

# The Ethical Theology of Elie Wiesel

## *The Town Beyond the Wall* as a Key Norman Lamm

Of all the works of Elie Wiesel, the one which might most appropriately be called "theological" is *The Town Beyond the Wall* (TBW). It recapitulates, and anticipates, some of the most significant themes with which the author is concerned in many other works, both fiction and non-fiction. In TBW Wiesel uses the medium of fiction to confront some of the most crucial and overarching philosophical issues: suffering, evil, rationality, madness, silence, indifference, meaningfulness. TBW, therefore, requires not only literary criticism — though that too — but philosophical analysis based upon the sources of the Jewish tradition, which, after all, are the vitalizing wells of Wiesel's own life and thought. Indeed, the real significance of TBW (or, for that matter, much of Wiesel's other works) is best decoded with a deep knowledge of classical Jewish literature.

Wiesel, in this book, reminds me of Kohellet, Ecclesiastes. He picks up a theme, fondles it, examines it from several aspects, and either puts it aside for more attention later or rejects it. TBW is not simply a philosophical work in fiction form; it is a series of profound meditations, a modern version of a tale by the Hasidic storyteller, Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav: intriguing as the story is in its own right, its true message lies beneath the surface. Like a Biblical verse, a section of a Talmudic Agada, or a Midrash, it must be read on two levels, or what the Jewish tradition calls *peshat* (the plain meaning) and *derash* (the symbolic meaning).

First, a brief outline of the plot. Michael, the protagonist, is born and lives, during his earliest youth, in a little Hungarian town, Szerencsevaros. After the war, which shatters his life along with that of his family and townspeople, he finds himself in Paris, penniless and haunted by the ghosts of the past. He finally meets and forms a fast friendship with Pedro, an unusual, hearty and insightful man. Pedro is part of a smuggling ring. Since Michael's burning ambition is to return to his hometown, for reasons he himself does not yet fathom, Pedro arranges for his new friend and himself to be smuggled across the border for a total of three days. The

first day there, Michael confronts "the spectator," a non-Jewish neighbor who had watched with glassy eyes while the town's 10,000 Jews were gathered in the synagogue for deportation to their deaths. The spectator informs the Communist police, who arrest Michael.

Michael is determined to hold out for three days so that Pedro can return safely to the West. He is subjected to a unique kind of torture in the prison, which the police call a "temple": the prisoner is made to stand facing the wall; he is not permitted to sit. During these continuous standing sessions, which are called "prayer" — standing against the wall being the traditional Jewish position for prayer — the officer in charge attempts to make the prisoner "talk." When Michael finally collapses, he is thrown into a cell with three other Jews.

### A Novel of Ideas

Wiesel's ideas are revealed mainly through the thinking of Michael, a stand-in for the author himself; through his conversations with Pedro and flashbacks to his childhood in Szerencsevaros. The events that take place after he is cast into his cell are also highly significant as are the brief legend at the end of the book and its opening quotation from Dostoevski.

TBW addresses itself to the question of questions with which religion must wrestle and which is both its triumph and its defeat: that of suffering. Like Jacob of old, the author wrestles with the Angel, with God Himself, in a stirring, agonizing, moving encounter. The name "Michael," chosen by the author deliberately, is also the name of the Angel with whom Jacob wrestled — and over whom he triumphed, but

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not without lasting scars (*Yalkut to Va-yishlah*, 132). According to the Sages (*Midrash Aseret ha-Dibrot*, 1), Michael, the Guardian Angel of Israel, performs the role of a high priest in heaven, who every day offers up a sacrifice consisting of the souls of the righteous. In Wiesel's story, it is Michael who protests the sacrifice of the innocents which it is his tragic role to behold.

Wiesel rejects categorically any attempt to offer simple explanations for the eternal riddle of suffering. He wants no part of any theodicies, finding them contrived, insulting — and perhaps more unbearable than the very suffering they pretend to explain away. In the alleys of Paris, Michael is befriended by the alcoholic derelicts living on the margin of French society. What do these *clochards* dream about at night? Thirst, they dream the whole world is thirsty. One of them relates a parable of a man, consumed with thirst, trudging wearily across the desert. Before expiring, he sees the world suddenly bathed in water, transmuted to liquid. And he is happy, he is no longer thirsty. At that point he reaches the oasis, drops to his knees, and "like the first man ever, he touches the calm surface with the tip of his tongue. And he leaps to his feet, furious and disappointed." But the *clochard* himself swigs at his wine and adds: "I've drunk from that spring. I prefer thirst" (p.77).

