

Elie Wiesel In Hasidism: Rabbi Mendel of Riminov and Rabbi
Moshe of Uhely 92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive November 1,

1990

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Once again, for our third annual encounter, let us enter the enchanted orchard of Hasidic tales. Maybe some of you will choose to remain inside. If not -- well, you will.

(laughter) Tonight, I suggest we examine the destinies of two masters of whom we have not spoken yet. Actually, theirs is a story -- the eternal story -- of waiting. Of Jewish waiting for redemption. Universal redemption. [00:01:00] Everything separated them, and yet, both had the titles rav and rebbe. Rabbi and spiritual leader. Both attracted thousands and thousands and thousands of followers. Both -- and this is important -- handed down their succession to someone other than their sons. Who are they? One is called Rabbi Moshe of Ujhel. The other one, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Riminov. Great tzadikim, renowned guides who fostered countless legends through their love of God and of Israel. They dedicated their whole lives to their people, to bringing them closer to God, and to bringing God closer to his children.

How could a Jew such as myself [00:02:00] not love these men? How could I not love them, for whom each word was an act of love? For them, every gesture was linked to the elan, the impulse which thrust them separately towards their fellow human beings. Faithfully following the Beshtian teaching, they would place the human being at the center of their concerns, even their mystical concerns. In order to redeem the Shechinah from its exile, one must simply put an end to exile. Ah, say the Hasidim. Golus, golus, exile, exile. How hard it is to endure. How long is exile, and how painful it is. How can one bring it to an end? Rabbi Mendel and Rabbi Moshe had a common dream of hastening [00:03:00] redemption. One through prayer, the other through violence. I mean, violence, as we shall see later. We shall evoke both men.

Let's start with Reb Moshe. Why him? You will understand my favoritism, later, not right now. I will give you the beginning of an explanation right away. Rabbi Moshe of Ujhel was the founder of the Sighet dynasty. And Sighet, my native town, after all, deserves some priority, doesn't it? Actually, I am not a Hasid of Sighet. I am a Hasid of Vizhnitz. I always have been. A matter of luck in geography or biography, you know. My grandfather, Reb Dodye Feig, and his daughter, my mother, Hashem Yikom Damam, were [00:04:00] fervent followers of Vizhnitz. And

once, I even began telling you a story which I didn't finish, which I will finish when the Messiah will come. (laughter) How could I not be influenced by them? Vizhnitz meant, still means, Ahavat Yisrael. Tolerance, moderation, compassion, love of Israel -- the people, Israel the state, the land -- and all people. Which is not the case of Sighet. Surely not today, when Sighet has been taken over by Satmar fanatics. One day, I may tell you about Satmar too. (laughter) But Sighet remains Sighet, a beginning, so let's begin.

A story. The story takes place on the Sabbath, on the Shabbat, on the twenty-eight day of the month, the hot month of [00:05:00] Tammuz. Coming home from a place called Shtetovich, where he took part in a circumcision ceremony, the revered Rebbe Moshe of Ujhel, who was over 80 years of age, became ill. It was the first time this was happening to him. That's right; he had not been sick one day in his entire life. He had never worn glasses. He had never complained of any pain. He used to baffle doctors, so robust was his health. Now, all of a sudden, on that Shabbat, everything suddenly was changed. Age had caught up with the Tzadik. The man, who up until then had only paid attention to spiritual matters, has just been reminded of his physical limitations. Was this the body's revenge for being [00:06:00] neglected too long? The rebbe was not well, and he

was getting worse. The family circle wanted to call the best doctors in town, but the patient was against it. He refused to let them come between him and his Creator. If God wishes to keep him alive, then he will live, he said. If God does not wish to, who could hold him back?

Lying on his deathbed, he recited the usual psalms and prayers. And suddenly, with his face on fire, he stopped, reflected for a long time, and in a firmer tone of voice, addressed God.

"Master of the universe," he said. "You know the truth. You know I am the worst of men, and you also know, deep down, truth is all that I seek. Truth is all that I care about. [00:07:00] I don't wish to delude myself; my virtues are few. But they include my love of truth. I have never uttered a word that was untrue. Why should I start now, when I'm about to appear before you? No, I am not lying when I tell you -- I tell you, Master of the universe, that if Moshe, son of Chana, had known in his youth that he would grow old, that his hair would turn gray and white, and that he still would not set eyes on the redeemer, he could not have gone on living. But you would promise him every day that the Messiah would be there the next day. Always the next day. And you kept him in suspense. You made fun of him. Well, I am asking you. Is it fair? Is it nice to make fun [00:08:00] of an old fool? That's why I'm imploring you, master

of the universe, send us the Messiah. Believe me, I am not asking that for myself. I am asking it for your sake, so that your name be glorified, so that your glory be sanctified. I do not want anything for myself. I am not asking for anything. Listen. May I, Moshe, son of Chana, be an offering. Let my death expiate and atone for the sins of my people. That is all I want. I am prepared to give up even my share in paradise. I am ready to give up my future life, but let the Messiah come. Let the Messiah reveal his face and impose his authority. I do not need him anymore. But your people do." [00:09:00] Close quotes.

Then, Rebbe Moshe was silent. His feverish eyes looked for a point in space to stare at. What did they see? According to a source, he started reciting the prayer which is part of the morning service, *Elokai, neshama shenatata bi tohorah hi.*

"Almighty God, the soul that you entrusted to my care is pure. You created it, you kept it, and now you will take it from me again." Thereupon, he closed his eyes. The great Tzaddik of Ujhel had just left the world, which he had graced and enriched with his teaching for so long. There are other stories told about him and by him. We will narrate some of them later. First, in the spirit of Hasidim, let's not break with tradition,

and let us devote a few minutes to [00:10:00] some preliminary remarks.

