

Elie Wiesel In Hasidism: Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Why has he decided to leave Europe and go settle in the Holy Land? What made him break with his familiar surroundings? The appeal of Jerusalem? Haven't other masters felt the same attraction for the eternal city? Why has he, he alone then, chosen to make Aliyah? Did he ever exist at all, was he really a human being, a man made of flesh and blood, a man among other man and exposed as they were to both wonder and danger? Did he live among people? Did he but see them? Did they actually see him? [00:01:00] If being a hero implies having one's virtues exaggerated and one's powers idolized, then the master we shall try to meet tonight is just the opposite. Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh is so unassuming, so entrenched in his own shadow, that he goes unnoticed more often than not. As one seeks clues to him, to his life, one becomes inevitably frustrated, so elusive is he as a person, as a rebbe. Not that he was the only one who was modest, not that he was the only one who was austere and humble, others were too. But they were famous for their humility, whereas Rebbe Wolfe wasn't famous at all.

Could such a person be real? Could his stories [00:02:00] be true? Does his legend really reflect his life? Once Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh was invited to a circumcision. Naturally, he accepted. One does not refuse such an invitation because according to tradition, it is always issued in the name of Abraham himself. And yet, it was cold outside, freezing, never mind. An icy wind struck his face, never mind. As the sleigh moved slowly forward, he felt sorry for the coachman and his horse. If only he could walk. But it was far, too far to walk, so Rebbe Wolfe began feeling guiltier and guiltier. Finally he arrived at his destination, the inn was crowded with guests. Now that he had arrived, the ceremony could start. The father recited the solemn blessing, the *mohel*, accomplished the ancient rite, and then parents and guests sat down to celebrate with food and wine [00:03:00] the immortal people of Israel, which has just gained a new son. They sang and they danced with exuberance and did not notice their special guest, Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh, leaving the room. He had gone outside to look for his coachman in the courtyard. And when he found him, he asked him to go inside. "You are cold and hungry," he said, "You need food and a drink." "But the horse," asked the coachman, "Rebbe, who will keep an eye on the horse?" "I will," said Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh. "You!" exclaimed the coachman. "I cannot allow you to do that. It would be unworthy of you." "Why?" asked Rebbe

Wolfe, "Why unworthy? If the master of the universe keeps an eye on the horse, why shouldn't I? Do you think I am more important, more distinguished than the master of the universe?"

Unable to counter such a forceful argument, [00:04:00] the coachman gave in. He went into the inn, joined the crowd, gulped down a drink, and then another one. No one missed the Rebbe. When the meal was over and grace had been recited, the guests left the inn and in the courtyard near the stable they saw a man half frozen who was making strange movements with his arms and legs to keep warm. And when they recognized him they began shouting, "Rebbe, is that you? You took care of our horses?" They were shocked and he didn't understand why. "What is wrong?" he said, "What is wrong in taking care of poor peoples' tired horses?" This anecdote is interesting for three reasons. One, Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh was convinced that as Jew and human being he could and indeed should change places with the coachman. [00:05:00] Two, the coachman must have thought so too. (laughter) For in spite of his initial protests, he did accept the exchange. Three, once the exchange occurred neither the hosts nor the guests noticed it.

Let us hasten to say that the last fact is more significant than the first. One easily understands that a great master should be

humble, but not that he so be humbled by his so-called admirers. Didn't they invite him? Didn't he come from far away? Wasn't he considered after Abraham and Elijah, who go to all such ceremonies, wasn't he considered a guest of honor? And yet, after he had had one drink, nobody even bothered to look at him. Nobody paid attention to him. [00:06:00] Everybody allowed him to go outside and freeze among the horses. So, they demonstrated to him and themselves that he wasn't really needed. That they found it natural for him not to be at the center of their celebration, not to follow him, not to listen to his words, not to sing with him and for him. Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh, a master unlike any other. Granted, we have said the same thing about all the others, and justifiably so, but he is special, he is a case apart. In a way, as you shall see, he was the poor man's Rebbe. Others are modest, or want to be, but cannot. Their function and their followers compel them to discard modesty in the name and for the sake of heaven. Modesty, like vanity, is a tricky business. In every field of human endeavor, some people appear to seek the limelight in order to better hide [00:07:00] in the shadow. To run after glory in order to run away from it later. In Hasidism too the problem existed before and after Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh.

Many masters fled honors in order to combat their vanity, but he did not even feel he deserved any honors. In his case, the struggle against vanity is meaningless. Rebbe Wolfe cannot even conceive of being vain. Rather than guide and master, Rebbe Wolfe, as you shall see, is a brother, an older brother for his followers.

Again, this is true of some other rebbes, but they were richer, wiser, stronger than their disciples, whereas Rebbe Wolfe was not. Or rather, he thought he was not. He viewed himself as being on the same level as his followers, as being their equal at best. And so, he never demanded anything, [00:08:00] never asked for anything, never promised anything. He felt he needed his Hasidim more than they needed him. He needed them, he needed a brother. Let us not yet touch upon his studies, his knowledge, for the moment let us simply stress his naiveté, his innocence. He is immune to anything false, false erudition, false vanity, and false humility. He never wears a mask, never invokes excuses or alibis, whatever he does, he remains authentic. When he is with others, he gives of himself, for he possesses nothing else. He listens more than he talks, he withdraws as soon as he feels he is no longer needed, or even before. Why should anyone need him, he seems to wonder all the time, and yet, he is a Rebbe. A Rebbe who attracts, a Rebbe who

deserves all the honors due to a Rebbe. [00:09:00] And thus we wonder, how did he reconcile himself with his title. How did he manage to be at the same time so utterly shy and yet so prominent? We shall study this phenomenon during our exploration tonight.

But first, a few preliminary remarks. One, by now surely you must have guessed that when it comes to Hasidism I am biased. My love for Hasidism, its masters, its disciples, its followers, has many reasons and many layers. I was born a Hasid and, you know, once a Hasid... Two, Hasidism at the beginning aimed to change man, not religion. It attempted to alter man's relationship to society, to the world, his fellow man and himself. [00:10:00] Such is the brilliant dialectic of Hasidism, that the Hasid can both help his Rebbe and be helped by him. He can fear God and love him. He can sing and cry at the same time, sing and despair at the same time. Somehow the Hasid knows how to assume his or her contradictions. Three, Hasidism has its importance not only in religious categories, but in literary terms as well. It succeeded in raising small talk to the level of philosophy, and in transforming anecdotes into events, and events into legends, or the other way around. How is man to overcome his limitations? How is he to live in a world of violence and fear? In other words, the teaching of the

old masters is relevant, how relevant, to our generation.

[00:11:00]

Now why have we chosen Rebbe Wolfe for tonight? We have chosen him because he is more difficult to cope with. Oh, when he was alive he was the easiest person to meet, to love, but now 120 or 150 years later, he is almost impossible. He is impossible, as you shall see, because there is very little about him. The material about him is next to zero, and yet, we have to do something, not with what we possess, but with what we do not possess. On the surface he seems transparent, simple, and even simplistic. So much so that I came to the conclusion that perhaps the impression must be misleading. To paint the portrait of these spectacular leaders of the movement, of giants such as Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, Rebbe Pinchas of Koretz, is relatively easy. [00:12:00] In any way easier than that of Rebbe Wolfe, who wanted to be unknown so much so that he succeeded. As in years past, therefore, we shall go on a pilgrimage. And by now we have met the Besht and his contagious enthusiasm, Rebbe Pinchas and his wisdom, the Ropshitzer and his humor, the Rizhiner and his majesty, the Kotzker and his anger, Rebbe Nachman and his imagination, the Seer of Lublin and his messianic anguish. But tonight we shall meet one of its anti-heroes, a master who did not look like a master, a rebbe who did

not behave like a rebbe, a great teacher who lived simply in blissful unawareness of his greatness. Of course Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh will serve only as a symbol. Through him and beyond him, but not without him, we shall penetrate [00:13:00] a new dimension of Hasidic experience. A dimension that reveals strange dreamers who appear lost in creation.

Children, who without realizing it, offer help and comfort to adults. They seem forever on the move to help a poor widow here, a sick orphan there, an innkeeper in prison. We meet them and we smile. Without them, the road would be so cold and deserted. Perhaps we gathered here tonight because we need them, or at least, we need to talk about them. And so, we shall try to retell a few tales, some well-known, some less known. We shall endeavor to deepen both their apparent and hidden meanings and in doing so, we hope to be touched by their nostalgic and melancholy beauty. If I may paraphrase the great French poet Paul Valery, who wrote it [00:14:00] as a frontispiece on the Palais de Chaillot, "Friends, do not enter a Hasidic tale without fervor, without desire, without friendship for those who dwell in it. If you wish the gates to open, accept to open your own first, if you accept, the traveler in you will become pilgrim." And so, tonight our pilgrimage will take us far away to a distant little town called Zbarazh. And though the town no



longer exists except in Hasidic legend, it has been waiting for us, look, the doors are open.

[00:15:00] Zbarazh, a Jewish town like many others, somewhere in Eastern Galicia or the Western part of Ukraine, which means that it endured occupations and re-occupations of various armies.

Jews lived there since the early sixteenth century and suffered from the siege by Khmelnytsky, the invasion of the Turks, the raids of the haidamaks, and the activities of the

Einsatzkommandos. Most of the 5000 Jews who were massacred in

1941, haven't I told you a town like many others, a story like

many others. But Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh was a rebbe unlike any

other. Where and when was he born? We do not know. [00:16:00]

Some time, somewhere in the Ukraine, in the middle of the

eighteenth century. No facts have been recorded by Hasidic

chroniclers. Was it done on purpose? Is it a case of voluntary

omission? To show the man's unreal dimension, the most common

data is immersed in twilight. We know, for instance, that he

had children, but most historians fail to mention their names or

even their number.

Characteristically, his birth itself is linked to a legend. And

it came to pass, we are told, that on that night, during the

High Holidays, his father, the fierce and feared Maggid of

Zlotchov had a dream. The Hazzan, the Cantor, who had died [00:17:00] shortly before, returned from heaven. "What are you doing down here?" the Maggid wondered. "Tonight," said the Cantor, "there are souls being reborn and sent back to earth, mine too. You want to know why? I will tell you why. After I left your world, and as I prepared myself to appear before the celestial tribunal, I searched my memory. What have I done right? And what have I done wrong? I conducted a thorough examination of my life and came to the conclusion that I had not done too badly. Almost no serious sins, no major mistakes. In fact, it seemed to me that I was ready to enter paradise and take my rightful seat in its garden. And then I was led before the heavenly tribunal, and the judge scrutinized my record and said, you forgot one point, vanity. [00:18:00] But because it was my only sin and my most recent one, it was decided to send me back into your world so as to enable me to remedy the situation." And legend has it that his soul entered the body of the Maggid's son, who was to become later Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh, a symbol of humility.

We know from legend that his youth was turbulent. In fact, when he was young, his behavior left much to be desired. He would waste days and nights with unsuitable friends doing unsuitable things. Lazy, unwilling to study, he preferred going after the

more earthly pleasures. Was he aware of the anguish he inflicted on his poor father? [00:19:00] The Maggid tried to discipline him to no avail. Wolfe was already 12 and his father grew desperate. As was the custom, the father had the scribe write phylacteries for his son's bar mitzvah and when they were completed, he inspected them himself. And all of a sudden, legend tells us, tears began rolling down his cheeks into the boxes with the Tefillin and from one moment to the next, the young Wolfe changed his lifestyle. His father's tears succeeded where his sermons had failed. The father, the famous Rebbe Yechiel Michel of Zlotchov, deserves closer study. An intimate of both the Besht, the founder of the movement, and his successor, the great Maggid [00:20:00] of Mezeritch, the Preacher of Zlotchov was a fascinating character. Intensely involved with the entire community of Israel, he aspired to be lifted up by those who were above him and to lift up those who were below him. In other words, no person is the first, nor is he or she the last. No one is absolutely just nor entirely unjust. An individual may be both sinner and saint at different times or even at the same time. Whoever goes too far in one direction may easily find himself or herself going in the other. Pascale already said it, I think, (French) [00:20:51 - 00:20:53] this is untranslatable. (laughter)

