



Imagining Holiness

Classic Hasidic Tales in Modern Times

JUSTIN JARON LEWIS

Imagining Holiness



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the South African War, 1899–1902
Gordon L. Heath
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Founding Judaism, 70 to 640
Jacob Neusner
- 52 Imagining Holiness
Classic Hasidic Tales in Modern Times
Justin Jaron Lewis

SERIES ONE
G.A. Rawlyk, Editor

- 1 Small Differences
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1815–1922
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in Modern Mexico
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- 24 The Chignecto Covenanters
A Regional History of Reformed
Presbyterianism in New Brunswick
and Nova Scotia, 1827–1905
Eldon Hay
- 25 Methodists and Women's Education
in Ontario, 1836–1925
Johanne Selles
- 26 Puritanism and Historical Controversy
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Justin Jaron Lewis

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

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CONTENTS



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS / xi



PART ONE

A Taste of Hasidic Tales

Blessing the Moon / 5

The Candle / 9

Protection from Fire;
Husband and Wife Reunited / 11

The Ecstasies of Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev / 13

A Journey with Rebbe Moses Leyb of Sasov / 15

The Spot of Sugar / 17

Forgetting the Mishnah / 18

The Butcher's Blessing / 21

The Reluctant Rabbi / 22

To Be a Leader / 25

Wedding Presents / 27



PART TWO

In the Marketplace: The Stories in Context

1 Preliminary Questions / 35

2 Authors and Books / 47

3 Historical Context / 57

4 Literary Context / 70

5 Issues of Authenticity / 82

6 The Status of the Stories / 96



PART THREE

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

- 7 Study and Storytelling / 111
8 R' Hayim's Strange Blessings / 129



PART FOUR

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

- 9 "Taste the Food on My Plate" / 159
10 The Changeling / 171
11 Eydl of Brody: Stories against Stories / 183
12 The Naked Rebbe / 207



PART FIVE

The Wounded Body

- 13 Scorched by His Glowing Coal / 227
14 A Paradox That No One Can Solve / 250



AFTERWORD / 262

APPENDIX:

Names and Dates / 265

GLOSSARY / 269

NOTES / 275

BIBLIOGRAPHY / 315

INDEX / 341

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Imagining Holiness



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

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PART ONE



A Taste of Hasidic Tales

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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 in this book. Many more of their stories are later cited in full or in part. 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, stories like this one 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 Nomska, 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 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 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 storey 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 the merchant's 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 as both frightening and 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 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 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 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 Kotsk, 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” (*Ey-zehu 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 Tsanz 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.”

Wedding Presents

Source: Michelson, *Meqor Hayim* no. 182

This unusually long tale has a story-within-a-story structure, with Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz telling about Rebbe Elimelech of Lizensk (d. 1786) and about Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczyce, who appears here as a young disciple of R' Elimelech. The story includes elements touched on later in this book: the rebbe's storytelling as a theurgic/magical practice, and the presence of a woman character who shows strength and initiative but is eclipsed by the narrator's focus on her male counterpart. Other interesting aspects include a rare glimpse of a rebbe acting less than superhuman, fleeing from an epidemic; folk practices (which were attacked as superstitious by modernizing opponents of Hasidism); acceptance of the traditional feudal structure of Eastern European society (mirrored by the social organization of hasidic groups, with rebbes as "lords");²⁹ and ethically problematic aspects such as the treatment of the tavern-keeper at the end of the story-within-the-story. A gentler version of this story, set in an earlier time, was published by the secular Yiddish author I.L. Peretz under the title "Der Balshem firt oys a shidekh" ("The Baal Shem Tov makes a match"); an oral version, also featuring the Baal Shem Tov, can be found in Weinreich, *Yiddish Folktales*, 279–81.

❧ The great scholar Rabbi Uri Tenenzaft (long may he live), rabbi of Starinia, wrote to me:

Once there was an epidemic, heaven protect us, in the town of Tsanz, and the holy rebbe, R' Hayim, fled from the town. The townspeople, following his orders, took an orphaned boy and girl and married them to each other. According to custom, the townspeople provided for all the needs of the wedding; and the wedding canopy was in the cemetery, since it is known that this is a remedy that halts epidemics. And indeed God in his great compassion told the destroying angel, "Cease!" and the epidemic ended.

When the holy rebbe R' Hayim heard that God had remembered his people, he returned to his house and held a banquet to honour the newly married couple, and he had them invited to the banquet along with all the townspeople. After the meal he turned to the young bridegroom (whom everyone called "the town son-in-law") and said to him:

"Although I was not present on your day of joy, I will give you my wedding present now. But first let me tell both of you³⁰ a story of the righteous and holy rebbe R' Elimelech, of eternally blessed memory, of Lizensk."

Once there were a male and a female servant who were working for a tavernkeeper. He promised them such-and-such a yearly wage, but they did not want to accept the wages from him a bit at a time; they thought it would be better for them to work for several years and then receive a substantial sum all at once, enough to do something with.

But, to their sorrow, their hopes were not fulfilled, because after a few years the wheel of fate turned for their employer (heaven protect us), and he had nothing left to pay them for their work. When they saw that he could not pay them, they forgave him wholeheartedly and hired themselves out to another employer in a different town.

After he had worked there for over a year, the young man [the male servant] saw his former employer, who was begging from door to door (heaven protect us). The young man went up to him and asked about his bitter situation, and why he had not looked for some way of earning a living rather than casting his honour into the dust, begging from door to door.

His former employer answered, "If only I had a hundred gulden, I could [make a fresh start and] earn a living from my own labour."

As soon as the young man heard these words, he went and told the other servant, the young woman. He told her that his counsel was that the two of them should give their former employer the amount he had mentioned, since they had already earned that much with their new employer.

The young woman answered, "Although your words are right and good, I cannot fulfil your request and agree to your plan. I have come of age to be married, and who will want to marry a poor young woman without money or a trousseau? But I will agree to give him all my money on one condition: if you will promise me with a handshake³¹ to take me as your wife, though I have no money."

The young man did not hesitate, and he promised her with a handshake, and they gave their first master all their money. He left happy and contented, and engaged in some trade, and the Blessed Name brought him success, so that from then on he earned an honourable living.

But the young man and the young woman agreed to go begging from door to door to raise their wedding expenses, because at their age they would not be able to work as servants for someone else long enough to earn so much. [After some time] they bought a horse and a wagon and travelled together from town to town to raise the money they needed. They committed no transgression, even though they were always together.

All of this caused a great tumult among the household of heaven. The holy rebbe R' Elimelech (may his merit protect us) also saw all this, through the spirit of prophecy, and longed very much to be at the wedding of such a holy couple. Once he told his holy disciples to travel with him to a certain place. They travelled for a few hours, until they came to a tavern in a village. There Rebbe Elimelech gave orders to stop. It was already time for the evening prayers, and they went into the tavern and recited the evening service. They did not tell the tavernkeeper who they were but made as if they were merchants.

After the evening prayers they noticed a young man and a young woman sitting in a corner of the tavern. The rebbe R' Elimelech asked them who they were and what they were doing there. The young man told them this whole story, and that they were travelling to raise their wedding expenses.

The rebbe said to him, "I see that you are good Jews; why should you continue violating the prohibition of an unmarried man and woman travelling together?³² It would be right and good for you to marry each other first, and afterwards you can still travel to your hearts' content."

This seemed good in the eyes of the young man; so they set up a wedding canopy right away, and the rebbe R' Elimelech (may his merit protect us) conducted the wedding, according to the law of Moses and Israel. After that the tavernkeeper served them supper – and all this was a joke to him.

After the meal, the holy rebbe R' Naphtali of Ropczyce climbed onto the table and began announcing the wedding presents, according to custom.³³ To begin with, the rebbe R' Elimelech gave them the village they were in as a wedding present. Then one of his disciples gave them the mill, with six millstones, in the neighbouring village. Another one said he was giving them a thousand Rhenish gulden as a wedding present. After that, they told the tavernkeeper that he should also give some present to the couple. But his mouth was filled with laughter as he said, "Isn't it enough for you that I gave them food and drink today for nothing? Am I supposed to give them presents too?" Thereupon the Rebbe of Ropczyce said that he was giving them the tavern and its distillery as a wedding present. It was all a joke to the tavernkeeper.

After the grace following the meal, the rebbe R' Elimelech and his disciples went home, and the newly married couple went on their way. When they were close to the forest by that village, they heard a voice crying out in Polish for help: "Help! Rescue me!"

The husband said, "Let us turn aside and see who is crying out." Although it was still in the darkness of the night, with only a little

moonlight, he went into the forest until he found where the voice was coming from. There he saw a young man dressed in the manner of a nobleman, sitting on a horse that had sunk to its neck in the mire. When he saw this, he ran back and brought his horse with the wagon; and by God's mercy, he succeeded in pulling the young nobleman out. He had him lie down on the wagon, because he was completely exhausted, almost without strength.

When the husband asked the young nobleman who he was and what he was doing there in the darkness of the night, he answered that he was the son of the lord of that village, and he and his family owned many more villages; and the previous day had been the day appointed for his wedding³⁴ to the daughter of the lord of the neighbouring village. The banquet had already been prepared and the guests were arriving – many of the nobility from all around. But as they were eating and drinking in his father's house, in the midst of the meal, the young man felt a craving to ride to the forest and hunt, to bring some fresh meat to the banquet to surprise the guests. So he forsook the company and rode by himself to the forest, without letting anyone know. But when he was in the forest, the horse suddenly began to sink into the mire. Since then he had been crying out; if his rescuer had not come along, he would surely have died. So the young nobleman related, in tears; and he asked the husband to bring him to his father's house.

When they drew near the mansion of the lord, the young nobleman's father, and people there were told that the lord's son was on his way, all of them ran to meet him with great joy. They embraced and kissed him, rejoicing like those who find rich plunder,³⁵ for they had already given him up for lost.

The young nobleman told them everything that had happened since he left, and how close he had been to death – if not for this Jew, who, like a delivering angel, had rushed to help him and taken him out of the mud and mire.

When his father heard his son's words, he embraced the Jew, put his arm around him, and led him and his wife into the mansion. He sent for the Jewish tavernkeeper of that village to bring them food and drink to their hearts' content, and they rested there from the toil of their travelling.

Afterwards the lord called the Jew into the hall where the guests were and said to him, "Because you have done this and saved my son's life from death, I am giving you this village as a present." The young nobleman's mother said, "And I am giving him the village tavern, with

its distillery.” The other lord, the bride’s father, said, “And I am giving him my mill, in the neighbouring village, as a present.” And that lord’s wife gave him a thousand gulden cash.

Then they gave him deeds, signed and sealed, for each of these presents, and sent orders to the overseers of each of these places telling them that they had been given to that Jew, and that when he arrived there they were to hand over everything to him, as set out in the deeds.

Now, when it reached the ears of the Jewish tavernkeeper that he was compelled to turn over his tavern, he was greatly shocked, and travelled immediately to the holy rebbe R’ Elimelech. He wept before him bitterly and pleaded with him to pray for him so that he could remain in his place, for he had nowhere to turn.

But Rebbe Elimelech answered, “Didn’t I tell you to give some present to that couple out of your own good will? You didn’t listen; now, therefore, give him the tavern, and there is no more to say about it.”

That was the story that the holy Rebbe of Tsanz told. And he concluded, “I, too, am giving you such-and-such a village as a wedding present.”

The person who told me this story said that he heard it from a man who had visited that couple in that village, which belonged to them, who heard the whole story from [the husband] in person.³⁶

This concludes the words of Rabbi Uri Tenenzaft.

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PART TWO



*In the Marketplace:
The Stories in Context*

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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 *Shivḥe 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 so, 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 that 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.³³ 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, 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.⁴² 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, *Shivhe 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 part 2 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.

CHAPTER TWO



Authors and Books

One of the more striking images in hasidic tales is the Baal Shem Tov standing in the public thoroughfare, telling stories to passers-by.¹ Hasidic tales indeed belong to the marketplace, a noisy place of people of different stripes coming and going with their wares and ideas. This highly public aspect can be illustrated by locating Berger and Michelson, and their books of stories, in their historical and cultural contexts.²

Israel Berger was born in 1855 to a hasidic family, near Lapush in Transylvania, then part of Hungary. His father, Rabbi Isaac Simhah, was extremely pious, and Berger revered his memory as that of a holy man and wrote his praises alongside those of the great rebbes.³ A disciple of the Rebbe of Sighet, Yequiel Judah Teitelbaum (the Yetev Lev, 1808–1883),⁴ Israel Berger served as a rabbi in Transylvania, in Galicia (which was also in the Austro-Hungarian Empire), and finally in Bucharest, the capital of the kingdom of Romania, where he lived when his books of hasidic tales were published and where he died in 1919.⁵

Berger wrote several homiletic books⁶ that attest to his devotion to Hasidism. For example, the title page of *Retzon Yisrael* on the months and holy days refers to “our sages of blessed memory, the authors of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds and the Midrashim; and Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai [reputed author of the Zohar], peace be upon him, and the Ari of blessed memory [the great kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria], and the Baal Shem

Tov of blessed memory and his holy followers, of eternally blessed memory, the true masters of the spirit of prophecy [*ruah haqodesh*]." Berger thus presents the hasidic rebbes (the followers of the Baal Shem Tov) as the successors and counterparts of the founding figures of traditional Judaism and of the kabbalistic tradition.

The range of Berger's knowledge, together with the extent to which he was immersed in tradition and out of step with advancing modernity, is illustrated by his involvement with a book authored by his brother, Meir, but titled *Imre Yisrael* (Words of Israel) to honour Berger's part in it. Published in 1912, this book consists of religio-magical and folk-medical remedies for epilepsy,⁷ together with "charms (*segulot*) for success, for love and favour, to nullify an enemy, for virility, and other matters ... from ancient manuscripts ... and from the traditions of our rebbes, the followers of the Baal Shem Tov of blessed memory, from their oral teachings and from their writings ... and from a manuscript from the sages of the Holy Land ... and from an old manuscript from Italy." The ostensible author, Meir Berger, adds that most of this material came into his hands through his brother, Rabbi Israel of Bucharest, whose rabbinic approbation (*haskamah*) is also found at the beginning of the book.⁸

Israel Berger was highly respected by various rebbes and rabbis of his time, who refer to him as a learned scholar, as a respected religious author, and as a kabbalist.⁹ Several of the rebbes whose praises he compiled were still alive in his youth; in particular, he knew Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz, who wrote an affectionate reply to a letter from the young Berger concerning questions of prayer;¹⁰ Berger refers to him as "my teacher and rebbe."¹¹

In contrast, little information is available about Abraham Hayim Simhah Bunem Michelson. Much, however, has been recorded about his father, Rabbi Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson.¹² Tzvi Ezekiel was born in 1863 in Bilgorai, near Lublin, just as the outpouring of books of hasidic tales was beginning. Twice in his childhood he visited the court of Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz, to whom his family was related. A hasid of the Rebbe of Ger (the *Sefat Emet*),¹³ he was a respected rabbi, serving several communities in Poland, which until the First World War was part of the Russian Empire. From 1893 till 1921 he was the rabbi of Plonsk.¹⁴ His *haskamah* appears alongside Israel Berger's on the above-mentioned book of charms.

As of 1921 R' Tzvi Ezekiel served on the rabbinical council in Warsaw.¹⁵ He remained active in religious and communal matters and as an author until his death in the *khurbn* at age seventy-nine or eighty. He was a prolific author in the fields of halakhah (Jewish law), homiletics, and genealogy and stories of holy men, which particularly interested him.¹⁶ "You only had to

mention to him your father's name, or your grandfather's, and the Rabbi of Plonsk [as he was still known in Warsaw] would already be telling you about your heritage and your ancestry for hundreds of years back."¹⁷ Tzvi Ezekiel had a role in the editing of his son's book *Meqor Hayim* and perhaps others. He was also a major contributor of stories both to his son's books and to those of his relative by marriage, Israel Berger.

Abraham Hayim Simhah Bunem Michelson was born in 1886 in Krasnibrod, Poland, where his father was serving as rabbi. His mother's name was Hinde Serl.¹⁸ As of 1910 at the latest, he was married and living in his wife's town of Zgierz, near Lodz, where he prayed in the *shtibl* (hasidic prayer-house) of the Ger hasidim.¹⁹ Israel Berger refers to him as a learned rabbi: "My relative by marriage, the great, brilliant and scholarly rabbi, our teacher Rabbi Abraham Hayim Michelson, long may he live, wrote to me."²⁰ In the traditional context this need not mean that Michelson engaged in the rabbinat as a profession, and he does not appear to have published anything other than the books studied here. He apparently remained in Zgierz all his life,²¹ until he too was murdered in the *khurbn*.²²

Memories of Abraham Hayim Michelson are scattered throughout the memorial book for the Jewish community of Zgierz. One detail allows a pleasing glimpse of his personality: "He was blessed with a sense of humour, and sayings of his made the rounds of the community."²³

Michelson's *Shemen HaTov* (The good oil) appeared in 1905. It is a collection of teachings ascribed to, and stories told about, Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg, his brother R' Phinehas Horowitz, and several other rabbis who were their ancestors or relatives.

Four more books of Michelson's were published in 1910, after his move to Zgierz:²⁴ *Ohel Elimelekh* (Elimelech's tent or Elimelech's monument)²⁵ on Rebbe Elimelech of Lizensk; *Dover Shalom* (Speaker of peace/shalom) on Rebbe Shalom of Belz, including *Ohel Yehoshua* (Joshua's monument) on his son Rebbe Joshua of Belz; *Ateret Menaḥem* (Menahem's crown) on Rebbe Menahem Mendl of Rymanów; and *Ohel Naftali* (Naphtali's monument) on Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczyce, which includes *Zikhron Yitzḥaq* (Remembrance of Isaac) on his maternal grandfather, Rabbi Isaac Horowitz. Two more books appeared in 1911:²⁶ *Ohel Avraham* (Abraham's monument) on Rabbi Abraham Abish of Frankfurt am Main, and *Meqor Hayim* (Fountain of life/hayim) on Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz. Michelson apparently wrote one more book, *Ohel Rabi* (The rebbe's monument) on Rebbe Jacob Isaac, the Seer of Lublin, which seems never to have been printed.²⁷

At least three of Michelson's books, *Dover Shalom*, *Ohel Naftali*, and *Meqor Hayim*, later appeared in abridged, popular Yiddish versions, translated

anonymously (not, given the occasional mistakes, by the author himself). The Yiddish *Meqor Hayim* was produced by the same publisher and printer as its Hebrew original and appeared the same year (5672 on the Jewish calendar, 1911 or 1912).²⁸

Israel Berger, besides his homiletic books (not considered here), compiled a series of books in praise of holy men titled *Eser Qedushot*, *Eser Orot*, *Eser Tzahtzahot*, and *Eser Atarot*. These four volumes were published under the collective title *Zekhut Yisrael* (The merit of Israel). All had apparently been written by 1906, when *Eser Qedushot* was published, but *Eser Orot* was published in 1907 and the last two volumes in 1910.²⁹ The titles, playing on kabbalistic imagery of the ten sefirot or aspects of the divine, translate as “Ten holinesses,” “Ten lights,” “Ten radiances,” and “Ten crowns.” Each book contains teachings, stories, and biographical data about ten different holy men. Berger also compiled *Simhat Yisrael* (The joy/simhah of Israel) about Rebbe Simhah Bunem of Pshiskhe, and *Qedushat Yisrael* (The holiness of Israel) about Rebbe Shalom of Belz. Both had been written by 1907; *Simhat Yisrael* was published in 1910, and *Qedushat Yisrael* was apparently not published.³⁰

Although Michelson’s books initially met with some criticism and opposition, both his and Berger’s books of tales were soon reissued and have been reprinted many times.³¹ Moving testimony to their importance to Jews after the *khurbn* is the fact that several of them – *Ohel Elimelekh*, *Ohel Naftali*, *Eser Qedushot*, *Eser Tzahtzahot*, and *Eser Atarot* – were already reprinted in 1947 and 1948 in Germany, by and for “displaced persons.”³² At the turn of the twenty-first century, they have appeared in new, high-quality editions from hasidic publishers, with approbations from current rebbes, funded by donations from members of a variety of hasidic groups.³³

Characteristics of Berger’s and Michelson’s Books

In the context of traditional Jewish literature, these books belong to the genre of *shivhe tzadiqim* – “praises of holy men,” often rendered in scholarship in English as “hagiography.” Hasidic hagiographic works are in the tradition of the first book of hasidic tales, *Shivhe HaBesht*, which itself followed in the footsteps of earlier Jewish hagiography such as *Shivhe HaAri* (Praises of Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great kabbalist of sixteenth-century Safed).³⁴ Another traditional literary term that applies to these books is *liqutim*, “gatherings” or “compilations.”³⁵ As such they can be seen as part of a long tradition of Jewish anthologizing extending at least from the medieval period to the twentieth century.³⁶

Berger’s and Michelson’s books resemble each other in form (for example, each story or teaching is numbered but not titled) and content. Many of

their stories begin with source attributions that include published books, oral transmission, and letters from informants.

Their technique of collecting stories by letter seems to have been the straightforward one of asking likely contributors to mail as many stories as possible. *Meqor Hayim* no. 20 begins: “My relative, the great scholar, Rabbi Phinehas HaLevi Horowitz, long may he live, Rabbi of Kosov, wrote: ‘As to what your honour requested from me, that I write you all the stories I have heard about our master the Rebbe of Tzan, may his merit protect us – your honour is surely making fun of me. For I have been hungrily listening to stories of our master, may his merit protect us, for the last thirty-five years, and how many nights have I spent listening to marvels about him.’”

Unlike some collectors, Berger and Michelson do not rewrite their stories in a unified style but leave them more or less in the words of their sources. There is much shared material: Michelson makes extensive use of Berger’s books; Berger makes some use of Michelson’s books and of correspondence from Michelson himself; and many correspondents, including Michelson’s father, R’ Tzvi Ezekiel, and their relative, Rabbi Abraham Segal Itinga, contribute material to both.

Berger’s books are the more clearly organized. Typically, there are separate sections devoted to each rebbe’s biographical data and family relationship to Berger; stories; sayings; written teachings; and letters from the rebbe. A concluding paragraph gives the date of the rebbe’s death and often the text of his tombstone. Berger himself refers at times to his effort in organizing the material, and he appears to have been selective about what to include; in several instances when he considers a story to be well known, he merely summarizes it.

Michelson’s *Shemen HaTov* has separate sections of teachings and stories. The rest of his books are less organized; they typically begin with facts of the rebbe’s birth and some stories of his early life, but then chronology disappears and all kinds of material are mixed together. Michelson’s books give the impression of having included everything that was available, frequently including contradictory versions of the same story.

The anonymous Yiddish versions of *Dover Shalom*, *Meqor Hayim*, and *Ohel Naftali* are different in character; they leave out a great deal of material and keep, basically, the most dramatic stories.

Attributions, Anonymity, and Authorship

My attention to individual collectors may seem misplaced, since hasidic tales are often seen as anonymous folk products.³⁷ In actuality, some published hasidic stories were original works of fiction.³⁸ I do not think Berger or

Michelson or their correspondents were inventing new stories. Precisely, however, when these men were writing down stories drawn from oral tradition, they must be seen as authors, not simply recorders. Devising a version in the canonical Hebrew language of a story first told in the Yiddish vernacular was inevitably an act of literary creation.³⁹

As secular authors of the time who worked in both languages were discovering, the expressive capacities of Yiddish and traditional Hebrew are quite different.⁴⁰ Yiddish has colloquial vigour and a wealth of idioms. The traditional Hebrew of the time lacked these aspects, but allowed for allusions to classic texts in ways that oral or written Yiddish versions could not do.

For example, in the Hebrew original of *Meqor Hayim*, a character disparagingly refers to Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz as “the rabbi who limps upon his thigh” (*harav shehu tzoleya al yerekho*). The verbal allusion to the biblical Jacob after his wrestling with a divine being (Genesis 32:32) adds a larger dimension to the rebbe’s disability. This is lost in the Yiddish translation of *Meqor Hayim*, where the remark is simply “the rebbe who is lame” (*dem rebe’n vos er iz lom*).⁴¹ (There was no Yiddish equivalent of the King James Bible to allow for biblical expressions to be easily recognizable in the vernacular.) On the other hand, the Yiddish phrase has a natural and colloquial feel which the Hebrew lacks.⁴² Such examples show that written hasidic tales are something other than transcriptions of oral originals. They must be recognized as literary creations.

Nevertheless, although this study is focused on books by collectors whose names are printed on their title pages and signed in their introductions, questions about authorship persist.

In the culture in which I am writing, ideas of authorship are bound up with rules of copyright. Copyright existed in Berger’s and Michelson’s culture, both in Jewish and in secular law, and is emphatically invoked by the publishers near the beginning of several of these books. Thus a note in *Dover Shalom* states, “The prohibition of ‘encroaching on a boundary’ is known, according to the law of our holy Torah and the rules of the [Russian] Emperor, and it is forbidden to anyone to print this book. For the rights in this book belong exclusively to us, the publisher.” There is a similar warning at the end of the *haskamah* section in *Eser Orot*.⁴³ *Eser Qedushot* and *Ohel Avraham* include “deeds of sale” from the author to the publisher, which reiterate the prohibition of reprinting the work without the publisher’s consent.⁴⁴

In principle, Berger’s and Michelson’s family relationship and friendship would not make a difference here, since it was the publishers – not the authors, who had been paid outright – who stood to lose money from copyright violations. This, however, did not prevent our authors from borrowing considerable amounts of material from each other’s recently published books. For

example, Berger's *Eser Qedushot* repeatedly cites Michelson's *Shemen HaTov*, published the previous year. Michelson's *Ohel Naftali* appeared the year after Berger's *Eser Tzahtzahot*, which it cites repeatedly. Both authors cite other contemporary books as well. This was not uncommon; as noted by a recent hasidic editor, two books of tales compiled by Judah Aryeh Frenkl, published in 1910/11, "are mostly just copied from [Berger's] *Zekhut Yisrael*, without citing a source!"⁴⁵

Nor, more subtly, did copyright concerns stop contributors from sending identical material to both compilers.⁴⁶ Finally, it did not stop the publisher of *Meqor Hayim* from producing a Yiddish version of the book in the same year as the original. The Yiddish versions of *Meqor Hayim*, *Dover Shalom*, and *Ohel Naftali* are completely anonymous. Not only is the translator not named, but Michelson's name does not appear anywhere on these books.