First of all, a question. Why did Rebbe Moshe tell God to hasten redemption, not for us or for him, but for God himself? Even if it is true, is it nice to say? Is it up to a mortal being to say it? Wouldn't God know what is good for him? Wouldn't God know what his creatures may have learned? What right do we have to say -- we, when we say our prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, *aseh l'ma'anacha im lo l'ma'aneinu*," do it for your own good, for your own sake, for your name, for your glory, if not for ours. Does the Almighty happen to need anything, as if it were? This question applies to the Tzaddik of Ujhel and to other righteous people as well, and to all Jews who pray, [00:11:00] and perhaps even to those who do not.

Prayer is essential to Jewish faith. Both Hasidim and their opponents believe in prayer. The difference between them? Hasidim are a bit noisier. (laughter) They would say: more fervent, call it *dvekus* or *kavanah*, spiritual concentration or mystical cleavage, the result is the same. Hasidim want to be sure of being heard in heaven, so they sing and pray with all their strength, and are being heard everywhere. "Let my stories become prayers," said Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, the greatest

teller of tales in Hasidic and universal literature. Last week I told you of a visit to his grave in Uman. My wife and I heard their moving prayers that still reverberate in us, and maybe next week -- [00:12:00] when he died, his throne remained empty, but his prayers continue.

Now, the general topic for this year's series are fathers and sons, so let us say a few words about the relationships between sons and fathers in Hasidism. At first, on the level of followers, they were not good. They always quarrel; Hasidim quarrel, they love to quarrel. Haven't we related, right here, over the last 23 years, the ideological dissensions and personal conflicts which would oppose so many followers of so many rebbes? And even the fathers to the sons, because the latter felt attracted to the new movement, whereas the fathers wanted to remain with the establishment? This is almost commonplace in early Hasidism. The father is always an opponent, [00:13:00] a misnagid, as we call him. The son is often a Hasid. Out of loyalty towards his master, the son would leave his father's house. Later, by force of circumstance, the situation would improve. The Hasid's father would view it with pleasure when his son became a Hasid in his turn. Then, the problems will be of a different kind -- between some rebbe and one of his sons who ran away and slammed the door. We spoke about them years

ago. Should we get back to them? Wait. We seem to forget something. Look. Here, our door is open. (laughter) (audience applause)

[00:14:00] In the Jewish tradition, one honors the soul of a departed with study. And someone very close to me just got up from shiva. And therefore, I suggest -- I would like to dedicate this study to the soul of an old lady, Yetta bat Rabbi Nachman. (pauses) [00:15:00] We just said earlier that when Rabbi Nachman passed away, (pauses) Rabbi Nachman's tomb is in Uman, and we went to Uman. When he died, he was about to die, we know that he left no heir to wear his crown. Did he have problems with his children or disciples? Not in the sense of our inquiries this year. But he was troubled by their pain. The premature death of his youngest son, Shlomo Ephraim, opened wells of sadness in his tormented soul. Why then did no one in his close entourage succeed him? The reason for it is well known. His last words, to his weeping Hasidim, were, "Do not cry." And he said in Yiddish, *ikh vel eikh nisht farlazn* "[00:16:00] , I am not leaving you." Which means, I will not abandon you. And his followers took his words seriously and literally. That is why he remains their master and teacher to this very day. Their attachment to him is of such purity that

one cannot not be moved by it. The way they speak about him, the way they retell his tales.

But let's not be too idealistic and not over-romanticize the movement. Within the movement, there were some family tragedies on the summit level. The Rizhiner's son, the great Rabbi Yisrael Rizhiner's son, the son named Reb Berenyu -- there is a story about his escapade to the maskilim, to the enlightened, [00:17:00] to the emancipated circles in Czernowitz. Or even Reb Dov Ber [his third son, Rabbi Moshe], the son of the Baal HaTanya, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe. And his strange adventure, far away from home. Both cases provoked turmoil in the Hasidic world. But they were exceptions. Generally speaking, sons of great masters remained faithful to their fathers.

As for Rabbi Moshe of Ujhel, his story is different. But then, all stories are different. At first, the Hasidic world knew of Reb Moshe as an opponent. Like his father, worse. His father was at least drawn to the new movement, which was already shaken up and therefore has galvanized so many Jewish families and [00:18:00] communities everywhere. It is even rumored that Reb Hersh Premishler, as was his father's name, had spent a Sabbath in the town of Brody together, or almost together, with the

famous Reb Michel of Zlotchov. Actually, Reb Hersh happened to be there and heard that Reb Michel was also there. Rabbi Michel's reputation as rebbe and preacher reached the farthest Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. It was said of him that after he got married, he had spent one thousand days and nights in solitude. It's also said of him that when he faced an audience, he read people's thoughts. At times, he would reveal their hidden sins. I confess to you, I have not learned that art from him, [00:19:00] so don't worry. (laughter)

But whenever he would read their sins, he would incite them to repentance. Hasidic chroniclers are grateful to him for preventing the Brody leadership from excommunicating the Baal Shem Tov's movement in 1772. Reb Michel's argument was a legal one. He said to the community leaders and rabbis, Jewish law forbids to condemn the accused in his or her absence. Let us invite the Besht. Let him defend the viewpoint and behavior of his disciples. And therefore, the Besht never stopped thanking him for that. Should he go to his Friday night services? I mean, should the father of Reb Moshe of Ujhel go to Reb Michel's services? No way. [00:20:00] Reb Hersh knew enough about Hasidic customs to know right from the start that they were not for him. Too disorderly, too much commotion, too much chanting, too much swaying, too much ecstasy. In short, too much of

everything. No, all those exhibitionists, not for him. He went to pray with his own kind -- that is, the anti-Hasidim, where everything was quiet. But he was curious, nevertheless. What do they look like, those masters who are so much talked about? What if he went to attend at least the masters' Shabbat meal? Oh no, heaven forbid. One must not go too far, after all. All right, he would go and attend one, the so-called third meal, *shalush seudos*. Just like that, to see, for a short while, to have a look.

