

Elie Wiesel:

(audience applause) Tonight, let's forget, if possible, what is happening in the world today. Whatever is happening is not nice, not good, worrisome. Then why should we talk about it tonight? We talk about it every morning at breakfast, or whenever we meet each other. Let's talk about something else. I invite you, actually, to a pilgrimage. Let's go far away to Europe, Eastern Europe, to the end of the eighteenth century, and talk about a great movement whose reverberations are felt even today. Surely here.

Question: is it conceivable that [00:01:00] inside Hasidism there would be an extraordinary spiritual community that teaches that from the very depth of great personal sadness, a moving and powerful appeal is issued for continuous faith and renewed joy? No rebbe, no master, suffered more in his life than Rebbe Yitzchak Meir of Ger. And yet, how is it that his life story contains a warning not to give in to distress? His tales bring forth numerous questions. For instance, Hasidism is also based on fellowship and friendship. But can excess of either, or love, be counterproductive for the soul? Could too much

affection [00:02:00] become too dangerous for the mind? Or to quote a French poet, "How far may one go too far?"

The master who is our subject tonight, Rebbe Yitzchak Meir of Ger, would probably answer in the affirmative. To him, both the mind and the soul are in constant need to be sharpened, challenged, and awakened. Belonging to the third generation of the Beshtian Hasidic movement, who knows. Throughout generations of student and teachers, with his books on Biblical and Talmudic commentaries, who knows that his work, what we call the *Chiddushei ha-Rim*, the innovation of the commentaries, of the concept of learning, that characterize him.

Who knows [00:03:00] that he, the founder of the school of Ger, which ranks today among the most pedagogically flourishing and politically influential movements in Israel and also, though to a lesser degree, even here in America? Who knows that this man actually was so exceptional, and so extraordinary, that whenever we read anything about him or by him, we tremble? I admit, I like him very much. But then, I like them all. (laughter) Each and every one for his own way, his own qualities, style and mystery. I like the Hasidic masters. Though I remained an admirer of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov and his stories, as I was close to the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, of blessed

memory, and therefore, [00:04:00] I claimed and still claim my real, total allegiance to Vizhnitz. That of my childhood. I continue to be attracted to the passion of learning and the fervor in worship one finds in the school of Ger.

While still a bachelor, it is in the Gerrer shtibl, a small room on the ground floor on 101st Street with my friend and ally, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. We would come on the Sabbath and holidays to attend services in the nearby Gerrer shtibl, auditorium. There, we took part in theyet inspiring way of addressing our prayers to the Lord. Often, we would meet their friends, who remembered pre-war Ger. Reb Leibele Cywiak . The Yiddish [00:05:00] chronicler Reb Yoseph Friedenson of the Warsaw Ghetto. Reb Avramele Zemba, all survived the Warsaw or Łódź Ghettos. Some have returned even from Treblinka. While listening to them on the High Holidays, crowning God as king of the universe, in insisting on His divine justice and kindness, some of them, if not most of them, added to their own plight that of their first rebbe, whose incomprehensible suffering on different levels, as we shall see later, preceded ours.

A disciple and companion of great leaders, he too dominated the stage. Much is known about his public activities. From orally transmitted texts, chronicles and letters, we get a lot of

material. But who was he in his personal [00:06:00] life? Did it have its own inaccessible secrets? What shielded him in moments of great grief? How did he reconcile intransigent scholarship and warm compassion, kindness and rigor? How did he accomplish his own vision of Hasidism, and to whom did he transmit it? What was his concept of friendship, and how did he deal with its breakdowns? If there is in every one of us an event, an episode, an encounter, a question, a story that defines us, what was his? We know that since his childhood, nothing discouraged him. No one frightened him. He always found the right answer, the right words to get out of any situation.

Naturally, to get acquainted with him, [00:07:00] one must look at his environment. And to observe a character, one must locate him. And there, we witness the first dispute dividing the young Hasidic movement. It opposed the school of Peshischa to the house of Kozhnitz. Two places in Russia. Remember these two names; the two are pillars of the same edifice. In the beginning, since the revelation of Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, the master of the good name, in 1736, his movement was a kind of non-violent, real peaceful revolution in Jewish life. Its progression was turned inward. Its goal as well, as its modus operandi, were to attract a family here, an individual there,

going from place to place to influence poor and rich people, [00:08:00] mainly poor and melancholy with a story, a song, a smile, a blessing. Even a simple handshake. There were no intrigues, no jealousies, no personal power-seeking ambitions among the disciples -- not yet.

