

## Sermon for YK Yizkor – 16 – Generation to Generation Elie Weisel z'l

An 83-year old man is beginning his convalescence after open-heart surgery. His 5-year old grandson comes to pay him a visit. The older man hugs the little boy and tells him, "Every time I see you, my life becomes a gift." The boy looks his grandfather over as he talks and then says with a very serious tone, "Grandpa, you know that I love you and I see you are in pain. Tell me: if I loved you more would you be in less pain?" The wise, gentle grandfather looks at his grandson, Elijah is his name, and thinks to himself – at this very moment God is smiling as He contemplates His creation. The grandfather, Elie Wiesel, hugs Elijah again.

Such was the scene five years ago when Elie Wiesel had emergency open-heart surgery. When I read the account in Elie's book, "Open Heart," I was dumbfounded. How does a person go from the flames of Auschwitz to a belief that God would care about one tender moment with his grandson? Or perhaps, after surviving and thriving, there is no other conclusion, but that a grandchild's wisdom and love validates everything.

When Elie Wiesel's voice fell silent this past July 2<sup>nd</sup>, we lost the voice of a generation of survivors, the voice of those who perished, the voice of millions of ardent supporters of Israel and the voice of anyone suffering under tyranny or abuse. We lost a witness, a teacher, an advocate and a philosopher. And even with all that he taught us during his life, with all of the wisdom, the questions, the prolific writings, his passing reminds us of another aspect of Elie Wiesel. More important to him than any of those things, Elie was a son and Elie was a father. Elie was a link between generations and he dedicated his life to remembering his father and insuring that his father's world, his values and culture, were passed down to his son and grandson.

In fact, I believe what motivated his personal life, his public life and even his choice of careers as writer, teacher and witness was this idea that he could be a link in a chain that stretched from a generation nearly lost to a thriving generation of the future. And so on this day when we gather to remember our loved one's lost and carry their wisdom and influence into our future, let's look at the life of Elie Wiesel for the incredible example he sets for us in that task.

In "Night", Elie Wiesel's memoir about his experience in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, we meet Eliezer, a Jewish boy of almost 13 who studies Jewish mysticism with the keeper of the Chasidic shtiebel in town. The teacher came from Hungary warning of the dangerous shadow falling over the Jews of Europe, but his fears are dismissed as the ranting of an old and lonely man. Three years later, the teenager Eliezer finds himself in the depths of that shadow and the flames that came with it; he finds himself in Auschwitz. There, trying to protect his father, filled with shame because he sees that as a burden and a threat; there, witnessing children go to their deaths and then turned to wisps of smoke, he declared, "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."

Of course, Elie changes his mind about that. Even in the last sentence of his anti-God declaration, we understand that it is not God's existence that is in doubt, only His goodness, or maybe His usefulness. "...even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself." So, he acknowledges that God exists, Elie just wants nothing to do with him. There is a very important idea wrapped up in that passage. The idea that we can be angry about God and have our doubts about God without denying the existence of God. Even with everything he goes through and even in the loss of his own sense of humanity and the shame

of the mixed emotions he feels about the burden of care for his father, even amidst all the death and injustice, Elie never denies God – he is angry with God, sure, but he does not deny God.

So what does he do with that anger? He embraces Judaism as fully as anyone ever has. Elie was a religious man his whole life. When he didn't have the words for a prayer or a talk, he would break out in a *niggun*, a wordless religious melody that he could infuse with his emotions. He was known to do this on occasion in front of a class. Could you imagine going to a lecture from Elie Wiesel and suddenly he closes his eyes and just starts to sing a song of pure prayer? Incredible.

Why did he not turn from his faith after all he'd witnessed? I can't be sure, but I think it is because it was his faith that connected him to his father and to the old world he once knew and it was his faith that would connect that old world to his new world as embodied by his son Elisha. As Elisha recently said when asked about his father's personal legacy, "For him the guiding principle that governed that lens was always, 'Have I been a good Jew?' That meant many different things to him. If you unpacked what a good Jew was, it meant being a good human being and a good father; a leader in the community when leadership was needed; a good husband; someone who respected and brought respect to the memory and traditions and name of his ancestors; someone who was humbled by the concept of man's place in the universe but still felt mandated to fix the world; and someone who, when approached by people, would make time to talk with them and make them feel welcomed and listened to."

Elie Wiesel not only transmitted these amazing truths to his son, he transmitted them to all of us. Because in truth, that is what made Elie so special. It wasn't that he told his story of surviving the Shoah and how his father didn't make it. It wasn't that he was the first survivor to tell his story. I know that by legend that's the case, but it's not really true. Others were already telling their story when *Night* was published. Perhaps Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi were the most gifted writers telling the story, but that's not what made Elie so special either. What made him special was all the things he taught us in addition to his story.

He was a model of a fine human being, a leader in human rights advocacy for Soviet Jews, for the victims of genocide in Bosnia and the victims of apartheid in South Africa. He was a leader who was not afraid to challenge the powerful. He famously called Ronald Reagan out for plans to visit a German cemetery where SS officers were buried. He did this in person, at the White House, in front of the cameras and microphones at a ceremony standing right next President Reagan while the president was trying to honor him for his work. That's chutzpah – but it's necessary chutzpah. US Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro said "...Elie taught us to speak truth to power. As I was just becoming politically aware, his public stance on President Reagan's visit to the cemetery in Bitburg was a model for how to express dissent in an open society." In other words, Elie was, in many ways, America's living conscience and that impact continues to this day.

