A Religious and Spiritual Quest in the Works of Elie Wiesel
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Abstract
Every book written by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel deals, in one way or another, with the question or the subject of God. Born and raised as a religious, young boy, because he was Jewish, he was arrested by the Nazis in 1944 and taken to Auschwitz, the largest of the concentration camps. Seeing and experiencing the horrors of the torture, the gas chambers, the crematoria, and all the other aspects of man’s worst inhumanity to man, young Eliezer begins to question not only his own deeply held beliefs, but the very existence of a God who would allow such things to occur. To quote:

Evil unleashed and unrestrained, at last caused Eliezer to see God in the face of a dying child. Forced to watch his murder a man asked accusingly, “Where is God now?” And Eliezer heard an inner voice respond: “Where is He? Here He is… He is hanging here on this gallows…”

In each of his subsequent books, Wiesel, in one way or another, deals with the psychological, moral, and religious dilemma of God’s silence. As he writes:

How does one answer the person who demands an interpretation of God’s silence at the very moment when… man has greater need than ever of His word, let alone His mercy

Elie Wiesel’s writings dwell, on one way or another, with this question as well as the role of religion, any religion, in modern society.

Introduction
Job had nothing left in this world except words, but he knew how to use them; he made them quiver; he made them scream.

On October 14, 1986, Elie Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace. According to one excerpt from the presentation speech “…[Wiesel’s] vision is not characterized by a passive obsession with a tragic history; rather it is a reconstructed belief in God, humanity and the future.”

Following various celebratory events in Stockholm after the ceremony, Wiesel and his family went to Israel, where, at a dinner in Wiesel’s honor, Rabbi Menashe Klein, Wiesel’s friend since Buna, Buchenwald and Ambloy, recounted:

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In the camp, one Yom Kippur, an SS man came into our block. After beating some inmates he shouted triumphantly: “Jews, so where is your God now?” At that time we were too terrified to answer. But here is our answer now, and we give it to him in Jerusalem. “God of Israel, our God is God. And He is where His people is. ”

\[(Night, 64)\]

In *Night*, Wiesel’s autobiographical work on the Holocaust, Wiesel struggles with the question of God's silence. The question of how the young, suffering boy who questions a God who seemingly turns His face away from his people to his people, as expressed in *Night*, to the distinguished author of over forty books in which he expresses his faith is the subject of many scholarly books and articles. To write something that differs from all that has already been published, it is necessary to approach it from a somewhat different perspective. For that reason I have interpreted Wiesel’s first seven books from the boy who questions his faith, to the man who finds it again. As such, it is a religious and spiritual quest, in which I refer to the protagonist as “the wanderer.”

**Night: The Wanderer’s Descent into Hell**

Although in an epic quest mythic gods and goddesses help the hero/wanderer achieve his goal, each of the protagonist/wanderers in Wiesel’s subsequent six books, comes closer to a better understanding of the co-existence of man with God, ultimately resulting in a renewal of his faith. For this reason, each of Wiesel’s protagonists, although he may be called by a different name, or no name at all, can be interpreted as an aspect of the persona of Wiesel himself.

The descent into evil had begun prior to the camps. For him it began with the desecration of three Jewish institutions. The first was Passover, the time that had been chosen for the arrest of the leaders of the Jewish community. Ironically, contrary to this holiday, which celebrates Moses leading his people from slavery into freedom, the Nazi SS led them into slavery and death. In this way,

As a central framework for his story, Wiesel takes the core narrative of Jewish tradition, the Exodus, and reverses it in order to show the reversal of the classical paradigm of the Exodus/Sinai traditions. As in the first Exodus, there is a going out, [from slavery in Egypt] …this time the going out is from an ordered land into chaos—a movement from the secure and ordered word of Sighet into the unspeakable horror of the death camps. \(^5\)

Here there was no Angel of Death to spare the Jewish children and prisoners questioned the silence of God.

The second desecration was the fact that the expulsion took place on the Sabbath, the traditional day of rest, and the third was the desecration of the synagogue, in which the Jewish villagers were forced to await the trains that would take them to their suffering and deaths.

Eliezer had come from a religious background steeped in devout Judaism and Hasidism. His joyful existence, however, came to an abrupt end when he was herded with all his friends and relatives into a cattle car in which they were taken to Auschwitz. As the transports moved toward the death camps, the entrance to Hell, young couples, “free from all constraints…gave way… to instinct, taking advantage to the darkness to copulate….” (33). In addition to lust, madness, premonitions of evil, and death ensued as the train made its way toward Birkenau, the reception center for Auschwitz. Its name evokes a mental image of chimneys belching flames of human flesh. The sign at the entrance, “Arbeit Macht Frei” [Work Makes You Free],” means the opposite, as here the notorious Dr. Mengele, with a mere gesture of a conductor’s baton, sends Eliezer’s mother and young sister to the gas chamber, while those who are to enter the camp are forced to witness infants and children piled high in lorries and wheeled to giant trenches into which they are dumped and burned. No tombstones mark their common grave. In the concentration camp SS guards take from the Jews their valuables, their body hair, the gold from their teeth, and even their names, reducing people to numbers. Here Jews who are still alive, recite the Kaddish for themselves, recognizing the fact they are already dead to an uncaring world. The picture Wiesel paints of this experience is that of “the anti-chamber of hell…” (45).

