

Elie Wiesel Early Hasidic Masters: The Maggid of Mezeritch 92<sup>nd</sup>

Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive October 30 1969

Elie Wiesel:

"What did you learn in Mezeritch?" Rabbi Aharon of Karlin was asked, and he answered, "Nothing." "Nothing?" he was asked. "Yes," he answered. "In Mezeritch I learned what it meant to be nothing." (laughter) There are some Mitnagdim hymns. (laughter) I like music, but... "It is in Mezeritch that I learned," said Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, "that God is God. Of course everybody says it, but only he who was in Mezeritch [00:01:00] knows it." A third Hasidic master, Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg, used to say, "Before, in my youth, I would blindly seek to torture my body so it could accommodate my soul. Since Mezeritch, I no longer do so. In Mezeritch I discovered the harmony which should prevail between the two."

These stories -- without the music -- are characteristic and true. They show the quality not as much of Mezeritch itself but of those that went to Mezeritch, and they also show the diversity of what all these people, and many more, found there. Mezeritch, [00:02:00] as you know, is a little town which became famous in Hasidic literature, and because of Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch, the Maggid, it has occupied a most predominant place

in Jewish history. Tonight, I propose to try and go, together with you, like Shmelke of Nikolsburg and Levi Yitzhak and the others, to Mezeritch.

Who didn't go to Mezeritch then? It is said, I quote: "After the death of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement, the Shekhinah itself, the divine presence itself, left Medzebozh, the town of the Baal Shem Tov, and moved to Mezeritch," [00:03:00] and the expression that was used by the Baal Hatoldot is (, "di shkhine hot genumen di torbe," *Torbe* meaning his bundle, "and left to Mezeritch." Where, in Mezeritch, the Maggid -- Maggid being the preacher -- Reb Dov Ber assumed leadership of the still-new revolutionary movement. With him, meaning with the Maggid, Hasidism left the realm of legend and entered history at last. Even those historians, who for reasons of their own, questioned the Baal Shem Tov's existence, do admit that the Maggid of Mezeritch was his follower. (laughter)

Almost everything that can be known about a leader in love with mystery is known about him. [00:04:00] Though he did not keep a diary himself, his disciples did. In Hasidic tradition, the great rabbis never kept diaries, never committed writings to the paper. We know already that the Baal Shem Tov, in truth, left

no physical evidence of his existence except his disciples. We know that Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, for instance, asked his papers to be burned. We know that the Kotzker Rebbe used to burn his papers himself every evening after he wrote one page, always the same. (laughter) But the Mezeritcher Maggid's commentaries on the Torah and on the Talmud were transcribed by his disciples and quoted in their own work. We know that Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev took notes even about his small talk. [00:05:00] Another disciple went still farther, and throughout his lifetime, a spiritual leader himself, did nothing but repeat what he had heard from the great maggid in Mezeritch.

Thus we do know very much about his origins from his disciples and from the books that they wrote. We know much about his childhood, his way of life before and after he met the Baal Shem Tov. We know that his parents were poor, that in his youth, he enjoyed getting up at sunrise and walk and walk for hours, especially in the forest or near rivers and lakes. We know that he was nearsighted. We know that he limped. We know that he trembled when making speeches, and he didn't make many speeches. We also know he was not too healthy, and we know he was an excellent father who took great [00:06:00] care of his son. He did not have too much admiration for women as such, but somehow

he loved their beauty, and in order to justify that love, he said it is the beauty of the Shekhinah. (laughter)

And we also know, of course, his exact place in the history of Hasidism and its imaginary universe. For instance, one of the best testimonies about the Maggid of Mezeritch and his court we have not from a Hasid, but from a philosopher, a famous philosopher, named Salomon Maimon, the contemporary of Mendelssohn and a friend of Kant. And he came at the age of 20 to Mezeritch because he was attracted by the legend and by the revolution that took place in Hasidism. So he came and he described exactly what he saw, [00:07:00] and the description is a literary masterpiece. He describes who he found there, Hasidim rich and poor, from all over Poland and Russia and Ukraine. And he describes the way the rebbe refused to see him. He was not a philosopher yet. He had to wait until Shabbat. And he describes the meal. Apparently the Shalosh Seudot, the third meal of Shabbat, the most beautiful hour of the Shabbat, the rebbe used to be dressed in white because he wanted to appear -- he had a sense of decorum -- as the high priest. Even his snuff box was a white snuff box. And then the rebbe, says Salomon Maimon, began singing the *B'nei Heicholo, d'ch'sifin*, the Lurianic song, and everybody joined in. And then, he says, the rebbe, in the [00:08:00] twilight, recognized every single

person in the room and called him by his name and even quoted his birthplace, and he said, "You from there and there, quote a passage of the Bible." And each Hasid around the table had to quote one verses, one pasuk of the Bible. And although they had nothing in common, all these passages, when the Mezeritcher Maggid then began speaking, he linked them, and he began speaking, and everyone, says Salomon Maimon, everyone was sure that the maggid spoke to him. So he was tremendously impressed.

But then he describes why he left. He left, he says, because one day I was in the beit midrash, in the synagogue, and one Hasid was late for prayer, for services. Then he came two hours late, and the maggid asked him, "Why are you late?" And he said, [00:09:00] "My wife just gave birth to a daughter." And the maggid said, "To a daughter? Then you should be whipped." And the poor man said, "But why should I be beaten if my wife gave birth to a daughter?" But you know logic and Hasidism does not always go together. (laughter) So he was beaten up. He got 39 lashes. And after he got these 39 whip lashes, the maggid, the Mezeritcher Maggid, looked at him and said, "And now, let's go and worship God in joy." And Maimon says, "In joy? I don't want that kind of joy." He was afraid of being beaten himself. He left Mezeritch, and he became an opponent.

