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Elie Wiesel: Moral Action in an Immoral World

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ELIE WIESEL:

MORAL ACTION IN AN IMMORAL WORLD

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ABSTRACT

The following essay, "Elie Wiesel: Moral Action in an Immoral World," is an investigation into the three ways Elie Wiesel's characters in his novel *The Town Beyond the Wall* deal with their often painful and confusing views of the absurd world about them. Because *The Town Beyond the Wall* is a very autobiographical work for Wiesel, the backdrop of chaos found in the novel—the concentration camps, the death of the main character's father, mother and sister, the cold indifference with which the rest of the world watched as the Jews were 'liquidated'—are found in Wiesel's world too. Reading Wiesel's works, one discovers how the chaos of past events such as the Holocaust and Hiroshima not only plague Wiesel's generation but still linger as signs of absurdity at the present. One also comes to realize that current tragedies, such as those in Zaire and Bosnia, darken the shadow chaos casts on the world today. *The Town Beyond the Wall* calls attention to the different ways one can react to the horrors of the past and the horrors to come: as a spectator, indifferent to others' trials and tribulations, as a mad person, retreating within the chaos of the world, or as an artist, attacking one's fears and molding his own meaning and vision of the world by embracing others and making himself into an artwork.

--The only real concern of the artist is to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art. (James Baldwin, *Autobiographical Notes*)

Introduction:

An absolute crime. The first of its kind. Rapes, beatings, murders, they are nothing new. Christians, Muslims, Jews, men, women and children, they have all killed and been killed, raped and been raped, beat and been beaten, but rarely before had anyone tried to erase an entire people from the face of the earth. Perhaps the Armenians in 1909-1918. But never before with an ideology to justify it so extensively. Never before had anyone tried to burn the proof of another people's existence. Humans were turned into fire logs that fueled a monstrous death machine. Children were hung. Women were beaten. Men were raped. Order was overturned by the Absurd. People, not animals, did this. Animals are not capable of such horrendous, unimaginable crimes. People like your neighbor and mine, people like your aunt and mine, people like your father and mine, people like *you and me* did this. Millions closed their eyes, covered their ears, pinched their noses, turned their backs. Millions did not do a thing, did not say a word, did not scream out a cry. Sat on their hands, expressed their concern, even whispered their disgust, but went no further, said nothing more, did nothing more. Indifferent, cold, passive, impersonal, neither for nor against, weak, evasive, inhumane. Pathetic!

Looking back on *the* event, the preceding are my observations. Reading about the Holocaust, studying it, talking about it, I am perplexed; it confuses me, blurs my vision of

reality, humanity, our depths, our capabilities. But I was not there. What if I had been? What would I think then? Elie Wiesel, author of *The Town Beyond the Wall*, was there. He was in Auschwitz and Buchenwald and he has a story to tell:

> The hero of my story... is neither fear nor hatred; it is silence. The silence of a five-year-old Jew. His name was Mendele. In his eyes the whole sweep of his people's sufferings could be read. He lived in Szerencsevaros, which in Hungarian means the city of luck. One day the Germans decided to rid the country of what they called the Jewish plague. Feige, Mendele's mother, a beautiful and pious young widow, had a visit then from an old friend of her husband, a peasant who owned an isolated farm on the other side of the mountain.
>
> "Take your son, Feige, and come with me," the peasant said to her. " I owe it to my friend to save his family. Hurry up, now!"
>
> It was night. The streets were deserted. The peasant lead the widow and her son to where he had left his wagon. He had them get up into it, and then he said to them: "I'm going to load the wagon. You'll have to be buried under a mountain of hay. It has to be done. I'll work out two openings so you can breathe. But be careful! In heaven's name, be careful! Don't move! Whatever happens, don't budge! And most of all when we leave town, at the sentry station! Tell that to your son, Feige."

The widow took her son's face in her hands and as she stroked his hair gently she said to him, "Did you hear? We must be silent. Whatever happens! It's our only chance. Our lives depend on it. Even if you're afraid, even if you hurt, don't call out, and don't cry! You can scream later, you can cry latter. Do you understand, Son?"

"Yes, Mother, I understand. Don't worry. I won't cry. I promise."

At the sentry station two Hungarian gendarmes, black feathers in their hats, asked the peasant where he was going.

"I'm going home," he answered. "I have two farms, two fields; the town lies between them. To move wheat or hay from one to the other I've got to cross the city. I've done it so often that the horses know the way all by themselves."

"What are you hiding underneath?"

"Nothing, officers. Nothing at all. I swear it. I have nothing to hide."

The gendarmes drew their long swords from their black scabbards and drove them into the hay from all angles. It went on forever. Finally the

peasant couldn't stand it any longer: he let out a whimper, and tried to smother it with the back of his hand. Too late. One of the gendarmes had noticed. The peasant had to unload the hay; and the gendarmes, triumphant, saw the widow and her son.

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

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

A thick silence fell. (*The Town Beyond the Wall*, 112)

I have never encountered a silence as powerful, as disturbing and as inspirational as Mendele's. The silence of Mendele, in which his entire peoples' unjust suffering can be read, consumes Wiesel. A survivor of the Holocaust himself, having lost his father, mother and sister to the 'final liquidation,' Wiesel knows the essence of Mendele's silence. The silence of Mendele and Feige is a speaking silence, that speaks and cries out in their story and the stories of Kalman, of Varady, and of all the procession of characters in Wiesel's novels.

But another silence also tells a story. The silence of all the spectators of the world who said volumes by their silence. And that story speaks today as people watch Rwanda and Zaire, as they close their eyes to Bosnia. But the strongest story told by silence is in the world turning its back on the chimneys of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. That is the story that cries out for another scream.

The silence of Mendele itself is not enough to conquer the silence of the spectator. Mendele's silence must be accompanied with stories, screams, shouts, laugher and tears if one is to revolt against the absurd, against evil, against unhappiness. Covered in the shadow of the Holocaust we can be certain, if we were not before, that we are faced with a world that is often unjust and chaotic. But Wiesel reminds us in *The Town Beyond the Wall*—a novel in which the main character, Michael, who is Wiesel's alter-ego, who too has encountered *the* event—that one thing is certain: we are surrounded by others who are faced with similar struggles, fears, concerns, worries and uncertainties. With the character Pedro, Michael's best friend and mentor, as his mouth piece, Wiesel encourages us to walk with one another, talk with one another, suffer with one another and, ultimately, stand-up, shout-out, and defend one another from the chaos of the world.

How does one deal with the pain of seeing the true nature and devastating depths of humanity? Of the world? Wiesel points, in *The Town Beyond the Wall*, to at least three ways to deal with these depths: One can become a spectator, shielded by indifference. One can choose madness, retreating from pain and absurdity. One can become an artist, molding one's own meaning and happiness with those around them. The third approach, that of the artist, is most noble, the most productive and the most certain in this uncertain world. Pedro, an artist, taught Michael not only how to survive

but how to create a meaningful, artistic life in a potentially meaningless world. Michael, in turn, passed this knowledge onto the Silent One, one of the prisoners he encounters in a Hungarian jail cell. Passed on, Pedro's words of wisdom saved Michael's life. Passed on, Pedro's words of wisdom saved the Silent One's life. Wiesel, after walking up to the edge and having gazed down at the abyss below, has come back as a messenger for all the dead Jews. Wiesel has come back to pass on wisdom that might add meaning, purpose, joy and redemption to our lives.

Prayer One

"I HAVE A PLAN—TO GO MAD!"
Dostoevski

Viktor Frankl, the renowned Holocaust survivor and psychotherapist, writes that "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life" (*Man's Search for Meaning*,105). If one is to participate in this search for meaning, Frankl states, she must search for the meaning to be found in suffering, for suffering is an inextricable portion of the human condition; "To live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in that suffering" (9). If suffering is an essential aspect of meaning, the same must be said of chaos; for, from the chaos of the universe immeasurable suffering is born. Because of the overwhelming presence of chaos, it too must be incorporated into such a search for meaning. One must ask what is chaos' significance for my life: how does its existence challenge my present order and system of beliefs? While human beings' rationality, which searches for order in chaos, has brought them many luxuries and conveniences, it also has brought them a burden: the duty to reflect, the duty to reflect on one's actions, those actions' results and their ramifications. So, in order to find meaning in life, one must find meaning in chaos—an arduous and threatening task. But finding meaning in chaos is difficult; in fact, it seems counter-intuitive. Reason, which does not create order but searches for it, is inept in dealing with the chaos of the universe[1]. The fact remains though that if one desires to come closer to the truth and incorporate the truth into one's meaning, he must ask questions about chaos. Wiesel had no choice but to acknowledge chaos' presence in his life—though he did have

[1] Post modern philosophy would argue the opposite—reality is a human construct, there is no truth apart from the truth we assign to something. I do not have the proper background to adequately challenge this view, and though I find it interesting, at this point I will only make note of it.

the option, like Meir, one of the characters in *The Town Beyond the Wall*, to discount its presence. The world about Wiesel, and that of his alter ego, Michael, in the same novel, a world covered by the shadow of the Holocaust, contains all the signs of chaos: disorder, meaninglessness and absurdity. Wiesel, after spending time in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, having lost his sister, mother and father to the death camps, recognizes the chaos and the madness of the world about him and is perplexed, sickened and consumed by the logical and theological implications this chaos has on the meaning of his life. Wiesel's view of the world is clouded by his discovery that theology and rationality are not the antithesis of chaos and absurdity but all of them are intermingled. For this reason, chaos and absurdity, which stand as backdrops to the world surrounding Wiesel, are also backdrops to his novels, *The Town Beyond the Wall* being no exception.

