

A LETTER FROM THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE TO ELIE WIESEL  
DATED 24 NISAN 5725 (APRIL 26, 1965)

# Understanding THE HOLOCAUST

The recent death of Nobel Laureate and Holocaust memoirist Elie Wiesel has triggered many discussions about faith in the aftermath of the death camps of Auschwitz and Treblinka. Regrettably, many of those discussions were superficial, and do not represent authentic Jewish thought and hashkafah. As a counterpoint, we bring to you the following penetrating letter, for the first time rendered into English.

I received your article about Jewish atheists in the Pesach edition of the *Jewish Advocate* by coincidence, as your article was printed on the reverse side of a letter I wrote to them in opposition to interfaith dialogue. I say “coincidence,” but obviously there is no such thing as coincidence for us Jews, because everything happens by *hashgachah pratis*.

Since Jews are always searching for *remazim*, the fortuitous juxtaposition of our articles gives me an opportunity to write a few lines to you, especially since there has been a lapse in our correspondence of late, and a few words during a *farbrengen* don't really count.

Incidentally, I was informed that you were present at some of the recent *farbrengens*, but for whatever reason you didn't feel comfortable to approach me.

I was very intrigued by your article and read it with great interest. You write that your initial take on the tragic (or tragicomic) rabbi who spoke out against the *Ribbono Shel Olam* was that he was expressing his protest against the injustices of the world. I assume that you were only using it as a turn of phrase, because a person who was educated in the seminary of a movement whose entire philosophy is diametrically opposed to fighting and rebelling, and is all about making life simpler and easier, is certainly incapable of the level of thought necessary to reach such conclusions.

It is self-understood that I agree with you that the claim of *hashofet kol haaretz lo yaaseh mishpat* [will the Judge of the whole world not do justice?] can only be authentic and have sufficient power if it comes from the anguished heart of one who is a true *maamin*. That is why we find that the first person to ask that question was Avraham Avinu, the greatest *maamin* and father of the *maaminim bnei maaminim*. *Chazal* also tell us that the first person to ask the question of *tzaddik v'ra lo, rasha v'tov lo* was none other than Moshe Rabbeinu—the same Moshe Rabbeinu who taught the Jews, and the world at large, the concepts

of *Anochi Hashem Elokecha* and *Lo yiheyeh lecha elokim acheirim*, which includes not viewing human intellect as an “idol” or final arbiter in how a person should lead his life. Therefore, I was very surprised that you didn't present this idea as well as its conclusion. This is the answer *Chazal* (*Menachos* 29b) tell us was given to Moshe Rabbeinu when he was shown the Romans ripping off Rabbi Akiva's flesh with iron combs, and he asked, “Is this the reward for learning Torah?” Hashem replied, “*Sh'sok. Kach alah b'machashavah*—Be silent, for this is what I have decided.”

Bear in mind that Moshe's question was not just a matter of speech but something that permeated his entire thought process. Therefore, when Hashem told him to be silent, it wasn't just a command to stop talking about it; it was a command to stop thinking about it as well.

What is the only answer he is given? “This is my decision,” which isn't really much of an explanation! Nevertheless, this didn't weaken Moshe Rabbeinu's *emunah* or that of any of the other authentic questioners and those who had authentic demands for answers. On the contrary, we find that this strengthened their *emunah*, as we see clearly in *Tanach* concerning Iyov. Similarly, we find that not only was Avraham Avinu's *emunah* not shaken at all, but he was even able to overcome all of the *nisyonos* he faced. And the same applies to all the other “rebels,” who remained strong *maaminim* until their final days.

I believe you will agree with me that it isn't happenstance that all of the authentic questioners kept their *emunah*; indeed, it is impossible for it to have been otherwise. For if the question is sincerely meant and arises from a genuine concern for justice and righteousness, then it is obvious that such a deep feeling can only come from the conviction that *true* justice and righteousness must originate in a supernatural source, one that is above human understanding and feelings. As a direct result of this realization, the question doesn't only affect the person's emotions and intellect, but his essence as well.

