

REVISING NIGHT

Elie Wiesel and the Hazards of Holocaust Theology

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Try to imagine the ideological gap that exists between those who struggle to find meaning in the Holocaust and those who deny its reality. Try to see the size of it: an A-Bomb crater, a city-shaped hole in the earth. On the one side we find survivors, clergy, scholars, and the simply concerned, engaged, whether they realize it or not, in a theology of destruction, taking measure of a darkness so vast it nearly looks like God. On the other we have the likes of David Irving, Michael Hoffman, Robert Faurisson—the kind of historians-on-the-side who assert that Zyklon B was merely a pesticide, that the number of Jews murdered was actually far less than is contended, that anyway they died of typhus, and that, really, nothing much happened at all.

“These are morally sick individuals,” Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel has said of revisionists. “While I am able to fight against injustice, I have no idea how to go about fighting against ugliness.” For their part, Faurisson and company refer to Wiesel—a man the *Washington Post* once referred to as “a symbol, a banner, a beacon, perhaps the survivor of the Holocaust”—as the “Prominent False Witness,” and, when good old-fashioned name-calling will do, “Elie Weasel.” When it comes to the Holocaust, theologians and revisionists shout at each other from across the expanse, openly despising what the other represents.

Yet what is theology if not a kind of revisionism? In the landscape of human

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discourse, theology occupies the place between fiction and history, myth and memory. It is from this place that Wiesel has said, "Auschwitz is as important as Sinai." Insofar as the Holocaust has changed humanity's relationship with God every bit as much as the giving of the Law, there is no denying that this is true. It is similarly true that, like Moses, Wiesel has served as mediator of an ineffable Event. While he considers different responses to this Event in each of his books, throughout his work Wiesel treats the Holocaust first of all as a theological occurrence. As with God's word at Mount Sinai, as with God's test at Mount Moriah, the occasion of God's greatest silence exists for Wiesel outside of time. It is an Event of such magnitude it transcends history.

Transcending history, though, is a tricky business. Sinai need not be historical for it to have meaning. If Auschwitz is granted the same status, is it not at risk of sharing this implication? In making the Holocaust primarily a matter of theological concern, does Elie Wiesel, witness to the world, court a benign sort of revisionism? At a time when it has become commonplace for revisionists to snarl that the Holocaust is a religion and Wiesel its prophet, what are we to do with a theological Auschwitz?

Uncomfortable questions have uncomfortable answers. To the first: If you traffic in faith, doubt is inevitable. To the second: A writer revises, it's part of the job. And to the third? Think again of that gap between piety and denial. Now stand in the ditch. We are implicated even by asking.

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"That the extermination of the Jews of Europe ought to arrest the attention of theologians seems obvious," the historian Amos Funkenstein once wrote. "That it has actually done so . . . is a fact." Yet the responses provided by Holocaust theologians are seldom parsed; rarely examined. Regardless of results, the willingness to struggle with the meaning of atrocity is often deemed noble enough to safeguard it from critique.

Naturally, there are exceptions. Funkenstein, for one, has identified three distinct varieties of theological response to the Holocaust, and he treats them all with disdain.

The first he names the direct theological response: it is the attempt "to salvage a theodicy from the rubble left by the eruption of evil as an apparently autonomous force." On the one hand this may mean religious Zionism: the phoenix Israel born of Diaspora's ashes. On the other, it is the rarely voiced *haredim* we-told-you-so: European Jewry did not die because they were Jews, but rather

because they had forgotten they were Jews. With the Holocaust, in other words, God reopened the floodgates. Those left alive to make such a claim have implicitly been rescued in an Ark of righteousness.

Funkenstein rightly regards this sort of theological response as offensive. He is only slightly less critical of the other options. The second possible response is the “polemical”—a strategy of blaming rival theologies for not holding true to their spirit; asking Christians why they do not act like Christ. Hypocrisy, says Funkenstein. Similarly, the third response, “the critical reflexive,” the willingness to question theology itself in the face of catastrophe, he regards as honest but rarely honest enough.

