

92NY

The Elie Wiesel Living Archive OPEN HEART —Jewish Adults—Handout

On the Title and Expression, “Open Heart” (5:44-6:40)

“So the volume, the little volume that I wrote and published on the subject deals with my own experience, and its title is simple and true, *Open Heart*. At times in past decades, in this very place, I often try to speak to you on various themes with an “open heart”—meaning, to reveal, as much as possible, that that moved me to do something, to fight for something, or just to study and teach on a given topic; always be honest, sincere, and therefore with an “open heart.” But I never thought that the expression “open heart” had not only a moral significance but also a pragmatic, a realistic, and a medical one . . .”

Consider:

Prior to this lecture, what moral significance would the expression “open heart” have for Prof. Wiesel when he would lecture at the 92Y?

What new added significance does the expression “open heart” have for Prof. Wiesel in this lecture?

Prof. Wiesel describes the title, *Open Heart*, as being “simple and true.” To your mind, what makes each of these words—“simple and true”—fitting to refer to the title of this lecture?

Growing Old in America (22:46-26:19)

What’s so wrong in being old? In my little town, Sighet, old people were not only respected, they were also loved. But not only loved but also respected.

I loved my grandfather. I was attached to him with all my heart. Twice a year he would come on visits. And on those days and evenings, I must say my life had a special magnificent and luminous area around it. To me they were holidays. His being there was a holiday. Every moment counted, every word had meaning, every Hasidic tale enriched my memory and my imagination, every smile from him was a gift, a caress. I learned so much from him, with him.

And here in America, what do we do with old people? We send them to an institution, away. Can you imagine in my little town do that, to send my grandfather or other grandparents just even to a village nearby? Here things are different. In truth, here, admit it, we don’t like old people. Therefore, so much, we’ve got so many products in the pharmacies, help you to remain young. Okay, remain young, but why discard old people?

At best we sent them to Florida or Arizona. Oh, we love them, but from afar. Are we really that disturbed by their presence? Perhaps by their disabilities? Are we afraid to see in them what and who surely we will become one day? They ask for so little, just to remain part of a family, see their grandchildren grow up.

I am going around in this country, pleading for them, and I am trying to convince schools, for instance, to send children to old age homes with a tape recorder. Let them, the old people, tell the young people stories of their life. It could be something so beautiful, it could be for the sociologists, for the philosophers, for the educators to help let them tell their story. And it would help the children, it would help the old. As always, I'm very good in giving advice—which is never accepted.

We are doing so much for children, thank God, but that's not enough. But still, at least we are concerned with their welfare. But what about the old? And I wish I could inspire enough people to change their attitude in this respect, and wage a campaign to keep the old people here, not too far away, keep them with us, not away from us. Remember younger, younger friends: with God's help, you also, one day, I wish it, you will become old. So I plead for your future as well.

Consider:

- Do/did you have a grandparent or elderly family member or friend with whom you visit? What special contribution have those visits (and your relationship with them overall) made to your life? What contribution has it made to his or her life?
- In the spirit of Prof. Wiesel's suggestions: How can we do more "to keep the old people here"--to make the elderly a visible regular presence in our daily lives?

The Meaning and Purpose of Life

a) "Never Wait" (35:59-36:14)

"The Jew that I am who studies the Talmud and our sources: we learn it is incumbent upon you to live as if you were to die the next day, we are told. And therefore every day must be special, and never wait until the next day."

b) "Uniqueness of Life" (39:33-40:12)

"That is what I learned in cheder when I was very young, and later in the yeshiva, and later still by studying the sacred books: the uniqueness of life. No human being has ever been here before, and no one will ever be; there may be people like us, but not *us*. And therefore, to kill a life--really, as the Talmud says--is to destroy the world, because who knows what that life could have produced: what children or grandchildren or descendants, great doctors, scientists, humanists, poets."

Consider:

- Prof. Wiesel ascribes to each person uniqueness and the potential to use his or her unique life to make a difference.
- How can we help to promote this message in order to help individuals carry out their unique mission in the world?
- How can we help share this message with children?

We Are Not Alone (49:30-50:45)

We're here really to help one another. I believe that morality means to recognize that we are not alone in this world. God alone is alone. The human being is not, must not be. And therefore the worst that can happen to a victim is when the victim feels abandoned and therefore alone, that nobody cares.

Whenever we had to take on a cause for victims who were in prison, or in camps, or society or of destiny, always that. One thing I can do--I cannot help them financially. I cannot help them in any other way--but one thing I can [do], just to make sure that that victim should know that he or she is not alone. And therefore I write, you know, and ask those who work with me in the office, we write so many letters just to be sure that somebody who suffers should never -- at least that. I cannot help the suffering, but one thing I can [respond to is] the loneliness, the solitude, which can become a curse.

Consider:

We just read about Prof. Wiesel's emphasis on uniqueness and seizing the moment of living. In light of that emphasis, and in keeping with his message about making sure victims know he or she is not alone: how can you partner with Prof. Wiesel in the mission to help others? Take a moment to write at least 3 ways that you could immediately begin to take action!

Bikur Cholim/Visiting the Patient**(4:43-5:43)**

“In the Jewish tradition, *bikur cholim*, visiting the patient on his or her sick bed, is among the 10 most important social commandments. And they are limitless, *ein lahem shiur*. If you don't believe this, just ask the patient that is close to you. Therefore, in the Talmud we learn that the visitor of an ill person takes away a great part of his or her illness. Does this apply to physicians as well? Well, I have never studied medicine. At times I wish I had. Just to relieve another person's aches, to be able to reduce them, perhaps even to eliminate them, to bring comfort and peace to those who need them--is there anything worthier than that, more beautiful?”

(1:00:05-1:01:02)

“In conclusion, just a marvelous little episode. At the beginning of my convalescence in the hospital my grandson Elijah, he was then six, came to pay me a visit. I love him. I hugged him, and I said to him, “You know, every time I see you my life becomes a gift.” He observes me closely as I speak, and then, with a serious face says, “Grandpa, you know that I love you, but I see you are in pain. Tell me, if I loved you more, would you be in less pain?” I am convinced that God at that moment was smiling as He contemplated His creation.”

Consider:

Prof. Wiesel speaks about the great importance in the Jewish tradition of visiting the sick, including, as the Talmud says, that “the visitor of an ill person takes away a great part of his or her illness.”

Discuss the following related points:

How can someone “take away” another person’s illness? Have you had that experience, either from the side of the visitor or from that of the patient?

Why do you think Prof. Wiesel cites this teaching? And why does he make sure to mention the Talmud as its source?

In what way does the conclusion of the “Open Heart” lecture—which recounts the hospital visit of Prof. Wiesel’s young grandson—reinforce the Talmud’s teaching? In what way (or ways) does this concluding episode model the quest for an “open heart”?