

Elie Wiesel In Hasidism: Rabbi Abraham the Angel

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) An angel? A Hasid, an angel; a rabbi, an angel. That's what they called him. Rabbi Avraham the Angel. Or in Yiddish, Rabbi Avrom Malech. He was a rebbe unlike any other. A tzaddik unlike any other. And his place in Hasidic literature and legend remains, indeed, unique. Other masters were admired and loved by their followers, but he -- Rabbi Avrom Malach, Rabbi Avraham the Angel -- ran away from those who sought to become his followers. Other teachers elicited affection and [00:01:00] loyalty from their disciples, but Rabbi Avraham the Angel had no Hasidim, for he chose to be alone. Is this why they called him the Angel? Is this why he always appears in our literature as a case apart? Because angels are not to be seen, and he really was not seen. Usually he would appear with his tallit over his face, and it is said that people were actually afraid to look at him. According to legend, a visiting tzaddik, a just man, once inadvertently gazed at him, and he was seized by such panic that he forgot to pray over the drink he held in his hands. And for some time afterwards, he could touch neither food, nor wine. [00:02:00] What startled him so? No clear

reason was given. Maybe he was afraid to reveal the reason of his fear.

Another legend has it that a Hasidic master was eager to meet the celebrated Rabbi Avrom Malach, the angel. Apparently he had been told of other peoples' experiences with him, and therefore he spent weeks and weeks preparing himself for the encounter. Finally the day came when he entered Rabbi Avraham's study. But upon seeing him, the visitor felt such terror that he ran away without so much as greeting him.

It is said that the Besht's own two grandsons, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim and Rabbi Boruch of Medzhybizh, felt uncomfortable when they first met him. The older brother, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim, was so unnerved that he let his eternal book of psalms [00:03:0] -- Tehillim -- slip from his hands and fall to the ground, the first time such a thing had ever happened to him. We are told that the great Rabbi Boruch of Medzhybizh, who had problems with most of his peers -- he didn't like anybody -- but we are told that he demonstrated deep respect towards Reb Avrom Malach. He had heard so many stories about him that he once decided that he must see him. He came to Fastiv, where Rab Avrom lived, went to his house, looked through the window, saw the rebbe, and ran away.

We are told that when the reverend Rav Nachum of Chernobyl visited Fastiv, the city where Rav Avrom lived, the community's leaders came to plead with him to use the influence on the angel and make him appear in public. "I am ready to try," said the famous Reb Nachum of Chernobyl, [00:04:00] "but I warn you -- you will be frightened." Still, they insisted. Said Reb Nachum, "Let us wait for an occasion." It came. A circumcision. Reb Avrom Malach was offered sandak, to hold the baby, whereas Reb Nachum was going to be the mohel, and do the circumcision. When Reb Avrom appeared, his face was covered with his prayer shawl, as always, and for an hour, no one dared to say a word. They waited to see his face. Another hour passed. And then, Reb Avrom took the infant and placed it on his knees, at which point his prayer shawl inadvertently fell on his shoulders, and his face became visible. Hundreds of people took flight in fear. Said Reb Nachum, "Even I was afraid, and so much so that the ritual knife slipped from my fingers. [00:05:00] I don't even remember if I recited the proper prayer at the proper time." But the circumcision took place.

What was it about Rabbi Avrom that frightened whomever was in his presence? Well, tonight we shall try to penetrate the universe of this strange master, who refused to be a master, and

who may even have refused to be strange. And we will try to discover his secret ambitions and desires, to the extent that he had any. What did he wish to achieve through his quest for solitude and silence? As we have already seen, he tends to shun visitors, so we will stop before his portrait, and scrutinize it instead. And for this we will go to Mezeritch, the renowned capital of Hasidism, [00:06:00] where his father the Holy Maggid, Rabbi Dov Ber, was carrying forward the work and the mission of Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov -- the Master of the Good Name, the Besht.

We had occasion to meet the Holy Maggid years and years ago when we left Mezeritch, after the passing of the Besht. We went to Mezeritch because the whole world, which in Hasidic terms means the whole Hasidic world -- which even that doesn't mean entirely that -- (laughter) but we were told that the whole world went to Mezeritch. Where else would they have gone? The Maggid was, after all, the Besht's worthiest successor. That was clear to anyone familiar with the scene. Granted, the Besht's son, Reb Tzvi Hersh, was alive and well. He could have occupied the throne, but he said no. Right away, some sources say; no, not right away, [00:07:00] after two years; others said earlier. The fact is that the Besht was not succeeded by his son.

Granted, too, the Besht's learned disciple, Reb Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye, the author of the famous Toldot Yaakov Yosef, was ready and willing and eager to assume the mantle of leadership. Few men were as close to the Besht as he had been for such a long time. Still, the choice fell on the Maggid. And there again it is strange. Few masters had seen the Besht less frequently than the Maggid. Yet their link was profound, and when the Maggid was crowned leader of the entire movement, few voices rose in dissent.

Then why did the Maggid's son, Rabbi Avrohom, not stay in Mezeritch, to follow in his father's footsteps? Why did he leave the [00:08:00] kingdom, fortified if not built, built if not imagined, by his father? These are good questions, and we shall try to comprehend the case of this reluctant master little bit later. We shall explore the relationships that existed between fathers and sons in Hasidism -- teacher and pupils, disciple and disciple, and all the relationships that occasionally perturbed the turbulent Hasidic family.

