



**INSTITUTIONEN FÖR  
SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER**

# **FAITH IN ELIE WIESEL'S NIGHT**

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### Abstract

**Title:** *Faith in Elie Wiesel's Night*

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**Abstract:** The aim of this essay is to examine whether the traumatic experiences that Elie Wiesel depicts in his novel, *Night*, led the author or any other character he encounters to lose their faith. Considering that the author describes himself and other characters in the novel as believers, one wonders how it would be possible not to lose faith after experiencing the terror of the concentration camps. The reader understands that a crisis of faith occurs and loss of faith might ensue. The focus of the study is on the religious faith and how faith permeates the world depicted in *Night*, the characters and the imagery that we encounter in the book.

**Keywords:** Night, Elie Wiesel, Eliezer, faith, silence, death, fire, Holocaust

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## Introduction

Elie Wiesel, the author of *Night*, made the issue of exposing and informing the world about the Holocaust his call in life as he wanted to make sure the world would know about the atrocities of the Holocaust and never forget. In the preface of the second and latest translation of the novel, Wiesel states that if he only had written one book, this would be the one. His experience of the Holocaust is a deep dive into the darkest places of humanity. Elie, or Eliezer the narrator in the novel, is a young boy, brought up in a Hasidic environment and immersing himself into Jewish mysticism, when he and his family are deported, in cattle cars, all the way from Romania to Auschwitz in Poland. They are partly separated; his mother and youngest sister were killed on arrival, while he and his father do whatever possible to stay together until the awaited liberation. The novel is a raw and revealing description of their life in the concentration camps, where everybody is struggling to survive or at least die as painlessly as possible. While the young Eliezer was a devoted Jewish believer at the beginning of the novel, he encounters doubt about his knowledge about God and possibly loses his faith. Several other characters he mentions in the novel, including his father, have similar feelings, which they sometimes voice.

At the beginning of the novel, Eliezer and his friend Moishe the Beadle discuss issues of faith and divinity. Eliezer wonders what questions are permissible to ask or not to ask about God's presence in people's lives, and if according to Jewish teachings, is it even acceptable to doubt God's general good intentions towards people, every time people encounter hard times? Moishe tells Eliezer that "man comes closer to God through the questions he asks Him" (5) and that, although God replies, people don't understand God's answers. Instead, Moishe tells Eliezer that "the real answers ... you will find only within yourself" (5). That is what Eliezer has as his reference point further on in the story. The questions that may or may not be responded by God are constantly on his lips and in his mind.

The aim of this project is to understand the author's and other characters' transformation of their beliefs. Did they lose their faith in God, or are they just doubting God's existence or his presence during the abominable events of the Holocaust, just like anybody else would do, for whatever reason, anytime life offers struggle? When Reeve Robert Brenner (2014) interviewed survivors of the Holocaust, he asked them these questions that I mention above, and in his assessment of the answers he got, we can find the whole spectrum of reactions. Some doubted God's existence but never lost their faith, some of them refused to think of God being a part of

the Holocaust at all, some became atheists and some became even more aware of God's will for them. One of the steadfast believers puts it like this:

I refused then and I refuse now to challenge my faith and to summon God to a disputation. If I went ahead and challenged God and my challenge was victorious then I would be all alone. I would have been utterly alone in the camps, and I could not have survived. And I couldn't survive today. (103)

Another one, who denies the existence of God but also expresses guilt for doing so, says:

It is disloyal, I know, for me to be the goy I am today when I should be behaving and believing like the good Jews they were. I feel terrible about it; but I don't do anything about it - except occasionally urging my kids to go to the synagogue on the holidays as though that would make up for it. (112)

In the first chapter of my project I will present the theoretical and historical context of my qualitative research. Elie Wiesel is one of many scholars that depicted the Holocaust and different kinds of issues related to having experienced the Holocaust. Many scholars focused on the more general questions, like why and how the Holocaust could occur, while others, among them Elie Wiesel, focused on more specific questions, such as faith and health before, during and after the Holocaust. I will also try to account for the literary genre that *Night* can possibly be identified with given that the story depicts events from the author's encounter with the horrors of the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel describes his ordeal in *Night* in such a manner that, of course, raises questions to whether his story is indeed an autobiographical memoir or mainly fictitious with elements of autobiography. The third issue I will focus on is religious faith as coping mechanism, where I will try to connect Aaron Antonovsky's sense of coherence (1979) and Reeve Robert Brenner's assessment of Holocaust survivors' testimonials about faith during the Holocaust (2014).

Further on, the second chapter will bring the characters of the novel to light, with a main focus on Eliezer but also others that he encounters during his ordeal. The notion of faith is again the main aspect of my focus, this time from the characters' points of view. Several of them struggle and express doubt or even loss of faith throughout the novel, just like Eliezer does. It is important to understand their struggle and why they act like they do.

Last, but not least, the third chapter will focus on the imagery and allusions in the novel and how these stylistic aspects bring the reader closer to understanding the characters' spiritual struggles. The images, the words, and many times, the silence, become all too vivid reminders of what the characters are going through. Even then, faith and doubt are present and expressed in various ways.

## Chapter 1: Context and Theory

In this section of my project I will try to give a background to my study in order to understand the context of the story of *Night*. Elie Wiesel was one of the first, if not the first, who broke the taboo of discussing the Holocaust at a time the world was doing its best to avoid bringing the subject into the light.

