7 Yearning for Sacred Place

Wiesel's Hasidic Tales and Postwar Hasidism

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Prologue

In *Souls on Fire*,[1] Elie Wiesel begins his chapter on the School of Pshiskhe with the story of Eizik son of Yekel of Kraków, who dreams of treasure in Prague, but after his journey discovers that the treasure is really to be found in his own home.[2] The point of the story is not, as is sometimes suggested, that since the treasure you seek is really already inside of you, you don't need to make the journey, nor even that you need to make the journey in order to discover that the truth is inside you. Recall that, as Wiesel writes, Rabbi Simha-Bunam of Pshiskhe would tell this story each time he accepted a new disciple.[3] Rabbi Bunam *did* accept disciples; he did not send them all back home where they came from. Apparently Rabbi Bunam wanted precisely those disciples who realized that they didn't have to be there, who knew that their spiritual growth was in their own hands, not in those of the master they had sought out. The tale reflects on the School of Pshiskhe, its culture and values, the independence and boldness of spirit it sought to cultivate. In this understanding, the story and the journey, the tale of the rabbi of Pshiskhe and his disciples, each inform the other, reflect the other, interrogate the other, assist in defining the other.

This story on the complex interaction of rebbe, Hasid, story, and place is a good point of entry for our inquiry into Wiesel's contribution to our understanding of Hasidism. Nearly all accounts of Hasidism point to the centrality of the zaddik in the movement. The zaddik is link between heaven and earth, conduit of blessing, center of his community, in some sense the center of the world itself.[4] We also know of the importance of stories in Hasidism. From the earliest period hasidic tales conveyed the values of the movement and highlighted the role of the zaddikim. Hasidic storytelling is endowed with ritual holiness and has performative power; the telling of a story creates

its own sacred space.[5] My goal here is to explore the complex relationship between zaddikim, the tales, and hasidic reconstruction of sacred place, all in light of the work and contribution of Wiesel.

The Nineteenth Century

While the zaddik and the story were central to Hasidism from its very inception, both institutions continued to develop. Roughly around 1800, the zaddik's charismatic leadership became hereditary; among other factors, the Polish-Russian pattern of inheritance of noble estates may have served as a model.[6] In tandem with this development, the zaddik's place of residence took on a new importance. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, certain small and otherwise undistinguished provincial towns—*shtetlach*—won fame as the home of great masters, the seat of their lineage's court.[7] This continued even after the death of the founder of the lineage, since the zaddik's residence would typically be revered as a shrine.[8] The belief was that the spirit of the master was still present at the residence, in the court, at the grave or sepulcher. Known as the *Ohel* ("Tent"), the burial place would be visited for petitionary prayer and during yahrtzeits, the anniversary dates of the passing of the saintly family members interred there.[9]

Thus the rebbe's presence made the town into a hasidic center. He became in effect the town's patron, responsible for its spiritual stature and material blessing.[10] Indeed, the town often owed its reputation and place on the map of the hasidic world to the rebbe who bore its name. (At a still later period, as we shall see, this relationship would sometimes survive the physical dislocation of the rebbe and even the destruction of its Jewish residents.)

In a parallel manner, the role of hasidic storytelling continued to evolve throughout the nineteenth century. The stories of a particular lineage encapsulated the collective wisdom of the school where they were told and the dynasty that preserved them. Tales pointed to core hasidic values as embodied in the life of the court. When the individual Hasid reached a situation similar to that of the tale in some respect, he may have heard in the tale the voice of his rebbe, providing inspiration and encouragement as well as perspective and direction. The guidance received from a tale thus assisted the Hasid to act with wisdom and integrity, consistent with the ethos and values of the lineage to which he was affiliated. For example, stories in the Chabad-Lubavitch school tend to emphasize Torah knowledge, Divine omnipresence, and uncompromising fearlessness in carrying out the will of God as understood by the rebbe. The combination of talmudic scholasticism, contemplation of divine immanence, and militancy in praxis create the characteristic profile of Chabad Hasidism, and this signature is reflected in Chabad's fund of stories and tales. In this way, the function of the hasidic tale, the function of the court, and the function of the zaddik vis-à-vis the Hasid dovetailed and mutually reinforced each other. The rebbe told the tales and embodied their wisdom, while the shtetl became the destination around which the tales turned and

where they would be heard most authentically and fully. Each dynasty's storehouse of hasidic tales helped define its identity in the constellation of the hasidic world.[11]

Wiesel's writings on Hasidism illustrate this interaction with poetic beauty. Listen to his evocation of Worke in *Somewhere a Master,* in the chapter titled "The School of Worke":

