

On Being a Jewish Author: The Trace of the Messiah in Elie Wiesel's Novels

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In *Somewhere a Master* (1982), Elie Wiesel invokes a teaching from Pinchas of Koretz, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism: “To be Jewish is to link one’s fate to that of the Messiah—to that of all who are waiting for the Messiah” (23). To link one’s fate to that of the Messiah is not only to await but also to work for the coming of the Messiah, even though he may tarry—even though, if one may speak such words, he may never come. To be sure: the Messiah is the one who has forever *yet to come*, so that to be Jewish is to forever be engaged with an eternal *yet to be*. To live is to live on the edge of the *yet to be*. Or, for Wiesel, to live is to live in the midst of the *and yet*. There abides the Messiah: in the *and yet*. For Wiesel, to link one’s fate to that of the Messiah is to link one’s fate to the *and yet*, particularly after the Shoah. The Shoah altered forever the meaning of the Twelfth of Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles of Faith, the belief in the coming of the Messiah, even though he may tarry—a belief that would recur throughout the works and the life of Elie Wiesel.

Bearing witness to the truth and the wisdom of the Jewish messianic tradition was, for Wiesel, the tie that most profoundly bound

him to the Jewish tradition and therefore to Jewish life: for Wiesel the tie to Jewish tradition was his post-Holocaust connection to life, and that bond lay most profoundly in his link to the Messiah. In *Open Heart* (2012), he recalls the tale of a survivor, a Hasidic rabbi, who finally agreed to say what happened to him “over there.” Suddenly the rabbi began to sing the *nigun* of “Ani Maamin,” “the most beautiful, most moving *nigun* I had ever heard. He added nothing: For him, the song said it all. Shall I be able to sing up above? Shall I too be able to intone this *nigun* that contains all that I have tried to express in my writings?” (46). The words of the *nigun* are the words of the Twelfth Principle of Faith, recited every day in our prayers: *Ani maamin beemunah shlemah beviat haMashiach; veaf al pi sheyimanmeah, im kol zeh achakeh lo bekol yom sheyavo*—“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.” These words contain all that Wiesel struggled to express throughout his voluminous writings. These words contain all that made him or any Jew a Jewish witness and therefore a *Jewish* author, words that perhaps come to a single word: *HaMashiach*.

Linking his fate to that of the Messiah, Wiesel linked his fate to the fate of humanity and thereby quickened the steps of the Redeemer, both in his writing and in his life. He exemplified the words of Emmanuel Levinas, whom he knew very well: “To love one’s neighbor is to go to Eternity, to redeem the World or prepare the Kingdom of God. Human love is the very work, the efficiency of Redemption” (*Outside the Subject* 58). In *Souls on Fire* (1972), Wiesel paraphrases Levinas: “Every encounter quickens the steps of the Redeemer; let two beings become one and the world is no longer the same; let two human creatures accept one another and creation will have meaning” (33). A *living* human love is messianic to its core: like God, the Messiah is not to be studied—he is to be *lived*. To be sure, “for most writers,” Wiesel once said, “their work is a commentary on their life,” but for Jewish writers “it is the opposite; their lives are commentaries on their work” (*Against Silence* 2: 255). And their lives as Jews are linked to a messianic redemption of humanity. Wiesel was above all a Jewish writer who lived and

wrote from the depths of Jewish teaching and tradition, steeped above all in waiting and working for the coming of the Messiah.

“One of the characters who has been present in all my writings,” says Wiesel, “is the character of the Messiah, and who is the Messiah, what is the Messiah, if not the embodiment of eternity in the present, the embodiment of eternity in the future. He is waiting for us as long as we are waiting for him” (*Against Silence* 3: 288). The embodiment of eternity in the present and in the future lies at the core of the messianic sense of history that guides Wiesel’s literary endeavor: rarely has there ever been a more intimate sense of the link between literature and history, between the Messiah and time itself. “The awaiting of the Messiah,” says Levinas,

is the duration of time itself—waiting for God—but here the waiting no longer attests to the absence of Godot, who will never come, but rather to a relationship with that which is not able to enter the present, since the present is too small to contain the Infinite. (“Revelation in the Jewish Tradition” 203)

In the words of Wiesel, “the Messiah symbolizes our preoccupation with time instead of space” (“A Portrait of the Messiah”). Perhaps better: time is the tarrying of the Messiah. That the Messiah tarryes is what gives meaning to life, for the dimension of meaning is the dimension of time. The Messiah, therefore, does not end history—the Messiah *is* history, inasmuch as the meaning of the Messiah lies in the wait for the Messiah. In the words of Levinas, to link one’s fate to that of the Messiah is to affirm that salvation “remains at every moment possible” (*Difficult Freedom* 84). Indeed, in the *Ani Maamin*, the word translated as “wait,” *achakeh*, means “expect”: I shall *expect* the coming of the Messiah because it can happen at any moment. Thus, the mentions of and allusions to the Messiah, even though fleeting, pervade Wiesel’s novels.