But a few preliminary remarks, as always, may seem useful. Some of you may argue that my attitude towards Hasidism is remarkably uncritical. This may be true, and it is. My approach to the Beshtian movement is influenced by what I have taken from it;

namely, the need and obligation for a Jew to love the Jewish people; and through it, but not [00:09:00] without it, people -- all people, who need compassion in a cold and cynical society. Ahavat Yisrael, the love of Israel, is still to me the principle that characterizes a Hasid, and Jew, and therefore, on a broader scale, a human being. No wonder Rabbi Akiba, our friend from last week, had such appeal for the Hasidism. His insistence of v'ahavta lere'eicha kamocho -- and you shall love your fellow man -- focused the humanistic tendencies of the Hasidic message and the Hasidic way of life.

The trouble is that some Hasidim, especially today -- but then probably not only today -- are only willing, or were only willing, to abide by this principle selectively. They love Hasidim, but only those who belong to their particular rebbe. They love only those who are [00:10:00] citizens of their particular quasi-monarchy. In the 20 years since we have begun exploring the different schools of Hasidism here, we have seen some of them at work. Ahavat Yisrael can, like all such codes, be distorted. In its name, through various disputes and quarrels, Hasidism has been divided, unfortunately, more than once. The Hasidim seem to have forgotten the Besht's emphasis on tolerance, on understanding. That the Hasid is he or she who tries not to judge anyone. No one is here to represent God; we

are all here to serve God. And therefore, equal rights and human rights are inherent part of the Jewish tradition. Just as all men are supposed to be God's children, all Jews must be descendants of Abraham, and disciples of Moses.

And now, the time has come. Let us move to Mezeritch. I am sure that when we come to Mezeritch, we shall find the doors are already open -- and ours, too. (laughter)

Like Emperor Joseph the Second, lehavdil, Rabbi Avrohom Malach was born in 1741. So we are now in the middle of the second [00:12:00] part, or at the second part of the eighteenth century, which, as we know, has been dominated by fire and violence. Poland was partitioned, America fought for her independence, China invaded Tibet, war between France and Britain, Prussia and Austria, Britain and Prussia, Prussia and Russia, Sweden and Prussia. Politically and militarily, the European continent is in constant upheaval. But culturally, it seems to attain the zenith. Goethe and Montesquieu; Voltaire and Diderot; Bach and Pergolesi and Haydn; Goya and Gainsborough; Samuel Johnson and Jonathan Swift. They were all Reb Avrom's contemporaries.

What was happening to general society was reflected in the Jewish community. The new movement of Hasidism was conquering villages and cities and provinces. [00:13:00] It caught the imagination of young students in thirst for knowledge and experience. It offered hope to desperate villagers who needed to believe in something. It offered hope where there was no hope. Of all the Hasidic masters whose ways and words remain shrouded in mystery, those of Rabbi Avrom Malach -- Rabbi Avraham the Angel -- seem most mysterious. Is it because he was overshadowed by his great and awe-inspiring father? Or because he died too young, at the age of 35 or 36? There is something about him that disturbs, captivates, and eludes anyone trying to understand him. There is something about him that seems so -- so alien to the spirit and message of Beshtian Hasidism.

The Besht [00:14:00] had taught his followers to search for joy in life. There was no apparent joy in Rabbi Avrom's days and nights on this earth. The Besht urged his disciples to respect man's needs in this world. Rabbi Avrom devoted himself to the higher spheres alone. His goal was to attain the other world -- the one below he aspired to leave behind as quickly as possible. And yet, few of his generation, of his age, have been as extolled, as glorified, as loved. Maybe in order to understand



his case, we should say a few words -- or repeat a few words -- about his celebrated father.

In spite of what the Hasidic tradition wants us to [00:15:00] believe, the choice of Reb Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritch, was not unanimous. Unanimity in Judaism is rare. (laughter) As we mentioned earlier, Reb Yaakov Yosef would have liked to succeed the Besht, and he must have had some support somewhere. For instance, he had the support of the great Reb Pinchas of Koretz, who was both companion and disciple of the Besht. Did Reb Pinchas really openly, publicly endorse his candidacy? It seems that actually between Reb Tzvi Hersh, the son, and Reb Pinchas, there was also a friendship. But Reb Pinchas actually wanted a third candidate. He had wanted Reb Nachum of Chernobyl. But still, in spite of all the dissensions -- and there were -- [00:16:00] the Maggid prevailed. And after he was elected and crowned, his stature was such that no one -- but literally no one -- ever dared to dispute his authority.

No doubt, the Maggid was endowed with today we would call charisma. Though physically disabled, his spiritual aura left no visitor in-moved. Near-sighted, limping to the point where he could walk only with crutches, constantly plagued by obscure

ailments, it was enough for him to appear in the house of study for all the students to flee in fear.

But fear was not all he inspired. Much more than that, he inspired admiration, devotion, and loyalty. His words were taken as commands; his messengers to communities distant and near, [00:17:00] never questioned his decisions. They went wherever he sent them, always recognizing the validity of his judgment. He sent Rabbi Aharon Karliner and the great Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad, to White Russia, where Talmudic scholars were needed. Whereas Rabbi Yisroel Kozhnitzer, and Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk, were dispatched to Galicia. Where simplicity, kindness, softness, tenderness, were more needed by people who wanted to meet just masters who would understand them, but not teach them.