In reality, a serious and dangerous quarrel began only in 1772 when following the passing of the Besht, the founder, the great Maggid, the great preacher, Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch took over the helm, and imposed his social architectural vision on the growing movement. At that point, his adversaries, particularly in Lithuania, where the prestige of the Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, was unequaled, emerged as their institutional [00:09:00] opposition. Ideologically and practically, they waged an organized campaign denouncing the Hasidim's behavior as heretical. Hasidim were accused of favoring prayer over study, of distorting old customs and rules, and these denunciations were meant to exclude them from the large community of Israel.

In some cases, they turned to the police with weird political accusations. Some masters, as Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad, Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin, were sent to prison. Still, these anti-Hasidic activities, though bitter and painful, never represented a serious threat to the Jewish people, for

they came from the outside. Was it due to the astonishing success of which the Beshtian movement could be [00:10:00] so rightly proud? Its victories all over Central and Eastern Europe were numerous and glorious. Facing outside adversaries was easy; fighting inside opponents was not. We need also to remember almost overnight, Hasidic schools and courts multiplied. It's simple: the Maggid, the preacher of Mezeritch, left many disciples who became masters themselves. And each of them did the same. Their sons established their own little, if not-so-little kingdoms in small cities and villages, resulting in unavoidable frictions and disputes, rarely between leaders but often between their assistants and followers. Each and every one saw in his master the only one worthy of wearing the Beshtian crown.

In the annals of secular revolutions, such phenomena were frequent. Splits [00:11:00] and counter-splits among the Jacobins in France, communists and Mensheviks in Russia, Trotskyites of the Left and the extreme Left everywhere else. In general terms, we know that history is often shaped from the inside more than from the outside. And that is what happened also to Hasidism's so-called elite, which was concentrated, first in Lublin and Peshischa , and then in Peshischa and Kozhnitz. We shall come closer to their fiery, impatient

confrontations, and to the story of a great master filled with melancholy and grandeur. As soon as our patient lovers of Hasidism are invited to come in.

Actually, after the passing of the Besht, the leader, the founder [00:12:00] of the movement, and his successor, it was only of Hasidism as experienced in Lublin, Kozhnitz, and Peshischa , to go through upheavals and crises of loyalty. Could one belong to more than one school? Probably not. To follow more than one path? Surely not. Is it then possible that the regular Hasid defined himself by his opposition to the one facing him? An adept of the fierce and irascible master of Kotsk opposed all of them at the same time? At that time, one could lose one's orientation following the splits that plagued, and perhaps on a certain level, enriched, the heritage of the founder.

But Ger was not [00:13:00] part of them. Ger remained Ger. What is Ger? In the enchanted kingdom of Hasidism, especially in its first developing phases, a master was distinguished by his miracles. Another by his fervor. Still another by his songs, or by his silence, and or by his methods to overcome despair. But as for Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Ger, he was known by his passion for learning, in which he found his total

fulfillment. Did it also help in frequent moments of distress? Born in 1799, still a boy, he lost his father, Reb Yisrael. He was the husband of Chaya Sarah, the [00:14:00] Maggid or the preacher of Kozhnitz' servant or niece.

Legend preceded his birth. While still in his mother's womb, the preacher stood up when seeing the pregnant woman entering his study, saying, "I pay respect not only to you, but also to your son to be born. He already is a sacred soul." Naturally, the preacher took care of the little orphan and watched over his education. He must have been, and indeed was, a precocious child. A fast learner, he surprised everyone with his quick answers to questions raised by illustrious adults. One day, the preacher turned to him and said, "I will give you a golden coin if you tell me where God dwells." And answered [00:15:00] the boy, "I will give you five golden coins if you tell me where he doesn't." (laughter)

