

# Dynamics of Faith in the Works of Elie Wiesel

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Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust witness and survivor, was given the Nobel Peace prize in 1986 for his insight into the nature of humanity. Through his many works of fiction, his lectures, and his interviews, Wiesel has addressed the Holocaust as a test of faith in God and humankind. Faced with the inhumanity of the Holocaust, Wiesel has questioned the boundaries of the concept of God and has struggled to comprehend the dynamics of faith.

By analyzing Wiesel's significant works and the commentaries on his writing I have discovered the significance of the Jewish concept of Godwrestling. In the Torah, Jacob is given the name Israel because he has wrestled with God and prevailed. I find strong parallels between Jacob and Elie Wiesel, both of whom have led the Jewish people through a crisis in faith. Both men survived terrifying experiences and were changed forever. They both gained strength within themselves, and they both gained wisdom. Jacob, one of the forefathers of the Jews, gave strength to the people Israel: the people who have wrestled God and have prevailed. Wiesel has redefined faith in light of the Holocaust, a difficult task when facing a silent God.

In this essay I discuss the hypothesis that faith is strengthened by a challenge overcome. In the literature of the Holocaust, especially Wiesel's contributions, this is a prevailing theme. Faith is dynamic because it can be questioned and tested without being destroyed. Indeed, the metaphor of Godwrestling, struggling with faith while maintaining close contact with it, suggests that we must question our faith in order to give it strength. Only by posing questions can we hope to find answers. God may be silent, but humanity will not be.

Genesis 32:25-31

Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." Jacob asked, "Pray, tell me your name." But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved" (Plaut 216).

This is the Biblical story of Jacob's transformation into Israel. When Jacob's life is threatened by a strange aggressor, a struggle ensues. In the end, the aggressor gives Jacob a blessing. The confrontation seems strange and abrupt, but within the context of Jacob's life it has significant meaning. The struggle takes place on the eve of another meeting, one between Jacob and his brother Esau. Jacob will be answering for having

stolen Esau's birthright by deceit. As Jacob waits alone on the bank of the river Jabbok, he fears his brother's vengeance. Yet, instead of meditating on the events to come, Jacob enters into a strange and mystical struggle.

Jacob is forever changed by the events of that night on the riverbank. Although he has been physically injured, he is spiritually stronger and emotionally ready to meet with his brother. When the time comes, Esau is moved unexpectedly to show a great love for Jacob. The Torah script reads, "Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept" (Plaut 219). Perhaps Esau was aware of the new strengths Jacob had gained, and could therefore forgive him for past weaknesses.

After reading the story of Jacob's meeting with the mysterious aggressor, one might ask, "With whom did Jacob wrestle?" In the Torah, Jacob is told that he wrestled with "beings divine and human." Does this mean that he wrestled with a form which was both human and divine at the same time? If so, this would constitute idolatry. Perhaps Jacob wrestled with more than one antagonist. Perhaps Jacob wrestled with a divine being in human form. To fully understand Jacob's experience we will explore several interpretations, both separately and in relation to each other. These various aspects of the whole picture provide insight into the question of the dynamics of faith. The first significant explanation is that Jacob wrestled with a man, a stranger. The Torah refers to "ish", meaning man, and in the story Jacob's wrestling partner seems to be his physical equal. If we accept this interpretation then new questions arise. Elie Wiesel asks:

Why did the nocturnal visitor attack poor Jacob whose very name he claimed not to know? Because he was Jewish? Or because he was alone and far from any inhabited place? And why was the stranger so intent on learning the identity of his victim?... And why would he not disclose his own identity to Jacob?...And how did the nocturnal visitor, with the advent of dawn, turn into... God, in the eyes of Jacob? (*Messengers of God* 108).

Perhaps the man was not one man at all but a symbol of humanity. If so, then Jacob was metaphorically wrestling with mankind, a powerful concept. This was a two-sided match; perhaps Jacob and mankind were challenging each other. Jacob had to prove that he was ready to work for the good of humanity, and humanity had to prove that it was worth being a life's work. The struggle was practice for his life to come, and the challenges he would continue to meet. Jacob wrestled with the forces of mankind and emerged as Israel, a man capable of leading the Jewish people. In the course of the struggle, Jacob was forced to learn to utilize his strengths and minimize his weaknesses. He gained skills necessary for the role he was destined to play in history as forefather of the people Israel.