Michelson's authorship of his Hebrew books has been disputed and ascribed by some to his father, R' Tzvi Ezekiel.⁴⁷ The strongest argument for this is that Israel Berger repeatedly cites *Shemen HaTov* as written by R' Tzvi Ezekiel.⁴⁸ In a parallel case, Ira Robinson notes that R' Yudel Rosenberg, a significant author of hasidic tales, put the name of his son Meir Joshua on one of his books. Robinson sees two possible reasons: "It would allow him to distance himself from the project ... Secondly, young Meir Joshua was on the marriage market, and ... having this publication to his credit might help him get a good match."⁴⁹ In the case of the Michelsons, though, the first motive does not seem relevant since R' Tzvi Ezekiel published similar work under his own name. The second motive might be applicable, but to *Shemen HaTov* only, since the other books were published when Abraham Hayim was living in Zgierz after his marriage.

Attributing even *Shemen HaTov* to R' Tzvi Ezekiel is problematic. The book includes repeated citations from the writings of "my father, my teacher" (*avi mori*), R' Tzvi Ezekiel,⁵⁰ and oral communications from him.⁵¹ The last twenty-seven pages of the book (127–54) consist of a letter from R' Tzvi Ezekiel to his son Abraham Hayim, praising *Shemen HaTov*, repeatedly referred to as "your book," and commenting on and adding to the teachings and tales – quite an elaborate hoax if R' Tzvi Ezekiel is the real author!

R' Tzvi Ezekiel's name appears in large type at the bottom of the last page of *Shemen HaTov*, as the "signature" to his letter. His name is also mentioned on the title page and in the introduction. It would make sense for his name to be the one that stayed in Berger's mind after he read the book, and a quick look at the book would find R' Tzvi Ezekiel's name there very prominently. Or, Berger may simply have thought of the book as a joint effort, for which it would be most appropriate to honour the elder Michelson, the noted rabbi.

R' Tzvi Ezekiel certainly played a part in shaping his son's books. All of

them open with introductions that include a lengthy comment from R' Tzvi Ezekiel, and all quote him frequently. In the introduction to *Meqor Hayim*, Abraham Hayim thanks his father for helping him "in the arrangement of my book."⁵² At the end of the introduction he also thanks his friend and relative, Rabbi Abraham Segal Itinga of Dukla, for helping "with my work on this book."⁵³ Rabbi Itinga is thanked in similar terms in the introduction to *Ohel Naftali*.⁵⁴ Similarly, Israel Berger collaborated with his brother Meir on a book of a different genre, as mentioned, and with his son, R' Moses Berger; the family tree at the end of *Eser Qedushot* (see below) is credited to Moses Berger, as are several tales.⁵⁵ These books, then, were collaborative efforts.

Both R' Tzvi Ezekiel and Rabbi Itinga are also among the correspondents who contributed considerable material to both Michelson and Berger (and to other collectors of tales).⁵⁶ They themselves were authors of similar works. Rabbi Itinga (1874–ca. 1924)⁵⁷ wrote a number of homiletic books,⁵⁸ and his *Imre Tzadiqim*, a compilation of sayings and teachings of various rebbes,⁵⁹ would be published in Lemberg in the early 1920s and reprinted several times.⁶⁰ Both Berger and Michelson mention Rabbi Itinga's hagiographic work, *Shem HaGedolim HaShlishi*.⁶¹

These co-authors are not given much honour, however. Both Berger and Michelson credit their informants in a rather slipshod manner. Citations from the same source often extend over several numbered sections. Sometimes continuity from one paragraph to the next is indicated by "further from the aforementioned" (*od mehanal*), and the end of the citation by "*ad kan leshono*" (end quote). These conventions, however, are not always followed. Many stories appear to be uncredited when in fact they are part of a sequence. Others really are uncredited, but this does not necessarily mean that they are the compiler's original work. The newer editions of Berger's and Michelson's work have found it necessary to clarify a great many of the attributions. For researchers, as noted by Nigal regarding earlier collections, this means that caution is needed in any attempt to establish the source of a specific story.⁶²

Confusion surrounds who wrote what even when the attributions are fairly clear. Thus, *Ohel Naftali* no. 39 begins, "My father and teacher wrote to me." A few pages later, story no. 46 ends, "to this point [*ad kan*], my father and teacher wrote to me from a letter from Rabbi Yequitiel Aryeh Kamelhar of Stanislav." Was Rabbi Kamelhar, not mentioned at the beginning of this sequence of stories, the source for all of them?

The lack of clarity in Michelson's attributions is evident from the way some of them were misunderstood by their anonymous Yiddish translators.

For example, *Meqor Hayim* no. 252, which begins “When I was studying in yeshivah,” is attributed in the Yiddish version to Michelson personally: “The author of this book relates as follows.”⁶³ The yeshivah in question, however, was in Hungary, and there is no indication that Michelson spent time there. The story is probably part of a letter from Rabbi Menahem Mendl Margolies that begins at no. 250 in the Hebrew original; however, Michelson has not included an “end quote” anywhere.

My overall impression is that Michelson’s work consists almost entirely of material taken more or less verbatim from various sources, some credited and some not, while Berger has done more to shape his sources, often telling stories in his own words. Many of Berger’s attributions are general references to written or oral tradition rather than to specific sources: “It is mentioned in books”; “It is already famous from early books”; “Hasidim are accustomed to saying”; “It is widely known”; “It is known and famous.”⁶⁴ In all such cases someone had to shape the story into words, most likely Berger himself.

Although Nigal remarks that “Berger is outstanding in citing his sources,”⁶⁵ this is not always the case. Rabbi Itinga expresses dissatisfaction on this issue at the end of a letter printed in Michelson’s *Meqor Hayim*:⁶⁶ “Your honour should be aware that the stories printed in [Berger’s] *Ezer Tzahtzahot*, in the section on [the Rebbe of] Tszanz, from no. 16 to no. 23, without any mention of my name, are also from me. When he concludes there in no. 22 with ‘end quote’, the meaning is ‘end quote’ from the letter from me.”⁶⁷

In most cases, the Yiddish *Dover Shalom*, *Meqor Hayim*, and *Ohel Naftali* have simply left attributions out. This is a major departure from the conventions that structure the Hebrew books. In Berger’s and Michelson’s Hebrew compilations, attributions sometimes outweigh the material they introduce. A striking example is *Eser Orot* 5:11, where a saying about the holiness of the Maggid of Kozienice, eight words long in the Hebrew text, is encased by attributions, as follows:

My relative by marriage, the great scholar, the rabbi of the community of Plonsk [Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson], further wrote to me in the name of my relative, the great scholar, the rabbi of the community of Yozefof, our teacher Rabbi Shalom Joseph, may his light shine, who heard it from the holy mouth of the holy rabbi, our teacher and rabbi, Rebbe Abraham Jacob, whose soul is in the hidden heights, of Sadgora, who was speaking to his son-in-law the holy rabbi, our teacher Rabbi Avi Ezra Zelig, the memory of a holy man for a blessing (the son of the holy rabbi of Mogielnica), at night at the beginning of the intermediate days of Sukkot, the

anniversary of the death of the holy preacher [of Kozenice], and said as follows: "I heard this from my father, may his merit protect us" (that is, our master, the holy of holies, of Ruzhyn), "who said about the preacher of Kozenice that his body had the radiance of a thousand Jewish souls." Thus far his holy words.

Despite their prominence, it appears that the attributions in the Hebrew books are not primarily intended to provide information. Contrary to the expressed wishes of Rabbi Itinga, they do not function to give credit where it is due. Rather, they are part of the formal structure of the books, sending a message by their presence. Their message is parallel to that of the genealogies included in these works, which demonstrate that the authors are rooted in the world of the rebbes by interwoven family ties.⁶⁸ The message of the attributions is that the stories too have roots. They are part of a tradition, handed on from one trustworthy person to another. Once that key message is established, the details of who actually wrote or told what are not so important.

Berger's and Michelson's tales, then, are not anonymous folk products; they are authored stories; but their authorship is complex, collaborative, and often hidden.

I turn now to a broader perspective on the historical setting of these authors and their books.

CHAPTER THREE



Historical Context

Hasidism and Its Rivals

Hasidism, at this point in its history, was in a far different situation from its early period, a hundred to a hundred and fifty years before, which has received much more scholarly attention. Some of the great struggles of hasidic history were over, yet times of growth and consolidation had been succeeded by a time of losses.

Within traditional Judaism the attempts made at the end of the eighteenth century by the mitnagdim (Yiddish: *misnagdim*, the “opponents,” traditional non-hasidic Jews) to suppress Hasidism had dramatically failed. Hasidism had quickly become the mainstream form of Judaism in much of Eastern Europe. Already early in the nineteenth century,¹ leaders of the mitnagdim and of the hasidim had begun to see themselves as allied against their common enemy, the Haskalah – a Jewish movement for religious liberalization, secular education, and engagement with European culture. By the 1860s, when the wave of publication of hasidic stories began, most hasidic authors were producing works of commentary or halakhah that were scarcely different from those of their mitnagdic counterparts.²

In Poland, home of the elder and younger Michelson, the integration of the values of the mitnagdim into Hasidism was especially strong, particularly among Ger hasidim such as the Michelsons.³ There was a return to the centrality of talmudic study and to punctilious observance of the set times of prayer, both cast in doubt in earlier Hasidism. The process accelerated in

the years before the First World War, and Polish Hasidism became a conservative force.⁴

This situation is reflected in the elder Michelson's autobiographical sketch at the beginning of his volume of responsa, *Bet Yehezqel*. He describes a childhood focused on intense Talmud study and reminisces about his years in yeshivah in Biala, with the Talmud as the exclusive curriculum.⁵ He refers to the head of the yeshivah, R' Zeev Nahum, not a hasidic rebbe, as *admor*, "my master, teacher and rabbi," a term often used as a synonym for "hasidic rebbe."⁶

In Berger's and Michelson's books of stories, there is no consistent terminological distinction between hasidic rebbes and other rabbis. Non-hasidic rabbis are always referred to with great respect.

Occasionally, there is a direct reference to a sense of rapprochement, as in this saying reported, cautiously, in the name of Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz (*Meqor Hayim* no. 85): "If I were living in the times of the mitnagdim of former generations, like our rabbi the NodabYhudah [R' Ezekiel Landau of Prague]⁷ and his colleagues, I would have rolled myself to them under their tables [in self-abnegation], because their holiness and their intention were for Heaven, wondrously so. The mitnagdim who opposed the hasidim in those early days were better than (and so on)." The narrator interrupts the sentence before it denigrates the hasidim of R' Hayim's own time, adding a traditional phrase often applied to such self-censorship, "to conceal this matter gives honour to God."⁸

Nevertheless, some tension between hasidim and mitnagdim did remain, as it does to this day. Thus, in 1904 Ephraim Daynord, a bookseller, reprinted the early anti-hasidic tract *Zemir Aritzim*, presumably with the expectation that it would find an audience.⁹ In his long introduction to *Eser Orot*, Berger devotes many pages to refuting criticisms of Hasidism that might be raised by a religious, non-hasidic reader – for example, that some rebbes lacked talmudic learning, a requirement for mitnaged leadership. In light of this tension, our authors' depiction of all of traditional Judaism as one entity is not an inevitable result of the softening of the conflict but a choice, and somewhat of a utopian one.

As for the Haskalah, it is often depicted as a spent force after 1881, because the pogroms of that year dashed hopes for integration with the non-Jewish world.¹⁰ This, however, does not seem to have been the perspective of the time. Certainly the educational dimension of Haskalah was still lively. In Zgierz, for example, the future home of Abraham Hayim Michelson, there was great excitement among the maskilim (adherents of Haskalah) when the well-known maskil Jacob Benjamin Katzenelson founded a modern cheder (children's school) there in 1894.¹¹ There were "modern" cheder

schools in Plonsk as well, teaching Hebrew in a systematic, “modern” manner as well as Russian and German.¹²

Haskalah literature remained a threat and a lure to hasidic youth. The Zionist leader Shlomo Zemach, who was born to a hasidic family in Plonsk in 1886 and studied with R’ Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson in his youth, recalls in his memoirs the shock of his initial encounter with Haskalah books at age thirteen, in 1899.¹³

At the same time it had come to be possible for individuals to bridge the divide between Haskalah and Hasidism to some degree. R’ Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson’s library included many Haskalah books, and there are times when his Hebrew style shows an awareness of them, though he was inimical to the movement.¹⁴ The Zgierz memorial book, in discussing congregants of the Ger *shtibl*, mentions “Reb Daniel Lantshitski, a hasid and maskil” and “Reb Monis Angl, Reb Bunem David Pshitik and several other hasidim and young men who were learned in Torah and Haskalah.”¹⁵

The possibility of any degree of rapprochement may reflect the weakness of both movements at this historical juncture. Both grudging respect for the former days of Haskalah and abiding hostility for its contemporary manifestation can be heard in these words from Berger’s *Eser Orot* 3:41: “They tell about a man who was one of the maskilim of the generation [the time of R’ Levi Isaac of Berdichev, early nineteenth century], a great scholar and well-versed in Torah – and not like the maskilim of our time, who have learned neither Bible nor Mishnah, but only dress in an Edomite [Christian-style] shirt, shave their beards, throw off their head-covering, and become maskilim, and what wisdom do they have? This man was a great heretic.”¹⁶

Reform Judaism, only about a half century younger than Hasidism itself, is also a factor to consider.¹⁷ Though Reform was primarily a Western European and North American movement, by Berger’s and Michelson’s time it had made some inroads among Eastern European Jewry. Bucharest had a well-established Choral Temple, a Reform synagogue with an organ and a choir that included men and women, non-Jews among them. The official chief rabbi of Romania would pray and preach there on Friday evenings although he attended the principal Orthodox synagogue on Sabbath mornings.¹⁸ Some of the anxiety to be noted in these books around deviations from halakhah may reflect awareness of the Reform movement with its freedom from halakhic restraints.

New Ideologies

In general, the turn of the twentieth century was a time of ideological ferment in the Eastern European Jewish world, little of which was compatible with

the conservative stance of contemporary Hasidism. Various forms of socialism, romantic Jewish nationalism, and Zionism stirred hope and activism and competed for Jewish allegiance.

The activities of Shlomo Zemach and David Ben-Gurion in their home town of Plonsk in the first few years of the twentieth century, while Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson was serving as town rabbi, provide a glimpse of this upheaval. Not only Jews but other minorities of the Russian empire were turning to revolutionary hopes; Shlomo Zemach was deeply affected by the arrest of his Polish family doctor for sedition in 1901.¹⁹ The young Ben-Gurion introduced labour organizing to Plonsk, sometimes on a comically small scale in the crafts-based shtetl economy: "With [his sweetheart] Rachel's help, he brought the 'rope industry' of three people, owned by his sweetheart's widowed grandmother, to a halt."²⁰ The main house of study and the synagogue were the settings for union meetings and for a public debate between Ben-Gurion and a representative of the Bund, a major Jewish socialist movement that emphasized Yiddish culture rather than Zionism.²¹ The Zionist youth group that Ben-Gurion and Zemach were involved in founding had prestige and influence among the young.²² The death in 1903 of the Zionist leader Theodore Herzl was intensely mourned,²³ and in May 1906 eight Jews from Plonsk joined a group of 150 Polish Jews departing for Palestine; more were to follow.²⁴

How did local hasidim respond to these trends? The first meeting of Ben-Gurion and Zemach's Zionist youth group in December 1900 was disrupted by a group of young hasidim, and a brawl ensued.²⁵ On the other hand, Zemach notes that between 1901 and 1903, when he was already known as a Zionist activist, he was still spending long hours in the study hall, praying with the Ger hasidim, and studying on Sabbath evenings with Rabbi Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson. He was still accepted and even honoured in these circles; but he felt an increasing tension and distance between tradition and Zionism.²⁶ Certainly, in Zemach's recollections, Rabbi Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson is a representative of the old order and not part of the excitement of Zionism and other political developments.

Discrimination and Anti-Semitism

Zionism and socialism offered hope in the face of the mounting difficulties of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, where modernization went hand in hand with growing, not diminishing, anti-Semitism. Zemach describes the horror felt in Plonsk at the news of the Kishinev pogrom in 1903.²⁷ In the wake of the pogrom, Rabbi Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson, like community leaders elsewhere, was involved in organizing a company of Jewish firefighters, intended also

as a self-defence force. Further pogroms followed the attempted revolution against the czarist regime in 1905.²⁸

The legal status of the Jews was also under attack. In Poland, civil liberties allowed to earlier generations of Jews were being taken away.²⁹ Rabbi Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson had several difficult experiences as a result of the Russian government's interference in Polish Jewish life. In 1884 he was drafted into the Russian army but managed to fail the health examinations for three years running and escape service.³⁰ In 1887 certain Jews angered by Michelson's decision against them in a dispute with another Jew denounced their rabbi to the government as a smuggler of seditious books, noting that Krasnibrod was near the border with Austro-Hungarian Galicia. Michelson's library was ransacked and more than half his books – two full wagonloads – were confiscated for having been brought across the border without authorization. In 1924, on her deathbed, his wife, Hinde Serl, reminded him of the tears she shed, and cried again at the memory.³¹ It had taken three years for most of his books to be returned to him; twenty-four had been burnt.³²

In 1891 the government required rabbis to pass a test of competency in the Russian language; Michelson was able to pass after difficult study.³³ In 1893, when he was chosen as rabbi of Plonsk, government regulations required an election to be held, which the community circumvented by putting up a nominal candidate.³⁴

Cheder children in Plonsk had to attend a class in Russian and celebrate there occasions such as the czar's birthday.³⁵ In 1910 interference with Jewish schools went further as the government decreed that Jewish children in traditional schools must have a two-and-a-half month summer vacation, as in secular schools. From the perspective of the traditional religious community, this was an attack on the study of Torah and on the livelihoods of teachers (*melamdin*). In this instance Michelson was eventually able to intercede with the appropriate official, and the decree was revoked.³⁶

The situation was far better in Hungary, birthplace of Israel Berger, where Jews had political rights and Judaism was an officially accepted religion as of 1895, though here too anti-Semitism was a growing political presence.³⁷ Berger himself, however, at the time he wrote his hagiographic books, was living in Romania. There, beginning in 1878, Jewish rights previously won had been stripped away:

Jews are not considered citizens even when natives of the country and doing military service. They cannot be officers in the army, nor are they allowed to rise even to the rank of corporal. No Jew can take a bursary at a university. In Roumanian primary schools (which are free for Roumanian children) Jews must pay, and indeed are only received when there happens

to be room for them. Jews are not allowed to practice law or to hold any Government office without being specially admitted to citizenship, a privilege very difficult to obtain; and they cannot become teachers in State schools except for foreign languages. They are not allowed to buy any property in cities or towns.³⁸

Modernity and Secularization

Eastern European Jewish life was being further disrupted by economic changes. A feudal economy was undergoing modernization, with many Jews entering the proletariat and migrating from rural and shtetl settings to the larger cities.³⁹ Shlomo Zemach describes the economic world of Plonsk as it still was in his childhood. Most Jewish workers were craftspeople such as tailors or hatmakers; many of their dealings were with the Polish farmers in the surrounding area. All the stores in town were Jewish-run, patronized both by Jews and by the quarter of the population that was non-Jewish.

Jewish men who made their living in these ways filled the synagogues and study halls morning and evening, praying, reciting psalms, and studying aggadic texts; unlearned in Judaism by the standards of the time, they were referred to collectively as *Baale En Yaaqov* – those who studied the *En Yaaqov*, a compendium of stories and ethical teachings from the Talmud rather than more advanced texts. But, Zemach recalls, this Judaism of the people was coming to an end during his years there; the children of these unlearned but pious Jews were beginning to leave for Warsaw, where they found work in factories and might join the socialist Bund.⁴⁰

Non-ideological secularization, too, was making inroads among Eastern European Jewry, especially in major urban settings.⁴¹ The memoirs of the religious author Phinehas Miller describe Bucharest in particular as a community that still maintained traditional religious forms but was practically non-observant. Miller, who like Israel Berger came from the pious region of Transylvania, primarily describes visits to the city beginning in 1920 but also refers to the previous decades. He devotes pages of bitter invective and black humour to the religious failings of every sector of the Jewish community.

The Jewish population of Bucharest was substantial – at the time of Berger's books, it was about 41,000, 15 per cent of the city's population.⁴² But almost none of these Jews were religiously acceptable in Miller's eyes. Many Jews knew no Hebrew and kept no observances except following the death of a relative; they would then make a point of entering synagogues on a daily basis to read a transliterated Kaddish.⁴³ "The vast majority of those who

prayed in the [Orthodox] synagogues were public Sabbath-breakers, and most of them ate non-kosher food and transgressed almost every prohibition of the Torah," Miller writes.⁴⁴ Even worse, the Orthodox rabbis and other religious professionals were ignorant and inadequately observant. He notes that secularized *kohanim*⁴⁵ from Transylvania would travel to Bucharest to be married to divorcees by Orthodox rabbis there, contrary to halakhah. "No Orthodox rabbi from the region of Transylvania would ever eat meat in Bucharest," because the kosher slaughterers were presumed to be incompetent.⁴⁶

Miller's contemptuous characterization of religious life in Bucharest extends to the hasidim. He says that Romanian hasidim in general loved their rebbes but kept up only the externals of hasidic life.⁴⁷ Hasidic men would attend their rebbe's tish (Sabbath table), follow the hasidic version of the prayers, and consult their rebbe about family problems. Nonetheless, they would shave their beards and sidelocks and were not properly observant of the Sabbath or the laws of women's ritual immersion; nor did they provide their children with a proper Jewish education.⁴⁸

Miller attended the third Sabbath meal of a minor rebbe in Bucharest but did not eat there because the wine and the freshly baked bread had been bought on the Sabbath (on credit?) from Christians. The rebbe's wife entered the room with uncovered hair, contrary to the usual hasidic standards of modesty.⁴⁹

One would expect that Israel Berger, coming from a very pious upbringing⁵⁰ in Transylvania, would likely feel as out of place as Miller did in such an environment. Miller certainly thinks he did. Somewhat begrudgingly, he admits: "In the city of Bucharest, too, there were a few rabbis who were great Torah scholars, who are worth mentioning." Of these rabbis, he had met four; Berger is the first one on the list. Miller concludes, "But these rabbis were like guardians without a vineyard, like shepherds without a flock."⁵¹

In Berger's own words, in a footnote to his long introduction to *Eser Orot*, which addresses doubts that religious Jews might have about hasidic tales, we have a bitter denunciation of less-observant Jews. He says that these Jews call themselves "maskilim" but have no right to do so:

My intention is not to argue in these words of mine with the wicked, who cast off observance, the heretics . . . How much more so in our time, when whoever is a slave to lawlessness, easily casting off the yoke of the Torah and the commandments, eating what has the taste of non-kosher food in it aplenty, and violating the Sabbath publicly and so on – can call himself by the name "maskil," among the maskilim of this time, and make himself

a new Torah, choosing whatever he wishes with his coarse and degraded mind ... even if he never tasted the taste of philosophy, and, *a fortiori*, never exerted himself to read and study the words of one who refutes false philosophy, but has only read some books of the scoffers of this generation. Such people are disgusting even in the eyes of decent gentiles.

Books published alongside those of our authors provide further evidence of cultural change. The booksellers Amkroyt and Fraynd, of Przemyslany (today's Peremyshlyany, Ukraine), publishers of Michelson's *Dover Shalom*, *Ohel Elimelekh*, and *Ateret Menaḥem*, also published a Yiddish book of longer, non-hasidic tales, *Nifleot HaBore* (1910).⁵² Its back cover is devoted to advertising notices for other books available from the same publisher. The Yiddish spelling and style of these notices is distinctly more modern than the archaizing Yiddish used, typically of such story books, inside the covers. One book advertised is a collection of modern Hebrew songs and poems, with Yiddish translations, suitable for school and home. The notice for this book begins, "The [modern] Hebrew language has penetrated everywhere that Jews live." Another book is an edition of the Pentateuch which begins, "*Ven ir farhert shabes ayer kind khumesh*" (When you review your child's Pentateuchal lessons on the Sabbath). A book of *tekhines* (prayers in Yiddish, mainly for women) includes "pleasant parables taken from many books of Midrash." An edition of the Siddur (traditional prayer book) and a booklet for "grace after meals" are also advertised. So is an aid to arithmetic, its notice beginning, "Doing arithmetic well is the foundation of a good businessman. You can only learn it through our *Practical Arithmetic Master*." The intermingling of secular and religious concerns, of traditional modes of expression such as *tekhines* and new ones such as modern Hebrew poetry, speaks of a society in transition.

Emigration

Many Jews were leaving Europe altogether for lands where tradition had much less sway. These were the years of mass emigration overseas, especially to the United States.⁵³ In Romania the Jewish population was 266,652 in 1899; beginning the following year, some 70,000 Jews emigrated; "they travelled on foot as far as Hamburg and from there went to the United States, Canada, and Great Britain."⁵⁴ Abraham Hayim Michelson had an uncle and a brother in Capetown, South Africa. Israel Berger's brother Meir ended up in Canada.⁵⁵

All these factors – ideological ferment, secularization, economic disruption, anti-Semitism, emigration – made the years when Berger’s and Michelson’s books were written and published a time of loss and decline for Hasidism, as many of the younger generation left the fold.⁵⁶ All of Europe was soon to be convulsed by the First World War, a catastrophe for Hasidism that interrupted the outpouring of books of hasidic tales.⁵⁷

Berger’s and Michelson’s Response to Modernity

Berger’s and Michelson’s books make few direct references to any of these upheavals. The stories are set in earlier generations, in the times of the great rebbes and rabbis of the past whose deeds they celebrate. Nevertheless, there are some stories that evoke the conflict between tradition and modernity, and, as noted, some direct expressions of hostility to modernized Jews. For example, we are told that the second Belzer rebbe, R’ Joshua, praised peace among Jews but vehemently rejected any peace or compromise with “progressive” Jews (*hamitqadmim*), to their dismay.⁵⁸ Scattered through Berger’s and Michelson’s books there are phrases like “in those days,” expressing nostalgia for the past about which the stories are being told. Michelson explicitly presents his books as reactions against loss of faith and the spread of new ideas: “In these days when the ways of the Torah and piety are in mourning, and foreign transplants and the sprouts of false beliefs grow along the way that leads to the house of God, I thought it correct and just to write.”⁵⁹

Family Chronicles

At a time of alienation between generations, Berger’s and Michelson’s tales are firmly placed in a context of family. Their books are family chronicles. This is a key to understanding them.

The first of these books to be published, Michelson’s *Shemen HaTov*, declares on its title page that it contains teachings and stories “of *zeqeni* [literally, ‘my grandfather’] R’ Shmelke of Nikolsburg, of *zeqeni* his brother R’ Phinehas, and of their ancestors and relatives.” The title page of *Eser Qe-dushot*, Berger’s first hagiographic work, states that it is about “ten great scholars and holy men related to our family.” After naming them, the title page notes that the relationships to the author’s family will be explained in the family tree (*megilat yuhasin*) at the end of the book. Another note adds that, as the family tree will mention, the family includes some 250 other holy men, some of whom will be the subjects of further books.

