



## Ethical Issues for Today

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### Introduction

**JOEL ROSENTHAL:** In the significant year of 1945, a Protestant minister named Charles McFarland wrote a brief history of the then thirty-year-old Carnegie Council. The title of this small book was *Pioneers for Peace Through Religion*, and it told the story of the early years of the Council. In the introduction, one of the Council's surviving founding trustees, Arthur J. Brown, explained the principle on which the Council was founded in 1914. He wrote:

A just and durable peace must be based not only upon knowledge but upon character. International agreements may express character, but they do not create it. Education alone does not make men good; it increases their capacity for evil. It is clear that if we are to have an enduring peace, it must rest upon the righteousness of God and the brotherhood of man. Andrew Carnegie recognized this and created the Carnegie Council to promote peace on this basis.

Brown and McFarland took their cue from the American preacher and social activist Harry Emerson Fosdick, who once warned: "A civilization always dies, first of all, at the roots. It dies in the spirits of men. It dies in the death of forces that make men creative and loyal and right and strong within. If our civilization is not thus to die, it will take more than law to save it; it will take a profound moral and spiritual revival."

Fortunately, we have a man equal to this task, a man who can help us move toward a renewal of our moral commitments. Elie Wiesel is a man who has wrestled with the most profound questions of faith and doubt, life and death. He is a man who understands what religion and ethics can and should mean for our personal and public lives.

### Remarks

**ELIE WIESEL:** What is the role of ethics? What is the definition of ethics? I am sure there are certain areas of agreement on these questions that all of us are ready to accept, but ethics and law are not necessarily identical. Ethics, in a way, is superior to law, because laws change; they are usually man-made (today you would say they are human endeavors). We have seen certain places in history where the laws were unlawful, the laws were inhuman, and yet they were the Law. You cannot say that about ethics.

What is the difference? The law is something that governs a community of individuals in spite of everything else, meaning there must be no interference between the person and the law. The law applies

to all human beings equally, with equal force and equal validity.

Ethics is more human. A weak person is ethical and a strong person is ethical because both of them try to help the other person, yet the weak person is not necessarily required to do what the strong person can do. Ethics is something that involves the other person. The law can exist without other persons. The law is in the books, and the law therefore in certain societies is independent.

Again, an example: the Soviet law was the law, and the constitution of the Soviet Union was a great document, except nobody read it, and even those who read it didn't abide by it. It was one thing to be an ordinary person, a citizen of the Soviet Union, and therefore subjected to all the humiliations that the dictatorship applied, and quite another thing to be the person ruling in the name of the law, and therefore fashioning, shaping the law.

That always reminds me of the ancient dictatorships. Take the Caesars in antiquity. As you know, the Caesars, the emperors, never died natural deaths for a simple reason: the moment the Caesar died, all the laws were abrogated, and new laws had to be invented, created. Therefore, most of the Caesars were killed by their successors, who wanted to establish a new order. Machiavelli, who was a most imaginative political scientist—he was a cynic, but nevertheless wise—mentioned with subtle humor, tongue in cheek, "Poor Septimius Severus, who didn't know that no ruler has ever succeeded in killing his successor." But they tried, and they often succeeded retroactively.

The law in civilized society is different. It survives its authors. Take the ancient Jewish law, which applied to kings and subjects alike. King David was the greatest king in Jewish history. Nevertheless, when he sinned he couldn't change the law; he was reprimanded and eventually punished. For the law is mightier than the ruler, but not stronger than the victim. In ethical societies, or in ethical conditions, ethics means to take the side of the victim.

Now, where do we learn that? There is a marvelous story in Talmudic literature, which I'm sure many of you know: A pagan visited two founders of Talmudic schools. One was a rigorous man named Shamaï; he was somber, inflexible in his rigor. The pagan came to Shamaï and said, "Teach me the entire law, the entire Torah, the Book of Books, while I stand on one leg." Shamaï sent him away without answering his question.

He went to the other founder, a lenient, moderate, kind man named Hillel, with the same request: "Teach me the entire law while I stand on one leg." Hillel said, "Oh, it's very simple: Do not do unto others what you do not want others to do unto you."