## Rejection of Theodicies

Indeed, some solutions to the problem of suffering are more intolerable and unbearable than suffering itself. In rejecting theodicies, Wiesel is rejecting all the prim rationalisms of the ages that have attempted, in one way or another, to weave a garment of intellectual arguments to disguise the harsh nakedness of suffering. But it will not go away, it remains an existential fact defying rationalization and intellectualization. In the final analysis, theodicy is an affront to the dignity of the sufferer and makes a joke of the most impenetrable riddle of human existence. It is not rational nor even mystical explanations that Wiesel is seeking but rather human approaches and, even more, a confrontation with the God who permits suffering.

A strategy toward suffering that Wiesel lightly touches upon is that of indifferentism, a studied apathy in response to pain. In Tangiers, Michael meditates about a sleeping Arab who half listens to a story repeated daily, with identical gestures, in the marketplace by an old Arab storyteller. Michael tells him:

You're happy. Allah is great, and if what he accomplishes is not, that's his affair and not yours. You just sleep. One day is like another, one dream is like another, men repeat the same stories always, the rivers flow to the sea: Why torture yourself?...Right, you are right, sleep...Tomorrow you will welcome a new day no different from yesterday...Happy those who close their eyes: for them nothing changes. (p. 113)

But, "Michael rose and walked away hastily." Why? The Arab's tale repeats the same happy ending which Michael knows is not true to life. So, whether the indifferentism results from the contemplation of the cyclical nature of history, as with Kohellet or with the Stoics, or

whether it is a quietism that comes from the awareness of God's presence everywhere, as in the Hasidic concept of *hishtavut* (that all is the same, whether pain or pleasure, for God is everywhere), the solution is unsatisfactory. Quietism is an escape, even if the posture be heroic. For if the story tells us that in the end all will be well, it is probably false. And if it tells us that life and history keep on repeating themselves, then it is "solving" the problem of suffering by stating that since life has no meaning anyway, why search for the meaning of suffering.

Moreover, toward the end of the book, the protagonist rejects Stoic indifferentism by affirming that apathy toward suffering soon becomes apathy toward man and is dehumanizing.

A similar theme on which the author meditates is that of silence — not the silence of indifference but that of the hero. Michael plays with this theme; it may not be enough to provide the answer he is looking for or even the question he is trying to formulate, but it certainly is something worthy of admiration. Indeed, Michael himself, during the long torture of his "prayer" sessions, refuses to cry out. He is not only holding out in order to protect his friend Pedro; he is also in effect responding to suffering with silence. He tells the tragic story of five-year old Mendelev, who, hidden with his mother by a friendly Gentile peasant under a bundle of hay in an attempt to save them from the Hungarian Fascists, is warned, above all, to be silent. But they are discovered by the border police.

"Mama," Mendelev wept, "it wasn't me who called out! It wasn't me!"

The gendarmes ordered him off the wagon, but he couldn't move. His body was run through. "Mama," he said again, while bloody tears ran into his mouth, "it wasn't me, it wasn't me!" The widow, a crown of hay about her head, did not answer. Dead. She too had kept silence. (p. 120)

It is Michael who tells this story, and he does so in loving admiration of the child Mendelev, his townsman. It is interesting that the Midrash (Deut. R. 5) refers to the Angel as "the prince of snow," whereas Gabriel is "the prince of fire." Michael's approach is that of the silence of snow rather than the crackling dynamism of fire.

