

Phylacteries as Metaphor in Elie Wiesel's
Le Testament d'un poète juif assassiné

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The novels of the Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, were initially read as eloquent expressions of remembrance and witnessing to the massacred millions who perished in Hitler's inferno. Wiesel has himself stated, however, that his writing is an attempt to rediscover the boy he happened to be, the profoundly religious *yeshiva boher* (Jewish student of religious texts) whose God and world were rent asunder by the events of the Holocaust. Each novel is likewise replete with the language, symbols, and meta-structural techniques firmly placing his *oeuvre* in both the universal and Jewish traditions of lamentation literature. I would argue, moreover, that Wiesel's novels and entire literary universe are also profound expressions of Jewishness and of the author's fundamental belief that post-Auschwitz Jewry must draw nearer to its authentic roots and affirm a personal commitment to Jewishness/Judaism and not simply to membership in the Jewish people.

In his slim volume, *On Jewish Learning*, Franz Rosenzweig sought to define this notion of Jewishness in the following manner:

what we mean by Judaism, the Jewishness of the Jewish human being, is nothing that can be grasped in a "*religious literature*" or even in a "*religious life*"; nor can it be "*entered as one's creed*" in the civil registry of births, marriages and deaths. . . . It is only lived—and perhaps not even that. One *is* it. (57-58)

Jewishness could only be comprehended from within the Jewish condition and by actively living and directly practicing a Jewish life. One ought not infer from such an interpretation that Jewishness must of necessity be equated with a strict adherence to orthodox Judaism and the rigorous,

logical minutiae of Divine and rabbinic laws governing all aspects of life. For Rosenzweig, and by extension I would propose for Wiesel as well, Jewishness is a recognition of one's moral and ethical responsibilities to all of God's creation. Moreover, Jewishness signifies an identification with the Jewish people, its history, culture, and traditions. As Wiesel has stated in *Sages and Dreamers*:

Whoever does not accept Jewish history in its entirety is not Jewish; whoever wishes to identify with one period, one tradition, one burden, or one privilege cannot be Jewish. To accept Judaism means to accept oneself within the totality of Judaism And whoever is unwilling to accept all of it stays outside. (169-70)

More precisely, Jewishness means being a witness to God's presence in this world and to His moral mission as evidenced in the richly variegated and frequently tragic history of Israel. This exhortation to remain faithful to one's Jewishness achieves its most complete and compelling treatment in Wiesel's 1980 novel, *Le Testament d'un poète juif assassiné*.

In this novel, Wiesel returns to the world of Soviet Jewry, first visited in the mid-1960s, that had provoked his journalistic study *cum témoignage*, *Les Juifs du silence* (*The Jews of Silence*). The novel attempts to present the struggle of these Jews for survival as a religious community and a "nationality" within the Soviet state. Wiesel also examines the betrayed hopes of those Jews who had placed such faith in the utopian socialist ideals of the Russian Revolution. His protagonist, Paltiel Kossover, represents one of those Jews. The scope of his life represents a broad image of the young idealistic Jewish radicals whose yearnings for justice and equality catapulted them into the revolutionary movements that raged across Europe from 1900 until the Second World War. More than a revolutionary, Paltiel is also represented as a Yiddish poet whose work found some considerable success in the USSR after the War. Wiesel established in this fictional characterization a composite figure for those twenty-four leading Jewish poets and intellectuals who were executed by the NKVD on Stalin's orders on the night of 12 August 1952. More than a mere symbol of those murdered poets, Paltiel symbolizes the difficulty for any Soviet Jew to maintain an authentic Jewish identity in a state that seeks, at best, to minimize one's existence. Paltiel's struggle is eventually transmitted in his testament, a unique confession written while in prison and destined for eyes other than those of his NKVD inquisitors.

Paltiel's testament was meant for his son, Grisha. The document is the father's method of conveying the essence of his own failure in life to his only heir:

Truth, for a Jew, is to dwell among his brothers. Link your destiny to that of your people; otherwise you will surely reach an impasse. . . . I must tell you that in my *Testament* I did plead guilty. Yes, guilty. But not to what I take to be the meaning of the charge. On the contrary: guilty of not having lived as my father did. That, my son, is the irony: I lived a Communist and I die a Jew. (*Testament* 16)

Paltiel's manuscript, thus, recounts the tale of a man in flux, always seeking himself, continually becoming. As such, the novel has been viewed by scholars and critics as a traditional *Bildungsroman*.