Thereafter every book of Michelson's, starting with the title page, and every chapter in Berger's books, starting with the chapter heading, begins by noting the author's family connection, directly or by marriage, with the rebbe (or rabbi) who is the subject of the stories. The holy men are referred to by such terms as *zeqeni/zeqenenu* (my/our grandfather) *meḥutani/meḥutanenu* (my/our "in-law"), and *sheer besari* (my blood relation – used loosely to mean "my relative.") It does not matter how many decades or centuries ago they lived or when a marriage linking two families took place.

At the end of *Eser Qedushot*, as promised, is an elaborate family tree, carefully organized and with each significant ancestor numbered, compiled by Israel Berger's son Moses. One great ancestor (or reputed ancestor) after another is listed with the abbreviation *alef zayin*, i.e., *avi zeqeni*, literally "my grandfather" or "my great-grandfather," back into ancient times:

(12) My grandfather our holy teacher Rabbi Jacob Kopl, the first, who came to Kolomaya after the expulsion from Snatukh, and had a record of his family tree, going back to (13) my grandfathers the sages of Provence, the authors of the Tosafot, who belonged to the family of (14) my grandfather, the holy Rashi, who was a descendant in the thirty-third generation from (15) my grandfather the godly tanna [early sage] Rabbi Yohanan HaSandlar, peace be upon him, who was a fourth-generation descendant of (16) my grandfather the godly tanna Rabbi Gamliel the Elder, who was the son of (17) my grandfather the godly tanna Rabbi Simeon the Patriarch [*HaNasi*] who was the son of (18) my grandfather the godly tanna Hillel the Elder, who belonged to the family of (19) my grandfather Shefatiah (see Talmud Ketubot 62[b]), who was the son of (20) my grandfather King David, peace be upon him.⁶⁰

The title pages of Berger's homiletic books also mention his descent from great rabbis, as, in some detail, do those of R' Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson's works. The families of Berger and Michelson were linked by marriage, and their references to each other always acknowledge this. Various contributors to their books are also referred to as relatives. Adding to this R' Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson's introductions to his son's books, the involvement of R' Moses Berger in his father's work, and the hagiographic chapter devoted by Berger to his father R' Isaac Simhah, the world of these books of tales is entirely pervaded by family connections.

As David Assaf notes, the family tree in *Eser Qedushot* shows that nearly all the hasidic rebbes from the beginning of the movement onward were related to each other by complicated ties of marriage, and that the Bergers

(and thus the Michelsons too) were related to almost all of them.⁶¹ These family ties, of course, extend beyond the hasidic realm, certainly in the generations before the beginning of the movement. Thus the non-hasidic Rabbi Abraham Abish of Frankfurt am Main is an appropriate subject for a book by Michelson because he too is a holy ancestor. Michelson, after all, does not state anywhere that he is compiling books of hasidic tales but does say that he is telling stories of his family.

Berger and Michelson were part of an aristocracy of rabbis and their families⁶² dating back before Hasidism and extending beyond it, claiming illustrious, even royal, ancestry, and maintaining itself, like any aristocracy, through carefully arranged marriages. This aristocratic idea continues to play a role in Jewish life today, especially in the hasidic world, where the marriages of rebbes and their children are worked out in terms of building connections between dynasties.⁶³ Yet Berger expresses an awareness of the decline of this aristocracy in his own time. In his short introduction (*haqdamah qetanah*) to *Eser Orot* (reprinted in *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* and *Eser Atarot*), he writes, “For my offspring, long may they live ... I have arranged [this book] before them as an eternal memorial, for them and for the offspring of my offspring, so that they may know from whose womb they emerged ... so that our family may not become mixed with loathsomely blemished families, of rebels against the light, casters-off of the yoke, transgressors of our holy Torah—as so often happens (because of our many sins) in these times.”⁶⁴

Berger is thus unhappily aware of an increasing number of marriages between Jews from Orthodox families—specifically, families of rabbis, like his own—and those from liberal or secularized families. This is a form of “intermarriage” within the Jewish community from which he wishes to protect his family. In saying so, he is taking a frankly anti-modern stance, not only against secular or liberal forms of Judaism but against the democratic spirit of social mobility.

In another way too the emphasis on family is anti-modern. Berger and Michelson do not tell their own stories, but stories of their families. Their own names, in their introductions and title pages, always appear as “son of,” followed by their fathers’ names and honorifics. Judging by the meagre information I have been able to find about him, Michelson, in particular, has been remembered almost exclusively as the son of R’ Tzvi Ezekiel, and this indeed is how he presents himself.

Yet this was a time when Hebrew autobiography was becoming a genre in its own right. In the works of such contemporaries of Berger and Michelson as Berdyczewski, Brenner, and others, a recurrent theme was the struggle of the author for individual self-assertion and separation from his traditional

past.⁶⁵ This resonated with the life experience of many young people in times of secularization and social upheaval. In direct contrast to this contemporary motif, Berger and Michelson present themselves not as autonomous individuals but as members and representatives of their families, extending back into bygone generations.

Imagined Community, Imagined Past

Berger's and Michelson's choice to tell their stories of bygone days can be further understood in light of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, its conclusions dovetailing with those of another influential study published the same year (1983), Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition*. Anderson draws attention to the fact that the sense of belonging to a group or society, on any level beyond face-to-face contact, is an act of imagination. For example, "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."⁶⁶ According to Anderson, the "ruptures" of modernity led to the inventions of new "imagined communities." In contrast to, or even because of, their newness, these communities imagined for themselves long, continuous histories.⁶⁷ In Hobsbawm's terms, "the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging" leads to the invention of new traditions that are presented as old.⁶⁸ Such traditions are expressions of a past that may never have existed from a historian's perspective.⁶⁹

While Anderson's and Hobsbawm's primary topic is the rise of modern nationalisms, often involving claims for a new nation's longstanding roots in a glorious past, their analysis applies to the works of Berger and Michelson as well.⁷⁰ The past presented in Berger's and Michelson's stories is more obviously imaginary than some, consisting as it does of legends passed on in a variety of versions, permeated with miracles. This imaginary past is part of an effort to sustain an imagined community, a unified, trans-generational Ashkenazi religious culture in which Hasidism is the authentic successor of traditional Judaism through the ages. This is an imagined community broad enough to include learned and observant Yiddish-speaking Jews who are not hasidim, while excluding gentiles, secularists, religious liberals, and traditionalist Jews of other ethnicities.

Many aspects of the form and content of Berger's and Michelson's compilations can be understood as aspects of their resistance to modernity through an imagined community and imagined history. These books are

family chronicles in a time of generational strife; they are focused on the past in a time of intense hopes and fears for the future. In their genealogies and attributions and in their mode of production by collaboration with contributors and borrowing from other texts, they present themselves as artifacts of an Ashkenazi community transcending borders and rooted in the distant past.

Attention to other aspects of these books' rejection of modernity, as well as, conversely, their deep implication in it, requires further consideration of their literary context.

CHAPTER FOUR



Literary Context

Hasidic and Haskalah Literature

From the beginning, as several scholars have noted, books of hasidic stories were in a tug-of-war with the literature of the Haskalah and with the modern, secular Yiddish and Hebrew literature that evolved from it.¹ Arguably, the growing popularity of liberal or secular Jewish literature spurred hasidic authors to begin publishing books of tales in ever-increasing numbers beginning in the mid-1860s.²

Berger and Michelson were writing in an exciting time for modern secular Hebrew and Yiddish literature. Shlomo Zemach remembered it as a period of great literary creativity among the Jews of Poland and the rest of the Russian regime. Not only was there much new writing in Hebrew and Yiddish – Zemach was reading Berdyczewski, Tchernichovsky, Bialik – but more and more people were aware of it. Sholom Aleichem's books, mainstays of the new, modern Yiddish literature, were to be found in every house. Newspapers too were widely read. People in general, Zemach continued, were talking about the news, about hopes for transformation in the Jewish condition, about literature and new ideas.³

New types of reading occasionally leave a trace in books of hasidic tales. There is a reference in *Ohel Avraham* to reading secular history: when a story mentions R' Abraham Abish's magical intervention with the King of Prussia to stop a war, a parenthetical note adds, "For it is known to those who read the chronicles of the world that there was a severe war then, called 'Seven Years,' between Austria and France and Prussia."⁴

Notably, references to fiction such as the popular works of Sholom Aleichem cannot be found. At a burgeoning time for fiction in Yiddish and Hebrew, the stance of compilers of hasidic tales is a refusal of fiction.⁵ Much hasidic discourse around stories concerns their factual reliability. Various hasidic stories or books of tales are denounced by hasidic figures because they are not true; one must be careful about stories in general because some of them are not true, and so on. Collectors of hasidic tales insist on the truth of their stories.⁶

The publisher's introduction to *Eser Atarot*, the final volume in Berger's *Zekhut Yisrael*, says that the rabbis who gave approbations to Berger's books saw them in the context of a struggle against secular literature. Their intention was

to shut the mouths of the accusers, the scoffers of this generation, "slaves who delight in lawlessness."⁷ And (because of our many sins) they are breaching the bounds of the Torah with one breach after another, printing books of scoffing and heresy to draw the masses of the House of Israel into their trap ... Therefore, the learned rabbis and tzaddikim of our generation, long may they live, have set one against the other, so that we may act with courage and strength, offering on the printing press wondrous stories and sayings and teachings of the splendid and holy ones of the ages ... For, as it is known, when one rises, the other falls.⁸

The competing literatures also influenced one other, for example, in terms of style.⁹ Early Haskalah writing was characterized by a high-flown, wordy style with ample use of biblical allusions, sometimes referred to as *melitzah*.¹⁰ Among the first books of hasidic tales to appear in the 1860s were two by the same author, *Pe'er MiQedoshim* and *Qehal Qedoshim*, both published in 1865 and written entirely in this style.¹¹ Several of Michelson's books begin in this same elaborate style for a few introductory paragraphs.

As for Berger's books, they arguably reflect a sense of organization and clear, topical presentation that derives more from the systematic, rational approach of Haskalah and Wissenschaft des Judentums (the academic study of Judaism as developed in nineteenth-century Germany) than from any hasidic source.¹²

Berger's and Michelson's books, however, allow these influences only so far and no further. They know and cite, for instance, *Bet Rabi* by Abraham Samuel Heilman, an account of R' Shneur Zalman of Lyady, the first rebbe of the Lubavitch dynasty, and his successors, published in 1903. Initiating a trend followed by much Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) historiography later in the twentieth century, Heilman used many of the conventions of secular,

academic scholarship.¹³ *Bet Rabi* includes a methodological introduction, footnotes in a scholarly style, and some critical evaluation of sources. Its departure from earlier hagiographic works is signalled already by the heading chosen for the author's introduction: rather than a *petiḥah* (opening) or a *haqdamah mehameasef vehamelaqet* (foreword from the collector and compiler), it is a *davar el haqorim* (a word to the readers), as in more academic Hebrew publications of the time.¹⁴

Beginning with their introductory materials under old-fashioned titles like *haqdamah qetanah* (small foreword) and *petiḥta ravta* (extensive opening),¹⁵ Berger's works refuse the secular conventions that *Bet Rabi* embraced. There is no mention of methodology; when footnotes appear now and then, they are used to introduce additional stories.¹⁶

As for Michelson's high-flown introductory paragraphs, they always lead into a discourse by his father, R' Tzvi Ezekiel, which responds to one or another point in the book through a learned disquisition, filled with abbreviations and laconic references to holy books. Incomprehensible to the non-Talmudist, these discourses linguistically embody the old culture of the house of study as opposed to that of modern literature.¹⁷ After this juxtaposition of elaborate, allusive styles, Michelson's books settle into the simpler, less formal style of most hasidic Hebrew.

Still, Michelson's compilations can even cite a book published only in German, *Der Chassidismus* by Aaron Marcus (1901). This book is cited, however, as if it were a traditional work written in Hebrew: "So wrote R' Aaron Marcus in *Sefer HaḤasidut* [the (holy) book *Hasidism*]." ¹⁸

Language and Readership

The language and even typography of Berger's and Michelson's books provide important clues to their intended readership. Like many hasidic texts produced in primarily Yiddish-speaking communities, they are written in what might be called a literary dialect of traditional written Hebrew. It is characterized by stock phrases drawn from classical Jewish texts; honorifics and other formulaic expressions, often printed as acronyms; inattention to some aspects of "standard" Hebrew grammar such as grammatical gender; Hebrew adaptations of Yiddish turns of phrase; frequent inclusion of Yiddish words; and stylistic variation between a formality reflecting classical Hebrew models and informality reflecting underlying Yiddish thoughts. Often entire phrases appear only in Yiddish, especially in the direct speech of rebbes. Many stories would be completely incomprehensible without an understanding of Yiddish.¹⁹ Thus, although Berger's and Michelson's books were written in Hebrew, they were intended exclusively for a Yiddish-speaking readership.

Berger lived in Bucharest, which had a large Sephardi population. One might perhaps think that he wrote his books in Hebrew in order to include Sephardi Jews in his readership. His extensive use of untranslated Yiddish shows that this was not the case. Why, then, were these books in Hebrew?

The longstanding Ashkenazi tradition was to publish serious books only in Hebrew, because Hebrew was the holy language and the language of culture. Unlike other vernaculars used by Jews in different cultures – medieval Arabic, or English today – Yiddish traditionally had no standing as a language of culture. This had changed, however, by Berger's and Michelson's time. There was now a thriving Yiddish literature with artistic merit and a popular audience. The fact that Berger and Michelson – like nearly all hasidic authors – did not publish in Yiddish, despite the presence of so much Yiddish embedded in their Hebrew texts, constitutes a refusal to participate in this modern, secular cultural development. Similarly, the hasidic Hebrew of their works is remote from the incipient modern Hebrew used by more secular authors of their time, associated with Zionism or other forms of Jewish nationalism.

The choice of Hebrew rather than Yiddish automatically restricted the readership.²⁰ Most Jewish women in Eastern Europe did not learn to read Hebrew with comprehension, though many did read Yiddish, which, as the vernacular, could be understood when sounded out. (This was changing to some extent in Berger's and Michelson's time, but only in maskilic and Zionist circles and with many limitations even there.²¹) Berger and Michelson were thus excluding most women from their readership.

With respect to male readers, Shaul Stampfer, sifting through the available evidence, argues that although most boys learned to read Hebrew by rote, only an elite actually grew up with enough command of the language to read most texts with understanding.²² Jewish Eastern Europe was largely an oral culture in which even textual study was mostly done in groups led by a teacher who read the text aloud and explained it.²³ Stampfer states that "the end of the nineteenth century was noted for a rise in the readership of Haskalah literature and Hebrew literature in general."²⁴ Nevertheless, the author publishing in Hebrew was still turning away from the possibility of reaching a mass audience.

Berger's and Michelson's books were printed in Rashi script rather than the standard Hebrew typeface known as "square letters." Classically used to set apart the commentaries in the Bible and Talmud from the main text, Rashi script was also used as the only typeface in many traditional religious books.²⁵ A possible reason for this is that Rashi script is considered less holy than the standard Hebrew typeface; therefore, books printed in Rashi script need not be treated with the same level of respectful care as books in "square

letters.”²⁶ Even many Jews with a traditional education, however, find Rashi script more difficult to read.²⁷ Though it was taught universally in traditional elementary education as the typeface in which Rashi’s commentary on the Torah was printed,²⁸ it was taught second, after “square letters,” and the average boy may never have grasped it as firmly. Girls traditionally did not learn it at all. In earlier generations they did learn the very similar typeface known as *vaybertaytsh*, used in Yiddish books intended for women.²⁹ By the late nineteenth century, however, nearly all books in Yiddish and an increasing number in Hebrew were printed in square letters.³⁰ Already the first of the mid-1860s compilations of hasidic tales included passages in square letters as well as Rashi script.³¹ Publishers such as Amkroyt and Fraynd advertised in their back-cover blurbs, mentioned above, that their books were printed in “large letters” (*groysye oysyes/otiyot gedolot*). This may have had to do in part with growing secularization; boys not receiving a traditional cheder education would not learn Rashi script.³²

The choice of Rashi script thus sent a visual signal that the intended audience consisted of male readers with a traditional education who were willing to negotiate the additional difficulty of the script. As suggested by Berger’s bitter note in *Eser Orot*, quoted above, secularized Jews were not included in the intended readership.

The convoluted talmudic discourses contributed by R’ Tzvi Ezekiel to the introductions of Michelson’s books narrow the target audience further. To follow them, one would have to have some yeshivah training. Though of course many readers might have felt free to skip over these sections, they do send a signal that the book is intended for a religious and learned readership. All this is consistent with the conclusions reached by Glenn Dynner, whose focus is the early nineteenth century, about hasidic literature generally: “Hasidic books were primarily aimed at advanced yeshivah students, rabbis, and well-educated merchants, that is, society’s intellectual and spiritual role models.”³³

Some of these aspects of Berger’s and Michelson’s Hebrew books contrast with the versions of Michelson’s *Dover Shalom*, *Meqor Hayim*, and *Ohel Naftali* that appeared in Yiddish. These books are in square letters, not Rashi script, and include vowel points for easier reading. All introductory materials and details of family ties have been left out.

The translators themselves were no ignoramuses; for example, the translator of *Meqor Hayim* is able to render correctly an abbreviated Aramaic phrase like *bediqne h”q* (*bay zayn heyilige bord*, “by his holy beard”).³⁴ The expected audience, however, does not know rabbinic texts, and the stories are adjusted accordingly. Thus, a reference to a rebbe in a trance being *be’olam*

ha'atzilut, “in the World of Emanation,” a kabbalistic concept referring to a specific aspect of the spiritual universes, becomes in Yiddish the much more general *oyf yener velt*, “in the other world.”³⁵ A halakhic commentary added to one story is left out completely in the Yiddish.³⁶ Another story in *Meqor Hayim* refers to the rebbe studying “the Mishnah, chapter *ezehu meqoman* [what are the locations], which is fluent in everyone’s mouth.”³⁷ This chapter of the Mishnah should indeed be “fluent in everyone’s mouth” since it is included in the daily morning prayers. Nevertheless, the translator apparently did not expect his audience to recognize it and simply refers in a general way to studying Torah.³⁸

While their intended readership is thus much broader than that of the Hebrew originals, these Yiddish books are still directed to a traditional audience and disconnect themselves from modernity. Thus, as mentioned above, their Yiddish, typically for story books of their type, is old-fashioned compared to the language of publishers’ advertisements and to the literary Yiddish of the time. The same is true for spelling (with extensive use of vowel points) and vocabulary.

This archaism has an ironic side. These books, for example, refer to Yiddish as *zhargon* (jargon), a contemptuous name for Yiddish used by early maskilim. By this time, it had fallen out of use in secular circles, in favour of a more respectful attitude toward the language, but continued to be the word for Yiddish used on the title pages of these and many other Yiddish story books well into the twentieth century. Similarly, early maskilim, believing Yiddish to be a corrupt dialect of German, introduced modern German words into Yiddish in an attempt to “purify” the language. These imported words were increasingly rejected in secular literary Yiddish but remained part of the archaizing Yiddish of books of religious tales.³⁹

Hostility to secularized, “modern” Jews has remained intact in the course of translation. In one story Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz rebuffs a Jew in “short” (modern) clothes who asks him to pray for a fire to stop, saying, “Don’t sin and there won’t be fires!” Similarly, we are told that as a child R’ Hayim saw in a vision that a fire in his town was being kindled by modern “German” Jews (through their sins). (German Jews are stereotypically seen in hasidic tales as assimilated into Western culture; identifying people as German may mean only that they have adopted Western European manners or styles of clothing.) R’ Hayim also rejoices when approached by a clean-shaven beggar because he concludes that God has punished the man with poverty for the sin of shaving.⁴⁰ Joseph Dan’s suggestion that the popular audience for books of hasidic tales was largely made up of nostalgic secularized Jews is not supported by these examples.⁴¹ Stories like these are also evidence that these

tales of bygone days, in Hebrew or Yiddish, were not intended as outreach tools, at least not to a liberal or secularized audience, even though this is a role that some books of hasidic tales may have played.⁴²

Tales, Hasidic and Other

From their beginnings, hasidic tales were of a piece with other stories told and published in the surrounding Eastern European Jewish culture. Researcher Hayim Liberman, himself a Lubavitcher hasid, thus places books of hasidic tales in the literary context of *mayse-bikhlekh*, popular story-books, which had a long history in Yiddish literature.⁴³ In this light the usefulness of “hasidic tales” as a category becomes dubious. Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim*, it could be argued, created an altered, narrowly focused picture of this literature. In Berger’s and Michelson’s time, while there were many books consisting largely of tales about hasidic rebbes, little evidence exists that authors, publishers, or readers saw sharp distinctions between these tales and others.

For example, the publisher of *Meqor Hayim* in both its Hebrew and Yiddish versions was the bookseller David Roth of Lemberg, working with the printer R’ Nathan Neta Kronenberg. The same publisher and printer also produced a Yiddish book of three long non-hasidic tales with pious morals attached, *Hashgahat HaBore* (1912).⁴⁴ The cover is visually and verbally very similar to that of the Yiddish *Meqor Hayim*: “In this *seyfer* [holy book] are told very wondrous and important tales, which have been taken from libraries. We have translated it into pure jargon [Yiddish] so that old people and young children may all know the wonders of the blessed God.” There is nothing to draw attention to the fact that one book contains hasidic stories and the other does not.

The fact that hasidic books of tales are modelled, in particular, on earlier Jewish hagiography has been noted in scholarship at least since Eliezer Zweifel’s *Shalom Al Yisrael* in 1873.⁴⁵ But hagiography was also an important element of non-hasidic literature. An interesting example is, ironically, a book about the arch-enemy of the early hasidim, Elijah the Gaon (great scholar) of Vilna (d. 1797), hero of the mitnagdim. *Aliyot Eliyahu* (The Ascents of Elijah) appeared in Vilna in 1855–56, before the wave of books of hasidic tales began in the mid-1860s. Like many books of hasidic tales, it begins with an introduction (12–18) on the religious value of stories of holy people. It includes many stories, several of them beginning with attributions to oral tradition: “I heard the story,” “The story is well-known,” “So-and-so told me.” There are stories of revelations of Torah from heaven, visits from souls

of the dead, and ascents of the soul into heaven.⁴⁶ Nor did stories in praise of the Gaon cease to be published. Contemporary with Berger's and Michelson's books, a Yiddish book of "Praises of the Gaon of Vilna" was printed in Warsaw, 1907.⁴⁷

Stories of the Gaon of Vilna, from *Aliyot Eliyahu* and other sources, appear, in fact, in books of hasidic tales.⁴⁸ Many books of hasidic tales include some stories of non-hasidic or pre-hasidic rabbis.⁴⁹ This is another way in which Buber created an altered picture of the literature: his *Tales of the Hasidim* are stories about hasidic rebbes, pure and simple. This rarely describes the contents of the compilations he drew upon.

A number of figures praised in Michelson's books were not hasidim. For example, since R' Shmelke of Nikolsburg (1726–1778) was a contemporary of the Baal Shem Tov, his illustrious ancestors, among the heroes of *Shemen HaTov*, likely had no connection with Hasidism at all.

Other heroes of the tales were hasidim but not rebbes, such as R' Shmelke's brother, R' Phinehas Horowitz, the subject of many stories in *Shemen HaTov*, who became rabbi of Frankfurt am Main, far from hasidic territory. The same is true in Berger's books. The first protagonist of *Eser Qedushot*, Rabbi Ayzik of Safrin, a hasid of the Seer of Lublin, never conducted himself as a communal rabbi or rebbe.⁵⁰ Rabbi Moses of Dragitshin, a disciple of Rebbe Elimelech of Lizensk, is the subject of the first chapter in *Eser Atarot*; according to the account there, he was known as a kabbalist and author of learned works rather than as a communal leader.

As noted earlier, one of Michelson's books, *Ohel Avraham*, is devoted to a non-hasidic rabbi, Abraham Abish of Frankfurt am Main, a contemporary of the Baal Shem Tov.⁵¹ At sixty-two pages, this is the shortest of Michelson's books; the next shortest, *Ateret Menaḥem*, has ninety-six. Since, as noted, Michelson's collections give the impression of including everything that was available to the compiler, this suggests that there were fewer stories in circulation about R' Abraham Abish than about his hasidic counterparts. On the other hand, like hasidic rebbes, R' Abraham Abish works miracles, including super-swift travel (*qefitzat haderekh*, stories no. 17 and no. 40), a frequent theme of hasidic tales;⁵² and hasidic rebbes are depicted as telling stories about him (e.g., R' Enoch Henikh of Alexander, no. 31). Most significantly, the presentation of the book makes no distinction between R' Abraham Abish and hasidic rebbes: the title is *Ohel Avraham*, like *Ohel Elimelekh* or *Ohel Naftali*, the wording of the title page is practically identical with the other books, and it refers to R' Avraham with the same honorifics used for rebbes. Nothing suggests that this book is in any way unusual or different in kind from its predecessors. Apparently, for its author, it was not.

Hasidic Tales and Popular Literature

Historians of reading have suggested that a “reading revolution” took place in various countries and cultures beginning in the eighteenth century.⁵³ While this terminology has been criticized as overly dramatic,⁵⁴ the thesis seems valid as long as we take into account that the “revolution” happened at different times and at a different pace in different settings.⁵⁵

Broadly speaking, in earlier times, there were relatively few books or other printed materials in existence. Relatively few people could read at all, and those who were literate often read the same books (for example, in some societies, the Bible) over and over.

Under the impact of the social and economic changes of modernity, together with advances in the technology of paper-making and printing, many more books, newspapers, and so on were produced. These printed materials became ever more important as sources of entertainment and information. Literacy increased, and reading patterns changed; people were no longer satisfied with repeatedly reading a few books but wanted a variety of texts to read.

Zeev Gries’s important work on the history of Hebrew books confirms that a “reading revolution” took place among Eastern European Jews beginning in the eighteenth century when the printing of Hebrew and Yiddish books increased dramatically: “The publication of large amounts of popular and middle-brow literature in Hebrew and Yiddish in the eighteenth century served to awaken the consciousness of a broad Jewish public.”⁵⁶ This process entered a new phase in the last decades of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, with much greater circulation of books and newspapers in Yiddish and Hebrew and the development of a modern, primarily secular literature in both languages.⁵⁷

Cross-culturally, another dimension of these changes is that broader reading audiences are catered to by producers of inexpensive and accessible reading matter.⁵⁸ Such reading matter, however, is typically looked down on by cultural elites or those in power; often, members of such elites produce competing material, seen as educational and uplifting, for the benefit of lower-class readers.⁵⁹

In German literary criticism, the type of accessible reading material looked down on by elites while popular with broad circles of readers has been called *Trivialliteratur*⁶⁰ and considered a worthy subject of scholarly attention.⁶¹ This literature has been characterized as working within genre conventions (romances, detective stories, and so on), following familiar patterns in plot

and language, and confirming rather than challenging readers' assumptions and expectations.⁶² In Eastern European Jewish literary history, this type of formulaic, broadly appealing literature has been discussed mostly in terms of *shund*—a derogatory term for “trashy” literary and theatrical productions.⁶³ Yet the criteria for identifying *Trivialliteratur* apply to hasidic tales as much as to literary “trash.” While *shund* and hasidic tales are rarely mentioned in the same breath, it makes sense to juxtapose them. Both types of literature were highly popular and were equally looked down on by the modernizing literary elites of Ashkenazi culture.

