HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Night as Counternarrative: The Jewish Background

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Elie Wiesel's *Night* records the events that crushed the faith of a young boy growing up in a world of faith. It is a counternarrative to the narrative he was told as a child, to the stories, traditions, and values with which he grew up. Only the merest glimpses of that world appear in *Night*, which focuses relentlessly on collapse and destruction. Yet to understand the scope of the tragedy, to comprehend its full weight and existential burden, one must hold in mind a vision of the orderly world that preceded the collapse, in particular the religion into which Wiesel was born and the faith that nurtured him.

The religion is Judaism, a multitiered system of belief and practice based on the Hebrew Bible (*The Holy Scriptures*). The core of the Bible is the Pentateuch—the five books of Moses, whose core in turn can be seen as the assertion that humans are made in the image of God (Gen. 1.26; cf. Gen. 5.1) and the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves (Lev. 19.18). These two great principles illumine the Ten Commandments, especially the prohibition against murder on the one hand and the call to honor our parents—God's life-bestowing agents—on the other. The events in *Night* are a direct challenge to the values embedded in these commandments. The will of the perpetrators can be seen as triumphing over the will of the author of the commandments, the God of Israel. The narrator of *Night*, young Eliezer, observes that the only one who kept his promises to the Jews was Hitler. What about the identity of the ones who did not keep their promises? The reader no doubt thinks of the Allies, the politicians, the Jewish communal leaders. But it should not be forgotten that the first one to

make promises to the Jews was the Jewish God: promises of peace and blessing, of honor and achievement, of dignity and wisdom to inspire others. To appreciate the intensity of *Night*, one must hear it as a cry of betrayal.

The Bible points to the two great triads that would govern Jewish thought in all periods: God, Torah, and Israel; Creation, revelation, and redemption.

God in the Bible is a passionate personality: concerned about his creation, yearning for relationship with his creatures, capable of anger but also of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness.

Torah, the record of the divine-human encounter, includes a broad variety of genres and works: story and law, prose and poetry, ethics and worship. In the fullness of the biblical canon, the word *Torah* came to comprise the great prophetic visions of Isaiah, the joyous faith of the Psalms, the gnomic wisdom of Proverbs, the incisive questioning of Job, the knotty skepticism of Ecclesiasties, the fragrant eros of Song of Songs, the love and devotion of Ruth. The Torah is thus a sacred scripture that eludes monochromatic definition, that always and at all points breathes expansively with many voices and radiates multiple perspectives.

Israel is the people entrusted with the covenant, God's message of Torah, and charged with the responsibility to create a culture of blessing—of bounteous growth, generosity, and mutual respect—throughout the world, beginning in the land promised to their forefather Abraham. If Israel remains faithful to the covenant, it is promised peace, material prosperity, and spiritual distinction: "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19.6).

Creation means that the world is not an accidental emergence but the volitional product of a good Creator who surveyed his work and "saw that it was very good" (Gen. 1.31).

Revelation refers to God's gift of the Torah and more broadly to the wisdom immanent in the world and the human capacity to discover it and live in harmony with it. "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul" (Ps. 19.8).

Redemption points to a subtle telos woven into the fabric of creation, a bias for growth and repair, and the hope for a return of all things to their place and their dignity in God's good time. It underlies the fundamental optimism that pervades the Hebrew Bible despite repeated tragedy and trauma. This disposition to optimism is found at the end of the Pentateuch, with Moses's abundant blessing to all Israel; at the close of the Prophets, with the promise of Elijah's return and the restoration of "the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers" (Mal. 3.24); and at the conclusion of the

> Writings—and thus the Hebrew Bible as a whole—with the proclamation to the Jewish exiles by the Persian king Cyrus encouraging those who wished to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple: "the Lord his God is with him—let him go up" (2 Chron. 36.23).

From the Hebrew Bible Judaism received its basic ideas of sacred time (Sabbath and festivals); sacred place (Jerusalem, the Land of Israel, and the Temple), holiness and ethics; visions of an ideal future age (the messianic idea), and the quest for a direct experience of the divine (Jewish mysticism, known in some periods as kabbalah). While the biblical prophets could be overwhelmed at times by the power and immediacy of the divine presence, by the later books of the Bible, and certainly throughout the Second Temple period (fifth century BCE to first century CE), a tendency arose for God to recede from direct view. The main body of Jews came to believe that prophecy had ceased, that miracles were largely a thing of the past, and that although God could still be approached in prayer, his presence was to be perceived in the "still small voice" (1 Kings 19.12), in echoes and hints of the sacred rather than in the overtly miraculous events of the fast-receding foundational period. Especially after the Romans destroyed the Second Temple (70 CE) many Jews searched for God in their sacred texts and traditions, through study and sober deliberation. These tendencies eventually culminated in Rabbinic Judaism and its classic works: the Mishnah, the Midrash, and the Talmud.

