

*Elie Wiesel and the Politics of Moral Leadership*, by Mark Chmiel

reviewed by [Robert H. Abzug](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

The 1960 publication of Elie Wiesel's memoir, *Night*, marked a major turning point in the American consciousness of what we now call the Holocaust. A man of faith angry with God's and the Allies' absence from Auschwitz, Wiesel created a vision of meaning that stressed not only remembrance but also the moral duty to act against present-day enormities. Yet in a world replete with repression and plagued by outbreaks of genocide, how, when and for whom should one act? These questions have vexed everyone who has a social conscience. So have the contradictions, ambiguities and unintended consequences that so often attend the translation of moral imperative into concrete policy.

Mark Chmiel attempts to analyze Wiesel's own response to repression and genocide. When Chmiel first read *Night* as a college student it sharply "interrogated" his "youthful sense of Christian innocence." Now adjunct professor of theological studies at St. Louis University and of religious studies at Webster University, Chmiel returns the favor by interrogating Wiesel's record of "moral leadership," and especially his "solidarity" with suffering peoples around the world. Wiesel flunks Chmiel's solidarity test, emerging mostly as a lackey of American and Israeli interests. Unfortunately, Chmiel's earnest but morally obtuse exploration of the limits of Wiesel's solidarity with suffering peoples sounds the fashionably Manichean tones of Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, from whom Chmiel seems to have received most of his political education.

One might have expected more. Wiesel's meteoric rise from obscurity in postwar France to spokesperson for Jewish survivors and Nobel Peace laureate has brought in its train enormous and sometimes contradictory demands to address a vast number of issues, past and present. Wiesel became an advocate not only for the Jewish victims of the Nazis but also for those whose lives were threatened by genocidal actions around the world. He who was most at home as a philosopher and mystic felt drawn to the public stage and the enormous audience it gained for his witness and vision.

In turn, his understanding of human suffering and its global dimensions broadened and the questions he was asked became tougher. Could he still argue that the Holocaust was unique in light of Biafra, Bosnia and Rwanda? What was Israel's responsibility toward the Palestinians? His answers became more nuanced and human. At times, he even admitted conflict and uncertainty. At other moments, however, he seemed silenced by the difficulties of conflicting loyalties and devilish details. Only a few state-inflicted depravities appeared to be as clear-cut as the Nazi persecution of the Jews.

Chmiel's failure to bring careful human understanding and moral reasoning to this rich subject is something of a mystery. He acknowledges conversations and correspondence with an array of thoughtful scholars and activists, including Wiesel himself, and has carefully examined his subject's long record of public utterances and action. However, what might have been a study not only of Wiesel but also of the political and moral complexities facing anyone attempting to find common cause with the suffering peoples of the earth mostly ends up as a simplistic indictment. Chmiel occasionally praises Wiesel but usually only to measure what he sees as his descent from the high ground. He seems always ready, like a youthful prosecutor on the make, to catch the defendant in contradiction.

Chmiel chastises Wiesel most severely for his unwillingness forthrightly to endorse Palestinian aspirations and to criticize Israel's treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories. Yet never does Chmiel explore exactly what those aspirations are: an independent Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank, as some would argue, or also a second Palestinian state (Israel) after the granting of an unlimited Palestinian right of return? Wiesel might be hesitant to endorse the good intentions of a Palestinian leadership and its allies whose stock-in-trade (when speaking Arabic) has been Holocaust denial and anti-Semitic diatribe.

It is true that these issues have not prevented Israeli peace activists and even some politicians from pursuing meaningful peace negotiations (at least until recent months). However, that may be too much to ask of a Holocaust survivor—a possibility Chmiel does not even consider.

There are important moral questions one might ask about Wiesel's vision of the world, but Chmiel does not prove himself to be the dispassionate and subtle critic needed to explore them. It seems that his "Christian innocence" has simply taken a new and darker turn.