A second interpretation suggests that the physical struggle was a test, a practice for the potentially violent meeting with Esau. This interpretation supports the argument that Jacob wrestled with an angel, sent to prepare him for the next day's events. Elie Wiesel writes:

The majority chooses to see him as an angel; besides, Jacob did not like to fight human adversaries. With an angel, well that was different. But why would an angel attack him? For his own good, volunteers one text, to give him courage (*Messengers of God* 123).

A variation on this interpretation, however, suggests that it was Jacob's own guardian angel who attacked him that night: Jacob attacked by his own guardian angel.

The mysterious aggressor? The other half of Jacob's split self. The side of him that harbored doubts about his mission, his future, his *raison d'être*; the voice in him that said: I deserve nothing, I am less than nothing, I am unworthy of the celestial blessing, unworthy of my ancestors as much as of my descendants, unworthy to transmit God's message to man (*Messengers of God* 124).

In this interpretation Jacob was forced to wrestle with his own doubts, his built-in antithesis. He had to overcome his own doubts to prove to himself that he was capable of leading his people. By forcing the guardian angel to bless him, he forced himself to agree to the fact that he was capable of accepting the responsibilities that lay ahead of him.

In essence, Jacob engaged in a self-study. What better way to gain an understanding of one's self than to challenge one's self? Elie Wiesel asks, "Was this what Jacob had needed in order to become aware of his own strength, his own truth and the hopes he personified?" (*Messengers Of God* 123). The answer is that he *did* need to be challenged, to prove himself. He had to be forced to accept his own strength and he had to be tricked by the aggressor into recognizing his own truths. This is why Jacob felt that he wrestled with God. He faced humanity and he faced himself; in doing so he saw God. This is the combined struggle and the all-inclusive answer. In wrestling with God, Jacob also wrestled with every force which is a part of God. Wiesel says,

The Biblical text uses the word *ish*, man. The Midrash and the commentators elevate him to the rank of angel. As for Jacob- who should have known- he situated him higher yet: I have seen God face to face and yet my life has been preserved. The aggressor readily confirmed this appraisal: *Ki sarita im El- Your name shall be Israel for you fought God and you defeated him* (Brown 107).

Jacob wrestled God at the riverbank, and in wrestling God he was wrestling with himself and with humanity. In *Godwrestling*, Arthur Waskow explains, "To wrestle with God is also to wrestle with human beings- ourselves and others. It is to face polarities and unify them. Not only to face the polarities of Same and Other when we face each other, but also within ourselves to face the polarities of fear and guilt, of love and anger- and to unify them" (10). We are all facets of God, and so to wrestle with God one must be prepared for a match with all people and with one person- the Self. None of the interpretations of Jacob's story stand on their own, and none is invalid. The important thing is not which of the forces Jacob was wrestling with at which point, but the fact that he won, was blessed, was renamed. Jacob's victory over the stranger held a three-fold meaning. By wrestling "with beings divine and human"(Plaut 216) and emerging stronger than he began, Jacob proved to God and to humanity that he was prepared for his role in history. Most important, though, is that in the process of proving this to everyone else, Jacob also proved it to himself.

Jacob's story is extremely important to the Jewish people. In his metamorphosis from Jacob to Israel, Jacob established a relationship for himself and the people Israel with God. Just as Jacob wrestled, so do the Jewish people wrestle with faith in God and faith in humankind. Jews are Israel personified – the people Israel are the people who wrestle with God.

Since the Jews have this dynamic relationship with God, questioning is not only acceptable, it is demanded. Wiesel says, "I tell students, 'If you are angry with God, I respect you. If you love God, I respect you. Indifference I do not respect'"(qtd in *Against Silence* 1:310).

Robert Brown comments on this in *Messenger To Humanity*.

To quarrel with God is to pay God the supreme compliment: it is to take God seriously. It is to say that God matters enough to be worth some anger. To be indifferent to God is to pay God the supreme insult. It is to say that nothing of consequence is at stake (148).

