

Wiesel Archive

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) One day, Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, the master of the good name, still young and unknown, decided to hasten the coming of the Messiah. Actually, he had made such a decision more than once. But this time he felt the need for it more than ever. His people, the Jewish people, too long in exile, could bear it no longer. The oppressors had too much power. The haters, too many opportunities. For young and old, fear and suffering were part of the daily routine. How long would it last? How long must bloodshed triumph over prayer? Only redemption, redemption alone, the true one could put an end to an existence [00:01:00] threatened by despair. The Besht, the master of the good name, knew that. "Isn't the Messiah, Son of David, supposed to bring an answer to all questions?"

So the master left his hiding place in the Carpathian mountains and set out on a journey to Kushta, or Stamboul, as it was called then, in Turkey. From there, he had planned to board a ship for Jaffa. His goal was to reach Jerusalem where his close and beloved friend, Rabbi Chaim ben Attar of Morocco, the

celebrated author of *Or ha-Hayyim*, had been waiting for him for years.

Though they had never met, their souls were linked to the same root. The *shoresh neshama*, as it is called in Kabbalah. If only they could meet, even for one hour, for one prayer, for one chant, they were sure, both of them, that [00:02:00] redemption would follow. They wrote to one another, sent emissaries back and forth, made promises to one another that next year, and again the year after, they would be together. But they could never surmount the various obstacles to such a long voyage.

This time, the Besht felt the encounter had to take place, and therefore it would. He was ready to meet all challenges, but Satan was on the alert. He appealed to God's sense of justice: What right did any mortal have to force the Almighty's hand? Was this generation really worthy of welcoming its Redeemer? Have all men and women repented? Is the world ready for the ultimate change? Satan argued as always with conviction, and then a celestial voice was heard. "Israel, son of Sarah, the Besht is to be punished. [00:03:00] He has just lost his place in paradise."

Then, says a Hasidic legend, the Besht began dancing and singing, so great was his joy. "Now!" he shouted to himself, and to the forest which enveloped him. "Only now will I be able to serve the Lord for His sake, not for mine." Wonder of mystical wonders, the Besht had to lose everything in order to experience the purest joy.

What is joy? The absence of sadness? Of worry? What makes joy so special, so central to life that the Torah ordered us to incorporate it into certain holidays? Why *v'samachta b'chagecha*? Why does joy require a commandment? [00:04:00] Doesn't everybody wish to be joyous? According to certain commentators, the commandment is necessary because one does not always feel capable of receiving joy. Life can be darkened by pain, the mind absorbed by grave concerns. How can one be joyous when there is a sick person in the house and no money for medication? One cannot feel joy. But one must, for one is ordered by the law of Moses. One must force oneself, let the heart burst, but let it be open to joy.

A story. A Hasid came to Rebbe Moishe Leib of Sassov for help. "Rebbe," he said, "I need you. I feel crushed, so terrible is my anguish. I have so many obligations that I am unable to

meet. So many mouths to feed, so many deaths to mourn.

[00:05:00] I cannot bear it anymore." The old rebbe took his hand and asked, "Do you want me to weep for you? To mix my tears with yours? Is that what you want?" "Yes," whispered the Hasid. "At least, it will make me feel better. I will know that you at least understand me, that you share in my suffering. Weep for me, rebbe. Weep with me, and I will thank you. I will thank you with all my heart." But the Rebbe looked at him for a long moment and shook his head. "No, that's not what we must do. Weeping is no solution. Instead, I shall sing, and you shall sing with me. I know it's not easy, but why should it be? But we shall sing nevertheless." There was no good reason in the world for them to feel better, but they did.

One thing is known: [00:06:00] Joy is one of those rare but enchanting words that characterize the Hasidic mentality, aspirations, and condition. It is sought after so that the Hasid may plunge into it. Joy envelops the Hasid as does light, as does maternal love, as does the nostalgia of a child waiting for his father's return after midnight. Without joy, without the relentless emphasis on joy, the Hasidic movement would not have attracted such numbers of individuals and communities throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Even illustrious

masters, who, like Rebbe Mendel of Kotzk, incarnated anger. Or who, like Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, we shall speak of both later. Rebbe Nachman, who personified melancholy even they insisted, often [00:07:00] too much, on the necessity to cling to joy, if not to invent it.

"*Ivdu et Hashem b'simcha*," the Besht repeatedly urged his followers. "Serve the Lord in joy." But *b'simcha*, for those of you, all of you who know Hebrew -- *b'simcha* also means "with joy." Joy itself becomes a means of serving God. In other words, there is something ontological in joy simply because it is there, because it is given to man to elevate it, and link it to God's.