## Madness as Lucidity

Turning now to what is a major theme throughout *TBW* and many of Wiesel's works — that of madness — I must confess that I find the author's madmen — and madwomen — the most irresistible of all his characters. His psychotics conform with the current revisionist psychiatric theory that madness may simply be another and more intense form of lucidity. The madman is "farseeing. He sees the world that remains inaccessible to us. His madness is only a wall, erected to protect us — us: to see what Moishe's bloodshot eyes see would be dangerous" (p.18). One is reminded here of the incident told of R. Elijah, the famed Gaon of Vilna, by his disciple R. Hayyim of Volozhin. In Vilna, a clairvoyant who frightened people by his uncanny powers was once brought before the Gaon, to whom he revealed what the latter had been studying in the privacy of his chamber,



and even the content of his mystical experiences. The Gaon blanched, and conceded that the clairvoyant was right. "He then peered carefully into the face of the visionary and recognized that he was a melancholiac, and a melancholiac often has dreams which are true and accurate. Yet, he ordered his *gabbai* to expel the man."<sup>1</sup>

Madmen, Wiesel avers, "know that everything is false" (p. 19). The nature of human society is such that there is created a kind of moral imperative for decent men to go mad. "By what right," asks Moishe the madman, "are they not crazy? These days honest men can do only one thing: go mad! Spit on logic, intelligence, sacrosanct reason! That's what you have to do, that's the way to stay human, to keep your wholeness!" (p. 20). In a world gone mad, going mad — by the standards of that society — is indeed a salvaging of sanity. If the world is topsy-turvy, then one restores it by turning it upside-down, i.e., going mad. Hence, madness becomes a way of piercing through the moral lunacy of society in order to grasp the inherent sanity that life could be.

But in his ruminations on madness, Wiesel ventures other justifications for madness as a legitimate response to suffering. Answering Menachem, who maintains that God is not madness, Michael retorts, "And if, after all, He were [mad]? That would explain so much" (p. 148). This is not a way of countering madness with madness in order to arrive at the ultimate rationality of life. On the contrary, it declares that suffering reveals the essential irrationality at the core of experience — "the broken vessels," as the Lurianic image has it, at the center of existence — and therefore a rational or sane approach is doomed to frustration. The only sane response to the madness of existence consists of pitting one's own madness against it.

There is yet a third motive for the madness theme to which Elie Wiesel returns time and again. It is hinted at in the quotation from Dostoevski at the beginning of the book: "I have a plan — to go mad." I detect in this book — and in other passages here and there — the theme of madness as spite. God expects me to find meaning in my suffering. Well, I shall defy Him: "I have a plan," a strategy I have devised "to go mad" — to subvert the search for meaning and sanity and to deny to God the satisfaction of having me search for meaning in the depths of suffering. "The choice of madness," Michael says (p. 101), "is an act of courage ... an act of the free will that destroys freedom." When Pedro answers, "You're trying to drive God mad," Michael thinks: "And God too is trying to drive me mad." The "spite" theme comes through quite clearly.

### Dialogue Between God and Man

Yet, after all is said and done, madness, like suicide, is meretricious; it is only an escape — a "liberation from the self" (p. 100). It is "too comfortable, too easy [an] escape" (p. 101). What madness may gain in insight and psychological satisfaction, it loses in responsibility to one's self and to one's neighbor.

The dialogue between God and man, between Michael and his Creator, which is the inner level of discourse of this

<sup>1</sup>Introduction by R. Hayyim of Volozhin to the Commentary by the Gaon on the Kabbalistic work, *Sifra di-Tzeniuta*.

entire novel, takes on a relevant and realistic turn. In the classical parameters of this human-divine dialogue, the two partners are vastly unequal: God is omnipotent, man but clay in the hands of the Deity. But Wiesel writes as a modern, as one who has suffered the lash of demonic human powers in this technological age and waited futilely for the power of God to assert itself against the forces of night. One finds in *TBW* a keen awareness not only of man's power but also of his self-consciousness as an autonomous agent, with a corresponding and growing sensitivity to the impotence of the Divine. One hears here the echoes of Harvey Cox's thesis in *The Secular City*.

This thesis is put into the words of the ancient renegade, Varady, in the early part of *TBW*. Having immersed himself as a young man in the study not only of Talmud but of the esoteric mystical disciplines as well, he emerges to give a sermon before the entire town.