To show anger or love or any emotion to God is preferable to indifference. Even blatant denial is an admission in a way, because it supposes that there is something existing to be denied. Probably for this reason there is no Hebrew word for atheist. According to Wiesel,

The Jew, in my view, may rise against God provided he remains within God. One can be a very good Jew, observe all of the mitzvot, study Talmud – and yet be against God... as if to say: You, God, do you not want me to be Jewish? Well, Jewish we shall be nevertheless, despite Your will (“Jewish Values 299).

Godwrestling is an extension of a strong relationship with God because it implies contact and understanding. The act of wrestling with God provides a tight, almost physical relationship—a struggle in which the winner cannot be distinguished from the loser. An embrace cannot be distinguished from a stronghold. The two-sided struggle becomes one form, the wrestlers become two sides of a coin.

To be a Godwrestler is to recognize the paradoxical nature of God. A Godwrestler is a questioner, an arguer; one who holds God accountable. The Godwrestler has a relationship with God that is based not on dogma but on a constantly changing and constantly progressing struggle with faith. Those who brave this struggle are paramount to the future of Judaism and the future of philosophy, for if these questions go unasked the dynamic nature of our relationship with God will be imbalanced.

Even the word “Israel” has dynamic meaning. The Hebrew makeup of the word can be interpreted different ways, all of which have some meaning in the struggle with God. In *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson explains that, “The term ‘Israel’ may mean he who fights Gods, he who fights for God, he whom God fights, or whom God rules, the upright one of God, or God is upright” (20). The Godwrestlers relationship with God encompasses all of these facets of faith. Because the relationship is dynamic, it must continue to change and progress. Questions and the search for their answers provide for newer and clearer understandings. A relationship based on questions is an acknowledgement. Questioning supposes that something exists which must be questioned.

Elie Wiesel has come forward as a public challenge to blind faith. He has put God on trial. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Wiesel raises critical questions and tests the boundaries of faith. By vocalizing these questions, he has strengthened his people’s understanding of history and of God. It has often been said that the Jews always answer one question with another question. Perhaps for this reason the answers are not as important as the thought behind the question.

I am connected to Jacob by my own Godwrestling and by my self-chosen Hebrew name, Yisraelit (the female version of Israel). I feel connected to Elie Wiesel because I share with him a passion for questions. By studying these two important figures in the exploration of faith, one Biblical and one very real, I gain my own understandings of the dynamics of faith.

My first question is “What is faith?” Paul Tillich described the faith of the Old Testament as “the state of being ultimately and unconditionally concerned about [God] and about what he represents in demand, threat and promise” (3). He goes on to say that “It is the triumph of the dynamics of faith that any denial of faith is in itself an expression of faith, of an ultimate concern” (127). I define faith in God as a relationship in which God is acknowledged though not understood. This is a situation which cannot be solved, for God can never be understood. Commenting on the mysterious nature of God, John Fowles hypothesized that, “If there had been a creator, his second act would have been to disappear” (19). We can never understand, but on the other hand we must never stop trying to.

As I explore the dynamics of faith I find that God seems to have a paradoxical nature. To understand the paradoxes, I turn to the literature of the Holocaust. Here the dualities which exist and seemingly negate each other in God are questioned and explored. As Jews, our relationship with the enigmatic God who let the Holocaust happen becomes a puzzling one. Our understanding of a God who loves justice is shaken, as is the title of the “chosen people.” Ellis Rivkin expresses the mysterious discoveries of the nature of God in “The Concealing and Revealing God of Israel and Humanity.”

...we have a revealing and concealing God, a God both knowable and unknowable, both near and far away, both mind and heart, both all-powerful and helpless, both redemptive and damning. In a word, we have a God who was both present and absent at Auschwitz; who made the Holocaust a possibility but did not bring it about; who suffered with its victims but could not lift a finger to alleviate the pain, the anguish, and the heartlessness of it all; who remained true to his covenant with Israel and humankind but could not alter its conditions. Never in all of human history had God revealed himself so fully, or hidden himself so effectively (Rivkin 160).

In the face of this concept of God, what can we do? To counter the seemingly schizophrenic God of the Holocaust, must we both love and hate, condemn and bless at the same time? Perhaps we must continually challenge God to clarify His position.

