

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Well, this is a love story, a real love story, but not at all like others. It is a story that for sure could be simple, beautiful, and even happy, but it isn't, not just because, much like the drama told by the Yiddish writer S. Ansky in his play, one of the great plays of the world's classic canon, it has its share of nostalgia and distressing weight, but also because it enters into a mystical realm and even into the occult. I promise we will come back to Ansky. This play, called *Between the Two Worlds*, or *The Dybbuk*, is [00:01:00] directly or indirectly related to the events that we propose to evoke tonight. And they are out of the ordinary.

But let's say it from the start. This evening our guest of honor is also quite unique. Indeed, we have never known anyone like her. Without doubt the Hasidic movement has attracted, if not given birth to various characters, each with his or her own personality, way of living, and teaching style. There is a forerunner, the Besht, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the master of the good name. There is the friend of the Besht, his companion, Rabbi Pinchas of Korets. There is the architect of the

movement, the great magnate Reb Dov Ber of Mezeritch. There are the successors in Vitebsk and Pshiskhe, the Seer [00:02:00] of Lublin and his miracles, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov and his tales, the humor of Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz, the anger and solitude of Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk.

There is a school of silence in Worke. The living garden of Hasidism in Central and Eastern Europe is undeniably rich in attitudes, ideas, and interpretations. And we have in fact studied many of them here since the very beginning of our annual encounters. We have met them. We have explored their ways. We have learned from their teaching. However, however, there is a difference. And the difference is that we know something now. This evening we are going to know that there is a surprise in Hasidism. And the surprise [00:03:00] has to do that we are going to evoke a kind of unexpected rebbe who on the surface anyway does not occupy a place among the great masters of the Beshtian movement.

It's quite simple. We are talking about a woman. Though well-known like many of them she is next to them, strange, and extraordinary in all she does. She's neither spouse nor mother. Rather than marry and carry and take care of her household, a husband, young children, she spends her time studying the sacred

works of the Talmud and the secret sources of the Kabbalah. And she wields a power of attraction not just over women but also over men. She is a peculiar person, the soul of a rebbe [00:04:00] in the body of a woman. Now, let's remember, the role of women in Judaism has been maligned occasionally, misunderstood often.

Is it really a male religion? Do women have nothing to do there? Of course not, after all, all we know that our grandmother was Eve. Adam couldn't live alone. It's in the Bible. *Lo tov lihiyot ha'adam l'vado*, It's not good to live alone. And in the yeshiva we used to say it's not good. It's bitter. But the fact is that there have been already in the Bible, of course, great characters, legends about Sarah, legends about Rachel, great Rachel, Miriam, the first organizer of a feminist movement was Miriam, Moses's sister. And later on we have Yael, the one who actually brought [00:05:00] victory to the Jewish army then.

And we have naturally in the Talmud Bruriah, the great Bruriah, that wherever she appeared among scholars they ran away. They ran away simply because she knew more than they. She was better than they. And they were afraid of her. But in Hasidism we also had, we had the Besht's daughter. Strangely enough we

don't know much about his wife. But we know much about his daughter, Udel. And in Hasidism we are told that the name itself has meaning. It has a sacred meaning. Udl, oddly, is the initials of *eish dat lamo*, which means a kind of sacred fire, the law of the sacred fire is Udl.

And we know that the Besht and his daughter were very, very close. Again, we don't have stories of the Besht traveling with his wife, but with his daughter, yes, they travel together. She visited with him together many communities. [00:06:00] And also she married a disciple, given to her by her father, naturally. She brought joy to the students, furthermore, she performed miracles occasionally. The Besht brought about a situation in Judaism which was rare then. He addressed himself first to women. He would go to marketplaces speaking to women, telling them stories, and therefore the newness about person tonight is that she was really -- she became a master.

She became a rebbe, not a rebbetzin, but a rebbe with all the duties and prerogatives that are usually granted to such a person. So we are going to speak about her tonight. But of course at this point in our search for her, of course, we may open our customary [00:07:00] brackets for some preliminary remarks. One, you may ask why are we returning to Hasidism? Of

course I may answer with a question: why not? (laughter) Is there another topic that fits so many occasions? Is there a better way of answering a question or of telling a story than telling a story of Hasidism?

