

Elie Wiesel Legends of Hassidism II - Rabbi Nachman of Breslov

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive November 30 1967

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) All afternoon, today beginning 3:00, all the radio stations broadcast appeals to drivers. Don't take the highway, the parkways. Don't take the midway. In other words, stay home. (laughter) Apparently you did not listen to the radio. I do feel somewhat embarrassed to have brought you here tonight. I almost didn't make it. First because those who came are certainly my friends, so why should I do that to them? But on the other hand, perhaps it is fitting that Hassidic tales should be told in such a cold winter [00:01:00] night filled with snow and unpleasant.

So let us begin. 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 should we do, my 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, "how about the other subjects? What shall become of them?" "Sire, you are the king. You decide."

And the king, for once, took a decision. [00:02:00] "I do not want us to remain the only sane men in the world gone mad," said he. "In a world gone mad, there is nothing kings and captains and advisors can do except enter madness like everyone else, with everyone else. Still," said the king, "I should like to preserve something of our glory, something of our anguish. 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."

"What for?" asked the advisor? "Oh, it will help us," says the king. "It might even help them." And he placed his [00:03:00] arm on his friend's shoulder saying, "Let us, therefore, you and I, mark each other's forehead with the sign of madness, and each time I shall look at you, each time you shall look at me, we shall both know that we are mad."

This is not an oriental story, despite its Zen Buddhist flavor. It belongs to Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the great master of Hasidic tales which he turned into quest reaching beyond man's dreams and deceptions. Rooted in reality, taken from everyday life, these are tales that in the retelling transcend their plots and counterplots in quasi-metaphysical [00:04:00] situations. With Rabbi Nachman tales achieved sacredness,

although they all unfold against a secular backdrop. Jean Cocteau was asked, "If your house were on fire, what would you take with you?" "The fire," said the poet. (laughter) "If I were to forget all of Rabbi Nachman's teachings," said one Hasid of Rabbi Nachman, "I would still hang on to his tales."

"Whoever visits my grave," said Rabbi Nachman, "and whoever recites Tehilim, the Psalms, I shall pull him out from hell by the peyos, bord un peyes, pulling him by his beard and peyot." And this pledge [00:05:00] he tried to keep. His grave is in Uman in the Ukraine, and to this day it is visited by Breslover Hasidim from all over the world, from America and Israel. Some of them even undergo dangerous situations to go there. But somehow they manage to be there at least once a year on the yahrzeit. Others who cannot go, or at least cannot go that far, study his teachings and tell his tales in which they find a spark of his vision, an echo of his prayer.

But Rabbi Nachman has been compared not to Jean Cocteau but to Franz Kafka. Some critics even consider him to be Kafka's forerunner. Though separated by more than a century, Rabbi Nachman was born in 1772, [00:06:00] and by more than their upbringing, the two men seem to have shared their themes, their obsessions, their literary texture. Furthermore, the tzadik of

the Ukraine and the novelist of Prague appear to have lived, if not attracted, the same destiny. Both died young, the rabbi when he was 38, the writer when he was 41, carried away both by the same illness: lung cancer.

They experienced the same anguish and the same wondrous exultation when faced with the written word which then filled them with fear. Each demanded in his testament that his writings be destroyed. Each had a faithful friend, interpreter, [00:07:00] apostle to whom we are indebted for the survival of certain narratives, certain aphorisms which, without them, would never had reached us.

Rabbi Nachman had Rabbi Nathan, Rabbi Noson of Nemirov as Kafka had Max Brod. Yet unlike Kafka, Rabbi Nachman had a constant desire that his tales and his sayings should not be forgotten. Quote, "Anyone who could write a book and does not write it is guilty of murder," said he. With some authors today it's just the opposite. What Rabbi Nachman wanted to be destroyed were his own manuscripts, his own handwriting, and unlike Kafka's, they were destroyed moments before he [00:08:00] passed away.

Perhaps Rabbi Noson of Nemirov was too faithful a friend or too faithful a disciple. Was Kafka familiar with the Hasidic

milieu? All evidence points to the affirmative. He fell in love many times. And once he fell in love with a young girl whose father was a Gerer Hossid, a Hasid of Ger. And the father was not opposed to the marriage, provided Kafka would go to the rebbe himself and convince him that he, Kafka, is worthy to be the husband of his Hasid's daughter. The marriage did not take place. (laughter)

Kafka saw Hasidic rabbis in Karlsbad and in Marienbad where he used to spend his [00:09:00] summers. He even wrote a few beautiful pages about his encounters with Hasidism.

Furthermore, his sometimes friend Jacques Levy, a Yiddish actor, introduced him to the legendary and intense world of the Eastern European Jewish shtetl. On several occasions shows staged by Levy were introduced by Kafka, who agreed to serve as master of ceremonies.

Thus Kafka has become conversant in Jewish folklore and the Hasidic way of life. A close study of his novels and short stories as well as a comparative study with his own work and the tales of Rabbi Nachman will inevitably reveal striking resemblance which could not easily be dismissed as sheer coincidence. One example: [00:10:00] in *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka describes the misfortunes which befell upon poor Gregor

Samsa transformed into an insect. In horror, his family rejects him, disowns him, and ends up -- and that is one of the most cruel pictures in all of Kafka's works -- it ends up by sweeping him out of the house with a broom.

