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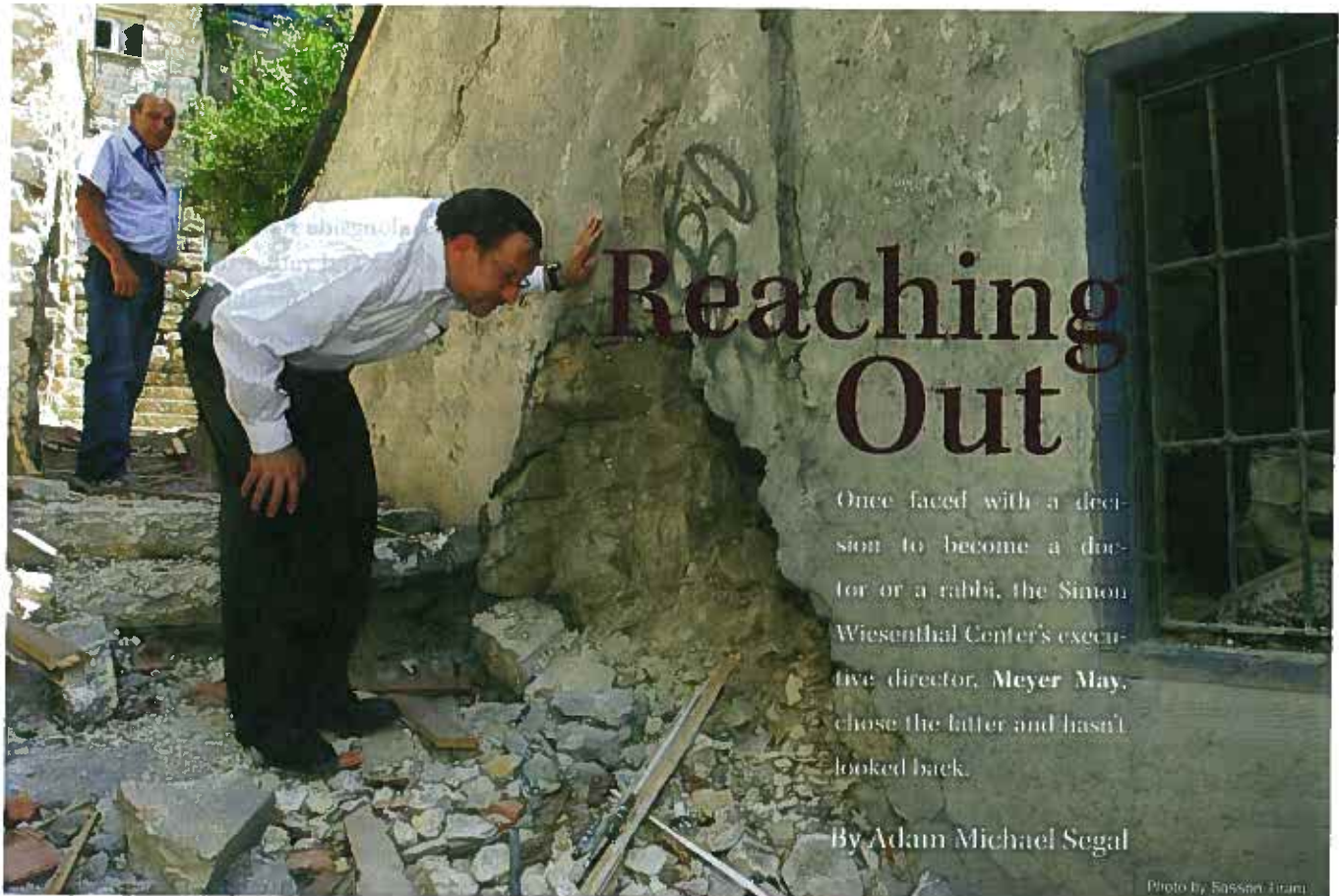
Justice for All

THE WIESENTHAL CENTER'S TIRELESS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **RABBI MEYER MAY.**



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Reaching Out

Once faced with a decision to become a doctor or a rabbi, the Simon Wiesenthal Center's executive director, Meyer May, chose the latter and hasn't looked back.