Eliezer and his father notice “an abdominal odor floating in the air, ”that of burning flesh” (38). Only by immersing his shoes into the mucky soil, thereby hiding their clean appearance, is Eliezer able to keep them.

Sonderkommandos use shovels to push gassed inmates into crematory ovens, and liars, hypocrites, thieves, murderers, and seducers, all wearing the uniforms of the SS, continually make life a living hell until, at last, on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, Eliezer feels himself to be “the accuser, God the accused” (79).

As the war nears its end, Russian troops approach the camp, and Eliezer and his father are forced to run with their inmates to Buchenwald in icy winds that blow “in violent gusts”(38). Starving men “…threw themselves on top of one another, stamping each other, tearing at each other…”for a crust of bread (112). As inmates fall dead, and are trampled upon by living skeletons, snow devours their emaciated bodies. Eliezer’s father, his skull fractured after having been beaten by an SS officer, succumbs as well.

When Allied troops arrive and liberate the inmates, Eliezer, looks into a mirror and confronts a living corpse.

Following his liberation, Wiesel lived in anguish with his memories for ten years, trying to find the words to relate his past in a meaningful fashion.

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6 The name Eliezer means "God of Help." It has to do with the names of most of Wiesel’s protagonists which consist of two parts, the beginning of which is El, the abbreviation of Elohim, or God. <www.abarimpublications.com/meaning/ELiezer.html.htm/#.UTMWCBkU6AU>

7 A religious and mystic form of Judaism, devoted to studying the outer and hidden, inner aspect of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). <Jewish VirtualLibrary.org/source/Hasidism.html>

8 The Jewish memorial prayer for the dead.

9 Jewish male prisoners in relatively good health whose job it is to dispose of the corpses.
Unable to assimilate his words well enough to describe the horrors he endured, he vowed to remain silent for ten years, “[l]ong enough to unite the language of men with the silence of the dead.” for he feels that the “role of the survivor [is] to testify.” This led to his religious and spiritual pursuit for answers and the renewal of his faith in God.

**Dawn: A Death of the Spirit**

While Night is the memoir of the survivor’s journey through hell, Dawn tells of the spiritual death of the survivor. As Wiesel comments, about this period, “Like Job, we sat in mourning, and like Job we felt alone…abandoned by our allies and friends…. forsaken, betrayed (A Jew Today 190).

To insure the survival of Judaism, the wanderer, now named Elisha feels he must reassert himself in a new and meaningful fashion and demonstrate his renewed strength to an indifferent world. Wiesel continues, “Faced with despair, the Jew has three options. He can choose resignation… he can seek refuge in self-delusion… or he can face the human condition…and do so as a Jew” (“Against Despair” in A Jew Today, 188). By choosing this third option he remains closer to the teachings of Judaism, which urge the sufferer to “turn every experience into a dynamic force…. “Our strength,” he maintains, “is in our freedom. Ultimately we alone must decide what to do – what to be” (Ibid).

At times, choosing the third option forces the oppressed to become the oppressor, obliterating the line that separates good from evil, a situation which faces the eighteen-year-old student named Elisha, the name of the wanderer in Dawn. As night fades slowly into day, he is forced to make an agonizing decision regarding these opposing forces.

He has left his academic studies to come to Israel, where he has joined a terrorist organization. Ordered to execute an innocent British soldier in reprisal for the execution of a Jewish leader, he faces the dilemma of going against what he believes to be a major factor in Judaism: the sanctity of life. Formerly meek and submissive, he must now prove his manhood to a doubting society, an action that is contrary to his beliefs. Despite his experience in the death camps, he believes that hatred and reprisal are not within Jewish tradition. Of this Wiesel has written:

> The Jewish people have never answered with hate…the enemy has never succeeded in bringing his Jewish victims down to his level…In the days of the Masada as in contemporary Israel, the Jewish warrior demonstrated his humanism. (“The Jew and War,” in A Jew Today, 210)

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12 Successor to the prophet Elijah, May be interpreted as “God is opulence.” <jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/5682-elisha>
By committing murder, he feels that not only will this be a departure from his personal moral code, but it will also involve those from his past, thereby making them accomplices to the crime. As Wiesel writes, “An act so absolute involves not only the killer but…those who formed him. In murdering a man I was making them murderers” (Dawn. 79).

The hours pass slowly as he struggles with his haunted imagination. The ghosts of those who formed his past appear to accompany him as well as to judge him. But believing he is victim of circumstance, Elisha, enjoins them instead to judge a God who has brought this about. Whereas Eliezer had seen Him die in the face of a child in Night, Elisha reviles Him for the injustices of man in Dawn.