Considering that *Night* makes a claim on being factual, I will also be looking at the literary genre of the text. Whether *Night* is autobiographical or just fictional might not be very important but at the same time, if it is factual, the story gives legitimacy to the horrors it brings to light. Last, but not least, I will look at the notion of faith from the perspective of Anton Antonovsky's sense of coherence, as he implies that faith is a possible coping mechanism when people struggle in life. Antonovsky's theory will be connected to Reeve Robert Brenner's account for survivors' testimonies about their faith before, during and after the Holocaust. Is faith something that people might take into consideration as a coping mechanism through life's trials and experiences?

### 1.1 Holocaust Studies

Holocaust Studies have expanded on a large scale after the foundation of the Yad Vashem Institute in 1953, and even more after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. Scholars from universities all over the world have studied and tried to comprehend the monstrous machinery behind what became the Holocaust, but also how the survivors could live their lives, very often as sole survivors of their family or relatives. The Holocaust has even been explored through the making of films, documentaries and many other art forms, for example photography, theatre and of course literature.

Elie Wiesel is one of many authors who wrote their memories as part of the process of documenting and studying the Holocaust. Alongside *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947), Elie Wiesel's *Night* is one of the most popular literary texts about the Holocaust. Wiesel himself says that it's important to remember and document the unspeakable, so that it may never happen again. In the preface of his second edition of *Night*, Wiesel says that he as a survivor of the Holocaust has "no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory"(xv). And Wiesel doesn't want his past to be the future, ever again. For the survivors

the Holocaust is still not a closed chapter because the physical and the psychological scars are still there, as Primo Levi writes in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986): “Anyone who has been tortured remains tortured. ... Anyone who has suffered torture never again will be able to be at ease in the world, the abomination of the annihilation is never extinguished. Faith in humanity, already cracked by the first slap in the face, then demolished by torture, is never acquired again” (15).

In the introduction to his collection of essays *Historicism, the Holocaust, and Zionism* (1992), the author Steven T. Katz indicates that the historicism of the Holocaust is important because it gives legitimacy to and preserves the idea of a Jewish people and spiritual integrity of Judaism, which is also where Elie Wiesel’s work plays an important role and is intended to make a contribution.

For Elie Wiesel it is all about memory, about its sources and consequences. For him remembering his ordeal and experiences was the difference between life and death. Memory of the Holocaust helped him move on with his life. Although his suffering led him to question his faith and witnessing God’s supposed absence, according to Patricia Karnowski (2016), Wiesel came to the insight that “God was memory, and that memory is what sustains the human race” (11). Karnowski claims also that Elie Wiesel’s work shows that: “the opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it’s indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it’s indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it’s indifference” (3). Indifference is what opened the way for the Holocaust therefore Holocaust studies in all forms is the antidote against indifference. One can imagine that Elie Wiesel feared this feeling of indifference and that is why he consequently brought up the issue of the Holocaust and also the issue of faith of the Jewish people in relation to the Holocaust.

*Night* was Wiesel’s way of starting to process his own Holocaust experience, but even more than that, he opened what could only be a Pandora’s box of the Holocaust. What was still very much taboo, little by little was accepted to be discussed and analyzed in literature, film and all kinds of art. That’s why Wiesel’s *Night* has such significance within the domain of the Holocaust studies.

## **1.2 Autobiography or memoir**

Is Elie Wiesel’s *Night* an autobiography, a memoir or just fiction? It is relevant for my project to understand the literary genre that *Night* subscribes to because within the domain of the

Holocaust studies, critics have been very keen on factualness due to the fact that the Holocaust is a very delicate matter but also because it was and still is one of the most questioned and denied historical facts, so people involved with the business of exposing the events of the Holocaust had to be true to facts. That is of course more subjective than not, because many of the survivors who disclosed their experiences could only do it from their own perspective and the reader is the ultimate judge of how the text makes an impact or not or if the “facts” are accepted as facts or not. Susan Rubin Suleiman (2000) argues that what makes a text a memoir is not necessarily the factualness of the written text. What Suleiman tries to show in her article is that sometimes memory is not factual when describing things that we have experienced. In the case of Holocaust memoirs, Suleiman claims that one should not mistake memory with a memoir; the first is a mental faculty while the other is a literary text. Suleiman mentions one particular memory that Elie Wiesel describes in *Night* and then several decades later again in another of his books, but the second time Wiesel had changed one detail. This, according to Suleiman, doesn't indicate that memoirs aren't reliable but rather that they show different layers of human memory. The memoir has the same characteristics as an autobiography, but the difference is that the memoir is often confined to one single event or period of time in the author's life.

Lawrence L. Langer (2013) is a less harsh critic and remarks that Elie Wiesel's *Night* is “scrutinized for reliability with a microscopic intensity that should be reserved for scientific experiments rather than literary endeavor” (205). Further on Langer pleads for Wiesel's cause when he notes that, “unlike most literature, Holocaust memoirs are not concerned with the possible and the probable” (207) so sometimes, how the facts presented in Holocaust memoirs are accepted as factual, depends on the interaction between the text and the reader.

