

D'var Torah

SINAI TEMPLE, SPRINGFIELD
SHABBAT EVENING, 9 JULY 2016

Lessons on the Death of Elie Wiesel, ט"ה

For me, being here and sharing Shabbat for the first time with you a few days into my rabbinate to Sinai Temple is a *shehechaynu* moment. So that is how I will begin my brief *d'var torah* this evening:

בָּרוּךְ אֱלֹהִים יְיַעֲדֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שְׁחַחְנָנוּ וְקִימָנָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנָנוּ לַזָּמָן הַזֶּה.

You are blessed, our Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe! You have given us life and kept us alive that we might live to this [sacred] time.

Last week, as I was waiting patiently for the movers to come – they came to our home a day and a half late (!) -- I sat thinking about what I might say this evening, of what I would tell you about some of my ideas as to what being an interim rabbi means. For that is what interim rabbis usually do for their first *d'var torah*.

But I'm one who believes that a *d'var torah*, a word of Torah, ought, wherever possible, to deal in a Jewish way with the events of the hour. And right now such an event is looming large before us, and that will be the content of my *d'var torah*. I'm speaking of the death last Shabbat of Elie Wiesel, *zikhrono livrakhah*, his memory for a blessing.

Elie Wiesel's death is a cataclysmic event, and I want to share a couple of my thoughts about what it signals, here and throughout the Jewish world.

Let's go back in time. As the piece about me in this week's E-vents said, I grew up in Chicago, specifically in Hyde Park on Chicago's South Side in what was then a very Jewish neighborhood. There were all kinds of Jews there. There were secular Jews, of course, and bundists too. There were the Zionists. There were the Yiddish speaking immigrants who had come here late in the 19th century and early in the 20th century, most of whom were nominally Orthodox (though their children ranged across the religious spectrum). And there were the German Jews, Jews who had fled Nazi Germany in the 30's and had come to Hyde Park where others of their ilk were there as well.

As a consequence, post-WWII, the fact of the Holocaust was all around, and it included then Jews who had survived the Holocaust and had come after the war and now often walked around with their sleeves rolled up so that the numbers tattooed on their arms would be visible to all who would notice them. But still, no one *talked* about an event called the Holocaust.

The reason? Come downtown with me from Hyde Park to Navy Pier, which was then the site of the Chicago two-year extension of the University of Illinois and where I began my college career. One of the courses that all of us had to take was Rhetoric, which was a fancy name for English writing, required since so many of us, graduates of Chicago High Schools, couldn't write a decent English sentence. But we didn't only write. We read too, prose written in *really* good English so we could see some of what we were supposed to be striving toward. It was in that course that I encountered for the first time (and this was in the late 1950's) the word, holocaust, small "h." Having grown up in Hyde Park with survivors all around, I didn't know the word. I looked it up. I found out it meant "destruction or slaughter on a mass scale, especially caused by fire or nuclear war." It's Middle English from an Old French word, *holocauste*, via late Latin from Greek *holokauston*, from *holos* 'whole' + *kaustos* 'burned.'

So where does the word, holocaust, come to be associated with what we now know at the Sho'ah? Elie Wiesel. He, a survivor, named it, and the name, so appropriate to its meaning, stuck.

I have a thought stemming from the annual Yom Hasho'ah observance on Boston's North Shore that I have been a part of since 1997. Every year, at the start of the observance, the North Shore "survivors" enter the darkened room single file in silent procession. They are carrying lighted yizkor candles which they place at the front of the stage. In the beginning, there were twenty-some, maybe more. Now the number has diminished, brought to the Eternal Home through a Divine Kiss brought about through the passage of time. Now, typically, the candles are carried by their children. They, many of them, have heard the stories. But they were not there. Who soon will be there to remember, to bear witness to the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust?

And such a survivor was Elie Wiesel. In fact, he was the prototypic survivor. As he wrote in his book, *Night*:

"Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget the 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."

And more he wrote in *Night* of the day of the deportation:

"One by one, they passed in front of me, teachers, friends, others, all those I had been afraid of, all those I could have laughed at, all those I had lived with over the years. They went by, fallen, dragging their packs, dragging their lives, deserting their homes, the years of their childhood, cringing like beaten dogs."

But it is not only for us to remember because of the impact upon us of the Holocaust. For Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust contained a lesson for all humanity. We remember that we were slaves in Egypt so that we can condemn injustice and maltreatment of people everywhere, and that is what he did.

The deniers are out there. In 2007, a 22-year-old man who called Mr. Wiesel's account of the Holocaust fictitious pulled *him* out of a hotel elevator in San Francisco and attacked him. (The man was convicted of assault)

But mostly the Holocaust *is* about us. The story of the Holocaust is *our* story. And soon, after the last of the survivors has departed this world, none who were there will remain to speak to our children, none to speak to us, none to speak to the world.

And so, the passing of Elie Wiesel is not only the sad passing of one who wore the number A-7713 on his arm. It is the passing of one who was a spokesperson for all who were there, those who did survive and the 6,000,000 who did not. And we, we who heard his story, and the story of all of the others who endured the torments of Hell and returned to tell us what they saw and endured, *we* need to continue to speak their words, to all who would listen. For their words are about what humanity is capable of doing, and what we must ensure, with every fibre of our being, never again happens. To us. To anyone. Here. Anywhere.

And so I can only say these words: Elie Wiesel has been summoned to the Eternal Home. May his memory remain for a blessing. Always.

-- Howard A. Kosovske