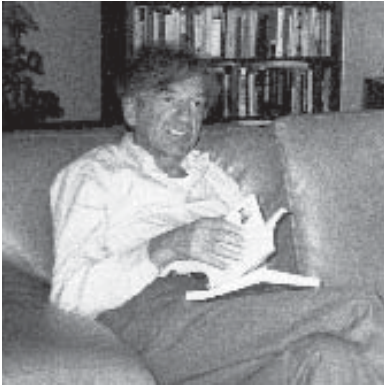


# Interview

## Elie Wiesel



*To speak of peace, Shabbat Shalom has met Elie Wiesel at his study in Manhattan. Questions are raised on a possible peace among humans, on peace between Jews and Arabs, between Jews and Christians, and even the ultimate peace which would reconcile us to God.*

*Elie Wiesel received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway, on December 10, 1986. His Nobel citation reads: "Wiesel is a messenger to mankind. His message is one of peace and atonement and human dignity. The message is in the form of a testimony, repeated and deepened through the works of a great author." He is Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University, and the author of more than thirty books. Described as a "modern prophet," a "moving writer," a "brilliant teacher," a "witness," the survivor of Auschwitz stands also at the forefront of current events; and on the world stage, he has become the symbol of remembrance and conscience. Mr. Wiesel lives in New York city with his family.*

**S**habbat Shalom: In *Ani Maamin* you write: "To be a Jew is to believe in that which links us one to the other, and all to Abraham ... Man calls man; The Jew is that call." How can we believe in that link?

Elie Wiesel: To believe in that link is indispensable, essential; otherwise one would be so alone that this solitude would become a crushing burden. My whole approach, so to speak, is to reach out towards the other. It is not detachment from the other, but attachment to the other which fascinates and interests me. Therefore, it is the human bond, the bond between human beings which, for me, is an adventure.

Without them, we would be like God, alone. And we are not God. We don't have the right to be alone.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Is it possible to understand the other and be understood by him?

Elie Wiesel: No, but one has to keep on trying.

**Shabbat Shalom:** What is peace for you?

Elie Wiesel: Peace is, first of all, hope. Peace is rare in history. Usually, peace is a kind of preparation for war. Our true peace is the peace we carry within ourselves. It starts with us. It starts within us. And if it

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is real, true, it blossoms. Of course, there is a peace, a realistic, pragmatic definition of peace: that there be no war is enough; when people are not killing each other, it's peace; when children are not being bombed, it's peace; when women are not raped, that is, somehow, peace. But that is not peace with a capital P. Peace with a capital P would almost have to be a messianic Peace, meaning that there would not even be a desire for war. It is not fear which stops us. It is desire which transcends us. We have to strive for Peace, otherwise, it is not even war, but indifference which overtakes us.

***Shabbat Shalom:*** In your books, you mention certain obstacles to peace... indifference... and ambiguity.

**Elie Wiesel:** Of course, because nothing is ever clear-cut. For instance: Have I always been for peace? In 1939 would I have said that I was for peace? For peace, for appeasement? In 1939-40, would I have accepted the verdict and the dictatorship of the enemy? Probably not! Certainly not! I think that I would have done everything... I was still very young ... I would have done everything to fight. Indeed, I would not have made peace. I would have waged war against war! But there are also other ambiguities.

***Shabbat Shalom:*** Namely?

**Elie Wiesel:** Of intervention. When do we have the right to intervene in another's life? In another's business? In another's country? In Haiti, there is an absolute scandal going on today

... what should be done to put an end to that scandal? In Somalia, there is hunger, there is famine... what should be done to achieve peace? In Bosnia... what should we do? Engage in military action?

***Shabbat Shalom:*** What should we do?

**Elie Wiesel:** Ah! If only I knew... In any case, I believe we should stop the bloodshed ... Things are getting better ... I am grateful, things are getting better. My struggle has been, first of all, to lift up the siege. It was a besieged city. Things are happening. Sarajevo is already an open city... will soon be an open city. We have to go on. We should not allow the troublemaker to continue.

