

Elie Wiesel In Hasidism: The Master of Izbitze

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) How is one to explain the estrangement and total breakdown in communication between two friends and companions who together had followed the same master in his daring and demanding quest for justice and truth? A quest which has culminated in two different schools for prayer, concentration, study, and seeking a way for redemption. In the Talmud this is quite simply impossible. We have never seen in the Talmud two friends who stop to be friends. We have seen it last week, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah and Rabban Gamliel remained friends. [00:01:00] Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, who was the disciple who provoked the discourse and the disturbances, they were friends till the very end. How is one to comprehend the painful fact that within the Hasidic movement, the most beautiful movement in religion, that preached friendship, a movement conceived by the Besht, the Master of the Good Name, with the purpose of bringing harmony and solidarity to Jewish communities that needed them to survive. How is it conceivable that an episode could occur, an episode so tragic that it separated master from disciple, teacher from colleague, a

separation so traumatic that it pushed each into his own refuge of melancholy and solitude.

This would not be an easy task. [00:02:00] Both men of whom we shall speak tonight are masters. Both contributed greatly to the growth of the movement. And for a while they belonged to the same circle, to the same legend. They were partners in the same vision. Whoever met the celebrated Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk must have glimpsed in his shadow the enigmatic disquieting silhouette of his favorite follower, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbitse, who suddenly mysteriously turned into his most powerful adversary. I suggest we hasten to meet them while they are for the last time still together. I invite you on a journey far away in time and space, far away in Jewish imagination. We have to go [00:03:00] to the year 1839, and we shall stop for one evening, for one Friday evening in Kotzk.

It is snowing, snowing everywhere. The streets are empty. The house of study is packed with students and followers who have converged from all over Poland to spend on Shabbat, at least, under the Master's roof to pray together, to dream impossible dreams together. Only the impossible is considered worthy of interest in Kotzk. Services are over and have been for several hours. Now the crowd is waiting. Waiting for the Rebbe to

appear, walk to the table, say the blessing over wine and bread, and allow the Shabbat inside him to dispel his and their reticence and doubt, and penetrate with his joy all that exists, all that suffers. Yes, the crowd [00:04:00] is already uneasy. Anxiously waiting for its leader to lead it closer to Torah, to God and His will. But the Rebbe is late, and time is running out. All around night seems like an open pit, one wrong move one might fall and injure one's self, or worse. Suddenly the Rebbe bursts into the room, makes his way to the table. Hundreds of men are breathless. Do they sense the threat hovering over them in Kotzk and the whole world? They dare not look at one another, they look only at him. Their leader whose inner life seems to consume him. But they are also careful, it is dangerous to look too closely. The Rebbe remains silent a long, long time. And then he recites the *Kiddush* sanctifying time slowly, haltingly, evidently oscillating between two impulses, two memories, two urges. And then, then as you know, something happens. [00:05:00] And we do not know what. Nor shall we ever know.

Years and years ago here in this place we explored all the possibilities. One thing is clear is that the Rebbe saw, said, or did something that no Rebbe had ever seen, or said, or done before him. Something so serious and so frightening that he

himself is crushed by his own fear. He faints. Close disciples carry him into his room and there he will stay rarely venturing outside for twenty years. What else do we know? We know that this incident marked the first split in the movement of Kotzk. The Rebbe's closest follower, his best advisor, his most cherished friend, Mordechai Yosef Leiner, left Kotzk [00:06:00] slamming the door, *Mi lAdoshem elai* he shouted biblically, "Whoever belongs to God follow me." And also he said something very sad, but poetic, he said, and I quote, "The Torah no longer dwells in Kotzk. All that can be found there are *shivre luchot*, the fragments of broken tablets." Some of the Hasidim followed him, others chose to stay with their strange master, and thus ended a friendship. And thus began another story.

Naturally, there are other versions of this same event. Some claim that the split occurred several weeks later, others say several months earlier. You know that Hasidic facts are known for their lack of precision. Let historians worry over that aspect of our tale. [00:07:00] We worry over the human aspects. What happened was tragic, everyone agrees on that. Hasidic chronicles have frequently recorded tensions and conflicts between Rabbis, and even more frequently tensions between their followers, but this was different because well, Kotzk was different. Why did it happen in Kotzk? What did Rabbi

Mordechai Yosef leave his friend when his friend needed him? And who else left with him? Many did. 500, or was it 800, Hasidim joined the dissident. Why? Later, many years later, when all the Hasidim tried to measure the grief and harm the split had caused the movement, they wondered whether at the time they had done everything in their power to avoid it. Hasidic chroniclers have retained a short yet incisive dialogue between a [00:08:00] certain Rabbi Shmuel and Reb Avrohom of Sochatchov. "I don't understand," said Reb Shmuel, "you were so many in Kotzk. You had in your midst the very best intellectual and spiritual exponents of Hasidism. You had the authority to intervene. You could have summoned Mordechai Yosef and ordered him to behave responsibly." And they said in Yiddish, a potch in punim woll geven genuk(Yiddish). "A slap in the face would have been enough." "Perhaps," said the Gaon of Sochatchov, "but we were not sure." "Sure of what?" "Of the purity of our intentions," said the Gaon of Sochatchov, "We could not tell whether our opposition to the dissident was motivated by truth or by vile jealousy." Vile jealousy, those are the words. I am quoting the Rabbi of [00:09:00] Sochatchov.

Well, tonight we shall proceed to find out more about the nature of their relations before, during, and after. Various questions arise, when does a teacher cease to have powers over his pupil?

When does a friend stop serving as support or vantage point?
When do human relations change and what makes them change? When
does black become white or red? When does a pure thought turn
into evil deeds? Perhaps a few words about leadership are in
order and the way it has been conceived in the Jewish tradition.
At the risk of shocking you, we must say that it is not supposed
to be democratic. You remember the three categories of leaders,
the king, the priest, and the prophet. Neither is elected.

[00:10:00] All have been appointed or anointed by God. It is up
to them to perform their duties, which incidentally they are not
free to give up. The Jewish tradition does not believe in
resignations. In Hasidic traditions we ought to speak of powers
in plural rather than of power. Where does the Besht's
authority derive from? Nobody has elected him. The Seer of
Lublin was chosen by his peers. Their power over their
followers stems from the followers themselves. Let the Hasid
discover another master and he will owe him his absolute
allegiance. To the Hasid his Rebbe is alone, to the Rebbe too,
the Hasid alone exists.

