

Elie Wiesel In Hasidism: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apta

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive October 20, 1983

Elie Wiesel:

(audience applause) Once upon a time, somewhere in Eastern Europe, near Kielce and Radon, in a place called Opatów, or in Yiddish, Apt, there lived a sage, a master unlike any other, to whom all others had vowed obedience. A man deeply concerned with all those who suffer in anonymity, who painfully drag their lives of misery across an oppressive and hostile landscape. He is our hero tonight. The supreme arbiter of ideological controversies which already at that time split the exciting movement of the Besht, his was [00:01:00] the court of last appeal, whose authority no one dared challenge or question. He was, and he remains, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt. Does this mean that he had no opponents? Not at all, he did. Everyone does. Even Moses had opponents.

The Rebbe of Apt, however, had real enemies. A mind that asserts itself cannot help but collide with opposing forces. Any personality, any leader, any teacher, will encounter obstacles. Indeed, their absence would imply that the impact was insignificant. This is true of all creative minds, and it is true as well of the Hasidic movement, which God knows, did

not lack internal conflict. And yet, nothing could stop the idea, the flame, the message. Fervor [00:02:00] cannot be stifled, and that is what Hasidism is: fervor. Humanity cannot be choked, and that is what Hasidism is. A profound outcry of humanity, for life, for love. This is the one word which best evokes our hero of this evening, love. It is the word which appears on his tombstone, the only one. For this Tzadik, this just man, forbade his disciples to engrave a eulogy on his stone. All he allowed was "Oheiv Yisrael," "Lover of Israel." Yes, the Apter Rebbe loved his Jewish brethren. He loved his people. And he loved every human being created by God in his image. Every man and woman, bound to the soil, but seeking the sky and its stars. [00:03:00]

Other masters had practiced Ahavat Yisrael. Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, the Moishe Leib of Sassov, Reb Yisrael of Ruzhin, and Rabbi Yisrael of Vizhnitz. But Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel was alone in receiving the almost-official title of Oheiv Yisrael. He was Israel's lover. Whatever he did, whatever he said, was done and said for love of his people. Moreover, he gave lessons in the subject: how to reconcile love of God with love of humanity, how to link love of life with love of truth and passion, with humor. Before his death, he said, and I quote, "If you pay me too many compliments, I shall be

embarrassed. I could not live up to it up there. What, I, a Tzadik? I, a Talmid Chacham, a scholar? [00:04:00] Compared to my masters and to theirs, I am less than nothing. There is only one virtue and one title I would like to lay claim to. Yes, I have loved Israel. I have loved the Jewish people. I have loved the Jews. I have tried to help them, console them. I have tried to ease the burden of their exile. Master of the universe, will you condemn me for that?"

So, let us try to make his acquaintance this evening. How does he differ from his peers? How can we recognize his story as being authentically his? Wherein lies his greatness, or his individuality? We must repeat what we have said here for the last 17 years, each time we spoke of Hasidic masters. Every Hasidic master was great and unique, and every one is my favorite. [00:05:00] The shining wisdom of Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz. The dark passion of Reb Mendel Kotzker. The simplicity of Reb Wolf of Zbarazh. The vision of the Seer of Lublin. It is immense, this gallery of Hasidism with all its portraits, all its subjects, all its echoes. Who is of greater importance, the architect or the dreamer? The storyteller or the teacher? The man everybody looked up to or the beggar forgotten in his corner, by the chimney? They are all important, and that is precisely what Hasidism teaches us. Every being holds a sacred

spark. Every spark is drawn from the primordial fire. Every gaze contains the nostalgia of exile, and every heart does have the strength to breathe, to endure, to hold back its tears. At a certain level, all beings are equal. All meet in Adam, who surely was not a saint, [00:06:00] who surely was not perfect. And yet, was there a man closer to his maker, more bound to him for so long a time?

The Hasidic movement, as we shall soon see, places the emphasis on the relationships between human beings. Man is not alone, nor is he or she ever superfluous, since they are linked to their fellow creatures, and at the same time, to God. He needs them. He needs them all, and they all need him. And the Tzadik of Apt needs his disciples in order to be admitted before the heavenly tribunal. He needs them to lay title to his share of paradise. Altruism supersedes all else. Love of one's fellow man is one of the great principles of Torah. And all of this is contained in the story we have just heard, the one about his tombstone. And what does it teach us?

First of all, that the Rabbi of Apt, as we shall see, [00:07:00] prepared himself for death. And that is what all the just do. Second, the Rabbi of Apt believed that life does not end with an individual's death. It goes on, as does creation. In another,

more sublime conscience, if not in conscience itself. In other words, conscience distills its own fate. The present contains its own immortality. Third, somewhere there is judgment. The human being will be judged. His deeds will be weighed. Nothing is forgotten. Fourth, what is a virtue here on Earth may be considered a flaw in heaven. Earthly virtues may well turn into vanity, it is therefore dangerous to take pride in virtues, or to take them seriously, or to take oneself seriously. Fifthly, Ahavat Yisrael, the love of one's fellow human beings, the only redeeming virtue available to man, [00:08:00] no one has the right to obstruct it in the name of humility -- even in the name of humility. A Hasid may very well say, Who am I that I should be loved? But he cannot say, Who am I that I should love? All beings are capable of love.

And, finally, the Apter Rebbe brings us closer to one of his descendants, a famous man, a great man. A man who died ten years ago, and who was my friend. Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel. Rabbi Heschel. I spoke last week about my teacher, Professor Lieberman. And I said when I came into his study on that day, I saw the desk was clean. Well, it's exactly the same thing that happened with Heschel. One week, I remember, I got a telephone call. [00:09:00] We were very close. I loved the man, I respected him, and I admired him. We had so much in

common. He was like older, older, older friend, although he wasn't that old. And I came into his study and he cried, for reasons that he alone knew. And I looked at the desk, and the desk was clean. He, too, knew. He wrote great books on Hasidism. He wrote a great -- very great book in Yiddish about Kotsk. In English, people compared him to Kierkegaard.