We have another description from a later historian, Graetz, and Graetz, as you know, was a great [00:10:00] opponent of Hasidism. What he wrote about the Baal Shem Tov and the Mezeritcher Maggid sounds anti-Semitic. He accuses him of being a swindler, of deceiving people. He says that in order to indulge in ecstasy, he's actually an alcoholic. And then he says that because the rebbe wants to show his prophetic powers, he has a secret police, informers, so he could know exactly what every Hasid is doing when and with whom, so he could say afterwards what they do.

The truth is that Mezeritch, the beginning or the continuation of Hasidism, was no deceit. It was really a revolution, a revolution in Jewish life -- and to those of you who were here last year remember our talk about the Baal Shem Tov. It was mainly a protest. [00:11:00] A protest against ugliness, a protest against fossilization of Judaism then. A protest against the establishment, because then the establishment used to be -- as it is today -- by rich people, but then it also used to be led by knowledgeable people, unlike today. (laughter) So the Hasidic movement, then, was an organized protest, putting the accent on aesthetic approach to life, on beauty as much as of truth, on sincerity, and mainly on solidarity. Hasidism in the beginning was really a protest against indifference --

indifference of man towards his fellow man and indifference of God towards his creation. [00:12:00]

Later on, we found a beautiful passage about the Gerrer Rebbe, the first Gerrer Rebbe, who was the brother-in-law of the Kotzker Rebbe. A Hasid came to him and the rebbe says, "Tell me, [Moishe?], how is our friend [Yankl?]. And Moishe says, "I don't know." And the rebbe begins screaming at him, "How come you don't know? You pray in the same synagogue. You study the same texts. You sing the same songs. And you don't know whether he doesn't miss anything, whether he's not sick, whether he does not need consolation or advice or a smile?" Hasidism, then, was a brotherhood, and it was mainly in the beginning, in French existential sense, a *project*, a projection, of man towards his creation.

The Mezeritcher Maggid, being the follower of the [00:13:00] Baal Shem Tov himself, had 300 disciples, of whom 39 eventually became great leaders in their own right. I'm sure you have heard their names. Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk and his brother, Reb Zushya of Hanipol, Reb Wolf of Zhitomir, and Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi, Reb Smelke of Nikolsburg, Reb Pinchas and his brother, Yisrael, and the Kozhnitzer Maggid, and the Holy Seer of Lublin. Some of the Baal Shem Tov's intimate friends, like

Reb Pinchas Koretzer or Reb Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye. But, reluctant at first to accept the maggid's leadership, ended up in joining the fold and become part of the majority. All those whose lives had been changed by the Baal Shem Tov, all the others who had wanted their lives to be changed, came to Mezeritch, seeking to submit to his authority. Being both [00:14:00] spiritual guide and a highly gifted organizer, the maggid knew whom to attract and whom to push away. His intuitive powers were such that he knew what to ask of whom, what to say to whom. And if we are to believe his disciples, he could fully describe anyone, any person who came to him, simply by looking at an object of his making. And he turned this intuition into his own philosophy and even into his own theology. He used to say that *koach hapoel b'hanifal*, "The creator is known through his creation." "Everything in this world," he used to say, "testifies to God because God is in everything." Even in idolatry, even in darkness, even in sin, you find a parcel of divinity and a parcel of beauty of God in man and [00:15:00] whatever testifies for man.

Even more than his own master, who handled people mostly on one level, the Maggid of Mezeritch then knew how to bring out the best in all kinds, of all ways, in all kinds of man. There were those whom he taught Nigla, the oral tradition, and others whom



he invited to enter the gate of Nistar, the secret tradition. He taught love of God through love of life to anyone who aspired to attain perfection through self-negation and renunciation of life. But anyone who put too much stress on love and not enough on fear, the maggid made him physically tremble with fear. Call it shock treatment or Zen Buddhism, but the maggid did possess, and we know it from the documents, the art of surprising people whom he wanted [00:16:00] as disciples. Astonishment is not only the tool of the artist, it is also an instrument of leadership, and the maggid had it.

A man, a mystic, came to see him. The visitor had given up food and sleep. The maggid asked his son, Reb Avraham HaMalach, The Angel, to feed him by force. Then he ordered him to repeat after him, word by word, the viddui, the ritual confession, "*Ashamnu bagadnu gazalnu*," "We were sinners, we were traitors, thieves." The man lost consciousness. When he came to, the maggid sent him off and told him never to start again, because some words can be as important as deeds; some words, said he, are deeds.

Another visitor, a scholar, came to see him and complained, bitterly, [00:17:00] to the maggid that he simply has lost faith. So the maggid asked him to repeat the prayer *Sh'ma*

*Yisrael*, "Hear, O Lord, Israel." Once, twice, and again from the beginning, and again. And that was all. And the man, whether he got back his faith or not, we don't know, but he learned to listen. [00:18:00]

One day, said Reb Wolf of Zhitomir -- one of his most beautiful disciples was Reb Wolf of Zhitomir. He was a kind of Berditchever. One day he saw in the street, walking, a father and his son, and both of them were drunk. So Reb Wolf Zhitomir turned to his friends and he said, "Look how beautiful it is. At last I see a father who can teach his son to go in his own ways." (laughter)

"One day," says Reb Wolf of Zhitomir, "we were at the *beit midrash* in Mezeritch. It was Friday afternoon, and in his study, the *cheder meyuchad*, the *maggid*, was reciting the Parashat Hashavua, the weekly portion of scripture to be read on Shabbat. Suddenly he stopped, and then we saw him standing in the doorway, staring at us, or at someone beyond us, and his whole body was burning, especially his face, especially his eyes. Seized with fear, Reb Pinchas, Reb Smelke, Reb Elimelech, and Reb Zisha ran out into the street. Reb Levi Yitzhak hid under the table. As for me, under the impact of a strange exaltation, I began to applaud with all my strength, and to this

day," [00:19:00] said he, "I regret it." And he never explained why he applauded and why he regretted it. Many tried to run away. They were afraid. But in running away from him, they actually ran towards him. It is like Solomon ibn Gabirol used to say about God, *mipanekha eilekha evrakh*, "From you I run towards you." It all depends how one runs.

One who ran to the maggid was a man called Rabbi Avraham Kalisker. For years, he lived in seclusion, refusing to meet people so as not to take time away from Torah. But once he heard a Hasid quote the maggid's interpretation of *umal'a ha-aretz kinyanekha*, "The earth is full of things with which men can buy partnership with God." And that was enough for [00:20:00] Reb Avraham Kalisker literally to jump out of the window and hurry to Mezeritch. And later, he came to Vilna and tried to convert the Gaon of Vilna to Hasidism. And he said, "What I learned in Mezeritch, I'll tell you a simple truth. *V'chai bahem*. I learned that the Torah is given to men so he may celebrate life, so that he may celebrate whatever makes life a source of celebration." And the Holy Seer, the chozeh, of Lublin used to say, "Once I heard the maggid say *Ein Kelokein*." I think today it is called the adoration prayer, the last prayer of the service. "Suddenly," says the Lubliner Seer, "the gates

[00:21:00] opened up in heaven and I saw the words become alive. I saw that there is no God like our God."

One day the maggid invited Reb Wolf of Zhitomir again to say grace after the Shabbat meal, and later he asked him, "Wolf, what do you feel?" "Two hands on my head," said Reb Wolf of Zhitomir, and the maggid commented, "That was the prophet Elijah ordaining you as rabbi."

As for the famous founder of the Lubavitcher movement, the Baal HaTanya, he especially glorified the maggid's knowledge, not his supernatural powers. He would say, "Miracles? In Mezeritch? Who needs miracles in Mezeritch? Who has time to pick them up?" He was mainly impressed by the maggid's mind. [00:22:00] Himself a great scholar, the philosopher of Hasidism, and he himself, a man of great knowledge, he said without the slightest hesitation, I quote, "Whatever I know is nothing in comparison with what he knows."

On the other hand, we have the testimony of another great though mysterious character in Hasidism called Reb Leib Soros, Reb Leib, the son of Sarah. He was a kind of -- forgive me for the comparison -- a kind of Tarzan (laughs) or James Bond in Hasidism. (laughter) He used to appear out of nowhere wherever

Jews were in danger, and legend says that he was very, very strong, physically strong. So wherever Jews were threatened, he came to rescue them by sheer force. When he came to the Mezeritcher Maggid and he left, [00:23:00] he said, "I came to the maggid not to hear his words nor to learn from his wisdom but simply to see him tie his shoelaces."

But unlike his master, who was sent to serve as leader, the maggid was chosen to serve. Later, we shall try to understand why he was called HaMagid HaGadol, the Great Master. What was his greatness? For the moment, let us say that some leaders can be measured by the people they inspire, and the fact that the maggid was chosen by his friends and colleagues to become their teacher shows that to them, he seemed superior, superior to themselves. As for his greatness, I think this is the mystery in this mystery novel called *The Maggid of Mezeritch*.

[00:24:00]

There are three versions describing his selection. Here is the first: It happened on the second day of Shavuot, one year after the Baal Shem Tov's death. All the disciples took place around the table, presided over by the late master's son, Reb Tzvi. Suddenly, Reb Tzvi got up, took off his white kaftan, and put it on Dov Ber's shoulders and wished him mazel tov. Then all those

present echoed his words and greeted their former colleague,  
"Mazel tov, mazel tov."

The second version: Just before he died, the Baal Shem Tov told his disciples, "He who will tell you how to vanquish pride will be your leader." So they intended to put the question to everyone in the group. The maggid [00:25:00] happened to be the first, and he answered, "Pride is one of God's attributes and therefore cannot be totally uprooted from oneself. One has to fight it every day, at each moment." And that was enough for all of them to stop questioning the others. They had no better answer, and he became their teacher.

The third version is the most poetic one, and I prefer it. After the Baal Shem Tov died, his disciples decided among themselves that he who would reveal something new about his life or his wisdom or his holiness would deserve to be named his successor. So they all began telling everything they knew about their late teacher. Stories and quotations followed one another. When the maggid's turn came, he related that [00:26:00] every Friday before the coming of Shabbat, the Baal Shem Tov would leave his physical body and exchange it for a new one. And he said, "I have seen him do it with my own eyes." And no one could give a more exaggerated version of anything.

(laughter) This shows at least one thing: the importance of telling tales in Hasidism. (laughter)

The Baal Shem Tov had one servant and friend called Rabbi Yakov, and this we know, that before he died, the master told him, "I left to all of my disciples something. Some will become rabbi here and there, but you are not a rabbi. How will you make a living? I'll tell you how. [00:27:00] You simply go around from one city to another, from one Jewish place to another, and tell stories about me." And he almost became a writer.

(laughter)

Later, naturally, more legends were created, invented, emphasizing the maggid's overall superiority over the others. The Baal Shem Tov considered him as his favorite disciple. Once he told him, I quote, "In your presence, I am a source whose waters are blessed only when drawn upon." Another time he was heard saying, "If only the maggid could go to the mikvah," the ritual bath, "he would bring the messiah." But being sick always, the maggid couldn't go to the mikvah. So close was the relationship between master and disciple, according to Hasidic legend, that the Baal Shem Tov [00:28:00] forced the maggid to give him his blessing after receiving his own. Yet historians of Hasidism remind us that the two men met in 1752, only eight

years before the master's death. Some claim, and apparently it is true, that the maggid visited the Baal Shem Tov only twice, the second and longest time for six months. How did they manage to become so close so fast? They managed. The Baal Shem Tov possessed, as you know, the secret of *kefitzat derech*, of taking a trip, of transcending time, (laughter) but that he really saw the maggid as his successor has not been established historically. So what? History established it, and what we know today, can you imagine the Baal Shem Tov didn't know then? (laughter)

Born in Volhynia [00:29:00] in 1710, 10 years after the Baal Shem Tov, Dov Ber had a poor childhood, was a brilliant student, and like the Baal Shem Tov, married young and earned his living first as tutor of children and then as wandering preacher. Apparently he was a good preacher. Later he offered advice to his disciples on how to do it. I quote: "A speaker," he said, "must become one with his subject rather than with his audience. The moment he hears himself speak, he should stop." So I should stop. (laughter)

As most early masters, the Maggid of Mezeritch was an adversary of Hasidism for quite a while. Both as Talmudic scholar and mystic who believed in mortification, he did not have too high



an opinion of the Baal Shem Tov's system to make life easier.

[00:30:00] He wanted life to be harder, always harder, to the point of becoming unbearable, and unbearable it became. He inflicted so much pain on his body that he felt sick. Someone advised him to go to the Baal Shem Tov and be cured. He went, out of medical necessity more than intellectual curiosity, but he went. We know that their first meeting didn't work out too well. The visitor was disappointed. The master spoke only about horses and coachmen. (laughter) Disillusioned, he made preparations to leave for home. At the last moment, at midnight, he was summoned back to the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov asked him whether he knew how to read the Zohar. The maggid thought he did, and said so, but he did not. His soul was not in the reading. That was the turning point. And as [00:31:00] he said later, suddenly the room filled with light, and he felt at Sinai again. He saw the fire and realized how much he needed it. He stayed. Won over by the Baal Shem Tov, he became totally committed to him as well as to his ideas -- perhaps more to him than to his ideas. He became his best apostle, his principal witness. They used to study at night, always at night, and although the Hasidim used to say that they did so because at night, who knows what mysteries are being revealed, the truth is that they studied at night to avoid other students to become jealous.

When relating incredible stories about his master, he went so far as to authenticate their veracity by stating, "I was there. I saw it." And what can you say [00:32:00] against that? For instance, and I quote, "When the Baal Shem Tov ate, I saw an angel come down, take his food, and turn it into an offering of fire." Or, again I quote, "The Baal Shem Tov's powers are felt in heaven as on earth. If he dislikes an angel, he can dismiss him and replace him on the spot." (laughter) Did he really believe all that? Did he mean the things he was supposed to have said? Probably yes. He must have said them for two reasons. One, to illustrate his own concept of the role of the tzadik, the just, the leader, and two, to stress his closeness to the Baal Shem Tov, as though he alone saw what others could not see.

Actually, the Baal Shem Tov had at least two other disciples who were at least as great as he. One was Reb Pinchas Koretzer, a chochem, [00:33:00] the wise man of Hasidism, and the other was Reb Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye, the first historian of the movement. Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz did not aspire to the throne; Rabbi Yaakov Yosef did. His works are of extraordinary importance -- without them I doubt whether we would know anything today about Hasidism -- especially his work called

*Toldot, Toldot Yaakov Yosef.* It took him 30 years to write it. In the book the Baal Shem Tov's name is mentioned 280 times. No doubt the master liked him once he was quoted saying, "After I die, I shall ask to be rewarded in *Gan Eden*, in the paradise, not for my good deeds, but for have given God a man like Yossele, like Yaakov Yosef." Why wasn't he chosen? It isn't clear. [00:34:00] Perhaps because he was not too sociable. He didn't get along too well with people. He was always angry. And especially, he disliked leaders of the community. What he wrote against Jewish communal leaders, (laughter) even the SDS today couldn't surpass. (laughter) He accused them of all things, and probably he was right in many instances. But then, also, I think, he was not chosen to become the successor of the Baal Shem Tov because he was a writer, and Jews, sometimes, you know, are suspicious of writers. What do they know about practical organizational matters? And indeed, what do they know? (laughter)

The fact remains that he was not chosen, and he felt bitter about it. His friend, Reb Pinchas Koretzer, tried to comfort him with a parable. [00:35:00] I quote: "When the king goes to bed," says Reb Pinchas Koretzer, "his crown hangs on a nail on the wall. Why on a nail? Why isn't it put for the night on the head of a politician, a minister, until the morning? Because,"

says Pinchas Koretzer, "the minister or the politician would think that he is the king. No such danger with nails."

(laughter) It was hard, but Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye was not consoled. His bitterness increased even more when he realized that his book did not sell. (laughter)

The story goes that in Berditchev, of all places, he was so angry at not having had a single customer that he was ready to [00:36:00] curse and annihilate the entire town. To appease him, Reb Wolf of Zhitomir again (laughs) sent an anonymous messenger who bought 100 copies, and the town was saved. (laughter)

If the choice of leadership fell on the maggid, it is because, perhaps, Hasidism already then preferred the spoken word to the written word. We know this part of the Jewish tradition, that the written word and the spoken word do not communicate the same experience, do not communicate the same truth, and therefore, there are two traditions. In Hasidism, they always preferred experience to knowledge. You remember, if I may quote T.S. Eliot saying "Where is the [00:37:00] wisdom we lost in knowledge?" Hasidic tradition always was aware of that, that too much knowledge may go not only against wisdom but against life, against people. So they preferred people to books. More

than any writer, the maggid, like the Baal Shem Tov, aimed not only to inspire followers but also to change their lives and organize them into a coherent, efficient movement with its own rules and structures and power structures, with its disciplines and programs, with its questions and answers. Within only 12 years, he managed to establish Hasidic roots throughout the entire Eastern Europe. The flame kindled by the Baal Shem Tov now penetrated thousands of small and large communities, and now doubt [00:38:00] that it was the maggid's doing.

He did it according to strategic plans of his own. He knew whom to send where to accomplish what mission. He dispatched Reb Aharon Karliner to Lithuania, Reb Menachem Mendel Vitebsker to Rayzen , Reb Nochum Chernobyler to Volhynia, and Reb Elimelech of Lizensk to Galicia. Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk was asked, "What do you accomplish in Vitebsk?", a town famous even before Chagall was born there, and he answered, "When I arrived in Vitebsk, I found modern elegant clothes torn to pieces and hearts of people complacent and whole. Now it's the opposite." But broken hearts were [00:39:00] attracted to Hasidism because Hasidism tried to piece them together again. It was that tzadik's task in Hasidism to reunite the fragments, to console those who felt exiles, hardship, and sadness. He had to upset the existing order, always. The maggid used to say, "Knowledge

is also in exile, and we have to free it." And he, who liked contradictions, who was the most mystical of the leaders, was also a rational man in organizing his communities. He would say, for instance, "Just as there is light and darkness in the world, there is light and darkness in man's thought." And this is a very deep thought, if I must say so. Certain thoughts of man are so dark that they seem impenetrable. [00:40:00] Much later, an anti-Semite called Céline, but a great writer, used to say "The tragedy of life is that we believe that wisdom is infinite. It's not true. Stupidity is infinite." (laughter) Some people are so stupid, you cannot reach the bottom. (laughter)

It is also clear that the maggid must have been aware of the revolutionary whims blowing in the outside world. Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu were paving the way for the revolution in France. Literature was substituting nature to abstraction. Goya in painting, Handel in music, were lifting art to new heights. In Jewish life, too, things were happening or were on the edge of happening. Mendelssohn's enlightenment was just around the corner. Judaism was ripe for some [00:41:00] kind of renaissance on all levels. Too many barriers separated the rich from the poor, the scholars from the madmen and dreamers. Some link had to be reinvented, imposed again, and Hasidism was that

link. Hasidism, as the means against solitude, was conceived by its first founder, the Baal Shem Tov, and adapted by his successor for that purpose. As seen by the Baal Shem Tov, the Hasidic idea was vague, fluid, almost sporadic, too impulsive. It had to be harnessed, framed, and tested by reality, and for this purpose, the maggid elaborated a concept of the tzadik, the rebbe, the holy man, the just, God's spokesman to man and man's spokesman to God, a question for whoever seeks an answer, an answer for whoever is burdened with questions. I quote: "The tzadik should accept pride [00:42:00] without being proud," said he, "anger without being angry. He should learn the art of speaking but speak not, the art of silence, and not be silent. You will say it is impossible. So what, that tzadik should learn to do the impossible. He should learn," he said, I quote, the maggid, "to be the word, not the speaker, to be the melody, not the instrument, not even the player." And he gave him in advice: "Never be satisfied to study Torah. Be the Torah." So in putting the accent on the tzadik, the maggid concentrated on the elite he had gathered around himself. Not everybody could join his circle. His disciples were chosen very carefully, according to his own judgment and criteria. Most were destined to greatness and leadership, with the exception of one. [00:43:00] There are vague hints about the one brilliant

disciple, the Elisha ben Abuyah in Hasidism, who learned too fast, too much, and became a drunkard or worse.

All the others turned into zealous missionaries, preachers, and practitioners of Hasidic fervor and ecstasy. Maybe another time we should speak about them. For instance, there were two great men, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk and his brother, Reb Zushya of Anipoli. They are worth more than one lecture, really. Both of them, they were called the holy brothers, and as you know, that before a rebbe becomes rebbe, he had to become anonymous. Or, as they called it in Hasidic language, he had *oprichten golus*, [00:44:00] to go into exile, which was the most beautiful and the most sensitive thing to do for a rebbe. To feel what everybody feels, almost without the identity. And it is said about them that one day they came into a *kretschme*, into an *achsania*, into a hostelry, where they were studying during the night. And during the night, a few drunkards came in, anti-Semites, and they began beating up Reb Zushya. Why Reb Zushya? And they were beating him up so much that he cried, but he kept silent. Then he fainted. While he fainted, his brother said to himself, "Now it is my chance to take his place." And he took his place. But then the drunkards who didn't realize the switch said, "Well, you had already enough. Let's take your brother." [00:45:00] And poor Reb Zushya got again the beating.



(laughter) And this story is told in Hasidism as an example for Jews and their suffering. No matter what they did for many centuries, they were always beaten, even if they changed.

