

Elie Wiesel In Hasidism: The Wonders of Rabbi Yisrael of Kozhenitz 92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive November 8, 1984

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) And it came to pass that when Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk felt that he was about to depart from this world, he summoned to his bed his most beloved disciples to offer them his farewell gifts. He gave his sight to the Seer of Lublin. His mind to Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov. His wisdom to the Rebbe of Apt. And his heart to Rabbi Yisrael, the Maggid of Kozhenitz. The story of the Maggid is the story of the Jewish heart.

A woman, a simple peasant woman, came to [00:01:00] him one day, and poured her heart out to him. She had been married for many, many years to a good man, a pious Jew. God-fearing, studious, learned. In the beginning, they were happy. They continued to be happy. How could it be otherwise? They had bread and milk for their daily meals. They had wine and fish for the Sabbath. God is, after all, the father of his people, of all people. It would be sinful not to feel happiness, except -- except that we are also unhappy, said the woman. We are unhappy because we are childless. "I see," said the tzadik. "I see." And after a while, he said, "Tell me, woman, what are you willing to do

about all this?" The woman didn't understand what he meant, or she kept quiet.

"My mother [00:02:00]," continued the Maggid with a smile, "my mother had the same problem. She was getting old. In fact, she was old. And still, she had no child. She wept. She cried. She tried fasting, and still, nothing happened. One day, she heard that the Besht, the Baal Shem Tov, the master of the good name, that the Besht himself was in town. She ran to his inn and pleaded with him to intercede in heaven on her behalf.

'What are you willing to do about all this?' he asked her.

'What can I do?' she replied. 'I can do nothing. My husband is a poor bookbinder, and I am his wife. We have nothing but ourselves. No, we do have something. I have a caftan, a cape, and I will give it to you.' She ran home, fetched the cape, and hurried back to the inn. Too late. The Besht had gone back to his place in Medzhybizh. So, she set out to follow him

[00:03:00] on foot. She walked from town to town, from village to village, until she reached Medzhybizh. She eventually found the right street, the right house. And when she found the Besht, she handed him the cape and waited. The Besht took the cape, hung it on the wall, and said, 'Now all is well.'

Whereupon my mother walked back to Apt and I was born one year later." "Thank you, thank you," shouted the woman excitedly.

"Now I know what to do. I'm going to bring you the best and most expensive cape in town." "No," said the Maggid. "Don't. It won't work. You see, there is a difference between my mother and you. You know the story." (laughter)

Amusing and charming as it may sound, this anecdote [00:04:00] does present some difficulties and warrants some comments. First of all, it does sound Hasidic, but not entirely. Not entirely because the woman in the story does not receive help. How is that possible? One woman becomes pregnant because of her story, and another one does not, all because of the same story. Isn't everybody entitled to benefit from the same story, the same way? And if not from the story, what about the rebbe and his sympathy, and his compassion, and his intercession? Really, is that why the woman came to the Maggid, to hear a funny story? What about her problem, what about her pain, her solitude, her anguish? What about her anguish? Why did the Maggid allow her to leave unconsolated? Because he had told her the story? So what. [00:05:00] Since when is ignorance better and worthier than knowledge? If not knowing Hasidic stories is a virtue, why are they told at all? Why did he tell her the story in the first place, and why are we repeating it?

At this point, we cannot but sympathize with the poor woman and take issue with the holy master for not empathizing enough with her. But we are only at the beginning of our pilgrimage tonight. Wait. Wait for a few more stories, legends, anecdotes, sayings. And perhaps our attitude will change. And who knows, our possible criticism of the man may turn into admiration. Such miracles do occur in Hasidism. Actually, some of you may remember that the great Maggid of Kozhenitz, his name was Rabbi Yisrael Hopstein, [00:06:00] is no stranger to our annual gatherings. He has been mentioned on numerous occasions, and always, he got favorable notices. He made guest appearances during our encounters with the great jester of Hasidism, Rabbi Naftali Ropshitzer, and with the awesome Seer, the khoyzer of Lublin. And with the magnificent defender of Israel, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev.

In fact, the Maggid of Kozhenitz was present during all our journeys to the sources of Hasidic inspiration and fervor. One cannot enter the dazzling gardens of the Beshtian movement without finding him waiting somewhere among the pillars. One cannot evoke Hasidism without feeling attracted to him as well. Because of his wisdom? Others may well have been wiser. Because of his erudition? Others may [00:07:00] well have been more learned. Because of his wonders and miracles? Greatness

is not necessarily measured by miracles. No, he was great for different reasons, on different levels. And we intend to elaborate on that later, as we dedicate this entire evening to his personality, to his life and work. But now, you already know that what we remember him for most is his heart. He had, in spite of the story, a Jewish heart, and a very warm one. So, we shall tell stories by him and about him. For what would Hasidism be without stories? It even offers us stories, against stories, stories to diminish the importance of stories. And when this occurs, what does one do? One waits before passing judgment. And while waiting, one tells another story.

But before doing that, [00:08:00] perhaps we should, on this third encounter this year, open again a few parentheses. One is an announcement more than a parenthesis and more than a remark. It is to say thank you to Reb Lavey Derby, who is the rabbi here, who has been for the last three weeks giving extraordinary sessions, I hear. Preparing some of you, hundreds of you, for these study lectures. And although he told you today that today was the last time he met with you this year, we are overruling him, and he will meet with his students, four hundred of his students, next week again at the same time in the same place. I also -- (applause) want to thank our friends in Harrisburg, who are still there, more and more. [00:09:00] And we are very

pleased, because they too have their study sections, and John Ruskay told me that maybe next year, we shall learn from that lesson and have joint sessions with dozens and dozens of cities and communities.