As last week, and the weeks and years before, let us make some preliminary remarks. First of all, I feel the need to include the Hasidic theme in each of our annual encounters. I find it literally impossible to meditate with you on the fascination with Jewish tales [00:08:00] without looking at the most beautiful of all. Without looking at the Hasidic tales, for Hasidism is this warm and passionate movement, which more than others -- with the exception of some parts in the Midrash -- brought forth beautiful and captivating stories.

Wasn't it the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, z"l, the founder of Chabad, who said that when the great Maggid of Mezeritch commented on the Torah, it was the oral tradition that he taught. But when he told stories, it was the written one, Torah *Shebichtav*, that he communicated.

So 30 years ago, we studied the tales of Rebbe Nachman Bratslaver. They invited us on a pilgrimage to the source of Hasidic beauty. Then we followed Reb Mendel Kotzker into his isolation. The Berditchever [00:09:00] through his struggle on behalf of our people. The Pshiskher to the depths of his illuminations. The Izhbitzer to his rebellion. And each time with every master, I have tried to share the inspiring adventure Hasidism is to his followers, and even to those who appreciate it from a distance.

And in these times, these last days of the campaign, I long for the Hasidic story. (laughter) I have heard so many facts and figures about our state of America. I've heard so many speeches repeatedly that I'm longing, literally, for somebody to tell me, "Come on, let's talk about the Besht, *l'havdil*. It's better."

But Hasidism remains a garden filled with sounds that become songs. [00:10:00] And prayers that become stories, and the other way around. And the garden is here for everyone to taste of its fruits. Anyone who is hungry may come in. All it takes is to yield to one's desire. All it takes is to open your heart, and open the door. (applause) (pause)

[00:11:00] Isaac Babel was one of the very great Jewish writers in Russia. He became a communist. He comes from a religious -- came from a religious family, religious background. And in his books -- not too many, he didn't write that many, he was killed by Stalin at an early age. In his stories, in his autobiographical stories and others, he always speaks about his studies of Talmud, Bible prophets. And he speaks about them with tenderness.

And there is a story. He describes as a lieutenant and war correspondent in the Red Army, with the Cossacks. He came to a place called Chernobyl. And Chernobyl was empty because the [00:12:00] Jews there were afraid of the Cossacks, with good reason. So he was looking for a Jewish home, and he was looking for the rebbe's home. He heard of the Chernobyler Rebbe. Couldn't find it, took him hours. Finally he did. He came into

the rebbe's house, one empty room, another empty room. And then he entered the rebbe's study. There sat the rebbe alone, studying, concentrated, so concentrated that he didn't even hear Babel come in.

Babel remained a long time watching the rebbe. And in his mind, he had prepared a speech. He was going to say to the rebbe, "Rebbe, it's enough. Leave your religion, it's [00:13:00] antiquated. A new song has risen, communism. Forget your God, forget what you learned, forget everything. A new era has begun. A new Bible is being written, forget all that." And he prepared in his communist mind, a perfect speech.

And while he watched the rebbe studying, he repeated -- he rehearsed his speech. And then at one point, the rebbe lifted his head. He saw a man in uniform. If a man is in his study he must be a Jew. So he asked him in Yiddish, "Where does a Jew come from?" And he said, "From Odessa." Then he said, "What do you want?" Says Babel -- at that point, he forgot everything. He forgot all of his intentions, he forgot the speech, he forgot everything. And without even knowing what he was going to say, he said, [00:14:00] "Rebbe, help me. Give me fervor, give me some *hislahavos*, some fervor."



I think this describes so well the power that Hasidism had, even on an Isaac Babel. And it stayed with him. And he describes -- with great nostalgia describes the centers of Hasidism that after the revolution, I quote him, "have been knocked out. But Hasidism itself," says he, "is immortal. Like the soul of a mother. Hasidism still stands, though with empty eye sockets at the crossroads of the furious winds of history." Close quotes.

Too pessimistic, Babel. To me, Hasidism evokes a vanished world, the world of my childhood. [00:15:00] And I owe it the chant that animates my words, my love for celebrations, my fascination with secret meaning inside revealed texts. Hasidism reminds me of my passion for study, prayer, and adoration, without which everything seems gray, flat, devoid of interest. When I think of my childhood, it is a Hasidic song I capture. It's a Hasidic tale I hear. And when I tell tales, all kinds of tales, Jewish and non-Jewish alike -- but all of them are Jewish, whether I want it or not -- they inevitably come out Hasidic.

But you may wonder, what is Hasidism? We know its defining moments, but can it be defined? Etymologically the term derives

from *chesed*, "kindness, charity grace." Thus, a Hasid is someone [00:16:00] who behaves charitably towards another. Towards another only? Towards himself, too. Is that all? Of course not. On a higher level, a Hasid is charitable towards him whose principle virtue is charity, namely God *kavyachol* himself.