He emphasized the strength of man, who could bring the Messiah to obedience. He claimed that liberation from Time would be accomplished at the signal of man, and not of his Creator ... "each of you, the men and women who hear me, have God in his power, for each of you is capable of achieving a thing of which God is incapable! ... [man] will conquer heaven, earth, sickness, and death if only he will raze the walls that imprison the Will! And I who speak to you announce here solemnly my decision to deny death, to repel it, to ridicule it! He who stands before you will never die!" (p. 37)

### Man's Defiance

Varady was ostracized because of this blasphemy, and yet he kept on maintaining, "I remain a Jew. At no time did I deny my religion or my people. But I still hold, and more than ever, that man is more important than God; that it is in no wise a sin to aspire to immortality, even at the cost of deposing God" (p. 38). There is, of course, something grotesque, though appealing, in Varady's assertion of fealty to his religion when he recites these words, and yet the whole of our technopolitan society is oriented in this direction. Ultimately, of course, Varady dies, a suicide, after requesting that his death be kept secret. Even when man fails in his attempt to depose God, he is embarrassed to expose his ultimate powerlessness. This strange mixture of *hubris* or arrogance and pretense on the one side, and worthlessness and despair on the other, is characteristic of modern man.

It is this test of power between God and man that is the substance of the legend that closes *TBW*.

Legend tells us that one day man spoke to God in this wise:

"Let us change about. You be man and I will be God. For only one second."

God smiled gently and asked him, "Aren't you afraid?"

"No. And you?"

"Yes, I am," God said.

Nevertheless, He granted man's desire. He became a



man, and the man took His place and immediately availed himself of His omnipotence: he refused to reverse to his previous state. So neither God nor man was ever again what he seemed to be.

Years passed, centuries, perhaps eternities. And suddenly the drama quickened. The past for one, and the present for the other, were too heavy to be borne.

As the liberation of the one was bound to the liberation of the other, they renewed the ancient dialogue whose echoes come to us in the night, charged with hatred, remorse, and most of all, with infinite yearning.

In all his tension with God, Wiesel never falls into atheism. Despite — because of — Wiesel's debates with God, he remains essentially faithful. "Oh God, be with me when I have need of You, but above all do not leave me when I deny You" (p. 49): this is a beautiful prayer he learned as a child. Pedro, the humanist, does not like it. "Denial itself," he says, "is an offering to His grandeur" (p. 123). One is reminded of the writings of Rav Kook, who includes the polarity of faith/denial in his harmonistic vision. Although denial can only be ephemeral it is, dialectically, a value in the universe of faith. The very quest is an expression of a spiritual orientation. "The light of the life of the supernal radiance is encompassed in it."<sup>2</sup> The passionate concern with the Ultimate is in itself a religious act even if expressed as denial. Better deny angrily than ignore indifferently.

In a significant passage, Pedro says: "The dialogue — or ... duel ... between man and his God doesn't end in nothingness. Man may not have the last word, but he has the last cry. That moment marks the birth of art" (p. 103), and "friendship is an art." The author is affirming that if one cannot find meaning in suffering in a straightforward way, at least he can emerge with protest (outcry), with probing (the question), or a creative transmutation of his suffering into art, the most sublime expression of which is friendship.

### Suffering in Love

We have here a novel interpretation of a classical Jewish doctrine, the rabbinic concept of *yissurim shel ahavah*, suffering in love. This is usually taken to mean that God punishes man out of love in order to make him, the sufferer, more pure and just. The term is Talmudic, with origins in the metaphor of the father-son relationship in the Bible.

I see reflections of this theme in Wiesel's description of one of the *clochards*, Omar, who beats his wife every night at 2:00 A.M. because he loves her. When his friends make him stop, she comes begging them to desist — his love is all the greater when he is violent. "You understand:" says Pedro to Michael, "they love each other. She's screaming; therefore all is well" (p. 125).

Because Michael does not understand this kind of love, Pedro tells him the story of his own sad love affair. "You understand: I'm Spanish. We don't think about love without thinking about death: I loved and I wanted to die. Love and death: the two most simple things given to man. You asked

if I understand love: I understand it because I understand death too" (p. 126). These sentiments are Biblical as well as Spanish: "For love is strong as death," King Solomon writes, "jealousy is cruel as the grave" (Song of Songs 8:6).

