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THE IMPORTANCE OF ELIE WEISEL

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Jonathan S. Tobin

Commentary, July 3, 2016

By the time he died yesterday at the age of 87, Elie Wiesel had attained a singular celebrity. He was the most famous Holocaust survivor and an icon of conscience. Wiesel was the winner of a Nobel Peace Prize, the man who took Oprah to Auschwitz and the person journalists sought out for comment any time there was an atrocity happening somewhere. Through his books and lectures he became the chief storyteller about the Holocaust and Hasidic tales. But he was also the person who helped inspire generations of Jews and non-Jews to care about human rights while still remaining faithful to the need to protect the Jewish people and Israel against the anti-Semitic successors of the Nazis. As such he transcended the Holocaust and became a seminal figure in 20th century Jewish history.

Wiesel's status as a witness of the Holocaust is now so deeply embedded in popular culture as well as those who study the subject seriously as to be taken for granted. But the influence of his writing during the period after World War Two when most survivors were not speaking about it cannot be overestimated. His *Night* is a book that has now been read by millions—but when it was first published in 1960, it was largely ignored. Yet along with the string of other books that followed it did more than merely keep alive the memory of that great crime and of its victims. It awoke in its audience a passion to care about drawing conclusions from history and a need to ponder the great question he asked about the silent complicity of the bystanders to the Shoah. For those who read his books and heard his lectures, Wiesel's work was a call to conscience and to activism. Without his work and influence, the history of the movement to work for freedom for the Jews of the Soviet Union and to defend Israel in that era would have been much diminished if not unimaginable.

I believe many of Wiesel's books and his collections of Hasidic tales will stand the test of time. But to grasp the impact of his work one must realize how important and unique *Night* was to its readers in that era. The same goes for his 1966 *Jews of*

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***Silence*, a book that, as much as any other event, helped launch widespread understanding of the plight of Soviet Jews during the decades when they were forbidden to emigrate to freedom in Israel and the West and sought to reacquaint themselves with their heritage after decades of Communist oppression.**

As important as his books were, by the 1980s, Wiesel the symbol of the memory of the victims took center stage. His public confrontation with President Reagan over Reagan's planned visit to an SS cemetery in Bitburg, Germany was a powerful moment that ought to stand as a lesson in how to respectfully speak truth to power. Reagan was a friend of the Jewish people and Israel and there were those who wished to give him a pass for doing a favor to his German ally Chancellor Helmut Kohl. But Wiesel didn't hesitate or spare him when he famously said, "That place is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS." That sealed Wiesel's status as celebrity icon of suffering and he endured criticism in his last decades from those who grew tired of seeing him showing up to lend his prestige for various human rights causes speaking in his trademark anguished style. But there's one more element of Wiesel's career that must be acknowledged and praised.

By his later years, Wiesel had risen above his beginnings to become a hero to many who cared nothing for the lessons of Jewish history. In an era when much of the study of the Holocaust had become dedicated to "liberating" the subject from a specific Jewish context and universalizing it, many of his admirers expected him to distance himself from Israel and specifically Jewish causes that were unpopular in the so-called "human rights community." But while he always tried to be above partisan politics and appeal to the world's conscience wherever genocide was taking place, he never stopped advocating for Israel and its right to self-defense even when doing so earned him abuse from the left.

Just as he failed to convince President Reagan to avoid Bitburg, Wiesel also failed to convince President Obama to make good on his pledge to dismantle Iran's nuclear infrastructure and to force it to abjure its genocidal threats against the Jewish state. But, as he did every time Israel came under attack, Wiesel remained

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faithful to the cause of the rights of the Jewish people and to their homeland and stood with Prime Minister Netanyahu as he sought to derail the administration's appeasement of Iran. It was in that sense fitting that a vicious anti-Zionist like Max Blumenthal would choose to abuse Wiesel even after his death. Wiesel always knew his place was with the victims of terror, not the terrorists or those who desire the destruction of Israel, which is the only true memorial to the Six Million and the living symbol of the Jewish people's will to survive.

Elie Wiesel may have spent his life pondering the mystery of survival when the world he knew as a boy went up in smoke through the chimneys of Auschwitz. But his life's work helped ensure that memory lives and that those who have followed must never forget or fail to remember their obligation to stand up against those who wish to continue the work of Hitler and his accomplices. In an era in which anti-Semitism is sadly on the rise again throughout the globe, we need Wiesel's example of moral courage more than ever. May his memory be for a blessing.