Possessing both niglah and nistar -- the oral and the esoteric traditions -- the Maggid knew whom to teach what, and when. If the Besht was the founder of the movement, the Maggid was its architect. It was the Maggid who gave it its structure. It was he who was responsible for its [00:18:00] organizational aspects, and for the success of its programs. Before him, Hasidism was impulsive, vague, fragmentary. The Besht came,

saw, was seen, was heard -- and that was enough. It was enough for people to join him.

But, if anyone is to be credited with giving the Hasidic commitment shape, it was the Maggid. It was he who introduced the notion of the Tzaddik, the just man, into Hasidic vocabulary and reality. What was a vague concept for the Besht was transformed into a cornerstone of doctrine by the Maggid. As he saw it, the tzaddik had to combine the virtue and the gifts of teacher, sage, guide, and spiritual father. He had to be both spokesman for the Eternal One in his dealings with man, [00:19:00] and his intercessor for man in his dealings with the Eternal One. He was required to accept honors without becoming vain; to pursue knowledge, but never for its own sake. To be accomplished in the art of speaking, so as to better remain silent; and to be accomplished in the art of silence, so as to better articulate simple yet complex ideas.

By placing the emphasis on the tzaddik -- on the just man, on the rebbe -- and by setting almost unattainable standards for him, the Maggid focused his attention on the elite -- on his immediate circle, rather than on the average Hasid. Few stories tell of simple Jews being directly helped by the Maggid. Simple Jews were helped by those who were helped by the Maggid. His

circle of intimates were exclusive; [00:20:00] he chose his disciples personally, according to criteria known only to himself. The master-disciple relationship, so special in every school of true learning, was indeed special in Mezeritch.

But what about the father-son relationship? What kind of a father was the Maggid of Mezeritch? Reb Avrom was 10 or 11 when his father first met the Besht. And so in Rovno, where they lived until then, father and son had time and opportunity to be together. Were they close? It seems so, from the entries in various chronicles. The Maggid was fond of his son, so much so that he once told a strange story, a story about [00:21:00] his wife. His wife went through terrible dangers one winter night, and was helped by the four matriarchs, Sarah and Rivka and Rachel and Leah, who interceded in heaven on behalf of her, so that she could give birth to a son -- Avraham, or Avrom.

Later, after his meeting with the Besht, did he still have time for his son? Did the new disciple forget his duties as a father? Strange as it may sound, the Maggid did not spend too much time away from his son, and away from his family. Some sources believe that he and the Besht met only twice. The second time for 6 months. Yet the two men remained spiritually

inseparable. But what about the son? [00:22:00] Did he take him to the Besht?

What happened to the son? What was to be his role in the great design of Hasidic innovation, or renovation? That we don't know. He could have met the Besht. But Reb Avrom didn't. When the Maggid ascended to the throne, he asked two of his trusted disciples to take care of his son, since he no longer had time to teach him. Rabbi Schneur Zalman was to teach him Talmud, and Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol was to initiate him in the virtues of humility. Rabbi Schneur Zalman seems to have been reluctant. And Reb Avrom was not known for his Talmudic scholarship. And therefore, Rabbi Schneur Zalman may have feared wasting his time with him. But the Maggid told him, "You teach him Talmud, and he will teach [00:23:00] you mysticism -- kabbalah."

It is worth noting that by that time, Reb Avrom was already in his twenties; and yet, he still needed a tutor in Talmudic studies. Eventually, the two men became close friends. Once, Reb Avrom accompanied Reb Schneur Zalman to his carriage, and he said, "You see your horses? Beat them. Whip them. Whip them until they forget that they are horses." Though the Maggid must have had a high opinion of his son's mystical knowledge, it was but rarely expressed.

Listen to the instructions the Maggid of Mezeritch left in his last will for, I quote, "my dear and beloved son, the saintly and just Avremenu. [00:24:00] He should daven Mincha and Maariv every day betzibur," which means every day with a minyan. "He should learn one halakha, one law from Maimonides's book, Yad Hachazakah, every day. Between wearing the tefillin, the phylacteries of Rashi, and those of Rabbeinu Tam, he should eat something before going on with his learning. He should recite four psalms every day with the same kavanah, with the same intention that accompanies the recitation on Yom Kippur Eve. He should, for heaven's sake, not isolate himself for more than one day. But on that day, he ought not utter a word -- not even to members of his family."

What else? The entire testament deals with similar obligations: to give charity, to avoid fasting on his -- the Maggid's -- yahrzeit, to [00:25:00] daven from a siddur, from a prayerbook, without commentaries. To remain silent, even passive, if attacked by critics and adversaries. An astonishing document. One would have expected the Maggid, a giant in the field of both kabbalah and Talmud, to leave a loftier message, a more secret message, to his son the kabbalist. Didn't the father wish his son to inherit his role? Didn't the father wish his son to

succeed him, to resemble him, to go in his footsteps? Why didn't he share some secret with his son?

The Maggid passed away, and when he passed away in 1772, there were among his disciples some who had turned to his son, Reb Avrom, to ask him to assume the position of teacher and leader.

[00:26:00] Listen to a ktav hitkashrut, which is a kind of combination of contract -- of tenure -- and loyalty document, written and signed by three renowned masters, one week after the shiva, after the passing of the Maggid.