Later, much later, evoking his childhood, he would say that at the age of eight, he would be able to see and hear Prophet Samuel himself, and Prophet Elijah, in person. Yes, he heard their voices. No wonder that the Seer of Lublin commented on his soul as being of high caliber. But he said, "But people, he will be made to suffer." He predicted, "People will make him



suffer." In fact, he believed him to be a kind of reincarnation of the Messiah, son of Joseph, the tragic of the two, who according to ancient sources will perish in an eschatological war. His reputation was so high that as an eight-year-old, [00:16:00] he received a strange proposal from a wealthy businessman. His name was Reb Moishe Halfan. He offered him to marry his daughter, but he wished to meet the young boy to know whether he, as he was called the Polish prodigy, really was a learned child. He submitted to an examination, asking him a complex question drawn from the tractate of punishment. The young eight-year-old student gave him an immediate answer that baffled him by its originality and depth. The businessman right away realized that the boy's erudition surpassed his own. So, on the spot, he made the decision. The student must become his son-in-law.

Well, [00:17:00] remember. In those times, everything was possible. Everything was possible because so many events occurred around them, around the Hasidic teachers and disciples. That they needed signs from heaven that their life and their destiny were actually protected and shielded. It is said that the student consented, actually, to get married, although he had already received a number of similar proposals from prestigious families. The reason? He was told that the girl in question

was not really known, let's say, for her looks. She was small with a big nose and -- let's be elegant and charitable and say no more. (laughter) [00:18:00] The story was transmitted so as to illustrate the master's humane nature and compassion. He felt that if he rejected her, no one would ever want to marry her. How could he be responsible for her humiliation?

So, the wedding took place. How old was he? Surely after his bar mitzvah, thirteen, or a bit later. Hasidic sources are known for their imprecision. One text mentions the figure thirteen, others make him younger, or older. What we do know is that the preacher of Kozhnitz himself officiated at his wedding, which must have been celebrated in customary Hasidic exuberance and enthusiasm. An immediate problem. [00:19:00] Reb Moishe Halfan, the father-in-law, wanted the couple to live in Warsaw, with him, stay with him, eat at his table, and go forward in life. But the preacher preferred to have his famous Hasid and disciple with him, in Kozhnitz. The problem reached Lublin for a ruling, and the famous of Seer of Lublin ruled in favor of the father-in-law. So, the young Rebbe Yitzchak Meir with his wife moved to the capital. To console the Maggid, the preacher, he promised him frequent return visits. Then, the preacher passed away. His son, Reb Moishe, the rich man, who succeeded him in the leadership position, treated the young scholar with special

affection. [00:20:00] Was he happy? The world outside was not a happy place. For the Hasidic movement too, difficult and troubling times were on the horizon, with post-Napoleon's Europe creating an atmosphere of fear and suffering.

Three Hasidic masters, all famous and powerful, died the same year, 1815. The Seer of Lublin, the Preacher of Kozhnitz, and Rebbe Mendel of Rimanov. Why? The three of them had taken part in a messianic conspiracy, aimed at hastening redemption for our people and the world. [00:21:00] They would meet in secret with no one else present, exploring together mystical means and methods. How to put an end to exile and its woes. They surely knew that one doesn't enter that perilous domain with impunity. That Satan's word also counts in heaven. But they took up the challenge, and they did, for they had to do learning from the most secret of all secret books. And they died far from each other. Their followers must have been heartbroken. But as always in the Hasidic movement, they learned how to overcome disappointment, misfortune, and sadness.

But what about the Rebbe of Ger himself? [00:22:00] Still an adolescent, was he affected by all these dramatic events, or was he shielded by his young age? In Kozhnitz, where he grew up, he was admired for his exceptional erudition and eloquence. Many

legends circulated around that. Whenever there was a need for someone to go on a mission to defend Hasidism against accusations of other Hasidic masters or of Hasidic ignorance, he was chosen for the task. At the historical oratory dispute between old school of Peshischa and the young school of Lublin that was arranged at the rabbinic wedding, at the place called Ostilla. He played an important role, [00:23:00] an important part. He would refute any reproach and criticism with persuasive arguments. His learning helped him win many battles. It is said that he slept little, two or three hours. His wife and friends invoked medical reasons, trying to persuade him to think of his health, and his answer to his wife was, "Why did your father make me marry you? Because for some reason, that in some circles, I was known as a prodigy. What is a prodigy? Someone who learns fast. But I -- I sleep fast." (laughter)

Why has he left the Kozhnitz community where he was loved and appreciated? [00:24:00] Perhaps because they loved him there too much, uncritically. He objected to honors and flattery. There could be a threat to one's idea of himself. "I," he once said, "need someone to tear my flesh, not someone to caress it." That may be why he left the court of Kozhnitz and its warmth for Peshischa, where the great rebbe, Reb Bunem, in the footsteps of Rabbi Ya'akov Yitzhak the Jew, had established a new school

where rigor and discipline were strict guidelines. He welcomed the new disciple with open tenderness, and yet the newcomer was beardless. Actually, the separation from Peshischa represented an important moment in his life. You must remember that [00:25:00] after the passing of the Preacher of Mezeritch or Kozhnitz, things were never the same. In Kozhnitz, surely not. The son of the preacher, Reb Moishe, did not have his father's stature. Known mainly for his piety and devotion, he wept all the time, but not enough for his learning.

No wonder that the young student from Warsaw who lived in meditation and study did not feel completely at home there. He felt better in Peshischa . When he returned from his visit, he found his first son dead. He connected the two events. So did the leader he left behind. To his close followers, the young Rebbe of Kozhnitz remarked, "He, [00:26:00] the Rebbe of Ger, perturbed my Sabbath. Now, he will be perturbed." And since then, we are told, history repeated itself. Strangely, each visit to Peshischa resulted in another death. Some say 13, others say 17 times when he visited Peshischa , and both numbers figured in the chronicles. Thirteen or seventeen funerals followed. At one of them, the mourning father said, "The day will come when we both -- both of us, the Rebbe of Kozhnitz and

I -- will be in [00:27:00] heaven together. Then, I will sue him before the celestial tribunal."

The Rebbe of Ger, a tragic figure? Yes. The most tragic? Perhaps. Others were afflicted by melancholy. We discussed it here, at this place, several years ago. The greatest of the masters, the Besht, the founder of the movement himself, or the Seer of Lublin, or Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, went through periods of great and deep depression. But surprising as it may sound, he, the first Rebbe of Ger, who may have had better reasons than they, did not. Again: Was he spared by his deep, incommensurable, [00:28:00] unfathomable love for learning that protected him?

When Rebbe Bunem of Peshischa passed away, the circle of close friends waited the traditional month of mourning before looking for a worthy successor. Two were considered worthy candidates, and both refused. One of them, the future master Rebbe Mendel of Kotsk, who at that time, lived in Tomaszów. And his friend, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Ger. Both had been very close to the late master. In fact, the latter was at his bedside during his last hours, listening to his last words. And Rebbe Bunem asked him to burn all his writings, [00:29:00] to the last page. Nothing ought to be spared from the flames. Why? He gave no

reasons. And his disciple didn't ask for any explanation, and he obeyed. Which reminds us of another great master, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who had given similar instructions to his faithful follower, Reb Nathan of Nemyriv, who also obeyed. But then let us also remember, in parentheses, the great Franz Kafka. And his friend, Max Brod. Kafka told Brod the same thing, "Burn all my writings." And thank God, his friend had the courage to disobey. But that's another story.

As for the Rebbe of Ger, our hero [00:30:00] tonight, he himself burned some of his own writings, of his own commentaries. Once at the request of his friend, Reb Mendel of Kotsk, and another time, because -- well, we don't know why. In both cases, he threw his own writings, his own works into the fire, while shedding bitter tears. Strange, this desire to erase all written traces. Was it to avoid false readings and interpretations, or to maintain the quality of the oral tradition that characterized early Hasidism, just as it did the early Talmudic lessons. The Besht himself actually hasn't left any of his teachings in written form. [00:31:00] When someone showed him some notes taken from his sessions, he said, "Nothing there is mine. It is the evil spirits."