Superficially you would say, "What kind of answer is that? Is that the entire law? Is that the entire Jewish religion, the entire Jewish tradition?" We always forget that there was a second part to the answer: "And now," said Hillel, "go and study."

Even the first part is important, however, because it teaches us that when it comes to ethical considerations it is not our relationship to God that matters. God can do very well without us. We may do things that displease Him and then, if we believe in Him, we will be punished. But what really matters, according to our tradition, what really angers God, is our sins not against Him but against our fellow human beings, wherever they are, whoever they are. In other words, if an ethical person believes in ethical principles, that person must, almost by definition, define himself or herself with regard to other people. It is always the other that counts. It is our relationship to the other that determines our humanity.

If I say, "For the sake of God I hurt or kill you," I sin both against God and against humanity. If I say, as it has been said in the past, "I kill you in the name of my love for God," it's even worse. You don't kill in the name of love for man or God. If you believe in God, if you believe in humanity, or in both, what matters is that you should be human to other human beings.

Now, once we say that, we pose a question: Is it possible to find an ambiguous dimension of ethics, just as morality can be ambiguous? Why is morality ambiguous? Because there is no absolute morality,

because my hope can be someone else's despair. What I consider to be good may hurt someone else. I am only human. The limits that I am subjected to and am aware of make me weak and vulnerable and, more often than not, open to uncertainty rather than to certainty.

Therefore, if I say, "This is my absolute conviction," I have said something unethical because there isn't anything absolute in life. My humanity is measured, I believe, by my questions, much more than by my answers.

So, once again, we say that the only direction I must follow is toward the other person for whom I am responsible. The question is: How far does my responsibility go? Two hundred years ago, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the responsibility usually fell upon the leaders, intellectuals, philosophers, or clergy. The French Revolution began with a dictionary. Simply, Diderot and Voltaire sat down and wrote a dictionary, and out of their words the Revolution emerged. Does this mean that there is a relationship between the words and the Revolution? Surely. Does it mean that there is a relationship between the words and the bloodshed, the violence, the hatred that the Revolution bequeathed? That's another question. Am I responsible for the interpretation of my words? What if I am misinterpreted? Am I also responsible for the possible errors that my readers make when they read my books?

One thing is clear in this century. Because of what is occurring in the field of science, we are more responsible for one another than ever before. Before, we had good excuses: we didn't know; we didn't see. Now we see and we know. Nothing can happen in the world today without our being aware of it. There were pretexts and excuses sixty years ago: "We didn't know; we were not informed. We have not been in the Gulag, and we have not endured Auschwitz. We don't know."

Today, there are no excuses. If China is still a communist dictatorship bent on violence, injustice, and persecution, and we accept it because we don't speak up, then we are guilty. We are guilty when we allow a nation to persecute political opponents, simply because it is big and because of *realpolitik*—because other nations need its votes or its commerce. Such an attitude is unethical. Why? Because rather than aligning myself with the rulers of China, I should align myself with the victims of China, with the prisoners in China.

The same is true with other tragedies, like Rwanda. I really don't know how we Americans live with it so passively, so quietly. A million people are now in Zaire, hundreds of thousands have been mutilated, tens of thousands killed. Children have died. We see it on television. They die—they die while we are looking at them—and we go on eating. Something is wrong. We have forgotten our ethical responsibility toward those who are not here. But they are there, and if they are there, they are here, because we are seeing that what happens in one place now affects all other places, or at least we feel here the effects of what happens there—and, if not, woe unto us.

Thus, for our decision-making process, I understand those who have problems. My friend Abe Rosenthal and I went together to Yugoslavia when the hostilities began there. We felt we had to go. One night, we came to a prison camp in Maujaca to speak to prisoners being held there. We were promised by the commander of the camp that the prisoners we chose as our interlocutors would be allowed to speak freely and without retribution. After asking the commander to leave the room, some of the prisoners, I think, did speak freely, although in whispers. When we returned to the United States Abe wrote about the experience brilliantly, movingly, as always. And I wrote about it as well. Three months later we discovered that those who spoke to us were punished and sent to harsher camps. At which point what does one do? We came to help them, and because of us they suffered more. So where is the ethical obligation, the demand for ethical conduct? What does a person concerned with ethics do?

