

A Post-Holocaust Hasidic Legacy

Where are we going? Tell me. Do you know?

I don't know, my little girl.

I am afraid. Is it wrong, tell me, is it wrong to be afraid?

I don't know. I don't think so.

In all my life I have never been so afraid.

Never. . . .

Say, do you know? Where are we going?

To the end of the world, little girl. We are going to the end of the world.

Is that far?

No, not really.

You see, I am really tired. Is it wrong, tell me, is it wrong to be so tired?

Everybody is tired, my little girl.

Even God?

I don't know. You will ask Him yourself.

—Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today*¹

A legacy is not only something that we preserve in the mind. It is something that we receive into the heart and the soul. We embrace it in our words and in our deeds. We hold it in our arms and in our hands, like a weary child who asks whether God is weary, too. Elie Wiesel's friend Nikos Kazantzakis once commented that perhaps God is not

so almighty after all but is as helpless as a child—and if we do not save Him, He will die: “He cannot be saved unless we save him with our own struggle; nor can we be saved unless He is saved.”² So we see what is at stake in receiving Wiesel’s Hasidic legacy, for it is just such a struggle. And it is just as fragile as the imperiled God, who is as weary as a child.

To acquire a sense of the post-Holocaust context of Wiesel’s Hasidic legacy, we turn to the Hasidic master, Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira, Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, who was murdered in the camp at Trawnicki on November 3, 1943. On February 14, 1942, he wrote, “A Jew, tortured in his suffering, may think he is the only one in pain, as though his personal pain and the pain of all other Jews has no effect above, God forbid. But . . . we learn in the Talmud (*Chagigah* 15b; *Sanhedrin* 46a) . . . God, as it were, suffers with a Jew much more than that person himself feels it.”³ Whereas Rabbi Yose “heard a Divine Voice like the cooing of a dove” over the ruins of the Temple, the Rebbe goes on to say, we know from Jeremiah 25:30 that “God roars, howling over His city.”⁴ And yet the Midrash tells us that God sits in silence over His city (*Eykhah Rabbah* 1:1:1). Why in silence? Because, as the Hasidic master Menahem-Mendl of Kotzk once said, the scream we hold back is more powerful.⁵ If “God is silence,” as Wiesel declares,⁶ in a post-Holocaust world His is the silence of a silent scream. For there are times when, like the five-year-old Joel the Redhead in Wiesel’s *A Jew Today*,⁷ like the child Hanna in his drama *The Trial of God*,⁸ God, too, screams without a sound. How, then, does God roar? He roars not only through the screams of “Mama!” that reverberate throughout the camps and ghettos, screams that threaten to undermine the very fabric of creation, but also through the whisper of a child who, like a Hasid shouting out a silent prayer, wants to know if God is weary, too.

Elie Wiesel begins his testimony in *Night* with a reference to a “Hasidic house of prayer.”⁹ His Hasidic legacy is one of prayer, without which we are left utterly homeless. These words, indeed, embody the primary targets in the Nazis’ project to annihilate the teaching and tradition of the Jewish people and with them the Hasidim of Eastern Europe. “Most of the victims who ascended the burning altar were Hasidim: the killers and they could not coexist under the same sky,” Wiesel has attested.¹⁰ And so the killers transformed the sky into a cemetery. “For Hasidism,” as David Biale and others have said, “the Holocaust meant decimation.”¹¹ It meant the decimation of everything that the word *Hasidic* signifies.

As for the house, one recalls that before they annihilated the Jews of Europe the Nazis rendered them homeless, with every Jew under Nazi

occupation sooner or later consigned to a camp, a ghetto, or a hiding place. Indeed, the house or the *bayit* is at the origin of Torah and creation, for the Torah begins with a *beit*, a *bayit*, which is a dwelling place. Thus, the meaning of creation is given in the first letter of creation: it is to transform this realm into a dwelling place for the Holy One. How? Through Torah, prayer, and acts of loving kindness, as it is written (*Pirke Avot* 1:2). Thus the Nazis forbade the study of Torah,¹² deemed prayer an act of sabotage,¹³ and punished anyone who extended even a kind word to a Jew.¹⁴