According to Helga Schwalm, it isn't easy to define what an autobiography is. Autobiographies narrate the author's life, are written in retrospect and based on the author's memory, a memory that can have lapsed, and often oscillates between emotions and facts. Autobiography also shows the duality of the narrator and the narrated, as they are the same person as shown in *Night*. The story is told by the narrator Elie Wiesel after the Holocaust, but the emotions depicted inside the story reveal the perspective of Eliezer during the Holocaust. In *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruin of Memory* (1991), Lawrence L. Langer, discusses the memory issue when it comes to Holocaust survivors such as Elie Wiesel, trying to voice their memories about the Holocaust. Langer explains why it sometimes may be easier to get the



survivors to tell their memories on tape rather than in writing, which is why he chose to videotape the interviews he used for the writing of his book. His opinion is that written memoirs are more restrained due to the language strategies that tend to veil horrific experiences and the ambiguity of life and death. However, Langer gives credit to Wiesel's mental picture at the end of *Night*, when Eliezer describes the gaze of a mere corpse when he has his first encounter with a mirror after the liberation. Langer claims that such deep memories well up from the buried self of the survivors (12).

Autobiography was already known in antiquity, starting with Augustine's *Confessions*, written between 397 and 400 AD. Augustine's autobiography is essentially a theological work, featuring spiritual meditations and insights. Helga Schwalm notes that Augustine "looks back to tell the story of his life from the beginning to the present, tracing the story of its own making" (paragraph 9). The story might not even have been told, if it weren't for a transformation of the "self" so that there's an "I" before the story and an "I" after the story. The parallels can easily be drawn between the spiritual autobiography of Augustine and that of Elie Wiesel, as there is a before "I" and an after "I" in both of them, even though they start and finish as each other's antipodes; Augustine reaches faith in God while Wiesel possibly loses his faith.

So, whether Elie Wiesel intended *Night* to become a memoir or not, the elements are there. However, over the decades and especially after the second translation was released, *Night* has been treated more like a novel than a memoir. But even so, beyond what the critics claim, Franklin (2011) admits that Wiesel's narrative is effective as it unfolds two separate angles; the first is a "testimonial" to the terror of the Holocaust and the second a "chronicle" of the narrator's, Eliezer's, spiritual journey and struggle. (75)

### **1.3 Faith as coping mechanism**

When people go through life-changing experiences, there's always a tendency, call it a built-in instinct, or maybe evolutionary reminder, to make sense of these experiences. We want to find a meaning with whatever comes our way, in order to cope with the changes, however big or small they are. The events or experiences I refer to could also be called "stressors". That's also the term Aaron Antonovsky uses when defining "salutogenesis", also called the sense of coherence theory, that he developed in the 1960's and 1970's.

Antonovsky's concept of health was a simple idea at first. His area of interest was

understanding and enhancing the adaptive capacities of human beings, so he decided to think backwards; thus, study health rather than disease, which means that he wanted to find out what makes people stay healthy and manage stress in everyday life. Antonovsky claims that traditional research in psychology, medicine and sociology, normally focuses on the ill, which made it impossible for him to get the answers he was looking for. He looked into the most recent findings in medical sociology, psychiatry and cultural anthropology and managed to develop a theory that could explain why certain people and/or certain groups of people are more likely to stay healthy and to cope with the stress of life. He found that these particular individuals own the ability to see life as meaningful and manageable, what he calls the sense of coherence.

The sense of coherence that Antonovsky examined, can be compared to a set of tools that one uses when putting things together and keeping them together. He mentions faith as being one of those tools, and in his research, amongst other perspectives, he even explored how Jewish believers coped with their Holocaust experiences. He concludes that "the crucial issue is not whether power to determine such outcomes lies in our own hands or elsewhere. What is important is that the location of power is where it is legitimately supposed to be. This may be within oneself, it may be in the hands of the head of the family, patriarchs, leaders, formal authorities, the party, history, or a deity" (128). And just like Wiesel makes allusions to the story of Job, Antonovsky does the same only that he claims that Job's faith was shattered not because of the physical sufferings or because he lost nearly everything, but because he couldn't see where God was in all that, much like Eliezer's wondering in *Night*.

Reeve Robert Brenner (2014) focuses specifically on faith's coping properties in his interviews with Holocaust survivors. Brenner emphasizes that after the Holocaust, the survivors' main concern was rebuilding sustainable lives rather than religious thinking. However, religious thought and behavior were not totally ignored. Many of the survivors needed time to recalculate their position in matters of faith. "They rebuilt their lives, both physically and spiritually. To help with spiritual rebirth, schools were opened, yeshivas sprang up, and books were printed as Jews struggled to preserve what remained of their spiritual heritage" (xvii). One can understand that Jewish faith in this case is seen as more than an individualistic religious practice; it is being Jewish altogether, but also faith is the safe ground which many Jews built their after-Holocaust lives on.

