Is Elie Wiesel Happy?

YOSEF I. ABRAMOWITZ

"You came for me?" asked a bewildered Mikhael Gorbachev.

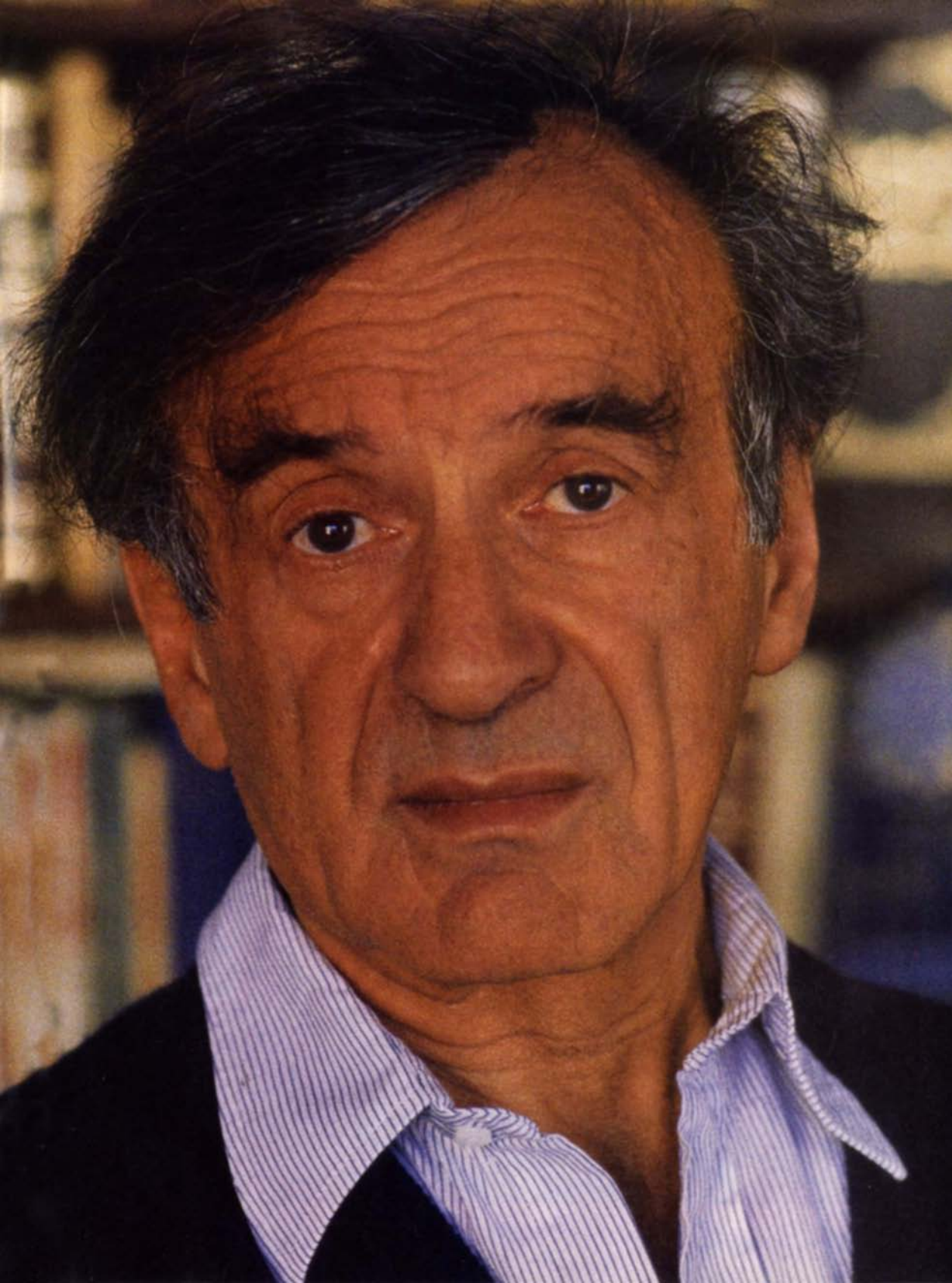
"As a Jew, I owe you that much," responded Elie Wiesel.

French president Mitterand sent Wiesel aboard a government plane to Moscow, where he met Gorbachev immediately after the 1991 coup failed, several months before the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

"When Gorbachev saw me he was moved. I asked myself, why was he so moved, with tears in his eyes? Because he had just realized that his friends were not his friends. Every single one had betrayed him. Those whom he had elevated, abandoned him. I have rarely seen a man as lonely as he was. And here comes a young Jew, and says I'm here to help you, to give you support. I was thinking: I'm a *yeshivah bucher* from Sighet, and all of a sudden I'm involved with presidents, bringing personal messages, and traveling in government planes. I was surprised."