But for the simple man, to live and survive disasters, past and present, or the memory of these disasters, for the simple mind to absorb enigmas and pain, for the simple man to live and survive without diminishing himself, it was necessary to have someone to admire, to worship, to follow, someone to trust without any reservation. And that someone, in the concept of the Maggid of Mezeritch, had to be the tzadik, and that's what the maggid intended to offer the dispersed communities in the dark depths of Eastern Europe, a [00:46:00] series of tzadikim. His purpose stemmed from practical considerations. Victims of endless misfortunes had to have the possibility of believing, first, that every man could become a tzadik, and second, that a tzadik could provoke changes in heaven and on earth. The maggid interpreted the saying "*da mah l'malah mimach*," "Know what is above you," and he said, "Know that *mah lemalah*, 'what is above you,' *mimkha*, 'also comes from you.' Your will is reflected above and obeyed as well."

The maggid decided one day himself to put an end to men's suffering and proclaimed that the time had come for the messiah

to redeem mankind. Imagine the upheaval in heaven. And he was asked in heaven, "But who are you to take it upon yourself to alter the course of events?" And he, with [00:47:00] modesty, said, "I am the tzadik hador. I am the greatest leader of the people." "Prove it," he was told. "All right," he said. "My disciples will confirm it." He called them into session and asked them, "Isn't it true that I am the tzadik of this generation?" And they didn't answer. He repeated the question. They still remained silent. He asked them a third time -- same silence. No one knows to this day why they remained silent. But we do know that redemption hasn't come.

His onetime adversary, Reb Pinchas of Koretz, already quoted, seemed to have reacted angrily to this episode, and he said, I quote, "If I so desired, I could bring the messiah as easily as I can lift a straw from the ground. But I prefer [00:48:00] to let God do it." (laughter) Yet the maggid wanted his disciples to believe that they could do it. Is this a flagrant display of pride? So what? *Umilbashto anava*, "God's coat is humility," meant in Mezeritch humility should be like a coat. One most know at times how to take it off.

On the other hand, having granted him too many powers, the maggid felt it necessary to counterbalance his action with an

appeal to modesty. "Beware of vanity," he urged his disciples. "Vanity can destroy all achievements." I quote him. "You can observe every command in the Torah and yet, because of one proud insinuation, it may all be put into a bundle and be thrown down into hell." The fight against vanity seems to have preoccupied [00:49:00] both the maggid and his disciples. All of them speak about it. Some speak about it so much, so often, that one might get the impression that they spoke of nothing else. A notorious Misnaged, an adversary to Hasidism, once expressed his astonishment before Reb Wolf of Zhitomir. I quote him. "There is something I failed to understand about my son-in-law. Since his escapade to Mezeritch, all he talks about is his fight against *gevah gayveh*, against pride. What does he have to be proud of?" (laughter) And he goes on saying, "Take me, for example. I, his father-in-law, I am a Talmud chochem. I studied at the yeshiva of the celebrated Gaon of Vilna. I know all the Talmud by heart. I fear God. I pray every day three times. I help the needy. I am performing all the commandments [00:50:00] on the Torah, and I am humble." (laughter)

One day, the holy brothers already quoted, Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk and Reb Zushya of Hanipol, were discussing the best way to begin serving God. Said Reb Elimelech, "Man should begin by seeing his own smallness, and thus he'll realize, by opposition,

the greatness of God." Reb Zushya objected, "Begin with man? What an arrogance on his part. Man should always begin with God and admire his greatness. Then he'll see his own pettiness." And since they couldn't agree, they went and put the question to the maggid, and he answered, "Actually, both ways are correct, but it's better to begin with man's smallness. It's safer. He who already lies on the ground does not risk falling down."

[00:51:00] Another time he said, "He who wants fervor, let him not look for it at the top of the mountain. There he'll find only storms and whirlwinds. Let him look for it under the ashes."

He undoubtedly had charisma, because even the simplest things he said were blown out of proportion and taken as eternal truth, but he also had common sense. Once he gave Reb Zushya a very charming advice. "Listen," he said, "I cannot teach you the 10 cardinal principles of how to serve God, but there are three things you can learn from a baby, and seven you ought to learn from a thief. From the baby, learn how to love, how to cry, and how to keep constantly busy. (laughter) [00:52:00] From the thief, learn: One, whatever he does, he does in hiding, secretly. Two, what he couldn't get today, he'll try to get tomorrow. (laughter) Three, he is loyal to his loyal associates, the honor of thieves. Four, he is ready to kill

himself for things considered insignificant by others. Five, once the desired object obtained, he doesn't care about it. Six, he is not afraid of hard blows. And seven, for nothing on earth would he change trades. Once a thief, always a thief." (laughter)

In our next lecture, we shall talk about Reb Israel of Rizhin, and in the Rizhiner tradition, in the *sadigur*, they used to say something similar. [00:53:00] A man can learn something even from modern technique. From trains, one can learn that to be one minute late can be too late. From the telephone, you can learn that what you say here is heard over there. (laughter)

Did the maggid's sense of humor match that of the Baal Shem Tov, who had an exquisite sense of humor? Much evidence points to the negative, but he had something. We know he was serious, always preoccupied and concerned about his own image. Only what he wanted to be known about his person was known. If so many disciples trembled before him, literally, it must be that he wanted them to tremble in his presence. He was conscious of the awe he inspired. He himself used to tremble before the Baal Shem Tov. Once, the story goes, [00:54:00] he prayed on Yom Kippur with the Baal Shem Tov. Unable to control his trembling, he leaned on the table, and the whole table trembled. Among the

many tales dealing with his powers, only very few tell of his ability to smile.