This same interpretation is also supported by A. J. Heschel (1969) as he claims that Jews

faith in God did not falter because of the Holocaust. “Isaac was indeed sacrificed, his blood, shed. We all died in Auschwitz, yet our faith survived. We knew that to repudiate God would be to continue the Holocaust” (1022). Again, Heschel also brings up the paradigmatic character of Job in the Bible (as both Wiesel and Antonovsky do in their works) and he wonders if the Jewish people should follow Job’s words or the advice of Job’s wife? Job says that he will trust in God even if God slays him (Job 13:15) while his wife tells Job that he should curse God and die (Job 29). Could this be interpreted as the Jewish people chose to follow Job’s words? Even today, the Jews’ rights are regularly undermined and they still have to put up with affronts from extremist parties, yet they fight for their existence and refuse to immerse into anonymity. Their faith and practices may have changed over time, but most survivors didn’t abandon their faith altogether. As Antonovsky mentions in his study and also Brenner and Heschel maintain, faith can be one of those tools that humans can use in order to make life more manageable and meaningful. Further on, Elie Wiesel’s life work shows that no matter how hard his struggle during the Holocaust, although changed, his faith remained within him. He remained the observant Jew that he was before the Holocaust and he was never ashamed to bring up issues of faith whenever he spoke or wrote. Maybe subconsciously Wiesel used his built-in faith as a coping mechanism even when he wasn’t aware of it.

## Chapter 2: The characters of the novel

In this chapter I will focus on the characters of the novel. It is of importance for my project, that I try to understand how the individuals that the author mentions in his testimony are presented and, in a way, why the author even mentions them. The author plunges into his own darkness, but he also shows the reader that he was not alone in that darkness because several other characters experience the night as well. As a reader, I want to understand what gives some of the characters the strength to go on, while others give up. Is Eliezer the only one struggling with the notion of faith?

### 2.1. The narrator's approach to the novel's characters

There's a multitude of characters that are, more or less, significant for the storyline; some are merely a passing whim, whereas others play a rather decisive role. There's Shlomo the father, Moishe the Beadle, Mrs. Schächter, Tibi and Yossi, the Akiba Drummer and some of the tormenters like Idek and Juliek.

The narrator is very blunt in his descriptions, especially when physical features are in the spotlight, and he uses figurative language that can trigger the reader's imagination. For example, when Moishe the Beadle was introduced, he is described as being "awkward as a clown...waiflike shyness...wide, dreamy eyes, gazing off into the distance" (3). The tormented woman, Mrs. Schächter, on the cattle train, is another striking character and the way the narrator describes her leaves an impression: "...she looked like a withered tree in a field of wheat. She was howling..." (25). Sometimes the boundary between good and bad is not so distinct, due to the horrific situations the characters are submitted to. For example, when Eliezer and his father are moved to Auschwitz, their first *Blockälteste*, literally block elder who was in charge of a specific barrack in the concentration camps, turns out to be a kind human being, but the act unfortunately costs him his position when "he was judged too humane"(44). Altogether the characters compose what could only be described as a lamentation of the night. Those we encounter in the novel, through the eyes of Eliezer, are likely to be suffering individuals, physically and spiritually broken.

According to Carol Patrice Christ (1974), the characters depicted by Elie Wiesel experience the agony of God's silence so what becomes important is not that the characters tell

us readers if they believe or disbelieve God's existence, what's important is that the characters tell God that He has abandoned them. The dialogue is not between characters and readers but between characters and God. "They question, accuse, even deny God to his face, but all within the context of a persistent relationship. You think you're cursing, but your curse is praise. You think you're fighting Him, but all you do is open yourself to Him" (19). There's a duality in the relationship between God and the characters of *Night* in the sense that, as mentioned in the previous chapter concerning faith as coping mechanism, the cursing that also Job's wife suggests, becomes praise instead. The duality is that while shouting curses at God, the characters still acknowledge his supposed existence and possibly even his power to affect their lives. Their faith is simply running through their veins so rejecting God for good might be impossible.

### **2.1.1 Eliezer**

In the opening pages of *Night*, we are introduced to the world of the narrator as a devout follower of the Judaic tradition. In his mid-teens, Eliezer is already considering extended studies of his people's faith and traditions, since he shows an interest in the Kabbalistic mysticism, which normally is not expected from someone that young. He highly cherishes God and through his assiduous searching for the understanding of God, Eliezer thinks he could understand eternity. He undergoes a profound transformation regarding his beliefs from the beginning of the novel and to the end, and his testimony is abundant with biblical imagery and allusions.

Eliezer, who becomes A-7713 in Auschwitz, is the author as a young boy, through whose eyes and voice all the reminiscing and narrating is done. Although he writes the novel when he is already grown up, we still get to experience the story through the 15- year old boy who was captured in such a traumatic way from his safe zone, in the middle of the protected Jewish community in Sighet. At that time the news of the war that ravaged through Europe was still not embedded in their minds. The war was something abstract that happened somewhere far outside their reality and their lives were not touched by it. All the Jews in Sighet lived their lives as usual and so did Eliezer. His dreams were too grand for his age, at least according to his father, who didn't think that Eliezer was ready for the knowledge of the mysticism of Kabbalah. Yet Eliezer thrives on the challenge and finds a way to go on with his plans. He finds a more than willing teacher in Moishe the Beadle. "And Moishe the Beadle, the poorest of the

poor of Sighet, spoke to me for hours on end about the Kabbalah's revelations and its mysteries" (5). This shows that his determination is greater than the obstacles. His eagerness to study and understand God shows that faith is a mechanism through which Eliezer copes with the world around him. His faith is what keeps him thriving and gives a sense of coherence to the world, as he is convinced that one day he will enter eternity and there he will find that questions and answers become ONE (5).