Excessive humility easily becomes false humility, [00:21:00] which is dangerously close to vanity, which whether true or false is equally bad. Excessive humility may provoke a kind of paralysis, a paralysis of the mind and soul. Too much modesty can prevent you from speaking up, from offering help, from shouting the truth. A story, one morning the Maggid of Zlotchov, Rebbe Yechiel Michel, arrived late for services. The congregation waited and waited for him to begin, but he took his time. Nobody there uttered a sound, with the exception of one man, a leader of the community, who stepped forward and addressed the Rebbe. "Excuse me," he said, "but," "But what," said the Maggid. "You came late," said the man, "all right, you must have been busy. But now that you are here, why do you make us wait longer?" The Rebbe lifted his head [00:22:00] and looked at him. "Tell me," he says, "There are many congregants here. Yet you alone chose to speak up. Why? Why you? Is it because you are more learned than the others?" "No, Rebbe." "More pious, perhaps?" "No, Rebbe." "But you are richer than they, aren't you? You are worth 50,000 rubles, right? And that is why you have the audacity to question my behavior. Do you really expect me to be answerable to 50,000 rubles?" Most rabbis today would not dare speak to their synagogue president that way. (laughter) Surely if they were rich and influential.

But the Maggid of Zlotchov did there because he knew his own value, not only as a leader, but as a human being. He knew that to possess means next to nothing, [00:23:00] what matters is substance. A person deserves respect for what he or she is, and not for any fortune they might have accumulated or inherited. Of Rebbe Yechiel Michel it was said that in his entire life he had never gone close to a stove for warmth, not even in the coldest winter nights. Also that he never lowered his head towards the food in his plate, not even after days of fasting. And finally that he never met with a man without telling him the truth. Man is nothing but dust, true, but he can look at the sky. Man is but ashes, true, but he can feel the fire. Man is stronger than fire, stronger than hunger, even stronger than the forces that consume him. Contradictory? No, ambivalent.

[00:24:00] Ambivalence is characteristic of Hasidism in general, and Rebbe Wolfe's family in particular. Let's explore this theme as it inevitably leads to dramatic dialectical situations. Listen to some more tales.

One day, Rebbe Wolfe heard unpleasant sounds coming from the kitchen. It was night. Putting aside a book, he heard his wife quarreling with a maid. He didn't say anything. Next day, again, he heard strange sounds coming from the kitchen. Again, putting aside his book that he was studying, this time he went

to find out what was happening there. He should have guessed it. His wife was having another fight with the maid. "She broke an expensive dish," the indignant Rebbetzin explained to him. "It was an accident," [00:25:00] cried the maid, "it was an accident." "No, she did it on purpose," said the Rebbetzin, "she did it to annoy me. And I'm going to deduct its price from her wages." "Then I shall go to the rabbinic court" said the maid. "Good," said the Rebbetzin, "sue me. Right now. And what are you waiting for?" And the maid interrupted her work and said, "All right, I am going to the rabbinic court." "Me too," said the Rebbetzin. "And me too," said her husband. "You?" said the Rebbetzin to her husband, "Why are you coming? I don't need you there." "You don't," said Rebbe Wolfe, "but she does." (laughter) "You are the wife of a Rebbe, she's only a poor orphan, and she needs me to defend her."

This anecdote is, again, typical of the man, always ready and eager to defend the poor, the victim, even when it means opposing him to his own wife, even when it means interrupting study and prayer. A person in distress [00:26:00] comes before meditation and concentration. Rebbe Wolfe was fully aware of the fact that the world is far from being just and charitable. That the oppressed are even more miserable than they appear to be and that many judges tend to favor the rich and the powerful.

A Rabbi's wife has a better chance to be heard than her maid. He knew the facts of life, Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh, he knew man's nature, and he had no illusion about society's justice and so-called mercy. And yet, he was naïve, he remained naïve, he was naiveté itself. And the question is, of course, how can one be both lucid and naïve? Well, one can if one is Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh. It is possible to be innocent and yet knowledgeable if one is Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh. [00:27:00] But still, how can one still be simultaneously Rebbe and child, leader and follower? How can one reconcile giving and receiving, need and comfort, the duties of the master and an awareness of not being one? Again, I can only tell you that Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh could. I told before, he was different from other masters. They perform miracles, he was a miracle.

Listen to another story. One day Rebbe Wolfe was traveling from or to Zbarazh to pay a sick call or perhaps to try and arrange some orphan's wedding. When he returned home he fell into a reflective mood. He sank into deep meditation. What about? His followers knew that his powers of concentration were total and unique, nothing disturbed him. And everybody respected his privacy, his occasional [00:28:00] need for isolation. But this particular time, someone broke the rules. A student approached him and asked for help. He was destitute, hungry, desperate.

Rebbe Wolfe listened to his woes, put his hand in his pocket, pulled out a silver coin, and was about to give it to the student, but changed his mind. He put the silver coin back into his pocket and handed the young man a copper coin instead. Understandably the student was not too happy. "What's the matter?" Rebbe Wolfe wanted to know. "I don't understand," said the student. "What don't you understand?" "I don't understand," said the student, "why the Rebbe changed his mind." "I will tell you why," said Rebbe Wolfe, "I wanted to teach you a lesson. A boy your age must never be ashamed, there is no shame in receiving. What others give isn't theirs anyway. [00:29:00] But that's not all. I also wanted to teach you that a boy your age must not rely too much on miracles.

The student blushed, bowed his head, and withdrew, but Rebbe Wolfe called him back. "What are you thinking now?" "I am thinking, Rebbe, that the Rebbe has just shown me a new way leading to God. Man must neither feel shame, nor rely too much on miracles." "Right," said Rebbe Wolfe, "that is the way that leads to God." And this young student later became one of the Rebbe's closest disciples. What do we learn from the story? First, that surprisingly Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh did have money in his pockets sometimes. Second, that he was practical, sometimes. And third, that he was a perceptive educator



[00:30:00] with pedagogical methods all his own. No wonder that he, the eternal student, was always surrounded by students. Some became his disciples, they admired him, believed in him, and saw in him a tzadik, a guide, a teacher, an exceptional human being, endowed with secret powers. And all this in spite of his genuine humility, or was it because of it? The question is relevant. When humility becomes a virtue, it may turn into a trap. If I tell you I am humble it means that I am not. Where then does true humility begin and where does it end?

Furthermore, how are we to reconcile man's vulnerability and his power, that tzadik and the Hasid, that tzadik and himself?

[00:31:00] On one hand the master, by definition, is endowed with powers. He dictates his will on creation and its laws. He can cancel evil decrees and defeat wicked enemies. It is given to him to alter the pace of existence and modify nature. All he has to do is to utter one word, invoke one name, say one prayer, and the sterile mother will bear children and the broken heart will open itself to joy. The Tzadik knows it and that is his problem.

He knows that whatever he desires he can obtain. How can one live with such knowledge and remain Tzadik? A Tzadik, more than anyone, must attain the extreme limits of humility. Which means he must eradicate in himself the last vestiges of pride or self-

satisfaction. [00:32:00] He must think of himself as unworthy, only then is he worthy. He must subordinate his wishes, his thoughts, his aspirations, his hopes, his very heartbeat, to the will of heaven. And only then will he impose his will on the will of heaven. He must bend his being, his life, let him become aware of his role, and he will lose it instantly.

Nowhere is the abyss as close to heaven as in the soul of the Tzadik. And thus, the Tzadik inevitably leads a double life and plays two parts simultaneously. He per force lives in constant contradiction with himself. In order to be what he is, he must think that he is not. To be a hero, he must think of himself as anti-hero. How did the great and holy Seer of Lublin put it?

[00:33:00] I prefer a rascal who knows that he is a rascal to a Tzadik who knows that he is a Tzadik. (laughter)

Confronting his followers, the Rebbe must be aware of his limitations. Yet, at the same time, because of his followers, he must ignore them. And so, we deal with problems of perception. A saint who knows that he is a saint isn't. Or more precisely, the moment he or she knows it, he or she no longer is a saint. A conscience that is sure of itself has no reason to be. To ever be whole, conscience must first be broken. As Rebbe Nachman of Breslov put it, "No heart is as whole as a broken heart." And the great Maggid of Mezeritch

before him said it differently and so beautifully. "What do you do," he said, "when you lose the key to the lock? You break the lock. So," said the great Maggid [00:34:00] of Mezeritch, "break your heart. Break it in a thousand pieces. And only then will God be allowed to enter." But in order to have the right to say this to his followers, the Rebbe must lead the way and serve as personal example. And that is why the Tzadik is often sad where the Hasid is not. The Rebbe preaches ecstasy while remaining melancholy. He proves that he is able to reconcile sadness with happiness. Yes, he can reconcile his sadness with a Hasid's happiness, but not the other way around. Demanding with himself, the master must be tolerant with his followers. Though he himself must aspire to perfection, he must accept the certainty that his followers can only try to follow as best they can. And this complexity one might say distaste for paradox appears also on the level of ideas. [00:35:00]

The Rebbe is supposed to evolve in a mysterious universe while the Hasid must cling to reality. The Rebbe is obsessed with eternity, the Hasid with the present. The Rebbe immerses himself in the Book of Splendor, the Zohar, the Hasid studies the Bible, says Psalms. The Rebbe comments on the Talmud and the Hasid is satisfied with a simple prayer, a melody, a smile. Of course there are exceptions. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

is monolithic. No half measures, no compromises, no concessions, no consoling forgiveness. With him it's either/or, everything or nothing, truth or damnation, knowledge or stupidity, but he is an exception even among the masters. The typical Rebbe is one who reassures his followers, comforts them, and consoles them, and above all stays with them. The typical Rebbe does not judge his followers, but on the contrary, tries to understand them and defend them. The typical Rebbe [00:36:00] is one who smiles and makes them smile.

And you will understand, of course, the role of the Rebbe, if you look at the situation of Europe and its Jewish communities, while Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh wanders from village to village, from inn to inn, the continent drowns in blood and hate. In France men are being killed in the name of justice and equality, in America in the name of independence, in Poland in the name of patriotism or anti-Semitism. We have said it many times, it bears repeating, art and literature flourish in the midst of ruins. The second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth stagger us with their intellectual riches, Voltaire and Rousseau, Goya and Kant, Mozart and Schiller. In occupied Moscow Napoleon wrote the charter for the Committee Francais. Culture and politics go hand in hand, [00:37:00] Lamartine and Musset are not the only ones to be

fascinated by the French Emperor. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov *lehavdil* uses him and his romantic destiny in some of his enchanting though disquieting tales about man's metamorphoses and exile. In that tormented and torn century when the Jews suffered more than their neighbors, for they did suffer at the hand of their neighbors, already then Jews were victims not only of aggressors, but of their victims as well. In that era of upheavals, what did a simple Jewish villager need most? Peace, and hope, and a sense of belonging. And in those days, who was better qualified to fill those needs than the Rebbe? The Rebbe never chastised, the Rebbe was never a preacher, but a friend. The poor Jews needed someone to tell them, [00:38:00] listen, creation needs its creator and a creator too needs His creation. You miss God? God misses you too, yes, you, individually, personally. You may not be learned, you may not be pious, God needs you nevertheless for there is something in you that is yours alone. There is something in every human being that can be found in no one else, so you too, are unique.

And this is precisely what a Jew at the brink of despair wanted to hear, to help him forget despair. He needed to know that he belonged to a people, a community, that he was part of history. He needed to know that someone, the Rebbe for instance, loved him enough to take an interest in his problems and share his or

her joys. And also that others [00:39:00] needed him enough to invite him to participate in their sorrows and celebrations. And thus the individual was no longer alone or mute, all of a sudden he was swept away by the *niggun*, the music of the Hasidic Movement. And all of a sudden he is a poet without even knowing it. And what is Hasidism if not a powerful and irresistible appeal to poetry. Leonardo da Vinci speaks of poetry as being blind painting and of painting as being mute poetry. Oh, was he wrong. Poetic silence does exist, but poetry is not intrinsically silent for life is not silent, nor is friendship silent. In those times, in the lifetime of the Besht, the Maggid of Mezeritch, or Rebbe Wolfe Zbarazh, the Hasid could not live in silence, he needed human words, brotherly voices that would help him against all odds [00:40:00] discover the world and its beauty, nature and its promise, man and his awesome yet majestic fate. More than ever in those times of great distress and misery, the Hasid needed someone to teach him how to see, how to feel, how to hope, how to remember. Of course, tomorrow, Hasidim will lose every reason to hope or even to go on living, but today, rooted in the present, while they are together in the court around the Rebbe they are carried by a powerful song of solidarity and by an overwhelming yearning. With their master, surrounding him, they lift themselves up higher and higher in order to gather up there in seventh heaven where they will be

given a taste of the ecstasy of eternity. That is what the usual Rebbe, to the extent that the [00:41:00] Rebbe can be termed usual, offers his followers, something that he himself does not possess. A refuge, a haven, a source of joy and serenity.

But then the Rebbe, on the other hand, by the strength he incarnates and the majesty he evokes cannot but represent to his followers the hero par excellence. Meaning someone good, yet strict, charitable, yet severe, tolerant with others, but inflexible with himself, in others words, a singular human being, an exceptional character in whom all attributes converge and in whom all contradictions are resolved. Let the master show weakness, let him show hesitation, and his followers will turn away from him. But they didn't turn away from Rebbe Wolfe Zbarazh. Does that mean that our poor Rebbe Wolfe Zbarazh played a trick on us? [00:42:00] That he is not a master after all? Is it possible that we have all been taken in by his legend? No. For anyone familiar with the sources there can be no doubt that Rebbe Wolfe occupies an illustrious place in Hassidic literature, a place comparable to Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl or Rabbi Zushya, the famous Rabbi Zushya of Hanipol. And he was their contemporary. Important witnesses left us testimonies of his influence. And thus we know that he was

kind, docile, generous, humble, infinitely humble, and ready and willing to suffer and die for the sake of another human being, or a creature, a horse, a dog. We know that he was simple, open-minded, warm, and sensitive. What was the secret of so much kindness in a man who lived in the midst of cruel events?

[00:43:00] The secret of a man who remained human in an inhuman society, a man who responded with kindness and serenity to an era that lacked both. What was it in Rebbe Wolfe's personality that seemingly made him immune to anger, hate, and self-pity? Had he always been that way, had he changed, and if so, when and why? To our regret, not enough has been recorded of his life to venture an answer. Impossible to analyze the evolution of his personality, when we see him, he is already a mature man, a leader, a master at peace with himself and the world.

Since one thing has been ascertained, namely that his very humility was subconscious, perhaps we ought to turn for advice to a man who in his time much later served as a kind of secular rebbe to his Hasidim. And I'm referring of course to [00:44:00] Rebbe Sigmund Freud. (laughter) He would probably say, you wish to understand the son, analyze his relationship to his father. Well, the Maggid Rebbe Yechiel Michel of Zlotchov was as known for his severity as his son was famous for his lack of severity. The father's sermons made his listeners tremble, his son's words



appeased them. Whenever the father spoke, the town took on an atmosphere of Yom Kippur with the entire community turning to penitence. His rigor was so great that according to Hasidic tradition, the Besht found it necessary to reprimand him. "God," said the Besht, "and God alone may judge his creation with harshness and even then it is up to man to try to attenuate it." So unbending was the father that if one is to believe Hasidic legend, he continued [00:45:00] to fulfill the same duties and chastise men and women for their sins in the other world, a world of truth. In after life we are told he presides over a tribunal which judges souls without the slightest trace of clemency.

But we may ask ourselves the question that perhaps if the son chose to take his peoples' defense, and chose to love his people, all his people, all human beings always, perhaps it was his way of rebelling against the father. Perhaps, but it may be simpler than that. It may be that Rebbe Wolfe's nature was good and kind. He could not bear the sight of suffering and tears. He was unable to hurt or to offend. He became [00:46:00] aware of this on the day of bar mitzvah, and we said it earlier, an occasion that should be watershed and awakening for every Jewish boy. Later, he deepened that sense of compassion in him. Did

he acquire secret powers? Perhaps. If so, he used them only to attenuate man's suffering. He opted to suffer rather than cause suffering throughout his life. Rather than weep, he preferred to laugh, and rather than shout, he preferred to sing. Rather yield to others than use force to make them yield. Such was the substance of his teaching, the essence of his existence.

Another story, A Jewish peasant came to spend Shabbat under the Rebbe's roof. As was the custom in Zbarazh, [00:47:00] he was invited to partake of all the meals at Rebbe Wolfe's table. Together with his disciples and honored guests, the first meal was a celebration, so was the second, and during the third meal a regrettable incident occurred. The Jewish peasant got hungry before the meal was served. Didn't he know that the third meal is the most solemn and mysterious of all? He didn't care. He was hungry and there was no food on the table. Luckily there was food in his pockets. To be precise, he always carried some tidbit in his pockets, just in case. So, he pulled out a piece of challah and some radishes and began to eat. And since he was eating, he wanted everybody to know what he was eating. And so, he made so much noise that the master and his disciples found it hard to concentrate, but they tried. They sang the traditional melodies [00:48:00] imploring the Queen of Shabbat not to leave them, not yet, not yet. The disciples were humming nostalgic

tunes and the peasant went on eating. The Rebbe spoke of Safed and Jerusalem, and the peasant went on eating. Finally one of the young disciples couldn't take it anymore. He turned to the disrespectful peasant and whispered, "Hey Brother, how dare you?" The others chimed in, what arrogance, what ignorance, get him out of here.

But then as the whispers of protest and indignation ran from Hasid to Hasid, the Rebbe raised his voice, and he said gently, "Do you know what I would like right now?" His disciples held their breath, what would the master like? Every one of them would have given his life to please Rebbe Wolfe. But what would please him right now? What would give him pleasure? Tense, they leaned forward so as to hear better. And the Rebbe said, "I would like a radish. (laughter) [00:49:00] Yes, friends, what I really want now is a radish. That's all I want. Does anyone have a piece of radish for me?" And suddenly the mood shifted, and the peasant was no longer the object of anger, only of envy.

Another story. Rebbe Wolfe was journeying to a ceremony, he was late. The coachman knew it and began using his whip on his horse. But the Rebbe stopped him, "Hey, why do you hit a poor animal? Horses are living creatures, why do you inflict pain on

living creatures?" "But we are late, Rebbe. We are late." "So what," said the Rebbe, "is it the horse's fault that we are late?" The coachman knew the Rebbe well enough not to argue. He put the whip back in its place and began shouting instead. Again, the Rebbe stopped him, "Why are you shouting at the poor horse? Horses are living creatures, why are you shouting at living creatures?" "But Rebbe," [00:50:00] said the coachman, "what do you want me to do?" "Speak," said the Rebbe, "speak gently to the horse." To speak and not punish, to speak and not condemn, to speak in order to educate and enrich, not to repudiate and humiliate, to speak to cure, not to hurt and wound. Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh believed in using language exclusively on behalf of man, and never as a weapon against him.

We know it that a number of rabbis gathered one day in Lvov, Lemberg, with a purpose of devising fierce measures against assimilation. It was in the beginning of the nineteenth century and most of the rabbis considered the situation close to an emergency. Jewish youth, listen, was falling victim to alienation due to ignorance and laxity. Jewish boys and girls were copying Gentile boys and girls. [00:51:00] They dressed the same way, spoke the same way, visited the same places. Boys were shaving their *peyot*, their ear locks. Girls went to secular schools. Parents sent their children not to *yeshiva* but

to workshops. If things were allowed to continue like that, the end of European Jewry was at hand. And that is why the rabbis had gathered in Lvov, to sound the alarm, to erect walls, to adopt new laws, to proclaim that emancipation means treason, that modernization leads to excommunication. The consensus was that leniency was out of the question. But before the measures were put to a vote, they were submitted to Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh who evidently had veto power. And he used it. "What are you up to?" he exclaimed. "You wish to excommunicate Jews? For what reason?" "Because they misbehave." "Am I to love them less than I love you?" [00:52:00] And the measures were discarded. How did the Besht put it? "A small Tzadik loves small sinners, it takes a great Tzadik to love great sinners." (laughter)

And that, of course, is the basic principle of Hasidic teaching, our love for our fellow man must resemble God's, which means it must aspire to be infinite. One day Rebbe Wolfe received complaints that certain Jews in Zbarazh spent their nights, may God forgive them, playing cards. And the master was urged to punish them or at least chastise them in public. But he refused. "They play cards," he said, "let them, they won't play to the ends of their lives, will they? One day they will stop, but in the meantime, they will have learned important things.

They will have learned to overcome sleep and fatigue.

[00:53:00] (laughter) And they will use their knowledge later for study and prayer in the service of God. So, why should I try to stop them? Why should I condemn them?" Was that his way of jesting? Did he have a sense of humor? Perhaps. A poor Hasid came to see him, to talk to him about his poverty, hoping to obtain a blessing which would make him rich, or at least richer. He had hardly begun when he was interrupted by Rebbe Wolfe who indicated to him that another Hasid was waiting outside. "But Rebbe," protested the poor Hasid, "I just came one minute ago. The man who preceded me stayed a whole hour. Why do you discriminate? Is it because he is rich and I am not?" "Oh no," said Rebbe Wolfe, "don't accuse me of favoritism, but let me explain. The rich man who preceded you had to talk for a whole hour until I understood that he was poor. Whereas with you, [00:54:00] one minute was enough."  
(laughter)

Still, I do not think that it was meant as humor. If it was, it was involuntary. He believed in what he said. He was convinced that the rich were also poor, that the wicked were also good, and that everybody was better than he. In this respect he went farther than even the Besht. The Besht aimed at bringing back sinners. Rebbe Wolfe did not look at them as sinners. To begin

with, he was convinced that all of them were good and saintly. The Besht believed that every man is capable of goodness. Rebbe Wolfe believed that every person was good. His Hasidim one day bought him a watch. And of course a week later it was stolen. But he refused to admit it. He said, "Who could have stolen a watch? [00:55:00] Since all those who came to see me are tzadikim, how should a tzadik steal a watch?" So, he was left without a watch. But then, you may ask, how could he be so blind, didn't he see evil around him? Didn't he realized that creation is being diminished by man? What did he think? That the messiah had arrived, that Satan had been vanquished for good? How are we to explain such a degree of naiveté in a man who, after all, was duty-bound to act as leader, thus as guide, as teacher in things both spiritual and practical, how could he lead others in their everyday activities while remaining unaware of reality, how could he be both hero and anti-hero?

