

Elie Wiesel Archive

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) People speak a lot about Hasidism. What is Hasidism? An ideology? A school of thought? A revivalist movement? A religious sect with social implications, perhaps? For some, Hasidism is none of the above. For others, it is all these, and much more. What is it, then? One word is missing in the list of simplistic hypotheses already mentioned. Should I reveal it now? Well, let me keep you in suspense for another moment.

To help you guess it, let us approach the topic [00:01:00] from a different angle and say that, paradoxically perhaps, Hasidism was born in solitude. In other words, it was a solitary man who ended up alleviating the loneliness of multitudes of people, threatened by separation and despair. That unique man, the celebrated founder of Hasidism, was Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. He belonged to no established movement, no existing school or group. With his wife, Chana, sister of Rabbi Gershon Kitover, he lived in a wretched hut, far from Brody, the nearest city, far from people and their daily routine. It was only when he reached the age of thirty-six that [00:02:00] he received, under rather mysterious circumstances, the heavenly order ordering him

to reveal himself, for he was needed. For years, he had resisted. Now, he had to fulfill his destiny.

And then, from all corners of Galicia, then Poland, men and women came to hear his words and tales, or simply to see him, to be with him for the duration of a Shabbat, to listen to his song or an evening prayer. He owed them very much for sharing their prodigious adventure. For without those followers, the Besht would have remained an unknown thinker or dreamer, hidden away in the forest, protected by his mystical visions, leaving solely for and with God, but with no real link [00:03:00] to his creatures on earth.

Contrary to all his disciples and theirs, the Besht did not begin his career as a Hasid. He began as a rebbe, a master, immediately, whereas all of the subsequent rebbes had begun as Hasidim. Naturally, the idea was his. The strength and wisdom that emanated from him was at the heart of the endeavor, but his first companions and his disciples were the embodiment of the idea. Thanks to them, one feels one can and one may define Beshtian Hasidism above all, and here comes the word, as a community.

Well, that is the missing word in the list: community. Admit it, [00:04:00] it is a beautiful word. How many terms carry such comfort and hope? Is it the opposite of loneliness, or is it its hidden face? Is it because we wish to escape or vanquish solitude that we want to seek out a community? We said it here two thousand years ago. According to tradition, God's solitude alone is praiseworthy. Ours is not. God alone is alone. A human being alone is not human. He or she must live with someone, create with someone. Things that will have -- that they will have -- in common.

"Lo-tov heyot ha-adam l'vado." God said to Adam. "It is not good for a man to live alone." In our yeshivot [00:05:00] over there, students went one step further and said in Yiddish, of course, *"Lo tov -- s'iz nisht gut, s'iz biter."* It's bitter to be alone. And, thus, Hasidism seems to be a defense against social or spiritual solitude. A Hasid is he, or she, who is part of a specific Hasidic community. A Hasid may run away from his rebbe, or his circle, but it is only to join another circle and follow another rebbe. For a Hasid, solitude is not, cannot be, an option.

Still, weren't there masters, even great ones, who have chosen isolation as a religious way of life? Yes, there were. So

what? Masters may do things that are forbidden to their disciples. [00:06:00] We know that. I know, you are now thinking of the Kotzker Rebbe, the revered Rebbe Mendel of Kotzk, the angry man of Hasidism, who for years and years wanted no connection to the outside world, but he was an exception in this, and in other areas as well. If time permits, we may return to him, but first, we should open our customary parenthesis.

This is the twenty-ninth year, or thirtieth year, since I began speaking here of my fervent love of Hasidism. A love I inherited from mother and my grandfather, *zichronom livracha*, both faithful followers of the Vizhnitzer Rebbe. And to this day, when asked to reveal my religious affiliation, I say I was born a Hasid, and I remain a Hasid. [00:07:00] Once a Hasid, always a Hasid. And when, at my Fifth Avenue synagogue, I observe *yahrzeit* twice a year, I still officiate at the *amud*, as we say, according to the beautiful, melodious nusach of Vizhnitz. I praise Vizhnitz, and I am not ashamed of it. I believe that the Vizhnitzer nusach is the most beautiful that exists. I am not even speaking of the nusach of holidays, or of Shabbat, what we call a (*vokhedike shimenesre*), simply the *Amidah*, to say the *Amidah* during the week. I wish you could hear it once. May I sing it? No. (applause) (laughs) To give

you a taste. [00:08:00] I know this is a shul but not really.
The niggun of Vizhnitz goes really like this, and simple
weekday. (singing) (applause)

T'ka b'shofar gadol l'cheiruteinu, v'sa neis l'kabeitz
galuyoteinu, v'kab'tzeinu yachad meiarba kanfot haaretz
l'artzeinu. Baruch atah Adonai, m'kabeitz nidchei amo Yisraeil.

