

Elie Wiesel In Hasidism: Different Masters, Rabbi Uri of
Strelisk, the Seraph 92Y Elie Wiesel Archive November 9, 1989

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Nu, better? Pachot o yoter. Okay, alright. Okay, let's start. The title is "Different Masters," and it is sure different. They are different, but the stories are the same. The questions are the same. In what way was he different? Was he really an angel of fire, whose voice was heard in heaven and on earth? Did he really make peoples' souls tremble in fear and ecstasy? It is said that he was a holy man, for whom terrestrial matters meant less than the movement of a tree caught in a storm. Surely he was different from his peers. That is what many people were saying, [00:01:00] and some people were thinking.

Have you heard of the strange incident that occurred at his funeral, one week before Rosh Hashanah? Listen. Under a dark sky, in the presence of a large number of disciples and followers, his son, Rabbi Shlomo, began reciting the Kaddish, and stopped after the first words. "It's the pain," someone whispered. "Pain can make one lose one's voice." After what seemed to be an endless silence, the old Rabbi of the community ordered the son to continue. In a halting voice, Rabbi Shlomo

completed the solemn prayer, which, as we face death, makes us proclaim God's majestic right to be glorified.

Later, a [00:02:00] commentator explained the interruption in the following manner. What is the purpose, the aim of the Kaddish? To help the soul of the departed climb higher and higher towards purity. But was such help necessary for Rabbi Uri, the Seraph of Strelisk? His soul had already attained the highest degree of holiness. It needed no assistance from anyone here below, be it his son. That is why Rabbi Shlomo had paused in the middle. He was convinced that even when his saintly father was alive, he had succeeded, unaided, to transcend his early condition. That even in this world, under God's watchful yet clement eye, he had evolved in celestial spheres, getting closer and closer to God, tempted by nothing [00:03:00] but an absolute sacredness.

So extraordinary a human being was Rabbi Uri during his lifetime that even after his death, he continued to fascinate those who had been devoted to him. Listen further. During the week of mourning that followed, Rabbi Shlomo, his son, astonished his visitors with his good, cheerful mood. At times, his face was radiating, as if illuminated by a secret joy, drawn from an invisible source. Clearly, he did not accept the death of his

father. He even said so openly. "Father is not dead," he said. "Don't you see that the Holy Serpaph, the Seraph of Strelisk, is still part of this world, even as his soul roams around the highest, most inaccessible spheres in heaven? A man like him cannot die. [00:04:00] A spirit like his cannot vanish. A soul like his is stronger than the angel of death."

When the shiva week was over, the old members of the school of Strelisk began talking to him about succession. They wanted him to ascend to the throne, and thus become their new master. He refused. Why? Simple. How could he succeed his father, since his father, to him, was still alive? True, other Hasidim -- the Bratslaver, for instance - also maintained that their rabbi had remained among the living. Still, when Rabbi Nachman died in Uman, his followers had observed the laws of mourning. They believed that though dead, Rabbi Nachman was alive. Not so Rabbi Shlomo. He really believed that his father did not die, and that therefore, he could not succeed him. [00:05:00] His Hasidim argued? So what. Hasidim love to argue. (laughter)

In the end, he won. He did not succeed his father -- not really. As leader of the Strelisker Hasidim, another pious man inherited both the title and the crown. For Rabbi Shlomo only

briefly survived his father. Four months after Rabbi Uri's death, the son was gone as well.

But tonight, we intend to talk about the father, not the son. Rabbi Uri. One of the truly great Hasidic masters of his generation, and perhaps of many generations. We shall try to scrutinize the principal elements of his life and legend. Why was he called -- why is he still called -- the seraph: the man of fire, the angel of fire, whose soul was aflame? I confess my affectionate [00:06:00] admiration for him. Firstly, because he incites us to dream fiery dreams. And then, because he is linked to the first rabbi of Kosiv, the founding father of the Vizhnitzer school, and whenever Vizhnitz is mentioned, I do not hide my bias. I remained a Hasid of Vizhnitz.

But before entering the world of Strelisk, allow me to make a few preliminary remarks on our efforts. For the last 20-odd years, we tried to describe a movement whose beauty and humanism have always inspired me. One, tonight, when we try to recall Strelisk and all the centers of learning and prayer that resemble Strelisk, we must also remember, hundreds and hundreds of houses of prayer and study that went up in flames on November 9th, [00:07:00] 1938, exactly 45 -- 51 years ago. The Kristallnacht. Strange -- last year, the whole city was filled

with echoes and ceremonies; and today, no one has even mentioned it. All the synagogues in the Third Reich were destroyed. Thousands of Jews were sent to concentration camps. Families were separated, old men beaten, rabbis humiliated, scholars spat upon. In the shadow of the first flames, darkness has descended upon Germany. Is it coincidence that the Berlin Wall fell the day when Germany should have remembered Kristallnacht?

But we shall speak about this topic next week, not tonight. We shall speak about forgetting and [00:08:00] remembering. And, I cannot resist at least to anticipate next week, and read one short poem, written by a Jew from Saloniki named Yehuda Perachia, a man who describes Saloniki, a city with 30 synagogues. And he claimed to have been the direct descendent of Yosef ben Matityahu HaCohen, Josephus Flavius. And he wrote quite a lot about the experiences of Sephardi Jews during those years. I read them and I read them because I believe that not enough has been said, not enough has been written, about the part of Sephardi Jewry, of Greek Jewry, Bulgarian -- not Bulgarian, they were not there -- but from other countries, [00:09:00] in those terrible, desperate, and despairing years. He wrote: "How long, compassionate God, will I go on lamenting? How long the tribulations of my people will I

suffer? How long will my head be a cistern of water, and my eyes running springs of withered tears?"