Elie Wiesel’s Holocaust theology does not fit neatly into any of Funkenstein’s categories. This is not surprising, as the exact nature of his theology has been seldom addressed. Theological critique often becomes a kind of blasphemy, and this is especially true in the case of a doubly sacred survivor-theologian like Wiesel. While his religious voice remains much discussed, it is little dissected. For fear of the implications of approaching a witness critically, few have been willing even to make the attempt.

One who has is Naomi Seidman, a professor of Jewish Culture at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. She tried recently to find answers to questions raised by Wiesel’s theological understanding through textual analysis, and in the process learned first hand the hazards of Holocaust theology.

In the last months of 1996, the young Yiddish literary scholar published a paper greeted by some as heresy, by others as the long-awaited slaying of a sacred cow. By comparing Wiesel’s *Night* to its earlier draft, *Un di velt hot geshvign* (“And the world remained silent”) published in Yiddish in 1956, Seidman undertook the first genuine criticism of the much revered book, shedding light on its journey from a bare-bones accounting of events to the existentialist memoir that for many has come to typify the Holocaust. What she documented, essentially, is Wiesel’s growth—his translation, perhaps—from survivor/witness to writer/theologian.

Using a method akin to biblical source criticism, Seidman’s paper traced the text’s development layer by layer, and predictably ruffled fundamentalist feathers. Letters written in response to the paper declared it a “futile and ugly performance.” Critics railed against its author as “ill-informed,” incompetent in the language of her scholarship, and worse: “Ms. Seidman’s brand of Holocaust revisionism is more deadly than Holocaust denial,” one of the letters said, “it is

a corrosive poison that destroys from within.” Even to research Holocaust theology, apparently, is to court revisionism—or, at least, to appear to do so.

Writing in Seidman's defense, Steven Zipperstein, the editor of *Jewish Social Studies*, in which the article appeared, knew what he was up against. The attack on Seidman, Zipperstein wrote, “conflates Mr. Wiesel with the Holocaust itself in its contention that his work cannot be interpreted critically without resorting to Holocaust revisionism.”

Elsewhere Seidman was lionized as “foremost among our younger generation of scholars,” and, with such support, ultimately she won the day. Rightly so: original, challenging, and crucial to reaching an understanding of Wiesel and the development of his thought, Seidman's paper is a careful and important piece of work. It will be discussed at some length. But first, a relevant aside: employed at the time by a Jewish cultural organization, moving in Yiddishist and Judaic Studies circles, I had heard about the paper and its mixed reception when it first was published. Yet I did not read it until recently. While trying to track down a copy of *Un di velt hot geshvign*, I remembered Professor Seidman had done work with it, and so did a Web search on her name. Along with her home page at GTU, up popped a link in blue letters: “Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage.”

Pleased as I was to stumble across the storied essay, I was puzzled that the link was not to the Web site of Jewish Social Studies, but to that of a group called AAARGH: *L'Association des Anciens Amateurs de Recits de Guerre et d'Holocauste*. My French is far from fluent; it took me few minutes to realize exactly what I had found.

From AAARGH's introduction:

“Cet article décrit les premières phase du processus de formation d'un des plus grands imposteurs de notre temps . . . La littérature holo-caustique est le plus énorme fromage de notre époque et Wiesel est son prophète.

[“This article describes the first phases of the formation of one of the great impostors of our time . . . Holocaust literature is the largest construction of our era, and Wiesel is its prophet.”]

Having survived one round of controversy, Naomi Seidman's careful, important piece of work happened upon another. It had found new life in a forum devoted to denying the Holocaust. It was an intellectual hijacking that had as much to do with her subject as her findings.



As its title suggests, “Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage” is concerned with anger, more specifically with the consideration of vengefulness as a common, appropriate and yet rarely acknowledged response to Jewish suffering. It deals also, however, with the historical development of Wiesel’s theology.