On the way there, he thought about his son, [00:21:00] Moshe. He was proud of his son. But he wanted so much that his son should get married -- into a wealthy family after all, it's not so bad. What do you expect, a Jewish father is not that different from a Jewish mother. (laughter) Therefore, he went into the room or *shtibl* where the Rebbe of Zlotchov and his followers were celebrating the most mystical of the Sabbath meals. And he was still thinking of his son. In the meantime, in the *shtibl*, inside, soft and heartbreaking melodies filled with melancholy dreams rose and fell in perpetual motion. It was as if the singers did not have the heart to stop for fear of finding in the ensuing silence an abyss in which all life is extinguished and all hope reduced to ashes.

[00:22:00] And yet, silence did set in at moments and it did not bring any distress, only nostalgia. It was the silence preceding the rebbe's speech, and then enveloping it. Reb Hersh, a determined opponent of Hasidism, could not help moving closer to the table, simply to listen. Suddenly, he stopped. Reb Michel was speaking. And he was talking about him. He was referring to his innermost thoughts. Hadn't he just said, "There are people who are never satisfied," said Reb Michel. "God has blessed them with a gifted son, who will one day enlighten the whole world, but they want money, too?" Well, please, do not [00:23:00] conclude from this incident that the great scholar like Reb Hersh instantly converted to Hasidism. No, that would be asking too much. But let's say that he no longer stood so far from it.

As for his son, Reb Moshe, he wished to be less tolerant, in other words, less open. He spent his whole adolescence studying, doing nothing else. Certainly not visiting rebbes who wanted to be miracle-makers; he had no use for them. For him, as for all the traditional scholars or lamdanim, the only miracle lay in being able to fathom a Talmudic sugya, and to outline its deeper and hidden meaning, grasping what Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael really thought and really meant. There was what they wanted to attain. [00:24:00] So much so that when he

was crowned Rebbe of Shinova, at the age of 24, Reb Moshe refused to go to Lizensk, which was not far, mind you, three miles at the most. Where the great Rabbi Elimelech, a disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch, had built his kingdom. Wasn't he at least curious as his father had been? No, only study occupied his mind. Learning was his passion. Why should he go to Lizensk? Wasn't the Torah everywhere the same? In Shinova too? Yet Rabbi Elimelech, the old Rabbi Elimelech, wished to meet him. And he said, "There lives a great soul within Reb Moshe. And I would like to talk to him." But Reb Moshe refused to leave his home.

According to one source, Rabbi Elimelech is supposed to have stopped [00:25:00] one day as he was going through Shinova in front of the young rebbe's house. He sent someone to tell him. And the amazing thing was, the rebbe, the young rebbe, refused to come out. Once again, the meeting did not take place, nothing doing. But Hasidim don't give up that easily. And he made up new plans, new stratagems, new projects, and all of a sudden, fortune smiled on them. One Hasid who lived in a small town located between Lizensk and Shinova had just had a son. That was the perfect pretext, the great opportunity. The father invited the old Hasidic master to the circumcision ceremony and offered him to act as sondak. Today, you would say godfather,

except godfather has terrible connotations. (laughter) As for Reb Moshe, [00:26:00] he was invited to recite the customary prayers that one recites at circumcision. What better chance could there be of having the two famous men meet?

On the morning of the ceremony, Reb Moshe got into the carriage that was to bring him to the village. And then, all of a sudden, everything went wrong. As he was leaving Shinova, he bumped into a notable from his community who had placed his carriage across the road. And he said, "I won't let you go any further. We are not going to let those Hasidim manipulate our rebbe." And the young Rebbe Moshe allowed himself to be influenced. He turned back. He was not about to become a Hasid, not yet. Later. "Too bad," said Rabbi Elimelech. "I have things to pass on to him." And later, Reb Moshe was to say, [00:27:00] "I was wrong to have let the opportunity pass by." He was to express a similar regret about two other events. But let's not jump ahead. Let's talk a little about our second guest of honor -- actually, they have a lot in common. Hasidim are all alike, although their masters are so different from one another.

And now, we go to Riminov. Before he became a rebbe, Reb Mendel Riminover was poor. In fact, he was poor later, too. But there

are degrees in poverty. It's one thing to be poor when you are alone, and another when you are not. And then, there's a difference between forced misery and freely accepted poverty. Look, Reb Mendel had married the daughter of a very wealthy man, who naturally, had hoped to make a businessman out of him.

[00:28:00] Naturally, his father-in-law was disappointed on two accounts. As he was opposed to the Hasidic movement, he also suffered from the fact that his son-in-law was devoted to it. We can imagine what Reb Mendel's wife had to go through each time she saw her parents, which was the case every day, since the young couple was living with them. (laughter) "When is that husband of yours going to get serious," the businessman would ask. His daughter would not answer. Days went by, then weeks and months. Then the father-in-law, angry, exclaimed that he had had enough. He turned his daughter and her husband out of his house into the street. They found a cold and empty hut.

As he refused to change his way of life, Reb Mendel could spend all his days, as well as many nights, [00:29:00] in the house of study, even forgetting to sleep. For Shabbat, his wife, without ever complaining, would manage to bring back enough wood to heat their impoverished home and enough food for them to eat. One Friday, she found nothing but closed doors and closed hearts. Even the kind baker, who usually gave her on credit, sent her

away empty-handed. She stopped on the street, trying to hold back her tears. Suddenly, she heard a voice calling out to her -- it was the baker. "I'll give you challah for Shabbat," he said to her, "on one condition. That you give me in exchange your share in paradise." She hesitated for a while, then made up her mind. "All right," she said, "it's yours." [00:30:00] That evening, at dinner, as she faced the Shabbat candles on the white tablecloth, Reb Mendel stared at her with intensity. There and then, she understood that he had guessed the extent of her sacrifice. Being modest, she blushed before looking up. And in her husband's eyes, she found her reward. God in his mercy had given her now a larger share in paradise. But that was one thing her parents, poor misnagdim, could hardly understand.