***Shabbat Shalom:*** There is the guilt of the aggressor ...

**Elie Wiesel:** Yes.

***Shabbat Shalom:*** Then, there is the guilt of the one who sees the aggressor and does nothing ...

**Elie Wiesel:** The spectator. I don't think it's the same thing, because the killer is a criminal; complicity is also criminal. Let's say someone sees, in the street, a person committing an aggression. Of course he is guilty. But, without any doubt, it's not the same thing. It is the one who kills who is a killer. The one who sees and does nothing is an accomplice to the killer. We must be cautious.

***Shabbat Shalom:*** Why are we so passive?

**Elie Wiesel:** You mean why

don't we do anything? Because most people are afraid. They are afraid to commit themselves. Commitment implies a lot of things. First of all, a waste of time ... it's as simple as that. Because if one commits himself today, it also means that he will commit himself tomorrow. Most people would rather remain apathetic.

***Shabbat Shalom:*** But it's not just a question of time, because we choose to spend a lot of time for things we consider as priority. Is it not, rather, that we have lost the sense of what is priority?

**Elie Wiesel:** I've mentioned one thing. There are also other factors. There is the fact that human nature is such that there are few people actually capable of generosity.

***Shabbat Shalom:*** You mention human nature. In your books, you highlight the fact that Auschwitz eludes all explanation ... how can we, then, overcome something we don't understand?

**Elie Wiesel:** How can we overcome something we understand?! These are two different processes which both claim acknowledgement. Both are valid. It depends ... it really depends. As for me, I know that all the questions I had, I still have them. They remain open ... I will never understand. I do not understand. But does this mean that I should stop being human, stop caring for my fellowmen? On the other hand, if someone says: "I do not understand, therefore, I stop caring for others," I must try to understand him.

***Shabbat Shalom:*** We are free...

**Elie Wiesel:** We are human...

*Shabbat Shalom:* Is forgiveness essential to peace?

Elie Wiesel: No.

*Shabbat Shalom:* It is not essential to forgive?!

Elie Wiesel: For me, it is not an issue that interests me. Who am I to forgive? I don't have that power. I am not authorized to forgive. At the most, I could forgive something which has been done to me, personally, ... but to a whole people! What is of interest to me is memory. And understanding. But forgiveness ... that's not in my power. Which does not mean that I do not forgive...

*Shabbat Shalom:* Maybe not collective forgiveness, of course, but ...

Elie Wiesel: I've never yet had someone come up to me, saying: "Mr. Wiesel, I was an SS in Germany in 1944-45. I have personally wronged you. Forgive me."

*Shabbat Shalom:* You say that even the killer was human...

Elie Wiesel: Yes. Of course, ... they had two ears, they had a nose, two eyes, a ...

*Shabbat Shalom:* A heart?

Elie Wiesel: Why not..., today we know that the killers were good fathers. Therefore, they had a heart for their children, for their wives, for their lovers, for their mistresses, who knows... for their dogs... they kept dogs... I don't understand that either... How could one kill and remain human? But this does not mean that all humans are murderers. Often, psychiatrists take a shortcut which I do not agree with: since Eichmann was human, since we are all humans, therefore, there is an Eichmann in all

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of us. No. That's going too far. Only the one who kills is a killer. There is no such thing as a potential killer. Until someone has actually killed, he is not a killer.

*Shabbat Shalom:* Does peace require trust? And how can we trust when we've seen what we've seen?

Elie Wiesel: Because we've seen what we've seen, we need to trust. I can always turn your question around. Otherwise, what is the alternative? Not to trust? So what? Live in a world of suspicion? In a world of anxiety? Of disdain? An act of trust is sometimes necessary.

*Shabbat Shalom:* Speaking about Arab refugees, you say: ..."We should simply come to the Arab refugees and try to help them. We should say: 'Listen, we too have been uprooted; we too suffered injustices; we lost more than you did. So let us teach you how one builds on ruins. Let us teach you how one can go on living without rancor and without resentment.'" Is it really possible to teach another?

