

Elie Wiesel In Hasidism: The Relevance of Hasidism Today

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) In a way, one might say that Hasidism is in fact, a celebration of human presence and Jewish memory. The rebbe and his Hasid are present to one another, remember one another, and together, they remember God, who in heaven, looks upon their togetherness with a smile.

A story. A Hasid came to the Rizhiner rebbe, in Sadigur, and asked for his blessing. "I am going to Vienna," he said. "Pray for me, rebbe. Pray that I succeed in business." "I will pray for you," said the rebbe. "Vienna is a city filled with danger and beauty. [00:01:00] It's easy to go astray. By the way, since you are going there, could you do me a favor? Could you buy me a pipe? I hear that the Viennese pipes are special." "Naturally," exclaimed the Hasid. "I'll buy you the best, the most elegant pipe I find. I promise you, rebbe." And the Hasid left Sadigur.

When he returned, he remembered all of a sudden, with shock and disbelief, the rebbe's request and his own promise. He had been so busy in Vienna, that he forgot the pipe. "Well," he thought

to himself, "I'll buy the rebbe another pipe. After all, here in Sadigur, we have shops, and they sell expensive pipes. I'll buy him the most expensive one, and that will do it."

[00:02:00] He did. But the Rizhiner did know the difference.

"How silly of you," he told his Hasid. "You think I need pipes? I have more than enough. But I wanted you, in Vienna, to think of me. I knew how busy you would be there, running around from office to office, from businessman to businessman, from bank to bank. So I thought, it wouldn't be bad for you to remember that you have a rebbe in Sadigur. And this, you have forgotten."

Hasidism means remembering, but then, everything else in the Jewish tradition means precisely that. What are the *mitzvot*, the commandments, if not ways to remember that they were given at Sinai? What is a commitment to study, if not to remember [00:03:00] those who were our teachers? As everything else, Hasidism is offered to us as a vehicle, and it is up to us to use it the proper way. As tonight, we are going to have what I think will be the last Hasidic encounter in our series, perhaps we should try to recapitulate past lessons, and at the same time, visit one or more masters we have not met yet.

For instance, we are going to meet tonight, in the beginning and at the end, Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac of Kalev, the Kalev rebbe. He

was as celebrated as others, if not more so, and yet, when we evoke the Hasidic kingdom, we mention the *tzaddikim* of Galicia, the Ukraine, Lithuania, and White Russia, but not of Hungary. So, Hungarian Jews such as myself may say, [00:04:00] why not? Why was the Hungarian Jewish community relatively so poor in Hasidic masters? Compared to Galicia and the Ukraine, White Russia and Poland, Hungary numbered very few indeed. The fact is that among all the disciples of the Besht, among all the disciples and the pupils of the Maggid of Mezeritch, there wasn't a single Hungarian.

Why? What's the reason for that? Is it purely demographical? There were less Jews in Hungary. Since when do numbers play a role in the pursuit of spirituality? We know that the Besht himself would go out of his way to go to a community, even small, to go to a family, to go to a person in need. [00:05:00] So why did he neglect Hungary? One of the reasons may be linked to Hungarian Jewry's general situation in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when Joseph II, an enlightened monarch, issued a variety of decrees, all favorable to his Jews, hoping perhaps to hasten the process of their assimilation, and even conversion.

The Jews were allowed to dwell in large cities, discard their traditional garments, and enroll in universities. These measures were publicized in the 1780s, but then the question is, what about the preceding years? If Joseph II was so praised for his pro-Jewish and pro-minority attitude, doesn't that mean that before him, the state policy was anything but pro-Jewish? And that Jews in Hungary, like everywhere else, did suffer? And did need comforting? [00:06:00] Where, then, were the Hasidic emissaries? Were they too busy elsewhere?

In fact, Hungarian Jews needed consolation. Even under the kind and benevolent Joseph II, they dwelled in fear of losing their Jewishness. Hadn't the king ordered them to shave their beards, cut off their *payot*, and throw away their *tzitzit*? Hadn't he decreed in 1787 that all Jews in his kingdom must adopt German family names? They endured physical hardships after the 1780s, as well. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the poor Jews of Újhely, those who could not present proof of earning a livelihood, were ordered by royal decrees to be deported to their former lands of origin.

Subsequently, [00:07:00] there were Hasidic dynasties in Hungary. We had Hasidim in Munkatsh, and in Sighet, Satmar, and Vizhnitz. But then, the geography becomes a problem. Wasn't

Munkatsh Czechoslovakia yesterday? Isn't it in Subcarpathian Ukraine? Weren't Vizhnitz and Satmar in Romania? Geographical confusion has always been one of the characteristics of Hasidism. One thing does remain certain: Újhely and Kalev were part of Hungary. And their fame came, and still comes, from Hasidim who still visit there, the graves of their masters, both in Újhely and Kalev.

We are told that many Gentiles do the same. They come to the Kalev Rebbe's grave asking him to intercede for them in heaven. A miracle-maker, the Kalever Rebbe? No. He was, instead, [00:08:00] a singer of sweet songs, filled with melancholy love for God and redemption. And the songs were so beautiful, and still are, that if time permits, we should -- Yossi and Yitzchak -- I may even sing one to you.

