

Imagining Holiness



MCGILL-QUEEN'S STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGION

Volumes in this series have been supported by the Jackman Foundation of Toronto.

SERIES TWO In memory of George Rawlyk
Donald Harman Akenson, Editor

- 1 Marguerite Bourgeoys and Montreal, 1640–1665
Patricia Simpson
- 2 Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience
Edited by G.A. Rawlyk
- 3 Infinity, Faith, and Time
Christian Humanism and Renaissance Literature
John Spencer Hill
- 4 The Contribution of Presbyterianism to the Maritime Provinces of Canada
Edited by Charles H.H. Scobie and G.A. Rawlyk
- 5 Labour, Love, and Prayer
Female Piety in Ulster Religious Literature, 1850–1914
Andrea Ebel Brozyna
- 6 The Waning of the Green
Catholics, the Irish, and Identity in Toronto, 1887–1922
Mark G. McGowan
- 7 Religion and Nationality in Western Ukraine
The Greek Catholic Church and the Ruthenian National Movement in Galicia, 1867–1900
John-Paul Himka
- 8 Good Citizens
British Missionaries and Imperial States, 1870–1918
James G. Greenlee and Charles M. Johnston
- 9 The Theology of the Oral Torah
Revealing the Justice of God
Jacob Neusner
- 10 Gentle Eminence
A Life of Cardinal Flahiff
P. Wallace Platt
- 11 Culture, Religion, and Demographic Behaviour
Catholics and Lutherans in Alsace, 1750–1870
Kevin McQuillan
- 12 Between Damnation and Starvation
Priests and Merchants in Newfoundland Politics, 1745–1855
John P. Greene
- 13 Martin Luther, German Saviour
German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917–1933
James M. Stayer
- 14 Modernity and the Dilemma of North American Anglican Identities, 1880–1950
William H. Katerberg
- 15 The Methodist Church on the Prairies, 1896–1914
George Emery
- 16 Christian Attitudes towards the State of Israel
Paul Charles Merkley
- 17 A Social History of the Cloister
Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime
Elizabeth Rapley
- 18 Households of Faith
Family, Gender, and Community in Canada, 1760–1969
Edited by Nancy Christie
- 19 Blood Ground
Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853
Elizabeth Elbourne
- 20 A History of Canadian Catholics
Gallicanism, Romanism, and Canadianism
Terence J. Fay
- 21 The View from Rome
Archbishop Stagni's 1915 Reports on the Ontario Bilingual Schools Question
Edited and translated by John Zucchi
- 22 The Founding Moment
Church, Society, and the Construction of Trinity College
William Westfall
- 23 The Holocaust, Israel, and Canadian Protestant Churches
Haim Genizi
- 24 Governing Charities
Church and State in Toronto's Catholic Archdiocese, 1850–1950
Paula Maurutto
- 25 Anglicans and the Atlantic World
High Churchmen, Evangelicals, and the Quebec Connection
Richard W. Vaudry

Imagining Holiness

*Classic Hasidic Tales
in Modern Times*



Justin Jaron Lewis

McGill-Queen's University Press
MONTREAL & KINGSTON • LONDON • ITHACA

< NOTE:

This page will be updated

© McGill-Queen's University Press 2009

ISBN 978-0-7735-3519-0

Legal deposit second quarter 2009

Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

Printed in Canada on acid-free paper that is 100% ancient forest free (100% post-consumer recycled), processed chlorine free

This book has been published with the help of a grant from McGill-Queen's University Press acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program. We also acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities.

Cip to come



In loving memory
of my father,
JACK LEWIS,
1929–1993

CONTENTS



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS / o



PART ONE

A Taste of Hasidic Tales

Blessing the Moon / o

The Candle / o

Protection from Fire;
Husband and Wife Reunited / o

The Ecstasies of Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev / o

A Journey with Rebbe Moses Leyb of Sasov / o

The Spot of Sugar / o

Forgetting the Mishnah / o

The Butcher's Blessing / o

The Reluctant Rabbi / o

To Be a Leader / o

Wedding Presents / o



PART TWO

In the Marketplace: The Stories in Context

1 Preliminary Questions / o

2 Authors and Books / o

3 Historical Context / o

4 Literary Context / o

5 Issues of Authenticity / o

6 The Status of the Stories / o



PART THREE

*Holy Men and Holy Books:
The Tales, the Talmud, and Jewish Law*

- 7 Study and Storytelling / o
8 R' Hayim's Strange Blessings / o



PART FOUR

*"The World as It Is":
Materiality and the Body*

- 9 "Taste the Food on My Plate" / o
10 The Changeling / o
11 Eydl of Brody: Stories against Stories / o
12 The Naked Rebbe / o



PART FIVE

The Wounded Body

- 13 Scorched by His Glowing Coal / o
14 A Paradox that No One Can Solve / o



AFTERWORD / o

APPENDIX:

Names and Dates / o

GLOSSARY / o

NOTES / o

BIBLIOGRAPHY / o

INDEX / o

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Whatever is worthwhile in this book could not have come to be without everyone who has contributed to my thinking and helped me with my writing since I began my academic work on hasidic stories some ten years ago. These include Harry Fox and Tirzah Meacham, Ananda Abeysekara, Glenda Abramson, Talia Acker, Donald Akenson, David Assaf, Alan Brill, Brian Britt, Hunter Brown, Yitzhak Buxbaum, Yitzchak D., Jackie Davies, Nathaniel Deutsch, Murray Enkin, an anonymous descendant of Eydl of Brody, Rachel Elijor, Morris Faienstein, Eva Frojmovic, Ilan Ganot, Maureen Garvie, Laurie Gashinski, Jonathan Geen, Phil Goldman, Meir Uri Gottesman, Dovid H., Andrew Halama, Jill Hammer, Chantelle Jackson, Kasia Kmiec, Diane Kriger, Eli Rose Kukla, Arthur Kurzweil, Allyson Lee, Moshe Yida Leibowitz of blessed memory, Gertrud Jaron Lewis, Anna Lilliman, Denise Lilliman, Steve Lofts, Kenneth MacKendrick, Kyla Madden, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, Shannon Mezzetta, Joan McGilvray, Miki Makihara, Léah Novick, Dov Noy, Nehemiah Polen, Rachel Rastin, Adele Reinhartz, Ira Robinson, Karen Roekard, Moshe Yosef Rubin, Yaakov S., Marianne Schleicher, Billy Shaffir, Anna Shternshis, the Skolier Rebbe of Borough Park, j wallace, Tobaron Waxman, Seth L. Wolitz, all my friends and mishpokhe, and Jane Enkin: “What is mine and what is yours is hers.”

Imagining Holiness



PART ONE



A Taste of Hasidic Tales

The story maker is always with us for it is our imaginations
which shape us, keep us, create us – for good and for ill.

– Doris Lessing, “On Not Winning the Nobel Prize,”
Nobel lecture, 7 December 2007



A Taste of Hasidic Tales

This book is a study of the collections of hasidic tales published by two prolific authors, Israel Berger and Abraham Hayim Michelson, in the decade before the First World War. I locate these works in their historical context and explore them as literature from a variety of perspectives. Before that, however, I begin with one of my favourite stories from these collections.

Blessing the Moon

☪ It was Saturday night, the night after the holy Sabbath, at the synagogue of the rebbe – the holy teacher – called the Seer of Lublin.

The hasidim – the rebbe’s disciples and followers – had already prayed the evening prayers and ended the Day of Rest with blessings over fragrance and fire. Now they were leaving the synagogue, gathered around their rebbe.

The Seer of Lublin was old, and he could walk only slowly and painfully, leaning on someone else. One of his disciples, Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv, was walking along beside the Seer, supporting him. Tzvi Hersh was a rebbe in his own right. The Seer would always call him “Rabbi Hershele,” with a mix of respect and affection.

It was a rainy night in late fall, with thick clouds covering the sky. As he walked along slowly, leaning on Reb Tzvi Hersh, the Seer of Lublin was looking at the sky sadly. It was the right night of the month to bless the moon in her growing from new to full, blessing her with singing and dancing. All the hasidim knew how important this monthly ritual

was to their rebbe, how it enlivened him in his old age. But through the clouds and rain, the moon was not to be seen.

The rebbe, the Seer of Lublin, stopped walking and sighed. He said, “Rabbi Hershele is being very kind to us, helping us to walk. But if he really wanted to be kind, Rabbi Hershele would give us a moon.”

Reb Tzvi Hersh answered, “Rebbe, from out here I don’t think we’ll see the moon. But if we go back into the holy place, inside the shul [the synagogue], maybe we will.”

There was some muffled giggling among the Hasidim, but everyone turned and walked slowly, with their rebbe, back into the synagogue. There, Reb Tzvi Hersh stopped with the rebbe just inside the door, at the nearest window.

Now some of the giggling was not so muffled, because everyone knew that window faced in the wrong direction; the waxing moon never shone in there. You would have to cross to the far side of the building to have any chance of seeing the moon at all.

But the Seer of Lublin was looking out through the near window, smiling. He pointed, and everyone looked; and through the window they saw a clear sky, and a beautiful moon shining through.

From inside the shul, they blessed the moon. They blessed her to grow and be bright as the sun. They danced in a circle, singing “*Siman tov umazal tov!*” – “Good luck, good fortune to all!” They leapt up toward the moon with outstretched fingers, chanting, “I dance toward you though I cannot touch you!” They blessed each other with peace: “*Sholem aleykhem! Aleykhem sholem!*”

When the blessing was over, the Seer of Lublin said to all his hasidim: “I want you to understand how much of a miracle this was.

“I know you think that Rabbi Hershele only cleared the clouds away and turned the shul around, so that this window would be facing toward the moon.

“But it was more than that.

“When Rabbi Hershele brought me back to the shul, he did not make me walk across to the far window. Out of kindness to me, he stopped my painful walking at this nearest window. When he did me that kindness, the universe turned around, and the moon shone in through this window.

“Because one act of kindness can turn around the whole world.”

That is the story as I tell it myself; a translation of the original text appears below. This book grew out of my enchantment with stories like this one –

though it also engages with stories I find much less palatable. It is part of an ongoing conversation about Hasidism and its tales, carried on among scholars, storytellers, and hasidim themselves. Each new study of the topic takes a different approach, deepening our understanding, yet there is always more to be said.

Hasidic teachings emphasize spiritual work with the material world; hasidic Jews tell a lot of stories. These aspects of Hasidism are related. Storytelling itself is seen in hasidic teachings as an example of spiritual work with the “material.” This book argues that hasidic approaches to the material world set up tensions that are reflected in hasidic tales and the sayings transmitted along with them. The tales also reflect the tensions of Hasidism’s relationships with traditional Judaism and with modernity.¹

I begin with a selection of some of the hasidic tales, from Berger’s and Michelson’s compilations, which are mentioned later. Many more of their stories are cited in full or in part later in this book. Hasidic tales from other collections will be introduced when they illuminate themes under discussion. Here and throughout, unless otherwise noted, translations are my own, and the source texts are in hasidic literary Hebrew, mingled with Yiddish, the spoken language of the compilers. My approaches to rendering this distinctive literary language into English vary from one text to another; no conclusions about the precise wording of stories should be drawn without consulting the originals.

To my knowledge, none of Berger’s or Michelson’s books has appeared in translation, except for some abridged Yiddish versions discussed below. This book is thus the fullest available compilation of translations specifically from their work, although many of their stories do appear, often freely adapted, in compilations such as Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim*.

Most of these stories are about hasidic rebbes; some are about rabbis. The rebbe of a hasidic group is its spiritual and organizational leader, a holy man, father figure, and intermediary with God. A rabbi is a scholar and authority on Jewish law. Typically a rebbe is also a rabbi, but there are many more rabbis than rebbes.² The abbreviation R’ stands for the title Rebbe, Rabbi, or Reb, which is a general title of respect for any Jewish man; it can be pronounced “Reb” in any case.

