

Opinion • Commentary

Who will be our moral compass now?

Eli Wiesel was the last of the last from a generation of wise people who served as humanity's conscience.



Elie Wiesel in 2009: his death was announced on July 2, 2016, by Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. (AP)

By AVI BENLOLO
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Elie Wiesel was the last one. Not the last Holocaust survivor. Not the last author or philosopher, but the last of the last from a generation of wise people who served as humanity's conscience. We still needed his wisdom to help us navigate these tumultuous times. Britain's renowned Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks defined this sentiment just a few days ago when he wrote,

“there is a widespread feeling that the world in the 21st century is running out of control... these are dangerous forces, the far right seeking a return to a golden age that never was, the far left in pursuit of a utopia that will never be. They are both enemies of freedom.”

Elie Wiesel’s life was buffeted by such extreme ideologies, and his caution remains significant. In today’s world, where life often seems to have little value, where faceless innocents are slaughtered by the dozens in terror attacks and quickly forgotten, Elie Wiesel reminded the world of life’s incredible value. He remained forever astonished “that I survived the Holocaust and went on to love beautiful girls, to talk, to write, to have toast and tea and live my life.”

His generation was the generation of the 20th century that struggled to put a broken world back together. His generation was the generation of Martin Luther King Jr. A generation that fought for social justice and humanity. It was a generation that spoke about not being silent. In King’s words, “our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” Similarly, Wiesel would argue “we must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

With Elie Wiesel’s passing, the great generation that empowered us and guided us to speak out against repression, violence and hatred - is gone. Gone are the icons who refused to shake hands with the devil, choosing instead to impart their righteousness through their actions and wisdom. Mahatma Gandhi, one of the first leaders widely revered for his non-violent methods, gave the world a new path toward freedom. He put the responsibility for social change on each and every one of us, instructing, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” And so, each of us becomes the centre – the bridge and the pinnacle – for expressing goodness.

A similar inner wisdom and peace is found in the profound writings of Helen Keller, who believed the moral imperative to improve the world starts from within. Deaf and blind from childhood, Keller understood better than most that “the best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched – they must be felt with the heart.”

The 20th century also gave us Mother Teresa as a guidepost for compassion. She dedicated her entire life to extensive humanitarian work in Calcutta, caring for refugees, the sick and the orphaned with love and affection. Mother Teresa showered the world with good will and believed that “kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless.”

And among the last of the greats was Nelson Mandela – the man who freed South Africa from the chains of the racist project known as apartheid. He understood that “to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

Freedom from our oppressors. Freedom of faith. Freedom from hunger and deprivation. Freedom from darkness. Freedom from hate and intolerance. This is the wisdom that our great prophets have imparted to us. But freedom, as Holocaust survivor Simon Wiesenthal warned, “is not a gift from heaven. You must fight for it each and every day of your life.”

For Elie Wiesel and all those of his generation who advocated for social justice, the commitment to fighting for freedom often led to criticism and ridicule. However, if there is one lesson these great men and women could teach us, it is to stand up for what we believe and know in our hearts to be right and true – even if we are standing alone.

This moral compass is the greatest gift left to us by Elie Wiesel. We are now all committed to serving as humanity’s conscience.

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