There is a story I may tell about both Lieberman and Heschel, which very few people know. It was before, much before, I got married, and I would often come for Shabbat to the Heschels. And then, [00:10:00] I would also go often to Lieberman. People in the seminary know that Lieberman, of course, was a misnagid. Heschel was a Hasid. And therefore, the misnagid and the Hasid didn't get along. And one day, it was after Rosh Hashanah, I received a telephone from Professor Lieberman. He said, "Where will you be for Purim?" (laughter) I said, "For Purim? Dr. Lieberman, it's six months away." He said, "Well, if you don't know, I will tell you now. You will come and have Purim dinner at home." I said if I am in New York, of course, with great honor and pleasure. A month before Purim, Dr. Heschel called. (laughter) "Where are you going to have Purim?" I said, "I don't know, I can't." "Maybe you come and spend Purim dinner." I said, "Dr. Heschel, really, it's impossible this time." "Well," he said, "okay, in that case, I will go to my cousin,

the Kopitzhinitzer rebbe." [00:11:00] I said, "Well, I wish I could go with you, I love the Kopitzhinitzer rebbe." Anyway. The problem was, that Dr. Heschel and Dr. Lieberman lived in the same building. (laughter) And Purim evening, I came, and Dr. Lieberman loved to drink, on Purim especially, so I bought a good bottle of vodka. And as I came, I pushed the elevator button, and who came out? Dr. Heschel. (laughter) "What are you doing here?" And luckily, I had the presence of mind to say, "Dr. Heschel, I came to bring you *mishloach manos*. A present for Purim." And I gave him the bottle of vodka. (laughs) He said, "How did you know I would be here?" I said, "I didn't, I was going to leave it [00:12:00] in front of the door." He said, "Why didn't you give it to the doorman?" I said, "I was afraid he would drink it." (laughter) So, he said, "Then let's go upstairs." I couldn't go upstairs, (laughs) because I had to go upstairs. He insisted, how could you say no to Heschel. We went upstairs. Took off jacket, Mrs. Heschel was there, I think Susie, we went up, we began talking, we opened the bottle, we drank it, and all the time I was thinking, I am being expected elsewhere. After an hour, finally, we came downstairs and he was going to the Kopitzhinitzer rebbe and I was going to stay there. Except how could I say it? So, he said, "Can I give you a lift home?" (laughter) I said, "No, no, no." He said, "Yes, I insist." [00:13:00] So he took me home.

I bought another bottle of vodka, (laughter) I was two hours late, and there were many people, Scholem and Spiegele and -- all many people. Around three o'clock in the morning, finally, it was late, and I was going home. For a while, I was weighing, should I take the stairs or take the elevator? I took the elevator. Came downstairs, nobody. "Ah," I said, "thank God." And then, I saw a taxi coming. I stopped the taxi. Out came Dr. Heschel. (laughter) And with exquisite humor and elegance, he said, "I brought you a taxi." (laughter) [00:14:00] (audience applause)

So, Dr. Heschel was the descendant of the Apter Rov, and we spoke very often about the Apter Rov, because he had the name, Avraham Yehoshua Heschel. He also had his love, his for Israel, his love for humanity. Maybe Ahavat Yisrael may sound to some people simple or simplistic. It isn't. It isn't. Beyond the word, there is reality, and beyond the reality, there is another reality. And perhaps nothing really is more important, for us today, than to adopt that mitzvah, that commandment, of Ahavat Yisrael, in its broadest form. And we learn it from the Apter Rebbe too, and one day he watched his Hasidim push as only Hasidim can push, to approach his table. [00:15:00] So to snatch shirayim, a phrase, a smile. And he said, "Do not. Don't push. It's no use. Those who know how to listen will

hear from a distance, and those who don't know how, won't hear, even from close by." But the Rebbe of Apt was the Rebbe of Apt, and of course, with us, it's different. You have to come closer to hear, or at least, you must come inside. So, open the door. (audience applause) (long pause) [00:16:00]

Two preliminary remarks again. One, I would like to remind you, if you have questions, you may give them to the ushers or to the office at the Y, and we shall try to share the questions with you next week, which is the last of this year's series. This year is the gematria tov, 17. Next year it's chai, 18. Two, this year, the innovation I would like remind you -- the innovation this year has been that Rabbi Levi Yitzchok is teaching a class before our session here, and more than a hundred people attend. And study has always been my passion, and the aim, the purpose of these meetings is to study together and I urge you to attend [00:17:00] more of his sessions next year.

And now, a story. Perhaps the most important and characteristic story of the Apter Rebbe's career. Listen. One day, he received a visit of a woman, known too well perhaps for her conduct. Whatever malicious tongues like to tell about a beautiful and rich and intelligent woman, they must have said

about her and did. And, "Rebbe," she said, "I need your help. I need your intervention for me in heaven. I want to repent. I want to change my ways. I want to change, help me." They are not alone in the rebbe's office. There is the gabbai and the servant and also a Hasid or two, no doubt. And they all listen as the master gets angry. "You dare to come to me?" he says. "Shameless woman. You have the temerity to appear before me? Don't you know that I have eyes to see [00:18:00] and that my eyes see into your innermost soul?" And to prove it to her, he proceeds to reveal certain things she had done. And the woman paled, and then answered gently and sadly, "I don't understand you, rebbe. Why must you reveal in public what God himself prefers to keep secret?" And she went away. One version says she was thrown out, and she said to the rebbe, "God is kinder than you. He allows me to stay in his house."

Later, the Apter Rebbe felt deeply troubled and stirred in his very soul. Quote, "This is the only person who has gotten the better of me," he said to his disciples, "and this encounter has humbled me. [00:19:00] It will remain a turning point in my life. It made me see, all of a sudden, that I was on the wrong path, for I chose din, judgment, over rachamim, compassion. A dangerous path for a rabbi. A barren one for a Hasid. Man is

not meant to judge his fellow human beings, and even less to condemn them. He is meant to understand them," unquote.