> *Worke:* another kingdom, a new, enchanting Hasidic adventure—another aspect of hasidic language, another face of the hasidic movement.
> *Worke:* a song both humble and powerful—a whisper with profound reverberations of communal life, intense and intriguing alike.
> *Worke:* a fervent but restrained prayer—full of ecstasy, but controlled ecstasy.
> *Worke:* a journey to the end of language—to the birth of silence.[12]

Note the invocation of the place-name four times, as a metonym for a style of hasidic living, a culture of spirituality meticulously defined and lovingly honed. This anaphora where no zaddik has yet been named identifies the hasidic culture entirely with the locale, the shtetl. The chapter titles of *Somewhere a Master* reflect the subtle change that took place as the movement matured through the nineteenth century: "Pinhas of Koretz," "Aharon of Karlin," "Wolfe of Zbarazh," "Barukh of Medzibozh," "Moshe-Leib of Sassov," "The Holy Seer of Lublin," "Meir of Premishlan," "Naphtali of Ropshitz," until the ninth and last chapter, "The School of Worke." The name of each of the first eight chapters is comprised of the master's given name and the place with which he was most closely associated. Both the person and the place are important, yet it seems that the main emphasis is on the master, while the place-name assists in his identification and is subordinate to him. But when we get to Worke (the last chronological stage of this series), the place name serves as rubric for the school as a whole; the shtetl and the masters who lived and taught there are now nearly identical.[13] This relationship between zaddik, place, school of hasidic culture, and collection of tales evolved slowly and clearly emerged only in the mid-to-late decades of the nineteenth century.

The Zaddik as Conductor

One aspect of the zaddik's role is to set the tone for his community's spiritual experience. This leadership includes choices and emphases in liturgy, Torah study, performance of commandments, and in particular, the characteristic rites of hasidic life such as the third Sabbath meal, the singing of melodies, and the like.[14] The effective hasidic leader conveys a characteristic style, orchestrating his court's spiritual experience.[15] Often the master bequeathed this style to his successor, and in some cases the style was carried forward for a number of generations. Chabad-Lubavitch provides a salient example, but it is far from being the only one.

Each major lineage developed its own distinctive culture and its particular reputation in the constellation of Hasidism as a whole. For one group it was piety, for another sweet melody, for a third fervent prayer, or scholarship, or social welfare and care for

the poor, or austere nobility, or efforts to redeem captives unjustly imprisoned, and so on. In the School of Pshiskhe, the reputation surely included individualism and independence of spirit; Modzitz was famed for its musical compositions and singing; while Worke evoked the mystic transcendence of silence. Wiesel's chapter on Worke shows how that lineage made silence emotionally expressive, even eloquent. The silence at Worke had its own musical tempo, phrasing, dynamics, even surprise.

The Twentieth Century

The zaddik's role as sacred pivot of his community was concretized in the court itself, whose material patterns and structural design displayed hasidic theology in schematized, graphic form. By means of this embodied social theology, the dynastic principle gave prominence to what would otherwise have been very modest locales. Throughout the nineteenth century hasidic centers fostered a protected domain where a quiet and unhurried Hasidism could flourish, luxuriating in a sacred space far from the pace and pressures of urban life. All this changed in the twentieth century, with the move to large cities such as Warsaw, especially during and after World War I.[16] During this period we encounter the phenomenon of rebbes named for towns in which they no longer reside.

But after World War II and the Holocaust, these towns as places of Jewish life no longer existed at all. The question then became, can a hasidic lineage survive the physical dislocation of the rebbe and then the destruction of the Jewish residents of the town whose name the lineage bears? The answer to this question depended on the fate of the zaddik himself. In general the corporate identity of a hasidic community does not long survive without direct personal contact with a living master. With the living master, there is stability and continuity, a natural focus for the community's efforts to regroup and rebuild. Almost without exception, it was only when a dynastic scion survived the war that a particular hasidic community was able to reconstitute itself. The postwar hasidic leaders who survived the Shoah and relocated to Western Europe, Israel, or the Western hemisphere saved the cohesive communities built by their ancestors from dissipation. Crystallized around family loyalty and the memory of great predecessors, the community's identity remained intact. And the lineage's identity was also anchored in place: a socially constructed place, the shtetl that no longer existed.[17]

The postwar hasidic master thus achieved a new role and prominence. One may assert that in the entire history of Hasidism, after the eighteenth-century foundational period, the hasidic master is never more crucial than in the post–World War II period. In this period, the lineage's story (now including the story of war trauma and survival) and the person who embodies the story mutually reinforce each other as never before. The dynastic narrative (re)constructs the place where the dynasty began, thus giving the incumbent rebbe his identity and his mission. The postwar rebbe is largely a creation of the story of his dynasty, whose shtetl no longer exists. The relationship is reciprocal since the story and the place can continue only with a rebbe. If there were no