Hasidism contains an appeal to fervor as well to memory. You need humor? Tell a Hasidic story. You want words of wisdom? Repeat a saying of a Hasidic master. But then there are other reasons as well. And one of them, of course, has to do with the turbulent world we live in. It seems haunted by many hate-filled and somber convulsions. In my little town in the Carpathian Mountains people would say that when a person is ill wherever you touch it hurts. And lately [00:08:00] I heard about from (inaudible), from somebody from my region saying whenever -- an elderly man, he said when I get up in the morning and nothing hurts I wonder, am I still alive? (laughter)

Well, this is true of our planet. Wherever you look, wherever you touch, it hurts. It's not only the civil war with its daily casualties in Iraq or the fratricidal war in Gaza, not only that, even our daily event, whatever happened this week in Virginia Tech we cannot not speak about it. One, the papers are full, of course, television is full. It's full of the stories about one young man came to America and became a killer. What

made him a killer? But somehow no one has noticed that it wasn't simply a suicide. It wasn't simply a murder, but actually it was a suicide-murder. [00:09:00]

And I wonder whether it was not subconscious, perhaps, the influence of all the suicide killers that began in Israel and then spread all over the world, even in Arab countries, in Muslim countries, Morocco, Algeria, in London, Spain, everywhere. It's impossible to imagine that this young man wasn't influenced because he followed exactly their tactic. We noted from the suicide bomber, suicide-killers, as I call them, in the Middle East that before they do what they are doing they tape a message. He taped a message. And the message is full of hatred. Their message is full of hatred.

He called himself a martyr. It's in his message. Now, a martyr? Since when is a killer a martyr? [00:10:00] A martyr is someone who is ready to die for God but not to kill for God. And so therefore we live really in a very strange world, and we need a little bit of joy.

Thirdly, in parentheses, today is April 19, and therefore I think for some people younger people wouldn't know that. It's a kind, for me, an anniversary. April 19, 1985 was Bitburg. This

name maybe doesn't appeal much to the young people here, but 22 years ago its name reverberated throughout the planet. At the time Ronald Reagan was president, a good man, a good heart filled with warmth. And he was going on a state visit to Germany promising then Chancellor Kohl to go with him everywhere, and they decided to go to visit [00:11:00] a cemetery, the cemetery was Bitburg, a military cemetery.

And the problem was we discovered a few weeks before that that it contains some 30 SS graves. And we couldn't accept that, that the president of the United States should go and pay tribute to SS graves? We led a campaign. We waged a kind of really a kind of campaign to make him change. I met him. And then on 19 of April in the White House there was a ceremony, and I spoke then to the president. And -- anniversary, just a few words. I said, "Mr. President, I would not be the person I am, and you wouldn't respect me for what I am if I were not to tell you also the sadness that is in my heart for what happened and what is going to happen. [00:12:00]

"What can I do," I said. "I belong to a traumatized generation, and to us Jews symbols are important, and furthermore, I am commanded by my tradition to speak truth to power." And this expression was lucky. And so many people now use it, and I

enjoy it. I shep *nachas*, you know, some words -- books were written called *Speaking Truth to Power* by Anita Hill, Cuomo-Kennedy, (inaudible). Whenever politicians don't speak with courage they say I speak truth to power. And it's good that some of my words at least are being adopted.

So why then tonight Hasidism and the entrancing legends of the [00:13:00] Hasidic universe? Well, exotic and colorful individuals abound. The person we are referring tonight is called the Maiden of Ludmir, or the Holy Virgin of Ludmir, or simply the Virgin of Ludmir. Her admirers and followers rushed from all corners of the province, from Volhynia and Poland to drink in her words and receive her teaching and her blessing, but who was she? We shall return to her later. She can wait. So will we, until the door is open.

So who was the Maiden of Ludmir? She herself did not write anything. Her disciples and loyal followers surely spoke of her with friends, acquaintances and strangers [00:14:00] but left nothing behind on paper. In other words, this makes any research on her astonishing appearances difficult because the only material that we do possess comes from rumors and oral accounts, not from direct testimony. Shmuel Abba Horodezky, Mordechai Biber, Yohanan Twersky, Menasheh Unger, David Mekler,

Shloyme Ansky, and recently a brilliant young historian Nathaniel Deutsch have looked into her remarkable fate.

Articles, tales, novels, and plays as well as doctoral dissertations are devoted to her. But biographical elements, collected pretty much everywhere, appear so vague, so distant, [00:15:00] so contradictory, so odd, so astounding, particularly so imaginary and full of fantasy that throw her very existence into question. And yet she was very much alive and well. We know her place of birth, her home , and we know her father's name, though again not her mother's. We even know or actually think we know her frame of mind, and these expressions which brought her much admiration on the one hand and hostility on the other.