So, let us in turn try to understand him. At first glance, his case seems clear, without a shadow of ambiguity. Born into a prominent rabbinical family, it is only logical that he should settle into his vocation. Disciple of a great master, he becomes a great master himself. He is admired, he's worshipped. He has followers. This is only natural. He embodies the sublimation of our aspirations, the dream of our dreams. Whenever he speaks, people listen. And whenever he is [00:20:00] silent, they listen more closely. His authority is accepted. It is total. And everybody is happy. The rebbe, because he feels in a position to help his followers, and the followers because they need his help. Could this be perfection? With not a shadow hovering over his good fortune, can a rebbe always be so happy with his Hasidim and with himself?

Let's consult the files. He was born around 1750, some say two years earlier, some say two years later. But everybody is in agreement as to the place of his birth, Nowe Miasto. His father is the rabbi of the town. A happy childhood, a studious adolescence. An excellent student, he learns Talmud, plunges into Kabbalah, makes a name for himself within the religious

community. A splendid career is predicted for him, [00:21:00] and the prediction comes true. He is appointed rabbi in Kolbasov, later, rovin in Iași, then of Apt, and finally, in Medzhybizh, where he dies at the age of 70 or 72 or 75. Thus, he will have reigned in Galicia, Romania, and the Ukraine, and everywhere, he will be remembered as a rebbe endowed with great powers, and especially with profound compassion. But how did he become a Hasid?

And he himself tells the story, and I quote, "It happened in Kolbasov. I was studying a difficult passage in the Talmud. Suddenly, I heard a carriage arrive. Two men got off, one young, one old. I offered them something to eat and drink, and then I stepped aside so as not to disturb them and so as not to be disturbed myself, in my studies. But it wasn't easy. They talked among themselves, and I couldn't help [00:22:00] listening. Worse, I didn't understand a word of what they were saying to each other. At night, all three of us went to the house of prayer, and then we returned home together. My two guests kept talking to each other, and still I didn't understand a thing. At midnight, I recited my prayers and so did they, but apart. The next day, they left without telling me who they were. And this annoyed me. It annoyed me all the more since after their departure, I felt deeply intrigued by their remarks

without knowing what they were. Without being aware of it, my two guests had dealt with questions which had for a long time preoccupied me. I was angry at myself for having let them leave like that, without asking whence they came and where they were going. Two weeks later, as chance would have it, they appeared again. I rushed to them and asked whether I could be of service. A bagel, [00:23:00] they said. Bring us a bagel. They took it, and left again. Then I started running after them. They made me get into the carriage. When we arrived in the next village, they suggested I turn back. 'We like you,' they said, 'but you belong to another master. You belong to Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk.' Now, who were the two travelers? Reb Moshe Leib of Sassov and Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev. It is thanks to them that I discovered the wondrous and vibrant world of Lizhensk," he said.

Hasidic legend tells us that the old master of Lizhensk and his young disciple were united in a true and pure friendship. It seems that on his deathbed, Reb Elimelech bequeathed his powers to his closest disciples and divided them. To one, he gave his piety. [00:24:00] To the other, his erudition. And the Rebbe of Apt received his wisdom. No wonder, then, that the other masters would turn to him in times of crisis. His common sense, his thirst for justice, his understanding for people and their

problems, made him universally popular. This was the reason for his many moves. Other rebbes also had to move frequently, but that was because they were compelled to leave home, driven away by implacable opponents, the misnagdim.

But with the Rebbe of Apt, it was different. He left because he was invited elsewhere. Actually, he was invited everywhere. Often, when they did not let him go, he continued in his post from afar. Long-distance. He would come back twice a year, and the people were satisfied. Better some crumb than nothing at all. At [00:25:00] Iași, they promised him everything, and gave him more promises, and many other things. And he accepted. And to the bereaved people of Apt, he offered the following consolation. "Don't be too sad. Although I am going to be Rabbi and Rov of Iași, I shall insist on being called the Rebbe of Apt. Even when I am not in Apt." And he kept his words. Even in Medzhybizh, where he lived the last 13 years of his life, he couldn't help it, he was continued to be known as Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt. He had two sons, and they did not succeed him. Neither did his three sons-in-law, but they remained inside the Hasidic kingdom, and filled other offices in other places, far from Apt. Apt remains [00:26:00] identified with only Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel.

And we know exactly the history of Apt. It was a small city from the fifteenth century, and there were pogroms right away. So much so that the Va'ad Arba Aratzot, the Council of the Four Lands, issued a decree forbidding Jews to live in Apt because there were so many pogroms and such hatred to them. Every Jew needed a special permit to settle in Apt. At the time of Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, there were some two thousand people, and in 1939, there were less than five thousand people. There was a ghetto, and they were all, of course, killed. Other personal features. It was well-known that the Apter Rebbe liked to exaggerate. In this, he resembled the legendary Talmudic sage Rabbah bar bar Hana, whose imagination surpassed [00:27:00] that of the greatest Oriental storytellers. And in this, the Rebbe of Apt also recalled his famous contemporary, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, with a difference. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav deployed his imagination in his stories, whereas the Rebbe of Apt employed in his life.

An example. You won't believe it, but he loved to eat, a lot. No other master, and few Hasidim, could match him when it came to emptying a plate. Occasionally, he even grabbed a plate of a neighbor at the table. (laughter) His Hasidim whispered that surely there had to be a deeper meaning to his behavior. He couldn't possibly suffer such hunger. And therefore, if he ate

so much, there had to be another reason, perhaps a mystical one. Surely, a religious one. To eat, after [00:28:00] all, is a mitzvah. Ushmartem l'nafshoteichem -- one is duty-bound to take care of one's health. The Apter Rebbe once said, with humor as we shall see later, something very beautiful. He said, "When the messiah will come, all days of fasting will be abolished. With the exception of two. Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of Av, which commemorates the destruction of the temple. And Yom Kippur." Why? On Tisha B'Av, who can eat? And on Yom Kippur, who wants to eat?

Occasionally, he would talk a lot and well. But that is of secondary importance. In general, the Hasidic master owed it to himself to set an example. Not to give in to the demands of the body, to distrust talk, to cleanse himself in [00:29:00] silence and song and prayer and study. But the Rebbe of Apt talked. And when he talked, he talked. And everyone, of course, paid attention. Everybody was conscious of the fact that the Rebbe was talking. And it happened that some people never managed to understand him, or so much as to follow what he said. Not that his discourse was complicated or obscure, that wouldn't have bothered his admirers, on the contrary. But his words appealed to ostensibly, to the imagination, to the literary, artistic imagination of the man. It was irrational, the way he talked.

