Picture yourself forced into a cramped cattle car and driven to an unknown fate. Imagine your little sister’s small, innocent, tear-stained face, looking at you for the last time as she is led by your mother’s shaking hand to certain death. Listen. You can hear their stifled sobs, and soon you will be able to smell their ashes as they rise from the crematorium.

Now ask yourself: Can God exist in a world where things like this happen?

For many survivors the answer is yes. One is Elie Wiesel, who, in his autobiographical novel, *Night*, describes the unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust—the callous, systematic elimination of morality, innocence, and human lives—and the struggle for survival that tested his faith. After bearing witness to sickeningly merciless acts, many prisoners found it hard to retain the belief that a benevolent God could exist, but a select few were able to retain some semblance of their devotion, and a great many more found inspiration in that retention. The protagonist of Wiesel’s novel, Eliezer, is an exemplar of this idea. Eliezer’s faith is severely shaken by the terrible display of human debasement that pervades the concentration camps, as well as by the perversion of his own moral compass. But despite his many denunciations of Judaism and attempts to stray from God, Eliezer survives the Holocaust with his faith intact, proving to millions that hope can be found in the darkest of places.

Before the concentration camps and crematoria, faith was an integral and unquestioned facet of Eliezer’s life. He is fully consumed in his studies of the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism: “By day I studied Talmud and by night I would run to the synagogue to weep over the destruction of the Temple” (3). At only thirteen years of age, Eliezer is dedicating his days and nights to his religion. He even asks his father to find him a master to guide him in his studies of the Kabbalah, and when his father refuses on the grounds that he is too young, Eliezer finds his own master in a man named Moishe the Beadle. When Moishe the Beadle asks why he prays, Eliezer replies, “Why did I pray? Strange question. Why did I live? Why did I breathe?” (Wiesel 4). There is no room for skepticism in his answer. God animates Eliezer; He dwells within. At that moment, Eliezer’s belief in God was as natural and unconscious as breathing. Yet his entry into the concentration camp quickly changes this.

Faith: The *Night* Light of the Holocaust

*by Christine Elliott*

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Slave laborers liberated from the Buchenwald concentration camp in April of 1945. The man lying on the second row of bunks from the bottom, fifth from the left, is Eli Wiesel.
In the time between leaving the ghetto in Sighet and entering the camp, Eliezer witnesses unspeakable cruelty from both Nazis and his own people. As Eliezer and his father march toward what they think is the crematorium, Eliezer questions his father’s whispered prayer: “Why should I sanctify His name? The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank him for?” (Wiesel 33). Eliezer wants to know how a God whom he believed to be awesome and enduring could allow babies to be thrown into fire pits, families to be separated, and Jewish people to assist in their own destruction. This questioning, however, does not signify the death of Eliezer’s faith; it signifies its transformation. As Moishe the Beadle had told Eliezer back in Sighet, “‘Man comes closer to God through the questions he asks Him’” (Wiesel 5). Questioning God is a fundamental part of believing in him. For the first time, skepticism is taking an active part in Eliezer’s faith. His belief in God is no longer taken for granted, but it is not extinguished. In fact, Eliezer is unable to rid himself of his unconscious attachment to God. On the first night in the camp Eliezer promises, “Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes. Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself” (Wiesel 34). The first sentence renounces his faith, but the second implies it is still alive. God dwells within Eliezer. Even in trying to renounce his faith, he invokes God’s eternal life.

Eliezer’s faith is truly tested when he witnesses the hanging of the young pipel, a Nazi officer’s favorite. As the group of prisoners watches the child swing back and forth on the brink of death, one of the men asks where God is, and Eliezer replies, “Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows” (Wiesel 65). This incident extends Eliezer’s religious transformation. After witnessing such an extreme display of inhumanity, he becomes completely estranged from the “child of the Talmud” that he was before leaving Sighet (Wiesel 37). This estrangement brings with it a detachment from his previous notions about faith; however, Eliezer’s continuing fight for survival shows that his faith is not completely annihilated. Faith facilitates hope, and hope is necessary for survival. It gives the prisoners of the nightmarish camps reason to struggle through another day. This hope does not necessarily have to be based in faith, but it often was for prisoners such as Eliezer, who had been immersed in Judaism from an early age.

