

Transcending the Literary: Aggadic Elements in Elie Wiesel's Tales

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Elie Wiesel has affirmed that the Chasidic tales of the world in which he grew up have always found their way into his own tales (*Somewhere* 205). If, as he suggests, these stories form the contexts for his storytelling, the tales have their own Jewish contexts in the aggadic, midrashic, and kabbalistic traditions, which form part of the oral Torah. Those traditions, too, provide the Jewish contexts for Wiesel's storytelling; they, too, are among the echoes that can be heard throughout his tales. "Novelists ought not to speak," says Wiesel; "Their mission consists in listening to other voices" ("Fiery" 249). Images and motifs from Midrash, Kabbalah, and Aggadah hover between the words and float in the margins of every line written by this Jew who continues to identify himself as a Chasid. Indeed, Wiesel is above all a *Jewish* writer. To approach him as anything else would amount to more than failing to understand him: it would be a betrayal of the murdered Jews whose muted outcry also abides between the words and in the margins of his every line.

The point is not only that certain tales from the aggadic tradition find their way into Wiesel's stories; certain figures and motifs from that tradition show up as well. His allusions to Abraham, Moses, and

Rabbi Akiba—indeed, his entire volumes of *Messengers of God* (1976), *Five Biblical Portraits* (1981), and *Sages and Dreamers* (1991)—are themselves vessels of Aggadah. But before examining some of the ways in which Wiesel draws the aggadic tradition into his tales, one should briefly consider the significance of storytelling in the Jewish tradition. In that way one may acquire a better sense of the Jewish-ness of this Jewish storyteller.

I. AGGADAH IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

Jewish tradition teaches that the Torah is the blueprint of all creation: four times, it is written in the Midrash, the Holy One looked into the Torah before beginning His work of creation (*Bereshit Rabbah* 1:1).¹ Unlike a blueprint, however, the Torah is itself the *stuff* of creation. This teaching from the Midrash is central to the ancient teachings found, for example, in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Book of Creation*, where it is said that Hashem “created His universe with three books [*sefarim*]: with text [*sefer*], with numbering [*sefar*], and with storytelling [*sipur*]” (1:1). The People of the Book—the People of the *Sefer*—are the people of the tale, i.e., the People of the Covenant of Torah. For, as seen in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, in the beginning was the tale—the *sipur*—and the tale is made of Torah, as much as the Torah is made of the tale. Thus, says Wiesel, “the tale of the Law is as important as the Law. And it is more profound than the commentaries” (*Souls* 187)—where the tale of the Law is the tale of the Torah, that is, the tale in the Torah and the Torah in the tale. Thus, the Torah includes the tale of the Torah in the Torah itself, in the Book of Deuteronomy: the teaching is not complete without the tale of the teaching. Because Moses relates the tale of the Torah to the Israelites, they are able to bear the Torah into the land. It is a tale, moreover, not just for Jews but for all nations. Hence, according to the Midrash, Moses related the tale of the Torah not only in the holy tongue but also in the seventy languages of the nations (*Tanchuma De-varim* 2). This is what Jews are chosen for: to tell the nations the tale of

¹References to *Bereshit Rabbah* and other sacred texts in the Jewish tradition will be cited parenthetically, as above.

the Torah—that is the light unto the nations: the *tale*.

Significantly, the verb *sipur* means not just to “tell a tale” but also to “relate a tale.” It is precisely through relating a tale to another human being that one enters more profoundly into a relation with another person. In this process the soul is transmitted from one person to another; life is transmitted from God to humanity. Just as the human soul is made of Torah, as it is written,² so is it made of tales: when God breathed the breath of life into Adam, He breathed tales into him. Recall in this connection the teaching from the *Zohar*, where it is written that there are three kinds of speech: speaking, saying, and relating (I, 234a). Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, explains: “Speaking and saying come from the surface, not from the depth of the soul. The mouth can sometimes speak what the heart does not feel. Even what the *heart* says can be at odds with what the man truly wills in his soul. . . . But ‘relating’ comes from the depths of a man’s being” (74). Relating a tale is a calling of deep unto deep. To transmit a tale is to transmit a portion of one’s soul. To receive a tale, as Wiesel has said, is “to become part of the tale” (“Sacred” 187), which happens when one transmits the tale in turn: to receive a tale is to become a storyteller.