At this point, perhaps, we ought to mention for the sake of
newcomers that it has been 16 years since we began our attempts
to come closer to Hasidic masters, [00:11:00] whose light brings
us warmth and whose wisdom makes us appreciate wisdom with humor

occasionally. We have followed these exceptional teachers throughout the obscure and perilous mountains in Poland, the Ukraine, Lithuania, Belorussia, and Hungary. We have visited them in their homes with their various distinctive seals, the royalty of Rizhin, and the compassions of Sassov, the anger in Medzhybizh, and the fervor in Strelisk. And above them and beyond them all, the great and unique Master Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the Master of the Good Name, who appeared out of nowhere to kindle sparks of fate, passion, and hope. Once again, that is what we intend to do tonight, to explore lives, events, legends, continuously listening to [00:12:00] the past so as to better understand the present. The present is often, especially in recent days, so dark that it's a pleasure to go back to the past. (laughter) If I have to choose between a Hasidic legend and a newspaper story, well, what would I choose? (laughter)

Through an analysis of the conflict that opposed Kotzk to Izbitse, we shall perhaps succeed in illuminating both, as we shall see later, believe me. The main problem in Kotzk had to do, don't laugh, with doors. Kotzk wanted them to remain closed, whereas Izbitse strove to open them. Well, are we to take sides in their quarrel? Since we favor both Kotzk and Izbitse, we shall do what they [00:13:00] didn't do, we shall

compromise. Let us first open the doors and close them later.

(applause)

While our Rabbis and their Hasidim prepare for battle, let us see what else is happening in the world. Some minor events and upheavals deserve to be noted and even remembered. A quick glance will suffice. The Turks approach Belgrade, the Persians invade Delhi, Frederick the Great of Silesia [00:14:00] begins his first fall against Maria Theresa, who soon accepts the crown of Hungary. Prague is occupied, as always, by French, Bavarian, and Saxon troops. We are in the middle of a bloody, violent, and yet eloquent century. Peace treaties and wars are every day events, and therefore intellectuals feel free to cultivate their own garden. Voltaire and Rousseau, David Hume and Jonathan Swift, Bach and Handel, Kant and Blake, and Benjamin Franklin, and Kierkegaard, and Balzac, and Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. In 1738, the famous Jewish financier, Joseph Suss, the Jew Suss, is hanged publically. In 1760, the year the Besht dies, the Russians occupy and burn Berlin. But for the Hasidim in Izbitse, or Kotzk, [00:15:00] they have more important worries to deal with. The same is true, of course, of all Hasidim everywhere. One saying by their master weighs more than all the editorial comments on world affairs.

Of the Kotzk Rabbi we have spoken and written. What about his friend and rival? We know very much about him. Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbitse was born at the beginning of the 19th Century in the village of Tomashov. His parents were wealthy, pious, and learned Jews. He went to *cheder*, then to *yeshiva*, and ended up at the court of the famous Rabbi Bunim of Pshiskhe, where the Besht's classical concepts were turned into life experiences. Mordechai Yosef was married by the time [00:16:00] he went there. He had a family, children, and a comfortable income from his parents and in-laws. As a young prodigy and *illui*, he was entitled to certain privileges to enable him to dedicate his days and nights to study without earthly concerns and ulterior motives. His earthly devotion to God was boundless. What made him choose Pshiskhe? At that time, that was the fashionable thing to do in Hasidic circles. Pshiskhe was then at the center of all conversations. One had to take sides for or against the new school that had split away from the Seer of Lublin. Nobody could remain neutral. One had to throw one's self into battle and find one's place in it, and thus, in creation. Mordechai Yosef by temperament, by nature, and by instinct was for Pshiskhe, but then the best [00:17:00] Hasidim then were for Pshiskhe. Because Pshiskhe seemed different, new, revolutionary. As his contemporaries put it, I quote, "Pshiskhe was a laboratory for souls. Souls were washed, cleansed, and

restored in Pshiskhe." Mordechai Yosef Leiner was 19 or 20 when he appeared before Rebbe Bunim. They called him der Blinder Rebbe Bunim.

Hasidic chronicles describe their first bizarre encounter with an almost childish mischievous anecdote. "Let us see who is taller," said Rebbe Bunim who was tall, very tall, whereas his young student Mordechai Yosef was small and thin. Mordechai Yosef, surprised, said nothing. But to his amazement, the Rebbe [00:18:00] rose from his armchair and came to stand next to him as if to boast of his own height. The young visitor was taken aback, a bit embarrassed, and began wondering whether he had not wasted his time coming to Pshiskhe altogether. But still he decided to give it a chance and wait. He waited one week, two weeks, several months. By then he was clinging to the Rebbe with his entire soul. But what was the meaning of the first test? Neither Pshiskhe nor Izbitse have bothered to offer any explanation. All we know is that at the end of that memorable first meeting, Rebbe Bunim smiled and remarked, "Don't worry, you are young. You will grow." (laughter)

It was there in Pshiskhe that he met his friend Reb Mendel.

What attracted them to one another? They were different

[00:19:00] in many ways. Reb Mendel was moody. Reb Mordechai

Yosef not. One loved solitude, the other was gregarious. Legend has it that Reb Mordechai Yosef enjoyed playing tricks on his friends, that he was a practical joker. Once a certain Boruch, offspring of rich and philanthropic parents came to visit the Rebbe and was royally received by the Rebbe's entourage. Reb Mordechai Yosef was offended by the respect that money could buy, even in Pshiskhe. He waited for the right opportunity to make his ideas known, and when one day some of the students went swimming in the river, Reb Mordechai Yosef followed them from a distance. And when all of them were in the water, he picked up Boruch's clothes and ran away. Boruch was angry but Reb Mordechai Yosef didn't care. But the Rebbetzin was angry and that meant trouble. [00:20:00] Sure enough she complained to her husband, to Reb Bunim. "Listen my dear husband," she said, "you are poor and you attract only the poor. For once God has sent us one student who is not poor, one who could help us, and look what happened, he was humiliated for no good reason. Where is justice?" Well, when the Rebbetzin has a good argument, even the Rebbe must abide by it. The Rebbe summoned Reb Mordechai Yosef and simply ordered him to leave Pshiskhe. The student chose not to argue his case. He took his belongings and left. But then Reb Mendel came to Reb Bunim and interceded on his friend's behalf. "It was not fair," he said, "to chase away a man of his caliber for such a trivial matter."

When a friend has a good argument, he always wins. "Good," said the Rebbe, "run after him. If he's still on this side of the bridge, bring him back. If not, let him go his own way."

[00:21:00]

Reb Mordechai Yosef was already on the other side. But Reb Mendel brought him back nevertheless. Commented Rebbe Bunim, "You cheated. And you will live to regret it. One day he will leave you and no one will bring him back." Still, Rebbe Bunim was happy to have him back. He treated him with special warmth and thought of him as one of his best disciples. "Mordechai Yosef," he once said, "is like the waters of the River Shiloach, they flow slowly, silently, and they are deep." Rebbe Bunim's perception of the man was correct, Mordechai Yosef was patient, tireless, relentless in his search for depth. Depth in ideas, in values, in experiences. Like Reb Mendel Kotzk, he rejected whatever seemed facile, accessible, superficial. That is why he stayed in Pshiskhe. [00:22:00] Pshiskhe meant a return to fiery beginnings, a return to authenticity. Elsewhere in the Hasidic Kingdom from Medzhybizh to Lizhensk, and even in Lublin, many leaders and their disciples yielded to success. A protest against melancholy, solitude, and despair, Hasidism had become an instant remedy against all those in suffering. The Rebbe had turned into Tzadik, healer and comforter, source of knowledge

and authority and truth. Between the master and his followers a new relationship had been established, the master had powers. In other words, he had power over his followers. One was hungry, one went to the Rebbe, one's children fell sick, life was full of hardship, exile became intolerable, the Rebbe had the answer. Worse, Rebbe became the answer.

Too easy for the faithful in Pshiskhe. For them Hasidism was more [00:23:00] than a glass of wine, more than the Shabbat meal, more than any words of consolation, more than a climate of cheer and exuberance. Hasidism had to remain what it had been originally at the time of the Besht, a revolutionary appeal to transcend the present, never yielding to the enticing aspects of routine and authority inherent in the movement. It had become the new establishment, and Pshiskhe was against any establishment. Its aim? To review all certainties and victories, to start all over again from the beginning. Truth to Pshiskhe was not something one received, it was something one acquired through hardship and sacrifice. Of the two students, who in a way constituted a pole of attraction in Pshiskhe, Reb Mendel is the more fervent [00:24:00] and more extremist. He is nicknamed the Dark, the [Schwartzter?] of Mendel, the somber one. He is Pshiskhe at its outer limits. He wants to go farther than the others, tear down the last mask, penetrate the ultimate

meaning of words and beings so as to confront the deepest truth, the one by which one is either saved or crushed. So strong is Reb Mendel's personality that at the passing of the Master Rebbe Bunim, he's chosen as successor. As the new leader, he doesn't want to stay in Pshiskhe out of respect for his Master. And he moves away and settles for a while in Tomashov, Reb Mordechai Yosef's hometown. And from there he goes to Kotzk. And all the great minds and souls from Pshiskhe follow him there.

The Rebbe and his friends have become allies in a war against falsehood and complacency. Together they hope to restore [00:25:00] primary purity to creation and make it worthy of its creator. These are Kotzk's finest hours. They remind one of the Besht and his legendary beginnings when those who became his disciples were still his companions. Is it Reb Mendel's influence? Reb Mordechai Yosef, who is wealthy, distributes all his possessions among his friends. All the Kotzker Hasidim did just that, except that most had nothing to give away. Kotzk was a kind of commune, a kind of *kibbutz*. There one renounced earthly possessions so as to gain spiritual riches. Reb Mordechai Yosef applies the theory to the letter, he gives everything away. As a result, his family is penniless. Even to provide for one meal of a Shabbat or a holiday becomes a problem. His friends, worried over his welfare, organize what

you might call a fundraising, a campaign on his behalf,
[00:26:00] so as to assure him of a regular income or subsidy.
But the solution is inadequate, for he refuses not to accept
money, he accepts, but he refuses to keep money. As soon as he
receives it, he gives it away to the needy and the poor. And
his friends then come up with a practical solution. They give
the money to his wife. (laughter)

From all available documents, it is clear that during that first
period in Kotzk, the two friends enjoy a harmonious
relationship. One that seems inspired, and so beautifully
inspiring. It appeared as though nothing could break it. At
times, we are told in the text, wishing to get away from the
crowds, they would leave the village and go for endless walks in
the forest, especially on Fridays. Not unlike the Ari Hakadosh
who centuries earlier [00:27:00] in Safed had done the same with
his disciples. They would walk in the fields and watch the
world getting ready for the arrival of the Queen of Shabbat,
Shabbat Hamalka, with her retinue of exciting angels of peace
and joy. From Hasidic chronicles we also know that on these
walks outside Kotzk Reb Mendel remains silent, as does his
friend. They listen to one another, to one another's' silence.
But when they return to Kotzk just before Shabbat, Reb Mendel

often seems angry. Whereas his companion appears serene and perhaps for the same reasons.

The two friends remain together for 13 years. 13 years of intense collaboration and comradeship. Granted they defer on many issues and in many ways, yet in spite of their differences, or perhaps [00:28:00] because of the differences, they progress towards the same goal. They help one another, they complete one another, they need one another. When Reb Mendel becomes a widower and considers marrying the sister of the famous Reb Itche Meir of Ger, whom does he ask to serve as matchmaker? Reb Mordechai Yosef. Reb Mordechai Yosef is also assigned the task of taking personal care of the best Hasidic elements that converge on Kotzk. He becomes their older friend, their mentor, their big brother. Reb Mendel seeks loneliness, his friend emphatically rejects it. In Izbitse, where he eventually establishes his kingdom, he will be remembered as the most accessible and likeable of all Hasidic masters. Different from Reb Mendel Kotzker, he does not feel the need to leave his disciples and isolate himself in the forest or in his study. He neither shouts [00:29:00] nor loses his temper. He never erects walls between his pupils and himself. He is there to serve them, to be present to them, to play a role in their lives, and listen to their pleas, and share with them his discoveries, his

memories, his dreams. For him it is the function of a Rebbe to live in the consciousness of his followers just as they live in his. That is why he doesn't have office hours. His door is always open, anyone may see him anytime. Anyone is welcome at any hour.

In the evening, we are told, he would meet his followers for a course in the Talmud. He is brilliant, erudite, generous, he speaks for hours and hours and his disciples listen for hours and hours. However if spontaneity is the rule for his personal relationship with his Hasidim, there exists one ritual for the study that he has established. It is always the *shamash*, [00:30:00] the secretary, the assistant, the beadle, who appears first in the house of study. He carries two candles and a volume of the Talmud in his hands. That is the signal that the Rebbe is about to enter. Students and auditors rush to their seats and wait in total silence. And when he appears at the door, all rise. They remain standing until he sits down. He begins the lesson. First he treats a subject on the examination, then he moves to others, from particular to the general, from Talmud to Torah to Midrash to Halachah to Zohar. He speaks until midnight, sometimes even until dawn. If he is weary he doesn't show it, but then he too has a secret side to his personality. Just as he is understanding with regard to his

followers, he is unbending with regard to himself. He does not favor mortification for others, but he does have recourse to it frequently. Having once accidentally put on [00:31:00] his left shoe first when one is supposed to favor the right side of one's body because the right symbolizes divine charity, he decided that the sin was so serious that he had to expiate this action by a day's fasting.

In general, he punished his body, which was sufficiently punished already. He suffered from tuberculosis. Often the pain was unbearable but he never complained. Once he remarked with a smile, and I quote, "My body takes its revenge on me but what can I do? To appease it would mean to inflict punishment on myself." In other words, as far as his own person was concerned, he was as strict and unyielding as his friend Reb Mendel Kotzker. Both remained faithful to Pshiskhe, both reflected Rebbe Bunim's lucid despairing vision of the human condition. Didn't Rebbe Bunim's own son, Reb Avrom Moshe [00:32:00] complain that there was too much obsession with death in Pshiskhe? "All my life," said Rebbe Bunim, "I have done nothing but ready myself for the hour when I shall meet the angel of death." Reb Mendel dwells in darkest depression.

And so thus, Reb Mordechai Yosef, listen to his story. It is Purim eve, and all the Jews in Izbitse celebrate a miracle that had occurred centuries earlier in Shushan. The miracle of the Jewish community surviving Haman's threat of extermination. The Hasidim are happy, but their Rebbe is not. The Reb Mordechai Yosef is meditating on some painful subject, he seems sad, melancholy. And all of a sudden he begins to describe an episode from his distant past. And I quote him now, "It was on Shabbat eve," he said, "we were in Pshiskhe. [00:33:00] Rebbe Bunim lifted his cup of wine to recite the *Havdalah*, but stopped at the last minute. Instead with a cup in his hand, he began to predict the future. One day, he said, listen well, one day before the coming of the Messiah, Jews will be so accustomed to luxury, they will need so much money that they will be living beyond their means. And thus, they will look for occupations and positions to earn money on the side. And they will run right and left to make money. And when I think what they will look like then, I feel pain at the root of my hair, and I feel my nails piercing the skin of my hands. I know," said Reb Mordechai Yosef, "I know Rebbe Bunim was right. I know that we are facing difficult times. Our Hasidim will no longer be able to feed their souls with Hasidism. [00:34:00] Not with Hasidism alone. They will look for other things and they will find nothing. They will continue to look and what they will find

will be bad. Only faith could save them. Unfortunately, they will rely too much on man, and not enough on heaven."

This vision could apply to our times, but it could also have been expressed, or more likely, repressed by his former friend, Reb Mendel Kotzker, with whom he continued to share more than one fear. Both were learned and pious, and both believed in self-sacrifice. Both were suspicious of the written word. You remember the story of Reb Mendel Kotzker, "Why," he said, "Why I am not writing books," he said, "Suppose I wrote a book? Who would read it? Some villager. When would he read it? During the week he would work too [00:35:00] hard. He would wait for Shabbat. Shabbat evening he's so tired. He would wait for next day. Shabbat morning he goes to services, he comes home, he has a Kiddush, he eats, and then he's very tired again, so he sits on the sofa and he says now, what can I do now. There is a book my Reb Mendel Kotzker, let me see it. And he will open one page, but then he will be so tired he will fall asleep. And the book will fall to the ground. And for him I shall write books?" (laughter) Yet both were published posthumously, and both of their works have been compiled by others. Both were physically vulnerable, fragile, frail, both were prone to illness. Both lived in fear and trembling. But then since they had so much in

common, why did they part? Was it because they resembled one another so much? [00:36:00]

There were other reasons, there must have been. We know most of the given reasons have to do with that evening saying that he, Reb Mordechai Yosef, didn't accept the Rebbe's solitude.

Furthermore, Reb Mendel was an individualist, Reb Mordechai Yosef was not. Reb Mordechai Yosef loved people, Reb Mendel did not. Both had the same reaction of repulsion when it came to money, with one difference though, the Kotzker Rebbe hated all moneys, whereas the Izbitse hated only his own. Reb Mordechai Yosef accepted the human weakness in man, Reb Mendel repudiated it. "Man must be worthy of his creator," said the Kotzker. "God must be compassionate with his creature," answered the Izbitse. Kotzk rejected the world which to him appeared condemned to eternal ugliness. Izbitse believed that ugliness is temporary and misleading. One can transform it into something else. [00:37:00] For Kotzk life means human endeavor to maintain itself, thus it means failure to accept the absolute power of God. For Izbitse a life means an invitation to God to leave heaven and enter into the limited and mutilated world of man.

For men and women to join forces and give life, said Reb Mordechai Yosef of Izbitse, they must temporarily for a fraction of a second forget God. And out of that forgetfulness, a child will be born, and that child may one day reach God's glory. But for the Kotzker this possibility seems outrageous. What? To forget God even a second? The whole world wouldn't survive that second. The whole world wouldn't deserve to survive that second. Kotzk believes that man is plagued by his instincts while Izbitse has faith in man's aspirations to overcome them. Reb Mordechai Yosef goes so far as to insinuate that man is [00:38:00] incapable of doing anything evil. I mean, of doing it by himself without God being a part of it. The Talmud claims *hakol biyeday shamayim chutz miyir'at shamayim*, that everything is from heaven except fear of heaven. But Reb Mordechai Yosef says, no, *hakol biyeday shamayim*, everything is from heaven *afilu yir'at shamayim*, even fear of heaven is willed in heaven. Good or evil man is too weak, too poor, too helpless to do anything without God. "When the Messiah will come," said Reb Mordechai Yosef, "God will dwell only in good. And men will do only good deeds. But until then, both are in exile intertwined with one another." That is why Reb Mordechai Yosef loved to quote the strange prophetic call, *et la'asot lAdoshem hafayru toratecha* here are times when to best serve God, one must transgress his laws. Does it mean that one must oppose God?