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ELIE WEISEL: IN MEMORIAM

Manfred Gerstenfeld

[Arutz Sheva](#), July 4, 2016

Elie Wiesel's life means different things to different people. US President Barack Obama said, "Elie Wiesel was one of the great moral voices of our time, and in many ways, the conscience of the world. He raised his voice, not just against anti-Semitism but against hatred, bigotry and intolerance in all its forms." Former Israeli President Shimon Peres said in his memory, "Wiesel left his mark on humanity through preserving and upholding the legacy of the Holocaust and delivering a message of peace and respect between people worldwide. He endured

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the most serious atrocities of mankind - survived them and dedicated his life to conveying the message of `Never Again.'...

Some persons become symbols during their lives through how they live and what they do. The Talmud says it is not the place a man occupies that gives him honor, but the man gives honor to the place he occupies. That was the case when Wiesel was nominated for president of Israel in 2007. Would he have been a good president? I doubt it. A representative function like this requires many formal duties, including shaking the hands of thousands, sitting at long dinners, and listening to all too often uninspiring speeches. These requirements stymie creativity. Wiesel, like Albert Einstein - another Jew who became a symbol during his lifetime who refused Israel's first presidency when Ben Gurion offered it to him - wisely turned the proposal down,

One of the many things a person who has become a symbol of morality can do is to influence policy and opinion with his statements. In Romania, the country where Wiesel was born, there had been many post-war efforts to distance the country from its responsibility for the Holocaust. An important step to expose this deflection process occurred when the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, chaired by Wiesel, released a report in November 2004 that unequivocally points to Romanian culpability. It declares: "Of all the Allies of Nazi Germany, Romania bears responsibility for the deaths of more Jews than any country other than Germany itself."

The increasing abuse of the term Holocaust pained Wiesel. In 1988, earlier than many others recognized this issue, he stated with emotion, "I cannot use [the word Holocaust] anymore. First, because there are no words, and also because it has become so trivialized that I cannot use it anymore. Whatever mishap occurs now, they call it 'holocaust.' I have seen it myself in television in the country in which I live. A commentator describing the defeat of a sports team called it a 'holocaust.' Since then the abuse of the Holocaust has multiplied many times.

As the distortion of the Holocaust and the falsification of its memory are subjects

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of particular interest to me, I want to mention Wiesel's role in fighting the Bitburg scandal. In 1985, U.S. president Ronald Reagan visited the German military cemetery of Bitburg. When his visit to Germany was announced, it was also specifically mentioned that he would not visit a concentration camp. Initially the impression was that only soldiers and officers of the German Army (Wehrmacht) were buried in the Bitburg cemetery. This visit, planned by the German government, was a clear act of whitewashing part of its past. The Wehrmacht, however, gave support to the SS, which carried out most of the mass murder of the Jews. Only years later would it become more widely known that the Wehrmacht itself had played such a major part in the murders.

Shortly after the visit was announced, it transpired that members of the Waffen SS were also buried in this cemetery. This led to huge protests against the visit. Reagan had agreed to go to Bitburg in order to show that the United States now had normal relations with Germany and its pro-American chancellor Helmut Kohl, but because of the protests he later decided to visit the Bergen Belsen concentration camp as well.

In his memoirs Wiesel devoted an entire chapter to the Bitburg affair. He summarized the essence of the whitewashing: The German tactic in this affair was obvious; to whitewash the SS. He wrote, "It is the final step in a carefully conceived plan. To begin with, Germany rehabilitated the 'gentle,' 'innocent'" Wehrmacht. And now, thanks to Kohl, it was the turn of the SS. First of all, the 'good' ones. And then would come the turn of the others. And once the door was open, the torturers and the murderers would be allowed in as well. Bitburg is meant to open that door...." Officials in the State Department tell me that Kohl bears full responsibility for this debacle; he convinced Reagan that if the visit were canceled it would be his, Kohl's defeat, and hence that of the alliance between the United States and Germany."

In 1986 Wiesel received the Nobel Peace Prize from the Norwegian Nobel Committee. This was an example of Wiesel honoring the prize rather than the prize honoring the man. When several years later Yasser Arafat would be one of the

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recipients of the same prize, he dishonored it. For years thereafter he continued to send murderers to kill Israeli citizens. A list of payments to Palestinian terrorists and assassins signed by Arafat was found in the Orient House in Jerusalem. It included Arafat's hand-written changes as to the amounts to be paid to each murderer.

There are Westerners, often calling themselves progressives, who show understanding for Palestinian Arab terror because they view the Palestinians as victims. Wiesel was a symbol of victimhood. He had suffered far more than most Palestinians. Wiesel didn't use it as an excuse to become a killer or support murderers, but to the contrary - to show humanity that however abused, a human can rise to great moral heights.

