, there is the tremendous task of persuading authorities and the public that the Nazi Holocaust was massive and pervasive. In the final paragraph of his memoirs, he quotes what an *SS* corporal told him in 1944: "You would tell the truth [about the death camps] to the people in America. That's right. And you know what would happen, Wiesenthal? They wouldn't believe you. They'd say you were mad. Might even put you into an asylum. How can anyone believe this terrible business - unless he has lived through it?"

Among Mr. Wiesenthal's many honors include decorations from the Austrian and French resistance movements, the Dutch Freedom Medal, the Luxembourg Freedom Medal, the United Nations League for the Help of Refugees Award, the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal presented to him by President Jimmy Carter in 1980, and the French Legion of Honor which he received in 1986. Wiesenthal was a consultant for the motion picture thriller, **The Odessa File**(Paramount, 1974). **The Boys from Brazil** (Twentieth Century Fox, 1978), a major motion picture based on Ira Levin's book of the same name, starring Sir Laurence Olivier as Herr Lieberman, a character styled after Wiesenthal.

In 1981, the Wiesenthal Center produced the Academy Award™-winning documentary, **Genocide**, narrated by Elizabeth Taylor and the late Orson Welles, and introduced by Simon Wiesenthal. Wiesenthal lived in a modest apartment in Vienna and spends his evenings answering letters, studying books and files, and working on his stamp collection. He lived there with his wife Cyla untill her death November 10, 2003.

As is to be expected, Simon Wiesenthal received numerous anonymous threats and insulting letters. In June 1982, a bomb exploded at the front door of his house causing a great deal of damage. Fortunately, no one was hurt. Since then, his house and office have been guarded by an armed policeman. One German and several Austrian neo-Nazis were arrested for the bombing. The German, who was found to be the main perpetrator, was sentenced to five years in prison.

He died in 2005, one of the moral giants of our generation.