

For some people, life passes them by with a similitude of events and day-to-day occurrences. Nothing in particular warrants excitement or agitation. These are perhaps the lucky people. Then there are those whose lives are marked forever by personal experience with a traumatic event such as war or terrorism. Whether the person is directly or indirectly affected, scars are formed that never heal, and often the assignment of blame or responsibility falls on God and the religion that supports the belief in God since people cannot find an alternative, or because the perpetrators purport to be acting in the name of God as warriors doing His bidding. When faced with desperate, dangerous, or evil events, many righteous people turn away from their belief in God, thereby diminishing their faith and raising doubts in the divine protection that religion offers.

In the novel, Night, Elie Wiesel describes his history as a survivor of the Holocaust, but as a victim of the fight for the steadfastness of faith in the face of evil. In the beginning of the story, we see a young boy who loves God and wants to learn more and more about his religion, mastering “the Zohar, the Kabbalistic works, the secrets of the Jewish mysticism,” (Wiesel 5). This young boy’s faith is put to the test when he, his family, and the entire Jewish community that he lives in is taken to either be massacred or put to work in the concentration camps. People believe differently when the question of a Creator is posed, but the most devoutly religious people believe in the concept of faith and its importance both in their lives and for their deaths, depending on what they believe happens to them after their death. Being of the Jewish faith, the young Wiesel would believe that God would be judging him at the end of his life and that intense faith would be important to maintain and covet until faced with death. This, however, is not true as the young Wiesel expounds on his dark journey through Auschwitz during World War II. Instead of an enlightening story about a young boy’s ascertainment of his faith in God through pain and hardship, we see the deterioration of his faith as he strives to understand why such evil could be permitted to run rampant and free, ripping the souls of innocent people away, and forever challenging the faith that was once inherently part of his persona.

Elie Wiesel is a wide-eyed young Jewish boy who wishes to enrich his heritage and belief by delving deeper into the Jewish faith. He is so young and his faith has not become solidified when he is confronted with the horrors of the concentration camps as everyday becomes a fight for survival. During his journey, we see the young Wiesel change and become a hollow man, disbelieving that there is the presence of God since any loving God would not permit these atrocities to occur. Wiesel describes himself as, “The student of Talmud, the child I was, had been consumed by the flames. All that was left was a shape that resembled me. My soul had been invaded – and devoured – by a black flame,” (Wiesel 37). The idea of a devoutly pious person losing faith when facing evil is not unique to Wiesel. Many face hardships and evil and turn their backs on God since they believe that their faith is somehow a shield against the evil atrocities that life offers. While providing us with a record of the terrible ordeal that the Jewish people endured, Wiesel’s account also provides us with introspection into the dismantling of faith through personal experience. A picture of the pre-Auschwitz Wiesel is visible as he

remembers the way that he used to be, “In days gone by, Rosh Hashanah had dominated my life. I knew that my sins grieved the Almighty and so I pleaded for forgiveness. In those days, I fully believed that the salvation of the world depended on every one of my deeds, on every one of my prayers,” (Wiesel 68). After his experiences in Auschwitz, Weisel describes himself as, “terribly alone in a world without God, without man. Without love or mercy,” (Wiesel 68).

Turning away from God after experiencing a traumatic event, especially if it affects the person on a personal basis, can be described as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. Post-traumatic stress disorder is described as, “the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to a traumatic event that arouses intense fear, helplessness, or horror” (Pfefferbaum 1251). When terrible events happen, people look for a cause and often they assign this to religion rather than to the actions of individuals. According to information available from the American Psychiatric Association, “man-made events are thought to be more traumatizing than natural ones,” and “severity, duration, and proximity” are all important factors when a confirmed diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder is made. (Pfefferbaum 1253). When considering the case of Elie Wiesel who was a young child when his family and community were savagely ripped from their homes and imprisoned, persecuted, and massacred at the hands of the Nazis, there is no doubt that he was traumatized perhaps most vividly from the moment that he was forever separated from his mother (Wiesel 29):

“And I walked on with my father, with the men. I didn’t know that this was the moment in time and the place where I was leaving my mother and Tzipora forever. I kept walking, my father holding my hand.”