Lubavitcher Rebbe in the postwar period, there would be no Lubavitch Hasidism today. The same is true of Satmar, Ger, Bobov, Belz, Viznitz, Skver, Karlin-Stolin, Munkacs, and so on.[18]

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "The seventh day is like a palace in time with a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere."[19] Mutatis mutandis, one might say that postwar Lubavitch is not a place but an atmosphere, in this case the atmosphere surrounding the Lubavitcher rebbe, and created largely by him. "Lubavitch" is wherever the rebbe is, and wherever there is a *hitkashrut* to the rebbe. When uttering the word "Lubavitch" nowadays, almost no one thinks of a town in Russia. What comes to mind is rather an address in Crown Heights, Brooklyn: 770 Eastern Parkway, or simply "770." This location is linked to a far-flung network of Chabad houses throughout the world established by the rebbe, and staffed by idealistic men and women who continue to be motivated by their bond to the rebbe even after his death in 1994.

Postwar Hasidic Renaissance

An early, and still arresting, portrait of a postwar hasidic community revived and led by a charismatic master was drawn by Wiesel. The last part of his novel *The Gates of the Forest* (1966)[20] is set in Brooklyn and depicts a fictionalized version of the Lubavitcher rebbe leading a *Farbrengen.* A major focus of the gathering is song. Wiesel writes,

> The *hasidim* sang. The song burst their chests and lit a thousand flames in their eyes. . . . At the far end of the room, facing the door, the Rebbe surrounded by his court, presided over the table of honor. . . . All those present feared and admired him and pledged him fidelity without limit, limning the forces which converged in his person and which he alone could put to use. . . . The *hasidim* followed him with radiant confidence . . . Let him walk first; liberation was at hand! And so they danced with joy, their heads almost touching the vaults of the universe.[21]

In his memoir *All Rivers Run to the Sea,*[22] writing of Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher rebbe, Wiesel acknowledges that the hasidic celebration described in *The Gates of the Forest* "was his celebration. The songs, vows, and fervor of the faithful were such that I felt as if I were with my own rebbe, back in my hometown."

The memoir tells of a visit to Lubavitch (that is, to 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn) one year during Simchat Torah. Wiesel stood at the entrance, hoping to avoid attention. Suddenly the rebbe noticed him and beckoned him, calling him by name; the Hasidim carried him over the heads of the crowd and deposited him "like a package" in front of the rebbe, who smiled at him. Wiesel recalls the ensuing dialogue as follows:

> "Welcome," he said. "It's nice of a Hasid of Wizhnitz to come and greet us in Lubavitch. But is this how they celebrate Simchat Torah in Wizhnitz?" "Rebbe," I said faintly, "we are not in Wizhnitz but in Lubavitch." "Then do as we do in Lubavitch," he said. "And what do you do in Lubavitch?" "In Lubavitch we drink and say *lehayim,* to life." "In Wizhnitz too." "Very well. Then say *lehayim*." He handed me a glass filled to the

brim with vodka. "Rebbe," I said, "in Wizhnitz a Hasid does not drink alone." "Nor in Lubavitch." He emptied his glass in one gulp. I followed suit.

[The rebbe offers a second glass of vodka and then a third. Wiesel is affected by the alcohol but the rebbe remains steady and focused.]

"You deserve a blessing," he said, his face beaming with happiness. "Name it!"

I wasn't sure what to say. I was, in fact, in a stupor.

"Would you like me to bless you so you can begin again?"

Drunk as I was, I appreciated his wisdom. To begin again could mean so many things: begin again to drink, to pray, to believe, to live. And then it was Simchat Torah, which is also my birthday.

"Yes Rebbe," I said. "Give me your blessing."

He blessed me and downed his vodka.

The Viznitzer Hasid has gone to Lubavitch and has been blessed, empowered to begin again, but this new beginning is possible only because the Lubavitcher rebbe and the Viznitzer Hasid are not in geographic Lubavitch, but the hasidic Lubavitch, revived by a living rebbe, who transmits old songs and stories as he inspires new ones. It is the living master who bonds the Chabad lineage of Russia and the Viznitzer devotee to a place, to an old-new place where new beginnings are possible and where blessings are effective.

The epigraph to *The Gates of the Forest* is a famous hasidic story. Here is Wiesel's rendering of it:

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! "I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient."

And it was sufficient.

God made man because he loves stories.