Despite the fact that the scriptures say, “Therefore choose life”(Dawn, 24-25), he now must inflict death. The irony is that throughout Dawn, the lack of hatred is a significant factor in Elisha’s mental turmoil, as he states, ”Their tragedy, throughout the centuries, has stemmed from their inability to hate those who have humiliated them (Ibid, 22). With the approach of dawn, he attempts unsuccessfully to hate the British officer whose life he must soon extinguish. According to the Talmud, “He who has killed one man alone is a killer for life,”((Ibid, 90), and Elisha, namesake of the prophet Elijah who had saved the life of a young boy by breathing air into him, will soon be guilty of murder.

Nonetheless, he does as he is ordered to do, simply saying, “I fired,” and as the officer sinks slowly to the ground, the ghosts of Elisha’s past begin “to leave the cell, taking [the officer] with them.” Elisha holds himself to blame, stating, “It’s done. I’ve killed. I’ve killed Elisha” (Ibid, 126). Whereas upon liberation from Buchenwald he had beheld the face of a corpse, now, feeling that he lost everything, including his morality as well his identity, he glances into the “tattered fragment” of the night, and not sees not only the image of his haunting past, but another face: his own.

The Accident:14 Therefore Choose Life

One by one the protagonists, in Wiesel’s next three novels ascend to a more meaningful existence. Wiesel has been called “the Job of Auschwitz,”15 and he frequently refers to Job in both his fiction and non-fiction. Thus his suffering in The Accident can be interpreted as a comparison to Job

Now it came upon a day that the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord and Satan came also among them…. And the Lord said unto Satan: Hast thou considered My servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a wholehearted and an upright man, one that feareth God and shunneth evil? And he still holdeth fast his integrity…. Then Satan answered the Lord and said, “Doth

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Job fear God for naught…?” And the Lord said unto Satan: “Behold he is in thy hands, only spare his life.” 16

At this point, spiritually and morally dead, the nameless protagonist, lonely and troubled, lies between life and death, having been critically injured after being hit by a taxi in New York City. Whereas Job’s misfortunes were due to God having made a wager with Satan, however, the protagonist sees this as a result of a God who had remained silent. At this point he feels that God needs man rather than man needing God. Recalling his teacher’s words, Wiesel writes, “God needs man. Condemned to eternal solitude, He made man to use him as a toy to amuse Himself” (Accident, 42). Whereas God had won his wager with Satan after Job declared his faith, in Him, in The Accident it is man who saves the life of the wanderer.

Overcome by forces stronger than he, the wanderer is, for some time, suspended between life and death. Parallels between Job and the wanderer are somewhat similar, yet differ in the fact that it was God who had taken from Job all that he had treasured, leaving him to wrestle with a horrible reality, whereas in the death camps it was man who had taken from the wanderer his identity and all that he had treasured, similarly wrestling with the horrible reality of his memories. Thus, in both instances it is man who holds power over God. Only by Job’s declaration of faith in God does God win his wager with Satan. In The Accident it is again man, the surgeon, who, as he literally holds the life of the narrator in his hands, ultimately determines his fate. As he states: “To hold in your hands a boy’s life is to take God’s place…in the operating room…. I only count on myself and on the patient… on the life of the diseased flesh. Life wants to go on. It is opposed to death. It fights (42).

The narrator, however, has renounced his faith, for at this point life is meaningless. Describing his feelings, he states, “I don’t care to go on living…” and staring at his image once again, he contemplates suicide.

Whereas it was God who had “changed the fortune of Job,” it is the surgeon who grants life to the wanderer. And whereas “the Lord had given Job twice as much as he had before, the wanderer is granted only the gift of life.

At last he is forced to once again face himself. At this time Gyula17, a friend of his from Hungary, comes to him. Gyula is a happy man who tells jokes and trades stories. During his visit, he paints a portrait of the wanderer and places it on a chair. As the wanderer once again contemplates his image, he states, “I was there, facing me. My whole past was there, facing me…. My eyes were a beating red…. They belonged to a man who had seen God commit the most unforgivable crime: to kill without a reason.” (Accident, 120).

Gyula, puts a match to the portrait, symbolically attempting to help the wanderer remember a happier existence, thereby somewhat lessening his suffering and once again accepting life. Nevertheless, although he still desires to die, he responds in horror, “I couldn’t

17 Meaning City of Luck <www.Google.com>
hold back my tears. I cried a long time after Gyula had closed the door behind him” (Ibid). Shedding tears for the death of his past, however, results in reawakening his emotions.

Whereas the book of Job concludes “….. After this Job lived a hundred and forty years, and saw his sons and his sons’ sons, even our generations. So Job died, being old and full of days (Job 42: 16-17), The Accident concludes with the narrator, restored to life by man rather than God, staring at the ashes of his past.