Wiesel's self-image as "a *yeshivah bucher* from Sighet" provides important hints not only into his pre-Holocaust life, but also insights as to how the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize laureate views himself today. Wiesel has been described as a modern prophet, a moving writer, a brilliant teacher and even a Jewish superstar. He is best known, however, as a survivor of Nazi horrors. Yet to keep describing Wiesel as a survivor does an injustice to the totality of his life and accomplishments. Elie Wiesel has not merely survived, he has triumphed. And if he would pause long enough to consider it, he might even say he's happy.

At 65, Wiesel marks 38 years since the publication of the best-selling *Night* and eight years since being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. "I can't believe



The baseball commissioner asked Wiesel to throw out the first ball. "I didn't even know what it meant. I was trembling all the time because I wouldn't know what to do. So I prayed."

it," he says, smiling and shaking his head at the incredible path his life has taken. "Thirty-eight years have passed, and the schedule keeps getting heavier and heavier."

Books are everywhere at Wiesel's home on the 26th floor of a nondescript Upper East Side Manhattan apartment building. A visitor is first confronted by thousands of books in Hebrew, Yiddish, French and English that cover nearly every inch of space between the floor and ceiling of the L-shaped living room. One upper shelf in a corner is devoted to the more than 30 titles bearing Wiesel's name.

Two framed pictures are the lone exceptions to the otherwise book-lined walls. When Wiesel sits at his large desk, he faces on the far wall a sketch of Jerusalem. When he turns around to use the computer, he looks right into a dark black and white photograph of the house in Sighet where he grew up. "Since I began writing, I always face that house," he said in a television interview. "I must know where I come from."

Eliezer Wiesel was born in the picturesque town of Sighet, below the Carpathian mountains that were once home to the Ba'al Shem Tov, the father of chasidism. Tantalized by chasidic tales his grandfather told, Wiesel's happiest childhood memories are punctuated with Shabbat songs, eating chocolates and studying a page of Talmud under a tree while the other youngsters played ball.

"He was a little sickly and certainly what we call bookish," recalls Professor David Weiss Halivni, who studied in *cheder* with Wiesel in Sighet. Halivni, now a professor of religion at Columbia University and one of Wiesel's closest friends, says that even as a child, Wiesel was "artistically more sensitive" to the mystical teachings of their teacher. Halivni believes Wiesel's sense of humor was conditioned as a child. "Maybe he had a premonition," he says.

"We were in the ghetto together. He was on the last transport, I was on the first. I left on Monday, he left Thursday," recalls Halivni, as if it occurred last week. "So we came to Auschwitz at different times."

"We met in Auschwitz," says Rabbi Menashe Klein. Wearing a black chasidic robe, *tzitzit*, white beard and sidelocks, Klein strikes one as Wiesel's Old World alter ego. "Somehow we got to Buchenwald and were liberated there together," he says. "We went to France then, and Professor Wiesel attended the Sorbonne. I, on the other hand, kept dwelling in our Torah."

Rabbi Klein, whose study in Brooklyn is also crowded with religious books, explains that Wiesel took a different path after the war as a result of the shock of his experiences during the Holocaust.

After the war, Wiesel studied in Paris, where he earned money directing a choir. Later he became the Paris correspondent for the Israeli daily *Yediot Aharonot*, earning $30 a month. His big break came when he moved to New York to work with the Yiddish *Forward*, earning $175 a month as a copy editor, writer and translator. "I remember when he lived on 103d Street," says Halivni. "He had only a small room, narrow, dark—you could see the poverty. I remember him sitting on the floor surrounded by records of Bach. At that time he was practically starving."

In 1956, Wiesel stepped off a curb in Times Square and was struck by a speeding taxi. Following the accident, which left him hospitalized for seven months, Wiesel desperately needed money and tried covering the United Nations for *Yediot* on crutches. Golda Meir, then foreign minister, took pity on the young journalist and would invite him back to her hotel suite, where she would prepare omelettes and tea and brief him on the day's events. In 1967, his books, which had been commercial failures, began to sell, and Wiesel was able to leave daily journalism to concentrate on book writing.

So powerfully embedded in the popular psyche is Wiesel's association with the Holocaust that many would find it surprising that the topic rarely comes up in his classes or in his writings. "When people didn't talk about the *Shoah*, I felt I had to. So many peo-

ple are doing it now, I don't need to any more," he explains. In fact, he always thinks twice about raising the issue. "I'm afraid of making it into a routine. I want it that whenever I mention the word *Shoah*, I should stop for a second and my voice should tremble, my whole being should tremble before pronouncing that word."

