

# Elie Wiesel Bearing Witness

## Reflection Activity



Based on the words of Elie Wiesel, author, teacher, survivor of the Holocaust and voice for humanity, at his speech before the United Nations. This reflection activity encourages exploration of individual elements of the lessons of memory as passed down by one of the masters of Jewish history who witnessed firsthand the horrors and the hope of Jewish life in a modern world.

The man who once stood before nations felt deeply privileged. A teacher and writer, he spoke and wrote as a witness to a crime committed in the heart of European Christendom and civilization by a brutal dictatorial regime - a crime of unprecedented cruelty in which all segments of government participated

When speaking about that era of darkness, the witness encounters difficulties. His words became obstacles rather than vehicles; he wrote not with words but against words.

There are no words to describe what the victims felt when death was the norm and life a miracle. **Still, whether you know it or not, his memory is part of yours.**

As a young adolescent, he saw what no human being should have to see: the triumph of political fanaticism and ideological hatred for those who were different. Multitudes of human beings humiliated, isolated, tormented, tortured, and murdered.

Those who committed these crimes were not vulgar underworld thugs but men with high government, academic, industrial, and medical positions in Germany. The question remains open: **In those dark years, what motivated so many brilliant and committed public servants to invent such horrors?**

Let me evoke those times: Babies used as target practice by SS men... Adolescents condemned never to grow old... Parents watching their children thrown into burning pits... Immense solitude engulfing an entire people... Infinite despair haunting our days and our dreams even many years later...

**When did what we so poorly call the Holocaust begin?** In 1938, during Kristallnacht? In 1939 perhaps, when a German ship, the St. Louis, with more than a thousand German Jewish refugees aboard, was turned back from America's shores? Or was it when the first massacres occurred in Babi Yar?

**What was Auschwitz: an end or a beginning, an apocalyptic consequence of centuries-old bigotry and hatred, or was it the final convulsion of demonic forces in human nature?**

**Not all victims were Jewish, but all Jews were victims.** For the first time in recorded history to be Jewish became a crime. Their birth became their death sentence. Correction: Jewish children were condemned to die even before they were born.

**What the enemy sought to attain was to put an end to Jewish history; what he wanted was a new world implacably, irrevocably devoid of Jews.** Hence Auschwitz, Ponar, Treblinka, Belzec, Chelmno and Sobibor: dark factories of death erected for the Final Solution. Killers came there to kill and victims to die.

An executioner's ideal of a kingdom of absolute evil and malediction with its princes and beggars, philosophers and theologians, politicians and artists, a place where to lose a piece of bread meant losing life, and a smile from a friend another day of promise.

**How was such calculated evil, such bottomless and pointless cruelty possible?** Had Creation gone mad? Had God covered His face? But what about man? How could intelligent, educated or simple law-abiding citizens fire machine guns at hundreds of children and their parents, and in the evening enjoy a cadence by Schiller, a partita by Bach?

**That tremendous catastrophe which has traumatized history has forever changed man's perception of responsibility toward other human beings.**

The sad, terrible fact is that had the Western nations intervened when Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia and Austria; had America accepted more refugees from Europe; had Britain allowed more Jews to return to their ancestral land; had the Allies bombed the railways leading to Birkenau, our tragedy might have been avoided, its scope surely diminished.

**This shameful indifference we must remember,** just as we must remember to thank the few heroic individuals who, like Raoul Wallenberg, risked their lives to save Jews.

We shall always remember the armies that liberated Europe and the soldiers who liberated the death-camps, the Americans in Buchenwald, the Russians in Auschwitz and the British in Belsen. But **for many victims they all came too late.** That we must also remember.

When the American Third Army liberated Buchenwald, there was no joy in our heart: only pain. **We did not sing, we did not celebrate. We had just enough strength to recite the Kaddish.**

And now, years later, **you who represent the entire world community, listen to the words of the witness.** Like Jeremiah and Job, we could have cried and cursed the days dominated by injustice and violence.

**We could have chosen vengeance. We did not. We could have chosen hate. We did not.**

**The Jewish witness speaks of his people's suffering as a warning. He sounds the alarm so as to prevent these things being done.** He knows that for the dead it is too late; for them, abandoned by God and betrayed by humanity, victory came much too late.

**But it is not too late for today's children, ours and yours. It is for their sake alone that we bear witness.** It is for their sake that we are duty-bound to denounce anti-Semitism, racism, and religious or ethnic hatred.

**Those who today preach and practice the cult of death, those who use suicide terrorism, the scourge of this new century, must be tried and condemned for crimes against humanity.**

Suffering confers no privileges; it is what one does with suffering that matters. **Yes, the past is in the present, but the future is still in our hands.**

Those who survived Auschwitz advocate hope, not despair; generosity, not rancor or bitterness; gratitude, not violence. **We must be engaged, we must reject indifference as an option. Indifference always helps the aggressor, never his victims.**

**And what is memory if not a noble and necessary response to and against indifference?**

But ...will the world ever learn?

## **PROGRAM GOALS:**

- To break down a larger text into elements for more precise review and understanding.
- To extract particular messages from the words of a witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust.
- To consider the intricacies and detail included.
- To learn of the specificity of the Holocaust as a systematic campaign for extermination of the Jews as a result of socially-accepted ideologies of hatred and demonization.
- To explore the possible reactions of the learners.
- To understand the implications of the Holocaust on our and future generations.

## **TARGET AGES:**

14 and up

This activity can be run with large or small groups - for Yom HaShoah or any time of year. Discussion can be as long as time allows. Can be followed by one of our activities.