All those things that Elie gave to his son, all those things that made a good Jew, being a good person, Elie gave to us as well. That's why he is so special to us. That's why I smile each time I walk by the picture in our office hallway of over a thousand of you packed into this room to hear him at Beth El's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Who else would we have wanted there, but our teacher, our example, the one who taught us to be a link in the chain, a link between the past and the future, through action, word and philosophy?

And that is our challenge today and every day, as we remember our loved ones lost. How do we harness the best of them, their ethics, their teachings, their spirit? One of Elie Wiesel's favorite stories is about a visit he made to Saragossa, Spain. Saragossa was once an important city. Before 1492 it housed a yeshiva and a thriving Jewish community. When Elie visited, however, no Jews had lived there in over 500 years.

Like most tourists, he visited the sites as well as the impressive cathedral. While walking through the Church, a man approached him speaking French and offered to be his guide for free; the man was proud of his town. After a while they started talking. It soon came out that Elie was Jewish and knew how to speak Hebrew. The man exclaimed–I've never met a Jewish person but I have something I want to show you. Maybe you can tell me what it is.” The two men walked to the Spaniard’s small apartment and when they arrived, he took out a fragment of a yellowed parchment. “Is this Hebrew?” the man asked, “My family has passed it down for generations. We were told that if it were destroyed, we would bring a curse on our family.”

Elie took the parchment, and as he read it, he began to tremble. He realized that it was not only Hebrew, but the words were more than 500 years old. Slowly he translated it for his guide. "I, Moshe ben Avraham, Moses the son of Abraham, forced to break all ties with my people and my faith, leave these lines to the children of my children and theirs, in order that on the day when Israel will be able to walk again, it's head held high under the sun without fear and without remorse, they will know where their roots lie. Written at Saragossa, the 9th day of the month of Av, in the year of punishment and exile."

“What’s the meaning of this document?” asked the alarmed Spaniard. Until that moment he considered being called ‘Judeo’ an insult and he knew nothing about the history of Spanish Jewry. And who better to explain that history than Elie Wiesel? He told him the story of our people in Spain-- the inquisition, Torquemada, the Marranos, and the ultimate expulsion of all Jews from Spain on the ninth of Av, 1492. The man’s eyes grew wider and wider as it all began to sink in, realizing that he and his family were somehow connected to Moshe Ben Avraham.

Fast-forward ten years. On a trip to Jerusalem, Elie Wiesel is accosted by a stranger on the street. In broken Hebrew the man says, “Mr. Wiesel: Shalom! Don’t you recognize me? Saragossa!” Wiesel hesitated. The man was speaking Hebrew, not French.

Then the man said, “I have something to show you.” Once again, he invited Elie back to his apartment, explaining as they walked how he had come to Israel, studied about Judaism, and returned to the religion of his ancestors. When they entered the apartment, Elie knew why they had come. On the wall hung a picture frame protecting the yellowed parchment he had read years before. But this time the man read it to Wiesel. As he finished, the man smiled and said: “I haven't told you my new name: My name is Moshe ben Avraham. It is Moses, son of Abraham. He is alive after 500 years.”

My friends, I think Elie, our teacher, our friend tells the story to remind us that it is never too late to embrace the world of our fathers, to live its values in a modern way and to pass those values forward. If this man whose heritage had been lost for 500 years can suddenly find it and revive it, than we can too, in whatever way is most appropriate for our family.

That is what this day of Yom Kippur is all about, about connecting with our roots and understanding how we will bring them into our lives in a relevant way. Perhaps no one has ever done that in a more spectacular way than Elie Wiesel. He taught us how to question, but also how to believe, he taught us how to mourn, but also how to live. Mark Podwal reported that, “At his funeral his son Elisha eulogized him by saying that Elie finally had an opportunity to ask God all the difficult questions. Knowing him, I am sure that Elie will question God’s answers.” The son is forever connected to his father’s father, two worlds bridged by one incredible man. Yet each of us has the ability to be that bridge. During the Yizkor service, we reflect on the lives of those who came before us so that we can understand how to bring them into our lives and into the lives of those who will come after us, whether that is our kids or our students, those we help or those we heal. This Yizkor, let us remember the blessing of Elie Wiesel and seek to bring his blessing into our lives.

A 9-year old boy stepped up to the lectern to eulogize his grandfather. He spoke of sharing simple moments with a man who was a moral titan to many. Elijah recalled the fun of making English muffins together, smothered in blueberry jam. As we recall our loved ones lost, may we all know the comfort of the simple things that made them ours and the great things that made them our connection to the world of our past, to understanding our present and to shaping our futures.

In just a moment we will turn to the Yizkor service in our special Yizkor books that you received on your way into the sanctuary...I encourage you to stay, as we all have people to remember, but if you would like to leave we will leave a moment for you to make your way out quietly.