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ELIE WIESEL'S GREAT MISSION ON BEHALF OF SOVIET JEWS

Natan Sharansky

[Washington Post](#), July 4, 2016

Perhaps better than anyone else of our age, Elie Wiesel grasped the terrible power of silence. He understood that the failure to speak out, about both the horrors of the past and the evils of the present, is one of the most effective ways there is to perpetuate suffering and empower those who inflict it.

Wiesel therefore made it his life's mission to ensure that silence would not prevail. First, he took the courageous and painful step of recounting the Holocaust,

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bringing it to public attention in a way that no one else before him had done. His harrowing chronicle "Night," originally titled "And the World Remained Silent," forced readers to confront that most awful of human events — to remember it, to talk about it, to make it part of their daily lives. Then, as if that weren't enough, he turned his attention to the present, giving voice to the millions of Jews living behind the Iron Curtain. Although he is rightly hailed for the first of these two achievements, it was the second, he told me on several occasions, for which he most hoped to be remembered.

Wiesel first traveled to the Soviet Union in 1965 as a journalist from Haaretz, on a mission to meet with Jews there, and was shocked by what he saw. Those with whom he spoke were too afraid to recount Soviet persecution, terrified of reprisals from the regime, but their eyes implored him to tell the world about their plight. The book that resulted, "The Jews of Silence," was an impassioned plea to Jews around the world to shed their indifference and speak out for those who could not. "For the second time in a single generation, we are committing the error of silence," Wiesel warned — a phenomenon even more troubling to him than the voiceless suffering of Soviet Jews themselves.

This was a watershed moment in the struggle for Soviet Jewry. While the major American Jewish organizations felt a responsibility to stick to quiet diplomacy, wary of ruffling Soviet feathers and alienating non-Jews in the United States, Wiesel's book became the banner of activists, students and those who would not stay quiet. He had realized that the Soviet regime wanted above all for its subjects to feel cut off from one another and abandoned by the world. Indeed, I can attest that even 15 years later, Soviet authorities were still doing their utmost to convince us — both those of us in prison and those out — that we were alone, that no one would save us and that the only way to survive was to accept their dictates.

Wiesel was thus uniquely perceptive in realizing that without this power to generate fear and isolation, the entire Soviet system could fall apart, and he was prophetic in calling on the rest of the world to remind Soviet Jews that they were

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not alone. The history of the Soviet Union would likely be very different had the struggle for Soviet Jewry not come to encompass the kind of outspoken, grass-roots activism that Wiesel encouraged in his book. Without public campaigns and the awareness they generated, there could be no quiet diplomacy to secure results. Every achievement in the struggle for Soviet Jewry over the succeeding 25 years — from making the first holes in the Iron Curtain, to securing the release of political prisoners and human rights activists, to ultimately making it possible for millions of Soviet Jews to emigrate — resulted from this mixture of activism and diplomacy, neither of which could succeed without the other.

Over the years, of course, Wiesel became an important part of establishment Jewish life. Every Jewish organization sought to co-opt him, to invite him to speak or to support their causes. Yet he remained deeply connected to the dozens of refusenik families whom he had effectively adopted as his own. From 1965 on, he once said, not a single day went by when he was not preoccupied with the fate of Soviet Jews, many of whom he regarded as his own family.

And he was true to this approach to the very end, to the last battle in our struggle: the March for Soviet Jewry in December 1987. Elie and I had first discussed the idea of a march more than a year earlier, in mid-1986. Yet six months after our initial conversation, I found myself lamenting to him that the Jewish establishment was too resistant to the idea, afraid of the logistical difficulties involved and of being painted as enemies of a newly born detente. Elie replied that we should not expect establishment organizations to take the lead and should instead mobilize students, who would pressure them from below to get on board. So I traveled to about 50 U.S. universities in the months leading up to the march, galvanizing activists who were eager to participate. And sure enough, just as he predicted, all of the major Jewish organizations eventually united behind the idea.

As we were all marching together, establishment leaders justifiably congratulated themselves for this great achievement. Elie looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and said, "Yes, they did it." Rather than splitting hairs about who had been more influential, he credited the power of the Jewish world as a whole. We had been

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right to act as we did, to make noise and push for change through our own resolute campaign, but we needed the establishment to see our efforts through. Wiesel understood exceptionally well how to unite these two forces for the common good.

Elie Wiesel’s humanism, his active concern for the voiceless, hardly stopped with his fellow Jews. He spoke out against massacres in Bosnia, Cambodia and Sudan, against apartheid in South Africa, and against the burning of black churches in the United States. He became, as others have said, the conscience of the world. Yet he never gave up or sacrificed even a bit of his concern for the Jewish people. He did not feel he had to give up his Jewish loyalty or national pride to be a better spokesman for others. To the contrary: It was the tragedy of his people that generated his concern for the world — a world he felt God had abandoned — and it was his belief in universal ideas that helped him to ultimately reconcile with his Jewish God.

