

Excerpts from Eli Wiesel's "The Jews of Silence"

P. 52 – “All three asked the same questions. Why are the Jews outside so silent? Why aren't they doing something? Don't they know what is happening here? Or they don't want to know? Maybe it's easier not to know, to ignore our suffering and carry on with their daily affairs, to act as if we didn't exist. I could not answer their questions. Why *is* the Jewish world so indifferent to the Jews in Russia? I don't know. I know only that this apathy, from an historical point of view, borders on the criminal. Even if we assume that our protests are useless to change Kremlin policy, they do change the spiritual climate for the Jewish population. They bring Soviet Jews the comforting knowledge of a single fact – that the Jewish people have not forgotten them, that they are not alone.”

P. 54 – “ A religious Jew told me, “Once upon a time Jews used to declare a day of prayer or a day of fasting to protest the maltreatment of a Jewish community, whether near or far. Tell me, how many such days have you held, and where? This is the most powerfully affecting aspect of their plight. I do not like to draw extreme parallels between the condition of the Jews in Russia and that of European Jews during the Holocaust. The analogy is illogical, unfair, and unreal. But from a subjective and emotional point of view it is impossible to escape the impression that the two communities have something in common: a sense of total isolation. And for this state of affairs it is we, not the Soviet authorities, who will one day be called to judgement. We as well as they are guilty. If we are unable to force Moscow to accept Russian Jews as citizens with equal rights, we can at least make contact with them, so that they may know that their welfare concerns us, that they, too, are our brothers.”

p. 75 – “One of the last Jews I met in Moscow was a rabbinical scholar. In comparing the present situation to that of the recent past, he quoted to me the commentary given by Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk to a verse from Exodus, “And the King of Egypt died, and the children of Israel sighed by reason of their bondage.” The question was raised: All the time Pharaoh was alive the Jews labored and suffered; why, then did they sigh at his death? Rabbi Menachem Mendel answered that before Pharaoh died, even to sigh had been forbidden. “Do you understand?” the scholar said. “Today we are permitted to sigh...although only when no



one is listening.” That Jews in the free world do not heed his sigh will never be forgiven to them. Of that I am sure. For the second time in a single generation, we are committing the error of silence.

One may question whether we have any way of knowing that the Jews of Russia really want us to do anything for them. How do we know that our shouts and protests will not bring them harm? These are very serious questions, and I put them to the Russian Jews themselves. Their answer was always the same: “Cry out, cry out until you have no more strength to cry. You must enlist public opinion, you must turn to those with influence, you must involve your governments – the hour is late.”

In Kiev a Jew said to me, “I hope you will not have cause to regret that you have abandoned us.” And in Moscow a religious Jew said, “The preservation of human life takes precedence over all six hundred and thirteen commandments. Don’t you know that? Don’t our cries reach you? Or do they reach you but not move you? If that is so, then we are truly lost, because you live in a world wholly guilty, and your hearts have become foul.” In every city I heard dozens of cries like these, almost without variation. I was not to forget, I was to tell it all, I was to warn the Jewish communities of the world that their continued indifference would be accounted a horrible crime in the years to come. I promised I would do it, but I wept for them as I promised. I wept because I knew that nothing would help. Our Jews have other problems on their minds. When you tell them what is expected of them in Russia, they shrug their shoulders. It is exaggerated; or, we can do nothing about it; or, we must not do too much lest we be accused of interfering in the cold war. The Jewish brain has killed the Jewish heart. That is why I wept.

I believe with all my soul that despite the suffering, despite the hardship and the fear, the Jews of Russia will withstand the pressure and emerge victorious. But whether or not we shall ever be worthy of their trust, whether or not we shall overcome the pressures we have ourselves created, I cannot say. I returned from the Soviet Union disheartened and depressed. But what torments me most is not the Jews of silence I met in Russia, but the silence of the Jews I live among today.”