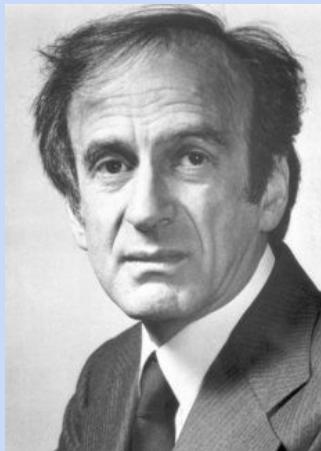




Religion & Society Unit 3.3

Significant Life Experience



Elie Wiesel

1928-2016

Prepared by Shayndel Samuel
March 8th 2022

What was Wiesel's significant life experience?

- ❖ Define Holocaust /*Shoah*
- ❖ Describe the Nazi horrors experienced by Wiesel
1944-1945
- ❖ Name the camps he was in and the conditions suffered
- ❖ Why it was significant to him (briefly)



What was the Holocaust?

US Holocaust Museum

Holocaust = slaughter and destruction on a mass scale (from Greek ‘burnt offering’)

Shoah = catastrophe (from Hebrew)

Churban = total destruction by fire (from Hebrew)

- ❖ The **systematic state sponsored persecution and murder** of around 6 million European Jewish men women and children and about 5 million others by the Nazis and their collaborators during WW2 in an evolving process from 1933 to 1945.
- ❖ Removing Jews from everyday German life by **increasingly harsh laws and restrictions, assaults, expulsions**.
- ❖ Nazi expansion across Europe, escalated **the use of ghettos, concentration camps, death camps and mass executions**.

Wiesel prior to the SLE

The Death of my Father”

- ❖ **level of adherence**

Traditionally observant family

- ❖ **understanding of religious beliefs**

Torah is the guide to living a Jewish life

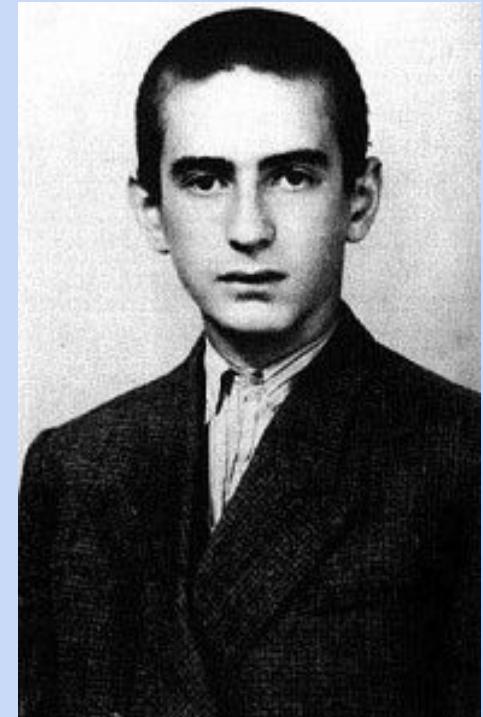
- ❖ **trust in relevant religious beliefs**

A good life is rewarded and sin punished

Death is part of the life cycle

- ❖ **engagement with the related
expressions of beliefs**

He attended *cheder* and synagogue



Beliefs expressed prior

“The Death of my Father”

- ❖ God's omnipotence, omniscience unquestioned
- ❖ A compassionate God
- ❖ Torah guide to living, wisdom and truth
- ❖ Regular synagogue attendance
- ❖ Studied Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism)

During the experience in the camps “The Death of my Father” “Night”

❖ **level of adherence in the camps**

Impossible to observe Jewish life

❖ **understanding of religious beliefs**

Questions all he has been taught about the nature of God

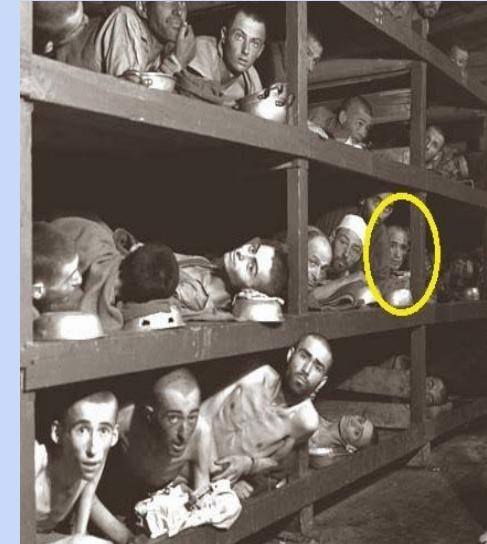
❖ **trust in relevant religious beliefs**

“The Eternal, Lord of the Universe, the all-powerful and terrible was silent. What had I to thank Him for?” (TDOMF)