Her name was Hanna Rochele or Hannah Rachel. We know she was a redhead, a dreamer. We know that she was the only daughter of a man named called Monesh [00:16:00] Verbermacher, a wealthy businessman from a small town in Volhynia called Volodymyr in Ukrainian and Ludmir in Yiddish. Her actual date of birth, however, has not been determined. Some sources indicate 1805 while others put it 10 years later, closer to the death of the great Hasidic masters, the Maggid Rabbi Yisroel of Kozhnitz, the Seer of Lublin, and Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov all implicated

during the Napoleonic wars in the mystically tragic so-called messianic conspiracy whose aim was to hasten the redemption of the messiah, and much to our regret and to the regret of all [00:17:00] generations to come, that revolution, that conspiracy was destined to fail. It failed.

And of course extraordinary stories have been written about that conspiracy, what they have done, how they have done it, and why it failed. But still, usually the date given to her birth or about her birth is 1806. We know, or think again, we think we know -- you know, when we speak about a Hasidic story like this, you know, strangely enough, l'havdil in Islamic literature, when they tell stories that once upon a time there was and maybe there wasn't. All these stories in Islamic literature are maybes. Maybe there was and maybe there wasn't. So here we must say we know or maybe we don't that her parents were childless. They were childless [00:18:00] for 10 years.

After 10 years a husband had or has the right to divorce his wife. But she persuaded him to continue. At wit's end, awaiting some kind of miracle she had suggested to her husband that a great Hasidic rebbe, Reb Mottel of Chernobyl is such a great man. His powers are so great that they should go to see him so that he could intercede on their behalf in heaven to have

a child. But which of them went to the rebbe? Which went to the rebbe to seek the blessing of that rebbe? Was it the husband or his wife? And to this day we don't know, not that it matters. We even wondered, by the way, if Monesh the husband was really close to the Hasidic movement at [00:19:00] all.

Once thing is sure, the tzadik, the rebbe, promised them they would have a child the following year. Father and mother would have preferred a son. They had a daughter. Was she tall or short, scrawny or in full bloom, slow moving or energetic? Did she have a low voice or perhaps solemn or shy? We really have no idea. All that we know is that from a very young age she liked to daven, to pray with kavanah, or concentration. We know that she loved to study, and she studied assiduously. One legend says that once while she was young she refused to touch her dinner. When questioned, was she hungry, wasn't she hungry, was she sick? No. [00:20:00] She simply didn't want to touch the dinner.

And later the butcher admitted that her meat was not kosher. That was her first miracle, her premonition. But there would be others to come. While still a teenager, and that too is a strange event, she fell in love with a student but was unable to approach him prior to their marriage in those times. But who

was that student? And here again we are in the dark. Was it a boy near whom she sat on the cheder school benches? Were there mixed student bodies? Impossible to believe. Was it maybe a yeshiva bochur, a student at a yeshiva whom she noted during services as a child or [00:21:00] as a young girl?

Perhaps the young man was a soldier, a Jewish soldier, a victim of the *khapers*, as they used to say in Yiddish then, forcibly recruited by the imperial army of the czar who happened to be there to pass town? What was his name, if there was such a boy? Was it Dovid, was it Meir? Both names appear in the legend. But was it in fact just a legend? It's possible. It seems as though she spoke of him to parents who naturally were against it. That's what parents do, they are against. (laughter) This was a time when the daughter of a good family just didn't fall in love like that without the encouragement or at least the initiative of her parents. [00:22:00]

Their daughter held her ground. And her parents gave in, says legend. Yet this love was more than likely purely platonic. There would have been no physical contact between them. Is it possible that they arranged secret rendezvous? Impossible, implausible, inconceivable. It simply was not done. Her father found another suitor for her, but his daughter would hear none

of it. When she protested saying she didn't love him, what, Monesh replied. So what? Who said that a woman should love her promised one before marriage? She should love him after marriage.

True or not, one of the writers who wrote about the Maiden or Virgin, [00:23:00] David Mekler, he claims that on this issue her mother took her side, and on her deathbed the mother begged her husband not to force Hannah Rochele to act against her will. Quote, according to Mekler, "I can see, she said to her husband, that my days are numbered. I ask only one thing of you. Do not give Hannah Rochele away in marriage too soon, in haste. Do not do anything without her knowledge or approval. Consult her before concluding any such agreement with the suitor's family. I will no longer be here, so she should be the one to speak for herself," quote, unquote.