The legacy of the early rabbis (first through sixth centuries CE) is a Judaism of modesty and balance, a low-profile religion that adapts to the loss of political power and prepares to survive and even flourish under conditions of exile and adversity. Rabbinic Judaism is a robust, fault-tolerant system that governs by mutual consent rooted in ideals of literacy and a shared culture of learning. In this society the voice of God is to be heard not in thunder but in the give-and-take of Talmudic debate. The divine light no longer shines visibly from the Temple but can be seen emerging from the interstitial spaces of master-disciple transmission and collegial discussion. In the rabbinic religion of intertextual play, God is the connecting link between generations, sustaining the dialogue between distant texts that are endlessly juxtaposed and related in new ways, jostling one another in provocative camaraderie. Rabbinic Jews believe in God with as much passion as their biblical forebears, but for them God hovers in the background, offstage, holding the script in his hands with love and care, observing the unfolding action with great interest and hope.

A central characteristic of God in the Bible is power—power to intervene in history, to deliver from danger, and to free from bondage. In rabbinic literature, by contrast, God is often portrayed as vulnerable and (at least overtly) disempowered, cultivating the virtues of patience and receptivity—just like his people. This theology receives its most striking expression in those rabbinic passages that portray God in prayer or weeping and mourning, actually shedding tears over the destruction of his house in Jerusalem and the exile of his people.

Closely associated with this image of God is the theme of the Shechinah, God's manifest presence, which feels the pain of suffering humanity and accompanies the Jews in their wanderings, providing comfort and hope of redemption.

The Talmudic corpus exceeds the expansive diversity of the Hebrew Bible by many orders of magnitude. It is an encyclopedic body of literature, whose wisdom has captivated and challenged generation upon generation of scholars and lay readers. It would be futile to attempt a summary here, other than to suggest that the resistance to encapsulation is itself part of the message: human nature is difficult, religion is complex, but there is hope in both, and the wise course is to remember that there are no easy answers and that every small opportunity to do good and to grow in learning and spirit must be seized enthusiastically.

Finally, there is one rabbinic aphorism that, in the light of our focus here, has an eerie and ominous ring: From the day the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken away from the prophets, but at times it emerges from the voices of little children—and madmen.

The Middle Ages saw the flowering of philosophical approaches to Jewish theology, as exemplified by the writings of Moses Maimonides (1135–1204). Maimonides struggled to remove all anthropomorphic conceptions of the deity; but while his austere theology was enormously influential, a counterapproach arose that delighted in imagining God in vivid language and poetic figures. This approach, known as kabbalah, reached its classical expression in the thirteenth century with the appearance of the Zohar, a work of astonishing literary, religious, and imaginative creativity.

The basic ideas and concerns of Jewish mysticism come from a close reading of Genesis, chapter 1. The first idea is the creative power of language. In Genesis, God creates the world by speaking; thus every utterance, every particle of language—especially the Hebrew language—has infinite power and significance. Jewish mysticism displays an endless fascination with all aspects of Hebrew, not just the semantic surface of utterances but also the details of letters—their shapes, sounds, numerical values, permutations, and combinations. The second main idea comes toward the end of the first chapter of Genesis, when God creates human beings—male and female—in his image. For the kabbalists, this act is more than a metaphor or a noble sentiment expressive of human dignity. The divine image is a true correspondence inscribed in the human body as well as in human emotion, intellect, and spirit; every aspect of human morphology corresponds to some aspect of divine being and life.

The ten modes of divine manifestation, or stages in God's self-disclosure, are the sefirot, the basic structures of kabbalistic theory. This theory is complex and ramified, but for our purposes it is helpful to note just a few basic patterns. On the kabbalistic tree of life (the map of emanation from the unknowable absolute to our created world) there are three vertical columns. The right column represents energy of infinite love and expansiveness. The left column embodies judgmental rigor and the setting of limits. The central column resolves these two polar forces in a beautiful, harmonious balance. There is a vertical polarity as

well. The highest position represents pure bestowal, and the lowest represents pure receptivity. The emphasis of the system as a whole is on reaching balance and equipoise and on the realization that each sefirah includes all the others in a supple and endless dance of energies. The kabbalistic practitioner strives for harmony in all aspects of life and especially for ethical commitment to giving to others, which prepares the kabbalist to be a receptive vessel for the divine flow of bounty and light. For the traditional kabbalist the best way to ensure that one's life is in balanced correspondence to the divine realm is by adherence to the Torah's system of moral and ritual practices.