Now, listen to a similar tale by Rabbi Nachman. A prince in a faraway country lost his mind and lost his reason and one day claimed to be a rooster. He took off his clothes, hid under the table, and refused to partake of the royal dishes. [00:11:00] Unhappy, the king summoned the best physicians, the most renowned psychiatrists, and all admitted being powerless. For some reason, he did not invite other people who maybe could have done something with some imagination, literary people.

But then one day a wise man, who was a literary person, appeared at the palace and asked for and received permission to try and cure the sick boy. He took off his clothes, joined the prince under the table, and like the prince, behaved as a good-mannered rooster should behave. He ate what roosters normally eat, moved around the way normal roosters do. Suspicious, the prince questioned him. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" "And who are you, [00:12:00] and what are you doing here?" replied the wise man. And he was polite, with the politeness becoming of a polite rooster.

"I?" said the prince. "Don't you see? I am a rooster." "Oh," said the wise man, "How interesting. So am I." Well, the two got acquainted, and in due time even became friendly. Then, having gained the prince's confidence, the wise man put on a shirt, a suit, shoes, all the while explaining to the sick boy, "You know, you must not believe that just by dressing like a man a rooster ceases to be a rooster." That sounded logical, and the prince agreed, and he too was dressed.

Next day the wise man asked that food be brought in from the kitchen, [00:13:00] but the prince, horrified, cried out, "Fool, what are you doing? You want to eat like them?" But his friend reassured him. "You know, you must not believe that just by eating like a man one becomes a man." And the prince again consented to that.

And then the wise man went one step further and said, "You know, you should not believe that by eating with man at their table a rooster ceases to be rooster and becomes man. One can look like, act like, behave like man and still remain rooster." And it worked. The prince, the rooster, became prince.

Both Kafka's hero and Rabbi Nachman's aspired to escape the human condition [00:14:00] as a protest by choosing sometimes to be more and sometimes less than a man. But while one evolves in a universe both sordid and brutal, the other is the inhabitant of a royal palace. Gregor Samsa is doomed to end in absurdity. Rabbi Nachman's prince, thanks to the patience and wisdom of man and his tales, will recover. Rooster or insect, man needs inspiration to become what he could be and what he is.

Another example. You surely remember Kafka's novel *The Castle*. I discovered it some 20 or so years ago while studying in Paris. I was young, and I used to read a lot. I didn't write at all. And when I discovered this book it was in the evening. I read it throughout the night. [00:15:00] At dawn I heard the horrible noises of road workers. Usually they annoyed me, not this time. I felt like running out into the street and shake their hands in gratitude. Thanks to them I was reminded that Kafka's world is not the only one given to man. I contained my enthusiasm that morning, and thanks to that, I managed to avoid being locked up.

The protagonist of *The Castle*, a certain Mr. K, tries to establish contact with the owner of the castle, the prince, without success. Incidentally you will see that in both works,



in Kafka's and in Rabbi Nachman's, the main protagonists are always princes or children of [00:16:00] kings and queens. Kafka's Mr. K is waiting and waiting to be called to the castle, but the call never comes, and the prince is never seen.

A similar theme can be found in Rabbi Nachman's tales. One day the king dispatches an emissary to deliver a message to some wise man in a distant city. But the wise man is not interested in receiving the message. For he simply does not believe that the king exists. But the messenger insists. "Here is the letter, and it is sufficient proof of his existence, isn't it?" "No," says the wise man. "Have you seen the king?" "No," says the messenger. "Then how do you know that the king is king?"

Then both wise man and messenger now began their search for [00:17:00] truth. They stopped a soldier in the street. "In whose service are you?" "I am in the service of the king." "Have you ever seen the king?" "No." So the two men burst into laughter. "Look at him. He serves someone he has not seen and will never see." They stopped an officer. He hasn't seen the king either. A general, not even he has ever laid eyes on the king, and the two men went on laughing and laughing, and through laughter they found despair, and through despair they realized

that there had to be a king linking laughter to knowledge and knowledge to despair and despair to kings.

Another example. In another novel by Kafka, *The Trial*, Kafka includes the episode of a man waiting to be admitted inside the law, but the doorkeeper says that he cannot [00:18:00] admit him at this moment. "Will I be allowed to enter later?" "Perhaps," says the doorkeeper, "but not at this moment." And the doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at the entrance.

The man sits there for years and years and many years. He tries to bribe the doorkeeper, who accepts all the bribes and still does not permit him inside. But the doorkeeper offers an explanation. "I do accept your gifts my friend only to keep you from feeling that you have left some things undone." And the waiting man gets older, weaker. He has one final question which he puts to the doorkeeper. "Everyone says the man strives to obtain the law. How come that no one has ever appeared seeking admittance, no one but me?" [00:19:00] And the doorkeeper answers him, "No one but you could gain admittance through the door since this door was intended only for you, and now I am going to shut it forever." It was all for nothing.

This tale is visibly inspired by Rabbi Nachman's. His heroes too, in a multitude of occasions, discover truth too late and speak to strangers who are keys to unknown gates to tales yet to be told. Rabbi Nachman's heroes, too, are usually faced with obstacles to overcome, walls to climb, faceless onlookers to befriend. Only with Rabbi Nachman the man, always a prince in or out of disguise, [00:20:00] always ends up by opening the door and plunging into the secret which he knows is waiting for him and for him alone.

