

The year was 1965. On Yom Kippur eve I found myself somewhere in Russia, in a synagogue crowded with people. The air was stifling. The cantor was chanting in drawling, listless tones. All around me were elderly, defeated-looking men. Their eyes were on me, questioning, wondering: Who was I? Where was the stranger from? What message was he bearing? My own eyes were glued to the handsome but seemingly lifeless face of an old man seated on the bimah, facing the congregants. He was praying and

sighing as though in a trance. He was the Rabbi. An ancestral, bewildering sadness emanated from his person. He seemed to be living elsewhere, resigned, beyond hope, foundering into a faraway past, even, perhaps, into oblivion.

Suddenly a mad thought crossed my mind: Something is about to happen; any moment now the Rabbi will wake up, shake himself, pound the pulpit and cry out, shout his pain, his rage, his truth. I felt the tension building up inside me; the wait was becoming unbearable. But nothing happened. Nothing interrupted the solemn and disquieting *Kol Nidre* service. The old man remained prisoner of his past, of his fear.

That was when I began to silently implore him. I insisted. I looked only at him, yet I saw nothing but his mask. To me he symbolized the tragic isolation of Russian Jewry humiliated and scarred from the time of the pogroms to the reign of Stalin, enduring a destiny apart, always apart, as though banned from history.

Tall but stooped, the old Rabbi was reciting the customary litanies, oblivious of his surroundings. From time to time his unseeing gaze wandered over the faithful. And all the while I was addressing him soundlessly, pleading with him, my heart beating wildly as though in expectation of a storm long abrewing, a drama about to unfold. I begged the old man: Do something, say something, free yourself tonight and you will enter our people's legend; let the hushed reality buried inside you for so many years explode; speak out, say what oppresses you—one cry, just one, will be enough to bring down the walls that

encircle and crush you. My eyes pleaded with him, prodded him. In vain. For him it was too late. He had suffered too much, endured too many ordeals for too many years. He no longer had the strength to imagine himself free.

During the weeks that followed my visit to the Soviet Union, I could not put my encounter with the Rabbi out of my mind. This defeated, beaten old man obsessed my thoughts. His silence lived inside me, his anguish was my torment. Now he, in turn, seemed to be expecting something of me: a gesture, a word, an answer. Could it be that he considered me responsible for his weakness, for his distress? That was when the idea occurred to me to offer him another chance to redeem himself and become the accuser. In my play he seizes that chance, driven by a beadle nicknamed Zalmen the Madman; at last the Rabbi will choose sacrifice.

Conceived as testimony rather than as a work of the imagination, the play is set in post-Stalin times. The deportees are returning from Siberia, but the terror and silence still dominate the Jewish communities. The tyrant is dead but his law still prevails; the nightmare has not yet lifted. No man—Jew or not—as yet dares to overtly denounce the iniquities and demand his right to freedom and dignity. The victims are still afraid to complain. The scars that cover the body and memory of the Russian Jew have not had time to heal.

Since then, it must be stressed, the situation has changed. In Russia the first to brave their jailers and defy the regime were the Jews. On the eve of Simchath Torah, I saw them dance and sing in front of synagogues, shouting their faith and their pride in Jewish history, celebrating with joy and exultation their inner liberation and loyalty to their past. Before Solzhenitsyn, before Sakharov, they dared proclaim a non-violent rebellion against their oppressors. Well before any other dissidents, they demonstrated their courage by writing letters, signing petitions, calling hunger strikes, occupying government offices. They were the first to set imagination afire—theirs and ours. They were the first to win any victories. They were the ones who gave meaning to the old Rabbi's cries of suffering. They were the ones who allowed hope to ring out across the world.

Are we listening? ...

Elie Wiesel