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The Death of the Baal Shem Tov

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The Death of the Baal Shem Tov

Abstract

Legend, not history, tells the life story of the Baal Shem Tov. The chroniclers of his day hardly noticed the folk healer from Medzhibozh who wandered around the 18th-century Jewish communities of the Ukraine, and later achieved fame as the founder of the Hasidic movement. The rabbinical authorities made no mention of him in their writings and the community leaders did not consider him a force to reckon with. But there he was: a Besht (abbreviated from Baal Shem Tov, "a master of good name") traveling with his small retinue of amulet writers from one small Jewish community to another, offering his mystical powers to cure the sick and the barren.

Disciplines

Cultural History | History of Religion | Intellectual History | Jewish Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

The Death of the Baal Shem Tov

By DAN BEN-AMOS

LEGEND, not history, tells the life story of the Baal Shem Tov. The chroniclers of his day hardly noticed the folk healer from Medzhibozh who wandered around the 18th-century Jewish communities of the Ukraine, and later achieved fame as the founder of the Hasidic movement. The rabbinical authorities made no mention of him in their writings and the community leaders did not consider him a force to reckon with. But there he was: a Besht (abbreviated form of Baal Shem Tov, "a master of good name") traveling with his small retinue of amulet writers from one small Jewish community to another, offering his mystical powers to cure the sick and the barren.

At every place he arrived, the Besht exorcized evil spirits from possessed people and haunted houses, and in his prayers redeemed the souls of the dead who wandered between heaven and hell. His conversations and epigrams expressed his particular teaching, his *toyreh*, but he frowned upon anybody who attempted to write them down.

As legend has it, "Once the Besht saw a demon walking and holding a book in his hand. He said to him: 'What is the book that you hold in your hand?'"

"He answered him: 'This is the book that you have written.'"

"The Besht then understood that there was a person who was writing down his torah. He gathered all his followers and asked them: 'Who among you is writing down my torah?'"

"The man admitted it and he brought the manuscript to the Besht. The Besht examined it and said: 'There is not even a single word here that is mine.'" (In *Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, p. 179)

* * *

ONLY after the death of the Baal Shem Tov, his disciple Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye (died 1782) put down in writing the wisdom of his master, and even then barely mentioning him by name, only referring to him as "my rabbi."

It took even longer, approximately 55 years after the Besht's death in 1760, for his life story to appear in print. A local printer of the town of Kopys, in the province of Reissen in Poland, obtained a Hebrew manuscript of tales about the Besht, and realizing its value, published it in 1814. The first printing did not bear the name of the compiler of these legends, but in a later edition he was identified as Rabbi Dov Ber (also Dob Baer ben Samuel), the son-in-law of Rabbi Alexander, the *shochet* who had been an amulet writer in the service of the Baal Shem Tov for eight years.

The small volume of tales met with an immediate success. Within two years of publication it appeared in four Hebrew and three Yiddish editions. In spite of an official prohibition that lasted over 30 years on the publication of Hasidic works, the book was continually being printed; when the ban was lifted many more editions were issued to meet a continuous demand.

Modern renditions containing informative introductions and notes appeared in Hebrew aimed at a non-Hasidic but interested readership. The English reading public had had the opportunity to examine sample tales about the life of the Besht in the anthologies that Martin Buber edited. The great religious philosopher had a special conception of Hasidism on the one hand and of modern man on the other, and he tried to modify the tales to fit both.

The first complete English translation of the book was prepared by Jerome R. Mintz and myself and appeared as *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov (Shivhei ha-Besht): The Earliest Collection of Legends about the Founder of Hasidism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970.

The cycle of legends in this hagiographic book unfolds the biography of a saint and a miracle worker, starting with his orphaned childhood and attainment of mystical knowledge and magical powers, and continuing with numerous incidents and episodes in which the Besht demonstrates his unique abilities, and finally culminating with the description of his death scene. In the bulk of the tales, the Besht appears traveling around the Jewish communities. Here he discovers the whereabouts of a lost son, there he cures a paralyzed woman. He fights demons in one town and produces rain in another. He foretold the future downfall of the powerful and predicted the rise of the poor and the humble; as for himself he led a life of prayer and devotion striving to achieve the utmost communion with God (*devekuth*). In some tales he is described in the company of his disciples who are eager to learn from him the secret of his mystical abilities, and in other stories his followers tell about the acts of his closest disciples and other righteous modest men.

