



# Elie Wiesel's Pedagogy: Making Us More Human

31.10.2017 | Joseph A. Kanofsky\*

**Key elements in Elie Wiesel's pedagogical method, as observed in his University Seminars at Boston University in the 1980's and 1990's, yield useful insight into how a secular classroom draws on deeply-rooted religious elements to enable students to realize their potential as human beings regardless of the differences in their religious backgrounds and inclinations.**

Each of these strategies (and this list is by no means exhaustive) draws on Wiesel's own religious and cultural-religious experience and transforms itself from a religious element into a secular one that nevertheless inspires spiritual feelings in students who are open to and willing to engage at that level. Most curious is that although Wiesel's own experience and identity was profoundly Jewish; his teaching nonetheless resonated with students of many different religious backgrounds, as well as those without or with a very weak religious identification; or even none at all. In the following, we will briefly discuss these four elements: the impact of the personal encounter, questioning and conversation as a mode of inquiry, the power of the story, and the paradoxical effect of Wiesel's profound Jewish identity and consciousness on his pedagogical impact as a teacher of the Humanities.

Elie Wiesel taught at City College of New York, Yale University, Eckerd College among others; but his longest tenure was as Andrew W Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University. Wiesel began teaching at Boston University in 1976, and retired in 2011. For many of those years, he taught two courses which were entitled "Literature of Memory," and subtitled with the specific content of the courses. These limited-enrollment seminars were in different faculties at BU: as advanced undergraduate Liberal Arts courses, School of Theology courses, and University Professors Program courses. This multiple listing allowed students from a consortium of local theological schools, including Harvard Divinity, Episcopal Divinity, Andover-Newton, and other seminaries to enroll in the seminar. Wiesel's students included lay and ordained Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Hindus, Buddhists; and probably more than a few agnostics.

Wiesel himself rejected loyalty to any of the main "streams" of American Judaism—while a member of an orthodox synagogue, he denied that he was an adherent of the Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, or Reconstructionist movements. Yet he proudly claimed the mantle of "Hasid." This was true on several levels. His ancestry and upbringing on his mother's side was as an adherent of the populist, mystical, experiential, revivalist movement in 18th century Eastern European Judaism that elevated intention, devotion, kindness, and sincerity to primary religious expressions; while all the while maintaining loyalty and even increased intensity on religious practice. Wiesel often recalled the stories and songs taught to him by his maternal grandfather, a renowned Hasid of the Wiznitz sub-sect. Later in life, he proclaimed his enduring identity as a Wiznitzer Hasid, and added, ". . .but the Lubavitcher Rebbe is my Rebbe." (A Rebbe is the charismatic leader of a sect, often identified by the geographic origins the sub-sect. Membership in a group may also be geographical or cultural; while adherents of a particular Rebbe study that particular rabbi's teachings and their religious lives resonate to the particular meter and rhythm that the Rebbe sets.)

There can be no overstating the centrality of the personal encounter in the Chassidic model of leadership known as Rebbe. It has been described as a "spiritual counselor," (Zalman Schacter) as a mystical miracle worker (satirized in I.J. Singer's *Yoshe Kalb*) as a charismatic intermediary

between G-d that can facilitate theurgy even from beyond the grave (Nachman of Bratslav) and even as an exemplary scholarly model (Schneur Zalman of Liadi). The face-to-face meeting between Hasid and Rebbe, between adherent/disciple and spiritual/religious guide, is crucial in the Hasidic worldview. It may range from extremely brief to extensive over a lifetime. It may include the most personal advice and guidance on spiritual as well as mundane matters.

To be clear: I do not believe that Elie Wiesel saw himself as a Rebbe, as a charismatic Hasidic rabbinic guide. Nevertheless, I have written elsewhere<sup>[1]</sup> that in many ways, he functioned as precisely this for a secularized American Jewish populace devastated by the losses of the Holocaust and haunted and traumatized by its own silence on the issue during World War II. As a witness, as a conscience, as a human rights activist, and as a living link to a vanished world; Wiesel certainly served, whether intentionally or not, to redeem at least some of the survivor guilt of American Jews. Yet in his classroom teaching, none of this was his main emphasis.

