

# Eli Wiesel Speaks About His Legacy

An Interview with Elie Wiesel  
by  
Rabbi Asher Jacobson

*A few years ago, I was invited by Mr. Herbert Black to have dinner with Dr. and Mrs. Elie Wiesel in New York. It was an invitation that I could not refuse after all,*

*Elie Wiesel is more than a speaker, writer, distinguished university professor and recipient of the Noble Peace Prize. He is one of the major figures of our time and has had an indescribable impact on our generation. The encounter was inspirational and moving. I have tried to reconstruct some of what was said that night, and with permission I am honoured to share the depth of this outstanding sage.*

**We noticed that you came tonight with security. Is this because of your recent attack in San Francisco?**

Yes. Throughout the years, I have received all kinds of vicious hate mail from anti-Semites, anti-Zionists and from Holocaust deniers. Though their words were violent, I tended to ignore them. But today the deniers and haters seem to have accelerated their hate from violent words to violent actions. It's unfortunate.

**You are coming toward the end of your career. What is next on your agenda?**

Without false humility, I honestly feel that I haven't even begun.

**What is your main project today?**

To fight Ahmadinejad, president of Iran. He is the world's number one holocaust denier. If he can convince the people that the holocaust never happened, then he can go on to preach that the establishment of the state of Israel was founded on false pretenses, and preach its entire destruction. Should he succeed in convincing the people, it would be the beginning of the destruction of Israel.

**As he is, would you compare him to Hitler?**

No one is like Hitler.

**Would the nations of the world allow Ahmadinejad to develop nuclear capabilities?**

The nations of the world must never allow this to happen. It would be disastrous for Israel and the entire region.

**Do you feel Israel will have to go in alone and attack Iran's nuclear facility like they did in '81 in Iraq?**

It's not the same situation. Unfortunately, it's not the same situation. Iran has multiple reactors that are underground, in populated civilian areas. Military action would be very difficult but I don't think it's impossible.

**Who is going to carry on your message, your courage, and your fight after you are gone?**

You! You are a witness of a witness and that is strong enough. In Judaism witnesses are very important integral part of the faith, even more important than the judges because the witness establishes the truth. The

Bible and the Talmud are filled with the notion of bearing witness in almost every segment of our life cycle. The Torah sees the witness as validating relationships, setting forth the calendar of time and establishing law and justice. It also categorically admonishes the false witness.

**But as the generations continue, it kind of gets diluted. We observe less. We are committed less and the memory becomes a vague.**

I disagree. I have tremendous faith in Judaism and its people. We have seen the miracle of Judaism over again. Sometimes it takes a generation or two, three, sometimes four, but the children or the grandchildren always come back. Take a look at Soviet Jewry. Many of the founders of communism were Jewish. Their intention was to destroy Judaism, to erase G-d and replace G-d with Socialism or Communism.

There is a joke told that in the beginning of Communism, there were so many Jews involved in the party that when the one or two gentiles left the cabinet floor, Yankel would say to Chaim, "Let's *daven mincha*."

Yet today, their very own grandchildren, and great-grandchildren study in the yeshivas in Israel and the United States and have once again embraced the very faith their grandparents tried to destroy.

During the Spanish Inquisition, in 1491 Jews were forcibly converted. Five centuries later, we are seeing their descendants come back to the faith. I have personally met one of these Jews, who I have spent much time with teaching him about Judaism, five centuries later. He calls himself today Moshe ben Chaim. It's a miraculous story. I write about it in one of my books.

**What would you say to the assimilated Jew that has become apathetic to Judaism and removed from its calling?**

I have never met such a Jew. The Jews who come to me through my writing, teaching, or lectures obviously wish to connect with Judaism, its people, its history, its cost.

**Suppose you would meet such Jews, what you say to them?**

I would say to them, "You don't know what you are missing – the richness, the beauty, the history, the scholarship, the calling. Imagine, for thousands of years a precious text has been protected and preserved for you with much sacrifice and defiance. It has been passed on from millennia to millennia just for you. Should you not, at the very least, look at it, study it; learn from it a few minutes a day?"

I would say that if you think by assimilating or dissociating yourself from Judaism will gain you greater acceptance as a human being in an advanced society, I would tell you that you are making a grave and historical mistake. The world will respect the Jew that lives, acts, and observes Judaism and Jewish life. And it will in the end despise the Jew who acts falsely to himself and his people.