Paltiel and his story do not merely present the reader with the engrossing saga of the development of one man's character. Underlying that aspect of the tale are Wiesel's ideas concerning the problematic task a Jew confronts in being truly Jewish. By writing this extraordinary odyssey, author and narrator expose the protagonist's rebellion against the adopted façade of the communist and expound upon the genuine desire to regain authenticity and truth. The tensions between Jewish identity and communist affiliations produce the testament in which Paltiel carefully reviews his past. In this *descente aux enfers*, the protagonist ironically realizes that by being truly Jewish he was a "communist." Paltiel's initial proof for this lies in his father's advice as the protagonist leaves home to pursue his quest to establish a socialist utopia:

I don't know your Communist friends. . . . I only know that their aim is to diminish unhappiness in the world. That is what counts, that is all that counts. . . . What matters is that they are fighting for those who have neither the strength nor the means to fight. The essential thing for you is to be sensitive to the suffering of others. (*Testament* 81)

Firmly rooted in the teachings of prophetic and rabbinic Judaism, his father's message stresses the notion of responsibility, which in Hebrew is *ahriot*, a word containing the term *aher*, or Other. His father's admonition subconsciously serves as Paltiel's *point de départ* when later he begins his personal quest to revive his own Jewishness.

The testament Paltiel conceived must itself be viewed as a thoroughly Jewish document, a *zavv'at*. This traditional ethical last will and testament of Jewish fathers to their children enshrines the lofty moral imperatives of Judaism and reflects the authors' fervent desire for their descendants to emulate their virtues and to shun their vices and shortcomings. Comparing his own Jewishness to that of his father, Paltiel himself

recognizes his failings and advises his son accordingly: "My father, whose name you bear, knew. But he is dead. That is why I can only say to you—remember that he knew what his son does not" (*Testament* 16).

Despite the testament being a profoundly Jewish text, one that, in addition to being an ethical will, might also be considered a *vidduy*, or confession, Wiesel has provided the reader a singular, subtle metaphoric *mise-en-abyme* in which are gathered the signs and symbols that form the author's vision of Jewishness.¹ Moreover, this trope underlines the protagonist's struggle to reclaim his Jewish identity. Wiesel's chosen image also serves as a *fil conducteur*, linking all the novel's various narrative levels and providing the structural cement and symbolic matrix which unite the text. The symbol in question: Paltiel's phylacteries, or *tephilin* in Hebrew, objects whose metonymical significance has to date been ignored by Jewish and non-Jewish scholars of Wiesel's *oeuvre*.

The term *tephilin* is reminiscent of the Hebrew word for prayer *tephilah*, and they do indeed form part of the ritual objects worn by observant Jews during morning prayers, except on the Sabbath and festivals. They are two small, hollow quadrangular receptacles fashioned of wood and the skins of animals considered as clean and fit (kosher) for use. One is worn on the left arm, by the heart, its straps being wound seven times down the arm and then around the left hand, eventually fashioning with them the Hebrew letter *shin*, recalling one of the Divinity's biblical names *Shaddai*, or Almighty. The second is placed on the forehead below the hairline directly between the eyes.² Wearing the phylacteries intimates subjecting human thoughts, feelings and actions to the service of God. Upon an examination of the object's contents it becomes evident that this ritual activity is imbued with a more profound intention. Each encloses the same four biblical passages: Exodus 13:1-10; 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-20, and it is the essence of those passages that provides the metaphysical core for wearing the *tephilin* and determines its choice as Wiesel's symbol.

The *tephilin* bear witness to the sacred ideals housed within the ritual objects. They are referred to as signs between God and His people. In the *Shulhan Aruh*, or the *Code of Jewish Law*, Rabbi Joseph Karo notes that in donning the *tephilin*, the Jew hallows a "precious precept, because the whole Torah is compared to the *tephilin*" (26). From this broad statement, one may conclude that the biblical passages contained within these simple boxes manifest the totality of the Divine Law and construct the foundations for the particular Jewish ethos and for a universal morality. In order to appreciate wholly the significance of Wiesel's symbol, one must analyze the biblical verses housed in the phylacteries.

The two texts excerpted from Exodus contain the Divine injunction concerning the wearing of the *tephilin*, as well as recalling the miraculous events of the first Passover and instituting the annual Passover festival. But the texts likewise repeat a significant imperative: "And thou shalt tell thy son in that day." The generally accepted interpretation of this passage stresses the responsibility of the parent to teach the child and to instill in that young life a desire to be dedicated to the history and traditions of the Jewish people. In addition, the text constructs the paradigm that freedom can only be achieved by linking oneself to one's people, its history and its particular moral codes.