For Michael rational order disappeared when he was standing in the middle of the square in front of the train station at Sczerenczevaros, with hundreds of other Jews, to be deported to the death camps. Chaos is the absurdity of Michael in pain—sick, alone without God or friend after the war. No longer a synagogue in Sczerenczevaros—that is chaos. And how does Michael deal with chaos? He has some models in the novel—as did Wiesel in his life: Old Martha and Moishe the Madman. Faced with chaos they chose the road of madness—or so people thought. A way out of the chaos is to go mad. Like Dostoevski, many of Wiesel's characters have a plan, 'to go mad.' The world does not show logic and rationality. And so why not go mad?

Moishe the Madman

> "The others!" Moishe cried, bringing a fist down on the table. "The others! By what right are they not crazy? These days honest men can do only one thing: go mad! Spit on logic, intelligence, sacrosanct reason! That's what you have to do, that's the way to stay human, to keep your wholeness! But look at them: They're cowards, all of them! They never say, 'I'm crazy and proud of it!' But they jump at the chance to yell, 'He's crazy! Moishe's crazy! Keep away from him!' As if every one of them wasn't at sometime in his life another man, called Moishe, Moishe the Madman!"

Moishe the Madman is not mad in the traditional spirit of madness—abandoning his rational faculties in order to join a storm of chaos and hallucinations like King Lear. Rather, while Moishe's outward appearance may fulfill the typical madman stereotype, Moishe—and I "speak of the real Moishe, the one who hides behind the madman—is a great man" (14). Moishe the Madman sits upon two chairs because he is so fat; Moishe the Madman weeps when he sings and laughs when he is silent; Moishe the Madman gets drunk and cries out nostalgic love songs; but Moishe, the man behind the madman, will not be fooled by clarity and the false structure it offers; Moishe understands that to say that humans were created in God's image may be blasphemy; most importantly, Moishe knows the importance of honesty, integrity and courage. And this is why Moishe was mad: In the dark days of World War II was it not crazy to keep one's eyes open and to tell of all that one saw? Moishe, Mad-Moishe, the babbling, singing, fat, morose Moishe, displays true *courage* with his penetrating gaze, displays true *honesty* by admitting all that he sees, and displays true *integrity* because he chooses to go on

seeing, not hiding behind blind walls of indifference and false clarity. The sights Moishe sees—Christians persecuting Jews, children giving him urine to drink, human to human cruelty—demonstrates that the world is not rational.

Moishe's willingness to see what was before him embodies inclusive meanings of honesty, courage, and integrity. When I refer to the 'inclusive' meanings of these words, I mean that honesty, integrity and courage are not attributes that can be achieved through random acts but that these attributes can only be fully realized when one's life is guided by such principles and is organized around them. Generally our lives are not centered around moral duties and obligations, but we only adhere to moral duties and obligations in convenient circumstances. Moishe, on the other hand, focused his life around what he saw to be true and thought to be right. Moishe, was far-seeing; he saw, as Michael's father says, "worlds that remain inaccessible to us," (14) and because in his younger years he had felt responsible to tell others of his visions he was considered 'mad.' 'Mad Moishe' was not a result of a soul invaded by spirits and strange voices but was the creation of those around him who did not want to heed his call or hear of his esoteric knowledge. Moishe suffers from what Wiesel calls mystical madness. Robert McAfee Brown, author of *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity*, writes that mystical madness characterizes those "whom the world calls "mad," since they believe in a different vision and challenge the existing order in the name of that vision. They are spokespersons for the divine and purveyors of a truth all persons need to hear. They offer a creative, indeed essential, contribution to human well being" (75).

The issue of esoteric knowledge surfaces through-out *The Town Beyond the Wall* and is used in a few different manners. Most specifically, Wiesel ties the theme of esoteric knowledge to Varady, Michael's childhood immortal neighbor who "risked not only his reason, but his faith,

in his passion to learn" (26) the mysteries of the garden of esoteric knowledge. The garden of esoteric knowledge can be better understood with a little background: Pardes is the Yiddish term for garden and is also a mnemonic for the four different types of biblical exegesis which are: literal, allegorical, homiletic, and mystical (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 2, 490). Early Jewish theologians believed that only with the last method, the mystical, could the hidden life processes of the Godhead and their connections with human life be unveiled. An ancient account of four sages who employed mystical interpretation to enter the garden highlights the rewards and dangers of this method. Of the four sages who entered the garden, only one emerged unscathed and successfully assimilated the mystical doctrines while one of the others went out of his mind, another became an apostate, and the fourth gazed and died (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol 2, 490). It would appear that Varady too, like the first sage, was able to assimilate the knowledge he gained in the garden of esoteric knowledge. It would also appear that Varady made use of this knowledge to live beyond his contemporaries' and his contemporaries children, to an old, old age. Varady does eventually die but it is by his own doing; Varady chose suicide over the Nazi oven.

This esoteric knowledge which most appropriately relates to Varady can also be used to effectively investigate Moishe's far-seeing view of the world. Moishe's esoteric knowledge is esoteric because it is beyond what ordinary mortals can fathom or are willing to fathom—frightening because of the secret it holds and undesirable because of the responsibilities it places on one. The secret hiding at the center of this desolate garden, which deters passerbys from visiting, is the eighteenth century Yiddish proverb "that nothing in the world is as whole as a broken heart" (19). The truth of this proverb, though there are many truths about it, lies in the fact that no one is completely whole until her heart has been broken. A person cannot feel

compassion, cannot feel pity, cannot even feel real joy until he has been truly devastated. And while this truth, which is often mistaken as depressing, detracts from the appeal of the garden, the duties the garden bestows on its potential guests are even more of a deterrent.

Michael's father is drawn to Moishe because he is far-seeing, he is wise, and because he is ready to see the world as it is. While Michael's father desires to look into the garden of esoteric knowledge as Moishe has, he realizes that this vision is dangerous and that "Moishe's madness is only a wall erected to protect us" (14) from that danger. But regardless of the risks involved with this search for divine knowledge, Michael's father longs to encounter the garden of esoteric knowledge. It is because of this determination of Michael's father to discover uninhibited truth that Moishe respects him and enjoys spending time with him. The knowledge reaped from a visit to this garden is dangerous for several reasons. Two of the reasons applicable in this context are, first, that the world is not wholly logical, meaningful, or ordered—thus undermining our present established order and reopening the chaos immediately below the surface; the second danger involved with a visit to the garden of esoteric knowledge is that the wisdom gained summons the visitor to heed the challenge of the other. The challenge of the other undermines our existing order and meaning by forcing us to examine the implication of our actions on other people and, at the same time, requires us to restructure our actions, habits and lifestyles. Hence, the danger and difficulty.

Through his work with the poor as he recounts in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire restructured and risked his life answering the call of the other. Calling attention to the oppressor-oppressed relationships that exist in the world today and how our present lifestyles and educational systems reinforce the oppression of the poor, Freire successfully incorporated esoteric knowledge into his life. The difficulties and dangers of acknowledging others does not

only come from the accomplishment of grand tasks such as Freire's but also comes from recognizing and heeding the challenge of the other on a daily basis. Since responding to the other is not natural to us, either on the day to day level or on the grander level, we would need a radical restructuring of our lives if we were to walk eyes open in the garden heeding the call of the other. Moishe did just this. He saw the chaos of the world but more importantly recognized his duty to listen to, look to, and dialogue with the other. This is why Moishe is honest, courageous and has integrity. This is also why Moishe is not just Moishe, but Moishe the Madman.

Old Martha

Moishe the Madman reminds us of our obligation to reply to the challenge of the other and of our fear of looking at the world as it is: a potential absurd abyss, or at the very least, a place that contains chunks of chaos. Old Martha expounds on our fear of the unknown and on the possibility of meaninglessness, as Moishe did, but in a very different fashion. Old Martha parallels the mysterious whipping winds, pelting rain, and booming thunder of an entrancing summer storm, of the Dionysian flux. Because of her power, mystery and chaos, we are oddly attracted to her:

> Outside, twilight swooped down on the city like a vandal's hand: without warning. On the red and gray roofs of the squat houses, on the living wall of ants surrounding the cemetery, on the nervous, watchful dogs. No light anywhere. Every window blind. The streets almost empty. In the square

> near the Municipal Theater only Old Martha, the official town drunk, exuberates. She has the whole city to herself and the city unfolds in a kind of demonic ecstasy. She dances, flaps her voluminous skirt, displays her naked, scabrous belly, gestures obscenely, shrieks insults, flings her curses to the four winds. Joyfully she prances before the universe as if before an audience, her mirror. (3)

Wiesel tells us that as a boy Michael was fascinated by storms; "He loved to watch nature let herself go. At sea he wished he could be alone on the bridge, alone to contemplate the unleashed waves" (4). Raw, uninhibited, unleashed acts of nature: the vigor, the enigma and danger of it captivate Michael as they seem to captivate people of all ages and times. Today, when a storm blows in, families pull out lawn chairs and watch, in the protection of a screened-in porch, the winds, rain and lightning. The uninhibited—especially in our subdued world—has always been awe inspiring and tempting.

Old 'mad' Martha, not only felt an urge to join a summer squall but followed her desire to its end and allowed herself to be gathered up and swallowed by the storm: "She wanted to be one of the elements, part of the chaos" (4). Michael, having wondered out into the town square late one night, sees Martha prancing about in a 'demonic ecstasy' and is entranced by her—by her letting go of herself. While Martha both frightens and disgusts Michael, he is indeed intrigued by her and as we read latter in the novel is tempted to turn away from all clarity and reason and take Martha up on her offer to come and "make love with me, see how my body is beautiful, how my blood is young. Come!... You'll be the center of the universe, the heart of the storm!" (5).

