

Elie Wiesel In Hasidism: Rav Shneuer Zalmen of Ladi -

Commitment to Fervor November 12 1981

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) This tale of solidarity, suffering, study, and faith, a tale of love as well, the love of Israel, has retained its magic to this very day, for it brings fulfillment and more than that. It brings ecstasy to thousands and thousands of men and women who are part of a community whose center, geographical and spiritual, lies within a half hour's car ride from where we are gathered tonight. But to acquaint ourselves with it we must go back 200 years and seek out the place far away on the other side of oceans and mountains somewhere in Tsarist Russia, in Petersburg to an ominous fortress, Peter and Paul, [00:01:00] that still stands today.

In a secret cell of an isolated wing a solitary prisoner, a famous one. He has been there for weeks and weeks since the month of Tishrei. It is now almost Hanukah. How much longer will they keep him in jail? How much longer will his trial continue? Suddenly the door opens, and the prison warden enters. He stares at the prisoner for a long, long moment. But the prisoner, lost in meditation, doesn't at first notice the visitor and jumps at the sound of his voice.

"I have been told," says the prison warden, "that you are erudite, that you know many things about many subjects. So then explain to me this passage from Genesis. We are told that Adam is running away from God, and God asks [00:02:00] him, *Ayecha*, where are you? Really? How can that be? Is it conceivable God, who does and sees and knows everything doesn't know where Adam is?"

"May I ask you a question first?" says the prisoner. The warden nods. "Do you believe in the Bible? Do you believe that it is divinely inspired and that it transcends individuals just as it goes beyond time?" "Yes." "Then this is how one must read that passage. God's question refers to all man of all times. God is asking us where are you in the world? What is your place in it? What have you done with the 46 years that you have already lived?" And the warden is seized by incontrollable trembling. He is 46 years old. And the question is one that touches a vulnerable spot. [00:03:00] Where is he in his own life? After all he is a warden, but he is in prison.

He leaves the cell a changed person. You may by now have recognized the prisoner, the great Rabbi Shneuer Zalmen of Ladi, or as some call him, the Rav of Ladi, or as we refer to him, the

Old Rebbe, the Alter Rebbe. He is a disciple of the celebrated maggid Reb Dov Ber of Mezeritch, friend of the latter's son Reb Avraham HaMalach, companion of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, and Rabbi Aharon of Karlin, of whom we have talked years and years ago. And above all he is the founder of the Chabad movement.

Few masters were as admired by so many people for so long. And few schools have survived the onslaught of history with as much fervor and creative energy. Why was he in jail? [00:04:00] Was it because, as Sartre put it much later, there exists a time when one can be free only in jail? Was it related to his victories, and there were many, or to his goals, which were lofty to the point of seeming unattainable? Who was he anyway? What was his special style, his trademark? How did his teaching differ from that of his companions such as the Berditchever or the Lizhensker or the Lubliner or the Rizhiner, who also spent time in prison?

In the last 15 years during our annual pilgrimages to the sources of Hasidic experience and inspiration we have met the Besht and his powerful call for passion and friendship and survival. Rebbe Pinchas the Koretzer and his plea for understanding and compassion, the Berditchever and his sacred

protest, the Kotzker [00:05:00] and his solitude, the seer of Lublin and his visions.

Extraordinary characters all in a class by themselves. Every one of them a founder of schools and dynasties. What did they have in common? They all believed that any deprivation of the poor and any humiliation of the victim is worthier of attention than all the knowledge of all the scholars and Kabbalists.

Within the equation that is man's life, the person matters more than abstract ideas. That is what they all thought. And that is what we admire them for.

Thanks to their compassion, ordinary Jews, even the madman and the beggars and the coachman felt they belonged to creation. If the master saw them how could the master of the universe not see them? It is this broad appeal to the masses that made Hasidism into an irresistible force in Jewish history. It taught us that one can, therefore one [00:06:00] must fight sadness, even when it seems unbearable. One must, therefore one can oppose exile even though its darkness seems everlasting.

Naturally Israel plays a central and even vital role in Chabad as it does in Hasidism, and it should in Judaism. Perhaps we ought to emphasize this for painfully obvious reasons which, in

parentheses, as a preliminary remark, we must expose. I am afraid that history is giving us signals, and it is up to us to decipher them. We the Jewish people are entering now a critical era. Unless we mobilize ourselves and our allies, and we do have some allies, we may awaken one morning and find ourselves powerless and hopeless.

Promises are not being kept. Commitments are being [00:07:00] broken. Oil worship has been turned into idolatry. Anti-Semitism is spreading. Israel is slowly and dramatically being abandoned by her friends. Her supporters become neutral. The neutral nations turn hostile. And the hostile powers gain military power of incredible, incredible dimensions. And Israel is alone. Alone except for the Jewish people.

We spoke about it last week when we discussed Rabbi Zeira and his commitment to Israel. Let us state again our belief, for it bears restating. We define ourselves always as Jews in relationship to Israel even though we do not live in Israel. But we do live in the history of Israel. When a Jew is alone he is alone with other Jews who are also alone. And when a Jew is even more alone he has no choice, [00:08:00] he becomes a Hasid. (laughter)

Now why did we wait so long, 15 years after all, for Rabbi Shneuer Zalmen to paint him in the Hasidic gallery of ours? Well, I admit he worried me. He loomed too large. He seemed too complex and intellectual a character to be talked about in one session. At one point I thought perhaps what we ought to do is to take one page of his masterwork, the Tanya or the Shulchan Aruch, distribute it among you and study only that page. And through that page we shall learn more about him and his time and teaching and his personality.

But that would be out of place for until now we have always tried to approach these masters through the portraits around them, about them, to the stories told by or about them. And therefore we should do the same about him. But still he frightened me. [00:09:00] He had to be approached from more than one angle, more. But that is not the only reason. There is another, and its name is Lubavitch. Though he lived mainly in Ladi his kingdom is associated with Lubavitch. And Lubavitch is right here in Brooklyn. So why talk about it when you can take a subway or a car and go there?

We have said it many times. Hasidism is neither doctrine nor theory. It is an experience to be felt and communicated, to be lived from within. You must be moved by it and moved with it.

Unless you are ready to become part of it, to integrate its song into your own life, you will sense neither its meaning nor its beauty. And yet it is so easy. Kfar Chabad in Israel, Eastern Parkway in New York, someone will talk to you about the Tanya, explain to you the depths of the message that the Old Rebbe communicates from generation to generation and teach [00:10:00] you his niggun, the famous niggun which we may sing next week for the last of our series this year, that mystical melody in which words become silence and silence turns into melody again; a song so profound, so hidden, so pure that you hear it literally with your soul.

A farbrengen with the Rebbe, a Chag HaGeulah in his presence, a l'chaim to him and from him will tell you more about Chabad than all the explanations in the world. And yet, and yet. We must speak about the Old Rebbe, Reb Shneuer Zalmen. We can wait no longer. *Ayecha*, where are we in the Hasidic universe? Where would we stand without him? Without him and his influence White Russia and Lithuania would have been lost to the Beshtian movement. Without him, without him we cannot imagine Hasidism without him.