I discovered another poet, a man named Enrique Saporta y Beja, also a Sephardi, and he also writes about that period, and he writes in a prophetic way. "God in heaven, God of goodness, how have you allowed these cruelties? How have you not prevented the Final Solution that had allowed the mowing down of so many Jewish men and women? But even though wounded in many places, we have not lost faith in you."

But again, this just for next week. Tonight, [10:00] as promised, we must keep our promise. We shall invoke different masters. Different from whom, and in what way? Aren't all supposed to be different in temperament, as well as in attitude, towards the basic problem of existence? The basic problem of the individual Jew and his community, his survival, his possible or impossible joy. The Besht is different from the Holy Ari. The great Maggid of Mezeritch is different from the Besht. Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz is different from the Shpoler Zeide.

Could it have been otherwise? A movement is dynamic by definition. It renews itself indefinitely, through the variety

of its components. Granted, without the Besht, there would have been no Hasidic movement. But without the Maggid of Polne, without Rabbi Bunim of Pshische, without the Kotzker Rebbe and his [00:11:00] devastating melancholy, Hasidism would not have become what it was, and possibly still is -- an orchard filled with spectacular fruit trees in bloom. Strelisk taught us that Hasidism is the glorification not of poverty, but of the poor. Not of ignorance, but of simplicity. Hasidism in Strelisk is what it was for the Besht: the despairing sigh of a poor cobbler, who cannot afford to send his children to school, up in heaven weighs more than the most brilliant study of the most erudite but heartless scholar.

Any human being weighs more than all the books in the world about human beings. That was how Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev saw it. One day, he instructed his most faithful disciples to [00:12:00] gather at the secret place, in order to unite their forces, and hasten the coming of the messiah. They were all there on time. Not he. An hour passed. Two hours passed. When he finally appeared, he apologized. "On my way here," he said, "I heard a child crying. He was alone; his mother was sick, or at work. What could I do? I went in just for a moment, to see whether he needed food or water. And I stayed."

"But what about the messiah?" one of the disciples cried out. "Oh," said the great Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, who was even more different than all the different masters. "You must understand. When a Jewish child is crying, I have to take care of him."

"But still, what about the messiah?" asked another disciple. "Oh, the messiah," said the Berditchever. "When a Jewish child cries, [00:13:00] the messiah can wait."

But those who came late tonight cannot. (laughter) (pause)
[13:10 - 14:18]

Well, has the messiah arrived? Not yet?

Rabbi Uri HaSeraph mi-Strelisk, or in Yiddish, the Soroph from Strelisk. Why the nickname? Why the Seraph? There exist, as always, two versions. Here is the first.

After the passing of his first wife, Freidele, Rabbi Uri seemed disconsolate. He could stop weeping. He was asked, is this not overreacting? Wasn't that tragedy that had befallen him [00:15:00] the will of God? And his answer is, "If my Freidele

had stayed with me for 70 years, I would have ascended into heaven alive." Having said that, he turned to one of his followers who was there, and asked him to bear witness, and said to him, "Tell me what you have seen, and let the others hear as well." Said the Hasid, "One day, I followed our holy master out of town, deep into the woods, and suddenly I saw him growing, growing, until his head penetrated the sky. I got scared. He was going to leave us. Panic-stricken, I seized the corner of his caftan, and held him back by force. And the rabbi regained his normal size."

A second version. A certain Rabbi [00:16:00] Isaac decided to spend Rosh Hashanah with the Holy Seer, the Chozeh of Lublin. On his way, he stopped over in Strelisk, where he spent the night at Rabbi Uri's house of study and prayer, the Beit Midrash. Around midnight, he saw the master enter the room, and -- as was his custom -- check on those who slept there, making sure that they needed nothing. Unnoticed, Reb Isaac watched as the rabbi walked back and forth, back and forth, his face glowing like burning coal. At one point, when the rabbi had his back to Isaac, Isaac was startled. He discovered that the rabbi had a face -- another face -- in his back. If only he had dared to question the rabbi. [00:17:00] The meaning of all that -- how can a man have a face, and another face? But he didn't

dare. "Well," he said to himself, "I shall ask the Seer of Lublin. He knows everything. He will explain this mystery, too."

But woe unto Isaac. When he reached Lublin, so moved was he by the sight of the Holy Seer that he forgot the question. He remembered it only after the High Holidays, when the time came to take leave of the Seer, who looked at him severely and said, "On your way home, stop again in Strelisk. Tell Rabbi Uri that I know he has two faces."

"But Rabbi," exclaimed Isaac, "that is exactly what I wanted to tell you!"

"Knowing and talking are two different things," answered the Seer. "Do what I tell you."

Naturally, Isaac did. [00:18:00] When he came to Rabbi Uri, he told him the story, and Rabbi Uri simply quoted the Prophet Ezekiel: "And the seraph has four faces. "And that is why he is called the seraph."