Old Martha was inviting Michael to abandon the Apollinian aspects of his character and lose himself in the Dionysian flux about him. Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, states that Apollo and Dionysus, the two art deities of the Greeks, were said to have existed in opposition to each other: Apollo being the god of form responsible for the sculpted order of the world, while Dionysus was the god of chaos in whom "everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness" (36). Nietzsche discusses the apparently opposing arts, one of which is embodied in persons who cling to crafted order and form in their lives and those others who abandon the Apollinian 'healthy-mindedness' to embrace the blissful, orgiastic ecstasy of Dionysus' primordial unity. Though these two art forms seem to run in opposition to each other, through "a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic 'will,' they appear coupled with each other, and through this coupling ultimately generate an equally Dionysian and Apollinian form of art" (33). The merging of these two art deities' aims is, after some reflection, no surprise. Art cannot exist without form, offered by Apollo, or without the generative chaos, offered by Dionysus. Music and dance, for example, which have the tendency to sweep us up into self-forgetfulness, cannot exist without form. Old Martha, who had forsaken any sort of form or order in her life and had allowed herself to be swept away by the swirling winds of ecstasy and intoxication, negating the possibility of being weighed down by sad, gloomy or serious restraints, was now enticing Michael to do the same.

There were times at the concentration camp, in France and in Marocco when Michael almost joined Martha's storm, almost chose madness, 'a free act which destroys all freedom,' not only to feel the power of the tempest but to escape the pain and meaninglessness of the world. Michael did not, though, go mad or abandon himself to "the witches' cauldron" (36) . While

Martha's madness shares many attributes of 'clinical madness'[2]—or madness as retreat—there is also knowledge to be gained by the inspection of her nature, for the chaos she embodies and flaunts is a part of all of us. People, in the attempt to preserve well being, often fool themselves into believing in a set of immutable laws and meanings which they cannot prove; or, in some cases, they may not fool themselves but may acknowledge that the laws and beliefs they abide by rest, at lest partially, on the unknowable. With the uncertainty found in many of our thoughts and beliefs comes the possibility of falsehood, chaos and meaninglessness. When Martha shrieks out "You're in my belly, all of you. You stink of my blood, you're tangled in my guts. And you think you're so pure" (6) she frightens us with the possibility that our laws, beliefs and ethics are not logical and rational, but rest on incorrect assumptions and are absurd. Wiesel uses Martha's shriek not only to frighten us but also to warn us, to cause us to reexamine our present laws, beliefs and ethics.

Along with warning us to take a closer look at our beliefs, at our supposed 'ordered' realities, Martha's mad shrieks demonstrates her absurdity even in a world that contains chaos. By the end of the novel Michael is still entranced by, and even a bit envious of, Martha's participation in the chaotic flux. But, even more so, he is offended by Old Martha and sees her for what she really is: "ugly, disgusting, rotten" (85). Michael comes to the realization that Martha "is mad. If nothing exists but her, there is no reason to hang back. There is no reason not to follow her into madness" (86). Sensing that more existed than Martha and her madness Michael chose not to follow her into the heart of chaos, a futile act which would only increase the absurdity of the world. What Michael did not discover for some time was that his asceticism—

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[2] Clinical madness is defined by Brown as "being so out of touch with one's surroundings that one is unable to function within them, cut off from the ability to respond or communicate" (75).

by which he hoped to increase the power of his spirit by mortifying his flesh—was also a futile practice because it erected a wall between himself and others. Michael refused to partake of Martha's mad dance because of its danger and futility but was simultaneously proving to be no more productive than she because his asceticism caused him to forsake crucial components of the human experience, i.e., friendship, pleasure and joy. Michael's father, in an attempt to pull him from his reclusive ways with Kalman, the Rebbe possessed by God, tells Michael that his body as well as his soul are gifts from God. If the soul, Michael's father tells him, is

> the link between you and God, the body is the same between you and your fellows... God is God because he is a bond between things and beings, heart and soul... To resemble God means to make perfect our bond, to broaden it, to render it more true, more useful, more radiant. Who does not live for man... creates for himself a false image of God" (43).

Hence, the body and the pleasures and pains it brings, the bridges it gaps between others, cannot rightfully be denied in the name of God or any other divine force.

Martha, in embracing the madness of a world of lust and drunkenness, in retreating, in enveloping herself in the excessive, denies the possibility of exchange with the others because she refuses to retain herself and instead becomes one with the wild untamed storm of chaos. Michael too, in embracing asceticism, eliminates the possibility of rapport with others and thus the possibility of resembling God. Martha certainly, and Michael temporarily, become fanatics in the search for truth and, as Michael's father tells us, fanatics in choosing eternity "forget life,

which is healthy, simple, and joyful; which is made up of laughter and stupidities and daily hopes and childish illusions, of adventures that fear no tomorrow" (42).

Final Thoughts on Madness

Aside from Moishe, all of the 'mad' characters in *The Town Beyond the Wall* have taken just one road in their search for truth: Martha has embraced chaos, Varady, in an attempt to prove that human strength is even greater than the strength of God, chose to impose his will on the universe and Kalman attempted to move himself and his disciples outside of time in order to hurry the coming of the Messiah. Each discovered a critical piece of the puzzle: one honoring chaos' existence, one exulting the power of man, one preparing the way for the Chosen, the Messiah. But in these diligent attempts to extract all of life's meaning and significance from only one piece they erred. Their focused and singular methods drew all their attention to a part of the puzzle, forsaking the other key pieces. When Michael first meets Varady he explains that he is studying philosophy and theology in order to please both his parents—his mother who lives body and soul for Hasidism and his father who adores reason and devotes all his time to questioning the eternal verities (25). Varady warns Michael, "It's dangerous... To swear fidelity to both light and shadow is to cheat. Of the roads that lead to truth there is never more than one. For each man there is only one" (23). After much thought, the accuracy and full implications of this statement of Varady's continues to perplex me. For this reason I cannot argue about the validity or invalidity of the statement that there is only one road to truth for an individual, but I do firmly believe that one of the underlying messages this statement conveys is incorrect. Varady's advice to Michael seems to support his isolated ascetic search, a search that will

eventually prove to be too narrow because it does not incorporate others. I believe that Wiesel indirectly warns of the danger implicit in Varady's claim at the end of Prayer I after both Hersh-Leib and Menashe, Michael's classmates who studied with him under Kalman, have plunged into madness in the *sole* pursuit of divine wisdom. After Michael's two classmates made their departure into the realm of chaos, the narrator states, and these words are autobiographical for Wiesel[3], "Michael did not follow his two comrades [into madness]. The Germans saved him" (47).

Martha, Moishe, Varady and Kalman all represent a part of Michael; they all are a portion of his soul and a part of his psyche. Michael wants to join the chaotic flux, he wants to be far-seeing, he wants to be stronger than God, he wants to usher in the coming of the Messiah, but what the reader comes to understand by the end of Prayer I is that these are not independent projects to be completed in a systematic order. Rather, one overlaps the other and by neglecting just one area Michael is lead astray from his overall goal—to ascertain truth. Michael yearns to know Varady's truths, and Moishe's and Kalman's and Martha's—truths that brought together may compose the truth. But getting caught up in one set of truths at a time Michael neglects the others and misses his target. To be saved from the madness that dwells at the end of each of these solo roads, Michael is going to have to merge all of the different wanderings of his soul. The incompatibility of Michael's reason, will, identification with chaos and devotion to God are all going to have to be balanced for him not only to find joy and a sense of peace in his life but in order for him to discover truth.

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[3] This line is the most autobiographical of the entire novel (Brown, 76).

Second Prayer

> To keep from stumbling he needed much solitude, silence, and concentration. He was seeking his God, tracking Him down. He would find Him yet. And He won't get off as easily as he did with Job. He won't win out so quickly. I'll be a match for Him. I'm not afraid of Him, not intimidated.
>
> Michael never ceased resenting Job. That biblical rebel should never have given in. At the last moment he should have reared up, shaken a fist, and with a resounding bellow defied that transcendent, inhuman Justice in which suffering has no weight in the balance.
>
> I won't be had so easily, Michael thought. I'll ask him. "Why do you play hide-and-seek with your own image? You'll tell me that You created man in order to put him to the test—which explains nothing. The contest is too unequal; and anyway it isn't an explanation I need, but a clear concise answer in human terms!" (52)

The black as night ashes curled out of the tall chimneys, were caught in the gusting winds and now were no where to be found. No one dared to explain the fire that was fueled by Jewish men, women and children and none of the living dead who had seen the black flames dared say what the deceased—scattered everywhere—might expect of

them. Some of the survivors pushed the unfathomable event to the farthest recess of their minds, some denied the possibility of life after death and chose suicide, some embraced madness, and there were some, like Michael, who passionately hurled accusations and questions to the One who had the power to prevent the event.

Following the Holocaust, Michael arrived in Paris as an adolescent, where he rented a small apartment, received no visitors, spoke as little as possible and was perpetually in a somber mood. For these reasons, Michael's land lady liked to teasingly call him the little priest. If the title was appropriate, it was appropriate not because of the reverence Michael showed that divine being who coldly watched his eight year old sister bend over with thirst waiting to be herded on a train that would take her to the 'final solution.' Rather, if the title was suitable, it was suitable because the first year Michael spent in Paris he focused his every ounce of energy grimly pursuing God, the being who stole his childhood from him. Michael intended to bring God to justice: "He took my childhood; I have a right to ask him what he did with it" (53).

Following the Holocaust, Michael would have liked to deny God his divine existence, but he could not. Like Zarathustra, Michael grieved at the absence of his God. Kalman still hid in his soul as did Kalman's obsession with the one necessary thing. But Michael wants to tell the old man in his own soul that God is dead, just as Zarathustra marveled, "Can it be true that he has not hear that God is dead?" (12). Michael would like to tell the old man in the forest and his own heart that God does not exist but, resentfully, he cannot—nor can Michael blaspheme: "I go up against Him, I shake my fist, I froth with rage, but it is still a way of telling Him that He's there, that He exists, that He's never the same twice, that denial itself is an offering to His grandeur. The shout

becomes a prayer in spite of me" (114-15). Forced reluctantly to accept God's grandeur, Michael's search for God becomes a struggle with God. But in order to struggle with God, in order to put God on trial, in order to ask him how he can justify the death of six million Jews, Michael first had to find him. Wondering if God would show himself in a hidden recess of his being, Michael strove to find him within; "Where is he? Where is he hiding?" (53). Michael could not understand the game of hide-and-seek that God seemed to be playing with his own image. Why would God need to partake in such an absurd game? Would he really create a game with no human solution? Could he have only created man in order to put him to the test?