Finding *Night* lacking “Jewish rage” in sufficient quantity in relation to both the circumstances which inspired it and the Yiddish text from which it was born, Seidman alleges that Wiesel excised all traces of the survivor’s desire for retribution when *Un di velt hot geshvign* became *Night*. In a news item which sparked much of the controversy of the paper’s initial publication, the *Jewish Daily Forward* reported, “In editing his Yiddish memoir for his French publisher, Ms. Seidman told the *Forward* by telephone from her Berkeley office, Mr. Wiesel ‘replaced an angry survivor desperate to get his story out, eager to get revenge and who sees life, writing, testimony as a refutation of what the Nazis did to the Jews, with a survivor haunted by death, whose primary complaint is directed against God, not the world, [or] the Nazis.’”

Building a case that the two memoirs tell significantly different stories, Seidman provides cogent examples of curious choices Wiesel made when reworking the original into French. Some of these are arguably matters of perception. In the first book, for example, the Wiesel family’s home, Sighet, is referred to as a *shtot*, a city, while in the second it is “that little town . . . where I spent my childhood”—essentially the archetypal *shtetl*. Such a change could easily be accounted for by nostalgia, or by the fact that by the time the second book was written the author, working as he did between one book and the next as a foreign correspondent, had seen far more of the world. Cambridge too would seem a city if one has never visited New York.

In other instances, however, the differences are such that it is hard not to see an agenda. When describing the post-emancipation activities of some of the camp survivors, for example, Wiesel reports some of the boys run off, in Yiddish, “*tsu fargvaldikh daytshe shikses*,” while in French they merely go “*coucher avec des filles . . .*”

“To sleep with young girls,” as the French has it, is hardly an adequate translation of the Yiddish, “to rape German *shikses*.” Obviously, it is an entirely different telling of the event. “There are two survivors,” Seidman writes, “a Yiddish and a French”—and two survivors will of course tell different stories.

Seidman’s contention is that far from being mere matters of word choice,

episodes like the one involving *fargvaldikn* and *coucher avec* suggest that the latter book is not merely a translated and edited edition, but rather an entirely different book written for an entirely different audience for entirely different reasons.

Well aware of the implications of this claim, and perhaps back-pedaling in the face of the assault she received, Seidman elaborated in a letter to the *Forward*: “To speak differently when you speak in a differently language, is neither hypocritical nor inauthentic; it is merely human, rarely deliberate, and perhaps inevitable.”

The editors of AAARGH apparently disregarded this clarification. Already they had found enough damning material to warrant conscripting Seidman's words to their cause.

Because *Night* is not, as the paper shows, the unmediated experience its more naive readers may suppose it to be, it is for the revisionists entirely false, a lie upon which larger lies have been built. Thus the revisionists' ostensible reason for republishing “Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage” is the implication, as they read it, that its subject, their nemesis, is a fraud.

Not surprisingly, this is a surface take on Seidman's reading of Wiesel. The import of “. . . The Scandal of Jewish Rage” is found not in the factual discrepancy between a book and its rewrite, nor in the headline-grabbing contentions that Wiesel clothed such crimes as rape in the stubborn vitality of the Jewish people. Neither is the heart of the paper Wiesel's supposed suppression of further incidents of Jewish retribution.

Rather the real story here is of the development of Wiesel's theology. The differences between the Yiddish telling and the French can be accounted for by this theology, as can revisionist interest in Seidman's work. So too, in fact, can the endless revisionist obsession with Wiesel himself.

“Let me be clear,” Seidman writes. “The interpretation of the Holocaust as a religious theological event is not a tendentious imposition on *Night* but rather a careful reading of the work.” That this is true can best be seen when *Night* is set against *Un di velt*, of which the same could not be said.

According to Seidman, Wiesel's first book should be considered as part of the larger genre of Yiddish Holocaust memoirs, which “often modeled themselves on the local chronicle (*pinkes*) or memorial book (*yizker-bukh*) in which catalogs of names, addresses, and occupations served as form and motivation.”

Though it is largely a work of history, however, the earlier book does allow God his place. One letter writer to the *Forward* was right to insist, “Not only are

all the French version's famous passages about God present in the Yiddish volume, but the latter contains other equally harrowing examples of the young death camp inmate's struggle with his faith."