But charity is not enough to define Hasidism, unless we place it in its broader context. Charity implies another person, and Hasidism means a sense of communion, a way of belonging to a community. Hasidism was and is a powerful remedy against solitude, sadness, and despair. That is where joy comes in. Joy being, as we have already noted, one of its basic components. The realization that one is not alone is, in Hasidism, already a valid reason to be joyous. Simply to think that a Hasid [00:17:00] comes together with other Hasidim to see the rebbe is already, for the individual Hasid and the Hasidic community around the rebbe, a reason to be exuberant and open to joy.

But the joy, that joy so indispensable in the life of the Hasid, where does he find it? Does he know for the fact that it exists? And if so, that it exists for him? And if the answer

is yes, where does he find the path leading him to it? Unlike pleasure, joy in Hasidism cannot be experienced in isolation. It must be contagious. To the Hasid, joy is conceivable only when it penetrates his family, his friends, and also the rebbe who is at the center of all of them. One may even go farther and say that a Hasid's joy is [00:18:00] linked to and is conditioned by the rebbe's joy, and is there also for the rebbe. The Hasid wants to receive or create joy so that the rebbe's joy becomes greater and stronger. But ultimately, in Hasidism, joy aims much higher, it aims at the Creator himself. As in many mystical traditions, man's goal is to make God happy, or at least happier.

But let's broaden the scale of our inquiry a bit. In the Bible, joy occupies almost no space at all. It is hardly mentioned. When God observes his creation, all we know about his reaction is *Vayar Elohim ki-tov*, he liked what he saw. That's all. No outcry of joy, no ecstasy, no gleefulness [00:19:00] over work well done. "The Creator was satisfied with his creation." All right.

But this lasted just a brief moment. He soon was, as it were, fed up. We spoke about this two sessions ago. God regretted

having created the world of and for man. As for man himself, he had little cause for rejoicing. Adam and Eve, expelled from Paradise, they found themselves plunged into sin and melancholy which lasted almost a thousand years. Their sons, a tragic tale of rejection, morosity, and murder. Noah, he and his immediate family survived the annihilation of humankind. And Noah needed to get drunk to feel some kind of joy. Their sons? Oh, Noah's sons, better not speak about them. (laughter)

Abraham, Isaac, [00:20:00] and Jacob: all three had problems, difficult, painful problems with their sons. And there is no joy in the Akedah. As for Jacob, whom has he been mourning for? His son Joseph who disappeared, or his brothers who had wanted him dead? Moses? We read of Aaron's joy when the two brothers met after a long separation, but not of Moses. Moses was never happy.

As for the people of Israel, the Bible does mention their joy, but when? When they saw the golden calf. Then, yes, they danced and sang in an atmosphere of ecstasy and exuberance. And after all that, *v'samachta b'chagecha*, says the Torah. Jewish holidays must be celebrated with joy.

[00:21:00] Well, there are two kinds of joy as we know: physical and metaphysical. The first is imminent, concrete, tangible. It's present around us, in us. The second strives to be transcendental. The first is close to pleasure, the second to fulfillment. The first is limited to the present, the second is timeless. Can the two be reconciled? The consensus is no. The body and the soul are supposed to be adversaries, if not enemies.

The concept of separation prevails also in this respect: physical pleasure comes at the expense of the soul. The two simply do not go together. One pays the price for the other. For the one to blossom, the other must be chained. Hence, the notion of *Nezirut*, or asceticism. Physical needs and satisfactions must be [00:22:00] repressed, curtailed in order to purify the soul and enable it to fly away towards the heavens. The body pulls downward, the soul upward. The body is dominated by instinct, the soul by faith.

Such an attitude was frequently adopted after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and following national catastrophes during the Middle Ages in Europe. The Jew has been taught to submit to suffering, which after all, was seen as the fruit of

sin and transgression. All pleasure that did not originate with God came from Satan. That's what they believed. Social or terrestrial gaiety was condemned, for it left the transgression intact, whereas pain and suffering reduce its size and importance. On the other hand, suffering is good for the soul, which will, on its dark wings, reach [00:23:00] eternal light and rare serenity.

Among mystical seekers, those who practice *sigufim*, self-inflicted pain, the penitent was told that his suffering was endowed with a meaning linked to the suffering of the *Shekhinah*, which is also in exile. That made the human suffering far more bearable. After all, if you love God, and God is suffering, how can you dissociate yourself from God? What? The *Shekhinah* is pained and you, a speck of dust, want to run away from suffering? Are you better than the *Shekhinah*? Better yet, the mystical idea was that human suffering reduces God's. If I suffer a lot, God will suffer less. The deeper the human pain, the more tolerable the divine affliction. In other words, not only does man suffer with God, on [00:24:00] account of God, but also for God.