To what purpose? No one knew. Let me give you an example, and I quote him. "For my son's wedding," he said, "the cooks prepared noodles so long that they had to be hanged from the rooftop [00:30:00] to dry. And from the roof, they reached the ground. And so many guests came to the wedding that two full wagons of straw had to be purchased so people could clean their teeth after their meal. From eggshells and onion peelings used in the kitchen, it was possible to build two long bridges over the largest river in town." He also said that he gave his son a coat whose hair is so long that the soldier on his horse with his sword drawn could hide in it. And yet, the coat itself was so small that it could be placed in a nutshell.

Many Hasidim heard the story. After all, they were repeated. But why did he tell the stories? And why to none other than Rabbi Boruch of Medzhybizh, [00:31:00] the grandson of the Besht himself. Still, Rabbi Boruch, who didn't really like any of the contemporary rabbis, seemed to appreciate the depth and significance of the story. Quote, "Never have I heard anything so beautiful from the golden mouth of a man," remarked Rabbi Boruch of Medzhybizh. To Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, whose pleas in defense of his people had made him famous, the Rebbe of Apt once told of how the people of Iași had erected a giant bridge in front of his house. A thousand times a thousand

boards had to be brought, and still, they weren't enough. The Hasidim, used to their master's exaggerations, listened much impressed. Suddenly, one of them, a merchant from Iași, by the name of Noakh, started nodding his head as a sign of approval. And the Rebbe rebuked him. [00:32:00] "Reb Noyekh," he said angrily, "what I am allowed to do, you are not. Is that understood?" And Reb Noakh learned his lesson.

But why was the Rebbe angry? Was it that he felt that he had no need of corroboration? Did he perhaps wish that no one confirmed what he said? That his words remain in the realm of fantasy? Did he intend to teach his followers an important and pragmatic lesson, that the Rebbe is entitled to do and say things which they, the Hasidim, must refrain from doing and saying? If he was afraid of being imitated, his fears were unfounded. No one would have dared do what he did, transform real life into impossible and implausible myths. He did it with extraordinary talent, and charm, and lucidity. Of course, [00:33:00] he didn't believe what he said, but they did.

There are many stories about him, and all are exquisite. The Maggid of Kozhnitz came to worship with him at the services, and one day, he exclaimed, "Apter Rebbe," he said. "Apter Rebbe, I thought saw Adam, the first man, our ancestor. He was here in

your minyan. He was worshipping with you. Is it possible?"

"Oh, I will tell you," said the Rebbe of Apt. "I suddenly had an idea which explains Adam's first sin. And so, he came by to say thank you." (laughter) He had two teachers. Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk, and Reb Yechiel Michel of Zlotchov. Of the latter one, he said, "In every [00:34:00] generation, there lives a just man who owns keys to Torah.

How did I know that he was my teacher? I heard him speak, and all my questions were resolved. But then he stopped speaking, all my questions returned to me, and that is how I knew." He was convinced that this was not the first time he lived in this world. The ancient concept of gilgul, of the transmigration of souls. And in his case, he meant it, at least he said so. I quote. "As you see me now," he once said to his disciples, "I have come ten times into the world here below. And each time, in a different body. I remember having been a high priest. I remember having been a prince, [00:35:00] a king, a Resh Galuta, the president of the Diaspora. Every time I endeavor to live up to the commandment which guides my life, the commandment of Ahavat Yisrael, I try with all my strength, committing every fiber of my being to the effort, but there was always something, some detail, some occurrence, an omission, an error, a denial, some obstacle that arose. And then, I would have to come down

again, in another guise, and start all over again. And fail again. And this is the tenth time that I am here to try. I hope I shall succeed. Yes, this time I would so much like to succeed."

One day, a Hasid in tears came to confide in him. Sobbing, he recounted his sins, but the Rebbe laughed and laughed. He roared with laughter, and the Hasid was shocked. He repeated his tale, and added details, one more terrible and terrifying [00:36:00] than the other. And the Rebbe went on laughing. Then the Hasid cried what measures of penance he had taken as atonement: long days of fasting, nights without sleep, the tormented dawns, years of wanderings, beatings, humiliations, tortures inflicted upon his body and upon his soul. He talked and he talked and the Rebbe kept laughing. Later, the Rebbe explained to his followers, and I quote. "You see, I met this man two thousand years ago in Jerusalem. He came with his offerings to atone for some inadvertent sin in the temple. He wept, poor man, and I wept with him. By now, all his sins have long been forgiven. He has no more reason to weep. That's why I am laughing. I am laughing because I want him to laugh with me."

Oh yes, he differs from his friends [00:37:00] in his imagination, but he also differs from them in his attitude towards political realities. His contemporaries, the Seer of Lublin, Reb Mendel of Rimanov, Rabbi Naftali Ropshitzer, the Rebbe of Liadi, the Maggid of Kozhnitz, all the great Hasidic masters, he steered his contemporaries. They all involved themselves in current events. They felt that they should and could play a role in matters of global policy. Even an active role, a decisive role in Napoleonic wars.

You will recall, perhaps, the messianic conspiracy mentioned so often in our meetings here. The story of the three masters who were determined to take advantage, if one may say so, of the political upheavals so as to advance the coming of the redeemer, the messiah. Whether [00:38:00] tied to a Napoleonic victory or a tsarist victory. But as for the Apter Rebbe, he kept aloof. Though his reign coincided with the French Revolution and counterrevolution, the American War of Independence, the partitions of Poland, the invasions of Russia, and the arrival of the French armies in the Holy Land. The end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth had all that the advent and bloodthirsty civilization to be surpassed only by the one which succeeded it in the following century. We need only read the testimonies of the time. René de

Chateaubriand, a great French writer, gives his testimony, and I shall quote a short passage. "We went," [00:39:00] he speaks of the French Army, "We went from country to country. The sword in one hand and the message of human rights in the other."

Napoleon, the liberator of enslaved peoples, the emancipator of the masses, how much blood did the Apter Rebbe's contemporary spill in the name of great ideals?

Let's read what another eyewitness tells about the conquest of Jaffa, Yafo. "Napoleon, the stage manager of spectacles, gives free rein to his soldiers to celebrate a victory. It happened on March 7th, 1799. Soldiers and civilians alike are massacred by the French. The carnage lasts for 30 hours, after which, 30 thousand [00:40:00] prisoners still remain." Then, so tells François Miot, Deputy Commissioner for the wars in Egypt, "Then, the prisoners of Jaffa were made to march into a huge quadrangle formed by the troops of General Bon. The Turks marched helter-skelter, already guessing their fate. There were no tears. There were no outcries. They were resigned. Some of the wounded who were unable to keep up to pace were slaughtered on the way. When, at last, they arrived in the sand dune southwest of Jaffa, they were stopped next to a pool of yellowish water. The officer divided the crowd into small groups, and had them shot down. The Turks calmly performed

their ablutions. Then having touched their heart and mouth in the Muslim manner of greeting, [00:41:00] they held hands, giving and receiving their eternal farewell. I," says the writer, François Miot, "I saw an old and distinguished looking man whose manner and tone of voice indicated distinction. Calmly order a hole dug in front of him, deep enough for him to be buried. He wanted to die by the hand of his own people. He laid down on his back, and his comrades soon covered him with sand. And then, trampled the sand down."

Forgive me this digression, which it is not, actually. I have always been fascinated by the phenomenon of parallel lives and events happening within the same timeframe. It is frightening. You read about wars ravaging Europe, [00:42:00] soldiers die in battle, civilians in the street, and children in cellars, and yet while all this blood is being shed and all these murders committed, the kings are busy arranging hunting parties. Festive dinners. Opera evenings. How can we explain that some beings live innocently, happy lives, while at the same moment, somewhere far away, or simply on the other side of a natural or artificial border, whole communities are being wiped out? How can we explain that while the Earth trembled in Europe under the boots of fanatical soldiers, the Jews on the fringes of history invented for themselves reasons for living and believing? What

a century that was. [00:43:00] Bloodshed on one hand, and culture on the other. Robespierre and Danton, Marat and Desmoulins, but also Marx and Hegel and Heine and Kant and Balzac and Schiller and Daniel Webster and Delacroix and Rossini and Emerson. There were those who served the gods of hate, at the same time that culture was being worshipped and celebrated.

And at the same time that within the Jewish community, somewhere in Eastern Europe, near Radon and Kielce, in a small place named Opatów, or in Yiddish, Apt, a master spoke of love and offered his disciples dreams of a noble society. A better humanity. A hospitable world. [00:44:00] A community made up of princes. How can we explain? We cannot explain. All we can do is tell the story, and even that is impossible. The question to me is, how informed was the Apter Rebbe of the events? What did he know of the great writers of his time? What did he know of the great musicians? What did he know of the paintings being created by the great artists? What did he know? Politically and militarily, he knew a lot, because all the wars occurred nearby. They were happening close to his kingdom. The events affected the Jews, and we know from experience that in times of crisis, the Jews were the first to suffer the consequences always. In times of war, the Jews on both sides are the first victims. [00:45:00] Shifting borders, armies in pursuit of one

another, laws which are proclaimed and rescinded -- they all bring suffering upon the Jews more than upon the others. Just last Yom Kippur, as I was sitting in shul, I read the Mishneh Torah by Maimonides. And there is a law that he quotes, that he codified, which is a -- strange, powerful. He gives the following law: that if one nation fights another nation, Jews everywhere should proclaim a day of fasting even though there are no Jews in either of them. Because when two nations are at war, it's a catastrophe. And ultimately, the catastrophe affects Jews. [00:46:00]

In his writings, in his talks, in the talks, table talks, Torah talks, the Rebbe of Apt rarely mentions current events. Did he live on the sidelines of the war? On the sidelines of the killings? On the sidelines of fear? Hasidic chronicles mention one incident, at least, in which he was involved. Three masters were denounced to the French Army of occupation and they were arrested. The Seer of Lublin, Reb Mendel of Rimonov, and Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt. And they were accused of espionage. And they were released, some say, by miracle. Others say thanks to bribery. Perhaps the two versions are correct. Back home, Hasidim used to say [00:47:00] that an official was a good official, I mean a charitable official, when he accepted their money. So, a miracle took place. The

policemen allowed themselves to be bought and bribed. And there is another, more detailed version told by the followers of the Rebbe of Apt, that the three accused men confronted the examining magistrate and it was he who backed off. Let's listen to an excerpt of the dialogue. Quote. "What are you doing?" asked the judge. "We are the servants of God," answered their spokesman, Rebbe Mendel of Rimonov, who spoke German. "And unless you show respect when talking to us," said Reb Mendel, "we shall not answer you." And then, Reb Mendel put on his shtreimel. And when he put on his shtreimel, the judge started trembling with fear and set them free at once. [00:48:00]

To be sure, the Rebbe of Apt didn't even have to do that much. He had no need of putting on his shtreimel as a strategic deterrent, because the gesture of his colleague, Reb Mendel of Rimonov, had proven effective. And so, the Rebbe of Apt extricated himself quickly from the political incident in which he had become involved. Was this his only activity connected with the war, with occupation? The world was in chaos, and he thought only of his Hasidim and their normal troubles and their daily concerns? In the first place, why not. Nobody else cared. Why shouldn't he care about them? Why shouldn't he dedicate all his efforts and his talents to help his fellow Jews? But having said this, we shall discover in Hasidic

chronicles mention of another intervention on his part, and this time, one of more pronounced political [00:49:00] character.

There are two versions of the incident. The first speaks of a rabbinical convention in Galicia, convoked to consider measures against the new laws of emancipation which obliged the Jews to renounce their customary way of dressing and to send their children to public school. In short, to integrate, for better or for worse, into the community in which they lived. Nowadays, you would call such a gathering a protest meeting. No doubt, there were stormy speeches, passionate debates, and no doubt, resolutions were adopted. But the other version is more subtle and more beautiful, and I prefer it for two reasons. First, because it places the emphasis on non-political action.

