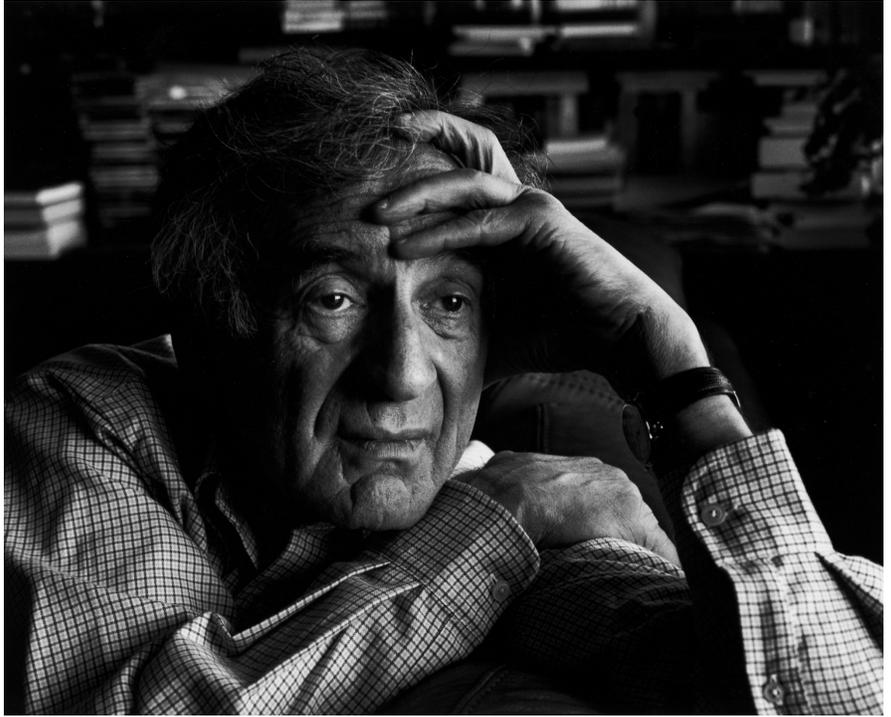


# ELIE WIESEL

“WHAT I WANT, WHAT I HAVE HOPED FOR ALL MY LIFE, IS THAT MY PAST SHOULD NOT BECOME YOUR CHILDREN’S FUTURE”

Elie Wiesel was brought up in a closely knit Jewish community in Sighet, Transylvania (Romania). When he was fifteen years old, his family was herded aboard a train and deported by Nazis to the Auschwitz death camp. Wiesel’s mother and younger sister died at Auschwitz—two older sisters survived. Wiesel and his father were then taken to Buchenwald, where his father also perished. In his autobiography, Wiesel writes: “Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never.” Wiesel has devoted his life to ensuring that the world does not forget the atrocities of the Nazis, and that they are not repeated. After the war, Wiesel became a journalist in Paris, ending his silence about his experiences during the Holocaust with the publication of *Night* in 1958. Translated into twenty-five languages, with millions of copies in print around the world, *Night* is a searing account of the Nazi death camps. Wiesel has since written more than fifty books. He served as the chairman of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust, and was the founding chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council. For his literary and human rights activities, he has received numerous awards including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal and the Medal of Liberty Award, and the rank of Grand-Croix in the French Legion of Honor. In 1986 he won the Nobel Peace Prize. Wiesel taught at Boston University and traveled the globe advocating for human rights and the discussion of ethical issues. He passed away in July 2016.



Elie Wiesel, ©2000 Eddie Adams

INTERVIEW TAKEN FROM KERRY KENNEDY’S BOOK *SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER*, 2000

**KK** Why don’t you give in to futility, the sense that there’s nothing one person can do in the face of the world’s ills? What keeps you going?