Gershom Scholem concluded his great survey *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*[23] with this story as he heard it from Shmuel Yosef Agnon. Scholem says, "You can say if you will that this profound little anecdote symbolizes the decay of a great movement. You can also say that it reflects the transformation of all its values, a transformation so

profound that in the end all that remained of the mystery was the tale."[24] But Wiesel's deployment of the story suggests something very different. The master remains central, indeed more central than ever before. A charismatic zaddik such as the Ruzhiner brings the story to life; his storytelling is an act of conjuration, a channeling of power, a translation of lost place to a new location, ultimately a revelation of the salvation embedded in the tale.

There are interesting variations between the story as presented in English versions and that of the earliest published Hebrew version, Reuven Zak's *Kneset Yisrael* of 1906. One line from Zak that is missing in Scholem but is implicit in *The Gates of the Forest* is this: "The Maggid said, 'The mystical intentions and prayers of the Baal Shem Tov I don't know, *but I will act by relying upon the Baal Shem Tov's intention;* and this too was accepted by Heaven" (Hebrew: *Ha-yihudim ve-hakavvanot she-kivven ha-Besht eini yode'a, rak e'eseh al semakh ha-kavvanah she-kivven ha-Besht, ve-nitkabel gam ken* [emphasis mine]).[25] It is clear that this reliance, this leaning, this placement into proximity, this concatenation from zaddik to zaddik going back to the Baal Shem Tov, is key to the efficacy of the rite and the story. It is not the story alone that has power, it is the latter-day saint grasping on to what is beyond his own reach: the contemplations of his uniquely illuminated predecessor, the Baal Shem Tov, known throughout Hasidism as "the Light of the Seven Days of Creation," that is effective.[26]

It is worth noting that when this story was told, the Ruzhiner dynasty was no longer in Ruzhin in Russia. It had long since relocated to Sadeger in the Austro-Hungarian empire; after the First World War it was to be found largely in Vienna, and after the Second World War in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem's Meah Shearim, and New York.[27] So Ruzhin is no longer in Ruzhin, just as Lubavitch is no longer in Russia. Lubavitch and Ruzhin reside with their respective rebbe—in some sense, they *are* the rebbe.

The introduction to *Legends of Our Time* (1968) describes Wiesel's visit to the Viznitzer rebbe in Bnei Brak. The meeting was uncomfortable and tense; the rebbe apparently disapproved of Wiesel's postwar life choices. In the eyes of the Viznitzer, the young writer compared unfavorably with his grandfather Dodye Feig, a fervent Hasid of the old school. Yet the rebbe remembered Wiesel and recognized him instantly. And the rebbe's presence in Bnei Brak, Israel, was not just ghostly nostalgia but living witness and promise. He had founded and led a community that rose from the ashes and flourished. The vignette of the meeting concludes by describing the Viznitzer's blessing (quite different from, yet still parallel to, that of the Lubavitcher rebbe): *"Dodye Feig's grandson should not go away empty-handed. Come and I shall give you my blessing."* Wiesel remarks: *"And I did not dare remind him that for so many years I have tried so hard to acquire for myself a name which needed to be blessed, too. Only after I had left him did I realize that perhaps the time has come for Dodye Feig's grandson to take my place at the typewriter."* This suggests that despite the gap that may have existed—at least in the pious zaddik's perception—between himself and the worldly writer, the blessing nevertheless took effect and did its work. Perhaps because of the

rebbe's challenge-cum-blessing, the writer is prodded to more clearly express his own voice. The blessing has found its mark even if its aged bestower seems to be laboring in opacity.

Homeward, Bound

We now come to the matter of lost childhood and the endless, futile quest for a destroyed home. In his most celebrated work, *Night,* Wiesel describes the deportation of the Jews of Sighet, an event that set into motion the murder of most of Sighet's Jews, and that ended forever the town's identity as a place of Jewish residence, as a shtetl. The memory of Wiesel's loved ones has been a constant theme in his writing, but so has the memory of his town. Indeed, he has returned, or attempted to return, to his birthplace time and again, but each attempt is painful, inconclusive, unfulfilled, because the Jewish town he seeks (as opposed to the geographical location) has been not just destroyed but erased.

In *Legends of Our Time,*[28] Wiesel collected a group of essays. One of the first essays in the book, titled "My Teachers," notes that "After the war I had several opportunities to return. . . . I did not return" (9). Yet a later chapter, "The Last Return," indeed describes a postwar visit to Sighet, in the mid-1960s. He dreaded the return because "that town they were talking about no longer existed. It had followed the Jews into deportation" (112). Their very memory had been erased: "The Jews have been driven not only out of the town but out of time as well" (127).