## **TIME INVOLVED:**

40 minutes

## **RESOURCES FOR EDUCATOR PREPARATION /BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE**

[https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/memory\\_leading\\_memory\\_lessons\\_i\\_learned\\_from\\_elie\\_wiesel/](https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/memory_leading_memory_lessons_i_learned_from_elie_wiesel/)

[https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/memory\\_of\\_sighet\\_the\\_legacy\\_of\\_elie\\_wiesel/](https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/memory_of_sighet_the_legacy_of_elie_wiesel/)

[https://israelforever.org/blog/great\\_leaders\\_speak\\_with\\_courage\\_tribute\\_to\\_elie\\_wiesel/](https://israelforever.org/blog/great_leaders_speak_with_courage_tribute_to_elie_wiesel/)

[https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/teaching\\_our\\_children\\_pain\\_of\\_memory/](https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/teaching_our_children_pain_of_memory/)

[https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/what\\_really\\_makes\\_us\\_free\\_by\\_elie\\_wiesel/](https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/what_really_makes_us_free_by_elie_wiesel/)

## **SUPPLIES NEEDED:**

- Projector for slideshow or printed copies of the quote graphics
- Pens
- Paper

## ACTIVITY INTRODUCTION

Begin talking about the importance of Holocaust memory - especially today when Jewhatred and Holocaust denial are rising everywhere in the world. What does it mean to bear witness, to be a witness, and why is it so important for us to do this in particular for the Holocaust? Emphasize how the Holocaust is a unique event in history - not because of the scale of victims but because of the systematic, legal process and social acceptance of an ideology based on hatred, isolation and murder of an entire group of people. Explain who was Elie Wiesel and mention a few things about him and his experience based on your background reading. As a teacher, author, Torah scholar, and human rights advocate, he spent his life writing and speaking about why we should remember and the lessons of the Holocaust that fall on the shoulders of each next generation.

## WAYS TO USE THIS RESOURCE:

Show the slideshow and read each text aloud. You can also ask different students to read a single line themselves. Give the students time to internalize each sentence and image before moving on.

Use the reflection questions below for a group discussion.

You can also print and hand out the images or just the quotes and give one quote to a pair/group (depending on the number of students). Use the discussion questions below as conversation starters that can open up into other discussions of interest.

## SLIDESHOW

[https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/e/2PACX-1vRv\\_57CaCcY4JKnmQvxggRw5pO2pO5Uu6La5YGZZ0YNwRpcuZTPTPA06r1cZUbXYVs0TESQ2VcQmh8e/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=30000](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/e/2PACX-1vRv_57CaCcY4JKnmQvxggRw5pO2pO5Uu6La5YGZZ0YNwRpcuZTPTPA06r1cZUbXYVs0TESQ2VcQmh8e/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=30000)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you know about Elie Wiesel?
- How do you feel as you hear his words?
- What do you think he felt standing in front of the United Nations and making this speech?
- What was the most powerful sentence that you remember from his speech?
- Do you think others should hear this speech? Why or why not?
- Elie Wiesel was a Torah scholar among other things. How do you feel his love for Judaism and his strong Jewish identity influenced his purpose in life after surviving the Holocaust?
- What do you interpret as a crucial lesson Elie Wiesel is sharing?
- What is a lesson you will share to join Elie Wiesel in bearing witness?

## TALKING POINTS:

1. Your personal thoughts and feelings about this quote.
2. The importance of being a witness and what that means in contemporary society.
3. What can be done to educate others about bearing witness.

## CONCLUSION/TIPS FOR EVALUATION OF ACTIVITY SUCCESS

Ask students to say something about their thoughts and feelings about their quote. Did they learn something new? If so what? Do they know what it means to bear witness?

## NOTES

It is important to make questions age appropriate and to be aware of any students who have survivors in their families (to have extra sensitivity).

**Our reflection programs are uniquely designed to ensure a powerful and meaningful experience for everyone. They are fitting for all ages and can be altered to suit the needs of any audience or time frame. They also make for wonderful private reading for Yom HaShoah or any Holocaust memorial learning opportunity. Some selections can also be shared through artistic representation.**

### HOW TO UTILIZE THIS PROGRAM:

- **Narrow down selections based on your desired program length**
- **Assign readings. During the ceremony, the MC should call up each reader by name.**
- **Prepare table and candles**
- **Ensure set up of audio/visual logistics for sharing of the accompanying presentation that runs simultaneous as a background to the ceremony**

**For more ideas or information on how you can personalize the memorial for your community, please contact us at [info@israel forever.org](mailto:info@israel forever.org)**

## About Links in the Chain

Links in the Chain™ is an educational initiative for reflective encounters with the Holocaust. An initiative of long-time Holocaust educator Elana Heideman, every Links in the Chain educational endeavor shares an emphasis on Jewish identity, tradition, family and community while encouraging critical thinking skills on the forces that influence the growth of Antisemitism, implementation of Nazi ideology, causes of local collaboration and the overwhelming indifference of the world which allowed the Holocaust to take place. For more information, contact [elanayael@israel forever.org](mailto:elanayael@israel forever.org)

## ABOUT THE ISRAEL FOREVER FOUNDATION

The Israel Forever Foundation is an Israel Engagement Organization that develops and promotes experiential learning resources that celebrate and strengthen the personal connection to Israel as an integral part of Jewish life and identity. [israel forever.org](http://israel forever.org)

**Your feedback matters as we aim to provide the best resources possible for your experiential and reflective learning experience. Please let us know if you use our program, and consider taking a minute to fill out our [evaluation form](#).**

And please contact us for more information or for unique resources for your learning audience.