Hasidic rebbes are also called *tzaddikim*, literally “the righteous”; depending on context I have often translated this as “holy men.”³

Characters’ names appear in common English spellings.⁴ Spellings of Eastern European place names are notoriously variable for historical reasons; I have usually transliterated the Yiddish names found in the texts, but when the current name of a locale (in English spelling, as of 2008) is known and

similar to the Yiddish, I have used that form. Most characters are listed with their dates and places in the appendix, which is followed by a glossary of Jewish and scholarly terms.

Some of the stories in this selection are ones that I particularly like. Others I find intriguing or disturbing, or they illustrate important points to be discussed later. For non-hasidic readers, the overall experience of reading these stories may be strange.⁵ That is one reason for including them here. Hasidic tales in hasidic sources do not follow Western literary conventions, and their underlying assumptions are specific to their culture. I have added titles and interspersed brief remarks about aspects of the stories highlighted in later chapters.

Blessing the Moon

(original) *Source*: Israel Berger, *Eser Qedushot* (1906) 2:326

I opened with my own adaptation of this tale for oral storytelling, which expanded on elements taken for granted or implied in the laconic original version. Every hasidic tale in written form can be re-imagined in this way.⁷

The protagonists of this story are the Seer of Lublin, Jacob Isaac Horowitz (d. 1815), one of the giants of Polish Hasidism, and Rebbe Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv (d. 1831). In its original context, the story glorifies R' Tzvi Hersh as a leading disciple of the great Seer and as a miracle-worker. The ethical element that my ending highlights is present, but more subtly.

The miracles in hasidic stories are one reason for controversy, even within hasidic circles, about their historicity. Though most hasidic tales are about real people, my concern in this book is not primarily with their factual reliability. As suggested by my title, *Imagining Holiness*, my core interest is in the stories as expressions of hasidic imagination.

☪ It is well known concerning our holy master of Lublin, the memory of a righteous and holy man for a blessing, that in the last year of his life, in the month of Marheshvan [October/November], at the end of the holy Sabbath, at the time of the blessing of the moon, the heavens were bound up in clouds, and it was pouring rain, and there was no moon. Our master Tzvi was guiding his rebbe, of Lublin, by the hand, after havdalah [the ritual ending the Sabbath], from the house of study to his house, since his rebbe was not in good health. As they were walking, our master of Lublin said [in Yiddish], “Now Rabbi Hershele ought to give us a moon!” Immediately our rebbe Tzvi took his rebbe and guided him back into the house of study, and stood him by the first window, and said to him: “Here, a beautiful moon for you!” So he

blessed the moon from inside the window. It was especially wondrous because that window was on the side from which the moon had never been seen. Our holy master of Lublin said after the blessing of the moon: “Do you imagine that R’ Hershele turned around the walls of the house of study? Not so. Rather, R’ Hershele turned around the structure of the heavens, until the moon was shining by this window, so that we would not have to go to more trouble, with our weakened strength, by going to the far window.”

The Candle

Source: Abraham Michelson, *Shemen HaTov* (1905) 2:11

The rest of the stories in this section appear in order of their publication in Berger’s and Michelson’s collections. This story is primarily about Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg (d. 1778) and Rebbe Joshua Heschel of Apt (d. 1825). The narrator emphasizes his own descent from R’ Shmelke; this emphasis on the rebbe as an ancestor or relative is an important aspect of Berger’s and Michelson’s works.

Traditional Eastern European Jewish culture valued “Torah study” – primarily study of the Talmud and other rabbinic works – as among the highest religious values. While Hasidism is often said to have changed this emphasis, such stories show that study did not disappear as a core value within Hasidism.

This tale is a rarity in that it prominently features a woman storyteller, Miriam, R’ Shmelke’s sister, and even notes that her audience included women.

The story refers to the rebbe’s “holy forehead.” Rebbes’ hands and other parts of their bodies are formulaically called “holy” in these tales.

☞ It is written in the introduction to the book *Semikhat Moshe*: 8

I heard this and it was told to me by the scholar and elder Rabbi Ephraim Yehiel Mikhl from Nomsk, who heard it himself from the famous holy woman Madam Miriam (of blessed memory) of Mahluv in Russia. She was the sister of the holy brothers, our teacher my ancestor Rebbe Reb Shmelke and our teacher my ancestor the author of Haflaah [an important work on Jewish law]. What happened was as follows:

The holy rebbe Joshua Heschel [of Apt] was near the town of Mahluv, and he said to his people, “Let us travel to the town of Mahluv to greet the holy woman Madam Miriam.” When they heard this, they all ran ahead of him to the town, to the holy woman’s house.

Their arrival caused a great tumult in her house. She asked them, “What is this uproar?” and they answered, “The holy man from Apt is coming here.” (R’ Ephraim Yehiel [the narrator’s source for this story] was there at that time, among the others who had come to the holy woman’s house.)

When the holy man [of Apt] came to her house, he was served food and given the seat of honour, as is appropriate. Then that holy man asked Madam Miriam to tell something about her holy brothers, and she told an awe-inspiring story. The story began:

It is known to everyone that my brother, Rebbe R’ Shmelke, never slept at all; he occupied himself with Torah and worship day and night. Only, if weeks upon weeks had gone by that he had not slept, and sleep overcame him, he was afraid to lie down on a bed because he might sleep for a long time. But on his table he had a jar of water for washing, and he would rest his holy forehead on the jar, so that he could not sleep much.

Once, in Nikolsburg, he was sitting up at night in Torah study and worship, and a very great, deep slumber fell upon him, so that he had no strength at all to study any more. So he rested his forehead on the jar as usual, but as he was doing so he put out his candle. And he immediately woke up from his sleep and saw that the candle was out, and he suffered greatly from this.

In that house where he was studying, there was a high upper story and a balcony, and in his anguish about being unable to study Torah at that moment, he didn’t know what to do. He took the candle and ran out onto the balcony on his way down to ground level to relight the candle. But when he stepped onto the balcony a man standing on the ground reached up to him, on the balcony, with a burning candle, and told him that he could light his candle, and so it was; the rebbe lit his candle, and sat down at the table to study as before.

After that, when he had calmed down, he remembered and said, “The balcony is several times higher than the height of a man! How could that man’s hand have been long enough to reach up to the balcony?” The rebbe was astonished by this – surely that was no ordinary man. So the rebbe R’ Shmelke performed a *yihud* [“unification,” kabbalistic meditation]⁹ so that it would be made known to him who it was.

So it was made known to him from heaven that there had been a great uproar in heaven – because, when the rebbe R’ Shmelke’s candle went out, true Torah was lacking, and also because of his anguish. Then Elijah was sent immediately to light his candle.

When the holy man [R' Shmelke] heard this, he began to cry, and he mortified himself for several months because of this – that Elijah had been imposed upon because of him.

Thus the holy woman narrated.

Now, the house was full of men, women, and children, and R' Ephraim Yehiel was among them. When the story was finished, the holy man [R' Joshua Heschel] got up on his feet with a loud outcry and great weeping, and said: “Did you hear the great sin of our rebbe R' Shmelke? Elijah was imposed upon for the sake of true Torah! Our rebbe mortified himself because of this great transgression!”

[R' Joshua Heschel] fell prostrate on the ground weeping greatly and crying out bitterly, saying: “If our rebbe mortified himself over a sin like that, how can we ever do penance?”

R' Ephraim Yehiel said to me that all the people there began to weep along with him; it was as if anyone who had a heart of flesh felt it being torn into twelve pieces, and a heart of stone would have melted. That is what he told me.

Protection from Fire; Husband and Wife Reunited

Source: Michelson, *Shemen HaTov* 2:168

(same as Michelson, *Ohel Naftali* no. 225)

The ostensible protagonist of the following two stories, which Michelson's text combines as one section, is Isaac HaLevi Horowitz of Altona (Germany), a non-hasidic rabbi of the mid-eighteenth century. There are stories about Rabbi Horowitz in Michelson's books primarily because he was the maternal grandfather of the hasidic rebbes Shmelke of Nikolsburg and Naphtali of Ropczyce.

The first paragraph of this section, called here “Protection from Fire,” is a fairly typical story of a holy man's power to guard his community from harm. I am including it in part to illustrate that “hasidic tales” are not only told about hasidic rebbes. The long story that follows, “Husband and Wife Reunited,” has practically nothing to do with the rabbi himself. It is a sensationalistic romance full of dramatic though somewhat illogical plot turns, included here as an example of how hasidic tales overlap with other genres of popular literature.

☞ In the book *MiTaame Yitzhak* [the source of a previous story] it is also written that the author had a tradition from the leaders of the city of Altona: when Rabbi Isaac HaLevi was near his death, there was a great fire there, and the fire subsided when he prayed. Then he blessed

the city that it would never again be consumed by fire, and said that if a fire did break out there, they should recall his words. Years later, flames were kindled and half the city was consumed, and they recalled his words and the fire went out immediately.

☪ *Another awe-inspiring story:* A merchant from Hamburg set out on a ship accompanied by a friend, and they were captured by pirates from Algeria, who took them to the slave market to sell them. The lord who bought them gave each of his slaves a plot of land to plough and sow, and assigned them a fixed period to complete their work by the appointed time; but if they deviated from their task and did not complete their work, there would be one law for them: to die, with their throats cut. Such was the authority of the rulers then.

This merchant, being a tender and sensitive man, could not do the work of his slavery, for he had no experience with it. So his lord took him out to spill his blood upon a stone; but he had forgotten to take with him his slaughtering knife. So he tied him to a tree and went home to get the knife.

Meanwhile his friend came to speak with him before his death, and the merchant begged him to attend to his burial. [The friend] promised to do so and parted with him in tears.

Then another lord passed by with an Ethiopian slave whom he had bought in the marketplace, and asked the merchant to tell him who had tied him there. He answered that he had not succeeded in his work, because he was a tender man and had been a great merchant. This lord took a liking to him. He untied his bonds and tied up in his place his Ethiopian slave; then he took the merchant with him and left.

After that the first lord came back with the knife, and, as soon as he arrived, he fell upon the man with terrible cruelty, without looking to see if it was his slave or not, and slaughtered him according to his sentence. Afterwards, the friend kept his promise and buried the man, without knowing who it was.¹⁰

In the course of time, the wheels of fortune turned and the friend was freed and returned to his city, Hamburg, and told R' Isaac HaLevi about these events; and R' Isaac [believing that the merchant was dead] permitted the merchant's wife to remarry, after he had discussed the matter with the great rabbis of the land.

So the wife became engaged to one of the rich men of the city, for she herself was very wealthy, and the match was written up in the newspapers, and they announced their nuptials in the manner of the aristocracy.

At that time the merchant was in America and had become very rich indeed. When he saw in the newspapers that his wife had been permitted to remarry, he was greatly troubled, and he left behind all his riches and travelled to Hamburg, where he arrived on the night of his wife's wedding. He came to Rabbi Isaac, crying out bitterly, and told him everything that had happened to him.

When he heard this, Rabbi Isaac threw himself on the ground, tearing his hair, for he thought that transgression had already come about because of this. He lay on the ground in a faint until midnight, and then he woke up and arose and said that he had been told from heaven that no transgression, heaven forbid, had taken place yet [the new marriage had not been consummated]. And so it was; and the next day the merchant came home to his wife and all was well.

The Ecstasies of Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev

Source: Berger, Eser Orot (1907) 3:3–9

This sequence of stories comes at the beginning of Berger's chapter on one of the most famous and beloved hasidic rebbes.¹¹ Rebbe Levi Isaac's demonstrative ecstasies of communion with God, extreme even in the hasidic context, are presented in these stories both as frightening and as funny. They are linked to earlier Jewish texts by the identification of R' Levi Isaac with the great sage and martyr of the second century CE, Rabbi Aqiva.

Tefillin, small leather boxes containing texts from the Torah, worn on the head and left arm for morning prayers, are not worn on the Sabbath or holidays and are taken off before the festive portion of the service on Rosh Hodesh (New Moon).

A traditional Passover seder (ritual dinner) includes two substantial portions of liturgical text – readings, songs, and prayers – with the actual meal between them. “This matzah” (matzah zu) is a reading recited shortly before the meal.