But for the love of God, Monesh is supposed to have exclaimed, since when should parents ask for the opinion of their children in such affairs? [00:24:00] They're too important. What a mother and father decide will be done. No, answered the dying mother, not Hannah Rochel. She is different. Promise me not to force her, and that is my last wish. And of course her husband made this vow that she so longed for again. Was this an actual

exchange, or was it completely made up? After all, Mekler, the author, was not there for this interaction. Could he have heard it from someone who was there? Possible.

What is certain is that the girl became motherless while still quite young. All the more astonishing then that Hannah Rochel said the Kaddish prayer for her mother. There was no boy, and she said she would [00:25:00] say Kaddish. Several accounts confirm witnessing her depressed, despondent, going alone, always alone, and she would go alone to gather her thoughts while mourning at her mother's grave. She was often in the cemetery. Once when she was 13 years old she fainted there. She stayed in a coma for several days or more. Another writer, Mordechai Biber, tells the story of Hannah Rochel's afflicted father going to pray to his wife's grave and asking his dead wife to intercede in heaven for their daughter.

Then he went to see the Mottel of Chernobyl with the same prayer. And he said to the Hasidic master, you have promised us a daughter, meaning a living daughter, and she [00:26:00] said what we find, of course, the woman of Shunammite who came to see the prophet Elisha when her boy died, when his son died. You promised a living person, a living child, and it falls on you to keep her alive for us. And the tzadik reassured him. Go home,

he said, you will find her revived, and she will bring you much joy, and a great deal of grief. And according to legend the prophecy of the tzadik was entirely fulfilled.

Now, why did she faint? Had she bumped her head against the tombstone? Some explain it this way. Others talk instead about an incident more mystical in origin and substance. According to the letter Hannah Rochel passed out and had a vision in which she saw [00:27:00] herself in heaven before the celestial tribunal was to decide her fate. Should she live or die? After some deliberation they decided to grant her a new soul made of pure spirituality. Now, was it the soul of a tzadik in search of a refuge? Here we are again, though from a rather narrow angle in the literary realm of Ansky, the author of the play *The Dybbuk*. Except that here the metamorphosis is less dramatic.

Her admirers say that Hannah Rochel was changed when she awoke, and she suddenly, without any preparation on her part, she achieved biblical, Talmudic, and mystical knowledge that no woman and very few men at her age [00:28:00] had. Was this before the funeral or after? Frustrated by her love or full of despair without her mother, Hannah Rochel broke off her engagement, which turned out to be a turning point in her life. One can imagine the scandal in the community. It was in

turmoil. Her fiancé's father demanded that Monesh give back the gifts that his daughter had received.

And that wasn't all. He also demanded a considerable payment for the harm done to his son's reputation. In certain circles Hannah Rochel was forbidden access to the *vayber shul*, the section for women in a synagogue. It is during this time that she took on the veritable behavior of a man. [00:29:00] In the morning she put on the tallit, the prayer shawl, and she wore phylacteries, lo and behold, two pairs of phylacteries of tefillin, those of Rashi and those of his grandson Rabbeinu Yaakov Tam. She worshiped three times a day, *shacharit*, *mincha* and *ma'ariv*

At 19 she mourned the passing of her father, and there again she said a Kaddish for him. Monesh left her an estate of some size as an inheritance. She used it to have an oratory, a shtiebel, a Hasidic shtiebel, constructed. We know where, or we don't, on the second floor for her in a certain building, and those men and women faithful to her who would come to be with her. More precisely, she addressed her droshes, her sermons to them from an adjoining room, according to some, or from behind the sheet used as a curtain, according to others.

The third meal, the *shalosh seudot* of the Sabbath was the great culminating point when imbued with mystical reverie she revealed her inspired commentary of the sacred texts. During the week, like any other Hasidic master, she welcomed visitors who, according to Hasidic custom, gave her *kvitlech*, or written requests explaining their health problems, family troubles, or financial predicaments. She, however, contrary to other rebbes, did not accept a *pidyon*, which means a monetary compensation for spiritual redemption, but maybe she didn't accept because she didn't need [00:31:00] money. She had money inherited from her father.

But anyway, because so many people came to her and because so many people were attached to her and so many people followed her, that things took on a turn for the worst. Her successes antagonized many people, particularly in the Hasidic circles largely dominated by Rabbi Mottel of Chernobyl's grandson, the grandson of the rebbe who actually foresaw that she would be born to Monesh and his wife. The same really who helped is now an opponent. And people began to whisper and eventually less discretely that her activities showed that she was veering away [00:32:00] from the heritage of the Baal Shem Tov, the Besht.

A pious woman is praiseworthy, so is a Hasidic woman. A woman well-versed in the esoteric texts, okay, that's still acceptable. But a woman filling the role and functions of a rebbe is going too far. It is transgressing the tolerable limits. At this point in the story I must come back to Ansky who actually saw link to the whole story of the Ludmirer Moyd. Ansky's account strikes me because some of it comes from the mouth of a certain Yossele Dreyer, which was really, it must have been a living witness. At the time of Ansky's visit in Ludmir in 1915, which means some 10 years after or [00:33:00] 20 years ago, again, we don't know when, after her death.

And Ansky speaks of this in addressing the Jewish quote, the Jewish Ethnographic Expedition, that was his profession. In addition to writing plays and contributing to the literature, the Yiddish literature to a very great extent, he already made a living by working for the Jewish ethnographic expedition, going around Jewish communities and see what was happening there. For the future, and we shall come back to it later on, but about Moyd, he says -- this is what he says. Quote, "The entire region buzzed with the Maiden of Ludmir, not only men and women but also scholars and rabbis from surrounding towns used to come to her as a holy person so that she could bless them. Rebbes came for blessings. She used to sit in her room near open

doors, [00:34:00] and everyone would stand in the house of study and listen to her homilies. A group of followers formed around her who man called the Hasidim of the Maiden of Ludmir. Tzadikim from this time came to take a look at this wonder woman. They tried to convince her that she should change her way of life and get settled, as all women do."

And around that time we know that the eminent tzadik Reb Mottel of Chernobyl set out to plead with her to marry. She yielded and was married to a rebbe. However, they quickly got divorced. But here I must say we have a problem. We have -- we encounter a difficulty, and that difficulty is confronting us. Because [00:35:00] we shall see what the argument was. In this important account by Ansky we learn that for a second time in her life the illustrious Rebbe Mottel of Chernobyl enters the picture. Sought out by adversaries of the Virgin, he had a long discussion with her. Once again it's unclear who went to see the other. Opinions differ.

But we do know what they talked about. Rebbe Mottel explained that her Hasidic path was not traditional, thus contrary to the Besht's teaching, and she answered that since she had received a life and a soul from the heavenly tribunal itself it was within her right to shape her own life her own way. What about the

rest? The tzadik was unable to come up with any argument against her desire [00:36:00] to study ancient texts. In fact, she could have cited, and according to some sources she did cite the example of other scholarly women who also were versed in the Talmud, in halacha, aggadah, the Midrash.

Likewise, he could not reasonably hold her piety against her. Doesn't a Jewish woman need to know the law to fulfill divine commandments? But in fact on this issue the Rebbe of Chernobyl could cling to biblical commandment to undermine the female rabbi's position, the one on procreation. Hadn't God commanded that Adam and Eve, soon after giving them life, be fertile and multiply on the earth? It was an irrefutable argument to which there was nothing Hannah Rochel could say, we are told in legend. So she had to give in. [00:37:00]

After all, the first commandment in the Bible is *Pru urvu*, go fructify and multiply. When I read it actually I was convinced that the argument really was a very strong argument, but there is a very, very great difficulty now. Why, why is it that Hannah Rochel, who knew so much, did not answer? And she could have actually said hey, hey, Rebbe of Chernobyl, don't you know Maimonides the Rambam who codified the law who says that that commandment -- don't be angry, ladies -- that commandment

applies only to men, not to women. (laughter) Of course you may ask how could they do it without? (laughter) But the fact is [00:38:00] the law, *Pru urvu*, is only to men.

So then why has Hannah Rochel not come to Hasidic master's argument with her own, that she was not transgressing the biblical law but choosing to remain single and alone. It is inconceivable that she didn't know that particular law. After all, when you open the Chumash and you study Rashi and commentary right away it said it's only for men. And she was a learned person, an erudite woman. Furthermore, how about Reb Mottel of Chernobyl himself? Why has he used the argument which he must have known was a wrong argument? Didn't he know the law? That too is inconceivable.

Where then is the solution? It is maybe in the question. How do we know the story of that dialogue? From the Maiden?

[00:39:00] From the rebbe perhaps? Probably not. Was there anyone else present at their discussion? Probably not. It's possible yes. A rebbe couldn't be alone with a woman, be she a rebbe. They couldn't. A man -- man cannot be alone in the same room. But it's also possible that somehow there was a person inside in a corner just to be there, closed eyes, closed not to listen, but he was there. And maybe it's quite possible that

when he came out and he, who was less learned than the others, told a story that he misheard somehow or misinterpreted, that that was the argument.

So we all know, therefore, not from primary sources but from witnesses who have heard from witnesses who have heard from witnesses. One thing we know, that the argument worked.

[00:40:00] She accepted marriage. And we know this for sure.

But whom did she marry? Some say a young Talmud scholar from an excellent but poor family. Others say no, she married a simple gentleman. How can we know? The consensus is nonetheless that there was a marriage. But of course this event, like so many others with the Maiden of Ludmir has several conflicting versions.

Some texts describe the wedding feast arranged by the groom's father and worthy of her status with musicians and sumptuous meals for the rich and poor with dancing, while others insist that it was according to the bride's wishes a simple ritualistic ceremony kept to a minimum. [00:41:00] However, everyone agrees on what happened next. What happened next was sad, disappointing. Did the wedding last one day, one night, one week? Supposedly the young bride did not attend the special

shivat y'may ha'mishteh, the seven days, the festivities that last the whole week.

It also seems, and with some degree of certainty, that the marriage was never consummated. Was this because of the wife's resistance or a young husband's reluctance? One explanation has been that already considering herself spiritually untouchable she insisted on remaining untouched. But another is [00:42:00] also that the new husband himself dreaded coming close to his young wife's body. In the meantime, he, the husband, had no doubt taken her disturbing reputation as a woman of superior and saintly quality seriously. A third writer, Charles Raddock, describes the husband as a scribe older than she. And she chased him from her house and demanded an immediate divorce.

Was this change too radical for those already set in their ways? Rumors flew. Amused in the beginning, some became hostile, inflexible, irascible, nasty. People did not quite go to the point of accusing the Virgin of being a witch, but [00:43:00] to undermine her reputation there were those who spread rumors that she was possessed. And some even used her own remarks about having a new soul to explain her eccentric behavior. So simply put, it all boiled down to a dybbuk. And this is exactly from where Ansky draws the theme for his spellbinding play. First

and titled *Tsvishn Tsvey Veltn, Between Two Worlds*, and then *The Dybbuk*, and that is a play that takes one's breath away.

His theme deserves to be discussed. At its most simple core it is a story of a betrayed friendship, and nothing in the world is worse than that. Two poor friends in a yeshiva somewhere in Eastern Europe felt close enough to make [00:44:00] this vow: if later on they marry and one of them has a son and the other a daughter, their children will marry each other. It so happened that things went otherwise. One became rich, and the other remained poor. The rich one had a daughter Leah, and the poor one a son, Chanan. Without going into detail let us say that the children somehow mystically loved each other while the rich friend forgot his promise.

One of the most captivating characters in the play is the messenger, a mysterious vagabond who arrives from somewhere to go wherever, somewhere else, always somewhere else in order to clarify the meaning of something invisible and explain the inexplicable. It is he who in speaking to the [00:45:00] nouveau riche friend offers this striking image. He who stands in front of a window sees other people. Cover the window with silver, and it becomes a mirror. And then he only sees himself.

In the play there is preparation for a wedding, a wedding that will not take place. As in Ludmir, Leah, the bride to be, goes to the cemetery, and once there she follows a tradition whereby the orphan goes to the deceased parent's grave to invite him or her to the wedding ceremony. As in Ludmir the young girl faints and then wakes up with a soul that does not belong to her. It is Chanan's, her actual fiancé, to whom she is bound by her parent's oath. [00:46:00] In the play Leah is no longer herself. It is actually Chanan speaking through her mouth. She expresses the disappointment of the sick and unfortunate man.

Like an accusation against this world of ours that denies pure love, true love, life-giving and mature love. As mentioned earlier, Ansky has heard echoes of the rumors about the Virgin of Ludmir. But he transformed them in adapting them for his play. Life and art share certain things in common but nonetheless remain separate. In Ansky's play there is an extraordinary sin. It strikes the imagination of exorcism. Ten men wearing their prayer shawls and holding black candles, make up the required [00:47:00] minyan. It is an agonizing, disturbing ceremony.

Reality and the imaginary, passion and the occult fight in the shadowy unknown, and eternal longing become entangled. But

there is no exorcism in the story of Ludmir. Even if there are illusions here and there in certain circles there are voices that could be heard urging to chase the dybbuk out of the maiden. Nevertheless, nothing indicates any consequences to these voices calls. In conclusion of the story, it is just as nebulous as its origin. Hannah Rochel must have been in her fifties when she decided to leave Ludmir and to make Aliyah, and to go and live the rest of her life in Palestine.