I quote. "We, the undersigned, desirous to link our spirits and souls to Him whose name is a blessing, for this purpose we submit to the authority of our teacher and master Rabbi Avraham, may he live forever, the son of our master and teacher, the head of all exiled, the Maggid of Rovno, may he rest in peace. And we shall respect and love him. We pledge to fulfill every word he will [00:27:00] say; and we shall do so immediately, with true dedication. And in so doing, we hope under his guidance to climb higher on God's ladder together with him. And so we ask our teacher and guide that as soon as he will receive this first letter from our hands, to inspire us with his holy spirit, and penetrate us with wisdom and understanding, and good counsel, and fear of heaven, and love for our people." Annopol,

Chanukah, 1772. Signed, Reb Yehuda Leib HaCohen; Reb Meshulam Zusya of Hanipol, the famous brother of Rabbi Elimelech; and Reb Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad, who was the greatest philosopher of Hasidism.

If these three men -- these three great men -- [00:28:00] chose him to succeed his father, they must have had good reasons for doing so. For at that time, it was not customary yet for sons to inherit the mantles of their fathers. Rabbi Avraham would have been the first. If the choice fell on him, it was not because of the father. Not only because of the father, but I think also because of the son himself.

Was there a resemblance between them? The Maggid accepted his role as guide. Not so the son. The son rejected his role. The Maggid preached the Beshtian principles of avoiding asceticism. His son was infatuated with its appeal. The father was a leader with every fiber of his being. His son refused to be a leader. The Maggid was a preacher, [00:29:00] who addressed large audiences, whereas his son sought shelter in isolation. And yet, as we see, the Maggid's greatest disciples wanted him, the son, to become their teacher, their leader, their master. Said the Besht's companion and friend, Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, already quoted, and I quote him: "Had Reb Avraham the Angel not



died so young, all the masters of his generations would have bowed to his authority." But then, perhaps, that is why he died so young -- so as not to become that source of authority.

As is the case with many Hasidic figures, especially of that generation, Rabbi Avrom was a legend among people who actually [00:30:00] had no access to him. Since the Maggid was legendary, everything about his son was legendary, too: his garments, his prayer shawl, even his birth, his education, his prayer books, his pulpit, his table, his chair. There are stories -- wondrous, marvelous stories -- about all of them. If that is true of objects, it is that much more true of his flesh and blood. No wonder, then, that legends abound about his father and mother, and about the son. Since the Maggid was destined to poor health, his son would choose to become sick by punishing his body, by depriving it of food, and rest, and other earthly necessities. Since the Maggid wished to see only special visitors, the son would choose something else. He would choose to see nobody. [00:31:00] Since the father was profoundly human, the son would become an angel.

Often he would fast and fast, until he would lose consciousness. Sometimes he would say the first word of a prayer, and lose himself in it for hours. His powers of concentration were such

that he would not feel the presence of people around him, or near him. He was once seen standing at the window, looking at a hill outside. "What is there to look at," one Hasid remarked. "It is nothing but dust, isn't it?"

"Yes," answered Reb Avrom the Angel. "It is only dust. That is why I am looking at it. I wonder: where did such dust take the chutzpah to think it is a hill?" (laughter)

It is said -- [00:32:00] and here we reach a point which, of course, we find indicative and characteristic of the man -- that whether Reb Avrom got married, his wife fainted. She could not bear the sight of him, (laughter) for his face was that of an angel. And we are told that that first night, he could not come near her. Hasidim claim that he could not descend from the higher spheres to come into physical contact with his own wife. He was afraid all the time of whatever was too physical. He was afraid of his body. He was afraid of imprisoning spirit in a body. Once he even complained that woe his generation, [00:33:00] and therefore how much more to ours, when kabbalah became physical. And in his language, it meant vulgar, for whatever was physical, to him seemed vulgar. Impure. All he wanted was actually to fulfill himself in his spirit.

Still, eventually he was persuaded of the importance of the first commandment in scripture, and before his first wife died, she gave birth to two children. The Maggid insisted that his son remarry. His second wife was the daughter of a renowned scholar, Reb Feivish of Kremnitz, a descendant of the legendary Reb Shaul Wahl, who is said to have been crowned king for one night by Polish noblemen, who [00:34:00] during a long, long, but fruitless debate, decided that the first man they would meet in the street would become king of Poland. And they happened to stumble upon Reb Shaul Wahl.

Reb Avrom's second wife was young -- 12 or 13 when she was brought to Mezeritch. Was it because of her youth, or because she had a better influence on her husband, that the Maggid showed her special affection? Legend has it that she actually preserved her husband's life for 12 years. In a dream, she found herself in an immense hall, facing a solemn and august group of men, who looked like judges, or angels, or other heavenly figures. [00:35:00] At one point, one of them said, "It is time for us to bring him into our midst." She understood the meaning of his words, which received unanimous approval. Approaching their table, she began pleading in favor of her husband. Her pleas were passionate, emotional, and rational. She did not know how long she spoke. All she knew was that one

of the men turned to his peers and said, "Well, let's give him another 12 years." And next day, the Maggid smiled at her and said, "Thank you for what you have done for my son."

She must have been a very exceptional woman, from all that we read about her. But then, I must, in parentheses, [00:36:00] draw your attention to something which hurts. When we try to do research on the Malach, on Reb Avrom, I was caught by the character, and frustrated by the meagerness of material about him. I have asked friends to do research wherever they went: in Israel, here, everywhere. Libraries were researched, and documents, and books; specialists were questioned. There isn't much about him. One friend of mine said to me, "Maybe that is why he is a malach, he is an angel. There are stories about people, but angels? Angels have no stories."