A master like many others, a man like any other man -- perhaps a bit better than most -- yearning for greater purity, deeper

devotion? No. Rabbi Uri is truly special. Alright, I know -- I say that of all the Hasidic masters. (laughter) And I think I am right in each case. (laughter) But more so in the case of Rabbi Uri. He truly is different on many grounds.

One, he does not belong to any illustrious line. Two, he was not appointed or chosen by a great [00:19:00] master for his exceptional scholarship and learning. In a way, he is a typical Hasidic rabbi, beloved by his followers, who bask in his love for God and for them. He helps the needy in general through prayer. Miracles? He is suspicious of miracles. His followers are encouraged not to rely on the supernatural. You know the old Yiddish saying, farlozn zikh nisht aoyf nisim, sagt tehilim,. Do not rely on miracles. Say the Psalms, you know. (laughter) Which he did. And yet, when nothing else seems to work, he, too, is ready to perturb the laws of nature for the sake of a desperate father or mother. What doesn't one do for the smile on the lips of a sick child?

But then, in what way is Rabbi Uri different from all the others? Wouldn't they do the same thing? Actually, the story of his birth and rise to glory is typically Hasidic. One finds in it hidden [00:20:00] innocence, naive goodness, and divine reward. In God's book, everything is related. No gesture is

lost, no tear forgotten. Weep, and someone will hear you, must hear you. Cry out, and your voice will reverberate in heaven, or at least in someone else's heart. Take the hand of someone who drowns in solitude, and angels will smile at both of you. Like marriages, all encounters are planned up above.

That was surely true of Rabbi Uri's parents. And now listen: a few biographical notes of Rabbi Uri. On the surface, Pinchas and Rivkele Kluckhoypt, who lived in Lianov, a small village near Lwów -- Lemberg -- had not much in common. [00:21:00] A poor orphan whose grandmother died of grief when her husband was beaten to death by pogromchiks, Rivkele worked as a maid in an inn for coachmen. The innkeeper and his wife had noticed this man, Pinchas, a coachman, who did not speak or behave like the others. He neither drank, nor cursed. And they decided that Pinchas and Rivkele ought to get married.

By coincidence, one more coincidence, the great Maggid of Mezeritch_happened to arrive in that inn. And so, he was present at the engagement ceremony. And when they got married, Pinchas changed jobs, and became a tailor. The couple was poor, and had to work hard for a living. But was it a happy marriage? It does not seem so. [00:22:00] Rivkele was probably

more pious and refined than her husband. Was it what we call today mental incompatibility? (laughter) Or some other kind?

One source states that, and I quote, "After ha-chatunah" -- after the wedding -- "lo yachla lisbol et tahaluchot ba'alalah." She could not tolerate her husband's behavior. What behavior? What could a simple tailor of Lianov have done to provoke such anger or resentment in his newly wedded wife?

Rivkele considered divorce, which at the time was extremely infrequent in Jewish life. She first went to consult the great Maggid of Mezeritch. He remembered her engagement party, and said, reprimanding her, "Do not even think of divorcing! You will have a son, who will bring joy [00:23:00] and consolation to our people."

And so, she didn't divorce. He sent her back to her husband. And when she became pregnant, she returned once more to see the great Maggid, who stood up to welcome her. And Hasidim say, he stood up because he knew she was carrying Rabbi Uri of Strelisk in her belly. But it is also possible that he stood up simply because Jewish tradition orders us to stand up before every pregnant woman. Why? Not only out of courtesy, but also because the child in her womb may be the messiah.

Anyway, Rivkele went home totally reassured. If she was pious and charitable before, she became more so now. She kept away from whatever was not kosher. [00:24:00] As a young mother, she prevented her child from even noticing whatever was impure. Shielded by his mother's extreme precautions, and inspired probably by the Maggid's prediction, there appeared to be no way for Rabbi Uri to avoid the glorious destiny that was awaiting him inside the Hasidic Kingdom.

Still, Rabbi Uri must have had problems with his father. At one point, he is said to have remarked, and I quote him, "Had my father gone to the mikveh, the ritual bath, at least once before my birth, I could have accomplished even more." (laughter) But here, Rabbi Uri made up for it. He went to the mikveh very often. Well, I do not suggest to follow him there, but let us visit him at his home.

Who is he? Born in Lianov in 1757, three years before the passing of [00:25:00] the Besht, he had a normal childhood -- I mean, normal for a lonely and melancholy Jewish child with an overprotective Jewish mother (laughter) in a Russian village where few Jews could be found. He himself later told the story of his father shedding bitter tears for not being able to gather

a minyan for his son's circumcision. And listen. He himself told a story. For an entire week, Pinchas tried to find 10 men. He could not even find nine -- or, for that matter, eight, five, or four. He went from village to village, from one marketplace to another, in vain. On the morning of the eighth day, as he was sitting in front of his hut, lost in thought, wondering how his son would be brought into the covenant of Abraham, how without a minyan for the ceremony his son would become [00:26:00] Jewish, he began to sob uncontrollably. Suddenly, he heard the sounds of a carriage approaching. As it pulled up in front of him, he saw that its passengers seemed in a good mood.

"Why are you upset," the coachman asked him. "Isn't God our father? Yes, then what troubles you?" Rabbi Pinchas explained his predicament. God had blessed him with a son, but now, eight days after his birth, it was time to circumcise him, and there was no minyan. "That's all?" exclaimed the coachman. "Rejoice, dear man! Your worries are over. Aren't we all Jewish? Look here -- the 10 of us are just returning from a wedding, and we have brought food along, enough for two minyanim. So what are we waiting for?"

