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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) For our last lecture I have a first surprise. There is no storm, no rain, no strike, nothing. Tonight tales, very simply, tales. Moses Mendelssohn was a philosopher, and he was as famous as a philosopher as he was famous for being very ugly. Most parts of his body were twisted, yet on account of his intelligence, the most beautiful and richest girl in town had been chosen to be his wife. Both parents [00:01:00] agreed to the match, and naturally did not bother to check with the principal parties interested: Mendelssohn and the fiancé.

Well, it was customary that way. Parents already then thought that they knew better. The children were not to see each other until the wedding. Everything was all right. The bride was in her room with her friends and female relatives. The bridegroom in his room made a customary speech, a *drasha*, holding his listeners, of course, spellbound. Then he was led to the bride. He lifted her veil and was stunned by her beauty.

Unfortunately, on the same occasion she saw him (laughter) and fainted on the spot. People around Mendelssohn tried to reassure [00:02:00] him and said you must understand. She is

excited, all brides are. He understood. Nevertheless, he went back to his room and made another speech, hoping to give her time to recapture her spirits and rest.

One hour passed, another one. What he did not know, although he may have guessed it, was that in the other room the wedding had taken on a very dramatic turn. The bride, although pretty but clever, simply informed her mother that for nothing on earth would she marry this living ugliness even if it concealed the most brilliant mind of all.

Well, you can imagine the tears, the sighs, the uproar. Aunts and cousins and jealous distant relatives and old maids [00:03:00] all spoke at once. All pleaded with the bride not to provoke scandals and not to bring shame on the family. She listened to nobody. As for Mendelssohn, he was still lecturing. Finally he understood that something had gone wrong. He requested an explanation. It was given to him. His reaction was calm. He sent a message to the bride. He would like to see her for five minutes but alone. And then she would be free to decide. She owed him at least that much.

They met alone. It was not very conformed to the religious practices of that time, but that was not really the problem.

Mendelssohn then said to her I understand your reaction, but please permit me to tell you a legend based on the Talmud.

[00:04:00] Before a child is born, a heavenly voice announces already the name of his future wife. When I heard it I asked the angel who guarded me to show me the person behind the name. He refused. I insisted. Nothing doing. So I chose blackmail. I said either you show me whom I am going to marry or I refuse to be born (laughter) and it will be your fault.

As you can see, he was as very precocious child. Well, the angel pleaded with him and cried. His counter arguments are irrelevant. And he had to give in. He took me to a place unknown, to me at least, and pointed at a creature whose sight [00:05:00] turned my blood into ice. Her body was more distorted than any idea conceived by any philosopher. "Who is she?" I shouted. "Your future wife," said the angel, lowering his eyes. "I don't want her." And the angel said it's not up to you to decide. "Oh no, after all I am marrying her. And in that case I refuse again to be born. I would rather stay here."

The angel, poor angel, began to cry. He was afraid of being punished for having revealed to me, Mendelssohn, my own future, my own disaster. I pitied him. Therefore I suggested a compromise solution. I would accept to be born, to marry this

woman, [00:06:00] but I would take on her ugliness. And the wedding did take place.

Why am I telling you this story? Number one, because I am a bachelor. Number two because I have told you so many Hasidic tales in the last three encounters that we had that I thought maybe a time has come to tell you a tale of someone whom Hasidim did not particularly appreciate. Tonight, therefore, I really would like to tell you a few legends of our time, but whose legends? Our generation lacks great figures with the charisma of a Reb Mendele Kotzker or a Rabbi Nachman. Reb Mendele once shouted in Yiddish, *fun a sakh gornishten, macht men eyn groysn gornisht* . (laughter) There are so many small people today that how can you really get something great even in the form of a tale out of our nothingness?

Abba Eban says that he is looking for a rebbe and cannot find one. I am looking too. Yet we do have stories, and we do have storytellers. Even more, we have tales. In the beginning, when I planned this series, I meant even to devote this last lecture simply to read modern writings by contemporary writers, some of them my friends, Manes Sperber, who wrote a beautiful book, *As a Tear the in Sea* or *Bellow*, or Chaim Grade, the greatest Yiddish

living writer today, or Danny Stern and Zeitlin, Glatstein.

[00:08:00]

There are so many tales today and all kind of books in all kinds of languages and Jewish tales, tales of sadness and tales of glory, tales that make you drunk with ecstasy and drunk with pain and fury. So let me tell you one more tale, half Hasidic. I too sometimes agree to compromises.

On the day the famous marshal Budyonny and his red cavalry took over the town of Chernobyl in the Ukraine a young lieutenant named Isaac Babel decided to pay a visit to the local Hasidic rebbe and the last of his line, a descendent of the great Nachum of Chernobyl, Reb Nachum of Chernobyl, a friend and disciple of the Baal Shem Tov.

Isaac Babel was eager to meet the tzadik but not because he himself was a Hasid nor to [00:09:00] satisfy the righteous curiosity and constant quest for new experiences and memories. His impulse to see the rebbe originated in the communist's urge to confront him with the facts of the impending end of his reign, and also in the wish to affirm that the world no longer lived in an era of faith, that in the light of the new sun on the horizon something was coming. Man had broken his ties with

God and sublimated all aspirations in his fervor for freedom. The era of religion is no more. We, the communists, are modern man's rebbes. That is what Isaac Babel, the magnificent storyteller from Odessa, wished to tell the rebbe of Chernobyl. His purpose, as you can see, was to convert him, to convert the rebbe by means of the word, of logic, and above all of history and dialectic. But how [00:10:00] was one to find him?