“In order to bring the *Mashiach* into one’s full consciousness,” writes Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, “each of us must strive to purify and make potent our faculty of speech in Torah, prayer, and the communication of love between us” (20). No Jewish author has

strived to purify and make potent his faculty of speech and his facility with the word more than Wiesel. And this is the point, what sets Wiesel apart from many other Jewish writers: he tirelessly waited, worked, and wrote for the coming of the Messiah. That is why his novels assume an aspect of prayer, as in, for example, *The Town Beyond the Wall* (1964), which is divided not into chapters but into prayers. Reading his tales, one can hear the call of the great storyteller of Hasidism, Nachman of Breslov, who enjoined his listeners, “Make my tales into prayers” (Wiesel, *Souls on Fire* 173). Where tales are transformed into prayers, eternity is embodied in the present and looms on the horizon of the future. Where tales are transformed into prayers, they become “the substance of language and the language of silence” (Wiesel, *Paroles d'étranger* 172; my translation). When tales are transformed into prayers, their fate is linked to that of the Messiah. But who, in Jewish teaching, is the Messiah?

THE MESSIAH IN JEWISH TEACHING: A BRIEF BACKGROUND

There are perhaps no teachings in Jewish tradition more confused and conflicting than the teachings on the Messiah. A few things, however, are clear. The one whom the Jews await is not the son of God any more than any other human being is a child of the Holy One. The Messiah is neither the incarnation of God nor part of a triune divinity; the Midrash, in fact, speaks of his mortal death, saying that when the Messiah dies, the World to Come will be ushered in (*Tanchuma Ekev* 7). Further, he is not born of a virgin, who in turn requires an immaculate conception. Indeed, from a Jewish perspective, the conception of any human being can be “immaculate,” since in marriage the sexual union that produces a child is itself holy, as is the one born from that union. Hence the dual meaning of *kiddushin*, which translates both as “holiness” and as “marriage.” And because we do not inherit Adam’s sin, we are born innocent and untainted, as we affirm each morning in our prayers: *ha-neshamah shenatata biy tehorah hiy*—“the soul You have placed within me is pure.”

According to Jewish teaching, children are not in need of redemption—they are the source of redemption, as the Vilna Gaon

maintains (45). In the Midrash, Rabbi Assi teaches that children begin their study of Torah with the Book of Leviticus because “children are pure, and the sacrifices are pure; so let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 7.3). The one whom we await, then, is not one whose blood will cleanse us of our inherently sinful being; rather, he will return us, body and soul, to the inherently holy relation to God and to one another. This may be one reason why the Midrash calls the Messiah the Son of Perets (*Bereshit Rabbah* 12.6), the child born to Judah and Tamar (see Gen. 38.29): the name *Perets* means “breach” or “opening,” and the Messiah is he who creates the most complete opening for holiness to flow into this realm.

Jesus’ statement, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18.36), is alien to Jewish thinking about the Anointed One. From their perspective, the Messiah’s kingdom is *in* this world and *of* this world, for as Adin Steinsaltz points out, *this* world, the *Olam Asiyah*, “is the most perfect form of the Revelation of God. It is said, ‘The existence of the material is the substance of the Divine.’ In other words, the highest values are found within matter, in the material world” (229). Therefore, the Messiah comes not to deliver us *from* the world but to draw Torah into the world, so transparently that the word of the Holy One will be engraved upon every human heart (Jer. 31.33), and justice and righteousness will reign (Isa. 9.6). Swords will be beaten into plowshares, and “nation will not lift up sword against nation” (Mic. 4.3). The Jewish wait for the Messiah is a waiting and a working for such a world.

With regard to other prophecies of the Messiah, in the famous disputation at Barcelona held in 1263, Nachmanides pointed out that “you will never find in any book of Jewish tradition—neither the Talmud nor the Hagadoth—that the Messiah son of David will be killed, that he will be handed over into the hands of his enemies, or that he will be buried with the wicked” (2.667). Most prevalent of all the unfulfilled prophecies concerning the Messiah is that the Jews will be returned from exile. Various prophets invoke various signs of the coming of the Messiah, but almost all of them invoke this one: the ingathering of the Jews (for example, Isa. 11.11–12; Jer. 23.3,

29.14, 32.44, 33.7; Ezek. 39.25; Joel 4.1; Zeph. 3.20; Zech. 10.8–10). The Midrash, in fact, teaches that in the time of the Messiah, the nations of the world will assist in the return of the Jews to the Holy Land (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 4.8.2).

Beyond that, the teachings are less clear and often more mysterious. In the Talmud, for example, it is written, “Know that there exists on high a substance called ‘body’ [*guf*] in which are found all the souls destined for life. The son of David will not come before all the souls which are in the *guf* have completed their descent to the earth” (*Yevamot* 63b; *Avodah Zarah* 5a; *Niddah* 13b; see also *Zohar* I, 119a). This mystical tradition underscores the connection between the upper worlds and this world. This mystical view associates the completeness of creation with the coming of the Messiah; it also articulates a connection between each soul and all of creation—between each soul and the Messiah himself. On the day of his coming, “Hashem will be One and His Name will be One” (Zech. 14.9). Which is to say: in the Tetragrammaton the upper letters *yud-hey* and the lower letters *vav-hey* will be joined, so that the holiness of the Holy One will be manifest throughout the world. Thinking and doing will be one; teaching and practice will be one; love of God and love of neighbor will be one.