**The Town Beyond the Wall** A Confrontation with the Self

Having survived and experienced a reawakening of emotion, the wanderer, is now named Michael, symbolizing of the angel of confrontation, for this is the wanderer’s confrontation with madness, a journey through the mind.

Michael has returned to his pre-war village, called Szerensevros, There illegally, he has been turned in by an informer and arrested. To extract information from him, the police subject him to the torture of standing for seventy-two hours in what is called “the temple,” a cell large enough to accommodate one person standing upright.

This is a book of paradoxes, of bad situations in which the behavior men exhibit lead to beneficial results, of torture that leads to strength, of extracting hope from what appears to be hopeless. It is a story in which the slow deterioration of the mind is paralleled by the slow growth of determination and sanity. In this book sacrifice has meaning, and the endurance of torture gains the life of a friend. Because it is a journey of emotions, the story is enhanced when compared to the findings of the psychiatrist Victor Frankl, in which he writes of the emotional reactions of prisoners who were forced to endure the severest and most degrading tortures in the prison camps. Michael’s emotional experiences are reminiscent of the phenomena Frankl describes, making a comparison of the two works an interesting study in human reactions to stressful situations.

Quoting Lessing, Frankl writes, “There are things which must cause you to lose your reason or you have none to lose.” In his own words, he continues, “An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior” (30). He observed that upon incarceration men tended to reject the present reality in order to establish a mental distance between themselves and the horrors they faced. Similarly, as Michael endures the torture known as “the prayer,” he exhibits this behavior, retreating into his mind and reliving those scenes of his childhood that invite him to enter a world of madness.

The “prayer,” so called because Jews pray standing, was devised as a method of “breaking a prisoner’s resistance by keeping him on his feet until he [passed] out.” “The prisoner is stood to face a wall; he stands there day and night. Forbidden to move, to lean. The prisoner may close his eyes and even sleep… without touching the wall: [he is] forbidden to cross his legs….” (Town 12).
Occupying himself with retrospective thoughts, Michael relives memories of those who lived in isolation, behind a wall of madness.

The first is Old Martha, the town drunk. With obscene gestures, she had invited him to partake of an evil, lustful type of insanity a thought from which he quickly recoiled, recalling his childish fear of her.

The second is Varady, an old man who had spent many years studying Hasidism and philosophy. He had emerged from his room one day and announced to the community that he would never die, as his will was stronger than God’s. From then on he had lived within a wall of isolation which the twelve-year-old Michael had breached. There he spent many hours conversing with the old man until one day, feeling himself to be falling into hell, he had run from the garden and the evil and madness of the soul living within it. He had fled “not looking back, as if Satan or his wife… were pursuing him,” (Town, 39) never to return.

The third is Kalman the Kabalist,20 his Hasidic rebbe21 who beckons to him from the madness of one so immured in his religious studies that he has isolated himself from both his people and from his bodily needs. 22 According to Kalman, “Most people live with souls and say prayers, that are not their own. Influenced by his teachings Michael begins to wonder whether or not own soul belongs to him.

Two fellow disciples, like their teacher, have also gone mad, and Michael is tempted to join them in a world “outside time,” where “withdrawn into their books, burrowing to the depths of their own essence…farther and farther from their fellow man,” they lived apart from reality.” (Town, 48). Influenced by his teachings, Michael begins to wonder whether or not his soul belongs to him, but again his is saved, this time from madness, by man, his own father, who had taught him to respect his body and love his fellow man. Whereas Michael had attempted to erect a wall of religious fervor between himself and others, his father had breached it, saying, “I don’t like fanatics. They do not live; choosing eternity, they forget life.” (Ibid, 47).

Martha, Varady and Kalman, all dead now, were madmen belonging to a past in which, “you had to be crazy to believe that man has any control over his fate (Ibid, 52). Of all the madman from his past, only an elderly man who had run through his village of Sighet, warning the Jews of the fate that awaited them, had known that, “everything is false…maybe the madmen are false too” (Ibid, 19). His madness had lain in the fact that he knew the evils of which man was capable and had tried to protect others from it. Although he had never physically erected a wall between himself and his people, he had hidden behind one emotionally.

At this point, the changing of the guard brings Michael back to the present.

According to Frankl, “… apathy… and the feeling that one could not care any more, were the symptoms arising during the second stage of the prisoner’s psychological reactions” (35). As

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20 Kabbalah is the name applied to Jewish mysticism. While codes of Jewish law concentrate on what God wants, Kabbalah tries to penetrate deeper, to the essence of God. 
<www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/source/Judaism/kabbalah.html>

21 Mad of God or Rabbi.
such, it “was a necessary mechanism of self-defense. Reality dimmed, and all efforts and emotions were centered on one task: preserving one’s own life and that of the other fellow (Ibid, 43-44).