The Jews, fearful of the Cossacks and their pogroms, were in hiding. Fortunately, the rebbe was known, also among non-Jews. Babel asked to be brought to him. Yet he found an empty deserted house, evidently evacuated in great haste. And the visitor did discover a secret door. And upon entering it found himself in a room whose walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling. Seated at a table an old man whose face had great dignity and power was studying the Talmud and humming to himself.

The rebbe's powers of concentration were such that the stranger's presence went unnoticed although Babel was staring at him fixedly for a long moment. Then the rebbe looked up and saw him. He seemed not in the least surprised to see standing [00:11:00] before him a man in uniform and staring at him. Living deep inside his own universe, still competing with Beit

Shammai and Beit Hillel, the rebbe of Chernobyl was incapable of distinguishing between the various uniforms of the various armies. He was not even aware of the cruel war ravaging the country or its staunch occupation by the Cossacks. Dealing only with Jews, he felt certain that the man before him was a Jew. He had to be. And if he was here it meant that his blessing was needed or possibly his intervention up there.

And so in a gentle voice the rebbe of Chernobyl asked Babel, "Tell me," in Yiddish, "what can I do for you?" And Babel, under his spell, forgot all the arguments he had prepared [00:12:00] and even the reasons that had led him to come and see the fabled rebbe. And from the deepest recess of his being a cry rose to his mouth, a cry that was formed before his birth. Rebbe, in Yiddish, gib mir hislahavus, give me some fire, or the word that goes in English, I think, give me some fervor.

With this modern legend we have almost come full circle. It brings us back where we started two months ago when we paid homage to the stranger who came to Hillel and asked to be told the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Said Hillel, as you remember, what you do not want people to do unto you do not unto them. [00:13:00] What a peculiar way of answering. Is this the

whole Torah which supposedly one can never fully grasp unless one's life is as eternal as the Torah itself? No.

Hillel's answer was nothing but a parable concealing the real answer, which is given rather than taught. The Torah, Hillel could have said, can be accepted in the passing moment.

Accepted, yes, mastered no. Was the stranger convinced? Yes or no, it does not really matter. If yes, it must have been because of the beauty of the tale.

This is why, and this is what we have attempted to show in our encounters beginning two months ago. Our purpose was to tell rather than teach legends. Our aim was to illustrate their [00:14:00] purely aesthetic quality, which is a key to whatever Judaism stands for and whatever it aims to prove. For what is Judaism if not a tale? And what is Jewishness if not at least at the origin a rebellion against vulgarity? And Judaism as we know comprises both the law and the tale of the law.

Like the Halacha, the law, the Aggadah, the legend, transcends the present and its limit. In behaving in a certain way, in following a certain pattern, in doing what has been done and repeated throughout generations, the Jew is not perpetuating relics but instills life if not urgency into the past. In

observing certain laws one is linked [00:15:00] to Him who gave them.

In telling certain tales one is capable of rejoining those they are about. As the Midrash said, *Ritzoncha l'hakir mi she-amar v'hayah ha-olam? l'ma aggada*, Do you want to know Him, who by the power of words created a universe? Study legends. We are not studying. We are telling them. Because through legends one can go back to the source, for there is only one legend, and it, this legend, reaches in 2,001 nights. Therefore the original title of our series was with relation to tonight somewhat misleading. Jewish legends past and present, they are all the same. What has been true 2,000 years ago is [00:16:00] still true today. Whether in the Midrash or in the Hasidic literature, it is *ayn mukdam u'm'ukhar ba-Torah*. Nothing is late. Nothing is early. Time is of no importance. A tale is defined by its virtue in combining past and present.

A parenthetical example, we mentioned Reb Nachum of Chernobyl, the forefather, the great, great father of the Babel rebbe. Reb Nachum of Chernobyl was poor and turned poverty into a philosophy, a weltanschauung. Poverty, he said with humor, is a precious gift, a rare stone, a diamond, and what is more, it costs so little. (laughter)

Well, the same concept without its naïve humor runs through many Talmudic texts. [00:17:00] Whether the poor themselves were convinced of their luck is not known. But it ought to explain why most Talmudic scholars for centuries were considered poor and *batlonim*, misfits to the extent that they were really gullible.

We spoke of fervor. It is this fervor which has always dominated the Jewish soul and the legends it illuminates. In contrast to what we are told by science, the Midrash claims that the first man, Adam, was more beautiful than all his descendants because the past links us not to the ape but to creation and its author.

Adam, says the Midrash, wished to be a poet. He began to sing. And so the angels mistook him for one of their own. In order to [00:18:00] delineate more sharply the borders between angel and man, God put the latter to sleep. The rest you know. In his sleep Adam dreamed that he had met the woman of his life. And his dream still endures. And sometimes it is not a dream. Yet his poetic outbursts are continuing, only now while he is singing it is the others who fall asleep.