❖ **engagement with related expressions**

He did not fast on Yom Kippur -the Day of Atonement (Night)

“To say Kaddish (mourning prayer) in that stifling barrack, in the very heart of the kingdom of death, would have been the worst of blasphemies” (TDOMF)



Beliefs expressed during the SLE

“Night”

“The Death of my Father”, Oprah Interviews, “A Theology of Protest”

❖ **Questions God’s omnipotence and justice**

Protests traditional understandings of God, asks angry questions

“I did not deny God’s existence, but I doubted His absolute justice” (Night)

❖ **God’s omnipresence questioned**

“I am overcome by desolation and futility” (The Death of my Father)

The incident of the boy hung in camp (Night)

❖ **Afterlife**

Questions whether his father is freed by death to join the Eternal (TDOFM)

❖ **God is a mystery**

“I didn’t lose faith in God, I rebelled against Him. I don’t understand Him.”

(Wiesel on ‘Oprah’, Dec 1993)

❖ **Impossible to observe Jewish life under the Nazis**

“A piece of bread there was more important than God.” (Wiesel on ‘Oprah’, Dec 1993)

After the experience

“Death of My Father”, Oprah Winfrey interviews
Nobel Prize acceptance speech

❖ **level of adherence**

“And in spite of myself, a prayer rose in my heart, to that God whom I no longer believed” (Night)

❖ **level of understanding**

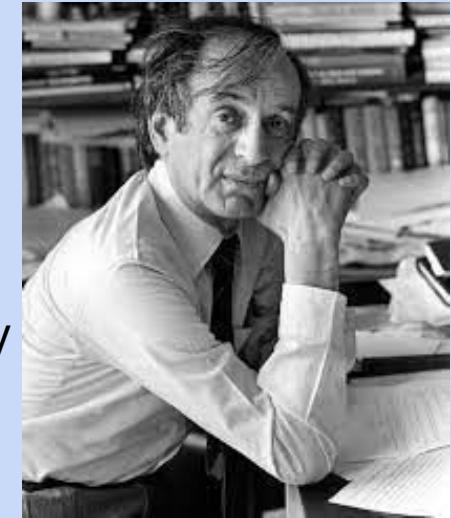
“I have six million reasons to give up on the world...and in spite of everything I must have faith in the possibility of every human being to remain human” (Wiesel on ‘Oprah’, Dec 1993)

❖ **trust in relevant religious beliefs**

“Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams into dust” (Night)

❖ **engagement with the expressions of belief**

Continued to be an observant Jew



Beliefs expressed after SLE

**“The Death of My Father”
Oprah Interviews,
Nobel acceptance speech**

◆ Never rejects God

“I didn’t lose faith in God, I rebelled against Him. I don’t understand Him.” (Wiesel on ‘Oprah’, Dec 1993)

◆ God remains a mystery

“Perhaps someday, someone could explain...how on the level of man Auschwitz was possible, but on the level of God it will forever remain the most disturbing of mysteries” (The Death of my Father)

◆ Continued to be observant of Jewish tradition

“You must never lose faith, even when the sword hangs over your head, That’s the teaching of the sages.” (Night)

◆ Wrote prayers, books, articles and stories

“I left the camp but the camp hasn’t left me.” (Wiesel on ‘Oprah’, Dec 1993)

Influence of Wiesel's religious beliefs and related expressions on his interpretation of the SLE

Oprah Winfrey interviews & Nobel Prize acceptance speech

- ❖ **Wrote 57 books based on his experiences**
- ❖ **Fought injustice and indifference around the world**

“To be free is important, but to try to help others to be free is more important”
(Wiesel on ‘Oprah’, Dec 1993)
- ❖ **Advocated for many causes** including Israel, the plight of Soviet and Ethiopian Jews, the victims of apartheid in South Africa, Argentina's Desaparecidos, Bosnian victims of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, Nicaragua's Miskito Indians, the Kurds and intervention in Darfur, Sudan.
- ❖ **The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity**

“to combat indifference, intolerance and injustice” throughout the world.
- ❖ **The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

Suggested references and links

- ❖ The United States Holocaust Museum
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>
- ❖ “Night” by Elie Wiesel
- ❖ “The Death of my Father” (short essay) by Elie Wiesel,
in Thinking the Unthinkable, Meanings of the Holocaust,
ed. Roger S, Gottlieb, Paulist Press, NY1990.
- ❖ Wiesel interviews by Oprah Winfrey (You Tube)
- ❖ The Oprah magazine, O, November 2000 issue
- ❖ Wiesel’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech
<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/lecture/>
- ❖ “A Theology of Protest - Elie Wiesel” in Holocaust Theology
by Dan Cohn-Sherbok, Marshall Morgan & Scott, UK 1989
- ❖ Elie Wiesel Foundation <https://eliewieselfoundation.org/>

