In Memory of Elie Weisel, July 9, 2016

I have been sad all week long.

Last Saturday night, when I retrieved my email messages after the end of Shabbat, I learned that Elie Wiesel passed away at the age of 87.

Since then, I realize that my sadness reflects not only the death of an individual, but in many ways, the death of a generation.

Elie Wiesel was a journalist, an author, a lecturer, a defender of human rights, but most of all, he became a face and the spokesman for Holocaust survivors.

And while the world will not quickly forget the atrocities of the Holocaust, because there are other survivors still alive, and there is the Holocaust Museum, and numerous memorials throughout this country and the world, nevertheless, without being able to hear the live voice of Elie Wiesel, our ability to remember will be different, and diminished.

Therefore, today, exactly one week since his death, I, not surprisingly, will offer a tribute in honor and in memory of Elie Wiesel.

Why was Elie Wiesel such a capable, if not iconic, spokesperson for Holocaust survivors?

One reason is that he spoke not only for holocaust survivors, but also in opposition to a multitude of other atrocities perpetrated over the last 70 years, against Jew and non-Jew, blacks-and-whites, Europeans or Asians, it didn't matter.

In Bosnia, in Darfur, in Rwanda, with the Solidarity movement in Poland, and on behalf of Soviet Jews (read Natan Sharansky's tribute published in the Washington Post a few days ago).

Elie Wiesel succeeded in this role also because his demeanor and presentation were always dignified, honorable, and menchlich.

You were able to hear everything he said without his needing to speak with a loud voice.

As a matter fact, often, the softer he spoke, the more powerful and more eloquent his words.

In 2009 I was privileged to attend a local lecture delivered by Elie Wiesel at St. John's College. The auditorium was filled.

There are two points I will share today from that lecture.

First, Elie Wiesel began to speak about what prompts and informs his work as an author, a lecturer, an educator.

And he said it all began when he was taught as a child, in Europe, before the war, how to study the Bible.

His teachers, his tradition, our tradition, the Jewish tradition, prompt us to look at the text with open eyes, critically, to ask questions, to delve deeper into the meaning of the words, and to discover thereby, the immense, holy Power within words.

Here was a worldwide renowned scholar, and best-selling author, speaking at a prominent institution of "higher learning," who claimed his entire approach to text goes back to what he learned in Yeshiva as a child.

It makes sense - the way he learned how to approach a text, is ultimately what allowed him to use his own texts, and his own words, to confront, to challenge, and not to remain silent in the face of evil.

Elie Wiesel consistently used language and the power of memory to combat the worst atrocities in the history of the world.

Over and over again, we learned that his tools, his weapons were the most formidable against the indisputable evil of human beings, and the apparent indifference of God.

Elie Wiesel's courage is well documented, even the courage to take positions, vocally, in opposition to sitting presidents.

News articles published all week long mentioned how he stood up to President Reagan when the president visited the Bittburg, German cemetery where SS agents are buried, how he confronted President Clinton on the need to act in Bosnia, and how Elie Wiesel attended Binyamin Netanyahu’s address to the joint session of Congress a little over a year ago in support of Netanyahu's opposition to the Iran Nuclear arms deal.

I understand why Elie Wiesel had to be with Netanyahu and in opposition to President Obama on this deal.

Elie Wiesel could not in good conscience see himself as supporting a deal with even the slightest possibility of bringing harm to Jews in Israel. He knew first hand what a difference a formidable Jewish state might have been to the plight of millions of Jews during World War II.

Let me now turn to the second item I wish to share from the Elie Wiesel lecture at St. John's College in September 2009.

This lecture took place in the throes of the financial crisis that affected all of us during those years.

And of course, during the crisis, the illegal thievery of Bernie Madoff was uncovered and became well known throughout the country.

Not only were we ashamed of the criminal activities performed by this Jewish crook, but we were also shocked at the names of the prominent people and organizations he swindled.

Elie Wiesel, and his wife Marion, were personally affected, as was the foundation they created after Elie Wiesel won the Nobel peace prize in 1986.

After his prepared lecture, Elie Wiesel took a few questions and one young man asked Elie Wiesel about his reaction to what Madoff had done to others and to him.

Displaying an incredible amount of perseverance, Elie Wiesel simply responded, without mentioning his name, that Bernie Madoff was an evil man and it would be best not to speak about him at all.

The other night I was directed in an email message from a colleague to watch segments of Oprah Winfrey's interviews with Elie Wiesel, broadcast about five years ago.

During one segment, Oprah also asked Elie Wiesel about his reaction when he learned what Bernie Madoff did to him and others.