Well, never in the history of Lianov had there been such a circumcision ceremony. It seemed that one of [00:27:00] the passengers happened to be a mohel (laughter); another, a teacher; a third, a singer; and all night long, there was praying, singing, and dancing.

"Can you guess who they were?" asked Rabbi Uri. "No? Let me tell you. The teacher was Moshe Rabbenu -- Moses. (laughter) The mohel, the first, Abraham Avinu. The singer was King David. (laughter) And do you know who was the godfather, the Sandek? Eliyahu HaNavi -- Prophet Elijah."

With such guests and their blessings, the child had to do well. (laughter) And he did. So precocious was he, that one day when he was heard sobbing, and his parents ran out to see what happened, they found him in the field, staring at the [00:28:00] sky. "Why are you crying?" they asked him. "Did you fall?" No. "Are you sick?" No. "Are you afraid?" No. "Then why the tears?"

"Oh," he said, "I feel sorry. I feel sorry for God. He has so many children, and they are all so far away from him."

At three, he was able to read the Bible; at five, he was discovering the depths of Talmud. Some considered him an illui, a child prodigy. Of his first tutor, nevertheless, various tales have been told, such as the following: since the tutor frequently wasn't paid by his father, who had no money, he would as frequently punish his pupil. He would punish him when little Uri knew his lesson too well. "You see?" he would shout. "You see the quality of my teaching? And you see, your father doesn't even pay me." (laughter) On the other [00:29:00] hand, when the pupil didn't know his lesson, the tutor would punish him again, shouting, "You see? You don't even pay, and you don't even learn. That's too much."

Later, the young Uri studied kabbalah, but not practical kabbalah. And a text says that whenever he would see an angel, he would close his eyes. Hasidic legend tells us that he was befriended by the village lord. How did it happen? Listen. That particular lord was a learned, enlightened man, who had once been visited by a Jewish renegade, who told him that he planned to become a missionary. "Why don't you try your debating skill on young Uri?" asked the village lord. The renegade accepted the challenge. As Uri was known to frequently walk alone in the woods, they decided to wait for him there. When he appeared, the renegade [00:30:00] engaged him in

conversation. "Why don't you give up the Torah? Don't you see it's obsolete and useless? It only brings trouble to those who believe in it."

At first, Uri kept silent, afraid of offending the lord of the village. But when the latter ordered him to answer, he said, and I quote him, according to that text: "When God gave the Torah, the entire Jewish people stood at Sinai to receive it. No Jew may give back the Torah on his own. If you want us to do it, you must gather all the Jews, from all over the world, and you and I will debate the question before them -- but not before." And Hasidim say that ultimately Rabbi Uri's answer made the lord of the village smile, and the renegade was chased away, and never heard from since.

As an adolescent, he [00:31:00] may have met the great Maggid of Mezeritch, who died in '72. We know that Rabbi Uri was searching for a master, and couldn't find one. He met Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk -- not good enough. He left him for Ostraha, where the very great Reb Yevi received him with great affection. But that was not what Rabbi Uri needed then. He left Ostraha. He went to Koretz, where Rabbi Pinchas simply refused to be his master. He didn't want to risk a refusal. From there he traveled to Neshkhiz -- would Rabbi

Mottele be his teacher? No. On he went to Onipol, where he was asked to stay, by Rabbi Zusya, as his pupil. He did not. Instead, he continued to Karlin, which was to be [00:32:00] his last stop.

Now why didn't he accept the other offers? I would have. After all, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk! Rabbi Zusya! But why didn't he? Were the other masters less pious, less impressive than Rab Shloimele Karliner? No acceptable theory has been advanced. The truth is that a secret bond exists between the soul of a master and that of his disciple. And no one knows its root or reason. We call it shresh neshamah. Just as there is love at first sight, there is hitkashrut at first sight. The Hasid has only one master, and for the master, every Hasid is the only one. It is as though their bond were older than Creation itself.

Some commentators say that Rabbi Uri was suspicious of some masters. That he thought they were not careful enough and could fall [00:33:00] prey to vanity, which in Hasidic literature is considered the sin, the malediction. It pushes one into the precipice without warning. "Better throw yourself into a burning furnace than become famous," said Rabbi Uri.

He was once asked, "How is it that today's rebbes take so much money from their followers, whereas their distant predecessors were satisfied to receive much less?" And with tongue in cheek, he gave him a lesson in art. And he said, "How much does a living rooster cost? Pennies.

But a sculpture or a painting of a rooster, the illusion of a rooster, a fake rooster, costs much more." (laughter) Another time, he wondered aloud, "How can people be vain? Whatever we possess belongs to God; it is only given to us on [00:34:00] loan. Even our piety comes from Him on loan."

Anyway, he eventually became Reb Shloimele Karliner's disciple. How did he become his disciple? Did they meet in a room alone, discussing Zohar? No. Did he attend the lesson in mysticism? No. Did he attend the service? No. Listen: when Rabbi Uri arrived in Karlin, he saw Reb Shloimele sitting on a rock in the street, alone. "Peace unto you," said Reb Shloimele. And that was sufficient. Rabbi Uri felt he had reached his destination. Tradition has it that he stayed there seven years.