One more remark which has nothing to do with our subject but has everything to do with all subjects. Just before coming, I watched the news, and on the news, I saw what is happening in Ethiopia. I cannot tell you how affected one is, because I'm If we can send space vehicles around the world and we can do whatever we want to in science, in technology, in medicine, and not to be able an airlift to Ethiopia, to save those children with their faces, something is wrong. sure you are. That is absolutely impossible for us to sit here and talk about something so essential as Hasidism or Judaism or literature and forget there are ten million people now who are dying in Ethiopia. [00:10:00] Those children with their faces must haunt us, in everything we do, in every word we utter. There is something wrong; there is something despicably wrong with our society. (audience applauses)

I believe that literature, I believe that religion, I believe that religious literature, culture, mean sensitivity. We read more because we are more sensitive. And the more we read, the

more sensitive we become. And therefore, we should read more [00:11:00] and therefore, we should become more sensitive. And therefore, we tell stories. Tonight, we tell stories about Hasidism, and what is the Hasidic movement if not an exercise, an adventure in human sensitivity? What is a story? An enclosure. It exists by itself, but not for itself. You wish to capture its beauty, listen. You wish to comprehend its meaning, listen better, more intently. Be ready to enter it and search for its hidden zones. But how does one enter anything? A story is like the human heart, according to the great Maggid, Rebbe Dov Ber of Mezeritch. And the Maggid of Mezeritch, who succeeded the Besht, said, "If the heart is not open, use a key. And if there is [00:12:00] no key, break it." But please, latecomers, do not break the door. It is open.

Rabbi Yisrael Hopstein, the Maggid of Kozhenitz, was born in the city of Apt near Sandomierz in the year 1737. Which creates yet another problem with our earlier [00:13:00] story, which had to have taken place a year earlier in 1736. The year of the Besht's revelation. Is it possible that the Maggid's mother had already heard of the Besht's miracle so soon? He revealed himself in the neighborhood of Brody and settled in Medzhybizh much later. And yet the story tells us that the Maggid's mother followed him to Medzhybizh. How is one to solve these problems

of chronology and geography? Fortunately, Hasidism chooses to pay attention to neither. But there are other difficulties as well. There are different versions. Better yet, different stories about the Maggid's mother being helped by the Besht. Listen.

It was Friday evening and the Besht, surrounded by his close disciples, was celebrating the holiness and the [00:14:00] purity of Shabbat. Suddenly, the master fell silent, sinking into a meditation which lasted for hours. No one dared make a move for fear of disturbing him. Finally, he seemed to awaken, for he burst into laughter. When the Sabbath was over, Rabbi Zev Kitses timidly asked the Besht why he had laughed. "Come with me," he told his disciples. "I want you to meet someone special." The coach was ready; the horses were impatient. "We are going to Apt," said the Besht to his faithful coachman, Alexey. It was far? Not for the Besht's horses. They arrived in Apt before dawn. "Fetch a bookbinder named Shabtai," the Besht ordered his disciples. They found him and brought him to their master. "Tell us what you did [00:15:00] on the Sabbath eve," the Besht demanded.

And the bookbinder replied, "Since you mention it, this Sabbath was indeed special. You see, rebbe, until now, I worked hard

throughout and made just enough to allow my wife, Perele, to go to the market and buy candles, wine, fish and meat and challah for Shabbat. This week, I earned nothing. I am too old and my customers are leaving me. So, I told my wife, 'Perele, if this is God's will, so be it. We must not borrow money, nor shall we accept charity. Better fast and stay in darkness than depend on someone else's pity.' As always, I went to shul, said the usual prayers, and came home ready to sit down in darkness and fast. But to my surprise, there was light in my house and the table was covered with the finest dishes and the best wines. I did not wish to pain my wife, [00:16:00] so I did not ask her why she violated our pact and borrowed money. But she had not. She told me so during the meal. What had happened was that she had discovered on an old jacket of mine some golden buttons. And she had sold them for enough money to buy what she needed to prepare the Sabbath meal. When I heard that, I felt such joy, such ecstasy, that I took my wife and began dancing with her." And the Besht nodded and said, "I saw you dancing, and I could not help laughing. For the entire community of angels in heaven joined in your dance." And in spite of their advanced age, the old bookbinder, Shabtai, and his wife, Perele, had a child. The future Maggid of Kozhenitz.

Another version. [00:17:00] It was Kol Nidre eve and all of a sudden, the old synagogue of Apt witnessed something that always happened: a quarrel broke out about nusach style and tradition. Which tradition to follow in saying the piyutim, which certain chapters, which ones to omit and when. And the two sides fought with such conviction and vigor that all the prayerbooks were torn apart. At the end of the evening, someone turned to the bookbinder, Reb Shabtai, and said jokingly, "With all these damaged prayerbooks, you at least are bound to have a good New Year." (laughter) But the bookbinder, so concentrated had he been in the prayer, did not know what the man [00:18:00] was talking about. As a reward for his pious concentration, his New Year was a better one. His wife, Perele, gave birth to a son, and what a son. The future Maggid of Kozhenitz.

And there is yet a fourth version. (laughter) It happened during the winter, and the winters are brutal in Apt. Perele, Reb Shabtai's wife, went as was her custom to the river for an obligatory ritual immersion, tevila. When she found the river frozen, she went back for a hatchet and cut a hole into the ice. And performed the mitzvah of ablutions of tevila. That night, she told her husband, "I almost died while immersing myself in the icy waters. I almost [00:19:00] died while performing the mitzvah, the commandment of God. So my dear husband, please,

tonight, let your sword fly higher. Think higher." (laughter)
And so, according to this story, (laughter) it was thanks again to her virtues that the future Maggid of Kozhenitz was born unto them. One thing is clear from all the stories: that Reb Shabtai and Perele were old, very old, when they had their son. And in fact, they had him prematurely. He was born after seven months.

And no wonder then that in due time, Rabbi Yisrael involved himself with miracles. And especially with those helping barren parents. A boy in such a situation is usually spoiled, but he was not. [00:20:00] He himself often recalled a painful episode from the time he was seven. Even then, he loved to study, while some of his companions did not. During Hanukkah evenings, yeshiva students often played cards. And one particular Hanukkah evening, he promised his father that he would not join them. Instead, he would stay in the house of prayer only until three small candles remained lit. But a miracle happened and the candles lasted until late into the night. When he came home, his father scolded him. "You played cards," he said, and gave him what he thought was an educational spanking. "He was wrong," the Maggid said later. "I was studying. Had I said so, my father would have believed me. But I didn't want to use study for Torah, and I didn't want to use the study of Torah, [00:21:00] not even for the sake of avoiding a spanking."