Elie Wiesel wrote in *Ani Maamin*:

God of silence, speak.  
God of cruelty, smile.  
God of the word, answer.  
Just God, unjust God,  
Judge the word and judge the deed,  
Judge the crime and judge the tool.  
God present, God absent,  
You are in everything,  
Even in evil.  
You are in everything,  
Above all, in man.  
God present, God absent,  
Where are You  
On this night? (49).

God is everything and nothing, active and inactive. God is at the same time omnipotent, omnipresent, and silent. Wiesel speaks to this paradoxical God, challenging God to do something we can understand. He is challenging God to help us to have faith.

In 1928, Wiesel – a twelve year old living with his family in Sighet, Transylvania – asked to be taught Kabbalah, ancient writings on Jewish mysticism. Despite his father’s warning that the Kabbalah was not material for studying before the age of thirty, Wiesel found his own teacher and began to learn about the ancient mysticism. Wiesel grew up deeply religious and deeply studious. He says of his childhood, “I was a very religious boy. You cannot imagine- I cannot imagine- how religious I was. I was drunk with God. I lived for God, with God, in God” (qtd in *Against Silence* 1:39).

Eventually, some signs of the unrest that was to come began to appear in Sighet. At first only rumors, then a few arrests, and finally the Jews of Sighet were restricted to ghettos. In 1944 the entire Jewish community of Sighet was deported. Elie Wiesel was fifteen when he was put in a cattle car and taken to Auschwitz. He says, “My first contact with reality was in the war and the camps. I did not know that man exists... I thought only that God exists in man” (qtd in *Against Silence* 1:39).

This was Wiesel’s awakening. Just as Jacob came of age in reaction to a struggle with God, so Wiesel met a world he did not know and struggled with its forces of good and evil. Jacob and Wiesel both had awareness thrust on them. Just as Wiesel’s world expanded beyond his relationship with God, so Jacob came to see the world beyond himself. Both men, in recognizing a bigger picture, gained enlightenment as to their roles in history as leaders. Jacob set up a pattern of struggle with faith in God, faith in humanity, and faith in one’s self. For its survivors and for the world, the Holocaust tested the boundaries of each of those facets of faith. Elie Wiesel is a modern-day Jacob, redefining the dynamics of faith.

Wiesel writes of his sudden maturation, a horrific night which seemed to last until he was liberated from the camps:

Never shall I forget that night, that first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreathes of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never (Night 44).

Wiesel’s night, like Jacob’s night on the riverbank, caused a metamorphosis. Both nights brought struggle, both nights brought pain, both nights brought growth.

In the face of the Holocaust mankind asks itself, “How could God be silent? How could God allow this to happen?” The fact that millions were murdered and God did not intervene is difficult to accept. It suggests that there is no God, or worse, that God consciously allowed the genocide to continue. God’s silence is an action in itself, a passive-aggressive action. In the case of God’s role in the Holocaust, to not act is to act.

In *The Gates of the Forest*, Wiesel writes of an interesting dialogue between the main character, Gregor, and a rabbi:

“And Auschwitz? What do you make of Auschwitz?”

“Auschwitz proves that nothing has changed, that the primeval war goes on. Man is capable of love and hate, murder and sacrifice. He is Abraham and Isaac together. God himself hasn’t changed.”

Gregor was angry. “After what has happened to us, how can you believe in God?”

With an understanding smile on his lips the Rebbe answered, “How can you not believe in God after what has happened?” (194).

Though this passage seems enigmatic at first, it is clearer after a more in-depth reading of Wiesel’s work. During the Holocaust the Jews were tortured for their religious beliefs, so they clung to their beliefs as the ultimate rebellion. And herein lies the answer to one of my questions. What strengthens faith? The answer is: a challenge to faith. In the words of poet Robert Browning:

You call for faith:

I show you doubt, to prove  
that faith exists.

The more of doubt, the stronger  
faith, I say,

If faith o’ercomes doubt. (“Bishop Blougram’s Apology” 239-240)

Browning recognized the balance of dependency between faith and doubt. Questions imply faith because one who has no faith need not bother to question. For a believer, the questions are not only necessary, they are unavoidable. Isaac Bashevis Singer acknowledged the paradoxical relationship between faith and doubt when he said, “Doubt is part of all religion. All the religious thinkers were doubters” (“Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Universe”).