There are other teachings concerning the Messiah. The Midrash, for example, says that Gog and Magog will launch three wars against the Messiah in the winter month of Tevet. Messiah ben Joseph will fight those wars; in some accounts, he will be killed and then followed by Messiah ben David, who will usher in the everlasting age of peace (see Rashi’s commentary on Talmud tractate *Sotah* 51; see also the *Or Hachayim* on Lev. 14.9). In addition to Gog and Magog, the arch-enemy of the Messiah is sometimes called Armillus, who is spawned from Satan’s mating with a stone statue in Rome. Forty days after the spawning of Armillus, Messiah ben David will rise up to build the Temple in Jerusalem and defeat the offspring of Satan (Eisenstein 466). That Armillus is born from a stone is indicative of the Messiah’s defeat of the view that what is real is what can be weighed, measured, and counted and that power, therefore, is all that matters. Further, it is said that the Messiah will reveal the meaning of the blanks between the words and

in the margins of the Torah, the meaning of the white fire (Patai 257). Perhaps he will also reveal the meaning of other flames.

Because we are prone to tarry, the Talmud teaches that two times are destined for the coming of the Messiah: now and the appointed time (*Sanhedrin* 98a). This teaching is based on the words from the prophet Isaiah: "I HaShem will hasten it in its time" (Isa. 60.22); that is, I will either hasten it to make it now, or it will be in its appointed time. *Now*, if we perform the task for which we were created. *Now*, if we treat others, especially those who are most defenseless, with loving kindness. In short, *now is* the appointed time for *me* to act for the sake of another. Without the wait for the Messiah, there is nothing to hasten and no time appointed. Waiting for the Messiah, though he may tarry, is just the opposite of the languishing that characterizes so much of our intellectual game playing, which is no more than a means of marking time or killing time.

How long must we labor for the coming of the Messiah? According to the *Pesikta Rabbati*, 365,000 years (1.7). Which is to say: the wait is infinite, as infinite as our responsibility. Thus, said Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman, in the name of Rabbi Yonatan, "Cursed be the bones of those who calculate the end. For they would say, since the predetermined time has come, and yet the Messiah has not come, he will never come. Nevertheless, wait for him" (*Sanhedrin* 97b). In this *nevertheless* we have the needful response to the despair that haunts the post-Holocaust world: do not calculate the "end"—hasten it. The time of the coming of the Messiah that is now is the time for which I am always too late, because it is always *already*: the Messiah abides in the nexus of the *not yet* and the *already*. To be sure, in the Talmud it is written that there will be no Messiah because those days have already passed, in the time of Hezekiah (*Sanhedrin* 99a); the point, however, is not to put an end to the task but to underscore its infinite duration. Even though—and precisely because—I am too late, I must hasten the coming of the Messiah.

Wiesel has said that "for Christians, the Messiah is God's link to man; in Judaism man is God's link to the Messiah" ("A Portrait of the Messiah"). And so we see this insight unfold in the teachings of the Jewish tradition, as well as in Wiesel's novels: there is, both

throughout this tradition in general and throughout Wiesel's novels in specific, a sense that somehow God's link to His own redemption as Creator is tied to humanity through the fate of the Messiah. If everything is in God's hands except the fear of God, as it is written in the Talmud (*Berakhot* 33b; *Niddah* 16b), then the advent of the Messiah is in the hands of humanity. The Talmud teaches that the name of the Messiah is among the seven things that preceded creation (*Pesachim* 54a). (The other six are Torah, Teshuvah, Gan Eden, Gehenna, the Throne of Glory, and the Temple.) The Zohar teaches that "the 'spirit of God which hovered over the face of the deep' (Gen. 1.2) is the spirit of the Messiah" (*Zohar* I, 240a). The Messiah precedes the beginning to oppose the darkness that would undermine the beginning: bearing the name that preceded creation, the Messiah is essential to all of creation. Therefore, the Messiah is present in every generation, a name in search of a man, as well as a man in search of a name, often disguised as a beggar, a leper, or an orphan—or as an old man, a child, or a madman, the three characters who, as Wiesel once told me, form the foundation of his novels. And so we come to the fleeting traces of the Messiah in the novels of Elie Wiesel, the traces that define him as a distinctively Jewish author.

THE TRACES OF THE MESSIAH IN THE NOVELS OF ELIE WIESEL

In *The Gates of the Forest* (1966), Wiesel brings to bear several of the Jewish traditions surrounding the Messiah. The central character is a Hungarian teen named Gregor in the time of the Shoah, whose murdered parents left him to hide and survive in a cave—rather like Shimon bar Yochai and his son in the second century, whose task in the cave was to learn from Elijah what it would take to bring the Messiah, who would put an end to the Roman persecution. Instead of encountering the Messiah, however, he encounters a mysterious figure named Gavriel—like the Archangel Gabriel, the Angel of Judgment—who has spoken with Elijah, the herald of the Messiah. What did Elijah say to him? This: "The Messiah is not coming. He's not coming because he has already come. . . . The Messiah is everywhere. Ever present, he gives each passing moment

its taste of drunkenness, desolation, and ashes" (32). The Messiah abides in the desperate longing for his coming, in the desperate laboring for his advent, in the desperate insistence that we want Mashiach now. Perhaps this is what leads Gregor to declare to a Rebbe, "And I tell you this: if their death has no meaning, then it's an insult, and if it does have a meaning, it's even more so" (197). This is the dilemma, the needful tension, that only the Messiah can resolve—or sustain.