When one rebbe visits another, they would ordinarily sit at table side by side, honouring the visitor.

I have left out one pivotal story from this sequence; it is presented later in this book as the focus of part 5, chapter 13.

Eser Orot 3:3

☞ The great scholar, the holy rabbi of Berdichev! Kabbalists said that the soul of Rabbi Aqiva was in him. The greatness of his holiness and his cleaving to his God, his ecstasy in prayer, and his love for the Jewish

people are beyond telling. Our fathers have told us that when he stood to pour out his words before his creator, he shook and shuddered greatly, his heart melting within him with fear of God and his radiant splendour. And when a person left him in one corner they would find him in another corner, because of his powerful and awe-inspiring bowing and prostration. All those who were standing there when he was praying – the hair on their flesh would bristle, quaking would seize them, “and the people saw, and trembled,” terror of him and the fear of death falling upon them, “and they stood far off.”¹²

Eser Orot 3:4

☞ Once his hasidim were saying that when he recited the prayer “holy crown,”¹³ the angels gathered in their multitudes and all of them came to hear him. One of the rebbe’s opponents was there and didn’t want to believe them; he desired to test whether it was true that the rebbe’s prayer was beyond nature.

Now, once during the New Moon prayers, as the holy rebbe was praying and taking off his tefillin before “holy crown,” his ecstasy in prayer began. In his ecstasy he was careless about what he was doing, and he put away his tefillin in someone else’s tefillin bag. At that, his followers felt that he had become ecstatic in his prayer in his holy way, and they went to that opponent of his right away to tell him that the time had come for him to see with his own eyes, hear with his ears, and understand with his heart.

So he went there on the spot and stood right behind the holy rebbe. Then the holy rebbe in his ecstasy turned around facing him, and took hold of his clothing, and dragged him back and forth, almost from one end of the synagogue to the other, until that man managed to escape from his hands and run for his life – still breathing – and then he believed what they’d told him.

(*Eser Orot 3:5* can be found in chapter 14 below)

Eser Orot 3:6

☞ When [R’ Levi Isaac] would sit at the seder on Passover nights, when he began to recite, “This matzah . . .” he would slip down under the table, knocking over the seder [table], the plates, and the matzah. By the time his spirit returned to him, a new table with matzah and goblets

and another white garment would have been prepared for him. He put it on, and recited, “This matzah,” like someone reviving himself with a drink, saying, “Ah! Ah! This matzah!”

Eser Orot 3:7

☞ Once he went to draw well water for the sake of the commandment to bake matzah [for Passover], and in an intense mystical state he fell into the well. But no harm was done, because the water was not deep.

Eser Orot 3:8

☞ When he recited the blessing for reading the Scroll of Esther, he would dance on the lectern and almost on the scroll itself.

Eser Orot 3:9

☞ Once he visited the holy Rebbe Baruch of Medzhibozh; and the holy R' Baruch was a sensitive and stern man. The Rebbe of Berdichev said to him, “R' Baruch, dear, I'll sit at the table across from you, so I won't bother you with my motions.” This pleased the holy R' Baruch, because he hadn't wanted to say this himself.

They arranged the table sideways instead of lengthwise, so that it would not look as if the Rebbe of Berdichev had been seated far away at the other end. R' Baruch sat down on one side, and the visiting rebbe from Berdichev on the other side across from him.

But when they recited the blessing over bread at the beginning of the meal, the Rebbe of Berdichev went into ecstasy and leapt up onto the table, and of course he jumbled and broke all the glasses and bottles that were on the table.

And once he was in Kaluv for Passover, at the home of the holy Rebbe of Kaluv, and they set a table for him to have his own seder.

A Journey with Rebbe Moses Leyb of Sasov

Source: Berger, Eser Tzahtzahot (1910) 2:21

In this story a son of R' Levi Isaac of Berdichev plays “straight man” to Moses Leyb of Sasov (d. 1807). Some aspects of R' Moses Leyb's behaviour remain mysterious from beginning to end. In the context of hasidic tales about holy men, the most mysterious aspects of his behaviour are his overt expression

of pleasure in food (coarse food at that) and his casual conversation with a woman. The secret of understanding these aspects of the story are revealed in part 4, chapter 9.

☞ Once the holy Rabbi Israel of Pikav¹⁴ (the son of the Rebbe of Berdichev) came to Sasov, to Rebbe Moses Leyb – who said to him, “Pikaver rabbi, I have good tenants and I want to go see them; come with me.”

The rabbi of Pikav went in the wagon with R’ Moses Leyb, and on the road, as they entered a village, rain began to pour down – and they were in a simple wagon with no cover. A whisky distiller saw R’ Moses Leyb and recognized him and said, “Rebbe, come to my house.” The rain was drenching them, so they went to his house. The whisky distiller took the cow outside and swept the room.

R’ Moses Leyb kept saying, “Master of the world! Don’t take away this joy from me!” The rabbi of Pikav was wondering – what joy? But he already knew that the ways of R’ Moses Leyb were beyond understanding.

The rain kept getting stronger, so they prayed the afternoon prayers and the evening prayers, and the whisky distiller gave them each a cup of warm milk and brought straw and spread it on the floor, and they slept there; and the calf of the family cow was lying there too on the straw between them.

R’ Moses Leyb got up joyfully in the morning and said to the lady of the house, “Rusi!” (he knew her name) – “what are you giving us for breakfast?” She said, “Rebbe, say your prayers and I’ll give you breakfast.” So R’ Moses Leyb said to the rabbi of Pikav, “Pikaver rabbi, let’s stand up and pray,” and they said the morning prayers.

After prayers, they were given a bowl of millet cooked in milk. R’ Moses Leyb began to eat, and he said to the rabbi of Pikav, “Eat! This millet is so good! Have you ever tasted such good millet?” The rabbi of Pikav was a very delicate man and had never eaten such food; but R’ Moses Leyb kept telling him, “Eat!” and so he would taste a little more.

Then R’ Moses Leyb said to the whisky distiller’s wife, “Rusi, where did you get this good grain?” She said to him, “Rebbe, I borrowed it from the miller’s wife.” He said to her, “She must be a good woman to lend it to you?” She said, “Yes.” He asked her, “And is the miller a good man?” She said, “The miller is a cur! He’s a bad man and he’s always beating her, and she usually runs to me.”

He said, “And do you have any more of this grain?” She said, “No,

[the miller] only had this little bit of it that she lent to me.” He said, “And if the miller knew about it, what would he say?” She said, “If he knew about it, he would beat her terribly.”

The rebbe said to her, “Listen to me, Rusi. The miller is going to come home and ask her about the grain and beat her, and she’ll run to you. Tell her that it seems as if she wants to convert to Judaism, and then come with her to me.”

After that the rabbis went home and did not travel on to see the tenants. And indeed the miller beat his wife and she ran away [to Rusi’s house], and they travelled to the rebbe R’ Moses Leyb. He sent her to a different town, where she converted to Judaism, and she had sons who were among the greatest rabbis of their generation.

The Spot of Sugar

Source: Berger, Eser Tzahtzahot (1910) 6:27

(also in Michelson, *Ohel Naftali* no. 59)

This story highlights the hasidic concern for sexual restraint which extends to great anxiety (grounded in kabbalistic sources) over unconscious emission of semen. It depicts its protagonist, Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczyce (d.1827) with unusual emotional complexity.

The biblical verse which the rebbe quotes toward the end of the story, “If the anointed priest sins, for the guilt of the people ...” implies in its original context that the people are held responsible for the sins of their leaders. The rebbe’s interpretation, in a typically hasidic manner, ignores this context to make a quite different point.

☞ I heard in my youth from great scholars and hasidim a wondrous story about our master of Ropczyce. Once on the day before Yom Kippur, when the community had gathered at his pure table, they waited for a long time for the holy rebbe to come to the table according to custom, and he had not arrived. Some of his disciples went in and found him crying, his tears flowing, so much that it was impossible to go near him or speak with him because of the great bitterness of his crying. They told this to his wise and holy son, R’ Eliezer [of Dzikow], and asked him to go in, because they knew how very highly his father thought of him.

R’ Eliezer went in and asked his father about his crying, and he answered, “My dear son, I am very ashamed to go in to the table, and to go into the synagogue to pray on this Yom Kippur, because I have been reflecting that all these years, each year at the Days of Awe, I have promised the Blessed Name that I will turn in complete repentance and go

on the straight path. But I have examined my deeds, and they are crooked, and I have not repaired anything.” He was in great bitterness.

His wise and holy son answered him wisely: “My dear teacher, my father, I promise you that beginning now you *will* turn in complete repentance, and go on the straight path; so come with me to the table.” His father nodded to him and said, “If you’re promising me, I’ll believe you.” Then he went in to the holy table for the meal before the fast.

Our holy master R’ Naphtali was drinking water with sugar, and he tucked away a lump of sugar in his white pants for after Yom Kippur.

That evening, when the rebbe was reciting the holy prayers, the sugar evidently softened and melted from the great heat of his praying, and became a spot on his white clothing. In the morning, when he saw a spot on his white clothing, and did not remember tucking away the sugar, he guessed that, heaven forbid, he had had a nocturnal emission, God help us. In tears, he said to his wise and holy son: “I trusted your promise for nothing! Look what has happened to me!” And all that Yom Kippur day he shook the world with his crying as he prayed – bringing the entire community to complete repentance.

After Yom Kippur, when he wanted to drink some water and was looking for the sugar in his pocket, R’ Naphtali remembered and understood that he had suspected himself wrongly and the spot had been from the melted sugar. Then he interpreted the verse, “If the anointed priest sins, for the guilt of the people” [Leviticus 4:3] as follows:

If it seems to the “anointed priest” – the righteous man, leader of his generation – that he has sinned, when in truth it is not so at all (and this is his error, that it seems to him that he has sinned, and a sin is an error)¹⁵ – this is “for the guilt of the people.” Because, among the simple people, there is someone who has sinned in this way and does not know how to turn in proper repentance. So the Blessed Name arranges things so that it seems to the righteous man that he has sinned in this way, and as a result he repents tumultuously; and all the people are forgiven, ordinary people included.

So I heard from tellers of truth, and the words of the wise are gracious.

Forgetting the Mishnah

Source: Michelson, *Dover Shalom* (1910) no. 64

This story involves several rebbes in a story-within-a-story structure. The initial protagonist, Rebbe Zadok HaCohen of Lublin (1823–1900), died only a decade before the publication of this story.

The saying from the Talmud cited early in the story means that a newcomer to a Jewish community is allowed to draw attention to his high level of scholarship. The entire story revolves around talmudic scholarship, reflecting the integration by Hasidism of the pre-hasidic view of Talmud study as the centre of Jewish existence.

The Talmud (compiled ca. 600 CE) is a kind of commentary on the Mishnah (early third century CE); the Mishnah itself is thus a well-known and highly authoritative classical text.

The word *mitzvah* primarily means a divine commandment; in Jewish parlance it has warm, positive connotations and is applied both to ritual observances and to good deeds.

In the last paragraph, the compiler, Michelson, acknowledges with unusual forthrightness the awkward fact that the same stories and sayings are often ascribed to different holy men through the vagaries of oral tradition. His respectful references to anti-hasidic rabbis are typical of hasidic tales in print.

☞ I heard that R' Zadok HaCohen (of blessed memory), when he was still young, when he needed the permission of one hundred rabbis to remarry¹⁶ and was travelling to the great rabbis to ask their permission, came to Belz, to Rebbe Shalom of Belz. Because “in a place where a person is unknown, he is permitted to say ‘I am a disciple of the sages’” [Talmud Nedarim 62a], when he came to the study hall and saw many people sitting and studying various topics, one in one tractate of the Talmud and another in a different tractate, he had a look at what each one was studying, and afterwards he paced back and forth a few times in the study hall, and then he delivered a pleasing analytic discourse [*pilpul*] on all the passages that everyone there had been studying, one after the other, and, wondrously, showed that all the passages they had been studying were relevant to each other.

In the evening, when R' Shalom came to the study hall, his custom was that his servant, Elimelech, would tell him every new insight from that day in the study hall. In the course of the conversation he also told him this – that today a young man from Poland¹⁷ had come, and he was a genius who showed forth wonders, combining and unifying all the matters that people had been studying in a variety of passages, in one beautiful and pleasant analytic discourse.

So R' Shalom had his servant call that young man to him and told him to repeat the analytic discourse that he had delivered that day in the study hall, and he repeated the analytic discourse to him.

But the holy master R' Shalom pointed out to him that he had for-

gotten a clear statement in the Mishnah; and every analysis flees before the Mishnah.

When R' Zadok HaCohen heard this, he was somewhat discouraged.

But when R' Shalom saw his discouragement, he said to comfort him that he should not be downcast because of this, "because this is nothing new, because a mistake and forgetfulness can even happen sometimes to the greatest rabbis."

And he told him that in Lublin there was once a man who used to buy a lot of combs, and every Friday, the eve of the Sabbath, when he went to the bathhouse, he would take combs with him and give everyone a comb to comb his hair. When the Rebbe of Lublin [Jacob Isaac, the Seer] heard about the deeds and conduct of this man, he praised him highly, and said, "May I have a portion with him in this great mitzvah!"

But when people told the words of the rebbe to the rabbi, the head of the rabbinical court of Lublin – the great scholar known as "brains of iron" [*der ayzener kop*], Rabbi Azriel HaLevi Horowitz, who was strongly opposed to the rebbe – he said that there is a clear statement in the Talmud that proves that this is not a mitzvah.

For it is stated in tractate Menahot (43b), "When King David went to the bath, and saw himself standing naked, he said, 'Alas for me that I am standing naked without any mitzvah' – until he remembered his circumcised flesh and was reassured." So, if this thing were such a great mitzvah, in keeping with the rebbe's praises, King David (may he rest in peace) would have known what to do: he could have brought combs with him to the bathhouse and lent them out, and that way he would have had many a mitzvah.

But when word reached the Rebbe of Lublin, he said that the rabbi, the head of the rabbinical court, had forgotten a clear statement in the Mishnah: "No one may look upon the king when he is having his hair cut, or when he is naked, or when he is in the bathhouse. It is written, 'You shall indeed set up a king over you' (Deuteronomy 17:15) – one whom you look up to in awe" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:5). Therefore, you must understand that King David could not do this mitzvah in the bathhouse.

Thus far the words of my informant [Rabbi Judah Zoberman of Shebreshin]. In my book *Shemen HaTov* (no. 91) I cited this argument, from Talmud Menahot against the words of the Rebbe of Lublin, in the name of my ancestor the holy man Duberish Heilperin, head of the rabbinical court and community preacher in Lublin, who was among

the greatest opponents of the holy Rebbe of Lublin. The counter-argument from the Mishnah in Sanhedrin is cited there in the name of our master Rebbe Shalom of Belz; see the text there. Conversely, his honour Rabbi Hayim Gelernter, long may he live, head of the rabbinical court of Kutov, wrote this to me in the name of my ancestor Rebbe R' Shmelke of Nikolsburg, may his merit protect us.

The Butcher's Blessing

Source: Michelson, Dover Shalom no. 73

This story about Rebbe Shalom of Belz (1779–1855, progenitor of the Belz dynasty, which remains significant in Hasidism today) is relevant to discussions later in this book about the use of talmudic material in stories and the holiness of the rebbe's body.

Attitudes toward non-Jews in hasidic stories are multi-faceted, including but not limited to hostile dismissiveness. The story immediately preceding this one in *Dover Shalom* proudly depicts a gentile nobleman asking R' Shalom to heal his insane son; R' Shalom does so by arranging things so that the dybbuk (possessing spirit) causing the son's insanity is transferred to a Christian priest.¹⁸ The rebbe explains that the dybbuk is the soul of a deceased Jewish woman who had been that priest's mistress. In this story, a less aristocratic gentile seeks the rebbe's help. The rebbe will not touch him, reflecting a world view that associates gentiles with impurity, but will extend help to him – on condition that he will help Jews.

Later in the story the rebbe attempts to keep two of his hasidim from travelling; when they travel anyway, they get lost in a blizzard. Presumably the rebbe foresaw this but did not explicitly warn them about it. This kind of veiled advice or warning is a recurrent theme in hasidic tales; it reinforces the aura of mystery surrounding rebbes and the importance of following their advice even without knowing why.

☞ Another time a gentile butcher came to the rebbe, sick throughout his body and limbs, heaven protect us. He lay motionless and could not move a single limb.

Now, the way of the holy rebbe was that when a Jew came to him with an ailment in any limb, he would run his holy hand over the spot that was ailing and handle it until it was healed.

But he did not want his holy hand to touch an “uncircumcised,” and he told his servant, R' Elimelech, to take his handkerchief and run it over the whole body and arms and legs of the sick man, and so he did.

The sick man said that he felt something like a wind leaving his whole body by way of his feet. After that the holy rebbe told him to try to sit up, and he sat up. After that he told him to try to get down from the wagon and walk around the wagon, and he did. Then the rebbe told him that the rest of his healing would happen in his house, as long as he promised to be good to Jews, and he promised him.

Fifteen years later a man and his future son-in-law were visiting the holy rebbe to receive his blessing before the wedding, and they stayed in Belz for the holy Sabbath. After the Sabbath it was not long before the wedding, and there were many preparations to take care of at home, but the rebbe held back his parting blessing until Tuesday, until the man came to him with his future son-in-law, complaining – why was he holding them back? Each moment was like a day to them, because they had to make their preparations, and on the coming Sabbath the young man would be called to the Torah in honour of his upcoming wedding. The rebbe answered, “I wanted to hold you back, but if you want, go on your way in peace,” and so they did.

On the road, as they were travelling at night through a great forest, a great, powerful storm arose – this was in the winter month of Shevat. In the forest was a deep pit, and because of the blizzard, what was crooked appeared straight, and they drove into the pit, and there they stayed and could not go any further, because the snow was very deep. So they admitted how completely correct the righteous man was when he wanted to hold them back from travelling, but what happened had happened, and what now?

They cried out to the Eternal from inside the pit, and suddenly there came to them that gentile butcher with his relatives and friends in wagons with horses and pulled them out of the pit and took them home and warmed them up. He told them that the holy rebbe of Belz had woken him up to make him keep his promise from back then, to be good to Jews. And even though he did not obey him to begin with, the rebbe would not let him sleep, and he saw him standing beside him, and so he hurried to help and rescue them.

The Reluctant Rabbi

Source: Michelson, Ohel Avraham (1911) no. 40

This story is a typical hasidic tale of a hidden holy man whose greatness is gradually revealed,¹⁹ though it is not about a hasidic figure. Rabbi Abraham Abish of Frankfurt am Main (d. 1771) was highly thought of by hasidim,

however, and is the subject in his own right of a compilation of “hasidic tales” from which this story is taken. Several typical motifs of hasidic tales are found here, including the appearance of the prophet Elijah to holy men and the miraculous shortening of the road to make a long journey brief.²⁰

This story is slow to get started, introducing characters who play no part in the action. Once underway, it mingles humour disconcertingly with with fear.

☞ *After R' Abraham Abish had studied with the great scholar and holy man Rabbi Naphtali Katz of Frankfurt am Main, he established his home in a village near the community of Kurów in the province of Lublin. (The community of Kurów is where the wealthy and pious scholar Judah Leybush, ancestor of Rebbe Menahem Mendl of Kotzk, lived; in one year he made a profit of ten thousand gold coins from his trade in furs, and he made a vow to support a Torah scholar in his house.) The rabbi of the community at that time was the great scholar Rabbi Phinehas, son of Rabbi Isaac.*

There my ancestor R' Abish made a living from producing grease for wagon wheels from oily wood, and also turpentine. Every market day he would come into town to sell his wares, and nobody realized what kind of man he was. They didn't know him, and he presented himself to all the townspeople as an ignoramus.

By decree of the Council of the Four Lands,²¹ every rabbi was obliged to travel to the villages during the days of Hanukkah, to improve the situation of the villagers in terms of our holy religion. He was to teach them Jewish customs, checking that their tefillin and mezuzot were in proper condition, and attending to other such things, for example the koshering of meat and the monthly immersion of women and the observance of the Sabbath. The rabbi of Kurów [R' Phinehas son of Isaac] had no idea that there were any Jews at all in the village where Rabbi Abish'l was living, and he had no intention at all of going there. But the Blessed Name brought it about that the rabbi and his travelling companions got lost on the road and came to that village. It was very snowy and cold, and they went to the inn to warm themselves and found out that a Jew lived there.

They went to his house and did not find him. They asked his wife, my ancestress, about him, and she answered that he was feeding the cows. When several hours had gone by and he had not returned, they were astonished and could not believe that in such intense cold he would be staying outside for so long, feeding his cows. The rabbi went

outside to walk a little, back and forth along the road, and in the house next door he saw a candle burning. This was surprising to him, because by now it was very late and all the villagers were in bed.

He went over there and heard two people studying Torah with great fervour. He opened the door and saw my ancestor sitting alone, studying – and both of them were taken aback. The rabbi understood that Rabbi Abish was one of the hidden holy ones and that Elijah the Prophet had been there with him. And my ancestor, who had thought he was hidden, was pained that what had been concealed from everyone was now revealed. But Rabbi Phinehas promised R' Abish not to reveal it to anyone; he only asked that when he came to town from time to time, he would meet with him.

Now, in the old days the words of a rabbi and his commands were treasured; so when Rabbi Phinehas became ill, the heads of the community came to him to ask who should take his place as their rabbi after many more years of his life. He said to them, "In such-and-such a village lives Abraham, nicknamed Abish, which is an abbreviation for 'he shall grow like a cedar of Lebanon, planted in the house of God' [Psalm 92:13–14],²² and so he shall be in our town."

So, after Rabbi Phinehas passed away, the heads of the community travelled there to test R' Abish's knowledge. He said to them, "What have you come for?" and they answered, "We have come to ask your excellency to become our rabbi." He said to them, "What's a rabbi?" They answered, "A teacher of what is permitted and what is forbidden, who resolves questions of possible mingling of milk and meat, or innocence and guilt." And he, concealing himself, told his wife, "Listen, these heads of the community say it's forbidden to mix meat with milk!"²³

They were very taken aback that the man chosen for them by their holy rabbi to be exalted among them did not know things known to even the simplest people. They made their way back to town, called for a meeting, and told everyone what had happened. Everyone understood that he was undoubtedly one of the hidden holy ones, for surely the late rabbi had not been deceiving them. So it was decided among them that no matter what, they would bring him to their town as their rabbi, as their holy rabbi had commanded. After all, there were other scholars in the community who could teach and make decisions in matters of Jewish law.

So they travelled to R' Abish a second time; but again he refused. However, when he came to town to sell his wares, they took him by force and dressed him in clothing appropriate to a Torah scholar.

He stayed there for a long time, and they did not get much benefit from him. But he loved Jewish observance, especially being the sandek, holding the baby boy on his lap at a circumcision; and when he was needed as a mohel [ritual circumciser], he would eagerly go there, near or far, and he would take along the rabbi's servant, R' Ziskind. Once the servant witnessed how it was revealed to R' Abish from heaven that his brother had died and he was forbidden to put on tefillin.²⁴ And on the eve of the holy Sabbath, close to sundown, he went with R' Abish to a circumcision, and the road was shortened for them, and they arrived before the Sabbath though it was more than three leagues away.

So the congregation and the Torah scholars decreed that R' Abish must preach a sermon for them as best he could. He prepared himself and gave a fiery sermon. His last words were that since the Torah scholars had compelled him to engage in Torah study not for its own sake, they should be given their due. Within a short time all of them died, heaven help us. So everyone saw that he was a holy man of God, who "had found his heart faithful before Him."²⁵

To Be a Leader

Source: Michelson, *Meqor Hayim* (1911) no. 55

A substantial number of hasidic tales in praise of rebbes are attributed to the storytelling of the rebbes themselves.²⁶ Already the Baal Shem Tov, the founding figure of Hasidism, told dramatic stories about himself, about his ascents into heaven, for example.²⁷ Pragmatically, this suggests that to be recognized as a rebbe, it helps to have stories told about you, and to have stories told about you it helps to tell stories about yourself. Typically, however, as in this story attributed to Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz (d. 1876), such stories include the praises of other holy men. In this case the primary focus of the story is the Seer of Lublin.

The urim and thummim mentioned in the story were a mysterious divine oracle used in biblical times (see, for example, Exodus 28:30, Numbers 27:21). The Seer of Lublin's reference to the holy name (of God) shining in the urim and thummim is based on Jewish traditions associating them with the letters engraved in stones on the high priest's breastplate (Exodus 28:21).²⁸ The idea of the Torah having 600,000 letters which are permutations of the divine name is a widespread tradition with talmudic and kabbalistic roots.

Although this tradition primarily refers to the five books of Moses, the fact that the Seer goes on to refer to the Mishnah as "Torah" is typical of traditional Jewish usage.

The concise chapter of the Mishnah called “What Are the Locations” (Eyzehu meqoman) refers to the locations in the Jerusalem temple where various kinds of sacrifices were offered; it is included in the daily morning prayers, so that knowing it by heart would not be unusual.

Praven is a Yiddish term that in this context refers to the rebbe accepting and responding to requests for advice and blessing.

☞ Further from the above letter from Rabbi Abraham Segal Itinga of Dukla:

Rebbe Hayim of Tszanz would always tell about how, before he turned thirteen, he was in Lublin with the Seer, and the Seer said to him, “Yidele” – his habit was to call every boy he was pleased with by the name “Yidele” [i.e., “dear little Jew”] – “I enjoy looking at you very much, because you will be a leader of your generation.”

R’ Hayim recounted that when he heard the Seer saying to him that he would be a leader of his generation, the desire was stirred up in him to know what one had to do to become leader of the generation.

[R’ Hayim continued:] “And I saw the Seer in the midst of the *praven*, when there were a great many people there. Suddenly he said, ‘Everyone leave me alone!’ So everyone left the house, but I hid in a corner, and they didn’t notice me.

“I saw the holy rebbe walking back and forth in the room. Suddenly he came over to me and said, ‘Do you know why I ordered everybody to leave me alone? When the holy temple was still standing, when a Jew wanted to know what to do, he would ask the judgment of the urim and thummim, and they would tell him whether to proceed or desist. For on the urim and thummim, the holy name would shine. But today, when because of our many sins we have no urim and thummim, we can see in the Torah everything that we want to know, because there are sixty myriads of letters in the Torah and all the permutations of the holy name. But now, in the midst of the *praven*, the studying I had done earlier had run out, so that the holy name was no longer shining, and I didn’t know any longer what to tell, or how to advise, the people who were coming to me. So I ordered everyone to leave me alone, so that I could study and attain illumination again.

“But then I considered that that would be a burden on the community – there are people here who need to travel home and aren’t able to wait – and so it occurred to me to study [by heart] the chapter of the Mishnah “What Are the Locations,” so that I would have Torah to illuminate my eyes, and I would not keep the community waiting.”

PART TWO



*In the Marketplace:
The Stories in Context*

CHAPTER ONE



Preliminary Questions

This part of this study deals in a general way with the books of Berger and Michelson and with some issues in scholarship on hasidic tales. Readers who are primarily interested in the stories themselves are welcome to skip ahead and begin with part 3.

A traditional way of beginning a learned Jewish discourse is to pose a series of questions that will then be answered.¹ My choice to study the books from which the stories above were selected raises a number of questions: Why study stories at all? Why study *hasidic* stories? Why study *books* of hasidic stories, and why these books in particular? What are the values implicit in hasidic stories?

Why Study Stories?

In the last few decades the telling of stories has become a major subject of study in disciplines as diverse as anthropology, history, legal studies, medicine, politics, psychology, and many others. This trend is often referred to as a “turn to narrative” in these fields.² In this study, somewhat artificially, I reserve the word “narrative” for overarching accounts of how things were, are, and ought to be.³ A narrative, like a story, includes happenings (for example, “God created the world and chose the Jewish people”) along with images or motifs (for example, “God is powerful and compassionate”).

Such a narrative pervades a community’s imagination and cannot simply be summed up in words.⁴ Aspects of a community’s narrative, however, can be recognized through the small-scale stories or tales that people tell each

other. For example, a hasidic tale in which a rebbe works a miracle fits, with many other stories like it, into a narrative in which rebbes are supernaturally powerful helpers of those who put their trust in them.

But stories can also challenge and perhaps weaken narratives.⁵ In this context an obvious example would be a story about a rebbe trying and failing to work a miracle; less obvious examples are discussed later in this study. Storytelling is often understood as a way of communicating a culture's traditional wisdom and core values.⁶ It does do that, but it can also cast doubt on a culture's values and expose contradictions in its wisdom. As Michael Jackson observes, "Although the stories that are approved or made canonical in any society tend to reinforce extant boundaries, storytelling also questions, blurs, transgresses, and even abolishes these boundaries."⁷

This role of stories as expressions of doubt and cultural tension has been highlighted in the Jewish context in the works of such scholars as Rachel Adler,⁸ Judah Goldin,⁹ Daniel Boyarin,¹⁰ and Jeffrey Rubenstein¹¹ on stories in the Talmud, the central text of classical Jewish literature. This study applies a similar approach to hasidic tales.

Why Study Hasidic Tales?

Hasidic Tales in Hasidism

Hasidic tales are a significant part of hasidic culture. While hasidic Jews today are visually recognizable by their distinctive garb and known for their extreme traditionalism, the most distinctive feature of Hasidism in the Jewish context is its social organization around the holy men called rebbes.

Retrospectively, the Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760), a charismatic spiritual teacher and healer in Ukraine, is seen as the first hasidic rebbe. Most of today's rebbes trace their spiritual – and often familial – lineage back to the founders of Hasidism, who are collectively seen as the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov.

Under those early leaders, Hasidism overcame bitter opposition and became a mainstream form of Eastern European Judaism.¹² The various branches of the hasidic movement today (Belz, Bobov, Breslov, Ger, Lubavitch, Satmar, and many others, some with perhaps a few hundred adherents and some with tens of thousands) are typically named for the town in Eastern Europe where the first rebbe of their dynasty lived.

The Baal Shem Tov told stories, and stories were told about him.¹³ Stories told by and about rebbes, celebrating their wisdom, their charismatic personalities, and their miracles, have been part of hasidic life since its beginnings.¹⁴

After decades of oral storytelling and the occasional appearance of stories in hasidic books, the first book devoted primarily to hasidic tales was *Shivhe HaBesht* (Praises of the Baal Shem Tov), published in 1814. Within a year there also appeared *Sipure Maasiyot* (Tales),¹⁵ a collection of wonder tales from the oral storytelling of Rebbe Nakhmen of Breslov,¹⁶ with appendices of stories *about* Rebbe Nakhmen.¹⁷

While oral hasidic storytelling continued unabated,¹⁸ books of hasidic tales did not emerge as a category of Jewish literature until the mid-1860s. Several collections published in 1863 and 1864 in Lemberg (today's Lviv, Ukraine) were the first in a great wave of such books, which reached its height between the 1880s and 1914.¹⁹ Interrupted by the First World War and again by the *khurbn* (Holocaust), the publication of hasidic tales in traditional circles, side by side with their oral circulation, continues today.

In scholarship on Hasidism, the tales have often been sifted through as potential sources of historical facts, but less often studied as literature.²⁰ Yet these tales deserve close attention as literary expressions of hasidic culture.²¹ The person of “the rebbe” is key to understanding them in this way.

While many rebbes emerge from the stories as distinct personalities, it is also the case that the same story is often told about different rebbes.²² Even when this is not the case, distinctions between rebbes tend to blur. Elie Wiesel poetically describes his hasidic childhood experience of listening to stories:

I would listen to them as night fell – between the prayers of *Minha* and *Maariv* [afternoon and evening prayers] – in the House of Study filled with the flickering shadows of yellow candles. The Elders spoke of the great Masters as though they had known them personally. Each had his favourite Rebbe and a legend he liked above all others. I came to feel that I was forever listening to the same story about the same Rebbe. Only the names of people and places changed. Motives, deeds, responses and outcomes hardly varied; just as there was always a person in need, there was always someone to lend him a hand.²³

My interpretations of stories often follow Wiesel's insight, drawing on stories about individuals to reach conclusions about “the rebbe” as a recurrent figure in the hasidic storytelling imagination.

Hasidic Tales and the Study of Marginalized Cultures

Though for much of the nineteenth century Hasidism was the mainstream form of Judaism in broad regions of Eastern Europe, my own interest in

hasidim and their tales, extending into the twentieth century and the present day, can be contextualized with scholarship on marginalized, disempowered groups.²⁴ Hasidim today are among the economically poorest of Jews.²⁵ Since its beginnings, even when Hasidism has been socially powerful,²⁶ it has been viewed by Jews aspiring to integration with the modern world, as well as by gentiles, as a backwards, superstitious movement.²⁷ By the twentieth century, even before their near extinction in the *khurbn*, hasidic Jews were widely seen as fading remnants of outdated traditionalism, having played no part in significant developments of modern Judaism such as the Zionist movement.

Along with their increased attention to marginalized groups, historians have realized in recent decades that “minor” or “non-literary” texts are worthy of close attention.²⁸ Hasidic tales are among such texts. Even their great anthologist, Martin Buber, saw his sources, including the books which are the focus of this study, as “an enormous mass of largely unformed material . . . neither true art nor true folk-tale.”²⁹

Whether “art” or not, the tales are significant artifacts from a minority culture. Within Eastern European Jewry, itself an oppressed minority culture, they do not come from the secularized Jewish elite that created the respected works of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature but from hasidic circles. Unlike many hasidic teaching texts, the tales were not written by the inner circle of hasidic rebbes and their close disciples but by people closer to the periphery. Rooted in oral tradition, they go back to the voices not only of the rabbinic class but of less learned men and even women.

Hasidic Tales and Eastern European Jewish Culture

Many hasidic tales, as Karl Erich Grözinger has emphasized, derive from pre-hasidic folktales. They can thus be understood as expressions of East European Jewish folklore generally, as much as of hasidic culture specifically.³⁰ Conversely, specifically hasidic tales, in both oral and written forms, became part of the popular culture of Eastern European Jewry beyond hasidic circles. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries some secularized Jewish intellectuals were drawn to hasidic tales, and significant writers used them as raw material for “modern” Yiddish and Hebrew literature.³¹ Thus books of tales such as those of Berger and Michelson can be read not only as voices of Hasidism but, more broadly, of East European Jewish culture before the *khurbn*.

This is a lost culture. Millions of its people were murdered during the *khurbn*, dying along with their practices and institutions. Genealogist Arthur

Kurzweil speaks of knowing enough about how Jews died and wanting to know instead how Jews lived.³² The study of hasidic tales gives us a glimpse of the inner lives of many of these Jews, of how they imagined existence.

Hasidic Tales in World Literature

Hasidic tales soon reached well beyond Eastern European Jewry. In nineteenth and early twentieth-century North Africa, books written in Judeo-Arabic for a broad-based readership included stories of hasidic rebbes, translated from Eastern European sources. Polish Christians contemporary with Berger and Michelson told tales in praise of the Baal Shem Tov.³⁴ The tales also reached Western European readers, both Jewish and Christian, and became a recognized part of world literature, especially since Martin Buber (1878–1965), a non-traditional Western European Jew, began publishing his polished retellings. Buber's first books of hasidic tales, *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (Tales of Rebbe Nakhmen) and *Die Legende des Baalschem* (The Legend of the Baal Shem Tov), appeared contemporaneously with Berger's and Michelson's books, in 1906 and 1907. His most complete and definitive collection was published in Hebrew as *Or HaGanuz* (The Hidden Light) in 1946, and in German and English (*Tales of the Hasidim*) shortly thereafter. It has been translated into several languages and often reprinted.

Hasidic Tales and Hasidism Today

As expressions of the hasidic imagination, the tales continue to nourish Hasidism under the vastly changed circumstances of today. Hasidism was in decline, losing many of its adherents, when Berger and Michelson published their collections. Further decline came with the trauma of the First World War and then near extinction with the *khurbn*. Today the challenges of a secularized, ever-changing world are greater than ever. Yet Hasidism has undergone a remarkable renaissance, especially since the 1960s. Perhaps it is because of this renaissance that a stereotypical image of "Jewish" in popular culture today is likely to include the black hat and sidelocks often worn by hasidic men.³⁵ Though hasidim actually remain a small minority of Jews and Hasidism has far fewer adherents today than in Berger's and Michelson's time, it is retaining its adherents to a far greater extent; this trend and a high birthrate could lead to its demographic dominance of Judaism within a few generations.³⁶

In this context, hasidic storytelling continues to thrive. I have met young and middle-aged hasidic Jews steeped in stories from oral tradition; my lib-

rary includes recently published books of tales that ascribe their sources to the storytelling of trustworthy community elders.³⁷ Together with new compilations, older collections like those of Berger and Michelson continue to be reprinted.

The storytelling tradition can be seen as one source of the strength of contemporary Hasidism. The particular importance of stories in Lubavitch, a very successful branch of Hasidism that has had more impact on the non-hasidic world than any other, is noteworthy. Besides illuminating the past, then, these tales can help us to understand Judaism in the present and the future.

Yet the current vitality of Hasidism has done little to change the tendency of Jews and others to view hasidim either as romantic relics of a simpler past or as benighted and possibly dangerous fanatics. I want to understand this vital and growing culture in more nuanced ways, especially through the stories that circulate among hasidim themselves as distinct from adaptations such as Buber's.

I want to understand the narrative of Hasidism, which may challenge those of more powerful groups. I also want to investigate ways in which hasidic stories can challenge the hasidic narrative. In large part, hasidic tales exemplify the use of stories for community control within a social movement,³⁸ but they can also subvert and sow doubt.

Why Study *Books* of Hasidic Stories?

Hasidic storytelling developed and continues to thrive as an oral practice. *Books* of stories are secondary. Why, then, study books rather than contemporary oral culture?

One reason is that books of hasidic tales are, historically, a significant and popular part of Jewish literature. Joseph Dan observes, "During the period between 1863 and 1914, the period which saw ... the great works of the early classics of modern Hebrew literature ... many dozens of [hasidic tale] collections were published and re-published and became dominant in the Hebrew book market ... this genre was the most popular form of Hebrew narrative literature."³⁹

From the perspective of the study of hasidic culture, books are readily accessible. Scholars who are not in a position to spend a major part of their lives attending hasidic gatherings still have access to thousands of hasidic tales through printed sources.

In addition, books of tales offer a glimpse of their time that may be inaccessible otherwise. Works in praise of holy men published in hasidic com-

munities today – including English translations of earlier works – serve contemporary needs and often leave out controversial material.⁴⁰ Oral traditions too change and can be subject to censorship. Therefore, books of hasidic tales may reflect the oral tradition of their own time more accurately than stories told or retold today.⁴¹

Finally, there is no absolute distinction between oral and written literature, especially in a culture such as Hasidism which is both highly verbal and highly literate. As folklorist Eli Yassif has noted, hasidic stories have constantly passed from oral tradition into print and back again.⁴³ Other aspects of the interplay of orality and writing are discussed later in this study.

Why Focus on the Works of Berger and Michelson?

Israel Berger and Abraham Hayim Michelson were among the more prolific authors of books of hasidic tales; five such books of Berger's were published, and seven of Michelson's. Their works thus offer a substantial amount of material to study: a couple of thousand stories, anecdotes, and teachings of rebbes. Published at the beginning of the twentieth century, these works have been important sources for Buber, other popularizers of hasidic tales,⁴⁴ and historians of Hasidism.⁴⁵ They have also been popular among hasidim themselves and have been reprinted many times, into the twenty-first century.

Berger's and Michelson's collections are best considered together. The authors, who were relatives by marriage, were among each other's informants, received stories by correspondence from many of the same people (including Michelson's father, Rabbi Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson), and made use of each other's books, so that a great deal of material is common to their works.

Many books of hasidic tales were published anonymously. Concentrating instead on books by known authors whose biographies can be traced makes it easier to place them in context. Further, in a literature where the content of some books of tales is only vaguely hasidic, and the hasidic affiliation of some authors is uncertain, Berger and Michelson provide a starting point clearly within hasidic culture.⁴⁶

Appearing close to a century after the first books of hasidic tales, these books represent the literature in its maturity. To a large extent they are anthologies of this literature up till their time. They also come at the end of an era, shortly before the First World War which interrupted the publication of hasidic tales and left Hasidism in a much weakened state.

The historical period of these collections has been neglected in scholarship. Many studies of hasidic tales have focused on the earliest compilations, *Shiv'he HaBesht* and Rebbe Nakhmen's *Sipure Maasiyot*. Scholarship on Hasidism

in general has focused on the early generations. Conversely, ethnographic studies of Hasidism are a relatively recent phenomenon.⁴⁷ Only a few scholars, notably Naftali Loewenthal and Ira Robinson, have studied Hasidism and hasidic tales in the early twentieth century, a time of intense struggle with modernity.⁴⁸

Finally, Berger's and Michelson's works epitomize a number of the problems and issues with which this book is concerned, beginning with the question of what hasidic tales can tell us about hasidic culture.

What Values are Implicit in Hasidic Tales? The Buber-Scholem Controversy, and Beyond

Martin Buber introduced many Western readers to hasidic tales through his retellings and commentaries. In so doing, he created a still prevalent image of hasidic tales as joyous and life affirming. His works about Hasidism, especially his major compilation, *Tales of the Hasidim*, have remained popular and in print.

In scholarship on Hasidism, however, Buber's work has not fared as well. Particularly severe was the criticism of Buber offered by his younger contemporary, Gershom Scholem. Their clash, which has been called "the most interesting intellectual debate in twentieth-century Jewish studies,"⁴⁹ is reminiscent of hasidic tales about controversy between two great rebbes.⁵⁰ Scholem essentially founded the study of Jewish mysticism as an academic discipline, while Buber more than anyone else made Hasidism known to the world. Scholars have commented insightfully on the differing world views of the two men: "Scholem, a diligent and rigorous scholar of text, saw that Hasidism must have grown out of the books that he studied . . . Buber . . . wanted to see Hasidism as an excited movement that empowered people spiritually."⁵¹

Scholem's major statement on the topic, first published in 1961,⁵² raised the key point that Buber ignored the "theoretical literature," that is, hasidic books of spiritual teachings, and interpreted what he did select subjectively, ignoring historical context. Scholem noted that the "theoretical writings" began to appear in print well before collections of stories, and argued that only in the light of the teachings can the stories be understood.⁵³ Most importantly, building on an earlier critique by Scholem's student Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer,⁵⁴ Scholem challenged Buber's formulation that Hasidism taught "joy in the world *as it is*, in life *as it is*."⁵⁵ Rather, Scholem claimed, Hasidism aims to nullify the world by concentrating on the divine, which is seen as "*hidden* in the essentially irrelevant garment of the here and now."⁵⁶

Since Scholem's own research did not focus on hasidic tales, the debate is often understood as if Scholem had not critiqued Buber's approach to the tales themselves, only his choice of tales as his main field of study.⁵⁷ Some of Scholem's criticisms, however, apply to Buber's retellings of stories. For example, Scholem charges that Buber neglected "the magical element . . . and the social character of the hasidic community,"⁵⁸ and mistranslated kabbalistic technical terms in the stories, reading *yihudim* as if it meant "unity" rather than a complex type of meditation.⁵⁹ Scholem also mentions asking Buber why he left out of his work certain sayings of R' Israel of Ruzhyn, found in the anecdotal literature in which Buber specialized.⁶⁰

Buber responded⁶¹ that he and Scholem were pursuing different tasks, necessarily involving different methodologies. Scholem aimed primarily "to advance the state of historical knowledge about" Hasidism. Buber's own goal was to "effect . . . a renewal" in the spiritual life of his own time.⁶² Buber also insisted, however, on the historical accuracy of his key points. The stories, he insisted, are more important than theoretical works, since they depict hasidic *life*, and since Hasidism, like Sufism and Zen, characteristically expresses itself through stories.⁶³ Further, the fact that stories were published later does not mean they are younger than the theoretical literature, since they were first transmitted orally.⁶⁴

Buber answered Scholem and Schatz-Uffenheimer's argument that Hasidism does not affirm "life as it is" by distinguishing two trends in Hasidism. One, "the way of spiritualization," he traces to the Maggid of Mezritsh, successor of the Baal Shem Tov, and the other, "the hallowing of all life," to the Baal Shem Tov himself. The spiritualizing trend has its roots in Kabbalah and was not original to Hasidism; the hallowing of life is rooted in "the new mode of life" reflected in the stories.⁶⁵ Among rebbes who represent this new trend, Buber listed the Baal Shem Tov, "the Berditchever, R. Zusya, and R. Moshe Leib of Sasov."⁶⁶

By scholarly consensus, Buber lost the debate.⁶⁷ Scholem, however, scarcely applied his scholarly methodology to hasidic tales. Fortunately, later scholars, prominent among them Scholem's disciple Joseph Dan, have done so. Their research has sometimes supported Scholem's views, sometimes Buber's, and sometimes neither.

For instance, Zeev Gries has argued for the relative unimportance of books of any kind in early Hasidism, compared to oral teaching,⁶⁸ casting doubt on Scholem's reliance on the theoretical literature. Gedalyah Nigal has established that the earliest hasidic books already contain tales, and he and Khone Shmeruk have found evidence for Buber's contention that stories could cir-

culate orally for decades before finding their way into print.⁶⁹ Conversely, both Yitzhak Buxbaum and Yoav Elstein have shown that hasidic stories can often be best understood through hasidic teachings, as Scholem argued.⁷⁰ Researchers have given increasing attention to the magical element in Hasidism, which Buber filtered out.⁷¹ Glenn Dynner has examined the role of stories in the socio-political context of the growth of Hasidism as a movement, going beyond Buber and Scholem's primary concern with religion.⁷²

Buber's argument that in going beyond dry scholarship he was depicting hasidic "life" is still emphasized by his defenders and granted even by critics.⁷³ It is hard, however, to locate anywhere outside of Buber's books, the world-affirming or "realistic" tendency (in the sense of affirming concrete reality) that he celebrates. Supporters of Buber claim that this tendency has left no trace among recent generations of hasidim.⁷⁴ Whether it existed earlier is dubious.⁷⁵ Buber's examples of life-affirming rebbes depend on very selective use of the legendary material about them; for example, his claim that the Berdichever Rebbe, R' Levi Isaac, embodies the life-affirming tendency is hard to reconcile with the story of R' Levi Isaac, discussed in chapter 14 of this study.