Friedrich Nietzsche said, “What does not kill me only serves to make me stronger” (*The Gay Science*). In recognizing the tensions between a threat overcome and the subsequent strength, he was expressing the same tensions that make faith so dynamic. The constant pull between “Yes, I believe” and “No, I can not believe” means that, like a metaphorical tug of war, the two opposing sides can never rest. Both doubt and belief, by their inherent nature, must exist and must coexist. This is the paradox at play in Wiesel’s Cantata, *Ani Maamin*.

Ani maamin [I believe], Abraham,

Despite Treblinka.

Ani maamin, Isaac,

Because of Belsen.

Ani maamin, Jacob.

Because of and in spite of Majdanek (105).

In the following passages, Brown considers the dynamics of faith expressed by Wiesel in both *The Gates of the Forest* and *Ani Maamin*. He analyzes Wiesel’s fictional

representation of Godwrestling and Wiesel's own prayer to God. This is not a comparison or a contrast but an exploration of the duality with which Wiesel writes. His own prayers are comingled with his ability to express himself for his people.

It is not hard to identify with Gregor's question, "After what happened to us, how can you believe in God?" By a tremendous act of faith, we may even be able to identify with the Chorus's affirmation, "I believe despite Treblinka... and in spite of Majdanek." Wiesel has reminded us that no death-of-God theology originated in the camps. Desperate challenges to faith, yes; destroyers of faith, no.

But the rebbe's question leaves us aghast, the more so since it is asked with an "understanding smile on his lips": "How can you not believe in God after what has happened?" Auschwitz as a reason for faith? And the Chorus staggers us: "[I believe] Because of Belsen.... Because of... Majdanek" (Brown 162-163).

Brown is explaining that faith in God has been tested but not obliterated. Wiesel's faith, like that of the fictional rabbi, is not only intact but is strengthened by the challenge overcome. God has been questioned and has prevailed. This round of the wrestling match has been a pyrrhic victory for God. But the wrestling will not end, will never end as long as the world is unjust. Brown continues to explain,

...Wiesel is denying us the privilege of either an easy denial or an easy belief. When one says, in light of Auschwitz, "There are no longer reasons to believe," that becomes too simple; another must immediately say, "There are still reasons to believe, now more than ever. When one says, in light of Auschwitz, "There are still reasons to believe," that becomes too simple; another must immediately say, "There are reasons not to believe, now more than ever." And such a dialogue is finally not an external dialogue between two persons; it is an interior dialogue within every person. (Brown 162-163).

Brown concludes that the struggle with faith, the questioning of God, must be internalized. Once the struggle has been accepted, it can mature into an acknowledgement of a dynamic relationship with God. The mature act of Godwrestling allows for both anger and acceptance. If one can both praise God and condemn God at the same time, then this is what Wiesel's characters do. A passage from Wiesel's *The Town Behind the Wall* embodies this phenomenon:

I want to blaspheme, and I can't quite manage it. I go up against [God], I shake my fist, I froth with rage, but it's still a way of telling Him that He's there, that He exists, that He's never the same twice, that denial itself is an offering to His grandeur. The shout becomes a prayer in spite of me (123).

The Jews in Wiesel's books have a deep-rooted faith from which they cannot escape, even if they try. The God who has been silent may be hard to accept, but cannot be dismissed. Faith is stronger than the angry wills of Wiesel's characters. In *Night*, this struggle is apparent when the main character tries to come to terms with his changing relationship with God. He speaks from the depths of the kingdom of night, from Auschwitz, yet he cannot dismiss God. He says, "And, in spite of myself, a prayer rose in my heart, to that God whom I no longer believed" (104).

The Jews continue to pray *because* of God's silence, as well as in spite of it. They continue to seek connection with God. They overcome the silence of God with their own voices chanting prayers. Wiesel makes it clear that the Jews pray in spite of *themselves* and because of God. They pray although they know that giving up would be easier, less spiritually and emotionally taxing. To dismiss God is to take the easy path. To reckon

with God, to wrestle with God is very difficult. For Wiesel, it must be done so that he can continue with his life. He explains the difficulties he must overcome in order to maintain faith, “You don’t understand when you say that it is more difficult to live today in a world without God. NO! If you want difficulties, choose to live with God.... The real tragedy, the real drama, is the drama of the believer” (Brown 139).

