

Elie Wiesel Hasidism: The Shpole Zeide

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) One day, one day, I said to myself a long time ago, one day, we really must leave the center and spend some time with the peripheral disciples, whose admiration and dedication made their masters proud or happy. One day, I said to myself, we shall speak about Rabbi Michel of Zlotchov. Not long after his death, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh of Zidichov saw him in a dream. And Rabbi Michel was saying, "Do you know what I am doing here? I go from one world to the next. That's what I am doing. And do you know what I have learned here? [00:01:00] I learned that the world which until yesterday was my heaven, had suddenly become the earth which my feet now tread."

And Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh, the son of the Besht, who, having ceded his throne to the great Maggid of Mezeritch, had gone to live among the *Misnagdim*, the opponents of the Hasidic movement in Pinsk -- surely, one day, we ought to get better acquainted with him. And the son of the Maggid, Rabbi Avraham Malach, the Angel, who died at the age of 36. His legend keeps haunting the Hasidic world. Why did he choose to become an ascetic, a path diametrically opposed to the one taken by his father? It was

said of him that he was not of this world. [00:02:00] His soul, too pure for this earth, yearned only to return to Heaven as quickly as possible.

And what about Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl, who one day decided that darkness, too, was worthy of compassion? "After all," he said, "darkness, too, had been created by the Almighty God. Still, we, human beings, mistrust darkness. We curse darkness. We fight darkness. What do we do? We pray for the day to come. We wait for the light. We fear all that is obscured. We dread the night. Between light and darkness," said Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl, "darkness always loses. Isn't that unfair? No. Darkness only appears to be losing. In fact," said Rabbi Nachum, "it only goes into hiding. And sometimes, [00:03:00] darkness even manages to hide in light."

One day, we shall speak of Rabbi Dovid of Lelov, the friend of the poor, the friend of animals, friend of all abandoned creatures. A disciple of the Seer of Lublin, he used to come and spend the *Yamim Noraim*, the High Holidays, with him. Once, before the blowing of the shofar, the Seer noticed that the Reb Dovid was missing. They looked for him in his room, in all the other rooms, and at last, they found him in the stable, feeding

the hungry horses. And the Seer of Lublin congratulated him, saying, "What you did was more worthy than blowing the shofar."

And the Virgin of Ludmir, have we ever mentioned her? One day, yes, one day. She was a famous rebbe, you know. The only woman rebbe of Hasidism. [00:04:00] She wore the *tallit*, and *tefillin*, studied the sacred texts and their commentaries. She knew *Torah Sheba'al Peh*, she knew the Talmud, and she received visitors and petitioners, gave advice and blessings, and even managed sometimes to perform a miracle or two.

In short, it comes as no surprise that other rabbis became jealous, and felt so threatened that one day, they gathered in a top-secret meeting and resolved to take steps. Emissaries were sent to talk to her, in vain. She countered their every argument with one that was better. Finally, they decided to use the ultimate weapon. They would marry her off. (laughter) At first, she refused, and they insisted that she was obliged to obey the First Commandment, that she had no right to remain single. [00:05:00] Somewhere, they found a bridegroom, and a marriage took place, and, lo and behold, the new bride disappeared the next morning. And she was found in -- but I prefer to stop right here. (laughter)

Patience. One day. One day, we shall also tell a no less curious story about a no less mysterious character, Rabbi Leib Soros, or Rabbi Leib, son of Sarah, a sage, a just man, unlike any other. Listening to his marvelous, spellbinding adventures, we see him as a kind of secret agent, a kind of Hasidic Robin Hood. His mother, a great beauty, had quietly married a poor old *melamed*, an old teacher, because the son of the village lord was so desperately [00:06:00] in love with her that he threatened to carry her off by force, or else kill himself. Which, of course, meant that the Jews of the region would have had to pay the price, and that is why she quickly decided to marry the elderly *melamed*, the elderly man. True, the young lord could be in love with the beautiful Jewess, but not with a married woman, and surely not with the wife of a poor, wretched man of a teacher.

And so, for having saved so many Jews from a pogrom, Sarah got her reward. She conceived a son whom she named Leib, and whose soul, according to the Besht himself, was a very special one. The Maggid of Mezeritch gave him a letter of introduction that opened all doors. All doors for him, whenever he needed to be everywhere. And he was everywhere, for rescuing missions. Reb Leib Soros seemed to be wherever a creature was in pain, [00:07:00] or a community in danger. Incredible stories.

Amazing adventures. Endless wondrous legends are told about him. He had neither an established circle nor disciples. No village bore his name. He initiated no philosophical system, claimed no territory. He belonged to the entire Hasidic world.

He was forever on the road, making light of distances. Shortly before the Besht died, this is what he said to him: "You, Leib," he said, "will be flying between heaven and earth." We are also told that Reb Leib Soros always carried a satchel, to collect the grief and tears of his suffering brethren. Yes, one day, we shall speak of him, too.

For the last 18 years, in this place, with some of you -- who were born since -- we have tried to depict the great masters, each one with his own philosophical system, his set of personal attitudes. [00:08:00] The Besht, founder of the movement. The Maggid, its architect. Also, Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, who personified friendship, and Rabbi Zusya, who personified innocence. There is a school of silence in Warka, and a school of anger in Kotzk, and then there are the Seer of Lublin, and the Maggid of Kozhnitz, and their Messianic conspiracy.

What do they have in common? *Ahavat Yisrael*, love of their fellow man, love of the Jewish people. And a love that

illustrates the principles of Jewish humanism. And of course, love of Torah, of study, of teaching. And a passion for God, that involved God in all the affairs of all His creatures.

But tonight, we shall speak of the great Rabbi Aryeh Leib, [00:09:00] also called the Shpole Zeide, the Grandfather of Shpola. Now, why did we let him wait so long before taking a closer look at him? Eighteen years. Such an old man.

(laughter) I must admit, I don't know. Who knows why some people are always on time, and others are always late?