When managing people who have post-traumatic stress disorder, psychiatrists consider a good family relationship as a form of protection against a deepening of the disorder’s intensity (Pfefferbaum 1252); however in the case of Elie Wiesel, he had no family remaining at the end of the war. He was left alone and decided that God was to blame for everything that happened to him and his people. As he and his father along with the other Jewish men were being selected for the crematoria or the prison, Weisel’s father said a small prayer, honoring God. Elie Wiesel, a young boy, reacted to his father’s prayer as, “For the first time, I felt anger rising within me. Why should I sanctify His name? The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank Him for,” (Wiesel 33). Similar reactions have been documented in other people who are of religious backgrounds. The most recent, perhaps most resonating, devastating man-made event is the September 11, 2001 terroristic attacks on the World Trade Center. After this event, many people questioned the existence and compassion of God, seeking to associate the actions of these individuals with true religious beliefs instead of some perverted version of religion.

The evil that happened on September 11, 2001 will never be forgotten, but what should be remembered is that the evil came from people, not because of God. In the PBS special, Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero, several people involved directly in Ground Zero participated in interviews, commenting on their view of the role that religion played in the September 11, 2001

catastrophe. One Rabbi, Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, was asked how he answered people who asked him where God was on September 11, 2001 and his response was an astonishing, “What? You’re asking now? Why now? Why didn’t you ask about Bosnia or Rwanda or Hiroshima or gas chambers and concentration camps or go back through all of human history.” Instead of rejecting God because of the event, Rabbi Hirschfield recognized that, even though the culprits who committed the act were doing it in the name of religion, there is the “religious experience that keeps this stuff from happening.” Similarly, an Islamic scholar, Khaled Abou el-Fadl, believes as The Qur’an states that evil is, “the undoing what God has put together.” This puts the evil act or behavior strictly in the hands of the people who are actually doing the evil. Mr. Abou el-Fadl continues to emphasize that his belief and faith in God was not shattered or called into question after September 11, 2001 when he states, “I know God by experiencing God. I’ve experienced God, and so this is why a matter of faith is not a question for me. How can I question what I’ve experienced at the most intimate of levels?” Despite the horrors of this day, many learned, understanding people walked away with a stronger sense of faith, but still others who, perhaps, were not so solid in their faith walked away questioning how God could allow this to happen. An Episcopal priest, Reverend Joseph Griesedieck, who volunteered to help in the clean-up of the terrible aftermath of 9/11, expressed his emerging feelings of doubt when he stated, “the face of God was a blank slate for me. God couldn’t be counted on in the way that I thought God could be counted on...God seemed absent...I was left with nothing but that thing we call faith. But faith in what?”

In the spring of 1944, Elie Wiesel began his terrible journey that would end with the loss of his entire family as well as his faith. On September 11, 2001, the world was overturned by the catastrophic event that evolved into a global climate of terror, when two planes plunged into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Both of these events placed every human being’s faith directly on the edge of destruction. Those people who had no belief in God prior to these events were not affected in the same way as those who possessed belief in God. Some people, especially those whose faith is not solid and completely formed, assigned the blame to God as if God had commanded and supervised the world war and the terroristic attack to be undertaken, specifically targeting those groups of people directly affected. Others were able to understand that the actions of certain groups of people and also individuals are the result of their perversion of religious beliefs as well as their desire to cause destruction in the world. Perhaps the most resonating image of this loss of faith and, in fact, desire to discontinue living can be found in the dark, disturbing, morbidly-intense novel, Night. Elie Wiesel provides us with a picture of the faithless being that he has become as a result of his experience as a Jewish boy during World War II (Wiesel 34):

“Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those

moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes. Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself."

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