Let us imagine him once more in his prison cell. He speaks to the warden and says, [00:11:00] "What was your question? God

didn't know where Adam was? The answer is God did. Adam didn't." (laughter) But we too have a question. *Ayeichem*, where are you friends who should be in our midst and are still waiting outside? (laughter)

Let us study Tanya. Quote, "Tanya, it has been taught: *Mashbi'im oto t'hi Tzadik v'al t'hi rasha.*" An oath is administered to every soul. Be righteous and be not wicked. And even if the whole world tells you that you are righteous, regard yourself as if you were wicked," end quote. Thus begins the teaching of the master. The first word, as always, has turned into the name by which the book has achieved fame in Hasidic literature. Just as Midrash Rabba is called Midrash Rabba because the first word is rabba, here too Tanya has become the name of the book.

And the very opening passage gives us an insight into the Old Rebbe's outlook on man and his conflicts, life and its hidden goal, reason and its dual function of being part of both the solution and the problem. What do we learn from the introductory passage I just quoted [00:13:00] with the hope of giving you a taste of the work itself? That one must always begin at the beginning? More. That there is a beginning that came before the beginning.



*mashbi'im oto* Before the soul descends from the higher spheres, before it is inserted into the world of the living, before it enters time and gets a name and becomes a person with its own identity it is already exposed to the dangers of philosophy.

(laughter) The Tanya raises a question of logic. Why should we view ourselves as wicked when the Talmud orders man never to consider himself elsewhere as wicked? Why be just but think that we are not? Why this eternal discrepancy between being and appearance?

Characteristically, the author explores in [00:14:00] that same passage the grave question of theodicy. *Tzadik V'Ra Lo*, the mystery of injustice in an imminent universe created by God who is transcendent, how is one to reconcile one's self with the reality in which just men suffer and the wicked do not?

Of the Tanya, Rabbi Boruch of Medzhybizh, who had problems, as we shall see, with the author of the Tanya, but nevertheless he said, and I quote, "This is a work of the mind for the mind."

As for the historian Simon Dubnow he said, and I quote, "To move from other Hasidic volumes to the Tanya is to go from an obscure room to a hall full of light." Said Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, and I quote, "The Tanya is a miracle. Yes, to bring

God, who is infinite, into such a small book is a great miracle." [00:15:00]

It certainly is an important volume, one of the most important in Hasidic thoughts. As the movement's conceptual manifesto it deals with Hasidism from a totally new perspective. It brings to it an intellectual dimension which has become its trademark. Chabad means three attitudes, three demands, three modes given to man in his or her quest for perfection. The Hebrew letters forming the word Chabad, chet, bet, dalet, are the initials of *chochma*, meaning wisdom, *bina*, meaning understanding, and *da'at*, meaning knowledge. What do they have in common? All three emphasize reason and the fact that the mind too is a gate to heaven. Ecstasy, fervor, prayer are part of the Hasidic vocabulary and therefore of Chabad's as well.

But Chabad [00:16:00] adds and extolls study and the intellectual discipline instead of total belief in the supernatural. God is everywhere meaning he is in things both visible and invisible, in thoughts both perceptible and intangible. In other words, do not forsake study for the benefit of prayer. Rationalism for the benefit of mysticism always may lead man to the discovery of what makes the fleeting

moment eternal and the human being immortal and the inaccessible emanation of God still so accessible.

One day the Old Rebbe, Reb Shneuer Zalmen, heard his followers speak of miracle makers. "Well," he commented with a shrug, "in the days when I was studying under the holy Maggid of Mezeritch at his court, divine powers, the *Ruach Hakodesh*, were available freely and cheaply. Anyone could take it. As for miracles, [00:17:00] they were lying under the table. But nobody had the time to pick them up." (laughter)

The reasoning in Chabad is that human existence is in itself miraculous. The fact that a human being wakes up, remembers, finds his or her place in society, works for his fellow man weeps and loves and sings, is that not a miracle? The fact that we are given the power and the right and the privilege to question heaven and question ourselves, isn't that both awesome and rewarding?

The tree that grows and the man who watches it grow, the birds that fly and man who listens to their song, the solitary wanderer and the silent companion who chooses to walk alongside him a day an hour, are they not to be considered a source of wonder? Chabad is special because it tries to reconcile, to

combine, to unite mystical search with rational process, heart [00:18:00] and mind, feeling and reason. Chabad aims at reaching the human being in its totality.

Does all this mean that the Old Rebbe disavowed all miracles? Quite the contrary. He affirmed their presence but broadened their scope. It is up to us to be worthy of them, to be open to them, to see them. What is a miracle? That which we are unable to understand? No, that which we cannot understand and yet somehow do receive, do absorb, do understand except that the word understanding has in the process received another meaning.

But then there we go philosophizing again. But the Old Rebbe was also teaching philosophy and ethics and Talmudic ingenuity and mystical intuitions. He represented the total image of the Hasidic experience, and that is why he had such an impact. He is [00:19:00] particularly special within a movement that prides itself on having many special figures.

So Chabad, as I said, is Lubavitch, and here I owe you a confession that whenever I am in Lubavitch I always am compelled to remind my friends of Lubavitch in Lubavitch that I belong to Vizhnitz. (laughter) I am a Hasid of Vizhnitz. Where is Vizhnitz? In Bnei Brak, in Munsey, in Brooklyn, in Jerusalem.

Vizhnitz is everywhere except in Vizhnitz. But this is characteristic of Hasidism and the times we live in. The same is true of Rizhin, the same is true of Lublin and Lizhensk. Something happened to our history. We were exiled from space, and somehow we have taken the space with us elsewhere, and we have built our temples, [00:20:00] and we have built our hopes there.

Lubavitch has become a worldwide movement with branches on five continents. It is active even in some Arab lands and surely behind the Iron Curtain. Many of us have met old Lubavitcher Hasidim in Leningrad or in forsaken places where they manage to maintain some kind of intense Jewish presence. I found Lubavitch in Tiflis, in Morocco, or in small campuses in the United States. And there I cannot praise them enough for what these *shlichim* of Lubavitch are doing by bringing Judaism, by bringing Hasidism, by bringing a presence in places where young Jews might get lost among the cults or other dangerous experiments. So I found Lubavitch everywhere, but you will not find [00:21:00] Lubavitch in Lubavitch anymore.

Who is Rabbi Shneuer Zalmen? Defender of Hasidism, he served as its spokesman at public disputations. Devoted to the Besht, he pleaded with his followers not to denigrate his detractors. In

love with Eretz Israel, with the land of Israel, he was about to go and settle there together with his friend Rebbe Mendel of Vitebsk but changed his mind. He's self-disciplined. He rejected presents from his Hasidim. We also know that he helped establish farms and communes. We also know that he was always tolerant, very private, almost secretive, rarely spoke about himself, patient, serene, forgiving with some exceptions when he seemed unbending, especially during the end of his life.