Never. It means that even in [00:39:00] transgressing the law, one nevertheless remains linked to the one who gave the law.

So, there are pragmatic and practical differences between Kotzk and Izbitse. Reb Mendel wanted to remain at Sinai and wanted to keep his followers there. Reb Mordechai Yosef believed that this was impossible, no one can live that intensely all the time. No one could hear God's voice 24 hours a day and go on eating and drinking and being with someone else. No one could come so close to revelation and stay there. One would of necessity be consumed. The Kotzker's answer to this? Who cares? The Kotzker said, "Better one minute of fire than a year of boredom. Better one fragment of truth than a load of empty statements." Kotzk opposed compromises no matter what consequences. Do you remember the angry Master of Kotzker Mendel? In Kotzk, the Rebbe worked on [00:40:00] himself and his disciples as though they were metaphysical raw material, elaborating his concept of man projected into the universe between God and death. There were so many faults and they didn't discourage him. He seemed drawn to, hypnotized by the abyss. The idea that he might find an answer, that he might glimpse a certainty at the end of his voyage only increased his anguish. To his friend Yitzchak Meir of Ger he once said, "When he cursed the serpent, God condemned him to slither on the

ground and feed on dust. What a strange malediction. The serpent will never be hungry, is that a malediction?" "Yes," said the Kotzker, "not to be hungry ever is a malediction." For a need that could be satisfied, an urge that could be quenched were of no interest to him. A God whose intentions he could understand would not sway him. [00:41:00] To Rebbe Yaakov of Radzymin, who told him that the purpose of man was to work for the perfection of his soul, he replied disdainfully. "No," he said, "No, it wouldn't be worth it. The purpose of man," he said, "is to raise the sky." Easier said than done. Stated the Kotzker, "It's easier to extract Israel from exile than exile from Israel." "The problem is that men want to live in this world as much as in the other. Since God is God, let him come down from his throne, let him visit the hearts in distress. There are children to be fed, to be clothed, there is the wife to take care of, the cradle to placate, there is the head, the head that is bursting with pain," said Izbitse. But Kotzk didn't want that.

Confronted with worshippers who saw in him a Rebbe like all the others, here to help them carry their burdens, the Rebbe cried out, [00:42:00] "What do they want from me? Why do they harass me? How am I to make them understand that it is not my task to fill their stomachs and appease their sleep?" One night he

awakened his friend Reb Herschel Tomashover, and there he stood a candle in his hand saying, "Look Herschel, look, look here in my heart, there is such pain, such terrible pain. And they out there, they think of nothing else but haunting me with their foolishness and foibles." Disillusioned and bitter, the Rebbe detaches himself more and more from his followers. The extraordinary master is burdened with disciples who are ordinary Hasidim. They irritate him and he shows it. He becomes impatient, intolerant, more unrelenting than ever. These people riveted to their bodies annoy him. He thinks they do it on purpose. Their timorous civility makes him nasty. [00:43:00] He sees everything as being petty, derisive. He said, and I quote him, "Whoever believes in miracles is an imbecile, but whoever does not is an atheist." (laughter) Impossible to do the right thing. He states something and promptly denies it. Not content to revel in paradox, he drives it to paroxysm. He demands erudition, but doesn't hesitate to mock it. He stresses the importance of preparation for services, but services themselves are dispatched almost absent-mindedly. The external signs of joy repel him, but he doesn't appreciate those who think to buy God with tears. Man who addresses God in a familiar way incurs his displeasure as much as man who treats him as a stranger.

Of course, the more strangely he behaves, the more his prestige grows. Fortunately he is on guard, he gives free reign to his rage. "Long ago in my youth," he said, [00:44:00] "when I could still see inside myself, all these people didn't dare approach this closely." But the more he screams, the more they crowd his doorstep. He wins man by the fear he inspires. In Kotzk one lives in awe and in misery as well. In Kotzk one doesn't speak, one roars, or one keeps quiet. One spends one's time fighting, cheating desire. One does the opposite of one feels like doing. One eats when one is not hungry, one does without water when one is thirsty. One prays either later or earlier than is customary. The Rebbe says that when one feels like shouting and does not shout, that is when one truly shouts. Silence in Kotzk is so heavy, so dense, that it tears the nights. One doesn't dream, one is delirious. One doesn't walk, one runs. One walks a tightrope and it is he, the Rebbe, who holds both ends. He is present in all eyes, [00:45:00] in all thoughts. He paralyzes.

One runs after him, but he flees. Sometimes he awakens the faithful and tells him, "Go away, I am the Master here," and the other bursts into sobs. It's enough for him to look into someone's eyes for the other to faint. Why do you address God by calling him Father," he scolds a young man, "who told you He is your Father? Did He? If you want Him to be, force Him to be

your Father." Another time he stops a disciple, "Do you know where God resides?" And as the other gapes in astonishment, the Rebbe continues, "I'll tell you, it is where He is allowed to enter." And then a very beautiful story. Once he asked a disciple to ask him a question. The disciple says, "Rebbe, I have one very important [00:46:00] question. God could have created the world in one second, and yet He created it in six days. And look what a world we live in. In six days, and look at the result." So the Rebbe said, "Would you have done better?" At that time the disciple was so forlorn and so embarrassed that he stuttered, he said, "Yes." "Yes," said the Rebbe, "then what are you waiting for? Start now." (laughter) His words are repeated over and over, they are endowed with special meanings. One hesitates between the desire to understand and the fear of violating his interdiction. In the end even his friends are at a loss. Without explanation he will praise someone he publicly insulted the day before. His son gets married, it takes a great deal of persuasion [00:47:00] to make him attend the wedding.

