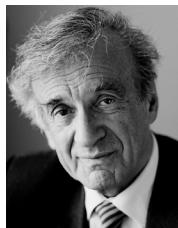


# *Does the Universe have a Purpose?*



Elie Wiesel

## I Hope So.

And if it doesn't, it's up to us to give it one. But first, let us consider these questions:

Why the world? Why people? Why did God consider it useful or even good to introduce them into his universal plan?

If we are to believe an old Talmudic legend, these questions are as old as Creation, and perhaps even older. The angels did in fact try to dissuade him. "What good will they be?" asked the Angel of Truth. "People will be unable to keep from lying." The Angel of Peace added, "People will never be able to live in peace without quarreling amongst each other." And so why not simply give up?

Was God wrong not to listen to his celestial counselors' wise warnings? History's answer seems depressing. It didn't take long for Adam and Eve, in paradise, to disobey divine will. These pitiful parents left their two sons to argue; one became the assassin, the second the victim of the other. Death thereby made its debut into human memory in the form of murder.

Incapable of living in society, people irritated God so much that he ended up lamenting the confidence he had placed in them. Hence the devastating flood. Was it his mistake to start over again?

Confronted by their creator, are people condemned to remain God's adversary, or even his enemy? Perhaps his prisoner? His orphan? The Jewish tradition in which I base my thoughts defines it unambiguously—we are his partner. To put it plainly: Though God created the world, it is up to people to preserve, respect, enrich, embellish, and populate it, without bringing violence to it.

Because the world is fragile and vulnerable, it has always been in danger. And this danger comes from man himself. Is it fear of solitude or death that makes it so desirable to

conquer and dominate another person's thoughts, dreams, and hopes? Does the torturer torment his prisoner or hostage to soothe his own anguish from awakening in a universe that will outlive him?

Will man one day understand that God alone is alone? That a living person is not alone and can depend only on him or herself to not be alone? And that each of us is responsible for another's solitude? And for the world that another carries inside?

Where is this world going today? Hard to know, but we do know that it's going there fast—in a train that seems to race toward disaster. How can we stop it if not by pulling the alarm? Aware of the perils that threaten the planet, perils coming from its own inhabitants, it is at times easy to lose hope. So many wars, massacres, and hatreds sweep over Creation that one wonders if God will lose patience.

Did he lose it before, when evil and misfortune seemed to reign over a Europe occupied by Hitler's army? Each time that a child died of hunger, fear, sorrow; each time a child expired in flames lit by men, it was right to wonder: Where was God in all of this? What could his goal possibly have been when, over there, the Kingdom of Night had replaced his own?

I admit that all these questions remain open for me. If an answer exists, I challenge it. The brutal and cruel death of one and a half million children neither could nor should have an answer.

But I know this: the questions that confront us today do have a response; and this response engages us. If the present world has a purpose or fate, it must be the same for all. And each human being, with his own background and culture, owes it to him or herself to affirm his or her own humanity with respect to that of his or her peer. The purpose of the world cannot be to propose or impose a choice between joy for some and distress for others. This is a false and unjust choice. If, in order to be happy, it is necessary for the other

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not to be, the world in which we live would look more like a prison than an orchard.

Transforming the whole world into a massive enclosure is indeed the goal of a fanatic suffering from ugly and unap-peased hatred, not of a sincere and warm-hearted believer. The former—the jailer—aspires to stifle out all those who are not like him. The truth is that he manages to put God himself in prison.

Man's task is thus to liberate God, while freeing the forces of generosity in a world teetering more and more between curse and promise.

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