That he was a good student is clear from the fact, recorded in the official Pinkas, the official book, the chronicle of Apt, that he was admitted as a full-fledged member of the scholarly association of Ner Tamid, the eternal light, when he was only seven. He had to pay dues, and his father paid them for him. Three silver coins. When -- at what age did he develop his attraction for Hasidism? Late, very late. He visited the great Maggid of Mezeritch, who had succeeded the Besht, and was impressed. And in fact, he was the Maggid's youngest disciple. But why did he wait so long? Why didn't he go to see the Besht himself, if only to say thank you? He surely knew the story with the cape, since he was the one who revealed it.

[00:22:00] The fact is, he didn't go, although he must have been 20, 23, when the Besht died, which means he was there when his Besht really led his greatest activities on behalf of Hasidism. But then, that is true of some other masters. One of them we have spoken about some years and years ago, Reb Elimelech of Lizensk, also could have gone to see the Besht and didn't. But later on, he regretted it, and there is a marvelous story about it that he would -- he would be so pained, so chagrined that he did not see the Besht, he would dream about him. And he would pray, somehow, to see him again. And the story tells us that

one night, late, he was standing at the window and thinking of the Besht. And all of a sudden, he saw a flame on the other side. And that flame had the face of the Besht. He knew it, and he was afraid, and at the same time, [00:23:00] ecstatic. So he said something, and because he said something, the flame broke into 60 thousand sparks. And every spark had the face of the Besht.

The Maggid, as we said, was 22 or 23 when the Besht died. And we know that Medzhybizh is not too far away from Apt, and yet, he didn't go there. And one possible explanation, not a very good one, is that he was too busy studying. He did travel a lot, but only to yeshivot, not to Hasidic masters yet. He went through Volhynia and Poland and studied with the men whom Eastern European Jewry considered its most prestigious teachers. One of them was Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg, who was known both as a Talmudic scholar and a Hasidic master. The young Rebbe Yisrael probably sought him out and the scholar befriended him. The Maggid remembered [00:24:00] having spoken on the topic of Hanukkah in the presence of Reb Shmuel, and I quote him. "All the dignitaries were ready to swallow me up alive." But then, Reb Shmelke remarked, "Good, good." And they all remained mute.

The young student also befriended Reb Shmuel's brother, the famous Rabbi Pinchas, the author of the *Hafla'ah*. The two brothers were faithful followers of the Maggid of Mezeritch. Under their influence, Rabbi Yisrael decided to go to Mezeritch and see for himself. And legend has it that he worked hard to save money to purchase a horse and a coach and to hire a coachman. The journey lasted many weeks. When at last he arrived in Mezeritch, he met Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the great scholar and philosopher and mystic, the founder of Chabad of Lubavitch. Who, in turn, introduced him to the Maggid of Mezeritch. [00:25:00] And the Maggid said, "Young man, where are you from?" "From Kozhenitz." "Where is it?" "Not far from Warsaw." "Good," said the Maggid. "I'm glad you came. I need you. I have in my possession a Lurianic prayerbook in manuscript, and you will proofread it."

Rabbi Yisrael stayed in Mezeritch 12 weeks. If one is to believe the Hasidic legend, and who would dare not to believe Hasidic legend, that the Maggid of Kozhenitz had finished reading eight hundred books on Kabbalah before he came to Mezeritch. But when he saw the old master, he understood immediately, he knew nothing. Not yet. But why did he leave Mezeritch? He had to. He had a wife, Raizel, and a son, Reb Moshe. The wife, his second. The first was Reb Aharon

Brisker's daughter, a great Talmudic scholar, the author of [00:26:00] *Minchat Aharon*. And we know that Rabbi Aharon wanted him very much as a son-in-law, but something went wrong and we do not know what. I tried to find sources, I went back everywhere. Nobody knows why their marriage didn't work. All we know is that it didn't last long. We also know that Rabbi Yisrael remarried and the family grew, two sons and two daughters.

He had to make a living. As Rebbe? No, not at first. At first, he did what most Hasidic masters had done before him: he became a melamed, an instructor, a teacher. Then, he became a preacher from Kozhenitz. And since the community was poor, unable to offer decent salaries, Reb Yisrael had also to preach in neighboring villages such as Magnishow and Grójec. His father, Rabbi Shabtai, died in 1761. And [00:27:00] every year, the Maggid went to visit his grave in the town of Apt. So naturally, local dignitaries invited him each time to preach in their synagogue, and he usually complied. One year he refused, explaining, "Did I accomplish anything with last year's sermon? So why do it again?"

Nobody protested; they were too polite. But that day, hundreds and hundreds of Jews gathered in front of the inn where the

Maggid stayed, waiting in silence for him to appear and speak. And when he did, they lowered their heads, still waiting. And suddenly, a man of the forest said aloud, "Rebbe, I wish to speak to you alone." They went inside. "Rabbi," said the man, "in my case, you did accomplish something. You spoke last year of the necessity for every Jew to have God before him.

[00:28:00] Well, since last year, I do. I constantly see his name before me. It is written with black fire on white fire, and it is you who made me see it." And so the Maggid preached another sermon.

From local chronicles, we know that he was a good preacher. In contrast to his colleagues, he rarely invoked fire and brimstone, but spoke with tenderness instead. He advocated love, not fear. The Torah must be obeyed not because of hell and its punishment, but because of its own infinite measure of gratification. Only once a year would he speak of sin and its consequences: on Yom Kippur eve, when the entire community of Israel, and indeed, the whole world, pass before the Almighty for sentencing. Penitence and repentance are then prerequisites.

"Let us atone for our sins," [00:29:00] the Maggid would say to his congregation, "but my sins are greater and heavier than

yours. I am a worse sinner than you." When one of his friends once asked him whether he truly believed what he had said, "Of course I do," replied the Maggid. "Impossible," objected the friend. "Why impossible?" asked the Maggid. "Just think about it. We are all about to enter the holiest day of the year, ready to fast, ready to pray and do penitence. Don't you know, my friend, that in matters of teshuvah, a hirhur, a thought, is sufficient?" His friend said nothing, so the Maggid continued. "Really, my friend. All these people are doing teshuvah. And you want to tell me that I, Yisrael, son of Perl of Kozhenitz, I should see in them sinners when I would be the sinner? No, my friend. They all did teshuvah, and they are all good Jews, loyal to their people, faithful to their ancestors. [00:30:00] And only I, who know myself, only I am a sinner."