By Adam Michael Segal

Photo by Sassan Tam

Rabbi Meyer H. May leads the kind of righteous life from which we can all draw inspiration: Rain or shine, he runs or walks three miles every day and maintains an impeccably healthy diet; as the executive director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, he travels across the world to champion human rights, tolerance, and dignity; he immerses himself in the teachings of the Talmud with a study partner when his travels don't interfere with his home life; and at all hours, no matter where he is, he puts his wife, seven children, and 19 grandchildren above all else.

"The idea is to go through life taking less and giving more. That's the challenge for all of us," reflects the 56-year-old May. "Even as we become more successful, we have to keep a perspective on what's really important. Giving time to our family is important. *Tzedakah* and community are important. We must be committed to giving and more giving."

By genuinely practicing what he preaches, May sets a fine example for the people whom he meets on behalf of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and, time and again, they have responded to his requests for support. In his 31 years with the organization, May has helped raise hundreds of mil-

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lions of dollars to fund everything from world-renowned tolerance museums to multimedia diversity training to Academy Award-winning films. While these results illustrate his gift for fundraising, May asserts that the center's mission is what really drives people's philanthropy.

"The name Simon Wiesenthal evokes the message of remembrance and justice, and that resonates with people all over the world," May explains. "They also see us as advocates for tolerance, which is not just a Jewish issue, but an important human issue."

GEORGE AND SYLVIA MAY RAISED THEIR YOUNG SON in an observant Jewish home in New York. Ethics, compassion, respect for others, and spirituality were nurtured

Meyer May

deeply and profoundly. “A *rosh yeshiva* is a highly revered person in the religious world, mentoring and guiding students in developing their Torah learning and religious personas. My father was my rosh yeshiva for honesty,” May beams proudly. “When my father was in his 60s and his vision problems proved too limiting, he went to the New Jersey Department of Motor Vehicles and handed in his license. When the clerk asked him why, he said, ‘The law says when you are no longer able to drive, you must surrender your driver’s license.’ She said, ‘In history, no one else has ever done that.’”

After graduating from high school, May dreamed of becoming a physician and was accepted into Rutgers University in New Jersey. He went early to register, in an effort to get into classes that would permit him to leave early on Fridays before Shabbat. While meeting with the dean of admissions, May mentioned that he also had an opportunity to study at a yeshiva in Israel for the coming year. The dean, taking note of student unrest on campus because of the Vietnam War, said, “Kid, if you want to be a doctor, I’ll see you in September. If you want to be a *mensch*, go to Israel for a year.”

May heeded the dean’s message. While in the Holy Land, he spent months contemplating whether being a rabbi or a physician was the right choice. “I went to the *Kotel* every night for months trying to figure out who I was,” he recalls.

“I finally decided I was going to go into the rabbinate.”

By the late 1970s, May and his wife, Shulamith, had moved out west to California, where he led Yeshiva University of Los Angeles alongside Rabbi Marvin Hier. Hier was just launching a new and rather unique Jewish human rights organization named for Simon Wiesenthal, a survivor of the Nazi death camps, who dedicated his life to documenting the crimes of the Holocaust and finding the perpetrators. Hier made his colleague a tempting offer. “Rabbi Hier figured out that it takes a certain kind of personality to raise money and he thought I would be a success,” relates May. “I said yes, and I’ve been working with him now for 31 years.”

May is grateful for his close relationship with Hier—as well as the camaraderie among the entire Wiesenthal professional staff. “I have profound appreciation for Rabbi Hier and his wife, Malka, my colleagues, the Belzberg family, our current chairman, Larry Mizel, and our Canadian chairman, Gerry Schwartz, for giving me the opportunity, encouragement, and mentoring to serve the Simon Wiesenthal Center,” he relates.

Starting out, May knew rejection would be a normal part of the job. “Rabbi Hier even told me I’d be lucky if I got three out of 10 to say yes,” May recalls with a smile. Despite the challenges, the young fundraiser was not deterred and in due time, he was not only getting individuals to donate, he



May (right) and Rabbi Marvin Hier greeting former Vice President Al Gore.