On a less intellectual level, something of this sort, in simpler language was offered the villager, the peasant, the cobbler, as an explanation for his or her sad condition. And he naively, and perhaps grudgingly, accepted it. For to him, to be Jewish in exile meant to accept everything.

Thereupon, in a mountainous village between Kitev and Kosev, appeared the Besht and his movement with its new message. Hasidism did not abolish existing principles or laws. Not even those habits of *sigufim* or self-inflicted punishment, but Hasidism simply added a new way for those men and women who were not [00:25:00] sufficiently equipped to handle the rigor of *Halakhah*. The Besht opened, as we said in Hasidism, "a new pathway to joy." Joy for the soul, yes, but also for the senses, for the body. *Kol atzmotai tomarna* - we say in our prayers, "Every bone, every limb of my body sings thy glory, oh Lord."

The body is also God's invention and offering. That was and still is the Hasidic position. The biblical commandment *Ushmartem et nafshoseichem*, ought take care of your soul, means take care of your health, of your physical health. The soul dwells inside the body. Thus, the Hasid feels gratitude towards

the body. There is the injunction, *V'ahavta l'reacha kamocha*, "And you shall love your fellow man like yourself." But [00:26:00] the *kamocha*, "like yourself," is frequently neglected. You cannot love your fellow man if you despise yourself. How can you say *V'ahavta*? How can you love another person if you yourself are your own victim, a victim of your own hate?

This applies to the visible as much as the invisible aspect of the person. How can the body of an individual be dissociated from his or her consciousness? Here lies the grandeur and the beauty of the Beshtian message: Everything is given by God. Therefore, nothing is to be humiliated. The body is entitled to its own privileges. It too is to be respected and properly treated. The body is entitled to its own joy, for [00:27:00] the Torah was given not only for the soul, it is given for the body as well.

In the Talmud, a certain Rebbe Berukha met the prophet Elijah in the marketplace. And he asked him, "Tell me, there are so many people here. Who among them will inherit the place of honor in the other world?" And the Prophet looked and looked, looked, and then he simply showed him two comedians. And he said,



"They. They will inherit such a place because they look happy, and they make people happy. They give joy to others."

In general, Shabbat is holy, for it brings joy to those in distress. The Shabbat is God's supreme gift. It is given to all human beings alike [00:28:00] to draw joy from its presence. When the *Shabbat Hamalka*, the Queen Shabbat, arrives we are all elevated to the stature of princes. But the angels of peace visit every home, not only the palaces. The coachman and the rebbe, the innkeeper and the *melamed*, the woodchopper and *tzadik* enjoy the same status. On the arrival of Shabbat, the poorest of the poor feel and look different: sublimated, purified, exalted.

But why should such a transformation occur only on Shabbat? In Hasidic communities, in the small shtieblach, the followers of the Besht did not wait for Shabbat. Naturally, they could not obtain everything that the Shabbat offers, but why not get at least something? After morning prayers, why not drink some slivovitz to warm the heart, to help the feet rise higher?

[00:29:00] For them every occasion seemed propitious. If the rebbe was present, how could one not, cup in hand say,

"L'chaim?? If he was not there? Was there a better way to remember him than with a drink? Someone had *yahrzeit*, "L'chaim." A group of students completed the study of *mishnayot*, "L'chaim." A Hasid drinks when he is happy, and when he is not. When he needs something, and when he gets it.

Opponents of the movement use such practices to denounce the spiritual and intellectual validity of Hasidism. They were wrong to define Hasidim as drunkards, as they did then in the eighteenth century, was to ignore the Hasidic commitment to Jewishness. A Hasid -- well, the truth. [00:30:00] The Hasid drinks because he likes drinking. (laughter) But beyond that and above that, there is something else. He does not drink because he enjoys drinking. He drinks because of its connection to a mitzvah. The satisfaction the Hasid gets from a good glass of wine deepens his attachment to the mitzvah, therefore to the soul, which is also thirsting for joy. Were the opponents, the *misnagdim*, convinced by such explanations? I doubt it. They continued their attacks, and the Hasidim continued to live their lives as best as they could.

In truth, Hasidim did not neglect nor put aside spiritual joy. They sought and desired it, but they also knew that they must be

worthy of its blessings. They realized they had to be patient. Meanwhile, [00:31:00] they did other things and tried to receive whatever they could from more immediately accessible rejoicing. In other words, Hasidism taught its followers to bind their concrete joy easily, found to what transcends it. You eat? Let your table become an altar. You drink? Physical joy is permitted and even suggested when it derives from a spiritual *élan*, a divine impulse. Two bodies unite not merely to attain the pleasure that only their union can provide, but to chant together the promise of life to come.