He used to sing songs in Yiddish, songs about the forest symbolizing exile, *Vald, Vald, wie tief bist du, Shekhina, Shekhina, wie weit bist du* (Yiddish). Forest, forest, how deep you are, *Shekhina, Shekhina*, how far you are. Had the forest not been so deep, the *Shekhina* wouldn't be so far. But then, we know that his songs are here, and songs are never far. Songs transcend time and space. Nothing can block a Jewish song.

[00:09:00] The song is always a key that opens any door,
including ours. (laughter) (pause)

Nu? (pause) And since tonight is a special night, because it
brings back memories of the last 25 years, perhaps this is the
time to acknowledge what I owe the Hasidic masters of whom we
have talked here. I would not be the person I am, the Jew I am,
[00:10:00] the writer I am, had I not been so deeply imbued with
their teaching. They penetrated not only my study, but also my
work and my life. But at times, it took me years before I
realized how much I have taken from them without knowing it.

Let us listen and tell, or retell, a few of the favorite
stories. First, Rabbi Nachman. Why? Because we should know --
I hope you do -- that since I began writing, I was haunted by
three themes. Three mysteries. Faith, protest, and silence.
All surrounded [00:11:00] by a kind of religious imagination,
and all penetrated by a thirst for understanding what cannot be
explained. Each of my characters feels the need, the urge, to
protest against man and his Creator, and does so sometimes with
words, and sometimes with silence. Sometimes by shouting his
faith, and something by renouncing it in the name of madness,
anger, and despair.

In one of my novels -- one of my favorite ones -- I describe a young man called *Michael* or Michael, who has been arrested behind the Iron Curtain, and was tortured [00:12:00] so as to make him confess not only his own misdeeds, but also his association with a friend of his, an accomplice called Pedro. Michael, or *Michael*, withstands all the torture, and then the torturers, the tormentors, had an idea. They put him a cell, together with other madmen. All of them were mad. And my hero understood that if this continues, he, too, will become mad, because madness, like everything else, can be contagious. And therefore, at one point, late, very late, but not too late, he understood that the only way for him [00:13:00] to save himself from insanity is to cure them from their madness.

I didn't know it then, but I took it from Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. The Hasidic masters we shall evoke again tonight -- each in his own way personifies one of these themes, if not all of them. With Rabbi Nachman, faith became a measure of his extraordinary imagination. With Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk, silence became a result of anguish, and its victory over faith. With Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, protest attained the dimension of worship.

Of course, I am not the only Jewish novelist, or non-Jewish novelist, who was influenced [00:14:00] by these masters. Far from it. Kafka would be the perfect example. Rabbi Nachman's imprint on him is more than casual, more than striking, and I have said it more than once, that had it not been Kafka, who was a genius, a seminal figure in literature, he could have been accused of plagiarism, because some of the stories that he told had been told already by Rabbi Nachman. And we know that he knew Rabbi Nachman.

Listen to my favorite Rabbi Nachman story. One day, the king sent for his advisor and said to him, "I have seen misfortune in the stars. All those who shall eat of this season's harvest shall be struck with madness. What shall we do, friend?" "Oh, it's very simple," said the advisor. "There are still, stored away, reserves from last year's harvest, enough for both of us." "And the others?" [00:15:00] asked the king. "What about the other subjects? The beggars and the fools, the saints, the merchants, the innocent dreamers, and the dreamers of innocence. What shall become of them?" "Majesty," said the advisor, "you are the king. You decide." And the king decided.

"I do not want us to remain the only sane men in a world gone mad," said he. "In a world gone mad, there is nothing men can

do except enter madness, like everyone else. With everyone else. Still," said the king, "I should like to preserve the present within the future. It would please me to know, friend, that when the time comes, we -- you and I -- or I and thou -- shall be conscious of our madness. Let us, therefore, mark each other's forehead with a sign of madness, and each time I shall look at you, each time you will look at me, we shall both know that we are mad." [00:16:00]

This story has a Zen Buddhist flavor, and I must tell you, the fact that an hour ago I saw the Dalai Lama (laughs) brings me back the story with a special tone. But the tale is not Oriental. It is Rabbi Nachman's. Because he, in his extraordinary tales, always spoke about kings and princes. It's hard to find a Jew in his tales. Maybe that is why he was opposed by the *Shpoler Zeide*, one of the very great masters of Hasidism. Because he, in his way, spoke about the universal condition from within the Jewishness, and he did so with a brio, with a mastery, unequal to this day.

You know, Jean Cocteau, the French surrealist writer, was asked once, "If your house were on fire, [00:17:00] what would you take out first?" And he said, "The fire, naturally."

(laughter) If the house were on fire, what would I take out? I

surely would take out Rabbi Nachman's stories, to save them, because they saved me.

There is one more story. The same, but with a different ending. The same story of Rabbi Nachman is told, that he said then to his friend, "Look. When the time comes, and the harvest will be cursed, and everyone eating from it will go mad, you and you alone will have the right and the duty to eat from the good, uncontaminated harvest, and you alone will be sane in a society gone mad, but then, your duty will be, then, [00:18:00] to go from city to city of my kingdom, from village to village, from house to house, and shout, 'Men and women, remember that you are mad.'" "

I like this story, too, because it gives me, I feel, the image of the Jewish people. That we have been in history for so long, and perhaps our task has been, at times of crisis and trials, to tell the world, "Look. You are mad."__We have to say that. "You are mad, what you are doing." Too much hatred in the world. Too much violence. Too much fear -- of each other. Too much fanaticism everywhere. It's mad to be a fanatic. It's mad to hate. It's mad to destroy the other, thinking that when the other goes, you remain unscathed. When the other goes, [00:19:00] something of you goes with the other.