Halivni leaves public speaking about the Holocaust to Wiesel. "But when he comes to see me," he says, "he listens and I shout."

While the Holocaust rarely figures prominently in Wiesel's public life anymore, his sensitivity as a survivor gives him an appreciation for every moment, and for life's fragility. He and his wife, Marion, still travel on separate flights. "Just in case," he says like a quick prayer, eyes flashing toward Heaven. It also drives him to work hard.

"There are people who want to do more than they can. Wiesel is one of them," says Rabbi Klein, who, like Wiesel, goes to sleep late and wakes up early to study and write. "For Wiesel, the Nobel Prize is no more than a ladder, a step, toward fulfilling the goal for which he remained alive: to do for the Jewish people." Like Wiesel and Halivni, Klein is consumed by his study and writing, having authored over 6,000 *teshuvot*—detailed responses to halachic questions.

"A person cannot live with the feeling that they have achieved the highest," says Halivni, who claims that the Nobel Prize has been a mixed blessing for Wiesel. "The Nobel Prize did not become an end, rather a new beginning. He realizes that the Nobel Prize was given to him as 'Mr. Jew,' and therefore he owes it to the Jewish people. In a sense it entails a greater responsibility. It has imposed a burden on him; the possibility of extending help, because of his connections, is much bigger. There is nothing more frightening for a sensitive person than having power."

While New York is far from Sighet, Elie Wiesel is never far from the forces that molded his childhood: chasidism and the Holocaust. And the struggle of these two forces to coexist in one soul is what shapes Elie Wiesel today, providing the creative tension for his ongoing achievements. Deep within him lies a young *yeshivah buch-*

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Elie Wiesel and his wife, Marion, kiss upon hearing the news of Elie's receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize.

er from Sighet; deep within he believes he survived the Nazi horrors for a purpose, as yet unfulfilled. Even so, Elie Wiesel is where he wants to be and is probably as content as he can ever be—unless the Messiah arrives soon to redeem the Jewish people, and of course, the world.

Clad in a well-tailored gray suit and hugging a velvet blue Torah scroll, Elie Wiesel dances in a tight circle with his friends and sings songs of praise to the God he has so often challenged. Wiesel is glowing; gone is the trademark somber look that is naturally chiseled in his sullen, handsome face. It is Simchat Torah for the Jewish people. Yet for Wiesel it is more; it is also his birthday.

"We never celebrated birthdays at home," Wiesel says of his childhood. He still rarely celebrates the occasion because "to me every minute is a victory." Both Halivni and Klein speak to Wiesel every year the evening of Simchat Torah. "All we do for his birthday is wish that we will see the redemption of the Jews," says Klein. "That is our goal, to live to see the *mashiach*."

In general, Halivni and Wiesel don't celebrate any of the Jewish holidays together because "it's too much of an association, too much of a burden," says the Columbia professor. They both miss dearly what Halivni calls "heavenly Sighet." Even so, Halivni joined his boyhood friend at the Fifth Avenue Synagogue to dance together on Wiesel's 60th birthday.

AP/COURTESY BOSTON UNIVERSITY FREE PRESS, ALBERT I. ETOILE

Wiesel threw out the first ball at the 1986 World Series. This impressed his son, Shlomo Elisha, more than his father's Nobel Peace Prize.

Wiesel credits his sanity to his family and friends. "I read, I listen to music, I speak with friends. My life is full. The main thing is not to waste time." But then he adds, "Sometimes I think that I too am insane. I was always in the minority, like the madman. When I began to talk about trying to teach the *Shoah*, how many others were there? When I began for Russian Jewry, how many others were there then?"

"What keeps Wiesel sane?" Klein ponders. "We sing together, eat together, *daven* together, walk together. He comes here before every holiday. Mostly we meet, we talk." Klein says that Wiesel, who sung in a choir as a child, still loves to sing chasidic melodies. "He would begin singing Friday night at 5:30 P.M. and wouldn't stop until after 2 A.M."

Wiesel says that his daily study of Jewish texts is essential for him. "I love to study. It gives you a good sense of proportion. After all, what Rambam says maybe is more important than the article I write for the *New York Times*."

Halivni and Wiesel express their friendship by always speaking Hebrew to each other. Halivni is one of the few who can really make Wiesel laugh. "The lightest moments we have is when we bring up characters from Sighet," he says.