A preacher he was, a preacher he remained. Unlike some of his close friends, such as the Rav of Liadi or of Berditchev, he never occupied the pulpit. He was not a rabbi, but a rebbe. After the death of the Maggid of Mezeritch, he chose Reb Elimelech of Lizensk as his master. Of his teacher, then he said, "I know more than he in matters of Kabbalah. And even in Talmud. But when it comes to mesirat nefesh, dedication to God and to other people; when it comes to ahavat Hashem, love of God and love of people, I learn from him." Yet he, as all the other

disciples, together they strengthened and enriched the Hasidic experience among the hungry and despairing Jewish masses, from the Dnieper to the Vistula and beyond. How he became a [00:31:00] rebbe? There is a story about it. There is a story about everything. One day, he visited his friend of whom we shall speak a little bit later, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev. It was winter, and the Maggid was dressed in a warm overcoat. Reb Levi Yitzchok accompanied him outside, forgetting to put on his own kaftan. "Lend me your coat," he said to his visitor. They walked and walked, and finally, Reb Levi Yitzchok returned the Maggid's coat, saying, "Now it's your turn to be warm." And that, according to legend, was a sign for the Maggid that it is his turn to become a rebbe.

Like Levi Yitzchok, the Maggid of Kozhenitz suffered greatly from the misnagdim, the opponents to the movement. The adversaries had picked both of them as their favorite targets. When Reb Levi Yitzchok was chased from his home, he sought refuge in Kozhenitz. And when the Maggid was [00:32:00] driven out of Kozhenitz, he fled to his friend, who then lived in Żelechów. There was a man there named Dovid of Makov. He was Hasidism's fiercest enemy. He wrote pamphlets upon pamphlets against them. And he hated the Kozhenitzer Maggid most of all. Was it because the Maggid had tried to prevent the publication

of his vitriolic, anti-Hasidic pamphlet? The pamphlet was a personal smear attack against all Hasidic masters. But particularly against the Maggid, who stood accused of being, and I quote, "So busy performing miracles that he has no time left for study." Now, that was really the problem then between Hasidism and misnagdim. The Hasidim said that the misnagdim don't pray. The misnagdim said the Hasidim don't study. Were they right? They were not. Now we know that they were not right. Neither was right. [00:33:00] But about Hasidism, we know at least one thing. That the first generation of the masters, those who joined the Besht, all of them were very great scholars. And it is inconceivable that they would have joined a movement and its leader if that movement and their leader would have advocated ignorance instead of study.

What did they advocate? They advocated simplicity, first of all. Meaning that one can reach God also through simple gestures. That if you don't know the Zohar, it's alright; you can still reach God with Sh'ma Yisrael. But don't stay with it. Once you know Sh'ma Yisrael, you should study prayer, and after prayer, you should study Torah, and afterwards Talmud, and then ultimately, the Zohar. One more example that should be quoted. We know [00:34:00] that most of these masters, of the first and second generation, they came to the Hasidic movement from the

opposition. They grew up as adversaries, and then, so to speak, they converted. We don't know of any example in the reverse. Not one Hasidic master became an adversary of the movement. They became their own adversaries. But that's something else. Hasidism at the end, because of the virtues that it incarnated, and because of the need it fulfilled, it won. At the end of the life of the Baal Shem Tov, Hasidism could really boast of a victory. It wasn't a landslide, but -- (laughter) almost. Almost.

What did they do? First of all, they discovered nature. Hasidism was a [00:35:00] return to nature. The Baal Shem Tov, the master of the good name, took his disciples like Rabbi Ari HaKadosh in Tzfat to nature, in the forest. And you must know that our people then, in those places and those times, who lived in the cities, who lived always hidden because of persecutions and fear -- suddenly, they discovered nature. There are trees, there are heavens, the sky is blue. And people could walk under the sky. The Baal Shem Tov characteristically when he began, he began as a teacher, as a tutor. And his task was to take Jewish children and accompany them from their homes to cheder. And we know what he did and how he did it. That there was an enemy who would beat them up, so he was there to defend the children. And he would walk with them slowly, singing. Now, remember that

image. [00:36:00] In the 18th century, the middle of the 18th century, when Jews lived in constant terror -- you could never see a Jew walking in the street, he was always running. Either running home or running to shul or running to the market or away from the market. Here comes the Baal Shem Tov, and he said, "Don't run. We walk. Slowly. Gently. And we sing. To sing in the street. Because what he said was true is always true, *layt apar panui minay*. God is everywhere."

And therefore, one more thing that he taught is to dream. He restored the dream to the Jewish community. And in those times, it was so difficult to dream. It was immediately after the Khmelnitsky pogroms, it was immediately after the Shabtai adventure, which turned bad, [00:37:00] and the Jewish communities from the Carpathian Mountains to the Dnieper would have gone under hadn't it been for this man and his friends. Who came to announce the news that God is not only the judge -- he is that too; he's not only the king of the universe -- he is that too; he's not only the father of all his children -- he is that too; but he is also our friend. The only movement, the only religious movement that I know, the only religious tradition which speaks of God as the friend of human beings, the friend of his children, is the Hasidic tradition.

Let us briefly examine the context: the second part of the 18th and the early part of the 19th centuries, during which Hasidism attained its consummate expression, both religious and socially -- have never ceased [00:38:00] to fascinate us. So much violence on one hand; so much naivete on the other. Washington and Lafayette fought for American independence, while the holy Maggid and his disciples established Hasidic kingdoms l'shem shamayim, for the sake of heaven. French revolutionaries introduced the word "terror" into our vocabulary, while proclaiming the reign of reason and liberty. While in Eastern Europe, the question for Jews was whether in the musaf service, what kind of word we should use -- nakdishach or *keter*. Napoleon altered the national physiognomy and the cultural landscape of Europe and beyond, but what mattered to Hasidism was the outcome of the dispute between Lisensk and Lublin.

And later, between Lublin and Pshiskhe. Danton and Robespierre, Bach and Beethoven, Kant and Goya, Mozart, the great Mozart, and Goethe were all [00:39:00] contemporaries of Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi, l'havdil. Contemporaries of Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg, Reb Zusya of Hanipol, Reb Mendel the Rimanover and the Maggid of Kozhenitz. They lived in the same period. Was there no similarity in the way they reacted to its impact? Was Jewish history so separate from other people's history?