God's exhausting game of hide-and-seek leads Michael to search his own soul where he found not God but a cemetery for the dead who sat in judgment of him. In Wiesel's third novel *The Accident*, one of his characters, who also survived the Holocaust, explains to his lover as he holds her head in his hands with his eyes locked on hers, "The story of [his] grandmother, the story of [his] little sister, and of [his] father, and of [his] mother; in very simple words [he] described to her how man can become a graveyard for the unburied dead" (274). Michael and many other of Wiesel's characters are walking graveyards—graveyards where the dead do not sit passively observing, but attack. Armed with an arsenal of guilt, they sit in judgment upon the weary living, watching their every move, listening to their every word, or so Michael thought. In France, Michael stumbles upon Meir, his childhood friend turned smuggler and inquires how he can justify his dishonest occupation. Meir, fuming with exasperation, tells Michael that anyone who survived the war is dishonest; all the honest men, Meir cries out, are dead: murders or suicides. The others compromise; they act as if nothing

happened, "as if the war was only a parenthesis they can open and close whenever they want to" (63). Though Michael may have to 'make a deal with his memory,' as Meir suggests, Michael opens his parenthesis more than most, allowing the dead to squeeze through and rob peace from his soul and sleep from his eyes. In pursuit of God Michael does not seem able to block out the voices of the dead who call his existence into question: Why has he survived when six million other Jews have died? What do the dead expect of him? Will the dead hold him accountable for his remaining days of 'grace?' Grace? Is grace really the gift bestowed upon the survivors?

Not only did Michael's grandmother and all the other Jews whose bodies "had not been buried, but entrusted to the wind that had blown [them] in all directions" (*The Accident*, 231) compose his graveyard within, but Michael worried that he himself was one of the dead. Michael feared that he was experiencing what Frankl describes as the second phase of one's development in a concentration camp, "a kind of emotional death" (*Man's Search For Meaning* 33). When Michael's father died, the man Michael had clung to for survival and meaning in the concentration camps, though in those circumstances one could not be had without the other, Michael did not cry. Michael was able to bear his suffering and give his life meaning in the concentration camps through the care he gave his father. Scrounging for extra crumbs of bread for his father, making sure that his father made it to role call, Michael's suffering was made more manageable because it served a purpose; Frankl writes that "suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning" (117). When Michael's father died, the parent he loved as a boy and the man to whom he owed his survival died, but he did not feel a thing, did not

shed a tear. This dreadful moment, which caused Michael to fear that he was no longer capable of feeling compassion or emotion, that he too was dead, haunts him like a ghost.

Michael's own memory of the death of his father is not the only ghost that haunts him. Yankel, Michael's alter-ego as Michael is Wiesel's alter-ego, was the Piepel, or the spoiled Jewish child of the Nazi soldiers in charge of the death camps. Michael and Yankel were both boys during their stay in the camps and over time came to be close friends, united not by their unequal status but by the inhumane way they were robbed of their childhood. Despite their friendship, or precisely because of it, Yankel also haunts Michael. Yankel was with Michael on his darkest day when Michael watched his father die and Yankel watched with curiosity. After having watched his own father shot in the back of the head on a soldier's whim and then having been granted the absurd authority to stroll through the concentration camp as a soldier would—holding people's lives in his hands—Yankel no longer had the capacity, or at least the know-how, to love. His distorted life negated the possibility for him to comprehend or partake in such a foreign activity. Prior to Michael's father's death, Yankel, astonished at the deep love Michael had for his father, tells Michael, "You're lucky. I'd like to love, too" (56). But just before Michael's father's death, after being close to the fire for too long, Michael can no longer love or feel compassion. After the death of his father, at which he felt as indifferent as the spectator who watched him and his family be carted away from the ghetto, Michael came to fear that he was now among the dead in the cemetery of his soul.

Contending with the notion that "death may invade a creature though life has not yet departed," (91) contending with the dead who were sitting in judgment on him, Michael also had to contend with Yankel, a direct link to his past, a direct reminder of

when the night was darkest. Emigrating to France following the Holocaust, Yankel, thirteen years old and unable to speak any one language correctly, was put into a class with children much younger and happier than he. On most Thursdays Yankel would come knocking on Michael's bolted door wanting to see the only other person who had seen all that he had seen, the only other person who also knew the dark depths of human nature. Michael was all-too-well aware of their unfortunate bond: "He's drowning too, Michael thought. They won't let him go, release him to the world of the living" (74). So it was with Yankel's death, an absurd death—absurd because it did not come in the concentration camp but on a street in Paris where he was hit by a truck, that Michael was most suffocated with the need to justify his own existence. Alive, Yankel was a hindrance to Michael's struggle with God; Yankel reminded Michael of the past, a past he would have liked to forget. Avoiding haunting memories of the past, Michael continued to send Yankel away pleading that he needed solitude for his struggle with God, but all the time knowing that he ultimately feared the gaze of Yankel. Dead, Yankel became his most feared enemy: Yankel took with him to the grave the memory of Michael tearless at Michael's father's death. When Yankel is alive, Michael admits his concern: "Yes, I'm afraid. I'm afraid of the bit of me that's part of you" (51). But once Yankel is dead, Michael's fear turns into horror, for he will never be able to justify himself to his only living friend, who had seen all he had, because he was too ashamed to face him.

Out of the little prince's death, an absurdity, Michael was creating an absolute value through which he viewed and judged all acts and beings (92). The absurd became Michael's lens with which he inspected God and truth; the absurd became the lens through which he put God on trial for the death of Yankel and the death of six million

Jews. Michael was committed to track God down and hold him responsible for his creation; through his questioning of the Almighty, Michael sought not only justice in an unjust, chaotic world but reconciliation with the dead; Michael sought human explanations and answers from the divine: an impossible task. Human understanding and divine meaning cannot be harmonized because of their different natures. Human understanding is finite while divine understanding and purpose is infinite and thus beyond our comprehension. Michael was futilely trying to reconcile two unreconcilable forms of intelligence. Frankl supports the incompatibility of human understanding and divine understanding with the following story in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*:

> After a while I proceeded to another question, this time addressing the whole group. The question was whether an ape which was being used to develop poliomyelitis serum, and for this reason punctured again and again, would ever be able to grasp the meaning of its suffering. Unanimously, the group replied that of course it would not; with its limited intelligence, it could not enter into the world of man, i.e., the only world in which suffering would be understandable. Then I pushed forward with the following question: "And what about man? Are you sure that the human world is a terminal point in the evolution of the cosmos? Is it not conceivable that there is still another dimension possible, a world beyond mans' world; a world in which the question of an ultimate meaning of human suffering would find an answer?" (122).

The relationship between the ape and his or her incomprehensible suffering can be paralleled to Michael's frustrated search for the meaning of the Holocaust—incomprehensible for his limited understanding but still potentially logical and purposeful for an omniscient God.

Michael might find this explanation of Frankl's reasonable, but it is not acceptable, for, "It isn't an explanation [he needs], but a clear, concise answer in human terms!" (52). Michael may never receive understandable answers in his trial of God, but he still has the right, and the duty, to continue to hurl questions at God concerning "inhuman justice in which suffering has no weight in the balance" (52). So why continue to question God if his answers are indecipherable or not given at all? And, in light of the notion that it may be beyond mortal capacity to apprehend God's purpose for the creation of the world as it is, if reasons are in fact given, what gives us the right to interrogate God? First of all, Michael is justified in continuing to question God because even if the answers he receives are incomplete and confounding a continued examination has the potential of shedding additional light on the subject matter even if no certain answers are arrived at. Michael may learn about God, as Wiesel does concerning the Holocaust, that "when the subject matter is the Holocaust, to know that we will know less at the end than we did at the beginning is already to have begun to know more" (Brown, 22). And why do humans, with their limited intelligence, have the right to question God? Because of the incommensurability between human capacities and divine capacities: Michael never ceased to resent Job, the biblical character who, after having called God into question for

Job's unmerited suffering, gave in, conceding that he did not have the divine insight to continue the dispute. In opposition to Job's accord, Michael vows not to let God "get off [as] easily as He did with Job" (52). Job did not realize, according to Michael or Emmanuel Levinas in *To Love the Torah More Than God*, that at the heart of the incommensurability between human capacities and divine capacities "the equality between God and man is established" (40); Job did not understand that because of God's unlimited power, with which he could have created a world in which suffering had meaning and purpose, that man had the right to ask him why he created the opposite: a world filled with unjust suffering. An all-knowing God allowed six million Jews to be murdered by the Nazi killing machine; an all-powerful God allowed Michael's mother, father and sister to die during the Holocaust; an all-loving God allowed the little boy in Wiesel's autobiographical novel *The Night* to be meaninglessly hung before the rest of the Jewish concentration camp prisoners; God—the almighty one—the only one who could have created a different world in which suffering meant something—watched as all these God-forsaken events took place, and this is precisely why Michael has the right to bring him to trial. God, Michael believes, has no answers. He wants God on trial to admit his mistake. That's all the answer he needs.