As the story and the events of the Holocaust unfold, Eliezer begins to show a duality in his feelings towards his father. Eliezer's until then unshattered beliefs are put on trial and he also begins to feel that his father becomes a burden rather than his support. The violence of the camps, the punishments and many other experiences that Eliezer analyzes and finds to be meaningless, lead him to not only doubt God's existence but to actually express his non-belief. This begins with him no longer praying and, like Job, he wasn't denying God's existence, but he was "doubting His absolute justice"(45). One of the most terrifying descriptions of the novel is that of the hanging of a young boy, that all the inmates are forced to watch. As they watch, Eliezer hears a voice from behind that wonders where God is in that exact moment and while they all wait for the boy to die, Eliezer hears a voice within himself saying that God was right there, hanging from those gallows. From this moment on, Eliezer changes his way of addressing God. He becomes the accuser, as if God was on trial and accused for being silent. Earlier in the story, before the hanging, Eliezer had already expressed that he was changed, that his soul had been "invaded and devoured by a black flame" (37), but after the hanging of the young boy, Eliezer was angry at God. He diminishes God and questions why people should bother to praise God after he allows these horrors to happen. As described in the scene of the prayer on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, it seemed that the other inmates weren't as troubled as Eliezer, because the prayer goes on whilst Eliezer anguishes in his thoughts (67). His faith no longer makes sense and the darkness of this insight fills him on the inside even though he tries to give the impression that he felt stronger without his faith.

In a doctoral dissertation about Wiesel's work, Marie Meisel Cedars (1984) discusses this ambivalence of Eliezer's expression of faith. Cedars implies that perhaps these sparks of faith that wake up from time to time is what saved him (59). In his talks with Moishe the Beadle, Eliezer says in the beginning of the novel that questioning can be the way to finding eternity, so questioning God's presence might just be Eliezer's way to getting closer to eternity. Alan L. Berger (2013) emphasizes that the word "question" contains the word "quest". Questioning

God, tradition and one's fellow human beings can and should enrich us. Further, Berger claims that during the Holocaust "the mark of a true believer was her or his questioning of God" (Steven T. Kats & Alan Rosen, 130). That is probably why Antonovsky's sense of coherence theory can explain the mechanism behind using faith in order to cope with hard trials in life. One may not understand how everything is correlated in the midst of the problem but still rely on the faith that someone is in control even if for the moment that someone is not visible.

His faith goes back and forth, he doubts, he anguishes, and in a way, he fights God in desperation because he wants to see a sign from Him. Eliezer is no longer at rest with God's silence and absence. Again, just like Job, he just wants to know where God is in the middle of his ordeal. Eliezer goes so far as to defy God and refuses to accept the benediction on the service of Rosh Hashanah. He calls himself strong for that reason and he manifests his newfound strength through putting God in the accused booth, Eliezer being the prosecutor. He watches himself through the lens of time and contemplates what he became; the old days' Eliezer, whose life was dominated by Rosh Hashanah, no longer existed (66-68).

### **2.1.2 Shlomo, Eliezer's father**

An orthodox Jewish man in his fifties, with wife and 4 children, Shlomo is cultured and highly esteemed within their community in Sighet. Eliezer describes him as being unsentimental and that he seemed to be more involved with the well-being of people in the community rather than his own family. He wants Eliezer to study, but not the Kabbalah. "There are no Kabbalists in Sighet" (4), he says to his son who is more than keen to immerse himself into the mysticism of the Kabbalah.

Shlomo is the character that struggles with the life in the concentration camps, alongside Eliezer, without being able to control what happens to neither of them. The only thing that Shlomo has left is his son. Shlomo could symbolize Abraham, one of the most important patriarchs of the Bible. Just like Abraham, Shlomo wants to protect his son but he also knows he has no control over the situation. In the Bible, Abraham is compelled by God to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac as an act of obedience, but Abraham doesn't question God's means with his pledge so one can only imagine that Abraham was at peace with letting God be in control. His faith was steadfast throughout the whole story. Eliezer reflects that "he [Shlomo] did not wish to see what they would do to me [Eliezer] ... his only son go up in flames" (33). However devout

Shlomo had been before the camps, there is little the reader senses about his feelings towards God in Auschwitz. Gradually, Shlomo seems to be transformed into a silent, defeated, shadow of a man. Being determined to keep his son alive, he tells Eliezer to not fast at Yom Kippur, which according to Jewish teachings was unthinkable, but Shlomo possibly thinks that holding on to the Jewish traditions wasn't relevant there and then. He dies of dysentery and Eliezer points out that his father was gone as if he never even existed. No prayers, no tomb, no tears.

Looking at Shlomo's situation, one can wonder why he doesn't as much as complain or voice anything about God's existence. Brenner's (2014) study about survivors' testimonies of their faith during and after the Holocaust shows to some extent that religious change shouldn't always be expected in response to suffering. Although we can only speculate, maybe in Shlomo's case, as we assume that he had been a devout believer, his passive silence was in fact his way of showing that suffering becomes a way to a higher purpose or to redemption and that he accepted his ordeal without questioning God's reasons just like Abraham did when challenged by God and also just like Job who wouldn't say curses against God despite the misery that struck him. Was Shlomo's devotion genuine at all before the Holocaust? His background surely demanded that he followed the Hasidic traditions and beliefs but one wonders why Shlomo's religiosity doesn't show more in the story.