But this is not the kind of "suffering in love" that Wiesel is happy with. Pedro reprimands Michael and tells him not to try to eliminate suffering by pushing it to its extreme, madness. He adds,

To say "I suffer, therefore I am" is to become the enemy of man. What you must say is "I suffer, therefore you are." Camus wrote somewhere that to protest against a universe of unhappiness you had to create happiness. That's an arrow pointing the way: it leads to another human being. And not via absurdity. (p. 127)

The concept of *yissurim shel ahavah*, suffering in love, is not to be understood as a theological form of masochism or sadism. It does not mean that God loves me and proves it by punishing me and making me suffer. Rather, the concept is now reinterpreted to mean: suffering which leads to the love of fellow man. This is a creative metamorphosis of suffering, one which is independent of the search for the focus of meaning in the experience of pain itself. Rather, it sidesteps all metaphysical or mystical probings into the nature of suffering by directing the sufferer to love others. This is a new, and yet very Hasidic, interpretation of the classical Jewish concept of *yissurim shel ahavah*.

### The Hiding of God's Face

The central theme of Wiesel's treatment of suffering and evil in the context of man's dialogue with God is the Biblical concept of *hester panim*, the hiding of the Face. In the Bible, God punishes man in two ways. The first is by turning His fury against him, seeking him out, and pursuing him to the end of the earth. The other way is less violent but far more devastating: God hides His face from him. He simply ignores him, and abandons him to the immutable, senseless, and meaningless laws of nature and history. When husband and wife "have words," they are far better off than when they do not talk to each other at all. The climax of that terrible list of cruel punishments to which Israel will be subjected in the case of their disobedience is capped by *hester panim*: "And I will surely hide My face from you" (Deut. 31:18). It is a concept rich not only in imagery but in consequence. In a state of *hester panim*, God and man both exist but they do not relate; silence replaces the tender words of love, the angry shouting, the whimpering, the pleading. This must not be confused with the *Deus Absconditus* of the mystics and the Gnostics. The Unknown God has never and will never reveal Himself. God who turns His face away is One who once smiled, and may yet be made to smile upon man. But while He is in hiding, man's life is void, empty, and he cowers in terror and confusion.

The Biblical concept appears in a different form and image in the Talmud and Kaballah. It is the concept of *shechinta be'galuta*, the *Shechinah* (Presence of God) in exile. In the Biblical concept, *hester panim* is a willful act

<sup>2</sup>See my *Faith and Doubt*, chap. 1, p. 36, n.17.



by God, in which He curbs His relationship with Israel and throws her into the realm of natural law and historical causation. The concept of *Shechinah* in exile adds one note: the *Shechinah* being coerced, as it were, into exile. Although this may sound mythological, it can be readily explained philosophically. In metaphysical terms, the existence of evil indicates a conflict between two doctrines, that of divine justice and that of divine power. The presence of evil means that if we retain the concept of absolute power, then we are forced to the conclusion that God is, as it were, malevolent. If, however, we insist upon the integrity of God's justice and love, we must accept some limitation on His omnipotence. When man is granted freedom by God, that grant necessarily implies a *tzimtzum* or self-diminution of divine omnipotence and, to that extent, God is "in exile."

In what is probably one of the key passages in the book, Michael hallucinates while he is standing in "prayer." He confesses to his childhood teacher, Kalman, "Master, I want finally to know God. I want to drag Him from His hiding place." He feels that he has discovered the secret: "God is in prison!" In classical Jewish terms, the *Shechinah* is in exile. Kalman's answer is significant:

"Yes, God is in prison. Man must free Him. That is the best guarded secret since the Creation." Michael wants to learn more about it: "Is that why so many good men go to prison?" "That's one of the reasons." Michael is still unsatisfied: "And thieves? Murderers? Traitors? Why do they go to prison? Do even *they* know God is locked up in there?" The master wags his yellow beard: "They know it. They go in because of that. To do away with Him."

The *Zaddik* (righteous man) seeks to release the *Shechinah* from His exile. And good men, Wiesel tells us, go to prison in order to emancipate God. We must somehow beg, cajole, plead, deceive, coerce God into turning His face back to us, into redemption from His exile in cosmic silence.