Occasionally, there were contacts, mostly hostile. Whenever nations went to war, Jews were among the first to suffer. On the other hand, when emancipation imposed itself as the latest fashion, Jews were its victims as much as its beneficiaries. Forced conversion was followed not by cultural freedom, but by forced assimilation. That is why Jews resisted both with equal passion. If the Maggid and his friends opposed compulsory military service for Jews, it was not out of fear for [00:40:00] their lives, but for their souls. When equal rights were granted to all citizens, some Hasidic leaders, including the Maggid of Kozhenitz, wanted them delayed. As far as Jews were concerned, they were apprehensive. They thought Jews might be affected by their newly won freedom in ways that would not make them better Jews, but more distant Jews.

However, as some of us know, on a higher mystical level, attempts were made by some Hasidic masters to merge Jewish history with general history and redeem both at the same time. That endeavor, known in Hasidic literature as the messianic conspiracy, was the work of three great masters, Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov, the Seer of Lublin, the Maggid of Kozhenitz. Redemption was their common obsession. Redemption was the obsession of all masters and all their followers. It remains the obsession [00:41:00] of all Jews. We are still waiting for

the Messiah. But redemption may mean a different reality or lack of reality to different people. Having concluded that most solutions to problems usually brought forth new problems, they opted to pray for the ultimate remedy, the Messiah. And said the Maggid of Kozhenitz, and I quote him with a smile: "*Ribono Shel Olam*, he said, master of the universe, I plead with you on behalf of thy people, Israel. Send us the redeemer. If for reasons known to you alone, you should be unwilling to redeem us, then you know what? Redeem all the others."

And this beautiful prayer is characteristic of the man. First of all, of his total faith in prayer. Of his concern for his brethren. And for people in general. [00:42:00] His mission on Earth? To offer help and hope. Whoever needed help knew where to turn. There exist innumerable legends about his powers to heal the sick, comfort the poor, encourage the forsaken. They called him the second Baal Shem Tov. There was an element of the supernatural in his own lifestyle. His younger sister had died at a young age, but the heavenly tribunal gave her permission to dwell in her brother's house. And according to legend, the Maggid would consult her in matters of charity. But so the story goes, she loved to watch the servants and report on their misdeeds to her brother. And the Maggid disliked

informers and told her to keep quiet. She felt hurt and left the house forever.

His house was a busy house. Whoever needed a home, whoever [00:43:00] needed a roof, came to the Maggid. He, for instance, received under his roof Reb Itche Meir of Ger, the future great master of Ger, and Reb Osher of Stolin, the founder of the Stoliner dynasty. And they grew up under his supervision. His house was always full, full of wandering beggars and melancholy innkeepers in need of something. Childless couples, abandoned wives, children of imprisoned parents all came to Kozhenitz in quest of miracles. Few Hasidic masters are reputed to have performed as many miracles as he did for as many supplicants.

Why did they all come to him? Perhaps because he had an aura of saintliness about him. Thin, emaciated, weak, unable to walk, he had to be carried physically, literally, day after day, carried to the house of prayer. [00:44:00] Physicians marveled at his ability to stay alive. Medically, they said, he was beyond their reach. He would spend days and nights in bed, rising only for services. But once inside the shtibl, he would jump to his place near the ark. Once, when he was invited to a circumcision ceremony, his disciples wanted to help him into his carriage, but he angrily rejected their assistance. "Naronim,

silly ones," he said. "You think I need your help? It is written, *im kaveh l'Adoshem yakhlifu koakh*, I borrow God's strength, and he has more strength than you." And the Maggid walked from the carriage to the circumcision. What does it mean? It means that if he could perform miracles for others, he could also, for the sake of a mitzvah, accomplish them for himself.

Were miracles his trademark, [00:45:00] his distinctive sign? No. Prayer was. Said he, and I quote him, "I love to pray. Nothing is as gratifying to me, nothing gives me as much joy, nothing offers me as much fulfillment." Nothing? What about study? Study too, naturally. But to him, prayer and study were totally compatible. One enriched and completed the other, and in fact, that is what I like most about him. Had he chosen one or the other, one against the other, he would have remained, I think, a marginal figure in the Hasidic tradition. But he managed to combine both. What he did is what all Hasidic masters did: they created the synthesis of Jewish learning, of Jewish customs, of Jewish thoughts, of Jewish songs. A very great writer and poet, [00:46:00] and the son of a great writer, Rabbi Aharon Zeitlin, *zichrono livracha*, the son of Hillel Zeitlin, *z"l*, said, "What the Hasidic masters used to do is

extraordinary, because they managed to take everyday gestures and words and sanctify them, rather than the opposite."

Everything became sacred. To drink became a sacred gesture. To go to see the rebbe was a sacred mission. Every word was sacred, because every person is sacred. He loved to learn, and he was a great scholar, as we shall see. So learned was he that even the goyim, the Gaon, Reb Chaim of Volozhin, praised his erudition, and I quote him. "When I as a wanderer came to Kozhenitz," said Reb Chaimel, "I discussed Talmud with the Maggid and found him to be erudite in the Babylonian and Palestinian treatises, which he knew [00:47:00] by heart, as well as the Tosafot." He wrote about Halacha and Haggadah, Talmud and Kabbalah, about Maimonides and the Maharal of Prague, the man about whom it is wrongly said that he created the golem. And in this case alone, I don't agree with my friend, Mark Podwal, who wants me to believe that he did.

What hasn't he written about? He wrote about philosophy and mitzvot. Rabbi Yitzchak Luria and Rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda. His knowledge was profound and all-encompassing, but for him, unlike for many others, it constituted no obstacle to prayer. "Man must be consumed by his prayers," said the Maggid of Kozhenitz. And we know that often, he lost consciousness during services.

Once in the middle of *Keter Yitnu L'cha*, he fainted. And only when someone called his [00:48:00] name did he regain consciousness. And to his son, Reb Moshele, he said, "There isn't an alien thought that did not come to me while I prayed. But I restored every one of them to its sacred origin."