Thus in his comments on the depths of relating, Rabbi Schneerson goes on to note a teaching from the *Sifre* on Deuteronomy 11:22: “You wish to recognize the One who spoke and brought the world into being? Learn Aggadah, for in Aggadah you will find God” (74-75). Why? Because, according to the fourteenth-century sage Rabbi Yitzchak Abohav, Aggadah is concerned with

the description of the true nature of the universe and the ideals toward which one should strive. It speaks allusively of mysteries and mysticism. It speaks of ethics and character and human nature. It speaks of purification of the body and sublimation of the soul. These are absolute truths. (246)

And where lies the absolute truth? In the task of creating a dwelling

place—for God and humanity. It is not for nothing, therefore, that Wiesel keeps a picture of his home in Sighet, Romania, over the desk where he pens his tales. Before him stands the vanquished kingdom, where he remains a child who loves to listen (*Somewhere* 205)—after the Nazis’ radical assault on the child.

This leads to a further point about storytelling in the Jewish tradition, particularly in the contexts of Wiesel’s tales concerning the significance of the child. In the *Shoah*, children were among the first to be targeted for extermination, not only in order to annihilate the Jewish future that they represented but also to destroy the Jewish tradition that they sustained: it is they to whom one first tells tales. Says Wiesel, “It was as though the Nazi killers knew precisely what children represent to us. According to our tradition, the entire world subsists thanks to them” (*Jew* 178–79). To be sure, many texts from the aggadic tradition attest to the importance of the child both to the life of tradition and to the Holy One Himself, whose presence is revealed through tradition. In the Midrash, for example, it is written,

Rabbi Yehudah said: Come and see how beloved are the children by the Holy One, blessed be He. The Sanhedrin were exiled but the *Shekhinah* did not go into exile with them. When, however, the children were exiled, the *Shekhinah* went into exile with them. (*Eichah Rabbah* 1:6:33)

One can see that the murder of the child is central to the Nazi assault on the Holy One: in the death of the child one also sees Him in the throes of death.

Wiesel drives home this point with devastating pathos in *Night* (1960), where the reader collides with one of the most dreadful of all the memories that haunt this Jewish storyteller: the hanging of a child. In the assembly of prisoners forced to witness the hanging, the young Eliezer hears a Jew next to him asking, “‘Where is God? Where is He now?’” And from within Eliezer’s soul comes the terrifying reply: “‘Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows’” (71). Then, there is Issachar’s wife, the woman in Wiesel’s *A Jew Today*

(1978), who sees dead children everywhere. “They are God’s memory,” she repeats over and over (81). That is to say, they are God’s memory of people as well as their memory of God. And only tales lead back to the source of memory itself. Wiesel is a teller of tales not because of any literary aspiration or even any artistic endeavor. In his own words, he tells tales “in order not to go mad. Or, on the contrary, to touch the bottom of madness” (*From* 13). And what lies at the bottom of madness? The *alef* that precedes the *beit* of *bereshit*, the word with which the Torah and all its tales begin, the *alef* that is silent or absent or present as silence, the *alef* that harbors the secret of the Divine Name itself, which is the memory of God.

II. AGGADIC ELEMENTS IN WIESEL’S TALES

How, then, are Wiesel’s tales situated in these contexts of Jewish storytelling? Of all the survivors to write their tales in response to the *Shoah*, Wiesel draws most upon the distinctively Jewish tradition of storytelling. Not only does he weave elements and motifs of Midrash and Aggadah into his own tales, but he has written his own versions of and commentaries on Jewish tales themselves. His retelling of the story of the Golem in *Golem* (1983) is a good example. It is based on a legend about the great sixteenth-century mystic Rabbi Yehudah Loeve, the Maharal of Prague. At a time when the Jewish community came under the threat of danger, he created a humanoid being, a Golem, to protect the Jews of Prague. It is said that somewhere in Prague, hidden away in an attic, the Golem still sleeps. If so, he slept through the slaughter of the Jews of Prague. Or had people simply forgotten the esoteric learning that would have brought him to life?