**DR. WIESEL** When you think of the other you realize that something must be done. If I think of myself, I probably wouldn’t have done many of these things. But what else can they do to me that they haven’t done already? I think of the children today who need our voices, possibly our presence, possibly all our help, but at least our emotions. I think of the minorities—social minorities, ethnic minorities, religious minorities, or health minorities, the victims of AIDS or the victims of Alzheimer’s. Then you have no right to say: “Since I cannot do anything, I shouldn’t do anything.” Camus said in one of his essays (and it’s a marvelous thing), that one must imagine Sisyphus happy. Well, I don’t imagine Sisyphus was happy, but I imagine the other is unhappy. And because the other is unhappy, I have no right not to diminish his or her unhappiness.

**KK** How did you, as a child, survive after your father died?

**DR. WIESEL** A few months after his death came the liberation. In those months, I could have died any day, any moment. There was no will to live. And even if I were to say today I wanted to live to testify, it wouldn’t be true.

**KK** Do you believe God gave you a special gift to bear witness to the atrocities, or was your survival arbitrary?

**DR. WIESEL** It was arbitrary. I don’t want to call it a miracle because it would mean that God performed a miracle for me alone. It means he could have performed more miracles for others who were worthier than I, probably, or at least not worse than I. I don’t think so. It was sheer luck. I happened to be there, and there were people standing ahead of me. And just as they left, the gate closed. Every single day I was there and at the last moment, the quota was filled. If I had been five rows ahead, I wouldn’t be here.

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**KK** Do you think there's a Divine plan?

**DR. WIESEL** No, I don't believe it. I don't know how to react to that. I don't accept it. I go on questioning God all my life.

**KK** Could you talk about the relationship between courage and love in your experience? From where do you derive your sense of hope?

**DR. WIESEL** It's very simple. Only another person can give me hope, because only another person can take hope away from me. It's not God. It's a person, a human being. Ultimately all this, our relationship with others, affects our own destiny, and surely our own moral attitude and destiny (call it love, call it friendship, call it conviction), is related to the other. Whatever it means, this relationship with someone else doesn't mean my relationship with God. All the laws, morality, are about human relations. In my tradition, my life, there was no animosity, no resentment, no fear in my family. It was a source of strength, of faith, with both my mother and father. Maybe I was too young when I left them.

**KK** Fifteen?

**DR. WIESEL** Yes. Maybe if I had lived longer with them I would have developed the same problems that children today have with their parents. I don't know. Maybe.

**KK** How about your own son?

**DR. WIESEL** He is the center of my life. The center of my center. He's now twenty-six. I am a crazy father. But he doesn't like me to speak about him.

**KK** You wrote that you were inspired by the Jews' courage and determination to remain committed to their faith, even in the face of evil and absolute powerlessness against it. Talk about your sympathy for the powerless.

**DR. WIESEL** The powerless, for me, are the most important, the weak and small. For me, that's why in every book of mine, in every novel, there's always a child, always an old man, always a madman. Because they are so neglected by the government and by society. So I give them a shelter. And therefore in my childhood, I liked these Jewish people—and do to this day. Years and years ago, I used to go and spend the whole afternoon with old Yiddish writers, whom nobody read because they were marginalized, to make them feel that somebody reads them.

**KK** It's important to reach out to people who are marginalized—

**DR. WIESEL** Yes, to those who feel nothing is worth it, who feel that one is forgotten. And in fact, with human rights abuse, with prisoners, nothing is worse for a prisoner than to feel that he or she is forgotten. Usually the tormentor, the torturer uses that argument to break the prisoner, saying, you know, nobody cares. Nobody cares. This is why, for instance, at a conference in Washington on the looted artwork and monies, I asked, "Why so late? Why the pressure now?" The main thing is we forget that most of the victims were not rich. The enemy stole our poverty and nobody speaks about it. They speak only about

the fortunes and the galleries of those who were rich. But what about the poverty of the poor? At times, when I speak, people listen, but they don't hear.

I owe something to these people who were left behind. We who are so life-oriented, who celebrate youth, who celebrate strength—it's enough to see the commercials on television of only beautiful girls, healthy young men to know that somehow it is a kind of rejection of those who are not young, who are not healthy, who are not rich. Therefore I feel I owe them something. That's also why I write. That's what I write. I've written more than forty books, but very few deal with the war. Why is that? Because I believe in sharing. I learn so I have to share that learning. I have a great passion for learning and for teaching. So many of my books are about learning—from the Bible, from the prophets, from mysticism.