(laughter) Waiting is not only a Jewish virtue, it is also one of the Jewish mysteries. It's so easy to come earlier than later, and yet, our people come later. (laughter) Maybe, some of our friends may like to wait, and make us wait. It doesn't matter. We, Jews, believe in *Ahavat Yisrael*, we believe in love of our people, and therefore, we open the doors not only to this hall, but even the doors to our story. [00:10:00] (applause)

(pause) Miracles, anger, and tenderness. These three words describe our hero tonight. As we shall see later, he performed miracles. He was capable of tenderness. And yet, he also manifested anger towards -- well, you will see. A confession first. I believe I know why I have neglected the Shpole Zeide until now. I did so because he bitterly fought a man, a master,

who has marked my life and my work, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. Excessive loyalty on my part [00:11:00] -- impossible to be too loyal to my Rabbi Nachman. I study his tales, I analyze his sayings, I teach his work. He's one of my favorite masters. I truly believe I would not be the writer I am, or the student I am, were it not for Rabbi Nachman's sayings, tales, and teachings, that I try to receive and to incorporate in my own.

I never understood why the Shpole Zeide, who was so kind, as every Hasidic master is supposed to be -- why he kept harassing Rabbi Nachman so persistently. Why would anyone torment poor Rabbi Nachman? Why would anyone persecute a visionary, a thinker, a poet of his stature? [00:12:00] But there is no denying it, for Rabbi Nachman and his disciples, the enemy was Reb Leib, the Shpole Zeide, and that is, for me, reason enough to be suspicious of him. Except for the tug-of-war with Rabbi Nachman, the Shpole Zeide has all the characteristics that attract me. He was unquestionably one of the great of his time. He inspired awe and respect to the masters and their followers for the part he played in the movement for the miracles he performed.

And then, there was his age. You know, in those times, we respected age. An old man, an old woman, were respected, and

they were not sent off to some old age home. And, I liked the old age in him. Older than most of his peers, he had the advantage of having known the Baal Shem Tov personally.

[00:13:00] It was the Baal Shem Tov who had made him face and accept his destiny. How could we not love someone who had been singled out by the Baal Shem Tov himself? And besides, how can one not admire a spiritual leader who was born old? For his birth is linked to a miracle, and the miracle is linked to the Besht.

And listen to what the Hasidic chronicle tells us. "Not far from Kyiv, in the vicinity of Uman, in a castle that belonged to Count Potovsky, there lived a certain Jew named Baruch. Baruch was a charitable man, who welcomed beggars and wanderers and offered them food and shelter. In fact, Baruch took care of the men while his wife, Rachel, received the women. Anxious to avert all danger of intimacy among their guests, they put them up in separate houses. [00:14:00] Imagine what a reputation they had throughout the region, and yet, while people were singing their praises, they nonetheless felt sorry for them, for Baruch and Rachel had no son.

But one day it happened, that among the beggars who knocked at their door, there was also the Besht, who at that time, was



still leading an anonymous existence. Disguised as a vagrant, he awaited the hour of his revelation. But Baruch unmasked him one night, when he saw a light from another world envelop the beggar. And the Besht said to him, "Swear not to tell a soul, and I promise you will have a son. And he will live. And you will call him Leib. A great soul will inhabit him."

In 1725, the couple had a son. To celebrate his circumcision, [00:15:00] they gave a meal, to which they invited all the Jews of the neighborhood, rich and poor, young and old. Baruch was not really surprised when he noticed the Besht among them, and the Besht motioned to him not to divulge their secret. After the ceremony, the rabbis blessed the infant, and then the Besht stepped forward, dressed as a beggar -- as an ignorant peasant -- and he expressed his wish to give his blessing, too. And he said, "I am only a poor, ignorant beggar. But it so happens that I love Jewish children, and they need every blessing they can get. I would like to offer mine to this child, since I have nothing else to give."

And before the amused looks of the rabbis, he continued, "I recall only one verse my father taught me. The Bible says, '*V'Avraham Zakein.*' What does *Zakein* mean? *Av*, I think, means '*father*,' so *Zakein* must mean '*grandfather*,' [00:16:00] or in

Yiddish, a zeide. So I wish that this child should become the zeide of the Jewish people." And the nickname stuck. From that moment on, from his *bris*, from his circumcision, the boy grew up as a zeide. (laughter) And nobody called him any other name, and when they spoke to the parents, they didn't say, "How is your little *Leibele*," but, "How is your little zeidele?"

(laughter)

And in fact, he did very well, and at the age of eight, he knew the Torah by heart, as well as the Prophets and the *Mishnayot*. But the parents' happiness was short-lived. Rachel died after his bar mitzvah. Baruch remarried, and his son left for Koretz to study with the famous Rabbi Pinchas, the future friend and companion of the Besht. The High Holidays, he spent with his father. According to custom, [00:17:00] he established his own home at the age of 18, meaning, he married at 18, and to support himself, he took on various jobs, as *shochet*, a ritual slaughterer, as beadle, as tutor.

One day, Rabbi Pinchas took him along to visit the Besht, who in the meantime, had emerged as the spiritual guide of countless communities, from the Vistula to the Dnieper. And when the young man saw the Besht, he cried out, "But this is the man with the shovel on his shoulder," and fainted. Years later, he would

tell his disciples, and I quote, "Before my birth, I wandered throughout the heavenly spheres among the sages and the just men, determined never to descend on earth. What for? Why should I mix with mortals, sinners, weak persons, and expose myself to their petty ambitions? I preferred staying up there. There, truth is without limits or flaws. [00:18:00] But one day, I met a man with a shovel on his shoulder, and he spoke to me thus. 'Listen here, young man,' he said. 'I work in the mud to help the souls purify themselves and lift themselves up, and you? You want to remain on the sidelines, a spectator? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Get down there. They are waiting for you.' And when I saw the Besht, I immediately recognized him, and so did he. And the Besht said, 'I thought you would be stronger. But you are young. You will have to work on yourself.'"

Strangely enough, he never saw the Besht again. Not that he could not have become his disciple. They were contemporaries. And maybe he would have liked to. But for unexplained and inexplicable reasons, his father had forbidden it. Still, the Shpole Zeide felt he belonged to the Besht. He was a kind of disciple in absentia. [00:19:00] Often, he murmured to himself, "Ah, if only my father had not forbidden me to see the Besht once more."

