

## The Elie Wiesel Living Archive Teaching/Study Guide #1 The Storytelling of a Hasid

### Town Beyond the Wall (2/19/67; first Y lecture):

1) The lecture begins: “Before reading, I’ll tell you something else which you should know. I am a Hasid. You won’t believe it, but it’s true. Meaning I do belong to a movement which unfortunately almost disappeared or at least has been changed. And in a way, I’m still trying to catch up with it as a ghost.

a) “I am a Hasid”: why is this “confession” important? Why is it something the audience (and thus us) “should know”?

b) visit to the Vizhnitzer Rebbe “22 years after we parted.”

Context:

EW always referred to himself as a Vizhnitzer hasid—a follower of this Rebbe.

e.g. “I almost became a Hasid of Kotsk. I say almost because I am still a Vizhnitzer Hasid.” (lecture 11/9/67)

Both EW and the Rebbe survived the war; speaking in Yiddish

EW’s account of their meeting also serves as the introduction for his book, *Legends of Our Time* (1968).

EW adds to the later book version in two important ways: 1) the Rebbe gives him a blessing; 2)

*“perhaps the time has come for Dodye Feig’s grandson to take my place at the typewriter.”*

Why begin the lecture or “reading” (and the book) about “legends” and “stories” with these comments?

How do the additions in the book version affect or perhaps change our answer?

2) What does EW mean when he speaks of transforming a person or experience into a legend? (The passages that follow are from the lecture *Town Beyond the Wall*):

*There was such a man as Moishe the madman, and I knew him. **I knew him, and I tried to turn him into a legend.** Actually, I think that before I was born, as everyone, I, too, had the choice to become what I wanted to become, even before that, a storyteller or a novelist. And I chose storytelling, and my novels are nothing but tales, but legends.*

*Today other books hold me in their grip, and I try to learn from other storytellers how **to pierce the meaning of an experience and how to transform it into legend.** But most of them talk too much. The song is lost in words, like rivers in the sand. The Selishter Rebbe told me one day, “Be careful with words. They are dangerous. Beware of them. They beget demons or angels. It’s up to you to give life to one or the other. Be careful, I tell you. Nothing is as dangerous as to give free rein to words.”*

*I try to put in each novel a legend. In some I try to put more than one. The legends are more important than the novels. [00:41:00]*

How might the following dictionary definition of “legend” help (or hinder) us in appreciating what EW means by “legend”?

*a story coming down from the past especially : one popularly regarded as historical although not verifiable*

And the lines that follow come from his fall, 1967 lecture on the “Legends of the Midrash” (11/2/67; all of the four fall 1967 lectures come under the rubric of “Legends”) :

*As a child I listened to my teachers [00:07:00] reading each year the same legends before Tisha B’Av, Rosh Hashanah, or Pesach. Each year I discovered them anew, the splendor of the services in the temple, the destruction of the sanctuary, the desperate endeavors of the sages to keep Judaism alive. **And somehow my masters did succeed to keep these legends alive. I remember I used to see the persons they talked about, all of them or in part, and somehow I was linked to them.***

*I was in Israel this year during the war and immediately afterwards. And when I came to the Kotel Maaravi, [00:08:00] which I saw for the very first time in my life, for a second I stopped, and the second turned into hours. And I became confused. **I simply didn’t know whether all the legends that I have learned when I was a child were legends and I simply remembered them or they were true and they were still going on and the present is the legend of the past.***

3) In a later lecture (“The Relevance of Hasidism Today,” 10/17/91), EW speaks of three themes that have dominated his writing: faith, protest, and silence. The latter has many facets in EW’s teaching. In this lecture, he links silence to legends:

*Silence plays [00:46:00] an important role in legends, in storytelling. Things that are not said are as important, if I may quote George Steiner, as things that are said. Poems that were not written have the same impact as those that were composed. Whatever I’m trying often to do is not to write. It’s to achieve such a power in silence that words are useless.*

Silence is not simply a vacuum or a form of emptiness. It is something substantial and active. How does the paradox of the “power of silence” enrich EW’s notion of storytelling?

The final words of the lecture take this idea of an active silence to another level:

*I think in storytelling or in literature, the silence, too, belongs to the tale.*

We can ask: what is the nature of the silence that “belongs” to this first Y lecture by Elie Wiesel? Thinking back to the beginning of the lecture: is the silence Hasidic? Is it bound up with the power of legend to transform experience? Is connected to EW’s book *The Jews of Silence* (1966), which he reads a page of in the original French and which rebukes the silence of the world in the face Soviet Jewry’s oppression?

See the following books: *Legends of Our Time; Town Beyond the Wall; The Jews of Silence*

See the Y lectures, *Jewish Legends, Past and Present*: 11/2/67; 11/16/67; 11/30/67; and especially

12/14/67