Were readers of *shund* also reading hasidic tales? Publishers, at least, did not necessarily distinguish between stories of holy men and more secular entertainment. The Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institute (YIVO) library includes a Yiddish book published in Warsaw in 1882 of tales of mitnagdic holy men—the Gaon of Vilna, the Dubner Maggid, and the rabbis of the yeshivah of Volozhin. Titled *Divre Tzadiqim* (Words of holy men), this work is similar in every way to Yiddish compilations of hasidic tales. Its back cover lists fifty-three books available from the same publisher or printer. They do not include any hasidic tales, but they do include just about any other kind of secular and religious reading. Listed one after the other without any thematic arrangement are books as diverse as a biography of the great Torah commentator Rashi, satires for the Purim holiday, and material that would likely be classified as *shund*: historical novels, romances (several of them “by a Parisian student”), and stories of pirates and robbers.

This type of popular literature was part of an international and cross-cultural phenomenon.⁶⁴ In Bengal of the 1890s, for instance, British authorities looked askance at a “vast popular literature, which was pouring off the presses and being sold by peddlers among the poor of Calcutta and the peasants of the hinterlands. This literature dealt in urban horrors—low-life, murderers, detectives, prostitutes—and rural fantasies—fairies, magic, adventures, astrology... it was somewhat similar to the penny dreadfuls and chapbooks of contemporary Europe.”⁶⁵ The more lurid types of stories associated with penny dreadfuls can be found in books of hasidic tales as well—as illustrated by “Husband and Wife Reunited,” included at the beginning of this book.

Buber, of course, included no such tales in his compilations. I would argue, however, that in his carefully selective approach to the material with which he worked, Buber created a new genre, “Tales of the Hasidim,” which had not existed before. Although I continue to refer to the works of Berger and Michelson and similar compilations as books of hasidic tales, I do so only by way of convenience and rough generalization.

Stories and Visual Imagery

Going beyond the printed word, Jean Baumgarten argues that hagiography – both hasidic and non-hasidic – grew in importance in Jewish Eastern Europe concurrently with an increase in the importance of paintings, drawings, and photographs of holy men.⁶⁶ This linking of the visual and the verbal is corroborated by more recent developments in the New World. After the death of the Lubavitcher Rebbe Joseph Isaac Schneersohn in 1950, his successor-to-be, R' Menachem Mendel, suggested that hasidim “should meditate on [the late rebbe’s] picture and recount stories of his greatness.”⁶⁷ Once R' Menachem Mendel himself became rebbe, photographs of his face gradually became ubiquitous, hand in hand with stories about him.

Morris Faienstein notes the invention of “rebbe cards,” which are bought and traded by hasidic youth – “a relatively recent phenomenon worth considering as a modern version of collecting stories.”⁶⁸ These cards are a religiously acceptable alternative to collectibles featuring sports figures and the like. While Buber classed hasidic tales with sacred texts of world religions, this phenomenon suggests that they can also be contextualized with baseball cards.

Hasidic Stories and Folklore Collection

From another perspective, several scholars have noted that collections of hasidic lore were part of a pan-European phenomenon of interest in folklore and legend, motivated by romantic nationalism. The Brothers Grimm first published their collections of retold folktales in 1812 and 1815, at the same time as the appearance of *Shivhe HaBesht*.⁶⁹

By the time of Berger’s and Michelson’s books, the universalistic ideology of early Haskalah had been overshadowed by more nationalistic trends in Zionism and in some forms of Jewish socialism and secular Yiddish culture – if anything, intensifying interest in folklore. A variety of Jewish scholarly and cultural endeavours of the early twentieth century can be seen, as Israel Bartal points out, as part of “the creation of ‘national culture’ [through] ... the collection, editing, and preservation of the nation’s cultural creative assets.”⁷⁰ Notable among such endeavours was An-ski’s ethnographic expedition of 1912–14, just after the last of Berger’s and Michelson’s books of stories had appeared in print. Beatrice Weinreich observes, “An-ski and his colleagues set out with the ambitious goal of finding and preserving all genres of Yiddish folkways, including oral tales and legends, throughout Jewish communities in the Ukraine ... [T]he expedition, which was cut short by the outbreak of World War I, gathered some 1,800 tales and legends.”⁷¹

Berger and Michelson, like many compilers of hasidic stories before them, present themselves as “collectors” (*measfim, melaqtim*). Michelson’s title pages precede his name with the phrase “I have gathered and gleaned, with the help of God.” In places, Berger proudly notes that he has gathered sayings of rebbes that are not to be found in their books.⁷² Berger’s deed of sale (see page 91) to *Zekhut Yisrael* refers to his work of *isuf veqibutz vevinus* (collecting, bringing together, gathering in).⁷³ Berger and Michelson cite stories from their own hearing; from dozens of earlier books, many of them not primarily books of stories, so that considerable searching must have been involved; and from letters from their far-flung correspondents.

On the part of more secularized Jews, interest in folklore by the end of the nineteenth century very much extended to Hasidism. No longer an object of bitter antipathy, Hasidism was now perceived as weak enough to become an object of exotic interest or nostalgia. Thus, Zeev Gries suggests that the stories of Rebbe Nakhmen of Breslov became more popular among romantic secularized intellectuals, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, than they had ever been among hasidim outside the small and controversial Breslov group.⁷⁴ In Vienna, beginning about 1890, Isadore Kaufman painted hasidim as symbols of Jewish authenticity – sometimes using non-hasidic models in costume, since hasidim were averse to being painted.⁷⁵ In collecting and publishing hasidic lore, Berger and Michelson were working, as Ira Robinson has emphasized,⁷⁶ not before the secular authors who reworked hasidic tales but after some and at the same time as others. The great Yiddish author I.L. Peretz had begun publishing reworked hasidic tales in 1894.⁷⁷ These modernist versions of hasidic tales themselves became primary sources, representing traditional East European Jewish culture, for more westernized readers in Germany, for whom German translations of Peretz’s hasidic tales began appearing in 1895.⁷⁸ Micha Yosef Berdyczewski published his Hebrew *Sefer Hasidim* (Book of hasidim) in 1900,⁷⁹ and Martin Buber’s *Tales of Rabbi Nachman* appeared in German in 1906 just as Berger’s and Michelson’s first books of stories were being published.

The mature Buber of *Tales of the Hasidim* made extensive use of Berger’s and Michelson’s work as part of what he saw as the raw and unformed material of hasidic folklore.⁸⁰ To later hasidic compilers, Berger’s and Michelson’s works became – like virtually every book of tales ever published within the traditional community – *meqorot neemanim*, “trustworthy sources” for the religious collector.⁸¹ Thus, to both secularized and traditional writers, Berger’s and Michelson’s stories themselves became part of the lost, “authentic” past. Yet how authentic were books of hasidic tales, given the literary and intellectual currents flowing around and through them? This topic deserves a chapter of its own.

CHAPTER FIVE



Issues of Authenticity

Hasidic Stories by Maskilim?

Michael Rodkinson (also called Frumkin), a key figure in the outpouring of books of hasidic tales in the 1860s, was a Lubavitcher hasid but left the fold and became a maskil. Nigal and Dan assess this information differently. As Nigal presents matters, Rodkinson wrote his books of hasidic tales – whose introductions warn against the dangers of the Haskalah – and later became a maskil.¹ In Dan’s presentation, Rodkinson wrote at least some of his books of hasidic tales while he was already a maskil, taking advantage of the gullibility of religious readers.² This assertion echoes the uncomfortable awareness expressed in hasidic literature itself that “jokers” may succeed in spreading false sayings and anecdotes.³ Little is known about various other authors of books of hasidic tales, and Dan suggests that many of them were actually maskilim.

There are known examples of maskilim producing ostensibly traditional texts.⁴ Regarding books of tales, such a hypothesis gains credibility from a book like *Shivḥe Tzadiqim*, published in 1883. Nigal’s introduction to his edition of this book notes that nothing is known about the author, Mendl Tzitrin. Nigal also observes⁵ that the introduction to the book atypically quotes Maimonides, viewed by maskilim as a model for rationalism. This book contains a substantial number of stories of dramatic controversy between rebbes, and an assertion by a mitnagdic character, unanswered by

his hasidic interlocutor, that controversy is inevitable when rebbes meet.⁶ Most curious is the inclusion of a story that includes a prophecy that had been falsified by the time the book appeared. This story attributes to R' Samuel of Kurów (d. 1820) the following coarse, extravagant, and time-bound messianic prophecy: "If you only knew what will happen another twenty years from now! ... Days are coming when there will be much money for the hasidim, to the point where the money will be spilling out of their bags ... and specifically for the hasidim. And then will be the messianic redemption."⁷ Plausibly, *Shivhe Tzadiqim* is the work of a writer with a Haskalah orientation, with tongue in cheek or with an intention of subtly undermining hasidic faith in rebbes.

Given the fraught nature of this issue, it is striking to find Abraham Hayim Michelson remembered in the Zgierz memorial book as a maskil. There we find the following paragraphs about Michelson:

In his youth he followed in the footsteps of his father, and he too occupied himself with the histories, stories and Torah teachings of rabbis and rebbes, and corresponded with the great rabbis of the time.

For a number of years he served as secretary of the Jewish community council of our city. He was numbered among the maskilim and lovers of Hebrew literature.⁸

The author of these lines (signed only S.P.) would appear to have known Michelson at first hand. It seems from the sequence of ideas that Michelson became a maskil only after writing in his youth his books of hasidic stories. But that is not the only possible reading, and there is room to wonder when the transition from hasid to maskil happened, relative to his books.

Conceivably, in the early twentieth-century context Michelson could have been both a hasid and a maskil at the same time: as mentioned earlier, another article in the Zgierz memorial book characterizes some fellow congregants of the Ger *shtibl* precisely in those terms. In Michelson's case, however, there is further evidence in the memorial book of a break with his hasidic upbringing:

Two brothers-in-law, Reb Ze'ev Elijah and Reb Ze'ev Mikhl Raykhert, among the "grandsons" of the [Ger] congregation, were lovers of the Zionist ideal. In time, they abandoned the *shtibl*, and founded, together with other hasidim of the city, a place of prayer for the adherents of the Mizrahi [religious Zionist party]. Together with them, the following hasi-

dim went over to the Mizrahi: ... [among others] Reb Abraham Hayim Michelson, son of the chief rabbi of Warsaw [R' Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson] and author of books on Hasidism and rebbes.⁹

Here the time is probably the 1920s, when R' Tzvi Ezekiel was in Warsaw. At that time, R' Tzvi Ezekiel himself is recorded as a supporter of religious Zionism, which had become a viable option in Poland after the war.¹⁰ While this may have made the transition easier for the younger Michelson, he is still depicted here as one of a number of younger hasidim who “abandoned” their hasidic congregations and “went over” to religious Zionism.

Already late in 1918, we find Abraham Hayim Michelson involved in Zionist enthusiasm. As secretary of the Jewish community council, his name heads the list of signatories to a declaration of the council celebrating the first anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. As secretary, he likely composed the declaration as well: “A day of remembrance is this day for us; today will be completed a full year since it was proclaimed, through the Minister Balfour, that the government of England promises ‘Palestine for the people Israel,’ and there will be redemption for us.”¹¹

Here, and in other resolutions of the council, Michelson signs himself in distinctly modern style – *hamazkir Michelson* (secretary, Michelson).¹² This contrasts with the “signature” of the introductions to his books: “The young Abraham Hayim Simhah Bunem, son of my father, master and teacher the great scholar, renowned for his piety, his honoured holiness my teacher Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson, long may he live, rabbi of the community of Plonsk and the region.” From one signature to the other, Michelson’s self-presentation has changed dramatically.

Although the simplest assumption remains that, to whatever degree Michelson became estranged from Hasidism, this took place after the writing of his books, it is a shock to find someone so involved with hasidic lore, one of the major authors of books of hasidic tales, drifting away from his roots. It is a dramatic example of the inability of Hasidism in the early twentieth century to retain its younger adherents, its “grandsons.”

One could also ask, given the example of Rodkinson in an earlier generation, if there is something about compiling books of stories that puts a person’s hasidic allegiance at risk. In Michelson’s case, involvement with stories could have led directly to a broader taste for literature, the love of Hebrew books for which he would be remembered. There is also the issue of belief and scepticism. A stated purpose of Michelson’s collections, as of many others, was to sustain faith in miracles: “The community is in need of faith, in our days when believers have vanished from among humanity, and faith

in providence, in miracles, is very weak.”¹³ However, writing down stories of so *many* miracles, some of them quite far-fetched, might be enough to test anyone’s faith. This is especially so since Michelson frequently includes differing versions of the same story, often cross-referenced. Much of the hasidic discourse around stories is focused on their truthfulness, and the issue of multiple versions was a difficult one for many hasidic authors.¹⁴

Referring to this issue in the introduction to *Ohel Avraham*, one of his last books, Michelson makes one of the most ruefully honest statements of any hasidic collector: “Although I know that, just as it is impossible for wheat to exist without chaff, so it is impossible for stories and traditions to exist without differing versions – nevertheless, if there is even a pinch of truth in the story, my toil and efforts have been worthwhile.”¹⁵ It is tempting to see in these words a growing scepticism about the verities of hasidic faith.

Mixture of Genres

Underlying Dan’s ideas about maskilic authorship is a deep suspicion of the authenticity and value of the literature of hasidic tales as a whole. Dan’s writings propose several criteria for determining the hasidic authenticity of collections of tales.

One such test concerns the mixing of genres. Dan’s book on the tales insists that stories (*sipurim*) and brief teachings (*siḥot*), even when couched in anecdotes, are two distinct genres and should be treated separately.¹⁶ He implies that the lack of such a distinction is evidence of inauthenticity, referring to “the mixture of the two genres, as it is found, for example, in the books of Buber, Newman¹⁷ and Wiesel.”¹⁸

Dan is surely right that teachings should often be read and interpreted differently from stories. Mixing the two is not, however, a non-hasidic phenomenon. Dan in fact acknowledges that many books of hasidic tales do combine both, specifically mentioning several of Michelson’s and Berger’s books.¹⁹ I would add that this is already the case in the earliest books of this literature. The first edition of R’ Nakhmen’s *Sipure Maasiyot* includes both stories about R’ Nakhmen and teachings from him in separate sections,²⁰ much like the arrangement of Berger’s books. In *Shivḥe HaBesht*, sayings and teachings of the Baal Shem Tov are interspersed with the stories about him, much as in Michelson’s books.

Nigal’s valuable scholarly editions of books of hasidic tales have contributed to obscuring this fact, by editing out material from some books. This is the case in Nigal’s edition of Solomon Rosenthal’s *Hitgalut HaTzaddiqim* (1901), and particularly in his edition of Michelson’s *Shemen HaTov*,

which leaves out the entire first section of this three-part book because it consists of teachings, as well as the entire last section, a letter from Michelson's father, R' Tzvi Ezekiel, which also offers little by way of stories.

Not only teachings but all kinds of other material are mingled with stories in "authentically hasidic" books. Both Berger and Michelson include many letters from rebbes. Michelson's compilations include a spell against the evil eye from Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg (included in the "stories" section of *Shemen HaTov*, 2:52) and a whole series of spells for this and other situations from R' Abraham Abish of Frankfurt am Main.²¹ Hasidic hagiographic books published in recent decades often include photographs of rebbes and facsimiles of letters, newspaper articles, and the like.²² Berger and Michelson might well have done the same had they had the technology; it is consistent with their approach.

Why would scholarship on hasidic tales obscure this aspect of these books? One reason might be the desire for workable classifications. As noted, referring to the works of Berger and Michelson as books of hasidic tales draws attention to one important aspect of their content, but it is not a precise classification – and there is something frustrating about that.

More deeply, there is the scholarly thesis (discussed in the next chapter) of the holiness of stories in Hasidism. According to this thesis, the compilers of books of tales should have been motivated by love and reverence for stories in and of themselves. If so, then certainly their books ought to consist of stories more or less exclusively. The fact that they do not means that another motivating factor and organizing principle other than the value of stories was at work.

One need not go far to find that organizing principle. Books that contain stories about, letters from, teachings by, and spells attributed to rebbes and other religious leaders are primarily interested not in stories as such but in the religious leaders. As Khone Shmeruk notes:

Hasidic hagiographic literature, since *Shivḥe HaBesht*, is first and foremost an expression of the extraordinary devotion and admiration which surround the personality around whom the praises are woven ... The weaving together of story elements with sober reports of dry facts is, for this reason, a widespread phenomenon in the hagiographic literature. For this reason, portions of informal talks, pointed witticisms, dreams, fragments of hasidic teachings, are intertwined with citations from printed works and from letters, even though they do not always contain story elements.²³

To the disappointment of scholars, myself included, who are primarily inter-

ested in stories, the value of stories to Berger, Michelson, and other authors like them is secondary.

One Rebbe or Many?

When Dan does acknowledge the centrality of the rebbe rather than the story per se, he overstates the importance of an author's own rebbe as an organizing factor. Both in his more recent articles on what he terms "Frumkinian Hasidism," a non-hasidic phenomenon of outsiders romanticizing Hasidism, and in his major book on the tales, Dan posits as a test of authenticity that a truly hasidic author would write only about one specific rebbe and his dynasty:

It was the creators of Frumkinian Hasidism who depicted the various groupings as one indivisible whole, as for example Martin Buber in his *Tales of the Hasidim*, which give equal weight to scores of zaddikim from a variety of communities and periods, something no authentic hasidic work has ever done. For the hasid, the social and religious grouping to which he belongs is a specific community led by a specific zaddik and his dynasty; other dynasties are regarded as of lower quality or, sometimes, as heretical and evil.²⁴

In fact, however, while some hasidim – certainly not all²⁵ – may regard other hasidic communities with disdain, this attitude is not prevalent enough to make it a criterion for authenticity in books of tales. Berger's and Michelson's works demonstrate this.

Dan's book on the tales includes a brief list of authentically hasidic books of tales, those focused on one rebbe or one dynasty. The first books on the list are Michelson's *Ohel Elimelekh* and *Ohel Naftali*. The list does not mention the authorship of these books, leaving the impression that they are by different authors devoted to different rebbes.²⁶ Following this comes a list of works written from outsiders' perspectives, which inauthentically treat all of Hasidism as a unified movement; prominent among them is Berger's *Zekhut Yisrael*.

This contrast between Michelson's works as authentically hasidic and Berger's as the works of an outsider is unfounded. As we have seen, Berger and both the elder and younger Michelson were hasidim, born to hasidic families, members of hasidic congregations, followers of hasidic rebbes. They even had access to unprinted manuscripts by hasidic rebbes, likely not available to outsiders.²⁷

Secondly, *Ohel Elimelekh* and *Ohel Naftali* are not by different authors with competing allegiances but part of Michelson's series of books devoted to a variety of rebbes. In this respect the only difference between Berger and Michelson is that Berger grouped chapters about different rebbes together, while Michelson published them as separate books.²⁸

Even Michelson's individual books are not entirely focused on one rebbe or dynasty. The title pages of *Ohel Elimelekh* and *Ateret Menaḥem* mention that stories of several other rebbes will be included "by the way." The title page of *Shemen HaTov* makes it clear that the book will be about Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg, his brother Rabbi Phinehas Horowitz, and several other rabbis who were related to them. This is obscured by Nigal's edition of *Shemen HaTov*, which leaves out stories 56 to 58 and 61 to 174 because they are not about R' Shmelke.

Both Berger and Michelson do in fact present Hasidism as one movement, glorifying hasidic figures "from a variety of communities and periods"; indeed, the books go beyond the hasidic movement, especially in Michelson's *Ohel Avraham*, about a non-hasidic contemporary of the Baal Shem Tov. Their works include stories and teachings that emphasize the importance of honouring all rebbes. For example, Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz "was accustomed to saying about all the tzaddikim that each one of them serves God in a different manner ... and anyone who says that only his own rebbe is a tzaddik – he would tear him out of both worlds!"²⁹

Historically, one of the major ruptures in Hasidism was the breaking away of the "holy Jew," Rebbe Jacob Isaac of Pshiskhe, and his disciples and successors, from the Seer of Lublin and his school. This controversy, dramatized in Buber's novel based on hasidic tales, *For the Sake of Heaven*, is mentioned in various stories in Berger's and Michelson's works. The elder and younger Michelson were Ger hasidim, and Ger derives from the Pshiskhe school. Remarkably, however, none of Michelson's books is about rebbes of Ger, Pshiskhe, or their allies. Except for two that deal with figures from an earlier generation (*Shemen HaTov* and *Ohel Avraham*), all Michelson's books are about figures closely connected with Lublin: Elimelech of Lizensk, the Seer of Lublin's own rebbe; the Seer's close colleague Menahem Mendl of Rymańów; the Seer's disciple, whose opposition to the "holy Jew" is mentioned in several stories, Naphtali of Ropczyce; R' Naphtali's disciples Hayim of Tsanz and Shalom of Belz. The unpublished *Ohel Rabi* was about the Seer of Lublin himself. As for Berger, his work celebrates figures from both sides, including the Seer of Lublin (in *Eser Orot*) and R' Simhah Bunem, successor of the "holy Jew" (in *Simḥat Yisrael*), as well as both R' Solomon Leyb of Lentshna, of the Pshiskhe school (*Eser Atarot*), and his bitter opponent R' Naphtali of Ropczyce (*Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot*).

Although some of the stories touch on controversies, these choices of which rebbes to celebrate seem like deliberate attempts to get beyond the wound, to create an imaginary past in which all of Hasidism is one. The sense of unity goes even beyond Hasidism to include many stories of non-Hasidic heroes.

Likely for Michelson, and certainly for Berger, this sense of unity was lived as well as written about. Berger's introductory chapter to *Eser Tzahtzahot*, "Toldot Yitzḥaq," in praise of his father, proudly notes that his father learned from many rebbes, and lists fourteen of them, among them such luminaries as Rebbe Israel of Ruzhyn and Rebbe Shalom of Belz.³⁰ Berger tells us that his father "was very dear in the sight of all the tzadikim of the generation."³¹ On his own behalf, Berger opens *Zekhut Yisrael* with a selection of letters written to him in his younger years by several rebbes: R' Yequetiel Yehudah of Sighet, whose disciple he was; R' Hayim of Tsanz; R' David Moses of Chortkiv; and R' Isaac of Buhuși. He refers to each of them by the acronym *admor*, "my master, teacher and rabbi," a standard title for one's own rebbe. In a note in the *haskamot* (approbations) section at the beginning of *Eser Qedushot*, he refers to himself as "devoted to the tzaddikim" in general (*davuuq batzadiqim*).³² Berger received rabbinical ordination from his rebbe the Yetev Lev, from Rebbe Mendele of Deesh, and from Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz.³³

For both authors, the activity of collecting their tales, largely by correspondence with rabbis all over Eastern Europe (their correspondence with each other, between Romania and Poland, is a good example) must have reinforced the sense of being part of one unified world of traditional Ashkenazi Jewry. (Ironically, the possibility of such correspondence was a result of distinctly modern developments. The founding in 1874 of the Universal Postal Union had streamlined postal service between virtually all European countries, at a time when steam power made the transportation of mail faster than ever before.³⁴) Such a sense of unity would not only serve the interests of nostalgic outsiders, as Dan suggests. At a time when Hasidism was weak and endangered, the choice to depict all of Hasidism as one – and, indeed, as part of a larger unity with traditional Judaism as a whole – was reinforcing, encouraging, and useful for the beleaguered Hasidim themselves.

The Economic Dimension

Another area in which Dan's sceptical articles cast doubt on the authenticity of many Hasidic tales is the economic dimension: "The motives for Frumkin's publication of his 'Hasidic' collections are not too difficult to discover: Financial reasons were undoubtedly central in his work."³⁵ The implication seems

to be that the financial motive disqualifies Frumkin and many other compilers of tales as producers of authentic hasidic literature.

Financial motives should indeed not be ignored. The lasting insights of Marx and others regarding the determinative role of economic factors in history are certainly applicable to books of hasidic tales. For example, the remarkable outpouring of books of hasidic tales that began in the mid-1860s can be linked to recent advances in printing technology and especially the widespread introduction of paper made of wood pulp, much cheaper than earlier paper made from rags.³⁶ The maskilic newspaper *Qol Mevasser* complained in 1869, "For some time ... Hasidism has begun to employ this instrument for disseminating among the people fanatical writings, miracles and wonders of the tzaddikim ... The printers have made of this an extremely profitable enterprise. They print some thirty thousand copies of such rags on blotting paper and the common multitude buy them cheaply like hot-cakes."³⁷ In 1911 a Yiddish book of tales about the Seer of Lublin, *Nifleot HaHozeh*, from the same publisher and press as Berger's books, was priced at one kopeck.³⁸

In the case of Israel Berger, it is possible to verify that financial motives were a factor in his hagiographic writings. The rare book collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary includes a three-page letter from several rabbis and prominent Jews of Bucharest appealing to wealthy Jews to help Israel Berger financially.³⁹ An initial appeal is signed by three men distinguished by their descent from great rabbis. Separate, briefer paragraphs follow, each signed by a rabbi or prominent citizen, including a joint appeal from two Sephardi rabbis of Bucharest and a paragraph written in German in Hebrew letters from a Dr M. Beck, whose name appears in Latin letters only. There is a final humble note from Berger himself. The leaflet itself is undated, but one of the signatories, Isaac Ayzik Tovish, includes the date: "the first day of the portion 'you shall strengthen yourselves,'⁴⁰ 5666."⁴¹ This corresponds to Sunday, 10 June 1906.

This appeal depicts Berger and his household living in dire poverty, not knowing where their next meal would come from. It emphasizes that, as a rabbi in the Ashkenazi community of Bucharest, Berger did not receive a regular salary but lived on monthly donations; times were bad for the community and the donors were not able to keep up their support. (This arrangement for rabbis among Bucharest's Ashkenazim is mentioned in other sources; the Sephardi community, though smaller, was wealthier and better organized.⁴²) Mention is made of the wealth in which Berger grew up, which makes his present poverty more bitter; Berger's praises of his father ("Toldot Yitzḥaq," beginning of *Eser Tzaḥtaḥot*) indeed mention his father's great

wealth, which he gave away before going to the Holy Land in his old age. The immediate reason for the appeal on Berger's behalf is the classic one that he has daughters of marriageable age and cannot afford to marry them off.