And second -- well, listen. Reb Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt was still staying with Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk, when the Hasidic world learned the bad [00:50:00] news. It concerned the education of girls. It's a dangerous subject. And a certain Fievel, a pious and erudite Hasid, approached his master one night, and said to him, "Rebbe, I had a din-toyre with the Holy One, blessed be He. I want to bring a suit against him." "Not now," said Reb Elimelech. "It's night, and the courts are not in session at night. Come and see me tomorrow morning." Reb

Fievel came. He knocked at his door the next morning. In the room of the master, he found his three great friends. The Seer of Lublin, the Maggid of Kozhnitz, and the Apter Rebbe. "Speak," said the master. "Well, it's simple," said the plaintiff. "The Talmud says that a half-liberated slave can marry neither another slave [00:51:00] nor a free woman. And that is why there is no such thing as partial freedom as far as slaves are concerned. Every human being must be free, and therefore, according to the Jewish law, one must force the owner of the half-slave to free the slave. Now," says Reb Fievel, "we belong to our God. How can we submit to the laws of a temple king as well? And why does this king persecute us since we belong to God, not to him?"

Having said this, Reb Fievel fell silent. Under the impact of these words, pronounced with sorrow and passion, the three judges lowered their eyes and held their breath for a long moment. And then, the Apter Rebbe pulled himself together and said, and I quote. "According to the law, the two opposing parties must retire [00:52:00] while the court deliberates. Fievel, leave. As for you, master of the universe, forgive us. But we know very well, you are everywhere, and even if you were to leave, you would still be here. But we vow that we shall render justice without fear or favor."

And in effect, the rabbis set about deliberating whether it was in accordance with Torah to impose on the Jews laws which prevented them from serving their God. And after lengthy debates, intermingled with interminable quotations, the court rendered its verdict. "Yes, Reb Fievel is right. The law concerning secular education and forced emancipation is unjust." Believe it or not, it was abolished three days later. Well, I prefer this version.

Study and prayer were, in times gone by, more [00:53:00] effective, even in politics, than the schemes of politicians. And besides, the concept of a trial against heaven has always fascinated me. Let's also acknowledge that the Rebbe of Apt, like most of the Hasidic masters, never excluded the possibility nor the right of a human being to enter into discussion or argue with God. For instance, when speaking of Abraham in Sodom, he said, and I quote, "Why did God agree to haggle with Abraham over the number of just men in the city? Fifty, 40, 30, 10. God knew perfectly well, right from the start, that there were none. Why didn't he say so right away? My poor Abraham, don't try. No, he let Abraham play the part of the peddler in the marketplace. Is that nice? Is that fair? How could he do that to his best and only [00:54:00] friend?"

The answer, according to the Apter Rebbe, is this. God wanted to teach Abraham a lesson. One must always ask questions, engage in dialogue. One must always encourage discussion. In other words, God, knowing the future of the Jews, wished to teach them the need of arguing, albeit against himself. No wonder that he succeeded. No wonder, also, that in their search for the supreme arbiter in Hasidism for the uncontested presiding judge, the Hasidic factions turned to the Rebbe of Apt.

There was an event, one event which constituted a turning point in the history of Hasidism. And it took place at the occasion of a famous wedding celebrated at Ustyluh. This wedding earned its place in Hasidism not [00:55:00] because it united two illustrious families, the bride was a granddaughter of the Rebbe, and the groom, the son of a prominent family of Botoșani. But because it served to forestall a split in the movement. Some explanations may be in order, briefly. At the time, the Hasidic movement suffered considerable internal upheavals. At Pshiskhe, the half-blind rabbonim, exhorted his followers to transcend themselves by study and fervor. Too many rebbes had too much power. The kingdom was apparently doing too well. Complacency had taken the place of the initial anguish. It was

pleasant to be a Hasid, and above all, it was easy. Too easy. One no longer came to the Rebbe to cling to him while he ascended to celestial spheres, but one came to expect a blessing. [00:56:00] A good position. A promotion. Some advice. The movement had settled down in comfort. The anti-establishment forces had become the establishment. And so, the alarm was sounded by Pshiskhe. A call to return to study. To the basic principles of the Besht. To the pure flames of the beginnings. A return to the source, disdain for easy life, for superficial honors, for artificial values.

A scandal ensued, naturally. Everyone set out to fight Pshiskhe. Cries of anger, denigration, stormy debates. And this was no longer a battle between Jews and non-Jews, nor between Hasidim and misnagdim. This was a battle among the Hasidim themselves. Everyone had to take sides. Whoever was for Pshiskhe declared himself to be against the others. Reb Yitzchak Meir [00:57:00] Rottenburg, later known as the Rebbe of Ger, left his master, the Maggid of Kozhnitz, to join up with Reb Bunim of Pshiskhe. Commented the Maggid of Kozhnitz, and I quote, "Poor, poor Itche Meir. He has disturbed my Shabbos, my Sabbath, and I am afraid that the same, if not worse, will happen to him." Was it prophecy? Poor Rebbe of Ger. He eventually had thirteen children, and he lost them all.

Unbelievably, sadly, tragically, every one of them died on Shabbat. No, of course, it was no punishment. No one should even conceive of such a possibility. Simply the Maggid of Kozhnitz [00:58:00] said something which may have sounded prophetic, but it illustrates the seriousness, the conflict, the tension, the hostility among the groups.

It was no game. The war against Pshiskhe had all the Hasidic centers of Europe seething. Some wanted Pshiskhe to be excommunicated, but this is not a thing to be done lightly. It's a last resort. First, all other measures had to be considered. Why not a public confrontation? A kind of trial? And a certain Reb Yosef of Yarychiv had a brilliant idea. Since there was a wedding at Ustyluh, and this wedding would attract everybody, why not use that wedding for offering the opportunity for both sides to come and argue their case? And who will be the judge? The Apter Rebbe.