And it is a house of *prayer*, of *tefillah*. In Judaism *tefillah* is not merely supplication or petition. It is also reckoning, confrontation, and wrestling, as the cognate *naftolin* suggests. The Hasidic house of prayer is a house of confrontation, as when the beadle in one of Wiesel's tales used to run to the synagogue and declare, "Master of the Universe! I am here . . . but where are You?"¹⁵ Assuming the mode of prayer, as he himself has said,¹⁶ Wiesel's writings frame just such a moment of reckoning and confrontation. Without this house of confrontation, there is no dwelling in a post-Holocaust world. Why? Because without this prayer, this *tefillah*, there is no reckoning—and therein lies the true horror, the horror to which Wiesel responds: where the post-Holocaust world is emptied of prayer, it is also emptied of reckoning, for both God and humanity. The problem that plagues us in our time, Wiesel once said to me, is that we no longer know how to pray. "My life?" asks Wiesel. And he answers: "I go on breathing from minute to minute, from prayer to prayer."¹⁷ Just so, those of us who are heirs to this Hasidic storyteller's legacy are summoned to the task to which the Hasidic master Nahman of Bratzlav summoned his heirs: "Make my tales into prayers."¹⁸ Thus we must go on breathing, from tale to tale, from prayer to prayer, from reckoning to reckoning.

Certain groups of especially pious Jews have been known as Hasidim for centuries. A text as old as the 149th Psalm, for example, opens with a call to the "assembly of Hasidim" to "sing unto HaShem a new song and His praise" (Psalms 149:1). The Talmud, moreover, invokes the *Hasidim ha-Rishonim* (*Nedarim* 10a; see also *Mishnah Berakhot* 5:1), the "first of the pious ones," who went far beyond the requirements of the commandments to show their love of God and neighbor; indeed, Rabbi Meir regarded Adam, the first human being, as the first of the ancient Hasidim (*Eruvin* 18b). Among the most famous texts of the thirteenth century is the *Sefer Hasidim* attributed to Judah ben Samuel of Regensburg, known as Yehuda HeHasid; it is a collection of tales and teachings from the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, or the "Pious Ones of Germany."¹⁹ In the

seventeenth century, following the advent of Lurianic Kabbalah, one finds other examples of the use of the term *Hasid*; in his comments on the *Shulchan Arukh Ha-Ari*, a Kabbalistic rendering of the Code of Jewish Law, for example, Jacob ben Hayyim Zemah maintains that only one who acts in the manner of the Pious, of the *Hasidim*, can ever have access to the hidden wisdom.²⁰ By the time Hasidism came to Eastern Europe, then, the notion had its precedents.

Still, it must be asked: what does *Hasidic* mean? How are Hasidic Jews different from other Jews? What do they espouse? On one level, simply stated, Hasidic Jews thoroughly embrace the traditional observances of Judaism but with a dose of Jewish mysticism to inform the mind and enflame the soul. In fact, as Moshe Idel points out, both Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem viewed Jewish mysticism as a “bridge between Jewish tradition and the Judaism of the present,”²¹ a bridge that obtains when other bridges have been burned. Elie Wiesel’s Hasidic legacy—a legacy that has its mystical dimension—might also help to construct a bridge between a recent catastrophic past and an imminent Jewish future. Says Idel, “Only the coexistence in Judaism of a variety of mystical paradigms can explain how Hasidism was able to put back in circulation a whole range of key mystical concepts that were either marginal or absent from both Lurianism and Sabbateanism,”²² which were among the mystical and messianic movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One category inherited from Lurianic Kabbalah that the *Hasidim*, including the Baal Shem Tov, embraced was *gilgul*, or reincarnation; indeed, the Baal Shem declared himself to be a reincarnation of the great sage of the tenth century, Saadia Gaon.²³ Two key concepts in Hasidism, however, that are absent from Lurianism are *devekut*, or “clinging” closely to God in all things, and *hitbodedut*, which is a retreat into “solitude,” not for the sake of removal from human relation but in order to return to that relation with even greater intensity and devotion for the sake of a higher relation.²⁴ For Hasidism, as for Judaism, there is no higher relation without human relation, no *ben adam leMakom* without the *ben adam lehevero*.