The first of Berger's hagiographic books, *Eser Qedushot*, was published in that same year, 5666/1906. The *haskamah* of Rebbe Joseph Meir of Spinka states, among its reasons for encouraging the purchase of this book, "This involves support for a Torah scholar who is in need for a great matter."⁴³ The "great matter" is probably the marriage of Berger's daughters.

The introductory materials to *Eser Qedushot* include a deed of sale from Berger to his publisher, his friend Rabbi Avraham Joseph Kleyman, noting that Berger had sold *Eser Qedushot* and the three other parts of *Zekhut Yisrael*, with the rights to all the income from their publication, to Kleyman. By the following year Kleyman had also bought the rights to Berger's two other hagiographic books, *Simhat Yisrael* and *Qedushat Yisrael*.⁴⁴

Thus there is every reason to believe that Berger's immediate motive for the publication of his books of tales was financial. At the same time, it would be ludicrous to argue that that is all there was to it. Had Berger merely intended to make some money in a hurry, he could have dashed off a book of tales on the literary level of the Yiddish *Meqor Hayim* or *Ohel Naftali*. The care and thoughtfulness of the editing of *Zekhut Yisrael*, and the reverence that shines through on every page for the holy men it celebrates, point to the spiritual motives that coexisted with financial ones. As Ira Robinson notes regarding hasidic books of tales in general, "The idea that these people were out to make a ruble is not to be disregarded. On the other hand, there were obviously other things on their mind ... it is important to tease out the other stuff."⁴⁵

Printing and distribution of books in Berger's and Michelson's culture were rarely handled by established publishing houses. This was more the affair of individual entrepreneurs, often booksellers, who would pay to have books printed and would distribute them as best they could. Such an individual publisher (*motzi la-or*) was alternatively and more descriptively called *hamevi levet hadefus* – "the one who brings [the book] to the printing press."⁴⁶

Abraham Joseph Kleyman, the publisher of Berger's hagiographic books, is referred to in the deed of sale in *Eser Qedushot* as being from the town of Kalbiel. As of the publication of Berger's next volume, *Eser Orot*, he was living in Warsaw, running a bookstore there and publishing other books as well.⁴⁷ As publisher, Kleyman had to pay for printing. He worked consistently with the printing house of R' Enoch Henekh Falman, in Pietrkow. Several Yiddish books of hasidic tales published by Kleyman at Falman's press, all dated 5671 (1911) are in the YIVO library: *Nifleot HaMagid*, which includes

some stories from R' Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson; *Nifleot Bet Levi*; and the *Nifleot HaHozeh* mentioned above, priced at one kopeck.⁴⁸ These and Yiddish books from other publishers, like the Yiddish versions of Michelson's books, were likely printed on the cheapest paper and sold largely by itinerant booksellers.

Kleyman may have chosen to print Berger's books on somewhat better paper; or perhaps it is simply because of their length that publication was not easy for him to afford. All four sections of *Zekhut Yisrael* should have been published at once; the expense of printing led Kleyman to publish them separately.⁴⁹ He had acquired the rights to all Berger's hagiographic works by 1907; it took until 1910 for *Simhat Yisrael* and the last two sections of *Zekhut Yisrael* to be printed, and *Qedushat Yisrael* was never printed at all. Several times, in the introductory sections of approbations (*haskamot*) from rabbis, a rueful footnote notes that the text of an approbation has been cut to reduce the expenses of printing.⁵⁰ Again, if Kleyman had been motivated only by economic considerations, he could have left out much more. It is reasonable to conclude that he was also motivated by religious feeling and his friendship with Berger.

Based on these examples, Dan's emphasis on the money motive appears well founded – not so, however, his sceptical conclusions from it.

To sum up, Berger's and Michelson's books show that Dan's proposed tests for authenticity do not work. Yet books of tales themselves make certain claims to authenticity, especially by appealing to prestigious sources, written and oral.

Orality and Writing

Jacques Derrida's critique of views that privilege speech over writing has led some thinkers to suggest that Jewish tradition anticipates deconstructionism by granting written text a more "original" and "authentic" status than speech.⁵¹ Indeed, many Jewish texts seem to assume that spoken words are made up of letters, which would make writing prior to speech – for example, the well-known motif of "the letters through which heaven and earth were created" by God's spoken words as described in Genesis.⁵²

The idea that Judaism privileges text over speech is supported by the centrality of texts such as the Torah and Talmud in Jewish religious life. In Eastern Europe, this went hand in hand with the high status of Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages of written text, compared to Yiddish, the Jewish vernacular. Thus, the Yiddish *Dover Shalom*, *Meqor Hayim*, and *Ohel Naftali* were of lower status in their cultural context than the Hebrew versions.

Even more significantly, these, like most Yiddish books of hasidic stories,

are translations of Hebrew originals. In this context, the Hebrew written text is primary and original; the Yiddish version, in the language of everyday speech, is secondary and derivative. The title pages of these and other Yiddish books of tales emphasize that their contents are derived from *sforim*, Hebrew books for religious study. Similarly, the publisher and printer of the Hebrew and Yiddish *Meqor Hayim* produced a Yiddish book of non-hasidic tales, *Hashgahat HaBore* (1911), whose title page announces “very wondrous and important tales, which have been taken out of libraries [*biblutekin*].”

This particular claim is illuminated by Ira Robinson’s observation that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries both maskilim and representatives of Orthodoxy were publishing hitherto unprinted Hebrew manuscripts.⁵³ The elder Michelson was involved in this phenomenon: the Orthodox publisher of a collection of medieval texts, *Divre Mosheh*, 1885, notes that he bought the manuscript from R’ Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson.⁵⁴ There was a growing awareness among traditional Jews of the wealth of still unpublished Hebrew manuscripts that existed in European libraries. Fantastic legends circulated around these collections,⁵⁵ and an author such as R’ Yudel Rosenberg found it expedient to present his original work as ancient texts found in “royal libraries.”⁵⁶

Berger’s and Michelson’s Hebrew books themselves, of course, are filled with citations from previous Hebrew books, including unprinted hasidic manuscripts to which they had access. “It is written in the (holy) book” (*katuv besefer* . . .) is one of their most common attribution formulas.

Clearly, however, in the realm of hasidic tales, this privileging of the written text is not all there is to it. Another very common attribution formula in Berger’s and Michelson’s books (and others) is “I heard from,” followed by the name of the informant or a characterization such as “a trustworthy man,” “a God-fearing hasid,” or “several elders,”⁵⁷ and sometimes by a chain of informants who transmitted the story orally. Other stories are introduced by “hasidim are accustomed to saying,” or “it is well known,” likewise appealing to a living oral tradition.

In principle, in the context of hasidic tales, both written and oral sources can validate a story or teaching. The classic formula is *mipi sofrim umipi sefarim*, “from the mouths of sages and ‘from the mouths’ of books.”⁵⁸ At the same time, in some respects it is oral sources that are privileged. After all, the tales in general are understood to originate in oral, Yiddish telling. (The presence of actual authored fiction is not acknowledged as a possibility in this literature!) More subtly, the language of Hebrew hasidic tales (and hasidic texts in general), with its frequent admixture of Yiddish vocabulary and literal translations of Yiddish idioms, points to the dependence of the

written text on its oral sources. Scholarship, of course, has often emphasized the oral provenance of tales in hasidic collections, as examples of Jewish folklore.⁵⁹

Now and then there are reminders among Berger's and Michelson's stories that much has been left in the oral tradition and not put in writing. As mentioned earlier, R' Phinehas HaLevi Horowitz, one of Michelson's informants, says he could not possibly be expected to write down all of the many stories he has heard about Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz.⁶⁰ These reminders are especially poignant when they refer to the musical dimension of the traditions. Several stories in *Eser Orot* 3 refer to words that Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev would sing on Rosh Hashanah. One report of these words ends, "and I have received the melody as well."⁶¹ Another concludes with reference to "a particular melody and gesture, sweeter than honey, which have been passed on to the hasidim."⁶²

All this lends support to the argument of Zeev Gries and others that oral culture is more important among hasidim than written texts.⁶³ The prestige of oral transmission is shown by the fact that it may even be claimed falsely to give higher status to a book. Thus, a Yiddish book of tales, *Adam Baal Shem* (Lemberg 1884),⁶⁴ begins "I heard this story from the holy Rabbi Shimshon of the holy community of Roshkov," but contains only instantly recognizable retellings of stories from *Shivhe HaBesht*.

The degree to which written hasidic tales privilege orality also stands out in the many Yiddish phrases in the direct speech of rebbes. Very often in Berger's and Michelson's books, utterances of a rebbe are in Yiddish, giving a sense of immediacy, and presumably representing his actual words rather than a translation. A similar practice is already found in the earliest books of hasidic stories.⁶⁵

Remarkable here is the reversal of the usual sacred/secular or high/low dichotomy of Hebrew and Yiddish. Hebrew is the prestigious and holy language; that is why it is the main language of Berger's and Michelson's books. When, however, a rebbe, one of the heroes who give these books whatever claim to holiness they have, speaks, his words are holier and more important than the surrounding text. Thus at these moments the Yiddish vernacular text is holier than the surrounding Hebrew. While traditional Hebrew is called *leshon haqodesh*, "the holy language," the words of a rebbe reported in Yiddish can be referred to as *beleshon qodsho*, "in his holy language."⁶⁶

Paradoxically, however, the Yiddish vernacular is not always closer to the oral tradition than literary Hebrew is. The Yiddish versions of *Meqor Hayim* or *Ohel Naftali*, for example, are not based on oral sources but translated from Hebrew. The original Hebrew versions of these books are thus closer

to the oral Yiddish sources of the stories. This is underlined by the fact that only the Hebrew versions contain frequent attributions to storytellers.

On the other hand, as noted earlier, these attributions are often copied, along with the stories they are attached to, from earlier written sources. Any neat dichotomy of orality and writing is hard to sustain.

Further, many of Berger's and Michelson's stories come from letters, written to them in rabbinic Hebrew by learned informants. These letters blur the boundaries of orality and text: they are personal communications not available in print, and yet are in writing and in the holy language.

As well, appeals to the authority of holy books or reliable oral transmission sometimes become delightfully mingled. Juxtaposing the two, Berger begins a story, "hasidic legend tells, and this is the oral tradition of the community, and it has already been printed in books."⁶⁷ Linking the two in a chain, a story in *Shemen HaTov* begins, "I heard from a trustworthy man, who saw in a book...."⁶⁸ Similarly, in one of the books of hasidic stories of the mid-1860s, we find, "I heard this story by word of mouth, from a trustworthy man who saw it with his own eyes in a precious book, called *Hospitality*, in the library of the royal city, Vienna."⁶⁹ Here reading an inaccessible holy book is equated with eyewitness experience, passed on by oral transmission, authenticating a story that, in actual fact, was most probably the author's own creation.⁷⁰

On the whole, hasidic tales are at the nexus between orality and literature.⁷¹ A review in a Yiddish-language hasidic newspaper of a recent book of hasidic tales describes the experience of reading the book as an intimate reenactment of an experience of oral storytelling: "The reader sits with the book, and hears in his ears the conversations of old-time hasidic Jews, telling the stories and the happenings that they themselves experienced. At the same time, the sounds of the heart are heard, along with the stirring emotions, and sometimes also the hot tears of the storyteller, who is reliving anew the stories and conversations, and one is pulled along by their fiery enthusiasm."⁷²

Thus writing and orality merge into one. In this context it makes sense that hasidic attitudes toward stories are intertwined with ideas about conversation in general. I will now look at some of these attitudes more closely.

CHAPTER SIX



The Status of the Stories

Status of Stories in Hasidic Culture

Joseph Dan's important book on hasidic tales, *HaSipur HaHasidi*, argues that in Hasidism, stories became holy *as* stories in and of themselves.¹ This claim has been supported and amplified by more recent scholarship on hasidic tales.²

Dan's own writings, in the meantime, have taken a different approach. Already the final chapter of *HaSipur HaHasidi* raises doubts about the authenticity of some of the many collections of tales published from the 1860s onward.³ Subsequent articles by Dan have expanded these doubts into a thoroughly sceptical stance toward the authenticity of most hasidic stories.⁴ These articles depict most traditional collections of hasidic tales, together with the works of Buber and other popularizers, as part of an essentially non-hasidic phenomenon of outsiders romanticizing Hasidism for nostalgia and entertainment. Similarly, Yehoshua Mondshine (himself a Lubavitcher hasid) dismisses all books of hasidic tales as light reading, not part of hasidic literature at all.⁵

In the face of this sharp disagreement, this chapter attempts to sketch out a nuanced view. In this context, I assume some continuity in hasidic culture, so that the views of contemporary hasidim are relevant. This is in keeping with the views of Hayim Liberman and A.J. Heschel that contact with living hasidic culture is useful in understanding its texts.⁶

My own first contact with hasidic tales was not among hasidim but in the Toronto community of amateur and professional storytellers and enthu-

siastic listeners.⁷ For many in this storytelling community, there really is a sense of holiness attached to stories in and of themselves, including folk tales, personal stories from life experiences, literary stories, and even jokes. Conversational references to the power and importance of storytelling, or “story,” are common. Well-known storyteller Celia Lottridge says forthrightly, “Storytelling is my religion.”⁸

The fact is, however, that nothing like this outlook is found in any hasidic community.⁹ Revealingly, the teachings of hasidic rebbes are often referred to as “Torah,” sacred text, but stories are not.¹⁰ Even in Breslov Hasidism, where *Sipure Maasiyot*, the compilation of tales told by Rebbe Nakhmen, is a holy work, reading it is not considered in the same category as “Torah study.”¹¹

Nevertheless, there are hasidic teachings ascribing sanctity to storytelling. The books by Buxbaum, Dan, Elstein, Loewenthal, and Nigal listed in the bibliography include many citations. Moshe Idel in his book on Hasidism summarizes some of the more emphatic of these teachings and discusses their implications in terms of mystical praxis.¹² Alan Brill’s important article on Rebbe Moses Hayim Ephraim of Sudilkov, the Baal Shem Tov’s grandson, establishes the importance of storytelling to this early master.¹³ Rebbe Nakhmen of Breslov told his disciples that his spiritual inspiration came from the stories of holy men that he heard in his youth.¹⁴ I personally was told by the Skolier Rebbe of Borough Park to continue reading and telling hasidic stories, since through stories of holy people my own soul would be drawn to theirs and lifted up.

Observations of oral storytelling in the hasidic world suggest, however, that the spiritual outlook reflected in these teachings is only part of the picture. For example, storytelling plays a role in rivalries between different hasidic groups. Student and hasid Dovid H. comments: “Another favourite [topic of storytelling] with hasidim is the relationship between different rebbes. They are usually along the lines of the honour given by other rebbes to their rebbe or dismissive witticisms by their rebbe about another rebbe.”¹⁵

Avrum Ehrlich’s *Leadership in the HaBaD Movement* draws attention to the political role played by stories in Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s acclamation as Lubavitcher rebbe in 1951, which followed a period of uncertainty after the previous rebbe’s death.¹⁶ Schneerson’s storytelling, drawing on a broad repertoire, entertained and inspired hasidim, increasing his popularity as a leader of communal gatherings.¹⁷ He also conducted himself in such a way as to inspire storytelling about him.¹⁸ During the period when the succession was in doubt, Schneerson told many stories about the previous rebbe and encouraged others to do so as well. This reinforced impressions of his strong connection with the previous rebbe, making him a suitable candidate

as successor.¹⁹ At the same time, this kind of storytelling was a spiritual practice. As Naftali Loewenthal notes, Schneerson's inaugural discourse after his acclamation as rebbe "mentioned each of his predecessors, telling a story about each one ... mentioning a figure from the past amounted to the process of mystical combinations of souls."²⁰

More generally, Ehrlich treats oral storytelling in post-*khurbn* Brooklyn as an aspect of hasidic "folk culture."²¹ Storytelling emerges as a key element of this culture in a very down-to-earth way, blending with rumour and gossip,²² cultivated as an enjoyable group pastime,²³ relied on as a means of connection with idealized memories of the past and the old country.²⁴

Referring to anthropological work in the same setting with members of a variety of hasidic groups, Jerome Mintz provides a full and nuanced summary of the functions of hasidic storytelling. Tales are among the few religiously legitimate forms of entertainment. As such they include "not only wonder tales but ... jokes as well."²⁵ Stories of the past function as records of community and family history. Describing rewards for good behaviour and punishments for bad, stories "serve as guides of conduct" and "a technique of social control."²⁶ An individual may be able to enhance his prestige by telling of miraculous help received – presumably as his own reward for good behaviour – or about encounters with the group's rebbe. Stories affirm aspects of the overall hasidic narrative: "the power and righteousness of the Rebbes ... the special relationship existing between the Jews and God ... [the fact] that the Rebbe affords his followers protection from chaotic fate." Finally, "The telling of tales can be a mystical expression ... To tell tales of the tsaddikim is one means of ... contacting their piety and power ... the Rebbe may also conceal a prayer in the tale, or the tale itself ... may have the power of renewing the event it describes."²⁷

Readers may notice aspects of all these functions in the written tales that are the focus of this study. It should be noted, however, that hasidic teachings in praise of storytelling cannot be assumed to carry over to books. Practically all the sayings of rebbes in praise of stories refer to oral storytelling, practically none to the writing or reading of tales.²⁸ Some critical remarks attributed to hasidic figures specifically denounce books of tales as likely to be filled with false stories.²⁹

In contemporary hasidic culture, Dovid H., connected with the Belz community, suggests, "You must remember ... that the true hasidishe story teller doesn't refer to books but has it all within him. *Er is angezapt mit khsidishe mases* [he is steeped in hasidic stories] is the way one would describe him. Stories are passed on at *yortsayt sudes* and *leykekh un bronfns* and *lekhayims* [types of communal gatherings involving eating and drinking], or sitting around an old man listening to his tales and memories."³⁰

A balanced assessment of the status of hasidic tales in books must take a number of factors into account:

1. Regarding religious texts in general, Boaz Huss suggests a typology of canonical books, which are sources of authority; holy books, whose physical presence or audible recitation is considered powerful in itself; and sacred texts, which are studied in a ritual or communal context.³¹

In this typology, books of hasidic tales are not “canonical,” since they exert no practical authority in the life of hasidic communities. Nor do they have the talismanic use of “holy books.” Are they “sacred texts”? Huss himself mentions the tales of Rebbe Nakhmen of Breslov as falling into this category, which involves study in a ritual or communal setting.³² I experienced this in the Breslov community in Safed during visits in summer 1990. The rabbi of the community, Elazar Mordecai Kenig, would read aloud from one of the tales at the late Sabbath afternoon gathering and explicate it in a trance-like state. No similar practice exists, however, for any other book of hasidic tales, though there are situations where *oral* storytelling takes on a communal, ritual dimension.³³

An alternative classification scheme is provided by Yiddish idioms. The Yiddish language has two words for “book,” the Hebraic *seyfer* and the Germanic *bukh*. Generally speaking, a *bukh* is secular in content, while a *seyfer* is a “sacred text” in Huss’s typology, a book for religious study.

The place of books of tales in this dichotomy is ambiguous. Many a Yiddish book of tales – hasidic tales or others – is referred to on its title page as *seyfer*. This, however, may be a bid for respectability not taken seriously by readers. Such a book would often still be referred to as a *bukh*, or more idiomatically a *mayse-bikhl*, “a little storybook.” Moshe Yida Leibowitz of blessed memory, a Yiddish-speaking Nikolsburg hasid and enthusiast of stories, told me that he would refer to a Yiddish book of hasidic tales as a *mayse-bikhl*, but would probably call a Hebrew one a *seyfer*.³⁴ On the other hand, the catalogues of Aaron Faust’s bookstore in Cracow from 1877 to 1893 include Yiddish books of hasidic tales – unlike other storybooks – in the *seyfer* category.³⁵

2. Many and perhaps most hasidic teachings in praise of stories are found in books of stories³⁶ – a fact that is obscured when they are compiled out of context. Their purpose in context is to increase the book’s status and saleability, and they ought to be “read sceptically, as every sales pitch should be.”³⁷
3. Well before the emergence of hasidic hagiography, it had become standard for Jewish books of stories to claim religious value. A pioneer, in 1602, was the classic Yiddish *Mayse-Bukh* (story-book), which boldly “tried to

pass itself off as a *seyfer*.³⁸ Especially from the beginning of the nineteenth century, a great many Yiddish books of tales drawn from folklore, rabbinic sources, and secular literature were in circulation. Their title pages inevitably emphasized the moral and religious lessons to be learned from their contents, often adding, “in the merit of this, may the righteous redeemer come speedily in our days.”³⁹ The same style, with a title page highlighting a moral lesson, was followed by maskilic storybooks such as the novels of Isaac Meyer Dik.⁴⁰ The claims of hasidic story compilers should be read in this context of appeals to the pious sentiments of potential readers.

Indeed, a likely categorization of most books of hasidic tales in the eyes of most of their readers, as suggested by Morris Faierstein, would be as “pious entertainment.”⁴¹ A contemporary hasidic expression of such a view is found in a letter from Shmuel Segal Roth, of Brooklyn, to a weekly Yiddish newspaper published by Satmar hasidim, *Der Yid*.⁴² Roth begins with a denunciation of contemporary Yiddish novels and the like, which are popular in the Brooklyn hasidic community, and which, just as in former times, are presented by their title pages as religiously appropriate reading.⁴³ Such reading matter, Roth argues, is in fact secular, and therefore of dubious permissibility even for girls, but certainly forbidden for males, who should be studying Torah. He continues, “If one does want to rest one’s brain a little, many storybooks about holy men are available – biographies of holy men, which contain stories that have been passed on from one person to another, which imbue a person with faith in holy men, faith and trust in God, good traits of character, and so on.”

4. As Mendel Piekarcz points out, in hasidic usage the words *sipurim* or *sipure maasiyot* (usually translated as “stories” or “tales”) and their verbal forms have a broad range of meaning that includes everyday conversation in general.⁴⁴ Thus in *Shemen HaTov* 2:155,⁴⁵ the word *sipur* clearly means “conversation”: “the *sipur* between them went on about half an hour.” In *Eser Orot* 3:39, *sipur* refers to bits of information or advice. Therefore, many teachings cited to support the thesis of the holiness of stories in Hasidism are not specifically about storytelling but about the ability of rebbes to invest even everyday conversation with mystical meaning.⁴⁶
5. The gist of many teachings cited in support of the holiness of stories is this: *even* stories can have spiritual value. In essence, stories are seen in many such teachings as a paradigmatic part of the material world, which can be transformed and uplifted but which, contrary to Buber, is not joyfully affirmed.
6. As noted earlier, compilers of hasidic tales insist that their stories are true. The only kind of make-believe story that has high status in hasidic dis-

course is the parable (*mashal*). Thus, in *Shemen HaTov* no. 60 (cited in *Eser Orot* 1:16), disciples realize that a story told by the Maggid of Mezritsh is significant *because* it is a parable. A parable is significant because of its point-by-point correspondence with some ethical or metaphysical truth. Other stories are valued because they are taken as testimony to historical truth about a holy man. This is not an outlook that considers stories intrinsically valuable. Abraham Michelson thus writes in his introduction to *Meqor Hayim*, “Let the reader not consider me as a mere storyteller.”⁴⁷

7. The role and status of both oral and written stories may vary considerably from one hasidic community to another; this would be a useful topic for further research.⁴⁸ The status of Rebbe Nakhmen’s tales in Breslov Hasidism remains unique. Scholars have noted the particularly prominent role of Lubavitcher hasidim in the publication of books of tales. The compiler and printer of *Shivhe HaBesht*, Michael Frumkin/Rodkinson, who revived the genre in the 1860s, such notable authors of books of tales as Jacob Kaidener (*Sipurim Noraim*) and Abraham Samuel Heilman (*Bet Rabi*), and prominent collectors in more recent generations, such as Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, were all Lubavitcher hasidim. Conversely, Izbica hasidim and those of Przysucha and Kotsk were less focused on the rebbe’s powers and thus less involved with stories.⁴⁹ A contemporary hasidic informant, Yitzchak D., suggests that in his community, Modzitz, “stories do not occupy a primary place . . . the focus is mainly on Torah and *neginah* [song, music].”⁵⁰ Of course the status of stories could also change over time; Morris Faierstein suggests that the importance of hasidic stories to hasidim has increased substantially since the Second World War.⁵¹

Status of the Tales in Berger’s and Michelson’s Books

Given these variations in the status of stories from one context to another, the evidence of Berger’s and Michelson’s books should be considered in its own right. The many letters from informants cited in both men’s books testify to the existence of a network of rabbis, many of them authors, across Jewish Eastern Europe, who loved stories and were enthusiastic about both hearing and writing them.

Israel Berger, Kabbalist and Storyteller

For Israel Berger, in particular, the spiritual significance of stories – or at least of stories and teachings together – was exalted indeed. In keeping with his world view as a kabbalist, Berger saw his books themselves as part of a world of invisible connections and supernatural influences for good and ill.

A postscript to the introductions of *Eser Orot* and *Eser Tzahtzaḥot* says:

Behold, I am announcing in the public square [*beshaar bat rabim*], on high and below, that with all my heart and soul and with entire willingness, I am giving, completely as a gift, half of the holy merit of these books of mine for the uplifting of the soul of my spouse, who was a descendant of many great scholars and holy men who are cited in these books – the reb-betzin [*rabbi's wife, learned*], the holy woman Madam Hinde daughter of Nekhe, may she rest in peace, who passed away, because of our many sins, on the sixteenth day of the month of Iyar, 5665 [21 May 1905].⁵²

The “holy merit” (*zekhut diqedushah*) of compiling stories casts light on Berger’s choice of title for his hagiographic work. *Zekhut Yisrael*, “Israel [Berger]’s merit,” was not a random choice but a description of what this work meant. This gathering of stories and teachings makes an impression “on high” both with the favourable forces that can lift a deceased soul to higher, better spheres and with the harsh forces that might accuse and attack the author. For protection from the harsh forces, the final book in *Zekhut Yisrael*, *Eser Atarot*, begins with a homily on the “binding of Isaac” (Genesis 22). Berger notes that he has included it because “it is already accepted by every Jew that the story of the binding of Isaac brings a sweetening of harsh judgments, for every generation. And after I merited, in my poverty, with the help of the blessed God, to complete these four parts ... and to publish them, I was afraid lest there be, heaven forbid, an accusation against me on high, appropriate to my lowliness and the insignificance of my deeds.”⁵³

The view of life in the stories, replete with hidden influences and miracles, is of a piece with Berger’s view of his own life; the stories could be said to provide a template for his view of life.