In the end Gregor realizes that "the Messiah isn't one man . . . he's all men. As long as there are men there will be Messiah" (225). For as long as there are men there abides the possibility of the answering of "Here I am for you" to the other human being, which is the only way we can answer to the Holy One. As long as there are men, there will be the responsibility to pose the question of meaning that Gregor poses above. There will be the responsibility to bring the Messiah that devolves upon humankind, since, according to the Hasidic masters Zadok ha-Kohen (Lamm 576–77) and the Stretiner Rebbe (Newman 248), in each of us there is a spark of the Messiah. "In concrete terms," says Levinas, "this means that each person acts as though he were the Messiah. Messianism is therefore not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops History. It is my power to bear the suffering of all. It is the moment when I recognize this power and my universal responsibility" (*Difficult Freedom* 90). If, as Gregor's father tells him, "the Messiah is that which makes man more human, which takes the element of pride out of generosity, which stretches his soul towards others" (33), then the Messiah summons man to an infinite responsibility to and for the other human being. In Wiesel's novels the one who waits is the one who awaits this realization and who will then act upon it.

Only in that way can we ascend through the fifty gates of the orchard alluded to in this novel's title. These are the gates that we count during the counting of the omer, marking the fifty days' journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai. The whole point of the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai is the redemption brought about through the Messiah, who awaits his entry through the fiftieth gate. Thus we glimpse the mystical significance of the Messiah in *The Gates of the Forest*. Says Rebbe Barukh of Medzebozh, "Beyond the fiftieth gate

there is not only the abyss but also faith—and they are one next to the other” (Wiesel, *Somewhere a Master* 74). The tension between these two poles is the tension of the wait for the Messiah, the tension that runs throughout Wiesel’s novels.

In *A Beggar in Jerusalem* (1970), the tension between the abyss and faith has its parallel in the tension between the past and the future. Here we see more clearly the profound link between the Messiah and history itself, as the time of the novel shifts between the abyss of the Shoah and the faith reborn after the Six Day War. Weaving midrashic tales with mystical imagery, Wiesel tells the tale of a Holocaust survivor named David, who goes to Jerusalem upon the outbreak of the Six Day War. He joins a tank unit, where he makes a pact with another soldier, Katriel, whereby each promises to tell the other’s tale if one of them should not survive. When Katriel goes missing, David proceeds to tell his tale. Indeed, Katriel, the son of a mystic from Safed, is himself a storyteller, a teacher, and something of a mystic, so that his name suits him: it means “God is my crown,” from *keter*, the highest of the ten *sefirot*. Rabbi Shimon teaches in the Mishnah that there are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of the priesthood, and the crown of kingship (*Avot* 4.3), and the crown of kingship culminates in the scion of David (Jer. 23.5–6). Katriel, then, is a pivotal figure with regard to the motif of the Messiah in this novel.

Indeed, Katriel’s father tells him, “You are the bridge between the Babylonian Sages and the generations to come. Each man must consider himself responsible for both, each man contains all.” Katriel asks if that burden is not too heavy, and his father replies, “You won’t always have to bear it alone. You’ll soon take a wife, you’ll raise children, and they will transmit my name and yours so that one day the Messiah himself will hear their voice” (96). If the Messiah is not one man but all men, his presence lies in the responsibility of all men to transmit the name that was before the beginning, so that the voices, the outcries, of all humanity might be heard. We discover how deep this responsibility runs in the cry of a Hasidic master as the Nazis are about to murder him and others:

I address myself to you, witnesses! Open your ears and remember. We do not want to die, we want to live and build the kingdom of the Messiah in time and prayer. Someone opposes this wish and that someone is One and His name is One. We know that His eternal secrets transcend us. But does He know the pain they cause us? Even so, brothers: we shall make Him a gift of our lives and our deaths. We wish Him to use them as He pleases, and may He be worthy of them. (74)

God opposes the wish of the Jews to live and build the kingdom of the Messiah? How can this be? And how can one wonder whether God Himself might be worthy of anything? This is where the Wieselian “and yet . . .” enters.

To add even more depth to the paradox, in the novel we see the Messiah, too, aligning himself with those who made God a gift of their lives and deaths. In a midrashic moment, Wiesel relates that the three Patriarchs once came before the celestial court and reported to God that all is in keeping with His divine plan. The heavenly hosts gathered together and celebrated. Then God asked, “The Messiah, where is the Messiah? Why isn’t he here taking part in the festivities?” The angel Michael reported that the Messiah has disappeared. God ordered that he be found and brought before Him. And so His bidding was done: the Messiah was brought before the Holy One, and God asked him, “Where have you been?” He answered that he had been in Jerusalem. He explained that he had decided to stay with God’s people, rather than join in the heavenly festivities, saying, “I had to join them, be one of them. Their will was stronger than mine, stronger than Yours, and so was their love. You see, they were six million” (54–55). And so we see the link between the Messiah and the beggar in Jerusalem. We understand, if only just a little, the meaning of one of the early passages in the novel:

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 trans-

forms man into pilgrim; no one can enter it and go away unchanged. (11)

For anyone who enters Jerusalem is, more powerfully than ever, charged with the responsibility to hasten the coming of the Messiah.