As for Reb Mordechai Yosef, his friend, he refuses to see only anger in God's creation. He rejects loneliness either as option or as virtue, or even as a possible vehicle to attaining truth. If God is everywhere, why shouldn't man try to be everywhere

with Him? Izbitse therefore comes closer to Lublin and Lizhensk than to Pshiskhe. The Rebbe there is seen not only as guide and teacher, but also, yes, as miracle maker. Reb Mordechai Yosef does everything Reb Mendel refuses to do. He intercedes in heaven on behalf of his people, the poor, the wretched, the orphans, the abandoned, the sick, the destitute. Whereas the Kotzker aspires to climb mountains, the Izbitse wants to stay with the men and women too weak or too poor to ever leave their homes. [00:48:00] "The summit is not to be found up there," he once said, "but here below with us, inside us." The mountaintops are for elites, and unlike the Kotzker, the Izbitse refuses to identify himself with the elite. He enjoys quoting a story about Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk who when he refused to receive a certain tzadik who had chosen to live in solitude, gave this explanation, "God says in the Book of Jeremiah, *im yissater ish bamistarim va'ani lo er'enu?* the man who hides, will I not see him?" "No," said Rebbe Elimelech, "when the question mark is replaced by an exclamation point, this citation reads, 'the man who hides from his fellow man well, I, God, refuse to see him too.'"

"*Lo ta'ashok et ray'echa*, Do not steal from your friend" means in Izbitse, if you are able to help your fellow man and do not, you are a thief. [00:49:00] The Talmud is explicit on the

subject. Whoever is able to pray for his friend and refuses to do so is a sinner. And who should pray for the Hasid, if not the Rebbe, who is also his friend par excellence? To Kotzk's objection to closeness between the chosen and the crowd, the scholar and the ignorant, Izbitse responds with the biblical words, *ha'shochan itam b'toch tim'atam*, God dwells in his people, even in their impurity. What? Is it possible that God associates with the wrong people? (laughter) And the answer is, in Izbitse, God associates with those who live in misery and with those who are doomed to dwell in sickness both material and spiritual, God associates with all people. If the *Kohen*, the priest, is ordered to take care of the *metzoraim*, the sick, the men and women who live outside [00:50:00] the community, why should the Rebbe do otherwise? Add to this one charming trait of character in Izbitse, which is not true of Kotzk, he had an understanding and warm attitude towards women. I quote him, "Man must realize," he said, "that women are their equals. Men have no right nor reason to feel superior." Unquote.

The result of all this, Izbitse became more attractive, more popular than Kotzk. The crowds who had given up on Reb Mendel now came to be received by Reb Mordechai Yosef. All those who sought miracles and were chased away from Kotzk now gathered in Izbitse. Does it mean that only the simplest and most ignorant

Hasidim, as it were, could be found in Izbitse? Not at all. When Reb Mordechai Yosef left Kotzk, some of its luminaries [00:51:00] had joined him, among them the famous Reb Leibele Eiger and the great illustrious Reb Zadok HaKohen of Lublin. Both were renown Talmudic scholars. Reb Leibele was Reb Akiva Eiger's grandson. As for Zadok, listen. When he was still young he met Reb Yaakov Ornstein, the author of Yeshuot Yaakov, who said to him, "I hear, young man, that you know half the Talmud by heart, is that true?" "Yes, it's possible," said the young visitor who refused to tell a lie. "Really? Which half?" "Any half." (laughter) If Reb Leibele and Reb Zadok opted for Izbitse, it must have meant that Izbitse was not just a place for the least learned, least ambitious, most simple villagers, but let's admit it, scholarship was not what attracted people to Izbitse. They came in search of [00:52:00] compassion, sympathy, and human warmth.

One day a group of klezmerim, wandering musicians, came to the Rebbe and poured out their grief. The village lord, *yemach shemo* they said, had promised them a good fee for a performance, but then he had cancelled it. And to make things worse, he had invited a Polish band to perform instead. "What do you want me to do?" asked the Rebbe. "Simple," said the chief klezmer, "Make him love good music." And low and behold we are told in

Izbitse legend a miracle occurred and overnight the village lord became a connoisseur of good Hasidic tunes. (laughter) The Rebbe never failed to respond to solicitations with warmth and concern. He never failed to find words of encouragement for those who needed help. One day his followers came to tell him that an astrologer had predicted that the end of the world was near. Two comets would collide and in the process destroy our planet. Many people gave credence to the forecast [00:53:00] and stopped working, studying, teaching, taking care of their business and families. The threat of collective apathy became real. "Do something Rebbe, say something," his disciples pleaded. "Don't worry," said Reb Mordechai Yosef, "and tell others not to worry. And I shall tell you why. It's written in the Book of Amos that God will not do anything without first revealing his secret to his prophetic servants and God has not revealed anything to me. Which means that the predictions are false," he said, and obviously they were. Did he really think of himself as prophet? No. As miracle maker, perhaps? Surely not. Anyone who sees himself capable or worthy of performing supernatural wonders will not perform them. Vanity is one of the pitfalls that even Tzadikim cannot avoid, not fully, not forever.

That is why all the masters spoke of their struggle against [00:54:00] *peniyot* and *shemetz shel ga'avah*, the slightest feeling of vanity can erase all previous good deeds and qualities. Reb Mordechai Yosef was too great and too intelligent and too clear-minded not to know that. Yet he felt that it would be arrogance to him to be different. Not from the Kotzker, but from the other masters. Like the others he was always on the side of the victims, like the others he offered his Hasidim hope by allowing them to believe in miracles, like the Besht and his disciples he even took the side of sinners. None before him had manifested such tolerance for sinners. If God chooses to judge them that is his business, no man ought to tell God what to do. No other Tzadik was as explicit in this respect. Izbitse believed that the task of Jews is to bring back sinners with [00:55:00] kindness, not to expel them from the community. Furthermore, Reb Mordechai Yosef maintained that sinners ought not to be seen as sinners, in other words their sins are not to be seen. God alone can forgive and only God knows what to forgive. No one has the right to do God's work for him. To judge is God's prerogative and His alone. To persecute others is wrong, but to be persecuted is equally wrong.

Sadly Reb Mordechai Yosef is persecuted, not by sinners, but by

other Hasidim. Those who stayed in Kotzk cannot forgive their former friends who they felt had deserted Reb Mendel by moving to Izbitse. For the split had profoundly affected all levels of the Hasidic world in and around Kotzk. It had resulted in broken families, enemy brothers, rivalries, resentment, hostility. [00:56:00] Every Hasid had to choose between the old and the new, between the silence of the Kotzker and the warmth of the Izbitse. Chroniclers tell of Kotzker Hasidim who did not stop at anything to torment their adversaries. Once during a harsh winter they filled the Izbitse house of study with snow. Another time they demolished the house of a Hasid in Levertov. They even put sand in the Rebbe's *cholent*. And they destroyed a *shtiebel*, which by sheer luck was empty at the time. In brief, it was in the best or the worst tradition of violent internal Hasidic quarrels.