Thus, as noted, Berger includes at the beginning of *Eser Tzahtzaḥot* a chapter in praise of his own father, Rabbi Isaac Simhah Berger, “Toldot Yitzḥaq.” In its depiction of extremes of piety and proud reports of the honour given to his father by great rebbes, this section is no different from any other hagiographic chapter in the book.⁵⁴ Further, Berger relates that his own birth was promised to his father by Rebbe Shalom of Belz, who also predicted correctly that this son would be troubled by envious people.⁵⁵ He and his father are thus like other characters in his stories.

Berger believes in the factual truth of his stories. In the section of approbations at the beginning of *Eser Qedushot*, he includes some letters written to him in his youth by rebbes. They are not directly related to the book, but are included, he explains, as character witnesses, “so that a later generation will know and believe that a rabbi as trusted⁵⁶ as myself – humble and devoted

to the tzaddikim – would only narrate what is clear to him and drawn from a trustworthy source.”⁵⁷ This insistence that the stories are not made up is typical of hasidic tales collections generally.

In his trust in the truth of the tales he passes on and his integration of the writing down of stories into a larger kabbalistic narrative, Israel Berger follows in the footsteps of his relative, a rebbe he himself visited, R’ Isaac Ayzik Safrin of Komarno (1806–1874), the subject of chapter 9 of *Eser Qedushot*. The Komarno Rebbe’s “Book of Secrets” (*Megilat Setarim*), extant only in manuscript in Berger’s time but cited by him in this chapter and elsewhere, contains a section of stories of the Baal Shem Tov that is a valuable artifact in the reception history of hasidic tales. These stories had a personal spiritual meaning for the Komarno Rebbe, connected with messianic aspirations for his own soul.⁵⁸ Though they include miracles that go as far as corpses walking, the rebbe insists repeatedly on their absolute truth: “This and all the stories are true as the Lord your God is true.”⁵⁹ In the autobiographical portion of the manuscript, the Komarno Rebbe tells stories with supernatural content about himself; one of them, about his prophetic abilities as a child, is included in *Eser Qedushot*, 9:7. Here we have a major spiritual figure in Hasidism who, like Berger, treasured and exalted stories through writing them down.

Any of Berger’s compilations would have as much claim to be called a *seyfer* (sacred text) as any book of hasidic tales possibly could. These books are addressed to a religiously learned readership, and they come with *haskamot*, approbations by noted rabbis. *Haskamot* play the roles of both the Roman Catholic *imprimatur* certifying that the book is free of heresy or religious error, and the “blurb” of contemporary publishing praising the book and its author and encouraging potential purchasers.⁶⁰ They were and are normal features of a *seyfer*, and their absence could lead to suspicions about the book’s value or religious acceptability.⁶¹ Nevertheless, most books of hasidic tales from *Shivḥe HaBesht* and *Sipure Maasiyot* onward appeared without them.

The *haskamot* on Berger’s books, from rebbes and rabbis, express great regard for the author and his work. In these *haskamot*, *Zekhut Yisrael* is referred to unambiguously as a holy book for religious study (*sefer haqadosh*, *haskamah* of the “*Sede Hemed*” to *Eser Qedushot*, 3). This high valuation is not only granted to the teachings the book contains. All of the *haskamot* mention that it contains stories, which several of them emphasize over the other content: “biographies [*toldot*] of tzaddikim ... and their Torah teachings and conversations”⁶²; “telling to a generation to come the praises of holy sages and the biographies of tzaddikim”⁶³; “biographies of tzaddikim ... namely their good deeds, their conversations, their practices, their attainments”⁶⁴; “stories (*sipurim*) and Torah teachings of tzaddikim.”⁶⁵

Notably, however, none of the *haskamot* or introductory materials in these books assign any importance to stories *as* stories. The holiness of the book is seen as coming from the holy people it is about.

R' Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson Studies a Story

In “Tzipahat HaShemen,” his appendix to *Shemen HaTov* (128–9), R' Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson provides a striking testimony that in his eyes printed stories were worthy of real study. Praising his son's compilation of stories, he writes, “You have drawn water from deep wells ... By way of example, I shall show you a tale about tzaddikim, foundations of the world, whose meaning is hidden and concealed, but it seems to me that I have penetrated their secret.”

In the tale he cites, from the book *Zikaron Tov*, the Seer of Lublin complains to Rebbe Mordecai of Neskhiz about the controversy and animosity besetting him. R' Mordecai asks if he has put up a building recently. The Seer of Lublin answers that he has only re-shingled the roof of his house. Rebbe Mordecai advises him that if he removes one row of shingles, the controversy will cease.

As if seeing himself, too, as a character in a story, R' Tzvi Ezekiel continues in storytelling style, emphasizing chronology and coincidence: “And several years ago, on Tuesday of the weekly Pentateuchal reading ‘*Tavo*,’ I saw this in the book *Zikaron Tov*.” Since hasidim do not refer to stories as “Torah,” reading stories is not referred to as “study” [Yiddish *lernen*, Hebrew *limud*], the term used for sacred texts. This is the case even here: R' Tzvi Ezekiel merely “saw” (*raiti*) the story in a book. On the other hand, since books of stories are sometimes presented as leisure reading for the day of leisure, the Sabbath,⁶⁶ it is significant that R' Tzvi Ezekiel was looking at such a book during the week, and perhaps even during time devoted to sacred study. He goes on with his story:

About an hour later, I was studying in the Torah portion of the week, “When you build a new house” [Deuteronomy 22:8], and it occurred to me to take some book or other from my bookshelf to see what was to be found there about the portion I was studying. As it happened I took the book *Maor VaShemesh* by the holy rebbe, the tzaddik, foundation of the world, Rebbe Nahum, the memory of a holy man for a blessing, of Chernobyl, and opened it to the portion *Tavo*. And my eyes saw that there was only one Torah teaching there [on that weekly portion] – and it was about exactly the passage that I had just been studying.

The teaching that Rabbi Tzvi Ezekiel cites from *Maor VaShemesh*, one of the classics of the hasidic “theoretical literature,” is an intricate homily drawing on interpretations of both the Talmud and the Bible. Some of its key phrases bring together kabbalistic concepts and magical thinking:

When, sometimes, people are giving someone distress, it is because of the forces of judgment [*hadinim*] that are aroused against him on high, which are clothed in these people ... The remedy for this is to raise oneself to the level of the World of Thought [or “consciousness,” *maḥshavah*] where there are no judgments ... Just as the roof is the essence of the house, so thought is the essence of a person, which shelters him from above ... Now, behold, when a person builds a house, the forces of judgment are aroused, especially outside the Land [of Israel], because [these forces] fill all the empty spaces of the world, as is known, and the person is diminishing their territory.

Rabbi Tzvi Ezekiel concludes: “I said: This, then, is the intention of the story that I saw just an hour ago! Understand: ‘the conversation of sages requires study’ [Talmud Sukkah 21b].”

Even in this discourse, R’ Tzvi Ezekiel assumes that the suitability of tales as subjects for serious reflection needs to be demonstrated. This is not how every reader would approach a book of tales; and indeed, even his own reflection to this depth on a story is presented as having happened almost accidentally.

On the other hand, this passage also suggests that, like Israel Berger, R’ Tzvi Ezekiel imaginatively understood his own life in terms of traditional legendary motifs, which included the operation of providence through apparent chance, as well as outright miracles. Elsewhere, he relates that he was miraculously saved as a baby when a soldier fired a gun at him, and that the story is well known in his family.⁶⁷

Abraham Hayim Michelson

Abraham Hayim Michelson’s books, like Berger’s, are addressed to a religiously learned audience. They do not, however, carry *haskamot*. This is likely a signal that the level of prestige asked and expected for these books was lower than that of Berger’s. Unlike Berger’s books, which were all published by the bookseller Kleyman, Michelson’s various books were published by several different booksellers in different cities. This might be an indication that they were not enthusiastically received, so that no publisher was drawn

to take on publication of the whole series – although, on the other hand, Michelson says in his introduction to *Ohel Naftali* (p. 3), “Thank God, my earlier books have spread through the world by the thousands.”

Michelson seems to have less trust than Berger in the absolute veracity of his stories. His open acknowledgment of this in *Ohel Avraham* has been noted, but throughout his books there are often multiple versions of the same stories, often cross-referenced, inevitably drawing the reader’s attention to the tales’ unreliability from a factual perspective.

This issue of reliability is salient in the poor reception received by some of Michelson’s books among those who might have been most expected to welcome them – the descendants and hasidim of the rebbes they praised. Regarding Michelson’s work in praise of Rebbe Shalom of Belz, “The best [*hamuvhaqim*] of the Belzer hasidim used to say that the book *Dover Shalom* was not to be trusted.”⁶⁸ My informant Dovid H. adds, “*Dover Shalom* was dismissed by the Belzers as *Dover Sheqarim* [‘speaker of falsehoods’; see Psalm 101:7] ... Chasidim are notorious in dismissing anything that is not to their liking, or that damages the image they try to create of themselves, as untrue or as something devised by *sonim* (foes) to smear their reputation.”⁶⁹

Similarly, the publication of *Meqor Hayim* was quickly followed by the printing of a protest from descendants of Rebbe Hayim of Tszanz, who “claimed that not only had the book been printed by worthless nobodies chasing after money, but it included falsehoods, fantasies, and things that had never happened, and some of the stories in it had been written down only for the sake of laughter and mockery.”⁷⁰ Some of Michelson’s introductions refer in a general way to opposition and attacks on his books.⁷¹

It seems then that both Michelson’s own sense of his books of stories, and their reception in at least some hasidic circles, fell far short of acceptance as sacred texts.

As noted, at least three of Michelson’s books appeared in abridged Yiddish editions. This in itself may be a sign of the lower status accorded the originals. Mondshine argues in reference to *Shivhe HaBesht* that the Yiddish translators of this work were very free with the text, adding, deleting, and revising, because it had no sacred status for them.⁷² The Yiddish versions of *Dover Shalom*, *Meqor Hayim*, and *Ohel Naftali* do not add anything that I have noticed, but they certainly cut extensively. For example, the Yiddish *Ohel Naftali* is sixty-four pages long compared to 148 in the Hebrew original. This suggests that the translators did not ascribe any exalted status to the originals.

These Yiddish books themselves would have little claim to *seyfer* status, regardless of the use of the word on their title pages – which are typical of the cheap story-books discussed earlier: “*Sefer Meqor Hayim*. In this *seyfer* are told very wondrous tales of the holy tzaddik, the rebbe R’ Hayim of Tsanz ... and of his son the tzaddik R’ Ezekiel of Sienawa, may their merit protect us. We have translated it into jargon [Yiddish] so that every person may know of the greatness of these tzaddikim and take a lesson from it in how to serve the blessed God.” Explicitly addressed to an unlearned audience, these *mayse-bikhlekh*, little story-books, might be popular, but their status at most would be that of edifying entertainment.

These Yiddish books are even printed carelessly, another sign of their low status compared to the Hebrew originals. For example, in the Yiddish *Meqor Hayim* the story interrupted by the end of page 87 does not continue on page 88, which begins with the middle of a completely different story.⁷³ Their literary quality is lower as well. The style is flattened: for example, most first-person narrations in the Hebrew versions have become third-person narrations in the Yiddish.⁷⁴ The stories are titled (not numbered as in the Hebrew) but nearly every title is the same: “Another Wondrous Tale of the Rebbe (so-and-so),” occasionally even if the story is *not* about that rebbe.⁷⁵ Literary subtleties have disappeared. For example, in the story I have titled “Wedding Presents” at the beginning of this book, from the Hebrew *Meqor Hayim*, Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz improbably promises the lordship of a town to a poor bride and groom. The story reaches a conclusion without a fulfilment of this promise, but then the narrator adds that the source of the story was “a man who had visited that couple in that village, which [indeed] belonged to them.” In the Yiddish the ending has become, bluntly, “and in the end it really happened that way, that afterwards they did own that town.”⁷⁶

Thus, a closer look at Berger’s and Michelson’s books shows a range of attitudes toward hasidic stories, from the relatively high esteem given them by R’ Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson or Israel Berger to the more tentative outlook of Abraham Michelson to the casual attitude of Michelson’s Yiddish translator. We also see a range in status for *books* of hasidic tales, ranging from the greatly respected status of Berger’s compilations, to the mixed reception of Michelson’s, to the probable role of the Yiddish translations of Michelson’s work as no more than edifying popular entertainment. In general, the status of hasidic tales must be seen as varying, depending on the specific community, individuals, and compilations involved, from serious texts for religious study with a diverting dimension, to cheap popular entertainment with some religious “redeeming value.”

Concluding Thoughts

Books of hasidic tales are not a genre apart, pristine and holy, above the literary and historical developments of their time. They are fully implicated in those developments, even as they constitute acts of resistance to many aspects of them. One aspect of this resistance is their resolute focus on the past. The connection with the past expresses itself in the use of models and sources from earlier periods of Jewish religious literature. This will be the subject of the next part of this book.

PART THREE



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

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CHAPTER SEVEN



Study and Storytelling

Rabbinic Literature and Hasidic Tales

As important as the Bible in shaping Judaism as we know it are the texts attributed to the rabbis of the Land of Israel and Babylonia between the first and sixth centuries of the common era. Collectively known as “rabbinic literature” (*sifre ḥazal*), these texts include the Mishnah, a compilation of legal traditions; the Midrash, not a single work but a genre of imaginative biblical interpretation; and two vast, wide-ranging works of law and lore structured as commentaries on the Mishnah, the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. The Babylonian Talmud, usually simply “the Talmud,” became the most authoritative of Jewish texts and, especially in Eastern Europe, the focus of religious study. The Talmud and rabbinic literature as a whole contain many stories that are comparable to hasidic tales, largely accounts of holy men, “the sages” or great rabbis.¹

This chapter looks at some uses of talmudic/rabbinic material in hasidic tales. My aims are more modest than those of scholars who have explored the typology of holy men, the ways in which the image of the hasidic rebbe and the motifs of hasidic stories develop out of earlier Jewish and non-Jewish sources. Susanne Galley in particular has identified models in earlier literature, including the Talmud, for typical hasidic stories of the stages of a holy man’s life;² ideally, this chapter should be read together with her work.

In terms of the development of the rebbe as a literary character and hasidic tales as a literary genre, the role of rabbinic literature is, arguably, actually quite minor. Rabbinic literature contains no biographical books, and schol-

arship suggests that books compiling biographical material, such as those of Berger and Michelson, are primarily modelled on later hagiography, especially *Shivḥe HaAri* (Praises of Rabbi Isaac Luria), first published in 1629.³ As for sources and models for individual hasidic stories, there are many other texts to be taken into account, especially the Bible,⁴ mystical works,⁵ medieval literature,⁶ non-Jewish hagiography,⁷ and Jewish and non-Jewish oral folklore.⁸

Nevertheless, the importance of rabbinic literature in traditional Judaism and its centrality in the traditional curriculum make intertextual connections between this literature and hasidic tales significant. This chapter's modest aim is to look at some of these intertextual connections and to argue that their effect is to equate the hasidic rebbes with the sages of the Talmud.

Maintaining that the rebbes were equivalent to "our sages," the founding figures of rabbinic Judaism "for whose merit the world exists,"⁹ was no small claim. In the historical context of the stories studied in this book, it served a double purpose. In the face of modernity, it rooted Hasidism, a movement scarcely 150 years old, in a much older "imagined past." In the context of Hasidism's ongoing struggle for acceptance among traditional Jews, it constituted a claim for the legitimacy and pre-eminence of Hasidism.¹⁰ Mitnagdim such as Rabbi Phinehas of Polotsk, subject of a study by Allan Nadler, "suggested that the supernatural powers attributed to the early sages and zaddikim were strictly a matter of the past."¹¹ Conversely, Berger's long introduction to *Eser Orot* counters pious readers' potential scepticism about miracles by listing forty miracle stories from the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. He concludes, "See, now, in these passages, all the kinds of wonders that are ascribed to our holy rebbes the followers of the Baal Shem Tov." In order for this argument to be convincing, the rebbes must be accepted as the equals of the sages. This is what the weaving of rabbinic sources into the fabric of the collections of tales seems designed to establish.

Teachings, Stories, and the Fabric of Quotations

From *Shivḥe HaBesht* on, hasidic hagiographic books include not only stories of and about the rebbes but also their sayings and teachings;¹² these teachings include interpretations of traditional texts or ideas.¹³ Often the Talmud and other rabbinic sources, including talmudic stories, provide the material for the rebbe's interpretations.¹⁴ Sometimes a teaching is embedded in a brief story, sometimes not (e.g., compare *Dover Shalom* no. 120 and no. 131). Thus there is no clear demarcation between stories and study of traditional texts.

The language of the tales, too, blurs such distinctions. From the early Middle Ages into modern Israeli literature, Hebrew writing makes extensive use of quotations and near-quotations from earlier texts. The spoken Yiddish

of learned traditional Jews is similarly permeated with talmudic and biblical references – gently parodied in the speech of Sholom Aleichem’s character Tevye. Hasidic tales often share this characteristic of written and oral Jewish communication. Biblical references are more frequent than talmudic ones, but the latter occur quite often. A good example of this kind of writing, found in Michelson’s *Shemen HaTov* 2:55, is a letter from Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg to the rabbis of Brody, with some twenty phrases drawn from the Talmud and other rabbinic sources, together with a larger number of biblical references.¹⁵

Sometimes a significant allusion is involved, but at other times the quotation may simply be the readiest way of expressing a thought, and the original context need not be significant. The temptation to over-interpret such references should probably be resisted.¹⁶

The question of how much meaning intertextual allusions convey is particularly vexed when the source texts refer to God. Frequently, for instance, entry into a rebbe’s room is referred to as *el haqodesh penimah*, “into the inner sanctuary,” from Leviticus 10:18, where it refers to the holy of holies, the place of the divine presence. Several further examples may be taken from one book, *Meqor Hayim*. In story no. 37, the phrase “who shall tell him what to do?” (*mi yomar lo mah taaseh*), referring to God in the *Tziduiq HaDin* prayer recited at funerals, is applied to Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz when he makes an unexpected choice of what blessing to recite over a fragrance. In no. 93 the side-curls of Rebbe Elimelech of Lizensk are described as *qevutzotav tal-talim*, “curly locks,” from the description of the male lover in the Song of Songs (5:11), always considered in rabbinic exegesis to refer to God. Stories no. 107 and 108 recall the imagery of the *UNetaneh Toqef* prayer recited on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, where the angels are seized with trembling in the presence of God; in this context there is trembling at the presence of a holy man. These examples, which could easily be multiplied, seem to point to a divinization of the rebbes.

On the other hand, there are phrases in which a deliberate allusion to the divine is less likely. In *Shemen HaTov* 2:168 (“Husband and Wife Reunited” in the selection at the beginning of this book), words referring to God in the monthly blessing of the moon, *hoq uzman natan lahem* (he gave them a law and a set time), are applied to an Algerian slave-owner. It could be argued, of course, that this is an appropriate choice emphasizing the master’s absolute power over his slaves. In *Eser Tzahtzahot* 9:12 (identical to *Meqor Hayim* no. 117), however, an ordinary hasid’s attempts to get his rebbe’s attention are described with the phrase *vehakol asah yafeh be’ito*, from Ecclesiastes 3:11. Referring in its biblical context to God’s creative work, the phrase is used here to mean “he was doing everything in a good and timely way.” It

is hard to see any relevance in equating the hasid with God; more likely, this is simply a clever use of a handy phrase.

Clearly, then, caution is required in seeing in such phrases allusions to other contexts. Not every quotation “means” something. In the aggregate, though, phrases about God are applied much more often to rebbes than to anyone else, underlining their special status in the hasidic imagination as representatives of and intermediaries with God.¹⁷ Returning to talmudic phrases in hasidic tales, even those without specific meanings do have the effect of weaving rabbinic literature into the fabric of hasidic tales, making them, in some way, part of the same world.

Key Allusions

There are also instances when full comprehension of a story depends on recognizing a talmudic allusion.¹⁸ A subtle example is *Dover Shalom* no. 26 about Eydl, daughter of R’ Shalom of Belz (this story is discussed in chapter 11). Another is *Ohel Naftali* no. 107, in which Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczyce, known in the stories for his wit, is bested in repartee by a young girl.

The holy Rebbe of Ropczyce said: “All my days no one ever bested me except one little girl. Once I was in the town of Zakhuv, near the town of Melitz, a town as small as a man’s palm. Only ten Jews lived there, and there was a synagogue and a Jewish cemetery. On the street I met a little girl, and I asked her: ‘No matter how you look at it [*mimah nafshakh*] – if you have a synagogue, to pray with a minyan [a quorum of Jewish men, traditionally required for liturgical prayer] of ten, why do you have a cemetery? If one of you died, you would not have a minyan to pray. And if you have a cemetery, then when one of you dies you will not have a minyan, and why do you need a synagogue?’ But she answered me that they needed the cemetery for strangers who came there from elsewhere.”

The talmudic expression *mimah nafshakh*, expressing a dilemma in which two possibilities seem to cancel each other out, is not likely an allusion to anything specific. It is a frequent talmudic phrase and the simplest way of expressing a fairly complex idea, as well as weaving the story linguistically into the world of the Talmud. On the other hand, the phrase with which the story opens, *miyamai lo nitzahani adam huts mitinoket ahat* [all my days no one ever bested me except one little girl], is almost verbatim from a story in Talmud Eruvin 53b. It is spoken there by R’ Joshua ben Hananyah to introduce several stories about himself in which he is outwitted by a woman, a young boy, and a young girl.

The use of this phrase is a reminder to anyone who might be inclined to think less of R' Naphtali for his comeuppance in the story that the sage R' Joshua had similar experiences and also told self-deprecating stories about them. More importantly, by putting R' Joshua's words in R' Naphtali's mouth in describing a similar experience, the story puts R' Naphtali and R' Joshua on the same level.¹⁹ The allusion is quite deliberate. It does not serve the humour of the story for R' Naphtali's interlocutor to be a girl, because this choice of character draws attention to a flaw in R' Naphtali's witty argument: he is ignoring the women and children of the community, not counted in the traditional minyan. If one of them died, the cemetery would still be needed, while the minyan would remain intact. (There are more ways than one in which women do not count in these stories; this will be one of the themes of part 4 of this study.) Since the joke would be better if R' Naphtali had picked an argument with a man, the choice of a young girl must be intended to strengthen the parallel with the sage R' Joshua.

Another use of a talmudic citation in the context of a witticism is found in *Meqor Hayim* no. 41:

The holy Rebbe of Tszanz, of blessed memory, once spoke in a joking way to a German and modern [*moderni*] Jew who had come to him for the holy Sabbath. When that man gave him a request and a donation [*pidyon nefesh*], and the holy rebbe promised him that everything would turn around for the best, he said to the holy rebbe in the language he was accustomed to [i.e., German], "*Ich danke*" [I thank you]." But the rebbe said to him, "Oh! *Danke shtus!* You ought to say [using the traditional Yiddish/Hebrew expression for 'thank you'] *yasher-koyekh*."²⁰

A note in the text explains the rebbe's remark. "Since the Talmud in Bava Metzia²¹ says *danka shtus*²² [the coin called a *danka* is *shtus*, one-sixth, of a dinar], he said that the expression 'danke' [German for 'thank you'] is *shtus* [Yiddish for 'nonsense']."

The rebbe's preference is not only for a Yiddish expression but for the Yiddish of traditional, religious circles. A *dank*, recognizably similar to the German *danke*, is a common expression for "thank you" in more secularized Yiddish.

There is no direct equivalence of the rebbe and the sages here, but an implicit claim is made to connectedness with the Talmud and all it stands for. The rebbe's clever pun on a phrase from the world of Talmud study concisely (despite the cumbersomeness of trying to explain it!) opposes the world of the westernized, modern German Jew to that of the traditional, Yiddish-speaking, Eastern European Jew, with the authority of the Talmud

firmly on the side of the latter. Thus his joke has a serious undertone, especially in the early twentieth-century context of its appearance in print.

The Narrator Studies the Story

Now and then a narrator follows a tale with reflective comments, making the tale itself a text to be studied. In several instances these comments draw on the Talmud, as in, for example, Berger's *Eser Orot* 5:13:

From a letter from my relative by marriage, the great scholar, the Rabbi of Plonsk [R' Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson]:

I heard from a Torah scholar who heard it himself from the mouth of my relative by marriage, the holy Rebbe of Mogielnica, who was telling it to the pious rabbi our teacher Rabbi Hershele of Tomashov (of blessed memory):

When [the Rebbe of Mogielnica] was six or seven years old, he was sleeping in one bed with his grandfather the Maggid of Kozenice (may his merit protect us). In the middle of the night, he felt the Maggid getting up from the bed, and someone came into the room. The Maggid walked back and forth with this man, around the room, and [the boy] was greatly astonished to see that the man was not speaking with the Maggid with the respect due to someone greater than him; so he thought to himself that this man must surely be Elijah the Prophet.

After that, when the man left, he asked the Maggid [in Yiddish], "Grandfather dear, who was he? Surely Elijah the Prophet?" But the Maggid answered, "No, my son, that was the [long ago deceased] rebbe R' Ber (the Maggid of Mezritsh); apparitions of tzaddikim are greater than apparitions of Elijah."

The matter of being en clothed in a body is explained in the Talmud (Ketubot 103a) regarding our Holy Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch], "every Friday night ..."; and see the commentaries of the medieval rabbis on the Torah portion *Vayera* regarding the seeing of angels, and see the commentary *HaTorah VeHaMitzvah* by the perfect scholar Malbim, of blessed memory, interpreting this matter in the portion *Vayera*.

Talmud Ketubot 103a relates that Judah the Patriarch (the reputed compiler of the Mishnah) visited his house every Sabbath evening for some time after his death. The Talmud does not actually explain the workings of this, however. Perhaps R' Tzvi Ezekiel's "the matter ... is explained" refers to commentaries on the talmudic passage.

The story itself, and R' Tzvi Ezekiel's learned commentary on it, convey several messages: a tale of the rebbes is a sacred text worthy of study; the world of the Bible, the Talmud, and the tales are all one; the rebbes have the stature of the greatest sages and indeed of angels, and, remarkably, higher stature than Elijah the Prophet himself.

In *Dover Shalom*, several tales depict R' Shalom of Belz healing the sick by the laying on of hands. At the end of story no. 29, the narrator²³ adds the brief comment, "In my humble opinion, this is the subject of the Talmud in Berakhot (5b): 'He gave him his hand, and he lifted him up', see the text there."

The talmudic passage referred to consists of two similar episodes in which one sage visits another who is ill, they converse about suffering, and the visitor offers the other his hand and lifts him up. Here, rather than the Talmud elucidating the hasidic story, it is the hasidic story that elucidates the Talmud: by knowing about R' Shalom – who healed by touch and who gained this power by spiritually purifying his limbs – we can understand, the narrator implies, what the sages were doing.

Talmudic Interpretation in the Plot of a Story: A Recurring Pattern

The rebbe's ability to interpret Talmud in ways that are insightful and challenging can figure in the actual plot of a story in a number of ways. For example, "Forgetting the Mishnah," included in the selection at the beginning of this book, revolves around talmudic interpretation as a competitive sport. I concentrate here on the following recurring pattern:

- A rebbe does (or says) something that other characters find puzzling.
- He (or another rebbe on his behalf) responds to the puzzlement by citing a passage of a rabbinic text. (Generally, he says or implies that it is a difficult passage.)
- He gives a novel interpretation of that text, resolving the perceived difficulty.
- Explicitly or implicitly, this interpretation of the text explains the rebbe's puzzling behaviour.

Several examples from Berger's and Michelson's compilations follow.

Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg's interpretation of Avot 2:10 is the crux of *She-men HaTov* 2:32, a variant of a story in the earlier collection *Qehal Qedoshim*.²⁴

When my ancestor, the rebbe R' Shmelke, came to the community of Nikolsburg [as the newly appointed rabbi] ... he asked the people who were already standing there in order to welcome him ... to let him spend an hour or so alone in a room before he came to greet the householders ... [but some of the householders] put their eyes to the keyhole of that room to see and hear what he was doing. They heard him speaking praises and honorifics to himself ... saying to himself, "Welcome, Rebbe! Welcome, Rebbe! Welcome, rabbi of the community of Nikolsburg! Welcome, our Master!" and other such words, with many sighs and bows, as one does before a very great man ...

[Later] one of them asked the rebbe R' Shmelke what his intention was in this matter. To this he opened his holy mouth with wisdom, answering, "The whole reason for your coming to me was only and entirely to give me honour. But honour is a foretaste of the world to come, and I do not wish to indulge in it ... Now, that which is taught in Avot 2:10 – 'Let the honour of your fellow person be as dear to you as your own' – means that just as you despise the honour which you give to yourself, and it is worthless in your eyes, so too the honour which your fellow person gives to you should not be dear to you ... So during that time I was saying to myself, 'Welcome, rabbi of the community of Nikolsburg!' And what a burden and shame those words were to me, and no honour; so that when you came to me, your words to me were like the words I had spoken to myself."

In one earlier version of this text, from the 1860s, *Maaseh Tzadiqim* no. 9b (Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 40), R' Shmelke acknowledges the conventional interpretation of the text from Avot: "I think that the interpretation of 'Let the honour of your fellow person be as dear to you as your own' – aside from the simple interpretation, that it is an instruction to be careful about the honour of your fellow person – is also an instruction to be careful about yourself ... so that the honour of your fellow – the honour that others, your fellow people, give you – should be considered by you as if you yourself were giving honour to yourself."

It is more typical of hasidic interpretation, however, for the original meaning to be ignored, as it is in the *Shemen HaTov* version, or actually repudiated as unworthy of the sages, as it is in the narrator's commentary in the *Qehal Qedoshim* version.

In all these tellings, the interpretation and the story are interdependent. The story could, theoretically, be told without the interpretation, having R' Shmelke explain his intention without reference to Avot; but then his thinking and behaviour would appear merely eccentric rather than being rooted in the study of authoritative texts. The interpretation, on the other

hand, practically requires the story to exist around it: how else could there be such a thing as “your own honour” in R’ Shmelke’s sense, except as he acts it out?

A very developed example of this pattern, focusing on a biographical statement about a sage in the Talmud, is *Shemen HaTov* 2:46, identical with *Eser Orot* 3:21.²⁵ It is once again Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg who propounds the interpretation, although he does so on behalf of R’ Levi Isaac of Berdichev. In the story, R’ Levi Isaac visits R’ Shmelke, and attracts unfavourable attention by talking about everyday matters with the rebbe’s wife in the kitchen, while wearing prayer shawl and tefillin, and then chatting with an ignorant guest in synagogue during the morning prayers. Finally the hasidim complain to R’ Shmelke. He answers:

It is stated in the Talmud,²⁶ “Rav did not engage in worldly conversation all his days.” This is startling: did all the other earlier and later sages engage in worldly conversation, heaven forbid? What can it mean that Rav is praised about this? Furthermore, for Rav, this appears a small accomplishment to praise him about.

But, in truth, the interpretation is as follows: “Rav did not engage in worldly conversation” means that even when he was talking about empty, physical matters, according to how it appeared and sounded to people in general, in truth, even those words were not worldly conversation; on the contrary, through them he was bringing about great *yihudim* [“unifications”: kabbalistic mystical practice]. “All his days” – from the beginning of the day until the night he did thus, talking with anyone, as much as they wanted, in worldly conversation and empty, physical matters – and in truth he was bringing about *yihudim* thereby, and he was able to keep up his mental strength for such divine service all day long. That is why our rabbis of blessed memory praised him about this, for nothing like this was found among the rest of the tannaim [early sages], who could only keep up their mental strength for such a high level of service for three hours before they fell from their high levels.

In the same way, the rebbe R’ Levi Isaac can keep his mind on this, and speak words that appear like worldly conversation and empty matters, and bring about through them awesome *yihudim*, on the level of Rav, the great tanna.²⁷ Such is not the case for me; I can only keep up such mental strength for three hours, like the rest of the tannaim.

Thus not only is R’ Levi Isaac equated with Rav but R’ Shmelke equates himself with “the rest of the tannaim,” the revered sages of the Mishnah. This is not enough, however, for Michelson in *Shemen HaTov*; intent on the

praises of his ancestor R' Shmelke, he has deleted the last sentence, as if to imply that R' Shmelke too should be considered as being on the level of Rav, not merely of the early sages in general. Conversely, both Rav and the other early sages are depicted as masters of a strange and demanding hasidic spiritual practice.²⁸ The imagined worlds of the Talmud and of the rebbes merge.

This same pattern recurs in *Dover Shalom* no. 62, drawing on a story from the Talmud. The tale begins with a rabbi, an important hasid of R' Uri of Strelišk, travelling to Belz after his rebbe's death:

When [the visiting rabbi] opened the door [to the room where his host R' Shalom received visitors], he saw the holy rebbe R' Shalom sitting on his chair, and also the rebbetzin [rebbe's wife] sitting in his room. Since with his rebbe, the holy Rebbe of Strelišk, he had never seen such a thing, the matter was very strange in his eyes ...

[Later], since the rebbe R' Shalom (of blessed memory) felt that the rabbi was taken aback by having found him sitting with the rebbetzin, he recited before him the saying of the Talmud (Berakhot 62a): "R' Kahana went and hid under Rav's bed,²⁹ and heard him conversing and playing [with his wife] and doing as he required. He said to him, 'It seems as if Abba's [Rav's] mouth has never tasted this dish!' Rav said to him, 'Kahana, are you here? Get up, come out, for this is not the way of the earth [talmudic idiom: this is not proper conduct]!' "³⁰ R' Kahana said to him, 'It is Torah, and I need to learn.'"

[R' Shalom said:] "Now, we must understand: R' Kahana, after all, entered to learn holiness and purity from Rav. Yet when he asked, 'it seems as if Abba's mouth has never tasted this dish,' he answered him, 'Get up, come out' – and why did he not answer him concerning his conduct in this matter?

"But the explanation is that there are two levels. The first is a very high level, that of a holy man all of whose limbs have been purified, for the sake of heaven, so that they are without any physical feelings at all. But, being obliged to do at least some physical deed in this world, he exerts himself with all his strength to cause to enter into himself some degree of physicality.

"And there is a second level, that of a holy man whose limbs have not been purified so much. But he exerts himself with all the strength he can muster to conduct himself with holiness and purity, not deriving enjoyment from anything physical.

"Rav was on the first level, and it was hard for him to do a physical action; therefore, he exerted himself with various actions in order to bring

something physical to actualization. But when he heard that R' Kahana was there, he said to him, 'Get up, come out, for this is not the way of the earth,' meaning: the way of the world in general is not like this. Rather, most people have coarse bodies and are obligated to conduct themselves in holiness and purity, to distance themselves from physical enjoyments. But R' Kahana answered him, 'This is Torah, and I need to learn,' [meaning] 'I also want to learn how to attain such a high level.'"

R' Shalom does not state explicitly that he is on a higher level (or that R' Uri of Strelisk was on a lower level), but the visiting rabbi understands the message. Indeed, the comparison between the rebbe and the sage implicitly puts the rebbe on a higher level than the sage: R' Shalom is so detached from physicality that sitting in the same room with his wife is to him what sexual intercourse was for Rav.

Like the story cited earlier about R' Shmelke and R' Levi Isaac, this one reads back into the Talmud an extremely demanding, otherworldly standard of spirituality. A more straightforward reading of the talmudic passage would be that Rav and his wife were frankly enjoying making love. For that matter the non-hasidic reader might not see anything puzzling in the behaviour of a rebbe sitting together with his wife. In the hasidic perspective of this story, however, R' Shalom's behaviour is unusual and needs to be elucidated through the study of the talmudic text, which is seen as difficult. Some of the implications of this hasidic tale as to physicality are explored in part 4 of this study.

This same pattern of talmudic interpretation applied to unusual behaviour can occur very concisely, without elucidation. *Eser Orot* 7:1 in its entirety reads: "Once when the holy Rebbe of Neskhez was speaking about the Rebbe of Apt, he said, 'The Rebbe of Apt was in the habit of telling exaggerations [*guzmot* – in this context, tall tales].' He added that there was a holy tzaddik who said about the Rebbe of Apt that he knew the secret of the saying of our rabbis of blessed memory, 'the tanna [here, a repeater of oral traditions] taught an exaggeration'³¹ and that is why he had the ability to tell exaggerations." Here, too, there is unusual behaviour of a rebbe to be explained by the interpretation of a difficult talmudic text. The interpretation, however, is not spelled out: behaviour, text, and interpretation remain in the realm of mystical "secret."

The deeds of the rebbes and the sayings or deeds of the sages illuminate each other. If one understands the sages properly, one is equipped to understand the rebbes too. This pattern brings alive the equivalence between the rebbes and the sages – or even the superiority of the rebbes, who are by impli-

cation harder to understand, more removed from everyday consciousness, than the sages.

Talmudic Motifs and Tale-Types

I have so far focused on hasidic stories' use of rabbinic sources where this is either explicitly acknowledged by the narrator or signalled by similar wording. There are also instances where stories are connected by their images and plots – to use the terms of folklore study, their motifs and tale-types. This is an important area for exploration, because such elements are less likely to be lost in retelling than the precise wording, and so in some sense are more intrinsic to the story.³²

In hagiographic tales, structural resemblances between stories further deepen the identification of the world of the sages with that of the rebbes. In *Eser Qedushot* 2:10 we read:

It is known and famous among the disciples of our teacher and master Rebbe Isaac Ayzik [of Zhydachiv], who heard him tell it himself, that his rebbe, our master Tzvi [of Zhydachiv] was given a precious stone from heaven. Early one morning in the winter, when he did not have a candle in his house and was occupying himself with the service of God, he saw, in front of him, on the shelf by the wall, something shining very much, and he saw that there was a great light in his house. He went to see what it was, and he found a great precious stone, the size of a large egg. He hid it until a goldsmith, one of his relatives, came, and he asked him in a whisper how much it was worth. And he was told that it was worth more than the treasures of kings. He fasted for a long time so that it would be made known to him from heaven what this was; and it was revealed to him that he had a choice, to choose one of two possibilities. Either he could keep the precious stone and there would be great wealth for him and his descendants for generations or he would be given the mind, or the soul, of the holy Ari. He chose that high level, and did not want the wealth. He asked what to do with the precious stone, and the answer was to throw it toward the sky, outside. He did so, and it flew like sparks of fire, until it was no longer seen.

In a rabbinic parallel, found in Midrash Tehilim 92:8 and other sources, R' Simeon ben Halafta sees his wife's distress at their poverty. He prays, and a hand from heaven gives him a precious stone. It is too fabulously valuable to sell, but he pawns it for money and buys food. His wife, however, rebukes

him for diminishing his portion in the world to come and insists that he pray for the stone to be taken back, which it is.

The stories share the image of the invaluable precious stone, the poor sage's choice between miraculous wealth and spiritual reward, and the miraculous taking back of the gift.³³ Notably, this hasidic version keeps its focus on the rebbe/sage to the point of eliminating the wife from the story.

A talmudic motif gives rich mythic overtones to *Dover Shalom* no. 13 and 23, somewhat different stories with the same general plot. Rebbe Shalom of Belz leads the prayers in a synagogue which is next to (no. 13) or, as it turns out, built on top of (no. 23) a cemetery. The story continues (in the more concise wording of no. 23):

During the *Qedushah* prayer the congregation did not join in with him. After he had completed his prayer, he said to them, "Why did you not say *Qedushah*?" They answered that they had not heard the *Qedushah* at all. Then the holy rebbe (may his merit protect us) said that under the synagogue there was a cemetery; and when the dead heard the blessing [immediately preceding the *Qedushah*] "Who resurrects the dead," coming from his holy mouth, they thought that the time of the resurrection of the dead had come, and they all stood up from their graves and there was a great tumult. "That is why you did not hear my *Qedushah*." He immediately gave orders for the kohanim [men of priestly lineage] not to enter the synagogue [because of the ritual impurity of the dead, which kohanim are commanded to avoid].

The motif of the dead actually arising when a holy man recites the prayer about resurrection is found in Talmud Bava Metzia 85b, where R' Hiya is asked to lead prayers on a fast day, and "when he recited 'Who makes the wind blow,' a wind blew. He recited 'Who brings down the rain,' and rain came. When he was about to recite 'Who resurrects the dead,' the world shook."

In the talmudic story, heaven causes the prayers to be interrupted so that R' Hiya cannot bring about the general resurrection, which must wait for messianic times. The mythic resonance is strong. Conversely, part of what gives the story of R' Shalom its poignancy is the contrast between its prosaic details – the impatience of the prayer leader when the congregation does not join in properly, the concern about proper observance of priestly purity laws – and the grandeur of its theme, the yearning for the resurrection. Ironically, R' Shalom actually does say the blessing and bring about results, as R' Hiya is not permitted to do; on the other hand, R' Shalom brings about

only a local and temporary resurrection, with the final one still remaining a distant yearning.

It is also possible for a hasidic story modelled on a talmudic source to give its protagonist more power than the ancient sage. As mentioned above, the Talmud recounts that Judah the Patriarch visited his house every Friday night for some weeks after his death. *Eser Tzahtzaḥot* 10:5 tells of R' Abraham, the great-great-great-grandfather of Rebbe Abraham of Stetin. After he dies shortly before the birth of his son, he says the Sabbath blessing over wine with his family on Friday night every week for thirteen years. Not only that, but for all these years he studies with his son, teaching him to read and then studying the Talmud and its commentaries with him. Finally, when his son is bar mitzvah (thirteen years old and subject to the commandments as an adult Jew), he helps him to put on tefillin for the first time, blesses him, and departs.

This R' Abraham is a pre-hasidic figure, but is in the book because of his connection by name and genealogy to Rebbe Abraham of Stetin. In the previous section, *Eser Tzahtzaḥot* 10:4, Rebbe Abraham's father, Rebbe Judah Tzvi of Stetin, is cited as taking particular pride in his lineage, "sixteen generations, generation after generation, of masters of the spirit of prophecy [*ruaḥ haqodesh*]." The glory of the R' Abraham in the story thus belongs to his descendants, the rebbes.

In the Talmud, when R' Judah's posthumous visits to his family are discovered, he stops coming so that the holy men of previous generations, who did not revisit their homes in this way, will not be seen as lesser. Apparently the hasidic tellers of this story had no such scruples.

Re-Enactment and Transmigration

In the above examples the talmudic source is not mentioned, but a rebbe can also explicitly re-enact a talmudic story. In Talmud Hullin 7a, R' Phinehas ben Yair is on a mission to redeem Jewish captives. He comes to the Ginai River and cannot get across; he tells the river to part for him (an echo, of course, of the crossing of the Jordan in the biblical Book of Joshua, chapter 3, and the crossing of the Red Sea in the Book of Exodus). A dialogue ensues; the river refuses, but when R' Phinehas threatens to dry it up forever, it parts and he crosses.

In *Eser Tzahtzaḥot* 8:13, Jews have been dragging a river for several days, trying to find the body of a drowned young man to give him a Jewish burial. Rebbe Tzvi Elimelech of Dynów talks to the river, saying, "Don't you think we can do what R' Phinehas ben Yair could do with the River Ginai?" Threat-

ening to dry the river up forever if it does not release the body, he speaks in the exact words of R' Phinehas ben Yair's threat in the talmudic story. Otherwise, his words are given in Yiddish; although the river, unlike the one in the Talmud, does not speak, the use of the vernacular gives an impression of familiar communication. The rebbe's claim to equal status with the talmudic sages is clear.

At other times it is the narrator who identifies a rebbe with a specific sage, as in *Ateret Menaḥem* no. 127, a story ascribed to an intriguing source, Napoleon: "It is stated in the writings of Napoleon that in all his battles he saw a red-haired Jew winning the victory for him, as Alexander of Macedonia saw the image of Simeon the Just in his battles. But during his last battle, at Waterloo, where he fell, he did not see the image of the red-haired man. It is known that our rebbe R' Menahem Mendl [of Rymanów] was red-haired." Talmud Yoma 69a is the source of the story of Alexander the Great, who comes down from his chariot and bows before the high priest Simeon the Just at their first meeting, saying that he has seen the image of this elder before him at every victory. R' Menahem Mendl is said to have supported Napoleon as part of an attempt to hasten messianic redemption; see the section "Dangerous Power" in chapter 13.

It is not far from the overt re-enactment of specific stories like these to the assertion, through the belief in transmigration, that a rebbe and a sage were actually the same person, the same soul. In *Ateret Menaḥem* no. 150, R' Menahem Mendl of Rymanów declares that the "holy Jew" (R' Jacob Isaac of Psishkhe) has the soul of the talmudic sage R' Zeira. *Eser Orot* 3:24 has R' Solomon Leyb of Lentshna, when his son is conceived, "drawing down" for him the soul of the sage Joshua ben Perahiah.

In *Eser Qedushot* 2:39, which presents a talmudic sage in the light of a later mystical text, R' Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv is reported as saying about himself "that in one transmigration he was R' Ishmael ben Elisha, the High Priest, and he still remembered all the ascensions that he made, as mentioned in the book of Hekhalot."

In *Eser Orot* 3:3 (see "The Ecstasies of Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev," at the beginning of this book), R' Levi Isaac is described in the same words used of Rabbi Aqiva, unconsciously moving from one corner of the room to the other in private prayer, in Talmud Berakhot 31a. His extreme behaviour is thus given an honoured precedent, and more. "Kabbalists said that the soul of Rabbi Aqiva was in him"; he is the actual incarnation of the renowned sage and martyr.

Later, in *Eser Orot* 3:20, the same words are applied to a different situation: "When something to eat was brought to him, and he had to recite a blessing

of enjoyment first, he would recite the blessing in a great fire of enthusiasm, to the point where he would be in one corner and the food in another corner.” There is no direct reference to Rabbi Aqiva in this latter story, but the verbal association has already been established.

The tradition identifying R’ Levi Isaac as Rabbi Aqiva goes beyond Berger’s collections and beyond the legends of the Berdichever himself. In Michelson’s *Meqor Hayim* no. 54 we find:

Concerning the holy Rebbe of Tszanz, people said that he had the soul of the holy rebbe the author of *Qedushat Levi* [R’ Levi Isaac] of Berdichev, the memory of a holy man for a blessing. The holy men of his generation also said this about him ...

I heard that the rabbi and holy man, our teacher Eleazar of Kozenice, travelled to the holy Rebbe of Tszanz and took shelter in his shade [became his disciple]. But when R’ Eleazar became ill of the illness he would die from, he said in the presence of the people who were standing around him that he regretted very much that he had travelled to that holy rebbe.

He told a story about the holy rebbes, the Maggid of Kozenice, and Rebbe Mendele of Rymanów, and the Rebbe of Lublin: after the death of their rebbe the Maggid of Mezritsh, they travelled to the holy Rebbe of Berdichev and wanted to take shelter under his banner. But when they heard the holy Rebbe of Berdichev say about himself that he had the soul of the tanna Rabbi Aqiva, they travelled away from him and did not want to travel to him again to be his disciples – because the disciples of Rabbi Aqiva did not live long.

The same applies [R’ Eleazar said] to the disciples of the holy Rebbe of Tszanz, who has the soul of the Berdichever – they cannot live long. So he said that when he got up from this illness he would no longer travel to [the Rebbe of Tszanz] but to the holy man Rebbe Isaac of Neskhiz. But (because of our many sins) [R’ Eleazar] died of that illness.

The death of Rabbi Aqiva’s disciples figures in Talmud Yevamot 62b, where it is taught that twelve thousand pairs of Rabbi Aqiva’s disciples died in one year between Passover and Shavuot. Apparently the soul of a sage carries with it the constellation of connections and events in the sage’s life. Someone who became a disciple of R’ Levi Isaac of Berdichev or R’ Hayim of Tszanz would be identifying himself with the disciples of R’ Aqiva and would be likely to share their fate. Again, the world of the sages and the world of the rebbes and their hasidim have been identified with one another.

Allusions and Audiences

Would readers of hasidic tales recognize allusions to rabbinic literature? While the Talmud had a central place in the traditional curriculum of Eastern European Jewish scholarship, talmudic study was somewhat displaced in early Hasidism by involvement in Kabbalah and emphasis on prayer, to mitnagdim consternation.³⁴ This is dramatized by the memoirist Yekhezkel Kotik, who recounts that his father, on becoming a hasid, stopped studying the Talmud, dashing family hopes of his becoming a rabbi.³⁵ A potential reason for scepticism about Hasidism addressed in Israel Berger's introduction to *Eser Orot* is that some of the rebbes are not talmudic scholars.³⁶

This disconnection from rabbinic literature was, however, neither complete nor permanent. Yekhezkel Kotik's father, who stopped studying Talmud, still studied Midrash. Several stories describe rebbes studying Talmud – in a distinctly hasidic spirit of devotional enthusiasm, but studying Talmud nonetheless. For example, in *Eser Orot* 3:36, Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev surprises the great non-hasidic Rabbi Moses Sofer (the Ḥatam Sofer, 1762–1839) of Pressburg when the latter asks him about a difficulty in the Tosafot commentary to the Talmud:

Immediately, the holy rebbe began reciting, with great devotion, Psalm 24, “A Song of David,” and threw himself under the table in great cleaving to God, as was his way, and then he told the learned rabbi the explanation of the Tosafot.

The learned rabbi, our master Rabbi Moses of Pressburg ... [asked] why he had recited that particular psalm. The holy rebbe answered, “Because it contains allusions to the names of the authors of the difficult passages in the Tosafot. So I prayed to God that the author of that passage in the Tosafot would come from his palace on high and tell me the meaning. And he came and told me.”

In a story included as a footnote to *Ateret Menahem* no. 157, the Maggid of Kozenice more straightforwardly demonstrates his virtuosity in Talmud study and thereby converts a mitnagdic scholar to Hasidism.

In the course of the nineteenth century, as noted earlier, there had been an increasing return to the importance of Talmud study in many hasidic groups. (In *Meqor Hayim* no. 71, R' Hayim of Tsanz highly praises the study of even one tractate of Talmud.) We can conclude that many readers, especially the learned ones to whom Berger's and Michelson's books were primarily directed, would likely be aware of rabbinic allusions.

Readers who were not serious scholars might still be exposed to many

talmudic stories through the popular compilation *En Yaaqov*, a selection of the non-legal passages of the Talmud. Shlomo Zemach's recollection of *En Yaaqov* as the basic text of pious but unlearned men was cited in part 2. At an earlier period, *Shivhe HaBesht* describes the education of an adult who has never studied before, with *En Yaaqov* as a basic component.³⁷ Further, Rashi's Torah commentary, essentially an anthology of talmudic and rabbinic sources, was much more widely studied than the sources it is based on.

Those who did not study at all could still be exposed to talmudic material orally, for example through the sermons of itinerant preachers. Classical rabbinic stories and sayings would thus be known by many beyond the circles of Talmud scholars.

I am struck by the degree to which storytelling and study of rabbinic sources are merged. Interpretations of rabbinic texts appear as teachings side by side with stories, as plot elements and as integral to the structure of stories. Through language and structure, through open and implicit allusions, the tales integrate the world of the Talmud with that of Hasidism, and identify one group of holy men with another, thus enhancing immeasurably the status of the rebbes and of tales about them. These stories affirm an imagined past that makes Hasidism the authentic continuation of Jewish tradition, and resist the disconnection from the past which modernity brings in its wake.

Integration of the imaginative world of Hasidism with the authoritative texts of the past is more difficult when those texts are legal rather than legendary in content. The tensions of integrating halakhah, Jewish law as developed in the classic sources, with the world view of the tales are the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER EIGHT



R' Hayim's Strange Blessings: Halakhah in the Tales

Halakhah and Hasidism

Martin Buber discerned in Hasidism a spirit of personalism, in which the human being, as an individual and in relationship to others, takes precedence over any fixed laws.¹ There is much to be said for this characterization. Certainly, representatives of an approach to Judaism centred on halakhah (Jewish law) have accused Hasidism of antinomianism,² from its early days until today. I once heard an Orthodox acquaintance say dismissively, “Hasidim don’t follow halakhah.” Although Hasidism never chose, like Reform Judaism (which arose only a few decades later), to consider halakhah no longer binding, and today’s hasidic communities, at least in the popular mind, represent the extreme of halakhic strictness, there are indeed tensions between legal norms and hasidic personalism.

The evidence of the tales, however, supports Buber only to a point. The world of Hasidism and of the hasidic tale is permeated with halakhah. The law is a part of hasidic life and imagination that cannot be ignored. Further, personalism takes priority over law not for every person but, almost exclusively, for a rebbe. Finally, the priority of any person over law is tentative and a matter of tension.

Though halakhah includes a moral dimension with many commonalities with non-Jewish moral codes, this chapter attends primarily to the distinctively Jewish formal and ritual dimensions of halakhah in exploring these matters.

Consider the following story, *Meqor Hayim* no. 37:

Once the holy Rebbe of Tszanz, when he was smelling myrtles and fragrant spices on the night of the holy Sabbath, recited the blessing *bore miney mezonot* [which is a blessing over food instead of the blessing over fragrance]. This was a great surprise, but “who shall tell him what to do?”³ After the Sabbath, hasidim arrived who had been in Rymanów for the holy Sabbath ... and they recounted the surprising thing that their rebbe in Rymanów had done: on the night of the holy Sabbath he recited the blessing *bore miney mezonot* over the spices. And it was a wonder.