The next step after this understanding is to stop and realize

that the entire approach of trying to understand something that is above the intellect with the rational mind is erroneous. Therefore, after having worked through one's shock, pain and grief, one must come to the realization that *im kol zeh ani maamin*—nevertheless, I still believe! Furthermore, that faith will become even stronger than it was before.

All of the above is in reference to your article, but I would like to address an additional point—a point that gets to the very crux of the issue—and it is a wonder that it is so often overlooked. I am referring to the fact that this “conflict” with *emunah* is not something new that suddenly arose in our generation; our nation had to face the threat of slaughter and annihilation, *Rachmana litzlan*, in previous generations as well. The Crusades, for example, were possibly just as bad as the Holocaust, if you look at the percentages and the atrocities. The only difference was that during the Crusades there wasn't even a ray of hope that the suffering would ever end, because they were carried out in the name of “that man” and the Trinity, which according to the Jewish interpretation is true idol worship and something that Jews could never accept upon themselves. Later, after the Byzantine Turks were conquered—for a time—by the Crusaders, there couldn't even be an expectation of anyone coming to save them. The Holocaust, by contrast, was carried out “only” because of the animalistic, bestial nature of those people, so there could at least be a hope that the world would be shocked by what was happening and put an end to Hitler, *ym”sh*.

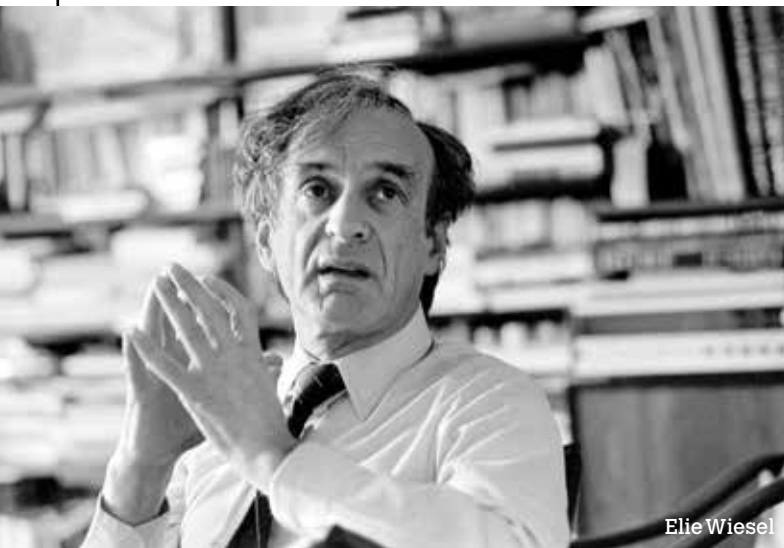
In other words, up until 1940, a believing Jew who was familiar with Jewish history and our nation's travails, including all of the decrees and annihilations, not just the Inquisition and the Crusades but going all the way back to Nevuchadnetzar, the king of Bavel, could only ask why he and his family were unfortunate enough to be included in Hitler's evil plan. However, the basic concept of a perpetual *omdim aleinu lechaloseinu* was nothing new to him, and therefore Hitler couldn't affect his *emunah* in Hashem. Only one whose *emunah* was already weak beforehand and was just searching for a basis for his denial of Hashem was able to “find” a “basis” in the Holocaust.



Nonetheless, the Holocaust did bring about a change in a different area, that of human development, culture and civilization.