His first wife -- Freidele -- worked as a maid in wealthy homes. Later, she opened a grocery store. After her death, he married Blimele, [00:35:00] Reb Mendel Kossover's sister, and

they were so poor that when Rabbi Uri came home for Passover, they could not afford to have their own Seder, and therefore celebrated it at the communal seder, at the table of the local rabbi. Later, he and his own disciples, most of them were just as impoverished as he. For he disliked and mistrusted the rich. Of his followers, only one was known for his wealth: a certain Reb Wolfe from Lemberg. "I like you, Wolfe," he once told him. "But I would like you even more if you were poor." (laughter)

"No, no," protested the frightened Hasid, "don't change things, Rabbi -- I like them the way they are!" (laughter) If I were to lose even a shoelace, I would be unable to pray properly." So, the Seraph of Strelisk allowed him to keep his money -- since he needed it for prayer.

But the other Hasidim had no problems with prayer, [00:36:00] though they were all poor, almost destitute. And they were not alone. Most Jews, especially those in the villages, lived in misery, fear -- and fortunately for them, some degree of hope.

Now let's have a closer look. What was their situation? What was happening outside the Hasidic universe while Rabbi Uri worked on his prayers? The world had entered a period of

violent and bloody convulsions, oddly accompanied by cultural renaissance. We have made this image, we have created this image, and showed it to you many times. It's always important to remember.

Rabbi Uri was a contemporary of Friedrich the Great and Scarlatti, William Blake and Diderot, Gainsborough and Schiller -- but was he merely aware of their existence? Did he perceive the burning impatience of history? There is something that [00:37:00] I like to think of, and to call it as simultaneity. How many of you remember that Socrates and Plato were giving their lectures and sharing their teaching at the same time when Isaiah and Jeremiah were speaking to the Jewish people in Judea? At the same time when Confucius and Lao Tzu were actually beginning their adventure in China, and at the same time when Buddha was born -- one generation; and they didn't know one another.

So Uri didn't know of anything that happened in the world. Did he ever realize that Europe was going through endless turbulence, and that Western civilization was enduring fundamental [00:38:00] mutations? Prussia and Great Britain are constantly at war; in America, there is the Revolution and the War of Independence; in Russia, czars and czarinas succeed one

another on Ivan the Terrible's throne. Poland is divided once, twice, three times. The French Revolution produces great orators, who, in the name of freedom, fill the prisons with former and future adversaries. In the name of life, they send hundreds of men and women to die on the guillotine.

The Ethics of our Fathers seems to have foreseen everything: *kol d'ataf*, the killer will be killed; the king's judges will be judged. Danton, Robespierre, Marat: in the end, there is only victor -- death. Death alone can boast of lasting triumphs. It ridicules covenants and alliances; it imposes its will on sovereigns and dictators. [00:39:00] And God in all that? His name -- or other names -- are invoked by those who die, as well as by those who kill. Is it because the century is nearing its end? The pace accelerates. Denmark is ruled by a madman, Christian the Seventh. Berlin is burned by Russian soldiers; Bengal suffers from starvation. Napoleon undertakes the conquest of the Orient. Kant and Rosseau, Goethe and Goya and Mozart build spiritual cathedrals while Europe drowns in oceans of blood and sinks into the abyss. Oh, yes -- history is on the move. It moves forward, then jumps backward. What will the nineteenth century be like?

While all these forces are at work, the Hasidic kingdom continues to serve as a haven, both enchanted and [00:40:00] blessed.

To God-fearing men and women who still believe in non-violence, in the importance of the sacred element in human relations; who still believe in the beauty and depth of each moment that passes. They are poor -- so what. They are oppressed? So what. They have their own kings, their own princes, their own ideals. They, too, are fighting, but their means are different. Their victories are of a spiritual nature. For a Hasid, what matters is the soul -- nothing else. The mind-- nothing else.

But what about one's daily worries? They must be transformed. But what about bread for hungry children? What about hope for desperate prisoners? Hunger implicates all those who have bread and do not share it. A prisoner in his or her cell implicates all those outside who are still free, and do not use their freedom to open the gates of all prisons. [00:41:00] Every problem must be examined from a moral aspect. And this moral aspect must govern the Hasid's conduct. One must look at one's fellow human being; one must listen to him, to her. One must help him. And who among us, at times, does not need help?

In those times, all Jewish communities needed help. All needed comfort. Especially those scattered in the forsaken corners of the Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, White Russia, and Romania. And even in France, where the French Revolution of 1789 had given human rights to its citizens but had forgotten its Jews. True, there were not many Jews in France then -- approximately 500 in Paris and some 40,000 elsewhere. But a delegation of Jews had to argue their [00:42:00] case before Parliament, and I quote their pathetic, heart-breaking question: "You are giving human rights to all human beings. Aren't Jews human beings?"

Of course, it was worse in Eastern Europe. But there, Jews knew where to go for help. They had their rebbes. And their rebbes offered them hope and consolation, and they helped them live and survive. The various masters attracted large numbers of disciples from all parts of Eastern Europe. That was the great Maggid's formidable victory: he had foreseen the political changes and taken appropriate measures. He had sent his best disciples to the four corners of Central Europe in a mission to enlarge the movement. More and more schools were created where masters and disciples sought to develop and enrich Jewish thought and memory. Each and every [00:43:00] master had his distinctive approach.

What was Rabbi Uri known for? His opposition to the popularization of kabbalah? His passion for the poor? We know that his son, Reb Shloime, was born in a cellar, and that many guests were invited to the circumcision in Lianov. All attended. But Rabbi Uri could not afford the customary seudat mitzvah, the meal that follows the ceremony. And he was heard saying, "And what if I cannot offer food and wine to my guests? Is that a reason for a Jewish child not to become a part of the Jewish people?"

Among the guests, there was a certain Reb Leib Dimeles, the brother-in-law of the Seer of Lublin. He was known for his wealth and generosity. When he saw the poverty of his host, he sent out [00:44:00] for the best food and drinks available. And he then offered Rabbi Uri valuable gifts, and clothes and money, and promised him to take care of the entire family. When Rabbi Uri protested, Reb Leibel said, "I am not giving it to you, for your sake, but for the sake of your son." And that very night, Rabbi Uri decided to leave Lianov and move to Strelisk, because Strelisk was known for the misery of its Jewish population.

When did he become a rebbe? After the death of his beloved teacher, Reb Shloimele, who was killed by a Cossack while reciting the Amidah prayer. Hence, the extraordinary importance

Rabbi Uri of Strelisk attached to prayer. To his disciple, he once said, "You wish to learn my teaching? Start [00:45:00] praying."

Masters and teachers came to attend his lessons, and he welcomed them with a test. They were made to drink two or three glasses of vodka, and if they couldn't handle the drinks, he told them that they still had much to learn. Once, when wealthy Hasidim appeared before him, he ordered them to go outside to the well, and bring in two pails of water. "Why is he doing this?" wondered Rebbe Bunam. "To teach them humility," answered the disciple, who had just returned from Strelisk.

Not surprisingly, soon only poor Hasidim remained in Strelisk. A tzaddik from out of town could not hide his astonishment, since the Seraph of Strelisk could accomplish miracles if he wanted. Why didn't he help his followers become rich?

[00:46:00] "Soon you will understand," answered Rabbi Uri.

"Look at my followers. Invite any one of them to join us." The tzaddik motioned to a man, asking him to come closer. "Listen," said the Seraph of Strelisk, "this moment is special. It is a moment of grace. *Sha'at ha'kosher v'sha'at ha'ratzon*. Tell me your most ardent and secret wish. I promise you it will be accomplished."

It took a while for the Hasid to control himself. "My wish? The rebbe wants to hear my real wish? It is to be able to say at least -- like the rebbe -- once, Baruch She'amar ve-haya ha-olam." At least once, a prayer the way the rebbe does. In other words, prayer in Strelisk was not a means to attain a goal. Prayer was the goal.

One day, Rabbi Uri interrupted a morning service, exclaiming, "I [00:47:00] know your needs. I know you need money to pay the butcher and the baker, the cobbler and the healer. So, whoever wants money, let him put his hand in my pocket. He will get more than he needs." And all remained motionless. Their mind was in another world, as was their heart. Their soul was not in their pocket.

It was in Strelisk that Rabbi Uri perfected, so to speak, his concept and practice of prayer. Like Rabbi Akiva, he would leave this world during prayer, detaching himself from reality, extracting himself from time itself. His soul would travel in celestial spheres, where he met other souls, all attracted by the same light. Only when Rabbi Uri ascended into heaven, he took others with him, allowing them to see what he saw.

[00:48:00]

When Reb Sholemke of Belz came to visit him on Shavuot, he was invited for an Aliyah. Shaking with fear and awe, Reb Sholem of Belz literally saw the Torah as it was written in the time of Moses: white fire on black fire. Rabbi Uri's ecstasy was so powerful, it is said, that every day before services, he put his affairs in order, and bid farewell to his family, as though he were seeing them for the last time. And to his wife and children, every day he would repeat his last will. And to a devoted disciple, he would say, "If you do not see me again, remember. The written notes on my table are not mine, but my teacher's." And Reb Sholem Belzer's comment was, "What did I [00:49:00] learn from him? The art and the power of prayer."

Now a few words may be in order to remind us who Reb Shloime his teacher was. Rabbi Asher of Stolin said of him, and I quote, "When Reb Shlolem prays, he has one of his feet in this world, and the other in the world to come -- and it is on the other one that he is leaning." As for Rabbi Uri, he testified, and I quote him: "The Heichal Ha-Negina, the sanctuary of melody, is the smallest of the sanctuaries, but none is as close to man. Enter it, and you will be in the presence of God. However, Rabbi Shloime Karliner did not need it; he approached God on his own. Through prayer."

And the great Rabbi Shneur-Zalman of Ladi, the founder of Chabad, commented, "No one [00:50:00] could be compared to Reb Shlomo, for no one prays like him. When he prays, he is taller. When he prays, he is higher than all of us."

One day, we are told, the king issued a decree forbidding Jewish communal prayer. Naturally, Jews everywhere moved heaven and earth to revoke the decree. They made such a noise that the heavenly court itself became troubled. And after long deliberation, it was decided to ask Rabbi Shlomo Karliner to render his judgment. Said he, "'Va'ani tefilati' does not mean 'I pray'; it means, 'I am prayer.' Who and what would the Jewish people be without prayer?" As a result, we are told, the decree was soon abolished.