So now we realize that something has happened in the course of our explanation tonight, already. A change of levels has already occurred. At first, we stated that the Hasidic [00:32:00] movement inspired the Hasid to seek joy wherever it could be found. But now we observe this quest climbing to a superior plane. Physical joy, limited to the senses, is no longer sufficient. It may be justified as a beginning, as an initiation, but not as an accomplishment in and of itself.

Once attained, joy must surpass itself and become a *Simcha shel mitzvah*, an act of spiritual endeavor. "To live in joy," said the Besht, "is to obey God's will." Commented one of his

disciples, "The Besht was sent down to us from heaven so as to teach us true humility and authentic joy." Even the Kotzker, Rebbe Menachem Mendel, who was not known as a happy man, even he stated, "Joy [00:33:00] is the broadening of the sacred."

And all Hasidic masters repeat a Talmudic saying: *Ein haShekhina shora mitoch atzvut* "The *Shekinah* does not dwell in an atmosphere of sadness." She, the *Shekinah*, too needs joy, our joy. Thus all the masters of the first, and second, and even the third generations, from the most illustrious to the most obscure, insisted on the necessity of surmounting melancholy, and replacing it with exuberance and joy.

But here we are suddenly faced with a problem. Since all these celebrated masters so convincingly preach the virtues of joy, how is one to explain their own penchant for melancholy, which at times seemed profoundly depressive? And [00:34:00] this question has been hounding me for years. Why did the Besht spend his last months often separated from his disciples? Why did his successor, the great Maggid of Mezeritch, voluntarily withdraw from his community during the last period of his life? How is one to comprehend "the great fall," quote-unquote, of the Seer of Lublin? And the 20 years solitude of the Kotzker?

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev. Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk. Rebbe Boruch of Medzhybizh. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav. At one point, all experienced an anguish bordering on terror, a distress nearing despair.

Stories about them can be found in Hasidic chronicles, strange stories, disturbing incidents so [00:35:00] uncharacteristic of what Hasidism aspired to become. Stories about these rebbes and their personal afflictions. How could they, spiritual guides and healers, pillars of the movement, how could they celebrate joy while suffering in their flesh, and in their soul the bitterness of exile?

Oh, the Baal Shem Tov himself was not spared. Shortly before his hour came, he would walk in the fields, tormented. And it is said of him that he defied the laws of language. He who so wanted to understand and to be understood no longer could. He seemed to forget names, events, faces. At times he would begin a sentence and fail to finish it. He appeared to have [00:36:00] lost touch with his environment. On occasion he would make strange gestures, even hit his head against a tree. He would also express remorse for having abused his powers. He stopped singing and telling stories. He was no longer himself.

What? The Besht, unhappy? The man whom God alone could bend, depressed? The consummate friend and protector of his followers, turning his back on those who needed him to surmount their own loneliness? I could not understand.

A similar episode involved the Berditchever, who admired King Solomon, not only because of his proverbial wisdom, but also because of his ability [00:37:00] to speak the language of madmen. We may never discover the full truth about an obscure period in his life. Hasidic texts hardly mention it. But judging by his symptoms, he may have succumbed to a kind of nervous breakdown. Yes, the Berditchever.

One night, he lost his way in his own hometown and found himself in what was called Tanners Street. And there he was seized by an almost infinite sadness. Soon, he fainted. Was it because he could not forget the little beadle, who had hanged himself from the synagogue's chandelier, wishing, according to a Hasidic source, to glorify the honor and glorify the Master of the Universe? [00:38:00] That is why the beadle committed suicide. And that is why the Berditchever was so depressed.

What was the connection between the rebbe and the beadle?  
Withdrawn from the outside world, locked in his own thoughts.  
After the beadle's death, the rebbe was incapable of fulfilling  
his task as teacher and guide, and spent his time, quote,  
"Reading fast, very fast, from his small book that never left  
him," unquote. What happened to his exuberance? His vitality?  
He, the most exhibitionist of all the rebbes became lonely, a  
victim and prisoner of solitude. His spirit seemed  
extinguished. He seemed frightened, terrified. What is the  
name of his suffering? [00:39:00] "Angels were jealous of him.  
And this is their revenge," said one *tzadik*. Here again I  
failed to understand.

The great, unique Reb Levi Yitzchok, the protector of the weak,  
the defender of all victims of injustice. The man who pleaded  
before God on behalf of his people. The man who sued God on  
behalf of his people! What provoked his mental anguish? What  
caused his soul such pain? What made him so vulnerable? What  
had he seen? What had he endured? What had he heard from his  
disciples that made him so downcast, troubled, desperate?

As for our dear and marvelous Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav,  
[00:40:00] his frequent plunges into melancholy were legendary. Constantly under unimaginable stress, both psychological and mystical, he endured such mood swings. They were sudden. He would jump from absolute ecstasy to ominous depression. From *gadlut hamochin*, the boiling process of his mind, to *katnut hamochin*, the stifling darkness of its smallness. When he was happy, his joy knew no limits. When he was sad, he brought the entire world down with his despair.

