8. Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech

Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, December 10, 1986

Elie Wiesel (1928–2016) was a noted Holocaust survivor, award winning novelist, journalist, human rights activist, and winner of the Novel Peace Prize.

And now the boy is turning to me: "Tell me," he asks. "What have you done with my future? What have you done with your life?"

And I tell him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.

And then I explained to him how naive we were, that the world did know and remain silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe.

Of course, since I am a Jew profoundly rooted in my people's memory and tradition, my first response is to Jewish fears, Jewish needs, Jewish crises. For I belong to a traumatized generation, one that experienced the abandonment and solitude of our people. It would be unnatural for me not to make Jewish priorities my own: Israel, Soviet Jewry, Jews in Arab lands ... But there are others as important to me. Apartheid is, in my view, as abhorrent as anti-Semitism. To me, Andrei Sakharov's isolation is as much of a disgrace as Josef Biegun's imprisonment. As is the denial of Solidarity and its leader Lech Walesa's right to dissent. And Nelson Mandela's interminable imprisonment.

There is so much injustice and suffering crying out for our attention: victims of hunger, of racism, and political persecution, writers and poets, prisoners in so many lands governed by the Left and by the Right. Human rights are being violated on every continent. More people are oppressed than free. And

then, too, there are the Palestinians to whose plight I am sensitive but whose methods I deplore. Violence and terrorism are not the answer. Something must be done about their suffering, and soon. I trust Israel, for I have faith in the Jewish people. Let Israel be given a chance, let hatred and danger be removed from her horizons, and there will be peace in and around the Holy Land.

COMMENTARY BY CLAIRE E. SUFRIN

In November 1989, two Holocaust deniers attempted to interrupt the keynote address at a conference on the Holocaust held at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Once their intentions became clear, they were quickly escorted out by one of the conference organizers, a Holocaust survivor and educator, and then arrested.

The following day, the front page of the student newspaper reported on the event, including a quote from one of the Holocaust-deniers, who claimed that he was "rushed" by "Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel." While this account bears little resemblance to what actually happened (and the article also provided the accurate information), the incident has greater significance than most cases of misrecognition. Just three years after Wiesel had won the Nobel Peace Prize, this Holocaust denier unwittingly demonstrated that the Peace Prize had cemented Wiesel's career as spokesperson for the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis. In the eyes of many, Wiesel was no longer *a* survivor, he was now *the* survivor, a symbol of every Jew who had somehow made it through the horrors of the Holocaust.

Indeed, in beginning his Nobel acceptance speech, Wiesel told the gathered dignitaries that the honor bestowed upon him "belongs to all the survivors and their children, and through us, to the Jewish people with whose destiny I have always identified." As Wiesel accepted the mantle of representing all survivors, he also claimed that the survivors collectively represent the entirety of the Jewish people. By naming survivors to the role of representing world Jewry, Wiesel placed the Holocaust at the center of collective Jewish identity. It is the lens through which he viewed the world, and he expected that Jews around the world would join him.

In the speech's next section, Wiesel stated his commitment to fighting injustice wherever it occurs: after the Holocaust, he explained, "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim." One must always become involved, on the side of the victim and against the oppressor.

Wiesel continued by explaining his priorities when it comes to the prevention of human suffering and the recognition of human dignity. He was unapologetic in stating that the well-being of the Jewish people is his top priority. He believed that his destiny was inextricably wound up in theirs. He found security in the strength of the State of Israel and its promise to defend the Jewish people but also fretted about the anti-Semitism of the Soviet Union.

Wiesel called it natural that, as a Jew, he would care most about Jews. Regardless, the statement points to a tension inherent in the very idea of giving a prize for peace. On the one hand, the award is given for specific work that the recipient has done toward peace. This work will, by definition, be located in some particular place and target some particular need. It would be impossible for anyone to prevent all acts of injustice; in order to accomplish anything an activist for justice must target certain injustices. Thus, Wiesel was honored for his work to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and against further specific violations of human dignity.

On the other hand, in its very name, the Peace Prize gestures toward something broader than any one cause and toward a goal that remains ever elusive. The concept of peace suggests something universal and redemptive, a new world order in which everyone will share. This is why Wiesel began by stating his general commitment to all who are suffering before focusing on the needs of the Jewish people as his top commitment. Nevertheless, there is something jarring about the straightforwardness with which he stated this priority, even as it is practical and realistic.