Wiesel shared how he and his wife received a phone call very late one night from their son Elisha.

Once reassured that everyone in the family was safe and in no danger, Elisha, proceeded to tell his father that Bernie Madoff was in jail and why.

After catching their breath, Elie Wiesel and wife Marion turned to one another and said, "we've seen worse – we've been through worse."

This was a new challenge, a new difficulty, but it was not the end of the world.

They had already seen what the end of the world looked like.

Last week I mentioned to you some communication I had with Pastor Heather Shortlidge, the associate pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Annapolis.

This week, senior pastor Bill Hathaway has returned and he initiated communication with me via email.

Let me read it to you and then share my response:

> Dear Phil:
>
> As I read Sunday's NY Times article on Elie Wiesel I thought of you and your community of faith. I have about 15 of his books and my 1969 paperback copy of Night is yellow and very worn but I am turning to it for my sermon on Sunday based upon a line from Paul's letter "He has rescued us from the power of darkness …."
>
> My, what a giant in terms of faith and moral reasoning.
>
> Just to say hello and to share my appreciation and now sadness for this great child of God.
>
> Bill

And my response:

> Hi Bill,
>
> Thank you very much for your message.
>
> It is comforting to know that you will be preaching about Elie Wiesel this coming Sunday.
>
> I am very distraught by his death. The world has lost a voice of moral conscience.
>
> Being the child of Holocaust survivors, I feel as if one of my own parents has died.

Thank you for adding holiness to his memory by invoking his name in your lovely sanctuary this coming weekend.

God bless you and all the worshipers at First Presbyterian.

Shalom,

Phil

The world may not know that Elie Wiesel was a great Torah scholar, certainly a most learned Jew.

Along the way he became quite friendly and influenced by the late Professor Saul Lieberman, who might have been, during his lifetime, the greatest Talmudist in the world.

I hold in my hand a book written by Elie Wiesel.

You may not of heard of this book, but I studied it years ago when I was a student at Wesley Theological Seminary working toward my doctorate.

The title of the book is "Messengers of God – Biblical Portraits and Legends."

It was translated from French by Marion Wiesel.

The dedication in the book reads as follows "for Rabbenu Saul Lieberman, my teacher, from whom I received more then, with these pages, I could ever give back. E. W.

In this book Elie Wiesel creates portraits of some of the leading biblical characters. I will share and conclude with the last two pages of the chapter entitled "Sacrifice of Isaac: A Survivor's Story.

"But the story does not end there. Isaac survived; he had no choice. He had to make something of his memories, his experience, in order to force us to hope.

For our survival is linked to his. Satan could kill Sarah, he could even hurt Abraham, but Isaac was beyond his reach. Isaac too represents defiance. Abraham defied God, Isaac defied death.

What did happen to Isaac after he left Mount Moriah? He became a poet – author of the Minha service – and did not break with society. Nor did he rebel against life.

Logically, he should have aspired to wandering, to the pursuit of oblivion. Instead he settled on his land, never to leave it again, retaining his name. He married, had children, refusing to let fate turn him into a bitter man. He felt neither hatred nor anger toward his contemporaries who did not share his experience. On the contrary, he liked them and showed concern for their well-being. After Moriah, he devoted his life and his right to immortality to the defense of his people.

At the end of time, say our sages, God will tell Abraham: your children have sinned. And Abraham will reply: let them die to sanctify your name. Then God will turn to Jacob and say: your children have sinned. And Jacob will reply: let them die to sanctify your name. Then God will speak to Isaac: your children have sinned. And Isaac will answer: *My* children? Are they not also yours? Yours as well?

It will be Isaac's privilege to remain Israel's Melitz – Yosher, the defender of his people, pleading its cause with great ability. He will be entitled to say anything he likes to God, ask anything of Him. Because he suffered? No. Suffering, in Jewish tradition, confers no privileges. It all depends on what one makes of that suffering. Isaac knew how to transform it into prayer and love rather than into rancor and malediction. This is what gives him rights and powers no other man possesses. His reward? The Temple was built on Moriah. Not on Sinai.

Let us return to the question we asked at the beginning: why was the most tragic of our ancestors named Isaac, a name which evokes and signifies laughter? Here is why. As the first survivor, he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter.

Isaac, of course, never freed himself from the traumatizing scenes that violated his youth; the Holocaust had marked him and continued to haunt him forever. Yet he remained capable of laughter. And in spite of everything, he did laugh."

Let us be assured, that the memory of Elie Wiesel will indeed be a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom