

**Elie Wiesel Legends of Hasidism: Rabbi Menachem-Mendel of Kotzk**

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**Elie Wiesel:**

Somewhere beyond the horizon, between Lublin and Warsaw, in a tiny village of 3,000 inhabitants, members of the strangest Hasidic community in the world are about to partake in the first meal of Shabbat. The place is Kotsk. The year is 1839. And if it is not to the time that I am intending tonight to take you back, it is at least the place, Kotsk. Kotsk is where I do intend to invite you tonight.

It is [00:01:00] winter, and winters are extremely cold in that region. Mountains of snow surround a village, and smaller ones surround every house, every hut. But inside a building, a wooden shack, with tables and benches and little else, the crowd seems unaware of the weather. All eyes converge upon a man who although in his early fifties looks much older. At the head of the long, rectangular table, lost in thought, tense and awakening to anger, the rebbe seems in no hurry to sanctify the wine before him. There is something extraordinary in the way he stares at the candlelight. He breathes heavily. Something is in his eye [00:02:00] that make people wonder. One feels that this man, with his broad shoulders, with wild beard, and

frightening face, is about to open who knows what gates before who knows what storms. No one dares to move, to utter a sound, silence becoming a weight which no one dares to upset.

And then, all of a sudden, it happens. "It," what? What happens? There were many witnesses to the event, but few left written testimony about it. In fact, to this day, 108 years later, we still are in the dark. We don't know. All we know is that some terrible event did take place. [00:03:00] Some Hasidim referred to it as "the eclipse." Others say that evening the holy rebbe fell sick, or that evening he chose to surprise Heaven and Earth. One version reads as follows: "After a long and heavy silence, the rebbe threw his head back and shouted, '*Leit din v'leit dayan.*' 'This world of ours is without judge or judgment.'" Another version: "Silently, looking intensely at the candles, he slowly, very slowly, stretched out his hand and put out the light. It was Shabbat."

And still another version: "Preoccupied, worried about the pogroms that had erupted in that part of Eastern Europe, [00:04:00] and there were many pogroms: Jews killed by Poles who suspected them of being pro-Russian, and Jews killed by Russians who, as usual, suspected them of being pro-Polish. So, as a result of these pogroms, the rebbe simply could not go on

with the service, with the traditional ceremony. He did not touch the wine, did not recite the blessing, but, on the contrary, seized with fury, banged on the table, and shouted, 'I demand justice. I want a judgment.' *Esav* -- Esau -- shed only three tears when his brother Jacob cheated him by taking away his *bekhorah*, his right as a firstborn, yet we still pay for them with rivers of tears and oceans of blood. [00:05:00] And then the rebbe asked, 'How long will this injustice last? I can tolerate it no longer.' And then, noticing the horrified look in all the eyes surrounding him, he sensed their fear, and went on screaming, 'What are you afraid of? You are nothing but hypocrites, liars, and flatterers. Go to hell, all of you, and leave me alone.'"

Which of these versions is true? They all end the same way: he lost consciousness and had to be carried out to his room, where he stayed, in quasi-absolute solitude until he died some 20 years later. The rebbe -- you have already [00:06:00] guessed it -- was Reb Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, the most tragic, the most eccentric figure in Hasidism. There are many legends about him, and all bear his imprint, and each one adds a shadow to the night which he embodied.

Of the more than thousand rebbe's the Hasidic movement had in Europe, he's the most original one. He transcended his own legend. The more one talks about him, the more his mystery grows. Alive, people feared his look. Even now, among Hasidim, his tales are remembered only in a murmur, while lowering our heads. One day he appeared in his *beit midrash*, in his synagogue, where for years [00:07:00] stubborn disciples were studying or praying or meditating in silence, sacred or forlorn. He shook his head and said to his faithful friend and confidant, Reb Hersh Tomashover, "Look at them, but look at them, and look at me. Had I been younger, they would not have dared coming so many, so close." And he returned to his isolation.

Why was he running away from people who believed in him? Against whom was this rebellion directed? What was his aim in severing whatever links man has with man? Like Rimbaud, he rejected admiration. Like Hölderlin, he turned prayer into protest. Like Prometheus, he turned [00:08:00] into fire whatever he touched. Was he a saint? A poet? A fallen angel? He defies classification, as does his behavior. Of course, psychiatrists would relish his presence. Philosophers would feel helpless. As for novelists, don't ask me. (laughter)

"A prisoner is the freest man of all," said Jean-Paul Sartre, and he knows nothing about it. This, however, surely applies to the Rebbe of Kotsk, who knew something about it. We do not know whose prisoner he was, but we do know how free he became, and we also know that at one time or another, all those who saw him [00:09:00] became his prisoners.

Here I must make a confession, in the true spirit of Kotsk. Two weeks ago, when we last met, I had a terrible experience before. I had prepared my talk for many weeks, studying the Midrash, and especially concentrating on the character of Job. And in studying Job, I almost became Job, and then you did. At the last moment, really at the last moment, two hours before I came here, Professor Lieberman of the Seminary was very kind and sent me something that he has written before, on the same subject. Needless to tell you that he almost upset all my theories, and I was the most miserable person [00:10:00] that you could imagine, even more than Job.

Tonight, I am almost in a similar situation. I tried to find anything that I could in the last couple weeks, parallely with the Midrash, on the Rebbe of Kotsk. Why? Why did I choose Kotsk? Actually, in order to bring you into the palace of Hasidism, I could have chosen Rabbis -- rebbes, rather -- who

are more characteristic of the spirit of Hasidism. I could have chosen the Baal Shem Tov, of course, or Rebbe Pinchas of Koretz, or the Berdichever, or the Apter. There are so many. Kotsk is certainly not characteristic of Hasidism. On the contrary, it is [00:11:00] anti, it is the awakening against.

I became almost a Hasid of Kotsk. I say almost because I am still a Vizhnitzer Hasid. I became almost a Hasid thanks to probably the greatest writer on Hasidism today, Professor Heschel. Professor Heschel, I don't even think that he is a Kotsker Hasid, but once he delivered a lecture on Kotsk, and I read his lecture, and the figure, from what he wrote, was so striking, so haunting, that literally I could not free myself from it. So I, for years, asked Professor Heschel, "You must write on Kotsk, [00:12:00] a real book on Kotsk." And for years Professor Heschel refused. Finally he agreed, and finally today I read it. (laughter) So, in a way, it is my punishment. In another way, of course, it is really a chutzpah to talk of Kotsk in the presence of Professor Heschel here. But the meaning of Kotsk, as you will see later, is to have chutzpah. (laughter)

I said that the figure of Kotsk haunted me; yet, there is no portrait or photography of him. All that is known of his habits and ideas we learn from his disciples. He himself wrote every

day, [00:13:00] but burned what he had written every evening.

And fortunately, many writers are not Kotsker Hasidism.

(laughter) Some Hasidim believe that, like his master, the very celebrated Yid of Pshiskhe, his dream was to compose a definitive book called *The Book of Man*, containing everything that can and cannot be said on the subject. Yet, he had meant to condense it into one page only, and this page he wrote and wrote and rewrote, and destroyed immediately each time.

Strange. Several hours before he died, he was still obsessed by this fear that perhaps something of his writings might survive him. He questioned his [00:14:00] old friend, the Rebbe of Ger, "Did you look well? Everywhere? In all the closets? In all the books? Are you sure that not one word remains, that everything is gone?"

Why didn't he want his thoughts to be preserved in a book? Once he gave the following reason: "Suppose," he said, "I wrote a book. Who would read it? Jews." Little did he know.

(laughter) "What kind of Jews? Our kind. Those who work hard during the week and have time for reading only on Shabbat, but even then they have more important things to do than reading books. They go to the mikveh, the ritual bath, the synagogue. They attend long services, and listen to sermons." [00:15:00] Apparently he knew what the American rabbis do. (laughter)

"Then they return home, exhausted. Then they had lunch, and this also tires them, so they decide to rest on the sofa. And then, at last, they take a book to read, my book. But fatigue naturally overcomes them. They fall asleep, and the book -- mine -- is on the floor. Am I then to write a book for that?"  
(laughter)

Lermontov, who did not destroy his writings, fortunately, uses the expression "prophetic anxiety" with regard to poetic creativity. One finds it in all tales concerning Reb Mendel Kotsker. All are profoundly disturbing. One recognizes a Kotsker [00:16:00] tale with no difficulty. While many Hasidic stories could be attributed to more than one rebbe, his belong to him alone. His stem from another source, another world, filled with dark powers, conflicts, and brutal violence, a world in which man attempts but cannot come to terms with his own mystery. In the world of Kotsk, man is condemned to choose between two extremes, between truth and the appearance of truth, salvation and comfort, between curses and rewards. It is one or the other and nothing else. "Only horses march in the middle of the road," said the Rebbe, and his road explored the ultimate ends of being and nothingness. "I stand," said he, "with one leg in the Seventh Heaven and with the other in Hell.

[00:17:00] It is difficult to be in both kingdoms and beyond at



once. So what? Who says that man must maintain his balance? Who says that to be a Jew means to accept his condition always? [00:17:19-00:17:28] (," Zol dos harts tsezetst vern, di pleytses tsepikt vern. Zoln himlen zikh aynbrekhn un der mentsh zol fun zayn veg nisht rirn. said the Rebbe. "Let your heart burst into pieces. Let your shoulders break. Let Heaven and Earth unite in fury. But man is not to give up his quest. Jacob fought with the angel, and because he dared doing so, because he dared defeat him, God, he got his name, Israel. But then, at dawn, Jacob, a good Jew, had pity and sent the angel away. [00:18:00] He shouldn't have. The angel returned more than once, under more than one disguise. He might have even disguised himself as Jacob. And now, one must fight him again, alone, against eternity, against generations of dead weighing upon his memory." Reb Mendel Kotsker is this lonely fighter, this fighter who, having reached a point of no return, is no longer waiting for anything or anyone. "The Messiah will come," he said. "The Messiah will come and liberate the world, but could find no one to redeem."

Do you remember the poem of Ya'akov Cahan, an Israeli poet? "Three Jews were taking appropriate measures to bring the Messiah by force. One night they [00:19:00] fell asleep. A child who happened to be there saw a stranger come in, look

around, tell a few tales, and leave. When the Jews awoke the child told them, 'A stranger came in, looked around, told a few tales, and left.' Then the Jews cried out, 'He came, but we were asleep.' Was it him? It doesn't matter. What does matter is that they had wanted him to come." You surely know the story of the man who dreams that a stranger enters his room at night. "Who are you?" he shouts hysterically. And the stranger replies, "You are asking me? It's your dream." (laughter) However, [00:20:00] with Kotsk, dreams turn into nightmares.

At this point it might be useful to remind you of what you already know: namely, that whatever Kotsk stands for runs, in a way, against the tradition of Hasidism, the tradition of Medzhybizh, and its teachings. Since the Baal Shem Tov, oppressed Jews discovered a way to draw joy from their very oppression and transmute it into prayer. Hasidic rebbes brought renewed life to Jewish communities, consoled the humble, and offered a smiling face to those who, in small, forsaken villages, needed such smiles in order to live, to believe, and, above all, to survive.

If the Hasidic movement took root so fast, and covered so much [00:21:00] territory, remember: its march to conquest lasted 20 years. If in 20 years it performed such overall changes within

European Jewry, it was precisely because it came at a time when Jewish multitudes needed hope more than fear, for fear they had enough, and hope, none. Broken and breathless as a result of pogroms and ill-fated Sabbatean ventures, the Jew in the Ukraine, in Poland, and everywhere in Eastern Europe, in order not to go under, had to convince himself that even at a distance, far from the source and the center of Judaism, he could define himself as Jewish, for God is to be found not only in celestial spheres of knowledge but also in small things, in everyday events, [00:22:00] and that he can be attained through simplicity. When things go bad, when pain becomes unbearable, when all seems lost, the Jew can still tell the tale of his experience, and, thus, accomplish miracles. This was the teaching of Hasidism.

The Baal Shem Tov and his disciples understood that a time had come to wage war against resignation, and, even more, against despair. They restored the sacred unto the individual, and linked him to others, and his experience to a collective one. To the Jew isolated and singled out as victim, the Baal Shem Tov said that eternity can be found in each instant. Each table can become an altar, and each person a high priest. More than one way leads to God, but the shortest one is through [00:23:00] fervor, and not through renunciation and suffering. God does

not dwell amidst suffering. He's not jealous of the kindness man shows towards man. The road to God leads through man. That is the meaning of Hasidism. The song of the shepherd; the tears of a mother at the bedside of her sick child; the purity of a gesture offered by a man who has nothing else but his gesture: God is everywhere.

Asked by a rationalist to prove God's existence, Reb Pinchas Koritzer, a friend and disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, simply opened the *aron ha-kodesh*, the holy ark, took a Sefer Torah in his arms and exclaimed, "I swear that God exists. Do you need a better proof than that?" The accent, then, was in [00:24:00] sincerity, on devotion rather than on reason. *Ahavat Yisrael*, the love of Israel, was of equal importance with *Ahavat HaBoreh*, the love of God. The Hasidic rebbe was the father, not the preacher, of his Jews, whom he had to defend against the whole world, and even against him who created the world and made it so hostile to them. The rebbe's goodness of heart became a quality more important than his holiness and wisdom. The Baal Shem Tov went against the wish of Heaven and tried to bring the *mashiach*, the messiah. Punished, he lost his memory, and all he remembered was the Alefbet, so he began reciting -- "Alef, Bet, Gimel, Dalet" -- and again, and again -- "Alef, Bet, Gimel, Dalet" -- with more and more fervor, with more and more ecstasy,

and finally he regained all that he had forgotten. Yet, the messiah has not arrived. [00:25:00] And one Hasid argued with God, "I do not know how to pray. All I know is the Alefbet, so take it and compose your own prayers."

There was in the earlier era of Hasidism something beautiful, deeply human, and melodious, and romantic. In spite of persecutions, it suddenly became so easy to be Jewish, perhaps too easy, almost like today. A chapter of psalms was as good as a page of Talmud. Unfortunately, today many Jews do neither. A nostalgic song carried a significance of *mitzvot*, commandments. If things went bad, there was the rebbe who would take care of them. The rebbe for his Hasidim could change laws, revoke catastrophes, and impose his will upon time. A poor father couldn't find a husband for his daughter? [00:26:00] He went to the rebbe. Business was bad? He went to the rebbe. The poritz, the master didn't like the Jews? They went to the rebbe, who didn't like the poritz. (laughter) And whether things got better or not, again, it did not really matter. What did matter was that there was someone who listened, who felt, who tried. Does a rebbe really accomplish miracles? Yes or no? Yes and no? Who cares? Who cared?

The miracle was that the Jew believed in the possibility of building temples -- to use Heschel's phrase, temples in time, while waiting for the real one to be reconstructed. The miracle was that the Jew, thanks to his rebbe, could sing and dance while there was no reason for rejoicing. [00:27:00] Thanks to the rebbe, the Jew moved into the present and into hope. He knew what to do and when, what blessings to invoke, and how to acquire them. The Baal Shem Tov opened the road; it was easy to take it then. The rebellion against rigidity and for inner liberation succeeded beyond imagination. The movement conquered the heart by the tales he told, and the tales got richer; so did those who told them. And Hasidism became an established way, or established fact of life. The movement spread, and the number of its rebbes increased, each with his code and followers, each with his system and school, each with his chants and mystical appeal. It was so easy to be a Hasid and a rebbe that the *misnagdim*, the adversaries, saw fit to make [00:28:00] their life somewhat more difficult.

Then came Reb Mendel of Kotsk. He was different. He was the rebel, or today he would be called the counterrevolutionary, or the liberal, or the fanatic. Proud and arrogant, he aspired to be the equal of the Baal Shem Tov. He wanted to walk on roads unknown to man, say things that were never heard. His aim was

to shake up the pillars of Hasidism and begin it all over again. With him, restlessness became an ambition to be achieved. With him, it is the fire erupting within the sanctuary.

