6. Hatred and Humanity

Allied forces liberated Buchenwald Concentration Camp in Germany on 16 April 1945. Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Laureate, is on the second bunk from bottom, seventh from the left.

Photo: Pvt. H. Miller, courtesy of Corbis-Bettmann

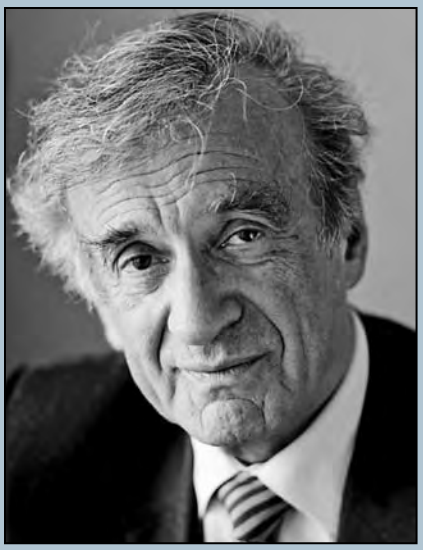

Photo: Sergey Bermeniev

Elie Wiesel

Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, Nobel Laureate, writer and human rights activist, was born in the Transylvania town of Sighet. Professor Wiesel was 15 years old when he and his family were deported to the death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. His experience there is recounted in the internationally acclaimed memoir *La Nuit* or *Night* published in 1958. Professor Wiesel has been the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University (United States) since 1976. Elie Wiesel and his wife, Marion, established The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity soon after he was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize for Peace. The Foundation's mission, rooted in the memory of the Holocaust, is to combat indifference, intolerance and injustice. A United Nations Messenger of Peace since 1998, Professor Wiesel has received numerous awards for his literary achievements and human rights activities.

Hatred and Humanity

by Elie Wiesel

Nobel Laureate
President of the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity
United Nations Messenger of Peace

Why hate? Why yield to its sombre and implacable force for which, locked on itself, manifests its will to destroy for reasons that bring embarrassment and despair to the human condition? What good may derive from hatred? Is there, can there be nobility in its realm? Has a work of art been produced by hatred? Literature and hatred, spirituality and hatred, beauty—can they go together? Knut Hamsen and Louis-Ferdinand Céline were great novelists, but their anti-Semitic writings are poor literature. Hatred is reductive; it cheapens. The popular saying that "love is blind" is wrong. Hatred is blind—and blinding. There is no light IN hatred, no exit FROM it. Homer's Iliad opens with anger: "Sing Achilles the anger of the gods". Anger yes, hatred no. All wars begin in the hearts of men, not on battlefields.

Why then is there still so much hatred around, in so many places, and what is its role in history?

In the collective memory of humankind, most societies have been ruled by something else than hatred. Ancient Greece celebrated wisdom, Rome glorified authority, Christianity emphasized love even in its fanaticism, Islam preached fanaticism even in its remarkable overtures to outside beliefs, and Judaism pleaded for

justice and truth even in exile. Scripture mentions a "Book of God's wars"; but it was forgotten. Was it because it could have inspired hatred? Hatred accompanies fanaticism and Scripture praises only two fanatics for their fanaticism: Pinhas the priest and Elijah the prophet.

Hatred as symbol of its power became a force and could be found only in religious or political dictatorships. To doubt there meant to be despised, condemned and punished. Where democracy is suppressed, the intent was equivalent to action. Of Erasmus, Stefan Zweig wrote: "He loved many things we love, poetry and philosophy, books and art, languages and peoples, and without distinguishing one from the others he loved the whole world. The only thing he truly hated? Fanaticism." Erasmus and Montaigne could function only where Christianity had not attained absolute rule. Both were made to suffer but neither was hated. "Hate thy enemy" was an imperative only when human liberty was totally stifled and eradicated, at times when to think differently meant to be different, estranged and thus to be less worthy of respect, compassion and help. Fanaticism inspires fear. The great Descartes withdrew his book on science because he feared he might endure Galileo's fate.

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But then, one could say: all this happened once upon a time, not now. Wrong. Today fanaticism has become or re-became a source of danger, the gravest of all. For the peril is not a new one. The twentieth century was plagued by two forms, two modes of fanaticism: one was political, lodged in Moscow and the other racist, with its central headquarters in Berlin. Their aim was global conquest; to attain it, both sacrificed scores of millions of human lives. Auschwitz and the Gulag must not be compared—I do not believe in Holocaust-related analogies—but they do have things in common. Both fanatically

distrusted the individual's otherness and abolished personal freedom, and both produced hatred.

Those of us who naively thought that the defeat of fascism and the downfall of communism resulted in the disappearance of anti-Semitism, racism and intolerance were mistaken. Anti-Semitism is on the rise again, racists are still vocal and active, and intolerance has resurrected. And the new one is not new. Religious in nature, it penetrates the daily news just as it dominated the Middle Ages during the Crusades and the Inquisition.

What is the seduction of excessive intolerance which surfaces in fanaticism? It gives the fanatic a sense of superiority. He thinks he knows better than everybody. He accepts no doubts. He is always sure that he is right.

Hence he avoids dialogue. What's the point in listening to views that must be wrong? Ultimately, the fanatic wants the entire world to be a prison. He wishes all people to be his prisoners. The keys are in his hands alone. Eventually, he puts God himself in prison. To oppose him is to liberate not only man but God Himself.

Please see the next page for discussion questions

Discussion questions

1. Elie Wiesel has authored over forty books, in which—among other themes—he described the Holocaust and other human tragedies as a call for action and empathy. Against this backdrop, how does he approach the theme of hatred?

2. According to Wiesel, how did hatred manifest itself throughout the twentieth century and which underlying motives does he identify?

3. What kinds of threats do acts of intolerance, like anti-Semitism, pose in the world today? Which specific examples are most significant to you?

4. How can individual, local and collective activism address the root causes of intolerance?

5. Should there be limits to freedom of speech? If so, what should they be?