**KK** How do people become cruel, talk about hate?

**DR. WIESEL** At least we are in a situation where we realize the consequences. What a hater doesn't understand is that in hating one group, actually he or she hates all groups. Hate is contagious, like a cancer. It goes from one cell to another, one root to another, one person to another, one group to another. If it's not stopped, it can invade the whole country, the whole world. A hater doesn't understand, therefore, that actually, in destroying others, he then destroys himself. Show the outcome, show the ugliness. There is no glory in killing people, and there's no glory in degrading people. There is no glory in persecuting. That's a very important lesson.

**KK** One taught over and over again. Is there a point in repeating it?

**DR. WIESEL** I know what you're saying. Of course there is. But to come back to what I said earlier, I know I don't manage to persuade people to change, but I do it anyway. A story: A just man decided he must save humanity. So he chose a city, the most sinful of all cities. Let's say it is Sodom. So he studied. He learned all the art of moving people, changing minds, changing hearts. He came to a man and woman and said, "Don't forget that murder is not good, it is wrong." In the beginning, people gathered around him. It was so strange, somewhat like a circus. They gathered and they listened. He went on and on and on. Days passed. Weeks passed. They stopped listening. After many years, a child stopped him and said, "What are you doing? Don't you see nobody is listening? Then why do you continue shouting and shouting? Why?" And the man answered the child, "I'll tell you why. In the beginning, I was convinced that if I were to shout loud enough, they would change. Now I know they won't change. But if I shout even louder, it's because I don't want them to change me."

**KK** After all that shouting, do you think you have made a difference?

**DR. WIESEL** Here and there, maybe. I get letters, at least a hundred a month from children who read my books. I answer every one of them. My first book came out forty-two years ago. I know that some are moved. I know they are.

**KK** Is it possible to have courage, the determination to make a difference in other people's lives, without suffering yourself?

**DR. WIESEL** Of course, by studying the suffering of others. And you can do it in an elegant way, a discrete way. If a person suffers, you cannot reduce his or her suffering, but one thing you can attain is that the suffering should not become a source of human nature.

**KK** What does courage mean to you?

**DR. WIESEL** You know, for me, courage is the way you define it. I don't even make U-turns. I remain a refugee at heart. I'm afraid of the police. So if I do run into them, I stop and move away. I let my wife handle it. I'm afraid of uniforms. Generals frighten me. It wasn't courageous for me to tell Ronald Reagan not to go to Bitburg, it was just natural. For me, prophets were courageous because they had no constituents, nobody protected them.

**KK** Wasn't there one very powerful guy watching out for them?

**DR. WIESEL** Prove it. Do you have a paper identity card, saying, I, the God of the universe, appointed you? It's only the prophet who said, "God sent me."

Go and prove it. And nevertheless, because of the personality, because of the words, he spoke through God. And that is courage to speak the truth. Power may be that of a president or a king. Power may be a destroyer of the individual. And power may be something you must address with courage, which is the truth. The problem is how do you find it? . . . What I want, what I've hoped for all my life, is that my past should not become your children's future.

# SPEAKING TRUTH TO GENOCIDE

## ELIE WIESEL

LESSON GRADE LEVEL: 9–12  
HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE: GENOCIDE

### UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS:

- **Article 3:** Right to Life, Liberty, Personal Security

### GUIDING QUESTION:

- How can we be more like Elie Wiesel today?
- What can this class do to remember the Holocaust and be a defender against genocide?

### TIME REQUIREMENT:

40 to 80 minutes

### OBJECTIVES:

After this lesson, students will be able to:

- Know who Elie Wiesel is and why he is a human rights defender.
- Learn how his example provides the inspiration for students to stand up to genocide today.

### COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.9

### VOCABULARY:

- **Defender**
- **Genocide**
- **Human rights**
- **Holocaust**
- **Kristallnacht**

### CONCEPTS:

- **Human rights**
- **Global citizenship**
- **Justice**
- **Government**
- **Power**
- **Individual responsibility**

### TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED:

- An LCD projector

### TEACHER TIP:

- Students should have completed a unit on the Holocaust.