In truth, Hasidism in its early stages emphasized the Hasid's role more than the Rebbe's. The Hasid was more important than the Rebbe. The Rebbe's function and *raison d'être* were to serve [00:56:00] the Hasid and not the other way around. Created by the Rebbe, the movement existed for the Hasid, the anonymous Jew who, as he encountered the Rebbe, ceased to be anonymous. In those times, the Hasid came from the lowest ranks of Jewish

society, and so did the Rebbe. Remember, the Besht recruited his followers among the poor, the neglected, the wretched, the forgotten, the oppressed, and he was opposed by the rich, the dignitaries, the establishment, financial or intellectual elite. Who clung to the Besht? Those men and women who, prisoners of their solitude, had cried, and endured, and despaired in silence. The nameless faceless human beings whose entire existence seemed one endless hopeless search for meaning and destiny came to the Besht for help. On a different level that was true also of the other Rebbes, the other Masters. They were far from being heroic figures. [00:57:00] The cult of the Tzadik as a forceful leader of men on earth and as intermediary and intercessor in heaven developed much later, three generations after the Besht. Until then, the Rebbe was neither powerful nor glorious, the Besht was not a prince of Jewish thought, nor was he the son of illustrious parents. He wasn't even a rabbi. He had appeared seemingly out of nowhere and had plunged into history and set it aflame. His origins were obscure, he had sprung from the lower levels of the community. What was his profession? Innkeeper, line digger, beadle, tutor, slaughterer, the Besht, the hero. Before he revealed himself, people had hardly noticed him.



Most of his disciples too were from modest backgrounds. Rabbi Aharon of Karlin's father was a beadle. Rabbi Moshe Kobrin's, a baker. [00:58:00] The Kozhnutser Maggid's, a book binder. And both Rabbi Uri of Strelisk and Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov were sons of tailors. Many Hasidic masters tried to live or relive the Besht's experiences. In other words, before serving as teachers they wanted to study and work on themselves. Before ascending to the throne, they endured anonymity, they changed homes and disguises, they lived a nomadic life, wandering from town to town, from house to house, and where they ate they did not sleep, where they slept they did not eat. They dressed as beggars and lived as beggars. They slept on the ground and accepted insults and injuries without a tear or a sound. Everybody had rights over them while they had none. To find themselves, they had to lose themselves first. To deserve to be visible, they first had to become invisible. Before revealing themselves, they had to be totally unknown. [00:59:00] Countless legends describe the preparatory stages of a Tzadik. We see him among wandering minstrels and fugitives from justice. We see him even on a circus bench. We find him disguised as shoemaker, coachman, milkman, occasionally he doesn't even look Jewish. In those legends the Tzadik does everything imaginable and unimaginable to hide his shining face in darkness.

And surely you remember the most moving of legends concerning the Tzadiks pre-revelation exile? It tells us of the two great Rebbes, the brothers, Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk and Rebbe Zushya of Hanipol. It is said of them in Hasidic legend that wherever they spent the night, the Hasidic kingdom took root. And so, they walked, and walked, and walked and thus extended [01:00:00] the boundaries of the Besht's movement. One day they arrived in a little town as dusk was falling. Noticing an inn they went inside, hoping to spend the night there. They were tired, exhausted. They laid down behind the stove, which was the customary place for wandering beggars. Soon the place fell silent and dark, and then all of a sudden they woke up in a panic. They were overcome by inexplicable fear. And so violent was their fear that they left the inn and the village in the middle of the night. The name of the place? Ushipizin, better known to this generation of ours as Auschwitzin or Auschwitz.

Yes, the boundaries of Hasidism ended there. [01:01:00] But for Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh, his metamorphosis was different from that of his peers or predecessors. Whereas they began by being anonymous and ended up being celebrated, he remained withdrawn and unassuming all his life. Even after he left his exile, he remained in exile. And throughout his entire adult life, he felt inadequate and unworthy of leadership, of influencing

others, of helping others. He never thought that he possessed keys to hidden treasures, nor did he ever claim to be closer to truth than his fellow man. How could people ask him to intercede on their behalf? He wondered how could he do for them what he failed to do for himself. More than anyone he needed help. True, he became Rebbe, he had no choice. Like the Holy Seer of Lublin or the Rebbe of Kotzk, he refused to wear the rabbinic crown [01:02:00] and like them he had to yield to Hasidic pressure and ascend the throne. Being the son of the famous Maggid of Zlotchov confers certain duties. His four brothers became rebbes and he had to say yes as they did, lest he be accused of desertion. Like his brothers, like most other masters, he attracted people from all over the country. To spend Shabbat in his home was a precious event. People came from afar to celebrate holidays with him and his friends. Hasidim came to ask for his advice in all matters. They drank his words, they respected, and admired, and loved him, as only they could. He was their Rebbe after all.

Except that he didn't want to be the Rebbe. He didn't think himself being the Rebbe. He was unaware of his stature, of his impact. He did nothing to broaden his little province, quite the contrary, he did everything to keep it small. He refused to be treated as sage or wonder rebbe, he performed [01:03:00] no

miracles, nor did he transform dust into gold, or foretell the future, or impose his will on heaven. In fact, he did nothing that seemed out of the ordinary or spectacular. In spite of his prestige, he chose to lead a life of simplicity and continuous anonymity. A Jew among Jews, that's all, a man among men, that's all. That is all he wanted to be. He had no charisma, he only fulfilled his duties towards his fellow man. Speaking to the mute and listening to them, holding out his hand to anyone sinking into sadness. That's all he aspired to accomplish and that is all he did. Never pretending to be more intelligent than others or more pious, he managed to be generous and more humble than most. What was said of Rebbe Zushya, that he was a genius in humility, just as others were geniuses [01:04:00] in the sciences or in Torah, was true of Rebbe Wolfe as well. Rather than attract attention he paid attention. Attention to those who lived unnoticed. And therein, I believe, lay his singular greatness. If the stories by him or about him are so profoundly moving, and they are, it is because they emphasize his concern for the underprivileged, the outcasts, the misfits. And as you know, even thieves benefited from his compassion.

One night his wife woke him up in a panic. "Wolfe," she whispered, "Wolfe, I hear noises. I hear thieves downstairs."

Do something." "All right," he said, "I will." He went to the door and began shouting, "Good thieves," he said, "good thieves, I want you to know that whatever I own I renounce for your sake. Don't worry dear thieves, you are not violating the law."

[01:05:00] Another time other thieves, or perhaps the same ones (laughter) entered his house at night. And again his wife woke him up, again he went to the door, but in the meantime the thieves fled, so Rebbe Wolfe opened the door and began shouting, "Listen, good thieves, listen to me. By mistake you have taken some jars with dangerous medication. Don't touch them. Don't touch them, remember they are dangerous." So much self-sacrifice and kindness after a while becomes a bit annoying. (laughter) How can one live with someone who never thinks of his own welfare? How can one love someone who loves everyone? How can one empathize with the man who protects thieves whose victim he was? Is that but human?

Well, [01:06:00] having reached almost the end of our pilgrimage, I must confess that Rebbe Wolfe of Zbarazh appeals to me in a very special way. I not only like him, sometimes I feel sorry for him. To live the way he did in a world that denied everything that he stood for was not easy, and yet, he thought it was. He didn't even perceive the discrepancy between his outlook on the world and the world. Like Rabbi Zushya he

suffered and he didn't know it. He suffered and yet he strove to reduce suffering around him. And so, between the world and Rebbe Wolfe, I choose Rebbe Wolfe. With cynicism all around us, I look upon Rebbe Wolfe as a teacher who can help us fight cynicism. Granted, unlike many masters, he had no messianic projects, and he was not [01:07:00] involved in eschatological conspiracies. But he did something else perhaps more important, he brought redemption on a small scale to individuals around him. He brought redemption without speaking of redemption. He performed miracles without calling them miracles. But at this point, we ought to raise again the question that has been troubling us all evening, who was he? A Rebbe in the classical sense, or an anti-Rebbe in the modern sense? The more one studies the sources, the more one gets the impression that they conceal some elements about him. Like Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, he carried heavy stones in his heart. The fact is that at the end of his life, he stopped all activities and broke all ties with his surroundings. And believe it or not, he made Aliyah. Why? To be alone at last? [01:08:00] Why did he seek total solitude? What did he hope to achieve? I don't know. Did he?

As one reads and rereads all the sources about his life and work, one senses a mystery. The man must have been more complex than he appeared. Something must have happened to him and we

don't know what. Something must have happened when he uprooted himself, and left Zbarazh, and went to the Holy Land through the Master of Medzhybizh, Rebbe Baruch, sent him there. But were their relations really that close? And why did Rebbe Baruch choose him? And why did Rebbe Wolfe obey? If Rebbe Baruch needed an emissary, he surely could have found a more suitable representative. In fact, anyone would have been more suitable than he. The Tzadik of Medzhybizh and Rebbe Wolfe were like two opposing poles. Rebbe Baruch personified [01:09:00] anger, the Hasidic anger, whereas Rebbe Wolfe believed in serenity. Rebbe Baruch exemplified ancient royalty whereas Rebbe Wolfe exemplified present poverty. The one was the living example of a hero, whereas the other evoked the image of a perfect anti-hero. What then was their common link if there was one? What motivated Rebbe Baruch to choose him and what motivated Rebbe Wolfe to accept? This episode of Rebbe Wolfe's move to Palestine remains shrouded in mystery. The years he spent there, we know that he lived in Tveria for a while. But the years he spent there were, so to speak, missing years in his biography. We know nothing of what he did there. Hasidic chronicles of that period record only one story, not about him, but about his wife. And the story is that they were so poor that she had to do strangers' [01:10:00] laundry for a living. And one can't imagine Rebbe Wolfe's misery, even darker than in

Zbarazh. One can imagine him in Tveria, in Safed or in Jerusalem, but after that, one no longer sees him. Somehow he vanished from the Hasidic landscape. What did he do in the Holy Land? Whom did he try to avoid or confront? What happened to the disciples he left behind in Zbarazh? When did he die? Of what? In what circumstances? We have no answers. All we know is that he died sometime between 1800 and 1820. Nothing is mentioned of what events preceded his death, something must have happened, but the chroniclers, usually so full of stories and fantasy, say nothing. There is only silence, disquieting, perplexing silence surrounding his stay in Palestine. What does it all mean? [01:11:00]

One possible explanation. Rebbe Wolfe wanted to leave Zbarazh, and Europe, and European Hasidism already torn from within, in order to attain a higher degree of anonymity. He wanted to flee the last of his admirers, his disciples, and the temptations they represented to him. In Palestine he finally managed to live off stage, finally nobody considered him a master. No one watched him, no one questioned him, no one followed him around. At last, his greatest wish had been fulfilled. The Rebbe of Zbarazh had become a simple inhabitant of Tveria, Safed, or Jerusalem like any other. That Tzadik had become a simple Jew



that no one knew or wished to know. At last he was being left [01:12:00] to his nostalgic silence and solitude.

In conclusion, my friends, the researcher in me, and the commentator in me, concede failure and defeat. I have studied all that has been written about our master tonight. I have researched the lives of his friends and disciples, I have studied his visible virtues and hidden aspirations. I wanted to understand him, to know him, and now I realize that it is impossible. For reasons that will remain unexplained, his code will not be deciphered, nor will his shelter be invaded. The true character of the man is beyond our perception. His face remains veiled. Is this his victory over legend? His triumph over fame? We do not know who he was in Zbarazh [01:13:00] or who he became in Jerusalem. Did he really exist? Was there a man beneath the name, a destiny beyond the legend? Did he try to bring Zbarazh to Jerusalem to save it from its tragic fate 120 years later? Did he fail? If Jerusalem is the song of the Jewish soul, then Zbarazh is its whisper? If the Hasidic Master was the great light to his disciples, then Rebbe Wolfe wanted to be nothing but a shadow that recedes at dawn or twilight.

A Talmudic saying may be applied to him, "What is man's life," says the Talmud, "a shadow. But what kind of a shadow? That of

a building that never moves? No. That of a tree that outlives the seasons? No. Man's life," says the Talmud, "is like the [01:14:00] shadow of a bird caught in full flight." But this is the beginning of another story about another man, a product of another age who curiously resembled Rebbe Wolfe. And his name is Paltiel Kossover. But who is Paltiel Kossover? You will have to wait until next week. (laughter) (applause)

**M1:**

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