The visit is accompanied by pain, disappointment, even elements of farce. A dog barks, startles him, and chases him out of his own backyard. In *One Generation After,*[29] where he picks up this narrative, Wiesel describes going to the garden to dig up the gold watch he received as a bar mitzvah gift. He finds the watch and takes it, then feels compelled to go back and rebury it because taking it made him feel like a thief.[30]

The longing to return to the town of his youth motivates many passages in Wiesel's writing, and remains present in his life.[31] The very last page of the second volume of memoirs, *And the Sea Is Never Full,* published in 1999, contains the sentence, "And yet I want to go back to Sighet one last time."[32]

There is a deep connection between the futile search for a hometown erased from history, on the one hand, and the recognition of the role of zaddikim in Hasidism's postwar rebirth, on the other hand. Childhood memories are intimately intertwined with the sense of self, one's feeling of place in the world.[33] It is true that every return to a childhood home is fraught with disappointment brought about by the inevitability of change. But typically change is incremental, accretive, usually most visible at the margins. In Sighet and hundreds of other towns of Jewish Europe, however, the rupture was sudden, total, irreversible. Everything ended in the course of a day. Others inhabited the place where Jews had lived and worked for hundreds of years; traces of the earlier residents disappeared. There was almost no "back" to go to; the erasure was

nearly complete. If there was to be a future, it had to be constructed somewhere else, yet it could be done only by telling the tale of what had once been.

So it was that surviving hasidic masters in their way, and Wiesel in his way, were engaged in parallel projects during the postwar years. This connection is brought home in Wiesel's account of a return to Sighet in the early 1970s. The most intense moment was entering his childhood house. He recounts:

> What made me realize that I was not at home? A spot on the wall. When the Wizsnitzer Rebbe died in 1936, we received his photo. He was a beautiful man. I remember putting the nail in the wall and hanging the rebbe's picture on the wall. The nail was still in the same spot—with a crucifix on it. And when I saw it, I realized if there is no room for the Wizsnitzer Rebbe in my home, there is no room for me either. And I ran out of the room, out of my home, out of my childhood.[34]

The "Wizsnitzer Rebbe" of whom Wiesel speaks here (the town's spelling varies) was Rabbi Israel Hager, born in 1860; the Viznitzer of the Bnei Brak visit recounted in *Legends of Our Time* was Israel's son, Rabbi Hayyim Meir Hager (1888–1972). It was the latter Hager who survived the war, emigrated to the land of Israel, and founded *Kiryat Wizhnitz* in Bnei Brak, said to be the first hasidic neighborhood since the establishment of the State of Israel.[35] The dismay of Wiesel's aborted return to his home is capped by the realization that his beloved rebbe's picture has been replaced by a crucifix. And yet, the rebbe had a son who revived Viznitz as a thriving community, Viznitz-in-Israel. And the child who nailed the photo on his wall was now a celebrated writer and lecturer, teaching and engaging new communities of learners, translating and transporting Hasidism.

If the child of Sighet was able to find so clear and compelling a voice despite the erasure of Jewish Sighet, this was due in part to the ongoing relationship with rebbes—the rebbe of Lubavitch, elsewhere than in Lubavitch; and the rebbe of Viznitz, but not in geographic Viznitz. And Wiesel, by the power of his pen and voice, has been able, in some way, to bring Sighet and all of Jewish Europe back to life, but not in Sighet.

We thus return to the story with which we began, the story of Eizik son of Yekel told by Rabbi Simha-Bunam of Pshiskhe. Eizik's treasure was not to be found away from home, not even in Pshiskhe, but it was the zaddik of Pshiskhe who transmitted this wisdom and told the story to each new disciple. The school of Pshiskhe showed how the teacher-storyteller—that is, the zaddik—and the story itself dovetail; their mutual illumination absorbed and encapsulated the meaning of Pshiskhe as a hasidic destination. What started out as a geographic center became a climate of the spirit that could be transported and reconstructed anywhere. Perhaps that is why, as modernity encroached upon and challenged Hasidism ever more aggressively and violently, offshoots of the school of Pshiskhe—Kotsk, Ger, Izbica, Sochachov, Amshinov, and others—have proved resilient, vibrant, able to renew their voice and their vision in new circum-

stances and geographic locations, speaking powerfully in a fresh idiom. In truth, any hasidic dynasty that was able to rebuild after nearly complete destruction has absorbed and lived this lesson.

There is no comprehensive study, so far as I know, of the miraculous rebirth of hasidic dynasties and communities after the Holocaust.[36] But the writings and the life of Wiesel show the way such a study must be undertaken—by focusing on the personalities of the rebbes, who were able to sing the old-country songs in new lands, who not only told stories but became stories themselves.