In evoking one of his strange, inexplicable dreams, and this was before Freud and Jung, Rabbi Nachman tells that while dreaming he didn't understand the meaning of the dream. So he asked, and here I quote, "I was answered. 'Go into that room, and everything will be explained to you.' I went. An old man was sitting there. I asked him, 'What is the meaning of all this?' So he took his beard in his hands and said, 'This is my beard, and this is the meaning.' I answered, 'I still don't understand.'" Of course. [00:21:00]

And he said, "'Oh, you don't? Then go into the next room, and you will understand.' I went there. It was a very long and spacious room with books everywhere, and on each page I opened I

could read the meaning of the dream." But Rabbi Nachman did not give us the meaning of his dream. His dream was sufficient.

Does it sound absurd? Naturally. But while with Kafka everything begins and ends in the absurd, with Rabbi Nachman the absurd is only a setting, a decor. It is given to man to go beyond it, sometimes by dreaming and sometimes by telling tales that contain dreams. With Rabbi Nachman, man defines himself [00:22:00] by his victories as much as by his struggles yet never by his downfall.

Rabbi Nachman said when one is sinking into mud, that is when one must scream, scream, and scream again. Is someone listening? It matters not. The scream in itself contains the tale and sometimes a dream. Rabbi Nachman's dreams are as beautiful as his tales and as meaningful. Once he dreamed that it was Yom Kippur and he entered a strange town. And they, he didn't say who, asked for a volunteer to be sacrificed. "And I said, 'Take me.' They [00:23:00] said, 'All right, but you must give your acceptance in writing.' So I gave it to them. But then when the hour came I regretted it, and I wanted to hide somewhere, but the crowds didn't let me escape.

So I ran out of town and entered another town only to find out that it's the same one. I tried then to hide among the *umot haolam*, the non-Jews, and I was sure that if they came to get me I will be delivered to them. Fortunately in the meantime, some other person volunteered in my place. Yet I cannot free myself from fear since."

But who is Rabbi Nachman? His life, which might have been a figment of his own imagination, [00:24:00] bears the mark of the adventurer of the highest caliber, of an adventurer intent of constantly surpassing himself in everything he did. He was the great-grandson of the famous Israel Baal Shem Tov, and yet he quarrels with almost all of his ancestors' disciples. He was a thinker and a Kabbalist.

As a thinker he was as important as the Baal Shem. He established a philosophy. He established a pattern of thought, a system of ideas. And furthermore, he transmitted his vision of the world by way of tales, which are masterpieces of their kind. Ascetic and opposed to skepticism, he regularly consorts with followers of the Haskalah, the Enlightenment, and even plays chess with atheists.

He was a sick man, but he [00:25:00] abhorred doctors. What he said about doctors can only be matched by what he said about other Hasidic rabbis. (laughter) Poor, he despised the rich. He did not permit his people to read the philosophers, yet he has read them all. We know that he knew Greek, and he read Plato in the original. Though in love with saintliness, he was almost intoxicated with saintliness, his behavior at times was that of a comedian.

We know all this thanks to Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov, quoted earlier, who was his confidant, biographer, and hagiographer. Another strange fellow, this Rabbi Nathan, for years [00:26:00] we know that he made the rounds of the Jewish communities of the Ukraine and Poland in search of a rabbi. An erudite, an easy-going Talmudist, he also loved to drink and sing. He delighted in the beauty that God, in his kindness, occasionally dispensed on earth. Then this happy Hasid met his master. Later he was to say, "If the earth were to be covered with knives, I would still roll on it to my master."

Strange, but his master took a liking to him immediately, and later he was to say, "Nathan, we have known each other a long time, but this was the first time that we saw each other." And from that very day on, Rabbi Nathan [00:27:00] lived only for

his master. He collected and recorded his Divrei Torah, his narratives, and even the slightest bits of conversation, his *propos de table*, his table talk. Later, assisted by some *tofsim v'khozrim* -- I am sorry, I have no translation for it, but especially -- it means people with good memories who are intelligent to grasp the thing very quickly, he saw to it that nothing pertaining to Rabbi Nachman was lost. And Rabbi Nachman recognized his services by saying, "Each one of you shares in my stories, but you, Nathan, more than anyone else."

Five years after the rabbi's death, Reb Nathan did something which is really unbelievable. He turned publisher and printer, [00:28:00] and no author could wish to have a better publisher than Rabbi Nachman had. Reb Nathan abandoned everything and published first the tales of his master and then the *Likutei MoHaran*, the Divrei Torah. The Hasidim of Breslov studied them and still study them as though they were sacred texts of divine inspiration.

In recommending them to the reader, Rabbi Nathan wrote, quote, "Pause and admire these marvels. If you are a man, and if you have a soul, you shall not escape biting your lip and taking your life into your hands. Your hair will stand up on your head and deeply awed, you will read words so powerful that they will

be your bridge to heaven." Even today the Hasidim of Breslov [00:29:00] are forever retelling his stories, seeking to find in them who knows what secrets, intelligible only to the initiated.

Said Rabbi Nachman, and afterwards Rabbi Nathan, "Each word here conceals a deep intention. Each character reflects an ancient primary truth." Actually, Rabbi Nachman himself situated his tales on the level of sanctity. According to him, some of the stories derive from prophetic source, and, on condition of being knowledgeable and deserving, it is permissible to use them in man's quest to purify himself as well as the universe.

I remember reading them as a child, thinking I understood what I read. Now I read them again more than 10 times because of you, [00:30:00] and I no longer understand. They are complex and simple, almost simplistic at the same time. Each one of his 13 major stories is composed of several, a series of concentric circles, the fixed center of which is the narrator and sometimes the reader. In all of them you find princes and wise man. Even demons are very good and very kind and ready to help man overcome his secret or his destiny. Beings in search of one another, man roving the farthest corners of the world, only to be reunited by the adventure they have just lived. We are



plunged into the deepest supernatural, and yet the word miracle is never mentioned.