Another tale from the aggadic tradition that appears among Wiesel’s works is more than a tale or a legend—it is the Haggadah, a prayer in the form of a tale that is told and retold at the Passover Seder. In his commentary on the Haggadah Wiesel writes, “To listen to a story is no less important than to tell it. Sometimes it is even more important” (*Passover* 67). To listen to this liturgical tale of liberation is especially important in the post-Holocaust era, as Jews face new contexts for returning from

exile to the Holy Land. If the Nazis' war against Jews was a war against memory, as Wiesel maintains (*Evil* 155), then it was a war against Jewish memory of Jewish teaching and tradition and against Jews' memory of who they are. In the post-Holocaust era, more than ever, listening to the tale of the Haggadah is part of remembering who Jews are.

Wiesel's engagement with the Haggadah extends into his fiction, particularly his novel *The Fifth Son* (1985). In the Haggadah there are four sons who ask four questions. The wise son asks, "What are all these testimonies, laws, and rulings that Hashem our God commanded you?" The wicked son asks, "What is the purpose of all this to you?" The simple son asks, "What is this?" But the fourth son does not even know how to ask a question. One's capacity for returning from death to life rests upon one's ability to remember the testimonies, laws, and rulings given by God. It also rests upon the ability to ask the question—not for the sake of oneself, as the wicked son's question implies, but for the sake of God and humanity. As for the son who did not know how to ask, Wiesel notes that Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev identified with him, as he would cry out to God, demanding an explanation for the suffering of the Jews (*Fifth* 35). Perhaps that silenced outcry is what belongs to the fifth son. Wiesel also points out that Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch read the four sons as four successive generations (34). Perhaps the fifth son signifies the generation that was murdered.

Just as the aggadic tales assume the form of prayer, so do Wiesel's tales often appear in the form of prayers. *The Town Beyond the Wall* (1964), for instance, is divided into prayers, not chapters. In it Michael endures the torture of standing at a wall, just as Jews stand at the Western Wall to pray, in order to save the life of his friend Pedro. The town beyond the wall is Michael's hometown beyond the Iron Curtain, where, with Pedro's help, he returns to confront the Indifferent One, who stood by as Jews were sent to murder camps. The town beyond the Western Wall is the heavenly Jerusalem where God dwells, awaiting the hour when men shall make it possible for Him to enter the earthly Jerusalem. (Can He be the Indifferent One?) In both cases "God is imprisoned," as Michael says (10).

To explain the nature of God's imprisonment, Wiesel ends the novel with a tale from Jewish folklore. According to the story, a man once proposed to God that, in order to understand each other better, he and God should trade places, just for a second. God agreed, and in an instant the two exchanged places. But when it came time to trade back, the man, who was now God and therefore all-powerful, refused. Since that terrifying moment, many years, perhaps centuries, have passed. Humanity's past and God's present have become too much for either of them to bear. The liberation of one is now tied to the liberation of the other. Now, in the post-Holocaust era their ancient dialogue has been renewed, charged with despair and dizziness, with anger and frustration, and above all with infinite longing.

If, for Wiesel, telling tales is akin to praying, then as he tells his tales, he faces Jerusalem—the town beyond the wall. In Jerusalem stands the gate of prayer, which for the Jewish storyteller is the gate of tales. Nowhere is this more evident than in *A Beggar in Jerusalem* (1970), a tale set in the time of the Six-Day War. There, the Chasid Wiesel recalls a remark from the Storyteller of Chasidism, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who said that “no matter where he walked, his steps turned toward Jerusalem” (12). So it is with Wiesel: no matter what tale he relates, his words turn toward Jerusalem, for Jerusalem represents precisely what the Nazis attempted to destroy at Auschwitz—the commanding voice of the Divine Presence as He dwells in the world. Just as the *Shekhinah* or Divine Presence is identified with Jerusalem, so is she associated with the community of Israel (*Zohar* II, 98a); the assault on the body of Israel, then, entails an assault on the *Shekhinah* and His dwelling place, Jerusalem.

These are the aggadic teachings one must keep in mind when Wiesel writes,

Jerusalem: the face visible yet hidden, the sap and the blood of all that makes us live or renounce life. The spark flashing in the darkness. . . . A name, a secret. For the exiled, a prayer. For all others, a promise. . . . Jerusalem: the city which miraculously transforms man into pilgrim; no one can enter it and go away unchanged.

(*Beggar* 11)

As the site where the Temple stood, Jerusalem signifies the presence of Torah in the world, and Torah signifies sanctity in the world. It is no accident that Wiesel compares the annihilation of the Jews in the Holocaust to the burning of the Temple (*Ani* 27). At Auschwitz the Temple was itself placed upon the altar.

