

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What events can suddenly change the course of a person's life?

Discuss

In a small group, discuss events that unexpectedly change people's lives—a natural disaster or death of a loved one, for example. Discuss possible effects and emotional reactions you or others might have to each event.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how young Elie Wiesel's life is profoundly and forever changed.

BACKGROUND

Time and Place

The town of Sighet, where *Night* begins, has been part of both Romania and Hungary at various times. During Wiesel's childhood, Sighet was home to 15,000 Jews. Most were devout Hasidic Jews whose lives focused on family, religion, and learning. Like most of their Jewish neighbors, the Wiesels were poor but intensely committed to education. For young Elie that meant spending his days and evenings studying sacred Jewish texts such as the Torah and Talmud. At the age of twelve, Wiesel began exploring cabbala, or Jewish mysticism—an approach to Bible study that analyzes hidden meanings in the text. As World War II progressed, Wiesel's father Chlomo began helping Jews escape from Poland, risking his life to help others escape Nazi persecution. Chlomo continued to believe that he and his family would not be separated.

Did You Know?

Judaism dates back nearly 4,000 years. It shares many ideas with—and in fact is an ancestor to—both Christianity and Islam. These three religions all originated in the same part of the world, the area we now call the Middle East. The sacred texts of all three religions overlap in several ways. The Hebrew Bible is what Christians call the Old Testament. Many of these Bible stories also appear in the Islamic sacred text, the Qur'an. Two important Jewish holy days are Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year and usually occurs in September. Ten days later comes Yom Kippur, which is a day of fasting and atonement. Passover is a springtime ritual that celebrates the Jews' escape from slavery in Egypt.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

compatriots n. fellow countrymen

edict n. official statement; law

expound v. to set forth in detail

firmament n. the sky, or heavens

hermetically adv. completely sealed; airtight
 pestilential adj. filled with disease; contagious
 phylacteries n. small boxes containing scripture; worn by some Jewish men for daily prayer
 pillage v. to rob with open violence
 premonition n. anticipation of an event, usually negative, even without actual warning
 truncheon n. a police officer's stick

Active Reading

Night Chapters 1 and 2

In chapters 1 and 2, a number of significant things happen to Elie Wiesel and the other Jews of Sighet. As you read this section, look for important events and for how people respond to them. List some key events in the Event column. In the Response column identify how Wiesel and the other Sighet Jews respond. In the third column, write what happens next in the story. Discuss whether or not the villagers' responses to events influenced, at least in part, events that followed.

Event	Response	What Happened Next
Moshe the Beadle is deported because he is a foreign Jew		

Responding

Night Chapter 1 and 2

Personal Response

What is your reaction to Moché the Beadle? What do you think about his treatment by the villagers after his return from Poland?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Describe Wiesel's community at the beginning of the story. How does young Elie view the world and his place in it?

2. What are some incidents that suggest or foreshadow the coming danger to the Sighet Jews? Why doesn't the community believe it is in danger?

3. What are the conditions on the Jews' train journey? How do the Jews react to Madame Schächter's behavior? What does this reveal about human nature?

4. What connection might there be between Madame Schächter's treatment on the train and possible future events in the concentration camp? What are some other ways that Wiesel foreshadows, or hints at, the horrors ahead?

5. Even though it was 1944, and Nazi extermination of Jews had begun years earlier, the Sighet Jews had very few facts about it. Do you think it is possible in today's world for a community to know so little, to be so unprepared? Explain.