Out of this bitter anger for God having created the world as it is comes the potential birth of art. If the "only real concern of the artist is to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art," (James Baldwin, *Autobiographical Notes*) then it is the Wiesels and the Michaels of the world who, with their questions and cries of injustice, pit themselves against God as artists to create a new way of seeing. The artist, with her 'flayed sensibilities and inflamed imagination' attacks her fear of the world as

meaningless and attempts to mold her own meaning, her own work of art, her own vision of God (108). The artist realizes, like that martyr, that his "life is not enough, he wants the life of others to beat in his veins, he wants to annex the cries and tears of the blemished and ruined who fight and despair" (98)—he wants justice, he wants meaning, and the only way to achieve either of the two is by forging it himself. So the artist strives after equity, achievable or not, and even though she may not have the last word, as Job discovered, this duel with God does not have to end in nothingness. A question persists, a question that if studied closely reveals that all humanity suffers unjustly, that all humanity feels loneliness, that all humanity feels pain and agony. This question, if voiced in a cry for others to hear, "marks the birth of art" (96). Job should have not given in so easily. He should have rebelled further. He should not have admitted that his suffering was just. Rather, he should have screamed longer and proclaimed louder that his suffering was unjust, not in order to have the last word, but so that others would hear his cries and say "Ahh, there's a man who knows how I feel. There's a man with whom I am connected not by my species alone but by my suffering." As a result of the artist's cry, people come to understand that one's struggles are not to be borne in isolation but rather in communion with others.

Could this be what the dead wanted of Michael? A Scream.

Third Prayer

--"Camus wrote somewhere that to protest against a universe of unhappiness you had to create happiness. That's an arrow pointing the way: it leads to another human being. And not via absurdity." (118)

The year following the Holocaust, Parisian youth had a philosophico-political struggle with their conscience. They, like Michael, needed to assimilate the meaning of this event into their lives. Europe stunk of murder. And though the youth were not responsible for the stench—their elders were—they still had to deal with it. Murder was not the only foul odor in the air; the complacency of millions who sat on their hands as the Jews were executed added to the smell. Their elders' passivity was no longer satisfactory—action, movement, and chatter were needed. Cafes were the gathering site of the disenchanted youth, their home base where bold plans were made, where political systems were lambasted, where everyone tried to cry louder than those at their side. To forget the odor in the air, everyone kept talking; "So Paris, that year, [became] an echo chamber in which converged all the sounds and vibrations of those who were afraid of silence (which they confused with emptiness), who were afraid of fear (which they took for cowardice), and who chattered only to reassure themselves" (67).

After Yankel's death, Michael had one of his closest encounters with madness. Never returning to his room after he left the hospital, Michael wandered the streets aimlessly taking on the life of a bum. Bridges and benches were his home at night as the Parisian sidewalks were during the day. Michael was "like a man half mad" (102) when Meir came across him: filthy, hunched over, unshaven, with nervous eyes. Meir took Michael to his hotel so that he could recover from his near crash with madness. After

days filled with nothing but rest and sleep and long conversations with Meir, Meir encouraged Michael to take a trip to Tangier as a writer for a local paper—his travel journals would be published periodically during his adventure. Reluctantly, Michael accepted the offer and it was in Tangier that he met Pedro, a friend of Meir's, who brought him to the crossroads of his life. At this crucial junction—one road leading to madness, the second to others—Michael discovered that silence was not, as he previously thought, "an emptiness but a presence. The presence of God when one is alone against the world" (115). Before meeting Pedro, Michael thought that the silence, which answered his questions was evidence that there was no God, or, that if there was a God, he was cruel for not responding. Throughout his search for the divine, Michael had not thought that the silence that set off his steps could be God, that the silence that allowed him to hear the beating of his heart could be God, that the silence of little Mendele, who was struck through with a gendarme's sword, could be God. Michael too had mistaken silence for absence and in so doing failed to detect that God may have been with him all along. The discovery of this God in silence was doubly surprising, for his mentor, Pedro, did not lead him in that direction.

Some, like the author Amos Funkenstein, in his essay *Theological Implications of the Holocaust: A Balance*, would propose that Michael was looking down the wrong road for answers to his questions concerning the meaning of the death of the Jews during World War II. To insinuate that a theological purpose can be found in the execution of the Jews is as offensive as it is impossible, Funkenstein argues. So rather than focus on its religious-theological meaning, Funkenstein would like to center his thoughts around what the Holocaust "teaches us about man, his limits, his possibilities, his cruelty, his

creativity, and his nobility" (301-302). Funkenstein too, like the youth of France, feels the horrors of the past pressing him down; Funkenstein too feels the need to act, but his action and the answers he seeks are not in the divine but in humanity alone. One of the dangers of searching for theological answers to the genocide of the Jews is that concrete answers will lead to an irrational God and an irrational world. Because of this difficulty, if not impossibility, one is tempted to say, or if not to say, to infer, that the Holocaust was meaningless. And this temptation, to forsake the event because one finds it devoid of any substantial significance, is, according to Funkenstein, "as offensive as to say it had a theological meaning, that is, purpose" (302). Not only is claiming ignorance of all meaning of the Holocaust offensive, it is dangerous. Dangerous because if we claim to be ignorant of the event's causes, purpose and meaning, then we cannot correctly assign guilt to those responsible for the event, nor can we take the proper steps to ensure that something of its magnitude does not happen again.

As true as Funkenstein's argument may be, it, in and of itself, will not satisfy the pious Jew in Michael whose view of the world cannot be devoid of God. Levinas, though, *In Loving the Torah More Than God*, presents an argument that leaves the meaning and responsibility of the Holocaust in human hands but includes God as a major piece of the puzzle, without making his association with that puzzle offensive or blasphemous. In tune with Michael's belief that silence was not an emptiness but "the presence of God when one is alone against the world" (115), Levinas asserts that it is by God's absence that he is present: "The guarantee that there is a living God is precisely a word of God that is not incarnate" (39). Creating a world in which he has no control over the day to day, God has put humans' fate in their own hands—he has given humans

independence to redeem themselves rather than giving them dependency on a divine creator; by "refusing to manifest himself in any way as a help, [God] directs his appeal to the full maturity of the integrally responsible person" (38). For the pious Jew, and potentially many religious persons, the difficult worship that Levinas promotes is as effective in finding human meaning in this world, and in encouraging moral action, as is Funkenstein's method, if not more so. Levinas is able to summon human judgment and divine judgment to call persons to moral action—to call persons to protest against a universe of unhappiness by creating happiness (*The Town Beyond the Wall*, 118), by themselves, independently, without the help of God.

When I was a little boy my grandmother gave me the Christian poem 'Footprints.' If I remember correctly, the poem explained the reason why at the beginning two sets of footprints could be seen in the sand, but later, just at the moment when the walker was in the most difficult straits, God seemed to have abandoned the person, for only one set of footprints could be seen. God explained to the walker that the one set of footprints was God's footprints, because at the point where only one set of footprints showed, God was carrying the walker. After studying Levinas' compelling take on God's presence through absence, I cannot help but feel that the poem would be more powerful if it read that there was only one set of footprints because God trusted that the walker could make the walk without him. I would be more touched if the poem implied not that the lone individual was weak and in need of God to tote him along, as a parent does a child, but rather that he was walking alone because he was strong and had the self-resilience to carry himself down the beach—storm or no storm.

While I find this second beach scene more exalting it is still incomplete. For the absence of God in the world does not leave Michael on a solo road to protest against unhappiness in solitude. On the contrary, Michael must look to others and bring others together to increase the force of his revolt. Thus, the poem 'Footprints' could be even more compelling if it had many sets of human footprints marching down the beach together.

But back to the story of Michael: after leaving Paris, he arrived in Tangier and spent a few weeks there working on his articles. On the last night he was to spend in Tangier, Michael hesitantly agreed to meet Meir's friend, Pedro, at the Black Cat Cafe. Arriving at the bar, Michael slid in the front door undetected by a group of men at the far end of the dimly lit establishment. The heavy smoke that hung in the air stung Michael's eyes briefly, but after the burn eased Michael cast his glance towards a group of men encircling a table in the back. Of these men, one, the tallest of the group, with his hard features and deep stare, looked on at the others as they traded stories, bellowing laughs and boasting toasts. It was this man who, when he spoke his melodious French, conjured up immense solitudes, gloomy forests, endless meadows and whose voce had the power to awaken Michael to freedom from his solo struggle with God (108-109). Taking a step deeper into the gloomy bar Michael was detected. Yussuf, Luis, Vassili and the others who had been trading stories shot unfriendly stares at this stranger who dared to disturb their private gathering until Pedro invited Michael to join the group. From that moment, from the moment he first spoke to Pedro, a man with whom Michael would form his closest friendship, things would be different. What was to be Michael's last night in Tangier became the first of seven that he would spend with Pedro and his comrades.

During Michael and Pedro's long midnight strolls through the streets of Tangier, Pedro's wisdom pointed out the road that would eventually lead Michael to discover himself, to discover that God was not to be found in the heavens but in the people all around him.

One night after one of Michael's and Pedro's many walks together, Pedro told Michael, "[you] want to eliminate suffering by pushing it to its extreme: to madness. To say 'I suffer, therefore I am' is to become the enemy of man. What you must say is 'I suffer, therefore you are" (118). Pedro wanted to show Michael that his struggle was not an individual struggle but a universal one, a struggle that others, who shared his same visions of chaos, were also undergoing. Michael's struggle did not isolate him from others, but rather, it united him to many people who had come before him, those who were presently with him, and generations to come—Michael was suffering unjustly as people always have and always will. These other persons, who recognize the chaos of the world and the unintelligible suffering that results from this chaos, were those whom Michael needed to reach out to so that together they might bear the weight of existence with dignity and strength. Suffering shared with others is less intimidating, less daunting. When one is able to realize that one's burden is not unique, that others had already borne similar burdens and survived, one can have more confidence and more hope in their struggle.