I faced the same problem before when I visited the Soviet Union for the first time, in 1965. I left with pockets full of notes, little pieces of paper, from Jews, and later dissidents, telling me, "Don't forget us, don't forget us, tell our story." I remember that I had a dilemma: If I write their names, they could suffer. Do I write them? I went back and I asked them. I said, "Look, you have to stay here. I leave, but you stay. If I write about you, you may be imprisoned. Tell me what to do." All of them said, "Use our names." My conscience was a bit assuaged. They gave me permission to write and identify them.

But what if they had said "no"? Could I have kept quiet? Could I have remained silent when they were oppressed? At that time the Soviet Union was a place where injustice was the rule rather than the exception. It was the accepted norm.

As for other situations, when can we—when must we—ask our leaders, our president here in the United States, for example, to intervene in places where we have no vital interest, so to speak? When should we "send our boys," as we say here, to risk their lives in faraway places? How can we answer American mothers when they say, "Look, America's security isn't in danger. Why do you send our sons to Bosnia?" What is the ethical situation then? For whom am I responsible, for the mothers here or the mothers there? The Bosnians also have mothers.

I believe that a nation is measured by its attitudes toward the weak—toward strangers, toward the sick, toward the old, toward children. How does our own land measure up?

Let's start with the old. I think, strangely enough, that our society is kind to old people. They benefit from Social Security and Medicare. There are other programs for them. Better yet, we are encouraging medical science more and more—and rightly so—to prolong life. Nothing is a substitute for life. But once a person has reached what we call a senior age, a golden age, what do we do with that person? We send him or her away—at best, to Miami. We cannot bear seeing them. Why not?

I come from a little Eastern European town, which was somehow Godforsaken in the Carpathian Mountains. It was the most beautiful gift for me as a child to be with my grandparents. To see my grandfather was a holiday. I used to visit him twice a year, and, believe me, when I traveled the seven kilometers in a fiacre to his home I prepared myself more than I do when I go to the White House today.

Who in my town would ever have sent a grandfather to an old-age home? Even the poorest of the poor would have kept him home. The bridge between the child and the grandfather is important. The child gives his grandfather his future, as he receives from him his past. If I could, I would send children from kindergarten and elementary schools to visit senior homes at least once a month. I would buy the children small tape recorders and tell them to simply say, "Tell us all your stories. Sing us your songs. Give us your memories." It would give so much joy to the children and to the grandparents.

As for the children, are we doing enough for them? Our society is oriented toward youth. On television we see only beautiful girls and young men, with white teeth and vigorous bodies. Everybody is young, healthy, and happy. But is this the true reflection and ideal of our society? Imagine someone arriving from far away judging us only from television. What would that visitor say? "Strange place. All they are obsessed with is toothpaste and Pepsi-Cola or Coca-Cola!"

As a writer, I occasionally look at the *New York Times* best-seller list. On it, there is always at least one book that deals with cooking and another that deals with dieting. Really, that is what we are concerned with: how to cook and how not to eat. We spend sometimes hundreds of dollars a day to avoid eating.

What are we teaching our children? What are we doing to prevent them from using drugs at an age when they are still innocent and vulnerable? Drugs are, I believe, one of the greatest dangers facing us today. Drug dealers roam our schools, offering ten-, twelve-, and fourteen-year-old children free drugs to get them hooked. I cannot tell you how harsh I would be if I were a judge, sentencing these drug dealers, these death merchants.

So, how are we protecting our youth? Are we doing enough? Are we emphasizing education enough? Are we teaching ethics with sufficient devotion?

I have been waging campaigns, lobbying our colleges and universities, urging presidents and faculties to prepare compulsory courses on ethics in professional schools for future doctors, engineers, architects. Students should learn not only how to make a machine work or how to perform surgery, but something about ethics as well. I don't really know how, in the few minutes that we have, to give you all the answers, but I have the good questions.