Insisting upon the sanctity of every human being as well as the connectedness of each to all others, Jewish teaching maintains that every human being is tied to the holiness of the Holy City.³ This association between Jerusalem and all of humanity Wiesel articulates in *A Beggar in Jerusalem* by relating a tale from Nachman of Breslov, a story of a city that contains all cities. In that city there is a street that contains all streets, and on that street stands a house that contains all houses. Inside the house is a room that contains all rooms, and inside the room sits a man who contains all men. And that man is laughing (30). Why laughing? Because, says Wiesel, “revolt is not a solution, neither is submission. Remains laughter, metaphysical laughter” (*Souls* 199). What is metaphysical laughter? It is laughter couched in the name of Isaac, who, like the children of Israel, was laid upon an altar. Thus, the God of Isaac is known as the fear of Isaac.⁴ That fear is transmitted in Wiesel’s tales.

The aim of his storytelling, however, is not to paralyze readers with fear but to enable them to live—by transforming them into messengers, as happens in Wiesel’s novel *The Oath* (1973). In this tale of the destruction of a Jewish community an old man saves a young man bent on suicide by relating to him a tale and thus turning him into a messenger: “I’ll transmit my experience to him and he, in turn, will be compelled to do the same. He in turn will become a messenger. And once a messenger, he has no alternative. He must stay alive until he has transmitted his message” (42). And so Wiesel transforms all into messengers, that is, into storytellers. That, indeed, is the task of every human being: to become a storyteller, a witness, “a messenger, a link between God and man, between man and man” (“Use” 82). That link

³See, for example, *Tanna debe Eliyyahu* (411).

is the portion of the Messiah in every human being.⁵ This teaching from the Aggadah is explicitly stated in *The Oath*: “The Messiah. We seek him, we pursue him. We think he is in heaven; we don’t know that he likes to come down as a child. And yet, every man’s childhood is messianic in essence. Except that today it has become a game to kill childhood” (132). From a Jewish standpoint, to tell tales is to affirm what Wiesel affirms in the title of one of his books, as taken from *Ani maamin*: “I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah; even if he may tarry, no matter what, I shall await his coming every day.”

Sometimes this anticipation is silent, as in *The Testament* (1981), a novel about Soviet persecution of the Russian Jewish poet Paltiel Kossover. In order to protect his father’s words Paltiel’s son Grisha assumes a muteness that shouts louder than any word. If for his father silence was a prison, for Grisha silence was a sanctuary over which he kept a most stern vigil: in order to protect his father’s words when the KGB wants him to “talk,” Grisha bites off his own tongue (304–05). Thus, he becomes a poet, “not like his father. In place of his father” (17). In so doing, he also becomes, like Wiesel, a messenger in the aggadic tradition. Grisha’s father, Paltiel, notes that, according to Aggadah, as long as King David was “composing his Psalms,” “the Angel of Death could not approach him” (30).⁶ Weaving his tales and composing his psalms, Wiesel shows how to stave off the Angel of Death, who ruled over the Kingdom of Night and who lurks in the twilight of the modern age.

Thus, one abides in the twilight that Wiesel explores in his novel by that name. *Twilight* (1988) is about a Holocaust survivor and scholar of Jewish mysticism named Raphael and his encounters at a sanatorium that specializes in patients who take themselves to be biblical characters. Here, too, is a teaching concerning the Angel of Death, again from Nachman of Breslov. When one dies, the legend teaches, one lies in the grave and waits for the Angel of Death, who comes to bring one into the presence of the Holy One. There is, of course, a catch: in order to

⁵Yitzchak Ginsburgh elaborates on this point (7).

draw nigh unto the Divine Presence, one must correctly answer a certain question. The question is the same for all, but for each the answer is different. And so the Angel poses the fearsome question: “What is your name?”⁷ Thus, among the patients whom Raphael meets is “the dead man,” who is afraid that when the Angel of Death approaches him to ask him his name, he won’t remember (141). He is afraid because to know one’s name is to know the names of one’s mother and father as well as the traditions those names bear. It means knowing that one is called by name for a mission and answering to that call. By asking one’s name, the Angel tries to establish something about one’s being that is intimately tied to one’s doing: knowing one’s name means knowing what must be done.