The responsibility to hasten the coming of the Messiah is a responsibility to save lives, to save even a single life, as we see in Wiesel's novel *The Oath* (1973). Here we have the story of Azriel, the survivor of a pogrom over a blood libel in the Hungarian village of Kolvilläg. He bears the secret of the destruction, and he bears the oath that he would never reveal its secrets. Fifty years later, however, he meets a young man bent upon suicide. And so, even though his oath binds him to the dead, he decides to tell the tale to this one human being and transform him into a witness. "Speak, the old man thinks. The best way. Make him speak. Speak to him. As long as we keep speaking, he is in my power. One does not commit suicide in the middle of a sentence. One does not commit suicide while speaking or listening" (22). So what is the dilemma facing the old man with regard to his oath? It is an oath not only to the dead who have passed but also to the Messiah who is yet to come:

The survivor resents his survival. That is why the Christians imagine their Saviour expiring on the cross. They thus situate him outside the circle of shame; he dies before the others, instead of the others. And thus the others are made to bear his shame. The Messiah, as seen by the Jews, shows greater courage; he survives all the generations, watches them disappear one after the other—and if he is late in coming, it is perhaps because he is ashamed to reveal himself. (79)

Azriel shares in the Messiah's shame.

Among those who were murdered in the pogrom is a man named Moshe, a madman reminiscent of Moshe the Beadle in *Night* (1960). "What is the Messiah," said Moshe,

if not man transcending his solitude in order to make his fellow man less solitary? To turn a single human being back toward life is to prevent the destruction of the world, says the Talmud. Do something good and God up there will imitate you; do something evil and suddenly the scale will tip the other way. (90–91)

Hence Azriel's effort to save the young man determined to kill himself is tied to his effort to bring the Messiah, to bring a time when the scale will tip the other way. God and man—each requires the other; neither can bring the Messiah on his own. "The Messiah," says Moshe. "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). Making children a first target in the extermination project, the Nazis set out to exterminate the Messiah. Because of the children, "we must be worthy not only of the Messiah but also of the wait for the Messiah. Let us be thankful for the wait," as it is written in Wiesel's novel *The Oath* (236). And so we see that, above all, the motif of the Messiah has to do with the children. If, as it is written in the *Tikkunei HaZohar*, the children are the face of the Shekhinah (cited in Polen 102), then, as the first targets in the Shoah, the enemy targets the Messiah by targeting the children first.

In *The Testament* (1981) we have a character who turned from the Jewish messianism that he grew up with and sought another messianism, a "messianism without God," as Wiesel has called it: communism ("A Portrait of the Messiah"). The novel relates the story of a Russian Jewish poet named Paltiel Kossover, who was arrested 12 August 1952, on what is known as the Night of the Murdered Poets, when thirteen Soviet Jewish intellectuals and artists were executed in Moscow's Lubyanka Prison. Unlike the other poets in real life, however, the fictional Paltiel was allowed to leave behind his written testament before being murdered. In it he relates the tale of his life, largely for the sake of his son Grisha. It is the tale of a Jew's return to his Judaism, with the Messiah haunting almost every page. In fact,

among the characters is a mysterious figure named David Aboulesia, who identifies himself as a Messiah Seeker (160).

In his youth, Paltiel explains to his interrogator,

[M]y questions revolved endlessly around the Messiah. I was aching to hasten his arrival, knowing that he would surely abolish the distance between rich and poor, sad and happy, beggar and landlord: put an end to pogroms and wars; unite justice and compassion, making certain that both were true. (71)

Of course, communism had promised to do all these things. However, unlike the interrogator, whose Messiah is named Marx, he adds, “Ours has no name. That is the majesty of our tradition: it teaches us that among the ten things that preceded Creation was the name of the Messiah—the name no one knows and no one will know before he appears” (72). Paltiel continues:

But this Messiah, how could we hasten his arrival? Reb Mendel-the-Taciturn knew how: We needed to study our holy texts closely, immerse ourselves in our esoteric tradition, learn the names of certain angels and free certain forces. Such is the disquieting beauty of the messianic adventure: only man, for whose sake the Messiah is expected, is capable and worthy of making his advent possible. What man? Any man. Whosoever desires may seize the keys that open the gates of the celestial palace and thus bring power to the prisoner. The Messiah, you see, is a mystery between man and himself. (72)

If any man may seize the keys that open the gates, then every person, beginning with the Jews, is summoned to the task of hastening the coming of the Messiah. If the measure of our days lies in the pursuit of that task, then so does the measure of our identity, of who we are. According to the Talmud, among the six questions that the heavenly tribunal puts to us is the question of whether we worked for the coming of the Messiah (*Shabbat* 31a; the other five questions pertain to honesty in our business dealings, our study of Torah, bearing children, our pursuit of wisdom, and our fear of heaven).