As his torture continues, Michael’s mind journeys to a more recent past in Paris, where he had gone following his liberation. The apathy Frankl describes is apparent in the way Michael had lived during that time. Knowing no one, “he had no circle of friends, tied himself to no group, [and] never received visitors” (Town, 58). In his solitude and isolation, he once again began to seek God.

In his insensitivity to his surroundings, the prisoner, as described by Frankl, ”soon surrounded himself with a very necessary protective shell” (Frankl, 35). As Michael had retreated into this shell and begun to search for meaning in his life, he wished to know what God had done with his childhood.

In Paris he had encountered alcoholics who, in their drunkenness, had regressed to a more primitive state of existence; temptresses had who beckoned him to enter a state of madness, and apathy in the young boy who had once been indifferent to the tortures in the camps. Once again Michael chooses sanity, and as he is escorted to the bathroom by the prison guards, the ghosts of the past begin to disappear.

It is a smuggler named Pedro, with whom Michael forms an intense relationship, who helps him develop a new concept of God as he teaches Michael that man has the power to do for another what God cannot. Through his discussions with Pedro, Michael, now released from his apathy, returns to the village of his childhood, only to discover that everything he had once known has disappeared. Strangers live in his former home and own his father’s store, and a government building stands where the synagogue had once been. Here Michael confronts those who had dispassionately watched the Jews being herded onto the trains and apprises them of his contempt.

It was Frankl’s experience that men who retained a measure of inner strength were more able to transcend their physical sufferings and put their experiences to a positive use, thereby retaining a measure of their human dignity. In other words, they became, “worthy of their sufferings” (107). In this way they were able to find what he calls “will to meaning,” in the present” (178). As he quotes Nietzsche: “He who has a will to live can bear with almost any how” (121).

Michael exemplifies this, as he has been able to face the memory of his experiences in the camps, breach the walls of madness, and confront those who had so impassively watched the expulsion of his family, friends and neighbors. Now Michael reasons that because his life had been worth saving, it must be for a purpose. Psychologically renewed, he feels a sense of rebirth.

*The Gates of the Forest:*  23  **Crossroads to Adulthood**

This is the period of time during which the wanderer progresses from youth to maturity and renewal of his faith. In it he will transcend his sufferings and discover in himself a sense of pride
in his identity as a Jew. Having lost both his name and his identity in the concentration camp, the wanderer now calls himself Gregor.

Because this story takes place for the most part in the forest, Gregor must choose which path he will follow as the “gates” represent the crossroads of his life. In the forest all is silent, and Gregor, lives in a cave, hiding in a “cloistered universe” (Ibid, 219) from the German and Hungarian armies, as he awaits his father’s return.

In the first section of the book, “Spring,” a nameless stranger comes to his cave to whom Gregor gives the name Gavriel. When questioned about his own identity, however he is overcome by emotion and thinks, “this is our first meeting… He knows my name,” and answers, “My name is that of an angel…. the angel Gavriel.” (Ibid). But the stranger, now known as Gavriel, replies, “… that Gavriel means “Man of God…it teaches us that what we call angels are only men” (Ibid, 23), and he proceeds to deliver Gregor into a world of painful truths, one being that his father will never return. From Gaavriel Gregor learns the meaning of tears for the destruction of Israel and laughers in the face of an enemy to whom the stranger refuses to surrender his dignity.

The stranger relates to Gregor the meaning of silence by telling him the story of Moshe the Madman, who thought he had come to earth as a Messiah. But Moshe was no Messiah at all because he had failed to turn the tide of events. Unfortunately, when it was time for the Jews to be killed, Moshe had been forced to remain silent when the Germans had cut his tongue out. Gavriel continues, “… the Messiah… is that which makes man more human, which takes the element of pride out of generosity, which stretches his soul toward others” (Ibid, 23).

In his last tale Gavriel relates how the prophet Elijah, having gone to heaven, is unable to die until the Messiah comes. The sad secret is that He has already come. According to Gavriel, “The Messiah is everywhere. Ever present, He gives each passing moment its taste of drunkenness, desolation and ashes…” (Ibid, 43). The truth of this is clear, for in each of four tales the stranger has related to Gregor there has been a Messianic element, linking man to man as well as man to God.

When they hear the soldiers and dogs from the Hungarian army seeking the Jew who has escaped, Gavriel offers to remain behind, allowing Gregor to escape. In this way he passes through a second “gate,” into a village.

The second path, “Summer,” symbolizes childhood and role-playing. As such when Gregor is assigned by Maria, formerly the Wiesel's Christian servant, to play the role of her sister's deaf-mute son, he walks about the village, meeting the villagers and learning that that everyone has a guilty secret, a sin to confess. As a deaf-mute, Gregor is seen by the village priest to be the perfect confessor. For this reason he is escorted into the priest’s confessional, where tells Gregor that he had committed the sin of sending a man to his death because he had refused to thank God rather than man for his rescue.