Babel was not a poet, yet his tales describing the lower depths of Odessa or the adventures, his own, of a Jewish writer lost among the Cossacks, are suffused with the fiery breath of poetry because in every one of his characters there is reflected a need for fervor, a need which for the Jew leads to either sanctity or tragedy and sometimes both. [00:19:00] The two sons of Aaron, great priest and brother of Moses, died on the threshold of the sanctuary, and commentary is *hosifu ahavah al ahavah*. Their death was the culmination of an excess of fervor, of ecstasy.

Paul Valéry, a French poet, said about the Palais de Chaillot, "*Ami n'entre pas sans désir,*" Friend, do not enter this place without desire, without passion. For the Jew it is not a matter of entering but of breaking down doors. He does not walk. He runs. His desire does not bring to mind babbling of a brook but the hypnotic appeal of a precipice. His fervor is a passion doomed to stay unfulfilled. It is not by chance that so many Jews found themselves at the origin of so many revolutionary movements, [00:20:00] the hippies included.

Even the unbeliever fashions for himself an eschatological vision of the world. With Freud what matters is where one comes from, *da maiayin bata*. With Trotsky what matters is seeing where one is going, *Da l'an ata holekh*. And very few are going

one step further *lifnei mi ata atid l'tain din v'khashbon*. Yet the one links the present to the distant past, and the other links it to the future, also distant. Both tend to transcend it in their wish to save it from being swallowed by the commonplace, the routine.

If I am to believe one of my rabbi friends, the Baal Shem Tov might have been a prey to what today would have been called a kind of LSD hallucinations without LSD. You may smile [00:21:00] at this, of course, so do I. I do not think that LSD is needed to attain hallucinations, good ones. But somehow in both cases, and this is a thing really to study, the language, the Hasidic language and the LSD language, is often similar. For instance, what is a *Kefitzat Haderech* if not a trip?
(laughter)

Well, of course, methods vary with the mores and times. But at the root it is always possible to discern the same terms of legend, of passion, the same call to fervor. Sometimes it ends badly. Most of the false messiahs ended up by converting either to Islam, as did Shabbetai Tzvi, or to Catholicism like Jacob Frank. Pushed to the extreme, [00:22:00] fervor engenders madness, loss of faith or death. And the example of course is the *arba she'nikh'n'su la-pardes*, the four sages that entered

the orchard of wisdom. They studied the *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. They admired the beauty of the universe, the way God conducts his world. And they found it beautiful for some reason. So one got mad and so forth and so forth.

In the case of Babel, his communist fervor cost him his life. Twenty years after his encounter with the rebbe of Chernobyl, disenchanted by the purges, having adopted silence as a form of literary expression, he was executed on Beria's orders. A few years later in 1952, Stalin, in a paroxysm of anti-Semitic paranoia [00:23:00] ordered the arrests of scores of Jewish poets, novelists, and actors, Peretz Markish, David Bergelson, Der Nister.

The Jewish community of Russia was entering the *Tochacha*, the era of malediction. Haunted by fear, it dreaded both dawn and dusk. It leave the hour of biblical legend. One day the tales that sprang from this period will be told in schools. A writer was ordered to appear at a public meeting to attack his colleagues and friends who were already in prison. We know his name. Being a Jew himself, he knew what risks he was running by disobeying, so he came. But standing erect under the gaze of his listeners, he remained silent for a long time, unable to

utter a word, and then [00:24:00] he collapsed. He was arrested, convicted, and shot.

Another, Der Nister, was among the last ones to be apprehended. For entire days and nights he paced his room crying. He was saying, "All my life I want to be a Jewish writer, and now I am beginning to have doubts. Because if I were a Jewish writer I would have been arrested by now." Shortly thereafter the police knocked on his door, and he welcomed them. "There you are at last." Reassured, he assumed his martyrdom, which to him carried a meaning of a certainty, that of his destiny as a Jewish writer.

A third, the poet Peretz Markish, lost his mind in prison. It is said that [00:25:00] Stalin had given orders, specific orders to drive Jewish writers to insanity before murdering them. Many years before, one great Jewish poet, Osip Mandelstam, was driven to insanity. He too was arrested, in '38. He was in a labor camp, and every night he was sure that at 6:00 in the morning he will be taken for execution. So his friends simply managed every night to move the clock always forward before he awoke for years.

Why bring up these modern martyrs and their tragic legends in this place and at this time? To show you that in Jewish history everything is connected. Isaac has been sacrificed and saved, [00:26:00] more often sacrificed than saved, but more than once. The word spoken and heard 3000 years ago affects us today. The temple in flames is part of our daily reality. The promise made to Abraham is still weighing on our will to survive. The legends of the Talmud, the legends of the Midrash, are not mythological in character, not for us. They are alive.

Be he angry or not, Jupiter or Zeus are not living human beings. King David is. In other words, a legend is modern because it unfolds in our lifetime, sometimes before our very eyes. But its substance is not. Behind every modern legend one finds or [00:27:00] senses another one which preceded it by 1,000 or 2,000 years. *hafokh ba vahafokh ba, dichola ba a* says the Talmud. Everything is in the Talmud. Everything is in the first *sipur* the first tale, the written and the oral tale. We think we are inventing a story, and yet it already forms part of an existence of a memory.

One might actually say that for 3,000 years it is the same Jewish legend being told over and over again. What changes is the setting. What changes is the lighting. What changes is the

teller. Thus a Jewish legend is not opposed to the reality of an event but rather enhances its duration and continuity. The stranger who approached Hillel in his childish [00:28:00] quest for truth, one meets him across centuries and continents, even today. Judaism is so fashionable today. Some people believe it's enough to read a given book, attend a given lecture, and then they will know everything there is to know about Judaism. Today it is in to be Jewish.

Yet Judaism is something else and not something else. Judaism has not really changed as a tale. The superficial level of it changes us. Job, Reb Mendel of Kotzk, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, the three subjects of our three previous talks are not figures of what Toynbee called a fossilized civilization. The tales about each of them are relevant to our [00:29:00] lives today.

All three, each in his own way, went to the very end of his quest, and each did so with ultimate fervor. An ancient proverb maintains that it is not because two clouds meet that the spark is lit. Two clouds meet for the spark to be lit. We find it in the Talmud. *baderekh she'adam rotze lalekheth molikhim oto* . Translation: man is led on the road he already chose. If we are what we are it is also because of Job's doubtful submission, Reb

Mendel's angry outbursts, and Rabbi Nachman's breathtaking hallucinations. They acted on our sensitivity. They acted on our mind. Their stories, sometimes, if we are fortunate, [00:30:00] we live them through.

The topicality of Job needs no elaboration. His rebellions could be ours, indeed, ought to be ours. For he who today does not address himself to God to question his ways and mysteries offers him nothing but his defeat. The teaching of Job calls for resistance. He says yes but means no. He bows his head but clenches his teeth. His silence reverberates in that of Kotzk.

The rebbe of Kotzk and his fanatic search for truth, we have spoken about it, a source of fire more than of inspiration. The rebbe of Kotzk remains our contemporary. Before choosing solitude he wondered aloud. It is written that after Adam and Eve sinned in paradise God cursed the snake [00:31:00] to eternally crawl in dust and be nourished by it. Where is the curse? Where is the punishment if it means never to miss anything? And the rebbe of Kotzk answered precisely, that is the punishment, never to miss anything. That's the worst of all curses. And our affluent society is here to prove it. For mankind is advancing, but man is left behind.

But since we are in Kotzk, let's stay there for a while longer. When we were there last we said that Reb Mendel of Kotzk may have foreseen or forefelt the oncoming Holocaust. That's why he had wanted, by thunder and lightning, to harden the Jews and make every one of them into a fortress. What was the event that marked and divided his life? We said, [00:32:00] some of you may remember, that it was the one that occurred on the fateful Friday evening of *Parshat Toldot* in 1839. Many disciples and followers were present, yet none revealed what they had witnessed. The conspiracy of silence lasted at least 80 years.

The very first revelation of the event, and nothing proves its authenticity, appeared in 1919 as we have said, saying that the rebbe had, in order to shake up heaven and earth, transgressed the laws of Shabbat in public. Whether true or false, the hypothesis does not alter the fact that for two or three generations the conspiracy of silence was total. And this fidelity to the image of their master or perhaps this fidelity to the image of their own useful adventure cannot but stun and move us. [00:33:00] The silence of the Hasidim, in retrospect, equals the gesture of the rebbe. Incidentally, Professor Heschel, whom we discussed with afterwards, after our lecture, does not really believe that the rebbe of Kotzk transgressed the laws.

Yet listen to a similar tale. It happened some 25 years ago. The hero is another Hasidic rebbe, Reb Arele of Belz. His town in Poland was occupied by the Germans who began preparations for the Final Solution. A ghetto was created. Jews were taken to slave labor. Others were deported. Among the first sought after by the Gestapo was the rebbe whose fame singled him out as a target. However, the Belz Hasidim were ready for such a situation. They managed to hide the rebbe. They provided him with a new identity. They even found him a place to work [00:34:00] as a shoemaker, as a tailor. And the Germans were raging for weeks and months.

Then danger became nearer, and the Hasidim decided to undertake an even more daring rescue operation to get the rebbe smuggled out and smuggled across the border into Hungary. They bought, somehow, the services of a German officer and a play, a *mise en scène*, was staged. A certain Yossele Greenfield, troubadour and comedian in his free time, had the task to learn to imitate the rebbe in all his movements, and he became his double. He did.

Then one Friday afternoon the Gestapo was informed that the Belzer Rebbe had come out of his hiding, that he would appear in public and pray in public. [00:35:00] And the rebbe did.

Rather, Yossele Greenfield did. And the Hasidim, who were perfectly aware of the masquerade, behaved as if he really were the rebbe. They obeyed him. They respected him. They glorified him. They implored him to intercede in heaven on their behalf. And while the Gestapo was busy arresting Yossele Greenfield, Reb Arele of Belz dressed as an officer of the SS. And his brother, Reb Mordechai of Bilgoray, in the same uniform, crossed the border into Hungary. Not one of the thousands of the Jews in the ghetto broke the conspiracy of silence. The rebbe was saved. And in '43 I attended his services in Budapest.

But Kotzk [00:36:00] and Belz were only following precedents established long before. In the book Kings Melachim Alef, we read about Achav and Isabel who order that all prophets be killed. Yet Eliyahu, Elijah, succeeded in hiding 100 of them in caves. Later he told the king, in the presence of his people, I am the only living prophet in the country. Everybody knew that it wasn't so, that others were hiding. Many man and woman even knew where they were hiding. Yet not one of them betrayed them. Because they were not informers. Because they observed the law of solidarity in silence. The generation of Achav rings in Talmudic legends at one and the same level as that of David.

[00:37:00]

The Belzer Rebbe disguised as an SS officer, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav disguised as a *raykah*, an underworld character, and Job questioning God, as you remember. Are you sure that you did not confuse Iyov, Job, and *oyev*, enemy? Since the beginning of time questions remain questions. Only answers change. And what links the question to the answer is the tale of man crushed by one and the other. Like the Kotzker Rebbe's obsessions, Rabbi Nachman's tales are relevant to our era. You remember the wandering princes, the wandering wise man, the uprooted children in search of beauty and serenity, the clever and good-hearted beggars.

Every one of Rabbi Nachman's tales is full of them. Well, who are [00:38:00] they if not the deportees of the early '40s? Who are they if not the displaced persons of the late '40s and the early '50s? In Rabbi Nachman's universe the characters are eternally changing roles and stories and settings. Don't they reflect the image of the Jew today? Who is he? An intellectual in America, a member of the domineering elite in France, a military hero in Israel. What is the Jew today? Perhaps he's a person waiting to be knifed by history, a character inviting storytellers to take him into their vision. A Jew perhaps is a person who must relive again and again the experiences, all the

experiences of his ancestors, all of his ancestors. Therefore his anecdotes have the flavor [00:39:00] of legends, which make him what he is, a spark of eternity in time.

In his great work, the "Letter to El Greco," Nikos Kazantzakis quotes three prayers. Prayer number one: Lord, bend me like an arc for I do not wish to rot away. Second prayer: Lord, do not bend me too much for I do not wish to break down. Third prayer: Lord, bend me like an arc so I can remain what I am, and to hell with it, even if I break down.

What then is a Jew? The arc. What then is his legend? The prayer. And then, what comes then? Then comes fervor. Talmud says *Nevukhadnezzar bikesh l'makhshira*, [00:40:00] the king of Babylon, the same Nebuchadnezzar, the enemy who destroyed the First Temple. He too had wanted to sing together with the angels like Adam before him. Adam was put to sleep. Nebuchadnezzar -- Nebuchadnezzar in English -- was slapped in the face. By whom? By the angel Gabriel who probably fulfilled the function of a critic. (laughter)

But why was Nebuchadnezzar slapped in the face? Is it a sin to feel like singing the glories of God? No, he was not punished says still the rebbe of Kotzk. He was only tested. Gabriel

wanted to see how the king would sing after being slapped in the face. (laughter) Well, we Jews, no test is needed because we know. [00:41:00] To be a Jew is to sing afterwards. And then he sung, thus become a Jewish legend.

For all legends, all questions, all tales that a child will listen to, that a child will tell, before his master, all answers imagined by one or the other have been given to Moses at Sinai. This beautiful Talmudic concept applies both to Halacha and Aggadah. Just as man is the imaginary part of God, the Jew is the legendary part of man. The history of the Jew may be that of a legend wandering through centuries from the bible to the judges, from the judges to the prophets, to the kings and to the various diasporas.

The ten martyrs of the [00:42:00] faith under the Romans, the pogroms of Taf-Chet and Taf-Tet, the Crusades, it seems as though the same event took over and over, took place over and over again. Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion, Rabbi Yishmael walked to their deaths conversing to or with God. Two thousand years later their descendents followed their footsteps. Two thousand years later many went to their death the same way. Yes, it took 2,000 years for the legend of Rabbi Akiva to reach the Warsaw ghetto.

Once upon a time there lived a saintly man named Reb Hillel Zeitlin. He was a poet, a philosopher, a columnist, a guide to his community. He saw the approach of the onslaught and had an idea how to prevent it. He tried to gather around himself 10 men, 10 just [00:43:00] men simply to recite Tehilim, the psalms. Would that be sufficient? Yes or no, it did not matter. At that point perhaps he felt that nothing else could be done, would be done or is worthy to be done. And this reminds us naturally of the Kotzker Rebbe who was convinced that if he only could find 10 men who would follow him into the forest and shout that God is God they would force the messiah out of his hiding. Two hundred years separated, Rabbi Nachman and Reb Hillel Zeitlin, and the same act was imagined, and the same failure was encountered.

Did Reb Hillel Zeitlin really believe that it was still possible to save the world by prayer? If so, he failed. The catastrophe was not averted. [00:44:00] Does that mean that David Melech Yisrael, David, the king of Israel is condemned to outlive Israel? "The messiah will come!" shouted Reb Mendel Kotzker, "And there will be no one left to be saved." So, wrapped in his tallit and tefillin, with the book of splendor, the Zohar, under

his arm, Reb Hillel Zeitlin, together with other Jews went to his death conversing with an un-visible presence.

The psalms and Talmud, the prayers and the messianic dreams proved powerless to avert misfortune. Why? asked Job. Why is there conflict between divine truth and human justice or injustice? His query as well as Reb Mendel Kotzker's anger and Rabbi Nachman's laughter are transmitted in different [00:45:00] forms in modern tales. Somewhere in a ghetto 10 Jews are being taken as hostages to be executed. One of them, Moishe the water carrier, is laughing. It is Purim, and the Germans too are laughing. And they say you Jews will pay now what you have done to Amon and his sons. But Moishe is laughing, and he explains on the gallows, "Today I am Moishe the water carrier. Tomorrow, tomorrow I shall be Moishe the martyr."

