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Elie Wiesel’s Survival in the Camps

Elie Wiesel’s bestselling memoir *Night* depicts the Holocaust through the eyes of a Holocaust survivor. Unlike Wiesel’s other books about this subject, *Dawn*, and *Day*, *Night* goes through Wiesel’s vivid memories and personal experiences in the camps, rather than the experiences of a fictional character. When he was a child in Sighet, Wiesel and his father disconnected from each other, and he instead devoted his time to learning the Kabbalah and furthering his Jewish faith (Wiesel, 4). Wiesel got sent to the concentration camps at age thirteen, where he stays with his father (29). Although Elie Wiesel could have survived the Holocaust by sheer luck, ultimately it was his loss of faith and relationship with his father that helped him live through the camps.

In the concentration camps, Wiesel does everything he can to stay with his father. Because Wiesel went as far as giving up bread rations to be with his father, it became his Achilles heel. Wiesel said “Unfortunately Franek knew how to handle this; he knew my weak spot. My father had never served in the military and could not march in step.…That presented Franek with the opportunity to torment him, and on a daily basis, thrash him savagely” (55). Using Wiesel’s fear of losing his father against him, Franek made Wiesel obey him without any question (56). Each time he almost got separated from his father, Wiesel did everything he could to stay with him, such as when Wiesel’s father gets mistaken for a corpse when falling asleep on the train. To wake his father up, Wiesel threw himself onto his body, slapped him relentlessly, and pleaded to the S.S. Guards “No!... He’s not dead! Not yet!” (98) as they determined if they should throw him off of the train. Throughout the last chapter, Wiesel’s father gets diagnosed with dysentery and slowly gets weaker and weaker, which deeply concerned Wiesel (110). As his father stepped one foot in the grave, Wiesel realized that “Suddenly, the evidence overwhelmed me: there was no longer any reason to live, any reason to fight” (99). This quote shows Wiesel’s dedication to stay with his father, and foreshadows how the death of his father would cause him to go into a year-long funk (113). If Wiesel and his father separated during the very first selection, he may not have had a reason to keep on living and pushing through the torture at the camps.

When Wiesel loses his faith in God, he gains the ability to survive in the camps for longer. At the beginning of the book, Judaism was so important to him that praying was almost second nature (4). Wiesel even asked “Why did I pray? Strange question. Why did I live? Why did I breathe?” (4). Despite devoting himself to the Kabbalah before the camps, Wiesel’s mentality towards God changes when he arrives in Birkenau and sees children being burnt alive in the crematorium (32). Wiesel started to question why God would let the Jews be tortured in the camps, saying “Why, but why would I bless Him?... How could I say to him: Blessed be Thou, … who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in furnaces?” (67). This is where Wiesel realized that there was no reason to be faithful to God because He would not do anything about their oppression. When a young pipel gets hanged, Wiesel’s faith shrank even more, causing him to draw a new conclusion about God: “Where He is? This is where --- hanging there from the gallows…” (65). Essentially, Wiesel stated that God died, and no matter what will not help free the Jews from the concentration camps. Wiesel hated God so much at that point, that he decided not to fast on Yom Kippur (69). According to Wiesel, “...there was no longer any reason for me to fast. I no longer accepted God’s silence” (69). Wiesel needed as much strength as possible to survive the labor and realized that eating on Yom Kippur was a way to stick it to God and make up for all of the torture he had gone through. If Wiesel had not lost his faith in God, he might have ended up like Abika Drummer and given up on survival due to God not answering his prayers (72). Losing faith allowed Wiesel to focus more on the survival of his father and himself, rather than false hope in God.

Out of all of the books about the Holocaust by survivors, why *Night*? It could be because Wiesel’s fear of losing his father and loss of faith in God helped him survive the concentration camps. Wiesel used his fear of separation and lack of faith to push himself to last throughout the entire Holocaust. This allowed Wiesel to avoid the crematorium and worse punishment than some of the other prisoners at the camps. If he still did not have a great relationship with his father and believed in God, Wiesel may not have been able to tell his story at all.

Works Cited

Wiesel, Elie, and Marion Wiesel. *Night: With a New Preface by the Author*. New

York, Hill and Wang, 2006.