Voice is the tool that has the power to bring people together for this battle with absurd suffering and incomprehensible meaning and Pedro's voice specifically had the power to awaken Michael to the possibility of a mutual struggle against the demon of non-meaning. Pedro possessed far-seeing power and wisdom, just as Moishe had, and though this vision brought disquiet to some—those who could not deal with the night that

he spoke of—it brought peace to Michael who was no stranger to the night. Pedro and his friends did not pull the blanket over their heads and bear the night alone; rather, they gathered, drank and told stories not to escape from fear and hate but to augment their hate and fear. Like Michael, these men feared the graveyard within more than external fears. Their greatest fear was fearing, hating and feeling no more. So they took refuge in stories that inspired bitter feelings to stir their souls, stories that centered around their thanks for hate and horror, for these harsh emotions were like islands of lucidity on which they could take refuge (108).

When Michael joined Yussuf, Vassili, Luis, Pedro and the others at the table in the murky Black Cat Cafe, a drink was pushed before him and he was told to tell a story. Digging deep into his mind, flipping through pages of his history, examining the faces sketched into his memory, Michael searched for the needed tale. He remembered when his teacher Kalman had told him that "sometimes it happens that we travel a long time without knowing that we have made the journey to pronounce a certain word, a certain phrase, in a certain place" (110). So Michael burrowed deeper and deeper until he had found it: the story of silent Mendele, a young Jewish boy from Szerencsevaros. Michael thought about how words, phrases and cries could often hold people's attention and draw them together but he also thought about how, on some occasions, words are too small, too weak, too inept, to convey one's message and how on these occasions shared silence was superior. So, the hero of Michael's story was neither fear nor hatred; it was silence; the silence of little Mendele in which the whole sweep of his people's suffering could be felt. On the day the Germans decided to rid the country of the Jewish plague, an old friend of Mendele's deceased father came to smuggle Mendele and his mother out of the town and

into the country where they would be safe. Hiding the boy and his mother under a mountain of hay in the back of his horse drawn-wagon, the man ordered Mendele to be silent, especially at the sentry station near the edge of town, and began the ride out to the country. When questioned at the sentry station as to the contents of his load, the man nervously told the gendarmes that he was merely transporting hay out of town. In order to make certain, the gendarmes drove their swords from every angle through the hay. Overwrought with anxiety, the man let out a whimper which was detected by the gendarmes who then forced him to dump his load. Removing the hay, Mendele sat in plain view on his mother's lap, bloody tears rolling down his face, quietly crying, "Mama... It wasn't me who called out! It wasn't me!" (112) His dying protest was to no avail; his mother too had been stabbed by the gendarmes and was dead. No, Mendele had remained silent and words cannot portray his pain but silence, like the silence of his rolling bloody tears, shared with others, can come much closer.

In the company of Pedro and his companions, Michael came to appreciate the human voice and the words and silences that are rooted in it. He learned the power of tales which utilize bold and exact words separated by abrupt, and drawn-out silences. Sharing tales, Michael felt the richness of existence once again as he had when he was a boy studying under Kalman; sharing tales, Michael's voice united him with others; sharing tales, Michael bore witness for the dead; sharing tales, Michael formed strong and deep friendships. Thinking back upon the long road he had traveled, Michael was most surprised by this last ramification of sharing stories with others—that they led him to friendship. By heeding Pedro's call to stay for an additional week in Tangier, Michael abandoned the isolation he had thought so crucial for his duel with God. Ceaselessly

searching for God in the lower depths, in himself and in the heavens, Michael failed to look right around him and in so doing failed to realize, as Pedro tells him, that "The way is no less important than the goal. He who thinks about God, forgetting man, runs the risk of mistaking his goal; God may be your next-door neighbor" (115).

During his stay with Pedro, Michael realized that he was at a turning point in his life. Something was changing. The walls of solitude that he had erected all around him were crashing down. His grim pursuit of God, when taken on with others, was no longer so grim. The night, and the memories that haunted it, were no longer so dark; "'Look at the sky,' Pedro said, 'It's getting light. The night is disappearing" (114). Michael's friendship with Pedro allows dawn to finally break and with dawn comes the possibility for Michael to participate in life again, to participate in a life which is meant to be, as his father had said, "healthy, simple and joyful; which is made up of laughter and stupidities and daily hopes and childish illusions, of adventures that fear no tomorrow" (42). This potential return to joy and simplicity is the result of Michael's recognition of the silence which is God. A silence which allowed Michael to hear his steps echoing off the sidewalk in unison with Pedro's: "No, you are not alone, but two, two, two" (115). Michael found out that united with others he could hold back madness, that united with others he was stronger, more real, more solid, and could be a more fierce opponent in his struggle with God.

United with others, Michael has the opportunity to multiply the strength of his case against God. After his last evening walking the streets of Tangier at Pedro's side, Pedro tells Michael that he will never forget that night for "From now on you can say 'I am Pedro,' and I, 'I am Michael'" (123). Michael has passed himself on to Pedro and

vice versa and it is through this passing on of one's self that Pedro and Michael will come to help many others. As Michael testifies, Pedro's advice to 'protest against unhappiness through creating happiness,' which cannot be done alone, comes to his aid when he needs it most. And then when he is in locked up in the Hungarian jail, Michael, because of Pedro's encouragement to "help many others" (123), comes to the aid of the silent prisoner with whom he shares a cell. Pedro was passed on not just to Michael but to the silent one and the silent one may too someday pass Pedro/Michael on even further. Thus, helping many others becomes inevitable if you reach out to just one.

With Pedro's insistence that Michael 'help others' he suddenly has a responsibility not just to some undetectable, omniscient, omnipotent being but to the man sitting across from him in jail, to the little boy on the street who asks him for money, to Yankel who wants to speak with him. Pedro's message to Michael, when he tells him that he may be missing his goal by forsaking his neighbor in pursuit of the divine, is to choose man over God—to choose the certain over the uncertain—if a choice has to be made. In this spirit, Pedro speaks for Levinas who, though a believer unlike Pedro, emphasizes the secular over the religious, the mortal over the immortal, the certain over the uncertain. Both Pedro and Levinas have chosen a lifestyle that focuses on humans and their struggles and, in so doing, endow humanity with responsibility, meaning, and the potential for glory. Levinas writes that, "To love the Torah more than God—this means precisely: to find a personal God against whom it is possible to revolt, that is to say, one for whom one can die" (40). This personal God is not to be found in transcendental concepts and ideas but in the persons to one's left and right—in dying for one's neighbor, one dies for God.

The Last Prayer

> [Michael to the Spectator] You think you're living in peace and security, but in reality you're not living at all. People of your kind scuttle along the margins of existence. Far from men, far from their struggles, which no doubt you consider stupid and senseless. You tell yourself that it's the only way to survive, to keep your head above water. You're afraid of drowning, so you never embark. You huddle on the beach, at the edge of the sea you fear so much, even to its spray. Let the ships sail without you! Whatever their flag—Communist, Nazi, Tartar, what difference does it make? You tell yourself, "To link my life to other men's would be to diminish it, to set limits; so why do it?" You cling to your life. It's precious to you. You won't offer it to history or to country or to God. If living in peace means evolving into nothingness, you accept nothingness. The Jews in the courtyard of the synagogue? Nothing. The shrieks of women gone mad in the cattle cars? Nothing. The silence of thirsty children? Nothing. It's all a game you tell yourself. A movie! Fiction: seen and forgotten. I tell you, you're a machine for the fabrication of nothingness. (161-162)

Michael's last night in Tangier, Pedro asked him if he could make one wish what would it be? Michael would do almost anything, he told Pedro, to return to his home town one last time. Since the end of the war all Michael had done was search for

Szerencsevaros; he believed that the truth was in Szerencsevaros, and he needed to find it. But it had never occurred to Michael that Szerencsevaros might still be where it was when he was a boy. He thought that his home town was in heaven or in Germany, but never had he thought that it might still exist where it is said to be geographically. But it was a possibility, so when Pedro offered to help get Michael home, Michael was ecstatic. Pedro told Michael to go home and when all the necessary arrangements had been made and the time was right, he would contact Michael for his departure.

After weeks of planning, the time had finally come. Boarding the train he was to take out of Paris, Michael went to car number 761 and entered. Anticipating his meeting the stranger Pedro had assigned to slide him through the Iron Curtain, Michael was dumb-struck—almost to tears—when he saw Pedro sitting there waiting for him. Trying to express his gratitude to Pedro for coming along, Michael was silenced by Pedro, who told him: "There's nothing more pleasant than to surprise a little brother. If you could have seen yourself, framed in that doorway, you would have believed in the richness of existence—as I do—in the possibility of having and sharing it" (124). For Pedro surprises were what gave life its substance, its worth-whileness, its possibilities: surprises enable people to believe in God again, in others again, in themselves again. Causing the world around you to tremble, to vibrate, surprises are a blessing which renew the vigor of life. Pedro tells Michael that if he had a prayer to address to God, it would be, "O, God, surprise me. Bless me or damn me: but let thy benediction or thy punishment be a surprise" (125).

Ironically, Pedro's and Michael's trip ends up with another, less pleasant, surprise. Michael, Pedro, and the guides who assisted with the rendezvous to Szerencsevaros, split-

up just before they reached the town. In three days they are to meet in front of the old cemetery for their departure. But things do not go as planned. Michael spent his first day walking about Szerencsevaros searching for the true reason for his need to return to the city of luck: could it be to see the home he had grown up in, to make sure that his father was really dead, to visit the synagogue? At the end of a day spent in recollections and contemplation, Michael discovered the true reason for his return. Michael needed to return to Szerencsevaros, so that he could question the Other—the spectator—who for the seven days during which the Jews were rounded up and carted off to the death camps in 1944 in the City of luck, blankly, emotionlessly, indifferently, looked out his window as the Jews were gathered up, struck by officers, denied water, and eventually ushered onto cargo trains that would take them to their ultimate liquidation.

