

# NOTES FOR THE COURSE

*On these pages you will find an outline of the course, with synopses of each chapter and the main points that are covered in the discussion questions for each session.*

## Elie Wiesel's Great Figures of the Bible

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In this course based on a PBS series, Elie Wiesel, teacher and master storyteller, looks at six stories from the Bible, exploring the dilemmas faced by key figures during central episodes of their lives. As he shares his interpretations, Wiesel tries to make sense of what befalls these characters and reflects on how their stories have meaning today. With extensive background on the Bible and on the stories, or midrashim, that have been created in response to the biblical text, the materials allow viewers to come to their own understanding of these biblical events.

Overall issues addressed in the course include:

- The ways in which the biblical stories resonate in today's world.
- The relationship between God and the figures of the Bible.
- How Jewish identity has been shaped by these biblical stories.
- The ethics, morality, and code of behavior that the figures live by and that we and Elie Wiesel hold them to.

### **Introduction:**

#### **The Tradition of Midrash**

The introduction traces the tradition of biblical commentary as it grew out of the period after the destruction of the Second Temple and the beginning of the diaspora. This practice, which has continued for 2,000 years, is embraced by Elie Wiesel as a way to grapple with the Bible and to express his own interpretation of its stories.

## **SESSION ONE**

### **The Story of Temptation: Adam and Eve and After**

The variations in the text of the creation story provide ample ground for interpretation. Scholars over the millennia have focused on the contradictions, using the different versions to express the complicated nature of all people and the complex relationship between man and woman. Elie Wiesel's ideas speak of his understanding of the age-old story in the light of much more recent history.

Key issues addressed in the discussion questions include:

- The understanding of a sacred yet contradictory text.
- What it means to be created “in God’s image.”
- Adam’s sense of loneliness, and how we relate to that feeling.
- The different interpretations of this story by Jews and Christians.

## **SESSION TWO**

### **The First Murder: The Story of Cain and Abel**

Guilt is assigned to Cain for the grievous act of murdering his brother, but we are asked to think about the responsibility of all parties involved, as Wiesel focuses on what it means to be “my brother’s keeper.”

Key issues addressed include:

- The form of punishment and justice in this story.
- Cain’s lack of redemption and ultimate death.
- The role of God.
- The responsibility we carry for violence in the world.

## **SESSION THREE**

### **Suffering and Sacrifice: The Story of Job**

The modern questions of why the innocent suffer and how one can maintain faith in an unpredictable world are reflected in the Book of Job. The beautiful language of this story describing catastrophe and intense pain provides a forum from which Elie Wiesel seeks answers for Job’s sorrow, and his own.

Key issues addressed include:

- The existence of evil and the suffering of innocent people in the face of an omnipotent God.
- The relationship and discourse between Job and God; between Wiesel and God.
- The ability to reconcile anger with deep faith in God.
- The connection between Job and Elie Wiesel.

#### **SESSION FOUR**

##### **About Fathers and Sons: Abraham and the Binding of Isaac**

What do we make of a God who creates, and then asks to destroy? How can we explain Abraham, who remains silent when he is asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac? Elie Wiesel explores the relationship between God and man, as he interprets this seemingly inexplicable event in the Bible.

Key issues addressed include:

- The contrast in the presentation of Abraham as a revolutionary and as a loyal and faithful servant.
- The connection of both Jews and Muslims to Abraham as a possible source of conflict.
- The story's resonance with generation after generation.
- The comparison of God in this story and in the Book of Job.

#### **SESSION FIVE**

##### **The Agony of Power: The Story of Moses**

From the palace of the Egyptians to the banks of the Jordan River, Moses undergoes a metamorphosis to become a great leader of his people. He helps liberate the Jews from slavery—and is rewarded, in the desert, with their rowdiness, ingratitude, and complaints. Wiesel examines Moses's devotion to God and to the Jews, the people he learns—against all odds—to love and embrace, accepting for them the Torah and leading them to the Promised Land.

Key issues addressed include:

- The impact of the experience of slavery on the religion of Moses.
- The transformation of the Jewish religion over the last two thousand years.

- The relationship between the ritual commandments and the ethical ones presented in the Torah.
- The notion of the Jews as “the chosen people.”

## **SESSION SIX**

### **Greatness and Passion: The Story of David**

There is an infatuation with David, who started his life as a shepherd and rose to become King of Israel, who despite his travails and questionable behavior, always came out a winner. Wiesel explores David’s ambitions, loyalties, and ambiguous motives, and concludes that it is his human qualities that we are drawn to: David sins, repents, and is ultimately forgiven.

Key issues addressed include:

- The idea of the Messiah coming from the line of King David.
- The characteristics of a successful leader.
- Wiesel’s explanation for why we love David.
- The relationship between God and David; Abraham; Moses; and Job.