While some scholars were fascinated with kabbalah for its intellectual sophistication and challenge, most devotees were on a personal religious quest to experience the infinite. For the kabbalist the entire universe is alive with the presence of God. Kabbalistic texts frequently quote Isaiah 6.3, "the whole earth is full of His glory." There are sparks of the divine everywhere, waiting to be redeemed—that is, transformed and raised to a higher state of being, aided by the compassionate attentiveness of the kabbalistic practitioner.

One aspect of kabbalistic thinking is the nonlinearity of small actions. In this view, we cannot judge the implications of a deed by applying rational criteria alone, by looking only at surface appearances. Since the upper world and the lower, physical plane are linked at every point, a good deed, even a good word or kindly thought, may redound throughout the universe with infinite power and blessing. Of course the opposite is true as well: negative energy can multiply exponentially with demonic virulence and fury. One mode of kabbalistic practice addresses this issue, attempting to sweeten—that is, sublimate and transform—negative forces in benign and positive directions. This aspect of kabbalah results in the near apotheosis of the human being, since the cosmic system as a whole is exquisitely sensitive and responsive to human initiative. As the kabbalists put it, "arousal above [on the heavenly plane] follows arousal below [on the terrestrial, human plane]" (Zohar 1.235a, 3.105a).

We now come to the Hasidic movement, which first flourished in the Jewish communities of eighteenth-century Russia and Poland. Hasidism embraces all aspects of the tradition it inherited: the creator deity of the Bible who in his love chooses Israel and who can be entreated in prayer; the tender compassionate father and divine teacher of Rabbinic Midrash; the abstract God of the Jewish philosophers; the unknown and unnameable absolute of kabbalah who self-discloses in the sefirot; the all-pervasive immanent presence verging at the edge of pantheism; and the popular deity of the common folk—a familiar member of the family, just as in the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Genesis—enigmatic, elusive, sometimes obstinate, as all family members can be at times, but by no means a stranger. This last description might be considered a cornerstone of Hasidic theology: God should not be a stranger.

Hasidism's founding figure is Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (d. 1760), known as the Baal Shem Tov ("Master of the Good Name"). He endeared himself to the common folk as a wonder-working kabbalist, healer, and shamanistic intercessor for the beleaguered Jewish people, but he also attracted a small inner circle of rabbinic scholars, opening their eyes and hearts with his profound panentheism—the experiential awareness of God's presence everywhere.

The Baal Shem Tov's major contributions are attitudinal and experiential rather than theoretical. They include:

Fearlessness: since God is everywhere, evil is ultimately an illusion, and there is nothing to fear but God.

A joyful, robust embrace of this world as God's arena.

Emphasis on religious pleasure: every religious act should strive for ecstasy, a rush of intense communion at the moment of joining with the divine. In particular, intense, ecstatic prayer is the very core of religious life.

The uniqueness of the individual, the centrality and sacredness of each personality, along with the appreciation of diversity in a changing religious universe.

The innovation in Hasidic social structure is the zaddik, the saint who is the center of the community and its link to heaven. The zaddik is responsible for his entire community, and the efficacy of his prayer channels blessing to the people. In return, the followers, or Hasidim, venerate their master and give him their fervent devotion. But the real grace is not in the zaddik or in the Hasidic community but in the bond between them that nurtures and enriches them all.

Hasidism conveys its teachings by direct contact between master and disciple, as well as in books that record the master's discourses, usually expositions of biblical passages. But perhaps Hasidic wisdom is best embodied in its tales and stories. Hasidic tales from the classic period represent such values as faith in God and in the zaddik; the power of prayer, inwardness, devotion, and simplicity; and the importance of seeing things from another perspective. Embracing these values almost invariably means seeing things from the side of the powerless, the disenfranchised, those who otherwise would not have a voice. The tales emphasize the importance of small changes that are immediate and accessible, in contrast to larger, systemic changes whose effects will be felt much later.

The Hasidic tale carried in one's heart functions by itself as a kind of teacher or mentor. To possess a fund of tales is to cultivate an inner voice providing perspective, poise, and grounding, a reservoir that can point to a new purchase on circumstances and assist in proceeding with wisdom and integrity.