A pious Jew somewhere in a camp spoke to God. Perhaps I am guilty. Perhaps we are all guilty and deserve this punishment, but what are you guilty of in having to mete out to us such punishment? Another story, another pious Jew in another camp [00:46:00] assembled a rabbinic tribunal to judge God. Still another story, a Kabbalist, his eyes closed, his lips sealed addressed himself to God of Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob. "I give you my faith as an offering, although you reject it. I

dedicate my fervor to you, although either I or you do not deserve it."

The same idea struck the poet Shlomo ibn Gabirol centuries ago who said *Mimcha Eilecha Evrach*. It is from you, Lord, that I am running away. It is towards you, Lord, that I am running away. And much later, a Bratslaver Hasid exclaimed what's the use of getting blind since I still see myself? [00:47:00] And a variation on the same theme: why worry about getting blind since I desperately continue to see you? For he is everywhere, even in the denial, which is the trap faced by man. But then in the same fashion one is permitted to assume that even acceptance can become a superior form of rejection.

Next day I was shown, by Professor Lieberman one of the most beautiful passages in the Talmud. God may love, says the Talmud. It is written *Yosheiv bashamayim metzakheik im ha-briyot v'lo al ha-briyot*. God may laugh with man, [00:48:00] not at man. Is the anxiety lifted? No. But the tale is beautiful.

Let us stay again with Rabbi Nachman. We have described in our last talk his bizarre behavior in Istanbul on his way to the holy land. He dressed like a beggar, a drunkard, a simpleton,

taking on different identities and disguises. And according to his disciple Reb Nathan, he mingled with children in the street and played with them in war games. Rabbi Nachman, the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov playing at war with children? What could be the meaning of it?

The question again was magnificently answered. Davka, by a great Misnaged who is also the greatest Talmudic scholar today, save Professor Lieberman. Said he, [00:49:00] "Preoccupied with the wars that were unleashed then, Rabbi Nachman had to protest somehow against these wars. And how does one protest against war? One has to underline and illustrate their absurdity. Therefore he found this poetic way of doing so. In reducing the bloody cruelties of war to a children's game he pointed out how senseless all wars are. And here too the symbol has relevance to the present situation. Wars are being waged. But now they are being waged against children.

Was it Heinrich Heine who said I know all the dates in history but not the events? With us it is different. Who cares about [00:50:00] dates since the events, in essence, vary so little? Once upon a time Jewish communities were massacred by the thousands. Yet the few remnant using Jacob's ladder took it upon themselves to clear the ruins of the temple in fire and

rebuild the kingdom around it. Once upon a time the few defeated the strong. Humility overcame arrogance. The besieged dispersed the surrounding enemies. Is this the tale of the Maccabees, of bar Kokhba, of Israel today? We live in times when reality itself is disguised as legend.

In order to accomplish the exodus from Egypt, God had to harden the attitude of Pharaoh. Had Nasser and Hussein not voiced publicly and repeatedly their determination to destroy Israel, they wouldn't have enabled her to attain [00:51:00] victory. Had Hussein been more patient, more tolerant, more moderate, Israel would not have taken possession of the old city and its western wall whose stones incarnate the fidelity of a people faithful to its past.

Whoever lived and witnessed this period, both tormented and exalting, became part of a biblical or Talmudic tale. The liberated cities had the same names as had the officers and men who conquered them. Why were there no victory celebrations? The price was too high, said General Yitzhak Rabin, too much suffering, our own and that of the enemy. And that sounds like God's irritation at his angels who had wanted to sing when the Jews crossed the Red Sea, *Maaseh yadai tovim bayam*, My creatures drown in the waters, and that's all you think about,

singing? [00:52:00] The ethical implications of Jewish legends past and present are still valid.

Moses, said the Midrash, was not allowed into the holy land because he had to kill an Egyptian. Of course, he had to kill him. Yet the scar on his conscience left by his deed cannot be healed. And David was ordered not to build his temple for he had been involved in too many wars, in too many battles. Then, like today, strange as it may sound, the Jew remains the most timid and the most poetic among the victors.

Thus it appears that legends of today are those of the past. We learn from the Midrash that before he died Adam was given the power to see the end of the future, including the last of his descendants. He saw us. Hence, we are linked [00:53:00] to the beginning and to what it symbolizes and conceals. Therefore, every Jew and every tale, in my opinion, must justify itself in relation to all others, to Klal Yisrael and mankind, and, in parenthesis, that applies not only to Jews, to man in general. If man would feel responsible towards mankind as a Jew should feel responsible toward Jews, the world would be better.

A Hasidic story, one of my favorites. Reb Zisha of Anipoli, the brother of Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, was traveling by train.

He was poor and looked it. His neighbor was a rich Jew and looked it also. Of course they didn't know each other. One was rich and one poor. [00:54:00] So the rich Jew permitted himself to be disrespectful. Reb Zisha took it very well, silently, humbly. But when both arrived in a certain town, Reb Zisha was greeted by many of his followers. Guilty and repenting, his train companion came with tears in his eyes and pleaded for forgiveness, explaining that he didn't know that the poor traveler was Reb Zisha. How could he possibly have known?

