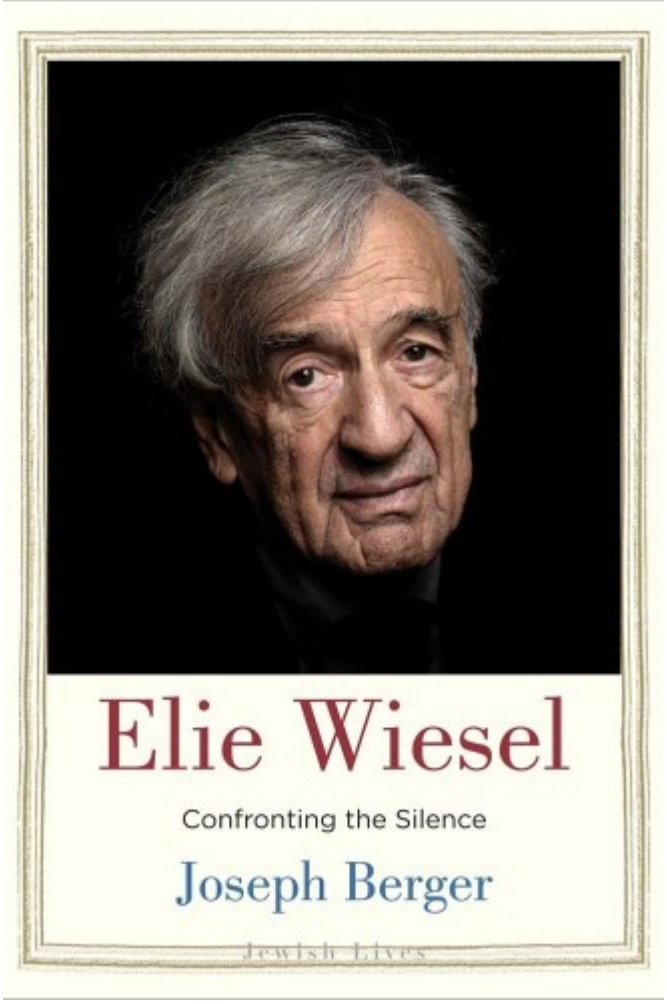
Elie Wiesel’s defiant faith

Journalist Joseph Berger documents the writer’s work, his activism, and the belief in God that he never fully renounced.

by Charles Scriven in the February 2025 issue
Published on January 28, 2025

In Review



Elie Wiesel

Confronting the Silence

By Joseph Berger
Yale University Press
Buy from Bookshop.org ›
RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

“How can you not believe in God after Auschwitz?” A rabbi put this question to Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, writer-activist, and Nobel Peace Prize winner, and it epitomizes one of two issues that stand out in Joseph Berger’s new biography of Wiesel.

One issue concerns hope: When evil is ghastly and relentless, what prevents giving up? How can you confront cynicism and resignation? The book suggests that faith—even difficult faith involving constant argument with God—is crucial. Despite our many questions, might not faith be indispensable to hope? After Auschwitz, ultimate trust in humanity, the rabbi was saying, feels like folly.

The second issue concerns how we deal with parts of our history that alarm and terrify us—or leave us ashamed. What does it mean to be an honest human being? Can you live a constructive life without bearing witness to inconvenient, often agonizing, facts?

The book’s author, a longtime *New York Times* journalist, means here to send discordant noises down the months and years, much as Wiesel himself meant to do. In the face of evil, especially when our own ancestors have played a part in it, we drift easily into forgetfulness, a shameless and pleasanter sense of the past. But such forgetfulness—such silence—is complicit with evil. Wiesel insisted on this. Only honest reckoning with former things can deliver us from new failure. As the prophet Zechariah from Wiesel’s own religious tradition might say, only judgments that are true can make for peace, for human flourishing.

Over some 28 chapters, Berger tells his subject’s life story from the standpoint of these two fundamental concerns. First there was a small-town Jewish childhood in Romania, infused with Sabbath rest, Jewish books, and a mother’s cosmopolitan perspective. Fascist violence followed: the shuttering of Wiesel’s hometown synagogue, deportation by train, and the death camps, with their assault on his family and their faith-consuming flames. Through all this, grievances against humanity (Why did no one care?) and against God (again, Why?) were driving the young Wiesel toward disillusionment and lost faith.

