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And it came to pass that when Rebbe Israel Baal Shem Tov felt he was about to die, he summoned his disciples, and when they all were gathered around him, he asked them not to give in in sadness. "In heaven," he said, "I shall do whatever I can to hasten the coming of the messiah." Needless to say, he meant what he promised, and he, of course, pledged himself to keep that promise. As soon as his soul reached heaven, he expressed the desire to meet the redeemer. His wish, after all it was the Baal Shem Tov, was granted. But the encounter provoked in the Baal Shem Tov such exaltation, such ecstasy, that he forgot his promise. [00:01:00]

This tale and this defeat was known also to his successor the Maggid of Mezeritch, who also wanted his disciples present during his last hours. He too promised them to precipitate events and put an end to man's suffering. So, to dispose of him, the angels turned him into one of them, and he too forgot what he owed the people below. "I shall not let it happen to me," promised Rebbe Yitzchak of Berditchev, "I shall succumb to no temptation and submit to no offer. I shall refuse to enter

paradise. I shall tell the judges of all judges, [00:02:00] the being of all beings, I shall tell him, I shall tell him what his duties are towards his creation and his children." Well, the Berditchever, when he came to heaven did stir up much noise, and did oppose resistance to all the angels and seraphim. And as legend goes, they had to use force to make him enter paradise. "Don't worry," said Rebbe Israel of Rizhin, or as we call him the Rizhiner, and he is the one who told us this tale. "Do not worry, I tell you, I shall resist better and longer. I shall not forget." Unfortunately it appears [00:03:00] that he couldn't keep his promise either.

What does this legend tell us? That he was a very proud man. Tonight we shall try and explore the legends about him. Those few of you who have been with us from the very beginning of our walk through the *Pardes Hahasidut*, the orchard of the Hasidic movement, will remember that until now we discussed, no, we tried to describe extraordinary characters. The solitary man of Kotzk who tried to reach God through anger. We talked about Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the Kafka of Hasidism, who tried to achieve perfection through imagination [00:04:00] and art. We tried to speak about the Baal Shem Tov and the Mezeritcher Maggid and their urge to establish disciples. Tonight it is a complete different character we are going to explore. He

resembles to none of them. For one reason, he was much less learned than them. If I were not afraid of my Rebbe, who used to be the Vizhnitzer Rebbe and the Vizhnitzer Rebbe is a descendent of the Rizhiner, I would say that the Rizhiner was very close to be an *am haoretz* . (laughter) But an *am haoretz* in those times -- (laughter) [00:05:00]

Yes, tonight we shall try to evoke his image and his imprint on the Hasidic movement. It is his tale we shall attempt to transmit. A disturbing tale, both beautiful and deceptively simple. A tale which marks the beginning and the end of an era in the life of Hasidism. After him, the movement was no longer the same. After him came the inevitable process of decline of getting away farther and farther from the source and from innocence as well. It happens always and wherever man in his impulse for self-purification attempts to transcend his destiny and accepts responsibility [00:06:00] for a world he has not created, which is the substance of Judaism. Man takes his step forward, stretches out his hand to a friend, a companion, to a stranger, perhaps, to enable them to cross the abyss. He refuses mediocrity, rejects ugliness, vulgarity, fights absurdity by imposing a sense, a meaning to it, defines himself as revolutionary and is ready and willing to fight the whole universe and its mighty rulers and captains and princes. If he

fails, it's all right, he becomes a martyr. But woe unto him who succeeds.

Nothing corrupts revolutions more, and more radically, [00:07:00] than success. For there follows a second generation and a third less and less idealistic. For a while it fights out of habit or even inertia. Eventually it turns its fight inwards, dividing itself into all kinds of factions, groups, and sects, each one against the other, and each one against all with substance giving way to form, to superficiality. Ideas are replaced by personalities. It's an unavoidable process. No surprise is eternal, no passion immortal. At dawn, night has lost its promise, its poetic impact. No revolutionary movement has ever succeeded [00:08:00] in maintaining a life, its initial inspiration, and transmitting the vision and thirst of its first builders. Nothing is harder to maintain than to maintain the dream after it has succeeded in molding reality. Swift victories, even those of the spirit, may prove dangerous. I believe that if Moses decided to lead the Jews through the desert for 40 long years, it was perhaps because he wanted to preserve the authenticity of their first victory over the Egyptians. One does not win battles with impunity. No fulfillment is possible without paying some kind of a price. And the price is usually one's own innocence. [00:09:00]

All this has been illustrated by most revolutionary movements, including those in Russia where Stalinism replaced Communism, in China where Mao Zedong's debilitating Red Book has become the last word of Chinese wisdom, as well as in art, and political science, and other fields. Where first discoveries, which are pure, and often beautiful, provoke ultimately spiritual downfall. And in a way, on a much different level, (*l'havdil eleph alpei havdalot*), this has also been illustrated by what happened to Hasidism.

The story of Rabbi Israel Rizhiner can therefore serve both as an example and a warning [00:10:00] hence its relevancy. Born in 1797, Israel Rizhiner was Hasidism's favorite child. He was also its last undisputed leader. His authority was never contested or even questioned. Was it because he was the grandson or the great-grandson of the Maggid or Mezeritch, the hero of our last talk? Perhaps. But he did enjoy a special status immune to criticism. He seemed to evoke special memories, special longings and dreams rather than achievements. People loved him without even knowing why, without even trying to know why. He was accepted, [00:11:00] admired, adopted, cherished, forgiven, but not understood. People used to say later that no one understood the Rizhiner, but to this day we

don't know whether this was meant as a compliment or his taste for solitude, his taste for luxury, his lack of scholarship and erudition, his pride, his new *derech*, his new way of life, so different from that of other masters and of Judaism as such, but so different of the early masters of Hasidism of whom he was a descendant. Rizhin in Hasidism means *malchut Israel*, the royalty of Israel, [00:12:00] or the sphere of *tiferet* in Kabbalah. Rizhin signifies glory and its external symbols discarded by Hasidism and Judaism until then. Already as a child, and he was a spoiled child, the future Rizhiner behaved like a prince in exile, entitled to honors and privileges not known. I quote, "At the age of seven," he said, "I visited Vienna and was accorded such a welcome by so many people of all walks of life, that I am no longer impressed today."

Nothing but the best was good enough for him. His elegant and somewhat modern suits, tailor made, were an astonishment. He was very handsome [00:13:00] according to tradition and very rich. And from the very beginning, there was in him a love for riches, but also a love for beauty. In later years, he had a palace with servants, orchestras, and horse stables. No races. His synagogue in Sadigur could accommodate 3000 worshippers. He would never go anywhere without an entourage of a hundred or so aides, cooks, and court favorites, and musicians. Rizhin was a

temple and Rabbi Israel its royal presence. Nothing was too expensive for the Rizhiner. [00:14:00] On Passover we know his guests were served in golden dishes. Every Shabbat brought another attempt to recreate lost splendors from Jerusalem before its destruction. The singing was reminiscent of the singing of the Leviim, the Levis, the meals of the service at the altar, and people by the thousands converged upon Rizhin and later Sadigur simply to be in Rizhin and Sadigur, simply to see the prince in his palace, the prince on his throne, the prince and his wealth. And strange as it may sound, nobody was shocked, nobody was scandalized. He, the Rizhiner, was above complaints, beyond judgement.

There were great masters [00:15:00] among those who came to see him. Reb Hersh Rimanover, Reb Itche Meir of Ger (the Chiddushei HaRim), Reb Itzikl Vorker, Reb Chaim Sanzer-- the Gaon Hatorah, a genius of Talmud and Halakha and even Samson Raphael Hirsch who was very far from Hasidism, among many, many others. None lifted an eyebrow. All were charmed, and all went away not convinced, but won over. No one criticized the Rizhiner. Why? What is the mystery about him? What were his powers? We shall try to find it out. Naturally, all those who came to see him in Rizhin or in Sadigur realized how different his Hasidism [00:16:00] was from their own. Different from the one they had

received from their masters. Once upon a time in Medzhybizh in the Baal Shem Tov's time, sorry, Mezeritch, in Berditchev, in Chernobyl, the Hasid had tried to conquer poverty using means other than money. To defeat sadness using means other than a *capella* of musicians. Hasidism then made it a point to fight appearances and mock comfort. The Baal Shem Tov was so poor that he had nothing to eat miShabbat l'Shabbat and so were his immediate disciples. And they advocated joy within misery, hope despite misfortune, faith [00:17:00] in spite of injustice. They advocated warmth and generosity in one's relation with another and severity, extreme severity, with one's self.

Once upon a time Hasidism meant a compulsion to emphasize clarity, simplicity, inner truth, and knowledge, and *devekut* (clinging) and fervor. It meant to them a return to nature, to genuine beauty, to identification. A Hasid would see a tree and become that tree. He would hear the song of the shepherds and become that song. That was his way of getting closer to creation, and to the creator, and to man, and to the [00:18:00] source of life and truth. He did not need castles and servants to feel at home in God's world. Processions meant nothing. Only being was important. What did the Baal Shem Tov teach his followers if not that beggars may be princes in disguise and that fools may be messengers for wandering prophets, linking man

to his past and his past to that of other men? We have tried in all of our talks to emphasize that point, that man through Hasidism and in a larger sense through the Judaic tradition, tried to be God's partner by being man's friend. So, Hasidism then became the abolition [00:19:00] before becoming a presence, the abolition between man and man, and world and world, and world and silence, and silence and song. But in Rizhin and later in Sadigur, what was glorified was the mask, not the face, the mirror and not the secret left unrevealed by the mirror.

The question then would be, why? Why did Rabbi Israel of Rizhin establish such a system so contradictory to whatever we know about Judaism? What did he aim to discover, to refute, or simply to prove? What play, what fantasy was acted out in Rizhin? [00:20:00] In what code was it written? Which were the symbols involved? He could have been criticized for his affluence, for the social gap between him and his supporters, but he was not. I would criticize him today being a Vizhnitzer Hasid. These poor Jews were so poor and they came from so far, from all the corners of their land and brought their poor pidion, their poor money, which they earned with the sweat of their work, and brought him who needed none of their moneys. He could have been, should have been opposed and challenged on the grounds that his extravaganza was bordering apparent heresy

[00:21:00] within Hasidic terms of reference, but he was not. He was free to do whatever he wanted the way he wanted. As a founder of a dynasty, if not of a school of thought, he seemed to be protected, untouchable, untouched. It is said that when Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt proclaimed a day of fasting and prayer, a *Taanit Tzibbur*, out of solidarity with a certain Jewish community in distress, on that same day the Rizhiner summoned his musicians to play for him. Yet, the Apter Rebbe called *Oheiv Yisrael*, the most famous, the senior among the tzadikim then was not really offended. He remarked, and I quote, "No one can understand the ways [00:22:00] and the methods of the Rizhiner." True, no one can.

Other Rebbes adopted the same attitude. Even the Kotzker Rebbe, so strong, so fierce, somehow accepted that the Rizhiner whatever he does, perhaps he has a reason and a right to do so. All of them agreed out of respect rather than complacency. He was simply above reproach. He was a Rebbe unlike others, a special case, a destiny in itself, not to be measured by the usual standards. But why, again, why such favoritism, why such privileges? Riches is not really anti-Jewish, [00:23:00] some Jews, not of my best friends, are rich. Even the Talmud's Rabbi was very rich and the trouble is Rabbi *m'kaved asherim hayahe* respected rich. But what made the Rizhiner so special? Only

because of his *zechut avot* , because of the Mezerticher Maggid? Or was it because he represented almost from the very beginning a real force, almost today we would say a political force, within the movement. A force that other leaders had to reckon with. Or was there something else? And if so, what was it? I'm afraid I must confess, I don't know. I don't understand how humble and learned figures, the Vorker Rebbe and the Gerer Rebbe could go along with his lack [00:24:00] of scholarship and his accent on aristocracy and its earthly attributes. Nor do I understand his own self-indulgence, his lack of restraint, and his lack of self-criticism. Or, to put it mildly, his exhibitionism.

Perhaps he really did aim to accomplish something, and we shall try to return to it later. For the moment, let us speak about his followers whose number increased from day to day, from month to month. Thanks to him the Hasidic movement had made new headway and reached into forsaken Jewish communities struggling for survival. His legend captivated the masses. His biography was enriched. Popular imagination attributed to him innumerable qualities and powers, [00:25:00] wrong. Some disciples claimed, and they referred their source as himself, that his soul was among the four Moses had brought back from heaven together with the Torah. The other three being, *noblesse oblige*, Rebbe Shimon

bar Yochai, who wrote the Zohar, Rebbe Isaac Luria, the founder of the Lurianic Kabbalah, and Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. The Rizhiner himself said that he had been on earth three times before. The first time as a young prince in the kingdom of Judea, a prince. The second time as a young priest in the Temple. Not *bilvad haLevi* a priest. And now was the third time. The old [00:26:00] Apter Rebbe already quoted bore witness that the Rizhiner's wisdom and knowledge were given to him directly from heaven. And the Rizhiner naturally couldn't but agree with him.

I quote, "I," said the Rizhiner, "was brought up as an orphan. Therefore I received the Torah directly from God's hands." Perhaps that explains why he refused to study. His tutor always complained, as we know from Hasidic tradition, about his unwillingness to read books. A man with such relations does not need teachers and could do without their [00:27:00] teachings. It also explains his lack of education. Yet even that was overlooked and forgiven. When he was five, or fifteen, according to the source, *hisgartel*, his ritual belt, slipped and fell on the floor. And the old Apter Rebbe picked it up and put it around the young man's waist murmuring, "It is like accomplishing the commandant of Gelilah, of rolling together the Torah, the scrolls of the Torah." Well, the spoiled child of

Hasidism remained spoiled to the end. In truth, the Rizhiner felt so sure of himself that he thought he didn't have to study. [00:28:00] Whatever words he uttered became interesting and important, to say the least. To Rebbe Moshe of Savran, a famous rebbe and scholar, who came for a visit, the Rizhiner showed with pride his stable and spoke with vanity and satisfaction of his magnificent horses. When the Rebbe Moshe of Savran left the Rizhiner, all he could say as a commentary was, I quote, "Oh, you didn't understand. The whole talk of horses was nothing but an allegory. In truth, the Rizhiner discussed *maaseh merkavah*, [00:29:00] a mystical concept for God's mysterious work in heaven and in history." His more formal speeches, though very rare, were never particularly erudite. Even his most ardent admirers agreed that he helped his followers not with study or prayer, but with tales, with the tales he told them or made them tell.

So, what was Rizhin Hasidism ala Rizhin made of? It was based upon three principles, joy, Emunah tzadikim called faith in the tzadik and *Ahavat Israel*, love for Jews, which in a broader context has always signified love for mankind. [00:30:00] So, his Hasidim had absolute faith in him. One man named Reb Yankev Yosef of Koretz told him once of his plans to move to a remote village and serve there as schoolteacher. "What," exclaimed the

Rizhiner, "another teacher?" Or as he said it in Yiddish, and his stories must be told in in Yiddish, he said, "*Vos? Nokh a dorf melamed?*" "No," he says, "you won't become a teacher. It is time for you to become rich." (laughter) Already then the Rizhiner, who was very clever, understood that from teaching one does not become rich. But so strong was poor Yankev Yosef's faith [00:31:00] that he began doing business and became immensely rich. Was that the Rizhiner's strength, to push his people to self-fulfillment? Maybe. But then, why did he need luxury, his own luxury to do that? The Baal Shem Tov in his wooden shack provoked more inner changes and deeper ones, but then the Baal Shem Tov had less disciples, less admirers, and all poor.

May I remind you of a story I have told here three years ago? The story told by the Kotzker Rebbe. The Kotzker, we won't come back to him, but he was probably the greatest [00:32:00] personage, the greatest character in Hasidism. Relevant today because of his behavior, because of his protests, because of imagination, and also because of his artistic approach to life and to art. Every writer and every artist experiences his anguish. What is the story? One day Reb Yitzhak of Warka, who was one of the three people who were permitted to come in to see him during his confinement, which lasted 20 years, Reb Yitzhak

of Warka came in and he said, "Shalom Aleichem, Rebbe," Peace unto you in good English. So, the Kotzker Rebbe says, "Don't call me Rebbe." "But Rebbe, you are a Rebbe." [00:33:00] "Don't call me Rebbe. I am not a Rebbe," said the Kotzker, "don't you see what I am? I am the holy goat. Let me tell you the story of the holy goat." "Once upon a time," he says, "there was a Jew who had a snuff box. This Jew went for a walk in the forest and lost his snuff box. So, he began to cry. But just then it happened that the holy goat was around. Who is the holy goat? The holy goat," says the Kotzker, "is roaming around the world from morning to midnight for it is his task with his horns to steer the [00:34:00] stars and move them to sing of the glory of God. So, when the Holy God and the holy goat, not being human, felt some compassion for a Jew, said, why are you crying? And he said, I lost my snuff box. That's all? Do you have a knife? Yes, I have a knife. Take your knife, cut a piece of my horn, and you will have a snuff box. Which the Jew did.

Shabbat he came to the synagogue and he took out his snuff box as is custom while they were reading the Torah and snuffed. But the aroma was so exquisite, there was something so heavenly about it that all of them converged upon him, forgot the *Kriat HaTorah*, [00:35:00] and said, where did you buy this tobacco.

He said, it's not the tobacco, it's the box. Where did you buy the box? I didn't buy it. Where did you get it? He told them. So, as soon as Shabbat ended, all the Jews of the synagogue took their knives, ran to the forest, found the holy goat, and each man cut a little piece of the horn for a snuff box. Finally the holy goat remained with no horn." Said the Kotzker, "That since then, the holy goat is still roaming the roads of the world from morning to midnight, but at midnight it can no longer stir with its horns the stars to sing the glory of God and of night. All it can do [00:36:00] is look up to the stars and feel a very profound nostalgia. Don't you see," said the Kotzker, "I am the holy goat." There is something in every artist afraid to give, if one gives, what do we have? Maybe we give too much. Well, the Kotzker didn't want disciples, perhaps he was afraid. The Rizhiner wanted disciples and wanted admirers. I don't know whether he saw himself as the holy goat, but his snuff box, you may be sure of that, was a golden one.

But then comes the next question, and it's more startling. Why did the poor people [00:37:00] love the Rizhiner? What attracted them to the Rizhiner? Did they see in him the possibility of say a personality transfer or sublimation? The fact that they liked him, worshipped him, proves they needed someone like him to admire and idolize. They needed to believe

that it was possible for Jews to live like princes even in exile, even in the cold region of Russia. In their eyes he was a reflection of past grandeur, a continuation of ancient dreams and ancient glory. He reminded them of what there once had been. With so much poverty around them, with so much misery in their heart, in their backyard, so much [00:38:00] fear in their heart, it was an uplifting experience to see their Tzaddik live under different conditions. He was their illusion, their holiday, he was their Shabbat. On the other hand, they had of course to invent some plausible explanation or justification for his originality. True, they said, here you see the beauty of the Hasidic naivete, they said, "Our Rebbe, poor man, beneath his golden robes he is wearing a straw dress, like a mourner's." And they said, "His shoes, so expensive, tailor-made, so elegant. Don't look at them, they are without soles. [00:39:00] He walks on snow, he suffers, but he will not show it."

Actually in his daily behavior, he encouraged his entourage to think along these lines. He never ate in public, he slept three hours a night, he spoke little, he liked to be alone, avoiding noise he seemed to be in constant concentration. When Rebbe Uri of Strelisk, the Saraf, died, his Hasidim came to Rizhin. A Hasid always needs a rebbe. Rebbe Israel of Rizhin warned them,

I quote, "If you want to stay, stay, but under one condition, learn to pray in silence, learn to meditate. Don't make much noise." [00:40:00] To protect his image, he kept the crowds at a distance so they would think of him as a saint who did not profit from his precious possessions. If he accepted them, it was only in order to fool Satan, they said. Satan or the evil spirit, the *yetzer hara*, and they were saying for him, "Where would Satan go and look for the Tzadik, for the just, in prayer, in the *beit hamidrash*. Certainly but surely not in the luxurious palace of a prince. Surely not under the expensive garments of someone who seemed not to know much about what is essential in Jewish thought and law. Satan's interest goes to the humble who he seeks to corrupt, not the proud, already corrupted." And the Rizhiner appeared [00:41:00] to be proud just like his father, Reb Sholom Shachna. The Kotzker Rebbe used to say, I quote, "God is where He is allowed to enter," *Got iz dort vu men lozt im arayn*. Reb Sholom Shachna said, "*Got iz vu ikh bin* - God is where I am."

According to legend, the Baal Shem Tov's grandson, the Baruch of Mezhbuzh, offered one day to join forces with him and rule the world. But the Rizhiner's father rejected the offer saying modestly, "I don't need you, I can do it alone." His son was not much less egocentric. He warned people that, I quote, "He

who speaks evil of me is guilty [00:42:00] of blasphemy and will be blackened in this world and the other world." It was dangerous to oppose him, whoever tried could lose his fortune, his mind, his life. Once he urged a rich businessman to give more to charity. "Rebbe," the man objected, "I don't mix in your business, please don't mix in mine." I am sure that every Rabbi in America heard the same thing at least once in his congregation. But the Rizhiner simply answered, "Nu, nu, we shall see." And the man went bankrupt. Another version of the same story. "If you don't mend your ways," the Rizhiner warned the same businessman, "you won't stay rich long." "Then you won't stay Rebbe," said the man who used to be generous with the Rizhiner. "Nu, nu," [00:43:00] said the Rebbe, "we shall see." And the poor minyaner found out what it meant to be disrespectful and what it meant to be poor again.

To his followers who were indulging in Hasidic elbow pushing around him, the Rizhiner said, I quote, "Why must all of you be near me? Isn't it enough to be in the same room with me? Or to be under the same roof? Under the same sky?" To a child who cried out in disappointment to his father that the Rebbe didn't have six wings like the angels, the Rizhiner simply said, "But I do have them. I have six sons, they are my angels, my wings." [00:44:00] Another version says that he called them the *shisha*

sidrei Mishnah, the six books of the Mishnah. Yet, and here comes the most moving part of his life, he was not a happy man. Despite his fame and despite his enormous wealth and authority he commanded all over Eastern Europe, his life was darkened by tragedy. First of all, a son, Reb Berenyu, the famous Reb Berenyu, *rakhmana latzlan*, ent astray. Reb Berenyu one day left his home and went to the big town, and joined the maskilim, the anti-Hasidic movement. Then he came back, legends say he was brought back by force. [00:45:00]

As for the father, earlier, the father spent 22 months in prison. He went to escape, dramatic escape through borders smuggled during the night, he faced trials, he experienced tribulations, and carried the weight of generations on his shoulders. Like his father and grandfather, he lived a relatively short life. Of them, he said, "They came down, did their work, and went back." Like them he had to live fast, intensely, and dangerously. Listen to a few biographical details and you will see the speed of his life. He was engaged at seven, [00:46:00] married at 13, and proclaimed Rebbe at 16. It appears that he did have some aspirations to become himself an angel, for during the first months of his marriage he refused to come near his wife, and the intervention of the Apter Rebbe was needed to make him perform his duties as husband. Then he

lived some 25 years in luxury. He was 40 when he was jailed in Kiev. The reasons for his arrest to this day are not clear. Some sources say he was accused of having pretended to be the king of the Jews, so the Tsar was jealous. [00:47:00] Others link his case to the murder of two Jewish informers. We know that 80 Jewish dignitaries were taken into custody then and the Rizhiner among them. Six communal leaders were sentenced to 2000 whiplashes and hard labor for life. One of them, the old Reb Michael Averbuch from Dunayevitz was set free during a prison transfer by young Jews who attacked his guards and smuggled him out of the country.

While the Rizhiner was in jail, most often in solitary confinement, his admirers left no stone unturned on his behalf. Governors were bribed, ministers petitioned and bribed, the Tsar himself was not bribed, but he was approached. [00:48:00] Intrigued by so many interventions, the ruler of all the Russians was said to have ordered the Rizhiner brought before him. The Tsar found that he had the eyes of a revolutionary. I don't know what that means, but that's in the text. So, because he had the eyes of a revolutionary, he left him in jail. The Rebbe then went through stages of depression. We know that he cried often, but never in the presence of visitors. After he is released on bail, which he forfeited, he fled illegally with a

smuggler's help to Austria where he adopted the name Friedman. Austria and Turkey offered him citizenship but he, and this is the mystery, he for some reason [00:49:00] unexplained, preferred to have in his documents written that he was the citizen of some country that really did not exist as a country. He wanted to be marked in his papers that he is a citizen of Jerusalem.

But his troubles were not over yet. The Russian authorities wanted him back and his case became a huge international affair involving governments on the highest level. Metternich was consulted, the British ambassador had orders to follow developments attentively. St. Petersburg spared no efforts to secure his extradition and failed. The Rizhiner, established in his own estate in Potek, near Sadigur, now had influential protectors because [00:50:00] thanks to his presence, the area prospered and bloomed. Even non-Jews had good reason to admire him. Among Jews, his fame reached unprecedented heights. With an added aura of martyrdom, his position was now totally unchallenged. Even the most dutiful Hasid couldn't object to his royal privileges, he had paid for them. Even the Kotzker Rebbe as we said, the uncompromising enemy of all establishments, of all things terrestrial, the fierce and savage seeker of truth, even the Kotzker Rebbe showed him respect and

sent messengers to see what is going on in Mezeritch, what is going on in Rizhin. One had to be chosen by God to be the victim of the Tsar. [00:51:00] A man who spent almost two years in prison for nothing had the right to subsequent luxury as a new unexplored dimension of his suffering. He had to be believed for he was already loved.

So, people flocked to him in even larger numbers. They came to bring to him their worries and their troubles, their sorrows and their thirst for consolation, for certainty of anything. Not all could speak to him, there were too many. He only received on Friday afternoons but those who needed to be received were received, and guided, and consoled. His common sense was so proverbial that he was consulted by famous Gentiles as well, politicians, just like [00:52:00] here during the elections. A frequent visitor was [Field] Marshal [Peter] Wittgenstein who by the way, never appeared empty-handed, he learned a lesson. He discussed with the Rebbe current affairs and even military strategy. Rich and poor, pious and enlightened, merchants and secular intellectuals all could be seen in Sadigur before making decisions, any decisions, no matter how important or unimportant. Was the Rizhiner considered a miracle maker? No, rather a sage known for his wisdom, not for his mystical powers. He was too modern, too liberal to indulge in miracles. Liberal

also towards his Hasidim. He permitted them to dress liberally, [00:53:00] those who had the means, in a modern way. When told of hooligans who mistreated defenseless Jews in his region, he didn't pray for their safety, but ordered the youth, his youth, to organize groups of self-defense. The first in the Hasidic, and perhaps in the Jewish, history.

He had a clear dislike of the supernatural. His approach to problems was pragmatical. He wanted his Hasidim to be healthy and normal, being himself accustomed to woodcutting and horseback riding, his Hasidim could see their Rebbe, just imagine, horse riding in the morning. Sometimes he would display a sharp [00:54:00] and refined sense of humor. Once a man told him, "Rebbe, I would so much like *t'shuva tun*, to repent." "Well," said the Rebbe, "why don't you?" "I don't know how," says the Hasid. "Really? You don't know how? Yet you knew how to sin, didn't you?" "Yes," said the Hasid, "first I sinned, then I knew." "Well," said the Rizhiner, "do the same the other way around. First repent, you will know later."

Apparently he liked horses, maybe because he wanted to identify with the Baal Shem Tov too much, of whom it was said in tradition that he was the real successor. As you remember, the Baal Shem Tov spoke to the Mezeritcher Maggid of horses when they first met. Because once the Rizhiner said to a Hasid of

his, "Look how beautiful, [00:55:00] look how magnificent this horse is." He got it as a gift. Do you know why? Because since this horse was born, he never wasted its time with small talk.

Another thing, he commented upon the saying of the Pirkei Avot, "*Siyag lachochmah sh'tikah*", the way to become wise is to be silent. So, he says, "If you have a wise man silent and a fool who is silent, how can you distinguish between the two?" He said, *dem chochem* [inaudible], the wise man is silent, but it doesn't pain him to be silent. Once, he said, with some sadness, [00:56:00] "Look how ugly this world can be. Artistic creations are honored, cherished, and so expensive, while man, God's creation, is rolling in dust, and his life is so cheap." Once, he said, and this is a very beautiful sentence, "It is not the beauty of the sound in the forest that is miraculous. It is not the beauty of the lightning that is miraculous either. It is man's ability to perceive the beauty in the forest and the lightning that is miraculous." And he also had a very prophetic sentence. [00:57:00] I think he said it when he was in jail. He said, "When the messiah will come, he will have to come first to save Russian Jewry." Reb Meir Premishlaner his friend and admirer once sent him an urgent letter with an urgent question. As you all know, one is supposed to eat on the Shavuot holiday,

I think in English it's Pentecost or something like that, you are supposed to eat kreplach that everybody knows what it is. So, Reb Meir Premishlaner asked how many kreplach should one eat? One is not enough, three may be too many, and two is not recommended because all [00:58:00] even numbers come from unholy spheres. *Vas tut men?*, what does one do? And the Rizhiner had a solution. I quote, "One would be enough, provided it be as large as two." (laughter)

As a practical man, and he was a practical man with practical advice for everybody, he told his Hasidim not to waste the possible for the impossible, not to sacrifice reality for dreams, not to give up immediate gains for unattainable rewards. He wanted them to help each other rather than aspire to redeem people they can never redeem. He wanted them to rise one step above the ground rather than walk on clouds. He wanted them to keep [00:59:00] the means as pure as the ends, perhaps more, because it is more difficult. Occasionally he would illustrate his ideas with tales about men lost in the woods. Their task being to first get back to the outside world and not try to correct it before while still lost in the woods. His favorite parable, here it is, I quote, "A man is lost in the forest, it is dark, danger lures behind every tree. Suddenly a storm settles the silence, the imbecile looks at the lightning, the

wise man at the road illuminated by it." "Rebbe," said one Hasid, "I have so many worries, my heart is so broken that I cannot study Torah." And the Rizhiner answered him, [01:00:00] "And who tells you that God wants your studies rather than your broken heart?" Asked how to worship God without lying to oneself, he replied, "I'll tell you how. First imagine you are the acrobat walking a rope across an abyss. In order to keep your balance, what do you do? When your body pulls to one side, you pull to the other. Second, what you are forbidden to do, don't do. But what you are allowed to do, wait a moment before doing it." Eloquent and incisive always, he knew how to smile at others, with others, and probably that was his greatness and his attraction. [01:01:00] And occasionally he even knew how to laugh at himself.

"The Talmud," he says, compares the *Yetzer hara*, the evil spirit, to *melech zakein uk'sil*, an old foolish king." I quote now, he says, "I understood why he is compared to a king, he rules over man's essence. Why old? Because he's older than man himself. But why a fool? This I understood," said the Rizhiner, "finally when I was in prison. He was with me even there. So, I told him, fool that you are, I am here, mainly I have no choice. But you?" He did not like the Rambam, Maimonides, first because Maimonides [01:02:00] was a

philosopher, and philosophy was not the Rizhiner's strongest subject. And second, let me quote, "Why I don't like Maimonides? Actually, I should like him, for he does refute Aristotle's theories. But imagine Jews like myself, simple, simple Jews, who would read Aristotle's theories in Maimonides' work and would fall asleep before they were refuted."

(laughter) Like all Hasidic masters, of course, he believed in God's presence everywhere. You know, this is the cornerstone of Hasidism, that God "*leit atar pinui mineih*" - God is everywhere. There is even one - [01:03:00] I think it was Rabbi Nachman who said, "If God is everywhere, how do you explain atheism? How can God be in atheism?" And the answer is, "There is one mitzvah, one commandment when one should not rely too much on God. That is the mitzvah of tzedakah, of charity. If a poor man comes to get something from you, don't say God should help you, you help him." But the Rizhiner attacked this problem, again, with exquisite humor. He said, "Even the *Resh-ayim*, even the wicked ones obey him. Fortunately for them, they are not aware of this, otherwise the *geplatst voltn zey fun kas*, they would die of spite and anger."

Yet, despite his sharp repartees and quick mind, he lost three verbal duels. The first to defeat him was a smuggler. The man who carried him on his shoulders across the border when he fled

Russia. In the middle of the night, while crossing the river, the smuggler, a Jewish smuggler, stopped and said, "Rebbe, if you want me to continue, you better promise me right now a place in paradise." And the Rizhiner understood this was no time to argue. The second oratory defeat occurred during the engagement ceremony of his son with a daughter of Reb Hesh Rimanover. In the presence of numerous prestigious guests and thousands of admirers, the Rizhiner turned to his future in-law and said, I quote, "It is a custom among *michutonim* to recall their ancestors. Well, know that my grandfather was Avraham Malach, the saint, the angel among men. His father was the celebrated Maggid of Mezeritch, who himself was a direct descendant of the Yehudah HaNasi, Johanan HaSandlar, and King David himself. And you, Rimanover Rebbe, where do you come from?" "Oh, I am neither son nor grandson of a Rebbe," answered Reb Hesh Rimanover, 'My father was a simple tailor, poor but honest. He did not teach me the mysteries and splendors of the Zohar, he didn't even teach me Talmud, he had to work for a living. I had to do my own studying. He did teach me something else. In tailoring, never to spoil what is new, and always to mend what is old.'" And the Rizhiner smiled and kept silent.

The third episode opposed him to his friend Reb Meir Premishlan. They met on the road while traveling. Reb Meir sat in his

modest little wagon drawn by a weak horse while the Rizhiner, as usual, was seated in his sumptuous carriage drawn by four horses exuberant with vigor. The Rizhiner felt that was too much and he felt he should explain, apologize. Clever he was, so he said, "I need these horses to pull me out of the mud, just in case." "Oh, I understand, I understand, yes. Meir understands," said the Premishlaner Tzadik who always referred to himself really modestly in the third person. "But Meir has only one horse, therefore he must be careful and not enter into the mud." (laughter) Again the Rizhiner smiled and said nothing. But usually it was he who had the last word. Some chroniclers maintained he wanted to have the last [01:08:00] of all words. Meaning he really wanted to be the messiah. Did he really see himself in that role? Some remarks from his lips tend to prove that he did. For instance, he said, I quote, "All the Tzadikim speak of the coming of the messiah, and pray to the messiah, and do nothing else. I keep quiet. It is like at a wedding, parents and the relatives are agitated, nervous, noisy, only the bridegroom stays in the corner and keeps quiet." Another so-called proof is in his affinity for brilliance, wealth, luxury, and glory. [01:09:00] His taste for royalty is supposedly linked to the messiah's royal title, *melech hamoshiach*, the king, the messiah. If one is to accept this hypothesis, then the Rizhiner genuinely believed himself to be

the redeemer for who mankind was longing since the beginning of creation.

I confess my skepticism with regard to this view. The Rizhiner was too clever to play such a game. He knew the end of all false messiahs, he knew the dangers that go together with these beliefs, it always went wrong. Messiah, the real messiah, probably does not know he is the messiah. And certainly before the [01:10:00] revelation does not behave as the messiah. That is the beauty of Judaism again. The soul of the messiah is still here among man and everyone can be, without him knowing it, the messiah. If not for the whole world, at least for one person. I think, therefore, the Talmud says that one of the things that was created before the universe was created was the name of the messiah. Only God knows it. Even the messiah is waiting for the name to be the messiah. So, the Rizhiner clever, even shrewd, couldn't have thought it. He should have known, he must have known, that a messiah does not [01:11:00] have musicians, and court jesters, and servants. He is the melody the musicians play, he is the prayer the poor man cannot even formulate if they are too poor and too miserable. The messiah does not covet honors and golden dishes.

How then is one to comprehend his parable about the wedding? I think that the Rizhiner's role in it is not of the bridegroom but of an honored guest. He saw himself that when the messiah will come of course he will be bound in the *chuppah* of the honored guest, who else? So, more than many Tzadikim, probably more than all of them, he spoke about the messiah. [01:12:00]

One could easily affirm, having studied the entire Hasidic literature that Hasidism as conceived and elaborated fervently and visually was more messiah intoxicated than anywhere else. Perhaps it is because the Rizhiner, the last of the early masters, sensed that only the messiah could save the next generation of Jews from their tragic destiny. Therefore he attempted to hasten his coming, the sooner the better. His tale is so not with limitations but his aspirations. He was literally obsessed with the coming of the messiah. He believed man to be worthy of such an event. And like the [01:13:00]

Shpole Zeide, like Levi Yitzhak Berditchever, he took sides in God's quarrels with man, and he took the side of man and acted as his spokesman before God. One day he explained, *Ribono Shel Olam*, Master of the universe, it is written "*l'mishpatecha amdu hayom ki hakol avodecha*" meaning we all stand in judgement before you to be judged. "No, in my book," said the Rizhiner it reads as follows, "we asked you to be judged since it is because of you that we suffer. It is because of us being thy

servants that we endure so much suffering." "It is also written," he said, "u'mipnei chataeinu galinu mei-artzeinu" meaning we were expelled from our country as a result of our sins, and he cried out, "No, exile preceded the sins, so you must bring us back." "Furthermore," he continued, "I swear to you, master of the universe, I swear that only the coming of the Messiah could bring, would bring repentance. And why wait? What's the use?"

Another time on Rosh Hashanah, he exclaimed, "God, be our Father and we shall be Thy servants. We shall be Thy servants only if you are our Father." Yes, he addressed God in tones reminiscent of the Berditchever, [01:15:00] though with less humility. I think that he is too, it's a mark of his greatness. Like the Berditchever and very like Rabbi Nachman, he wanted probably to prove something. He wanted to prove that man can fulfill himself, of course, with God, even against God, provided it is for the community, but not without God. Not outside of God. I'm sure that this is why he, who had less reasons than the Berditchever because he knew less, the Berditchever was a genius in Talmud and Halakhah, that's the reason why he opposed God. But he opposed him in his usual [01:16:00] princely quasi-arrogant manner. He said, "I can pray to God whenever I will, whenever I want because I am not a slave who comes to ask favors

of the king. I come as an advisor to discuss matters of state." Another time he was once heard to murmur, "*Ribono shel olam*, how many years do I know you, how many decades? So, I am asking you, is that the way to rule your world? It's high time to have mercy on your people. If you don't listen to me, then tell me, what am I doing on this earth?" And another time still [01:17:00] he shouted with pain, "Why is the messiah so late in coming? Does he think the next generations will be better, worthier? I tell him here and now that he is wrong. They will be much worse, so much worse."

In parentheses I will embellish two years ago speaking about Rabbi Nachman. Next day I got a phone call from a man who said, "My name is Professor Epstein from Jerusalem. Can I come and see you?" And I said, "Of course." When he came I was ashamed because he was an old man with nothing on earth, that I have him come, I would have gone to him. He came with the Gemara under his arm and [01:18:00] he said, "I simply came to correct a mistake you made in quoting gemara m'chazal." And I felt so humbled. And then he says that he's teaching Gemara in France, in Belgium, he's going around, he's teaching. And he says, "You know, my disciples now, those disciples that I have are *haamoretz* they are so ignorant that once I wanted in the middle of my course to close the book and say to God *Ribeinu Sheolam*,

Master of the universe, the Tzadikim of Belz you didn't want,
the *kedashim* you didn't want, the learned scholars of LLitaa you
didn't want, the Mussarniks of Slobadka, you didn't want
[01:19:00] so, (inaudible). (laughter)

The Rizhiner foresaw, he really I think foresaw what was coming
ahead, the decadence of history, the dehumanization that is
taking place nowadays. With his tragic sensitivity he decoded
the future, he knew what to expect, so what was coming? The
world was running into its destruction, man would lose his
faith, man would lose his justification on earth. His order was
to be of cosmic magnitude and filled with guilt. In his riddles
he saw the [01:20:00] *acharit hayamim*, the end of time. Good
and evil would have the same effects and the same rules. It
would be impossible to distinguish dusk from dawn, silence from
words, and words from truth, and truth from fear, and fear from
itself. He was a tragic figure for he sensed the futility of
his endeavors. "A day will come," he said, "when ignorance will
reign. Mediocre man will see that he is on earth and above
while spiritual people, learned people, men with feelings and
conscience, will be alienated. The most pious Jews will not be
able to recite the chapter of the Psalms." "I tell you this,"
he said, "so you will know that's how it should be for that's
how it will be if we do not do [01:21:00] anything now to

prevent it." Another prediction is horrifying. "A day will come when all people will begin hating Jews," I'm quoting, "they will hate them so much, with such passion, that the Jews will have no choice but to go to the land of their ancestors and that woe unto us, (*bei teshuv?*) he says, "will be the beginning of redemption. We will need them to make us Jews." Once he explained why he had refused to intercede in heaven for childless parents although he did enjoy to unite people in matrimony, he was a perfect *shadchan*, matchmaker.

I quote, "From the next century on, the souls sent down to earth [01:22:00] will be so horrible, so ugly, and so vulgar," I must say it in Yiddish "az s'vet zayn mies zey on tsu kuken" "Their sight will be unbearable." So, he said, "One must accept what is given, but pray to get it, no." He was a clever man, he had some intuitive wisdom and brilliance. He didn't read much I think, he didn't have much, but everything he left is like a jewel. A jewel sometimes painful, like a raw jewel and brilliant. [01:23:00] I quote, "A day will come --" he meant then before the messiah will come "-- when men will stop hating others and begin to hate himself." He also said, "A day will come when nothing will be coherent. There will be no relationship between man and his faith, desire and dreams, there

will be no relationship between the *meishal and the meishav*, meaning between question and answer.”