Modern Hasidism arose in Transylvania with the coming of Israel ben Eliezer of Medzhibozh (1700–1760), better known as the Baal Shem Tov (the “Master of the Good Name”). Born in the town of Okopy, he appeared in the aftermath of the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648–1649, which took place in the Ukraine during an uprising between Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians that left up to one hundred thousand Jews dead—about 90 percent of the Ukrainian Jews. That slaughter was

followed by the trauma of the false Messiah debacle of Shabbatai Tzvi (1626–1676), who had duped several thousand Jews into following him to the Holy Land, only to convert to Islam when they were detained by the Turks. Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem believe that these catastrophes played a significant role in paving the way for the rise of Hasidism.²⁵ Idel, however, believes that Scholem and Buber may have overestimated the influence of the Shabbatean debacle,²⁶ since such disasters could just as well have stood as an obstacle to any new promises. Because no one was sure of what to make of him, the Baal Shem provoked such suspicions.

Rachel Elior expands on the source of these suspicions in the Jewish world, as the Baal Shem came on the scene just a generation before Jacob Frank (1726–1791), who was deeply influenced by Shabbatai Tzvi. The scandal of Frankism came to a head in 1759, when he and his followers converted to Christianity. The Hasidim, Elior explains, were persecuted and excommunicated for their presumed association with Frankist Shabbateanism, “even though their outlook and way of life were very different from those of the Shabbateans. The error is easily explained by the proximity of time, place, and sources of inspiration. The traditional communal leadership feared any divergent organization, and any attempt to replace the established ritual practices of Ashkenaz with kabbalistic liturgies and rites.”²⁷ As it turned out, their fears were unfounded.

Elior notes an early Hasidic tradition concerning the relationship between Shabbateanism and Hasidism:

The Baal Shem Tov . . . related that Shabetai Tsevi came to him and sought rectification [tikun] and he said . . . that tikun is to become bound up together soul and spirit. So he [the Baal Shem Tov] began to connect himself to him—carefully, for he was afraid, for he [Shabetai Tsevi] was a great evildoer. Once the Baal Shem Tov was asleep and Shabetai Tsevi, may his name be obliterated, came to the Baal Shem Tov in his sleep and tempted him to apostatize, God forbid, and he threw him down with a mighty throw until he fell into the deepest Sheol.²⁸

Unlike Frank, Elior adds,

the Baal Shem Tov did not cut his followers off from the traditional world. He did not demand secrecy, blind obedience, or submissiveness, and he did not offer his followers a future

beyond the limits of human comprehension. Instead he sought to illuminate existence in this world in the light of the divine spirit, which is apparent to all who want to see it and dispels the enigma of being. In the reality he posited, the state of human being is enlightened by the all-embracing divine being, which he conceptualized as the abundant effusion of *hesed*, divine joy, and sanctity.²⁹

The Baal Shem was so distressed over the presumed association between the Hasidim and the Shabbateans, says Nahman of Bratzlav, that “they say in the name of the Baal Shem Tov that he suffered two perforations in his heart because of the Shabetai Tsevi affair and that is why he passed away” (*Likutei Moharan*, 1:207).

Most of what is known about the Baal Shem Tov belongs to Hasidic lore. It is said, for example, that he received the “Hidden Wisdom” from the great mystic Rabbi Adam Baal Shem of Ropczyce, who discovered a manuscript containing the secrets of Torah hidden in a cave; it was revealed to him in a dream that he should pass the secrets on to Israel ben Eliezer.³⁰ Early on the Baal Shem underscored the immanence of God’s presence in the world and taught the ways of *devekut*.³¹ Before long he became known for his wisdom, erudition, and righteousness. Immanuel Etkes observes that “the Besht’s abilities to combat supernatural entities was evident also in his efforts to heal the sick. In one story, the Besht cures a child on his deathbed by confronting the soul of the child and commanding it to return to its body.”³² As Biale has noted,³³ contrary to some legendary accounts, when the Baal Shem arrived in Medzhibozh—a town destroyed in the Chmielnicki Massacres and rebuilt in 1660³⁴—in the 1740s he was already known as a great healer and mystic. Moshe Rosman reinforces this view.³⁵