Why? To follow in the footsteps of the [00:48:00] Besht, who according to legend had tried several times to go there and thus bring about a final redemption. The story is he had a friend called Rabbi Ḥayyim ben Attar, the author of *Or ha-hayyim*, who was in Eretz Israel, in Palestine, and they were in correspondence. And the story is had the Besht and Or ha-hayyim met these two friends, out of their friendship the messiah would have come.

Is it that she tried to imitate Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who had succeeded in going to Palestine, but having just arrived was already dreaming about going back in diaspora? Unlike the Hasidic masters, she, the Maiden of Ludmir, never left an explanation. Now, by which route did she go there? We don't know, of course. Without doubt by boat, naturally, through

Romania probably, Turkey, possibly. Who were her travel companions? We don't know. [00:49:00] What was her life in the Holy Land? According to some she tried to rebuild her reputation as a rebbe, even there, by relying on her strengths, organizing prayers and groups for study and communal meditation.

Others insist on the contrary, that she did her best to remain anonymous. With what remained from her fortune she was able to live comfortably, but we don't know where. Tzfat or Safet, the epitome of mystical sites? In Jerusalem, ever the capital of messianic dreamers? We don't know. Years ago in bringing her up briefly in context of a longer talk on Hasidic topics I had done research on this extraordinary woman already. And I remember having discovered, but I forgot in which book or in which historical journal, that she passed her life in Palestine completely unknown and solitary. [00:50:00]

Am I mistaken? I seem to remember that she had been a laundry woman. Other sources said that she actually owned a drug store. A certain Efraim Tabenhaus gives us a portrait of this undoubtedly disconcerting woman taken from a diary kept by his father, Meir Tabenhaus, who knew her. They met in 1874. And he describes her living in the Mea She'arim neighborhood in Jerusalem. And he describes her as being short, with grey hair.

Did she leave her hair open? We don't understand. A pious woman does not show her hair. But that is what he writes. And he also says that she had the face glowing with a sacred light sitting at the long table presiding over a gathering of older women.

The younger Nathan Deutsch cites pieces of [00:51:00] information about her based on Jewish sources belonging to Sir Moses Montefiore's archives. Moses Montefiore was one of the great Jewish philanthropists who would travel all over the world simply to help Jewish communities. Horodezky relays that the Virgin of Ludmir had decided along with a devotee of the Kabballah to use their secret knowledge in anticipation of the imminent coming of the messiah. They were to hide in a cellar near Jerusalem to carry this out. She was there, but not a kabbalist companion.

He was about to leave his house when an old man appeared before him. The companion invited him in and offered him the usual hospitality. And he forgot about his meeting with the Maiden. And so who was this stranger? The prophet Elijah. He was sent down from heaven to keep the two mystics [00:52:00] apart, and so preventing them from accomplishing their goal, for it was too early to put an end to exile. But she was very close.

Farfetched legend. As with everything about the Maiden of Ludmir it all remains mottled. Did she remarry? Some say yes. Others also say she remained a virgin until she passed away. Where did she die? Again, in Safet, Tzfat? How old was she?

It was thought to be in 1888, but some also think that she died in Jerusalem in 1905. There was no eulogy at her funeral, no article mentions her passing. Where is her tomb? Menasheh Unger believes to have found it at the Mount of Olive cemetery. I knew Menasheh Unger. He was working at a Yiddish daily *Morgn Zhurnal* while I was working at the Yiddish [00:53:00] *Daily Forwards*. Menasheh Unger, an author of countless articles and several enthralling works on Hasidism, yes, he and I spoke often, and we both shared an admiration for this Hasidic literature that inspires warmth and tenderness, faith and hope to those in need.

And he's the first one who ever spoke to me of the Virgin of Ludmir. But it was Ansky, friend of my favorite Jewish historian, Simon Dubnow, who revealed her to me. Indeed, Ansky, we said, visited Ludmir as he visited other Jewish enclaves and villages in Eastern and Central Europe. Everywhere he went he tried desperately to gather anything that represented Jewish life and survival, its traditions, culture, ambitions, its fears

and triumphs, its nightmares, its dreams, its hopes, its joys.
And this is how he [00:54:00] describes his mission.