Coupled to those passages are the Deuteronomical texts. The first states the formal creed of the Jewish faith, the *Shema*, with its belief in One God; the second recounts the fundamental principle of reward and punishment with regard to Divine commandments. And yet, a closer examination of these texts again reveals that the Jew is enjoined to teach God's law to the children, "talking of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way." This repetition propounds the assertion that the transmission of Judaism's fundamental precepts is essentially established as a primary parental responsibility. Moreover, rabbinic exegesis stresses that the parent is given the pragmatic task of instructing by example. "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and *with all thy might*" (Deuteronomy 6:5, my emphasis). Though the Judeo-Christian tradition appears to concur on the meaning of loving the Almighty with one's heart and soul, the third manner is less axiomatic. One rabbinic interpretation states that "with all thy might" implies performing good deeds, even at the cost of all one's wealth and resources. That is, quite simply stated, taking responsibility for others. I believe Wiesel echoes this precise interpretation at the beginning of Paltiel's father's testament:

Tzedaka tatzil mimavet. Charity will save you from death. . . . That admonition means something else: in helping the poor, in looking after and listening to those who need us, we are exercising our privilege of living our life, of living it to the fullest. Without it we would not feel alive. (*Testament* 81)

That advice concludes with his father's plea that Paltiel remain Jewish *and* that he don his phylacteries every morning. "Promise me you will remain a Jew. . . . Promise to put on your phylacteries every morning" (*Testament*, 82). The evocation of the *tephilin* at this point not only establishes their metaphoric intent within the text, but it also signals the existence of a unique physical symbol to remind Paltiel of his links to his

father and to his father's directive to remain Jewish. This purportive *mise-en-abyme* quite literally embodies the essence of Jewishness and likewise underscores the existential struggle Paltiel will recount in his testament.

The *tephilin* with their message of responsibility toward self and toward others and of remaining and acting Jewish not only serve as principal metaphor in the novel, but they also heighten the tension between the communist and the Jew. Travelling about Europe and engaging in his socialist activities, Paltiel carries with him the silent reminders of his Jewishness and his father's testament. During the early stages of his wanderings, despite the gradual erosion of other vestiges of his Jewish identity, Paltiel remains faithful to his promise as he performs the daily ritual of wearing the *tephilin*. But the phylacteries are eventually placed aside in a crepuscular corner of his existence. And yet, despite their disuse, Paltiel refuses to be separated from them. They constitute a mute, tangible link with his father, his own Jewish past, and his silenced Jewish identity. When requested to relinquish them to a mysterious stranger, Paltiel's firm refusal symbolizes a conscious challenge to his adopted communist image. The mere possession of the ritual objects marks a profound bond with the Jewish people and its ethos. It is his link to his own past. Despite all other "transgressions," these simple, outward things remain to remind him of his historical and metaphysical heritage. And when his European saga has concluded and Paltiel returns to the Soviet Union, the *tephilin* are among those fragments in a suitcase that comprise his life: "What could there be inside this accursed suitcase to make it so heavy? Clothes. A few writings. Phylacteries in a small blue bag" (*Testament* 218).

The union of father and son and the continuum of past and present—all symbolized by the *tephilin*—are eventually shattered. These vital links exist only so long as the *tephilin* are among Paltiel's possessions. When they are mysteriously mislaid, the resulting rupture is rendered absolute since it is only at that moment that the Holocaust and its enormity of destructive evil manifest themselves in the tale. Prior to the Red Army's liberation of Paltiel's native town, Liyanov, the missing *tephilin* foreshadow a more tragic loss. Entering the town, Paltiel discovers that the world he had known, most especially the Jewish world of his father and forefathers, has forever vanished.

Though at this juncture Paltiel seemingly abandons his Jewishness by becoming a member of the Communist Party, the protagonist is haunted by his past and by his father's insistence to remain true to his Jewish self. And yet, his authentic Jewish image cannot be permanently

silenced, nor can his bonds with the Jewish people be completely severed, though maintaining them appears far more complicated and tortuous. The reader recognizes that a persistent Jewish essence continues to influence Paltiel, especially as evidenced in the poetic memorial to his father's annihilated world.