Yet Wiesel's faith was never fully or unalterably renounced. After his liberation from the camps, he connected with Jews in France who were still encouraging religious practice and the study of the Talmud. At the same time, he was learning French and taking up a university education that would put him in touch with the likes of Martin Buber and Jean-Paul Sartre. Goings-on in Palestine tantalized him, and once he could write in French, he found reporting jobs that enabled travel. His work eventually took him to New York.

By this time, he had already begun *Night*, the memoir of life in the camps that remains the best known of his writings. Published first in Yiddish and then in French, the book's sales were slow to begin; after its 1960 publication in English, the book became a phenomenon, with some 14 million copies sold to date.

Much of Berger's book deals with Wiesel's other memoirs, reports, and works of fiction. All were meant as a revolt against indifference and the demise of human conscience. *The Jews of Silence*, for example, came out in 1966, when 3 million Jews were locked inside the Soviet Union, effectively being "forced to assimilate." The book contended for "religious freedom and the right to emigrate" from Russia, ending with this sentence: "What torments me most is not the Jews of silence I met in Russia, but the silence of the Jews I live among today."

About this time, Wiesel was at once covering the Six-Day War and developing his thoughts for *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, the novel that would propel him into prominence as a writer of fiction on Jewish themes. The story of an Israeli soldier who grew up studying the Talmud, the book addressed the themes of God, witness, and survival. It earned front-page treatment in the *New York Times Book Review* as well as a prestigious French literary prize. Berger does point out, however, that in later and less successful fiction, Wiesel's passion for certain favorite themes would lead critics to fault him for "fashioning fictional polemics."

Wiesel married Marion Erster Rose in 1969, with a well-known Jewish theologian officiating at the wedding. Now growing tired of journalism's daily grind, he began to depend more on public speaking for income. At the same time, he struggled ever harder with the theological and moral meaning of the Holocaust. Still addressing God's absence, he also connected God with hope. In the memoir *And the Sea Is Never Full*, he wrote, "It is because I still believe in God that I argue with him." He addressed many Jewish organizations, and his spoken message was mesmerizing. Over time, his own life became an "emblem of the Holocaust."

Wiesel became a professor at Boston University in 1975. A few years later, under President Jimmy Carter, he chaired the project that produced the Holocaust Memorial in Washington, DC. This work was yet another instance of Wiesel's passion for remembering the past truthfully. He made an artful case for the memorial's focus on Jews: "Not all victims were Jews, but all Jews were victims."

Berger takes pains to argue, though, that even if his subject was an ardent Jew, he was by no means insular. Wiesel offended some Israelis by calling for a "more Jewish"—that is, more receptive—attitude to Palestinians. He visited South Africa under apartheid, Cambodia during the murderous reign of the Khmer Rouge, and Nicaragua while its leaders were persecuting the Miskito people. "We Jews suffered not only from the cruelty of killers, but also from the indifference of bystanders," he said later. Such indifference makes a person complicit in the crime.

Even as Wiesel continued to question God, he participated in Jewish religious life. He was home in New York with his family for Sabbath evening meals, chanting the Kiddush and Sabbath evening prayer. He embraced the comradery of the synagogue and continued to love Talmud study. When he was granted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, Wiesel began the public lecture that awardees traditionally offer by singing the plaintive prayer doomed Jews had sung in the camps, the "Ani Ma'amin" ("I believe with utter faith"). He still could not explain God in light of the Holocaust, but, as he declared during a related press conference, he had not lost faith. Sometimes "moments of anger and protest" brought him closer to God.

As 2016, the year of his death, approached, Wiesel's health weakened. At this point he did make misjudgments, Berger tells us, by his association with right-wing figures whose advocacy for Israel lacked the empathy he himself had displayed toward Palestinians, if not their leaders. Still, his life had made him a "towering figure" and "shining example."

Sustained as he was by an inner experience not everyone shares, Wiesel knew full well—and more sharply, no doubt, than most of us—that faith cannot be the endpoint of a logical-empirical
argument. It is somehow a gift, a bestowal from the realm of the mystical. Wiesel kept in touch with that realm by regular Jewish practice and thereby found strength for withstanding resignation and bearing witness to truth and hope.

How can we not believe in God after Auschwitz? Well, people *can* not believe, and some *do* not believe. Still, where there is doubt, discord, and violence newly

widespread and threatening, such an existence as Wiesel’s can be a parable for everyone. Berger’s book is demanding, more about character and ideas than drama and plot. But here biography becomes theology, a corrective journey toward faith at once chastened by reality and defiant against meaninglessness and whimpering self-concern.