What else? We know that he was a great letter writer. He wrote letters to other masters, [00:22:00] to their disciples and his, to his friends, to his enemies. He even wrote letters to the senate of Tsarist Russia. And something else which I discovered in the course of my long, long exploration of his life and study and work, that he was the first Hasidic master to really politicize Hasidism. He turned it into an active operational force with quasi-military overtones.

Of course other rabbis manifested an intense interest in world events, in armed conflicts, but they did so in their own way and for their own reasons. For instance, the Mendel of Rimanov and the Ropshitzer, they were involved as we have seen the Seer of Lublin, we have seen in years past. They were involved in the

messianic conspiracy. They have seen in the Napoleonic wars, the war of Gog and Magog, but that was a lot but not enough.

The Old Rebbe went much farther. [00:23:00] The Old Rebbe, we can say about him that his involvement in the war was real and concrete, as we shall see later. From studying the sources it appears unmistakable that he understood and analyzed the strategic developments and military aspects of every battle, every campaign. And he did what he could to tip the scale in favor of his side, the Russian side. No other master participated as much, as actively, as dangerously in war as he did. But then this ought not to be a surprise to anyone familiar with Chabad. Chabad views Hasidism as a commitment. And the Hasidim are an army. The followers are soldiers in the service of God. And to this day, therefore, the Rebbe of Lubavitch is the commander in chief of a great army.

But Chabad philosophically [00:24:00] poses many questions and gives answers. For the individual person the question of questions will always be what is my role, my function, my mission with regard to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*? God is here, and I am here. What do I want from him, and what does he expect me to accomplish or to renounce or to imagine? Man's relation to God, not as opposed to man but as leading to man, remains both the

mystery and the key to the mystery, confronting every person, every Jew since the beginning of beginnings. And no master has dwelt upon these issues with as much vigor, depth, perception, and intellectual honesty as the Old Rebbe did in his work and in his life.

His life has been marked by three events, and they all became turning points: [00:25:00] his encounter with the Maggid of Mezeritch, his imprisonment in Petersburg, and then the war, Napoleon's invasion of Russia. Little is known of his childhood, but that applies to most Hasidic masters of the period. They emerge out of nowhere to confront and lead an ever growing community in need of change and inspiration. They appear on stage only as responsible adults.

We know that he was born in 1745 in a village named Liozna near Mogilev and Vitebsk. His father, modestly wealthy, was Reb Boruch, son of Reb Ber. His mother was called Rivkah. Like most Jewish children then the boy went to cheder but did not stay too long. At 12 he was sent to yeshiva for his tutors said of him, and I quote, "He deserves to be my companion, my friend in study, but not my [00:26:00] pupil." At 13 he delivered a bar mitzvah speech that electrified the community. The official chronicle, the pinkas of the chevra kadisha, recorded the event



and called the bar mitzvah boy, I quote, "the renowned scholar whose knowledge is overwhelming and profound, our teacher, Rabbi Shneuer Zalmen."

At 16 he had gone through the entire Talmud with its principle commentaries 16 times. At 20 he discovered that he needed a teacher, a change of pace, a focus. For a while hesitated between Vilna and the great Gaon of Vilna and Mezeritch. In the end he chose Mezeritch, but incidentally he had married in the meantime. At the age of 15 he married into a wealthy and influential family that, as was the custom then, sought the best son-in-law [00:27:00] money could buy.

The young couple was subsidized by the in-laws who spared no effort to enable Rabbi Shneuer Zalmen to devote all his energies to study. But then why wasn't he happy? What had gone wrong? Did the family feel that he spent too much time studying after all? It seems they found his behavior bizarre. They felt his head was too high in the clouds, that while he might be a perfect scholar, surely he was not a perfect son-in-law.

And so the parents tried to persuade their daughter to ask for a divorce. When she refused they made his life miserable.

Endless complaints, pressures, threats, he paid no attention,

seeking refuge in learning. So they tried to prevent him from learning. They removed the candles from his room. He didn't care. He read by moonlight standing at the window, always standing. [00:28:00] He had disposed of the chairs in his study, forcing himself to stand, or had they been removed by the in-laws?

During the cold winter nights they refused him wood for the stove. Finally one day he took his wife and moved away. Many years later his mother-in-law, by then a widow, begged him to come back. His fame had spread throughout White Russia, and not surprisingly, that helped her to admit her mistakes. (laughter) "Come home," she said weeping, "and you will be treated like a prince." When he failed to relent she hastened to add, "And your Hasidim, don't worry. We'll take care of them as well."

But the Old Rebbe refused, explaining, and I quote, a beautiful parable, "Who can be happier," he asked, "than the child in the womb of his mother? Everything is offered him free, not only food and warmth [00:29:00] but also Torah. An angel teaches him in secrets before making him forget them at birth. The question you may ask is if life there is so good why does no one return there?" (laughter) And he answers, "Because the child is no longer a child."

Why was he persecuted by his in-laws? They wanted a scholar, and he rated among the most brilliant scholars of his time. They wanted a God-fearing Jew, a pious Jew, a famous Jew. He was all that. But then why did they torment him? The only possible hypothesis I can see is that he must have joined the Hasidic movement which they opposed. It had happened to many rabbis before him. I deduce this from the mother-in-law's casual pledge to take care of his Hasidim.

We can imagine the family arguments about the new way in Judaism discovered by the Besht. His decision to go to the Great Maggid must have been [00:30:00] preceded by many recriminations and discussions. How had he found out about Hasidism? Easy, Vitebsk was regularly visited by Hasidic messengers, and he must have met them. He must have liked them.

He was 15 when the Besht died, which means that he could have met the Besht, but he probably didn't. Some legends claim that he did, but they constitute no proof. The Old Rebbe himself once remarked that he had seen the Besht in a dream. But why didn't he go to Medzhybizh and meet with the Besht? If he was mature enough to get married he was grown up enough to leave

home for one Shabbat. He must have lacked either curiosity or the freedom to do so.

He lived in a milieu where study was praised and Hasidism was not, to say the least. What happened later? He was attracted to Mezeritch where he discovered another dimension to study and to life, [00:31:00] another mode of Jewish existence, another approach to self-fulfillment. Books he knew. Now he wanted to meet people. He needed companions, allies, friends. He needed their warmth. He needed them to teach him passion. And he knew that he would find them in Mezeritch.

The most promising young scholars came to Mezeritch for the same reasons. And they came enduring the same hardship. Rabbi Shneuer Zalmen couldn't afford a trip to Mezeritch, that we know. But his wife, whose permission he had requested, encouraged him to follow his intuition. She even gave him 30 rubles. And he promised to be back before 18 months. Another version has it that he received only six rubles. She didn't have more. But he received the six rubles from his brother Reb Mordechai, who had also started on his way to Mezeritch only without his wife's permission. As a result, Reb Mordechai was forced to interrupt his journey [00:32:00] and return home. The Old Rebbe continued alone, often without food or shelter.

Occasionally he would work for a farmer, a shepherd, an innkeeper in exchange for a warm meal or a few coins.

