

92NY

The Elie Wiesel Living Archive HASIDISM — Icebreaker Handout — Jewish Adults

My father, an enlightened spirit, believed
in man.
My grandfather, a fervent Hasid, believed
in God.
The one taught me to speak, the other to sing.
Both loved stories.
And when I tell mine, I hear their voices.
Whispering from beyond the silenced storm,
they are what links the survivor to their memory.

~ Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters

- Who tells the stories of your family? How?
- What objects/items hold the stories of your life?
- If your house was on fire (God forbid), what would you take out first? Why?

Hasidism's Components

Prof. Wiesel's teachings on Hasidism highlight several aspects:

a) Masters. Almost all of Prof. Wiesel's 92Y lectures on Hasidism focus on the Hasidic master (also called the Rebbe or Tzadik). "The Relevance of Hasidism Today" similarly begins with this focus:

"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."

The story about the pipe that follows is typical of Hasidic stories in its focus on the relation between master and disciple—and of Professor Wiesel’s special emphasis on the crucial role of memory:

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.”

(In contrast, Rabbi Nachman’s stories—often fables of kings and princes—are atypical).

b) Song. The beautiful quotation cited at the beginning of the handout highlights “speaking” and “singing.” It is the latter that Hasidism has also developed in a unique way, making *nigun* or melody a path of spiritual growth for Hasidim (and others). This dimension is important for Prof. Wiesel, who (in addition to being himself a hasid) had a special sensitivity to nigun and music. Wonderfully, he sings one of these melodies at the conclusion of “The Relevance” lecture [1:07:43 – 1:09:17].

c) fervor/celebration/joy. Singing and connection to a spiritual Masters are two Hasidic paths toward bringing *fervor* to Jewish life. Professor Wiesel emphasized these life-enhancing aspects of Hasidism again and again, in book after book and essay after essay.

Hasidism's Background & Transcript

28.5 minutes through 32 minutes, then 35 to 37 minutes

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. 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, 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, 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...

...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 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.

Prompts: According to Professor Wiesel:

- What are people searching for today?
- Why does Hasidism place such emphasis on prayer?
- What are today's rebellions? How might they be aligned with Hasidism's message?
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Take a moment to reflect on the following quote:

“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?”

This talk was given in 1991. In the summer of 2020 a series of new movements began, rooted in the pursuit of racial justice and equality. In addition to race, we see people seeking gender equality, fairness and equal access to everyone in spite of age, religion, ability, and more. Consider for a moment all the ways in which our society may still be in “a protest against fear... despair... the unknown...”

Consider some areas where this is relevant today in your community or country:

Later in this lesson, we will contemplate areas where we might be able to take action now. Please feel free to use this space for notes...

Rabbi Nachman & Madness – Transcript & Handout

(14 minutes & 30 seconds through 19 minutes & 10 seconds)

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?” 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.”

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, 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, 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, something of you goes with the other.

CONSIDER THIS:

As you listen (and read along, if you like) to Rabbi Nachman's story, as told by Elie Wiesel, consider the following:

- How do the two endings differ?
- Which ending do you prefer?

The theme of "madness" comes up in both versions of the story.

What do you think "madness" means to Rabbi Nachman? To Professor Wiesel? To you?

In what ways have, can, or do Jewish people tell the world "You are mad" - today and throughout history?

In what ways do you think Jewish people *should be* (or are) responsible for telling the world "You are mad"?

Use Your Voice:

Now it is time to contemplate ways in which participants can take action in their own lives, communities and beyond. This can include drafting letters to elected officials, school boards, other local, national and international organizations, or may even include starting one's own advocacy group. The message should be rooted in the tenets of Hasidism, encouraging action on a policy level. While the ideal outcome is true action, this is a time for brainstorming, collaborating and planning. Elie Wiesel's message truly encourages action rooted in deep learning.

Rabbi Nachman and Psychology – Transcript and Handout

(20 minutes through 25 minutes)

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. 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) *[skip ahead]*

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, 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. (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.**

Consider & Discuss:

How does the story show that, as Professor Wiesel says, "there is always hope"?

Why is important that the wise person "knows what to do with someone else"?

Who are the wise people in your life? And who are the roosters? When have you been either?