We have descriptions of the wedding. The [00:59:00] wedding of the century. Thousands and thousands of Hasidim converged on Ustyluh. Two hundred masters, clad in white, who were seated at the table of honor. There was the customary singing and dancing, but everybody awaited anxiously and impatiently the moment when the debate would open. The tension heightened when

a Hasid of Pshiskhe climbed on a table, undid his shirt dramatically, and bared his chest. "Apter Rebbe," he shouted, "look, look right into my heart. And there you will see that my master, the Rebbe of Pshiskhe, is falsely accused." Thereupon spokesmen from Pshiskhe and the one for his opponents presented their arguments, according to the rules. There was also a tragicomic incident. A Russian prince arrived in Ustyluh on business, and his carriage was [01:00:00] caught in traffic, because of the Hasidim. He couldn't move. "What is going on?" he inquired. And was told, a Hasidic wedding. He didn't understand. What's that, a Hasid? They tried to explain. But how do you explain Hasidism to a Russian prince? Especially how do you explain that some Hasidim who wanted to entertain the groom and bride according to the law, they were dressed as Cossacks? Cossacks, Hasidim? Hasidic Cossacks?

To make the story short, the prince, as always, had the Rebbe arrested. Whatever happened, the Rebbe was always arrested. (laughter) And the Rebbe acknowledged the offense. Yes, his Cossacks should have shown more respect for the prince, and they had to be punished. [01:01:00] "And right then and there," said the Rebbe, in the presence of the prince, "they have to be punished." And he summoned several Hasidim who were dressed as Cossacks with great -- with their epaulets, and he tore off

their epaulets. And he said, "You are no longer a Cossack."

(laughter) And do you know something? From that day on dates the Yiddish expression *oys kossack*. (laughter)

This incident had a happy ending, as did the debate. Pshiskhe carried off a definitive victory, thanks to the Rebbe of Ger, who managed to convince the Apter Rebbe with his Talmudic and mystical knowledge. The master of such a disciple couldn't be pure. Couldn't but be pure and worthy of respect. And that is how the movement weathered the crisis. The event had one more beneficial [01:02:00] result. The old Rebbe of Apt grew fond of the young Rebbe Yisrael of Ruzhin. And the latter dropped his belt, his girdle, the Apter Rebbe bent down to pick it up, put it around him, and said, "Now I am performing the mitzvah of galilah." The Apter Rebbe altogether liked his role as the old statesmen, the old scholar, and he liked to discover young, promising, guiding lights. It is he who discovered the first master of Pshiskhe.

One day, he ordered one of his disciples to initiate his reign, to begin being a rebbe. "But I am not worthy," pleaded the disciple. And the Rebbe answered, "And you think I am? If I can be Rebbe, so can you." From some stories already told, you already guessed that he had a marvelous sense of humor. One

day, he called out, [01:03:00] "Master of the universe, if you insist on sending me to hell, go ahead. But you know me. I don't have an easy temper. I would argue with the wicked so long until the supervising angels become exasperated. So, I suggest to you the following. Clear out all the wicked from hell, and I will gladly walk in." "Man is but a vessel," he said once. "A pitcher. It is God who does the pouring. Into some, he pours wine. Into others, vinegar." A man came to him to tell him of his troubles, and the Rebbe said, "God will help you. But what should I do until then? God will help you wait until then." (laughter)

Commenting [01:04:00] on the verse of psalms, *einayim lahem v'lo yir'u*, those idols that have no eyes and no ears, he said, "This sentence does not refer to the idols, but to the idol-makers. Those who make everything into life related to money, those who want money, and those men and women who think only of money, more and more money, they are the idols. They are blind. They never appreciate what they have, because they are always looking for what they don't have." One day, he came to a town in which two important men vied for the honor of being his host. Both of them were pious. Both were devoted. And both were well-off. Only one had an impeccable reputation, whereas the other one, well, didn't. The choice? He stayed with the one about whom

people were talking. And he said, "I don't judge anybody. Of course not. But there is one [01:05:00] thing. The first person is probably vain. And God says, I cannot live with vain people under the same roof. If God can't, how can I? The other one is a sinner. I don't know about his sins. I only know that maybe he repented." So, he often quoted the case of King David. Because King David had sinned and because he repented, he was accorded the privilege of composing his psalms. Does it mean that a person in order to write poetry must be a sinner? Some are sinners because they write poetry. (laughter)

The Rebbe was asked to explain the verse, "That for the Lord recognizes the path of the just, but the path of the godless leads astray." At first sight, [01:06:00] the sentence just doesn't make sense. Does it mean that God doesn't know the path of the wicked? Is it possible there is something God doesn't know? And he answered, "Oh no. God knows. The wicked don't, because their path leads nowhere. And there is only one thing left for the wicked. One thing left for all of us. Repentance. Which is the same path for all, but only the just choose to follow." The Rebbe of Apt talked often about repentance. So did other masters. Everybody talked about it. But he did so with a difference. He spoke of repentance, rather than of sins, and the chronicle testifies. He never spoke ill of anyone.

Some disciples had tempted him, provoked him, to no avail. He only thought of speaking well of everybody. Of pleading for all his people. [01:07:00] It is said that whenever he felt some impending danger to the people of Israel, he would retreat to his room, take off his glasses, and start wiping them. While he searched the future with his inner eye, intent on altering it or improving it, making it more pleasant.

The Hasidic sources extol his prophetic gift. In his youth, he questioned the leaves of the trees, we are told. He would question the clouds in the sky in order to know what will happen. Later, he listened to the footsteps of people who passed by in the streets. Then came a time when he refused to look. He refused to listen to the future if it looked too dark. He would lock himself into his room, but to no avail. The future kept taking hold of his spirit. The limbs of his body revealed to him what the morrow had in store for him and his family and [01:08:00] the whole family of Israel. And then, in his anguish, he would weep and plead with the heavens to take back his gift. And we are told that finally, God did take it back.

Later, the Rebbe of Apt tried to persuade his friends and pupils to do the same. "It is dangerous to see what is hidden," he

said. "All the more since unfortunately, it is rarely possible to change the course of events. It is given to the just to see, but not always to understand. Therefore, what good is knowledge?"