The outside world, too, was in turmoil. Nations vanished; others emerged. The French Revolution had already taken place; so had the one in America. Bach, Haydn, Vivaldi, [00:29:00] and Beethoven established classicism in music, while in literature classicism knew its first and temporary defeats. The Haskalah made its first footsteps. Napoleon rearranged a universe. New hopes were raised, horizons opened, and this turmoil was reflected in Kotsk, but reduced to its individual, existential, almost elemental level. In Kotsk burnt a fire. There is a fire in Kotsk, they used to say then, but it was a fire that consumed those who saw it burn, a fire which shaped shadows into fear and not into light.

The place is no longer there, nor is the principal character, but the Kotsker rebbe was never there. He was a stranger to his generation. He was not a stranger; [00:30:00] he is not to our own. Today, we would need a Baal Shem Tov for his miracles. We are in such need of miracles, more than ever. Today, we would need a Rebbe Yitzchak Berdichever, for his humaneness, and there is such lack of humaneness today. Yet, it is in Rebbe Mendele

Kotsker that our anguish is reflected, as is our desire to understand the force that crushes us. It is in him that we discover our contemporary. Imagine Job inventing his ordeal and you will get Reb Mendel Kotsker. Imagine Nietzsche choosing silence and strangling Zarathustra, and you will see Reb Mendele Kotsker. His depressions could become ours. His anger is our anger. His [00:31:00] thirst for truth remains, however, unquenched.

"We know the destination but not the direction," said Franz Kafka. What was Reb Mendel's destination? What did he try to prove or to attain in choosing solitude and wretch as weapons. Or what sickness was he suffering? Why did he spend his last 20 years in his private exile? Hiding from what enemy? Did he transgress? What laws? Did he or did he not defy the Almighty?

The object of our talk tonight, of course, is not to explain Kotsk but to tell its tale. Kotsk is not a philosophy but an experience to be transmitted from being to being, with sealed lips and open eyes. Kotsk [00:32:00] is no school of thought, or even of behavior. Kotsk is a place beyond, always beyond, a place where ends meet, where silence penetrates words and tears them apart, where any thoughts carry metaphysical weight. I think Gertrude Stein once said, "Whenever I meet André Malraux,



I am afraid to ask him, 'Monsieur Malraux, how are you?' I am afraid it would be indiscreet on my part." In Kotsk, less than that would be indiscreet, because in Kotsk everything is put into question, and that includes the art of questioning itself. Kotsk, the dark side of Hasidism, is the art of turning prisons into sanctuaries. Would you follow me [00:33:00] there, please?

Reb Mendel Kotsker, born in 1787 in Goraj, is, as we have seen, the holy rebel of Hasidism. He was always running away from comforts, spiritual or otherwise. At 15, he ran away from home. His father -- what a terrible thing -- was a notorious *misnaged*, so the child punished him and came to the Chozeh, the Seer of Lublin, whom he left, in turn, for the Yid, the Jew of Pshiskhe. Later he stayed with Reb Bunim. At 40 he became his successor, first in Tomaszów and then in Kotsk, where, nearly blind, he reigned like a mad King Lear until he died at the age of 72, illuminating darkness. [00:34:00] His life unfolded under the sign of protest, against his father, against the Seer of Lublin, and, at the end, against his own followers. With every year that passed, his rebellion gained in audacity, aiming at the creation as a whole, and often not stopping there.

Already in Lublin and Pshiskhe he was different from the other disciples. His knowledge was that of an illui, a kind of

genius. His requests, those of a reformer. They called him the dark one, the somber one, *Mendele Shvartze*. He was serious, too serious. He was never seen laughing. Cloistered from within, eternally dissatisfied with himself and others. Compliments annoyed him. [00:35:00] Kindness made him turn away. The Holy Seer of Lublin thought it necessary to warn him, "Mendel, your way leads to *Moreshkhoyre* , to despair." "So what?" He left him. "So what? If truth is to be obtained by despair alone, is that a good enough reason to discard it?" Truth was the key to his life. With him, it takes the proportion of an obsession, a mania. It is more important than prayer, than study.

[00:35:40-00:35:43] *Ki im bammahteret yimmase haggannav*, One has to dig deep in oneself, said he, in order to find the thief. Nothing else matters. *Lo tignov* means "Do not steal from yourself," for whoever cheats himself is guilty [00:36:00] of theft. But how be sure that the appearance of truth is the truth? To his friend, Reb Yitzchak Meir of Gur, he says, "If I only knew that a sinner is whipped over there in the other world, I would dance and dance and dance, and go on dancing." He did not know. He was not sure. He couldn't be. He despised certainties. He despised even more easy solutions. "For one hair of truth," he said, "I would give all the riches in the world." Richness? What richness? The word "money" literally disgusted him.

While castigating his body, he punished also his soul, and this he did hoping to change and renew Hasidism on its highest level. Perhaps he felt [00:37:00] its decline approaching. It was no longer the adventure it used to be in the beginning, though it still responded to its primary need. Perhaps that is why he refused to become a rebbe. He preferred the role of an anti-rebbe. In order to lift up the masses, he had to break away from them. But he was a strong rebbe. His friend, Reb Yitzchak Meir of Ger, who most Hasidim would have preferred as leader, stepped aside and gave him the throne. And throughout the long night, the two friends argued over who should be whose rebbe. Finally, Reb Yitzchak Meir won, and he said, "I was in the presence of a tongue of fire. I had to go under and submit to it."