The believer must reckon with a God who has often been absent in humanity’s time of need. He must tell himself that although God did not intervene, it doesn’t mean that God condoned the atrocities of the Holocaust. To comprehend a paradoxical God who both loves his people and abstains from saving them: this is the fate of the faithful, the believer. And it is a painful fate to accept. Still, throughout history the Jews have accepted the struggle.

From Abraham to Job to the Ba’al Shem Tov to the Rabbi of Berdichev, the Jew felt that he could call upon God to plead for an explanation or even to argue with Him. But with God averting His face, the Jew in the literature of the Holocaust is represented as suffering an irreversible abandonment, in a world devoid of God’s providence (Ramras-Rauch 6).

Wiesel explores the painful nature of accepting a struggle with God in his interview, *A Journey of Faith*. One who accepts the struggle cannot expect to emerge unchanged. Even the Biblical story of Jacob tells us that the stranger “wrenched Jacob’s hip at its socket.” The Torah is giving us a warning: if you are ready to question God, humanity, and your own preconceived paradigms, then you must be ready to accept the pain which comes with uncertainty.

So my problem, my crisis – there was a crisis in my faith – a came much later. I think two or three years later. I began wondering: what was the meaning of all that? – which is the question of all questions. What does it all mean?

Once you ask this question, of course, God enters into the picture. Where was God? But I’m asking the question from within faith, not outside faith. If I didn’t believe, where would be the problem? But if you do believe, then you have these painful questions. And these questions remain open to this day. (O’Connor and Wiesel 2).

Why does Wiesel continue to believe and to reckon with the questions? It is because one who does not question has no chance of finding answers, no chance of finding proof. Faith develops from questions, and questions acknowledge faith.

To find answers, or at least heal wounds left by the questions, the Jews bring Godwrestling to a tangible medium. They put God on trial. Virtually every one of Wiesel’s books has questioned and cross-examined God or the apparent absence of God. The following two stories by Wiesel are based on Jewish folklore. Since folktales are passed on from mouth to mouth, they tend to change with the years. Hence Wiesel has recorded the same story with two different endings. Read together, these two stories about the trial of God form a lesson neither could teach alone.

The first story:

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. Whatever you have to lose has long since been taken away.” 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 of the trial, He turned the sentence against his judges and accusers. They, too, were taken off to the slaughter (*Gates of the Forest* 197).

The second story:

“Inside the kingdom of night, I witnessed a strange trial. Three rabbis – all erudite and pious men- decided one winter evening to indict God for allowing his children to be massacred...”

What the introduction does not say is even more awesome: after the trial, at which God was found guilty as charged, one of the rabbis looked at the watch he had somehow been able to preserve in the kingdom of night, and said: ‘Oy! It’s time for prayers.’ And the three rabbis – ‘all erudite and pious men’– bowed their heads and prayed. (qtd in Brown 154)

Taken together, these stories embody the Jewish response to God. We wrestle, sometimes winning, sometimes losing. We cannot and will not break our ties with God. We are bound to God by the struggle. We are angry, we are frightened, we may even call God guilty. Still, while God is on trial and in some cases even deemed guilty, no side of the argument suggests that God does not exist. The anger and passion of those arguing for God’s guilt comes from the fact that God does exist, but has allowed the genocide.

In the book *The Trial of God*, Wiesel presents not only the prosecution but also God’s defense. One of the defense’s arguments is that God cannot be judged, only mankind can be judged. Mankind must be judged. In a lecture at Loyola University, Wiesel explained,

We cannot accuse God of things we do. Cain and Abel were brothers: God did not ask the one to kill, nor the other to let himself be killed. God did not order Auschwitz, nor did He order submission to Auschwitz. God may say, and He probably does, that He wanted peace, for His name is peace. But if war breaks out, do not blame Him. On the contrary, pity Him, feel sorry for Him who is made to see what His creatures are doing to His creation (*Against Silence* 177).