What kind of characters? There was the *shadchan* (matchmaker), Ziegenfeld, who always walked with an umbrella. And then there was the tall *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) and his short wife. And many others. "Hardly a conversation passes when we don't talk about Sighet," Halivni says. "When describing these things, recapturing the comical aspects of Sighet, then I see him having a hearty laugh."

Is Wiesel happy? To his friends, the question seems irrelevant. "We never think in those terms," says Halivni. He explains that chasidic spirituality gives Wiesel freedom—a second liberation—and that Wiesel "needs the joy of *chasidut* because he cannot always live in the shadow of the Holocaust." Wiesel, hesitant to allow an affirmative answer, gives a traditional response. "We don't speak about happiness in our faith, we speak about *simchah vesasson* (joy and gladness). What do we ask for? *Shalom*, yes. We mainly ask for *yirat shamayim* (fear of heaven), for study, for *chaim shel Torah* (life of Torah). What is Torah? Meaning. My life has been the pursuit of meaning, not joy."

For Wiesel, without a Jewish context, there is no enjoyment. When asked about *simchah vesasson* in his own life, he pauses

briefly, and then his words flow in his soft French accent. "Nineteen forty-eight, when Israel was born. I remember that Shabbat in Paris. I felt joy that came from history. Then the '67 war. *Shichrur Yerushalayim* (the liberation of Jerusalem), something that remains with me. And Simchat Torah in Moscow with young people."

Yet now "there is something missing, and when something is missing, happiness can't be present because happiness means nothing is missing. What is missing?" The professor pauses and then answers the question. "Certainty. The haunting idea that the century is ending, you have the feeling that it is trying to purge itself of its demons, of its nightmares with the pursuit of violence, of bloodshed, of hatred.

"In this generation, the pursuit of pleasure is at the expense of happiness. Pleasure is instant pleasure. Everything we are obtaining is instant. Instant meaning, instant love, instant philosophy, instant truth. And history is justifying that.

"The Gaon of Vilna said that the hardest *mitzvah* to accomplish is *'vesamachta bechagecha'* (rejoice in your holidays). 'Do not steal', 'do not kill', everything else is easy. *'Vesamachta bechagecha!'* To make sure that you rejoice," Wiesel says energetically.

Wiesel's voice then becomes barely audible, his downward gaze is steady. His consciousness seems to have been transported to another time. "Another kind of joy, even deeper than that, and more personal, was the birth of my son...even more, the *brit* of my son. To me in my life, it has the importance of the birth of Israel, the reunification of Jerusalem. I felt it in my body, in *every cell* of my body...."

The phone breaks his trance, and Wiesel walks over to his executive-size mahogany desk to answer it. On it sit two photographs: One of him with his wife and their son Shlomo-Elisha, and one a close-up of their son, both taken at least 10 years ago. Wiesel named his son after his father, who was in the camps with him and died only weeks before Wiesel's liberation.

"My father had no official position in the community, he was a kind of intercessor in the community, he was a grocery store owner," says Wiesel in a tone of great respect. "Somehow, I don't know how, he always defended the Jews with the authorities. Therefore, when something would happen, they would come to my father." At times his father was so busy with Jewish communal business that the young Wiesel would only see him at home on the Sabbath.

RICHARD LOBELL

Friends from *cheder* days in Sighet, Wiesel and David Weiss Halivni share a pleasurable moment in Wiesel's study in Manhattan. Sent on two different transports to Auschwitz, they were reunited after the war.

Wiesel himself has no official position in the Jewish community, yet he has served as an intercessor with heads of state, including President Reagan prior to his trip to Bitburg and President Clinton, to ask him to do more to help the Bosnians. Wiesel receives a tremendous amount of requests for his assistance with one issue or another. And although he is often flying around the world, he always makes sure to return to New York to spend the Sabbath with his family.

"The need to help Jews, I think I am following in my father's footsteps and I think he would have wanted it that way," says Wiesel. Wiesel says that he has only recently realized the similarities between himself and his father, and explains that it took a long time to come to this conclusion

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"because of *kibbud av* (respect for one's father), I didn't dare compare myself with him. He saved Jewish lives; I didn't. I try to teach, but he saved Jewish lives. He was arrested, he was tortured. I was not. So how can I compare myself to him?"

In honor of his father, Wiesel donated the initial seed money for Bet Shlomo, a $5 million complex outside of Jerusalem that includes a *yeshivah, kollel,* Talmud Torah, *mikvah,* matzah factory, *shul,* bomb shelter and even a swimming pool.