Souls on Fire has a deeply moving chapter on Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin. One memorable story does not appear there but was told by Wiesel in a Boston University class; it might be called the Story of the Pipe. I present the story here, as closely as I can recall it, in tribute to Wiesel as a great teacher, uniquely gifted to bring Hasidism alive in the classroom:

> A hasid of the Ryzhiner, in order to expand what was already a moderately successful enterprise, needed to make a business trip to Paris. A hasid never leaves without first getting his Rebbe's blessing, but in this case the hasid was hesitant to go to the Ryzhiner, mindful of Paris's reputation as a center of impious behaviour. He did finally approach his master. To his surprise, the Ryzhiner blessed him enthusiastically, telling him that his trip would be crowned with success, and that in addition he would suffer no spiritual ill effects or adverse influences in Paris. As the audience was ending, the Rebbe grasped the hasid's hand warmly and said, "By the way, when in Paris would you mind picking up a nice pipe for me? I'll be happy to pay you." The hasid responded, "No, of course it will be my gift to the Rebbe!"
>
> Apparently the Rebbe's blessing was effective: the hasid was busy every minute in Paris, contacting suppliers and meeting customers. He even found a synagogue that conducted services according to his custom. He returned to Ryzhin laden with merchandise and new business ideas. Just outside the town, tired but happy, he remembered the Rebbe's request—the pipe! He insisted that the carriage turn back and go to the nearest large town with a smoke shop, where he purchased the best pipe in the store. Entering Ryzhin once again, he went to greet the Rebbe even before going to his own home. He reported to the Rebbe on the success of his visit and that thank God he did not succumb to any of the temptations of the big city. And then, without making any claims about its origin, he presented the Rebbe with the pipe. The Rebbe smiled and said, "Yankel, please be seated. I have two questions to ask you. Number one, don't you think I know where you got the pipe? And number two, do you think I really wanted a new pipe? *What I wanted was that when you would be in Paris that you would remember that you have a Rebbe in Ryzhin.*"

This Ruzhin story highlights the centrality of *hiskashrus,* of bonding with one's master over space and time. The story is self-referential, suggesting that the story itself can foster and maintain *hiskashrus.* One can be in Paris but can live in Ruzhin. One can live in Boston or New York and live in Lubavitch and Viznitz.

The world has shifted violently and irrevocably. But in the face of disruption, displacement, and erasure, Hasidism has survived and even flourished by reconstituting itself around the triad of zaddik–story–place. Wiesel has described this process in a compelling, persuasive manner; he has lived it. His sensitivity to the power of person, place, and narrative may be behind his unforgettable prophetic assertion, the moment of speaking of truth to power, when he said to a U.S. president, "That place is not your place."[37]

In contrast, the place of learning and teaching of human dignity, of quest and sharing: this place is Wiesel's place.

Notes

1. Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters,* trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

2. Ibid., 203–206.

3. Ibid., 205.

4. An excellent introduction to this topic is Arthur Green, "Typologies of Leadership and the Hasidic Zaddiq," in *Jewish Spirituality,* vol. 2, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 127–56.

5. See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 349–50, and 424n35; Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), xvii–xxiv. For Rabbi Nachman's tales, see Arthur Green, *Tormented Master* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 1992), "Excursus II. The Tales," 337–71. For an example of introspective reflection on hasidic tales in a hasidic homily, see R. Kalonymos Kalman Epstein of Cracow, *Maʾor va-Shemesh* (Jerusalem: Even Yisrael, 1992), 2:520–21, s.v. *Eleh Ha-devarim.*

6. For a fuller account, see Nehemia Polen, "Rebbetzins, Wonder-Children and the Emergence of the Dynastic Principle in Hasidism," in *Shtetl: New Evaluations,* ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: New York University Press, 2006). See also Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Hasidism after 1772: Structural Continuity and Change," in Ada Rapoport-Albert, ed., *Hasidism Reappraised* (London: Littman Library, 1996), 76–140.

7. Jeremy Dauber has shown convincingly that early hasidic stories generally avoid realistic representation of spatial location. He argues that the reason for eschewing mimetic representation is ideological: "representation, description at a distance, mediated texts, is no substitute for direct contact with the Zaddik . . . , who is able to perceive 'the real truth' and to articulate it." Jeremy Dauber, "Looking at the Yiddish Landscape: Representation in Nineteenth-Century Hasidic and Maskilic Literature," in *Shtetl: New Evaluations,* ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 140–78; the quote is on 147. But Dauber focuses on *Shivhei HaBesht* and Rabbi Nachman's *Tales,* both published around 1815; it is the change that takes place as the nineteenth century unfolds that we are tracing here. The process whereby hasidic zaddikim became increasingly identified with Polish towns and cities and often came to control them is vividly described by Glenn Dynner in *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

8. One such town, Kozienice, is depicted in a memoir of a descendant of the founder, Rabbi Israel Hapstein. See Malkah Shapiro, *Mi-Din le-Rahamim: Sippurim me-Hatzerot ha-Admorim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1969); English translation: Nehemia Polen, ed. and trans., *The Rebbe's Daughter: Memoir of a Hasidic Childhood* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002) Cf. also Nehemia

Polen, "Coming of Age in Kozienice: Malkah Shapiro's Memoir of Youth in the Sacred Space of a Hasidic Zaddik," in *Celebrating Wiesel: Stories, Essays, Reflections,* ed. Alan Rosen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 123–40.