Reb Zisha of Anipoli then listened with sympathy and answered, "With genuine kindness I would gladly forgive you, but how can I? You did not insult Reb Zisha. You insulted a poor man. So go and ask forgiveness of all the poor who roam the world." In other words, if a Jew is humiliated anywhere, [00:55:00] we all are.

The continuity of legends is felt on all levels of Jewish existence but more so within the Hasidic community. The Hasidim have somehow managed to maintain alive memories and practices of Jewish centers, which without them would have sunk into oblivion. The Hasidim alone are really capable and willing to take along with them their former spiritual locations, Vizhnitz

and Borsha, and Visheva, Ger, and Kotzk, Bratslav, Rizhin, Karlin, and Sassov.

As Jewish inhabited towns and cities, they no longer exist on the European map. However, they reemerged in Israel, America, and even in Brazil. Hundreds of thousands of Hasidim were slaughtered, yet their movements in social structures were transferred and not erased. Isn't this the teaching of [00:56:00] Job? Because hope is lost, men must invent it. If man cannot begin, he at least has the power to continue.

One example: I was recently informed that a certain rebbe called the Kretshnifer Rebbe, is expected to arrive in New York. Kretshnif, a faraway reflection of an ancient burning. Kretshnif, a little village among many little villages surrounding my hometown, which after all was also a little village.

I remember the Kretshnifer Rebbe, a descendent of the dynasty of Nadvarna and Premishlan. He was a man of great physical power, strongly built, heavy shoulders and a bushy head. He used to shout his prayers as though he wanted to use force with God. I began [00:57:00] liking him one Saturday evening when I saw him

take out his violin and play, first nostalgic tunes which broke your heart and then gay ones to piece you together.

The rebbe and his violin, the rebbe and his Hasidim all perished. There are no longer any Jews to be found in Kretshnif, Bichkev, Siget, Bratslav, Karlin, or Kotzk. But all these places have almost physically moved to other continents. There are Bratslaver Hasidim, Kotzker Hasidim, and even Kretshnifer Hasidim. (laughter) And the new Kretshnifer Rebbe lives in Rehovot near the Weizmann Institute, of all places. And people come to him in search of miracles. And believe me, that with these people he's more popular than the scientists [00:58:00] are popular with other people. Does he really accomplish miracles? I doubt it, but who cares? But the miracle lies in that he kept Kretshnif alive, and the legend goes on.

There are more legends today. One of them happened here in New York, and since we have more time than last time I'll tell it to you. It happened in the Lubavitcher court here. Like Isaac Babel I am looking for fervor, and I thought I would find it in Lubavitch. So I came there. I met the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who is certainly a great rebbe, despite the public relations methods that his Hasidim are using.

He is a great man, and I like the way he's conducting his *farbrengen*, his celebrations. One evening I spent with him couple of hours, and I tried to convert him to Vizhnitz, because I am a Vizhnitzer Hasid. It didn't work.

A couple of months later, it was Simchat Torah. I came there. There were 2000 people in this hall. And I felt embarrassed because I had a beret, a French beret on with a rain coat. I didn't look like a Hasid. I rather looked like James Bond, you know. (laughter) And all of them, of course, looked like Hasidim. And because of my rain coat and my beret, the rebbe saw me. (laughter) Everybody did. [01:00:00]

So he was sitting on a stage like this surrounded with his Hasidim, and in the hall there were three tables in the form of a *chet*, a T, not a *chet*, a T, rather. So he called me. I felt embarrassed, and I really didn't want to go up. So I stayed there. He called me again. I still didn't go. But then he said something to his people, and literally I was lifted up in the air by some 10 arms, and a second later I found myself standing on the table opposite him. Well, you can imagine how I felt.

And the rebbe says to me, "Reb Eliezer, you don't come and say l'chaim [01:01:00] and wish me l'chaim." I said, "Rebbe, don't you see? I went over thousand heads to come and wish you l'chaim?" He says, "Is that how one drinks l'chaim in Vizhnitz?" I said, "Rebbe, I am not in Vizhnitz. I am in Lubavitch." So he says, "But do as one does in Lubavitch." I say, "How does one do in Lubavitch?" He says, "I'll show you." And I was offered a glass full of vodka. So I say, "Rebbe, it's very good, but in Vizhnitz one doesn't drink alone." He says, "In Lubavitch either."

So he said l'chaim, and I said l'chaim. But I am a very poor drinker. So I sipped a very short swallow of vodka. And he says, "Is that how [01:02:00] one drinks in Vizhnitz?" I said, "Rebbe, I am not in Vizhnitz. I am in Lubavitch." So he says, "But then drink as one drinks in Lubavitch." I said, "Show me, how does one drink in Lubavitch?" And he says, "I'll show you." He took his glass and emptied it. I said, "Rebbe, so strange, it's exactly the same way one drinks in Vizhnitz." And I drank it too .

So he says, "Of course." He says, "For Vizhnitz it's nothing." I said, "How did you guess it's nothing?" And I got a second glass. And my head was already turning. So I drank it. He

drank it. And then he says, "Another one?" I said, "Of course." (laughter) The strange part about it is that the 2,000 Hasidim there [01:03:00] were sure that the rebbe and me were talking roza d'rozim , you know, some very important -- (laughter) (applause) Who knows what Kabbalistic secrets.