At last he arrived in Mezeritch and was received by the maggid. And what was said between the master and the new disciple has not been recorded. What we do know is that both made an excellent choice for out of their encounter was to emerge within the framework of Hasidism a flame that is still burning, for theirs was a love at first sight. The disciple's admiration for the master was equaled only by the affection he received in return. Why did he chose Mezeritch over Vilna? He said, and I quote, "I know how to study but not how to pray."

Actually, he was not sure whether he made the right choice.

[00:33:00] He was already in Mezeritch, and he was still uncertain. He pledged to himself, and I quote, "If the Maggid teaches me *nigla*, the revealed tradition, I shall try to learn under him *nistar*, mysticism too. If not I go home." And for a while he didn't learn anything. So he decided to return to his family. He was already outside in the street when he remembered that he had forgotten some personal object in the house of Study. He went to fetch it and heard the Maggid explain a certain obscure passage in Talmud. And he remained.

Said the Old Rebbe, and I quote, "Before I came to Mezeritch I had faith. And it filled me with both love and fear of heaven. Being with the Maggid I climb to a higher level where my whole conscious existence became love and fear. I remember," he said. "I heard the Maggid say what are the divine attributes [00:34:00] of divine grace? Our love of God. The divine attributes of divine power? Our fear of God. Only words, a figure of speech? In Mezeritch I learned to take it all literally. God's grace is in his love, and God's power is our fear of God."

Thus developed between master and disciple a singular yet characteristic relationship that enriched them both. Was Rabbi Shneuer Zalmen the Maggid's favorite disciple? Probably, but then all his disciples probably thought the same. The fact is that the Maggid turned to him to write the *Shulchan Aruch*, the code of behavior that every Hasid and every Jew needs to lead a meaningful Jewish life. Was it the Maggid who asked him to write the Tanya too? This theoretical and ethical work was published [00:35:00] much later after the passing of the Maggid.

The first printing actually was not a printing. It was copied in manuscripts, a kind of samizdat, and circulated from Hasid to Hasid. Then it was printed anonymously, and believe it or not

it became an instant best seller. If one is to believe the Lubavitch sources, the first printing sold, if alle yidn gesogt, ( 15,000 copies. (laughter)

But his name wasn't on the title page. One of the *haskamot*, the imprimatur, the kind of introduction simply mentioned that the author was, and I quote, "A man of God, pure, pious, and modest." In truth, there was no need for him to indicate his name. Anyone familiar with Hasidic thought and life recognized his ideas right away. Of all [00:36:00] the great minds and souls surrounding the Maggid of Mezeritch he alone possessed such wide ranging knowledge. He had studied medicine and science, astronomy and mathematics, even philosophy, and of course both the revealed and the hidden traditions of Judaism. Only he had the ability to systemize Hasidism, which for the most part revolved around impulse, song, and personal commitment.

He understood that even mystical perceptions, flashes of truth must be integrated into a pattern. Incoherence is the enemy not only of rationalism but of mysticism as well. One must be coherent in all things, even when speaking of incoherence. That was the Old Rebbe's strength, and just as it remained the strength of Chabad.

One day the Maggid looked at his favorite disciple, [00:37:00] he looked and looked and said something happened to the Litvak. Er iz fardorten, he is spoiled. Reb Shneuer Zalmen blushed and suddenly lowered his gaze. "Feeling guilty? Don't," said the Maggid of Mezeritch. "I didn't mean you. I mean the Litvak in you." (laughter)

The Maggid would leave his room at night, and leaning on his crutches he would go into the house of study where he would go from one student to another and watch them sleep near the stove. Then he would silently return to his room. Once he stopped near the Old Rebbe, meditated a long moment, and whispered, "God is so great, and yet he chose to dwell in a body so small, so small."

The Old Rebbe was with the Maggid during the last year of his life in Hanipol. Only very close disciples were there. The attacks on the new movement had grown so violent [00:38:00] that some militant rabbis considered using the same methods in retaliation. The Maggid advised against it, but some were too angry, too excited. One night they met and voted to excommunicate those by whom they had been excommunicated, and



they need a minyan, a tenth man, and turned to Rabbi Shneuer Zalmen, who wasn't there, for an opinion.

What is the law about individuals who insult teachers and masters in Torah? Not knowing why his judgment had been solicited, he answered they are to be excommunicated. And so he was trapped. A ceremony was held, you know, with shofrot, with candles, and when the Maggid came in it was too late. "You lost your head," he commented. He died shortly afterwards.

The Old Rebbe stayed on for a while with the Maggid's son, his friend Rev Avraham Malach, the angel. Then he decided to [00:39:00] go home. His friend saw him to the door, then to the street, then to the coach. They were unable to part from one another. "I shall go with you to the outskirts of town," said Rev Avraham. Neither spoke as they rode slowly through the streets of Mezeritch. Suddenly Rev Avraham turned to his friend and said, "Please, tell the coachman to make the horses run faster and faster. Let them run so fast that they would forget that they are horses." Overwhelmed by emotion the Old Rebbe told the coachmen to turn around, and he stayed another year in Mezeritch with his friend.

But let us not run too fast. We are still in Mezeritch. The Maggid is still alive and so is Hasidism, alive and active and dynamic. Under the Maggid's leadership the Hasidic world has developed in 12 years into an empire bent on conquest from the [00:40:00] Dnieper to the Carpathian Mountains Jewish communities were all affected. Only Lithuania and White Russia were resisting. How could these fortresses be taken? With his organizational genius the Maggid of Mezeritch, who knew whom to send where, dispatched three emissaries: Rabbi Aharon of Karlin, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, and Rabbi Shneuer Zalmen of Ladi. And all of a sudden things began to move. But along with the new sympathizers and friends and followers came, naturally, new opponents and enemies, and both for good reasons.

Let us remember. What was Hasidism in the beginning? It represented a new hope or a new way of attaining hope for many abandoned and forsaken Jews in faraway villages and hamlets. Without the Besht and his irresistible message they would have gone under, so dark was their sadness and so total their [00:41:00] ignorance. They lived alone on the edge of Jewish history as if expelled from memory. Out of touch with the great urban centers and their organized communities, they gradually sank deeper and deeper into apathy. They no longer studied, nor did they pray. Few observed the law of Torah, and even fewer

understood its meaning. Soon they would forget that they are Jewish.

But then they heard the Besht's call telling them, teaching them, reminding them that all ways lead to God, that a heart, though broken, could still be filled with passion for God, that one can be Jewish if one wants to be Jewish, that as long as the individual Jew belongs to the Jewish community, the community of Israel, as long as he links his destiny with our collective faith, he is Jewish and thus participates in our people's adventure in history. [00:42:00]

However, in Lithuania and White Russia the situation was different. Their communities could boast of their flourishing yeshivot and their scholars and their students. There the average Jewish citizens not only loved Torah but loved to study it. There the Gaon of Vilna was king, and in his kingdom there was no room for ignoramuses. In other words, their Hasidism did not respond to a need. There was no need for Hasidism there. And yet it did attract followers. It did take root. Its influence did spread. Thanks to what? Rather thanks to whom.

The emissaries were great scholars, and their Hasidic message was transmitted in scholarly language. No one in his right mind

could have accused the Rav Shneuer Zalmen of ignorance. And yet he was a Hasid. And that gave the lie to the image the opponents had created of the Hasid. If Rav Shneuer Zalmen was a Hasid it meant that Hasidim had something valuable [00:43:00] to offer to all Jews, including the learned ones, the committed, the pious, and even the opponents. As a result the establishment did feel threatened and took brutal, cruel measures. Daily quarrels, holy wars split the Jewish community and set parents against children, friends against friends, and both sides naturally claimed that they were fighting *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven.

Much has been written about that phase in Jewish history, and we are not too proud of it. Both camps were fanatically convinced of possessing the truth. Today their fights seem ridiculous, absurd, childish, futile. Because of a prayer that was omitted or added people used their fists. Because of a change of ritual people caused bloodshed. Because of a rebbe or a rabbi allies became enemies, and as we shall see later some went as far as informing on their fellow Jews and sending them to prison.

[00:44:00]

And yet anyone who knows Hasidism will tell you that Hasidism never espoused heretical ideas or denied the basic principles of

Jewish tradition. All it tried to do was to continue an effort that had been going on for centuries: to offer all the children of Israel an ongoing possibility to fulfill their lives as Jews. The Besht emphasized prayer because the simple Jews then were incapable of praying. Prayer was a beginning, a bearing. Study was to follow, first the Bible, then Psalms, then Mishnah, and why not, even Talmud. If the Besht and his companions had indeed denigrated learning as charged they would have failed to take a foothold in our history. If Hasidism had preached heresy through change it would have quickly vanished from the Jewish scenery.

But the establishment refused to see things that way. There's an old and ancient [00:45:00] saying, an oriental saying that when the finger points at the moon only the imbecile looks at the finger. (laughter) You must look at the moon. And the establishment then looked at the finger. And it saw in Hasidism a new dangerous sect and fought it vigorously, bitterly, and publicly. Rebbes were persecuted, their followers humiliated, their sacred books burned, their gatherings dispersed.

Do you know that at the entrance to the great synagogue of Vilna the culprit was attached to something called the shame pole and spat upon by all the faithful entering to say their prayers?

Elsewhere Hasidim were whiplashed in the street for wearing Hasidic garment or for praying in the Hasidic style, for saying [00:46:00] *keter yitnu lecha* instead of *nagdish*. Listen to decrees. It was forbidden to marry daughters and sons of Hasidim. It was forbidden to eat in their homes or to feel compassion for them in their distress.

In a heartbreaking letter from Eretz Israel, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk asked, and I quote, "What do you have against us? Why such hatred? Why such an urge to hurt us? Don't we have the same fathers and forefathers?" And the Old Rebbe, Rav Shneuer Zalmen in one of his letters reveals that the enemies of Hasidim incited people to hate and even to murder while believing and proclaiming, and I quote the Old Rebbe that "whoever kills us is doing a good deed for himself and the community," unquote.

From all the sources about Hasidism and [00:47:00] Chabad it is clear that our hero tonight was involved in every aspect of the in fight. At first he sought peace by peaceful means. He tried to convince the adversary, rather speak than fight. Make friends, not war, you know the principles. He went to Vilna together with Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk hoping to meet with the Gaon and prove to him that Hasidism remained faithful

to traditional Judaism. Twice they went to his home. Twice they knocked at his door. And twice they were sent away. Afraid that they might return a third time, the Gaon left town and came back only when the two visitors had gone.

Now, why such harshness on the Gaon's part? In Hasidism, where we stress encounters so much, we are told many times that had the encounter taken place the messiah would [00:48:00] have come. May I in parentheses remind some friends who don't know it yet that in our tradition we also believe that some encounters are good because they did not take place. And the most famous one is, as you know, is Theodor Herzl and Sigmund Freud lived on the same street in the same time. And they never met. (laughter) Fortunately. Can you imagine Theodor Herzl knock at the door of Freud and say, "Dr. Freud, I have a dream?" (laughter)

How is one to explain the Gaon's harshness? From the Gaon of Vilna's viewpoint there was no room for argument. One does not debate Jewish renegades, says the law. And as far as [00:49:00] he was concerned they were all renegades. And if he at his lofty level entertains such thoughts one can easily imagine what lesser personalities thought and did in his name and perhaps without his knowledge.

How is one to explain the fanaticism? One is astonished, especially when examining the general context. Remember, the European continent was being swept by waves of unprecedented idealism. In America the young republic was reinforcing liberalism. Napoleon was carrying emancipation beyond all accepted borders. Everywhere people were trying to change society, invoking principle ideas, ideals of humanism. This is the time Eastern European Jewry chose to waste its vibrant qualities and forces in embarking upon what can almost be called a civil war.

An epidemic ravaged Vilna and hundreds of children died. Punishment, said pious people, punishment implies sin, and sin means sinners. Who sinned? The [00:50:00] Hasidim, naturally. They were guilty of having lacked respect toward the Gaon and therefore towards Torah and therefore towards God. Furthermore, the Gaon died during the Holy Day of Sukkot in 1797. For his admirers the sadness overshadowed the holiday. For the Hasidim the joy of Sukkot must supersede grief and did. "Blasphemy" shouted their opponents. "They rejoiced because the Gaon died and not because it's Sukkot."



And you can imagine the consequences. Shtiblach were broken into, their congregants beaten up, and now it was open warfare. And following the Gaon's funeral a committee was formed by his orphaned admirers to continue his fight against Hasidism and continue it to the end. Anonymous prosecutors, quote unquote, "were given permission to do their work." And the man hunt attained shameful proportions. As a result, in [00:51:00] 1798 22 Hasidim were arrested "for political crimes and anti-imperial activities," quote unquote. Among them Rabbi Shneuer Zalmen, who alone was indicted and escorted to Petersburg where he was to spend 52 days in a solitary cell of the secret police.

After the Old Rebbe was arrested a messenger was dispatched to Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev to inform him and also to ask for his intercession in heaven. "Tell me all you know," the Berditchever told the messenger. "What did the rebbe look like? Disturbed?" "Yes, disturbed." "On the outside or inside too?" "On the outside only," said the messenger. "How could you tell?" "He forgot to take one of his slippers," said the messenger, "but not his tallit and tefillin."

As for the prisoner, he was questioned by his interrogators about Judaism and Hasidism and the alleged difference between the two. It was clear that the rebbe had been a victim

[00:52:00] of a denunciation by someone who at the same time had provided the police with a list of questions to ask. The police officers acted as if the most important thing in their career was to understand why Hasidim and their adversaries do not pray from the same prayer book, why their rituals are somewhat different, why some sing and others do not, why some drink when others study.

They also wanted to find out, and this is more serious, more sensitive, more dangerous, why Hasidim were sending donations to Palestine, hence to a foreign power, thus to the sultan of Turkey, who is hostile to the Tsar of all the Russians. The rebbe explained that for centuries it has been Jewish custom to send money to the fund of Rabbi Meir Baal HaNes to help poor scholars and their families, that this was unrelated to politics.

But then the interrogators came forth with yet another question, one related to his book in the Tanya. Have they read it?

Someone has and given them [00:53:00] suspicious excerpts. The police officers quoted a passage from the Tanya which seems to be derogatory to his imperial majesty the Tsar himself.

Somewhere it is mentioned in the Tanya that in Kabbalah, in the mystical structure of the universe, the sphere of royalty ranks

among the lowest, which clearly was meant as an insult to the Tsar.

How did the Old Rebbe manage to separate truth from falsehood to prove his innocence? His followers of course had mobilized their allies and friends, used all their influence with politicians in Petersburg raising money and spending it freely. Still what is amazing is the fact that the Old Rebbe himself fought the battle, he himself, and he won it. Patiently, wisely, skillfully he refuted all the accusations, explained all the customs, all the contradictions, the new and the old, and convinced his interrogators that his imprisonment was wrong [00:54:00] and unfair and unjust.

Innumerable legends circulate about his life in prison. He impressed all those who came into contact with him: judges, officers, jailers. It is said that whoever saw him wearing his tallit and tefillin would never forget him. It is said also that the Tsar himself came to visit him in his cell. Fact or fiction one thing is certain, the rebbe's file, the old rebbe's dossier reached the Tsar's desk, unbelievable but true. This Jewish quarrel about rituals and prayers reached the highest spheres of Russian power. Furthermore and more shocking, the informer, a certain Rabbi Avigdor of Pinsk who had masterminded

the denunciations succeeded in obtaining an audience with the Tsar himself and proceeded to give his majesty a lecture on Hasidism.

Accusations and counteraccusations, [00:55:00] pleas and counterpleas, arguments and briefs, the file was handled by prosecutors and generals and governors and was finally entrusted into the hands of the famous General Kutuzov who won his place in history by defending Russia against Napoleon. How is one to explain their interest in and fascination with all these Hasidic and anti-Hasidic intrigues and plots? Why was the case examined at such high levels? I confess to have found no clue, no answer. Did they really envisage the possibility that a political conspiracy against the Tsar indeed existed?

Anyway, the Old Rebbe seems to have managed to dispel all the suspicions. And on the fifty-second day of his imprisonment while he was reciting to himself the words from Tehillim, from the Psalms, *pada beshalom nafshi*, you have freed my soul in peace, the door of his cell opened, and he was informed [00:56:00] of his liberation. It was the nineteenth day of the month of Kislev, and Chabad Hasidim proclaimed it a holiday, the Chag HaGeulah, the liberation holiday. And whoever has not attended a celebration of that event in Lubavitch should.

The joy unfolded on many levels and was justified in many ways. The Old Rebbe was free and the Hasidic movement legitimized. The government decree stated explicitly that Hasidism was entitled to the same rights as other religious groups. Still the Old Rebbe was apprehended again two years later, once more due to denunciations by Rabbi Avigdor. And once more the Old Rebbe knew how to clear himself and the movement.

Most of the documents, accusations and defense pleas, have been lost, unfortunately. And that is a pity. All we know is that the Old Rebbe wrote his [00:57:00] pleas in Hebrew, that they were translated into French and from the French into Russian. What is clear is that the letters were convincing enough to compel the Russian imperial authorities to release the Rabbi. Was that why the Rabbi felt so grateful to the Tsar that he took his side against Napoleon?

The Old Rebbe, free, returned to Liozna and moved his family to Ladi. And we don't really know why. His reputation was growing and spreading. From the Holy Land Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk wrote to his Hasidim advising them to follow the Old Rebbe and crown him as their leader. His authority was real, his prestige great, his power unchallenged.

Some Hasidim urged him to intercede on their behalf in heaven. He refused. He disliked the role of mediator. He said if the king strikes his son, [00:58:00] to whom should the prince turn, to a mediator or to his father?

One day he saw many Hasidim outside his window. They insisted on meeting with him. He refused. "What do they want from me?" he answered. "What could I possibly do for them?" His wife tried to calm him down. "They know you were close to the Maggid, so they would like you to speak to them about him, not about you." And that reassured him. He received them and spoke and spoke but regretted it later. "I told them everything," he said, "except the essential."

Did he, like so many of his peers, have a dark side to his personality, a mysterious vulnerability? Was there something he too aspired to keep secret? Was there a drama in his existence outsiders could not perceive? Was his own life really so organically structured, so lucid, so homogenous [00:59:00] as it appears to be in his writings? Did his stay in jail have no effect on him at all? The conversations with generals, the meditations in solitude, the fear, the anguish, the torture, did he go through all the experience unharmed, unchanged? Did he

ever regret not having followed his friend Rabbi Mendel of Vitebsk to the Holy Land?

It is true that on the way it was his choice. They had both wanted to go to Jerusalem but stopped in Mogilev. And there they decided to separate. The master of Vitebsk would go to Eretz Israel whereas he, Rav Shneuer Zalmen, would continue with the Jews who cannot go to Eretz Israel. But still he must have had doubts. He too must have felt the attraction of Safed. Why had he remained behind? Moreover, think of the trials and tribulations that were waiting for him in White Russia, the pain, the long battles, the endless challenges. Had he really been that sure that that was his place [01:00:00] in the world?

A few stories, one a very touching one, but it shows his character. He was learning, and he was lost in learning. His son was learning, the Mittlerer Rebbe was also learning. And both of them were penetrated by their own fervor to see deeper and farther the issues involved. And suddenly the Tzemach Tzadik, who was still a baby, began to cry. The Old Rebbe interrupted his learning. His son interrupted his learning, and both went to take care of the baby because a child's tears are perhaps not more important but surely more urgent than learning.

And then a very troubling incident. One of his favorite followers, who was a legendary Hasid in Lubavitch, a certain Reb Shmuel Menke told the story of their first meeting. Reb Shmuel arrived in Ladi late at night and knocked at every door.

[01:01:00] "Can anyone tell me where I could find Rav Shneuer Zalmen?" He went from house to house walking up people until he reached that of the Old Rebbe. "What do you want?" "I want to see Rav Shneuer Zalmen," said Shmuel. "You cannot. You must not see him," said the Old Rebbe. "I must, and I will see him," said the Hasid. "I shall not move from here until I meet him." And the rebbe said, "If you don't leave the premises right now I shall call for my gentile servant, and he will throw you out." "Really?" said the Hasid. "Then I shall call for my gentile servant, and you know what, he is stronger than yours."

(laughter)

"Do you know, do you wish to know how to recognize a great man?" he asked. "Watch him talk to simple people." If he communicates with them he is great. It takes greatness to talk to simple people but not talk down to them.

While journeying to Mezeritch [01:02:00] the Old Rebbe stayed at an inn for Shabbat. "Is there a synagogue around?" he inquired. No, in fact there were no Jews around. The innkeeper was the



only one. "Don't you long for prayer, and don't you miss learning?" he asked him. "Yes," said the innkeeper, but I have more urgent worries: how to feed my family." And the Old Rebbe shrugged his head and asked, "How many Jews lives in the nearest town?" "A few hundred," said the innkeeper. "A few hundred? Don't you think that God, who provides for a few hundred Jews, would provide for one more?"

Rav Shneuer Zalmen noticed an old man who sat at a table and understood nothing of the *shiur*, of the lecture he gave. "Let me explain it to you," he said to the old man. And he began to sing, and the old man began to smile.

One day he turned to one of his disciples and asked him, "What is God?" Struck with fear, the disciple did not answer. "Why don't you say something?" The disciple in panic couldn't open his mouth. [01:03:00] "I asked you a question," said the Old Rebbe. "What is God? I'm ordering you to answer." "I don't. I don't know." The Old Rebbe looked at him harshly and exclaimed, "You think perhaps that I know?" (laughter) "Of God I know no more than you, but I say and I proclaim God is and nothing exists outside him."

On his way back from Petersburg he stopped in Vitebsk where the Hasidim gave him a thunderous reception thanking God for freeing him and thanking the Rebbe for his brave and dignified defense of Hasidism. He was asked about the interrogations and experiences in jail, and he answered, "At first they wanted to know whether I belonged to the Besht and his movement. Had I said no they would have set me free right away, but I could not part with the Besht, not even for a minute." So he preferred to say yes and suffer the consequences.

A tzadik with such devotion, such memories surely must know many answers, including the one that [01:04:00] every Hasid and indeed every Jew seeks to discover: when will the messiah finally come? In Vitebsk the Hasidim wanted to know, and they thought the Old Rebbe must know. He must have thought about it in jail. And so they asked him the question. Said Rav Shneuer Zalmen, and I quote, "How do you think it would be possible for him to come? The messiah that the world wants will never come. As for the true messiah, the world will never want him to come, so there."

There must have been sadness, resignation, perhaps even terror in his words for they had a crushing effect on his listeners. Perhaps that is why he felt the need to add something to make

them smile, and he said, "One thing I can tell you, when the messiah will come you will see that he will be a *misnaged*, an opponent to Hasidism and not a Hasid." Why? I will tell you why. If he will be a Hasid the opponents will send him back, (laughter) but the [01:05:00] Hasidim will keep him even if he is an opponent.

Humor, if so it isn't characteristic of the man. He suffered too much to indulge in humor. Serious always, forever meditating, he seemed disturbed by people. God alone could appease him, and his love of God was total, all-embracing. Before his daily prayer he would say, and I quote, "I do not want your paradise. I do not want your world to come. I want nothing of what is yours. It's you and only you that I want. *hodu Adoshem ki tov, kibdu b'shmo*, praise the creator and his holy name."

One cannot help but like this prayer, this outcry to God for God. But let's examine it briefly. On the surface it seems so easy, so simple. He wants God. He wants God, but he has God. Who doesn't? If God is everywhere how could one live without him? So when the [01:06:00] rebbe says I want you, does it reflect joy or anguish, love or fear, gratitude or anxiety? Does he say it because he feels God or because he doesn't?

Because he is happy or on the contrary, because he isn't? Was he ever happy? Was he ever at peace? Could a person with his perception, his intelligence, his sensitivity really be at peace then? Well, I think he was. When? At the beginning.

During the time he spent with the Maggid of Mezeritch, in Rovno and then in Hanipol everything seemed possible then. Days and nights were lived in fervor. Words turned into prayer, dreams into visions. Once he saw a stranger enter the study of the Maggid and they spoke in a language he, the Old Rebbe, didn't understand. And later he found out the stranger was Rebbe Yitzhak Luria, the Ari Hakadosh himself.

How could he not experience a sense of fulfillment? He had a master, a teacher, companions. The teacher's son, Rev Avraham Malach, the angel, was his closest friend. [01:07:00] They had studied together. The rebbe had taught Rev Avraham Talmud, and Rev Avraham taught him Kabbalah. It is said that they were known to study in three-hour sessions except the Old Rebbe would move the clock backwards so he could study more Kabbalah.

But then the Maggid's hour came, and nothing was to be the same again. The movement split into schools following the lines of Poland's partition. For some time the Old Rebbe continued to

see in the dead Maggid the just of his generation. He couldn't accept that anyone could succeed him. And he was getting lonelier. Some of his friends had left for Palestine, others had died. And the opposition to Hasidism was growing more violent. Instead of uniting the movement, it was dividing it.

He tried to pacify adversaries, bridge gaps from within. At times he succeeded. Often he failed. His visit with the Boruch of Medzhybizh, the Besht's grandson, in Tulchin was far from a success. The Old Rebbe was on a fundraising mission for some poor, displaced villages. And Reb Boruch accused him of [01:08:00] trespassing on his territory. "But it's for the poor, sick Jews," said the Old Rebbe. "You want to help them?" said Reb Boruch. "Help them with prayer, not with money." Their discussion degenerated into a quarrel.

A strange scene occurred. Reb Boruch criticized his guest for revealing Kabbalah to outsiders and gentiles. And the Rebbe answered, "I know some gentiles who understand more than certain rebbes in Volhynia and Podol." "Don't talk like that to someone who is wearing the Besht's tefillin," said Reb Boruch.

"Tefillin must be examined every seven years," said Rebbe. "If not they are impure." "Your heart is empty of faith," replied

Reb Boruch, and his followers threw themselves at the visitor, who managed to escape through the window.

More serious was his dispute with Reb Avraham Kalisker. Its motivation was dual in nature, both ideological and practical. Reb Avraham was displeased with his work the Tanya, which he felt [01:09:00] dealt too much with philosophical themes, too much reflecting, too much reasoning. "*Tzaddik bemunato yichyeh*," said Reb Avraham, "means a just man must cling to his faith alone and discard philosophy. Faith needs faith and nothing else." Of course the Tanya was also attacked by emancipated scholars and rationalist anti-Hasidic Talmudists. But that was to be expected. Reb Avraham's arrows hurt the Old Rebbe more.

But there was another reason for their break: money, again money. Since the passing of Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk some Hasidic leaders had tried to change the collection system both on the fundraising and the distribution levels. The change meant conflicts between emissaries and their leaders. And the whole story is complicated and occasionally uncharacteristically sordid. Matters of prestige and power and local honor [01:10:00] played their part in the dispute. Rav Shneuer Zalmen

had to involve Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, who wrote letters on his behalf.

Well, in short, he had good reasons to be depressed. More followed. And here we come almost to the end. Napoleon had conquered Europe seeking to dominate the world, and now he invaded Russia. For the Old Rebbe and his family this meant tragedy and exile. You see, he opposed Napoleon, unlike the Maggid of Kozhnitz who supported him. Legend has it that Napoleon knew it and had given personal orders to apprehend the Old Rebbe and jail him. He failed because the Old Rebbe managed to flee deeper and deeper into Russia.

Now, why did the Rebbe feel such hostility towards the French emperor? He explained it in a letter to a devoted disciple, Reb Moshe Meisels. And I quote, "On the first day of Rosh Hashanah I was told and shown what would happen if, if Napoleon wins [01:11:00] Jews would be richer and more respected among gentiles, but they would get farther and farther away from our father in heaven. But if our gracious sovereign Tsar Alexander wins, Jews would be poor and humbled but closer to one another and together closer to our father in heaven." In other words, better to suffer than to assimilate. And the more you suffer the more you remain Jewish.