As I mentioned earlier, both Reb Mendel and Rabbi Yitzchak Meir, true companions and devoted friends of the school of Peshischa , both refused the honor. Each pointed to the other, let him become the master's heir and successor. Finally, for the sake of Peshischa , it was left up to them to decide. And they met at the village named Zhamot, isolated in an inn, located deep in the woods; they talked and talked. What they said to one another, the arguments they used, the tone of their voices, no one knows to this day. But we do know that both emerged victorious. [00:32:00] One returned to Tomaszów and Kotsk, and the other to Warsaw.

Nevertheless, we also know that the future Rebbe of Ger saw in his friend a worthy successor to Rabbi Bunem and became his follower. Furthermore, he wanted everyone to follow his example. Whenever he met a young student, thirsty for learning, he almost admonished him. "What, you are here with me? You have not been in Tomaszów yet? Go there, and you will feel what our ancestors felt at Sinai." Ah, the wonderful and wonderfully disquieting Rabbi Mendel of Kotsk. We have evoked him here with fear and trembling years ago. Obsessed with truth alone, he sought its fiery power [00:33:00] in extreme solitude and rigor. I revere this teacher, guide, and master, for whom life was meant to be a battlefield where one must walk, run on the



razor's edge, forever oscillating between the dizziness of the height and the fear of the abyss. Why did he avoid those who left their families behind and came to be with him? We shall return to him.

But we are still in Ger. A small village, or city, near Warsaw. Which in Hasidic followers, is even more famous, and surely more meaningful than Warsaw itself. Rabbi Yitzchak Meir is still there in Warsaw, living with his father-in-law who supported him and his family. His spouse, Feigele, worked in a textile store, [00:34:00] which her father purchased for her. That was not infrequent in those times, in the world of Jews in Eastern Europe. The wife worked so as to allow her husband to explore in study the depth of religious wisdom. I know today it doesn't sound right. After all, the wife should always work and the husband never? But then, at that time, who knows? Were the women actually -- were the wives happy? We are told that they were, but who knows? (laughter) Well, she worked, the wife worked simply to allow her husband to study.

So, for a while, she was the bread-giver in the family, until the crisis erupted. Soon, things changed. At one point, in 1831, [00:35:00] the new political situation, the Polish insurrection provoking Russian reprisals affected Jews as well,

and in the battles, the textile store was demolished. The master's father-in-law, Reb Moishe Halfan, was forced to financially support the nationalist rebels, and their defeat resulted in his own downfall. Everything he had was lost. At one point, he was arrested. And since then, the Rebbe's family often suffered from hunger. Literally, the great Talmudic scholar chose to go to work himself. He became the director of a factory that produced wool for prayer shawls. Naturally, the learned, erudite scholar was a weak businessman. [00:36:00] It ended in total failure. Then, he tried selling books. Same results, failure. How about publishing books? He tried and failed. Speaking of his poverty, he once commented, "If I so wish, I could obtain from heaven to make money, but I prefer to submit to God's will than to ask him to submit to my own."

If economic troubles were insufficient, they were followed by more serious ones. Suspected of helping the insurgents, like his father-in-law, he, the master, was imprisoned by the Russian authorities. For how long, again we must admit our lack of precision. We don't know. A day? A night? Longer? What is certain is that he shared his prison cell with underworld [00:37:00] criminals, and that his arrest provoked a wave of public protest, not only among Hasidim, but also among their antagonists, and even among Christians. So much so that the

authorities had to offer him official apologies and asked him to stay put at home. Still, no longer being safe and secure, he felt the need to change his address and name. From Rottenburg, which he was called before, he became Alter.

At the same time, or soon afterwards, Warsaw lost its chief rabbi, Reb Shlomo Zalman. The entire community was plunged into mourning. For 30 days, no public celebrations were allowed, no music was played at any gathering, women would not wear jewelry in the street, so beloved [00:38:00] was their spiritual leader. For his succession, the community's dignitaries and notables turned to Rebbe Yitzchak Meir, our hero tonight, offering him a very high salary. And he said no. Other invitations came from prestigious communities, near and far. He still said no. In the meantime, his reputation grew [inaudible] and wider, reaching religious and social spheres beyond and outside the Hasidic world. When the school of Peshischa needed someone to delegate to other masters, to explain to them the Hasidic message, it was to him they turned. Their delegation of Jewish leaders had to go and visit Sir Moses Montefiore to inform him of the plight of poor, impoverished Jewish families in Warsaw. He was part of it.