### MATERIALS:

- Poster board for each member of the class
- Handouts of Wiesel's profile from *Speak Truth To Power* [www.rfkhumanrights.org](http://www.rfkhumanrights.org/) / **Click on Speak Truth to Power / Click on "Defenders" tab**
- Oprah Winfrey interview of Elie Wiesel at the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IJ4mpCDVpE>

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

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### ANTICIPATORY SET:

- Show the following video in which Oprah Winfrey interviews Elie Wiesel at the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IJ4mpCDVpE>
  - Distribute to students the interview of Elie Wiesel from *Speak Truth To Power*: [www.rfkhumanrights.org](http://www.rfkhumanrights.org) / **Click on Speak Truth to Power / Click on “Defenders” tab**
  - Emphasize that in addition to speaking around the world for peace, perhaps Wiesel’s greatest accomplishment is helping create the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D. C., for which he was the founding chairman. Explain that it was due to Wiesel’s influence that the museum was started in 1993 as a living memorial for the victims of the Holocaust, and as a reminder of the cost of hatred in the world. Since that time, more than 34 million visitors have witnessed its exhibits, most of which can be viewed in this short video produced by the museum: <http://www.ushmm.org>
  - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
<http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=6MPeKNBZW6o>
- How is the Holocaust remembered today through memorials around the world?
  - The United States Memorial Holocaust Museum
  - Genocide in Armenia and Hitler’s reaction to it
  - Genocide in Cambodia
  - Genocide in Rwanda
  - Genocide in Darfur
  - Human Rights in Congo
  - What STAND is and how students have reacted to genocide today.
  - A poster on the accomplishments of Elie Wiesel as a human rights defender
  - A poster which explains the purpose of this project (to become a defender against genocide like Elie Wiesel); this poster should include students’ signatures, symbolizing their commitment to being defenders.
- Working in class for 2–3 days or at home, students will create a poster which explains their project, the guidelines for which should be established by the teacher.
  - To complete their research, students should go to the United States Memorial Museum’s website at <http://www.ushmm.org/>

### ACTIVITY 1:

- Suggest that one way students can follow in Elie Wiesel’s footsteps is to promote awareness of genocide to themselves and their community by creating an in-class Holocaust museum of their own.
- Give each student a large piece of poster board, and ask them to randomly select one of the following topics to research. Each topic has been adapted from the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org):
  - Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust
  - The role of Nazi propaganda in causing the Holocaust
  - The Hitler Youth for Boys and Girls
  - Kristallnacht
  - The Nuremberg Laws
  - The concentration camp system
  - The Nazi takeover of Europe
  - The mobile killing squads known as the Einsatzgruppen
  - The ghetto system
  - The larger death camps
  - Children in the Holocaust
  - The role of bystanders
  - The Warsaw Ghetto Resistance
  - The White Rose Movement
  - Irena Sendler as a Holocaust rescuer
  - Oscar Schindler as a Holocaust rescuer
  - Raoul Wallenberg as a Holocaust rescuer
  - The defeat of the Nazis and liberation of the camps
  - The Nuremberg trials and the role of Robert H. Jackson
  - What happened to the survivors after the war, where did they go, etc.?

### ANTICIPATORY SET:

In pairs, have students write the definition of genocide.

- Have students share their definitions with the class.
- Share the following definition with the class and in the same pairs, have the students compare this definition with what the class produced: “ Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:
  - Killing members of the group;
  - Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
  - Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
  - Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

As a class, discuss what genocide is within the context of international law.

### ACTIVITY 1

- Have the students research one of following historical conflicts and write a 5 page paper responding to the questions noted below:
  - Armenia
  - Holocaust
  - Rwanda
  - Bosnia
  - US Native Americans
  - Cambodia
  - Darfur
- The students should consider the following questions:
  - When did this conflict occur?
  - Who were the main players?
  - How did the global community respond?
  - Was the conflict classified as a genocide during the conflict or afterwards?
  - Did the conflict/genocide influence the evolution of international law?