The potency of the Baal Shem’s presence, prior to the advent of any *-ism*, set into motion a transformation of everyone who encountered him. Etkes reminds us that “the Besht did not regard himself as the leader of a movement, not only because in his day the Hasidic movement did not yet exist, or because it had never even occurred to him to found such a movement, but mainly because he perceived himself as bearing responsibility for the welfare of the Jewish people as a whole.”³⁶ There we have one category that defines the Hasidic movement and Wiesel’s Hasidic legacy: the responsibility that devolves upon each for the sake of all. The Baal Shem’s popularity drew reproach from Jews known as the Mitnagdim, or

the “Opponents,” chief among whom was the renowned Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, the Vilna Gaon; he believed that the Hasidim were spreading too many of the esoteric teachings among too many people too quickly. Biale maintains, however, that the conflict between the Mitnagdim and the Hasidim was relatively insignificant.³⁷ Still, he concedes, when the Hasidim celebrated the death of the Vilna Gaon in 1797, the spilt took on an unprecedented intensity.³⁸ In 1798, for example, the Mitnagdim went to the Russians and accused Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Chabad Lubavitch Hasidic dynasty, of espionage.

The Baal Shem attracted numerous followers, both from the elitist segments of East European Jewry and from the not-so-elitist segments of that world. Key figures in the transmission of his legacy were Yaakov Yosef of Polnoe and Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritch. Through these leaders there emerged the person of the *tzaddik*, a “righteous one,” who is able to elevate his entire following and to serve as a bridge between this realm and the upper realms. This particular understanding of the *tzaddik*, as it evolved over the generations immediately following the advent of the Baal Shem Tov, is another distinctive feature of Hasidism.

The *tzaddik*, Biale and others explain, “must bridge the chasm between himself and his followers by ‘descending to the people.’ He must periodically interrupt his state of communion with God and go down to the level of his followers in order to raise them up by joining himself to them. . . . What, more precisely, is the relationship between *tsaddik* and Hasid? The *tsaddik* is obliged to take care of both the spiritual and material needs of his followers, while the Hasidim are obliged to believe in the powers of the *tsaddik* and consequently to ‘adhere’ to him.”³⁹ It is important to note, he adds, that “the *tsaddik* is not a passive conduit between the upper and lower worlds. Instead, he is the quintessential expression of the movement in and out of the state of *devekut*.”⁴⁰ Note well: the *tzaddik* draws his Hasidim into the upper realms not only spiritually but also physically. This view of “the whole person of the *Zaddiq* as a channel, and not only his soul,” Moshe Idel observes, may be traced to the time of the great Lurianic mystic Moshe Cordovero (1522–1570), if not before.⁴¹ He goes on to note that “there can be no doubt” that the Hasidic masters were familiar with Cordovero’s most famous kabbalistic text, the *Pardes Rimmonim*, the writings of Isaiah Horowitz (1555–1630), and other Kabbalists, which expound on this notion of the *tzaddik* as a channel.⁴² In the nineteenth century, Hasidic dynasties stemming from the *tzaddikim* would come to the fore, based on the places where their

followers lived, such as Belz, Bobova, Lubavitch, Bratzlav, Ger, Satmar (Sztatmárnémeti), and Vizhnitz, the Yiddish name for Vizhnytsia, a town in present-day Ukraine. It is the dynasty to which Elie Wiesel was heir: he always identified himself as a Vizhnitzer Hasid.