Now, I believe that Rabbi Nachman, therefore, has taught us many lessons. Lessons how to live in society. Not to be afraid of being alone. After all, if I don't agree with the way things are, I would betray myself if I didn't say so. Rabbi Yisroel Salanter used to say, "Why are the *Aseret Hadibrot*, the Ten Words, or the Ten Commandments, given in the singular? *Lo ta'aseh l'cha pesel, lo tignov* - Thou shall not steal, thou shall not make an idol. Why in the singular?" And the answer is, he quoted, I think, Maimonides, but paraphrased it. "That when the time will come, [00:20:00] and the whole world will become pagan again, and you alone will be alone to believe in me, don't worry. You believe. You remain ethical, or at least, you try to remain ethical." Solitude, therefore, is not a curse. Solitude can be a source of inspiration, because solitude in itself can become a challenge, if not a defiance.

At one point, I learned something else from Rabbi Nachman. I learned from him psychology. The story is -- surely you remember -- that a prince lost his mind, as always in Rabbi Nachman -- they always -- somebody lost his mind. (laughter) And the king was desperate, because this prince thought that he was a rooster. [00:21:00] And he behaved like a rooster. He didn't want to sit with his father, he offended the guests

because he was naked everywhere, went around naked. And, well, he didn't harass anyone sexually, but -- (laughter) but it wasn't nice. (laughter)

I must tell you something, in parentheses, without any reference. I am sure that you, too, watched last week, the same dialogue. (laughter) Watch too much, you know. I resented something there which hurt me personally. The two titles, two words, that are so important to me or to of all of you, somehow were devalued. It was "Judge, why should we believe you? Professor, are you lying?" Professor and judge are extraordinarily beautiful titles, and all of a sudden they were nothing. A judge and a professor. [00:22:00] And they came back, they gave the titles, all the time -- they didn't say "Mr. Thomas" or "Ms. Hill." Professor Hill. Judge Thomas. Not good.

Now, the son of the king, therefore, thought he was a rooster. And he brought -- the king brought people from all over the world. Doctors and physicians and psychiatrists. Couldn't do anything. Finally, a wise man came. Wise man says, "King, majesty, let me try." "Try." What the wise man did -- he undressed -- also naked -- joined the prince under the table, and he said, "Hi." (laughter) And the prince said, "Who are

you?" "What do you mean, who I am?" said the prince. "Who are you?" "Don't you see?" said the prince. "I'm a rooster."
"Really? How strange," said the wise man. "So am I."
(laughter) "You are a rooster?" "Yes." "Great, let's be friends." They were friends.

And for a week or two, [00:23:00] or a month, they ate the same way, they spoke and they exchanged ideas, and memories, and ambitions, like two good roosters do. (laughter) Then at one point, the wise man said, "You know, my dear friend, you know, look. Why don't we get dressed?" "What? To get dressed? Are you crazy? We are roosters." He said, "Really. You can be a rooster and still get dressed. Rooster is something -- it's a condition, an existential condition. It's a philosophy. It's not only dress." They got dressed.

Then he said, "You know, really, why should we eat under the table? You can eat very well at the table." "Are you crazy? But we are roosters." "Naturally, you are a rooster, but you know, it doesn't mean you have to be under the table. Rooster is a universal concept, you know." (laughter) "You can eat at the table and still be a rooster." And so finally, he brought him back to normalcy. Now, the prince probably still thought he was a rooster, but a civilized one. [00:24:00] (laughter)

Now, I always compare this to Kafka's story. Kafka, the disciple, *The Metamorphosis*, when Gregor Samsa became a cockroach. And the difference between Kafka, really, and Rabbi Nachman, is that in Kafka, there is no hope. It is total despair. The last image -- with a broom, he was thrown out, ejected from the room. In Rabbi Nachman, this is impossible. There is always hope, because somewhere, there is always a wise man, who, if he doesn't know what to do for himself, he knows what to do with someone else.

So you see, I have learned from him quite a lot. Even when it comes to faith, [00:25:00] his imagination has enriched it immeasurably. Listen to one more story. Once upon a time, Rabbi Nachman tells us, a prince -- again, a prince -- was forced to leave his father's palace. Months went by, then years. Sick with nostalgia, he was unable to accept exile, which became harder and harder to bear. Then, the prince received a letter from his father. It reminded him of their separation. So he cried. He would have given anything to be able to put his arms around his father, or at least to be able to touch a corner of his royal tunic. Then, he stopped crying, and thought, "Why despair, since I am holding his letter in my

hands? And the king's handwriting being the king's will, therefore, is the king."

And so he began to kiss the letter, for it was proof that his father was alive, and so was his love for him. It was proof that just as the letter was a letter, [00:26:00] the king was king. And of course, you can always understand the metaphor -- the letter is the Torah, and the king is the King of Kings. What does Rabbi Nachman tell us? As long as the son knows how to read the letter, hope is possible. If the son forgets, then despair sets in. The image that Rabbi Nachman gives us always is, the son who wanders in the forest, and his father is calling him. As long as he hears his father's voice, he is bound to his father. But if he goes too far, and he doesn't hear anymore, then he's lost.

Now, you see that the elements of Hasidism, therefore, [00:27:00] had a profound influence on my work, but also on so many others. I believe, except for many Yiddish writers, like Peretz and of course, Opatoshu, almost his father, or Aaron Zeitlin -- and for some others like Isaac Babel, and Buber -- Buber wrote a very great novel, Gog and Magog, or in English it's called For the Sake of Heaven -- the modern novelist would like to use Hasidic themes or types. But unfortunately, because

of ignorance, in many cases, they come out as clichés. In a way, I would say only a Hasid should or could write, truly, about the Hasidic experience. How can one write about the *Baal Shem Tov* without knowing what the *Baal Shem Tov* [00:28:00] has taught his disciples?

How can one write about the *Baal Shem Tov* if one doesn't know the *Shivhei Ha-Besht*? If one doesn't know the *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*? That means, all these texts that exist and that have captured the beauty, the ecstasy, the fervor, the depth, of the Hasidic experience. The great writers of these days, Sartre and Camus, Steinbeck and Faulkner, or even Joyce and Bellow, claim kinship with other sources of inspiration. Their masters are not the Maggid of Mezeritch, or the Seer of Lublin.

Yet, as a whole, Hasidism seems lately to be increasingly popular. In every circle. And in philosophy classes as well. Why? Because of the social reform, or the return to mystical simplicity it advocates? Perhaps. [00:29:00] Perhaps also because it was meant to be both a rebellion against established order, or the establishment, and a synthesis within the Jewish community. And like then, in the eighteenth century, we tried to achieve synthesis today. Through rebellion, or change, or search for something else.

Also, the conditions that gave birth to Hasidism prevail in our generation again. What was Hasidism at its origin? A protest against fear. Against despair. A protest against the unknown. And today, fear exists. Call it racial intolerance that produces fear in our own city, and everywhere. Antisemitism -- where isn't it? Imagine that today, [00:30:00] we still have to fight antisemitism. In Poland, and in Hungary, and in Lithuania. And where not? Even in Japan. That means that there is something that we need to do, or to receive, to hear or to say, in order to live as Jews and understand the events that are here, to break out or to envelop us.

To Hasidism, the most important element, or one of the most important elements, is *kavanah*, meaning, a kind of sincerity. Sincerity is as important as knowledge. And perhaps more. Characteristically, the *Baal Shem Tov* was neither rabbi nor descendant of rabbis. He was a simple man, [00:31:00] of simple condition, to whom God was to be found not in books, but in man. To the *Baal Shem Tov*, God is not neutral, nor is He an abstraction. He's both man's judge and partner in creation, responsible for one another. And they -- meaning God and man -- are linked by love, which is the central theme in Hasidism. *Rachmana Liba Bai*, even God needs a heart.

A heart, meaning man's heart. God needs love. Man's love. Human love. So that the love of God is linked to the love of man. What man does to himself and to his fellow man, God does to him. It is written that God is man's shadow, and the *Baal Shem Tov's* comment reads as follows, "Just as the shadow imitates the human beings, so does God. For what is above is also below. [00:32:00] Let man fulfill his destiny, and creation as a whole will be improved, and only man can improve it." So, the *Baal Shem Tov's* Hasidism, in a world of inhumanity, puts the accent on man again, on the human being. And therefore, the *Baal Shem Tov* went on, saying, "Man cannot help others through self-denial, or self-effacement. He who says that man is to be sacrificed to God ends up in sacrificing both."

What the *Baal Shem Tov* wanted, and what his disciples wanted, was to create links between man and God, and man and man, and man and himself. Human beings among themselves. There was so much solitude threatening the Jew from within and from without, that something had to be discovered to diminish it, or at least, counterbalance it. Just like today. Hasidism, therefore, [00:33:00] when you think about it, was a remedy against solitude.

The *Baal Shem Tov* saw it as his task to bring people together. All people, not only Jews. He never advocated [proservatism?] among non-Jews. Among Jews, yes. What he wanted was to make Jews better Jews. And men, therefore, better men. And he abolished the frontiers among them. To him, a Jew who loved Jews also loved other people, and loved God. A Jew who rejected Jews ultimately had to reject God, and reject other people as well. For each human being represents more than himself. His or her fears and hopes are not theirs alone. If it is true -- and it is true -- [00:34:00] that with one hand before one's eyes, as the *Baal Shem Tov* used to say, one can hide the light of the world, and its breathtaking mystery, it is also true that it is up to the human being to remove that hand from one's eyes, and this is precisely what Hasidism has done. It removed the hand from our eyes.

And therefore, more than ever before, Hasidism has created a new environment. It helped us change -- if not the atmosphere, it changed our perception of the atmosphere. There are contradictions everywhere we turn, so what? Hasidism is not afraid of contradictions, but teaches us instead how to live with them. Hasidism says, one must find humility within pride, song within silence, [00:35:00] promise within punishment,

Ahavat Hashem within *Yirat Hashem*. In other words, one has no choice but impose a meaning on what has no meaning. One must create joy out of muted remorse.

But Hasidism in the beginning really appealed to the poor. It sought to elevate the poorest among the poor, even the unlearned, those who considered themselves and were considered by others as marginal Jews. Jews of no importance, either to God or to the people of Israel. Coachmen and cobblers, poor merchants, woodchoppers and peasants, innkeepers and peddlers. All those who due to objective circumstances were unable to devote time to study and meditation, received from the Beshtian movement [00:36:00] a sense of dignity and purpose. They were told that in the eyes of God, every individual matters. It is given to anyone to save lives, just as it is given to anyone to destroy them.