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AMERICA’S FOURTH OF JULY TIES TO THE STATE OF ISRAEL

Mike Evans

[*Jerusalem Post*](#), July 3, 2016

America’s Independence Day, by far the most important national holiday of the year in the United States, commemorates the birth of the nation and the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, with fireworks, picnics, concerts, parades, political speeches and ceremonies. It is a day of patriotism and the largest birthday celebration in America - a true day of remembrance. It is in this spirit that I, as an American, will celebrate Israel. The nation of Israel and the

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Jewish people have sacrificed more for American freedom per capita than any nation on earth.

Radical Islamists call America the “Great Satan” and Israel the “Little Satan.” The reason is obvious; the Jewish people in Israel have, with their own blood, defended America and the Western world against radical Islam since the days of its rebirth on May 14, 1948. When Jewish poetess Emma Lazarus penned the immortal words emblazoned on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, Palestine was desert, a wasteland in the hands of the unfriendly Turks. From 1881 to about 1920, three million Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States. Welcoming them to America were Lazarus’ words: “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free....”

Ties between the Jewish people and the early pilgrims in America were as foundationally strong as the rock on which the Pilgrims stepped ashore in 1620. A group hoping to found a “New Israel” would become highly influential when the colonists began to aspire to freedom. Early founders and presidents of the newly-formed republic would express the hope that the children of Israel might one day find rebirth in their homeland - the land God gave to Abraham. Our forefathers, including Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin, lobbied for an image of Moses guiding the Israelites on the Great Seal. Such presidents as John Adams, Woodrow Wilson and Abraham Lincoln lobbied for a homeland in Palestine for the Jews. President Harry S. Truman was the first world leader to recognize the new State of Israel in 1948.

One of the greatest symbols of Israel’s sacrifice is Yonatan Netanyahu, commander of Sayaret Matkal, who was killed in action on July 4, 1976 during Operation Entebbe in Uganda. Character and dedication are symbolized in a letter Yonatan wrote to his parents on December 2, 1973: “We are preparing for war and it’s hard to know what to expect. What I am positive of is that there will be a next round and others after that. But, I would rather opt for living here in continual battle than for becoming part of the wandering Jewish people. Any compromise will simply hasten the end. As I don’t intend to tell my grandchildren about the Jewish

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State in the twentieth century as a mere brief and transient episode amid thousands of years of wandering, I intend to hold on here with all my might.”

In 2008, Ugandan president Yoweri Musevani flew to Israel at the invitation of president Shimon Peres to attend the “Facing Tomorrow Conference.” When I discovered he was there, I immediately approached Grace, first lady of Uganda. I told her that her husband had broken his promise. I referred to the fact that Maureen Reagan Revel, the daughter of Ronald Reagan, had asked me in January 1986 to organize a press conference for president Musevani. Maureen had been having a difficult time arranging it because of all the negative press regarding Uganda’s former leader, Idi Amin. I was able to fulfill Maureen’s request and invited president Musevani to the National Religious Broadcasters Convention in Washington, DC. My invitation to Musevani was supported by then-director of the NRB Dr. Ben Armstrong, who invited the president to speak. I hosted Musevani and his cabinet in my suite, and during that meeting, he said, “I want to do something for you to show my appreciation.” I replied, “I only ask one thing of you, and that is to honor Jonathan Netanyahu with a memorial at the airport in Entebbe.” That did not happen...

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[Elie Wiesel’s Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech \(Video\)](#): *Newsweek*, July 3, 2016—Author and humanitarian Elie Wiesel, who died Saturday at age 87, won the Noble Peace Prize in 1986 in recognition as "one of the most important spiritual leaders and guides in an age when violence, repression and racism continue to characterize the world."

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[Israel Mourns Elie Wiesel as One of its Own](#): Aron Heller, *Times of Israel*, July 4, 2016—Elie Wiesel never lived in Israel, but on Sunday the country mourned the death of the esteemed author and Nobel peace laureate as though it had lost a national icon.

[‘My God, Why the Children?’ Selections from Elie Wiesel’s Writings, Speeches and Interviews](#): Tristin Hopper, *National Post*, July 3, 2016 —“I don’t know how I survived; I was weak, rather shy; I did nothing to save myself. A miracle? Certainly not. If heaven could or would perform a miracle for me, why not for others more deserving than myself? It was nothing more than chance.”

[Nine Iconic Sites that Celebrate American Jewish History](#): Gabe Friedman and Andrew Silow-Carroll, *Times of Israel*, July 4, 2016—Monday is Independence Day in the US. That means it’s time for many Americans to take a day off, watch some fireworks and grill large amounts of meat to enjoy with friends and family.