* * *

WHILE within the Hasidic community *Shivhei ha-Besht* achieved the status of a holy book soon after publication, and continues until this very day to be the cornerstone of Hasidic narrative literature, the position of this volume in the outside circles changed radically throughout the years. Initially the opponents of Hasidism, the *mitnaggdim*, regarded the legends with contempt, as an illustration of the feeble-mindedness and superstitious nature of Hasidic beliefs. Later, when the conflict between the two camps within Judaism subsided, and modern Jews appeared in East European Jewry, scholars and writers began to be interested in Hasidism, and viewed the legends of the Baal Shem Tov with romantic sentiment.

For them these narratives were the exemplary expression of the traditional folk in the East European Jewish community. They regarded Hasidic legends as expressing naive, sincere and direct emotions, ideas and values that were so much alive in the *shtetl*, but were nowhere to be found in the urban centers of scholarship in which the students and the writers lived.

But such a romantic sentiment is actually a double-edged sword. It involves both admiration and condescension. While the *mitnaggdim* despised the tales about the Besht and other rabbis because of their simplicity, literary writers loved them for the very same reason. Their conception of the tales has not changed much. They continue to consider them as unrefined and primitive literature. Hence any attempt to present the narratives before a modern literary audience allegedly requires textual improvements and modifications.

This attitude toward oral tales, which combines blatant disdain with good intention, is hardly unique with Jewish writers. Whenever authors in any language attune themselves to popular speaking or writing of narratives, they feel an urge to correct the tales, to improve upon them, to rewrite them in the image they have of folk tales and their verbal performance. After all, no peasant would tell literary experts how to write down a good village story.

In the case of Hasidic literature, it has been the intent of modern writers and philosophers to bring forward those aspects of thought and literary values which might be relevant to the problems of modern man, highlighting the piety of Hasidism. For example, in Tale 87 of *Shivhei ha-Besht* the narrator describes the Besht observing an unlearned simple hose-maker going on his way to the synagogue: "He looked through the window and saw the worker going to the synagogue." In Buber's rendition of the same text the sentence reads as follows: "He . . . looked out of the window. He saw a man go by. He carried his prayer shawl and phylacteries in his hand and set his feet as intently and solemnly as though he were going straight to the doors of Heaven (my italics)." (*Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters*, p. 68) This interpolation reflects Buber's conception of the Hasidim and is an alien element in their tales. Certainly, it is quite possible that modern man, whoever he is, is more interested in Buber's interpretation of Hasidism and his interpolations in their tales than in the actual legends.

This example illustrates a modern religious philosopher addressing himself to his audience. But the tales of the Hasidim were not intended for the literate educated public that comprises the readership of Buber. Their primary indigenous audience consisted of the followers of the Baal Shem Tov and other rabbis, and originally these people understood the tales within the context of their own social life and world of references. The attributes of crudeness, obscurity and primitivity which are accorded to these legends might reflect the ignorance of the sophisticated reader, his lack of understanding of the Hasidic world and its allusions and connotations.

But in bringing modern readers closer to the understanding of the tales we should not modify the texts, rather we should try to read the legends the way the Hasidim themselves listened to them. There is a need to find the clues for meanings, for allusions to traditional notions, and for the references to cultural facts and ideas. Above all, it is necessary to reveal for ourselves the narrative art which the Hasidim practiced so well every Shabbat afternoon around their rebbe's table, in short, what is the message of a particular tale and how is it communicated.

These tales have a literary integrity of their own which becomes apparent in the context of Hasidic narrative art. Instead of reading into the tales what modern writers and philosophers think about Hasidism, we might attempt to find out what meanings can be found in the legends themselves. Let us then read the following legend from *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*:

The Besht's Death

I will write a little about his death. His passing away was on the first day of Shavuot. On the Passover before that, the rabbi, our teacher Pinhas of Korets, visited with the Besht, and Rabbi Pinhas felt a little weak. Because of this he hesitated to go to the *mikveh* on the eve of the last holiday of Passover, and finally he decided not to go. On the seventh day of the Passover Rabbi Pinhas perceived within the prayer that it was decreed that the Besht would soon pass away because of his fight against the sect of Shabbetai Tzvi, as is told above in the story when they wanted to burn the Babylonian Talmud on Yom Kippur. (Tale 47 in *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*) The rabbi, our teacher and rabbi, Rabbi Pinhas, began to strengthen his prayer, but it did not help, and he regretted that he had not gone to the *mikveh*. He thought that if he would have seen this while he was in the *mikveh* it would have helped. After the prayer the Besht asked him whether he went to the *mikveh* on the previous day, and he said, "No."

The Besht said: "The deed has already been done and there is nothing that can alter it."

After the Passover the Besht was sick with diarrhea, but in spite of that he gathered his strength and went to pray before the ark. He did not say anything about it to his students, who were known to have powerful prayers, and he sent them elsewhere. The rabbi, our teacher and rabbi, Pinhas, did not return home. On the eve of Shavuot all his followers gathered to spend the night saying prayers, such as the redemption prayer of the Ari, God bless his memory. The Besht said torah before them concerning the biblical portion of the week and the giving of the Torah. In the morning he sent for all his followers to gather and he told Rabbi Leib Kessler and someone else, I have forgotten his name, to handle his burial. Because they were members of the funeral society and needed to know about diseases, he showed them the signs on each of the members of his own body, and he explained how the soul emanates from this member and from that member. He told them to gather a minyan to pray with him. He told

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them to give him a prayer book and he said: "Soon I shall be with God, blessed be He."

After the prayer, Rabbi Nahman of Horodenka went to the *Bet-Hamidrash* to pray for him. The Besht said: "He shouts in vain. If he could have entered in the gate where I was accustomed to enter, his prayer would have helped." At that moment the soul of a dead man came to him asking for redemption. He scolded him, saying: "For 80 years you have wandered, and you have not heard until today that I am in this world. Get out, wicked one." He immediately said to the servant: "Rush outside and shout for everyone to clear away from the road because I angered him and he may hurt someone." And so it was that he hurt a maiden, the daughter of the *shammass*. The servant returned and he heard the Besht saying: "I grant you these two hours. Do not torture me."

The servant said: "Who are you talking to, sir?"

He said: "Do you not see the Angel of Death who always ran from me? As people say, 'I banished him to where black peppers grow.' Now that they have given him control over me his shoulders have broadened and he feels joyous."

Then all the people of the town came to see him on the holiday, and he said torah to them. After that, during the meal, he told the servant to put mead in a large glass, but the servant put it in a small glass. The Besht said: "Man has no power [on] the day of death," (Ecc. 8:8, in the biblical context this phrase means that man has "no power over the day of death"), "even the *gabbai* does not obey me." Then he said: "Until now I have done favors for you. Now you will do a favor for me." Then he went to the toilet and the servant wanted to follow him. He asked him: "Is today different from any other day that you want to follow me? What do you see in me?" He did not go after him.

He also gave them a sign that when he passes away the two clocks will stop. When he washed his hands the big clock stopped, and his followers stood around it so that he would not see it. He said to them: "I am not concerned about myself because I know clearly that when I leave through this door I immediately enter another door." He sat on his bed and he told them to gather around him. He said torah to them about the column on which one ascends from lower paradise to upper paradise, and how this was so in each world. He described what it was like in the world of the souls, and he interpreted the order of worship. He told them to say, "Let the pleasantness of the Lord our God be upon us." He lay down and sat up several times. He concentrated on *kavvanot* until they could not distinguish the syllables. He ordered them to cover him with a sheet, and he began to tremble as one saying the 18 benedictions. Then slowly he became quiet and they saw that the small clock had stopped. They waited for a long time. Then they put a feather under his nose and they realized that he had passed away.

I heard all this from Rabbi Jacob of the holy community of Medzhibozh, who passed away in the Holy Land. The rabbi said that Rabbi Leib Kessler saw the departure of his soul as a blue flame. (In *Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, pp. 255-57)

THIS tale is hardly "typical" of the legends in *Shivhei ha-Besht*. Obviously, a description of the death of the central character could not be a recurrent theme. But its subject matter is not the only reason for the uniqueness of the tale. The form of the narration, starting with the opening sentence and continuing with the rest of the episodes, is marked by an inherent contrast with the other legends. Most tales start with a formula that validates the authenticity of the events in the narration by reference to a known personality as a source: "I heard this from . . ." The writer also evokes the sanction of oral transmission as a testimony for the historicity of the incidents. In such cases the writer serves in the role of a mediator between the oral teller of the story and the reading public. He transforms the legend from the oral to the written medium and becomes merely a transmitter of cultural knowledge.

Other tales, in which the authenticating formula is missing, open with a beginning which is common to Hebrew popular literature: "Once . . ." Joseph Dan of the Hebrew University contends that there is a greater preponderance of magical motifs and elements of the miraculous in this last group of tales.

However, the present tale is mostly realistic, even earthy in details, and above all it does not lack a validating statement, except in this text it appears as a signature at the end of the story: "I heard all this from Rabbi Jacob of the holy community of Medzhibozh." The authenticity of the story is reinforced by the fact that its source is a person from the Besht's own town, making it a local version of the legends of the death of the Besht. The writer in that case did not wish to present the tale as a partially fictitious and undocumented account. The subject matter is too important to be tampered with.

In fact there is reason to assume that the choice of the opening sentence, "I will write a little about his death," is not accidental. In the entire collection there is only one other tale which the writer opens in a similar form, and the examination of this story and its unique qualities may cast some light on the rhetorical intent and function of the present opening formula.