Let us stay within the flowery garden of Hasidism, but let us go on with our investigation of the other, master Rebbe Moshe Teitelbaum, the founder of its Hungarian branch. We know his story: that is his influence, his powers, his teachings. His life, too, is well-known. [00:31:00] More precisely, we think we know it. We know that his father was a righteous and kind man; that his mother was a pious woman who possessed the kind of faith that could shake the highest walls, so much so that we are told that the Ruach HaKodesh, the spirit of God or of prophecy,

dwelled within her. We also know that young Moshe would surprise scholars with his precocious mind. But did he have any brothers or sisters? Hasidic chronicles hardly mention them. Did he have any young companions, any childhood friends or hobbies? What games did he play? What did he do when he was not studying, when he was not praying? Strange, when the spotlight is on him, we only see him. And we always find him in a favorable situation. Always first in everything. [00:32:00] But where is he when the spotlight is on someone else? When he was nine, or 11 years old, according to another version, he made a speech -- a drasha -- in the presence of the most erudite Talmudist in town.

He had not reached the age for his bar mitzvah when his reputation already went well beyond Przemyśl and Galicia. As for his bar mitzvah celebration, he had it celebrated far from his family. Where? In Vilna, of all places. With the incomparable Gaon Reb Eliyahu. That's right, the very same man who was to become the fiercest opponent to the Hasidic movement. How did that happen? One legend says that as a young student, he realized one day that there was no one in his town or in the entire region who could answer all his questions. Therefore, [00:33:00] he set out for Vilna. It was a long and exhausting journey. Once he arrived in front of the Gaon's house, he was

told that the Lithuanian genius did not receive any visitors. Moshe started crying. The Gaon's servant felt sorry for him and helped him. "You know what?" he said. "Next Friday, wait here. The same place. And when the Gaon goes to the mikvah, speak to him."

Moshe approached the Gaon on the street as the latter was on his way to the ritual bath. "Who are you?" the Gaon asked him. And Moshe answered, "I have come from far away. From the far end of Galicia. I am here because I have hundreds of questions derived from my studies and nobody can answer me." Then, on the street, the Gaon asked him about his questions and listened to them one by one. And he answered only [00:34:00] at the end, linking all the questions, thus showing the young student that all questions are linked, and maybe all questions are one question. Showing the young student, too, that in the universe of Talmud, everything is held together and everything is endowed with meaning. Later, Reb Moshe said that he didn't understand a word of what he heard. But he remembered all the answers.

Naturally, he stayed in Vilna for the Shabbat, which was the day of his bar mitzvah. After he got back home, he became engaged to the daughter of a notable, Reb Nisin, who had previously put him to a test. Forty rabbis examined him. Was that when he

went to study at his uncle's, Reb Yosef, a famous wine merchant [00:35:00] and scholar in Kolbasov, or maybe before? The chronology is not clear on that particular point. On the other hand, we know that he spent a few years in Kolbasov with his uncle, and that those years left their mark on him. One day, an epidemic devastated Kolbasov. There was not one house where people were not in mourning. In desperation, Reb Yosef gathered the members of his community in the synagogue, went up to the holy ark, opened it, thrust his head into it, and cried. "Avinu malkeinu, our father and king, I hereby declare myself to be an offering. Accept my sacrifice on behalf of all those who are here. Let them live." A moment later, [00:36:00] he collapsed and died.

A newlywed, Reb Moshe has immersed in prayer -- his entire life was prayer, but then, even more than before or after -- and in study. And like Reb Mendel Riminover, for three years, he did not go near his wife. His father-in-law, unlike Reb Mendel's father-in-law, took care of their needs. But when the Reb Nisin, the father-in-law, died, his son-in-law took over the business for a while. Apparently, he was a better Talmudic scholar than a businessman. He lost nearly everything. Fortunately, there was no lack of offers for him. He took the one from Shinova, where a [00:37:00] position had remained

vacant after the famous Reb Shmelke had left for Nikolsburg. That took place in 1808. He was only 24 years old. Later on, he allowed himself to be talked into going to Ujhel in Hungary. And he remained there until the end. When he was a rabbi, not a Hasidic rebbe yet, he exercised his authority with a firm hand.

The rules of behavior which he imposed may appear too strict and too hard today. That's because the seductive wind of emancipation, the Haskalah, was already blowing across the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Reb Moshe, the Chatam Sofer, and some others thought it useful to appeal for a stricter Jewish religious life. [00:38:00] Among the campaigns which Reb Moshe had launched, there is at least one which may shock the young of today. The one against mixed dancing at weddings. In his eyes, it was a question of *yaharei gubal yavo*, better die than touch a woman other than your own wife. Was he loved by his community? He was feared. He was respected. He was admired. And is often the case, he was underpaid.

There exists a handwritten letter addressed to the leaders of the community in which, poor man, he requests a raise in salary. He explained why. He had a family to feed, a son and a daughter, and [00:39:00] poor people to help. His only son, Reb Eliezar Nisan, became seriously ill when he was nine years old,

and there was a daughter to marry off. But there, for the daughter, applicants were numerous. All Reb Moshe had to do was choose. Some extremely wealthy and influential people would have given anything to become his mechutonim, or in-laws. But he wanted a Talmid Chacham. He wanted a learned man, the best, for his daughter. And the best had an identity and a name: Reb Arye Leibish. The latter was not averse to it, but he was setting some conditions. That he have a chance to dedicate himself wholly to study, therefore, that he might be able to eat for a few years at his father-in-law's table. And Reb Moshe said, "With pleasure."

Only that wasn't all. The groom set another condition.