Legend has it that when his son, Reb Moshe, fell ill, desperately ill, the Maggid was overcome with sadness. And he began speaking about a text in the Bible about Hagar and her child. When Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, who at that time was still living in the neighboring village of Zelichov, heard of the Maggid's comment, he went to the mikvah and prayed to heaven to influence the Maggid's strength of thought so that he would pray for the recovery of his son instead of reflecting on Hagar. And he succeeded. And we are told that the Maggid prayed for his son and his son recovered. But Hasidic [00:49:00] legend in its generosity adds that that night, his son was not the only child to recover from his illness. All the sick children did, everywhere.

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev was one of his closest friends. When he was thrown out by his opponents on Hoshana Rabbah, in the middle of the holiday, he came to seek refuge in Kozhenitz. Later, when the Berditchever was, as we remember, deprived of

his mystical powers and went into depression and remained in solitude, he again sought and found comfort and companionship in the home of the Maggid. And we are told that for six months, Reb Levi Yitzchak, the most extrovert, the most generous, the most outspoken man in Hasidism, the most [00:50:00] daring defender of Israel -- he, in his depression, could do nothing but pray from a small siddur, a small prayerbook, not understanding what he was saying.

We have mentioned this disquieting phenomenon on other occasions. Most Hasidic masters had such periods. But they usually emerged from them stronger. By helping their followers, they helped themselves. And the Maggid helped -- couldn't but help. He helped Jews and non-Jews. They all flocked to him: princes, generals, noblemen, all had faith in him. Prince Poniatowski, Prince Czartoryski, Count Potocki, swore by him, and these are not legends -- these are facts. Prince Czartoryski had no sons, so [00:51:00] he pleaded with the Maggid of Kozhenitz to give him his blessing and pray for him. And the Maggid did, and he said to God, and I quote, "Master of the universe," he said, "you have so many gentiles in this world of yours. What do you care if you have one more?" (laughter) Actually, the Maggid of Kozhenitz had an exquisite sense of humor. A woman came to him weeping; her husband had left her.

"Why?" asked the Maggid. "He claims that I am old and ugly."
"Well, maybe you are," said the Maggid. "Yes," said the woman,
"but I used to be young and pretty." "Oh, master of the
universe," the Maggid exclaimed, "isn't this the story of your
people, too? Maybe today, after centuries of exile and
hardship, we have grown old and ugly. But remember in the
beginning when we first met? Knesset Yisrael, the community of
Israel was young and [00:52:00] fervent. And you ran after us,
didn't you?" (laughter)

A wealthy Hasid boasted before him of eating bread and drinking
water all week long. "Why do you do that?" the Maggid asked
him. "I am modest," said the man, "and my desires are modest."
"Don't be," the Maggid shouted. "I want you to eat roast meat
and drink wine." And to his Hasidim, he explained, "If rich
people eat meat, at least they realize that poor people need
bread. If rich people eat bread alone, they will think that
poor people can live on stones." (laughter) A villager and his
wife cried their heart out before him; they wanted a son, and
they were desperate. "Alright," said the Maggid. "I shall give
you my blessing, but it will cost you 52 gulden." "Why 52?"
"Because 52 is the numerical value of Ben, a son, the Hebrew
word [00:53:00] for son." "No," said the villager. "Thirty."
"No," said the Maggid. "Fifty-two." "In that case," said the

villager, "we won't need you. Come, woman," he said to his wife, "let's go home. God will help us without his blessing." And the Maggid smiled. "He has already helped you."

At this point, maybe you should explain, why do they take money? Why did some of these rebbes take money? In truth, most of them didn't keep the money. They would take money from some and give them to the others. Most Hasidic masters, it was known, never kept money in their home throughout the night. Whatever they gained during the day, they gave away to the poor people in the evening. But why did they take the money? And the reason is, it was called a pidyon, a kind of -- redemption, but a different kind of redemption. Why redemption? Because if the tzadik intercedes on behalf of someone, [00:54:00] it is possible that in heaven, they would say, "Who are you? What kind of person is this, who thinks that he is strong enough, is worthier than the others to pray for them? Isn't this a sin?" And so, the tzadik would say, "I know I am not worthy. But I am being paid for it." (laughter)

Once, the Maggid of Kozhenitz was told by one of his followers that an elderly couple, not of Hasidic background, had just had a child. "See?" the Maggid commented with tongue in cheek. "God wanted to show us something. He wanted to show us that he

too can confer miracles." (laughter) A couple was on the brink of divorce, and the Maggid wanted to know the reason. Said the husband, "I work hard all week. I long for the Shabbat. I love the Shabbat above all. I love kugel, [00:55:00] pudding. The problem is that the meals in our home are rich. I eat fish and meat and cholent. When the time for kugel arrives, I am no longer hungry." (laughter) "So, I plead with my wife, 'Serve kugel first.' She says, until her father's home, it was customary to serve kugel at the end of the meal." And therefore, they wanted to divorce. (laughter) And the Maggid said, "You are both right, and therefore, I order you to have two kugels on Sabbath." (laughter) "One at the beginning and one at the end." And since then, this kugel is called in the tradition of Kozhenitz, the *kugel sholom bayis*, the kugel that can bring peace to people. Because these two remained together.

Some of the stories had less happy endings. Constantine, the brother of Prince Adam Czartoryski, refused to give credence to the stories [00:56:00] about the Maggid's mystical powers. "You want proof?" he said to his brother. "Come, I'll give it to you." And they both went to the Maggid, and Constantine asked him to pray for his sick son, who was not sick at all. The Maggid did not respond. Laughing, Constantine insisted. And finally, the Maggid said to him, "Go home quickly. You may

still find him alive." And he didn't. But all the other legends deal with reward, not punishment. All the other legends deal with prayer. Kozhenitz means prayer. His book is called *Avodat Yisrael*, the Avodah meaning the prayer of Israel. It is the importance of prayer, the richness of prayer, the passion for prayer, that Kozhenitz illustrates. Remember, Hasidism saw in prayer the shortest way to heaven. The easiest as well.