While Wiesel is reconciled with the memory of his father, he is still wrestling with being a father. "The hardest is to be a good father, always," confesses Wiesel. Halivni says that it is not easy being the son of a great man. Shlomo-Elisha, who is now a senior at Yale, has been heard to say, half-jokingly: "It's hard growing up in a house where your dad is the arbiter of morality in the twentieth century."

Wiesel believes that "the father-son relationship is a test, both for the father and for the son. When the son leaves home, it is harder for the father than for the son," he says, hoping not to betray the privacy of his family life and yet trying to convey the love and understanding he has for his son. "The son has to free himself on the one hand, and at the same time be loyal," he says, speaking perhaps about both his relationship with his father and his son's with him. "The hardest things are the most rewarding," he adds.

"It was harder than studying a *suggiya* (tractate of Gemara)," says Wiesel of his major league baseball debut in 1986, when his son was 14 years old. One place where the worlds of father and son, of Sighet and New York, met was the unlikely arena of Shea Stadium at the opening of the second game of the World Series between the New York Mets and the Boston Red Sox. The baseball commissioner asked Wiesel to throw out the first ball.

"I didn't even know what it meant," Wiesel told *Sports Illustrated.* "I had a feeling he was talking mysticism to me." Wiesel declined to throw out the first ball at the first game, because of the Sabbath, and then tried to get out of the honor the second game because of the festival of Sukkot.

"But then the commissioner went—I must say this to his credit—he went and checked with rabbis and found that after sundown, it is permitted to throw a ball. So when he came back for the third time, I took counsel with my son. And when he heard that, he was more impressed with that than with my getting the Nobel Prize. So of course, I accepted. And I was trembling all the time because I wouldn't know what to do. So I prayed and my prayers were heard and apparently I did the right thing." The caption under his photo in *Sports Illustrated* reads: "For a man of peace, he threw a nasty palmball."

Wiesel and his son relate to very different worlds. Elie Wiesel is not of this generation, and seldom takes notice of or pleasure from contemporary culture. He wasn't sure who Madonna is, and has no patience to stand in line for movie tickets. "I don't like to watch television," he says, but then adds that he always watches the news and sometimes "Nightline."

When he is relaxed, among friends or teaching, Wiesel often displays an ironic sense of humor. "When Dan Rather speaks, more people listen to him than when Moses spoke." His laugh is short but sincere; he smiles freely when he hears the songs of his youth, when hearing of a *simchah* in someone's life or simply when schmoozing with his wife.

He looks slim and fit, and becomes energized when he walks into his classroom at Boston University or greets a visitor at his door. Does he exercise? "Never in my life," he says. Having the benefit of low blood pressure and low cholesterol, he allows himself the indulgence of milk chocolate, a childhood habit.

These glimpses of Elie Wiesel, the young Jew and the *yeshivah bucher,* only last a moment. Even the baseball story Wiesel weaves back to the present. "I was surprised because I thought of sports as nice, of a feeling of tolerance and respect. When they introduced me, first they announced, 'He lives in New York,' and they cheered." (He cheers "Yaaa!", lifting his arms in the air.) "And then they said, 'He teaches in Boston.' And everyone went, 'Boooo!'

"That's not so nice."

And then he smiles.

GLOSSARY

aliyah: literally, going up; immigration to Israel

chasidut: goodness, righteousness; practices and teachings of a Jewish mystical movement that began in Poland around 1750

chacham: a wise and learned person

chazan: cantor

cheder: literally, room; a small school for children's Jewish education

halachah: literally, the path; Jewish religious law

haroset: fruit, nut and wine mixture eaten at the Passover seder as a reminder of the mortar used in Egypt

havurah: literally, fellowship; an informal, usually self-led, prayer group

kavanah: deep intent or focus on prayer or *mitzvot*

Kiddush: prayer and sanctification of wine on holy days

kollel: a community building

macher: (Yiddish) literally, a doer; a big shot, usually referring to a Jewish community leader

mashiach: messiah

mikveh: Jewish ritual bath

narrishkeit: (Yiddish) foolishness

siddur: prayer book

Shoah: the Holocaust

simchah: joy, a joyous occasion

tallit: ritually prescribed, fringed prayer shawl

tefillin: phylacteries; leather straps used to bind two small black boxes containing the words of the *Shema* to arm and head

tikun olam: perfecting the world as God's partners through good deeds

treif: non-kosher

tzedakah: righteousness; often used to mean charity

tzitzit: the ritually prescribed fringes at the corners of a *tallit* or a four-cornered garment

yeshivah: a rabbinical college or seminary or a site of Jewish learning

yeshivah bucher: *yeshivah* student