In fact, God's role in *Un di velt* is not entirely unlike that in *Night*. In both, God is wholly and substantially absent. In the Yiddish, though, this is a different sort of absence. It is the immediate, obvious absence faced by the victim rather than the reflective, philosophical absence later experienced by the survivor. It is the difference between an absence felt by a man under duress and one who is trying to rebuild his life.

As Wiesel tells it in his memoir, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, *Un di velt hot geshvign* was written years after liberation, while en route to Argentina. "I spent most of the voyage in my cabin working. I was writing my account of the concentration camp years—in Yiddish. I wrote feverishly, breathlessly, without rereading. I wrote to testify, to stop the dead from dying, to justify my own survival."

Yet as he explains in the final pages of the book itself—written earlier, closer to the event and so perhaps more reliably—the composition of *Un di velt* actually began far sooner, sooner even than seems imaginable. *Night* reads: "Three days after the Liberation of Buchenwald I became very ill with food poisoning. I was transferred to the hospital and spent two weeks between life and death." *Un di velt* continues: "I stayed in bed for a few more days, in the course of which I wrote the outline of the book you are holding in your hand, dear reader . . ." Thus Wiesel's telling of story began even before he had lived its end. In fact, he began telling the story before he knew he would live at all: "So I thought it would be a good idea to publish a book based on the notes I wrote in Buchenwald."

Taking the book at its word, it seems possible that something like a rough draft of *Un di velt hot geshvign* was written, or at least considered, even while Wiesel remained in the camps. It's no surprise, then, that unlike *Night*, it is difficult to read the earlier book as theology. At times, in fact, it reads as a clear rebuke of the religious response to suffering.

The most telling scene in this regard did not have problems of translation moving from Yiddish to French—because it does not appear in *Night* at all.

The opening lines of *Un di velt hot geshvign* are missing not only from *Night* but, strangely, from Seidman's comparison of the works.

Un di velt hot geshvign begins "*in onheyb*," "in the beginning," as do most Yiddish translations of Genesis and the Gospel of John. By the time he put pen to paper, perhaps making notes in Buchenwald, Wiesel certainly would have

read the former, and, a curious young man, a budding intellectual, possibly the latter as well. Beginning as he does, Wiesel leans in close to scripture, unafraid to show his resemblance to it. He nods graciously to his influences, and then he spits on them:

“In the beginning was belief, foolish belief, and faith, empty faith, and illusion, the terrible illusion . . . We believed in God, had faith in man, and lived with the illusion that in each one of us is a holy spark from the fire of the *shekhinah*, that each one carried in his eyes and in his soul the sign of God. This was the source—if not the cause – of all our misfortune.”

These are Wiesel’s first published words, and there is no indictment like it in anything he has written since. In the form of this past-tense creed—not “we believe,” but “we believed”—the young Wiesel refutes religion as a whole; in its content, he refutes Judaism particularly; in its details, Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, a mainstay of his later work, specifically. Belief is foolish, faith is empty, the in-dwelling God is a fantasy long purchased but still not worth the price. This is Wiesel’s theology as seen through the dark lens of *Un di velt hot geshvign*.

What becomes of this in *Night*? The easy answer is shocking and simple: it disappears.

Night’s beginning, “They called him Moche the Beadle,” can be found several pages into *Un di velt*. Wiesel has stated that the only real difference between the books is the length; that he “shortened, shortened, shortened” the manuscript for purposes of concision. Looking at one beginning and the other, however, it is clear that there were also theological considerations at work. The original opening has in effect been replaced by French Catholic intellectual Francois Mauriac’s problematic christological introduction:

And I [Mauriac], who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner [Wiesel], whose dark eyes still held the reflection of that angelic sadness which had appeared one day upon the face of the hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Jew, his brother, who may have resembled him—the Crucified, whose Cross has conquered the world?

The very religious principles made to bear the weight of Wiesel’s scorn in *Un di velt* . . . are in *Night* enshrined in a narrative of a holy Jewish childhood. “I believed profoundly,” Wiesel writes. “During the day I studied the Talmud, and at night I ran to the synagogue to weep over the destruction of the Temple.” There is no mention

anywhere in *Night* that Jewish belief was the cause of Jewish misfortune. Thus faith is pulled from the rubble. Also patched and salvaged from the wreck of *Un di velt* is Kabbalah, which in *Night* is not maligned but rather sought out as the height of knowledge. Another sentence not to be found in Yiddish: “One day I asked my father to find me a master to guide me in my studies of the *cabbala*.”