Reb Mendel was respected by Reb Bunim's followers, but he troubled them. [00:38:00] They did not understand him, yet they followed him, first to Tomaszów, where he stayed two years, the happiest in his life, for they had meant new openings. With his close disciples, he used to take long walks in neighboring fields and forests. His court became a spiritual center, attracting brilliant and learned young men from distant places. Kotsk was the enemy of *anaratzut*, of ignorance. Anyone who

couldn't study the Talmud and the commentaries, and study them well, had no place there. But the best of the youngsters had abandoned parents, wives, and children to be with him who promised a renaissance to Hasidism. Sometimes bizarre scenes took place. Angry fathers and fathers-in-law, [00:39:00] crying women and children besieged the rebbe's study, pleading with him to return to him their men. It was of no use. The rebbe used to say to fathers, "In every child there are three partners, three associates: you, your wife, and God. And God did not want the children to quit studying." So they remained.

And the rebbe was immune to tears. He was allergic to weakness. In his battle, there was no room for weakness, any weakness. And soon the word got around. The spark which was lit in Pshiskhe turned into a flame in Tomaszów. In Tomaszów burnt a fire, [00:40:03-00:40:05] In Tomaszow brent a feier es geyt oft oyf an or a nayer, A new light emerged in Tomaszów, and Hasidism once more became an adventure, and a challenge. And its participants formed a kind of coterie, of a clandestine group, and they lived in true communal life, in a kibbutz. Everybody shared with the others whatever he possessed. They used to work manually in order to provide food for the others. But they shared everything: money and ecstasy; sorrow and exuberance; but most of all, the quest for truth. They worked and sang and

ate together, always together, planning new times and new methods of self-liberation. Every participant felt that he belonged to some [00:41:00] unique endeavor, to some rare vision. Accessible, then, Reb Mendel was their big brother who still could trust them, and in whom they could trust. He told them of his grandiose and immeasurable dreams. And listen to the poetry of his dreams: "If I had 300 men with cabbage on their heads and straw belts on their hips, willing to climb on the roofs of the world and shout that God is God, I could achieve redemption."

In Tomaszów he still believed he could find such companions who, like himself, would reject all that is small, and especially all that is mediocre. In Tomaszów he still hoped to create a new elite which would keep nothing that is not of substance.

[00:42:00] He who liberates himself liberates mankind: too proud an affirmation? So what? Humility itself can be false, and therefore a wall between man and God.

The Rebbe of Gur wrote to Reb Henschel of Alexander, "The same thunders and lightnings that were seen and heard at Sinai are now seen and heard in Tomaszów." And Reb Mendel himself, who was far from being the humblest rebbe in the world, explained to his followers, "Let me tell you who I am. First there was the

Baal Shem Tov. Then came the Maggid of Mezritch. Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg was the third, the Seer of Lublin the fourth, the Yid of Pshiskhe the fifth, Reb Bunim the sixth. I am the seventh. I am the Shabbat. I am the Shabbat of the whole universe."

[00:43:00] But the Tomaszów prelude ended prematurely. The local rabbi was not too pleased with such competition. As you can imagine, it was not new, so he was not too pleased with the Hasidic activity in this town. Relations worsened. Reb Mendel decided to leave and move to Kotsk, a small village somewhere between Lublin and Warsaw. It had then a population of 1,270 non-Jews and 1,652 Jews when Reb Mendel and his Hasidim arrived there. It took them less than a few months to transform it into a center of storm.

Why did Reb Mendel choose Kotsk? Because the local rabbi was one of his followers. It was easier. Was that the real reason? Probably, but there is one more, [00:44:00] more picturesque and more legendary: the rebbe and his Hasidim, says the Kotsk legend, wandered from town to town, from place to place, and could stay nowhere. People didn't want their presence. In Kotsk, people threw stones at them. So the rebbe said, "This proves something." (laughter) And they stayed.

For the next ten years, the rebbe worked on himself and on his dreams, as if on metaphysical, eschatological raw material, yet his followers couldn't follow him, and they saw in him a rebbe like the others, for they needed a rebbe as other Hasidim did. One Hasid came to him, asking for consolation, [00:45:00] simply consolation, and he said, "Rebbe, my wife died. I am poor, and I have seven small children to feed. Please console me." And the Rebbe looked straight into his eyes and said, "This is too much, even for me. I cannot console you. Ask God. Let him console you."

Another time, he shouted, "What do they want from me? Do they think I am here only to listen to their troubles about their old maids at home, or their sick stomachs?" A man asked him to intercede on his behalf: "Pray for me, rebbe. I need to make a living." "Are you too sick to do the praying yourself?" asked the rebbe. [00:46:00] (laughter) Because the rebbe always liked this primitive language. "Rebbe, I don't know how." "Oh, then *that* should be your problem."

Once he questioned Reb Yankel of Radzymin, "What is the meaning of man? What's man's purpose in life?" And Reb Yankele from Radzymin said, "Well, to give the soul its perfection." "Oh,

no," said Reb Mendel. "If it were only for this, it wouldn't be worth the trouble. Man was created, I am telling you, in order to lift up the sky."