Well, I know to some of you, you are astounded, because I don't
look like a Hasid. (laughs) [00:09:00] But surely you have
heard, maybe me, tell the story of a professor in the Hebrew
University of Jerusalem many, many years ago who taught ethics.
And one day he said to one of students, his best student, he
said, "Moshe, you will be a very great poet, and therefore, my
advice to you is marry a rich girl." (laughter) And the student
said, "Professor, how can you say that? You of all people. You
are teaching ethics. How can you say that?" And the professor
said, "Next door, Professor Frankl is teaching mathematics.
Does he look like a triangle?" (laughter) [00:10:00]

Well, in my work, both fiction and nonfiction, the Hasidic
memory and melody are dominant. Rabbi Nachman's tales
reverberate in mine. Rabbi Pinchas Koretzer, wisdom. Rabbi
Naftali Robshitzer's humor. Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Berditchever's
compassion and audaciousness. To me, they are all present. And

then I tell their stories, or repeat their commentaries, I feel that their words light a fire deep within my soul. Thanks to them, I can imagine a road that connects the beginning to the end of a tale that will never end. For the Hasidic community, no one must see himself or herself as a stranger. [00:11:00] No one must be kept at a distance. So, why do you stay outside?
(laughter) (pause)

More about my personal involvement in Hasidism next week, when I shall speak about my next book, [00:12:00] *All the Rivers Run to the Sea*, and I describe, really, my childhood, as the childhood of a Hasidic youngster.

What is a community? What must one do to create it? Is it enough to gather ten or ten times ten persons to turn them into a community? Must they all volunteer? In most languages, the word "community" is rooted in "common," and "common" is often anti-intellectual and pejorative, for it downgrades the individual. A common cold is not a very desirable condition.
(laughter) And that, of course, is only common sense.

Almost to a degree, we should [00:13:00] say, that whatever is common is not appealing. Kings and princes, by the way, would never marry a commoner. In Hebrew, it's different.

Etymologically, the term exists in several forms. *Edah* may be linked to *ed*, which means "witness." Within a community, each person testifies for the other, and the community itself testifies to the nourishment each member gives to the other. A related word is *tzibur*, collectivity, and it derives from the word *litzbor*, to collect. We collect each other. We collect from one another. One person, and another, thus become a collectivity. [00:14:00] There is also *kibbutz*. Yes, it too defines a community. *V'kabeitz nidacheinu*,, gather the forsaken, also means make them into a community.

If the term was adopted by Zionism, it does not necessarily mean that it was for the first time. In Bratslaver chroniclers, in Kotzker memoirs, too, the word *kibbutz* is used to describe all-embracing communal activities in the nineteenth century.

There is also another word, the beautiful one, which is *kneset*. It comes from the word *likhaneis*, again, to gather, to bring together, to pick things together. And, lastly, there is *kahal* or *kehillah*, which is most frequently used, for it is given in the Bible. What does it refer to? It describes [00:15:00] a group small or large of men and women whose destiny is their community, and the other way around.

In the Jewish religious tradition, since its origins, the notion of community has often been exalted. Community takes the shape of tribe and the contours of family. Many laws have been given our people with the implicit or explicit purpose to preserve the family. Some seem excessively rigorous, even to the point of being cruel, especially against adultery, incest, and sexual liberty. But then, they may have been critical to the survival of our people in the desert, where heat and promiscuity could have had gave consequences for family life and, thus, the hygienical community.

My teacher, [00:16:00] Shaul Lieberman z"l used to say that he was convinced, and so am I, had there not been these laws so harsh, then our people would not have survived. At Sinai, in the *Aseret ha-Dibrot*, the Ten Commandments or the Ten Words, the Ten Concepts, God speaks to the individual Jew, second person singular. That was to show, according to Rashi, that *vayichan sham*, the entire people was ready to receive the law as one person. In other words, everyone was responsible for his or her fellow Jew. Had one man, or one woman, shown or felt reticence or dissent, the text would have been in plural. Therefore, to be part of a community implies an obligation to protect its integrity.

By [00:17:00] the way, when a Jew speaks about himself in liturgy, he or she always uses the plural. *Al chet shechatanu*, forgive us the sins, not that I have committed, but now I become generous, that we have committed. Here, the individual wants to be shielded by the community, not that it always helped. Right at the beginning, we were subjected to two catastrophes, one physical and the other spiritual. The first, the floods, the *mabbul*, which we read last week in the *parshah*, mark the collective punishment God meted out to the earth's inhabitants for having corrupted it. The second, the Tower of Babel, resulted simply in the gigantic confusion of languages.

And our Talmudic sages failed to understand: why was God so harsh with the people [00:18:00] of the floods, who after all were only inhuman to each other? Their term is *chamas*, that they were cruel to each other, whereas he was more charitable towards the rebels. The rebels, theological rebels, who sought to climb up to the Tower of Babel, so as to ascend into heaven and replace him on his throne.