Could it be that his father was afraid that his only son would get too attached to the master, and thus, estranged from his own family? As a matter of fact, Reb Leib left both at the same time. At the age of 30, he chose exile, which is a Hasidic mystical tradition continued by other future masters. Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, and his brother Rabbi Zusya, Rabbi Shmelke -- all wandered through many countries. Reb Leibl wandered alone.

And for seven long years, the Zeide traveled in a thousand disguises, through towns and villages, close and far, never revealing his identity, nor the purpose of his wanderings. Was it the Besht who had advised him to go into exile, or in Yiddish, *oprikhten golus*? When giving him leave, the Besht seemed to have told him quite the opposite. "I wish one thing for you," [00:20:00] he said. "Wherever you are, may your foot be firmly anchored in the ground." But it only seems contradictory. One can feel at home in exile. One can taste eternity in one instant. One can fathom the depths of the earth by putting one's foot on the surface.

When Reb Leib arrived in a place, he was able to take possession of it. For a brief moment, it was his kingdom. In mystical

terms, this is the very essence of the experience of exile. Men must seek out the lost sparks, gather them, and deliver them to their sacred source. Everywhere, there are souls waiting to be called. Everywhere, and especially beneath the ashes, spark exists only for this call. What is required for men to look for them, and save them, find them, redeem them, And when all of them will have been delivered, the divine flame will become the Messianic light. [00:21:00]

On the level of human quest, exile helps men become acquainted with simple people. A Hasidic rabbi must involve himself in their practical daily needs and problems. A true Hasidic rebbe must feel at ease with lumberjacks, merchants, workers, tailors, shoemakers, housewives, maids, as much as with the most distinguished Talmudists. How could he measure a widow's grief, the pain of an orphan, the joy of a freed prisoner, if he is not their brother? That is why most of the great masters of the movement began by leading anonymous existences as humble, often humiliated, wanderers, before rising to the honors of their rank.

But for Reb Leib, the Shpole Zeide, the exile lasted longer than usual. Seven years, instead of the usual four. Seven years of discoveries, [00:22:00] of flights, of hunger, of casual

encounters, of shared pain. In short, seven years of exciting adventure. No other Hasidic leader experienced so many turbulent events in his lifetime. A man of the eighteenth century, he must have experienced, from however near or far, all its revolutions, all its wars, all its cultural and spiritual achievements or failures. The three partitions of Poland. The bloody uprisings that shook France. The conquests and defeats of European powers like England, Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Russia. The revolt of the colonies in America. The French Revolution. The event of the Napoleonic era.

All those borders that appeared and disappeared, all those conquerors who reigned sometimes no more than one night. All those henchmen who became [00:23:00] the victims of their own terror. And at the same time, all those creative spirits, who in spite of the continent-wide bloodletting, in spite of death ravaging the lands, bestowed upon humanity reasons for pride and glory. Kant and Goethe. Bach and Beethoven. Goya and Voltaire, and Rousseau. What did the Shpole Zeide know of what was going on over there, beyond his little Hasidic universe? What did he know of Napoleon's ventures in the Middle East? And of Robespierre? And of Wellington?

Let us carry our inquiry further. To what extent was his romantic concept of the world influenced by that which shaped the fate of Europe? Hasidism is a romantic adventure in Jewish history. But then, Romanticism, then, [00:24:00] was just beginning to have its impact on world history. Other Hasidic masters reacted to the events, each one in his own way. Some sided with the Tsar, others with his enemies. The great Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Lubavitch, prayed for the victory of Tsarist Russia. Reb Mendel of Rimanov, for the emperor of France.

But they all viewed emancipation as a grave danger to the Jewish community. Some proclaimed collective fasts. Others convened quasi-political meetings. For somehow, they all felt -- and maybe they were right -- that Jews would not use their freedom, their newly acquired civil rights, to be better Jews, but quite the opposite, to be less Jewish. They did not use those rights to create more *yeshivot*, and publish more important books, [00:25:00] but quite the opposite -- to go away, and to assimilate, and to adjust. And therefore, they were afraid. Maybe this is what frightens us, too. We know that we, Jews, we can resist terror. We can resist violence, and we can withstand persecution. But can we withstand comfort? Simple comfort? That is the problem.

The Shpole Zeide, conservative, traditionalist, he had no desire to make innovations or changes in the popular Hasidic movement. He was not like the Kotzker. He was not like the Seer of Lublin, who began building somethings, and they were volcanoes. Not he. He was there, solidly anchored in the movement, simply continuing the Beshtian tradition of Hasidism. [00:26:00] And he had friends, therefore, among the great. But most of all, he attracted the Hasidim. The ill, the poor, the forsaken. Those who needed miracles. Those who needed help, sympathy, compassion. Few other masters, in his neighborhood at least, have had such a reputation for miracles.

He had powers, and did not deny having them. He said, and I quote, "When I look upon my *etrog*, I see what is happening from one end of the world to the other." And one Hasidic scholar, later on in the nineteenth century, said, "Look what a great scientist the Shpole Zeide was. He knew that the planet, the earth, is shaped like an *etrog*." Of course he knew. He knew everything. But then, not only did he know, [00:27:00] he tried to impose his will in order to correct things when they were not to his liking. Victims of injustice could count on him. He would alter their destinies.



Like all the other Hasidic masters, he was of course, always on the side of the victim. For misfortune was something he was familiar with. He never forgot his years of misery, the years of hunger, of yearning. Later, at *Shpola*, where he settled in 1770, at the age of 45, he had many opportunities to gather worldly goods, but he chose not to. Like most Hasidic masters, whatever was given to him, he distributed among the needy. He would rather give than receive. His happiness was to make unhappy Jews happy, and such *Ahavat Yisrael* could not but impress the Hasidic communities and their leaders.

In the course of the years, he became a kind of patriarch, a grandfather, a zeide, to all of them. [00:28:00] Even the most famous one, like the Berditchever, who is the forefather of your rabbi here, Reb Lavey Derby. The Neshchizer came to see him, and consult with him. And I, myself, have always loved him. As a child, I loved the Shpole Zeide. I loved him as one loves a grandfather whose wisdom does not frighten, and whose stories make one smile and dream.