Here, too, is a midrashic connection in *Twilight*. In the sanatorium Raphael also meets Cain, the one of whom God asked, “Where is your brother?” (Gen. 4:9) and “What have you done?” (Gen. 4:10). In murdering his brother, Cain murdered his own name and with it the Holy Name. Echoing the Midrash, Cain says to Raphael, “When I killed my brother, it was really Him I wanted to kill. And He knows it. Any fool knows that whoever kills, kills God” (*Twilight* 58).⁸ Perhaps that is why the patient who takes himself to be God asks Raphael to weep for him (213). Perhaps there lies the immortality of the Immortal One: He can be murdered a million—even six million—times over. If children are God’s memory, as Issachar’s wife maintains (*Wiesel Jew* 81), perhaps that is what must be remembered.

Memory, in fact, is the defining theme of Wiesel’s next novel, *The Forgotten* (1992). It is about a Holocaust survivor named Elhanan, who in the throes of Alzheimer’s Disease must transmit his memory to his child Malkiel before it escapes him. Wiesel writes, “It is memory that connects [a Jew] to Abraham, Moses, and Rabbi Akiba” (71), a connection Wiesel maintains by weaving Midrash and Aggadah—the tales of Abraham, Moses, and Rabbi Akiba—into his own tales. In this novel he compares Elhanan’s effort to remember to a scribe copying Torah (159). Just so, Wiesel himself struggles to remember, a word at a time,

⁷See *Tikkun* by Nachman of Breslov (102).

by drawing the tales that are themselves Torah into his own tales. When Elhanan's son Malkiel asks the caretaker, Ephraim, what he takes care of, Ephraim answers, "What people throw away, what history rejects, what memory denies. The smile of a starving child, the tears of its dying mother, the silent prayers of the condemned man and the cries of his friend. I gather them up and preserve them" (192). Similarly, Wiesel preserves them by gathering up the aggadic memory of Abraham, Moses, and Rabbi Akiba into this memory to preserve what Jews must not forget, if they are to remain Jews, especially in the post-Holocaust era: not only the cries of murdered Jews but the tales of murdered tradition.

If the Jews fall under a judgment after Auschwitz, it is a judgment as to whether they know their name, whether they remember Aggadah, the plight with which Wiesel deals in *The Judges* (2002). Here, like the Angel of Death, the Judge asks the main character Razziel whether he knows his true name, and Razziel answers, "No" (42). Like Wiesel, Razziel is versed in written and oral Torah. Like Wiesel, he has many judges who gauge his every word, including the one person in the novel referred to as "the Judge," who judges five "hostages" caught in a storm en route to Tel Aviv. The aggadic tradition here lies in the very name of the main character, Razziel, a name taken from one of the most ancient of the kabbalistic texts, *Raziel HaMalakh*, or the *Angel Raziel*. To be sure, Kabbalah with its variations in Chasidism is one of the main sources of Aggadah in this novel which contains stories of and allusions to tales of the Maharal of Prague (71), Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (137–38), Moshe Leib of Sassov (149), and Moshe Rabbenu (183). And, like all kabbalistic Aggadah—indeed, like all of Wiesel's novels—it is laden with messianic allusions. For the Jewish writer who embraces the Chasidic tradition, these allusions are far more than literary devices—they are religious testimony.

III: THE LITERARY TRANSCENDED

Inasmuch as Wiesel's tales belong to the sacred tradition of Aggadah, they transcend what is normally regarded as literature. Where

literature may draw upon themes and motifs from Torah, Aggadah is Torah. The one who tells the aggadic tale does not “author” it—he transmits what has been received. Thus, the storyteller himself enters into Aggadah as a messenger who entrusts the listener with a message to deliver and a truth to attest. Bearing traces of Aggadah, these tales not only show elements of influence from that tradition, but they also harbor traces of revelation. That is why these tales transform readers into messengers in ways that reading *Hamlet* (1604) does not.

