

**INTERNATIONAL HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY / 'What Elie did was take a Jewish tragedy and place it on the world stage. He transposed Jewish pain to a universal scale'**

# A star-studded 'Night' to honor Elie Wiesel in New York

Five-hour January 29 event at Museum of Jewish Heritage will feature diverse community reading of the slim 116-page volume that changed the world

BY RENEE GHERT-ZAND | January 27, 2017, 4:58 am |

**M**illions have read Elie Wiesel's landmark Holocaust memoir "[Night](#)." When Oprah Winfrey selected it for her [book club in 2006](#), she turned it into an instant bestseller and countless students continue to read it as part of their high school curriculums.

But seldom is the slim volume about the author's experiences in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald Nazi concentration camps read aloud.

A special event in New York on Sunday marks International Holocaust Remembrance Day (which takes place two days earlier on January 27) with a wide array of artists, actors, writers, community leaders, government officials, students, Holocaust survivors and survivors of other genocides. They will honor the memory of the late Wiesel in a unique community reading of "Night" at the [Museum of Jewish Heritage — A Living Memorial to the Holocaust](#).

Co-presented by the [National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene](#), the reading will take place over five hours in the museum's Edmond J. Safra Hall. It will be simulcast throughout the museum's galleries and [streamed via the internet to online viewers](#) around the world. On-stage participants will take turns reading at least one page from the 116-page work. Most of the readers will read in English, and some will read parts of the text in Yiddish and French, in a nod to the languages in which "Night" was published before its translation to English and some 30 other languages.

Abraham H. Foxman, director of the Center for the Study of Antisemitism at the Museum of Jewish Heritage and former Anti-Defamation League national director, was instrumental in organizing the event honoring Wiesel, who [died last July 2](#) aged 87.

Foxman told The Times of Israel he was overwhelmed by the uniformly positive response from the invited readers, as well as public demand to attend. The 1,000 allotted spaces are filled, and there is a waiting list of those still hoping to have a chance to personally hear a portion of the reading.

Foxman said it was evident from the start that “Night” would be the central element for the program marking the first International Holocaust Remembrance Day since Wiesel’s passing.

“Elie’s greatest impact on the universe was the testimony of ‘Night.’ It was obvious that we would use this as a vehicle. What Elie did was take a Jewish tragedy and place it on the world stage. He transposed Jewish pain to a universal scale. ‘Night’ is the most-read Holocaust-related book, or perhaps second only to ‘The Diary of Anne Frank,’” Foxman said.

Folksbiene associate artistic director Motl Didner said there was a strong connection between Wiesel and Yiddish culture. Wiesel attended numerous Folksbiene productions, and the theater staged a special tribute to him in 2010. On a more intimate level, Wiesel was a familiar presence in Folksbiene artistic director Zalmen Mlotek’s life as he grew up, as the Nobel Laureate was friendly with Mlotek’s parents, Yiddish Forverts editor Yosl Mlotek and Yiddish song expert [Chana Mlotek](#).

“The Folksbiene has been a home for the survivor community for the 70 years since the end of the Holocaust and now serves the second, third and fourth generations,” said Didner.

“Elie Wiesel was a great inspiration to our community. Yiddish was his native language. It was the language in which he began his writing career. He even sang in Yiddish. It was only fitting that with his passing, especially given our new partnership with the Museum of Jewish Heritage, that we honor his memory by reading his most influential work,” Didner said.

Some of the readers participating in Sunday’s event knew Wiesel personally, while others never had the chance.

“I never had the pleasure and honor of meeting Mr. Wiesel, but I wish I had. So participating feels like a way of finally coming together,” said Tony, Oscar and Golden Globe-winning actor Joel Grey.

“Like most people, I too was devastated, and devastated by recollections of the Holocaust to this day,” said Grey, best known for his role as the Master of Ceremonies in both the stage and film versions of “Cabaret.”

Broadway actress Tovah Feldshuh, whom younger audiences will recognize as the overbearing mother in the current hit TV series “[Crazy Ex-Girlfriend](#),” knew and loved Wiesel. Her recollections of Wiesel as a man of moral and social courage, and also someone who always put concern for others first, inspired her to participate.

Feldshuh recalls how immediately after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Wiesel “held my face in his hands and said, ‘Tovah, how are you?’... that was *his* moment. The world was focused on him and he was so cellularly empathic that his first thoughts were naturally, effortlessly about ‘the other’ — in this case, it was lucky, lucky ‘I.’”

Sex therapist and media personality Dr. Ruth Westheimer also has fond memories of Wiesel, whom she called “a very important person in my life.” Westheimer praised Wiesel for everything he did for Jews and non-Jews alike, especially those who lived through the Nazi era.

As Westheimer reads her portion of “Night,” she will think of her friend Wiesel and miss him. She’ll especially miss the way he would greet her.

"I have met him many, many times, and I always got a kiss. What I miss most about him is his wonderful smile and the kiss on my cheek," she shared.

The list of readers is crammed with famous New Yorkers from many different professional fields, from violinist Itzhak Perlman to New York Police Department commissioner James O'Neill to Ms. Magazine co-founder Letty Cottin Pogrebin. Israel will be represented by Ambassador Dani Dayan, Consul General of Israel in New York.

At the end of the five hours, members of the Wiesel family concluded the reading.

Wiesel's son [Elisha Wiesel](#) told The Times of Israel that he is pleased with how the Museum of Jewish Heritage and Folksbiene conceived of the event.

"I think my father would have appreciated the respect with which the Museum of Jewish Heritage is approaching the event. No musical interludes, no speeches, no performances – just the reading. Some messages are too important to dilute," he said.

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**'Some messages are too important to dilute'**

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Although the community reading was planned to coincide with a day memorializing past tragedy, its resonance with current events is at the forefront of the younger Wiesel's mind.

"Listeners to this particular reading of 'Night' need only walk a few blocks to the site of the 9/11 Memorial to be reminded that hatred and murderous intent are unfortunately alive and well today," said Wiesel.

"There are still political and religious leaders who irresponsibly defame the 'other' and seek to divide us along our fault lines: religion, skin color, nationality, class, gender, sexual preference, and political affiliation," he said.

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