But about his wife is even less, and I feel she must have been a very special person. A very special personage, [00:37:00] with character and imagination. She was always dreaming. All the stories about her involve dreams. But this part of the tale can wait, for we are still exploring the strange attitudes of her husband, who refused both his role of master, and his role as husband.

Actually, the masters of the first generation rarely sought to occupy positions of leadership. None of them aspired to titles of honors. This is one of the great, beautiful aspects of Hasidism, of early Hasidism -- that power was of little interest to the first masters. The Besht himself was compelled by heaven to reveal himself. The Maggid was elected by his peers, and then, according to his own commentary, he saw his victory [00:38:00] as a punishment. Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz wouldn't hear of becoming a celebrity. And the same is true of Rabbi Levi Yitchak of Berditchev. In the School of Pshische, the rebbes had to be coerced to accept a verdict of their colleagues. The Rabbi of Kotzk, the eternally angry Menachem Mendel, preferred 20 years of solitude to one hour of glory. Many masters had gone into exile, and anonymity, before emerging as leaders, oprichten golus, as they called it. To be nobody. And maybe remain nobody. But surely, to be nobody before becoming somebody.

The Shpoler Zeide joined the caravan of minstrels, and clowns. Rabbi Nachman, the great Rabbi Nachman, on his way to the Holy Land, spent weeks and weeks under [00:39:00] an alias in Istanbul. Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg and his brother Reb Pinchas, Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk and his brother Reb Zusya,

mingled among beggars and wanderers in strange and dangerous inns.

Why, then, should Rabbi Avraham been different? Why should he have wished to attain what others wished to reject? Was he less humble than they? From one of his sayings, one may deduce the opposite. I quote him. "There exists a tzaddik," he said, "who is unable to lead his generation, because it cannot bear him." Now, to whom does this refer? To himself? That would be vanity -- unbecoming of a tzaddik, and surely of an angel. He must have been referring to a tzaddik, or a certain category of [00:40:00] tzaddikim, whose powers may have turned against him.

In other words, he is referring to a man who is too great, too holy, too learned; therefore, people cannot reach him, just as he cannot reach them. Does this mean that he opposed excess in all things? Listen to a letter he wrote to his friend and mentor, Rabbi Zusya. I quote. "To the friend of God, and mine, a living tzaddik who embodies the sacredness of his generation and its grandeur, Reb Zusya, may his candle continue to burn. I am surprised at a tzaddik such as he is. Here, Rabbi Zalmanke and I have heard from my holy father and teacher that a man must see himself as [00:41:00] nothing. But not as something small. Quite the contrary. Man must at times see himself as great, in

order to perceive the greatness of the eternal one. And therefore, my advice to him is not to yield. And all those who fight us will fall like straw. And we shall rise, and be courageous. These are the words of his friend who loves him truly, and who is waiting for his peoples' salvation. Avraham, son of Reb Dov Ber."

What provoked the writing of this letter is not clear, though it appears to be related to the persecutions that Hasidim were subjected to from misnagdim, the opponents, their traditional but fanatic adversaries. Rabbi Zusya must have maintained that suffering is not the worst calamity that could befall a Hasid. [00:42:00] For in Rabbi Zusya's view, suffering, too, was a gift from heaven, whereas Rabbi Avrohom must have asserted the opposite; namely, that suffering exists, and that it ought to be countered and resisted, especially when it involves other people.

But the most significant part of the letter deals with general concepts about man's relationship to the infinite. Man's inherent possibilities to face his creator. There is virtue in being vulnerable; in needing help from heaven. There is virtue in smallness, says Rabbi Avrohom. To be small means to pray for small victories, for small miracles, and to see humanity as a

whole composed of vibrant fragments. To be small means to realize [00:43:00] the greatness of the creator, and the emptiness of man, where he or she is empty of faith in God. Empty of God. To be small also helps man to confront nothingness. Who but man is aware of his own unworthiness? Of his own nothingness.

At this point, in the letter, Rabbi Avrohom gives an abrupt twist to his thoughts, and proclaims: "The awareness, the knowledge of one's nothingness, or of the nothingness in the world of false perception and illusions, is better. Better than the understanding of one's own smallness. Better to be nothing than to be small. Better to say that since God is God, I am nothing, than to believe that since God is great, [00:44:00] I am small. To be attracted by nothingness can be instructive. To be drawn to smallness is humiliating. The opposite of God, if there can be an opposite of God, is not smallness, but nothingness. And it, too, can be infinite, for God is infinite, and God is everywhere -- even in nothingness."

In choosing his ascetic mode of existence, Reb Avrom's goal was not to reduce himself to smaller dimension, but to confront the nothingness that is revealed to man in this world of nothingness. In living a life of self-denial, Reb Avrom



therefore must have had a [00:45:00] secret purpose in mind. He must have sought to prove something. To accomplish something. His asceticism -- his self-inflicted suffering -- were not capricious. Some mystics choose to suffer, so as to prevent others from suffering. They courted danger so as to diminish danger in the world. They intensified their own sense of exile so as to abolish exile, and hasten the coming of the Messiah.

Now, could all this be applied to Reb Avrom as well? A story. Once, on the eve of Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of Av, when we commemorate the destruction of both the first and the second Temple, Reb Avrom sat with the faithful on the floor of the synagogue, as is customary, mourning over the [00:46:00] destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, 17 centuries earlier. With candles in their hands, they waited for the Baal Tefilah, the chazan, to start reciting the Lamentations. After a while, he began. *Eicha yashva badad* -- oh, how the city of Jerusalem was left sitting alone.

"Eicha," repeated Reb Avrohom, as if to himself. And with his head buried in his knees, he meditated on the meaning of the image; the implications, the destiny of the word. He remained in that position throughout the service, throughout the night, until the next morning. He was alone for a whole night. And

next morning, when they came to the synagogue, he was heard [00:47:00] whispering, "Has the redeemer arrived? Has the redeemer arrived?"

A Hasidic master, Rabbi Yitzchak of Radzivil, who was there, trembled when he saw him with his head in his knees. "I never knew," said Rabbi Yitzchak of Radzivil, "I never knew that one can be here, in this synagogue, and relive from far the destruction of our sanctuary as if he had been there, when and while it happened."

Still, let's be fair and admit that this story could have been told about other masters as well, Hasidic or non-Hasidic. Most of them, if not all of them, shared, and still share, a profound longing for Jerusalem. Most of them wept over its tragic [00:48:00] fate. Who did not, or does not, mourn on Tisha B'Av. The memory of what Titus and his legions did to our sanctuary is still part of our experience today. But, Reb Avrom may have felt it on more than one day. Most mystics do. They rise at midnight to recite litanies; they weep over the exile of the shekhinah; and the shekhinah weeps with them.

Is this why Reb Avrom deprived himself of joy and happiness? How could he be happy, when the shekhinah was sad? How could he

experience joy when the shekhinah was in distress? How could he dream of redemption, when his entire being was open to nothingness? How could he believe in fulfillment, in a world that was so twisted? [00:49:00]

Now, is this why he was so beloved in the Hasidic kingdom? Because of his constant longing? Because of his desperate melancholy? Because of his self-inflicted wounds? Because of his voluntary rejection of anything that could bring him pleasure? Satisfaction? Grace, or peacefulness? Or is it simply what we said earlier -- that Rabbi Avrom was beloved because he was the son of the great Maggid? But then, if this were so, we may turn the question around, and ask: wasn't his problem precisely that he was the son of the Maggid? To be the son of a great man is not easy. To be the son of a great man is to carry heavy burdens, that have not [00:50:00] been chosen by the son.

This theme has not been adequately explored in biblical literature, and I think it deserves to be. I would like to know what Moses's sons thought of him. I would like to know what Aaron's two sons -- but that I do know. We know because the Talmud tells us that Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, introduced alien fire in the sanctuary. And we are told that

Aaron had problems with his two sons. They, in a way, became jealous of him, and they were actually punished, because at one point they said to each other, "When are the old people going to die, so that we can take over?" They could have said retirement, but. (laughter) [00:51:00]

What made Samuel's sons so susceptible to corruption? They were corrupt judges. Why do children so often rebel against their famous fathers? Ancient and modern history is full of examples. Where are the descendants of Moses Mendelssohn? Why hasn't Theodore Herzl left any heirs? Why did one of the Rizhiner sons leave the Hasidic community? Why did one of Reb Schneur Zalman's sons remove himself, and went far away? Were they all acting in anger? To punish their fathers for being known as something other than their fathers?

Is it not possible to live for one's community at the same time as one lives for one's own children? Must one make a choice? Must one make a sacrifice? My feeling is that Reb Avrom [00:52:00] found it problematic to be the son of the great Maggid. He may have felt that if people flocked to him, it was not because of who he was, but because of who his father was. He could never have been sure whether his leadership was his own, or a reflection of his father's. That is why, probably, he

refused to accept it, and chose to accomplish in solitude what his father had accomplished with his disciples and followers through the movement he had created with them and for them. That is why he may have decided to follow his own path, and establish his own system. Entertain his own goals. He had to free himself from his father, so as to be able to admire him later, and be faithful to him later.

That there had been a sense of rebellion in [00:53:00] him is to me beyond dispute. And I understand that it is quite inconceivable that his asceticism was meant as a goal in itself. I would rather think that even his asceticism -- meaning, his self-inflicted suffering -- was meant to oppose the generally accepted Hasidic way, emphasizing joy and exaltation as means to come closer to God. For this was the Beshtian way of Hasidism. And therefore, it also became the Maggid's way. For, remember: what was Hasidism then, immediately after the passing of the Besht? It was a necessity to restore to the individual a sense of sacredness, and confidence in his or her [00:54:00] ties with the community.

To the isolated Jew, living as an outcast, the Rebbe would say, and the Hasid would say, and the movement would say, "Your experience is not meaningless. It is part of an entity that

takes it into account. You should know that eternity is present in every moment. That every table may become altar, and every man high priest. You should know that there is more than one path leading to God. But the surest goes through joy, and not through tears. A Jew who is happy when he or she is supposed to be happy is accomplishing God's will! To observe the Sabbath in joy is as important as to weep on Tisha B'Av."

What else did Hasidism tell these people, then? That they should know, that God [00:55:00] does not like suffering. That God does not like sadness, and least of all, sadness and suffering that one chooses. God is not that complicated. God is not jealous of man's happiness, nor of the kindness man may show to one another. The sleeping child, the mother caressing the child, the old man listening to the rustling of the leaves - - God is close to each of them, for in each of them, God is present.