One, a Jew, very rich and very pious, came to see him. "How do you live?" he asked him. "Oh, my needs are few," said the visitor. "Only dry bread and water is enough." "That's very bad," replied the maggid. "I want you from today on to eat white bread and cake and drink the most expensive wine." "Me?" said the Hasid. "Why, rebbe?" "I'll tell you why," said the maggid. "If you are content with dry bread and water, you'll come to think that the poor ought to be fed with stones. (laughter) But if you eat cake, you'll give them bread."

[00:55:00]

The second story is about a peasant and his wife, who wanted him to bless them with a son. "All right," said the maggid. "It will cost you 52 rubles." Fifty-two is the gematria of ben. The peasant bargained. He wanted for less. (laughter) Nothing doing. Finally the peasant got angry and turned to his wife and said, "vaybleden," "Let's go home. We'll have to manage without him and do our own praying." And the maggid smiled. "You have already managed."

But where lay his greatness? That's the mystery which we are faced with. We have studied everything he has written, or rather quoted by his disciples. Where is his greatness? He left no work of Talmudic scholarship, no ethical system, no new philosophy. Whatever we know about his towering [00:56:00] personality, his charisma, his insight and complexity, they know only from his followers, and we must take their word for it. We have no other evidence at our disposal. Even so, upon close analysis of ideas attributed to him, one must conclude that mostly he tried and succeeded to perpetuate his master's theories, or as they are called, the Beshtian Hasidut. His views on *Tzimtzum haelokut*, for instance, are taken from the Besht, who had taken them from the Lurianic theories. The same applies to the Shekhinah being everywhere, *let atar panui mineh*, proclaimed the Baal Shem Tov, "God is even in man." And once the maggid did say something very beautiful. He said, "God created such a huge universe. There are so many worlds in this world, yet he chose to dwell in man's heart." But his attempt to resolve, [00:57:00] or at least formulate, fundamental metaphysical problems, relationships between man and God, man and man, man and himself, are not new either. Whatever he said had already been hinted at by his master. The Baal Shem Tov before him had been preoccupied by the mystery of man's passage to earth, by the link between good and evil, between death and

God. Even his theory of the tzadik's role in society derives from the Besht. Furthermore, not only was his master greater than the maggid, but even his disciples often surpassed him, each in his particular domain. The Baal HaTanya surpassed him in matters of halakha and speculative philosophy, the Berditchever in love for people, Reb Zushya in humility, and the Karliner in fervor. The maggid must have felt it, for he would often cry out, "What sin did I commit [00:58:00] that I became a rebbe, and famous at that?" But even this is not new. Already the Baal Shem Tov used to give an advice to his disciples: "If you want to live long, don't become famous." How, then, does one explain his powers over his disciples and others? By his ability to impress upon them that he had more than one key to the truth? Because he advocated more than one approach and had more than one gift? Because he simply wore his master's crown? Perhaps it had to do more with his disciples than with himself. I believe they needed a guide, they wanted a rebbe. Their solitude then was unbearable and all-pervasive. The motivation that made the maggid go to the Baal Shem Tov moved them to go to him, and the greater they were, [00:59:00] the more they needed a point of stability outside themselves, a shield against excessive pride and also against excessive humility. They went to Mezeritch mainly seeking human contact as much as knowledge.



They needed to belong. The feeling of being part of a habura, a fraternity, to share with others the same thirst for the same wine. To be in Mezeritch meant not only to be with the maggid but also to be with the companions, with friends. To attain self-perfection, they felt they had to go through someone else. From the moment they realized that the road to God leads through man and that man alone is God's link to his creation and a key to its mystery, they had to go to Mezeritch. The maggid then became the symbol of their quest. He himself remarked later about his disciples, [01:00:00] "I found light contained in a locker, so I opened the door. The flame was there, all I did was kindle it."

Is that enough for greatness? Yes or no, it doesn't really matter, but he had other qualities. I believe -- and that is his relevance to our epoch -- he was great because he dared to succeed the Baal Shem Tov. He was not afraid of being judged and losing in comparison. He understood the importance of transmitting teaching and new discoveries. He understood the necessity, not only to begin a new road but to continue. And he accepted his role as vessel of communication, to continue rather than to begin a new path. He understood the [01:01:00] necessity of providing the dispersed Jewish communities with leaders. He felt -- he had to foresee it -- that European Jewry

was embarking upon a long and difficult road and therefore needed dynamic leadership. Furthermore -- and here is his greatness -- once his disciples became leaders in their own right, the maggid did not become jealous of their fame and accomplishments. And, you know, this is something so rare in our times and in all times. If the Talmud says *l'olam al y'hay adam m'kaneh livno u'l'talmido*, a man should not be jealous of his disciple, it is because it is a normal thing to be jealous of the successor, to be jealous of the disciple. He was not jealous.

More than that, he never reproached them for searching for new ways. He wanted them [01:02:00] to be different from himself. He wanted each one to establish his own dynasty, his own school of thought. Rather than keeping them dependent on him, he wanted them to become independent, sovereign, and develop their own intense individual abilities to the limit and beyond. What they all had in common, of course, was their link with Mezeritch, and Mezeritch claimed its heritage from the Baal Shem Tov. Yet the maggid was not like the Baal Shem Tov, and therein, too, lay his greatness.