Their answer is both delightful and meaningful. Before the floods, people were wicked and cruel, quarreling, fighting, betraying, tormenting, and humiliating one another, one being the enemy of the other. Whereas, in Babel or Babylon, all were

together in perfect harmony, bound by the determination to achieve their common goal. In other words, God was not concerned that His creatures plotted against Him, since the plotting [00:19:00] brought them together. What mattered to Him was that earlier, like in Sodom later, people betrayed Him by betraying their fellow human beings, by repudiating their basic humanity. The generation of Babel suffered from a confusion of tongues. Well, one can live with it, even today. Furthermore, one can easily learn foreign languages. There are courses, even cassettes, for that. (laughter)

Franz Kafka actually had a different interpretation. He said just the opposite of what is written in the text. In the text, we say that when they went up building, they had one language, and then God confused the languages, they had different languages, and they didn't understand each other. And Kafka said just the opposite. He said, in the beginning, they had many languages. Then, as a punishment, God gave them only one. [00:20:00] And then, they didn't understand each other.

(laughter)

Most commandments in the Bible have little to do with heavenly matters. They deal more with earthly affairs, with man's relations with his fellow man, rather than with God. "V'ahavta

l'reiakha kamokha, Ani AdoShem." "You should love your neighbor or your fellow human being, for I am the Lord." That is the human dimension of divine intervention in human existence. Deny the other, and you have denied God.

The relationship between the individual and the community is even better illustrated in rabbinic legislation. It declares, so to speak, that one for all and all for one is the principle guiding our lives. Now listen to an example, an extreme example, from the Talmud [00:21:00] but as codified by Maimonides: "Should the enemy lay siege to a community, and demand for a man to be handed over to him, the community must refuse. At any price, yes, at any price, let the entire community allow itself to be massacred, rather than betray and condemn one of its own sons."

An inspiring lesson of selflessness and collective solidarity, isn't it? But, let's not run too fast. As always, there is always a "but." "But should the enemy name the person he wants to be handed over by the community, the community is duty bound not to sacrifice its members, but to submit to the enemy's will."

Question: What is the difference between the two [00:22:00] situations? In the first, the enemy acts under impulsion, the impulsion to kill an anonymous, therefore innocent, Jew, and therefore, in so doing, to humiliate all the others by forcing them to collaborate with him, the killer in the crime. And, therefore, the community must resist and resist to the end, for its national honor is a stake. In the second situation, we obviously deal with a fugitive from the enemy, because the enemy knows the name. The fugitive may be totally innocent, falsely accused, and charged with implausible crimes. Still, it is his fault that the enemy lay siege to the community. It is he who put the community in danger by hiding in its midst. He should [00:23:00] have taken in consideration the welfare of all the inhabitants and tried to seek refuge elsewhere: in the desert or the mountains. That is why the community responsible for its security and survival is permitted to remove its protection. In other words, each member of the community is responsible for its fate. Hillel's injunction -- "*Al tifrosh min hatzibur*" "Do not remove yourself from the community" -- ultimately means do not separate your destiny from its own.

It is not by accident, or by caprice, that certain prayers are to be recited in the presence of a minyan, or a quorum. Prayers in common ascend fast along to heaven. Each individual prayer

for peace must be linked to a prayer for the community. "Ya-
aseh shalom aleinu v'al KOL Yisrael." [00:24:00]

The three annual pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem were important because they enabled all the inhabitants to take part in them together. The desire to be together, to worship together, to celebrate together, to experience things together, is something one finds throughout the history of Israel. However, when we speak of Israel, we mean the entire community of Israel, transcending geography and time. Linked to his contemporaries along with his ancestors, the Jew is responsible for all of them. Whatever he does, he does in their name and on their behalf. Everyone's memory is part of our collective memory, which goes back to Abraham, to Moses, to our common creator. If I do something wrong, I shame Abraham. [00:25:00]

That is the context for our inquiry into the concept of community.

And what about Hasidism? How does it perceive community? A Hasidic community is naturally like any other community, except it's Hasidic. It is headed by its rebbe. Do not ask a Hasid whether he is a Hasid. That goes without saying. He is. Ask him to which rebbe he belongs, and there, problems may occur. The Hasid is almost, by definition, part of the rebbe's world.

Except for the Bratslaver, nicknamed the "Dead Hasidim," for they remain attached to the Rabbi Nachman, who died more than 250 years ago in Uman in the Ukraine, all name their master when naming their affiliation.

We've observed it with the Besht. He became a rebbe only when he was surrounded [00:26:00] by followers. Just as the Hasid cannot be a Hasid without a master, the master cannot be a rebbe without his Hasidim. Together, they constitute a community.