Despite Buber's emphasis on hasidic life, the living hasidic communities of his own time were of no interest to him.⁷⁶ If he had lived a century earlier, would he actually have been drawn to Hasidism, as he believed?⁷⁷ Men of that time whose modern, enlightened outlooks were similar to Buber's, such as Solomon Maimon or Joseph Perl, encountered the real hasidic life of that early period and saw it as superstitious obscurantism.⁷⁸

Yet Buber's scholarship cannot simply be dismissed, and his stand vis-à-vis Scholem has many defenders representing a variety of perspectives.⁷⁹ A desire for synthesis between the two polarities of Buber and Scholem has remained acute among many scholars.⁸⁰

As to whether the tales or the theoretical literature are more important, it is possible to cut the Gordian knot. The two genres come from different sources, and what can be learned from them is different. Thus, Buber could find support for his dialogical approach in legends told by hasidim about R' Levi Isaac of Berdichev, and in his conversations and arguments, literally in I-Thou mode, with God.⁸¹ Scholem could point to R' Levi Isaac's own book of teachings, *Qedushat Levi*, one of the more widely read texts of hasidic theoretical literature, with its frequent references to meditation on the *ayin*, the impersonal divine "nothingness."⁸² The theoretical literature is written by rebbes or based on their oral teachings, and is intended primarily for hasidim. The tales are told by hasidim and have reached audiences well beyond hasidic circles.⁸³

This duality in the sources is acknowledged in passing by Scholem himself when he refers to a “popular . . . version” of the hasidic outlook, which “derives not from the theology of the founders of Hasidism but from the mood of some of its followers” and “is sometimes . . . reflected in the world of hasidic legend.”⁸⁴

Regarding Buber’s approach to the tales, the distinction suggested earlier between “narrative” and “stories” may be useful. As this study suggests, the narrative that emerges from hasidic tales, as well as from hasidic teachings and social organization, is dualistic and hierarchical; it does not affirm an acceptance of material existence but an imperative to transform it spiritually. There are elements in many hasidic tales, however, that subvert this narrative. I see these story elements as expressing unresolved tensions in hasidic culture. Buber, as both a thoughtful reader and a philosopher-artist, drew on such discordant story elements to weave together a full-fledged counter-narrative. This life-affirming, dialogical narrative, which he chose to present as “real” Hasidism, was incompatible, however, with most hasidic stories.

This book follows in Buber’s footsteps by taking hasidic tales seriously as an expression of Hasidism. In a sense, it is a sustained engagement with the picture of hasidic tales established by Buber’s poetic retellings and commentaries.

As I have suggested, the reader of Buber is likely to think of the hasidic tale as a distinct genre, with quasi-scriptural status, which celebrates “joy in the world as it is, in life as it is.” The chapters that follow in this part of this study explore the ambivalent status of tales within hasidic culture, as a literary form considered intrinsically “low” and “material,” and problematize the notion of hasidic tales as a distinct genre. Part 3, engaging with areas downplayed by Buber, shows how the tales use earlier Jewish texts, particularly talmudic literature, to construct Hasidism as the legitimate heir to Jewish tradition. This position leads to tensions between traditional Jewish law and the freedom and power of the rebbe. Part 4 investigates representations of “the world as it is” in stories about food, about the bodies of the rebbes themselves, and about women, whose physicality appears as inherently disruptive. Part 5 analyzes disturbing tales about ritual circumcision and about the anger and dangerous power of rebbes. These thematic studies cast doubt on Buber’s claims for the life-affirming nature of the tales.

I now begin to explore the contexts and meanings of Berger’s and Michelson’s tales. Since any given theoretical approach will shed light on some aspects of a text while hiding or repressing other aspects, my approach is

one of principled eclecticism, borrowing elements from a variety of approaches in order to illuminate the texts as much as possible. Scholarship on Hasidism has established that even stories that cannot be used as historical sources provide valuable glimpses into the hasidic imagination.⁸⁵ This principle is a guiding assumption of this study.

APPENDIX



Names and Dates

This list (in English alphabetical order by first name) of many of the rebbes and other leading figures mentioned in this study places them in chronological and geographical context.¹ Geographical information is current as of 2008 and often does not reflect the borders in place at the time the stories were told or compiled.

- Aaron (Perlov) of Karlin [Belarus], d. 1772.
- Abraham of Stretin [Stratin, Ukraine], d. 1865.
- Abraham Abish of Frankfurt am Main [Germany] (non-hasidic rabbi), d. 1771.
- Abraham Jacob of Sadgora [Ukraine], d. 1883.
- Baal Shem Tov (Israel ben Eliezer, founding figure of Hasidism, based in Medzhibozh [Ukraine]), ca. 1700–1760.
- Baruch of Gorlice [Poland], d. 1906.
- Baruch of Medzhibozh [Ukraine], d. 1811.
- Chentshiner Rebbetsin [of Chęciny, Poland] Sarah Horowitz Sternfeld, d. 1937.
- David Moses of Chortkiv [Ukraine], d. 1900.
- Dov Ber (or Duber), also Maggid of Mezritsh.
- Eliezer of Dzikow [Poland], d. 1861.
- Elimelech of Lizensk [Leżajsk, Poland], d. 1786.
- Eydl (Eydele) of Brody [Ukraine], d. 1885.
- Ezekiel (Shraga) of Shinove [Sieniawa, Poland], d. 1899.
- Gaon of Vilna [Vilnius, Lithuania], (Elijah), great opponent of Hasidism, d. 1797.
- Hannah Rachel, the Maiden of Ludmir [Volodymyr-Volynskyi, Ukraine], d. ca. 1888.

- Hayim (Halberstam) of Tsanz [Nowy Sącz, Poland], d. 1876.
- Hayim Eliezer (Eleazar) Shapiro of Munkatsh [Munkács; now Mukachevo, Ukraine], d. 1936.
- Isaac of Buhuși [Romania], d. 1896.
- Isaac (son of Mordecai) of Neskhez [Nesukhoyezhe, Ukraine], d. 1800.
- Isaac Ayzik (Taub) of Kaluv [Kálló/Nagykálló, Hungary], d. 1821.
- Isaac Ayzik (Isaac Judah Yehiel Safrin) of Komarno [Ukraine], d. 1874.
- Israel (Friedmann) of Ruzhyn [Ukraine], d. 1850.
- Isaac HaLevi Horowitz of Altona [today part of Hamburg, Germany], non-hasidic rabbi, grandfather of Shmelke of Nikolsburg and Naphtali of Ropczyce.
- Jacob Isaac of Lublin [Poland], also Seer of Lublin.
- Jacob Isaac of Pshiskhe [Przysucha, Poland] (the Holy Jew, *der yid hakodesh*), d. 1814.
- Jacob Joseph HaKohen of Polonne [Ukraine], d. ca. 1782.
- Joshua (son of Shalom) of Belz [Ukraine], d. 1894.
- Joshua Heschel (or Abraham Joshua Heschel) of Apt [Opatów, Poland], d. 1825.
- Levi Isaac of Berdichev [Ukraine], d. 1809.
- Leyb Sarah's (Aryeh Leyb), d. 1791 (?).
- Maggid ["Preacher"] of Kozenice [Poland] (Israel Hapstein), d. 1814.
- Maggid of Mezritsh [Mezhirichi, Ukraine] (Dov Ber), d. 1772.
- Malkah of Belz [Ukraine], wife of Shalom of Belz, d. 1852.
- Meir of Premishlan [Peremyshlyany, Ukraine], d. 1850.
- Menachem Mendel Schneerson "of Lubavitch," [based in Brooklyn, New York], d. 1994.
- Menahem Mendl of Rymanów [Poland], d. 1814.
- Miriam Hayah of Shotz [Suceava, Romania], d. 1903.
- Miriam of "Mahluv in Russia," sister of Shmelke of Nikolsburg.
- Mordecai (Motele) of Chernobyl [Ukraine], d. 1837.
- Mordecai of Neskhez [Nesukhoyezhe, Ukraine], d. 1800.
- Moses Hayim Ephraim of Sudilkov [Ukraine], d. 1800.
- Moses Leyb of Sasov [Ukraine], d. 1807.
- Nahum (Menahem Nahum Twersky) of Chernobyl [Ukraine], d. 1798.
- Nakhmen of Breslov [Bratslav, Ukraine], d. 1810.
- Naphtali (Tzvi) of Ropczyce [Poland], d. 1827.
- Nathan (Nosn) Sternhartz of Breslov (or "of Nemirov"), d. 1845.
- Noda bYhudah* (R' Ezekiel Landau of Prague [Czech Republic], opponent of Hasidism), d. 1793.
- Phinehas Horowitz, author of *Haflaah* (of Frankfurt am Main), brother of Shmelke of Nikolsburg, d. 1805.

- Phinehas (Shapiro) of Korets [Ukraine], d. 1791.
- Seer of Lublin [Poland], Jacob Isaac Horowitz, d. 1815.
- Sefat Emet (Judah Aryeh Leyb Alter) of Ger (Gur) [Góra Kalwaria, Poland], d. 1905.
- Shalom of Belz [Ukraine], d. 1855.
- Shalom of Kamenka [Kamenka-Bugskaya, Ukraine], disciple of R' Naphtali of Ropczyce.
- Shmelke (Samuel Shmelke Horowitz) of Nikolsburg [today's Mikulov, Czech Republic], d. 1778.
- Shneur Zalman of Lyady [near Vitebsk, Belarus] (of Lubavitch), d. 1813.
- Simhah Bunem of Pshiskhe [Przysucha, Poland], d. 1827.
- Solomon Leyb of Lentshna [Leczna, Poland], d. 1843.
- Tzvi Elimelech of Dynów [Poland], d. 1841.
- Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv [Ukraine], d. 1831.
- Uri (the Seraph) of Strelisk [Novyye Strelishcha, Ukraine], d. 1826.
- Yehiel Mikhl of Zloczow [Zolochiv, Ukraine], d. 1786.
- Yequetiel Judah Teitelbaum of Sighet [Sighetu Marmaiei, Romania] (the *Yetev Lev*), d. 1883.
- Zusya (Meshulam Zusya, Zusha, Zisha) of Annopol [Ukraine], d. 1800.

GLOSSARY



For ready reference, the following are brief, non-academic definitions of Jewish (Hebrew or Yiddish) and scholarly terms found in this book.

AGGADAH (*adjective*: AGGADIC) Lore as distinct from law; non-halakhic parts of rabbinic texts.

ASHKENAZI Noun and adjective referring to the branch of Jewish ethnicity and tradition that includes Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jewry.

AVOT Often called “Ethics of the Fathers” in English, a popular rabbinic text included in the Mishnah.¹

THE BLESSED NAME A pious way of saying “God” (Hebrew *hashem yitbarakh*).

CHEDER A traditional, small-scale school for Jewish children, primarily teaching basic Hebrew reading.

DEVEQUT Attachment or cleaving to God. I have translated this word in various ways including “mystical state.”

DUALISM In this context, the view that people consist of bodies and souls that are distinct entities, with the soul seen as vastly superior.

DYBBUK A malevolent possessing spirit identified as the restless soul of someone deceased.

GASHMIYUT Materiality, physicality.

GENDER IDENTITY A person’s own sense of being female, male, or perhaps something not covered by those two categories.

GENDER ROLE The work a person does, the way a person acts, etc., when it is perceived by others as appropriate to a particular gender.

GUFANIYUT Corporeality, physicality.

HAGIOGRAPHY Stories and compilations in praise of holy people (not necessarily Christian saints).

HALAKHAH (*adjective*: HALAKHIC) Traditional Jewish law.

HASID (*plural*: HASIDIM) An adherent of Hasidism; a follower of a particular rebbe.

HASIDISM A spiritual and social movement within traditional Judaism, originating in Eastern Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. Allegiance to rebbes is a distinctive feature of Hasidism. There are many hasidic groups, each with its own rebbe, with no centralized organization.

HASKALAH In the Eastern European context, a primarily nineteenth-century Jewish movement for religious liberalization, secular education, and engagement with European culture. (For an overview see Bartal, *Jews of Eastern Europe*, chapter 8.)

HASKAMAH Rabbinic approbation.

KABBALAH (*adjective*: KABBALISTIC; *practitioner*: KABBALIST) An esoteric but highly influential stream of Jewish thought and practice, an important source for the theology of both hasidim and mitnagdim. In the kabbalistic imagination, Jews are enmeshed with divine, angelic, and demonic forces in a web of connections and influences.

KAVANAH Focused attention; the spiritual intentionality that should accompany the fulfillment of a commandment.

KHURBN The Holocaust. I use this Yiddish word as appropriate to the culture under discussion; in other contexts it refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and again by the Romans, the greatest previous tragedies in Jewish history.

KOHANIM (*singular*: KOHEN) Men considered to be descended from the Temple priesthood of ancient times. Traditionally, various priestly purity laws still apply to them. For example, they may not marry divorcees or enter cemeteries.

KVITL (*plural*: KVITLEKH) A written request for a blessing or advice, presented to a rebbe.²

LEB OF LEBN Life; after a person's name, this is a Yiddish expression of endearment.