### ACTIVITY 2

- Using the students research, create two timelines:
  - Timeline 1 will highlight the conflicts.
  - Timeline 2 will highlight the evolution of international human rights and humanitarian law to include mechanisms established to address such crimes.
- As a class, discuss how and why a specific conflict did or did not influence both the evolution of international law and the global awareness of Genocide.

### CULMINATING ACTIVITY

- Direct the students to the interview of Elie Wiesel from *Speak Truth To Power*. [www.rfkhumanrights.org](http://www.rfkhumanrights.org) / **Click on Speak Truth to Power / Click on “Defenders” tab**
- As a class, discuss the role that he has played in helping bring about change in regards to how the global community understands and responses to genocide.
- Ask each student to spend 20 minutes in reflective writing exercise. Have students share one thought about what they learned about Elie Wiesel and the effort to stop genocide.

## BECOME A DEFENDER

- Once they complete their posters, the students will honor Elie Wiesel's work by creating a "living" Holocaust museum of their own. To do so, follow these steps:
  - Group posters in chronological order by topic, and place them around the room or a larger display area like the school's library, cafeteria, etc.
  - Ask students to stand in front of their poster to explain their topic to their peers, to another class who hasn't studied the Holocaust, or better yet, to a parent's night gathering. Doing so has the added benefit of having the students become more of a defender, which in the end is what this project is all about!
  - The teacher may want to make this event even more significant by inviting a Holocaust survivor to speak afterward, which in turn will reinforce the importance of what the students have accomplished.
  - For more information on how to incorporate this lesson into a larger Holocaust Day of Remembrance, please contact teachers Monnie DeBerry and Duane Eliff from Hardin County Middle School in Savannah, Tennessee, both of whom have teamed up successfully to stage such an event and poster project over the past few years. This lesson is based upon the initial framework which these two great teachers created and provided.
- STAND trains and mobilizes volunteers with educational information, online resources and social networking to protect citizens from the violence of genocide.
- Create a Human Rights or Darfur group in their school, have an event to raise money and awareness for the refugees of the crisis, such as a spaghetti dinner, battle of the bands, or loose change drive in the cafeteria.
- The students can get more ideas for this charitable work by researching the student group called STAND (Students Taking Action Now Darfur!), which trains and mobilizes volunteers with educational information, online resources and social networking to protect citizens from the violence of genocide [www.standnow.org](http://www.standnow.org)
- For additional resources on genocide prevention, visit the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum <http://www.ushmm.org/genocide/>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### International Rescue Committee:

<http://www.theirc.org/>

The IRC works to help people survive humanitarian crises and afterward, to begin the rebuilding process. They work in 40 countries and 22 U.S. cities in an attempt to restore safety, dignity and hope to millions of people.

### AEGIS Trust:

[www.aegistrust.org](http://www.aegistrust.org)

A non-profit organization that campaigns against genocide and crimes against humanity. Aegis Trust also runs the Kigali Memorial Center in Rwanda and the Holocaust Memorial and Educational Center in the UK to teach the public about the realities of genocide.

### United To End Genocide:

<http://endgenocide.org>

### The Enough Project:

<http://www.enoughproject.org/>

A non-profit organization that takes a preventive approach to genocide and crimes against humanity while also working to stop current and ongoing genocide.

### Genocide Prevention Now:

<http://www.ihgilm.com/genocide-prevention-now/>

A review published online of Holocaust and genocide news and information.

### International Crisis Group:

<https://www.crisisgroup.org>

A non-governmental organization that focuses on resolving and preventing all kinds of deadly conflict. Their work focuses on distributing informative reports on these kinds of conflicts.

### Genocide Prevention Task Force:

[http://www.usip.org/genocide\\_taskforce/index.html](http://www.usip.org/genocide_taskforce/index.html)

An extension of the U.S. Institute of Peace that aims to make genocide prevention a U.S. national priority and to provide leaders with policy recommendations to help prevent future genocide.

### The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

<http://www.ushmm.org>

Offers teaching materials for teachers and students to help them learn about the history of the Holocaust, reflect upon the moral and ethical questions raised by that history and to consider the links to genocide today.