[00:40:00] That Reb Moshe, his father-in-law, go with him and spend a Sabbath with the holy Seer of Lublin. And what was meant to happen happened. The opponent was won over. The reason for his transformation? Just like -- just like the father of Reb Mendele. All of a sudden, he realized that the Seer of Lublin was really a seer. He noticed that the Seer could read him like an open book and was telling him so, in front of everyone. Again, once more, the element of Ruach HaKodesh, meaning, of prophecy -- not for the future, but for the present -- [00:41:00] to see the present in the present person was a strength that many Hasidic rebbes used in order to

attract their followers. And the Seer of Lublin used it to attract Reb Moshe.

But still, the father for his part did not become a Hasid when he saw Reb Michel of Zlotchov; the son did. A Hasid of the Seer of Lublin, and a friend of his great disciples. And when the Seer of Lublin died in 1815, but not before, he himself took on the heavy but the glorious crown that every Hasidic rebbe wears. Naturally, a skeptical person would smile. Thought transference or telepathy may or may not have existed for hundreds and for thousands of years. But that is no proof that he who practices it is a master. [00:42:00] The same skeptic, or another one, would say, how could a visitor know if what the Seer had said to him in front of everyone was aimed at him and him alone? Couldn't it be that the Seer was speaking generally while thinking about his whole audience, but that Reb Moshe was interpreting his words in his own way? Isn't it a little, the skeptic would say, like astrological predictions, which are so vague that they seem to apply to people who are totally different in their mentalities as well as in their personal lives?

But that can be comprehended as a virtue, I believe, rather than as a flaw. Isn't that what used to be said about the Besht

himself? Didn't his greatness consist in the fact that when he spoke in public, everyone present thought that he was addressing him or her personally? But all that may be irrelevant. The Hasid needs [00:43:00] no explanations, whereas the skeptic has no use for them. The fact remains that Reb Moshe was so impressed with the powers of the Seer that he declared himself his disciple. He was to go and see him a second and a third time, no more. Later, he was to make the following comment, and I quote him: "During those three meetings, I took what I could from him, and also what I wanted. But he did not reveal what it was." Besides, that was a little bit in his nature. To create suspense. Pointing at the mystery without going further. When he declared that he was sorry that he had not met Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk, he added that he had two more regrets. One of which was turning down the invitation from a stranger to teach him Kabbalah, and [00:44:00] that there is a long story in Hasidic chronicles about a mysterious man who lived in town who was actually a kabbalist who left him secret writings. Had he known before, but -- it was too late.

I was going to tell you the story, but we have already spent too much time with him in Ujhel, and maybe we should leave Hungary to go to nearby Galicia, and visit Reb Mendel -- Torem, that was his name -- Reb Mendel of Riminov, who must, and rightly so, be

feeling a little neglected. But actually, Reb Mendel of Riminov did not mind being less sought after than others. He was always busy waiting for others and for the Messiah. While waiting, he was working. Working for his people's redemptions, a redemption [00:45:00] sabotaged by cynics. In ancient Greece, where there were many sects, the worst sect was the cynic sect. And the Hasidim, who didn't know much about ancient Greece, knew something about cynics. And they hated cynics. They would call the cynics (Greek), apokorsim, atheists. One day, Reb Mendel went near the window, gazed at the sky, and said in a loud voice to those near him, "Just look outside. I am sure that there are some cynics who wish to prove and can prove that there is no sky." In fact, with a little cynicism, one can deny all of reality. If Pharaoh had known that in Egypt, he would not have fought against the departure of his Jews. [00:46:00] He would simply have ridiculed it. With a few words in jest, he would have settled the matter for history.

If Reb Moshe Teitelbaum of Ujhel liked to keep some events in his life secret, Rebbe Mendel of Riminov went further and threw a sort of veil over everything that concerned his private life. The Hasidic chronicle tells us hardly anything about his parents, his childhood, his adolescence. In other words, about his formative years out of the public eye. We know that he was

born in 1745 in Neustadt, on the Vistula River. Which means that he could have met the Besht, who only died 15 years later. But as was the case with Reb Moshe Teitelbaum, he kept away from Hasidim at first. He began wandering, and we don't know [00:47:00] why, nor do we know where. At one point, we find him in Nikolsburg. Look at the relations, Nikolsburg was the place of Reb Shmelke, the Rabbi of Shinova, who left his place for Reb Moshe Teitelbaum. So, we find Reb Mendel in Nikolsburg, where the great Reb Shmelke snapped at him, "What are you doing here? Aren't you a bit young?" And Reb Mendel left. And again, we do not know where he went. We do encounter him, all of a sudden, in Berlin. And there he studied with Rabbi Daniel Yaffe. He studied Talmud and tosafot, rishonim, acharonim. He was especially attracted to the commentary of the Alfasi. One night, we are told, the author of the Alfasi appeared to him in a dream and advised him to go and visit Reb Elimelech in Lizensk, the same Rabbi Elimelech [00:48:00] -- imagine. The same Rabbi Elimelech whom he didn't want to see earlier. And he saw him. And he stayed with him. And Reb Elimelech gave him honors, great honors. So much so that he appointed him as the Baal Shacharit for Rosh Hashanah.