Now we go to the third topic, the stranger. Are we hospitable to the stranger? That is an ethical problem, because again I know the answer that I receive when I speak on behalf of immigrants: "What about us? If we, the American people, invite everybody to come, what will happen to the jobless here at home? Who comes first?" People even quote to me my own source, the Talmud, saying that "the poor of thy town must be closer to you than the poor of other towns." I should care first for my family, and I'm not embarrassed to admit it. I should care, and I do care, for my family and my friends before I think of others. But I shouldn't feel good about it. There is something about the helplessness of a stranger that should move us. If not, how can we talk about ethics?

I was once a refugee. I came to America as a refugee. Before that, I lived in France as a stateless person, going around the world as a journalist with a travel document, and nothing can be worse than that. Only a refugee who comes to America can appreciate the American passport and the strength and the honor of being an American. Somebody who was born here cannot appreciate that.

I can't tell you enough how grateful I am to this country. I tried to write about it in my memoirs. I came for one year. I was a foreign correspondent in New York for an Israeli newspaper, although I was not an Israeli citizen. Every evening I would do what all the other correspondents did: go to the New York Times, buy the paper at 9:30, steal a few news items, and send them to Israel.

One evening after I left the New York Times, as I crossed Forty-third Street to go to the cable office on Forty-fifth Street, a taxicab hit me. I flew in the air for a whole block. The ambulance picked me up on Forty-fourth Street. I was in a coma for ten days. Months later I went to the immigration office to extend my visa. The officer there said, "Your travel document is valid for only one year because you are a stateless person. It needs to be extended." I went to the French consulate. A secretary said, "This can be done in France, not here." I said, "How can I travel? I am in a wheelchair." I went back and forth from the consulate to the immigration office. Finally, the immigration officer said, "Why don't you become an American?" I said, "What? That's possible?" He said, "Of course. Why don't you apply for permanent residence?" I said, "I don't know how." He said, "I'll show you how," and he showed me how. Now, how could I not be grateful to the American bureaucracy?

If that is not enough, five years later I flew back from Europe and I found a message at my hotel the day I arrived: "Please call Mr. So-and-So from the FBI." I am still a refugee at heart. I thought, "What did I do that the FBI would look for me?" I ran to a telephone and called the FBI. A man said, "Yes, Mr. So-and-So was here, but he has gone home for dinner." I thought, "I'm going to spend a sleepless night, worrying." At 8:30 or 9:00 that evening the telephone rang. The caller said, "My name is So-and-So. I'm with the FBI. I'm calling you because I didn't want you to worry tonight." And he explained, "You didn't register for the draft. Are you a conscientious objector?" If I could have embraced him I would have. Only in America would an official worry about me worrying. I can tell you that in France, which is, after all, my cultural home, it could never happen, nor anywhere else. So I am grateful to this country for that, for the hospitality it shows toward all strangers.

Now, as for the sick, are we doing enough? I'll be brief because you understand well the problem there. I believe we should extend all our help to those who are helpless. They are prisoners of their condition, prisoners of their disease, like the AIDS patient or the Alzheimer's patient.

I wrote a novel about Alzheimer's after I met a victim of the disease, the wife of a friend of a friend. Meeting her gave me the impetus, the idea to do more research on it. I felt then that nothing could be worse—not even cancer. Cancer elicits sympathy in all those who surround the patient; Alzheimer's does not. On the contrary, it is somehow rooted in anger and even creates anger because the person is not there: the patient's identity has vanished.

I compared the disease to a book. You tear out a page, then another page, then another page, and another memory, and another event, and finally at the end there are no more pages, only the cover remains. That is Alzheimer's. How can one not think of its victims? How can one not feel empathy for those whose "cancer of identity" has spread to their entire being, who don't even know who you are and surely don't know who they are?

In conclusion, what does it all mean? It means that we are duty bound to feel more responsible for—or at least sensitive to—those who need us. We must be more sensitive to death. Here in America, funeral parlors embellish death with make-up and pomp. This is not my tradition. In the Jewish tradition death is a brutal event in one's life; one must receive it as a cruel blow from God or from nature or from destiny.

There were those who died some forty or fifty years ago in Europe and who are being maligned, and whose memory is being profaned to this day in so many ways by those who deny their death—those whom we so elegantly call revisionists, but whom I would rather call deniers. They claim that we did not suffer, that our parents did not die, that the killers did not kill, that the victims did not perish. Are these anti-Semites more vicious than those who committed the acts?