[00:46:48-00:46:53] (break in recording)

So they went on with more fervor. And still he said, "That's not the way one dances." [00:47:00] And again they were dancing. And still he said, "No, that's not the way." Finally, they stopped, and they said, "Rebbe, what is the way?" And the rebbe said, "One should dance on the roof of the highest building and on a razor's edge."

Another time he saw his Hasidim dancing, because then still they were dancing, and he joined them, and suddenly he stopped and shouted, "What's going on here? Who tells you there is something to rejoice about?" Or in his words, "[00:47:43-00:47:46] Vos far a mekhutonin zent ir mit der lecha-dodi?" Untranslatable. (laughter) He left them, but they ran away.

One morning [00:48:00] he noticed a young student walking around, concentrated, and praying with *kavanah*. He stopped him. "What's the matter with you? Do you understand the words of your prayers? Did you say this morning [00:48:18-00:48:19]



*Modeh ani lifanekha?)?"* This is a morning prayer saying "I am thanking you, God." Still, untranslatable. "Do you know what *ani*, I, means, and what *lifanekha*, before you, means? Do you know?" And the poor boy didn't. He ran away.

One Simchat Torah, he reprimanded his followers for inviting, as is the custom, King David to join the festivities. "Who permitted you to disturb King David?" "Recant him." (laughter)

[00:49:00] Impatient, increasingly distant, people more and more irritate him, because they are too attached to their bodies. Everything seems petty in his eyes. He wants to break his chains and breathe the cold air of Samitz, but they are in his way, so he screams, "[00:49:25-00:49:29] (*Oxen ferd vos ton ir veln fun mir*)?" Horses, oxes, what do you want of me? But his efforts to chase them are fruitless. The stranger he gets, the more he is admired.

In other Hasidic camps, of course, he is criticized. His methods are not in line with the movement. He couldn't care less. His own disciples stick by him. He doesn't realize it but he keeps them by the fear he inspires. [00:50:00] Kotsk develops suddenly into a hallucination. People shout or keep silent, but never speak normally. They do live now on a razor's

edge, but the razor is in his hands, and whoever sees him is no longer the same. Whoever enters his study is sure not to die without fear of God in his heart. He refuses to be admired by crowds, but they are getting larger and larger, for, in his presence, one lives intensely, dangerously. Not one act, not one word, not one blink of the eye are wasted.

The rebbe himself was a living contradiction. He was a great *illui* and he studied all the time, and yet when he met Reb Leibeke Eger, also an *illui*, [00:51:00] he mocked him, and he said, "What's the use of studying?" He believed in purity, and he expressed himself in a most primitive way. More than that, he never changed clothes. It's a terrible thing. He became sick at the end, and after he's dead they found 15 suits in his room. He also, although sick, didn't let doctors to touch his body.

Furthermore, he adored humiliating the strong, and sometimes showing kindness to the humble. The rich he physically abhorred. The poor sometimes he liked. His first wife fell ill, so he spent weeks at her bedside. [00:52:00] His son got married, but force was needed to make the father attend the ceremony. Furthermore, he who despised earthly matters became suddenly interested in politics. As you see, it's not new.

(laughter) He supported the Polish rebellion against the Russian occupation. He signed proclamations, petitions. He signed appeals for funds. The Poles lost the war, and he, Reb Mendel, in danger had to change his name, from Halperin to Morgensztern. Again, it's not new in America. (laughter) And he did escapvre arrest by the Russians. However, whether Halperin or Morgensztern, Reb Mendel remains Reb Mendel. He sinks deeper and deeper in his own darkness. [00:53:00] Some of his closest disciples, like Reb Mordechai Yosef of Ishbitz, think he is going too far. "We need a human being and not an angel," says he, adding, "There are Shivre-lukhes in Kotsk. The tables of the law were broken."

Reb Mendel fears the opposition is gaining ground, but, too proud, he ignores it. And then the dissidents break into the open. Reb Mordechai Yosef does what his master once did: he leaves him and takes a number of followers with him. Reb Mendel is hurt but does not show it. Nobody dares mention the dissidents in his presence. Also, Reb Yitzchak Meir of Gur remained faithful. So does Reb Yechiel Meir of Gostynin, the Jew of Psalms, the Thilim Yid. Some dissidents even return, and they go to see Reb Mendel, who thunders at them, "Why did you come back? Why are you looking at me? [00:54:00] Who do you

think I am? [00:54:02] A koymen kerer ? A chimneysweeper?"

The images of Kotskare extraordinary.

The tragedy is latent. Fate is about to knock at a door.

Deceived, wounded, his senses sharpened from hunger and sleeplessness, the rebbe resents the Hasidim who left, and those who remained. Who knows? Perhaps in his heart, in his subconscious, he even is on the side of the new rebels, those who stood up to him. "Like a death-stricken bear whose children were taken away, I will throw myself at them," he shouted.

"Take them out of my sight." But because they stay on, he thinks they are weak, and he admires strength. "Pharaoh was a man," he said. [00:55:00] "He stood up even to God himself and did not bow to his first blows falling upon him. He admired Bilaam. He admired Abraham Ibn Ezra. He admired force, strength, and he admired Moses, whose anger he aspired to inherit."