One main thrust of his teaching was fostering and nurturing direct, one-to-one relationships with his students. In fact, this was an unusual and innovative aspect of his teaching. Wiesel's seminars were very tightly limited in enrollment (50 students per seminar, hand-picked by his professional assistant). He required that each student meet with him individually. Wiesel scheduled time to ask each student privately and in-depth about their background, their experience in the seminar, and their aspirations in life. He opened himself up for questions as well on his own life and worldview. He offered to help them advance their studies and careers in any way he could, and I know of several students that availed themselves of his global network. He maintained personal contact with students for decades after they left the classroom. He also encouraged students to build relationships with one another, concluding the seminar term on many occasions with a hope that students would meet each other years in the future, and recall that they had studied together, and continue their conversations. Wiesel evidently felt that his teaching could not be accomplished solely through classroom lecture and discussion, however fruitful that was. He evidenced belief that the one-to-one human encounter, whether in the rubric of teacher/student (adapted from the Master-Disciple relationship in Hasidism detailed in several of his books) or of mutual friendship (expanded in other fictional works) was an essential part of learning, and a cornerstone of his pedagogy.

Another key element was the notion of Questioning. Again, lifted directly from a formalized and well-documented Jewish context, the Questioning has its fullest expression in Talmudic literature, where each proposition advanced by a sage in the Talmud is immediately subjected to a barrage of questioning: from whom did you learn this teaching? What is the scriptural basis for this principle? Is this notion essentially similar or dissimilar to other legal-theoretical discussions in other talmudic discussion-units (sugyot)? While the logic and hermeneutical rules of talmudic discourse are formalized and predicable (see Luzzato, Chajes, Steinsaltz, others), the questioning nature of Wiesel's inquiry in the classroom is less rigid yet more adaptable to students of varying backgrounds and frames of reference. He deployed a range of questions of the text at hand from the predicable (What is the book about? Where is G-d in all this?) to the sublime (Where is the hope? Does this novel indict one person, or a whole system? How do you fight an enemy that is also your brother?), the questions were as good as their defenses, and as in other places in the Jewish pedagogical tradition, served to advance both the student and the teacher's inquiries.

The paramount Jewish pedagogical experience, the Passover Seder<sup>[2]</sup> opens its middle conversational component with Four Questions. Various commentaries (and the text for the evening, the haggadah, has been republished and re-edited in thousands of versions) debate whether or not the Four Questions are even addressed in the course of the seder: one view maintains that the questions are never answered at all, another argues that they answered in the subsequent two lines, yet a third finds the answers in the remaining text of the haggadah. Wiesel's questions in class about the text and its author's intent, its relevance to other books discussed in the same term, its relation to other books of its time and of other times, and its

relevance to the students' own lives and their own questions may be similar: the questions may be answered forthwith, or linger for the remainder of the day or the year, or perhaps even for a lifetime. Wiesel frequently expressed his belief that "a good question is better than a good answer." He cited the maxim of the Briskers, the Lithuanian school of talmudic study: "No one ever died from having a good question."

A third element basic to Wiesel's pedagogy is *The Power of the Story*, to borrow a subtitle for one of the Literature of Memory seminars from 1990. The concept may also be discussed as narrative imagination, the tale, or the illustrative parable. This trope is common to much of religious literature from Jesus's parables to the Buddha's aphorisms to the Hasidic tale. And yet, Wiesel's reliance on the power of the story to have powerful effects in the life of the hearer is not to be underestimated.

*The Power of the Story*, Wiesel once said, is to keep the story alive at its extreme possibility. That possibility may be a relationship or an experience or even the perception of the Divine. A story presents an elusive or ephemeral concept or relationship in a more readily-accessible context. This renders the difficult-to-know or the unknowable more immediate. Even the Divine can be understood through anthropomorphic terms, as Job may have intended when he said 19:26) "from my flesh I see God."