Quote, "With every old man who dies, with every fire that breaks out, with every exile we suffer, we lose part of our past. The best example of our traditional lives, our customs and beliefs are vanishing. The old tales and songs and melodies will soon be forgotten. In short, our past, sanctified by the blood and tears of so many innocent martyrs, is vanishing and soon will vanish." These words were written in 1914. Aren't they applicable to our own times? From what used to be a great and flourishing Jewish community in Ludmir, who remained?

[00:55:00] Is it possible that 70 years ago a malevolent, evil dybbuk has entered history with the goal of debasing the humanity of man and destroying a people drunk with God and obsessed with his part of eternity?

And since today is April 19 perhaps we ought to include in it another date , another anniversary. April 19, 1943 the Warsaw ghetto rose and fought the German army with arms and resolve and the Ahavat Israel. That was the first civil insurrection against the invader in occupied Europe. The German armies, at that time still the mightiest in Europe, used heavy artillery and war planes against the [00:56:00] several hundred ghetto

fighters, the lowliest and saddest in the war. Remember, and I said it actually to President Reagan in the White House in my address to him, every underground movement in occupied Europe received help, emissaries, agents, money, weapons, contacts, trainers except the Jewish one.

Communists were helped by Moscow, the others by London and Washington. Only the Jewish resistance movement was abandoned. Their pleas for help went unheeded. Mordechai Anielewicz, the charismatic commander in chief of the uprising, sent desperate appeals to the outside world and to the Jewish world and especially to the Jewish leadership in America and obtained nothing. Where did they take the courage, the strength to take Jewish history on their shoulders [00:57:00] and lead it into battle? Were they heroic whereas others were martyrs? Over there even the martyrs were heroes and the heroes martyrs.

And they too had a chronicler, Emanuel Ringelblum, but he had a forerunner, Ansky. One need only read and study this anthropological style questionnaire distributed in hundreds of Jewish communities to people from all walks of life in order to grasp its author's wide range of interests. What did he want to know? He distributed these questions and wanted to know, some examples, how do you picture the Angel of Death? What does he

use for weapons? Does Angel of Death even have [00:58:00] a life? Does he take the life or the soul? Is the Angel of Death happy to do his work, or does he do it solely out of duty? Does he act alone or with servants? And Ansky wanted simple people to answer these questions in their imagination, not the learned people, eh, they could find the answers. What does a simple Jew in a village think?

Furthermore, can the Angel of Death be tricked? For where does he arrive and by which route does he leave? Can he be evaded through the study of Torah? Can a tzadik, a righteous man, drive him away? And then once in the tomb, does a soul know what is happening outside? Do the dead in cemeteries speak to each other, he wanted to know. [00:59:00] Do they ever leave their tombs at night? I can tell you in my town I as a child, as a young man even, I thought yes. We were afraid not to be at midnight near the groyser *shul*, near the great synagogue because we were told that at midnight the dead men come and read the Torah.

And oy vavoy, and terrible. If you hear your name being called to the Torah what do you do? And we are told what to do, to go backwards. That means we believed in it. Do the dead ever leave the town? And then he asked, do you know the stories

about two dead people in litigation who appear before the court presided over by a rebbe, which is the story of the dybbuk, of the play. He posed hundreds, [01:00:00] thousands of questions, and I have here a lot, in the hundreds, about beliefs in other worlds, reincarnation, the migration of souls, all asked in almost scientific tone.

He insists on learning everything, discovering all, remembering the entire thing. Because he believed -- then he believed that the world is coming to an end or at least that part of the world, the Jewish aspect of the world. He already felt, he felt, that something is wrong, that history, general history and Jewish history are in conflict. And who knows what will remain? And what he said, therefore, why he is doing and what he wants to do, isn't it relevant to the time in which we are living now? Oh, really, from what had been a world of shtetlekh, Jewish communities, with their rabbis [01:01:00] and their students, with their dreamers and their princes and their beggars, with their wise men and with their madmen, their wanderers and storytellers, their princes, what is left of all of them?

Could it possibly be, really, could it possibly be that there was a possession, there was something unholy taking hold of history, a dybbuk, yes, a dybbuk? And then of course a question

is, who can perform the exorcism? How do you chase that dybbuk out of history? What can we do to ensure that hatred is, if not abolished, at least degraded? That murder, brutal murder should be not natural, that we shouldn't accept it, that certain [01:02:00] deeds that separate people from one another, that cause so much fear and trembling to so many people should simply be transformed into an act of generosity and compassion.

As we say in the Talmud, *teiku*, the question remains a question. And all we can is tell the story. Thank you. (applause)

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