After the death of Reb Elimelech, he visited other masters and settled in a place called Prystek. He left Prystek to go to

Riminov in 1791. During the big dispute, and there was a tremendous dispute which split the Hasidic community -- between the disciples of Pshiskhe and those of Lizensk. This is where Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak, who was known as the Jew from Pshiskhe, went to take refuge. He knew [00:49:00] that Rebbe Mendel's protection meant something to the Hasidic community. Although Reb Mendel had many followers, who could have helped him live better, he lived in poverty. One day, his son, who was still young, came to complain that he was hungry. "Impossible," his father answered him. "God would not let a child be hungry. If you were hungry, he would have given me the means to feed you." Bearing that in mind, the boy left the room. Then the rebbe noticed a silver coin on the table. He called back his son. "Now I believe you," he said to him. "You were really hungry." (laughter)

He was said to be strict with people. He found noise unbearable. Whenever he would say sha, [00:50:00] those present would shake with fear. One day, he said a little sentence in passing. "Whoever is too lenient in his behavior with the holy covenant, let him leave the room right away." And they all fled the room. All except the old rebbe Kalonymus, who was to say, "I would have done it, too. I would have followed the others. I was as afraid as they, but I am too old." Even the

authorities were afraid of him. As some opponents informed the authorities against them, the Rebbe of Afta, the Seer of Lublin, and Rebbe Mendel were arrested and brought before the court. As Rabbi Mendel could express himself in perfect German, which he had picked up in Berlin, he acted as spokesman. "Who are you?" the judge who was Austro-Hungarian asked him. "We are servants," Reb Mendel said. "Whose servants?" [00:51:00] "The king's." "What king?" "The king of kings." "And why are you wearing white clothes?" "It was a custom there for rebbes." "What about you?" said Reb Mendel. "Why are you dressed in black?" And the judge got angry and was about to say something, pass sentence maybe, but a terrible fear got hold of him. He started shaking all over. And only after he had sent away the three defendants did he calm down.

Power on Earth hardly impressed Reb Mendel. He was offended by displays of wealth, as well as by self-importance. He forbade women to wear jewelry. By the way, he even forbade brides to wear jewelry, in order not to arouse jealousy. But what really filled him with indignation was injustice. He saw to it that shopkeepers [00:52:00] would not cheat with their scales; that rich people would not humiliate the poor. Usually, he would be the one to demand important sums of money from rich people and would distribute them to the needy. In his testament, he

expressed the wish of opening a window into his ohel, the tent, or the little building over his grave. Thus even from there, he would be able to keep an eye on what the members of his community were up to. I hope you feel what I feel when I try to relive the Hasidic period of the eighteenth century. I'm always filled with gratitude and admiration towards those masters who tried to bring a sense of beauty to [00:53:00] people in the small villages and forsaken communities -- had no way of coming even close to beauty.

A simple coachman who worked hard from morning to evening, who his entire life was worrying about getting a dowry for his daughter, paying the rent to the village lord. Or a simple wife who worried her heart out, how to raise funds to ransom her husband from jail or prison. But when they came to the rebbe, they felt uplifted. And all of a sudden, the poorest of the poor felt like princes of an enchanted kingdom. What these masters have done to these [00:54:00] despairing and desperate Jews is give them a sense of wonder, by sharing with them their sense of mystery. Reb Mendel has done it; all the others have done it. And therefore, many Hasidim came to Reb Mendel, especially because Reb Mendel, like some of his peers, had managed to perform miracles. So, people who needed miracles, because -- without those miracles, they would have died, of

despair perhaps -- so those who came to Reb Mendel came as supplicants and left reassured.

Jews and gentiles came to Reb Mendel for help, for miracles. And historians have recorded a visit of Prince Dropsky, a Ukrainian prince, [00:55:00] the son of Lwów's famous official architect. And the prince came to Reb Mendel's grave in 1883, and to the Jewish community leadership, the prince explained why. He said that when he was eight, desperately ill, about to die, his mother found no doctor who could help him. And a Jewish friend of his mother's said, "Why don't you go to Reb Mendel?" So she came to Reb Mendel and cried. And Reb Mendel listened, and then withdrew into a corner and spent three hours of fervent meditation and prayer. And afterwards, he said to the mother, "Do not worry. Your son will live." [00:56:00] In fact, he got better at 12 o'clock. "All I tell you now is go home and then bring him to me for a blessing."

That is why, said the prince, he came to the grave. He placed a kvitel, a written request, on the tomb. And again, a Jewish historian was there, and he managed to read the content of the kvitel. And here it is, and I quote it, verbatim. The Ukrainian prince said, "Souls of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, please pray on behalf of Mendel Torem's soul. And you, Mendel.

If you are already standing before the heavenly tribunal, intercede on behalf of the two oppressed peoples, Israel and Poland. And also, [00:57:00] for my sake. And on behalf of my children and grandchildren, signed, Miacheslaw, son of Viktoria Dropsky.

Legend has it that once, during Rosh Hashanah, Reb Mendel had made a pact with Satan to gather all the sins committed by Jews everywhere and bring them before the celestial tribunal. As Satan busily went to pick up the last bundle, Reb Mendel threw all the bags into the abyss. Naturally, Satan raised hell in heaven. (laughter) He sued Reb Mendel and accused him of stealing, of bad faith, and interference with the judicial system. The tribunal deliberated and issued its verdict. Reb Mendel was declared guilty. [00:58:00] And his punishment was to be sold as a slave. At which point, King David's voice was heard. "Good. God himself will be the buyer." And he used a sentence from our Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur prayers, *l'koneh avadav badin*. One Shavuot, the festival of weeks, he told his congregation -- it was dramatic, I can almost see the scene. He said, "Together with our ancestors, we have sworn allegiance to God and his Torah at Sinai. I hereby free you from your vow. And so, I am asking you again. Now, are you ready to accept the law?" And of course, they said, "*na'aseh v'nishma*, we accept."

[00:59:00] The needs of others were constantly on his mind. Every Sabbath for 22 years, he would deliver sermons, always on the same subject. On the Biblical passage which deals with manna in the desert. Now, what was manna? By the way, I love it because it is, to me, something beautiful. What is man? It's called man, in the Bible. When the food came down from heaven, people asked each other, "Man who? What is it?" So, the question became an answer. It got a name. So, that's why we say, "Man who? What is it?" You say, "Give me some, what is it." (laughter) But for Reb Mendel, he said -- what he said, "What was man, or the manna? [01:00:00] It was an equalizing way that God had of ruling over the people of Israel. All received the same portion from the same food. Nobody would be hungry. Now, if in the desert, no person would suffer from hunger," said Reb Mendel, "how could we tolerate that men and women and children should be subjected to hunger in a living community? How is that possible?" And therefore, every Sabbath, he would plead with his people to fight hunger and to feed those who suffered from it.