As just mentioned, in most tales the author functions as a mediator between oral tradition and his readers. There are only two stories in which he reports events he personally witnessed, both of which concern Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye. One of these legends is an account of the

righteous conduct of the rabbi, to which the writer was but a passive observer (Tale 144, "Feeling the Tefillin"), but the other is a story about an incident in which the writer was actively involved as a young man (Tale 51, "The Protective Prayers") serving as a messenger for the rabbi. This last tale opens with the phrase "Let me write a little in praise of rabbi . . ." which is similar, also in the Hebrew original, to the beginning of the present story.

Hence the phrase serves the author to remove the barriers of mediation. No longer does he appear in the role of a transmitter of information who relies on stories others told, but he tries to convey a sense of direct personal involvement in the events. With this phrase he introduces a story in which he participates, and at the same time he involves the reader in his own contemplation about the next episode he is about to write.

In contrast with the more common opening formula in the past tense, "I heard from . . .," which is passive, he begins the present story with the future tense tentative verb, "I will write . . ." Consequently there is a dual direct personal involvement of the author in the story; first, as a character partaking in the episode and, secondly, as a writer communicating with his readers. This opening formula suggests that it introduces a personal narrative. Although the writer himself was not present at the Besht's death scene, the introduction signifies his fictive presence there, as if he were in the room being able to follow every single move the Baal Shem Tov made in his last hours. Secondly, the phrase "I will write . . ." also establishes a relationship of communicative intimacy and confidentiality between the writer and his reader which is absent from all other tales in the collection.

* * *

ONCE begun, the narration of the Besht's death scene becomes a story which develops along two intertwined themes: a general reversal of relationships and a gradual resignation from life. The reversal of relationship becomes apparent by comparing the situations in this story with other tales in the collection. Throughout the book the legends establish the figure of the Besht as a personality who prays for the welfare of the Jewish community and its individual members. He produces rain and cures the ailing; he redeems wandering souls and combats Satan. In critical situations he appeals before the Throne and the rabbinical authorities in paradise on behalf of the entire Jewry. However, in the present tale the relationship reverses itself, transforming the Besht from a subject to an object. He does not pray for the Jews but they pray for him.

The sequence of prayer scenes alternate between an individual and a communal appeal for the well-being of the Baal Shem Tov, yet neither is effective. The reversal is situational and not absolute for the disciples do not possess the necessary spiritual force the leader had had. There is a growing awareness of the irreplaceability of the Baal Shem Tov; neither of his disciples could do what he could have done. The recognition of the ineffectiveness of the prayers amounts to a gradual resignation from life, a sense of futility. The plot is punctuated by two statements of despair that the Besht pronounces after the failure of each of his disciples. After the prayer of Rabbi Pinhas, the Besht says: "The deed has already been done and there is nothing that can alter it." And after the prayers of Rabbi Nahman, he says: "He shouts in vain. If he could have entered in the gate where I was accustomed to enter, his prayer would have helped."

Each of these statements is followed by a narrative manifestation of a gradual resignation from life, first a corporal and later a socio-religious withdrawal. The Besht instructs the members of the funeral society about the emanation of the souls from the members of the body, and later he refuses to redeem a wandering soul, an act which he performed throughout his adult life. Previously he was capable of saving souls "by the thousands and the tens of thousands" (Tale 46), but this time he rejects the sole soul that appeals for him to invoke his special powers. By refusing the spirit of the dead this last favor, the Besht renounces his socio-religious role in life and this act leads to a further reversal of relations which occur on the levels of religious beliefs and social order respectively.

First, the Angel of Death, whom he successfully banished "to where black peppers grow," is now looming behind him ready to take control of him. Secondly, on the social level, the servant disrupts the master-servant relationship that has been maintained between them previously, and now, out of concern for the Besht, he disobeys orders and takes command of the situation. Finally, the social reversal of relationship occurs within a biographic dimension. The people that surround the Besht take away from him the adult status in society and treat him like a child by attempting to violate his privacy in the toilet.

Yet the death scene is a final glorious moment in which the Besht appears the way he was: surrounded by his followers. Rabbis die the way they lived, with their disciples around them. As usual, he is saying a torah about the upper worlds and the ascension of the souls and his followers listen and observe; except this time, for him, teaching and reality unite.

The reversal of relationships, the gradual withdrawal from life and society, and the last affirmation of the Besht's role in the community all culminate in the final moment of his life. When death comes, the termination of corporal and social existence becomes an event of cosmic dimension. The world comes to a total halt. Death is the end of time.

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