And of course, at that moment in Jewish history, it was a powerful, irresistible message. By putting the accent on the attainment, on the beauty of the visible joy, the accent on friendship, love, simple human love. On putting the emphasis on impulse, [00:56:00] rather than on erudition, or the strict observance of the law. Hasidism brought back to the fold

thousands and thousands of Jewish men and women, who, faltering under the weight of their burden in Eastern Europe, from the Dnister to the Tisa, came close to conceding defeat, or despair, or both. That is why the movement under the Besht and the Maggid swept over those parts of Europe. The Maggid and the Besht had succeeded beyond their hope to spark, kindle, between Kosev and Kitev was illuminating the sky of the night, the faces of the night, beyond the horizon. Not one community that did not bear its mark.

As a result, I am convinced that Rabbi Avrom Malach, the sensitive, [00:57:00] the refined, the romantic young man, must have come to the conclusion to which the Kotzker Rebbe came later -- that all of a sudden, it became too easy to be a Hasid. You didn't have to do anything! You took a glass of slivovitz, you sang a song, of course you made a prayer, you said a prayer -- how can you not recite a prayer? And all of a sudden, you are a Hasid. And I am convinced that Reb Avrom Malach rebelled against the facility, and the simplicity, of Hasidism as he had witnessed it already then.

I therefore believe that there must have been at one point even a rebellion in him against his father. A legend brings his dead father into his dream. [00:58:00] And the Maggid, the dead

Maggid, already dead, asks him, "Why do you follow the path of suffering? Why don't you obey my will? Why don't you implement my teaching? Am I not your father? Aren't you commanded by the Torah to honor my will?" And in his dream, Reb Avrom answers, "My spiritual father is God. And I owe him and him alone obedience."

Well, one need not be Freud to interpret this dream. In his subconscious, the son rejected what he learned from his father, and therefore he abolished this simple father-son relationship. But on the other hand, we may also interpret his behavior in terms of admiration of and attachment [00:59:00] to his father. Isn't it possible that it was precisely because of his infinite love for his father, of his pride in his father, that he refused to imitate him, or even to take his place in Mezeritch?

Actually, the place was not Mezeritch, but Annopol. For a bizarre thing happened during the Maggid's last year. All of a sudden, without any explanation, he decided to move from the Hasidic capital Mezeritch to the small town of Annopol. Why? No clear answer is given in Hasidic literature. Did the Maggid feel that his task had been accomplished? That his disciples, all reigning rebbes in Eastern and Central Europe, no longer needed him? Did he seek greater solitude?



I have been troubled by this enigma for [01:00:00] years. My suspicion may be correct. Maybe the motive lay elsewhere. Maybe it had to do with his relation to his son. Quite simply, the father may have wished to spend more time with his son. With him alone. The Maggid had given so much to so many disciples and followers that he may have wondered at the end of his life whether he had not been unfair to his own son! Whether he had neglected him by not paying enough attention to his problems and concerns. That is why he may have gone to Annopol, with his family. But why Annopol? Perhaps because that was the home of Reb Zusya -- you know, the marvelous simpleton, innocent, marvelous master of Hasidism. And he was Reb Avrom's closest friend.

I must tell you that although I like my chidush, I like my interpretation, there is nevertheless what our great master, Reb Shaul Lieberman, z"l, used to say. Pshat is better than a chidush. A simple interpretation, a simple explanation, is always better. I am afraid that there may be a simpler explanation, with some strange modifications. For instance, there is a tradition in Belzer Hasidism, which explains why the Maggid left Mezeritch, and moved to Annopol. Actually, he left

Mezeritch for no mystical reasons, but for medical reasons.

There was an epidemic that ravaged Mezeritch.

So first he went to Rovno, which was a place where he had been before he came to Mezeritch. But Reb Zusya pleaded with him to join him in Annopol. The Maggid liked him, [01:02:00] and accepted his invitation. But when the mayor of the town heard of the Maggid arriving from a plague-infested city. He wanted to expel him. He changed his mind only after Reb Zusya assured the mayor that as long as the Maggid will stay in Annopol, no one will die -- not even of natural death. And the Belzer tradition says that sure enough, no one died. As a result, when the Maggid wanted to leave Annopol, the mayor didn't allow him to leave Annopol. (laughter) And therefore, he stayed there until he passed away in 1772, on the nineteenth day of Kislev. And the tradition tells us that then, people began dying again.

Before his death, the Maggid told Reb Zusya, "Now, you go [01:03:00] and take my place in Mezeritch." And Reb Zusya went there, and died there. What a strange story. The two friends had simply exchanged places of burial.

But the father's renewed relationship with his son in Annopol may also explain the letter his three great disciples wrote to

Reb Avrohom, offering him the succession to the throne. I think that in doing so, they may have sought to please the father. In Annopol, father and son were probably together as never before -- so much so that Reb Avrom's second wife may have felt excluded. Did she object? Did she try to create obstacles? All this is, of course, hypothesis. But it would help to explain the strange, [01:04:00] unkind attitude the Hasidic community developed towards her. And I like her.