He did not like small villages. He was suspicious of them. He insisted that his followers leave their hamlets and move to town. For what reason? Because Jews must not live on the

fringe, he said. They must mix with other Jews, give, receive, exchange, quarrel. But be [01:01:00] together. Isolation is dangerous for Jews. Dangerous physically and morally. An isolated Jew will inevitably tumble into oblivion. Is there any danger more serious for a Jew or any human being than oblivion? Isn't oblivion what delays redemption? In the last analysis, what drove the two masters, Reb Moshe of Ujhel and Reb Mendel of Riminov, was their obsession with true and ultimate redemption. And here, we enter a phase which we have already explored on numerous occasions, because it is romantic, it's dramatic, it's heartbreaking, but magnificent. Reb Mendel of Riminov, together with the Seer of Lublin and the Maggid, the great Maggid Rebbe Yisroel of Kozhnitz, [01:02:00] decided to act on destiny, or give faith a little push. Taking part in what is called in Hasidic chronicles the sacred conspiracy, or messianic conspiracy, they would meet secretly to prepare the coming of the Messiah. Through prayer, through the use of Kabbalah Ma'asit, practical Kabbalah, through other ways too.

One must say that the events of the times lent themselves to this kind of activities and endeavors. Napoleon was reshaping the world. As they were convinced that the events bore an eschatological character, that the war between France and Russia was the war of Gog and Magog, the three masters thought it wise

to participate in those events. Let's point out that the whole Hasidic movement participated in it, in its own fashion, of course. That's because Napoleon, when [01:03:00] he rearranged the borders and the structures of European nations, obviously changed drastically the physiognomy of a large number of Jewish communities. Jews in their little cottages and in their homes took a stand. That was bound to happen; how could Jews not pronounce themselves for or against the political philosophy of the former Corsican corporal. Were his boundless ambitions good for Jews? What about principles of equality, therefore, of social integration? Were they dangerous for the Jewishness of the Jews?

The supreme authorities of the Hasidic kingdom were unable to adopt a common line of action. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Lubavitch, sided with the tsar, as did Reb Naftali of Ropshitz. Whereas Reb Mendel of Riminov favored the French emperor. And he uttered a terrible sentence, and I am using that word with all its etymological strength. [01:04:00] It was a disconcerting sentence, disturbing, staggering. I must confess that I don't understand it. That is, I don't understand how a Hasidic rebbe, a Tzaddik, a just man, a person attracted to all that is good and charitable could give utterance to such a thought. He said, and I quote him. "Let the soldiers,

the French soldiers, walk knee-deep in blood from Prystek to Riminov, but let the Messiah come." Unquote. In other words, let him come at any price, no matter what the cost. Even at the cost of violence, of terror, of suffering, even if innocent victims have to die? Does it mean the end justified the means in his eyes as well? Anyway, Napoleon lost the war. But in 1812, [01:05:00] it was he, Reb Mendel, according to legend, who agitated in heaven in favor of the Napoleonic war against Russia. Napoleon thought that he wanted territory. It wasn't him. It was Reb Mendel. (laughter) You know, Jews are always warmongers. If you don't believe it, read Pat Buchanan. (laughter)

But the mothers came running, pleading with him to stop the hostilities and save their sons from being kidnapped into military service, he answered, "The body alone is shouting with pain. The soul is not." Even when his two accomplices and friends died the same year, in 1815, and he too was going to die the same year, he continued to struggle alone. Secluded in his private study, [01:06:00] with doors and windows locked, he would conduct solitary hakafot, dances, every night, between Shemini Atzeret and Chanukah, in order to hasten redemption. But it did not come. The conspiracy ended in failure and we are ill even today because of its consequences.

Like all Hasidic masters, our two guests of tonight lived in constant expectation of the Messiah, but not in the same manner. Rabbi Mendel, as we have seen, resorted to action, whereas Reb Moshe preferred prayer. In other words, they were alike, but not in every way. So, (sighs) we are soon going to conclude. Let us [01:07:00] ask therefore the question. In what respect were these two Tzaddikim alike, and in what respect were they different? Both masters were succeeded not by their sons. Reb Moshe Teitelbaum left his throne not to his sons, but to his grandson, Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Zalman Leib, who was to establish the dynasty of Sighet Satmar.

As for Reb Mendel of Riminov, his crown was to be worn by his faithful servant, Reb Hersh, rather than by his sons, Reb Nosson Yehuda or Reb Yisroel Yankev. Why? It is not very clear. Perhaps the father had wished them not to be jealous of one another. Reb Naftali Ropshitzer told them that in 1813, their father had gathered numerous Tzaddikim, [01:08:00] asking them to help him precipitate events. And during a memorable session, he exclaimed, "Whoever has but one impure thought should leave the room. I tried," said Rabbi Naftali Ropshitzer, "I tried to argue with him. If they all obey you," I said, "you will remain alone, without a minyan." Still, he sent them away, all of

them, except Reb Hersh, the servant. Is that why he had to become the successor? Anyway, he turned down the honor. In order to evade pressure, Reb Hersh ran away and went to seek refuge with Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz. It was only then that Rabbi Naftali died, 12 years later, that Reb Hersh agreed to succeed his master and teacher, Reb Mendel of Riminov.