Elie Wiesel: Yes, yes! It all depends! Of course we can! Otherwise, I'm wasting my time as a teacher!

*Shabbat Shalom:* But to an enemy?

Elie Wiesel: Myself, I never saw in the Arabs an enemy. I think of young Arabs, and I see unhappy men, unhappy women sometimes led astray by violence, blinded by the wish to do harm,

to do justice. For them, it was the same, but not for me.

*Shabbat Shalom:* Does peace with the Arab world imply more than a political dimension? Does it imply a religious dimension?

Elie Wiesel: Yes, I would think so, because any peace implies a religious dimension. Not only between two nations. When two nations make peace, when two beings make peace, in that agreement, in that movement, there is a presence, a third presence, a religious presence. But again, I don't talk about that; I very seldom talk about religion. I talk about culture. About education.

*Shabbat Shalom:* Why don't you talk about religion?

Elie Wiesel: Because too many people do. Too many harp on that.

*Shabbat Shalom:* If you had a word of wisdom for those involved in the peace process, what would it be?

Elie Wiesel: Oh! I would simply say: "Learn to listen."

*Shabbat Shalom:* What is there in the act of listening?

Elie Wiesel: Listening is an opening.

*Shabbat Shalom:* What kind of peace would you like for Israel?

Elie Wiesel: For Israel? A creative peace, not of despair, but of

hope. Actually, I think that things are going better. What happened some weeks ago was terrible. But I am profoundly optimistic as far as the peace process between Israel and the Arabs is concerned. We cannot give up now.

*Shabbat Shalom:* You write: "The sincere Christian knows that what died at Auschwitz was not the Jewish people but Christianity." Is it still possible for Jews and Christians to speak to one another after what happened?

Elie Wiesel: I have been in dialogue with Christian friends for the longest time. Of course, they each know that they can never know what I know. They accept, within the bounds of their love, since we consider ourselves religious, inasmuch as I speak of religion, that our two concepts, that our two attitudes, that our two desires, be not a desire of exclusion or inclusion. What I said about Christianity, I still believe. The fact that the killer was Christian is a problem even more serious for Christianity, more serious than for the victims of the event, the victims being Jews. The killer was Christian!

*Shabbat Shalom:* Are you waiting for something from the Christian world?

Elie Wiesel: I wait for this recognition. Not for us. For us

*The fact that the killer was Christian is a problem even more serious for Christianity, more serious than for the victims of the event.*

Jews, in fact, I think it is too late. What could people now do that they haven't already done? But, after all, we are talking about the world, about humankind. I am talking about the third millennium, the twenty-first century. There are very few Jews in the world, ... and many Christians! And I think we should do things together to save future generations.

*Shabbat Shalom:* For instance?

Elie Wiesel: Together, we could fight against fanaticism, against injustice, against oppression. We could do things together...

*Shabbat Shalom:* You write: "Our children had no effect on their killers. Or on the world. Or on God." God kept silent ... In any case, you present Him as a silent God. If that is so, does He still have the right to speak today?

Elie Wiesel: Do we have the right to speak today?

*Shabbat Shalom:* Was God saying something when He kept silent?

Elie Wiesel: I don't think so ... Maybe He was. In any case, I do not understand, I don't understand that language. I like silence, but not that silence. But you know ... I have my quarrels with God ... I always had ... to this day.

*Shabbat Shalom:* How do we avoid falling in the trap of imprisoning God in our definitions?

Elie Wiesel: How about not defining Him? God is beyond definition. God is always this, but also that. God is always here, but also there. If you close your

eyes as you enter in the night, when you are alone ... you can hear in yourself, words... or songs... or memories... or sighs... and that is all you can offer to Him ... And in offering that to Him, you accept His Presence.

*Shabbat Shalom:* In your books you have presented yourself as a witness. You also mentioned the difficulty as well as the fear of not having succeeded in doing so ... one more time... And yet one has to keep going on...