[00:39:00] There, we have an interesting story which I heard from his descendant, Shlomo Shamir. And he said that when he met Sir Moses Montefiore, he asked him to intervene with the authorities not to force Jewish schoolchildren to learn Russian. They only had to learn Talmud, Hebrew, and Yiddish. But why not learn a foreign language, wondered Montefiore? If Mordechai from the Book of Esther in Persia had not studied Persian, the foreign language of the time, he wouldn't have understood the high officials, Bigthan and Teresh, who conspired to kill King Ahasuerus. And therefore, actually, because of his understanding what they wanted to do, the King, [00:40:00] or the emperor, his life was saved. And therefore, later on, the Jews were saved. "You may be right," said the Rebbe. "But if Jewish children had to learn Persian in Jewish schools, the two conspirators would have known that they knew and that he knew Persian. And then, they would have been more careful not to chat about it in the presence of Mordechai the Jew."

Nevertheless, his argument was a better one. When a dramatic debate -- we spoke about it -- between representatives of the two factions in Hasidism at the historic wedding of Ostilla, one side's spokesman for the Lublin establishment, those of the dissident Pshiskhe on the other, his voice was dominant. In general, what was his role outside the Hasidic world? We don't

know, we really don't. Some sources [00:41:00] maintain that his arrest was due to his activities against the forced anti-assimilationist policy of the government. Together with Rabbi Yitzhak of Worke the man who established a school, the school of silence, the man who was asked once by a friend of his how he learned silence. He didn't answer. (laughter) But together, the two fought against the laws prohibiting Jews from wearing their traditional garments and beards. And in that fight, they also had to combat fellow Jews, who preached total emancipation.

Inside the Hasidic community itself, opinions varied. Facing the question whether pious Jews ought to violate the laws and risk prison or even death, some answered in the affirmative. Others, surprisingly including the Rebbe [00:42:00] of Kotsk, declared that the choice of garments to be worn does not derive from Biblical law and do not deserve to go to the limits of choosing death, rather than transgression. After all, they said, didn't uncle Esau wear gentile clothes when he appeared before his father, Jacob? Eventually, the anti-Hasidic laws were defeated. Was it because of the Hasidic protest? We don't know. But they were.

And the Rebbe of Ger continued to live his life fully in the Hasidic universe--that suddenly underwent a convulsion, which

on all levels, in every family at home, produced powerful shockwaves. And it came from Kotsk. The friend of our hero. From Kotsk, where Rabbi Mendel began a process of personal withdrawal from his fervent, [00:43:00] if not ecstatic, followers. He slowly but irrevocably made himself inaccessible, invisible, unreachable to them. Locked in a secret quest which no one could explain, in a small room, through a hole in the wall, he would observe students in prayer and discussions. And when he appeared, usually at night, they were seized with panic and ran away. Only two persons were allowed to see him, his servant, Rabbi Hersh Tomashover, and his friend, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Ger. They did nothing to explain his retreat from anyone else.

There, too, we have already studied here his life and teachings long ago. His dark fire continues to burn in my memory. His isolation aroused curiosity and anguish. And also, [00:44:00] resentment in his own circle. At the end, one of his favorite disciples, Reb Mordechai Yosef, together with the group of dissatisfied dissidents, left him and established their own little kingdom in a place called Izbica. And they were a minority. Most disciples stayed, at least in the beginning, where they were. And one of them explained his attitude. "The Talmud tells us of Rabban Gamliel's school, that in the time of

Hillel the Elder, only he whose inner life was reflected in his outside behavior was admitted inside. And for him, the gates were open. Others were rejected." Added the Hasid, "In Kotsk, what we do is simple. If the doors [00:45:00] are locked, we break the glass and enter through the window."