9. See the description in *Rebbe's Daughter,* 139–41.

10. The economic aspects of Hasidic Royal Courts are vividly described by David Assaf in *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin,* trans. David Louvish (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002); see esp. 267–324.

11. Steven Katz has written of the need for attending to the *role* (that is, the social function) of retelling tales in hasidic life, as well as considering the differences between the various hasidic lineages. See Steven T. Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 77. Joseph Dan, in *The Hasidic Story—Its History and Development* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), 235–38, distinguishes between collections of hasidic tales published by maskilim and other "outsiders," in contrast to tales collected and published by "insiders." These latter tend to focus on one lineage—the one of which the editor is an adherent. These efforts, Dan observes, are in effect monographs on the lineage and its masters, tend to downplay the miraculous and fabulous, and contain much of solid historical value. It may be added that these collections tend to highlight the wisdom of the particular lineage's masters as captured in their aphorisms and parables, and the vignettes told about them.

12. Wiesel, *Somewhere a Master: Further Hasidic Portraits and Legends* (New York: Summit Books, 1982), 175; emphasis and formatting mine. I have attempted to hear these words as they likely were spoken by their author; it should be recalled that most of the published essays were delivered orally, and that the poetic cadences—and silences—are an important aspect of Wiesel's powerful eloquence.

13. There is a similar pattern in *Souls on Fire* where the chapter called "The School of Pshyshke" comes after ten chapters whose headings name an early master or his disciples.

14. On this see A. Wertheim, *Law and Custom in Chassidism* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1960).

15. The role of hasidic masters in orchestrating melody during prayer services was noted by the early anti-hasidic polemicist David of Makov. Writing about Rabbi Hayyim-Heikel and his court in Amdur during the years 1773–87, he quotes an enthusiast as follows: "Our Rebbe has a very sweet voice and knows how to sing songs as do all those who pray with him. . . . Our master Heike's honey-toned melodies are surpassingly pleasing. He beats time with both his hands, clapping them together, as [the hasidim] respond in harmonious chorus." See Mordecai Wilensky, *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim,* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1990), 173; Wolf Zeev Rabinowitsch, *Lithuanian Hasidism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 128. A recent article that explores linkages between musical conducting and charismatic spiritual leadership is Stephen Cottrell, "Music, Time, and Dance in Orchestral Performance: The Conductor as Shaman," *Twentieth-Century Music* 3, no. 1 (2007): 73–96.

16. The displacement of Abraham Joshua Heschel's aristocratic hasidic family from the countryside to major cities such as Vienna and Warsaw during the Great War is described by Edward Kaplan and Samuel Dresner in *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998). See esp. 34 on the relocation of Heschel's uncle, Rabbi Alter Israel Shimon Perlow, to Warsaw. Throughout his Warsaw years until his death in 1933, this saintly figure was known as the "Novominsker Rebbe."

17. Joseph Dan has noted that the main factor securing the miraculous contemporary rebirth of hasidic communities in the aftermath of the Holocaust was "adherence to their hereditary *tzaddikim*." See Joseph Dan, "Hasidism: The Third Century," in *Jewish Mysticism,* vol. 4: *General Characteristics and Comparative Studies* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1999), 67–85; "The Contemporary Hasidic *Tzaddik:* Charisma, Heredity, Magic, and Miracle," ibid., 111–30.

18. The fate of Alexander (Alexandrov, near Lodz) Hasidism is instructive as a counterexample. Before the Second World War, it was one of the largest hasidic groups in Poland, rivaling Ger in num-

bers and influence. But while the Gerer rebbe escaped to Eretz Israel and began the rebuilding of his community, almost all the Danziger heirs were killed, and Alexander has to this day not recovered its former prominence. See Tzvi M. Rabinowicz, *The Encyclopedia of Hasidism* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), 84, s.v. "Danziger, Yitzhak Menahem Mendel, of Alexander (1880–1943)."

19. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1963), 21.

20. Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest* (New York: Avon, 1966); trans. Frances Frenaye, from the French edition (1964).