Akiba Drumer’s loss of faith and subsequent surrender to the selection highlight this idea. Early in the narrative Akiba was one of the most faithful prisoners, encouraging others to pray with him and to view their circumstance as a test of faith, but he soon loses his positive outlook. Eliezer notes the consequence of Akiba’s transformation: “If only he could have kept his faith in God, if only he could have considered this suffering a divine test, he would not have been swept away by the selection. But as soon as he felt the first chinks in his faith, he lost all incentive to fight and opened the door to death” (Wiesel 77). Unlike Akiba, Eliezer has felt severe gaps in his faith without surrendering to death. In fact, he already felt them when Akiba was God’s biggest advocate: “As for me, I had ceased to pray. I concurred with Job! I was not denying his existence, but I doubted His absolute justice” (Wiesel 45). Eliezer’s identification with Job exemplifies the maturity and endurance of his faith. Job is a biblical character whom God plagued with terrible misfortune in order to prove to Satan that men would remain faithful against all odds. Job does indeed remain faithful, but becomes inquisitive about God’s nature and ultimately learns that He works in mysterious ways that no human being can ever fully understand. Unlike Job, Akiba Drumer is unable to live with his religious uncertainty. Eliezer, on the other hand, makes room for skepticism in his faith. By agreeing with Job, he acknowledges the possibility that his horrible predicament may be a divine test that he is inca-
able of understanding, allowing him to retain hope and continue to fight for survival.

A crucial moment in this fight comes during the long, freezing run out of Buna. Here, Eliezer and his fellow prisoners feel completely isolated: “We were the masters of nature, the masters of the world…doomed and rootless, nothing but numbers, we were the only men on earth” (Wiesel 87). The prisoners are now the masters of their own universe, not God. This new conviction, however, does not make them enlightened or free; it makes them alienated and unfeeling. Under the harsh conditions of the march, survival takes precedence over any deeper need or emotion. The simplicity of only having to think about keeping their feet moving and their hearts beating—and of having done so thus far—gives the prisoners a sense of control. Their physical inability to think about anything but survival gives them the illusion of omnipotence. In the midst of this futile, indefinite journey Eliezer feels completely separated from God and considers giving up, but he is reminded of his faith again when he realizes that Rabbi Eliahu’s son has abandoned his father.

Eliezer is horrified that Rabbi Eliahu’s son has deserted his father, but he senses a weakness within himself and fears that he might do the same to his father. He asks God to keep him from sinking to that level: “Oh God, Master of the Universe, give me the strength never to do what Rabbi Eliahu’s son has done” (Wiesel 91). Eliezer’s appeal to God in this moment of vulnerability shows the continuation of his faith. When circumstances get bad enough, self-preservation is the only thing on the minds of the prisoners, but God is still alive in the soul of this prisoner. He no longer feels that he is the master of his own universe. In fact, he needs help controlling his most basic instincts to survive, fearing that they might displace his devotion to his own father and to God the Father.

Unfortunately, on the last night of his father’s life, Eliezer gives in to these instincts. He ignores his father’s cries, and feels a tinge of relief when he dies, an event that puts Eliezer on the same level as Rabbi Eliahu’s son, removing his last semblance of morality. It also provides a final, devastating blow to his faith. The fifth commandment is “Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12). In abandoning their fathers, Rabbi Eliahu’s son and Eliezer are disobeying God and separating themselves from Him. However, Eliezer expresses guilt for his betrayal of his father and of God: “No prayers were said over his tomb. No candle lit in his memory. His last word had been my name. He had called out to me and I had not answered” (Wiesel 112). But Eliezer’s words are not the words of a person who has abandoned his faith. On the contrary, his regret that there had been no religious memorial for his father shows that, even his darkest moment, Eliezer is approaching his predicament...
from a religious perspective. God is still dwelling within him.

Wiesel’s narrative ends with a newly-free Eliezer looking in a mirror for the first time since leaving Sighet. He is shocked by the stranger looking back: “From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me” (Wiesel 115). The person Eliezer sees in the mirror is a battered, desolate shell of his former self. His residual faith is hidden beneath his feeble exterior and dwarfed by his overwhelming sense of loss. But out of the ashes springs new life; out of the charred soul of Eliezer springs Elie Wiesel. Since writing *Night*, Wiesel has used the persecution he experienced to fuel his political activism. He has become a champion for human rights, for which he thanked his enduring faith in his Nobel Prize Acceptance speech: “I have faith. Faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and even in His creation. Without it no action would be possible” (Wiesel “Nobel” 120).

While *Night* is a story of unthinkable sorrow and loss, it is also a story of hope and renewal. Wiesel’s life after *Night*—his revived faith and his profound influence on the lives of others—is a testament to that renewal. With his political activism, he shows the Jewish people and persecuted peoples around the world that their suffering is anything but inconsequential. With his powerful recounting of Eliezer’s journey from Sighet to hell and back, he reminds the world of its capacity for evil, but also of its capability to survive unthinkable horrors. And, perhaps most importantly, that if it is possible for Eliezer to keep faith amidst the abyss of human depravity at the tender age of twelve, it is possible for anyone, anywhere.

**Works Cited**