Unlike Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the master of Hasidic tales, our next subject, Reb Mendel told few tales, but they are all filled with awe. For instance, a man is lost on the road. He notices a castle on fire with no one to extinguish it. "It must be empty, with no keeper or owner," says the man to himself, the man who is lost on the road. [00:56:00] But then he hears a

voice coming from one of the windows, shouting for help, saying, "I am the master of this castle." And Reb Mendel's disciples trembled, for they understood. The castle is burning, the forest is aflame, and the master is crying out for help, and that proves that there is a master.

Another one. Once, Reb Itzikel Vorker, also one of the few faithful friends and disciples, comes to see him, and greets him. "*Shalom aleichem, rebbe.*" "Rebbe," exclaimed Reb Mendel. "Why do you call me Rebbe? Don't you see that I am a goat?" [00:57:00] Reb Itzikel Vorker looked astonished and didn't answer, so Reb Mendel went on. "Yes, I am a goat. That's what I am. Don't you see that?" And he went on, telling him the following story. Once upon a time there was a holy goat roaming around the world, waiting for midnight, for at midnight its horns stretched out and touched the sky, and evoked the stars to sing God's glory. Once the goat saw a poor Jew in tears. "Why do you cry?" "I lost my snuffbox," said the Jew. Being a goat, and not a person, the goat couldn't stand the view of a Jew so unhappy. (laughter) "You know what?" said the goat. "I'll help you. [00:58:00] I have horns, two of them. Cut off a piece of one and you can use it as a snuffbox." The Jew did just that, and overnight became an object of envy. People from all over town whom he has never seen, whom he has never liked, who didn't

like him, swarmed all around him, and all wanted his tobacco, for it was the best, the finest, and the cheapest in the world. Whoever smelled it felt the odor of paradise. Eventually, people asked him, "Tell me, where did you buy the tobacco?" And he said, "Oh, no, it's not the tobacco." "But what is it?" "It's the box." "So where did you get the box?" And the poor man had to reveal. If he had only a spirit of a businessman. [00:59:00] But he was not, so he revealed where it came from. And all the people ran out looking for the holy goat, and they found it, and everybody cut a piece out of its horns, until the holy goat remained with none, and at midnight it could no longer touch the sky, awaken the stars to sing. All the goat was left with was nostalgia and a sense of true, unredeemed loss.

This last tale is characteristic of Rebbe Mendel's fears. He was afraid that the mediocre has a power over the genius. He was [01:00:00] afraid that the impure can overcome the purity. And I understand him so well. I do believe that intelligence is not alone contagious; stupidity is contagious, as well. I really know it. It happens if I read bad books, and, well... (laughter)

One more tale which is characteristic of Reb Mendel Kotsker. Once upon a time there was a king, and the king had a son. And

the son quarreled with the king, so the king chased him away. And for years and years the prince [01:01:00] was in exile with strangers, and he was poor, and hungry. He was alone, with no friends, because no one knew that he was a prince. Years later, the king came into town, so the prince also stood along the road, applauding his father. The father saw him, recognized him, stopped, and said, "Aren't you the prince?" He said, "Yes." "Then, if you are the prince, you may ask anything. I would give it to you." And the prince says, "Father, please give me a piece of bread, and give me some nice clothes, because I have none." And the father said to his son, [01:02:00] "Poor, poor child. Are you so far removed from home and from the past and from the source that you don't even remember that you could have asked? All that you needs are is bread and clothes, while you could have inherited my kingdom."

He believes -- and, incidentally, this tale is more characteristic of Rabbi Nachman than of the Kotsker -- the Kotsker believes that a secret loses its mystery if revealed, so he was afraid that if he were to mix with a crowd, he would lose ultimately his own identity, and many great men share such fears. Hence, they chose exile, like Rimbaud; solitude, like Hölderlin; solitude [01:03:00] and death, like Nietzsche. Reb Mendel's life was dominated by fear. He believed more in Pachad

Yitzschak than in Chesed Abraham. Abraham returned from the Mount Moriah alone. God's intervention came too late. In the beginning, Reb Mendel was afraid that he would not find the truth. Later, his fear was that he did find it, and he came to understand that perhaps God wants to be feared, rather than loved. Perhaps this realization moved him to rebel against life, against reason, and ultimately he chose insanity.

At the age of 52, he made the irrevocable decision to go into retreat. Very few people were allowed inside his room: the Rebbe of Ger; the [01:04:00] Rebbe of Warka; his son-in-law, the genius, Reb Avrohom Sochatchover; and, naturally, his friend Reb Hersh Tomashover. Even then, at times he spoke with his children and their mother. Sometimes he even helped, I think, his children with their schoolwork. Sometimes he screamed for his shammes, Reb Feivel, his servant, "Come in! Come!" And Reb Feivel came in, and the Rebbe said, "Tell me: did you hear him come?" And Reb Feivel used to say, "I was so afraid -- I didn't know whom he meant -- that I said yes." And Reb Mendele Kotsker shook his head, saying, "Yes, I know. [01:05:00] I heard him come. He is coming."

Other times, he simply erupted, as a madman, into the *Beit haMidrash*, waking up his tired, forlorn Hasidim, shaking them



up. "What are you doing here?" Once he asked, "[01:05:30-01:05:36]?" Is there one face which could be the face of the face of God? And his Hasidism, frightened, ran away. They always ran away, and they always returned.

