GLEANINGS ABOUT NIGHT FROM WIESEL'S MEMOIRS

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Elie Wiesel is widely acknowledged as one of the world’s great teachers. There is indeed much to learn from him as a witness to the Holocaust, a prize-winning author, and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, but I have always wondered what made him the great scholar, teacher, witness, and humanitarian that he is.

What accounts for his remarkable career? Besides the obvious ordeal of the Holocaust itself, was there some formative event or circumstance that enabled him to write so powerfully about the horrendous experiences we read about in Night? And what gave him the capacity to identify so completely with the sufferings of others?

A partial answer—and perhaps the most important part—is suggested by the experiences Wiesel had with a man who became one of his most important teachers in the early post-Holocaust years. It was an unsettling experience with this teacher that led Wiesel to a very important insight: “Man is defined by what troubles him, not by what reassures him.”

What does he mean? The answer can best be conveyed by telling the story of Wiesel’s encounters with the man who would become his most unforgettable, if not his most influential, teacher.

In the first volume of his memoirs, All Rivers Run to the Sea, Wiesel describes the first time he set eyes on the man. It happened during evening services when the man unexpectedly showed up. “Dressed like a vagabond, a tiny hat perched
on his enormous head, he stood in a corner, lost in his thoughts. Someone told me his name was Shushani and that he was a genius.” Someone else referred to him as a “madman.” Another said he was a “mad genius.” (118)

Wiesel admits that he was fascinated by madmen—probably because of the Hasidic influence in his early years—but leery of geniuses. While he debated with himself whether to approach the man, the man disappeared. This incident took place in 1945 at an OSE-operated home near Lyons. Fortunately, the strange man and Wiesel would meet again.

After the war, the OSE (the children’s rescue society) resettled young liberated Jews in OSE homes. The sixteen-year-old Wiesel was sent to France. In these homes the Jewish youths received medical attention, food, and lodging. They associated with other survivors and began to establish new lives for themselves. Schooling was a major focus of OSE support. Observant youth, including Wiesel, resumed traditional Jewish practices such as eating kosher meals, putting on tefillin to say prayers, and studying the sacred texts of Judaism. Wiesel again took up study of the Bible and Talmud that he began as a young boy back home in Sighet.

At this crucial time, as he resumed his study, Wiesel had the good fortune of meeting up with Shushani again. The decisive encounter with Shushani, as Wiesel describes it, occurred as Wiesel was traveling by train on his way back to Taverny, in the suburbs of Paris, where he had been moved again by the OSE. It was a Friday and Wiesel was preoccupied with thoughts about the book of Job, as he prepared for the talk he was scheduled to give the next day following the Shabbat service. His thoughts were interrupted by a voice from the other side of the train’s aisle. It was the voice of Shushani.

The strange vagabond-looking man, whom Wiesel had seen some time earlier, moved to a seat beside Wiesel and struck up a conversation. After an opening inquiry about what Wiesel was reading, and without waiting for an answer, Shushani grabbed the book from Wiesel’s hands and hurriedly flipped through its pages. He announced that there was little of value in the book and asked why Wiesel was wasting his time on it. Wiesel said that he was preparing for a talk he was to give the next day on the book of Job. The incredulous Shushani began to probe young Wiesel’s knowledge of Job and managed to undermine any confidence Wiesel might have had in giving the talk. Certainly, the commentary he was reading to prepare would do him no good.

They conversed a few more minutes, but it seemed like an eternity as the train lumbered along. Wiesel’s feeble attempts to explain what he knew about
Job left Shushani unimpressed. Shushani chided the teenager for having the chutzpah to give a public talk on Job. Wiesel felt humiliated by Shushani’s sarcasm and was greatly relieved when the train finally reached his destination. He got up to leave the train and politely wished Shushani a good Shabbat.

To Wiesel’s dismay, Shushani announced that it was premature to wish him a good Shabbat. He would see him tomorrow. He was coming to hear Wiesel’s talk. That Shabbat, Wiesel admits, is deeply inscribed in his memory “like a punishment.” (122)

Wiesel reports that during his talk Shushani did not interrupt, nor did he offer any comments after it was over. But on the next day, Sunday, Shushani gave a “real” lecture on Job—a lecture that was wide-ranging in its erudite exposition of Torah, the book of Job, Rabbinic commentaries, and Midrash. Shushani’s lecture expounded on philosophy, truth, and myth. His erudition dazzled Wiesel, and even humiliated him when Shushani insisted that he admit how little he really knew. Wiesel was forced to acknowledge that Shushani was right. He really hadn’t learned much—yet.