What, then, is the nature of those reservations I mentioned before? In other words, what was the quarrel between him and Rabbi Nachman? Why was the Shpole Zeide so harsh? So intransigent? So fiercely hostile towards the greatest, and

surely the most tragic, of all Hasidic storytellers? How are we to explain such antagonism between the two princes? The difference in age? Their different lifestyles? Their divergent religious philosophies? [00:29:00] Was there no one to mediate between two such leaders and pillars of the movement, no one to make peace between them? Some tried, and we shall see that later. But take note that they had not always been enemies. For quite a long time, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov and the Shpole Zeide had a friendly relationship.

When Rabbi Nachman returned from his famous adventurous trip, to *Eretz Yisrael*, to the Holy Land, he hurried to visit the Shpole Zeide, who, it must be said, was both pleased and touched, and showed it. He received him with such affection and warmth. The young rebbe was celebrated and exalted at *Shpola*. The quarrel broke out later. But why at all was there a quarrel? For two reasons.

The first: Rabbi Nachman decided to settle in Zlatipola. Now, Zlatipola not only belonged to the province of the Zeide, [00:30:00] it was simply two miles away from *Shpola*. And the master, the Zeide, could not tolerate this intrusion. For, remember, that the Hasidic world, from the third generation on, was divided not only philosophically, but also geographically.

Each master had his territory, his domain, his kingdom. What right had Rabbi Nachman to invade Zlatipola? Particularly since Zlatipola held a very special place in the Zeide's life story, having been the scene of quite a few of his adventures.

It was there that he had been employed as beadle. There were no other candidates for this menial post. It was there that he revealed himself a miracle-worker. He was respected, admired, and yet, in those days, he had been expected to die young, for there was a kind of curse [00:31:00] on the beadles of Zlatipola. They never lasted long. And that's why they gave the job to the Zeide, who was still anonymous. The Zeide outsmarted them, for curses had no power over him, and he did his job, he read the Torah, even the *Tochaha*, the very special part of the malediction which people are afraid to read, or to get an *aliyah* for. He sounded the shofar, and instead of complaining, like his predecessors, he helped those who complained to him.

And so, when he moved away to *Shpola*, he left a number of true and faithful friends behind. And then came Rabbi Nachman. A great-grandson of the Besht, he was well-received. Did he wish to pray with his people in the little *shtiebel*? If not, the community offered him the big synagogue. Rabbi Nachman soon

accepted the big synagogue, and introduced his own *nusach*, his own style, for the solemn *N'ilah* service, [00:32:00] the most majestic of all services in our liturgy.

And then, rumors quickly traveled to *Shpola*, saying that Rabbi Nachman changed the *nusach*, changed the style, and therefore, that meant a lack of respect, it meant arrogance, and it's not nice. Well, it was a declaration of war. Rabbi Nachman answered. He said, "What do you want of me?" he said. "When the Shpole Zeide was there, in Zlatipol, he was not the Shpole Zeide. He was simply a beadle. So the *nusach* was the *nusach* of a beadle. Why shouldn't I change the *nusach* of a beadle?"

The explanation didn't do too well. (laughter) And therefore, there was war. The second explanation of the war is that there was a theoretical disagreement. [00:33:00] The quarrel between the two masters was not a personal, but an ideological one. A young man came to the Shpole Zeide, we are told, once, and asked for a *tikkun*, asked for some -- to help him redeem or repair something in his soul, and the Shpole Zeide said, "Listen. If you want a Kabbalistic *tikkun*, go to Rebbe Nachman. He is a Kabbalist. If you want me to teach how to recite psalms, stay with me." It's a characteristic difference that the rabbi --

the Hasidic rabbi said, "I am only here for simple people, for psalms, *Tehillim*. He should go and teach you Kabbalah."

Rabbi Nachman addresses the elite. The Zeide speaks to the crowd. The former is seeking substance, the latter, popularity. Rabbi Nachman affects the mind. The Zeide warms the heart. One disturbs, the other reassures. [00:34:00] One might look upon it as a rehearsal of the future conflict between the Rebbe of Kotzker and the Hasidic establishment of his time. We who live at the end of this century can see that both sides have valid points. The Shpole Zeide saw people in distress, and did what he could to alleviate their lot. Rabbi Nachman Breslover had the same intention, only he conceptualized the issue.

In Rabbi Nachman's eyes, the idea of suffering carried as much agony as suffering itself. The Shpole Zeide refused to see suffering as a concept. To him, it was something concrete. It had to be dealt with. It was evil that had to be fought or cured. Now, who is right? The Shpole Zeide resorts to strong measures. He changes the laws of nature. He imposes his will on heaven. A man is in prison? He will be freed. A woman is ill? She must be cared for. Children are hungry? They must be fed. A community's in danger? [00:35:00] He will save the community by prayer.

*Ha-tzaddik ozer*, says the Talmud, the just man commands. And his will must be done. He does not hesitate to issue the following warning, and I quote him, "If our enemies are stupid enough to kill a Christian child, in order to accuse us of ritual murder, I would not do what the Maharal of Prague did. I would not use the golem. I would bring the child back to life, and let the child point the finger at his murderers."

I was thinking of it, the last few days, in a different way, still with the case of Leon Klinghoffer, who I hear was here, praying, in this place, with Reb Lavey Derby on Yom Kippur. He came to *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur in this very place. The fact that happened to him is not only that he was killed in such a brutal way, but what happened afterwards. [00:36:00] It is so rare that a body who was thrown into the sea should suddenly come back to shore. And it is really as though destiny had sent him back to accuse the murderers.

The disciples of the Shpole Zeide claim, as a result, in his lifetime, not a single *alilat dam*, not a single ritual murder, was committed in the land. In other words, Shpoler represents the supernatural, miraculous aspect of Hasidism. The Besht, too, had a reputation, as healer and visionary. The Maggid of

Mezeritch possessed divine powers. His disciples, with rare exceptions, knew how to appeal to the imagination of the people by feats that were beyond ordinary human reason. We must acknowledge the circumstances. At that time, the Jews of Eastern and Central Europe [00:37:00] were living precariously on the brink of doom. The communities had been decimated at the time of Khmelnytsky and convulsed by the activities of the Sabbateans. They were now having difficulties getting reorganized.