How did Rabbi Aaron of Karlin put it? "When Jews meet, they should study Zohar, the mystical book of splendor. If they cannot, let them learn Talmud. If they cannot, let them open the Bible. If they cannot, let them pray. If they cannot, let them love one another." There is always something to do, something one can do, for his or her fellow human being, and therefore, for God. That is why Hasidism placed such emphasis

on prayer. If there is inequality in piety -- somebody's always more pious than I -- [00:37:00] or in learning -- somebody's more learned than I -- there is none in prayer. Prayer is the true equalizer. A shepherd boy's song is heard in heaven no less than the sage's innovation.

And so we go, therefore, to the element of simplicity in Hasidism. The importance of simple gestures, of simple words, of simple incantations. All this was illustrated by the Besht in a very beautiful story. The story of two neighbors. One was a great scholar, and the other a poor blacksmith. And so in the early morning hours, the first rose to go to the house of study, and he was so happy that he was going to study, and to pray, and to please God, whereas the other was going to his workshop, always sad that he cannot [00:38:00] go to the synagogue, to the house of study, he had to go and work. And once they crossed one another in the street. The learned man looked at the blacksmith with a sneer of disdain, whereas the blacksmith looked at the scholar with a sigh of sadness.

The scholar said to himself, "Thank God for His gifts that make me so happy. Look. Look at the difference between the two of us. I rise early, he rises early. I am going to study, but he is going to do manual work." The blacksmith would say to

himself, "Woe unto me. He rises early, I rise early. But he is going to serve God, and I, what am I doing with my life?" Years and years passed. Both men died, and appeared before the celestial tribunal. The learned man presented his case.

[00:39:00] "I spent my entire life learning," he said, "praying, teaching." Naturally, his deeds were put on the heavenly scale. It was clear. He would go to paradise, and join all the sages, and the teachers, and the prophets. But then, at the very last minute, a prosecuting angel appeared with some incriminating material. (laughter) He brought a sneer of disdain. And it, too, was placed on the other side of the scale. And this little sneer outweighed his good deeds.

As for the poor blacksmith, his case was presented, naturally, by the prosecuting attorney, the chief prosecuting attorney. "This man didn't pray enough, didn't study enough, never had time for God, only for his work. [00:40:00] Too busy. No time for Torah. No time for prayer." It was clear that the blacksmith's soul would be sent to hell. But then, at the last minute, an angel for the defense came, running with a piece of newly discovered evidence in his hand: a sigh. A sigh of sadness. And envy, for not having had the opportunity to study and pray. And this sigh, too, was put on the other side of the balance. And it outweighed everything else.

In this story, you have the beauty and above all, the humanity, the compassion of the Hasidic story, the Hasidic tale, and the Hasidic universe. So I learned from it. [00:41:00] And therefore, there is always a Hasidic story in my stories, in my novels, and there is always a small gesture that determines the fate of the story itself. I am still waiting for some critic to find in every novel, this small gesture. But you know.

There is one more master who has influenced me, has impacted me, and this man actually illustrated solitude and anger. He's the Rebbe of Kotzk. The great Rebbe of Kotzk, the Mendel Kotzker. Abraham Joshua Heschel used to call him the Kierkegaard of Hasidism. Always angry, always on the edge of despair, but always searching for absolute truth. He was, really, the most tragic and eccentric figure in Hasidism. [00:42:00] The last 20 years of his life were spent in complete retirement, in solitude.

If Rabbi Nachman symbolizes imagination and its outer limits, Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk personifies fear and trembling. Hence, his claim to be our contemporary. He is. Students and teachers in existential philosophy everywhere would identify with him, more than with many others in Hasidism. For Auschwitz as past,

and Hiroshima as future, our generation cannot but feel close to the Kotzker Rebbe, whose quest for ultimate truth, for authenticity, both in memory and in hope, made him discover fire behind every word, flames beneath every shadow.

There are so many numerous legends, and some of them were told here. All bear his imprint. [00:43:00] Of the more than thousand Hasidic masters that lived and worked and died in Europe, he was the most original. He transcended his own tale. The more one talks about him, the more his mystery grows. Alive, people feared his look. Even now, among Hasidim, his tales are being repeated only in whisper. One day, he appeared in the *Beit HaMidrash*, where for years his disciples were studying, or praying, or meditating in silence, sacred or forlorn, he shook his head and said to his faithful friend and confidante, Reb Hersh Tomashover, "Look at them, Hersh, look at them, and look at me. Had I been younger, they would not have dared coming so close, so many." And he returned to his hideout.

Why was he running away from people who believed in him, who loved him, who feared him, who admired him? Who saw in him their leader, their guide? [00:44:00] Against whom was his rebellion directed? Did he or didn't he commit something

blasphemous, one Shabbat evening? Did he? No. Saint and cursed poet, he touched fire, and whatever he touched turned into fire. We are told that his books -- because he had written books -- like his master, the Jew of Peshischa, were written and burned.