For Hasidic Jews and for Wiesel's Hasidic legacy, gratitude and joy resting upon *relationship* are paramount. That is one way in which Hasidism epitomizes Judaism: in its accent on *relationship*. "What is Hasidism," writes Wiesel, "if not the belief that man must have faith in God *and* in people? You suffer? Pray to God but speak to your friend."⁴³ Few of us can fathom how extraordinary these words are, coming from a Hasid who emerged from the gullet of the antiworld. Faith in God? Faith in people? What can these words mean in the aftermath of Auschwitz? And yet Wiesel's Jewish teachings and testimonies are an effort to restore meaning to these words in the aftermath of a radical assault on the bond between word and meaning. Indeed, his is an effort to restore meaning to the very word *after*. "After?" he has written. "Did you say: after? Meaning what?"⁴⁴ Only a legacy can restore an *after*.

And so we come to the *after* in the Hasidic legacy. Here Arthur Green, with his notion of Neo-Hasidism, is of particular help. The Shoah is such a radical, unprecedented rupture of Jewish life, teaching, tradition, testimony—including the life and teaching of the Hasidim—that we should think of Wiesel's Hasidic legacy in terms of a Neo-Hasidic legacy. What does *Neo-Hasidic* mean? Green explains that it is "the notion that Hasidism has a message wider than the borders of the traditional Hasidic community, that Jews and others who do not live the lives of Hasidim and who have no intention of doing so might still be spiritually nourished by the stories, teachings, music of Hasidism—indeed by the telling of the narrative of Hasidic history itself."⁴⁵ Here Green has captured the meaning of *legacy*, as well as the innovation that Wiesel brings both to Hasidism and to Judaism. Wiesel's Hasidic legacy—his Hasidic *demand*—is for all humanity, and not just for the Jewish people, the traditional audience of the Hasidic sages. The Nazis obliterated the Hasidic world that was confined to Eastern Europe; Wiesel is chief among those witnesses who extend that world throughout the wider world. In *A Beggar in Jerusalem* he gives voice to the teaching couched in this universality: "There comes a time when one cannot be a man without assuming the Jewish condition."⁴⁶ If, as Green says, "Wiesel offers the first significant retelling of the story of Hasidism after the Holocaust,"⁴⁷ it is because Wiesel's legacy is Hasidic through and through. For Wiesel, *Jewish* and *Hasidic* (not to mention *human* and *Hasidic*) have virtually become the same thing.

I once repeated to Elie Wiesel a story about the Hasidic master Rabbi Uri of Strelisk, from his book *Somewhere a Master*. According to the tale, Rabbi Uri would make his final farewells to his family each morning before he set out to the synagogue for the morning prayers. Rabbi Uri was convinced that if he should attain the ascent to the upper realms that the prayers required, his soul might not return to this world.⁴⁸ Realizing that Wiesel's soul would not ascend but would descend into dangerous realms when he took up the task of writing his novels, I asked him: "How do you survive writing one of your novels? Do you not approach the edge of an abyss when you sound those depths?" He answered: "Yes. I descend . . . somewhere. But I have my . . . safety measures. My lifelines. I never write a novel without also studying or writing about something else: the Bible, the Talmud, Midrash, Hasidism. Without that lifeline, I could not find my way back to life." That lifeline was fundamentally Hasidic. Many of Wiesel's first lectures at the 92nd Street Y in the 1960s were on the Hasidic masters. His first collection of portraits were portraits of Hasidic masters. And he always prayed according to the custom of the Vizhnitzer Hasidim, just as he prayed in Auschwitz.

The Talmudic sage Shimon ben Azzai maintains that the most foundational of all Jewish teachings—and therefore of all Hasidic teachings—is that all human beings have their beginning in a single human being (*Talmud Yerushalmi, Nedarim* 9:4; *Bereshit Rabbah* 24:7). This teaching contains what Wiesel refers to when he says that "at Auschwitz, not only man died, but also the idea of man."⁴⁹ This most fundamental of Jewish teachings would become the teaching most fundamentally opposed to the Nazi view on what imparts meaning and value to the other human being. Why did God begin with just one human being and not two? The sages say it was so that no one may declare to another, "My side of the family is better than your side of the family" (*Tosefta Sanhedrin* 8:4). There is only one side of the family, which means that all of humanity is interrelated, physically through Adam, metaphysically through the Creator, with all the ethical demands that come with being part of a family. Indeed, the Hebrew term for "human being" is *ben adam*, a "child of Adam." There is no teaching more inimical to National Socialism's pivotal claim that there is no connection between the Aryan and the non-Aryan and no ethical obligation of one human being toward another. And this ethical demand lies at the core of Wiesel's Hasidic legacy.