In the various texts about Reb Avrom, one senses an obscure hostility -- why not call it by its name -- towards his widow. Is it because she was much younger than he? In other words, because she survived him? Or because she had her own identity? Or because she did not follow him to Pastov, near Kiev? Rabbi Avrom did go to Pastov alone, after accepting a position there. He had refused to return to Mezeritch or to stay in Annopol. He seemed to prefer a new locality; a place where his father had not been. But his wife was against it. She wanted to stay in Annopol. Later she explained that her father-in-law came into her [01:05:00] dream and warned her against letting her husband go to Pastov. She didn't even go there for the High Holidays. Reb Avrom sent messengers to persuade her to come and join him, but she refused.

Reb Yehuda Leib HaCohen, the preacher of Polna, and Reb Zusya, who may have Reb Avrom's emissaries, did not hide their displeasure with her. How is it possible that she, the rebbetzin, didn't go and join her husband for the High Holidays? Well, when shortly after this incident, Reb Avrom the Angel passed away, they realized that right she had been. They should have heeded her warning. They shouldn't have allowed him to leave Annopol.

As a result, she was not present at her husband's death. She wasn't even informed about it. A messenger came to Annopol, [01:06:00] went to her home, and said nothing. But he did confide the secret to her youngest son, Sholem, so that he could say the Orphan's Kaddish. She still didn't know. But a day or two afterwards, she noticed that Sholem rose too early for services, and unbeknownst to him, she followed him. From behind the wall, she heard him say Kaddish, and only then did she understand. According to lore, she began observing the week of mourning. At its completion, she began thinking of going to Pastov, and she went to Pastov, to receive her late husband's possessions.

We are told that the whole town came to greet her. Important Hasidic leaders celebrated Shabbat in the home where she stayed.

They sang and danced, [01:07:00] but she watched them with melancholy eyes. At one point, she fell asleep. In dream, she saw her dead husband enter a large hall, followed by a group of distinguished, elderly men. He asked them to take their seats. And then, he turned to them and said, "Here is my wife, may she live a long life. She's angry at me for having been apart from her for long periods of time, and rightly so. That is why I turn to you, and in your presence, I am asking for her forgiveness." She waited a moment, and in her dream, she said, "I forgive you." When she awoke, all her sadness was gone.

But her sadness must have returned to her, for she lived in misery. Reb Nachum of Chernobyl wanted to marry her -- she was only 24 or 25. [01:08:00] But in her dream, she was told by her late husband that he was against it. Reb Nachum's daughter eventually married her son, Reb Sholem. In turn, they had a son, who became one of the great masters of Hasidism, Reb Yisroel of Ruzhyn. But Reb Avrom's widow did not live to see this. In her despair, she left Annopol, and she went to the Holy Land, incognito. No one knew who she was. She made a living by doing the laundry for well-to-do families. She died in poverty, and no one knows where she was buried.

Ach! The Rizhiner once exclaimed, "If only someone could tell me where my grandmother's tombstone is to be found." A strange ending to a strange story. Why was she [01:09:00] abandoned by Reb Avrom's admirers? And his father's followers? Why did she choose anonymity in the Holy Land? Why didn't she reveal her identity to the Hasidim there, who surely would have given her the honors due her. Could it be that she was repentant for having interfered in Annopol in the relationship between husband and father? Between the Angel and the Maggid?

I don't know. I must tell you, I don't like what happened to her, for I like her. But, of course, this is because we all are also very fond, we remain fond of her husband. Somehow, he manages to inspire great affection, just as he inspired loyalty in his lifetime. We are told that his friends were so close to him that even after he died, [01:10:00] they remained close to him. Rabbi Yisrael of Plotzk was his close friend, and ardent admirer. We are told that one day, Rabbi Yisrael of Plotzk came to Pastov, and of course, naturally, he went to visit the grave of his friend. An hour later, he returned to town, and called for the Chevra Kadisha, the community's burial society, and said, "I am going to die. Reb Avrom the Angel is too lonely; he needs me. Please, give me a grave next to his." And he died that day. They buried him next to his friend.

Years later, Reb Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad, was invited to Pastov, and he refused. And he said, "To visit Pastov and not to [01:11:00] go to the Angel's grave is impossible. To go is dangerous. The Angel could do to me what he did to Rabbi Yisrael of Plotzk."

Now, why was he so admired and beloved? Because of his father? Because of his suffering? The son of a strong-willed father, he must have felt at times helpless, if not useless, when he realized that suffering is for most human beings a question, not a solution. Of himself, he once said, "In the beginning, I punished my body, so that it would bear my soul. Then I punished my soul, so that it could bear my body." Could this be what life is all about? An endless process of self-inflicted punishment? Is this -- could this be true? [01:12:00] Is this reflecting the life-affirming tradition of the Jewish people? Could this be in line with the Hasidic view that joy leads to truth, and to God, who is the ultimate truth?

"Master of the Universe," Reb Avrom the Angel once whispered, "if one could imagine this world for one second without your intervention and presence, what good would it do us? Without you, who needs the other world, the world of eternity? Who

needs redemption and the Messiah, if you are not here to see it happen? Who needs the resurrection of the dead, if you are not present in our life? Without you, Master of the Universe, how could anything else be?"

Without God, life would be without problems. Without anguish. But also without [01:13:00] hope. For God is not only the answer to those who suffer as a result of questions. God is also the question to those who think that they know what suffering is all about. God, the Angel, Reb Avrom. What a story. Thank you. (applause)

**M:**

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