Then there is something else, also painful. It is linked to Bierkenau. Near Bunker 2, the burial place of many Hungarian Jews, ten huge crosses and a few Stars of David were placed years ago. I am sure that whoever placed them there meant well. They wanted to demonstrate their solidarity with the victims. But I feel it was wrong. All religious symbols—and not only crosses—should disappear from that place. Bierkenau is its own symbol. The Hungarian Jews who were killed there were the most pious of the pious Jews. Even with the best intentions, that is not the place for Christian symbols. I feel frustrated because, on the one hand, I don't want to offend anyone. I know what the cross means to Christians, but I would like the Christians to know what it means to us. Until now I have tried to sensitize certain people to this sad affair—with no success, I confess, but my life is like that.

Then, there is also the question of showing sensitivity toward victims of injustice and political prisoners, in China and elsewhere. Their fate ought move us to rage. How is it possible that people should still suffer today for their opinions? How is it possible that oppressive regimes can get away with it?

If I were to recapitulate, I would say that ethical consciousness means sensitivity. Why do I teach? Because I believe that a teacher sensitizes his or her students. If I teach *Romeo and Juliet*, I do not tell them it's a story of love. Romeo and Juliet did not die because they loved one another. They died because their parents hated one another.

If I teach Kafka, it is because Kafka gave us the image of absurdity, and therefore of the indifference of this century's society. You study Kafka and you see Joseph K. in *The Trial* get up in the morning and say, "Good morning," and the landlady doesn't answer. You have the feeling throughout that the main character doesn't know why he is being accused nor of what. He hasn't done anything wrong, and yet at the end he dies.

I teach Camus. Camus wrote a book called *The Stranger*, which made an impact on an entire generation. The narrator, a man named Meursault, begins his story by saying, "Mother died today. Or maybe, yesterday." Listen well. It made no difference to him which day his mother died, which means he was indifferent to the life of one day of his mother. He describes further on that he went to the funeral and didn't feel anything. He killed a young Arab, and he didn't feel anything. That was the image of our society then. People killed, people watched others kill, and they felt nothing.

The opposite of that, of course, is sensitivity. We must be sensitive if we want to deserve the beautiful, honorable adjective of being ethical.

In conclusion, there are many, many laws in the Bible. We believe there are six hundred and thirteen laws. Ten of them you know; probably you observe them. But there is a little-known one which I love because it is the governing principle of my life. In Hebrew it says, *Lo tan mort andamaryaha*. When the blood of your friend is being shed, says the Bible, do not stand idly by. If I did so, I would have no right to speak about ethical issues today, or any other day.

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### About the Speaker

Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize winner and Boston University professor, has worked on behalf of oppressed people for much of his adult life. His personal experience of the Holocaust has led him to use his talents

as an author, teacher, and storyteller to defend human rights and peace throughout the world. In addition to the Nobel Prize, Wiesel's efforts have earned him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States Congressional Gold Medal, the Medal of Liberty Award, the rank of Grand Officer in the French Legion of Honor, and honorary degrees from many institutions of higher learning. A native of Romania, Wiesel and his family were deported by the Nazis to Auschwitz when he was fifteen years old. His mother and younger sister perished there, his two older sisters survived. Wiesel and his father were later transported to Buchenwald. After the war, Wiesel studied in Paris and became a journalist. He remained silent about what he had endured as an inmate in the death camps. During an interview with the French writer François Mauriac, Wiesel was persuaded to end that silence and subsequently wrote *La Nuit* (Night), published in 1958. Wiesel is a devoted supporter of Israel; he has defended the cause of Soviet Jews, Nicaragua's Miskito Indians, Argentina's "disappeared," Cambodian refugees, the Kurds, South African apartheid victims, famine victims in Africa, and recently the victims and prisoners in the former Yugoslavia. Among the best known of his many publications are *Night* (which has been translated into twenty-five languages), *The Forgotten*, *Sages and Dreamers*, and the recently published first volume of his memoirs, *All Rivers Run Into the Sea*.

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