Who were the Besht's first followers? From the chroniclers of the time, we learn that they were peasants, villagers, simple men and women who lived and died far away from Jewish centers, almost on the sidelines of Jewish history. They had no one to guide them in the ways of Torah, no one to teach their children the Jewish alphabet, no one to offer them spiritual support and economic assistance. They were alone, on the edge of the abyss, threatened in their very existence as descendants of our patriarchs. Many lacked the will to keep from sliding into oblivion. Most would [00:27:00] have vanished from Jewish history, had it not been for the Besht and his close disciples who came to shake them out of their resignation and help them rediscover the Jewish soul in themselves.

That is why the Besht and his disciples preferred to spread their teaching in remote villages. For them, it was urgent. The scholars and their pupils in the cities could wait. The villagers could not. The villagers needed to feel that they had not been abandoned. That their membership was assured in the large and immortal community, which believes in a caring God and in his compassionate people.

It is enough to study the Besht's life and legend, to realize that in his eyes, every human being was worthy of his attention and his affection. If the Besht was forever traveling, it was because he felt needed by more than one [00:28:00] person, in more than one place. He appeared wherever victims of solitude and prisoners of despair needed him, or someone like him. But was there anyone like him? They needed him to bring consolation and hope, hope above all. Did they receive what they were longing for? All the poor did not become rich because of the Besht. All the sick did not recover their health because of the Besht. But all felt connected. All grew convinced that the Jewish people and God had not given up on them.

Not enough study has been initiated about the role of communal conscience in the blossoming of Hasidism. Alone, man is vulnerable. Within a community, he's less. A Hasid, therefore,

refuses to be alone, hence, [00:29:00] his attachment to the rebbe, who in return is attached to all his followers. Said Rabbi Sholom Dov Beer, the fifth rebbe of Lubavitch, and I quote him: "A Hasid is he who lights lanterns in the street, not in his home, but in the street, to see better and be seen, to disperse the darkness so as to better see other people who are as afraid of invisible shadows as he is."

Legend recalls that one day the Besht prayed longer than usual. Exhausted, his disciples went home. Later, the master told them not without melancholy: "Imagine a rare and beautiful bird sitting on the highest branch of a tall tree. Naturally, people wanted to see it, and so they formed a living ladder, which allowed one of them to climb up to the top. But those who were below could not see the bird, so they lost patience and left. [00:30:00] As the ladder disintegrated, the rare and beautiful bird flew away." In other words, as long as the community was solid, nothing can resist its endeavors, for each member draws his personal strength from the collective source. Detached from the community, the tallest and most gifted and saintliest man is unable to lift himself up above his condition.

Which hour is very intense in a Hasid's day? That of prayer, for then he's joined by other Hasidim. Still more intense is

that of song, for he's joined by other singers. But even more intense, and more marvelous, is the hour dedicated to dance. Together with his companions, the Hasid dances and dances to the limit of his strength. He goes on dancing until the point of ecstasy. [00:31:00] Once can work alone, one can even study alone, but one cannot dance alone.

Hasidism attributes sacred qualities to dancing. When the Besht and his disciples were dancing with the Torah, angels were in the audience. It is said that some great masters, such as Rebbe Moshe Leib Sassover, for instance, obtained more miracles from heaven by dancing than through his other interventions. No wonder that the principle of the book *Chaverim*, of bonding, if one is to use that term, of cleavage, of being together with other friends, is as important in Hasidism as *emunah tzadikim*, having faith in the tzadik.

Hasidim would come to spend the Shabbat under the rebbe's roof not only to solicit his intercession in heaven on behalf of a sick husband or child, but also to be together with friends, [00:32:00] exchanging anecdotes and memories, wisdom and melodies, gestures of community, of friendship. But there again, they needed to know that nothing separates them from the rebbe, or from each other.

The Besht told his friend and disciple, Rebbe Pinchas Koretzer, of their common past. "Pinchasl, Pinchasl," he said, "You know, as I know, that man is not alone. You and I and all Hasidim must be aware of that. All of us have worked hard in Egypt under Pharaoh to preserve the holy tongue, to remember the names of our ancestors, and the memory of the covenant. All of us have sat at the feet of the prophets and received their teaching. All of us have followed Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai from Jerusalem to Yavne. All of us have heard the terrifying [00:33:00] words of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai hiding in a cave from Rome's tormenters. That is why now, you and I must remain united, to be together." A Hasidic aspiration? No. A human obligation, and a Jewish obsession.

In his volume called "Or ha-Meir," "The Light that Lights," or "The Light of He Who Lights," Rabbi Zev Wolf of Zhitomyr writes, "When we became Hasidim, we embarked on a partnership with the master of the universe. And, as partners, each and every one of us had to invest what he possessed. The erudite brought his erudition, the wealthy, his wealth, and the wise, his wisdom."

But what about the principal partner? [00:34:00] What has He invested in the deal? His limitless faith in those who want him

as their king and father, in those who crown him each day as head of their community. Such is the belief of Jews in general and Hasidim in particular. Whenever a community, a true community, is formed, God is present.

If every Hasid of every rebbe glorifies the notion of community, it was a thousand times more so in Kotzk, where the quest for communal life and experience has been pushed farther than anywhere else. In Kotzk, and for a while before that, in Tomaszów, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Tomaszów, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, Rabbi Bunim of Peshischa's brilliant young disciple gathered around himself a small group of selected disciples. Together, they attempted to renew the enthusiasm and [00:35:00] fervor that had characterized the beginning of the movement at the time of the Besht. Their goal was to rediscover the movement's original truth as formulated by the Besht, to begin again the journey to the primary light.

For the Kotzker Rebbe felt that Hasidim, in a short time, had fared too well, that it was spoiled by success, that it had become complacent. For instance, it was too easy to join. Anyone could become a Hasid of any master. No effort, no sacrifice was required. No challenge was envisioned. And the Kotzker Rebbe disliked this, rejecting anything that was facile.

That is why he wanted to belong to a minority that would reshape the world, and the small group around him lived in a kind of kibbutz or commune. They shared everything: food, money, [00:36:00] clothes, books. Better yet, they decided to share mitzvot and aveirot, good deeds and bad deeds. They shared their places in the world to come. In other words, they all declared themselves totally responsible for one another. I said totally, in all domains, including the invisible, that of the mind, and that of the heart. For them, communal living meant what it said. All ideas, all hopes, all possessions were common treasures.

And yet, the flame that was lit in Kotzk, which was then the youth capital of Hasidism, soon became dark and laden with anxiety. Kotzk was different from the very beginning, different from other Hasidic centers. Kotzk remains different in Hasidism. [00:37:00] Kotzk was an exception. Seeking knowledge and truth, the best from everywhere converged upon Kotzk. Human links were created. Dreams took shape there. In Kotzk, people prayed, studied, and celebrated differently. In Kotzk, one was ready to sacrifice everything to gain authenticity and self-knowledge. *Lo tignov*, "Thou shalt not steal," was interpreted in Kotzk as "Do not steal even from yourself." No easy solution. No self-delusion could gain foothold in Kotzk.

Nowhere did disciples live more intensely than within the exclusive Kotzker community in the shadow, or in the light, of the strange master, Rebbe Menachem Mendel.

Naturally, there were problems. In the name of that small community, the larger community was often threatened. At [00:38:00] times, one could witness eerie scenes in the rebbe's court. Abandoned mothers or spouses would besiege the rebbe's home, pleading with him or his close disciples to give them back their sons or husbands, and their pleas were in vain. The rebbe answered that every human being owes his or her life to three associates: father, mother, and God, with God's part the most significant. But then again, even if the master had given in, the disciples would have refused to leave him. One does not leave a place, a community, where every thought is experiment and every prayer experience. One does not quit a spiritual center where every instant is revelation.

Still, was it wise? Was it just, or charitable [00:39:00] for the rebbe to encourage, or, at least, tolerate, the family crises around him? Even if, for a sacred cause? Does one have the right to acquire riches for the soul at the price as someone else's suffering? Is the Hasidic family more important than, say, the biological family?

All my adult life, I admired Kotzk. And yet. I admired the intellectual rigor and the quest for spiritual purity that the Kotzker inspired. And yet. For one cannot, one must not, forget the mothers, the wives, the children who suffered and perhaps despaired at home while their sons and husbands and fathers who expressed, who expressed their love for God alone, but [00:40:00] also, in a way, to their teacher and guide. Granted, the Hasidim scaled invisible mountains, discovered extraordinary truth. But how could they forget those whom they have left down below?

A disturbing figure, the Kotzker Rebbe. How are we to comprehend this character, his method, his particular way, since we remain unable to penetrate its secret, and that of his inner ambitions? We are entitled to ask the question: Was it on his part an attempt to warn us, even then, more than a hundred years before the tragedy of European Jewry, of the dangers inherent in our traditional family structures? Is it possible that he, who was endowed with so many mystical powers, could see [00:41:00] our mortally trapped communities in wartime Europe, being lured to their death, to their enemy, to the enemy that was the angel of death as a result of their traditional family attachments?

Now we know that a hundred years after the Kotzker Rebbe's voluntary isolation, it happened in 1839, a curtain of anguish and fire separated those Jewish communities there from the rest of the Jewish world, thus beginning the time of ghettos and death camps. In many places, it was possible for young men and women to save their lives by illegally crossing certain borders, or by running away to join partisan units in the forests. But most of them refused to leave their old parents. [00:42:00] The enemy, in his vicious perversity, knew perfectly well what he was doing in undermining the living foundation of Judaism. Just as in most cities and villages he began always by destroying by fire the principle synagogues, he used the ancient Jewish commitment to family as a means to annihilate the Jewish people with greater efficiency. He urged Jews everywhere in occupied Europe not to worry, and the same line of thought went through Europe. Families will remain together. Don't worry. Many believed him, as the very element that for centuries had kept our people alive now almost became a vehicle of its destruction.

Similarly, [00:43:00] faced with the imminent approach of the Crusaders so many centuries earlier in many provinces of the Rhine, Jews gathered in synagogue courtyards rather than take flight. Waiting for the frenzied mob, they drew closer to one another more than before. The community became somehow a better

community. The same scenes were acted out always in every courtyard of every synagogue, and later on during the pogroms of Bohdan Khmelnytsky. During the Crusades, they remained in the courtyard until the enemy came. And then, as you know, they committed collective suicide, rather die than be converted by force. [00:44:00]

More recently, I myself have known some who were offered the possibility of hiding in homes of good-hearted Christians, and I write about it in my memoir. I have known people who could have obtained false Aryan documents, but they preferred to say no. They refused to disassociate themselves from their community. "Whatever will happen to everybody will happen to us as well." The man who said that, my father.

Only three Hasidic rebbes succeeded to escape from deportation. The Vizhnitzer Rebbe, Reb Chayim Meir'l, *zichrono livracha*. The Gerer Rabbe, Reb Avraham Mordechai, the author of *Imrei Emet*, *zichrono livracha*, and the Belzer Rebbe. The Belzer Rebbe, *zichrono livracha*, and his brother, the rebbe from Bilgoraj, crossed the border dressed [00:45:00] in German military uniforms. How did Belzer Hasidim in occupied Poland manage to bribe German officers to lead the descendants of Reb Sholom Belzer to safety in Hungary? How did they manage to persuade

the rebbes to leave their disciples in their distress? Books have been written about it.

I myself saw the Belzer Rebbe after he arrived in Budapest. I remember, though a Hasid of Vishnitz, I wanted to see the Belzer Rebbe. I wanted to see the man, the rebbe, who escaped from Poland, and I remember it was an unforgettable Shabbat in Budapest. Thousands and thousands of Jews from the capital and other cities were there. The synagogue was packed. From a distance, I looked at him, wrapped in [00:46:00] his tallit, I looked at him with every fiber of my soul. Was he tall? I don't know. Was he not? I don't know. But he was there. He seemed weak. I remember the pensive expression on his face. I looked and looked at him, and I remember, my look itself became a prayer.

Of course, one may wonder, why did the shepherds abandon their flock? Their faithful followers explained that they did so against their will. I believe them. They wanted to stay to the end with every Hasid, but their followers forced them to leave. Some go further and say, it would have been harder for the disciples if they had to watch their beloved rebbes undergo suffering and humiliation. [00:47:00] I do not know whether the answer is satisfying or not. Who am I to judge? When it comes

to that period, I don't know anything, only that the majority of the Hasidic world vanished during the reign of night.

Nevertheless, those few who survived in Europe, the United States, and, naturally, in Israel managed to rebuild their centers of prayer and study with an amazing intensity and luminous passion. But then, that should not surprise those of us who are familiar with Hasidic custom.

In the ghettos and the camps, Hasidim sought the company of other Hasidim and thus create their own community within the large community of inmates. They comforted and helped one another with a word, a smile, a piece of bread. In spite of the oppressive [00:48:00] atmosphere, in spite of the presence of death and its servants, they found ways to spend the moment of Shabbat together so as to remember its sacredness. At work, under the watchful eyes of cruel supervisors, they exchange wondrous tales of their respective rebbes. And in so doing, they escaped the horrors of the present and found refuge in memory.

I remember some of them. I remember their whispering voices when singing: "*Tzavei yeshuot Yaakov*" or "*V'taheir libeinu l'ovdikha v'emet.*" There, I remember the melancholy smiles on their parched lips. I remember their pathetic efforts to regain

the fervor of before. I remember, and I feel pain piercing my soul.

When a Hasid feels sorrow approaching, he goes to see his rebbe, for the rebbe plays a major role in his existence. Before making a decision to change jobs or apartments, [00:49:00] he consults with the rebbe. When he needs to know whether to trust a surgeon or to allow his daughter to marry one nice Jewish boy or another, he goes to the rebbe for his approval. As head of the Hasidic family and community, the rebbe knows everything and is interested in everything. His judgements are not to be questioned. That's how it used to be before the war, in Sighet and Lodz, in Warsaw and Antwerp. That's how it still is in Brooklyn and Jerusalem. It is the rebbe who holds his community together. Authoritarian attitude, excessive discipline, absolutely not. The Hasid never relinquishes his right to be free and to join another group. But remember, it is not the rebbe who chooses the Hasid. It is the Hasid who chooses the rebbe, and he can leave his rebbe any time he chooses [00:50:00] and become involved in the modern world, but more often than not, he stays in Brooklyn, or Monsey, or B'nei Brak.