In Kotsk itself, there was fear that the future Rebbe of Ger may join the dissidents. There were rumors to this effect, all unfounded. He remained faithful. Reb Mendel thanked him for his loyalty. "You, Yitzchak Meir," he said, "did not forget me, and I shall remember it until my last day." So maybe imagining his friend happy, how could he be when so many Jews in the region still in exile enduring oppression, and then also, how could a father who lost one child after another be happy? How could he be happy in 1839 when in Kotsk, things were worsening daily? Reb Mendel, the secretive [00:46:00] master, his great and fearsome friend and teacher was taken ill and refused to see doctors. The Rebbe of Ger was urged to intercede with him. He hurried there immediately, and the two friends spent hours together. And the illustrious, stubborn patient gave in, he took medications for a while, then he stopped.

Word spread that the end was nearing. Wishing to be there, disciples and followers converged on his home. They recited

psalms, praying with their heart and soul for his days to be prolonged. He heard them and commented, "They would do better to spend their energy in study." Death did not frighten him. To his son-in-law, Reb Avrom of Sochaczew, the *Avnei Nezer*, he whispered, "What is there to be afraid of? One leaves one room for another, a better one." And he added, [00:47:00] "Study is what matters." He closed his eyes, forever.

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir was present at the funeral; he wept saying, "You don't even know what you just lost." Thus was officially born the school of Ger. Was it different from Kotsk? Very different, surely in style. More Beshtian, accentuating collective fervor more than solitary meditation. Here, young students were not chased away. Too many arrived? Never enough for those who loved learning in depth a page, a problem, an ancient Talmudic and medieval commentaries. What was essential was the total connection with Torah, which means both practice and study. Hundreds, rumors spoke of thousands, of followers hurried to spend Passover under his roof. He would tell them, "Listen. I am not [00:48:00] just a regular teacher for everyone. I don't need money. Honors, I had enough in my life. I don't need more now. What I desire most is to have you penetrated by truth, by helping you come closer to our Father in



heaven. And he who wants something else, his place is not here."

Eventually, he left Warsaw for nearby Ger. His academy, his yeshiva, his school attracted the best students as well as their teachers, whose colleagues and friend he wanted to be. Among them was the greatest to embody Hasidic thought such Reb Heynekh of Aleksander, Rabbi Akiva Eiger, Reb Azriel Charif, Reb Asher Ashkenazi and Shloyme Soifer, Reb Yisroel Salanter, the renowned, inspiring founder of the Mussar movement. What attracted so many people from so many spheres? [00:49:00] He did not perform miracles. He was just a spiritual guide on whom they could lean in moments of distress or doubt. To them, his words had both strength and weight, and occasional humor that resonated with joy in their hearts. One day, he remarked, "It happens that you hear someone declaring that he is giving up on the world, but is the world really his for him to renounce it?" And also, "One of the ten curses that God sent upon Pharaoh's Egypt was darkness. The text says man no longer saw his brother, and not one moved from this place." Commented the teacher, "It means that he who does not see his brother did not move from his place in darkness."

Incidentally, the Rebbe of Kotsk interpreted the same [00:50:00] words differently. "It is not," said he, "that people did not see one another because of the darkness, no. It was because they did not see one another that darkness existed. In other words, their own darkness was the curse in Egypt." Another day, Reb Yitzchak Meir recalled the sins of our ancestors committed while wandering in the desert. "Remember," he said, "it is also with their sins that the Torah, that Scripture was made. And this. "The Torah tells us that the voice of God was heard at Sinai. That means according to the translation of the Targum, that it continued to reverberate uninterruptedly, which means until today. For it is written 'hayom,' which means today, you will hear my voice, and today means today, now." And also, in Yom Kippur, [00:51:00] the name of the great pardon, the sermon, he quoted Hillel the Elder, who said "If I am not for myself, who will be? And if I do not what I must do, who will do it? And if not "now," when?" The Rebbe went deeper into the question. When will this "now" be here? This "now" has never existed before and will never exist again. As the Book of Splendor, the holy, mystical book the Zohar says, "The garments of the morning are not the same as those of the evening."

He loved to speak of the inner point. He wrote Hebrew poems. He was a man who knew so much of so many fields, so many areas.