Toward the end of his life, Reb Shlomo moved to Ludmir, which was under Russian occupation. It happened during the month of Iyar. [00:51:00] A special squad of Cossacks had arrived in town to disarm a band of Polish insurgents. While searching for them, its commander stumbled upon a gathering in a house. In the meantime, we were already in Sivan. The commander did not know that Jews had assembled there to celebrate Shavuot, which that year fell on the Shabbat. The officer entered the

shtiebel. Reb Shlomo, lost in prayer, did not notice his presence, not even when the officer stood next to him and spoke to him.

Reb Shlomo's grandson wanted to yell, but dared not make a sound. Finally, he shyly pulled his grandfather's caftan -- without success. Reb Shlomo Karliner, absorbed in prayer, remained motionless. And thereupon, in an outburst of anger, the officer fired at him point [00:52:00] blank, hitting him three times in the hip. And the rebbe fell to the ground. "Why did you bring me down?" he asked, opening his eyes. His Hasidim carried him to his room. Nobody knows if he realized that he was dying, but we do know that he asked for the Zohar, the Book of Splendor, and he began reading it. We also know that he died while delving into its mysteries.

As his worthy follower and disciple, Rabbi Uri of Strelisk also placed a strong emphasis on prayer. But then, wasn't this part of Hasidic teaching? With the exception of Reb Mendele Kotzker, all Hasidic masters believed in the power of prayer. But with the exception of Reb Shlomo Karliner, none went as far as Rabbi Uri of Strelisk. Praying, for him, was a constantly renewed statement of being ready to die for [00:53:00] God. He said, "Why did God accept Abel's offering? Because he gave of

himself. To pray means to become offering and sacrifice. Unfortunately," said Rabbi Uri, "we have forgotten how to pray, and we must learn again. King David said he knew how to write psalms. All I know is how to recite them." But in truth, no one recited them like him. No one had his fervor, his passion, his flame. And thus, Strelisk became a new center in Hasidism -- a center of ecstasy, where his followers forgot their links to the material world and attached their being to the Almighty Creator of all worlds.

With the strength of his prayer, Rabbi Uri succeeded, we are told, in saving not only the living, but the dead as well. Hasidic legend [00:54:00] has it that he held the keys to hell in his hands. And therefore, every Shabbat, the angels in heaven would wait for him to end the Havdalah prayer before they could usher the sinners back to hell. And there is a marvelous Chinese proverb: "When you are in a hurry, sit down."

(laughter) And this is precisely what he did, and this is precisely why he made a special effort not to hurry.

Does all this sound supernatural? Like most masters, Rabbi Uri was versed in mystical studies. Again, what would Hasidism be without its mystical component? But -- there is a but. Though inspired by mysticism, Rabbi Uri was opposed to its

popularization because he was afraid of its trivialization. He was against publishing mystical books. [00:55:00] As a result, he entered into open conflict with other great masters, such as Reb Tzvi-Hersh of Ziditchoiv, who publicly encouraged the study of the Zohar and the Lurianic commentaries. Rabbi Uri believed that the study of kabbalah for the uninitiated was too dangerous. The debate therefore split the movement once more. And when Rabbi Tzvi-Hersh declared that he knew the entire Zohar by heart, Rabbi Uri responded in the third person -- he always spoke of himself in the third person. He said, "Uri does not know the whole Zohar by heart. Uri is satisfied to know only one verse by heart; but that verse offers him enough food for thought for a thousand days."

In general, he was sharp, and his sayings were brilliant. Listen to some of his favorite sayings. And I quote him: "The Torah," he said, "is composed of 600,000 letters, one for each soul of the people of Israel. [00:56:00] Omit one letter, and the entire Torah is psula, unfit for use. And the same is true for the Jewish people: eliminate one of its children, the people will not be the same. We cannot afford losing any of our children."

Also, he said, "Why are letters and words separated from one another in the Torah?" And the answer: "To illustrate our occasional need for solitude. True, we must all belong to the community; but at times, we must also belong to ourselves."

Another saying. He loved to say, "Uri," he said, "is not afraid he'll be asked why he wasn't Abraham or Moses. But Uri is afraid that when he will come before the celestial tribunal, they will ask him, 'Uri, Uri. Why weren't you Uri?'"

When his son, Reb Shlomo - named after Reb Shlomo Karliner, his teacher -- got married, [00:57:00] he began building his own daven shtiebel -- that's how they called it: the prayer room. Just at that time, messengers came to his father from Palestine, asking for contributions for a house of study to be established in the name of the Holy Ari, the Ari HaKadosh, in Tzfat, in Safed. And Reb Uri said, "I will not give you a penny, for three reasons. Firstly, when the messiah will come, and the Holy Ari will finally come to his synagogue, there will be so many people there, there will be no room for me. Secondly, my son is building a shtiebel -- he also needs money. And lastly, I have no money." (laughter)

He believed that a person can be known and studied by every one of his limbs: his eyes or her eyes; his face. Even [00:58:00] the person's palm tells me who that person is. He also said every person must go through a thousand worlds every day. He also said, sadly, "People come to me. When they come to me, they know where they are going. But where am I going?"

And the most beautiful of all: he said, and I quote him, "Truth remains true, even if we do nothing about it." He said, "I know nothing; nothing at all. All I know is I must envelop myself in the tallit and shout "Shemah Yisra'el - Hear, O Israel." And once he shouted Shemah Yisra'el with such force and exuberance that the ceiling broke down over his head.