This theme is also reflected in the epilogue to the book, the "legend" about God and man exchanging places. Man's self-apotheosis is accompanied by God's imprisonment. The legend is a way of protesting man's excessive power and God's lack of it. The ceding of freedom and power by God to man is what makes man human — and gives him the opportunity to be cruelly inhuman. God is now "in exile" and man, having abused his freedom, has transformed himself into a demonic god. Pedro tells Michael: "Man is God's strength. Also His weakness" (p. 13).

## The Spectator

We are at the point where the two levels of Wiesel's discourse, the *peshat* and *derash* of the book, begin to converge. After he has crossed the border, Michael discovers what it is that really pulled him back to his home town: his need to confront the spectator who looked, with a stony glaze, at the terrible scene of the roundup and deportation of the Jews, and did not utter a word. Michael wants to humiliate him, showing him neither love nor hatred, but only contempt. In his imagination, Michael questions Pedro:

Do you understand that I need to understand? To understand the others — the Other — those who watched us depart for the unknown; those who observed us, without emotion, while we became objects — living sticks of wood — and carefully numbered victims? (p. 159)

Wiesel is confronting not only the human spectator but also the divine spectator — who looked but said not one word. Both levels, the symbol and the interpretation, are revealed by the writing of "the Other" with a capital O.

Contrasting the spectator to the executioner, Michael says:

But this is not true of that Other. The spectator is entirely beyond us. He sees without being seen. He is there but unnoticed ... He says neither yes nor no, and not even maybe. He says nothing. He is there, but he acts as if he were not. Worse: He acts as if the rest of us were not. (pp. 161-162).

Here too "the Other" is spelled with a capital O, offering an excellent example of the state of *hester panim*. It is to understand the human him and the divine Him, and to arouse both him and Him, that Michael returns — and goes to prison, where he is subjected to "prayer" in the "temple."

Michael berates the Hungarian spectator, he pours out his contempt for him (pp. 170ff). "The spectator reduces himself to an ... 'it.'" And indeed, in a state of *hester panim*, when God hides His face, God and man become "it," instead of "thou," to each other.

## Responses to Suffering

In taking vengeance upon the human spectator, Michael is captured by the police, tortured, and ultimately thrown into prison. It is in his cell that the story reaches both its dramatic and ideational climax. He has three cellmates: Menachem, the young man who was not punctiliously observant but who, when he heard from his child the lies about Judaism taught him by his Communist teachers, returned fully to piety and observance; the psychotic Impatient One who attacks the others because he suspects they are hiding the letter for which he is waiting; and the Silent One, who is catatonic and closed off from all human contact. We have here a typology of three kinds of human responses to suffering. The lunatic Impatient One represents those who expect the secrets of the universe — what the Talmud calls the inscrutable *kavshei de'rahamana* — to be presented to them concisely in a brief letter. Their desire for total explanation, given simply and in plain language, leads them to lose sight of all moral values.

Far more interesting are the other two prisoners who symbolize two different aspects of God as He is perceived by man. The Silent One is God whose face is hidden, God in *hester panim*, who has cut off the dialogue. As for Menachem, he represents the living God of Jewish history. It is ultimately Menachem — "the consoler," in Hebrew — who teaches Michael how to live, who shows him what he is looking for.

It is Menachem who salvages Michael's sanity in the cell. He gives him "an arm to lean on," and is thus the symbol



of his consolation. When Menachem was led out of the cell by the jailors, Michael saw only his back. The particular image has no special relevance in the context of the story, if read according to *peshat*, its plain meaning. It has enormous significance, however, if Menachem is seen as a symbol of God. Recall that when Moses asked to see the glory of God, he was told, "Thou shalt see My back; but My face shall not be seen" (Exodus 33:20, 23). When Menachem, the human symbol of the Biblical God, leaves, Michael breaks out into uncontrolled sobbing for the first time; Menachem had been pleading with him earlier to cry as the only response of which man is capable in the face of God's inscrutability. It is Menachem alone who consoles him, not the Impatient One — the mad, demonic, gnostic symbol; or the Silent One — maddeningly wordless, deistic, agnostic. Menachem represents the God of sympathy and faith and compassion.