[00:57:00] Some masters spent more time preparing for prayer than praying. Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev was one of them. When he came to visit the Maggid of Kozhenitz, the Maggid asked him to make an exception and do what people did in Kozhenitz, daven on time. Reb Levi Yitzchok promised, and tried, and failed. In his ecstasy, he forgot time. *Kavannah, devaykut, hitlahavut*, concentration, fusion, fervor, are key words in Hasidic vocabulary. It is not what one says but how one says it that matters. A simple Sh'ma Yisrael on the lips of a shepherd is worthier than a litany uttered by a sage. "Turn my tales into prayers," said Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. "What is prayer if not an expression of man's need to transcend himself and turn ordinary words into a ladder leading up to heavenly thrones?"

"The fact that I am a descendant [00:58:00] of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is enough to make me drunk and go around dancing,

dancing in the streets," said the Maggid of Kozhenitz. "Just imagine," said he, "I, a speck of dust, but a descendant of Abraham, can speak to God almighty, and address him as thou." What is prayer, if not a dialogue? A dialogue with God. All of a sudden, you are no longer alone. Yet you are alone -- alone with God, who listens. And at times, even responds. Prayer draws its fire and meaning from a most obscure zone in our being. A source where sound becomes word, and word becomes melody, and melody turns into offering. Prayer is an encounter with memory and God. Perhaps with God's memory. An encounter with oneself. A moment of grace, of abandonment, of affirmation, of recognition. If art is [00:59:00] man's way of saying no, prayer is his way of saying yes. Yes to creation, yes to creator, yes to life and its meaning, yes to faith, to hope, to joy. Yes to humanity. A beacon to the lost wanderer in the forest, a presence to dreamers in search of dreams, a window to the soul, prayer is what is most indispensable in man's passage on Earth. If Torah kept us alive, prayer kept our hope alive. God himself needs prayer. Ours and his own. What is His prayer, the Talmud tells us. *She'hikhbosh ka'asi va'rakhem al banai*, may I, God, contain my anger, and have pity on My children. When everything else seems lost, prayer still exists and thanks to it, everything else becomes possible again.

We know from so many chronicles and witness accounts that the Maggid used to study and daven in a singsong; [01:00:00] that is how he would speak, too. All his words were melodious, and Hasidim believed that his tune was special. He had heard it from the lips of angels. Other disciples maintained the opposite: that the angels learned the tune from him. And still others claimed that the angels were created by his tune. Kozhenitzer Hasidim explain how their master had acquired a beautiful melody, a niggun, which he alone would sing for Lecha Dodi, a certain prayer on erev Shabbat, on the Sabbath eve. Once at midnight, he heard a voice calling him, moaning, "Holy teacher, help me." "Who are you?" "A wandering soul. All gates are closed to me." "Who were you?" "I used to be a musician. I belonged to a troupe of minstrels and troubadours. I sinned a lot." "Why did you come to me?" "I played at your wedding, and you liked the tune. And you made me play it again and again." "Do you still remember it?" [01:01:00] asked the Maggid. "Play it!" And the dead musician did. And the following Friday evening, the Maggid sang that melody for Lecha Dodi. But nobody could join in, for nobody ever remembered it.

Like Reb Pinchas of Koretz, the Maggid of Kozhenitz loved singing. And when he was ill and weak, his friend, the Jew of Pshiskhe, sent him two disciples to sing for him. And his

health improved with every hour, with every song. The Jew of Pshiskhe said he knew that I had not managed to penetrate the olam haniginah, the world of melody. That is why he sent you to me. The Maggid said, "Every man leaves the bondage of Egypt of every day, and every day, we must receive the law. The Torah speaks of today, of today too. Its tales are for and about now. Cain and Abel, a story about jealousy. The Tower of Babel, [01:02:00] vanity. The floods, a story about lust." And said the Kozhenitzer Maggid, "God as my witness, that what gives me true pleasure is a fervent prayer. God grants me this pleasure as a reward for the few good things that I may have performed. But it makes me worry. For me, there may be no further compensation in the other world."

Now, we come back to the first story we told tonight. Remember it? Remember the unhappy woman? She was ready to buy the Maggid a caftan. Did the Maggid help her? First, we said no. Now, I say yes. He helped her because he taught her a lesson. That she doesn't need him. That it is possible to be heard in heaven without spending money on gifts and presents, without coming to rebbes, without coming to masters with pleas [01:03:00] and supplications. He taught her to rely on her own prayer and to be the author of her own story. What the Maggid of Kozhenitz sought to achieve with prayer was not only

individual improvement for his fellow Jews, but redemption on the cosmic scale.

Together with his two friends and associates, the Seer of Lublin and Reb Mendel of Rimanov, they conspired to hasten the coming of the Messiah. And they would meet, we know secretly, clandestinely, we know exactly where and when they would meet. To organize that revolution. For they saw in the Napoleonic wars that ravaged Europe a heavenly sign that the times were ripe. Those wars to them symbolized the apocalyptic upheavals of Gog and Magog, who according to mystical traditions, will precede the coming of the Messiah. The tsar and the emperor played the parts of Gog and Magog. Who should win, who should [01:04:00] be defeated? The Hasidic community at large was divided. Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi sided with the tsar. Reb Mendel with Napoleon.

The Maggid, in the beginning, agreed with Reb Mendel, but then yielded to Reb Shneur Zalman. Hasidic legend has enough information, or call it imagination, to give us the background. Reb Shneur Zalman and the Maggid agreed that whoever would blow shofar first would win the argument and the war. So, on that Rosh Hashanah, the Maggid urged his followers to pray fast, faster, still faster. But when he reached the part of tekiah

shofar, or the shofar blowing, he stopped and said, "Oy, Reb Shneur Zalman has outwitted me. His people had blown the shofar before services." (laughter) And so, the Maggid too turned against Napoleon. Which of course is the reason why the emperor was defeated at Waterloo. (laughter) [01:05:00] And if you think that Napoleon didn't know it, you are wrong. He knew it. There are Hasidic legends to prove it. (laughter) The emperor himself came to see the old Maggid, who received him lying in bed. And we know the details, so many details, of what Napoleon told him. He pleaded with him to no avail. Had the masters agreed on whom to support, the Messiah might have come. But then as today, unanimity is not the most obvious Jewish virtue. (laughter)

