

**The Elie Wiesel Living Archive
Teaching/Study Guide #2 Primordial Questions**

In Hasidism: Rabbi Shneur Zalman (1981; 15th anniversary year):

context:

a) Professor Wiesel grew up in Sighet, Hungary, where a number of Hasidic courts were based (including Vizhnitz, Sighet, Satmar, and Kalem). EW's maternal grandfather was a well-known Hasid of Vizhnitz—and Professor Wiesel always identified himself (in the 92Y lectures as well as elsewhere) as a Hasid of Vizhnitz. A Hasid is generally a follower of a specific Hasidic Rebbe or Master—and EW continued to maintain a relationship with the Vizhnitz Rebbes after the war. In addition, he cultivated a close connection to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, based in Brooklyn. (See for example the first excerpt from “Elie Wiesel on Simchat Torah”). EW makes reference to the Lubavitcher Rebbe early in this lecture.

Professor Wiesel notes that the Lubavitcher Rebbe urged him to write a book on the founder of Chabad Hasidism, Rabbi Shneur Zalmen of Liadi, also known as the Baal HaTanya. The present lecture features Rabbi Shneur Zalmen (1745-1812). The names “Lubavitch” and “Chabad” refer to the same group and movement within Hasidism.

b) Masters. Almost all of Prof. Wiesel's lectures and book chapters on Hasidism focus on the master (also called the Rebbe or Tzadik). Indeed, the sequel to his book, *Souls on Fire*, is entitled, *Somewhere a Master*. The founder of Hasidism, Israel Baal Shem Tov, emphasized a joyful service of the Almighty; his successor, Rabbi Dovber, the Maggid of Mezeritch, continued that emphasis but also nurtured a group of students whom he sent with this message to towns and regions of Eastern Europe. Rabbi Shneur Zalmen belonged to this group and brought the Hasidic teachings to the Jews of White Russia.

This was Professor Wiesel's 18th 92Y lecture on Hasidism. He gave four subsequent lectures that center on a Hasidic Master. He also presented three general lectures on Hasidism: 1) *The Relevance of Hasidism Today* (1991); *In Hasidism: Community* (1995); and *Joy in Hasidism* (1996). EW published a number of books devoted in whole or in part to Hasidism that were based on the lectures. The opening two chapters and the epilogue of *Souls on Fire* (1972) are especially helpful in giving historical, thematic, and personal context to the lecture on Rabbi Shneur Zalmen.

c) With the exception of the three lectures noted above, EW approached Hasidism and Hasidic Masters by way of “portraits.” This is EW's word for the form in which he transmitted all of his Torah lessons: Biblical, Talmudic or Hasidic. Most of the time, he did not choose to take the usual steps, which consists of quoting verses and analyzing them; nor did he highlight a theme and examine it from different angles. **See Handout Quotation 1c**, for 1) my description of EW's distinctive manner of Torah study, and 2) EW's comments on the special challenge brought to this approach by the study of Rabbi Shneur Zalmen.

According to what Professor Wiesel says in the handout, what might a portrait yield that study of a page of a book would not? How does the lecture itself give us further ideas about what had Professor Wiesel choose this approach?

II) “Where are you?” (In Hebrew: *Ayeka*). For Professor Wiesel, questions serve as the essential path to learning. The lecture’s focus on the question, **Ayeka/where are you?**, thus brings this dimension of Professor Wiesel’s inspired pedagogy into sharp relief.

The story of Rabb Shneur Zalmen’s incarceration is one that Professor Wiesel tells numbers of other times in his writing and teaching, including in the opening paragraphs to the second volume of his autobiography, *And the Sea is Never Full*.

In these tellings, the emphasis falls on a famous episode where the prison’s warden seeks the Rebbe’s help in understanding an enigmatic biblical passage: How, the warden asks the sage, can G-d call out to Adam and Eve “Ayeka,” where are you? How can the One who is Omniscient, all-knowing, not know something as simple as where Adam is hiding?

See Handout Quotation IIa

- 1) How would you describe the Rabbi Shneur Zalmen’s interpretation of the verse?
- 2) “After all he is a warden, but he is in prison.” How might this sentence (which is one of EW’s comments on the story) have to do with the change the warden undergoes?

See Handout Quotation IIb

EW returns to “Ayeka” (joined to a conversation about the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac) at the conclusion of his lecture.

The shift from the beginning of the lecture to its end is from *you* to *we*: “But where are we?” How does the concluding “we” challenge us to think of the “primordial question” in a new way? (see below)

See Handout Quotation IIc

EW refers to “where are you” as the “primordial question.” Why might it earn that title? In what way do EW’s comments expand the story’s meaning and relevance?

III) “We have said it many times. Hasidism is neither doctrine nor theory. It is an experience to be felt and communicated, to be lived from within. You must be moved by it and moved with it. Unless you are ready to become part of it, to integrate its song into your own life, you will sense neither its meaning nor its beauty.”

What does EW mean when he says, “lived from within”? To your mind, how does EW’s manner of teaching about Rabbi Shneur Zalmen make us “ready to become a part of it,” to live it “from within”?

IV) “to integrate its song into your own life”

Hasidism has developed Jewish song and singing 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 of Hasidism” lecture; our website contains a list of the other Y lectures in which Prof. Wiesel sings (and comments on) nigunim/Hasidic melodies.

Hasidic melodies have been composed both by Masters and by their Hasidim; Rabbi Shneur Zalmen composed ten melodies. About his famous melody, “Arba Babos” (Four Stanzas), Professor Wiesel comments in his lecture: it is a “mystical melody in which words become silence and silence turns into melody again; a song so profound, so hidden, so pure that you hear it literally with your soul.”

What could Professor Wiesel mean by hearing “with your soul”? How does his special description give us insight into the importance of song for Hasidism and for Rabbi Shneur Zalmen? How might it give us deeper understanding into a Hasidic “commitment to fervor”--which is the lecture’s subtitle?

Often, the important role of song in Hasidism dovetails with its stress on joy and celebration. Professor Wiesel emphasized these life-enhancing aspects of Hasidism again and again, in book after book and essay after essay. Indeed, the original French title of EW’s book, *Souls on Fire*, is *Celebration Hassidique* (Hasidic Celebration). Where do we find reference to joy and celebration in the lecture? In what way is this aspect of Hasidism brought into sharper focus in Professor Wiesel’s account of meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe on Simchat Torah?