Especially in the villages and hamlets, isolated Jewish families were watching their own decline, without schools, without houses of study, without rabbis, without friends, without *dayanim*, without *shochtim*, the Jews felt they had been forgotten. Forgotten by God, and forsaken by their own people. Expelled from Jewish history.

Having lived, or rather, survived, outside the Jewish law, far from Jewish customs, cut off from Jewish learning, from the spring of Jewish learning and Jewish life -- many village Jews no longer knew what it meant to be a Jew. And they had to be brought back. Not by lectures, but by song, [00:38:00] by stories. Had the Besht been a scholar, had he preached *Zohar* to his audience, had he given Talmud *shiurim* in the marketplaces, I

think that he would have failed. He chose to sing, to pray, to tell stories, to listen, above all, to listen. And that is why he was so successful in reaching so deeply, so quickly, the far-flung Jewish communities, especially the small ones, to reawaken them, reinforce them, reintegrate them, in the body of the Jewish people and its memory.

Rabbi Nachman, too, in his way, followed in the footsteps of the Besht. As a matter of fact, he claimed kinship with the Besht even more than the Shpole Zeide, more than any of his contemporaries. The Besht was, after all, his great-grandfather. We know that from his childhood on, and certainly since his adolescence, he never made a decision without visiting the Besht's grave, [00:39:00] in Medzhybizh, so as to commune with him in his thoughts, and receive his advice. If he felt angry with his uncle, the great Rabbi Boruch, it was with regard to the Besht. Each one considered himself the only true and direct heir of the Besht.

But Rabbi Nachman contended that all practical necessities notwithstanding, it was a mistake to reduce the Beshtian revolution to simplistic formulas, to basic notions, and elementary gestures. He saw the work of the Besht as more profound, more complex than that. For him, it had intellectual



and mystical implications and applications. Was that elitist? So what? Where would Judaism be if not also for the elite? And the result was war, between a descendant of the Besht and a man without *yichus*, without rabbinical connections. Between a philosopher, and a man of action. [00:40:00] Between a thinker and a populist.

And the battle was waged with Biblical quotations, Talmudic aphorisms, Hasidic pronouncements. International conflict seemed petty by comparison. (laughter) In the Hasidic world, and especially in the towns *Shpola*, *Zlatipola*, or *Breslov*, people were interested, above all, in the most recent developments of the feud. Who had said what? To whom? In what tone? And what had been the reply?

Since the literature of *Breslov* is richer than that of the *Zeide*, the reader tends to get a one-sided picture. Often, it is the Hasid of *Breslov* who informs us -- who tells us what the *Zeide* and his disciple said about Rabbi *Nachman*. "But the young master had gone astray," they said. That he had swept his disciples along with him, they said. That they were drinking *slivovitz*, God forbid, (laughter) before morning prayers. [00:41:00] That they let themselves go in their joy and ecstasy

and came dangerously close to Sabbatean ideas and practices taken over by Franks, simply because they were joyful.

And Rabbi Nachman said, "They have erected a straw man in my image, and they attack him." Rabbi Nachman, incidentally, responded in kind. Passivity was not his way. He enjoyed fights, and at times, could be ferocious. His verbal attacks were sharp and biting. At one point, the Breslover Hasidim began seeing in the Zeide an incarnation of Satan's emissary. "An angry old man," quote unquote, appears in at least one of Rabbi Nachman's dreams, probably in three, trying to hurt him, and it is always the Zeide. In some of his stories, an old man is trying to hurt many people. It's the Zeide. "It happened," said Rabbi Nachman, "that Satan uses the services [00:42:00] of an alleged *tzaddik* to prevent the just from fulfilling their mission," and he meant, of course --

But from that moment on, all that the Shpole Zeide was doing was harmful, impure, and evil. Shpole was the *Sitra Achra*, *chas v'chalila*, the other side, the enemy. And said Rabbi Nachman -- and he said with a -- what we call in French a *jouer des mots*, he played with words. He said, "The Talmud advises us to jump into the lion's den in order to escape an enemy. But what does one do when the enemy is a Leib -- a lion?" Meaning, the Zeide.

Now, there was a great man who tried to make peace, and that was the Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, who is the most beautiful, the most charming, the most extraordinary master of his time. And he, who wanted to make peace between God and the Jewish people, tried a harder job: [00:43:00] to make peace between Jews and Jews. (laughter) He did his best to appease both camps. He was close to both masters, and yet, possibly because of his own temperament or because of his respect for the Besht, he manifested a more pronounced sympathy for the young rebel, Reb Nachman. It is said that in order to settle the matter at the highest level, he convened a gathering of the great leaders. If minutes were taken, they were not made available to chroniclers -- surely not to me.

All we know is that the debates were stormy. In spite of the Shpole Zeide's popularity, the Hasidic leaders presented all kinds of arguments, and they objected to his ways, to the Shpole Zeide's ways, of attacking Rabbi Nachman. In their eyes, Rabbi Nachman was the victim, and they all knew what that was like. They had been victimized often enough by their opponents.

[00:44:00] It was clear, therefore, that Rabbi Nachman suffered in Zlatipola, but he also suffered at Breslov, where he later moved. Geographical distances did not improve matters. The

harassments continued, and so did the war. It is said that during the summit meeting at Berditchev, someone proposed that the Zeide be excommunicated for having insulted the Besht's grandson, a Talmid Chacham, his scholar, in public.

And it seems that the majority could have been mustered in favor of such a resolution. I don't believe it. But we are told that the wife of Reb Levi Yitzchok objected. She urged her husband to reject such an attempt, which would give Berditchev a bad name. And the Hasidim of Breslov claimed that the Rebbetzin of Berditchev intervened for a different reason. She had received money from the Zeide. (laughter) [00:45:00] Not for herself, *chas v'chalila*, but for the village poor and for charity causes.