Reb Mordechai Yosef specifically ordered his followers not to fight back. Some obeyed, others did not. They were human, not saints. They felt compelled to answer the insults, to respond to persecutions. Can one blame them? Kotzk was never known for its tolerance. Listen to a story. Two Hasidim were [00:57:00] partners, they were fond of one another, they trusted one another, they were ready to sacrifice all their possessions for one another until Izbitse proclaimed its dissidence from Kotzk.

Well, you guessed it, one remained loyal to Reb Mendel, the other followed Reb Mordechai Yosef. And for the sake of peace and business, they decided never to speak about their opposing loyalties. For a while they succeeded, but then one day they had to. You see, business was bad, and when that happens what does one do? Ask any Hasid, he or she will tell you, you go to the Rebbe. Only he can prevail in heaven to change the direction of the stock market. (laughter) But the two partners were in a serious predicament, which Rebbe would they consult? Actually the answer was simple, they couldn't go to the Kotzker, who surely would have thrown them out, he wasn't interested in profit. So, they should go to the Izbitse, right? Wrong.

[00:58:00] The problem was that the Kotzker Hasid wouldn't go to Izbitse. How could he, a fervent follower of Reb Mendel betray him by seeking out his rival?

His partner first tried to reason with him, then became emotional. If we don't do something we'll go bankrupt. Still, the Kotzker Hasid refused, better bankruptcy than go to Izbitse. And then his partner fell ill and now implored him to go and see Reb Mordechai Yosef in his name, as his messenger, at least to ask him to pray for his recovery. And that helped. And the recalcitrant opponent gave in to pity and went to see the Reb Mordechai Yosef. But as soon as he appeared before him he said,

"Rebbe, I feel I must tell you not to misinterpret my presence here. I am not your follower, but the Kotzker Rebbe's, may he live a long life. If I am here it's only as a messenger for my silly associate, who is sick. [00:59:00] He believes in you, but not I." (laughter) "Supposing I performed a miracle," said Reb Mordechai Yosef, "supposing I cured your friend and your business?" "I would call it witchcraft," replied the Hasid. "Supposing that I convinced you that I was telling the truth?" "Impossible. Only the Kotzker Rebbe knows the truth," said the Hasid. He couldn't be shaken. And he went so far as to leave Izbitse without saying goodbye to the Rebbe, who nevertheless was so impressed by his sincerity that he gave him his blessing in absentia, and it worked. (laughter) The sick partner recovered, as did their business, but the Kotzker Hasid was still not convinced.

In truth, the hostility between the two camps never abated. The literature of Izbitse simply ignores the 13 years that Reb Mordechai Yosef had spent with the Kotzker, and the Kotzker tradition does mention them, but always scornfully. Those of Reb Mordechai Yosef's friends who had stayed behind [01:00:00] refused to be associated with him or even to cross his threshold. Such was the case with Reb Itche Meir of Ger. Some Kotzker loyalists said that it was because of the dissidents

that the Messiah was delayed in coming. As for the Izbitse loyalists, they repeated their rebbe's argument, everything is *min hashamayim*, everything is ordained in heaven. If I broke away from Kotzk, it's because I had to. The Rebbe of Warka refuted this argument by saying, and I quote him, "If you receive the instructions from heaven, you could have, and should have turned to the Kotzker Rebbe for advice. And he would have told you what to do." At this point finding ourselves on theological grounds and before concluding our exploration tonight, let us stop again and examine the incident, the split itself. What happened in Kotzk that motivated the revolt against the revolutionary kingdom of the awesome Reb Mendel? [01:01:00] Was it an accident? Was it simply the logical outcome of the situation filled with ideological tensions and conflicts? All the sources point that way. They suggest that Reb Mordechai Yosef left because of Reb Mendel's decision to become a recluse. And I humbly suggest another hypothesis, but first the story itself.

Again, we are in the year 1839. The adventure glorified by Reb Mendel is still in its first phase, Kotzk means ambition, Kotzk means daring projects to bring God's truth back into man's world. Though moody, Reb Mendel is still visible and accessible to his disciples. At times he chooses to be alone, but even

then he welcomes visits by Reb Mordechai Yosef, who is still one of his most intimate friends. One day, as Reb Mordechai Yosef emerges from Reb Mendel's room, [01:02:00] he stumbles upon Reb Henoah of Aleksander who wants to know what is new in there.

"Nothing," replies Reb Mordechai Yosef. "I knew already then," said Reb Henoah much later, "I knew already then that he was no longer one of us." But if Reb Henoah knew, he didn't reveal it to anybody. At any rate, even Reb Mordechai Yosef didn't know. In fact, he continued to play a dominant role in Kotzk. He belonged to its intellectual elite and served as intermediary between the secluded master and the disciples eager to approach him. Since they could not be received by Reb Mendel, they had to be satisfied with his close friend, Reb Mordechai Yosef, and he listened to their woes, showed interest in their problems, and tried to solve them. Thus he knew more than anyone else what the average Hasid, to the extent that there could be an average Hasid in Kotzk, needed.

At any rate, he knew more than the Rebbe himself and for good reason, the Rebbe didn't want to know. Reb Mendel sought silence [01:03:00] and was angry with anyone who dared to interfere with his solitary quest. More than anyone, Reb Mordechai Yosef was in a position to see the dangers threatening his friend. Helplessly he watched him sink deeper and deeper into his anger, which ultimately became his prison. One Friday

evening just before *Kiddush*, he heard Reb Mendel whisper, as if to himself, "They do not understand me. They fail to understand there exists two ways to attain heaven. One way is to dig on the outside, and the other is to dig on the inside." And Reb Mordechai Yosef understood the meaning of those words and was terrified. Inside tunnels could surely lead to the abyss, to irrevocable loss. He found it unbearable to be in the presence of any who were not entirely true and pure, the Kotzker did. One Friday evening he frightened his Hasidim by shouting [01:04:00] and I quote, "This week we read in the biblical portion that '*vayishlach Yaakov malachim el Eysav*, and Jacob sent messengers to his brother Esau,' what do you want me to do with a Jacob who uses angels as emissaries to an Esau." Reb Mordechai Yosef heard everything and suffered. He knew that something had gone wrong in Kotzk. His former friend had finally gone too far. In the name of abstract truth, he had turned his back on real suffering, real anguish, and real people. True Pshiskhe had been a rebellion against Hasidic complacency, but there is a point beyond which the revolt itself could become complacent. In all things according to our tradition it is man, man who must serve as measure. *lo bashamayim*, the Torah is not in heaven. [01:05:00] After all, God does not want us to become angels, he merely wants human beings to be human.