Elie Wiesel: Uh-hum...

*Shabbat Shalom:* "If you are searching for a spark, it is in ashes that you must look for it..."

Elie Wiesel: This is not from me, but from a Hasidic master...

*Shabbat Shalom:* What about you? Have you found the spark?

Elie Wiesel: No, ... I found ashes.

*Shabbat Shalom:* Are you still looking for it?

Elie Wiesel: Of course I am!

*Shabbat Shalom:* Do you believe in peace?

Elie Wiesel: Wholeheartedly! And totally! Even when it escapes. Even when it dims...

*Shabbat Shalom:* What does being a teacher mean for you?

Elie Wiesel: I love to study; I have a passion for learning. And because of my passion for learning, I have a passion for teaching. To pass on. The urge is there to pass on what I have received. And I love to be with my students. There is a bond between us. We are close. Really close.

They are close to one another and I am close to them. Even when I get a sabbatical, I don't take it; I only take a semester because I need to see them, to listen to them, to be enriched by them.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Do your students bring anything to you?**

**Elie Wiesel:** Of course they do, otherwise I would not be teaching. And sometimes, I learn more from them than they do from me...

***Shabbat Shalom:* One last question... If you had a question to ask me what would it be?**

**Elie Wiesel:** Oh! I would ask: "What is the question that you would like to ask me?"

***Shabbat Shalom:* Why do you always turn my questions around?**

**Elie Wiesel:** No, not at all, on the contrary. It is an extension of your question, to show that

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there is another dimension to your question. And all are very good. But as for me, if you are somewhat acquainted with my work, you already see that I have no answers. I only have questions. So, it's unfair. You come with your questions ... And you expect me to answer. But if I answered, I would be lying to myself since I have no answers. So, I try to deepen your questions. This being said, is the question on my lips the same as the question on yours? There are questions even in the Bible ... There is a question asked by Moses ... if I were to ask the exact same question, would it be the same? Earlier on, you mentioned faith, and God, and sometimes I have turned your question around. In doing so, is it still the same question? In any case, it shows that there is enough substance to

deepen our reflection on the question. In other words, let's imagine that someone repeats the same question all the time. Does it change in the process? Even if it's the same person who all the time repeats the very same question? ... I'm talking about real questions ... It's fascinating... When I say that I don't have answers, trust me, I don't. It's hard. I accept with deep humility that I don't have answers. If you wish, what we have done together is an exercise inside the question... it's not an escape... Otherwise, why ask you to come and waste everybody's time... It is so that we can, together, engage in a kind of lesson on the question.

***Shabbat Shalom:* And what is the lesson?**

**Elie Wiesel:** That the question is rich. Profound and hard. Perennial. Questions link human beings, answers divide them.

Interview and translation by Jane Sally Kiasiong-Andriamiarisoa

## Some books by Elie Wiesel:

*A Passover Haggadah*, illustrated by Mark Podwal (Simon and Schuster, 1993).

*Sages and Dreamers: Portraits and Legends from the Jewish Tradition* (Simon and Schuster, 1993).

*Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters* (Aronson, Jason, Inc., 1993).

*Night, Dawn, Day*, translated by Stella Rodway (Aronson, Jason, Inc., 1992).

*The Fifth Son* (Warner Books, Inc., 1991).

*Twilight* (Warner Books, Inc., 1989).

*The Trial of God: A Play in Three Acts*, translated by Marion Wiesel (Schocken Books, Inc., 1986).

*Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (Simon and Schuster, 1985).

*Four Hasidic Masters and Their Struggle Against Melancholy*, foreword by Theodore Hesburgh (University of Notre Dame Press, 1978).

*Zalmen or the Madness of God* (Random House, Inc., 1975).

*Ani Maamin: A Song Lost and Found Again*, music for the cantata composed by Darius Milhaud, translated from the French by Marion Wiesel (Random House, 1973).