LULAV A bundle of a palm frond and branches of myrtle and willows, held along with a citron fruit and waved during the morning prayers of the Sukkot holiday, based on Leviticus 23:40.

LURIANIC KABBALAH The branch of Kabbalah, involving complex theological and meditative traditions that traces its origins to Rabbi Isaac Luria (Land of Israel, sixteenth century).

MAGGID Preacher; the title of several hasidic rebbes.

MAKHETENESTE One's child's spouse's mother.

MASKIL (*plural*: MASKILIM, *adjective*: MASKILIC) An adherent of the Haskalah.

NOTES



Authors' names have not been included in citations from the collections of tales compiled by Israel Berger: *Eser Atarot*, *Eser Orot*, *Eser Qedushot*, *Eser Tzahtzahtot* (published under the collective title *Zekhut Yisrael*) and *Simhat Yisrael*; and by Abraham Hayim Michelson: *Ateret Menaḥem*, *Dover Shalom* (including *Ohel Yehoshua*), *Meqor Hayim*, *Ohel Avraham*, *Ohel Elimelekh*, *Ohel Naftali*, and *Shemen HaTov*.

A Taste of Hasidic Tales

- 1 On hasidic tales as “sites of tension,” see Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 19.
- 2 In the Hebrew originals the word *rabi* can represent “rabbi” or “rebbe.” The related word *rav* often means a rabbi who is not a rebbe. The plurals of both words appear in the common phrase *rebeyim verabanim*, “rebbees and rabbis.” Often, however, a rebbe is called a *rav*, perhaps to emphasize that he is also a scholar and legal authority. At the cost of this nuance, my translations in such contexts usually render *rav* as “rebbe” for the sake of clarity.
- 3 Equivalent terms are *admorim*, from the acronym *admor*, “our master, teacher, and rabbi,” and *gute yidn* (Yiddish for “good Jews”).
- 4 Biblical names such as Abraham are given in their standard English forms. When a person’s preferred romanization of his or her name is known, it has been used; this is the case for the family name Michelson, found on R’ Tzvi Ezekiel’s letterhead (Shemen, *Biografye*, 73), and for many modern authors. Transliterations do not represent actual hasidic pronunciations of Hebrew or Yiddish, which would be confusing for readers accustomed to other systems. The YIVO standard

- (see glossary) is used for Yiddish, and a “non-scientific” system approximating modern Israeli pronunciation for Hebrew.
- 5 Compare with Nadler, “Holy Kugel,” 193.
 - 6 Citations from Berger’s and Michelson’s works are by chapter (when applicable) and story number. Occasional references to page numbers are the earliest editions.
 - 7 This was the approach taken by the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach; his tellings of hasidic tales were longer and more emotionally expressive than the written sources he often worked from.
 - 8 I have often left Hebrew book titles referred to in the texts untranslated; most are compact allusions to biblical or rabbinic texts.
 - 9 On *yihudim*, which is mentioned several times in this study, see Fine, “Contemplative Practice of Yiḥudim.”
 - 10 This makes little sense unless the merchant and the Ethiopian slave looked remarkably alike, but logic is not the strong point of this story.
 - 11 Section 3 is the first actual story in the chapter.
 - 12 Exodus 20:18 (at Mount Sinai).
 - 13 More literally, “holiness of the crown” (*Qedushat keter*), part of hasidic liturgy on the Sabbath, holy days, and New Moon.
 - 14 Today’s Novyy Pikov, Ukraine.
 - 15 Based on the previous verse in Leviticus, which refers to sin committed in error, and perhaps on the root meaning of the word *ḥet*, “sin,” which has to do with “missing the mark.”
 - 16 On this process for circumventing the normal requirements of religious divorce in extreme circumstances, and this episode in the life of R’ Zadok, who had not yet become hasidic, see Brill, *Thinking God*, 22–4.
 - 17 Belz itself is in the region of Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire.
 - 18 On dybbuk stories see Nigal, *Magic, Mysticism and Hasidism*, 67–133.
 - 19 See Galley, *Der Gerechte ist das Fundament der Welt*, 117–85.
 - 20 On appearances of Elijah, see Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 280–93; on swift travel, *ibid.*, 82–5, and Nigal, *Magic, Mysticism, and Hasidism*, 33–49.
 - 21 The overall Jewish communal organization of the Kingdom of Poland, mid-sixteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries.
 - 22 Abish, *aleph bet yud shin*, is made up of the initial letters of [*ke*]erez *baLvanon yisgeh, ṣḥetulim* (like a cedar of Lebanon he shall grow, planted).
 - 23 An extremely basic aspect of the rules of kosher food.
 - 24 A mourner is expected to refrain from most prayers and rituals during the first stage of bereavement, before the funeral.
 - 25 Nehemiah 9:8, referring to Abraham, included in the daily liturgy.
 - 26 For example, in *Simḥat Yisrael*, story after story about Rebbe Simhah Bunem of Psishkhe is ascribed to his own reminiscing.
 - 27 See below, chapter 1, note 13.

- 28 On these traditions, see Kaplan, *Living Torah*, on Exodus 28:30.
- 29 Thanks to my student Rachel Rastin for this insight. See Brill, “Spiritual World of a Master of Awe,” 29–30.
- 30 Or “all of you”: the grammatical form has changed from singular to plural.
- 31 A handshake (*teqiat kaf*) is a binding form of agreement in Jewish law.
- 32 A man and woman not married to each other are not supposed to be alone together, even on the road. See Lewis, “Women’s Voices, Men’s Laws.”
- 33 Part of the role of the *batkhen* (*badḥan*), the “jester” or master of ceremonies at a traditional Eastern European Jewish wedding.
- 34 The text uses the term “wedding canopy” (*huppah*) as if for a Jewish wedding, accentuating the parallelism between the Jewish and gentile bridegrooms.
- 35 A stock phrase, from Psalm 119:162.
- 36 Or, “he [the narrator’s informant] heard the whole story from that man [who visited the village] in person” (literally, “and he himself told him all this”).

Chapter One

- 1 See, for example, Berger’s long introduction to *Eser Orot*.
- 2 See Davis, *Stories of Change*, 3; Phelan, “Narratives in Contest,” 166; Scholes et al., *Nature of Narrative*, 285.
- 3 This concept is rooted in Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* (on *grands récits*, often translated “grand narratives.”) My own thinking is more influenced by narrative theologians, such as Goldberg in *Getting Our Stories Straight*, and by discussions of Israeli and Palestinian narratives in the political context, such as Alpher et al., “Narratives Revisited.”
- 4 Thanks to Steve G. Lofts for this thought.
- 5 I am extrapolating from the insights of a number of scholars. See Bascom, “Four Functions of Folklore,” 342–4; Benford, “Controlling Narratives,” 64; Jackson, *Politics of Storytelling*, 28; Leavy, *In Search of the Swan Maiden*, 2; Ochs and Capps, *Living Narrative*, 7–18.
- 6 A common theme of both popular and academic writing, for example, Kane, in *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*.
- 7 Jackson, *Politics of Storytelling*, 25.
- 8 See Adler, “Virgin in the Brothel.”
- 9 See Goldin, “On the Account of the Banning of R. Eliezer ben Hyrquanus.”
- 10 See, for example, Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 212–19, on Resh Laqish and Rabbi Yohanan, discussed in chapter 13.
- 11 See, for example, Rubenstein’s comments on the “Oven of Akhnai,” “Honi the Circle Drawer,” “Rabbis and Wives,” in *Rabbinic Stories*, 80–2, 128–9, 139–41.
- 12 Recent presentations of the rise of Hasidism include Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania*, chapters 8 and 9; Dynner, *Men of Silk*.
- 13 See Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 9–11, on stories attributed to the Baal Shem Tov by his

BIBLIOGRAPHY



For the early editions of Berger's and Michelson's books, I had access to photo-offset reprints, typically printed in Israel and undated. Bibliographical data here are for the original editions. Bible, Talmud, and other rabbinic and medieval works are cited from standard printed editions and electronic databases.

Adam Baal Shem (in Yiddish). Lemberg, 1884.

Adler, Rachel. "The Virgin in the Brothel and Other Anomalies: Character and Context in the Legend of Beruriah." *Tikkun* 3, no. 6 (1988): 28–32, 102–5.

Aescoly, Aharon Ze'ev. *HaḤasidut bePolin* (Hasidism in Poland). Edited by David Assaf. Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 5759/1999.

Akenson, Donald Harman. *Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1998.

Alexander, Tamar. "Love and Death in a Contemporary *Dybbuk* Story." In *Spirit Possession in Judaism: Cases and Contexts from the Middle Ages to the Present*, edited by Matt Goldish, 307–45. Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2003.

Alfassi, Itzhak. *HaḤasidut* (Hasidism). Israel: Sifrit Maariv 1974.

– *HaḤasidut BeRumeniyah* (Hasidism in Romania). Tel Aviv: Segulah 5733/1973.

Alpher, Yossi, Ghassan Khatib, Paul Scham, and Walid Salem. "Narratives Revisited." *Bitterlemons: Palestinian-Israeli Crossfire*, 35, 4 September 2006, <http://www.bitterlemons.org/previous/blo40906ed35.html> (accessed July 2008).

Alter, Robert. *The Invention of Hebrew Prose*. Seattle: University of Washington 1988.

Amodio, Mark C., ed. *New Directions in Oral Theory*. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies 2005.

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso 1991.
- Asheri, Israel Hayim, and Isaac Lifshits, ed. *Siaḥ Zeqenim* (Conversations of the elders). Vol. 5. Brooklyn 2004.
- Assaf, David. *Derekh HaMalkhut: R' Yisrael MeRuz'in* (The regal way: R' Israel of Ruzhin]. Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History 1997.
- *Neeḥaz BaSvakh: Pirqē Mishbar Umevukheh BeToldot HaḤasidut* (Caught in the thicket: Chapters of crisis and discontent in the history of Hasidism). Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History 2006.
 - “One Event, Two Interpretations: The Fall of the Seer of Lublin in Hasidic Memory and Maskilic Satire.” In *Polin*, edited by A. Polonsky, vol. 15, 187–202. Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization 2002.
 - *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin*. Translation of *Derekh HaMalkhut*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002.
- Auerbach, Uri. *Reb Meir Premishlaner: His Life and His Work*. (Title page reads: *Reb Maerl Premishlaner: His Life, Works, and Divrei Torah*). New York: Moznaim 1983.
- Aykhtler, Yisrael. *Kemalakh Hanitsav al Rosh Derekh* (Like an angel standing at the head of the path). Jerusalem: Mishkenot Haro'im 5755/1995.
- Babel, Isaac. *Red Cavalry*. London: A.J. Knopf 1929.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1968.
- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 2d ed. University of Toronto Press 1998.
- Band, Arnold. *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*. New York: Paulist Press 1978.
- Bartal, Israel. *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772–1881*. Translated by Chaya Naor. University of Pennsylvania Press 2006.
- “The Kinnus Project: Wissenschaft des Judentums and the Fashioning of a ‘National Culture’ in Palestine.” In *Transmitting Jewish Tradition*, edited by Y. Elman and I. Gershoni, 310–23. New Haven: Yale University Press 2000.
- Bartal, Israel, et al., eds. *KeMinhag Ashkenaz VePolin: Sefer Yovel LeKhone Shmeruk* [According to the Custom of Ashkenaz and Poland: Festschrift for Khone Shmeruk]. Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History 1993.
- Bar-Zohar, Michael. *Ben-Gurion*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1977.
- Bascom, William R. “Four Functions of Folklore.” *Journal of American Folklore* 6, no. 266 (October–December 1954): 333–49.
- Baumgarten, Jean. “Le Gaon de Vilna entre l’histoire et la légende.” *Les cahiers du Judaïsme* 6 (1999–2000): 60–71.
- *Récits hagiographiques juifs*. Paris: Cerf 2001.
- Belcove-Shalin, Janet S. *New World Hasidism: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America*. Albany: State University of New York Press 1995.
- Ben-Amos, Dan, and Jerome R. Mintz, eds. *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov*. English translation of *Shivḥe HaBesht*. New York: Schocken 1984.