While Hasidism was a central component of the culture of Sighet Jewry before the destruction, much of the spirit a religiously sensitive young man would have absorbed was simply the common legacy of the traditional Eastern European Jewish community. A core value of the common legacy was respect. Even inanimate objects were treated with respect: food was never thrown about or

handled in an indifferent manner. Books, especially sacred books, were treated with reverence; when stacked, care was taken to place the Bible on top, with other books arranged in a sequence reflecting their place in the canonical hierarchy. Worn, aged books were not discarded but were laid to rest. Of course parents were treated with reverence: a child would not interrupt a parent, sit in the parent's seat at table, or call him or her by name. In some communities children only addressed parents and teachers in the third person.

This was the common ground of Jewish life. But those who embodied the ideal of *mentshlichkeit* (humanity, heightened ethical sensibility) went much further, dignifying every encounter with young and old, friend and stranger, rich and poor and holding in mind the constant awareness that all human beings embody the image of God and that all creatures bear a divine spark. Householders knew and followed the Talmudic dictum that pets and farm animals must be fed before the family sat down to table.

Finally, despite the focus on parents and the elderly, traditional Jewish society was very child centered. Children were prized not just as God's blessing for the future but also as inheritors of the Torah. Parents would go without food in order to pay for a child's education.

One of the holiest and most poignant moments of the week was at the onset of the Sabbath, on Friday evening, when parents would bless their children. With the gentle glow of the Sabbath candles as a backdrop, all children—from infants to adults with families of their own—would hear the ancient biblical words ("May the Lord bless you and keep you. . . ."; Num. 6.24–26) uttered with deep love, parental hands resting on their heads. The blessing would conclude with the parents' deepest personal wishes for their children, perhaps articulated only in the silence of a caressing gaze.

Here we return to the biblical ideal of blessing, which implies bestowal of bounty and success as well as acknowledgment—the recognition of the preciousness and significance of the other and the awareness that we only come into ourselves by recognizing and acknowledging the being of the other. To bless is to rejoice in the connectedness of similarity and in the integrity of difference—even in one's own children.

With this brief picture of Judaism and Jewish values in mind, we can see clearly how *Night* functions as a counternarrative, almost a counter-Torah. While the pages of *Night* contain no direct quotation of a classical Jewish text, the texts and traditions are always there, offstage, moaning and mourning quietly. Judaism hovers as a disembodied ghost, a broken faith, a dark nimbus casting shadow and no light. Both the Jews and the Judaism of Eliezer's childhood have been murdered.

In the beginning of *Night*, God is strong, and Eliezer's faith is strong. By the end of the memoir, the God of Eliezer's childhood stands defeated, crushed. To be sure, there are biblical precedents that one can point to: the book of Lamentations, passages in Job, Jeremiah, and the Psalms. Yet these books contain at

least a glimmer of hope; alongside the passages of despair, one can point to verses of consolation and hope and even joy. There is nothing like this relief in the unrelenting horror of *Night*.

To find appropriate resources for grappling with the world of *Night*, one might turn to classic Rabbinic literature. For it is in the Talmud and Midrash where, as noted above, a theology of divine vulnerability and disempowerment comes to be articulated, where the Shechinah suffers with humanity and wanders in exile with the Jewish people.

Deuteronomy presents a seemingly uncomplicated religious calculus: the good are rewarded, the wicked punished. While Job probes and challenges this approach, the rabbis begin to problematize the whole calculus. The fact is we don't always know why the good suffer and the wicked prosper. And just as the righteous are not always blameless, the wicked may have redeeming features, may deserve our sympathy. The Mishnah teaches that when a criminal is put to death for his crime, the divine presence, the Shechinah, suffers with him (Sanhedrin 46a). Rabbi Meir (second century CE) taught that a hanged criminal must be let down immediately and respectfully buried. To allow the body to linger in its mortification and disgrace is an offense against human dignity and against God, in whose image all humans are made, the just and the wicked alike (Sanhedrin 46b).

It is only by embracing a God of vulnerability, of self-restraint and apparent powerlessness that Judaism was able to survive the loss of the Temple in Jerusalem and of national independence. These trends are intensified in the world of kabbalah, whose texts are filled with images of the Shechinah's fall, of her suffering and shame. The complexity and suppleness of kabbalistic theology, however, leave room for a domain of divine transcendence, assuring the eventual triumph of goodness and blessing, of God's original plan for creation, so that the Shechinah will be raised from the dust and the world and God will achieve fullness and completeness.

These theories put into relief one of the most vivid images of *Night*: that of the little angel, the child dying in slow agony on the gallows. In this context, the famous words, "Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows . . ." (65) take on a new aspect. It is indeed God who is on the gallows, suffering—not for humanity but with humanity, indeed as humanity. And children embody the sacred in a particularly vibrant form. As the Zohar puts it, the face of a schoolchild is the face of the Shechinah, the growing edge of the divine, oriented to the world, beaming hope.