From his window overlooking the marketplace, he noticed his disciple Chaikel, who seemed in a rush. He called him in for a brief talk. "Chaikel, Chaikel, have you seen the sky this morning?" "No rebbe, I have not." "And the street, Chaikel, have you seen the street?" "Yes rebbe, I have seen the street." "And now, do you still see it?" [00:41:00] "Yes rebbe, I do." "Tell me what you see." "People rebbe, I see people, and horses, cars. Gesticulating merchants, excited peasants, men and women coming and going. That's what I see." "Chaikel, Chaikel," said rebbe Nachman, shaking his head. "In 50 years -- in two times 50 years there will be on this very spot a street like this one, and a market like this one. Other carriages will bring other merchants to buy and sell other horses. But I shall



no longer be here. Neither shall you. So I ask you Chaikel, what's the good in running if you don't even have time to look at the sky?"

Is that the essence of the Hasidic way of viewing life? Of man's destiny, Rabbi Nachman leaves us this description. I quote him again. He said, "What is it -- it is [00:42:00] a man condemned to death, seated in a cart drawn by two horses who know the way, the way to the gallows. The two horses are called day and night, and how they run, how they gallop."

Really? Is this how a Hasidic rebbe talks to his followers? Shouldn't he inspire them to think of life more than death? Of creativity rather than destruction? Is this how he expected to demonstrate even in moments of agony, the value of promise and the possibility for hope? So many contradictions and paradoxes.

The mystery is perhaps best personified by the grandson of the Besht, Rabbi Boruch of Medzhybizh, whose tendency to lead a somber, joyless life provoked real antagonism at the highest echelons of the movement. [00:43:00] What moved him to melancholy? When did he first succumb to its somber seduction? What were its effects on his personality? Hasidic chronicles do

not delve into these questions. All they tell us is that he would often be seized by an inexplicable moroseness. In general terms, not only from the Jewish viewpoint, his was a tragic *Weltanschauung*.

Listen to the way he described the human condition. "Imagine," he says, "Imagine a man who has been expelled from his country. He arrives at a place where he has no relatives, no friends. The customs and the tongue of the land are unfamiliar to him. Naturally, he feels lonely, terribly lonely. Suddenly, he sees another wanderer, who like him has no one to turn to, no place to go. The two strangers meet and [00:44:00] become acquainted, they talk, and for a while stroll through the streets together. With a measure of luck, they may even become good friends. This is true of God and man. They are strangers who happen to walk together, and who try to become friends." What a terrible story, man and God strangers to one another.

So absorbing was Rabbi Boruch's dark mood, that the famous jester, a *shoykhet* named Hershele Ostropoler, had to be engaged to cheer him up. The same Hershele who incidentally long fascinated the previously mentioned great Russian Jewish writer, Isaac Babel. One evening, the rebbe told Hershele to light the

candles for the room was dark. The jester lit one candle. "Hershele," scolded the rebbe. "One candle is not enough. I cannot see." [00:45:00] Next day Hershele lit 10, 20, 30. He wasn't going to stop lighting candles, as if wishing to please his master. "Hershele, Hershele!" scolded the rebbe again. "Are you going to blind me now?" (laughter) Visibly, rebbe was angry. "I don't understand," said the jester. "Yesterday you were against darkness, now you are against light?" And only then the Rabbi Boruch burst out laughing. "Hershele," he said, "You want to teach me when to be angry?"

And yet it is to him that poor Hasidim came, expecting him to alleviate their pain, to dissipate their sadness. To insert into their bleak existence a ray of hope, a measure of joy. And curiously enough, [00:46:00] he, the rebbe, be it Rabbi Boruch or Rabbi Nachman, or any other succeeded in giving the Hasidim what they wanted and needed. Once, Rabbi Boruch went so far as to shout to an unhappy visitor, "I order you to accept joy! Do you hear me? It's an order." And the visitor answered sheepishly, "Rebbe, I want to obey you, but I don't know how."

The rebbe jumped on him. "You don't know how? I will show you. Think of the Seer of Lublin, he himself knew days and nights of

anguish. Still people descended on his home, hoping to find methods of fighting anguish, and reasons to overcome all the forces that negate happiness. Was it strange to see his attraction to joyous visitors? A notorious sinner was known to have permanent access to his study while ordinary Hasidim [00:47:00] waited for days and weeks to be admitted. 'What can I tell you?' he said, 'This man's joy pleases me. It's real, it is genuine, not like yours. When you commit already a transgression, you instantly regret it. Instead of savoring it, you start sighing, weeping. Not he, he's not ashamed of his joy.'"