To be sure, the Apter Rebbe, like most of his contemporaries, interceded with heaven to prevent misfortunes from happening, or at least to limit their effect. Innumerable miracles are attributed to him, sometimes the same which are attributed to others, which is a miracle in itself. But a true miracle is one for which we must look elsewhere. In a world of upheavals, at a time of bloodshed, he succeeded [01:09:00] in interposing himself as a wall, a powerful rampart, between his Hasidim and a hostile and alien world. Therefore, at his court, politics and plots were not discussed. No attention was paid to wars among kings and mighty. Under his *ameuse*, a compassionate gaze, the Hasidim lived outside the times and found their fulfillment in song and active, humane, warm faith.

He died at the age of 70 or 72 or 75, in the year of 1825.

Which others remember for other reasons. That was the year when John Quincy Adams began his presidency. Pushkin wrote his *Boris Godunov*. And Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was given its first performance in England. To the end of his long life, burdened

by his years and [01:10:00] crowned with victories over despair to be Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt, at last, allowed sadness to invade his soul. We notice it as we read stories about him or his own commentaries. He began to show an exaggerated interest in death.

Once, the great Reb Yitzchok Isaac of Komarno saw him console a widow, and the Rebbe was sobbing. Later, he explained, she was the Shechinah. The widow of Knesset Yisrael, the widow of Zion. One day, he commented on the Biblical verse, "And it was here that Moses died the servant of the Lord." That is how Moses is called in the first sentence of the Book of Joshua. "How was it possible for Moses to serve God after his death?" asked the Rebbe. And Rashi explains. Before his death, Moses was allowed to see [01:11:00] the promised land. So, as to bring the news to the patriarchs, listen, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God has kept the promise he made you long ago. "In other words," said the Rebbe, "even after his death, Moses remained the messenger of God."

During the month in which he was to pass from world to world, from the world below to the world of truth, he frequently gathered his children and his disciples around him in his room and talked to them of death. And they all listened in silence,

deeply affected. Sometimes, he would pace the room, his face aflame, his eyes burning with a vision which already was carrying him far off to the other side, towards eternity. And one day he stopped his pacing. And standing in front of his table, he exclaimed, and I quote, "There comes a moment where beings and objects stand up to bear witness. I therefore ask you, [01:12:00] table of wood, to bear witness for me. You will testify that I have eaten according to the law. That I have used you to study. That I have used you to teach. That I have never put you to shame. Will you say so? Table of wood, will you testify on my behalf?"

Another day, he fell into a dreamy, melancholy mood. Something weighed heavily upon his heart. A disciple dared ask him the real reason. "I feel," he said, "I feel that I shall soon be leaving. I shall be going to present myself before the heavenly tribunal. I shall be asked, Who are you? And I shall not know what to say." Barely had he finished uttering these words when a messenger appeared at the door. He had come from the [01:13:00] Holy Land with a message for the Rebbe. The Kollel, the saintly community of Volhynia, residing in Tiberius, elected him president. And the Rebbe was very pleased. He ordered a great feast to be prepared. He radiated happiness. He entrusted a sum of money to the messenger and said to him, "As

soon as you get back to Tiberius, tell them to buy for me a plot, a grave, next to the one of Prophet Hosea."

And the legend adds, the night Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt died, a heavenly voice woke the members of the Volhynia and Tiberius, and said to them, "Get up. All of you, get up. Your master is arriving. Attend to him. Honor him as a leader of holy communities. Honor him. He deserves to be honored as he is returning to his place." And the [01:14:00] watchmen of the community, we are told in Hasidic legend, saw a casket whooshing through the air, accompanied to the cemetery by thousands and thousands of souls.

Another legend tells of another curious episode. On the eve of the Rebbe's death, a vegetable vendor in Apt, or was it Medzhybizh, told her neighbor of a dream she had had the night before. She had seen her late husband passing by without noticing her. So she ran after him and cried, "My dear husband, first you left me with little orphans. And now you don't even recognize me?" And her husband whispered to her, "Don't shout. I cannot stop. I am not allowed to stop and talk to you. I have to purify the air, for all the just souls who are preparing themselves to escort the holy Rebbe of Apt into the world of truth." And finally, one [01:15:00] more legend. At the moment

of his death, Reb Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt opened his eyes, looked at his sons, his daughters, his grandchildren, his disciples and theirs, his devoted friends, all those invisible men and women whom he had loved with all his heart, and he started to weep. He was gripped by compassion for each one of them, and for all of them together as he murmured, and I quote, "And the messiah. The messiah who is still not coming. When will he come at last, when? We are waiting for him. We are waiting. And he is late in coming. Why is he late?" He stopped to catch his breath, and then continued in an infinitely sorrowful voice, and I quote again. "I remember when Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev [01:16:00] left this world, he promised that he would go to see all our saintly ancestors. And he would beg them to do something. He would not leave them in peace until the messiah would come to save his people. But the angels deceived him. They lifted him up, and carried him from sphere to sphere, even higher, from sanctuary to sanctuary, revealing to him truths that were both ancient and unheard of, lights which were clear and dark at the same time. And in his delirium and his ecstasy, he forgot his promise. Yes," said the Apter Rebbe, "too bad for us, the Rebbe of Berditchev forgot his promise," and again, he stopped to catch his breath, and he continued. "But I -- I promise you, I will not forget. I swear to you. I shall not [01:17:00] forget."

But then, I am asking you, since he hasn't forgotten, why does the messiah still delay his coming? I am thinking of this last legend and a profound sadness comes over me. I, too, I remember. But it is other things that hound my memory. There was a time when many of us, friends and anonymous, faceless, ageless Jews, declared that if by a miracle, by the grace of God, we should escape and be spared and survive, we would dedicate our lives to telling the story of our agony and the agony of the Jewish people, [01:18:00] and human multitudes engulfed by the kingdom of night. If we survive, we said to each other, and to ourselves, we would make each day a monument and each night a prayer. So that upon the ruins of creation, the debt will never forgotten nor denigrated. A new hope would arise for future generations. Well, while we retell the legends of Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt, the lover of Israel, we ask ourselves, have we kept our promise? In the grip of daily worries, locked into circumstances, filled with temptations, fears, challenges, we do so many things. Too many things. And we [01:19:00] find so many pretexts and so many reasons. Who among us, friends, who among us can say that he or she has kept the pledge given to the dead who vanished into the dark recesses of history and the inscrutable imagination of its author. (audience applause)

M:

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