Recall what David Aboulesia, the Messiah Seeker, says to Paltiel. The Messiah, he tells him, is

of this world, young man. The Talmudic sages place him at the gates of Rome, but in fact he lives among us, everywhere. According to the Zohar, he is waiting to be called. He is waiting to be recognized in order to be crowned. Remember, young man, the Messiah looks like anyone at all except a Messiah. His name, which preceded Creation, also preceded him. The story of the Messiah is the story of a quest, of a name in search of a being. (160)

The unknown name in search of a being is a name that summons each of us by name, a name that seeks us out, forever putting to us the questions put to the first human being and his firstborn: "Where are you?" (Gen. 3.9), "Where is your brother?" (Gen. 4.9), and "What have you done?" (Gen. 4.10). Just so, when Paltiel runs into Aboulesia some years after their first encounter, he asks him if he is still seeking the Messiah, whereupon Aboulesia answers, "When he's not looking for me, I'm running after him" (188–89). If, as Aboulesia says, "the great thing is to not to be the Messiah but to seek him" (163), it is because the one way we have of answering, "*Hineni!* Here I am for you," is to undertake the quest and to raise the question that itself is the source of redemption.

Here it is worth briefly explaining Aboulesia's reference to the gates of Rome. According to the Talmudic tale, one day the great third-century sage Joshua ben Levi was deep in meditation at the grave of Shimon bar Yochai, when the Prophet Elijah paid him a visit, as Elijah sometimes did with the great sages. Joshua ben Levi asked him, "When will the Messiah come?" And the Prophet replied, "Go ask him yourself. He is sitting outside the gates of Rome, a leper binding his wounds. But, unlike the other lepers, he binds just one wound at a time, so that he may be ready to reveal himself at a moment's notice." Joshua ben Levi went to the gates of Rome, found the Messiah, and asked him, "Master and Teacher, when will you come and reveal yourself?" And the Messiah replied, "Today, if you will heed the voice of the Holy One" (*Sanhedrin* 98a). That is where the

story ends. It is said, however, that if Joshua ben Levi had helped him with his wounds, the Messiah would have revealed himself.

Having lived through the carnage of the mid-twentieth century, Paltiel has serious questions about the whole messianic endeavor, questions that arise out of compassion for the Messiah himself. He says to Aboulesia,

The more blood flows, the nearer peace. But I cannot stand the sight of blood. If, in order to appear in his immaculate glory, the Messiah has to have himself announced by shrieking nations massacring one another, let him stay home. . . . Poor Messiah! All the things done for you in your name—all those things you're made to do. (189–90)

Perhaps for Wiesel one key to redemption lies in this suggestion that the price of redemption is too high. And yet . . .

Although in Wiesel's novels discussed so far the Messiah is only alluded to, awaited, or sought out, in *Twilight* (1988) the Redeemer makes an appearance as a patient in a sanatorium, a place that is indeed in a kind of twilight zone. The novel is about a Holocaust survivor and professor of Jewish mysticism named Raphael, who goes to a sanatorium that specializes in treating patients who take themselves to be biblical and other religious figures, including God Himself. Raphael goes to defend the mysterious figure of Pedro, who made his first appearance in Wiesel's *The Town Beyond the Wall*, against a certain slanderer. Taking a professor of Jewish mysticism as his main character, Wiesel wastes no time drawing upon his own vast knowledge of the teachings on the Messiah in the mystical tradition. Nor is it any accident that we find his character Raphael, the "professor" of mysticism, mingling with the madmen. "Mystical madness," says Wiesel, "is redeeming. The difference between a mystical madman and a clinical madman is that a clinical madman isolates himself and others, while a mystical one wants to bring the Messiah. What is the ultimate aim of mysticism? To bring the Messiah" (*Against Silence* 3: 232). And so Raphael turns to the madmen.

Early in the novel, Raphael encounters an old man who is also a madman:

The patient spoke, and Raphael listened. The more he listened, the less he understood. The old man spoke of God and His attributes, and of the ten *Sephirot*, which collectively symbolize the king's crown and majestic power. He described an invisible palace surrounded by fiery walls where the Creator of the world awaits the *Shekhina* to restore his Creation to the origins of innocence. And the eagle's nest where a lone, melancholy Messiah prays for time to accelerate its rhythm, for words to open themselves to the Word. . . . (13)

In these few lines we see the depth of Wiesel's understanding of the kabbalistic tradition and its impact on the motif of the Messiah in his novels.

The reference to the eagle's nest is crucial to a reading of the motif of the Messiah in *Twilight*. This reference to the nest where the Messiah prays stems from a passage from Torah:

If a bird's nest chance to be before you in the way, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs, and the mother sitting on the young, or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young: you shall surely let the mother go, but the young you may take to yourself, that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days. (Deut. 22.6–7)

The *Tikkunei HaZohar* says that the "bird's nest" refers to the exile of the *Shekhinah*, or the Divine Presence (12b). The Zohar explains that the meaning of the bird's nest is revealed in the prophecy of Isaiah: "And they shall go into the holes of the rocks and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord and for the glory of his majesty, when he arises to shake terribly the earth" (Isa. 2.19). "The glory of his majesty" refers to the Messiah, who will reveal himself only to launch a war. After a time of tribulation, the Messiah will be crowned, and all the nations of the earth will behold him. And so Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai teaches his son:

The Messiah is hidden in [Eden's] outskirts until a place is revealed to him which is called "the Bird's Nest." This is the place proclaimed by that Bird [the Shekinah] which flies about the Garden of Eden. . . . The Messiah enters that abode, lifts up his eyes and beholds the Fathers [Patriarchs] visiting the ruins of God's Sanctuary. He perceives mother Rachel, with tears upon her face. . . . Then the Messiah lifts up his voice and weeps, and the whole Garden of Eden quakes, and all the righteous and saints who are there break out in crying and lamentation . . . until it reaches the highest Throne. . . . Then from the holy Throne the Bird's Nest and the Messiah are summoned three times, and they both ascend into the heavenly places. . . . Then the Bird returns to her place. The Messiah, however, is hidden again in the same place as before. (*Zohar* 2.8a–8b).