The Baal Shem did not call for a resurgence of the study confined to the narrow circles of scholars, nor did he turn to the asceticism that had been associated with earlier Hasidim. To be sure, the Baal Shem drew one

of his closest disciples, Yaakov Yosef of Polnoe, into his circle by turning him away from asceticism.⁵⁰ Rather, he opened up the gates to God to anyone capable of gratitude and joy, precisely in a time when all were blind to anything for which they might be grateful or that they could rejoice in. The Baal Shem Tov, says Wiesel, “taught them to fight sadness with joy. ‘The man who looks only at himself cannot but sink into despair, yet as soon as he opens his eyes to the creation around him, he will know joy.’ And this joy leads to the absolute, to redemption, to God; that was the new truth as defined by the Baal Shem.”⁵¹ Given their post-Holocaust context, these words are as extraordinary as Wiesel’s post-Holocaust legacy.

Equally extraordinary is the Hasidic emphasis on gratitude, which is also a key to redemption. Says Wiesel in his commentary on the Passover Haggadah, “A Jew defines himself by his capacity for gratitude. A Jewish philosopher was once asked, ‘What is the opposite of nihilism?’ And he said, ‘*Dayenu*,’ the ability to be thankful for what we have received, for what we are.”⁵² Wiesel’s Hasidic legacy tells us that the path to redemption, both for God and for humanity, lies in joy even in the midst of despair, in gratitude even when we are hungry, and in struggling with God.

When in Wiesel’s *Ani Maamin* Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob confront the Holy One with the murder of the children, we read, “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob go away, heartened by another hope: their children. They leave heaven and do not, cannot, see that they are no longer alone: God accompanies them, weeping, smiling, whispering: *Nitzhuni banai*, my children have defeated me, they deserve my gratitude. Thus he spoke. He is speaking still. The word of God continues to be heard. So does the silence of his dead children.”⁵³ So you see, just as the redemption of humanity rests upon human gratitude, so too does the redemption of the Shekhinah rest upon divine gratitude, even amidst the silence of her dead children: gratitude not for their immense suffering but for the truth that their suffering *matters*, despite the impossibility of deriving any meaning from it. As the character Gregor declared to the Rebbe in *The Gates of the Forest*, “I tell you this: if their death has no meaning, then it’s an insult, and if it does have a meaning, it’s even more so.”⁵⁴ The redemption opened up by joy, gratitude, and struggling with God, even as God struggles with Himself, does not come through suffering but rather in spite of suffering.

If Auschwitz is central to Wiesel’s post-Holocaust legacy, Jerusalem is central to his Hasidic legacy. The Hasidic master “Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav,” Wiesel relates, “the storyteller of Hasidism, liked to say that no matter where he walked, his steps turned toward Jerusalem.”⁵⁵ As the

site where the Temple stood, Jerusalem signifies the emanation of Torah into the world, and Torah signifies the sanctity of life in the world. The Midrash teaches that the windows of the Temple were designed not to let light in but to allow the light of Torah to radiate out from the Temple and into the world (*Tanhuma Tetzaveh* 6). Thus the third-century sage Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi taught that the Temple was a greater blessing to the nations than it was to Israel (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:3). The nations, and not just the Jews, can no more live without Jerusalem than they can live without God. Like a *tzaddik*, Jerusalem is for everyone a bridge between this realm and the upper realms. “That’s where the town of my childhood seems to be now,” says Wiesel, “up there, in a Jerusalem of fire, hanging onto eternal memories of night.”⁵⁶ That is why the young Eliezer would weep at night over the destruction of the Temple,⁵⁷ even though he may not have known it at the time: the town of his childhood would be the heavenly Jerusalem of fire, hanging on the eternal memories of fire, of flames such as there have never been.