There are so many tales, not by him, but about him, and all are disturbing and personal. He would be, really, a very great hero for a novel, and then, I repeat, Opatoshu wrote about him, *The Poilische Velder*, the forest of Poland. Kotzk meant a Kotzker *derech*, a Kotzker way. So different. [00:45:00] It explored the beyond, always, where being and nothingness meet and destroy each other, rather than complete each other. "I stand," he said, "with one leg in the seventh heaven and the other in the precipice. Up or down? Don't stay motionless."

Kotzk meant a renaissance in Hasidism. A continuous upsurge of something new, a quest for something new, whatever existed had to be changed, had to be reevaluated in the light of new ideas, new words. And the Kotzker, therefore -- when I speak of anguish, it is always the Kotzker who comes to mind, because he was the source of anguish to his generation. He loved isolation. He loved his anguish, [00:46:00] because he loved truth more than anything else. Kotzk means truth, quest for

truth, and since truth cannot be obtained, not easily, that he was so unhappy. He loved silence as well. He used to say, and he and his disciples used to say, "The silence screams the loudest." He used to say, "Some experiences can be communicated with words, others with silence. Still others, even not by silence."

Once, his friend, Reb Itzik of Warka, came to visit him. The Kotzker didn't respond to his greetings. And when the visitor repeated his blessing, "*Shalom Aleichem*, peace unto you, rebbe," the Kotzker shouted, "Don't call me rebbe! Don't you see what I am? Don't you see I am not a rebbe?" "Who are you?"

[00:47:00] "I am the holy goat, the heilige tsig, the holy goat. Open your eyes and ears and listen," he said. "Once upon a time, there was a holy goat roaming around the world, waiting for midnight. For at midnight, its horns stretched out and touched the sky and moved the stars to sing. Once, the goat saw a poor Jew in tears. 'Why do you cry?' 'Because I lost my snuff box.' Overtaken by compassion, the goat said, 'Do you have a knife? Cut a piece of one of my horns, and you'll have a snuff box.'

The Jew obeyed, and overnight, became an object of envy. People in the synagogue, and the marketplace, from all over town,

people whom he had never seen, never liked, who didn't like him, now swarmed around him, and all wanted to smell his tobacco, the best, the purest and finest and cheapest in the world.

[00:48:00] Whoever felt it knew that it came from paradise.

Eventually, people inquired, 'Where did you get such exquisite tobacco?' He answered, 'It's not the tobacco, it's the box.'

'And where did you get the box? Did you buy it?' 'No.' 'How much does it cost?' 'I don't know.' 'But where did you get it?' He told them. 'From the holy goat.'

So immediately, all took their knives and ran to the woods, to the holy goat, cutting pieces from its horns, until the holy goat remained with none. And so, at midnight, it could no longer touch the sky. No longer awaken the stars to sing. All the goat was left with was nostalgia, and a sense of unredeemed loss."

After the Kotzker, we must speak about Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, [00:49:00] one of my favorite masters. One of the greatest. His love for his people was such that he dared, he dared to challenge the Master of the Universe on behalf of his people. And the way he did it, always during the holiest of days, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Once, he stopped the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, and he spoke to God, he

said, "*Ribono shel olam*, Master of the Universe, why do You do all that to Your people, to Your people? Why do You allow the people to suffer? Why do You prefer other people? You prefer Ivan." And he said, in Yiddish, *zol Ivan bloizen shofar* (Yiddish). "Let Ivan blow the shofar. I won't." And he refused to blow shofar. Until he pleaded with Him again, with God, and he said, "If You want shofar, okay, [00:50:00] I'll give it to You, on credit." (laughter)

Again, the stories of the Berditchever rejoice and elevate at the same time. Surely you remember his "(Yiddish), a guten morgen zu Dir, *Ribano shel Olam*, good morning to You, Master of the Universe. (Yiddish), *ich, Levi Yitzchok ben Sarah fun Berdichev I, Levi Yitzchok, son of Sarah of Berditchev.*

(Yiddish), *ich bin gekommen zu Dir mit a din Torah, Ribono shel Olam, I came to You to sue You, ribono shel olam.*" Who would dare to say that? Was it Camus who asked whether man can become a saint without God? With Levi Yitzchok, the question is to be phrased differently. Can man become a saint against God?

And the entire Jewish people, as one person, answered, yes, Levi Yitzchok could. [00:51:00] A Jew can be Jewish with God. Even against God. But not without God. And not without Jews._ Not outside the Jewish people. A man can be human, and even argue

with God, but it must be on behalf, and not against, his fellow human beings.

Levi Yitzchok, therefore, is one other master who remains with me. And I've spoken about him, I've sang his songs, but tonight, I want to finish with the Kaliver. I ask the question again. Why was Hungary discriminated against? Why didn't the Besht send somebody to Hungary? Or the Maggid? He sent everywhere, he sent his emissaries, he knew whom to send where. [00:52:00] Why not to Hungary? Rabbi Levi Yitzchok did come. Strangely enough, we are told that when he was expelled from Żelechów, where he was rebbe before he came to Berditchev, and he was expelled, and humiliated, he came to Hungary. We know that because we are told that he came there on a Purim, and he sang and he danced on the table with such ecstasy that everyone fell into step, and joined him in song.