"Back in Breslov," [00:31:00] says one Breslover Hasid, "there were miracles scattered around the floor, under the tables, and there was none to pick them up." In the imaginary world of Rabbi Nachman, everything seemed miraculous, even the daily routine. The fact to get up in the morning and be able to speak and be able then to be silent. And yet his characters are no angels. Because man has no need for angels in order to negate time and conquer space. Sometimes when you read Rabbi Nachman you have the feeling he really was a space scientist.

Man has not to be an angel to defy reason and free the soul from its prison. Both the romantic novelist and the surrealist poet could learn much from Rabbi Nachman. [00:32:00] He's more daring than Paul Éluard and André Breton. He couldn't care less about the three principle rules of the so-called suspense drama. In his narratives there is neither unity of time nor unity of place, not even unity of action. His characters are forever leading each other, hiding behind each other, and one never knows who plays whose role. Their fortunes are linked without any visible sequence. They are arbitrarily intertwined and again arbitrarily disentangled. Each of them embodies many

others just as each narrative contains many separate episodes, every one of which is a tale in itself.

Thus what Rabbi Nachman gives us is a series of mosaics, and at the core of every scene there is another [00:33:00] scene. And one could easily lose his way. There are too many *ma'asiyot b'tokh ma'asiyot* , too many stories inside his stories. And in the end the central theme recedes into the background.

At first glance this seems surprising in the work of an artist such as Rabbi Nachman, an artist who even in his secondary tales, with all their internal networks, has a pattern and clarity and where he accords such an importance to detail, the color of the sky, the mood of a child, the eyes of someone passing by, the tonality of silence. How could he neglect the very structure, the very body, the integrity of his own novels?

Yet since these same apparent weaknesses are in all of his stories, we may [00:34:00] conclude that they could only have been deliberate, expressing his concept of the very art of storytelling. It is as though he wished to make us understand that for the individual it is more important to study and relate the mystery of his own existence than that of the creation of the universe. "There is more truth in the smile of a child who

is thirsty," said Henri Bergson much later, "than in the mouth of a philosopher." Every fragment reflects the whole. Every being is a witness for that which makes him at once the most fragile and the most immortal of creatures.

Once upon a time, Rabbi Nachman tells us, there was a prince, another one, who was forced to leave his father's palace. Months went by, then years. Sick with nostalgia, he was unable to find himself a resting place. Exile became harder and harder to bear. Then the [00:35:00] prince received a letter from his father. It reminded him of their separation. And he could have given anything to be able to put his arms around him or even just to touch a corner of the royal tunic. But then he thought to himself, but I am holding his letter in my hands, and the king's handwriting, being the king's will, therefore is the king.

At that he began to kiss the letter and cry, of joy, of gratitude, of nostalgia, no matter. The letter was proof that his father was alive, and it was a link between them. And just as the letter was a letter, the king was king.

One day Rabbi Nachman was standing at his window overlooking the Breslov marketplace. And he saw one of his men, a certain

[00:36:00] Chaikl running about, taking care of his business. He called to him and asked him, "Chaikl, did you look at the sky today?" "No, Rabbi." "Chaikl, come here, near me, to this side of the window, and tell me what you see there in the street. Tell me." "Rabbi," he says, Chaikl, "I see people, many people, horses, many horses, and merchants running in all directions. That is what I see, Rabbi."

"Chaikl, Chaikl," says the Rabbi, "in 50 years from now there will be here in this very spot another market, not this one. Other carriages will bring other merchants with other horses, but I will no longer be here. You will no longer be here. So I ask you, what good does it do [00:37:00] you to run since you don't even have time to look at the sky?"

In all of his imaginary tales there is always someone running, someone seeking, and the wise man always telling him where to run, what to seek. And all communicate by way of stories. Each new character making his appearance on the scene brings with him a new tale.

As an example, let us quote his most beautiful and also his most obscure tale entitled *Mayse vegn zibn betler*, "The Story of the Seven Beggars." These are seven stories which he told in the

span of several weeks. And according to Rebbe Noson, his biographer, we know, that he himself didn't know what he was going to say. [00:38:00] He was a real writer, a real artist. He used to say to his Hasidim who listened to him, well, where are we? And they told him where he left off, and he began almost dancing with suspense. "Ah, am I curious to know what is going to happen." (laughter)

Once upon a time there was a king who renounced his throne in favor of his son. The son's coronation became the occasion of much merrymaking and exuberance. There was singing and dancing in the streets. Actors and musicians were on hand to entertain the members of the court. At the height of the festivities the king turned towards his son and said, "My child, I can see in the stars that one day you will lose your throne. Please promise you that you will not be sad on that account."

[00:39:00]

The new king was kind and covered himself with glory. A patron of the arts, he encouraged artistic endeavor in all its forms. He was concerned that all his subjects be happy. Whoever wanted money he gave money to. Whoever hankered after honors was granted honors. Then one day all the inhabitants of a certain country fled. In their flight they had to pass through a

forest. Two among them, a boy and a girl, strangers, lost their way. They were still small, only five years old, both, and they were hungry. And they started to cry.

And they caught sight of a beggar with a bundle slung over his back. They asked him for bread. He gave it to them. "Where do you come from, children?" "We don't know." The beggar wanted to leave, and they begged him to take them along, but he refused. "I don't want you to come with me." Then [00:40:00] they realized that he was blind. They expressed their astonishment. How could a blind man see the road before him?

And Rabbi Nachman comments, quote, "Their astonishment surprises me. How can such small children be astonished?" And he explains, "They were intelligent. That is why they knew how to be astonished." The greatest gift is astonishment.

Well, to make it short, the blind beggar left them with a wish that they be like him. The next day, famished, they began to cry again. Another beggar came to feed them. He was deaf. Like the first, he refused to take them with him but wished them to be like him: deaf. On the third day [00:41:00] it was the turn of a stutterer, to give them first to eat and then his blessing. Then there was a fourth beggar. He had a twisted

neck. The fifth was hunchbacked. The sixth had no arms, and the seventh no legs. And each, upon taking his leave, wished them to be like him.

Eventually the children took to the road again and became wandering beggars, like them. Everywhere people felt sorry for them. They became famous among beggars, very successful. One day it was decided by the beggars themselves to marry them off. Probably this is the only Jewish point in Rabbi Nachman's stories. (laughter) The ceremony took place in the royal capitol [00:42:00] on the day of the king's anniversary. And listen to the description, which is really wild, as a hippie would say. A large hole was dug for 100 or so guests, and there the marriage took place, and everyone rejoiced.

But the newlyweds remembered their adventures in the forest and regretted the absence of the beggars. And suddenly the first one appeared, the blind man telling them an amazing tale. The next day was the turn of the deaf beggar, and he told his tale. And so it went for the entire *shivat y'mei mishteh*, all the seven days of the celebration, except that Rabbi Nachman stopped on the sixth day at the sixth beggar.

The note from Rabbi Nossan began that he used to take his stories from everyday life. He would have given anything to meet [00:43:00] newspaper men, but he didn't because every person he met he had only one question to ask, which is the question of every newspaper man: what's new? That's exactly what he asked every person: what's new? And from the events that they told him, he transmuted the event into a tale. One of the tales he told, which is in "The Seven Beggars," was told about a *bet melekh*, it's a complicated story.

After here there was Napoleon. He liked Napoleon. Well, the sixth day he stopped, and he did not tell the story of the seventh beggar, and later he confided to Rabbi Nathan that the story of the seventh beggar would be told only after *biat hamashiach*, the coming of the messiah. But in the meantime nobody remembered the beginning. [00:44:00] What happened to the king who was crowned while his father was still alive? What happened to his father? Did the son lose his throne? Did it really sadden him? It doesn't matter.

What counts for Rabbi Nachman are the tales in here and in debt of the king. He's more interested in beggars than in kings. The beggars are not simple beggars. The blind one says, "I am not blind, the world is blind. Furthermore, it is the things



that the world does not see that makes me blind. Furthermore, I am not even old. I am still an infant." And the deaf one says, "I am not deaf. It is believed that I am so afflicted because I can hear only the absence of things and beings. Some deplore the absence of happiness, others rejoice in the [00:45:00] absence of misfortune. It is to this absence that I am deaf." And the stutterer says, "I hardly stutter. I am an orator, a lecturer. Only I," says the stutterer, "I like to express nothing except perfection." And so forth and so forth.

The same structure can be found in all of Rabbi Nachman's tales. They're always strange men coming to rescue lost princes and old men hanging on to their childhood. Here and there one meets a man of the forest or a man who knows how to listen to noises.

And he said in Yiddish m'zogn az fun zogn vert men nisht trogn. s'iz nit emes. In English it would mean some words can make woman pregnant. It doesn't have the same taste. (laughter)

Rabbi Nachman did believe in the power of the word, that words can tear down all doors. Words are the most beautiful and also the most terrifying of all adventures. Rabbi Nathan and the other Breslov Hasidim attach a mystical interpretation to these stories. Sometimes it's a pity. Their commentaries take away

more than they give. According to them we are dealing with the eternal dialogue conducted by God with his people and the *Shechinah*, the king being God, the prince being the Jewish people, and the princes, the *Shechinah* or the Torah or perhaps even the tzadik, the just, or the messiah.

I don't [00:47:00] like their commentaries because it's a kind of, I feel, an apologetic. They try to apologize for his stories. The stories are much more profound than they make them sound. They try too hard. And yet Rabbi Nachman's characters are only rarely Jews. Although sometimes giving way to a delirious impulse, he imposes upon them Jewish behavior. He makes everybody Jews.

Somehow even then one forgives him this lack of logic. After all, he is a writer. But numerous were the Hasidic rabbis who were less inclined to be indulgent towards Rabbi Nachman. He was resented for his originality, for his individualism and also for his inordinate pride, to which we shall come later. And also for his stories, which are neither Hasidic [00:48:00] nor Jewish in the strict sense of the word. His heroes are not rabbis but princes, and their exploits are not examples about repentance but real stories with suspense and beauty.

In some circles feeling ran against him because he consorted with unbelievers and even clandestine Frankists. Before leaving for Palestine, we shall talk about that later, he insisted on spending a night in Kamenetz- Podolsk. Accompanied by a servant, he spent one day and one night there disguised as merchant. He always disguised himself. None knows what he did there. One only knows that access to the city then was forbidden to Jews. He himself later said cryptically that, [00:49:00] "He who knows why Eretz Yisrael was first in the hand of the Canaanim, of the Canaanites, also knows why I had to go to Kamenetz- Podolsk before leaving for Palestine."

His Hasidim say, according to Reb Hillel Zeitlin, who was one of the great poets and great philosophers and great writers about Breslov, that his goal was to bring back to Judaism certain Frankists whose headquarters were in Kamenetz- Podolsk. On the Kabbalist level this interpretation appears plausible. Rabbi Nachman, whose every thought converged on the *mashiach*, the messiah, harbored the desire to gather all the *nitzotzot*, all the sparks and integrate them into the holy flame. That is why he loved to chat with free thinkers, [00:50:00] to bring them back to the cradle. That is why he told stories, to transform them into legends and then into prayers and then into flights of ecstasy.

Unfortunately, the other Hasidic rabbis refused to admit the validity of his powers and his intentions. Der Shpoler Zeyde, for example, the grandfather of Shpola, or the Rebbe of Savran quite openly and ferociously carried on a state of war against him and his followers. They were banished more than once. If you should read the *charamim*, the excommunications pronounced against the Breslover, it is appalling.

Jews who believed in Der Shpoler Zeyde were forbidden to marry, intermarry, with the Breslover Hasidim or to eat at their table. Furthermore, it was forbidden [00:51:00] to feel pity for them. And in one herem it is written, quote, "Whosoever shall pity them shall not deserve to be pitied himself." This kind of quarrel, not infrequent within Hasidic movement, generally took place on the rabbi's level -- sorry, not on the rabbi's level but on the followers, or the Hasidim. It is told that Der Shpoler Zeyde himself, the most fanatic of the Breslover enemies, said, "What I reproach him is to have come too early." It is also said that when Rabbi Nachman died, Der Shpoler Zeyde mourned his death 30 days.

Let us note, by the way, that Rabbi Nachman hardly remained passive. He returned blow for blow. He called his adversaries

the *m'forsamim* , the famous people, meaning [00:52:00] the infamous people. And what he had to say about them was not very flattering. Quote, "Certain leaders are incapable of leading themselves and yet want to lead others." He also said certain famous rabbis become famous only because of their quarrels. Just as famous as they, he refused to be like them. He wanted to be different, and he really was.

Of those closest to him he demanded total commitment and rewarded them for it. Their doubts, their ills, he took them all upon himself. In this respect he did conform to the classic Hassidic style. In other ways, though, he frequently did not. It happened that he would disappear for weeks or months at a time, sometimes even longer. He rejected stability [00:53:00] and loved movement. Rather than settling into the comfort of fame he chose to remain constantly on the move. His moods changed abruptly, unpredictably. He would tumble from the greatest heights of ecstasy into the bleakest of glooms. He wavered between the *gadlut ha-mokhim* and the *katnut ha-mokhim*

He said, "Every day I change level and identity." And he said something about God which took on himself. "God," he says, "never repeats himself." He didn't either. Happy, his joy was without bounds. Sad, he carried the entire world with him into

despair. Nothing like it had ever been seen before. Don't forget that the *Kotzker Rebbe* was later.

A rabbi, we know, must be strong and stable, a pillar to be looked up to and leaned upon by his Hasidim, [00:54:00] but here Rabbi Nachman believed that he could do and get away with anything.

A story. Once upon a time there was a mountain, and on its highest peak there beat the heart of the world. Close by on another mountaintop there bubbled a spring. The heart and the spring fell deeply in love, each needing the other to live and to hope. But they could never become one because each time the spring moved it could no longer see the heart, thus incurring mortal danger. So it did not move, and every evening, when dusk fell, they became sad. And to console each other they exchanged gifts such as the day barely gone by or then perhaps the new day lying in wait at the close of the night.

Rabbi Nachman, the author of [00:55:00] this story, wanted to be both spring and heart and the rhythm of the world, no more, no less, rather more. His vanity could shock us. Granted, he frequently cast himself into roles of exaggerated importance. His wish for his Hasidim was simply to understand his tales.

Quote, "I envy the roads you traveled in order to come and see me." Or, quote, "As for my book," the one that he destroyed, "it will be commended upon by the messiah himself."

Another time, and this he said with a little bit of very sensitive and beautiful irony. He said, "Actually, I have all the attributes, all the qualities of the [00:56:00] *mashiach*, the messiah. The only difference is that he will come. I won't." (laughter) One day he cried out, "If the world only knew to what extent it needs me, all mankind would throw itself down on the earth to pray for my health." That's because he didn't believe in doctors. (laughter)

Some of his disciples received his pledge that in the afterlife he will make angels out of them. How is one to reconcile such pride with the image of the tzadik? Rabbi Nachman would say that the tzadik is comparable to his creator and not to his creature, that therefore he is situated beyond our scope of understanding, and finally that therefore [00:57:00] we could hardly be blamed for not understanding him. But still I propose that we try.

The key, in my opinion, may be found in the journey which marked his life. At the age of 26 he decided to go to the Holy land.

Indeed, what he said on the subject of Palestine could easily be applied to our time. Quote, "Whoever wishes to live as Jew cannot reach that goal outside Eretz Yisrael. Some Jews think they wish to go there. Some may even be ready to go there, on one condition, that it be in luxury." And Rabbi Nachman concludes, "Whoever aspires to go there must go there on foot." And we shall see that his own journey was far from luxurious.

He had made the decision to go to Palestine on the eve of Passover. [00:58:00] He was still living in Medvedevka. His wife, upon being informed, sent him a delegate in the person of their daughter with mission to determine how he planned to provide for his family's needs. Rabbi Nachman's cold reply was, "You, my daughter, shall go to your future father-in-law. Your older sister will find work as a maid somewhere. Your younger sister will no doubt find a family to take her in, if only out of pity. Your mother can work as a cook. As for me, I shall sell everything in order to raise the necessary travel expenses." And he did. And he left shortly after.

A man, mysterious, for he remained nameless, -- in the Breslover text he is referred to always as the *melaveh*, [00:59:00] as the rabbi's companion -- and this man went with him everywhere to take care of his practical matters. The rabbi was not a



practical man. Unlucky, the rabbi and his companion went from mishap to mishap. Whatever you can imagine happened to him, even those things that you cannot imagine, all catastrophes. *The Odyssey* of Homer is, as you would say, peanuts. (laughter)

Hardly have they set foot on board their boat in Nikolaev but of course a storm breaks out. During a stopover in Istanbul they learn that all travel to the holy land has been suspended. Why? Because it's feared there that Napoleon might be planning an invasion. It had to happen to [01:00:00] him. Eventually they find a boat, and naturally the sea is mean. In the port of Jaffa all passengers finally disembark, except Rabbi Nachman, who is suspected of being a spy, a French spy. (laughter)

Well, he leaves the boat at Haifa. It is the eve of Rosh Hashanah. Rabbi Nachman is in seventh heaven. But hardly had his feet touched holy ground that he is ready to leave, to go back home. He consents to stay because the Breslover texts always manage to stress that the rabbi was not *akshan*, , he was not stubborn. If people insisted, he gave in. So he consented to stay until after the holidays. And then listen to what happened.

A young Turk came every [01:01:00] day to pay him a visit. Rabbi Nachman couldn't understand what the man wanted. He didn't speak Turkish. But day after day the visitor came, simply to look at him in silence or to tell him things that poor Rabbi Nachman couldn't understand. And one day the Turk appeared armed to the teeth, and he was angry, and he was screaming his head off. So they brought an interpreter who translated. The Turk was challenging the rabbi to a duel. (laughter)

Rabbi Nachman fled and was hiding at the house of an admirer. And he didn't get out for a couple of days. Later, the Turk, the same Turk, calmed down and sent word to the rabbi to say that he need no longer fear him. And Rabbi Nachman came out of hiding. The Turk came [01:02:00] back to look at him, and again in silence. And Rabbi Nachman later commented, "The gentleness of the Turk frightened me more than his anger." It's not true. He was frightened. (laughter)

Then he went to Tiberias. Naturally, an epidemic broke out. So Rabbi Nachman and his man escaped by climbing a wall. They arrived in Safed, in Tzfat, then Acre, in Akko, and again they had to flee because Napoleon was on his way, still Napoleon because the two flotillas, the Turkish one and the French one,

were preparing a naval battle in which Rabbi Nachman wanted nothing to do with.

The Pasha of [01:03:00] Akko gave orders to the civilians to evacuate the fortress, otherwise, as it's called in French, les bouches inutiles, all those who are not soldiers will be killed for they took up rations and food of the soldiers. Rabbi Nachman wanted to flee of course.

Somehow Rabbi Nachman succeeded in getting aboard a boat but be separated from his friend. Yet later they met, separated again, and they met again on a ship, which they meant to be a neutral ship. And of course it was a Turkish warship. And Rabbi Nachman was locked in a cabin, again taken as a spy. His companion was handed a rifle and mobilized on the spot to fight the French. If that wasn't enough, once more a storm broke out rocking the boat. [01:04:00] It took in water. And all around them waves. And I quote Rabbi Nachman's description, "Waves were standing up like huge mountains scooping out gigantic valleys between them." And there are tales, descriptions there which are really beautiful. He even describes how they tried to fight the clouds by shooting at them with guns.

Rabbi Nachman and his man finally became worried. The end was approaching. Rabbi Nachman then instructed his man to divide the contents of their purse in two and suggested that each hide his share in his belt. And with somewhat macabre humor, his anonymous companion answered, "Rabbi, what for? Do you really think that the fish will not swallow us [01:05:00] without money?"

Then Rabbi Nachman, for the only time in his life, invoked his ancestral favors, his *zechut avot*, and he prayed to the Baal Shem Tov to be saved, and they were. The account of this voyage is among the most beautiful, the most ingenious of literature. Two Jews, prisoners of the Turks, unable to communicate with them. It is easy to imagine their state of mind, their terror. Rabbi Nachman's greatest fear was that he would be sold as a slave. But the ship anchored in Rhodes. After many adventures, the Rabbi and his man were finally permitted to disembark, thanks to the local Jewish community, which had paid a certain ransom. Then they started again on their journey home, passing once more through his temple.

But here let us return for just [01:06:00] a moment. The Breslover texts say that during the first day in Istanbul Rabbi Nachman was behaving in a very peculiar fashion. The expression

is *k'ekhat ha-pakhutim*, as a nogoodnik, as someone -- a nonbeliever. They're not entering into details, but one can imagine to say what *ha-reikamim*, *ha-pakhutim*, it meant a lot.

In Istanbul suddenly he would run around in the streets barefoot and hatless, dressed in only his interior garments. And then on the streets he would play with children as a child would play. He jumped. He yelled. He ran. And playing in war with the children. [01:07:00] Worse yet, he met Jews, and to each one he gave the impression that he's someone else. Even worse yet, a famous tzadik named Reb Zev has welcomed him with respect and honors, but he, Rabbi Nachman, proceeded to make fun of him openly. He would wait to take his meals at the precise moment that Reb Zev was conducting the Shabbat services. The behavior of a comedian, maybe, of the *commedia dell'arte* rather than that of a Hasidic rabbi.