“How was I to reconcile Auschwitz and Jerusalem?” asks Yedidyah, the main character in Wiesel’s *The Sonderberg Case*. “Would the former merely be the antithesis, the anti-event of the latter? If Auschwitz is forever the question, is Jerusalem forever the answer? On the one hand the darkness of the abyss, on the other the dazzling light of daybreak? At Birkenau and Treblinka, the burning bush was consumed, but here the flame continues to warm the hearts of messianic dreamers.”⁵⁸ Amidst the flames of the Hasidic house of prayer consumed in the Holocaust there is another flame, one that warms the hearts of the messianic dreamers. It is the flame of the Hasidic legacy that Elie Wiesel has bequeathed to us through his portraits of the patriarchs and prophets, as well as the sages and masters. It is a legacy that we receive from a Hasid who loves Jews and Judaism and celebrates both. His first two volumes of portraits, in fact, were celebrations: *Célébration hassidique: portraits et légendes* [Souls on fire: Portraits and legends of Hasidic masters] (1972) and *Célébration biblique: portraits et légendes* (Messengers of God: Biblical portraits and legends) (1975).

Finally, with regard to Elie Wiesel’s Hasidic legacy, we should note one more thing about his innovative approach to Judaism. Wiesel understood that after the Holocaust nothing remained the same. “In the beginning there was the Holocaust,” he asserts. “We must therefore start all over again.”⁵⁹ Wiesel’s Hasidism enables him to start all over again. It opens up for him the *and yet*, which he describes as his “two favorite words”⁶⁰

and are so crucial to his approach to Judaism in the aftermath of the Shoah. It is a Judaism that leads us to put God on trial but to pause for *Minhah*, the afternoon prayers. It is a Judaism that leads us to cry out *Ayekah!?*—Where are You!?!—to God in the midst of the *Hineni!*—Here I am for You!—that we offer up to Him. It is a Judaism that makes it possible to love Jews, love God, and celebrate both in the aftermath of the unthinkable.

His Hasidism leads him to the reintroduction of another category in Jewish texts: the portrait. The Jewish tradition of portraiture is, from one perspective, ancient. Examples can be found in the writings of Flavius Josephus (CE 37–100),⁶¹ *Tzena Ureina* of the 1590s (sometimes called the *Women’s Bible*),⁶² and the *MeAm Lo’ez* of Yaakov Culi (d. 1732), as well as in the hagiographic literature, such as portions of the *Sefer HaKabbalah* of Abraham ibn Daud (1110–1180),⁶³ the martyrologies from the time of the Crusades, and portions of the Zohar. Others include the *Sefer HaHezyonot*,⁶⁴ which contains portraits of Isaac Luria sketched by his student Chayyim Vital (1542–1620), as well as the *Shivhei HaBesht* compiled by the disciple of the Baal Shem, Dov Ber of Mezeritch.⁶⁵ Although there are later precedents for portraiture, such as Hillel Zeitlin’s (1871–1942) volume on Nahman of Bratzlav,⁶⁶ the post-Holocaust context imparts to Wiesel’s portraits an unprecedented dimension. And, unlike the earlier examples of portraits of the sages, Wiesel uses the word *portrait* in the titles of his essays on the sages.

Through his portraiture Wiesel brings out the flesh and blood, the heart and soul, and the very humanity of these men and women who otherwise get lost in the teachings and traditions they bequeath to us. For the *meser* or the “message” transmitted through the *mesorah* or the “tradition” is not merely the teachings that belong to a doctrine; if that were all Judaism amounted to, it would indeed have been lost in the Shoah. No, the message transmitted through the tradition lies in the *humanity* of our teachers and not just in their teachings. It lies in the very meaning of humanity that came under a radical assault in the time of the Shoah. Let us consider, then, this innovation that Wiesel brings to Judaism and that constitutes his Hasidic legacy: the portrait.