We know the three conspirators met often, usually at the home of the Kozhenitzer Maggid, who for health reasons, couldn't go anywhere. They had their secret discussions and prepared their secret moves for the next battles. And they worked on their plan. It appears that they were close to success when Satan, as always, used his own arguments up there in heaven [01:06:00] and the project was sabotaged. The three participants died the same year, 1815. The first to die was the Kozhenitzer Maggid. It was Erev Sukkot. He was close to 80, old, weak, sick. He had fought valiantly to the end. To his daughter, Perele, he once

remarked, "If I so wish, I could bring the Messiah." "Then father," she said, "Why don't you?" And he said, "The price of redemption would be high, too high. Jewish blood would be shed in the streets. People would search with candles for the Jew who has remained alive, and they would not find him." "Then don't," said his daughter. "The life of even a single person would be too high a price to pay." A variation of the same theme is told about Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev. He too sought redemption. Once, when he was about to utter [01:07:00] the mysterious names on Yom Kippur and thus break the chains holding the Messiah a prisoner, he suddenly perceived the crying of a hungry child. And he immediately hurried away to feed it. And he said, "The Messiah can wait. The hungry child cannot."

Since I mentioned Perele, perhaps we should say a few words about her, because she is a fantastic personality. She was a very strong character in the Hasidic movement. She studied Talmud. Not only the Bible. And she knew Talmud. Furthermore, we know that she would often don a tallit, a prayer shawl. And she would fast Mondays and Thursdays, like the mystics. Many Hasidim considered her a rebbe, not a rebbetzin. And they brought her kvitlech, soliciting her blessings. She was close to her father. Their relationship was reminiscent of the [01:08:00] relationship that existed between the Besht and his

daughter, Udel. But Perele's life was filled with tragedy. All her children died young, except the one, only one, who later became the Serafin of Magelnitzer.

The Maggid of Kozhenitz died on the eve of Sukkot in the year 1815. And Kozhenitz itself died during Sukkot 1942. We know from other chroniclers that the ghetto was evacuated, liquidated, on the first day of Chol Hamoed. People had felt the end was near. And they had felt it before the holiday, for on the first day of Sukkot, parents and children who met in the shul recited their prayers and bid farewell to each other. "Our life ends tomorrow," they said to one another, according to survivors. [01:09:00] Most were sent to Treblinka. The others to a nearby labor camp. One of them, a survivor named Leah, a woman, daughter of Yankl Sherman, tells of four Kozhenitzer Jews whom the Germans hanged publicly in the square. And the eyewitness said, and I quote her, "They were hanging, and the wind was moving them back and forth, back and forth. Not like human beings, but like laundry. Yes, like laundry."

As for the great-grandson of the Maggid, who had succeeded on the throne of Kozhenitz, Rabbi Aharon Yechiel, he was away from Kozhenitz. He had left his hometown before the outbreak of the war. He was active among young Jews, especially the

assimilated, trying desperately to bring them back to Judaism. He was known to be charismatic and artistic. Often, he would play the violin and sing, [01:10:00] and thus attract the youth. The war found him in Otwock near Warsaw. One day, in 1942, as he was studying Talmud, a messenger came to tell him the tragic news about what was happening in Treblinka. For a while, he remained motionless. Bent over the Talmud. Then, it is told, he whispered to himself, "In this case, why go on living? It's too much to bear." He stood up, went into another room, settled into a chair, and died.

Strange part of all this is the Maggid himself. The Maggid, one day, had an argument -- silent argument -- with one of his predecessors, the famous Reb Yankev Yosef of Polnoy, who was the first chronicler of Hasidism. Reb Yankev Yosef of Polnoy wanted to predict the coming of the Messiah, [01:11:00] and he said, "The Messiah will come in taf shin alef." Meaning in 1941, because he explored a sentence, *ki tisa et rosh b'nei Yisrael*, when the people of Israel will lift their heads, it's in the Bible. And taf sin alef - tisa - means 1941. The Maggid said, "He is wrong. The Geulah will come not in 1941. The redemption will come," he said, "in 1942." Because, he said, 1942 is taf shin bet. Taf shin bet is Shabbat, and Shabbat means Shabbat menuchah. Which means, in 1942, he said, the people of Israel

will at last know some peace. Poor Maggid of Kozhenitz. 1942, to him, was the year of redemption. That was the year when Kozhenitz ended.

That was the year [01:12:00] when -- the killing of the Jews had attained cosmic proportions. Did he feel it? He must have felt that something is wrong in creation. He was heard whispering, "Master of the universe, I beseech you to send us the redeemer. If you need a Kohen Gadol, a high priest, I will show you the holy rebbe of Apt. If you need a prophet, look at the Seer of Lublin. If you need a Tzadik, Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, Reb Mendel of Rimanov. If you need a penitent, take me, I repent. I repent for all the sins I have committed, for all the sins I could have prevented others from committing, I repent for all the others."

To the Rebbe of Apt, who found him lying in bed on Shavuot, a holiday, he said, "I am like a soldier. I am a soldier, Apter Rebbe, I must fight, and I will." And then, on Yom Kippur, [01:13:00] lying on a stretcher facing the holy arc, he stopped before the prayer "Vayomer Hashem 'Salakhti Kidvarekha," which means "and the Lord has said I forgave you." And the Maggid whispered, and I quote him, "Master of the universe, you alone know how great and powerful you are. I do not. But you also

know how weak I am, and that I do know. And yet, throughout the month of Elul, I have been here, in this place of worship, and I have prayed to you day after day, hour after hour, not for my own sake but for the sake of your people. The people of Israel. And so, I'm asking you, master of the universe, do you think it's easy for an old man my age to take upon himself the burdens of a community? And yet I took them on myself. But in exchange, Lord of creation, God of [01:14:00] Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you do something, which for you is less difficult. Is it really so difficult for you to say two words -- just two -- *salakhti kidvarekha*, I have forgiven?"

One legend says that he fell quiet. He waited a minute, another one, and he waited a long while. And that legend says that suddenly, he burst into song, a song of joy. And he said, "God has answered our prayer. He has forgiven our sins." Another legend says that the Kozhenitzer Maggid, during that last Yom Kippur service, was determined not to resume his prayer until he himself would hear God's answer. Was it too much for Him? Too great an effort? Rabbi Yisrael [01:15:00] Hopstein, the Maggid of Kozhenitz, died, four days later. And the Messiah -- the Messiah has not come. (applause)

M:

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