What was regarded as illusion in one book becomes deepest truth in another. Why? Wiesel was kind enough to provide a possible explanation: “Maimonides said it was only at thirty that one had the right to venture into the perilous world of mysticism. You must first pass the basic subjects within your own understanding.” And that seems precisely what Wiesel, at thirty, did in rewriting his first book. Having exhausted his historical understanding of events in *Un di velt hot geshvign* he moved on to mystery with *Night*.

As *Night* makes clear, Wiesel’s unique brand of mysticism is crucial to understanding his theology. The key to both can be found in the figure of Moche the Beadle, and in the differences, again, between this character and his Yiddish counterpart. For purposes of clarity while discussing these differences, I’ll refer to the Beadle (or *Shamas*) of *Un di velt* as Moshele, as he is called in Yiddish, and that of *Night* as Moche.

In the Yiddish, Moshele has just one role in the narrative. He is introduced immediately as one who had come back, “from there! from there.” That is, he is one who has been where the truth of the Holocaust is well known. He reports what he knows and has seen to the Jews of Sighet and they, to his dismay, do not believe him.

Moche serves this purpose also in *Night*. Returning to Sighet months after deportation, he is found sitting by the synagogue door:

He told his story and that of his companions. The Jews . . . were made to dig huge graves, and when they had finished their work, the Gestapo began theirs. Without passion, without haste, they slaughtered their prisoners. Each one had to go up to the hole and present his neck. Babies were thrown into the air and the machine gunners used them as targets. This was in the forest of Galicia, near Kolomaye. How had Moche the Beadle escaped? Miraculously . . .

In each book the Beadle serves as first witness. Like Wiesel himself, Moche and Moshele are privy to awful truths the world does not want to hear. This, it must be stressed, is Moshele’s only function in *Un di velt hot geshvign*. To put it bluntly: he is introduced, he testifies, he is doubted and then, of course, proven correct.

In *Night*, however, Moche serves a more complex narrative and theological purpose. Taking on another and equally important role, it is he who initiates Eliezer into the mysteries of Kabbalah. The following does not appear in the original book:

He had noticed me one day at dusk, while I was praying . . . ‘Why do you pray?’ he asked me, after a moment. Why do I pray? A strange question. Why do I live? Why do I breathe? . . . After that day I saw him often. He explained to me with great insistence that every question possessed a power that did not lie in the answer.

That nearly every word in *Night* regarding Kabbalah and other of the more esoteric aspects of Judaism has been added to a text that was supposedly “shortened, shortened, shortened” suggests that the most striking and intentional difference between the Yiddish in the French is not the suppression of Jewish rage, as Seidman contends, but rather the imposition of a theological frame on the story.

Just as there are two survivors responsible for the presentation of Wiesel’s story, there are two witnesses within it. One is historical, Moshele; the other is theological, Moche. In the translation of Moshele, who is only witness, into Moche, who is witness and sage, Wiesel has created a mouthpiece for his theology. It is a unique Holocaust theology, a theology of questions without answers; one that equates knowledge of the depths of man’s depravity with knowledge of the heights of man’s wisdom. Moche is Master of both, and through him Wiesel the writer gives voice to Wiesel the theologian:

“Man raises himself toward God by the question he asks Him,” he was fond of repeating. That is the true dialogue. Man questions God and God answers. But we don’t understand His answers. We can’t understand them. Because they come from the depths of the soul, and they stay there until death. You will find the true answers only within yourself.

There are a thousand and one gates leading into the orchard of mystical truth. Every human being has his own gate. We must never make the mistake of wanting to enter the orchard by any gate but our own . . .