As the successor of such an extraordinary personality as was the Baal Shem Tov, he did not try to resemble him, to copy him in

any way, and no one else would have dared to avoid total identification with the founder of the movement. Anyone else would probably [01:03:00] have done the utmost to follow it in his footsteps, to remain faithful to his way of life, to his thoughts, to his likes and dislikes. Had the maggid done that, we would have had another Baal Shem Tov, only smaller in size, much, much smaller than the first. But the maggid followed a different road. He understood that to remain faithful to his teacher, he had to have the strange mixture of courage and piety required to deviate from his teachings, at least on the surface. In order to keep alive the image, the legend, the heritage of the Baal Shem Tov, the maggid had not to be the Baal Shem Tov. And that was his greatness, because Mezeritch was not Medzhybizh. [01:04:00]

Contrary to the Baal Shem Tov, the maggid did not travel, did not seek out the masters. The Baal Shem Tov was always abroad, always away from home, on the move; his successor, never. The Baal Shem Tov showed concern for everybody everywhere, the maggid mainly for the elite, for his own messengers, for the emissaries. The Baal Shem Tov prayed together with crowds and wanted them as large as possible, and sing with them; the maggid prayed alone, and only at the end of the services, nine privileged disciples were called in to form a minyan. The Baal

Shem Tov was accessible to everyone: whoever wanted could come and see him without passing through intermediaries. Not so the maggid. He was the first to appoint a gabbe to keep intruders away. More than the Baal Shem Tov, he had a sense of decorum and stage managing. The Baal Shem Tov used to [01:05:00] walk around simply dressed, sometimes as coachman, sometimes as peasant, woodcutter, and wanderer. Not so his successor. The maggid, assuming the role of high priest, was elegant, impressive. He wished to inspire fear, as the Besht inspired love. And towards the end of his life, the maggid, who was sick all his life, used crutches, which made his sight even more frightening. His sickness became one more wall erected between him and the outside world. He actually was the forerunner of the Kotzker solitary rebbe.

But then, a strange event occurred. He decided all of a sudden to move from his hometown, from his kingdom, from Mezeritch, [01:06:00] to Hanipol, a little town. Why? The reason is not clear. Not much is said about it in Hasidic literature. Was it because of the increased attacks on the part of the Misnagedim. If that was the answer, it was not the whole answer. Geography had little to do with the war between the fanatic Hasidim and their just-as-fanatic adversaries.

Perhaps he felt his work was done. His disciples were doing well on their own. They didn't need him anymore. Perhaps he aspired to more solitude. Having devoted his entire life to others, he needed to be alone to evaluate how much he had changed while changing the image so many Jews had of themselves. It is also possible that he intuitively felt what would happen to his movement. Hasidism was meant to be a rebellion against the establishment; [01:07:00] now it became an establishment of its own, which is the fate of all revolutionary movements. It will happen in America as well with all the young rebels. I think now it has already become that way. Now, to be a conformist is the real nonconformist. But he felt it, already in his lifetime, that the cycle is being opened and closed again.

So the maggid came to Hanipol in 1772, and that was the year when Poland was partitioned between Germany, Austria, and Russia, meaning more suffering for more Jews. As usual, when nations fought among themselves, it always ended by Jews paying the price. That was the year the first Hasidic book, the *Toldot* by Reb Yaakov Yosef was published and burned publicly. That was the year the Misnagedim convinced the Gaon of Vilna [01:08:00] to excommunicate the Hasidim. Hasidic leaders considered a counteroffensive, counterbans. The maggid refused to approve

their plans. As the anti-Hasidic persecutions grew in numbers and intensity, some disciples, including the Baal HaTanya, assembled one night in the synagogue and began performing the eerie ceremony of burning candles and proclaiming the *cherem*. And excluding them, the Misnagedim, from the living community of Israel. Suddenly they heard a familiar sound of crutches: the maggid. He was very sad and contained his anger. He simply nodded and he said, "You have lost your head." And all understood the meaning of his words: they had lost him as their head. [01:09:00] He was going to leave them. But he consoled them. "I promise you," he said, "that whenever Hasidim and Misnagedim will quarrel, the Hasidim would win." Did he know what was in store for both Hasidim and Misnagedim? What was the difference, you remember, between a Hasid and Misnaged? The Hasid was accused by the Misnaged of praying too much and studying too little, and the Misnaged was accused by the Hasid of studying too much and praying too little. Today, the Hasidim don't pray, the Misnagedim don't study. (laughter)

The Mezeritcher Maggid died several months later. We know, we have a description of his departure. He put on his tallit of Shabbat and his tefillin. All his disciples were there, [01:10:00] surrounding his bed, and his last words were prophetic. In Yiddish he said "*haltn tsuzamen*," "Keep together,

remain united." We know that it was snowing outside. A storm was blowing furiously over the village, the same storm which, several generations afterwards, was to uproot exalting Hasidim and stubborn Misnagedim and carry them towards fire and night, towards the mystery of the unknown. Only their tales remain, and through these tales we are one with the disciples of the maggid, and through them with the maggid himself, and through him with the Baal Shem Tov, and through him and through all of them we are linked with the purest and most fervent moments of Jewish history and Jewish fantasy and of the Jewish soul. Without which [01:11:00] our history -- history of man and history of Jew, which a long time coincide -- would be poorer, much poorer, for it would be devoid of dream, devoid of nostalgic legend. What is a Hasidic legend, whether of the Mezeritcher, of the Kotzker or Bratslaver? A legend is a tale which transcends its own existence, its own age. It is always, when you view it in historic context, it is a tale about absurdity. But a tale about absurdity is actually a tale against absurdity. (applause)

**M1 :**

Thanks for listening. For more [01:12:00] information on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y and all of our programs, please visit us on the web at 92y.org. This program is copyright by 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y.