Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom

By Cantor Deborah Katchko-Gray

Some people get recharged from a visit to a spa, a vacation far away or a pulse pounding rock concert. I admit, I enjoy all of those things, but what really lifts me up and opens my heart and mind is a visit to Elie Wiesel's classroom. Each year I try to attend at least one class and several lectures of my mentor , Prof. Elie Wiesel. His classroom is like no other, the setting is elegant and regal dedicated to his beloved parents, Shlomo and Sarah Wiesel, who perished in the Holocaust and whose names are proudly displayed as you walk into the Elie Wiesel Center for Judaic Studies at Boston University.

I was 19 when I entered Prof. Wiesel's first class at Boston University. I'm 53 now, and I still get a thrill from being there, a feeling of awe, gratitude and hope for our world. The lessons I keep learning have helped me throughout my life.

This semester Prof. Wiesel is teaching his own works, fiction and non-fiction. I attended a class that focused on his book, "The Trial of G-d," and another using "Legends of Our Time," one of my favorite of his more than 50 books he's written. The lecture on Monday evening, Nov. 1 was entitled, "The Rebbe of Ger – A Tragedy in Hasidism."

I would like to share some of the interesting lessons and bits of wisdom I gathered during my two days of study.

Lessons from "The Trial of G-d"

■ "The Trial of God" was based on a real event that Wiesel witnessed at Auschwitz. Three prominent rabbis decided G-d was guilty of crimes against humanity, yet still prayed the evening service. The challenge is to ask questions, search for hope, and offer compassion where it is needed.

■ In the early 1960's a Catholic man asked Elie Wiesel, " Why do you still remember the Holocaust?" Wiesel answered, " Look, many years ago one Jew was killed. Why do you still remember him?"

■ Wiesel went all over the world asking psychologists and psychiatrists about hate. They said that a child begins to hate only at age three. A child learns to hate, so he can unlearn to hate.

■ Fanaticism is the enemy of civilization, friendship, logic and love.

Wisdom from "Rebbe of Ger- Tragedy in Hasidism"

■ One has no choice but to go forward in troubled times, but we cannot go forward if we are alone.

■ When one people are threatened, all people are threatened. Building a mosque at the World Trade Cener means we can build religious tolerance together.

■ The opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference.

■ The Rebbe of Ger was known for his passion for learning. The School of Ger is distinguished by its fervor, songs and silence, methods to overcome melancholy. Hassidism was about renewal, a new way to repeat ancient prayers, new roads leading to understanding human beings. The Rebbe of Ger taught to understand the inner point of one's heart.

Wisdom from "Legends of our Time"

This class was most interesting and moving to me. Prof. Wiesel recalled many incidents from his childhood, the concentration camps, his family, and his experiences after the Holocaust.

■ Elie Wiesel's mantra is " Think higher; Feel deeper." Elevate yourself by the choices you make.

■ There is usually a crazy disturbed person in Wiesel's works of fiction. He explained to us why: When he was young, on Saturday afternoons, his father would visit prisoners, his mother and sisters would visit the hospital patients, and Elie would go to the mental wards and bring candy. He was fascinated with their world. What was it? There was a fascination with someone who lives in a different world and can't be reached. Elie Wiesel knows he can't reach every person, but to this day he tries.

■ Moshe the Beadle from his childhood, tried to describe what happened to the first transport of Hungarian Jews. They dug their own graves, were shot and murdered. Moshe alone, escaped and tried to tell people what he saw. No one believed him.

Elie Wiesel and Cantor Deborah Katchko-Gray

Indifference enabled the killers to kill. With no consequences they were free to murder.

Elie tries to give meaning to his life by honoring his parents. In moments of decisions, he feels they are there with him, helping him to make the right decisions. His life has been dedicated to understanding hatred and antisemitism. He wonders if the world will ever learn? He was asked to give the opening address to an international conference on antisemitism and asks, " If Auschwitz hasn't cured the world of antisemitism, what will? What can?" While it would be easy to give up, Wiesel says he can't and he won't.

■ His advice for living a life of meaning? Respect the other for the mystery the other contains. Respect the other for what they understand and for what they don't understand.

He reminded us " there are no chance encounters." I have always felt that way about many moments in life. Certainly, walking into Prof. Elie Wiesel's classroom was one of those moments. It continues to enrich my life and give it meaning.

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