Going back to the story of the Bible we can observe how Abraham is silent all the time during the road trip his son and he are taking to the place where the sacrifice of the son was to be made. In the same way, Shlomo seems to keep his silence most of the time during their ordeal. It is difficult to interpret his silence. Is it a silence of hope? Shlomo hoping for God's intervention and that Eliezer would be saved from extinction? Which is probably what Abraham hoped for as well. Or is it that the narrator, is using the element of reversal and in fact Shlomo is silent because he is angry with God or no longer believing in God. Maybe Elie Wiesel is trying to show his own ambiguity between believing and doubting through the character of Shlomo.

### **2.1.3 Moishe the Beadle**

Moishe the Beadle is a man without means, a typical religious Jew, poor, humble and wise. The community acknowledges him with their generosity. This rather unnoticeable man is the one that Eliezer turns to when he needs to learn about the mysteries of the Kabbalah. He takes his



role as a tutor seriously and without expecting anything in return. He sits and reads the Zohar with Eliezer for hours at the synagogue, “not to learn it by heart but to discover within the very essence of divinity” (5). He is what Brenner (2014) calls the observant Jew, a mystic whose only wish is to be in the presence of God and follows as many of the religious Jewish practices as possible. That is why the material world isn’t important to Moishe.

Just like Shlomo, Moishe’s character is embedded with symbolism, as Moishe could impersonate nearly all the prophets described in the biblical texts. Because Moishe is a foreign Jew, he is deported together with the other foreign Jews, crammed in cattle cars, without knowing where they were heading. Then, through what Moishe describes as a miracle, he manages to escape and come back all the way from Poland to Sighet, so that he can warn people of the terror he has experienced since he was deported. He is a transformed person, almost reluctant in having this mission, but he does his best to spread the message. When he realizes that people don’t want to believe it, he remains silent. The prophets were God’s envoy to the people of Israel, giving them warnings and often making them repent from their bad deeds. If they did not repent, then some kind of catastrophe would strike them. Hosea was one of the prophets that was sent to warn Israel, that if they did not stop with their sins and worship of other gods, God would allow their nation to be destroyed and sent into captivity (Hosea 4). In the same way, Moishe the beadle is the symbol of the biblical prophet, since he escaped death ‘miraculously’ and came back to warn the people. And just like in the old times, the people didn’t listen. Moishe is, in this way, the bearer of the old Jewish beliefs that God gives warnings before something bad is about to happen, giving people a chance to change.

The last time we encounter Moishe the Beadle is on the eight day of Passover and we never get to know exactly what happens to him. Just like the prophets, he plays his role and then disappears rather unnoticed. What happens in the case of Moishe can be considered a paradigm, because unlike the prophets, he wasn’t successful with his mission. He failed to make the Jews of Sighet listen and the consequences were catastrophic. The failed mission can be extended further through Madame Schächter and her warnings of the fire that awaited them on arrival at Auschwitz. And again, the Jews choose to call her mad, just like they did with Moishe.

#### **2.1.4 Akiba Drumer and rabbi from Poland**

With his solemn, deep voice, Akiba Drumer “entertains” the inmates with Hasidic songs. Akiba

appears several times during the storyline. He is the character that attempts to reassure those around him that God only tests the Jews and their faith, and that God shows His love towards them through this suffering. A similar attitude can be found in the description that one of the interviewed survivors gives to Brenner (2014) but corresponds also with Antonovsky's idea of coherence.

I suppose I'm one of those unusual Jews who looks upon the Holocaust as concrete proof of God's greater intention for mankind and particularly for the Jews... The message to the Jew was that he should keep the Torah and all the commandments, and if and when he fails to do so the savages will be unleashed against him. (p.58)

The survivor that expressed these words was still convinced that, how ridiculous that may sound, the Holocaust still must have had a meaning and that it was the Jews' responsibility for one another to hold on to their beliefs and become more observant.

But Akiba gives up his hope and his faith eventually after not passing one of the usual selections, where the Nazis inspect the inmates' health and ability to continue working. The ones who didn't pass the inspection were sent to the gas chambers and the crematory. Eliezer tells us that as soon as Akiba "felt the first chinks in his faith, he lost the will to fight and opened the door to death". However, Akiba did still ask the other inmates to pray the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dying, for him (77). Even this attitude can be found in another of Brenner's interviews. The survivor first describes how devoted and observant a Jew he was before the Holocaust and how his faith changed during his ordeal. He explains that he no longer felt God's closeness and that after the Holocaust he could no longer feel the intimacy that he felt before, although he hadn't completely abandoned his faith (67-68).

The Kaddish itself proclaims the greatness of God which gives this situation a paradoxical twist: while many believers experienced the destruction of their faith, others were helped by the same faith to power through. When the author tells the story of Akiba's last days, he also mentions another person whom he knew, a rabbi. He is always praying and reciting the Talmud. But one day this rabbi said that it was over, and that God was no longer with them. He knew that they weren't normally allowed to express those kinds of words and thoughts. But he could no longer believe that God was the God of mercy, when he suffered "hell in (his) soul and (his) flesh"(76). In Brenner's testimonies we encounter several survivors that express loss of faith and loss of sense of coherence just like Akiba Drumer and the rabbi in *Night*. "...when good people, good prayers for good purposes go unanswered, the only conclusion I can arrive at is that God does not exist" (112). Even Marie Meisel Cedars (1984) expresses what Eliezer

mentions in the episode above, that those who gave up died soon after (59).