The ultimate role for a Jewish boy in a community of Christians is that of a scapegoat. As such he plays the role of Judas, the betrayer of Christ, in a school play. As Judas, he is stoned by those who hate Jews because they see him as having betrayed their Savior, which incites the
villagers to enact their roles of Jew-haters, and stone the Jew in their midst. This continues until Gregor realizes the role Judas had actually played in the development of Christianity. It is as though, “a thousand veils were rent: the Prophets emerged from the past and the Messiah from the future” (Ibid, 111). The hatred of the villagers, and Gregor's bleeding face”...“belonged to someone else who had been dead for two thousand years but had been kept cruelly alive to expiate the crimes that had been committed by others” (Ibid). Nonetheless by his silence he has actually salvaged the reputations of all those who had confided in him.

At last the role-playing stops, and Gregor speaks. Taking him for a saint, his speech as a miracle, the villagers beg for his forgiveness, but he has none to give, and reveals his true identity.

To save Gregor's life, Count Petruskanu, who who had remained silenet while had attending the school play, takes him back to the forest, thereby closing the gate which progresses from Gregor's summertime childhood into his “autumn” period of adolescence.

In this third section, “Autumn” Gregor, with the help of his childhood friend Leib the Lion now joins the Jewish partisans and is given a dangerous assignment, to rescue Gavriel, whom he believes has been arrested by the Hungarian soldiers and languishes in prison. Flirting with danger, he meets with Janos, a Hungarian jailor with whose help he expects to rescue Gavriel. But, as often happens in adolescent dreams of fulfilling courageous missions, this is not to be. Rather than being able to rescue Gavriel, it is because of this very mission that Leib the Lion, the person responsible for Gregor’s acceptance into the peer group, is arrested.

Now Gregor, facing a tribunal of his fellow Jews, their faces “sealed, more inscrutable and intense than usual” (Ibid, 161), must prove his innocence as well as his courage. After being questioned again and again, Gregor fabricates a tale in which he proclaims himself to be responsible for his actions. The members of the tribunal, believing him, are willing to accept his guilty sacrifice and plan to execute him. If they do so, however, Gregor will die as the result of a lie, “not as the work of another’s blind will but as a crowning absurdity” (Ibid, 175). Clara, Leib's girlfriend, corroborates his original version of Leib’s capture, however, and as a result of her statement, he is accepted once again and acquires a role model, a young Yeshiva 24 student who had never doubted his innocence. To Yehuda, “a Jew could never be on the side of the executioner: the one… stops time while the other prolongs it to infinity” (IBId, 196). Yehuda urges him to mature and admit his love for Clara. He tells Gregor not to wall himself off and suffer alone, but instead to open himself to others. When Yehuda is stabbed to death by a peasant, Gregor avenges his death. In doing so, he assumes responsibility for himself and his actions and progresses into adulthood.

24 Student in a Jewish educational institution.
The fourth section, “Winter,” takes place several years later. Having left the forest, Gregor has been living in Brooklyn, married to Clara. Much older and no longer beautiful, she still longs for Leib the Lion, and Gregor no longer loves her.

At this point, searching for meaning in his life, Gregor attends a Hasidic celebration. Here he meets a Rebbe who has no answers for him but exhorts him to love God despite man’s suffering. Of the ecstasy of the Hasids, the Rebbe tells him:

There is joy as well as fury in the Hasid's dancing. It's his way of proclaiming: you don't want me to dance, I'll dance anyhow. You've taken away my reason for singing, but I shall sing. I shall sing of the deceit that walks by night... You didn't expect my joy, but here it is; yes my joy will rise up; it will submerge you.” (Ibid, 203)

The Hasidic crowd is possessed by joy and laughs in the face of suffering. About to join the joy of the Hungarian song, Gregor sees a stranger entering and recognizing his face as that of Gavriel, asks of him one favor: “Gavriel… give me back what I gave you. I’m alone and leading a false life. I want to change, to become again what I was. Give me back my name” (Ibid, 75). But the man remains silent, in his silence demanding that Gregor, speak of his past and restore to himself that which is not Gavriel’s to give. A night passes during which Gregor relives all that has transpired since they had seen one another in the woods. During the night Gregor comes to realize that no man can give you what you already possess. Through Gavriel’s silence he has been able to find himself and in that self the portion of man that allows him to be his own Messiah. Once more he accepts God.

In the morning Gregor is greeted by a young Yeshiva student who invites him to join the minyan25 and leads him to the synagogue where it seems to him as if “every step took him to the past;... [where] soon he would find waiting for him the child he had once been....” (Inid. 222). When the child asks his name, he, replying that is Gregor, is told by the child that Gregor isn’t a Jewish name…. (Ibid). At that point he takes back his name, Gavriel, and by regaining his name, he regains his Jewish identity. Accepting the phylactories26 from the child, he winds them about his for his forehead and arm, enters the synagogue, and “[prays] for the soul of his father...[his] Rebbe, ...his lost childhood... and the soul of God” (Ibid).