### Man's Liberation of Man

After the Impatient One is also removed from the cell, Michael responds to the imaginary advice of Pedro and undertakes to liberate the Silent One from his silence. The book draws to its climactic conclusion with the effort by Michael to engage the Silent One in human dialogue: "If two questions stand face to face ... it's at least a victory" (p. 187). Michael makes an enormous effort, and at last succeeds in getting the Silent One to break out of his terrible solitude and begin to relate. The dialogue is restored. Good men, as the author told us in the beginning of the book, go to prison to liberate God. If I had to give a subtitle to this book, it would be the Aramaic *itaruta di-le'tata* "the arousal from below," the term used by the Zohar in conjunction with its polar opposite, *itaruta di-le'ela*, "the arousal from above," as one of the two meanings of initiating or restoring the divine-human dialogue.

The author rejects Stoic indifferentism. He tells us that apathy toward man (and, on the theological level, toward God) is dehumanizing. In the monologue at the very end — and one cannot tell if this is Michael speaking to the Silent One, or the voice of Pedro coming to Michael, or both — we read: "One day the ice will break and you'll begin to smile: for me that will be a proof of our strength, of our compact" (p. 188). In Biblical terminology, the opposite of *hester panim*, the hiding of the Face, is *nesiat panim*, the raising of the Face, or *he'arat panim*, the illumination of the Face, when the King smiles benignly at His subjects. In order to initiate the dialogue, limitations must be acknowledged, in both the human-to-human and the human-divine level: "Even God admits His weakness before the image He

has created." But when it begins, the ice melts and consolation is at hand.

The story concludes with night receding as Michael comes to the end of his strength. The last sentence is quite enigmatic: "The other bore the Biblical name of Eliezer, which means *God has granted my prayer*." This "other" is probably the Silent One, symbol of God in hiding, who has now come out of his hiding and granted Michael's prayer. It is intriguing, too, to note that Wiesel's Hebrew name is Eliezer. The *Shechinah* is released from its exile, the dialogue begins anew. God is no longer silent. And here we must note one last reference in the traditional sources for the name "Michael." The Midrash (Numbers R.2) tells us: "Why was his name called Michael? Because when Israel crossed the Red Sea, Moses began to sing, and said, 'Who is like unto Thee amongst the gods, O Lord?' There is none like God — *Ein Ka-El*, hence: Michael." The name *Michael* means, in Hebrew, "Who is like unto God?" But we recall too that trenchant and pathos-laden comment of the Rabbis who added one letter to *ba-elim*, "amongst the gods," and made it read *ba-ilmim*, "Who is like unto Thee amongst the silent ones, O Lord?" (*Gittin* 56b). Michael's struggle is not only a search for God, but an attempt to wrest Him out of His silence, to pull Him out of His self-imposed prison. And now, there is Eliezer: God helps, God hears prayers, He is liberated from His incarceration in a dungeon where man stands in a quite different kind of "prayer."

In that awesome legend at the end of the book, after centuries and eternities of mutual antagonism by the God trapped in the finitude of His own creation, and man who had arrogated to himself the quest for omnipotence, the drama begins to quicken and the ancient dialogue is renewed with infinite yearning. There is, after all, the possibility that the hiding of the Face will come to an end, that the *Shechinah* will emerge from its exile, that man will return to a sense of his own limitations and a salvaging of his own humanity. This humanity can be rescued only when man seeks to engage the other — and the Other — in dialogue, in relatedness, in love. It is a vision of a time when neither God nor man will any longer be merely a spectator. *Yisa Hashem panav eilakhah ve-yasem lekhhah shalom*. "The Lord will turn His face unto you and grant you peace" (Nu. 6:26).

Michael recalls what Kalman once told him:

Sometimes it happens that we travel for a long time without knowing that we have made the long journey solely to pronounce a certain word, a certain phrase, in a certain place. The meeting of the place and the word is a rare accomplishment, on the scale of humanity. (p. 118)

Elie Wiesel has spoken his word, in this place, at this time. It is a rare accomplishment, on the scale of humanity.