The rebbe's advice to his Hasidim was, "One must know how to laugh and sob at the same time." How extraordinary. The most melancholy of masters strove to make his followers happy. But then didn't Rabbi Nachman write his masterpiece about seven beggars -- for the famous story which I believe to be a jewel in literature, Hasidic or general? [00:48:00] Didn't he say that he wrote this story with the goal of teaching the reader, quote, "How to rejoice" unquote?

A great master gave the following advice: "When joy enters your being, you no longer think of your enemies or of the harm they

are capable of doing you. When you are joyous, you are because you don't think of your enemies." Most of the masters spoke so forcefully against *atzvut* and *yeiush*, sadness and despair, that we are compelled to wonder at times if, to paraphrase Shakespeare, they did not protest a bit too much. Indeed, one is forced to entertain the question. How have they managed to communicate an optimistic view to their followers, when they themselves seem to need it more than they?

[00:49:00] It may all seem illogical, even paradoxical, but in the realm of the Hasidic experience, it really wasn't. In the Hasidic world, the rebbe does not serve as a model. And the rebbe's life is, by definition, full of possible ambivalence and ambiguity. The rebbe is there not to be understood. He must understand, but no one can understand him. It is up to the rebbe to accept power without being affected by it. To invite anger or sadness without succumbing to either. To aspire to total identification with the other while remaining true to himself. It is up to him to speak in order to be quiet. To renounce the magical words, so as to better express his innermost thoughts.

As for the Hasid, he must never imitate the master. For he

would then himself [00:50:00] be a master, perhaps his own. There are things the master can do but the Hasid cannot. The master can on occasion walk close to the abyss, whereas the Hasid must stay back. The master may, if he is so inclined, mortify himself, punish himself, inflict suffering on himself. But the Hasid may not. Both the master and the Hasid may experience difficult hours of depression, but their reasons are not the same.

We understand them both. The circumstances of the Hasid are known. In that period, in the beginning, the time of Voltaire and Rousseau, Kant and Goethe, Danton and Robespierre, the Hasid did not benefit from the humanistic turbulence that shaped society. From the outside world, the Hasid [00:51:00] heard only voices of hatred. Locked into his poverty, he knew that no one would come to pull out its claws and restore his rights to life, dignity, and happiness.

At times, he must have been ready, or almost ready, to give up not only on humanity, but also on its creator. That's why he needed the rebbe. He believed that the rebbe alone understood him. That no one but the rebbe was concerned with his worries, his misfortune, his implacable destiny. Thanks to the rebbe,

the Hasid felt less abandoned, less rejected, less alone. His life had meaning in the Beshtian universe. His work had a goal, and it was very clear: to come nearer to God.

And God listened to his words. In the Hasidic world, [00:52:00] man and God worked for the same goal: to come closer to one another. In the Hasidic universe, it was man who had the possibility, who felt the need and also the privilege of coming closer to the Almighty Creator. God saw his affliction, and was not envious of his rare hours of harmonious felicity. The shepherd marveling at the sunset, the child smiling at the passerby, the passerby smiling back at him. Saying only a few words, "Peace unto you, child. Remember that life is full of signs and signals."

God's eyes never lose their flame. It was just reflected in the eyes of the shepherd, the child, the passerby. Therein lies the secret of secrets. The Almighty Creator [00:53:00] of all the past, present, and future worlds chose man's heart as his privileged, favorite domicile and dwelling place. To a golden palace or an edifice made of precious stones, God prefers the frail human heart, which aches and sighs, in words or in silence. The human heart which calls for love. Which is

capable of whispering softly, or of shouting louder and louder. The human heart, which can at the same time lose hope and regain it. Perhaps for the same reason.

That's what the rebbe tells the Hasid. And he, the Hasid, feels a peace. Like God, he did not need castles, nor did he seek riches in order to feel at home in God's creation. A heart was enough for him, and to walk in the forest was his greatest adventure. He looked at a tree and became [00:54:00] that tree. He heard the shepherd's nostalgic song, and he became that shepherd and that song. Thanks to the rebbe, he could climb very high, and fall very fast, and start all over again. He could observe pain and tragedy, and not be crushed, just as he could absorb gaiety and serenity, and not become vain. He looked at the rebbe and he remained the Hasid he had been. But what about the rebbe himself? He had the choice of not looking.

Let's take one of my favorites. At least, but they all are, but this one now is. Let's take Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol, the brother of the famous Rabbi Elimelech. Rabbi Zusya, the most innocent and touching of the Hasidic garden, the Hasidic universe, who was poorer than his poor followers. But Rabbi Zusya refused to recognize [00:55:00] poverty by its name. To him, nothing could



be bad, and surely not evil since everything came from God. If one mentioned to him his own suffering, he denied it asking: "What suffering? Zusya is a happy man." He always spoke about himself in the third person. He said, "Zusya is happy to live in a world created by God, blessed be he, and destined to redeem itself in truth and joy. To suffer means to miss something, but Zusya misses nothing, needs nothing. Zusya needs God alone, and God is here." Zusya of Hanipol was convinced that human beings were meant to be happy, even when they were physically broken.