25 The number of persons required by Jewish law to be present for a religious service, in Orthodox, ten males over thirteen years of age. <www.The Free Dictionary> ElieWiesel, SOU*ld
26 ... two small leather boxes, each of which contains strips of parchment inscribed with quotations from Hebrew scriptures. One is strapped to the forehead, the other wound around the left arm. They are traditionally worn by Jewish men over the age of thirteen during morning worship services except on Sabbath and holidays. <www.The FreeDictionary>
A Beggar in Jerusalem: At One with His People and His God

At last at one with his people, the wanderer is now, in Jerusalem. The book the most mystical for it is many stories in one. The "I" blurs the centuries and in doing so, there is no notion of time, no." laws, and no notion of place or continuity. The characters are forever “leaving one another... sometimes to hide behind one another for no apparent reason.” Thus it is:

... impossible to know who is playing what role and for how long. The episodes arbitrarily into one another, follow one another, becoming inextricably into tangled. And then, just as arbitrarily, they reach an abrupt ending.... Every scene is a mosaic of ten fables... whose every fragment is a tale in itself.... One easily loses the thread.. forgetting the main subterranean plot.... The reader-listener no longer has any notion of where he is or what might be awaiting him; he is helpless, lost in a strange land. (Ibid, 181)

Allegorically, it is open to several layers of interpretation, the wanderer encompassing many wanderers. Each aspect of its mystery hides within it another mystery, each tale within it composed of several tales. Each character composed of other characters. As Wiesel has written: “imagine a series of concentric circles whose fixed centers are buried in man's innermost being, the “ being inside the“I” These concentric circles represent the nine sephirot, or aspects of God that emanate from their Infinite source.29

After having renewed his faith, the wanderer feels at one with his people, his past, his traditions, and his earthly heritage. The wanderer in this book is a beggar David, symbolic of the young warrior king who slew Goliath. He stands at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, the city considered to represent the soul of the Jewish people. Of its essence, Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav, a Hasidic Rebbe, once said:

there is a certain city which encompasses all other cities....And in that city there is a street, which contains all other streets in the city. And on that street there stands a house, which dominates all other houses on the street. And that house has a room, which comprises all other rooms in the house. And in that room there lives a man in whom all men recognize themselves.29


28 The Zohar, according to Jewish mysticism, the "splendor or radiance" is considered the most important books of the Kabbalah. According to it, there are ten sephirot, (spheres) which emanate from the Divine. According to the Zohar, the tenth sphere, the Shekinah, represents "the kingdom" of God, the mystical archetype of the community of Israel As such, she represents both the mystical idea of “Israel in its bond with God and its bliss,” as well as its "suffering and exile.”


30 The Shekinah, also known as Malkah or Malkuth, is often portrayed as a bride or princess whose male lover is a composite of the nine lower nine lower sephirot.. < JewishVirtualLibrary.org>
Each evening David stands with others as they gather to relate tales of strange and wondrous exploits in strange and distant lands. The tales span the centuries, blurring the line between fantasy and reality. Each embodies aspects of other characters from history as well as more recent times.

David is at one with one of three survivors in his village who, because of what he had witnessed, is in an insane asylum. He is at one with the Jewish population of a village who had been forced from their homes into the woods and shot by the Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing squads). He is at one with a Jew who had been hidden by a Christian noblewoman who was killed as well because of her humanitarian efforts. He embodies aspects of the protagonists from Wiesel's earlier novels: Michael, who had fought insanity in The Town Beyond the Wall; Elisha, the young Israeli who had acted contrary to his religious beliefs when ordered to kill an innocent man who represented an enemy in Dawn; and Gavriel, who had renewed his faith in The Gates of the Forest.

At dusk a grieving woman dressed in black and extinguishing one candle, symbolic of the death of the six million and European Jewry, lights another, symbolizing the birth of a new Judaism in the Holy Land. At midnight the Shekinah, symbolized by Malka, comes to mourn for her husband Katriel and their son Sasha, both taken from her in her youth. She whispers David's name, for according to mystic legend, their reunion will bring about the reunion of God with his chosen People.

At the Wall the beggar/wanderer is at one with those who had stood there before him: “Kings and prophets, warriors and priests, poets and philosophers, rich and poor” (Beggar, 203). He is also at one with those whose ashes are buried in a cemetery in the clouds, all who have died in “the cemetery that was Europe” (Ibid). Beholding Malka, he asks her if she is aware of how the Jews have been able to reclaim Israel, their ancient homeland, and she, understanding the centuries of persecution and slaughter, replies that she is. Katriel, representing the studious East European Jew of her youth, is gone forever. In his place is David, the proud, new, strong leader of his people.

Malka leaves, for the quest has not yet been completed. The Shekinah cannot be reunited with the Infinite until all men live in peace. The beggar, in a state of transition, not yet ready to differentiate between “his ghosts and his guides,” (Ibid, 254) is unable to decide to which group he owes his allegiance: those of the past or the future. Thus for now, he remains at the Wall, at one with time and legend.

