

REMEMBERING MY TEACHER AND FRIEND ELIE WIESEL

Personal reflections of a lifetime, on the occasion
of Wiesel's third Yartzeit this Shabbat, 26 Sivan

• JONATHAN PORATH

Elie Wiesel and I first met nearly 50 years ago – on Friday morning, October 24, 1969. I recognized him, sitting in the back row of Prof. Saul Lieberman's Talmud class at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan, from the picture on his book jacket. I was 25 – a senior rabbinical student. He was 41 – already a famous author and activist. I approached him and introduced myself. I told him what a powerful impression his epic work about Soviet Jewry, *Jews of Silence*, had on me, and how, inspired by his book, I had traveled in his footsteps to Moscow for Simhat Torah in 1968 to be a witness and a participant in that great Jewish celebration and demonstration. Indeed, I had written in my diary: "Wiesel was right!" but never thought I would be able to tell him about it in person.

He responded with great warmth and interest, and we formed a friendship that lasted a lifetime. It left the deepest impression on me, which I want to share on this occasion of his third yartzeit.

Following each of our many conversations back then, I made notes in the back of my Talmud notebook (hence my knowing the exact date of our first encounter, wanting to capture and preserve my imme-

diately recollections.

He called me "Reb Yonatan" and I responded with "Reb Eliezer," titles of respect and fondness.

I was writing a Hebrew high school course on the Jews of Russia and he was very interested in reviewing my curriculum.

I told him about a recently concluded United Synagogue Youth high school trip to the USSR which I had led, and he was fascinated by the stories.

He said to me something totally unimaginable at the time, yet prophetic: he was very optimistic about Jewish life in the Soviet Union because of the deep Jewish feelings of the young people there! Subsequently, when he wrote a review of my book *Jews of Russia: The Last Four Centuries* he entitled it "We Can Be Proud of Jewish Youth" – only he wasn't just talking about young Soviet Jews – he spoke about me as well.

It wasn't by chance that I dedicated my textbook to him: "To Reb Eliezer from Sighet."

Over the course of the years, we continued our contacts and shared life's special moments.

We corresponded. When my grandfather (Rabbi Israel Porath z'l from Cleveland) passed away, I sent him my eulogy and he responded with handwritten words of comfort, "Your hesped is poignant: simple, austere and true."

He and his wife, Marian, came to our wedding at Lincoln Square Synagogue in NYC and gave us a kiddush cup and a mayim acharonim stand (for after-meal washing) – which we use proudly until today.

My wife Deena invited him to a surprise birthday party and although he could not attend, he called to give his best wishes.

He reached out on personal and family milestones, such as the bat mitzvah of our youngest daughter Yael Bat-Tzion ("I send you and all of the children a thousand brachot").

There were many visits, calls and exchanges over the years.

After we made aliyah, our contact became sporadic, to my embarrassment. After all, Wiesel had received the Nobel Peace Prize, chaired the President's Commission on the Holocaust, and had become the most famous Jewish humanitarian in the world. He was meeting with presidents and prime ministers and many, many fancy and important people.

Even though whenever we met in Jerusalem, after a public lecture or appearance, or at the opening of the new museum at Yad Vashem, he would greet me by name with a big smile followed by a big hug. Who was I?

Finally, at Deena's encouragement, in preparation



THE WRITER with Elie Wiesel in 2013. (Photos: Courtesy)

for a trip to the United States, I contacted him, and received his warm invitation to visit him at his office at the Wiesel Foundation in Manhattan.

I will never forget those meetings.

HE HAD an extraordinary generosity of spirit. When I asked him to inscribe a copy of his latest (and ultimately, final) work, *Open Heart*, he wrote as follows:

“To Reb Yonatan Porath – who brings great satisfaction to all who learn with him or from him – with warmth and affectionate blessings; Eliezer ben Sara.”

He took a deep, almost fatherly personal interest. Following our aliyah he continually asked, “And what are you doing in Israel?” We shared our mutual experiences of both recently becoming zaydes/grandfathers (“pure nachas” in his words), and especially about being sons. When I presented him the book I had written about my father’s life, I noted that the story was ultimately about me – the son, even more than about my father: “Naturally!” he responded. When I told him that my mother, whom he knew, was planning her 99th birthday party at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in Jerusalem, he responded that if he is in town – he will certainly come (my mother would have loved that).

A few years later, at what proved to be our final visit, I felt that I was taking too much of his valuable time and tried repeatedly to excuse myself—only he kept me; he did not want

to say goodbye. Finally, as we were about to part, I told him that I was thinking of embarking on a future project, writing up my lifetime experiences with Soviet Jews, and his parting words to me were: “Do it! Do It!”

His final words of encouragement echo very deeply within me. Those same words could apply to many of us, who all too often postpone embarking on some long yearned-for endeavor, and always seem to find reasons to delay. Elie Wiesel would tell us not to hesitate, not to be afraid.

Clearly, our souls had touched.

Elie Wiesel influenced a myriad of people around the world during his lifetime and inspired many “shlichim/messengers” to spread his words and deeds. I was privileged to one of them. His personal attention and loving encouragement changed the vector my life and path, and for that, I am forever grateful.

Yehi zichro baruch – May his memory be for a blessing. ■

Inspired by Elie Wiesel (1928-2016), Rabbi Jonathan Porath has spent his life working with Soviet and Russian Jews, taking Jewish teenagers to the Soviet Union, writing about the Jews of Russia, co-founding Keren Klitah Aliyah-Neve Orot in Jerusalem to welcome newly arrived Soviet Jews, being on the senior staff of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee’s Russian Department for 15 years, and visiting Russia 175 times. He made aliyah in 1984, and lives in Jerusalem. He is available for teaching, speaking and adult trips to Jewish Russia at jporath1@gmail.com.

INSETS:

(TOP) WIESEL’S dedication to the writer in his final work, ‘Open Heart,’ in 2013: ‘B”H [with God’s help] to Reb Yehonatan Porath – Who brings ‘nachaturach’/pleasure to all who learn with him or from him. With warmth and affectionate blessing; Eliezer ben Sara.

A DEDICATION from November 5, 1969: To Reb Yehonatan – For his blessings from Russia – From a messenger like himself. Eli Wiesel 24 Heshvan 5730.