Thus we see the depths of this Jewish writer's engagement with the Messiah. It is an engagement rooted not only in the passionate longing and working for the coming of the Messiah but rooted also in the millennial Jewish tradition targeted for extermination in a time when the Messiah was more desperately needed than ever before.

As one might expect, one of the patients in the sanatorium identifies himself to Raphael as the Messiah. Perhaps reminiscent of the Nazarene, he is in his early thirties. Taking Raphael to be a little skeptical, he assures the professor:

Don't worry. I'll save you anyway. I'll even save those who refuse to be saved. In fact, I'll save them first. That is my mission. The Lord entrusted me with it. He has several saviors, the Lord. One takes care of wise men, the other of fools. The Messiah of the Just lives next door. I'm the Messiah of the Wicked. Thieves and killers come to me for salvation. (174–75)

The reference to two Messiahs brings to mind the two Messiahs of the Jewish tradition mentioned previously: Messiah ben Joseph, who comes in a time of great evil, and Messiah ben David, who comes in a time of great goodness. "This patient," we read, "holds a special

fascination for Raphael. Since childhood, he has loved messianic talks. Mystification intrigues him because of the Messiah's role in it" (175). Raphael engages this patient and explains to him some of the Jewish teachings and traditions on the Messiah. "In my tradition," says Raphael, "the Messiah is anonymous. Our sources put greater emphasis on messianic times than on the Messiah's personality. For us, the wait is more important than the wish to be the Messiah" (177). The waiting and working for the Messiah is more important because it is a way of coming to the aid of the Messiah, to extend a hand to the anonymous, leprous beggar outside the gates of Rome.

Raphael relates that when he was a child, his parents gave him the blessing that he should live to see the coming of the Messiah. Never mind whether living to see the tribulations surrounding Messiah ben Joseph is such a blessing. To that the patient answers, "Well, their blessing has been realized! Here you are in the presence of the Messiah. . . . Have you nothing to say? You repudiate me just as your people repudiated Christ? Never mind. I'll save you in spite of yourself" (177). Again the overlap with the Christ of Christianity, even though the Christian Messiah bears little resemblance to the Jewish Messiah. And yet Jesus of Nazareth was Jewish. Could it be that, as the Christians of the early centuries de-Judaized the Anointed One, they themselves repudiated him? Indeed, in *A Beggar in Jerusalem* a character who encounters Yehoshua (Jesus) on the day of his crucifixion tells him that his brothers the Jews will be made to suffer for him, whereupon Jesus broke into tears of despair (56–57). And, given the anonymity of the Messiah and the teaching that he comes to us in various disguises, could it be that disguising himself as a madman who claims to be the Messiah is among the most cunning of his disguises? "Sometimes I envy my colleague," says the patient to Raphael, "the Messiah of the Just. His kingdom is filled with beauty and holiness, mine is ugly and twisted. His radiates joy, mine is steeped in violence. And yet . . ." (177). Again the *and yet*. . . . And yet what? Perhaps this: the Baal Shem Tov taught that gratitude and joy run deepest precisely when they are most groundless (see Wiesel, *Somewhere a Master* 133–34). The groundlessness yawns in the *and yet*. . . .

So we come to Wiesel's novel *Hostage* (2012). The year is 1975, and Shaltiel, a storyteller by profession, is kidnapped on the streets of Brooklyn by an Arab and an Italian, members of the Palestinian Revolutionary Action Group; they hold him hostage and threaten to kill him unless three Palestinians are released from captivity. In order to keep from being overcome with terror, Shaltiel does what he does best: he tells stories to his captors and to himself. Haunted by the years he spent as a child in hiding during the Holocaust, his tales are a weave of memories, Hasidic teachings, and mysterious figures such as One-Eyed Paritus. In the end the Italian releases the hostage. When Shaltiel believes that his captors are indeed going to kill him, we are told, "A Talmudic saying comes to his mind. On the first day of the funeral, the dead person hears an angel who comes to his tomb, knocks and asks his name [see Nachman of Beslov 102]. Woe to the one who forgets it. Don't forget, don't forget, Shaltiel mumbles to himself. Shaltiel, son of Haskel and Miriam, don't forget." And

Paritus asks him in a whisper: it's the second question that soul is supposed to answer: Did you hope for Redemption? Redemption: Is Shaltiel still waiting for it? Is it for the Jewish people, whose destiny and faith are defined by a timeless expectation, waiting for the one who puts off coming to save them, Shaltiel and the entire world? (204)

The capacity for raising such questions—and not the capacity for fixed formulas and ready answers—lies at the heart of working for the coming of the Messiah. Near the novel's end, therefore, we hear the voice of the one whose words form its epigraph, which ends with "Oh, if only I knew the art of questioning" (1). Of course, Shaltiel's name means "I have questioned God."