Photo courtesy of the Simon Wiesenthal Center

Meyer May

was garnering support from governments. "I had this idea in 1984 to go to the legislature in Sacramento, California, and ask them for support, even though they hadn't ever given money to a private foundation before," May recalls. "With the championship of the state's senate president, David Roberti, we received \$5 million from the state. To date, we have received nearly \$100 million in local, state, and federal appropriations."

Over the years, the Simon Wiesenthal Center has grown exponentially. It presently boasts offices in Los Angeles, New York, Toronto, Palm Beach, Paris, Buenos Aires, and Jerusalem and is renowned globally for defending the safety of Jews and teaching the lessons of the Holocaust. Impressively, it also has a constituency of over 400,000 households in the United States.

A crown jewel of the organization is its Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. Founded in 1993, the museum invites visitors to confront bigotry and racism, and to understand the Holocaust in both historic and contemporary contexts. "We have an experiential museum that has been seen by 5 million people in 15 years," May says. "From those 5 million, the vast majority are not Jews, which shows how vital the museum really is."

Another significant Wiesenthal contribution is its Moriah Films division, which has produced films—including two Academy Award winners—that have been seen by half a billion people worldwide. "Our films have been narrated by some of the great names in Hollywood, including Michael Douglas, Whoopi Goldberg, Nicole Kidman, Morgan Freeman, Kevin Costner, Dustin Hoffman, and Sir Ben Kingsley," May says. "Our latest film, *Against the Tide*, opened to rave reviews and deals with the subject of American Jewry during the Second World War, showing some of the great moments of communal responsibility as well as some of the failures."

In addition to his many executive responsibilities with the Wiesenthal Center, May is also involved in the broader Jewish community. To that end, he is the president of the Rabbinical Council of California and serves on a number of nonprofit boards, including ArtScroll's Mesorah Heritage Foundation.

WHEN HE WAS A 10-YEAR-OLD BOY, MAY MET A VERY important person. "I saw her across the room and she just struck me," he says. "I remember her. I can still tell you what she was wearing and what her hair looked like. We married each other when we were quite young." The

couple celebrated their 36th anniversary this year. "She's a kind, beautiful, brilliant, and spiritual woman, and a wonderful mother," May says of Shulamith. "She's a top-notch educator and just started her own successful yeshiva high school for girls, B'nos Devorah, named for her dear mother and my beloved mother-in-law."

With an incredibly demanding job and a large family, May concedes the best lesson in balance he learned was taught by his son. "When my oldest son was 7 years old, he came home with a grade of 40 percent on a test," May recalls. "When I asked him why, he said, 'Abba, you're never home.' So I made up my mind—that day—that every night, I would teach him. And I did. Even if I wasn't in the same city, I would do it on the phone. In fact, I learned the entire *Mishnayot* with both of my sons and am especially proud that in the seven years it took us, I only missed seven days!"

Although the Simon Wiesenthal Center has a multifaceted mission, a cornerstone of the center is its staunch dedication to Israel. "Israel has always been the national home of the Jew, and Jews throughout the millennia dreamed of their return to her. The establishment of the State of Israel was a tremendous grace of God," May intones. "But for Israel, no Jew would be safe, nor could we enjoy the success and influence we have achieved. I believe Jerusalem in particular is the place where we should emphasize what unites us all."

It is in this profound line of thinking that the Simon Wiesenthal Center is endeavoring to build the monumental Center for Human Dignity: Museum of Tolerance Jerusalem. Designed by legendary architect Frank Gehry, the center will reflect, teach, and demonstrate the "history and vital need for tolerance in Israel and around the globe."

Included on the site will be a museum, a theater complex, a conference center, a grand hall, an education center, and a library. It is also intended to be a hub for economic, cultural, and educational activity in Jerusalem. May is hard at work seeking support. "We already have seven gifts of \$10 million each, and \$105 million in hand," he says. "Rabbi Hier and I are not stopping there."

As he looks to the future, May is guided by the same positive principles that have led him to great success throughout his life. "I see myself working together with my colleagues I very much love," he says. "I also see myself at the opening of the Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem. And then I will be ready to serve the center for at least another 20 years!" **UM**