Faith in humanity is tenuous in light of the Holocaust and the atrocities that men committed against each other. These are actions which were perpetrated by men, and humanity allowed them to continue. However, while humanity is guilty of inhumanity, there is a sense of hope that mankind can improve. Wiesel argues, “Perhaps some day someone will explain how, on the level of man, Auschwitz was possible; but on the level of God, it will forever remain the most disturbing of mysteries” (*Legends* 20). Perhaps we will always have to reckon with a silent God, but we must not also allow ourselves to be silent. We must be a voice against injustice. We must say, in essence, *if God does not intervene then I will*.

As the search for understanding continues, it seems that the answers may be more painful than the questions. Could the silence be a punishment from God? Could the Holocaust be a modern version of the Biblical flood, or of Sodom and Gomorrah? If so, then what was the guilt of the Jews? What were the crimes of the one million children murdered in the Holocaust? Answers only yield more questions.

Could God’s silence mean that, as Nietzsche suggested, God is dead and it is we who have killed him? Richard Rubenstein has written that in a confrontation between God and the evils of the Holocaust, “Auschwitz has destroyed God and made denial of God morally mandatory” (qtd in Brown 54, 156). In essence, to accept God after the Holocaust would mean being an accomplice to God’s silence and inaction. Rubenstein is saying that we must act as if God is dead, whether it is true or not. Auschwitz has actually destroyed our relationship with God. Rubenstein is saying that, like the

Orthodox Jews who sit shiva for a child who marries a non-Jew and rejects the Jewish faith, we must sit shiva for God who has deserted the Jewish people. This concept, though based in the tradition of orthodoxy, is antithetic to the concept of Godwrestling.

To deny God because of the Holocaust implies that one has a rigid idea of God. It is to assume that one can know why God acts or does not act. To dismiss a god who does not fit one's own definition of God is to ignore the dynamic nature of God. When Elie Wiesel wrote, "Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust" he did not say that God was murdered along with the Jews at Auschwitz. He said that the God he had believed in no longer existed. He said "murdered *my God*" because the God of his religious childhood was no longer the God of a young man who had witnessed the horrors of Auschwitz. Robert Brown explains, "It is not God, but Wiesel's 'faith' that is consumed by the flames. What has been murdered is 'my God and my soul,' the God conceived of by the pious Hasidic child of fourteen years..." (Brown 54).

And yet, Wiesel did not lose his faith. His faith changed; it did not continue to come easily, but it continued to exist. Wiesel says, "How strange that the philosophy denying God came not from the survivors. Those who came out with the so-called God is dead theology, not one of them had been in Auschwitz" ("Talking and Writing" 271)

Again Wiesel is telling us that faith grows stronger when tested. If the silence of God during the Holocaust is the ultimate test of faith then humanity must reckon with the challenge and move forward. We will probably never be able to comprehend God's ways, and perhaps it is not our place to understand. In "The Authority of Silence in Elie Wiesel's Art" Terrence Des Pres argues,

**God's presence, his absence, and out of these two, the insoluble problem...** After Auschwitz, in other words, God's presence is most strongly felt through his absence, which may indeed be an insoluble problem for the intellect but which, as experienced, is known and expressed as that eternal silence of the universe in the face of human agony. Quarreling with God is part of Jewish tradition... For Wiesel in any case- and let us not forget that he is a deeply religious man- for Wiesel this silence has become a permanent source of pain and the surest proof of God's existence" (56).

If we accept the life-long struggle that is faith, then we also accept continued challenges to our beliefs. The Holocaust was a formative event in our understanding of God's silence, but it was not the end of our problems. Even amid cries of "Never Again!" from survivors and their families, racial genocide continues. Historically, we witnessed the same downfall of human conscience in the Spanish Inquisition of 1492, the Holocaust of 1942-1945, and today's ethnic cleansing in the Balkans.

Perhaps our hope for humanity is dictated by the same rule that applies to our faith in God. We believe *in spite of and because of our pasts* that humanity will improve. We have hope that the next generation will learn from the mistakes of past generations. Perhaps it is not God's role to intervene in matters concerning the atrocious behavior of mankind. Perhaps God is silent to force us to solve our own problems and be responsible for our own decisions.

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