

**The Elie Wiesel Living Archive**

**Handout Lesson #2 In Hasidism: Rabbi Shneur Zalmen of Liadi: A Commitment to Fervor**

Ic) Alan Rosen, "Introduction." *Filled with Fire and Light*. "The portraits narrate the life of a biblical personage, Talmudic sage, or Hasidic master, whose contribution to the Jewish realm of experience has been profound, distinctive, exemplary, and eternal. In some cases, the details of the life are fairly well known; often, they are obscure. Out of a multitude of sources, EW culls facts, legends, episodes, stories, anecdotes, distilling reams of information on the subject's family and friends, teachers and students, obsessions and antipathies.

His interest in doing so is not, however, mainly historical. He is rather intent on showing why it is important for us--today, now--to be aware of such a personage, sage, or master. How do these spiritual giants inspire in the reader a desire to emulate them in his or her quest for knowledge, in nurturing an unbounded compassion for others, in setting forth a bold vision for the future of the Jewish people--and, in the case of some personages, in resolving to live a meaningful life after suffering immense personal loss or witnessing collective catastrophe."

In this light, the portraits dramatize how a single individual has made, and can make, a difference.

EW: "Well, I admit [Rabbi Shneur Zalmen] worried me. He loomed too large. He seemed too complex and intellectual a character to be talked about in one session. At one point I thought perhaps what we ought to do is to take one page of his masterwork, the Tanya or the Shulchan Aruch, distribute it among you and study only that page. And through that page we shall learn more about him and his time and teaching and his personality.

But that would be out of place, for until now we have always tried to approach these masters through the portraits around them, about them, through the stories told by or about them. And therefore we should do the same about him."

II a) "In a secret cell of an isolated wing a solitary prisoner, a famous one. He has been there for weeks and weeks since the month of Tishrei. It is now almost Hanukah. How much longer will they keep him in jail? How much longer will his trial continue? Suddenly the door opens, and the prison warden enters. He stares at the prisoner for a long, long moment. But the prisoner, lost in meditation, doesn't at first notice the visitor and jumps at the sound of his voice.

"I have been told," says the prison warden, "that you are erudite, that you know many things about many subjects. So then explain to me this passage from Genesis. We are told that Adam is running away from God, and God asks [00:02:00] him, *Ayeka*, where are you? Really? How can that be? Is it conceivable God, who does and sees and knows everything doesn't know where Adam is?"

"May I ask you a question first?" says the prisoner. The warden nods. "Do you believe in the Bible? Do you believe that it is divinely inspired and that it transcends individuals just as it goes beyond time?" "Yes." "Then this is how one must read that passage. God's question refers to all men of all times. God is asking us where are you in the world? What is your place in it? What have you done with the 46 years that you have already lived?" And the warden is seized by incontrollable trembling. He is 46 years old. And the question is one that touches a vulnerable spot. [00:03:00] Where is he in his own life? After all he is a warden, but he is in prison.

He leaves the cell a changed person. You may by now have recognized the prisoner, the great Rabbi Shneur Zalmen of Liadi, or as some call him, the Rav of Liadi, or as we refer to him, the Old Rebbe, the Alter Rebbe.”

II b) “Why the joy? Because his son is saved? No: Because God's will has nevertheless been accomplished. Isaac was alive and so was Abraham—and yet, God's will had been fulfilled. Could we claim the same thing? Have we accomplished God's will? In other words: do we know where we are in the world? Are we sure of having uttered but one true word, of having done one good deed, of having restored one spark to its holy origins? Are we sure that we are not living someone else's life?

The three disciples fall silent, and Rebbe Shneur Zalmen, the future Master of Liadi and Chabad, is listening—he is listening to the silence of night, and the fire illuminating its shadows, he is listening to all the sounds in the world since creation—and we, now and forever, shall listen to him.

Where is he? Better yet: where are we?

IIc:

In your view, what is the first question, the one that determines all others?

EW: For me the "first question" depends on many things: the moment, the day, my mood, the situation in which I find myself. But most often, it is the first question asked in the Bible: "Where art thou?" In other words, Where am I? God asks Adam, Ayaikah [sic]?, "Where art thou?" and this, I think, is the primordial question. Where are you in life? At each tragedy, each situation, we ask ourselves, What is my role in this? Where is my place—whether in God's grand design or in the mean designs of men? What is my responsibility to my child, to the dead, to the living?

*Evil and Exile* (1987), p. 153