## Chapter 3: Imagery and biblical allusions

In this chapter I will focus on the figurative language and the allusions that give depth to the story. Words are not only nouns, adjectives and verbs, but entire worlds of imagery. The author appeals to the reader's visual and auditory senses throughout the novel in order to give the reader the feeling of participation in the story. Wiesel uses graphic language, so the reader can't escape the reality of the experiences and the environment of the concentration camps. The weather, the surroundings or the persons that he meets at different occasions are described in raw details. For example, when Eliezer is in the infirmary because of a wounded foot, he describes the patient next to him as being "skin and bones" and "his eyes were dead" (78). One can see elements of realism in the text. In a comparative study of Holocaust literature, mostly fiction, Sidra Dekonen Izrahi (1976) claims that a subtle psychological analysis in the world of concentration camps is not possible and that language in these texts delineates regions never before explored by the human being (115). Izrahi contends that the abstract became the reality in the system of the camps.

Altogether, the notion of faith is hidden within the description of the night, silence, fire and death. The allusions that are made throughout the story carry the reader to the world of the Torah, the Talmud and Jewish mysticism, so faith is like a blanket that covers the entire world of *Night*. For the reader who hasn't been initiated in these kinds of texts, it can even be difficult to understand what the narrator means due to the biblical references and at times deeply religious language.

### 3.1 Night and Silence

The first concept is a reference to the darkness of the Holocaust and to experiencing the tragedy that came with it. The night, darkness and shadow are omnipresent in Wiesel's text. A lot happens at night and the experiences that he endures and describes for the reader are also surrounded by darkness. The preparations for the move to the ghetto take place at night, the preparations for the deportation take place at night, and the loss of his father happened at night. When the author uses the word *night*, he no longer means rest or just the absence of light. It's as if he describes evil impersonated; darkness equals death, desolation and isolation. "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night"

(34).

Night and silence are intertwined, and the author compares darkness and silence with the absence of God. Both night and silence are repeated over and over again in the text of *Night*. Eliezer is surrounded by silence; the night, the sky, his father, and of course God. Whenever there are no answers to Eliezer's questions or what happens is too unbearable, there is silence and darkness. Yet the silence seems to speak the most. An example of this expressive silence is when Eliezer tells us about the day of Rosh Hashanah when he meets his father to tell him Happy New Year, even if he no longer believed it. He describes a moment when he kisses his father's hand and none of them says anything to the other, yet they had "never before understood each other so clearly" (69).

Silence also impersonates cowardliness, the kind that Eliezer experiences several times. He keeps silent both times his father is violently beaten in front of him, and he keeps silent other times when he thought he should speak his mind but was simply too afraid of the consequences. That silence made him feel ashamed then but is probably what made Elie Wiesel not keep silence anymore after the Holocaust. The author's life work is the exact antipode of the silence that he kept and experienced as Eliezer in the concentration camp. The more profound the silence, the louder his work had to be.

What is important to notice is that the silence of God seems to be the one that torments Eliezer the most, just like it does to Job in the Torah. But what makes the difference is that God does speak to Job at the end, in a whirlwind, but He remains silent towards Eliezer and the other characters to the end. This silence alienates the characters in Wiesel's story from the divine presence that the protagonists of Biblical stories still experienced in spite of their ordeals. On some level, the silence of God gives the impression that He abandoned His own people, if one is to draw the parallel to the covenant that is a part of the life of the Jewish identity. The covenant is somehow broken or at least interrupted for Eliezer, considering his devout faith and his deep personal relationship with God before the Holocaust (Christ, 20). George Steiner (1988) in *Writing and the Holocaust* mentions the covenant and implies that there has been a covenant of dialogue between God and the believing Jew back from Abraham's time and that the strength of this covenant is not the "reflection of the metaphysical discourse on the nature and attributes of God, but rather a 'living in his presence'" (154). So, if living in God's presence is what Eliezer and other characters in *Night* are used to, maybe it's not incomprehensible that they wonder whether God is still with them or not, now that they don't seem to get any signs

from him. The night is all they have left if God is absent.

### 3.2 Fire and Death

Just like night and silence, the concepts of fire and death also have deep meaning in Elie Wiesel's *Night* and are open for interpretation. First of all, fire is in itself a paradox, because fire is both good and bad. Fire can give warmth and light, both of which are basic human needs. But fire also demands respect and that means that it has power over its surroundings. In biblical stories, God shows Himself to people, through the element of fire, often as a pillar of fire, that cannot be touched and barely looked at. The pillar of fire shows both strength and support, which is what God gives to the people of Israel in most of the biblical stories. In the Bible we can read about God being a pillar of a cloud to lead the people at daytime and a pillar of fire to light for them at night (Exodus 13:21-22). God's presence and power is shown through the fire.

However, what we see in *Night* is not the good nature of fire, but the exact opposite of it. In *Night*, the fire represents hell and death. Elie Wiesel uses again the technique of reversal, and according to an interpretation made by Ellen French (1981) in her doctoral dissertation, the pillar of fire from Exodus becomes the flames and the chimneys of Auschwitz. The leading and protective pillar of fire, which represented the presence of God in the Jews' lives, turned into the hell of Auschwitz, thus representing the abandonment of God. Further on, the flaming ditch that consumes babies, and that Eliezer describes vividly in the text of *Night*, is the recreation of the Exodus story where God destroys the Egyptian army by drowning them in the Red Sea. So, the reversal here would be that the children of the Jewish people are the ones being destroyed in the fire, when it should have been their enemies who perish (105-106).