Still, the Zeide must have been in a rather difficult position, to have escaped a kind of *cherem* excommunication only thanks to the Rebbetzin, for it's proved that there was a consensus in favor of his enemy, who was persecuted. We know that the Zeide sent many messages to many rabbis, asking for their support. We have even some letters. But we also know that few of them responded favorably, and here again, I am convinced that Rabbi Nachman had the advantage of being considered the victim.

The Zeide, after all, ruled over a large territory, and he had been a leader for many more years, and he counted many rich people among his followers. Rabbi Nachman, the young man, on the other hand, first in Zlatipola, and later in Breslov, never had a moment's respite. The Zeide's followers never ceased [00:46:00] persecuting him and his disciples.

Well, we do love Rabbi Nachman, spellbinding storyteller. Impossible not to love a man who speaks to you of princes and fools, of beggars and sages, who live in faraway forests and listen to voices that hold a thousand secrets of creation. One of the reasons that made the Shpole Zeide oppose Rabbi Nachman was the stories -- that Rabbi Nachman's stories did not deal with Jewish stories, with Jewish people. They did not deal with *tzaddikim*, with just men, with rabbis. They dealt with anonymous people, with kings, with princesses. Very rarely do we find a Jew in his stories.

And that wasn't something that the Hasidic world accepted easily. A Hasidic rebbe should become someone who is dealing in literature? [00:47:00] Having said this, if we leave aside the context of Breslov, let's also say that I love the Zeide no less. After all, he, too, is endowed with admirable qualities as master and friend. He dares to do what other rabbis do not

allow themselves to do. Do you know what he did, mainly? He loved to play with children, and they were his great love. Now, how can you not love a rebbe or a person who loves children so much?

He seems a child among children when he is with them, so infectious is his joy. He makes people laugh. He loves to make children and their parents laugh. By the way, he talks and acts and performs. He arouses enthusiasm by the way he dances. He is the greatest dancer in Hasidic history. As Rabbi Boruch of Medzhybizh watched him dance, [00:48:00] he said, and I quote, "What you achieve by dancing, others do not attain by praying." And the Zeide's modest answer -- for once, he was modest. He said, "That is because I had an excellent teacher, *Eliyahu Hanavi* himself, the Prophet Elijah."

And he told a story from how he learned to dance from his days of exile. In a Russian village, the *poritz*, the landowner, forced a Jew to get inside a bearskin and dance with one of the notables, and the one who would be judged the better dancer would gain the right to whip the other. Of course, the Jew didn't know how to dance, while the notable did. And of course, the Prophet Elijah asked the Zeide to come to the Jew's rescue, by taking his place inside the bearskin. And when the Zeide

protested that he did not know how to dance, the Prophet said, "Don't worry, I will teach you." And the Zeide saved the Jew, whipped the notable, and was left with a passion for dancing.

[00:49:00]

It is said that people came from everywhere to see him dance. And that watching him, one felt impelled by an invisible force, and lifted all the way to heaven. But probably, he must have been envious of Rabbi Nachman, who told stories, because he, too, began telling stories. And I am convinced he told them mainly to show Rabbi Nachman that he was not the only one to kindle his followers' imagination. But there was a difference. Rabbi Nachman invented his stories, while the Zeide drew them from his own experiences, especially from the years of his exile, before his accession to the rabbinical throne of *Shpola*.

Every imaginable and unimaginable adventure had happened to him. He had been a member of a theatre troupe. He had been a member of itinerant actors. He was also in a circus. [00:50:00] Once, he performed in taverns, and he mixed with the variety of colorful people, including thieves. As a result, he himself ended up in prison once. A fellow traveler had stolen some silver, and hearing the police arrive, had handed the Zeide his bag for a moment, telling him that he had to follow a call of

nature. And the Zeide was arrested, beaten, imprisoned, and found himself in a cell with robbers and thieves who demanded, quote, "membership dues," to join their union. (laughter) And since he had no money, they beat him.

As he told the story, the Zeide smiled, and explained to his disciples that the ordeal had a purpose, for everything in life has a purpose. He said in jail, he had recognized among the thieves one who had been once a Jew. He had started talking to him, and persuaded him to return to his roots, to repent. Once, on the day of Purim, he danced with his Hasidim for hours.

[00:51:00] And then, noticing a certain Reb Zelig Potriachik of Kyiv, he called to him mockingly, "Well, Reb Zelig, did you happen to see Reb Nachman of Zlatipola recently? They say he tells great stories. Do you remember any?" "No, I don't remember," said Reb Zelig. "I only remember there was some story about a princess. That's all." "All right," said the Zeide, "if you donate a nice sum of money to my poor for *Pesach*, I will tell you a story which you will remember." And he told him a story, and this is it. Listen.

Once upon a time, there was a king who wanted a palace. And he wanted it to be the most beautiful palace in the world. To whom should he turn? To his Jewish Potriachik, of course.



Potriachik is a kind of man who does everything. After all, that's what the Jews are for. To get through the impossible. The Potriachik accepted the royal commission, [00:52:00] and left on a journey throughout the lands and capitals to look for the most magnificent wood, of the rarest kind, that's almost impossible to find, but he did find it. Jews find everything.

The king sent him a thousand workmen to help gather the wood, cut it, and build the royal palace. Then it was all done. It was indeed considered the most beautiful palace in the world. Every visitor who set eyes on it would stand there, open-mouthed. Overwhelmed with gratitude, the king appointed the Potriachik minister, or prime minister, in charge of the important affairs of the kingdom. And everybody was happy. Until the day when the king had a new fancy. He wished the windows to be of the same color as the wood.

Again, he called the Potriachik, who again set out on a search. Finally, he managed to find a Cossack, a glazier by trade, a true genius. Would he be able to satisfy the king's desire? No doubt. This Cossack could do anything with glass. He was as good as his word. [00:53:00] The palace got the special windows, the king radiated happiness, and he appointed the Cossack minister of the court. Only that, says the Shpole

Zeide, Cossack remains Cossack, and he became envious of the Jew, and denounced him to the king for some trumped-up crimes.