A vibrant network of Hasidic centers, Brooklyn is, to me, a Hasidic miracle. Here, people work, study, worship, and dream,

in a kind of social and spiritual place with few links to the outside world and its scientific discoveries. I am not sure they even heard of astronauts, microbiology, or psychoanalysis. If they did, I wonder whether they appreciate their usefulness. To them, a page of Gemara is more important.

Go to Borough Park and you will see fierce-looking old men, shy women, dreamy young girls, incredibly studious adolescents on their way [00:51:00] to cheder or yeshiva. Here, long forgotten images and events remain intact. The drug epidemic is non-existent here. Children do not rebel against their parents, I hope. Williamsburg, a kind of state within state, a fortress whose inhabitants want to be different and isolated, and indeed, they are, in more than one way. The afflictions and upheavals of modern society do not exist here. For their disputes, and they are numerous, these Hasidim do not turn to American courts, but to rabbinic arbiters. The struggle against misery is waged along ancient rules. Parents, friends, neighbors assist one another. Someone is sick, funds are immediately collected. Some needs seed money for a business venture, a gemilut hasadim fund exists for that purpose. [00:52:00] Facing adversity, Hasidim stick together. Even those who are fanatic in matters of faith and practice are generous with one another in matters of social welfare. Now, mind you, I speak, of course, of

Hasidim who belong to the same group, but the groups fight.
It's normal.

But in this Hasidic garden transplanted from Eastern Europe, one finds all kinds of people, rich and poor, old and young, somber faces and radiant ones. Some are quarrelsome, others appeasing. Some are tolerant. Others remain blind.

Don't they constitute a monolithic group? As before and elsewhere, they are divided into ideological factions, dynasties, and coteries. At times, one gets the impression that some of them are only looking for conflict. Some are dominated by hatred, yes. There is hatred among them, too. Hatred [00:53:00] for the other, for those who are not. I don't want to mention names here. But the dominant component in their circles is, in their own circles, solidarity. When the Hasid arrive from afar, even today, and has no relative, he is immediately offered hospitality and shelter. A position is quickly found for him, and if he is a bachelor, even a good shidduch.

Well, I like this neighborhood. I visit it occasionally to plunge again into my childhood, and possibly to extend it. Williamsburg could be called Sighet or Satmar, just as Borough

Park can be called Ungvar or Rizhin. That's Hasidism for you. It heeds no law of geography. You think that Sighet is in Romania? Nonsense! Here, in Brooklyn. The affection a Hasid feels for his rebbe and his disciples transcends international decisions or national borders. A Hasid of Izhbitza [00:54:00] may reside in Manhattan or Paris, but his heart is in Izhbitza.

As a child, I went to school in Sighet, but I felt at home at the court of the Vizhnitzer Rebbe. In Williamsburg, I happened to chat with a friend from before, also a survivor from Sighet long ago. Not a Vizhnitzer Hasid. Though he's more or less my age, he seems much older. With his grayish and black caftan, he paints me with a look of crushing worry. I ask him the question which has been haunting me for decades: "So, since our childhood, nothing changed?" "Torah is above changes," he answers. "What about the tragedy? What about the suffering? What about Auschwitz and Treblinka and God in all this?" "Oh," he says, "Auschwitz proves that nothing happens without the will of God, blessed be his name. Treblinka proved the human beings need God. Without him, they kill [00:55:00] or despair. And I, who am still searching for the meaning of those names, for the meaning of those times."

I look at my friend and remember a Hasidic legend. When the Besht died, his disciples noticed that the two clocks hanging on the wall had stopped. The same thing was said about my rebbe of Vizhnitz. When Reb (inaudible) Vizhnitzer died, also, the two clocks on the wall stopped. Was it a sign during the Besht that the movement had entered a new era following its master's passing? Or was it a sign that for his followers, time didn't exist? Centuries and upheavals have no bearing on them. There is more similarity between a Hasid and his predecessors than between someone who is a Hasid and others who are not.

I ask my friend, "Have you ever doubted?" "Never." "Have you ever felt [00:56:00] lost in this universe?" "Never." He sees my bewilderment, and his voice grows somber. He must read my mind. I simply wonder, what such a behavior is human? He says, "In what way," says he, "would my faith be less human than your absence of faith?" And I don't answer. Where does he get the notion that I have no faith? Or that I have lost my attachment to the community of believers? I have never said that. I have never said that I do not believe in God. I simply said that my generation has the right to tell God of its pain and despair. But my friend continues, "You have no horror." "So have I." "You are disappointed in God." "I have faith in him. It is human beings I am disappointed in." "So am I."