Then when the rebbe saw that one more glass and I would be crushed, the first victim of Vizhnitz in Lubavitch. So he pitied me, and he says, "Well," he says, "what do you want me to wish you?" And I said, "Rebbe, a Vizhnitzer rebbe knows what to wish." He says, "But we are in Lubavitch." (laughter) So I said, "Then do what you do in Lubavitch." So he said, "Should I wish you a new beginning?"

Which was very clever, I must say, because it has so many levels. One, another [01:04:00] glass of vodka. (laughter) Two, he knew that Simchat Torah is my birthday. They know everything, have such an intelligence. Three, we were carrying on a dialogue for years about religion and Hasidism and faith and so forth. And of course he might have meant a new beginning. But I was so drunk that I dared to ask him, "Rebbe, a new beginning for both of us?" And he said, "For both of us."

Another very beautiful tale which I am collecting has to do with Israel's prime minister, Levi Eshkol, who is coming here in February as an official visitor -- unofficial visitor. I was with him when he went to the White House. [01:05:00] In '64 the very first official premier, visit by a premier. It was very touching because when Johnson wants to do something he does it well, excepting Vietnam. But he had, you know, the army, the marines, honor guards, music, and poor Eshkol came out, me with him. We didn't know what world we were. (laughter)

And Eshkol, who never had any military training, had to inspect the honor guard with the captain, you know, giving him reports showing him this is this; this is this. And behind Eshkol, Johnson. And it was something really moving to see that for that moment Johnson is one step behind. The real person then is Eshkol. And the ceremony was so colorful that Eshkol [01:06:00] had tears in his eyes.

So an hour later I asked him, tell me, what did you really see? What did you really feel? What did you really think that moment? And he gave me an answer which cannot be invented, which must be true. He said, "I don't know why, but suddenly I saw myself again as a child in the Ukraine coming out of cheder,

of school, with a lot of young non-Jewish anti-Semites chasing me." What makes Eshkol run? Now you know. (laughter)

Another tale which I collected has to do with Golda Meir.

[01:07:00] She was also received by a president but not as an official guest. She was received by the late President u John Kennedy in Palm Beach. And she came to plead with him in '63 or '62, the end of '62 to get Hawk missiles for Israel. And Kennedy said no. He said I'll give you whatever you want, but not missiles. Because then he was still naïve, and he believed that world disarmament is possible. And he wanted to limit the missile race and so forth. And he said no, no, no.

And at one point the discussion was so heated that he, in an outburst, said, "But Mrs. Meir, tell me one thing. I am offering you economic aid. I am giving you diplomatic support. I am giving you secret guarantees [01:08:00] but not missiles." And she says, "We would like all the other things but missiles too." And then he says, "But why is Israel so security minded? All the time, with whomever I meet, only security reasons." And Golda Meir, whom I saw the very day she met Kennedy, told me the following thing.

She said suddenly I had no more arguments. All the political arguments were gone. What could I have told him? So I simply told him, "Mr. President, I am the daughter of an ancient people. Twice our temple was destroyed, our people dispersed, and our sovereignty taken away. Yet we have managed to survive for 2,000 years because of a dream that one day [01:09:00] we will have it again. One day we shall have the temple. One day we shall have sovereignty.

"And this dream is what linked the Jew of Brooklyn to the Jew of Paris, the merchant of Liverpool and the tailor of Lodz, the mystic of Safed and the philosopher of Amsterdam, the industrialist of Massachusetts and the rabbi of Haifa and Tzfat and Jerusalem. Should this beginning, which we have just opened with patience and impatience and toil and blood, should this beginning be taken away from us, the merchant in Liverpool and the tailor in Lodz, the industrialist of San Francisco and the [01:10:00] philanthropist of New York and all the Jews who have no link, all the Jews dispersed and so different one from the other, would not even be capable to dream."

And that did it. It's unbelievable. Kennedy looked at her, startled, and without a word said all right, you got the missiles.

So you see, legends are important. Perhaps the world was not created by the word, but it surely was created for the word. And the word, in the final analysis, is more important than missiles. All the machines in the world do not possess the power and the mystery that are [01:11:00] contained in one word, especially if it is conceived in fervor.

Well, here we are at the end of an adventure, of an experiment. The series of our lectures are over. What we did not know two months ago, we do now, to my surprise. They will continue next year. Next year we shall try and tell more tales. We shall also try and show that they are always the same, although their beginnings are not.

The world is still incomplete, said Franz Rosenzweig, said also the Kotzker Rebbe. It is man's task to complete it, and the same could be said about legends. After everything has been told and retold, only then one becomes aware that everything still remains [01:12:00] to be told. The end of a tale goes

beyond its own end just as the beginning of a tale has its own tale. A true tale is one that survives those who live in it.

The Talmud says l'olam al yitpareid adam mei-chaveiro, elah mitokh d'var halakha . When friends part they should invoke always a matter of law. My very close friend, David Weiss, who teaches Talmud, would be more apt and more qualified to teach Halacha here. So therefore I will not slap my own face and enter Halacha. Therefore, I will simply say this.

As a child I heard a storyteller telling many tales. The storytellers were never [01:13:00] the same, and the tales, I thought, were never the same. But I know now it was always the same tale for always they began with the words "once upon a time." But then the storyteller disappeared. And the storyteller took the tale with him. And he even took time itself with him. And my looking for his tales is what he left me.

(applause) [01:14:00]

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