**The Oath: A Gift for Mankind**

In The Oath, the seventh of Wiesel’s books, the wanderer, now an aged man named Azriel, has been under oath, never to divulge the secret of the destruction of his village, Kollvillag. As its only survivor, he is the living incarnation of this village of ashes. Its only survivor, he had been

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30 The Shekinah, also known as Malkah or Malkuth, is often portrayed as a bride or princess
90 A name of Hebrew origin meaning, “God is my help” <ThinkBabyNames.com
instructed to become the beggar who roams about giving of himself anonymously and becoming spiritually richer for it. \(^{33}\) In the words of a Hasidic Rebbe, “I send you on the road to the unknown so that you may lose yourself before finding yourself again” (Ibid, 53). After all the years of wandering, imprisoned by his vow of silence, it is now time to help bring about the Tik\(\text{k}n.\(^{34}\) According to Hasidic teaching:

> It is by descending into the depths of his own self that man wanders through all the dimensions of the world; in his own self he lifts the barriers which separate one sphere from the other; in his own self, finally, he transcends the limits of natural existence and at the end of his way, without, as were, a single step beyond itself, he discovers that God is all in all and there is “Nothing but Him.”\(^{35}\)

Azriel, after having descended into these through the protagonists in Wiesel’s preceding six books, has one-by-one lifted the barriers to self-knowledge. Now, as an old man, he recognizes that eastern European Jewish life no longer exists. He, the sole survivor, has been living among the ashes of his village, and feels he is going mad. If he keeps his vow of silence, its secret is doomed to die with him. “There are thousands… of Azriels within the old man. It is [his] task to bring them together; when they have become one [he] shall be free.”\(^{36}\)

Azriel carries within himself the story of the Jews of Kollvillag as it progressed from one generation to the next. He must now pass it on the young boy named Abrasha\(^{37}\) who will transmit it to future generations. Thus by linking the past to the present, Azriel will ensure the continuity of Judaism, for Abrasha, is to transmit it to future generations.

**Conclusion**

In each of his first seven books, Wiesel dealt with psychological, moral and religious dilemmas of why God had remained silent while His people are being murdered. As he writes, “How does one answer the person who demands an interpretation of God’s silence at the very moment when…man has greater need than ever of His word, let alone His mercy?” (Oath, 245). Despite this question, however, Weisel, who as a young survivor of the Holocaust, seemingly questioned his faith had now succeeded in renewing his faith in God. Several years after the publication of

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\(^{34}\) The Oath, p.55  
\(^{35}\) Repairing the world. According to the writings of Isaac Luria, when the Creator contracted His Divine self to make room for creation, Divine light, contained in special vessels, was scattered when these vessels shattered and their shards scattered about the universe. While some light contained within these vessels returned to the Divine source, other light attached itself to the scattered shards. These shards constitute evil and are the basis for the material world. Adam was intended to restore the Divine shards through mystical exercises but became guilty of sin. Hence, to bring about Tik\(\text{k}n\) means to bring about a fractured world. <www.MyJewishLearning>  
\(^{36}\) Scholém, p. 341.  
\(^{38}\) The Hebrew meaning is Father. www.ourbabynaming/meaning-of-Abrasha.html
The Oath Wiesel expressed this belief in a cantata entitled Ani Maamin [I Believe] which was performed in Carnegie Hall on November 13 and 14, 1973:

\[ Ani maamin, \text{ Abraham} \]
\[ Despite Treblinka, \]
\[ Ani maamin, \text{ Isaac,} \]
\[ Because of Belsen. \]
\[ Ani maamin, \text{ Jacob,} \]
\[ Because and in spite of Majdanek. \]
\[ Dead in vain, \]
\[ Dead for naught, \]
\[ Ani maamin. \]
\[ Pray, men. \]
\[ Pray to god, Against God, For God. \]
\[ Ani maamin. \]
\[ Whether the Messiah comes, \]
\[ Ani maamin. \]
\[ Or is late in coming, \]
\[ Ani maamin. \]
\[ Whether God is silent \]
\[ Or weeps, \]
\[ Ani maamin. \]
\[ Ani maamin for him, \]
\[ In spite of him. \]
\[ I believe in you, \]
\[ Even against your will. \]
\[ Even if you punish me \]
\[ For believing in you. \]
\[ Blessed are the fools \]
\[ Who shout their faith. \]
\[ Blessed are the fools \]
\[ Who go on laughing, \]
\[ Who mock the man who mocks the Jew, \]
\[ Who help their brothers \]
\[ Singing, over and over and over: \]
\[ Ani maamin. \]

Of this work, he writes, “… it is for Him that we recite Ani Maamin—yes, I believe with all my heart in the coming, however belated, of the Messiah”.

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39 All Rivers Run to the Sea, 6.
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