The Jew was arrested, brought to judgment, condemned to death, and all the time the king knew perfectly well that he was not guilty. But all the king could do was commute the sentence to life in prison, and exile him to Devil's Island. He also secretly gave him 10,000 rubles, as well as an axe, matches, candles, and a rifle. And he told him, "I know that you are innocent, and I know your innocence will help you escape." And there follows -- it's a long story -- follows an exact and detailed description of the island with its birds, its beasts, its trees, its skeletons, its climate, its sounds, everything. [00:54:00] And we are told that the Jew took heart again. He managed to make a fire on the island, to fish, and build a small boat, and one day, he cut open a fish and discovered inside a golden ring, which he recognized at once. It was the king's, and he remembered that one day when he had gone sailing, the king had lost his ring. It had fallen into the water, and was carried off by the waves.

And the Potriachik had an idea. And the Zeide described, again in every detail, the escape of the Jew. A romantic, adventurous story, for if the Cossack had remained Cossack, says the Zeide,

the Jew remained Jew. And after many dramatic adventures, the Potriachik's boat reached the river that flows through the capital in his kingdom. He went ashore, undressed, hid his clothes, and returned to the river completely naked. Later, when the king went for a walk along the riverbank, he noticed a naked man. [00:55:00] Believing that the man was about to drown, he sent one of his men to the rescue. How great was his surprise when he saw before him, his beloved Jew, the friend, the Potriachik, who proceeded to tell him his adventures.

Over there, he said, on Devil's Island, he had reached the end of his strength and had drowned. A giant fish had swallowed him. A fish so huge that he was able to walk about inside its belly for hours. Finally, the fish had spat him out before the king of the seas, the Leviathan. And the Potriachik said, "Majesty, the king of the seas is a great king, and his world is like paradise. In fact, I was unable to look the king in the eyes. They shine like the sun. He questioned me about my past, and I told him everything. My work for you, your generosity towards me. I also described him the way you live, and I told him of the beauty of your palace. [00:56:00] As soon as the Leviathan heard my report, he got excited. 'That's wonderful!' he cried out. 'I, too, have a palace like that, exactly like

that of your king. It's made of the same wood, and I must have the same windows. I must have them.'" (laughter)

"And so, the king of the seas entreated me to go and see you. Majesty, he asked me to come and to convey to you his request. He needs the Cossack." (laughter) "Send him the Cossack, and you will earn his everlasting gratitude, and you know, Majesty, he is a great king, the king of the sea. One day, you may need him. And by the way, in case you may doubt my words, the king of the sea gave me the ring that you lost. Remember you lost the ring that was lost in the sea? It was swallowed by one of his fish, and brought to him, [00:57:00] and the king now gave me the ring and now I am giving it to you."

The Potriachik handed the ring to the king, who had no choice. Between kings, there is solidarity. And he ordered the Cossack to be apprehended and be sent on a very special mission into the sea, to build the new palace for the king of the sea. And the Shpole Zeide ended the story, "And that's what happens to those who hate the Jews." (laughter) Because, he said, it was Purim, who was the Cossack? Haman. And the Potriachik? Mordecai, of course. And he ended something beautiful. He said, "When Mordecai remains Mordecai, everything is possible."

The Hasidim of *Shpola* must have liked this story. Other masters liked it, too. We are told that Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin enjoyed having it told to him, [00:58:00] especially on the night of Purim, and sometimes, also on Yom Kippur, on Day of Atonement. He believed that it contained profound and sacred meanings. Besides, in those days, when Jews had to endure so much cruelty, it was a pleasure to listen to a story in which the wicked were punished and the just rewarded. It was a relief to hear a story in which a Jew was reinstated to his rightful place and given back his rightful honors.

As for me, I admit it freely. Oh, I love the Shpole Zeide. But I prefer Rabbi Nachman's stories. I love his imagination, his warmth, where nobody dies, really. I love his way of leading us out of ourselves and again, back to ourselves, by a shortcut, a detour, a word that hides another -- a thousand others.

The Shpole Zeide is a great person. A great personality. He's different from his peers, and therefore, we cannot not admire him. [00:59:00] For instance, we know that many Hasidic masters, in order to please their followers, they flattered them. The Shpole Zeide was known for something else. He insulted his followers. But, his followers knew that on his lips, all the insults changed into blessings. His harshness hid

great tenderness, and that is why when Hasidim came to him, they would plead with him, "Insult us, offend us." (laughter) And the angrier he got, the luckier they felt. (laughter) And though I don't like insults, I like to imagine the Hasidim happy and blessed in *Shpola*.

Yes, he is a remarkable character. To be convinced, we only need to read again the Hasidic chronicle which tells us of something that other Hasidic masters have done, too, especially the Berditchever, meaning, [01:00:00] his suit against the Almighty God. For the love of Israel, he protested to the God of Israel. Like Levi Yitzchok. But before that, listen to another story.

One Passover eve, he exclaimed. He said, "Master of the universe, according to custom, we begin the Seder on Passover eve with the word *Kadesh*." That is, the child says, as soon as the family comes home from the synagogue, the father must immediately sit down at the table. Why such a hurry? So that the children should not fall asleep, since they must ask the Four Questions and hear the story of the Exodus. And what is the question? *Mah nishtanah, halailah hazeh?* What is this night different? "Well," said the Shpole Zeide, "master of the universe, we are Your children, and we are all tired. We are so

exhausted. Please, say *Kaddish* quickly. [01:01:00] Sanctify us with joy, make haste and deliver us from exile as long as we are still awake. Let us not fall asleep, for once we are sleeping, You will not want to come and deliver us."

And when they heard these words, we are told, the followers, the Hasidim, started to weep, and the Zeide stopped them. "No," he said, "brother Jews, no sadness tonight. Tonight we shall rejoice. Tonight we make our Father in heaven be part of our joy. Let us show Him that the child is capable of dancing in the dark."

One more interesting aspect about Shpole Zeide. Unlike most masters of his time, he did not become melancholy. Most of them, at one point, [01:02:00] had to fight despair, and some of them were vanquished by despair for a while. Even the Berditchever for one year, suffered, from -- call it depression or despair. Not the Shpole Zeide. Somehow, he managed to stay always joyful, or at least to impart joy on his Hasidim.