When you study the text, you realize that Reb Hersh was a strange person. We call him Reb Hesh [01:09:00] now, but then, he was called Reb Hersh Meshares, Reb Hersh the servant. Born of humble parents who died when he was 10, he never made a secret of his mother's origins. To Rabbi Yisrael of Rizhin, whose grandson married his daughter, he said, "My parents died when I was 10 years old. For five years, I worked with a tailor who taught me an important, if not essential, lesson. That is, never waste what is new and mend well what is not. That's all I know," he said. When the question of succession arose, neither man's son protested. On the contrary, Reb Nosson Yehuda helped the old followers convince Reb Hersh to take on his functions. He was probably honoring the wish of his father, who loved his servant as if he were his real son. Besides, Reb Hersh was [01:10:00] so dedicated to Reb Mendel that even on his wedding day, he came and made the rebbe's bed. That was because the

rebbe could not sleep in a bed which hands other than his servant's had prepared.

Many legends exist concerning his election. The story goes that Reb Mendel's two sons went to Rabbi Naftali Ropshitzer to seek his advice as to which one of them should succeed their father. On their way, they met a villager who wanted to entrust them with a kvitel, a written request for a blessing. A kvitel for Rabbi Naftali Ropshitzer, they refused to take it. In jest, they said to him, "Give it to that man," and they pointed to the servant. And Reb Hersh took it quite naturally, as if he had done nothing else his whole life. Then, they both understood, and they accepted that he would be the successor.

Another story. It was told by [01:11:00] Rabbi Nosson Yehuda, the son himself. One day, Reb Mendel called him together with Reb Hersh, the servant. He blessed them both. He was already old. He felt he was going to die. But he blessed his son with his left hand, while he blessed his servant with his right hand. Still, out of respect for Reb Mendel, the latter waited for 12 years before occupying the throne left vacant at the death of his master. Reb Hersh was famous for his fervor in praying, and he too, like his master, attracted many followers. Most of them were poor, but some were less poor than others. And Reb Hersh,

like his master, would take money from wealthy people and distribute it among impoverished people. Like his master, he loved those who did not get enough love or who did not get enough joy. The unfortunate ones, [01:12:00] those who were despoiled, deprived of God's favors, he loved. The victims. And when he died in 1847, Rabbi Meir of Premishlan remarked that with him, the gates of charity had closed.

Now, for the last segment of the portrait, we must say that Reb Hersh, the servant, experienced the most tragic life of all the Hasidic masters. Few had to suffer so many misfortunes. He lost his wife and all 14 of his children, the boys and the girls. He could perform miracles for his followers, but not for himself. One of his daughters was about to die on a Shabbat, on the Sabbath. Merciful [01:13:00] God, he pleaded, let her live. At least another day. Her death would disturb the peace of the Sabbath. And she lived. Why didn't he ask for more? Or maybe he did. She passed away the Monday after. His second wife bore him a daughter which whom they called the alter yidene, the old Jewess, hoping that the name would bring her luck. (laughter) And it did. She lived and was able to start a home and family. From his second wife, he also had a son, Reb Orshetl. At the age of four, he was engaged to be married to the three-year-old Rokhl Leah, the Rizhiner's daughter. He died. But the Ruzhiner

was stubborn. Rokhl Leah, he said, will marry [01:14:00] Reb Hesh's grandson, Reb Shleiminyu. The wedding did take place. When Reb Hersh passed away in 1854, the Ruzhiner married his third widow, a 29-year-old woman who was beloved in both camps to the end.

My question is, how did Reb Hesh manage to resist melancholy, sadness, despair? How much can a person take, be it a master, a rebbe? Apparently, when it comes to pain and sorrow, one can bear more than one knows, especially if one has faith. And Reb Hersh had faith. In spite of the endless tragedies that struck him since his orphaned childhood, he did not succumb to depression. His fervor and his ecstasy during prayers were famous, [01:15:00] even afterwards. His love for Israel, universally celebrated. His sense of gratitude, legendary. He never stopped thanking God for everything. The air which he breathed, the sleep which deserted him, the dawn that welcomed him. He was thankful for being able to listen and to speak, to sing and to study, to awaken people to God's mysterious presence. What would life be without God's presence?

Now, before really concluding this excursion in the enchanted garden, may I remind you of a question I have asked earlier in the evening -- do you still remember it? Should I examine you?

We asked, how can we pray to God, *aseh l'ma'anacha im lo l'ma'aneinu*, save us for your sake if not for mine? How can I say [01:16:00] to God, do it for your name, for your glory? Is it to explain what Giordano Bruno will declare later, much later, namely that the Almighty cannot exist except if the universe exists? In other words, that the two worlds are linked and inseparable. No. That would be a purely pantheistic approach to theology, and Jewish tradition is opposed to it. What then is the answer? Is Abraham Joshua Heschel right -- is God in search of man? Let us reopen the Talmud. Said Rabbi Chama, son of Rabbi Chanina, "It is written after the Lord, your God, shall you walk. Is it possible for man to walk after God, who is invisible?"

The meaning of the verse is we must imitate God's attributes, or as philosophers put it, *Imitatio [01:17:00] Dei*. As God clothes the naked, we must clothe the naked. As he is merciful, we must be charitable. As he shows compassion, so must we. In other words, just as we realize at one point that God does not intervene in human affairs for his sake but for ours, it is up to us to do whatever we are doing, not for our sake but for His. Is this why Reb Hersh Meshares, Reb Hesh the servant of Reb Mendel, became the servant of the Almighty? Is this why he could go on with his life and work, going from cemetery to

cemetery, from grave to grave, from saying Kaddish day after day? As if to say Master of the Universe, look, in spite of all that happened to me, I am not giving up on you. Therefore, I implore You, in spite of all that [01:18:00] we might do to You, please do not give up on us. It's possible. Still, I do not understand how Reb Hersh Meshares, Reb Hesh the servant, the orphaned father 14 times -- how he could humanly experience joy on Sukkot, peace on the Sabbath. How he could share fervor in study and prayer. He who had lost his battle 14 times to death. But he could. He knew how. I don't. (audience applause)

[01:19:00]

M:

Thanks for listening. For more information on 92nd Street Y and all of our programs, please visit us on the web at 92Y.org.

This program is copyright by 92nd Street Y.

END OF VIDEO FILE