21. Ibid., 187–89.

22. Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 402. See also the statement in *Against Silence:*

> The fourth chapter of *Gates of the Forest* is about Brooklyn, the *Farbrengen,* and my idealized image of a Hasidic rebbe, the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I describe how we met, how I came to the first *Farbrengen.* I describe our first conversation, which lasted hours. At one point I asked him point blank, "Rebbe, how can you believe in *Hashem* after the *Khourban*? He looked at me and said, "And how can you not believe after the *Khourban*?" Well, that was a turning point in my writing, that simple dialogue.

Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Wiesel, selected and ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 3:63.

23. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* [1941] (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

24. *Major Trends,* 349–50.

25. Reuven Zak, *Kneset Yisrael* (Warsaw, 1906; repr. Bnei Brak: Kneset Mordecai, 1983), 23.

26. A similar point is made by the lead story in Yaffa Eliach's *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). The story, told by the rabbi of Bluzhov, Rabbi Israel Spira, is one of survival by means of a seemingly impossible feat, jumping over a large, yawning pit. The frail rabbi and a friend close their eyes, jump, and make it to the other side alive. As Eliach tells the story, the rabbi's young friend asks him:

> "Tell me, Rebbe, how did you do it?"
>
> "I was holding on to my ancestral merit. I was holding on to the coattails of my father, and my grandfather and my great-grandfather, of blessed memory," said the rabbi and his eyes searched the black skies above. "Tell me, my friend, how did *you* reach the other side of the pit?"
>
> "I was holding on to you," replied the rabbi's friend. (3–4)

27. There are several books tracing the twentieth-century history of the multibranched Ruzhin dynasty as it moved into the modern world. These works, written by dynastic insiders, are entirely appreciative and noncritical, but contain much valuable information. See, for example, Menachem Brayer, *The House of Rizhin* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2003); Yisroel Friedman, *The Rebbes of Chortkov* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2003).

28. Elie Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

29. Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After* (New York: Bard/Avon, 1972).

30. Ibid., "The Watch," 80–86.

31. The number of index entries in the memoirs under "Sighet, EW's return visits" as well as those in *Against Silence* suggest the prominence of this yearning.

32. Elie Wiesel, *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs 1969–,* trans. Marion Wiesel from the French (New York: Knopf, 1999), 410.

33. Cf. Louise Chawla, *In the First Country of Places: Nature, Poetry and Childhood Memory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

34. *Against Silence,* 3:41; compare *All Rivers Run to the Sea,* 72. Notable in this connection is the account in *All Rivers,* 12–13, on the elder Rabbi Israel of Viznitz's last visit to Sighet, where he is said

to have told Wiesel's mother: "Sarah, know that your son will become a *gadol b'Israel,* a great man in Israel, but neither you nor I will live to see the day." This would have taken place sometime in the mid-1930s.

35. According to Tzvi M. Rabinowicz, *The Encyclopedia of Hasidism* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1996), 165.

36. For now, see Janet S. Belcove-Shalin, ed., *New World Hasidism: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). Belcove-Shalin's chapter "Home in Exile: Hasidism in the New World," 205–36, has a fine sketch of the Bobover rebbe and his achievement in reestablishing a flourishing Bobover community in Boro Park, Brooklyn; also noteworthy is the chapter by Solomon Poll, "The Charismatic Leader of the Hasidic Community: The Zaddiq, the Rebbe," 257–75. See also Jerome R. Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim: An Introduction to Hasidic Culture and Oral Tradition in the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); idem, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). There are many popular works on postwar Lubavitch in Brooklyn and warmly appreciative sketches of the rebbe, but the topic awaits a full scholarly treatment that would place due weight on Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson's thought and voluminous teachings as well as on his extraordinarily charismatic personality and communal achievements. Shaul Shimon Deutsch, *Larger Than Life: The Life and Times of the Lubavitcher Rebbe Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson,* 2 vols. (New York: Chasidic Historical Productions, 1995–97), reproduces many rare primary documents and is a treasure trove of information, but this multivolume biography has thus far covered only Rabbi Schneerson's early years. Elliot R. Wolfson has made an important contribution to our appreciation of the depth, subtlety, and power of Rabbi Schneerson's thought with his *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Also worthy of note is Maya Balakirsky Katz, "On the Master-Disciple Relationship in Hasidic Visual Culture: The Life and Afterlife of Rebbe Portraits in Habad, 1798–2006," *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture* 1 (2007): 55–79. Katz insightfully remarks that Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson forged "a post-Shoah group identity around a distinctly American leader who was also the spiritual repository of the six preceding Russian leaders" (55, abstract)

37. On the Bitburg affair, see *And the Sea Is Never Full,* 225–50, esp. 238.

ELIE WIESEL

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