The dissonance between the aspiration of a universal peace and the particularities through which it will be accomplished is only underscored by Wiesel's commenting, after he assessed the relative well-being of Jews around the world, that there are other cases of injustice about which he cared deeply: apartheid in South Africa, the denial of Lech Walesa's right to dissent in Poland, and a few others.

The two lists—first of injustices against Jews and then of injustices against others—underscore Wiesel's claim that Jews must care for one another before they cared for anyone else in need. It is his interpretation of the classic Hebrew idiom, *kol Yisrael 'aravim zeh b'zeh*: the people Israel are responsible one for the other. It is a message that resonated in the wake of the Holocaust, coming as it did from a survivor who pointed a finger at the world and accused them of failing to prevent the murder of six million Jews.

But as the Holocaust recedes into the past, as Jews are accepted more and more fully into American society, his reference to a shared Jewish destiny now

registers as ethnocentrism, which can be of questionable value when it comes to getting along in a multicultural society. Sudden flares of anti-Semitism renew the debate, however temporarily: can Jews count unequivocally on anyone but one another?

There is a second question to ask: what of non-Jewish victims of the Nazis, of which there were several million? Where do the memories of these victims fit in, whether they were killed for being political dissidents, for being homosexuals, for being members of the Roma or Sinta peoples, or Jehovah's Witnesses? What, in short, is the meaning of the Holocaust or the lessons we should take from it?

In the 1980s, Wiesel chaired the United Holocaust Memorial Council, responsible for the establishment of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which opened in Washington, DC in 1993. Today the museum's mission statement identifies the Jews as having been the "primary victims" of the Nazis but then lists other groups that "suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny."[1] The statement points to the underlying question: should we understand it as an event of the most extreme anti-Semitism? Or is it meaning more universal, about a universal human capacity for hate of the other?

Wiesel concluded his Nobel speech by addressing the despair of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. He derided the Palestinians for using terrorism and violence to resist Israel. At the same time, he also said that "Something must be done about their suffering, and soon," insisting that if Palestinians and others in the region stop hating Israel, it will be possible for Israel to make peace and thus to alleviate the suffering of Palestinians.

Wiesel did not know then that the First Intifada would break out just a few months later or that the conflict would remain ongoing, with periods of relative calm and others of outright war, for the rest of his life. Throughout, Wiesel's strident Zionism kept him from addressing the suffering of Palestinians perpetrated by the State of Israel beyond statements similar to the one he made in Stockholm. Whenever Israel asserted itself against Palestinians in particularly egregious ways, there were voices calling upon Wiesel to use his platform to condemn the Jewish state or to speak out on behalf of more peaceful resolutions to the conflict. But Wiesel never did so. After his death in 2016, assessments of

1 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Mission and History," accessed July 9, 2019, https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/mission-and-history.

his life were filled with praise for the tremendous humanitarian work he did as a writer and speaker somewhat tempered by a resurgence of this criticism.

Ultimately, Wiesel's unapologetic refusal to criticize the State of Israel or to promote policies that the State might enact toward finding a solution to the suffering of the Palestinians serves as a reminder of yet one more aspect of the Nobel Peace Prize. In accepting the award, Wiesel climbed the final step onto an invisible pedestal, and it was from there that he spoke to the world for the rest of his life. We, his audience, looked to him as a moral compass. That he had a blind spot, so to speak, is a reminder that he was, after all, still human. His determination to protect Jews and then all others facing genocide brought him the Nobel Prize; the Prize in turn enabled him to do more good for humanity. But that very same determination became, for some, the source of his most significant limitation.

Wiesel's humanity is underscored by a moment from the ceremony that is not captured in the text of his speech but can be seen in the video recording of the ceremony. Just before he formally began his speech, Wiesel placed a black kippah on his head and recited the *she-hecheyanu*, the blessing thanking God for sustaining us until that particular moment. The blessing is a statement of gratitude; it is also a statement of bewilderment: how could it be, God, that I am here? Wiesel took off the kippah before he began his official words and accepted the mantle of speaking on behalf of the Jewish people.