**Do you believe in G-d?**

My book, *Night*, has often been misunderstood. There have been books written on my book as well as many articles. Sometimes I ask, where do they get this *narishkeiten* (stupidity)? Yes, I have my issues with G-d. But it's the G-d of my father and grandfather and I will never turn my back on them.

I remember in Auschwitz how many gave of their rationed bread and stood on line to adorn themselves with a smuggled pair of *tefillin*. I prayed then and I pray now. I put on tefillin and try to be as committed a Jew as I can.

It's very easy for anyone who experiences some struggle in life to say, "I don't believe in G-d anymore." To me that is not a big deal. Anyone can say that. It's cowardly, a cop out, and is the result of a small mind. People have misunderstood my struggle with G-d and have taken it as disbelief.

**For decades you have been the witness bearer for the six million murdered Jews, would you not consider representing now the over six million living Jews as president to Israel?**

I have been asked by Israeli officials countless times, by holocaust survivors, through petitions from Israeli citizens but I have declined.

**Why?**

For the same reason I declined receiving *smicha* (Rabbinical Ordination) from a great rabbi in Europe who didn't give *smicha* easily. People come to me and listen to me because the words I say are my own. I am who I am because of my own words.

I am a great supporter of Israel. I have always tried to support every leader the people of Israel have elected. I try to respond to each and every one of their requests. I visit, Jerusalem three times a year - Succoth, Shavuot and Tisha B'Av.

**Why Tisha B'Av?**

To prove Isaiah wrong when he begins the Book of Lamentations, "Oh, how the city that was once so populous remained lonely like a widow!" When I come to Jerusalem, I see it filled with Jews joyful and alive. To me the city Isaiah is referring to is Warsaw. For the Jewish people of Europe Warsaw was "the princess among the provinces and now she weeps bitterly in the night" alone and abandoned.

**What is the function of the Eli Wiesel Foundation?**

In Israel, the Elie Wiesel Foundation helps support 1200 Ethiopian children obtain training in all vocations and professions so that they can integrate well into Israeli society.

**Are the Ethiopian Jewish children easily accepted into Israeli society?**

Unfortunately there is racism even amongst our own people in Israel and we cannot tolerate that. We have even been accused of reverse racism. People ask, why are you helping only the Ethiopian children when there are so many in Israel in need? Our response to them is that we are doing what we can and in time the foundation will expand to other communities.

**The world is shaken by the Virginia Tech massacre. They are characterizing the shooter as unstable. What is your reaction?**

The Virginia Tech people are saying he was disturbed, isolated, etc. This might be true but what is also true is that he committed this act with full awareness and consciousness. He planned and executed this act like a suicide bomber. The techniques were even the same as we see from the terrorist suicide bomber.

**Did you know the Romanian-Israeli Jewish professor, Liviu Librescu, who gave his life for his students?**  
"No, I did not know him. But he made a remarkable *Kiddush Hashem*."

## **Would you consider him a martyr?**

I dislike the word martyrdom. It's been hijacked by the terrorists who kill others in the name of G-d. True martyrdom is to give one's own life so that others may live. Professor Librescu, in his death, showed the world the true value of life. In the Jewish tradition, the relationship between teacher and student is distinctly unique. The Talmud equates it to the same kind of a relationship as a father has to his son. Professor Librescu demonstrated to his students that kind of love.

What happened at Virginia Tech reminds me of the story that the Talmud relates (Sanhedrin, 14).

During Roman times, the Empire enacted a cruel decree against the Jewish people, stating that anyone who conferred rabbinic ordination or anyone who accepted ordination would be killed. Furthermore, any town in which ordination was conferred would be destroyed. Its boundaries would be eradicated.

R' Yehudah be Bava, a great sage and teacher of the time, went against the Roman rule and sat between two large mountains, and ordained five of his students.

When the Romans discovered them, R' Yehudah ben Bava said to his students "My sons, run!" The students asked him: "Our teacher, what will become of you?" He responded, "I am placed before my enemies like a rock that cannot be turned. I will not turn and flee from them."

R' Yehudah ben Bava stood at the opening of the cave. The Talmud relates that the Romans cast three hundred iron spears into R' Yehudah ben Bava. His body resembled a sieve. True martyrdom is to give one's own life so that others might live.

Rabbi Asher Jacobson is the spiritual leader of the Chevra Synagogue in Montreal.