But he is a special case, an exceptional man, as is the Kotzker, as is Rabbi Nachman, because most masters did suffer while refusing [00:56:00] to ignore the suffering of others. It happened that in contemplating the undeserved punishment of his followers, a rebbe ended up seeing nothing else. He listened to so many stories of threatened and shattered lives that he demanded from heaven an answer, an immediate intervention, a miracle. And when nothing came, or at least not in time, he vacillated between rebellion and silence, as was the case of the *tzadikim* of Lizhensk, Berditchev, Lublin.

Faced with the endless distress of pious men and women who were worthy of a better fate, the rebbe must have felt weakened. And

in their world, a string must have broken. A midnight sun became dark, leaving its black stars transformed in aimless thoughts, searching for a shelter. [00:57:00]

May I once more admit that I love this disturbing, if not depressing aspect of our great Hasidic masters? The aspect of not being capable of surmounting melancholy and sadness, not always, not all the time. I love them a thousand times more because they seem so human, as human as their disciples. Perhaps that is why, for a moment, they lost ground. How could they have remained forever confident and serene in spite of everything when day after day they met only the people who were marked by suffering and misfortune? Who came to see the rebbe? Not happy people, not peaceful people. Those who came [00:58:00] needed something, needed someone. Those who came were all victims of misfortune.

If the rebbes, the masters, could have suffered in their place. If they could have diverted the punishments from them and taken them onto themselves, they would have done that. But that is not possible. Not for human beings, and not for Jews. No one is capable of living or suffering in another person's place. At best, one can suffer with someone else in difficult hours. One

can try to help a person be present to his or her agony, but there human empathy ends. Ask patients in hospitals, they will tell you. No one knows their pain. Oh, there are of course God-sent and [00:59:00] blessed people, who are the physicians and the nurses who try to help. But even they -- they don't know what the patient feels. Even in the mystical domain, *Imo anochi b'tzarah* means, God says "I shall be with you in tragedy, and the other way around." We are with God. God is not in exile instead of Israel. Nor is Israel there instead of God. We are there together.

But then what could the rebbe do? Oh, he prays to God and teaches the Hasid how to pray. And when God's ways remain hidden and the Hasid is desperate, the rebbe at times may feel helpless and perhaps unworthy of his task. And then he may lose his powers, and his sensitivity to joy and to light. And then [01:00:00] he's actually ready to abdicate his role and no longer be rebbe.

But this moment of hesitation and doubt lasts only a moment. With the exception of the Kotzker, all the other masters, all of them had the strength to overcome their own problems and return to their previous functions, and once more help. Help the Hasid

gain some measure of happiness. Because immediately when the brackets are closed, the rebbe takes hold of himself, gives himself a good shake, and wakes up. It was only a passing episode. He's still aware of his powerlessness, but he's no longer its prisoner. He realizes that he has no right to give in order [01:01:00] to be away. He has the right and the duty to give in order to be present to his Hasid. He cannot give up. He will find the proper words, the necessary strength to console those who have faith in his power of faith. From a source unknown to himself, the rebbe draw enough courage to bring joy, happiness, and peace, without which his disciple, his follower, his visitor will not be able to continue.

And so it is from within his frustration, from within his depression that the rebbe invokes gaiety as a means to serve God. And it is so that he helps victims of misfortune overcome their inner obstacles, which lead to total resignation. It is from the edge of despair that the rebbe calls for hope. In other words, in helping others, the rebbe helps [01:02:00] himself.

How this influenced my own work, I shall perhaps bring some illustration next time. But for the moment, all I can say is:

the Hasidic movement, which was borne in despair as a message against despair, survived the worst catastrophe in recorded history. How come that most of the victims of that tragedy came from Hasidic background? Why was the enemy out to destroy not only the Jewish people, but also and perhaps first of all, those whose piety and whose fervor could have served as an example to others? An example of life, friendship.

How come all the other way, [01:03:00] we must say, how come that Hasidism survived? How come that it's blossoming again? How come that Vizhnitz is once more a center of great Hasidic fervor and piety, and song and prayer? And Bratslav, and Ger, and Satmar? In all of them, both here and in Israel, especially here and Israel, how come? Is that a Hasidic miracle?

I have learned many lessons from our masters, who have in common not only a commitment to learning and faith, but also an ability to show compassion and generosity. It is under their influence that I have written many tales, because I have learned from these masters a very important question. Is there a joy more pure, [01:04:00] more profound, more human than the one borne from the deepest sadness? (applause)

**M:**

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