In Wiesel's *The Sonderberg Case* (2010), One-Eyed Paritus is said to be a mysterious figure supposedly found among the Apocrypha from the age of the prophets (63). In fact, One-Eyed Paritus turns up in several of Wiesel's novels, including *The Judges* (2002) (77, 193), *A Mad Desire to Dance* (2009) (183), and *The Fifth Son* (1985) (129, 194). In *Hostage* Paritus tells Shaltiel,

Someday I hope to meet the man who knows the Messiah's name and identity as well as the date of his advent. When that happens, the whole world will know it, including you. On that day, man will understand that, faced with his destiny, which is his truth, questions and answers will have become one. (124)

There we have the messianic age: it comes not with the elimination of the question—the *shelah*, with *el* or “God” at the heart of the question—but with the merging of the question with an answer to become yet another question. “Somewhere,” said Nachman of Breslov, “[t]here lives a man who asks a question to which there is no answer; a generation later, in another place, there lives a man who asks another question to which there is no answer either—and he doesn't know. He cannot know, that *his* question is actually an answer to the first” (Wiesel, *A Jew Today* 158). Thus, the first question put to the first man becomes at once an answer and another question, turned back on itself—or on Himself: Where are you?

In the latter portion of *Hostage*, we have an episode that sums up Wiesel's decades-long engagement with the Messiah and what underlies the trace of the Messiah found throughout his novels. It comes from a Hasidic tale that Shaltiel's grandfather related to him, the story of how the Baal Shem Tov once gathered his closest disciples to teach them the mysteries of the final Redemption: How and when to recite certain of the litanies; say the number for each of the heavenly angels; take the ritual bath and cite specific verses of the Psalms and the Zohar; practice an absolute asceticism of silence and chastity for a specific number of days and nights. All the things that had come down to him from his Masters—and to them from theirs, going back to the sixteenth-century Rabbi Hayim Vital and his master the ARI (Issac Luria), and as far back as Moses, all the things concerning the advent of the Messiah—he passed on to them.

They were to meet at an appointed time in a secret place in the forest, where they would confront the Messiah with the suffering of the Jewish people. But the Master was late. Even the Messiah was kept waiting. “But on my way here, a few steps before reaching you,” explained the Besht,

I heard a child crying in a hut near the edge of the forest. His cries were heart-breaking. His mother had probably gone to fetch wood for the hearth, or milk. So, brothers and friends, I couldn't help opening the door to the hut, stepping inside, looking at the baby in his shabby cradle, singing a lullaby for him and consoling him. Do you understand? When a child cries like this, the Messiah can and must wait. (160–61)

Do we understand?

This is why the wait for the Messiah is more important than being the Messiah, even more important than the advent of the Messiah: waiting for the Messiah rests upon our ability to hear the outcry of a child. If the wait does not sharpen our sense of hearing and our capacity for answering “Here I am for you,” then it is truly in vain. Each time we answer such an outcry, we create an angel, as the Talmud teaches: our thoughts and words and deeds create angels, and they go out into the world to do their work, for good or for ill, to unlock the gates and open the way for the Messiah or to close them, both here below and on high, as in Jacob's dream of the angels ascending and descending the ladder to the upper realms (see *Avot* 4:11; *Chagigah* 41a). Thus we hold the Messiah hostage—or is it the other way around? Perhaps we are his hostages, held as a ransom for creation and the redemption of this world.

CONCLUDING THOUGHT: ON BEING A JEWISH AUTHOR

Scholars are fond of holding forth on Jewish thought, Jewish literature, Jewish identity, Jewish this and Jewish that—and I am as guilty as anyone. But what is Jewish about a Jewish author? I think we have the trace of an answer in the trace of the Messiah that permeates the novels of Elie Wiesel. As he has said, “[O]nly when night seems irrevocably sealed can the messianic light break through. With the dawning of the messianic era good and evil and light and darkness will become one. All nations will hate Jews. They will hate themselves” (“A Portrait of the Messiah”). Is the age upon us? Is it about to dawn? In a sense, it does not matter: as long as there is the

outcry of a child to answer, we must first respond to that outcry with our own cry of "Here I am for you!" Like firefighters, we must be first responders to the children and to the child within each human being, each *ben adam*, because there was a time when "with each hour, the most blessed and most stricken people of the world numbers twelve times twelve children less. And each one carries away still another fragment of the Temple in flames. Flames—never before have there been such flames. And in every one of them it is the vision of the Redeemer that is dying" (Wiesel, *Ani Maamin* 27, 29). Wiesel breathes a breath of life into that dying vision.

That dying vision haunts the messianic visions that leave their trace throughout Wiesel's novels. It is a vision fraught with an overwhelming, unprecedented tension, a tension that constitutes the trace of the Messiah. Wiesel articulates that tension in a passage from *Sages and Dreamers* (1991): When the Rabbi of Kretchenev was deported to Auschwitz, "he began consoling his disciples: It is written, he said, that when the Messiah will come, God, blessed be He, will arrange a *makhol*, a dance, for the Just. *Makhol*, said the Rabbi, may also come from the verb *limkhol*—to forgive. . . ." And so, declared the Rabbi, "there will come a time, when the Just Men, the Tzaddikim, will forgive God, blessed be He" (131). And so we come to the ultimate realization, the thread that forms the trace of the Messiah in the novels of Elie Wiesel: in the post-Holocaust era, God Himself needs the advent of the Messiah as much as His children do. And man is, indeed, God's link to the Messiah.

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