All four elements that permeate *Night* are tied in some way to the concept of faith. Silence is needed when a person wants to come closer to God and the very obvious example of that is monachism. In *Night* we experience the opposite side of silence, the one that ignores. Night is also positive, as described in the Bible, it is the time of rest. But here we meet the gruesome side of night, the one involving fear and not seeing God. The element of fire is also positive as described above, but we only see the destructive side of it. We only see the fire that consumes people's lives, hopes and faith. This fire is not to be trusted and followed as we learn from the episode of the Exodus, but to be feared and avoided by all means. And last, but not least, the element of death is also omnipresent in the story but we only encounter the horror of death.

Faith and death are intertwined when it comes to faith. The Bible says a person needs to die from itself and trust entirely on God. The death referred to is not a physical one, but a spiritual one and it basically means that one abandons his own control and lets God lead instead. It also means rebirth which is letting the old self die and be reborn as a new person.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to analyze Elie Wiesel's world of *Night* from the perspective of faith. To study the theme of the Holocaust from a perspective of faith seemed at first a little bit odd. But I soon found out that it was a common topic of research among scholars of different academic disciplines. Elie Wiesel's intention with his work, in this case *Night*, was to bear witness, even if he also was aware that the Holocaust was not like any other subject to research about. On a personal level, I wanted to allow myself this study because it brought me a little bit closer to my Jewish roots.

The theme of faith is intertwined with the Jewish identity as Elie Wiesel shows through his story. Eliezer's physical and spiritual journey, from the starting point of an observant Jewish scholar, at a young age, leads the reader through a painful transformation. But Eliezer was not the only character going through that kind of metamorphosis. His father, to some extent his friend Moishe the Beadle, Akiba Drumer and the rabbi were also exposed to the change. Understanding the transformation that took place, required a look at relevant Holocaust studies and at the world of Judaism and Jewish faith and mysticism. My research needed to have the background of Elie Wiesel's world in order to understand why faith was even an issue during his ordeal at Auschwitz.

Although, it wasn't very important to establish whether *Night* was indeed autobiographical or just simply fictional, it was important to understand the literary elements the author uses to achieve his goal with the text. Different critics had different points of view, but my conclusion is that most of them agree that Elie Wiesel had an important message to the world whether it involved pure factualness or included some fictional elements too. Much like Augustine in his *Confessions*, there is a before "I" and an after "I" in Elie Wiesel's *Night*. So, from that perspective and comparing the two, *Night* could be considered a memoir with theological and spiritual connotations. This is not at all improbable since the theme of faith is omnipresent in both works, albeit as each other's antipodes.

The events of the Holocaust left deep physical and mental sores in the bodies and minds of the survivors so looking into Aaron Antonovsky's (1979) sense of coherence theory was important for understanding if there is a connection between the coping mechanisms that people develop in order to overcome life challenges, and the concept of faith. Antonovsky shows that some Holocaust survivors indeed use their faith in God as a coping mechanism and they



believed that their faith was what kept them alive and move on in spite of their hard trial through the Holocaust, and it was also obvious in the text of *Night*. Several characters, including Eliezer, search for God's intervention and help during their ordeals. As I mentioned, the entire story builds on the concept of faith and even when Eliezer says he no longer believes, he still prays, just in case deliverance would come.

*Night* is a story filled with imagery and biblical allusions that make readers understand that faith was very important for the Jews in the Hasidic community of Sighet; their faith was a force in their life and their identity. Experiencing God's silence and the darkness of Auschwitz leads most of them to desperate acts of denying and disbelieving God and his existence. Other than Akiba Drumer and the rabbi from Poland, there is no way to be sure if any characters actually lost their faith. We know that they pleaded for God's help and we have been together with Eliezer through his agony, but he never actually says he stopped believing altogether. It looks like Eliezer rebels against God because God doesn't seem to care, but Eliezer feels empty without his faith.

At the beginning of *Night* Moishe the Beadle encourages Eliezer to not look for answers to his questions, but to ask deeper questions and in that way the question and the answer will become one. Throughout my study I realized how more and more questions were raised rather than answered so I have come to believe that questioning is not necessarily a way to getting answers but more a way to continued questioning, at least when it comes to understanding faith and religion. This is the paradox of Elie Wiesel's *Night*, that it affirms both humans' need of God and also God's need of humans.

This research gave me the opportunity to get closer to the concept of faith as it is practiced in Judaism. The perspective of the research was probably not the most optimistic one, since the text was about Jewish faith put to test and in some cases failing, but it also raised from its own ashes at the end because despite the terrible experience that the Holocaust was, the narrator not only physically survived but also reclaimed his humanity through the power given by words. His faith was shaken to its core but wasn't entirely lost.

However, questions that deserve further research could be: what can we learn from Eliezer in terms of coping with our challenges in life? Can faith keep us sane when evil strikes us? In the light of our global context, when we can see glimpses of the same evil as the Holocaust, can those people find hope in their faith? But maybe the most urgent of the questions is how do we teach future generations about history, so they don't have to repeat it?

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