Michael's interrogation of the Spectator and his time spent in a Hungarian jail cell following this interrogation, comprise the majority of 'The Last Prayer,' the final chapter of *The Town Beyond the Wall.* During his interrogation of the Other and his jail time Michael ties together and actualizes several of the lessons his father, Moishe, Pedro, Menachem (one of his cell mates) and others have taught him along the way.

Ever since the end of the war, Michael had been searching for answers to the meaning of his life, to the meaning of the Holocaust. He was searching for answers not only so that he might know what Yankel, his father, his mother and the other dead spirits that lived in his soul might expect of him but also so that he might bring God to justice if his answers were insufficient. Spurring this search along, though it was not apparent to him until he reached Szerencsevaros, was Michael's need "to understand the others—the Other—those who watched us depart to the unknown; those who observed us, without

emotion, while we became objects—living sticks of wood—and carefully numbered victims" (148). Michael was relieved that this pressing need for answers, for the answer, that had been chasing him around was obeying some sort of inherent logic. He was not mad. He was searching for a well-deserved answer. How could the Other—the man who gazed out his window across from the synagogue—remain indifferent to the entire spectacle (150)? How could this motionless, bland, bored, bald, fat face sit and blankly watch as the Hungarian police and a few Nazi soldiers beat women and children (150)?

When Michael came across the Spectator's house and the real reason for his return suddenly became clear to him, hate and anger did not heat up his face and throb through his temples; rather, curiosity enveloped him: "How can anyone remain a spectator indefinitely? How can anyone continue to embrace the woman he loves, to pray to God with fervor if not faith, to dream of a better tomorrow—after having seen that?" (150). And, most importantly, how can anyone "After having glimpsed the precise line dividing life from death and good from evil" (150) not scream-out, not cry-out? How? This lack of emotion, this show of continual indifference, was utterly unfathomable for Michael, at least for the moment. The third in the triangle, the spectator stands in sharp contrast to the victim and executioner who are tied by their direct relationship, a relationship that Michael understands. The executioner tries to negate the victim but in doing so at least acknowledges the victim's presence. But the spectator thinks he is above both victim and executioner; he will inquisitively stare at both but face neither. The spectator "is there, but acts as if he were not. Worse: he acts as if the rest of us were not" (151).

Letting himself into the spectator's house, Michael walked through a short corridor and found the Other reading at the kitchen table. His face in profile, Michael

sized up the man who wore glasses—a symbol of anonymity (153)—and his home, which was equally inconspicuous. Feeling a presence in the room, the man looked up at Michael and asked what he wanted. No response. "What do you want?", he asked again. No response. Firmly, now standing, the man asked again, "What do you want?" This time Michael responded, "I want to humiliate you" (155).

Michael had come to bring the Spectator to trial just as he had wanted to bring God to trial, but this time the match was equal, this time he would surely win. Michael ordered the Other to get him some wine to drink. Upon filling two glasses, Michael tossed the contents of each, in turn, in the Spectator's face. Then Michael began his interrogation: "A Saturday in spring. Nineteen forty-four. On one side, the Jews; on the other, you. Only the window—that window—between" (156). Do you remember? Yes, he remembered. Had the Spectator felt shame, remorse, or pity? No, there was no emotion attached to the memory—Guilty! Had the Spectator taken action of any sort? No, he only "wanted to live in peace and quiet" (150)—Guilty! "Your duty was clear: you had to choose" (160). You did not—Guilty! Rather you chose to "scuttle along the margins of existence... afraid of drowning, so you never [embarked]" (161)—Guilty! You reduced yourself "to a stone in the street, the cadaver of an animal, a pile of dead wood" (160)—Guilty! The other was not a man among men, he was a man who thought himself above men. In a desperate effort to safeguard his life, the Spectator had lowered himself to the status of an object. No longer a man, the Spectator was an it. He was a "machine for fabrication of nothingness" (161). He was guilty.

Culpable—Michael sentenced the Spectator to contempt. This man, who "belonged to the category of men who fear only the police" (154), did not deserve hate.

Hate, Michael explains, is for humans; hate is for executioners who beat and kill you. But hate is not for spectators; cowards are not worthy of such a vital emotion. The sentence of contempt, rather than hate, that Michael conferred upon the Other was twice as severe because it implied his inhumanity, it called his bluff. The Spectator was not strong and wise, keeping to his own business—he was weak and near-sighted, failing to recognize his intrinsic relationship and responsibility for others, a relationship which stems from his humanity, from his nature, from his social and rational abilities that define him as a human and tie him to other humans, whether he likes it or not. The spectator had ignored his humanity and deserves to be doubly punished.

In *Loving the Torah More Than God,* Levinas supports strong verdicts for spectators when he discusses a tale from the Torah about how a thief, who steals in the night, fearing humans but not God, should be more severely punished than the brigand, who attacks his victims in broad daylight, showing no fear of people or God (25). The evil committed by the executioner and brigand is, in Levinas' opinion, equal and deserving of correspondingly severe sentences. The same can be said for the thief and spectator, except that they "who have no fear of [God], but fear only what people might say... those who express sympathy with the drowning man but refuse to save him—punish them, O Lord, punish them, I implore You, like a thief, with a doubly-severe sentence" (25).

Michael wanted to humiliate the Other with contempt and as his trial of the Spectator progressed, he began to achieve his end. The man who silently and coldly watched Michael's little sister suffer with the anguish of thirst behind his cold window could not stand to have Michael not hate him; "I couldn't bear that! Your contempt

would burn at my eyes; they'd never close again! You've got to hate me!" (163). The Other was beginning to break now, he was beginning to show signs of humanity, his emotions were betraying him, he could not stand to be thought of as a coward, he needed to be thought of as a man. The pleadings of the Spectator moved Michael. The one who had seemed to be only indifferent quivered and, just for a brief moment, looked almost as if he were going to cry. Surprisingly, Michael said that if the Other would have cried he would have reached over and thrown his arms around him. Michael only wanted a twinge of sorrow from the man, a twinge of guilt, a twinge of anything, so that Michael might have some sign that he reached him, that his words had touched him. But quickly the Other regained his composure and a smile crested his lips.

When Michael's energy was drained, he gazed out the same window from which the Spectator had years earlier looked. Then he turned and, without saying another word, left. Only a moment later did Michael realize the significance of the Other's smile: a police officer was waiting just down the road for him. After being shoved into the officer's car, Michael looked up to see the Spectator sitting in the front seat. Michael's and the Other's eyes locked in the rearview mirror, and, triumphantly, the Spectator's eyes said, "Now you'll have to hate me!" (164). But Michael only smiled. Michael's prediction was about to come true: "the dead Jews, the women gone mad, the mute children... they haven't forgotten you [Spectator]. Someday they will come marching, trampling you, spitting in your face. And at their shouts of contempt you'll pray God to deafen you" (162).

But Michael was not only the judge and the accuser at the trial of the Spectator. He was also a defendant. During his confrontation with the Other, Michael realizes that

he too is and was the spectator—at his father's death, at Yankel's knocking, in the hot sun in front of the railroad station. He is the spectator watching the original Spectator suffer. The judge, spectator for the moment, will, in his turn, also be questioned. And when this time comes it will be seen whose life, the spectator's or the judge's, weighs heavier in the balance. Thus, there is an inherent danger in calling the spectator into question: there will be cross-examinations, and these cross-examinations can be painful.

Before talking about the Spectator's critique of the Jews, a critique that labels the Jews as spectators in their own victimization, I must acknowledge the sensitive, complicated and intricate nature of this issue which I will not be able to give its due in the context of this paper. I would be ignoring an important issue of *The Town Beyond the Wall*, if I ignored Michael's inner struggles with his and his peoples' roles as spectators in the Holocaust. So I will move forward in this discussion carefully, keeping in mind Yehuda Bauer's message, in his essay *They Chose Life, Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust*, that the Jews fell victim to brute force and were not, contrary to the beliefs of Hannah Arendt in her monumental work *Eichmann In Jerusalem*, herded to their death like passive sheep. The Jews, Bauer writes, "though divided, powerless and politically helpless, nevertheless seem to have had the strength and resourcefulness to fight for life in their own ways" (55), ways which included: careful calculation of the best methods to save their lives, i.e., cooperation for the sake of life, guerrilla and partisan groups, sabotages, camp uprisings, etc.

But Michael (and Wiesel) are uneasy. Arendt's question bothers him, even before Arendt asks it. The Other, after being questioned by Michael, claims in his defense that he was not doing anything wrong in just observing the Nazi-Jewish confrontation but was

rather watching some strange game that he could not understand (157). The game was played, says the man in the window, between the passive Jews on one side and the cruel and unopposed Nazis on the other. With these words of the Other, Michael's feelings of hate rather than contempt began to boil up within him. He needs to humiliate the Spectator. He cannot just hate. Hate is too easy. As much as he would have liked to deny these words of the Spectator, his accusation rang a little bit true; "we went at it as if we were playing a game. Without protesting, without fighting back, we let ourselves be cast as victims" (157). Thus, it appears that Michael is not only haunted by Yankel, and the other dead Jews whom he carries around, but by his memory of how he and his entire city allowed themselves to be lead to the slaughter house.

Before Michael had taken the stand in his and other Jews defense concerning their roles as spectators, Michael had said that, "The executioners [he] understood; also the victims, though with more difficulty" (149). Initially Michael's ability to better understand the executioners—like Karl, the soldier who publicly flogged him with a bullwhip—baffled me. But as Michael came to acknowledge his own role as a spectator, a role for which he felt only contempt, his wavering hate / contempt / even understanding for the spectator's hesitancy to reach out to the victim becomes more clear. As a compliant victim of the soldiers who loaded him up and carted him off to the concentration camps, Michael was also a spectator. Forced to acknowledge his relation to the spectator, Michael had to face his own cowardice and contempt for himself, his father and his entire people. Sentencing the Other, Michael had also sentenced himself. But at the end of Michael's trial, a feeling of completion came over him. Michael had delivered

his message and in the mean time it would appear as if he may have finally purged his own soul; "The task is accomplished. No more double life, lived on two levels" (162).