One day, he said, smiling, "Master of the universe, try to understand us. You have placed the *yeytser hore*, the bad impulse, the bad inclination, in the human heart, and good things in the book. No wonder we succumb to temptation. Had

You done the reverse, it would be so much easier." Naturally, as I said, he, too, when things were desperate, he felt the need and the right to plead for his people. [01:03:00] For our people. Even with God. And here is an eyewitness report that I found, written by his *shamash*, by his beadle, a certain Reb Isaac Spira. And I quote now the whole story.

It happened in the third year of the Zeide's stay in *Shpola*. I, Isaac, was his servant. A terrible famine reigned in the land. The Jews suffered more than the rest of the population, since the Jews were poorer. And the Zeide was unhappy, deeply hurt. He held himself responsible for the starving Jews. And his inability to help them prevented him from sleeping, from eating, from studying. He no longer ate anything, except a bit of bread with his tea, so as to make a *bracha*. [01:04:00]

Among the thousands of letters sent to him from all over, there were some written by great Hasidic masters, who begged him to use his powers. To change the heavenly decrees, and their heavy curses. So the Zeide wrote to ten great men, and invited them to join him as soon as possible. They were: Reb Zusya of Hanipol, Reb Leib Mohiach the preacher of Polna, Reb Leib Kohen of Berditchev, Reb Yisrael and Reb Azriel, both of Politzkin, Reb Yaakov Shimshon of Shepetovka, Reb Velvela of Zhytomyr, Reb



Gedalia of Lunitz, Reb Mordechai of Neshchitz, and Reb Noteh of Razdal, and they all came.

And the Zeide bade them sit down around the large table and said, "I want you to know that I intend to bring suit against [01:05:00] the Almighty God, blessed be He. I want you to be the tribunal." And then, they all started to pray and to weep. It was heartbreaking. After the service, the Zeide ordered me to read the customary proclamation to the effect that the court would be in session and for what reason. In the name and upon the order of the holy community gathered here, I declare that Rabbi Leib, son of Rachel, is bringing suit against the Blessed Name before this tribunal, seeking judgment according to the law of the Torah. The tribunal will be in session three days from this date, in this very hall.

Isolated from the rest of the world, the 11 rabbis spent the next three days and three nights in prayer, shivering and preparing themselves. I alone was allowed to enter and [01:06:00] see whether they needed anything. But as soon as I crossed the threshold, an unknown anguish took hold of me, so powerful I could not breathe. On the fourth day, the ten judges took their places around the table, wrapped in their *tallit* and *tefillin*. The Zeide ordered me to proclaim that the tribunal

was in session. I stayed close to the door, so as to be able to bring a book in case one of the rabbis should wish to consult it.

I heard the Zeide begin the indictment. "In the name of all the feeble women, and all the starving children, I lodge a complaint against Him, our Creator, who could and should feed them and help them, but does not. He who gave us the Torah is obliged to respect its law, and the law enjoins the master to take care of His servants, just as a father must watch over the welfare of his children." [01:07:00]

And the Zeide quoted sources and legal opinions to support his charge. And he spoke for a long time, raising and lowering his voice whenever necessary. He was covered with sweat. His eyes were burning, and his body was trembling, and I don't know how long he spoke. I know only that the ten judges listened to him with all their being. Then, they exchanged some words. I was unable to hear anything, and neither could the Zeide, since he, as the plaintiff, had to stay away during the tribunal's deliberations.

And then came the moment when the ten judges cried out, as with a single voice, "The *Bet Din*, the tribunal sides with Reb Leib,

son of Rachel, and we decree that it behooves God, blessed be He, to feed the children and their mothers. Such is the opinion of this earthly tribunal, [01:08:00] and we appeal to the heavenly tribunal to endorse it." And all this was repeated three times. And then, the Zeide ordered me to go and bring schnapps and honey cake. And they said *l'chaim*, and their faces shone with a light I had never seen on them before.

And the famine was over shortly thereafter.

Another story. One Rosh Hashanah day, the Zeide received a visit of four great masters: the preacher, Reb Leib of Polna, Reb Leib Kohen of Berditchev, Reb Zusya of Hanipol, and Reb Mordechai of Nishchit. And after the meal, they remained alone. They talked of the Messiah, who was not coming, and how the plight of the Jews was worsening from year to year.

At a certain moment, the gentle Reb Zusya [01:09:00] turned to Reb Leib of Polna, who was a famous preacher, and said, quietly, "Reb Leib, if the Messiah is late in coming, it's your fault, rather than ours, for you do not do enough to lead our people to repentance." But without giving the preacher time to answer, the Zeide got up and said, "*Ribono shel olam*, Master of the universe, I swear to You by everything I hold sacred that You

will not succeed in returning Your people to the path of righteousness by punishing them, by persecuting them, by tormenting them. And You who know everything, You know this too, and therefore I beg of You, try something else. Try to reclaim them gently, by happiness and joy."

And later the same day, he commented as if to himself, "I have seen what our great ones had to say about the mystery of the coming of the Messiah. Some said this, the others wrote that. [01:10:00] I have no doubt that they were entitled to say whatever they said. As for me," he said, and this is extraordinary, "I can reveal only one thing: the palace of the Messiah is under lock and key. The lock is huge and terrifying. But in the year 1840, the propitious hour will come to open the gate, and there will be no one to open it."

In conclusion, I love the grandfather of *Shpola*, the Zeide of *Shpola* for his wisdom. I love him for his ability to love the people of Israel. I love him for his daring. I love him for his affection for human beings, which he linked to his affection for God. And I love him also for his prophetic melancholy.

[01:11:00] But I don't understand it. Why did he indicate the year 1840? Why not 1940? Has he made a mistake in a hundred years? Has the chronicler made a mistake in a hundred years?

Why did he say that the palace of the Messiah would remain closed because there would be no one to open the gates? I don't know why. I only know that we must do as he did.

We must live in expectation, and make of our waiting a way of life, of hope, of creativity. And that we must keep repeating to ourselves, every day, the *Ani Ma'amin, Ani Ma'amin, b'emunah shelemah*. Every day, we must repeat it, even if the Messiah is late, he will surely come in the end. [01:12:00] One day, one day, he will come. (applause)

**M:**

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