In all fairness, he wasn't the only one to fear emancipation as ordered and implemented by Napoleon's legions, but few Jewish leaders and even fewer Hasidic masters were as extreme in their fight against him or for the Tsar. Strange, admit it, Rav Shneuer Zalmen, the ally of Tsar Alexander? What kind of *shidduch* is this? (laughter) Why? Because Alexander released him from jail? Was it his way of showing gratitude to a country and a system that had allowed justice to [01:12:00] prevail and Hasidism to triumph over its enemies?

From his son, the Mittlerer Rebbe Dovber's letters, we get a picture of the family's tribulations during the Napoleonic invasion, and it is a literary masterpiece. You should read it in toto. I quote in part, "Though he, the Old Rebbe, was weak and tired and old and the winter was cruelly cold he refused to stay even one day under French occupation. He took his entire household, put everybody, 28 souls on two wagons, and we left in a hurry." And the son emphasizes that the general in Ladi, a certain Ulyanov, was helpful in arranging the flight, as was his superior officer, General Nebrosky, who was stationed in Krasny at the beginning of the war.



The letter gives accurate details of the flight. Thanks to the two generals we said, quote, "We received good passports," unquote. The letter is descriptive. I quote, "On Friday before the first day of Elul the enemy sent," listen, "40,000 troops [01:13:00] into Krasny, which was defended only by 8,000 men. General Nebrosky told the Old Rebbe to flee to Smolensk because the French brought 300 artillery guns and threw them into the battle. They left Smolensk for Dorogobuzh, even traveling on Shabbat, since it was *pikuach nefesh*, a matter of life and death. They reached Vyazma, believe it or not, and there Leo Tolstoy took care of them. (laughter) On his advice they proceeded to Mozhaysk and then to Moscow, Vladimir, [Garad?], Tambov, Ural, and Kursk. High ranking officers, governors offered them assistance everywhere officially. Somehow they all knew of his position and also of his loyalty and services to the Tsar."

We know it now from studying the text that he had organized, and that too amazed me and surprised me so much, he had organized [01:14:00] an intelligence network behind the enemy lines. Reb Moshe Meisels whom I quoted already, knew French, and Reb Moshe Meisels, therefore, joined the military intelligence of the French army and would send his messengers as a good double agent to the Rebbe's son, Reb Moshe, who also knew French. There was

a network, and the network worked against Napoleon for the Russian Tsar. And therefore wherever the Rebbe went he was treated with great favor by all the generals who also felt the need to protect him from Napoleon.

Now think about it, the Old Rebbe involved in spy business.

(laughter) During the war his health was faltering. It was winter. The Old Rebbe was sick. His strength was leaving him, and he was aware [01:15:00] of it. The wanderer was at the end of the road. And one day he asked his young grandson, "What do you see?" And Tzemach Tzadik, the child, didn't answer. He continued, the Rebbe continued, "Nothing? You see nothing? We see the divine nothingness."

Later he asked his sons and daughters to gather around his sick bed. He wished to talk to them for the last time. "I want you to know," he says, "that the dead know nothing of what is happening here, nothing of what is happening of this world of ours." In other words, if they knew they would do something about it. They would interfere. They would change things. They would try to improve them. If they don't it's because they can't. One must not rely on the dead. One must rely on the living and on God who gives life to the living.

He died at the age of 66 and was taken to Hadiach in Poltava to be buried. His elder son, Reb Dovber, was away from home [01:16:00] in Kremenchuk on a mission entrusted to him by his father. For three days he was beside himself. Then he quieted down and said, "My father is teaching Torah in heaven too. And there too someone listens. Now it's up to you to turn me into a messenger." He succeeded his father to the throne of Chabad.

And at this point, before we conclude tonight's exploration, perhaps we ought to touch upon a painful and mysterious episode related to the movement's founding fathers. It has to do with the Old Rebbe's son, Reb Moshe already quoted. Bizarre stories have been circulating about him. In Lubavitch sources it is referred to as the well-known episode, so well-known that it isn't known at all. Somehow he disappeared from Hasidic history.

Anti-Hasidic sources speak of his "going to the priests," quote unquote as protest over the movement's decision to take Reb Dovber as their [01:17:00] leader. He himself had wanted that position. Chabad scholars maintain that when he had gone to Petersburg to obtain his father's release from jail he had met with some wrong people but that nothing terrible had happened. Opponents of the Hasidic movement have hinted at worse

hypothesis. One uncontested fact remains. He left home and became a wanderer, and he died far away. And no one knows the circumstances of his death or the location of his grave.

Stories of sons of famous rabbis gone astray exist about more than one master. One day we may deal with them exclusively, but tonight we are looking at the fathers. And they command our total attention. So let us stay with Old Rebbe, Rav Shneuer Zalmen. And let us conclude with one more tale.

One night while he was still in Mezeritch he couldn't sleep because of three disciples arguing over the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. It was dark in the room. [01:18:00] One could see only a few shadows slowly moving on the wall near the stove. Suddenly the Rebbe heard one man whisper, "Why such a fuss over Abraham? If God ordered me to do the same would I refuse? You and I and all of us," said another disciple, "is not the same thing. We have an advantage over Abraham. We are his descendants while he was a descendant of pagans. Still," said the first disciple, "It's God himself who gave him the order."

"True, true," said the second disciple. "Abraham received God's order, but he showed no hesitation. Would you not hesitate?"

"Anything God would ask I would do, and so would you and so

would we all without hesitation," said the disciple. "You fail to understand," said the third disciple who had not yet spoken. "You fail to understand Abraham. When the angel stopped him from consummating the sacrifice of his son Abraham experienced a peculiar joy which he found hard to contain. Why the joy? Because his son was [01:19:00] safe? No, because God's will has nevertheless been accomplished. Isaac was alive, and so was Abraham, and yet God's will has been fulfilled. Do we experience the same kind of joy?"

The three disciples fall silent, and the Old Rebbe, the future master of Ladi and Lubavitch is listening. He is listening to the silence of night and watching the fire illuminating its shadows. He absorbs all the sounds in the world since creation, and we here, now and forever, shall listen to him. And so it is time for us to leave him, but we cannot. Not before we ask him and ourselves some questions. What made the disciple say that Abraham experienced joy? What kind of joy was that? And what about Isaac and his right to feel joy? Faith, yes. Fear, yes. [01:20:00] Faith in spite of fear, yes. Fear in spite of faith, yes. But joy?

This question, which remains obscure, unanswered, and rightly so, throws a strange light on the man who told the story, the

man who died in Hodiatch as a refugee far away from his home in search of peace and truth in turbulent times of war. Perhaps he knew that our people, our generation will forever remain on the Akedah, and therefore joy will not come to us easily. We will have to invent it, to carve it out of torment and anguish and agony. If obtained, that could become the purest of all joys. Born out of darkness it opposes darkness. Is this the story we tell and retell, Abraham and Isaac? [01:21:00] But then where is Abraham, and where is Isaac? Where are they? Better yet, where are we?

(applause)

**M1:**

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