There were many who believed, particularly among the so-called *maskilim*, that in the 20th century, having reached the apex of civilization with “advanced” philosophical schools of thought, widespread university education as well as ethics and good manners, that it was impossible to have a recurrence of what took place in the “dark times of the Middle Ages.” This attitude was expressed in the literature, in the press, and in the speeches of the leading thinkers and personalities of the era. This was used to refute the “antiquated” approach of the *Tanach* that *chesed leumim chatas* and the Rashbi's claim that “*halachah b'yadua she'Eisav sonai l'Yaakov*.” Then suddenly it all came crashing down, and the entirety of the culture and civilization of the 20th century was destroyed. It became apparent that it was not a contradiction for the same man to be a philosopher or a poet with impeccable manners, frequenting the high-society salons of Berlin, and to simultaneously carry out the atrocities of Treblinka, etc. Furthermore, these were not just a few exceptions, a few monsters; this





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was an entire nation of 100 million people! Moreover, to quote the headline of your article, “The World Was Silent.” We could even add a subtitle: that a considerable portion of the world was delighted at what was happening, even if they were disappointed that they couldn’t be the ones to carry it out.

If the Holocaust affected any belief, it should have been to clarify that it is impossible to rely on the human conception of justice and righteousness, regardless of a person’s education or diploma from a university, and even if he is the son of a highly accredited academic.

It is sad and embarrassing that people are afraid to express this conclusion, not to mention its logical implications for the day-to-day life. This unfortunate reticence can also be seen among *frum* spokesmen, even those who saw what man can do when left to his own devices. This is because, as I wrote in the beginning of this letter, people are looking to make their lives easier and more comfortable so they can sleep better at night. They do this because it is easier to follow along with the rest of the world, even though it is the same world that was silent and was even happy in the face of the horrors that occurred.

I would now like to make a personal observation that is connected to the conversation we had the last time we met in my office. Your series of articles “And the World Was Silent” has reawakened a thought that I would like to take this opportunity to express.

It is self-understood that to remember and not forget is a very positive thing. The Torah says, “*Zachor eis asher asah lecha Amalek*,” which Chazal tell us is a *mitzvas asei*. It is especially so in light of the growing tendency and effort to try to forget and make others forget what actually happened. However, this is only one aspect of our job. The other and perhaps more important part consists of taking an active stand against the so-called “Final Solution” that Hitler, just like Haman, had in mind.

The way to do this is by working in the direction of “*kein yirbeh v’chein yifrotz*.” If we are to reach that goal, it will certainly not help if we are perpetually heavyhearted from constantly reminding ourselves of what happened and making sure not to forget—

however important that may be. Instead, we must increase and encourage the rebuilding of the Jewish nation—as the Jewish nation—the literal meaning of “*vayifru vayirbu vayaatzmu bime’od me’od*”—the exact opposite of the planned “Final Solution.”

As in all things, it is important to not just encourage others but to be a living example. This is especially true of someone who personally lived through all these things, that he demonstrate that not only didn’t Hitler win but, to spite him and those who helped him, he will establish a large family with children and grandchildren.

I will permit myself to say in the strongest possible terms that despite how important it is to relate what happened to the present generation, and notwithstanding how hard it is to free ourselves of those memories and experiences, in my view our most important mission is to fulfill “*al korchach atah chai*,” with the emphasis on *atah chai*—that the liveliness should be apparent.

In other words, you must make every effort to tear yourself away from your memories and adopt a lifestyle with a stable structure—married life—and establish a Jewish home and a Jewish family. This will certainly bring about Hitler’s true downfall—that he was not successful in his attempts at making it that there be one less Vizhnitzer *chasid* in the world. On the contrary, you will raise children and grandchildren who are Vizhnitzer *chasidim* until the end of time.

I don’t mean this as a witticism, even if I am not being precise with my words; I mean a Vizhnitzer or Lubavitcher *chasid* or anyone who keeps Torah and *mitzvos* in general. However it turns out, that way will surely be good. My main point is that just as you survived more difficult things in your life and made it to America, so too, if you truly want it, you will attain this as well, and Hashem will grant you success.

Is the letter too long? Well, if you will get married in the near future *kedas Moshe v’Yisrael* and with *mazel tov*, then my writing it, and the bother of your having to read it, will have certainly been worth it. ●

(Translated from the original Yiddish; exclusive to Ami Magazine)