The most tragic of his visions is contained in the following prayer. A young Hasid of the great Maggid of Mezeritch married the daughter of a fiery misnaged, always happened there with intermarriages. But the father-in-law made him take an oath and choose between the Mezeritch and his wife. [01:24:00] The young man was in love, he swore he would stay home. But after a while the Hasid-like Hasid, thick with nostalgia, ran away to Mezeritch. Upon his return, the father-in-law took him to the local Rabbi and asked him to seek a judgement. The Rabbi consulted the *Shulchan Aruch*, the code, and pronounced a verdict. Having broken his promise, the culprit must divorce his wife. Soon after, the young Hasid fell sick. He was hungry, he had nowhere to go and sleep and eat. And he died in the street. Well, continued the Rizhiner, when the Messiah will come, the young Hasid can file a complaint, a *din Torah*, against his father-in-law and the local rabbi, both guilty of his premature death. His father-in-law will say, I obeyed the Rabbi, [01:25:00] the Rabbi will say I obeyed the *Shulchan Aruch*, and the Messiah will say, the father-in-law is right, he obeyed the rabbi, the rabbi is right because he obeyed the *Shulchan Aruch*, and the *Shulchan Aruch* of course is always

right. But then he will embrace the young Hasid and say, what business do I have with them? I come for the umgerecht, for those who are not silent.

The messianic idea and dream, so deeply rooted in Judaism as a dream and as waiting, for so deeply rooted all-pervasive in the Rizhiner that he or his son, Dovid Moshe Chortkover, (inaudible) on that, he or his son prepared a special room called *chadar hamashiach*, [01:26:00] the room of the Messiah. All of the precious objects were stored there, and no one was allowed inside. But the Rizhiner died without welcoming the Messiah. He was sad and weary. He knew he was going to die, he was ready. And, he didn't protest. Not much is known about his last moments. Much is known about the way his son, Reb Nochum of Shtefenesht, departed. We know that several hours before his final agony, that Nochum washed, put on his Shabbat clothes, went to bed, and asked his friends to sing Rizhiner melodies, and he sang with them, sang, and sang, and sang, until he died. The Rizhiner had more time to get ready. [01:27:00] On the eve of his last Yom Kippur, he stopped at the entrance of the synagogue, put his hands on the *mezuzah* and murmured, *Yehi ratzon*, May the will be *zoll zayin a kapora far klal Yisrael*, may I expiate and sacrifice for the entire household of Israel." He died one month later, he was 54.

120 years after the event, the character appears more puzzling than during his lifetime. His habits, his charisma, his taste for decorum and perhaps showmanship remain a mystery to students like me who believe in his greatness. And I do believe in his greatness. It's hard to believe that he loved luxury for the sake of luxury. True he was no great philosopher or teacher, but he was great as a person, [01:28:00] as a leader. Too great to love a world just for its own sake. All reports testify to that. His ambitions, I believe, were not material ones. I believe he aspired to prove something else, to defy somebody. What and whom? No one knows. Perhaps he wanted no one to know. Perhaps he chose to create his own mystery through luxury. Just as we don't understand the demented mortifications of the Kotzker, the rebellion fantasy of Reb Nachman Breslover, we cannot grasp the meaning of the Rizhiner's hypocrisy. That he didn't want riches for himself, that is clear. An austere master (inaudible) said, "The Rizhiner is ready every moment to sacrifice himself for Klal Yisrael." [01:29:00] Upon close analysis one realizes that the Rizhiner always thought in terms of collective experiences in historic and trans-historic categories. Perhaps he tried to console and comfort his poor Hasidim in showing them that Galut Yisrael, the exile, the reality of exile does not exclude the dream of Malchut Yisrael,

the dream of redemption. Perhaps he tried to offer them a refuge inside that exile, just as the Talmud for 2000 years was a refuge inside persecutions.

I believe that what kept Judaism for 2000 years is the Talmud. Outside they were slaughtering Jews and five steps from them here in the room there were Jews studying such irrelevant or apparently irrelevant questions that were [01:30:00] based in the olden-day *yontif*. That was the strength and that was the fuel of the Jewish people for 2000 years. Perhaps he wanted to provide another fuel. Perhaps he wanted to remind them that *Malchut*, royalty, is also an attribute to God. That the form is also part of reality and of trans-reality just as the content is. Perhaps he wanted to remind them and him that the God of Israel is also the king of Israel, whose dispersed and destroyed kingdom remains, must remain indestructible. Perhaps he wanted to emphasize the warning of Reb Aharon Karliner who said, as you remember, we are all princes and to forget that is the gravest sin of all. It is also possible that he had still higher aspirations or justifications. [01:31:00] In artistic terms, (inaudible) contains a certain joy, provokes a certain kind of ecstasy that no possession could offer. Is it possible then that the Rizhiner chose luxury out of despair? Or rather to obtain despair? That he aspired to go beyond all limits, beyond

the limits of his belief and found poverty within plentitude, sadness within joy, and joy again of an entirely different nature and substance within that sadness? Is it conceivable that he came to the realization that he would never resemble his ancestors, and therefore chose to be rich and show them that he could nevertheless be like them, one of them? [01:32:00]

Although he had more obstacles to overcome, he would be as great as them. That despite appearances he was on their level and that appearances have their own secret. Is that why he spoke so often of the messiah? To bring an end to all appearances.

All these are hypotheses, and I would like to say yes to all these because I, as a Vizhnitzer Hasid would like to defend the Rizhiner and believe in him and everything he did. But for me the Rizhiner remains a mystery. I am bothered by his super sensitivity on one hand, and his excessive self-indulgence on the other. It is too easy to say that it is easy to suffer in misery. That it is more disciplined to be alone inside [01:33:00] the crowd, humble and famous, poor, wise, rich. Only rich people can say that. Instinctively I am suspicious of material rewards accompanied by alibis. The sinner remains (inaudible) and the characters on stage. Means can and do influence the end. Every game runs to this but ultimately defining itself by its own rules. How then is one to make out

the Rizhiner? I would like to see him as a tragic visionary with the gift to view things with painful clarity. He knew he was the last of a line. He knew that after him Hasidism would [01:34:00] no longer be the same. That later Hasidim would have the leaders they deserved and inherit a world which would not deserve them. He also knew, he must have known, that it was not enough. Unfortunately, and that is a tragedy of man's life and endeavor, it is not enough to call upon the messiah to make him come. (applause)

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