We are now in 1827. The Hasidic kingdom has grown. It is now an immense movement, with many centers, many capitals:

[00:59:00] Kozhenitz and Riminov, Lublin and Pshiskhe, Lizhensk and Rizhin and Kotzk, and Tsanz, and Sadigur. The great masters of the earlier generations are gone, as are gone the three participants in the holy conspiracy for redemption, who paid with their lives for their daring experiment. God's hand cannot be forced with impunity.

Having lived and worked, studied and taught for 70 years, Rabbi Uri of Strelisk is aware that the end is near. Members of his immediate family, of his intimate circle of faithful disciples, come from near and far to be with him. Physical pain and mental anguish have not left him for weeks and weeks. What will happen when -- what happens to a kingdom when it loses its crown?

Psalms are being recited from morning to evening, from evening to morning. [01:00:00] A rumor spreads through the community: he has just lost consciousness. Only his lips are moving, but it is difficult to hear what he says. Probably a prayer. Will his prayer be received now?

His agony seems endless. From time to time, Reb Yehuda-Tzvi of Stretin -- his favorite disciple, probable successor -- opens the door, looks at the master, and closes it again. At one point, he enters the room and fails to reappear. His sobs break the silence. Everyone is now sobbing. Later, Rabbi Yehuda-Tzvi was asked, how did he know that it was indeed the end? And he answered, "It is written in the Bible: lo yir'ani ha'adam vechai. No person could see God and live. When I opened the door, I realized that our master had [01:01] seen."

And so, the House of Strelisk was in mourning; and the entire Hasidic kingdom was in mourning; and the universe itself, filled with Hasidic nostalgia and fervor, was in mourning. Following tradition, older Hasidim sought to crown the son, Reb Shlomo, as their new master, but he refused. Anyway, as we said, he survived his father by only four months. And so, the disciple, Reb Yehuda-Tzvi of Stretin, was unanimously elected to the throne. That may well have been the wish of Rabbi Uri. Between master and disciple there existed a powerful affection that people compared to the one that had once linked Moses to Joshua.

Rabbi Itzchak-Eizik of Kalev, the marvelous Hungarian tzaddik who would like to go into the fields [01:02:00] and buy shepherds' songs, and sanctify them as mystical tunes -- and I know some of them -- asked Rabbi Yehuda-Tzvi, the successor, to tell him of the Seraph of Strelisk. "Tell me more about him."

"I cannot," answered Rabbi Yehuda-Tzvi. And since the Kalever Tzaddik insisted, Rabbi Yehuda-Tzvi opened his shirt, pointed to his heart, and exclaimed, "Kalever Tzaddik, look! Look well into my heart, and you will see how I was fortunate to have had as my master and teacher."

In conclusion, for tonight's excursion into Strelisk, a commentary that tradition has preserved in the name of Rabbi Uri. Maybe next week we shall talk more about [01:03:00] the element of fervent friendship in Hasidism as well, just to show how it was extinguished one biblical generation ago. But now, just a commentary.

The Midrash tells us that together with Abraham, his nephew Haran also entered a burning furnace. Abraham went first, emerged unscathed, whereas Haran, who followed him, did not -- he was burned. "How are we to explain," asked Rabbi Uri, "the miracle of the one and the tragedy of the other? Both entered the furnace."

It is simple, according to Rabbi Uri. Abraham said to himself, "If I want the idols to be smashed and burned, I must prove my conviction by throwing myself into the flames." And because he had thus risked his life [01:04:00] for his ideal, he was saved by God. But Haran was more skeptical, and more practical. He thought, "I will see what happens to Abraham. (laughter) If he comes back alive and healthy, I too shall go into the flames. If not, I always have time not to go." Well, he was not ready to risk his life for God, and that is why he lost it. The moral

of the story: one must risk everything at times for the sake of one's belief, of one's faith.

In the final analysis, who is a Hasid? Someone who is faithful, meaning someone who is filled with faith. Faith in God and in his words; faith in his community and beyond it, in the larger human community, composed of the living and the dead, thus offering promise to the first and [01:05:00] benedictions to the latter. Faith in memory helps the individual transcend his or her condition. Faith in the future must be justified by memory. The greatness and holiness of Rabbi Uri of Strelisk: he knew how to reconcile his love of God and his love for his fellow human beings. He remained faithful to both, but never at the expense of either God or his creature.

To an opponent of Hasidism who criticized Rabbi Uri, the great Rabbi Ziskind Landau remarked, and I quote him, "You criticize him for not being sufficiently erudite? Well, I want you to know that there are various geniuses among rabbis. There are those whose specialty is the domain of tahor ve-tameh -- pure and impure. Others who know everything about kiddushin -- about marriage and divorce. Still others who are our teachers in the field of compensation -- nezikin. But Rabbi [01:06:00] Uri of

Strelisk is a genius in the domain of yirat shamayim and ahavat Hashem: the fear of God, and the love of God.

But then, you may ask, how is one to teach these essential virtues? The son of his successor, Rabbi Avraham ben Reb Yehuda-Tzvi of Stretin, was asked this question, and he said, "Fear of God is something I cannot teach you." As he said, "Hakol b'yedei shamayim chutz me yirat-shamayim - that, you alone must learn. But I can teach you love of God."

"And what is it?" he was asked.

"Oh," he sighed, "it's so simple. It is love for the person next to you."

I know -- you may say: "That's all? It's so easy!" Easy? Did you say easy? [01:07:00] Then why not try it. (laughter)
(applause)

M:

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