But he didn't stay. We only know that two dynasties were created, meaning Újhely, Reb Moshe of Újhely, and the Kaliver Rebbe, Reb Yitzchak Izak Taub. Who came first? Újhely was greater, therefore, for some time, I was convinced that the Újhely came before Kaliv. [00:53:00] And it's not so. Only in studying the sources, I realized that it is not so, that first came the Kaliver Rebbe, because he was older. He was born in

1751. He came to Újhely, according to some sources, at the age of 30, and he remained from 40 years -- or 36, or 40 years, Rav, Rabbi, and Rebbe in Kaliv.

Újhely had a different story. Újhely had a rabbi, a certain Meisels, who left. And then came as a replacement, a rabbi called Rabbi Pinchas Luri, who was a direct descendant of Rabbi Yitzhak Luri, the *ARI Hakadosh*, the Holy *ARI*, the founder of the Lurianic *kabbalah*. And for some reason, [00:54:00] it didn't work out. There was right away a conflict between him and the community. And when you read, today, the chronicles about it, you cannot believe it. The community persecuted him, the community hated him. The community even went what we call to *Maharot*, meaning, to the non-Jewish tribunal, to try to expel him. And they invented all kinds of charges, except the most modern ones. They said he was a drunkard, they said that he was unlearned. Never. He was a good rabbi, and he was a *talmid hochem*, he knew, he knew Torah, he knew the law. But they didn't like him.

Why didn't they like him? I'll tell you why. They didn't like him because he spoke Yiddish, and not Hungarian. That is interesting. [00:55:00] The Hungarian Jews -- I mean, the real Hungarian Jews, not ours, the Sighetter or the Munkatcher -- the

real Hungarian Jews (laughter) -- they spoke only Hungarian. You couldn't speak a word of Yiddish there, and if you did, they didn't like it. (laughter) The other Hasidic rebbes spoke Yiddish. In Poland, in Lithuania, in the Ukraine. They spoke Yiddish. Hasidism is a Yiddish-speaking movement, even to this day. You go to Lubavitch, and of course, the rebbe speaks Yiddish.

The Moroccan Jews who became Lubavitcher Hasidim learned Yiddish. It's a pleasure for Yiddish. Now, really. Except in Hungary. And that gives me the idea. They didn't send emissaries because they didn't know Hungarian. (laughter) They only knew Yiddish. The Kaliver Rebbe [00:56:00] managed to stay there for so long because he did speak Hungarian. We know that many things about the Kaliver Rebbe.

The biography's there, and elements of the biography are available. We know, for instance, that he was twice married. He had at least one daughter and three sons. He was sick at the end of his life, but for many years, and he had some skin trouble. I don't know the name of it, but my friend Mark surely knows. He had trouble of skin -- his itching. It means, it was so itching that it was pain, unadulterated pain. He couldn't put on clothes. He couldn't put on leather shoes. He had --

for years, he was lying in bed, naked, under his sheet,
[00:57:00] and one story is that one of his -- a certain Reb
Shaul came to visit him, and the Kaliver Rebbe said, "Look at
me. Look at me. What do I look like now?" And the disciple
was very nice. He said, "Rebbe, you look" -- of course, he
referred to his nakedness, but nicely, he said, "You look like
Adam before he sinned." (laughter)

He was so full of pain, the Kaliver Rebbe, that we are also told
something very strange, that he had a whip in his hand, and he
would hit the wall with the whip. And it took me some time to
understand, why did he hit the wall with the whip? And the
reason, probably, is that he was angry at his body. He, for
instance, loved to go to *mikvah*. He loved to go to the ritual
bath. But because of this, he couldn't go. So, he was angry.
[00:58:00] One story, for instance, tells us that once, before
Kol Nidre, all of a sudden, he left the *shul*, and he ran to the
forest. One disciple ran after him, and he saw his rebbe
undress, and immerse himself in a well.

When they came back, they said, "Reb, why did you do that? It's
Kol Nidre, almost *Kol Nidre*." He said, "Don't you know, we are
told in the Bible about the well of Miriam, Moses' sister, which
was a mobile well. And this mobile well goes around the world.

It's a sacred well. Today, it was here. How could I miss it?"
(laughter)

He was angry at his body, but how can one be angry at one's body? It's forbidden. The body, too, was created by God. And therefore, he used the whip to pour out his anger at the wall.

A very sad story is that one of his three sons went astray.

[00:59:00] You know, we have it in Hasidism, with a few masters. But in his case, it was -- listen to the story, and I'm going to read it to you in the original, with translation. *Yadua l'kol* , it is known to everyone, *ki ekhad mibanav halakh b'derekh lo tov* , that one of his sons chose to go astray, *v'lo ho'ilu lo kol ha'tokhakhot*, and all the admonitions, *asher hokhi'khuhu ohavei aviv ha'kadosh she'haya akhar petirato*, all the admonitions of his dead father's friends were of no use. *V'hiney pa'am ekhat*, once, *ba eilav aviv ba'khalom b'Shabbat kodesh*. Once, on a Shabbat, his father, [01:00:00] his dead father, came to him in dream, *v'hizhiro*, and he warned him, *she'yashuv midarko hara'a*, he warned him to abandon his evil ways, *ki mara tihiye akharito*, lest he will have a bitter end. *V'lo ho'il gam zot*, and that, too, was of no use. *U'pa'am akhat, halakh tsaddik ekhad mitalmidav haga'on Rabbi Shaul*, the man who came -- the disciple who came to visit him when he was

sick--so one of his disciples, a certain Rabbi Shaul, went to his master's tomb, *v'tza'ak mar she'yaseh eizeh p'ulah b'yad khazakah*, and urged the dead master to do something, anything, with force, *she'bno hanav yakhzor b'teshuvah*, [01:01:00] so as to bring back his own son towards repentance.