There is one theory that his voluntary exile later turned into an [01:06:00] involuntary one. His friends believed it to be safer for him, as well as for his followers, not to be in contact with anyone. There might be some truth to it. For a simple Hasid, it would have been a devastating experience to see his rebbe untidy, unclean, with his wild eyes, in beggars' clothes. Often months went by without the rebbe saying a word. He was a great believer in silence. He used to say, "When a man has something to scream about, and knows how to scream, and yet does not scream, then the scream is strongest."

Through two holes in his door he participated in the offices of Shabbat [01:07:00] and the Holy Days. Sometimes he was called to the Torah, and then he came out, completely enveloped in his tallis, as a ghost, or as an angel of fire. He ate little, slept little. At night, he liked to stare straight into the yellow flames of the candle, flickering on his table, a shadow among shadows, feeling the encounter with dawn. A shadow among

shadows he remained, even after the candlelight went out, and he did not encounter dawn.

Thus we are back at where we began: the act of open rebellion. Was it blasphemy or sickness? Perhaps both. [01:08:00] The rebbe, at the end of his quest, must have realized that there is not much man can do to fulfill or overcome his condition. For the rebbe suddenly realized that no way can lead ultimately to realization. Reason failed. Fate failed. So he tried to make the impossible possible, do what no rebbe before him ever did. Therefore, he pushed reason to its end, and go beyond, and therefore he pushed fate to its end, and went beyond.

If his act of liberation had a meaning, it must have been an attempt to say no to his [01:09:00] own being, and what it concealed. Perhaps he meant to show that one can remain a good Jew, even while saying no to the *Ribono-shel-olam*, to the master of the universe. Perhaps he believed that, like himself, God wants us to give him our strength, not our weakness. For it was not the first time that his behavior ran against established tradition, against the *Shulchan Aruch*. His friend, the Gerer Rebbe, Reb Yitzchak Meir, became his friend one Rosh Hashanah, when he saw Reb Mendele Kotsker, still a disciple in Pshiskhe,

alone in the *beit midrash*, his lips tightly closed, determined not to pray *Mincha*.

On the day the [01:10:00] Jew of Pshiskhe was near his death, all his disciples recited psalms. He, Reb Mendel, alone did not join into the prayers. Finally, Reb Bunim came and pleaded with him, "Mendel, [01:10:18-01:10:09] Zayt nisht keyn akshn, Do not be so stubborn." For even then, already then, Reb Mendel used silence as prayer. But later, he turned it into protest. That so many great men, Reb Itzikel Vorker, and the Gerer, and others, remained faithful to him to the end prove that his blasphemy was no real blasphemy.

When he died, Reb Yitzchak Meir of Gur said, "From now on there will be nobody to put [01:11:00] words into our hearts." Before he died, Reb Mendel said, "At last. At last I shall see him face to face." And it is not known whether it's meant to be a promise or a warning.

Well, it is time for us to leave Kotsk. Kotsk doesn't exist anymore, except in a few hearts. For the Holy Days, and sometimes on Shabbat, I often pray in a Gerrer shtiebel, with Gerrer and Kotsker Hasidim: Rabbi Cywiak, Zemba, Zucker, [Nissenson], true Kotsker Hasidim who are full of fire.

Sometimes I go there with Heschel, and we [01:12:00] talk of Kotsk -- mostly of Kotsk -- and the mystery remains intact.

What were the Rebbe's intentions? We don't know. Heschel believes that the Kotsker Rebbe ranks by his imagination, by his fantasy, by his outspokenness, with the prophets. I rank him much higher. Heschel is a composition of prophets in his writing. It's a slip of the tongue, but I take all responsibility for it. I wanted to say Kotsker, Kotsker Rebbe, but it's also true about Heschel. The Kotsker Rebbe is a composite figure. He is probably one of the five or ten or three [01:13:00] greatest characters that ever lived. His imagination was so wild -- and don't laugh -- today's generation, those who seek to go beyond consciousness through LSD or hippies or not would have followed the Kotsker Rebbe. Today, all the rebbes would have followed the Kotsker Rebbe, because he was something that very, very few generations were privileged to witness, and to see, and to be castigated by.

Perhaps the Kotsker Rebbe had a kind of premonition of what was going to take place in Europe, hence his despair. In Kotsk burnt a fire. [01:14:00] Perhaps he had hoped to fight fire with fire, and he failed. Eighty years after his death, another fire, from another source, transformed his Hasidim into torches,

illuminating their own sacrifice. The movement which had preached fraternity among men and their reconciliation with nature and God and song and belief became the altar on which multitudes of Hasidim and others disappeared. The world did not deserve them. The world did not deserve the message of Hasidism, filled with spirituality and song, accompanying man on his solitary road. The world did not deserve the tales [01:15:00] Hasidim told and lived. Perhaps that's why the Hasidic communities were among the first to be swallowed up by the flames of the night. We all lived in some imagination of Kotsk, and we all died in Kotsk before people died somewhere else.

Perhaps the Rebbe of Kotsk foresaw these events, and therefore had wanted to prepare his Jews to be strong and intransigent; capable to resist evil in all its forms and dimensions, on all levels; capable to resist God himself, if need be.

Was Kotsk an episode in Hasidism? Was Hasidism an episode in Jewish history? Jewish history [01:16:00] is the secret of history. The Hasidism of Kotsk is the mystery of Hasidism, and perhaps the mystery of history. "Life," said André Malraux, "is an inn with no roads leading from it, to it." Kotsk is this

inn. It is still burning. The world is aflame, and we know  
that inside there is a master in the castle. (applause)

**M1**:

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