To speak of questions and gates here is portentous, foreshadowing the gates of the camps and the questions to God the camps will raise. Already we begin to see the theologizing of the Event. In *Night*, the teacher of the mystical secrets becomes also the teacher of the truth of the camps. Who is to say whether it was the theologian or the writer in Wiesel who could not resist the symmetry of it? Regardless, this development marks the birth of the theology that informs all of Wiesel's work. Through Moche, Auschwitz for Wiesel comes to stand for the mystery of darkness, Kabbalah, the mystery of light. To create such a schema, though, is to fit the Holocaust into a rather tidy cosmology. Whatever this says for the skills and imagination of a writer, it does little service to history.

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"Revisionism is an ancient practice," Pierre Vidal-Naquet wrote, "but the revisionist crisis occurred in the West only after the turning of the genocide into a spectacle, its transformation into pure language . . ."

"Pure language": To this we should add the word "religious," for the latest trends in Holocaust revisionism seem to focus on and make use of religious or theological language more than any other.

At the risk of giving attention where attention surely is not due, the leader of this movement seems to be the American revisionist Michael Hoffman. A fairly typical quote:

The "Holocaust" has become a media religion, the last truly believed religion in the otherwise agnostic West. It is a civic religion, one of the aims of which is to replace the crucifixion of Christ at Calvary with the experience of the Jews at Auschwitz, as the central ontological event of Western history.

What is most troubling about this is that, breaking it down and considering it piece by piece, it would be possible to find reasonable people who might agree.

Elsewhere in the *Forward* of November 15, 1996, for example, while sparks

were flying over Yiddish scholarship on the letters page, in the arts section we may read: “the Holocaust . . . has already passed from historical event to secular religion.” Continuing on, to the connection between the Holocaust and the crucifixion, we must remember that theologically it is not just acceptable but incumbent upon Christians to look on the Holocaust and see Calvary. John Paul II has called Auschwitz the “Golgotha of the modern world.” Given the choice Jews generally would forego this kind of empathy. For empathy too can be a kind of revisionism. The Church is built on co-opted Jewish tragedy; left unchecked it would surely build again. Yet wouldn’t Wiesel himself agree with the Pope’s implication—and Hoffman’s charge—that Auschwitz is the central ontological Event of our time? “Ontological Event,” in fact, is shorthand Wiesel favors. Perhaps Hoffman even borrowed the term, just as AAARGH borrowed Naomi Seidman’s scholarship.

Such are the hazards of language. Words often say one thing and mean another. It seems there is bound to be a time in every Jewish writer’s life when she will be quoted by an anti-Semite.

Is the solution, then, silence—as is so often suggested? Or, in fact, is the solution a greater willingness to speak?

While it has not always been the case, in the modern world theology has no defense against revisionism. Particular theology in a pluralistic society is a to-each-his-own affair. Thus to speak of the Holocaust in religious terms—to preach the ineffability of the Event, to invoke the incomprehensibility of the camps, to use all those units of theological language to say what we believe cannot be said and thus to remove it from the mundane—this too is a kind of denial. Again, Hoffman: “Belief is not incumbent. I can live my life and be a good, productive citizen without accepting a single iota of Jewish theology about their ‘Shoah.’ If Jews want to believe it, fine. Every religion is entitled to its own story.”

Some would counteract this abuse of both religion and language with the radical assertion that, in fact, we can speak of the unspeakable, we can comprehend that which is cheapened by thought.

“The crime committed by the Nazis was of immense proportions,” Amos Funkenstein writes, “the horror and the suffering transgress our capacity of imagination, but it is possible to understand them rationally . . . The prehistory of genocide, its necessary preconditions, can be illuminated more and more. The mental mechanisms by which Nazi ideology justified mass murder can be followed step by step.”

Such thinking offers a strong prescription, but even a bitter pill can be a

placebo. If we continue to speak of atrocity in religious terms we will never take full responsibility for it. And so we will never learn. And so it will continue to be denied. And so it will happen again.

And yet, as Elie Wiesel is fond of saying, and yet: even a practical theology, a thoroughly human theology, remains a theology. It remains an attempt at universal understanding, and so can only come up short. While we who believe believe generally, and those who deny deny generally, we live in particulars. We die specifically, even in mass graves. It may well be that God alone can give meaning to six million, but one by one theology is meaning's thief.