What is the explanation? According to his Hasidim, he was intent on throwing off the *kategor*, , the demon who was anxiously trying to prevent him from completing his journey. Rabbi Nachman supposedly remembered what happened to the Baal Shem Tov. He, too, went through Istanbul. He wanted [01:08:00] to go to the holy land, and the Hasidic tradition says had the Baal Shem Tov reached the holy land the messiah would have come.

So maybe Rabbi Nachman thought that by assuming a disguise he could outwit Satan.

As for me, I am inclined, rather, to accept another hypothesis. In my view, Rabbi Nachman was endowed with a refined and acute sense of humor, which he turned into a metaphysical attempt of solving problems. He played with the children in order to scoff at the tzadik within himself. His pride was only a disguise. It was feint and meant to deceive. That is why he pushed it to the end, to the limits of the believable. That is why he dressed like [01:09:00] a clown and sometimes behaved like one. Consciously, deliberately, he exaggerated the salient aspects of his personality to make himself laugh.

He said when the messiah will come nothing will change except that fools will be ashamed of their foolishness. Another time he said, "*Ribono shel olam*, Master of the universe, I pity you." As if to say really, was it all worth the while to creating this world, to creating this farce, this comedy? Why did you do it? What for?

In his book of tales we find this story which may serve as key. Again, once upon a time there was a country [01:10:00] which encompassed all the countries of the world. And in this country

there a town which encompassed all the towns of the country. And in this town there was a street which encompassed all the streets of the town. And in that street there was a house which encompassed all the houses on the street, and in that house there was a room, and in that room there was a man who encompassed all the men on earth, and this man was laughing. Was he laughing? Was he laughing?

Who is this man? God-kavyakhol? Rabbi Nachman? Someone else? I was often haunted by this laughter. I always thought that laughter has a role to play in Jewish history. Our history began with laughter. Abraham had a child called Yitzchak, [01:11:00] meaning *ki tzakhakta li* , you made fun of me. What is this laughter about? And I was always haunted by this laughter. Maybe whatever happens to us is simply a way of listening to God's laughter, God laughing at man.

Rabbi Nachman did not dismiss laughter. He speaks about it all the time. He did dismiss doubt, but he loved questions. He said, "Not to question one's self about God is to diminish him, to insult him. To understand God means to reduce his intelligence to the level of ours." Well, through his stories he's still asking us questions.

In my town there were no Breslover Hasidim. I saw some of them later in Jerusalem. [01:12:00] They are called the dead Hasidim, the Toyter Hasidim, because they would accept no rabbi to replace Rabbi Nachman. "My fire shall burn until the end of time," said Rabbi Nachman, and they took him literally. "I shall not leave you," he said before dying. And they took him literally. For these Hasidim this promise has a real, a literal meaning.

In their synagogue in Jerusalem there stands Rabbi Nachman's armchair. Many Hasidim, hundreds of them over the years had saved small, detached pieces of it. And all miraculously succeeded in deceiving that in various places of Europe and in bringing each his little piece of wood to Jerusalem. And all those who [01:13:00] carried a piece of wood managed to get to Jerusalem, and the armchair is there.

I knew a Breslover Hasid during the war, over there in the kingdom of night. He kept repeating, to whomever was willing to listen, famous Breslover sayings. Gornisht iz azoy gants vi a tesbrokhn harts, Nothing is as whole as a broken heart. Or Gevald Yidn, zeit eich nit miyayesh. For heaven's sake, Jews, do not despair. "Out of despair," says Rabbi Nachman, "I shall



pick up joy. *ha-khokhme*" he said, "to have joy when one is joyous." (laughter)

He recited prayers, my friend, my Breslover Hasid friend.

[01:14:00] He told stories. I have forgotten his name. I remember one of the Breslover sayings he used to say over there. Two men who live in different places or even in different times may still converse, for one may raise a question, and the other, who is far away in time or in space, may ask a question that answers it.

This man died. His voice is still sometimes within mine. Who then was Rabbi Nachman? It is hard to know. He was much too complex to know. What we have of him are his tales. And they are beautiful enough to make you catch [01:15:00] your breath. And then in spite of the atmosphere of legends surrounding them, or perhaps because of it, they can be viewed in a very contemporary context.

During our next and final lecture, I wonder what will happen next time. (laughter) The first lecture it was raining. The second one we had a taxi strike. Tonight it was snowing. During our final lecture next week we shall be touching upon

modern legends, and in fact, we could easily turn to Rabbi Nachman's tales again with just very slight modifications.

For example, once upon a time there was a king who knew that a harvest was going to be cursed and that whoever would eat of it would go mad. So he had huge store rooms constructed [01:16:00] to hold the reserves of the last harvest. He entrusted the key to his best friend, and this is what he told him: "When my subjects and I will have gone mad, you will have as mission to roam the world going from country to country, from town to town, from street to street, from house to house, from man to man, and you will shout, 'People, do not forget. People, do not forget.'" And the friend in question had no choice but to obey.

So let us imagine that he entered the room which encompassed all the others, and he tried to find a word encompassing all the others. And in this room he found a man alone. And this man encompassed [01:17:00] all the others. And suddenly this man began to laugh. And the king's friend could not help but join in the laughter, and the two of them, all day laughing, all day laughing until despair was found, and through despair a king was imagined. And the king himself, was he laughing? That is the question.

(applause)

M1:

Thanks for listening. For more information on 92nd Street Y and all of our programs, please visit us on the web at [92Y.org](http://92Y.org).

This program is copyright by 92nd [01:18:00] Street Y.

END OF AUDIO FILE