U'tefilato asta p'ri, and his prayer was received, it was fruitful. *Ki hasof haya*, for the end was, *asher haben shovev hahu*, the wild son, *behiyoto atir n'khasin*, who in the meantime became very rich, *pa'am akhad baboker*, one morning, *be'kumo mimitato*, as he rose from his bed, *v'halakh l'tayel*, that he went for a walk, *bagan hamefu'ar shehaya eitzel khatzero*, he went for a walk in the luxurious garden which was his, *u'ba l'fanav sham bagan*, and in that garden appeared before him *aviv hakadosh be'hakitz*, and his father now appeared before him, no longer in dream, but as he was awake. *B'ka'as gadol*, [01:02:00] and the father was angry.

v'hotzi ilan mishorasho, and he uprooted a tree, *v'hipil al raglo v'al gufo*, and he threw the tree on his feet and on his body. *V'nishbar rakhmana litzlan l'sh'varim*, and the entire body was broken into pieces. *V'amar lo*, and he told him, *ki ata yukhrakh la'azov mima'asav hara'im*, now he will have to abandon his evil ways, *v'lashuv b'teshuvah shlayma*, and to repent.

V'shakhav kama shanim (He, and the son lay in bed a few years, *al eres davai*, in pain, *af she'ibayd kol r'khuso*, until he lost his fortune. *V'nasa baal teshuvah gamur*, and he became a real *baal teshuva*, a real penitent. *U'tzadikay hador kibdu'hu meod*, and the sages, the just men of [01:03:00] the generation, respected him.

This story is sure, it's clear, it's a true story. The Rebbe of Kaliv himself didn't write books, and his disciples didn't collect his sayings in book form. That, too, was different. We know that the *Seder*, Passover eve, he would sing the *Haggadah* in Hungarian, not in Hebrew. How do we know that? We know that, that Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg, who was his master, on Passover eve, during the *Seder*, would close his eyes, and then he was capable of seeing every one of his disciples, and hear them say the *Haggadah*, [01:04:00] except for the Kaliver Rebbe, because the Kaliver Rebbe spoke Hungarian. (laughter) And Reb Shmelke didn't know Hungarian.

We also know how the Kaliver Rebbe was discovered. He was discovered by Reb Leib Soros, I think I mentioned him one. He was the adventurer of Hasidism. He was a mysterious man, the invisible man, who would go from one corner of the country to another in an hour, in a minute. Time didn't mean anything,

space didn't mean anything. When he had to save some Jew, he would be everywhere instantly. And one day, he came to Kaliv -- Nagykálló -- and he heard the young shepherd, nine years old, sing beautiful songs.

And the -- there are a few versions. One version is that he heard the nine-year-old boy, shepherd boy -- not even a shepherd boy, he was guarding the ducks [01:05:00] -- ducklings. And he heard him sing, and the songs were about the *Shekhina*, about God, and he said, "What, a nine-year-old boy?" So he said, "Who are you?" He said, "I am Raisel's son." So a widow. So he went, Reb Leib Soros went, to the widow, and persuaded her to give him her son, and he brought the son to Reb Shmelke.

The other version is that actually, he learned the songs from the shepherds. The shepherds sang love songs. But he, the nine-year-old song, transformed the songs into holy songs. He himself, the Kaliver Rebbe, we also know, was modest, and he asked on his tombstone to write something very simple. Simply to say, that the Kaliver Rebbe lies here, he was an ehrliche Yid, was hot gelernt a blat gemora, he was a pious [01:06:00] Jew who could learn a page of Talmud.

So to me, the Kaliver Rebbe, really, are his songs. And when I think of him, it is his songs that I remember. And this is, therefore, the other theme, the last theme, that I would evoke. In every one of my novels, there is always somebody who sings. Somebody who feels the urge, the sacred urge, to sing. What are we doing with words, if not trying to turn them into song? So here is, for our farewell tonight, the Hungarian song of the Kaliver Rebbe. It's called "Sol a kokosh mar." It's a love story of [01:07:00] a man saying that somewhere, there is a bird. With yellow feet and green feathers, and that bird is waiting for me, for me alone. And then, the song says, but when will I be united with the bird? And so forth.

The meaning is, the bird, of course, is the *Shekhina*, and we are -- the shepherd is -- *knesset Yisrael*. The body, the corpus, the people, of Israel, waiting for the *Shekhina*. And this is the song.

[01:07:43 - 01:09:17]

Sol a kokosh mar, moygvred megvirt mar, jzald er jzerbn,
shik mejzerbn,
sheitl edje mahdar,
jzald er jzerbn,
shik mejzerbn,

sheitl edje mahdar

De mitschada mahdahr? De mitschada mahdahr? Sharga labba

jinji a saya,

engem uda vahar,

Sharga labba

kik a saya,

engem uda vahar.

Deh mikhorr less uz mar?

Deh mikhorr less uz mar?

Ha az Ish-ten nekede rendel,

ah tied less uz mahr.

"Deh mikhorr less uz mar?

Deh mikhorr less uz mar?

She' Yibaneh haMikdash,

Ir Tzion Timalei",

Akhur less uz mar.

Thank you. (applause)

M1 :

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