The fourth and arguably the most central element of Wiesel's classroom teaching is the notion that "More Jewish I am, the more Human I am."

Guided by Andre Malraux's vision that "the 21st century will be religious or it will not be at all," Wiesel taught and modeled the idea that the more profoundly one embraces one's own faith tradition, the more human, even universally human one becomes. This is in no way a move toward syncretism; toward a shared faith among humankind; it is decidedly particularistic. It is not an ecumenical or evangelical move; Wiesel stated his ideal: not that all should embrace one faith, but rather "that the Jew should be a good Jew, the Christian a good Christian, the Muslim a true Muslim;" and in seeking that path of humility, of fulfillment in God's sight, of appreciating at once the multiplicity and the unity of being "created in the Divine image and likeness;" each spiritual path becomes at once a particularistic path toward self-realization and self-actualization and at the same moment opens up from a place of security and confidence the ability to embrace and appreciate others not as we would like them to be but rather as they are. Wiesel most decidedly rejects dilution of the religious experience, too. It is, in his view, only the most honest, sincere, and God-aware embrace of faith that opens up the soul to the essence of human being, which is to be sympathetic, sensitive, self-aware, responsible, and neither alone nor willing to stand idly by as another is alone, isolated, friendless and forsaken.

Elie Wiesel's pedagogy as gleaned from his university seminar room teachings is quite apparently deeply rooted in his Jewish intellectual, spiritual, and social experience. As such, it will be quite resonant with elements in Christianity and Islam, particularly as mentioned here. Its resonances with eastern spiritual and teaching practices remains to be explored; yet it is unlikely that the notion of becoming more universally human by means of a thorough and complete embrace of one's religious identity is rooted only in the western tradition.

Wiesel's influence on 20th Century American Jewry, on the global movement for human rights and for Peace have yet to receive sufficient scholarly attention. What is likely even more enduring will be continued critical attention paid to Wiesel's philosophical, spiritual, and humanistic teachings both through his writings and public media voice; and his four decades as a university professor, most of those as an aptly-titled Professor of the Humanities.

## New Journal

With edition 4/2016 one of the most important journals in the field of Jewish-Christian dialogue in Germany came to its end: "Freiburger Rundbrief" (Freiburg Circular). The journal once was founded in 1948 by Gertrud Luckner (1900 – 1995), a Christian social worker involved in the German resistance to Nazism and later was named as righteous among the Nations by Yad Vashem in 1966. After a break from 1987 until 1993 (for reasons of age Luckner was no longer able to edit the journal) the journal reappeared under the name "Freiburger Rundbrief - Neue Folge" (Freiburg Circular - New Edition) and was edited by the Swiss Catholic theologian Prof. Dr. Clemens Thoma, a well known expert in Jewish-Christian Dialogue. After his death in 2011 the journal was edited by Prof. Msgr. Albrecht Renker until its recent end of appearance.

In summer 2017 a follow-up journal was started under the name: "Zeitschrift für christlich-jüdische Begegnung" (ZfBeg; Journal of Christian-Jewish Encounter), edited by the Catholic theologians Prof. Dr. Reinhold Boschki and Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Schwendemann. The first edition of this new journal is devoted to life and work of Elie Wiesel. The article above by the Canadian Rabbi Joseph Kanofsky appeared in this first edition of ZfBeg in German translation and is reproduced at this point in its original English version with kind permission.

**Please see:**

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[1] Kanofsky, Joseph A: Elie Wiesel als Rebbe des zeitgenössischen amerikanischen Judentums, in: Boschki, Reinhold; Mensink, Dagmar (Hg.): *Kultur allein ist nicht genug. Das Werk von Elie Wiesel – Herausforderung für Religion und Gesellschaft*, Münster 1998, S. 333-346.

[2] See Klawans, Jonathan (2001): Was Jesus' Last Supper a Seder?, in: *Bible Review* 17, S. 24-33.

Source: Zeitschrift für christlich-jüdische Begegnung, vol 1-2, 2017. With kind permission.

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