And so, the rebellion against the Kotzker's rebellion grew. After a time, Reb Mordechai Yosef couldn't hold back his warnings, "Hasidism needs a Rebbe," he said, "not a saint who hates his fellow man for being what they are." And then the crisis nearly exploded on Simchat Torah. The evening before, hundreds of Hasidim had danced with the Torah and celebrated it in joy. The Rebbe was late, unusually late. What was there to do? "Let's go and have *Hakafot*, the seven rounds with the Torah at my place," suggested Reb Mordechai Yosef. Some joined him, others stayed. Soon after Reb Mendel arrived. They began the ceremony and the Rebbe, as was the custom, danced the *Hakafot* named after King David. And as was his custom for 13 years, [01:06:00] he invited his friend Reb Mordechai Yosef to the dance named after Joseph, Yosef, Joseph. But Reb Mordechai Yosef wasn't there. And the Rebbe who was in such ecstasy didn't know that he wasn't there. He handed the Torah to someone thinking that the one who will receive it will be his friend, but it was his son Reb Dovid, the son of the Kotzker. And suddenly the Kotzker Rebbe realized his mistake. And when he saw that the Torah was not in the hands of his friend, but of his son, he wanted to take back the scrolls. And strangely enough his son refused to let go. Commented Reb Mordechai Yosef much later, and I quote him, "He thought he had handed me the

scrolls from the beginning, that it was I who received the scrolls, and that is why he tried to take them back. He wanted publically to deprive me of my powers. [01:07:00] And that is why I was not there."

Now it had become clear, it was inevitable, the two friends were about to break their ties. And yet, they did make repeated attempts not to reach the point of no return. When Reb Mordechai Yosef left Kotzk to go home to Tomashov, he was escorted to his carriage by the Rebbe himself. Reb Mendel even asked him for a farewell present and Reb Mordechai Yosef handed him all the kvitelach he had received from unfortunate disconsolate Hasidim. The ultimate irrevocable split occurred several weeks later during the fateful Friday evening when the Kotzker Rebbe did something or said something that has remained, as we said, a burning scar. One single word may have been enough to put an end to a fervent friendship, and perhaps to a unique struggle. One single word [01:08:00] may have marked the beginning of Izbitse and of Rebbe Mendel's quasi-total isolation for 20 years. And here comes the hypothesis that I offer to you in conclusion. Reb Mordechai Yosef left before the Kotzker Rebbe entered absolute seclusion. He broke away fairly early. Why? Why didn't he wait a bit longer? Why didn't he remain at his friend's side when he was needed most to overcome the

growing anguish? In other words, isn't it conceivable that we were mistaken until now that a sequence of events was inverted, that it was not Reb Mordechai who reacted to the Kotzker, but the Kotzker who reacted to Reb Mordechai Yosef? Isn't it possible that Reb Mendel [01:09:00] chose solitude because his close friend, companion, and associate deserted him. It is only after the defection, which must have caused him great disappointment and grief, that the obstacles before him became unsurmountable.

From that moment on, he wished to find in solitude all that he could not find in his relations with people. Friends too could drive man to despair, that was something he discovered only then. And this would explain Kotzk's extreme hostility towards Izbitse which otherwise would seem excessive, after all, it was not the first split in Hasidism. There had been others, between Lizensk and Lublin, Lublin and Pshiskhe, but none was as personal. Because of what Reb Mordechai Yosef had done to their master and through him to all of them he became the enemy. If it had not been for him, Reb Mendel might not have run away from his followers. Thus they [01:10:00] felt cheated, frustrated, betrayed. If it had not been for Izbitse, Kotzk would have continued to keep its human, clement, mystical, and messianic and compassionate image. Between Kotzk and Izbitse the abyss

was never to be bridged. Some Hasidim overcome by remorse and even nostalgia tried to come back to Reb Mendel, they were not readmitted. The Kotzker Rebbe himself chased them away. "Why did you come back," he asked them, "to see me? Who do you think I am, a chimney sweep?"

Of course some refused to be discouraged. The greater the resistance they encountered, the more they wished to stay. The magic, the power of Kotzk was stronger than the kindness and the novelty of Izbitse. Still, why not admit it? Izbitse too kept on growing. Hundreds of Hasidim came to see the man who dared defy Reb Mendel. And when the Kotzker learned of his rival's popularity, he had one of his rare [01:11:00] smiles and said to his wife, "Are you surprised? Why should you be? What do you think he learned from me? To be a shoemaker, perhaps?"

(laughter) The Kotzker died in 1859, the Izbitse died seven years later, and his dynasty spread throughout five generations, merging into other Hasidic families.

Let's skip a few and simply speak of the fifth descendant who was Reb Shmuel Shlomo of Radzyn, the Radzyner Rebbe, who in a ghetto near Sobibor rose against the Germans and the Judenrat with powerful appeals to resistance and combat. The great and unique poet Yitzhak Katznelson devoted a magnificent and

heartbreaking poem describing the Radzyner Rebbe's glorious bravery as he wandered through Poland trying to ransom dead Jews and bring them to *keva Israel*, to Jewish burial. [01:12:00]

"Give me fifty men," he told his disciples, "I will be their leader and we shall fight. And we shall set the ghetto on fire and stop the killers and the murderers because silence is dangerous, silence means consent, silence means consent, it means complicity." His pleas went unheeded, when he was finally apprehended by a German officer in 1942, he spat in the German's face and he was executed and buried in the Jewish cemetery. And so, both Kotzk and Izbitse remained two separate rivers, both flowing into the sea of Jewish history where events and stories disappear only to emerge again, just as nocturnal chants vanish into the night only to be heard again and again by man at dawn.

[01:13:00] (applause)

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