J'ai vu mon père en songe (I Saw My Father In A Dream), a slim volume of Yiddish poetry, resurrects the lost world of Paltiel's Jewishness and youth, though no poem actually evokes the memory of his father. The original structure of this collection had intended that an opening poem would lyrically depict Paltiel's father leading a silent funeral procession, the verses serving as a surreal metaphor for the lost culture of which Paltiel had once been a part. At the last moment, however, the poet chooses to delete this poem for fear of offending or annoying his communist readers. But how many communists would have been capable of reading Yiddish? What reason might therefore have induced Paltiel to this cowardly act of self-censorship? I believe the protagonist consciously omits that particular poem out of guilt for having abandoned his Jewish self, for having broken his promise to his father and for the ensuing loss of the *tephilin*. Thus, in this bout of the struggle between the Jew and the communist, the latter would seem to have gained an advantage. But, as Paltiel quickly learns, the "communist" ideal will not tolerate any degree of Jewish identity. Frightening new pogroms erupt, striking at the very source of Jewish identity: words. Jewish presses are closed, books seized, writers imprisoned.

Into the chaos and failure that characterize his life, his son is born. Grisha serves as a catalyst to stimulate the revival of his father's Jewishness and to permit him to perform parental duties as prescribed in the biblical verses encased in the *tephilin*. Grisha becomes the means by which the painful existential struggle Paltiel has endured will be terminated. In a broad ironic stroke, the son will assist the father in rehabilitating the father's silenced Jewish image.

An important feature of Jewish life incumbent upon parents is the transmission of names. During the Spanish Civil War, Paltiel had experienced a unique event: "One morning, among the ruins of a cemetery . . . I came upon a tombstone whose inscription made me shiver: Paltiel son of Gershon" (*Testament* 190). His exact name had died centuries before, only to be reborn in him. The chain of Jewish life had been maintained. The reality of this experience later manifests itself in Paltiel's decision to name his own son after his father, thereby reviving a name in the community of Israel. Not only has a name been retrieved from the silence of death, but Paltiel consciously decides to voice that name in the ritual of *brit meila*, the ceremony of circumcision when a male

Jewish child is introduced into the ancient Covenant between God and Israel.

With the renewal of the Covenant, Paltiel again assumes his parental responsibilities as directed by the biblical texts contained within the *tephilin*. It seems fitting, therefore, that the protagonist's regeneration as a Jew should achieve more complete realizations with the resurrection of the crucial symbol of the *tephilin*. As mysteriously as they had disappeared, the protagonist now discovers them crammed into a drawer. "The next second, without knowing what I was doing or why, I took them out of their bag, kissed them and put them on my left arm and forehead. . . . All the rituals had come back to me" (*Testament* 285). And with them, a profound sense of Jewishness engulfs Paltiel. As if encountering an old friend, he rekindles a fecund relationship. This action does, moreover, propound several other significant implications. First, it represents Paltiel's means for Grisha to observe the use of an important symbol of his faith. Secondly, father and son establish a silent bond through the straps of the phylacteries, a relationship more fully developed later when Grisha is presented with his father's testament in which the biblical imperatives contained in the *tephilin* become actions. In the testament, Paltiel has assumed his role as father, teacher and guide, thus fulfilling his responsibilities and forging the chain of Jewish life and traditions, thereby linking himself to his father and to his son.

In the pages of the testament, Paltiel Kossover outlines his quest to understand his Jewish nature and his desire to espouse it completely. "The reward of being Jewish lies in defining oneself, not in being defined. The gift is possessing one's heritage and in affirming one's existence on one's own ground" (Dawidowicz 31). Though menaced by torture and death, Paltiel redresses earlier shortcomings and in his testament constructs a fitting legacy for his son. In inheriting his father's words—themselves infused with the biblical messages humbly housed in the *tephilin*—Grisha will speak "not like his father," but "in place of his father" (*Testament* 14), passing on eternal truths to yet another generation. Linked to their common heritage, father and son will struggle to create hope for a better, more humane future.

Notes

1. *Vidduy*, or Jewish confession, is addressed directly to God and ought to express sentiments of honest regret and sincere repentance. The confessional prayers are phrased in the plural as the entire community regards itself as responsible for many offenses it might have prevented. In accordance with a

Talmudic statement in Tractate Shabbat 32a: "When a man is sick and near to death, he is asked to make confession," every Jew makes confession on his/her deathbed.

2. The complete laws for wearing the *tephilin* can be found in the Talmud, Menahot 34a-37b, and repeated in Volume 1, Chapter 10 of the *Shulhan Aruh* (*Code of Jewish Law*).

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