If *Night* chronicles the defeat of God the divine father, it is also the story of the ruin of Eliezer's human father. When we first encounter the father, he appears strong and wise, compassionate but somewhat distant. Notably, he dismissed the reports of grave danger; it was he who made the decision not to attempt escape.

Gradually, as the horrors unfold, the relationship between father and son changes. Eliezer sees his father weep for the first time (19). The son has

discovered his father's vulnerability and realizes that his father is dependent on him for survival. His father is beaten, but Eliezer does not respond, does nothing to intervene, and is filled with remorse and shame (39). Later his father is beaten again, with even more savagery. Eliezer is angry—not at the perpetrator but at his father, for not knowing how to avoid the wrath of his tormentor. Eliezer thinks of how to move away from his father, to avoid being beaten himself (54). On another occasion, because his father cannot march in step and is repeatedly punished on account of it, Eliezer becomes his teacher, giving him lessons in marching in rhythm (55).

Eliezer's struggle against the temptation to treat his father as a burden emerges as a central theme of the memoir. After discovering that a certain son had abandoned his father, he prays, "Oh God, Master of the Universe, give me the strength never to do what Rabbi Eliahu's son has done" (91). Eliezer comes to realize that his own task of survival is made more difficult by his commitment to his father. Nevertheless he does not abandon him but remains faithful to the end.

It is hard not to see Eliezer's struggle to remain faithful to his father under impossible conditions as reflecting his fight to retain some relationship with the God of his childhood. The world of *Night* had no sacred time, no sacred place, no sacred ritual, no sacred text, no comfort of family or of tradition. But the great challenge was, How could Eliezer abandon his divine father just when Eliezer needed him the most? No, the real question was even more painful: How could he abandon his divine father just when God needed Eliezer the most?

Night provides no answer to this question. Indeed, as the memoir comes to an end, the loss and collapse seem to be total. "Since my father's death, nothing mattered to me anymore. . . . I no longer thought of my father, or my mother" (113). There is no coda, no note of hope, no glimmer of light. The narrator supplies no biblical verse, no rabbinic aphorism, no Hasidic tale to alleviate the gloom. (These would come later, in subsequent works, to be written at a later stage in the author's life.)

And yet. In the very last scene, Eliezer has survived, has been liberated from Buchenwald, and finds himself in a hospital hovering for two weeks between life and death. Summoning all his strength, he gets up, wanting to see himself in the mirror hanging on the wall, for the first time since the ghetto.

> From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me.
> The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me. (115)

What the narrator sees is shocking, a shattered self. Yet the last word, "me," makes it clear that that shattered self is not to be identified with the narrator. The corpse's eyes that looked back from the mirror, "his eyes," were not those of the chronicler; the narrator has recovered self-awareness, has found a voice, has a face beyond the image in the mirror. The mirror did more than reflect the

present in inexorable fixity; by its very starkness, it broke open a window on the future.

Here we are reminded of a Talmudic story, which—consistent with the rest of *Night*—the author does not cite but which may nevertheless illumine this final, arresting image of the memoir. The Talmud records that Simeon the Just—considered the last truly saintly high priest of the Jerusalem Temple (second century BCE), whose countenance shone with a godly light—was reluctant to partake of the sacrifice of the Nazirite, the man or woman who had sought holiness by forswearing wine, growing long hair and then shearing it, and avoiding impurity. Simeon was afraid that the Nazirite's ascetic vow was taken in haste, for mixed motives, perhaps for reasons of religious exhibitionism. On one occasion, however, Simeon fully approved of a Nazirite's vow. There was a handsome young man who had beautiful eyes and long locks of hair perfectly framing his striking features. He was unaware of his comeliness, having never seen his image in a mirror. Once he went to draw water from a well and saw his own face gazing back at him. Becoming aware of his physical charms for the first time, he felt the strange stirrings of temptation and sin, so he immediately decided to devote his lustrous hair, indeed his life, to God by taking the vow of the Nazirite (Nedarim 9b).

Perhaps the narrator of *Night*, seeing the ghost in the mirror for the first time, is moved to follow the path of the post-Holocaust Nazirite. He knew that the eyes in the mirror would never leave him. They called to temptation—not that of lust but of collapse and despair. But he would choose to direct his own gaze to the future, to tell the tale, to introduce a new generation to the world that was destroyed, to participate in the sacred task of rebuilding. Can one think of a more sacred response to the face in the mirror?

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Approaches to Teaching Wiesel's *Night*

Edited by

Alan Rosen

The Modern Language Association of America
New York 2007