He says, "Why did God tell Abraham in the Bible, the man of absolute faith, not [00:52:00] to worry?" Said he, "Because Abraham did worry. Abraham worried that God might find another messenger worthier than he." After all, he loved to quote Reb Moshe Leib Sassover's aphorism, who said, "The world is dangerous like a sword's edge. There is an abyss on one side and an abyss on the other." In 1866, at the age of 67, he fell ill. Physically and mentally exhausted, a leg wound gave him atrocious pain. On another level, he could not bear the thought that the new law would compel Talmudic students to enlist for military service, which would surely stop them from learning sacred texts. [00:53:00] So on the eve of Yom Kippur, he shouted with all his strength, "We must do something. We must do everything to prevent students of Torah from being torn away from Torah."

Following the solemn and poignant evening [inaudible] of Neilah, which is the closure of the whole ceremony, he turned to a confidante and whispered, "I will not live through the coming year, I know it. Every year at this hour, I would see Prophet Elijah, who would wear white clothes and smile at me. This evening, he seemed angry." Several weeks afterwards, after disturbing signals appeared, one Shabbat, the Biblical portion was read dealing with the sacrifice of the red cow, which the

sages interpreted as atonement for the death of one just man. That afternoon, during the mystical third meal, [00:54:00] the disciples were unable to chant the usual hymns. Fifteen minutes before the end of the Sabbath, the Rebbe recited a psalm which one reads at funerals. In the middle, he stopped and returned his soul to his creator. And the Hasidim lamented, "Woe to a world that has lost its leader, and woe to the ship that has lost its captain." "A great darkness has descended upon the world," echoed Rebbe Avrom of Ciechanów. Reb Lipman of Radomsk broke down in tears. "I have nothing more to do in this world, I must ascend to heaven to welcome the Rebbe of Ger next Sabbath, with a special song." He died that Sabbath while studying the Book of Splendor.

What the first Rebbe of Ger left as a heritage [00:55:00] an entire school, an entire movement, that still attracts hundreds of followers and disciples. They are recognized by their allegiance to his memory and by their love for his work. His immediate successors, particularly the *Sfas Emes*, or language of truth, brought new rigor and lasting honor to his name and accomplishments. Their Hasidim are also known for their solidarity. It is characterized by the following story, which I heard from a Gerrer Hasid in the shtibl on 101st Street in Manhattan. One day, the Rebbe asked one of his followers, "How

is a certain Hasid? He used to daven here with us." "I don't know yet," the man answered. "I haven't seen him for a long time." "What?" said the Rebbe. "You are both followers of Ger. You both study the same sources, repeat the same stories, and recite the same prayers. [00:56:00] And you don't know what your fellow Hasid is doing? Whether he is happy in his business and at peace with his fate? Whether his family is healthy? Whether his daughters are married? Whether they have children? And you consider yourself a follower of Ger?"

Several times this evening, we have mentioned his tragic destiny. Tragic it was. Year after year, a child was gone. In a house of mourning, he observed the laws of mourning. Each time, he sat down for the shiva period and recovered. How did he cope with so much pain? How did he go on living, praying, studying, and teaching, while waiting for the next funeral of another one of his children? The last of his sons, Reb Avrom Mordechai, who died at 40 in 1855, leaving behind a widow with many [00:57:00] young children. Family, relatives, friends, and Hasidim cried at the funeral. To his wife, the Rebbe said, our faith will be a consolation to others, who on similar occasions would be able to say, "Yitzchak Meir's sorrows were greater than ours. And he didn't complain, so why should we?"

I must say that at least I heard one descendant of the Rebbe, who is here, again I quote him, Shlomo Shamir, who said that he doesn't think the whole thing happened. That is so frequent in Hasidism. You hear a story and immediately, the opposite. But his argument is that we don't know where the 17 graves are. I still believe the story happened. As I said earlier, I heard it in the Gerrer shtibl from survivors of Treblinka. And they quoted it each time the greatest tragedy [00:58:00] was evoked.

Is it possible, is it even conceivable, that at least to his distant followers, his tragedy was meant to be an example to be followed essentially or to later by a different kind of survivors? As a rule, I always worry over analogies when we deal with the unspeakable event. Therefore, I tell the story, the first Rebbe responds to tragedy not as an answer. I fervently believe that in this respect, there is no answer. But I tell it simply as a desire to include it in the vast framework of our collective memory. That wounded memory is condemned to remain until the end of times an eternal question mark. It's God alone must answer. [00:59:00] Thank you. (audience applause)

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