Does he grant me the right to declare myself a Hasid? Probably not, but I envy him. [00:57:00] For him, everything in the world is so incomprehensibly simple. Divine justice is the fundament of his existence. All questions have answers. Suffering implies punishment. Faith is a remedy. No scar on his conscience, no wound on the surface of his soul, no compromise ever. Every minute of his life attaches him to eternity. Every gesture corresponds to an inner conviction. His past is filled with sacred fire and absolute faith, as is his present. What does he think of his old friend? Luckily, he is a fervent believer, but no fanatic, but there are others who are. There are those who think their community alone represents the large community of the Jewish people.

One rabbi, whose name I have never heard before, has been persecuting me of late, and has been organized a campaign to force me to change the passage in *Night* describing my first night [00:58:00] in Birkenau. It's a cri de coeur against creation and Creator that now hangs on the wall at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, which I have nothing to do with this decision. Has he been there? It doesn't matter. He knows about it and doesn't like it. And in his self-appointed role as chief censor, he insists that I remove it from the museum. And

perhaps, why not, replace it with a confession imbued with contrition. Whom does he represent? Orthodoxy? Orthodox rabbis urged me to resist his efforts. Hasidism? No. Only fanatics. And, God knows, the fanatics are as damaging to him as to us.

Well, we shall talk about it perhaps next week. But now it's time to conclude and to recapitulate. [00:59:00] What is, for the Jew, a community? I can never imagine Jews who are not surrounded by other Jews. In joy, as in sorrow, a Jew is never alone. Just as man needs other men to be human, a Jew needs other Jews to be Jewish.

It is not the enemy that makes us Jewish. When I hear someone saying that it is because of Hitler that he or she is Jewish, I feel sad, even angry. I don't give the enemy so much credit. It's not because of the enemy that we want to be Jewish. It's because of the Jews we want to be Jewish. And he or she chooses to define himself or herself not in relation to the hate that they elicit from strangers, but rather by the faith they inspire in their people.

A Jew alone is in danger. [01:00:00] A Jew alone is a Jew in danger. His security lies between the community, which helps

him survive and attain fulfillment. And so, community is the keyword that indicates what path to follow. It opens hidden gates and bestows ancient strength and wisdom on everyday matters. A vital, vibrant word, a singular word that cuts through all others, challenging them and enriching them. What would the Jew be without his community? A withered branch, a nameless wanderer, buffeted by alien, hostile forces. Together, Jews represent collective consciousness and mission. Alone, they end up coping with their own weakness and disappear. Together, they are each other's affirmation.

What is the gravest sin a Jew can commit? To cut himself or herself off from the community of Israel. And what is the harshest punishment one can receive? To [01:01:00] be excluded from the same community. Just as excommunication is the ultimate sanction, adhesion is the supreme reward. In spite of their courage and tenacity, the Marranos in Spain and Portugal foundered in the end, whereas centuries later, their distant disciples in the Soviet Union succeeded in maintaining a foothold in our history. The difference: the Marranos acted alone. They fought their battles for memory, as isolated individuals and families in their caves. The Russian Jews resisted as a group, as a community. The Marranos hid when lighting Shabbat candles or playing to the God of Israel. The

Russian Jews went through the streets of Moscow singing, shouting their eternal loyalty to the people, to the history of Israel.

By linking his memory and soul to those [01:02:00] of his people, a Jew therefore lives not outside time, detached from reality, but at that place where all threads are woven together. When he remembers his childhood, he finds it in the childhood of our people. And he thus discovers that the Jewish child in the Jew is an eternal voyager. His imagination knows no boundaries, his curiosity is endless.

In other words, the Jew who forsakes his people will be forsaken by it. Supported by his own, enveloped by his own, the Jew will be generous not only to those surrounding him, but all men. All men and women who at times must have been strangers in foreign lands and victims of misfortunes. When the Jew is Jewish, he can help those who are not. When the Jew ceases to be Jewish, he helps no one.

Many non-Hasidic teachers became Hasidim, because Hasidism, as we said, community has been amplified. [01:03:00] But the reverse is not true. The enemies say that the community of Israel is a danger to Israel. At times, it is. So what? So

what? We have seen that we can live with danger and in danger if we know why we are living and why we are dying.

The attraction of Hasidism, it offers a sense of belonging to those who feel somewhat lost in a world which is still looking for its bearings. When the Besht died, he told his disciples, *halt zich tsuzamen*, stay together. And that became the password among Jews in the ghettos: stay together. Its validity is as certain today as it was then, if not more so. [01:04:00]

M:

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