Wiesel was caught. He knew Shushani was right. He writes that this encounter with Shushani, difficult as it was, actually drew him to the man. He instinctively knew that he wanted to study with this strange man whose intellect surpassed any he had ever known. He was irresistibly drawn to this man’s enormous intellectual power and wide-ranging knowledge.

If he shook my inner peace, that was what I wanted. If he overturned certainties, so much the better, for they were beginning to weigh heavily on me. Man is defined by what troubles him, not by what reassures him. (124)

Shushani’s influence on Wiesel cannot be overstated. “It is to him I owe my constant drive to question, my pursuit of the mystery that lies within knowledge and of the darkness hidden within light.” (128)

Wiesel studied privately with Shushani for several years. It was only much later that he learned his name and background. Shushani was born in Lithuania with the name Mordechai Rosenbaum. Even before his bar mitzvah it was reported that he could recite the entire Talmud by heart. People came from great distances to hear him speak. Wiesel writes that Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas was among Shushani’s famous pupils.

Under Shushani’s guidance Wiesel took up the study of many subjects,
including asceticism. Learning about asceticism was compelling, Wiesel says, because it involved “the lure and quest for suffering, the will to suffer so as to infuse one’s own suffering and that of others with meaning.” (150) Through their conversations about asceticism and suffering Wiesel began to discover the possibilities—and the limitations—of writing about his own experiences in the camps. Wiesel writes that they talked about suffering’s relationship to truth, redemption, and spiritual purity. They spoke about suffering as a “gateway to the sacred.” Wiesel says he thought about writing his memories of the camps “which I bore within me like a poison. . . . I thought about it with apprehension day and night: the duty to testify, to offer depositions for history, to serve memory. (150)

As Wiesel struggled over the duty to testify, he found himself reflecting on what it means to remember. His thoughts about this question reveal both philosophical understanding and personal insight. He says that to remember requires one to live in several worlds at one time—past, present, and future.

It is to revive fragments of existence, to rescue lost beings, to cast harsh light on faces and events, to drive back the sands that cover the surface of things, to combat oblivion and to reject death. . . . (150)

The desire “to combat oblivion and to reject death” made Wiesel aware that some day he would write to celebrate memory. He remained troubled, though, by the impoverishment of words.

Wiesel struggled with the limitations of language as he thought about telling his story. He admits that words frightened him. “What exactly did it mean to speak? Was it a divine or a diabolical act? The spoken word and the written word do not reflect the same experience.” (150) He acknowledges that his early adolescent immersion in mysticism made him suspicious of writing. He remembered that Rabbi Itzhak Lurie did not write. His disciple Rabbi Hayyim put his teacher’s teachings down on paper. It is not known whether Rabbi Lurie approved. He remembered that Rabbi Nahman ordered his own writings to be burned. He remembered also that the Zohar refers to the galut hadibur (the exile of the word) “for words, too, are exiled. A chasm opens between them and their content.” (151) Wiesel lacked confidence that he could write about what he had experienced. He already sensed what he later came to feel with greater conviction: human words are simply inadequate to express the depths of suffering and its meaning.
It would be another ten years before Wiesel would come forth with his deposition. During those years he would pursue a writing career as a journalist, but he remained silent on “the Event”—until the first publication of Night in 1958.

The French Catholic writer and Nobel laureate François Mauriac, whom Wiesel first met in 1955, was instrumental in getting Night published. Mauriac and Wiesel admired each other personally and respected each other’s work. Mauriac was the first person to read Night after Wiesel shortened the original Yiddish manuscript; and it was Mauriac who eventually found a publisher for it. Publisher after publisher rejected it, but Mauriac persisted. Mauriac’s foreword to Night acknowledges the importance he gave to the work: “This personal record, coming as it does after so many others and describing an abomination such as we might have thought no longer had any secrets for us, is different, distinct, and unique nevertheless. . . . [It is] a book to which, I believe, no other can be compared.”

What, then, was the turning point in Wiesel’s life that led to his writing of Night?—and to a remarkable career of bearing witness to the Holocaust and to speaking out on behalf of all who suffer from oppression and injustice? Arguably, it was his unsettling initial experience with the wise teacher Shushani.

From Shushani he learned about Job, Midrash, the Talmud, and humanity. From Shushani he learned to question certainties, to care deeply about the suffering of others, and to acknowledge the power (and limitation) of words. Eventually, and above all, these lessons led Wiesel to a sense of responsibility, of personal moral accountability in the face of oppression and suffering.

From Shushani Wiesel learned that “Man is defined by what troubles him, not by what reassures him.” He learned that despite the limitation of words, he had to make his deposition.

Notes