Through his tales Wiesel issues a summons that comes from beyond them. Where is that “beyond?” It is couched in the texts and in the prayers of the Aggadah. As seen, these texts and prayers are an explicit part of Wiesel’s tales. Even Primo Levi, who turned his face from God in the face of Auschwitz, suggests that the tales of the *Shoah* might themselves be viewed as the tales of a new Bible (59). If this is the case, then there must be a definitive link between the stories of the “new Bible” and the texts of *the Bible*. For the Jews living in a post-Holocaust world, Emil Fackenheim maintains, an encounter with the biblical text has become a necessity, if they are indeed to live as Jews (*To Mend* 18). This existential necessity confronting the Jew lies in the nature of Jewish relation to being. If being has meaning for Jews, it is, in the words of Emmanuel Lévinas, “to realize the Torah. The world is here so that the ethical order has the possibility of being fulfilled. The act by which the Israelites accept the Torah is the act which gives meaning to reality. To refuse the Torah is to bring being back to nothingness” (41). Either Torah or Auschwitz: that is the existential necessity confronting Jews and underlying the recovery of Jewish life in the world, and neither the messenger nor the one who receives the message can avoid this either/or.

If the storyteller is such a messenger, as Wiesel has said (“Storyteller’s” 57), then he is far more than a literary figure. Operating within the aggadic tradition, he is a messenger from Mount Sinai who has been plunged into a mountain of ashes. “Let him who wants fervor not seek it on the mountain peaks,” Wiesel quotes from the Maggid of Mezeritch: “Rather let him stoop and search among the ashes” (*Souls* 71). And yet there is no *stooping* to search among these ashes, for

they have ascended into the heavens to transform the sky into a cemetery. Likewise, Wiesel ascends in order to search not through “literary devices” or “literary imagination” but with sources that transcend the literary. Thus, one may better understand Wiesel’s striking statement: “There is no such thing as Holocaust literature—this cannot be. Auschwitz negates all literature” (*Jew* 197). If God showed His face at Auschwitz, as Wiesel has suggested (“God” 309), then one means of approaching that face is through Aggadah, the very thing that came under assault in the Nazi assault on the Holy One.

After Auschwitz, however, this aggadic testimony requires sounding the depths of a certain madness. If the Midrash, subjected to the Nazi assault, is to find its way from the anti-world into the world—if Jews are to recover the Jewish presence that the Nazis deemed an ontological crime—then what is needed is what Fackenheim calls “midrashic madness,” a madness that finds an opening for holiness to return to a realm where holiness has been vanquished. This madness, Fackenheim explains,

is the Word spoken in the anti-world which ought not to be but is. The existence it points to acts to restore a world which ought to be but is not, and this is *its* madness. After Planet Auschwitz, there can be no health without *this* madness. . . . Without this madness, a Jew cannot do—with God or without Him—what a Voice from Sinai bids him do: choose life. (*Jewish* 269)

Through the character Zalmen, Wiesel cries out, “One has to be mad today to believe in God and in man—one has to be mad to believe. One has to be mad to want to remain human” (*Zalmen* 79). One has to be mad, as perhaps Wiesel is mad, to tell these tales.

“In the beginning,” says Dr. Benedictus in *Twilight*, “there was madness” (37). In the new beginning there is midrashic madness. With this midrashic madness a Jew must choose life as a Jew, bringing Jewish children into the world despite the fact that the identity that gives them life may well threaten their lives. That is why a Jewish response to the *Shoah* requires a dose of midrashic madness: since Auschwitz

the Jewish storyteller must seek the Word which ought not to be but is, which is to say that the mending of the world requires the mending of the word through the tales of the Torah, which constitutes the world itself, for the world is in the word, not the other way around; and for a Jew the world made of Torah is rooted in the aggadic word of Torah.

How, then, shall one understand this midrashic madness with regard to Wiesel's tales? A tale from the Midrash itself may provide an answer. When Jacob wrestled his identity as a Jew—as Yisrael—from the Angel of Death, the Angel “put his finger to the earth, whereupon the earth began spurting fire. Said Jacob to him: ‘Would you terrify me with that? Why, I am altogether of that stuff!’ Thus it is written, ‘And the house of Jacob shall be a fire’” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 77:2). In the post-Holocaust era these words of Torah ring with new and terrifying depths of meaning, and Wiesel helps sound those depths. In the time of the *Shoah*, says Wiesel, “fire was the dominant image” (*Evil* 39). He answers the fire of *Shoah* with the black fire on white fire of Torah,⁹ with the fire that is the stuff of the soul itself. Figuratively, then, to read Wiesel is to burn with him.

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⁹See *Devarim Rabbah* 3:12.

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