Reflecting on the multiple roles both he and the Spectator played at different times in their lives, Michael came to the conclusion that "Man is not only an executioner, not only a victim, not only a spectator: he is all three at once" (163). All of us are victim and executioner and bald-headed spectators. The role of the spectator is perhaps a side-effect of living in an incomprehensible world where the suffering of another has insufficient weight to make us act. We do not care because we cannot afford to care. We do not care because we are afraid. But for whatever reason we 'spectate,' our 'spectatorship' deserves contempt. The spectators reduce themselves "to the level of an object" (160). Perhaps we cannot always avoid the role of the spectator. But we can, if our hearts are not dead, learn how to weep.

Learning to weep opens up the possibility of embracing humanity and by embracing humanity one becomes the antithesis of the spectator. For Michael this embrace is only possible after he replaces his laugh of madness with weeping tears. Menachem, one of Michael's cell mates who was a pious Jew, tells Michael to "Pray to God to open the source of tears within you... it's your only chance" (136). But Michael refuses, he prefers his laugh of madness. Out of Michael's laugh of madness, he has constructed walls, walls that were meant to protect him from the memories of the concentration camps, walls that were supposed to protect him from the memory of the death of his father, walls erected to protect him from the pain of Yankel's death, walls, that Michael had thought would protect him from the anguish of a God-forsaken life. But Michael's efforts to protect himself and focus his attention on God did not bring about the

end he had intended. In his search for answers, Michael turned away from people who could have helped him find solutions. In his search for God and his struggle with God, Michael shut out the divine in the other with the high walls he had built around himself to keep Yankel and Menachem and Milika away.

One night though, Michael was awaken by a scuffle in his jail cell. The Impatient One, another of Michael's cell mates, this one insane, was strangling Menachem. Michael leapt to his feet and ripped the Impatient One's hands off of Menachem's throat. After regaining his composure, Menachem gave Michael "a look so full affection that it made Michael tremble" (167) and, for the first time, weep. With tears rolling down his cheeks, one of the walls Michael had erected around himself was knocked down, bringing Michael both a sense of relief and shame. By weeping, Michael was able "to find the crust of existence less thick, less hard" (167) but he was also forced to admit that he was not immune to emotion, that he was not strong enough to bear his lot alone. Weeping was not, though, an act of resignation for Michael but an act of acceptance that allowed him to sink down, cry and then rise up and revolt with others at his side—as he does later with the Silent One.

Just after Menachem's show of immense gratitude helped to break down one of Michael's walls, Menachem and the Impatient One were transferred to different cells. Devastated with Menachem's departure, alone in his cell with only the Silent One, Michael was once again tempted to protest against the absurdity of his circumstances by escaping into madness. Now left with only the Silent One, who had not shown a sole emotion since Michael had set an eye on him, Michael had no one to keep him sane. Without anyone to converse with, to argue with, to weep with, Michael was beginning to

spin down toward the pit of chaos which lies below solitude, loneliness and meaninglessness. Before Michael gave himself over to madness, however, the image of Pedro, which Michael carried with him, saved Michael one last time. The hallucination, dream, ghost, recollection, whatever it was, of Pedro spoke to Michael, challenging him to "recreate the universe. Restore [the Silent One's] sanity. Cure him. He'll save you" (172). This image of Pedro pointed out the sin and failure of voluntarily going mad: look at the Impatient One, his behavior is sterile, futile, his revolt is weak, he is a machine running in neutral, he has liberation but he has not liberty (172). "The only valuable protest," Pedro told Michael, "is rooted in the uncertain soil of humanity" (172). Save the Silent One.

Rising the next day, Michael felt renewed. He had a mission, a goal, something to shoot after, something to achieve. Pedro's challenge gave meaning to Michael's existence; he was now responsible for another human's life. Frankl's assessment that out of concrete assignments, demanding fulfillment, meaning is bestowed upon one's life and as a result of this meaning one's circumstances are made tolerable, proved to be true in Michael's case. Pedro's message to revolt against unhappiness with happiness was coming back to Michael now and he resumed his creation of a world with joy and meaning from the void around him (172). The Silent One was far from being alert and conscious of his surroundings, so Michael's first attempts at establishing an exchange with him were only on a sensory level. Michael would take the boy's food from him, push him, shout at him, do anything for some sort of response. After a few days, a response came. It was only a look, but a look which indicated that the Silent One was still capable of questioning, of suffering, of yearning. With the partial fulfillment of his

assignment to save the Silent One, Michael's desire to live was once again strengthened. Now, that the Silent One had shown this tiny change, Michael could dream of much more. Not only did he need to focus his attention on procuring responses from the Silent One but he also needed to set an example of what it meant to be a man. So, acting very much as his father had told him a man is supposed to act, Michael "danced, laughed, clapped hands, scratched himself with his dirty nails, made faces, [and] stuck out his tongue" (174). Michael showed the Silent One that life is supposed to be simple, healthy and joyful and made up of "laughter and stupidities and daily hopes and childish illusions" (42). And Michael is himself discovering what it means to be human.

Out of his tiring duty to help raise the Silent One from madness, Michael once again felt life beating through his veins. Pedro had challenged him to reach out and help many others, to help the Silent One, and as a result of Michael's efforts he was saving himself simultaneously. Michael's redemption is tied to the redemption of the Silent One. In his dark prison cell, lying on a dirt floor, with only scraps of bread to eat and cups of soup to drink, Michael was trying to push back the night with his bare hands (176); he was forging happiness in a dark hole; he was revolting, revolting against meaninglessness by embracing humanity.

Conclusion:

One day, when Michael was just a boy, he heard a stranger in the synagogue chant the following prayer: "O' God, be with me when I have need of you, but above all do not leave me when I deny you" (44). Stunned by the prayer, Michael reported it to his yellow bearded master, Kalman, who cried out "Ah, how beautiful! How beautiful! I want you to repeat it for me" (43), and so he did, over and over again. Kalman explained to Michael that every person has a prayer that belongs to him, just as every person has a soul that belongs to him. But too often, just as it is difficult for one to find her soul it is also difficult for one to find her prayer. On this day though, Michael had found his prayer (44). But what about my soul, Michael asked Kalman. Is the soul within me really mine? "'Question it,' said the master" (44). Ever since that day, when Michael was still an innocent boy in Szerencsevaros, he has continued to repeat his prayer and he has continued to question his soul.

I aspire to pray with the same conviction, bitterness and passion as did Michael. His confusions and unanswered questions—the Holocaust, Yankel's absurd death, chaos—did not stop him from continuing to search for the truth but enraged him, pushing him to continue to question God, to shout at God, to scream at God. I pray that I might be enraged!

Michael did not retreat to the depths of madness after the cruel death of his sister, mother and father; but rather, the unjust suffering that he faced day in and day out and his disturbing vision of the world infuriated Michael causing him to revolt: forging meaning from meaninglessness, happiness from unhappiness. I pray that I might revolt!

The indifference in the Other's face, his cold, impersonal, detached, inhumane stare moved Michael to feel contempt for the spectator. In his trial of the Other, Michael realized that he too was a spectator: carted off by the Nazis without a scream, feeling no emotion at the death of his father, avoiding Yankel's pleas for help. Because Michael had played the role of the spectator, he was overcome with self-contempt. In order to redeem himself, in order to save himself, in order to save another, Michael reached out to the Silent One. I pray that I might feel contempt both for myself and for spectators!

Michael discovered that it is the nature of the ethical person to swim against a turbulent river of chaos and eternal suffering. Michael discovered that to stay above water in an honorable fashion, and, as Dostoevski writes, "to be worthy of [one's] sufferings" (Quoted, *Man's Search For Meaning*, 75), that one must fill his life with concrete meaning which can only be found in those around him. I pray that I too 'might be worthy of my sufferings.'

Wiesel writes that the Silent One, whom Michael reached out to, "bore the Biblical name of Eliezer, which means *God has granted my prayer*" (178). Michael's prayer was answered. He was able to question God, deny God, yell at God, rebuke God, but God never left his side. Michael's prayer was granted.

Having spent months inspecting Michael's prayer, studying it, praying it, questioning it, I think I have come to discover my own prayer: "O' God, give me the intelligence and wisdom to discover the truth, give me the will and determination to continue to question the truth, but above all give me the strength and courage to act in accordance with that truth." For truth is hard to come by, but the courage to abide by that truth is even more rare.

Although I now find myself praying both Michael's and my own prayer, I cannot emphasize enough that the most fundamental truths I have learned from Wiesel in *The Town Beyond the Wall* transcend theological boundaries crossing over into universal, secular territories. Michael's story is more than a fictional narrative that places ethical demands on believers; Michael's story is a call to justice that rings as true and as pertinent to the atheist as it does to the pious Jew. Wiesel concludes, *in The Town Beyond the Wall,* that humanity is obligated to respond to the call of the oppressed, to the weak, to the forsaken. The key role Pedro, an apparent atheist, plays in Michael's development is evidence that this call to justice transcends theology. Michael's premises, for his conclusion that we as humans are obligated to respond to the call of the other, are not rooted in mysticism, faith or the unknowable; but his premises are rooted in the concrete, secular and the certain. I believe that Wiesel would concur with Zvi Kolitz, in "Yossel Rakover's Appeal to God," the short fictional account of the end of the Warsaw Ghetto, recorded in Levinas' *Loving the Torah More Than God*, that he is happy to belong to the unhappiest of all peoples of the world because their "precepts represent the loftiest and most beautiful of all morality and laws" (21). I think that Wiesel might add, though, that the beauty of the Jewish precepts, and the beauty of the moral duties he puts forth, are beautiful because they apply to all humanity and truth that connects all cultures, that spans all countries, that crosses all ethnic boundaries; they are beautiful, for as John Keats writes, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know."

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