The hasidim are surprised and puzzled because of their ingrained commitment to law. The assumption of the narrator and the characters is that there are specific blessings, with specific words, to be recited under specific circumstances. There is no question of spontaneity in this regard. On the other hand, despite the hasidim’s puzzlement, the rebbes’ strange choice of blessing is not explained. A major point of the story is the mysterious connectedness of the rebbes with one another. The halakhic problem of reciting a blessing for food over fragrance becomes a side issue, but the story implies that ultimately a rebbe can do what he wants.

What if anyone other than the rebbe had recited the blessing as he did? In an actual hasidic community, such a choice would quickly be corrected as an ignorant mistake. In the world of the tales, if such a story were told about an ordinary hasid – as stories about comparable mistakes are told – the narrator would make it very clear that the hasid was ignorant and mistaken. The story might continue with praise of the hasid’s fervour, or with a rebbe finding mysterious meaning in the mistake, but the mistake would be labelled as such. For example, in *Ohel Naftali* no. 95,⁴ several rebbes laugh even as they praise the effective prayer of an ignorant man:

For that year there was, heaven help us, a decree from on high that was not good, concerning the women, and many women died, especially pregnant women, heaven help us. There was a villager in the congregation, and as they were reciting the afternoon prayers before Yom Kippur, in the blessing of the years [*shanim*] he said *nashim* [women] instead of *shanim* [years]: “Bless for us ... Bless our women like the good women, for blessing ... Who blesses the women ... Blessed are You, Eternal, who blesses the women.” As he was praying this he cried bitterly over the suffering and sickness that prevailed, heaven help us, and his prayer bore fruit on high. That is why the rebbes were laughing about this righteous pleading.

Only when the protagonist is a rebbe is there the possibility of telling such a story with no hint that the rebbe is ignorant. R' Hayim's unusual blessing is not labelled as mistaken. Nor does it need to be justified as having a positive result. There is surprise, wonder, but no judgment. In stories like this, the law has become irrelevant; only the person matters – when the person is a rebbe.

The law is pervasive in the background of hasidic tales; but the person of the rebbe is in the foreground. The law and the person are often in tension. The law is in tension with the rebbe's unique freedom to do as he pleases. More subtly, it is in tension with his supernatural powers. Most deeply, perhaps, it is in tension with the storytelling imagination itself. Here, there is a connection with the cross-cultural observation of folklorists that "characters in folktales and myths may do things which are prohibited or regarded as shocking in daily life."⁵ In the tales of Rebbe Nakhmen of Breslov, in which the imagination roams most freely, Ora Wiskind-Elper has noted, with only slight exaggeration, "the complete lack ... of any indication their landscape was a Jewish world."⁶ In hagiographic tales the landscape must remain Jewish because the imagination does its work through the character of the rebbe – but that character sometimes acts in "un-Jewish" ways.

The Halakhic Imagination

A Halakhic World

In general, halakhah pervades the world of the tales, and most stories cited in this chapter can be taken as representing several others. Hasidism developed in communities in which normal expectations of observance among Jews in general were much more demanding than they are today, and never rejected these expectations.⁷ Thus many stories take for granted such aspects of an observant life as daily prayer or refraining from travel on the Sabbath, and the binding nature of the norms involved. Rebbes themselves, from the earliest generations of Hasidism onward, are depicted as anxiously concerned about their own compliance with halakhah.⁸ *Dover Shalom* no. 60 begins with R' Shalom of Belz's deep distress at accidentally pulling a hair from his moustache on Rosh Hashanah, thereby transgressing, though inadvertently, a detail of the prohibition of work on a holy day:

In the book *Taame HaMinhagim* [Reasons for Jewish customs] it is written: Once, as Rebbe Shalom of Belz was about to begin to recite the blessings before the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, he wiped his holy mouth with his hand, and he noticed a hair from his moustache on his

hand. When he saw the hair on his hand he put down the shofar and sat down on the nearest chair, and his face was very pale. Rabbi Ayzik, his prompter,⁹ asked him what was the matter, and he showed him the hair on his hand.

Rabbi Ayzik said to him: I will tell you a story. Once, Rabbi Nathan Adler,¹⁰ of blessed memory, came to our master Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg, and saw the rebbe R' Shmelke pacing back and forth in his house, in great perplexity, screaming "I made a mistake, I made a mistake!" Rabbi Nathan Adler asked him about this, and he showed him that he had made a mistake in writing one of the divine names on one of the sheets of parchment in a Torah scroll that he was writing, as a scribe.

But Rabbi Nathan Adler said to him, "Why the screaming? What does it matter? If he (he meant the evil one) catches this, he'll choke on it!"

Then Rebbe Shmelke said, "You've brought me back to life."

When Rabbi Ayzik had told this story to R' Shalom of Belz, he said to the holy rebbe, "Why is our master and teacher in such perplexity? 'If he catches this, he'll choke on it!'"

And the holy rebbe, too, answered him, "You've brought me back to life."

The other side of such anxiety over transgression is that the enthusiasm of the rebbes for the ritual observances required by halakhah knows no bounds. Some stories express this by taking the rebbes in their enthusiasm beyond the bounds of normal behaviour, as in "The Ecstasies of Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev" included at the beginning of this book.

Dover Shalom no. 141 expresses boundless enthusiasm by suspending the laws of physics, taking a story of R' Shalom of Belz into the realms of surreal fantasy. Leviticus 23:40, referring to the Sukkot holiday, states, "You shall take for yourselves, on the first day, the fruit of splendid trees, palm fronds, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook."¹¹ This is the basis for the ritual of holding and waving a lulav, a bundle of a palm frond, myrtle and willow branches, held along with a citron fruit, during the morning prayers of the Sukkot holiday. In the story, a visitor sees R' Shalom during the waving of the lulav, standing in the air. He determines that this is not an illusion and is puzzled as to its significance, until he hears R' Shalom expounding the verse from Leviticus. With typical hasidic disdain for the niceties of grammar, R' Shalom teaches that the beginning of the verse means "You shall take yourselves" – that is, "one should also take oneself, and lift oneself up to the highest height at the time of fulfilling this exalted commandment – it is a time for dancing in the air!"

The Power of Halakhic Rulings

Halakhah is a legal system in its own right, with its own courts. A rabbinical court (*bet din*) may be called on to rule according to halakhah on all manner of disputes. In the imaginary world of our texts, this authority sometimes goes very far indeed. *Shemen HaTov* 2:65, in a tale about Rabbi Phinehas Horowitz, head of the rabbinical court in Frankfurt am Main, recounts:

A woman came before the rabbinical court to complain about her husband, who was squandering all of his wealth on charity and acts of kindness. A poor man also came, to complain about his rich brother, who was watching him die of hunger but had no mercy on him. The court immediately sent for both men.

The husband of that woman came, and they asked him, "Why are you wasting your wealth?"

He answered, "Because no one knows his set time, and our sages have said, 'Repent today for you may die tomorrow' [Talmud Shabbat 153a]" ...

As he was still speaking, the other one arrived, the rich man, and they asked him, "Why are you cruel to your brother, the pauper? Why aren't you willing to help him at all?" ...

He told them, "Because one never knows – a man might live to be a hundred, and have nothing left in his old age to provide for himself, so I need to keep the money for myself."

Then a ruling was decided upon: that God should protect each man from what he was afraid of. The rich miser, who was afraid of living long – may his fear not come true. The spendthrift, who was afraid of dying young – may God protect him and may he live for many long years. And so it was.

Shemen HaTov also includes two texts (2:36 and 2:37) presented as actual documents from the rabbinical court of Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg (R' Phinehas's brother). In the first, a long-married couple, Jacob and Binah, have complained about their lot in life: they are childless, and Binah is ill and weak. The rabbinical judges note that such troubles could only be a result of accusations made against the couple before the heavenly court. Therefore, citing the Bible, Talmud, and the agreement of Rebbe Shmelke, the judges rule that God must heal the woman and give the couple the opportunity to blunt the accusations by fulfilling a great commandment, namely circumcising a healthy son.

In the second document, the first ruling has come true and Jacob and

Binah have a newborn son, but he is weak. Stating again that such troubles could only result from accusations on high, the judges note that, “especially since we have not found in the entire Talmud that it is appropriate to bring accusations against such a [young] child,” any judgments against him are to be null and void.

These texts reflect a long tradition, found in the biblical Book of Job and significant in the Yom Kippur liturgy, in which supernatural accusers try to bring calamity upon people. This is related to the kabbalistic idea of the “forces of judgment” mentioned above in the section “R’ Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson Studies a Story.” The imaginary world of *Shemen HaTov* is so permeated by halakhah that supernatural accusations and divine responses to them are understood to proceed in a halakhic manner, following rules set down in books which rabbis have the authority to interpret. The halakhic authority of rabbis gives them the confidence to take cases out of the hands of the heavenly court and respond to them with rulings binding on high and below.

The Power of Halakhic Study

The study of halakhah may involve the search for correct answers to questions such as those facing rabbinical courts or individual rabbis, as well as disinterested study of halakhic texts as a religious practice. In hasidic tales the study of halakhah takes on unexpected spiritual and supernatural dimensions.

The historical Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz was an important authority on halakhah, author of highly regarded responsa (answers to difficult halakhic questions). A story in *Meqor Hayim* (no. 13) depicts him dictating his book of responsa, *Divre Hayim*:

When our master the author of *Divre Hayim* began to arrange his responsa, to publish them under the title *Divre Hayim* ... he had no leisure to do so all day long, only at night after midnight. Then he would send for his scribe ...

When the scribe had sat down and prepared his paper and ink and pen, the holy rebbe would take his holy manuscript and read to him two or three lines, and the scribe would write them down. But when a few lines were done, the holy rebbe would run to the mikveh [ritual pool] with his servant; he would go in and immerse himself. It is known that his legs were covered with wounds, and he would undo all the bandages [since immersion in a mikveh must be done naked] and the blood would be flowing ...

Then he would return to his house and begin again to read aloud, and the scribe would write. Before another five lines were finished, he would return again to the mikveh. Thus he would immerse himself five times during the whole night, while the scribe was able to add half a responsum, or perhaps an entire brief responsum, to the book, on the cold winter nights – in order to speak Torah thoughts in holiness and purity.

The rebbe's ritual immersions are by no means halakhically required. They are acts of supererogatory piety. Yet their context is the intense reverence attached to the dictation of halakhic rulings. Talmudic allusions enhance the power of this story. In immersing himself five times, the rebbe is like the high priest in the rituals of the Day of Atonement, described in the Mishnah (Yoma 3:3) and in the *Avodah*, a high point of the Yom Kippur liturgy. The removal of his bandages echoes the description of the Messiah, suffering among the beggars at the gates of Rome, in Talmud Sanhedrin 98a.¹² The rebbe becomes a mythic figure, and his halakhic rulings become an arena for the most intense devotion and self-sacrifice.

Various stories in *Dover Shalom* state that Rebbe Shalom of Belz stayed awake for a thousand nights in a row, studying Torah. According to one version (no. 89), "Many have told how he stayed awake for a thousand nights, to deeply study one halakhah of what is forbidden and permitted, namely the laws of non-kosher conditions of [a bird or animal's] lung – to deeply study it in holiness and purity and the learning of Torah for its own sake."

In another reference to these thousand nights, we read (*Dover Shalom* no. 14), "On the thousandth night Elijah the Prophet, of blessed memory, was revealed to him, and studied with him the laws of synagogue construction. It was then that [R' Shalom] was inspired to build his synagogue."

One might not expect a story of immersion in Torah study for a thousand nights, culminating with the revelation of Elijah, to be all about rather mundane halakhic rules. But this illustrates the importance of halakhah in the imaginary world of the stories.¹³

At the same time, the halakhic imagination gives new meanings to halakhic study. *Dover Shalom* no. 126 ascribes spiritual benefits to the study of compendia of halakhic rules: "I heard in the name of the Rebbe of Belz, of eternally blessed memory, that all his fear of heaven was bestowed upon him because of his constant study of the *Turim* [the fourteenth century code of Jacob ben Asher] with the *Bet Yosef* commentary; and especially, when he studied the *Tur Oraḥ Ḥayim*, he would draw fear of heaven abundantly."

This is followed (still in no. 126) by a story of healing power coming from halakhic study. According to this tale,¹⁴ R' Shalom's usual practice was simply

to tell any sick person who came to him for help that the illness would go away; and it immediately would. On one occasion, however, his promise did not help, "so the sick man came to him a second time. The rebbe said that all kinds of healing are in the *Tur* and *Bet Yosef*; and there is one section whose special power is that if someone has studied that section, he has the power to drive out that particular illness. But he had not studied that section for a long time. So he reviewed his study of it, and then he spoke to the sick man as he usually did, and immediately the illness ceased." Such stories integrate the rebbe's supernatural powers with his devotion to halakhah, making one part and parcel of the other.

Rebbes and Non-Observant Jews

Conversely, some stories revolve around non-observance. Berger's and Michelson's collections, appearing in a time of rampant secularization, include a variety of stories about rebbes' encounters with lax or non-observant characters. The rebbes' responses vary from harsh judgment to empathetic pastoral attempts to bring the characters back to a more observant life.

In *Eser Orot* 3:43, a butcher asks Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev, who is passing through his town, if he is a shochet (kosher slaughterer) because the nearest shochet lives at an inconvenient distance. R' Levi Isaac asks if the butcher will lend him the large sum of twenty silver rubles. The butcher apologetically refuses since he does not know if R' Levi Isaac is trustworthy. R' Levi Isaac teaches him a lesson by pointing out that, all the more so, he should not trust a stranger to perform kosher slaughter.

Several stories depict Rebbe Hayim of Tszanz as implacably hostile to non-observant Jews. The fact that other stories depict this same rebbe deviating from halakhic norms underlines the fact that the rebbe's freedom is unique. At the same time, any deviations on the rebbe's part are understood as taking place within an overall context of halakhic observance, which is not the case with these non-observant characters. In *Meqor Hayim* no. 222, a businessman who has become successful because of R' Hayim's blessing admits that he has begun to violate the Sabbath for the sake of his business. R' Hayim refuses to bless him anymore, and his wealth is eventually lost. In *Meqor Hayim* no. 79, mentioned earlier, the rebbe rejoices to see that a clean-shaven man has become poor, understanding this as deserved punishment for the halakhic transgression of shaving his beard.

Rebbe Shalom of Belz, by contrast, is often depicted as involved with the non-observant, trying to bring them back to the fold. Thus in *Dover Shalom* no. 38 R' Shalom prevents a rich Jew from marrying a non-Jewish woman, and the man eventually becomes devoutly religious.

Dover Shalom no. 48 begins with the rebbe telling a story about an almost completely non-observant man: "Near our city there was a man who was bad, and I mean completely bad; a bad man who was bad.' So the rebbe repeated himself twice and three times, to testify about him that he was completely bad. And, R' Shalom said, he was truly bad, such that he did not leave any sin in the world undone, perversely and not out of desire. Only one rabbinically ordained commandment, namely washing hands before eating, did he hold to, and he did not depart from it all his days."

The complete sinner with only one observance to his credit is killed by robbers when he decides, in spite of the danger, to go in search of water to wash his hands before eating. Consequently, "there was a great uproar in the heavenly heights, reaching to the heavenly court, because a man had risked his life and died for the sake of a rabbinically ordained commandment ... and his judgment was proclaimed for the light of life in paradise on high."

One might read this as a story in praise of martyrdom, but R' Shalom concludes it with praise of everyday observance:

"Now then, gentlemen, incline your hearts! If for one rabbinically ordained commandment he inherited the world to come, how much more so if a person observes and keeps all the commandments of the Torah according to its laws and its details."

In spite of the existence of well-known stories in rabbinic literature and Jewish folklore about great rewards for Sabbath observance, filial piety, charity, and acts of self-sacrificing repentance,¹⁵ I do not know of a pre-hasidic story in which such great reward comes for such a minor, non-biblical, purely ritual observance (as R' Shalom emphasizes) on the part of a terrible sinner. R' Shalom's story is explicitly said to have a pastoral purpose of supporting and encouraging observance; he told the story "to breathe the awe of heaven and love of the commandments into the hearts of the hasidim."

In *Dover Shalom* no. 47 a Jewish farmer admits to R' Shalom that he works on the Sabbath. R' Shalom exhorts him to observe the Sabbath properly, and the farmer agrees, with the reservation that he would like permission to work on the Sabbath at harvest time. In response R' Shalom once again turns to storytelling, telling the farmer an elaborate rendition of a well-known Jewish joke: A devout Jewish couple are forced to convert to Christianity. Then permission is granted them to return to their faith. Grateful but anxious, they plead for their return to Judaism to be delayed until after Passover, to spare them the trouble of cleaning and preparations for the holiday.

The rebbe assumes, and appeals to, a basic commitment to observance: it is obvious to the farmer that if the couple in the joke become Jews again, they will observe Passover fully. At the same time, the joke acknowledges that being observant has its difficulties. By doing so it expresses R' Shalom's

empathy for the farmer's desire to have it both ways, to keep the Sabbath and to work when necessary. This has the desired effect: "The villager understood the moral, and took it upon himself to keep Sabbath, refraining from all work in the field, to rest on the seventh day at ploughing time and harvest time forever." The farmer returns to the observant community, from which he was never far to begin with.

The Halakhah of Discipleship

Besides matters of everyday observance and halakhic study, a number of stories revolve around less common halakhic questions. For example, in *Dover Shalom* no. 79, R' Shalom of Belz, visiting Rebbe Uri of Strelisk for the first time, becomes concerned over the halakhah that one should not pray standing behind one's principal teacher. Illustrating the importance of such halakhic concerns, there are at least two earlier versions of this story in print, in the mid-1860s collections *Maaseh Tzadiqim* no. 31 and *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim* no. 3a (Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 59–60 and 73). The earliest published version, in *Maaseh Tzadiqim*, most emphasizes the textual source of R' Shalom's concern, referring to the authoritative code of halakhah, the *Shulḥan Arukh* (Nigal 60):

R' Shalom went to pray in the synagogue where the holy rebbe R' Uri of Strelisk was praying and stood there near the place of the Rebbe of Strelisk. When it was time for him to pray the *Shemoneh Esreh*, our teacher R' Shalom investigated in his thoughts and his mind whether he was permitted to stand there to pray it, because of the law stated in the *Shulḥan Arukh*, *Orah Hayim*, "One may not stand behind one's teacher and pray."

He was weighing in his mind whether according to law R' Uri was his teacher, or was he not his teacher, since this was the first time he had come to him, or perhaps he was his teacher ... until R' Shalom resolved in his mind to turn from side to side, according to the law as explained there in the *Shulḥan Arukh*.

This halakhah derived from Talmud Berakhot 27b regarding prayer in the presence of one's principal teacher is found twice in the *Shulḥan Arukh*,¹⁶ which rules, "let him not face toward his teacher's back; rather, let him turn himself to one side." This is seemingly misinterpreted in the story as turning from side to side. Perhaps the story goes back to a knowledgeable source – in *Maaseh Tzadiqim* and *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim* it is attributed to R' Shalom himself – but has lost some of its halakhic precision in the course of retelling.

In all three versions the story concludes with R' Shalom accepting R' Uri as his teacher (his rebbe), after R' Uri says what was going on in R' Shalom's mind. In the version of *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim* this is told with a subtle word-play that changes the meaning of the halakhah. This wordplay depends on the Hebrew wording and would not be possible in Yiddish, once again reinforcing the conclusion that these tales must be studied as written literature, not simple transcriptions of oral telling. R' Shalom's halakhic doubt is phrased as follows (Nigal 73): "I began to think, 'It is forbidden to pray behind one's teacher.' But after that the contrary came into my mind: who says that he is my teacher [*rabi*]? Let me first see what he is like."

After the prayers, R' Uri says publicly, "Who wanted to come and test me as to whether I am a rebbe [*rabi*] or not? Let it be known that I am indeed a rebbe, and it is forbidden to pray behind me!"

In the context of R' Shalom's thoughts, the Hebrew word *rabi* means "my teacher." In R' Uri's reply, however, the same word can only mean "rebbe."¹⁷ The wordplay implies an extension of the halakhah: from a case-by-case directive regarding proper behaviour toward one's own teacher to a general rule of conduct in the presence of a hasidic rebbe. The distinct role of the hasidic rebbe leads him to be seen as each person's principal teacher. Thus, in effect, Hasidism adds a highly significant halakhic rule to all the existing ones: reverence for the rebbe.

This in itself has antinomian consequences. Aaron Wertheim's important study, *Law and Custom in Hasidism*, discusses specific deviations from established halakhah that took place historically in Hasidism, though always within the overall framework of observance. He grounds these practices in the supreme authority of the hasidic rebbes: "Whenever their leaders' views contradicted the *Shulhan Arukh* ... the hasidim always acted in accordance with their Master" (Wertheim 96). Thus we turn to tensions between the law and the person of the rebbe.

Contradictions

The Rebbe Breaks the Law

In a number of hasidic stories, rebbes depart from halakhic norms. The narrators usually express some discomfort about this, yet deviations continue to recur.

Sometimes there is no particular reason for the rebbe's deviation from halakhah; a story may, like the tale of R' Hayim's strange blessings, simply illustrate that a rebbe can do as he pleases.¹⁸ In the story after that one, *Meqor*

Ḥayim no. 38, R' Hayim apparently misreads a word during the public reading of the Scroll of Esther; his son-in-law attempts to correct him, but the rebbe repeats the word as he first read it and continues the reading. He is not stopped again and no explanation is offered.

Often, however, the stories provide some motivation for the rebbe's halakhic breaches. Sometimes it is connected with the understanding that the rebbe is involved in active intervention in the destinies of Jews. This is frequently the case in stories involving departures from the halakhically specified times for liturgical prayer.¹⁹ In *Meqor Ḥayim* no. 175, R' Hayim recites his prayers late, in contrast with a more punctilious rebbe. He then justifies his conduct by recounting a parable about a man who does not ask the king about his own needs at all, only those of others, and is therefore admitted to the royal presence at any time, early or late.

Deviating from a different halakhic norm for a theurgic reason, Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczyce sounds the shofar on Rosh Hashanah so quietly that his wife has to get someone else to blow it again so that she can hear it.²⁰ The rebbe is very pleased, because the evil powers paid no attention to such quiet shofar-blasts, which could therefore ascend straight to heaven.²¹ In a more sinister theurgic act, in *Eser Orot* 5:33, the Maggid of Kozenice puts a curse on Napoleon by inserting his name into an ominous verse from the Torah. He does this during the public reading of the Torah, which must, according to halakhah, follow the written words with accuracy.²²

At other times, a rebbe's religious ecstasy distracts him from halakhic requirements. In *Meqor Ḥayim* no. 121, R' Hayim of Tsanz sings in ecstasy all night long at the Sabbath table, apparently without reciting the Sabbath blessings or, indeed, eating the meal.²³

There is also the highly antinomian possibility of deliberately choosing a transgression for the sake of spiritual growth. This arises in *Meqor Ḥayim* no. 30, though in a carefully constructed situation where there is traditional support for each possible choice facing the protagonist. The story is attributed to a contemporary rebbe, Baruch of Gorlice (d. 1906), the son of R' Hayim of Tsanz:

Once (so said our master and teacher the Rebbe of Gorlice, may his merit protect us), I was sitting with my father at a Sabbath meal, when a great doubt arose in my heart. It is known from holy books that it is proper to look at the face of a tzaddik, and that this is beneficial for increasing one's piety ["fear of heaven"]. But it is stated in the Talmud that it is forbidden to gaze at the face of the leader [*hanasi*].²⁴ So, then, what shall I do? It arose in my mind that it would be best to sin for a good intention [*la'asot*

averah lishmah], in order to attain piety, *un hob gut gut ongekukt dem tatn* [and I took a good long look at my father]. But as I was having a good look at his face, he yelled at me, “*Vos kukstu mikh azoy on! Men tor dokh nisht!* [What are you looking at me like that for? It’s not allowed!]”

R' Hayim here affirms the halakhic prohibition, but not before his son has invoked the potentially explosive hasidic concept of *averah lishmah*, sin for a good purpose.²⁵

To the non-hasidic reader, perhaps the most accessible and attractive motivation for deviation from halakhah is human compassion. In *Eser Tzahtzahot* 5:5, Rebbe Uri of Strelisk sees his servant drinking water on Yom Kippur night but, several times in a row, does not remind him that he should be fasting, reflecting that the servant might truly need to drink. The story emphasizes R' Uri's *ahavat Yisrael* (love of his fellow Jew), but also justifies his choice through the halakhic norm of *pikuah nefesh*, the priority of saving life.

Is This Chicken Kosher?

Compassion is highlighted in a story in *Eser Tzahtzahot* (4:28) involving the common situation of doubt (because of some internal blemish) as to whether a freshly slaughtered chicken is kosher. A rabbi would be expected to examine the chicken and make a determination.

Once a question came before [Rebbe Isaac Ayzik of Kaluv] as to whether a chicken was kosher, and the holy rebbe said to his disciple, the Rabbi Saul mentioned in a previous story, “Go and have a look at it, because a poor man needs it for the holy Sabbath.” Rabbi Shaul took it in his hand and said, “kosher,” without checking and examining at all.

His rebbe asked him, “What is this – you didn’t examine it at all?” He answered, “The rebbe’s words assured me that it was certainly kosher.” The rebbe said to him, “You have judged well, you have ruled well.”

And he told him that once a famous tzaddik died and left this world; and he had a beautiful voice and the qualifications of a prayer-leader. So they honoured him, in the world above, to lead the prayers of welcoming the Sabbath. But then there was a great tumult, as a woman came in with a complaint, holding a chicken in her hand. She said that once she had come to him with a question about this chicken on the eve of the holy Sabbath. The rabbi, this tzaddik, had not wanted to trouble himself to find a leniency, and he ruled that the chicken was not kosher. So that

woman had no meat to eat [for that Sabbath]; but if he had troubled himself he would have found a way to declare the chicken kosher. So the court on high ruled that since he had ruined the delight of that Sabbath for this woman, they would impose the penalty on him that he would *not* lead the prayers of welcoming the Sabbath. “So you did well in declaring this chicken kosher, and it is indeed kosher.”

A very similar story is told of the non-hasidic Rabbi Abraham Abish of Frankfurt am Main in *Ohel Avraham* no. 11. With its citation of the Mishnah, this is also an example of the pattern noted in the previous chapter where the holy man’s strange action is explained by an interpretation of a rabbinic text:

On the eve of Yom Kippur several hundred questions [as to whether a chicken or the like was kosher] were addressed to him; and they were all kosher. The judges of his rabbinical court were astonished at this. He said to them, “One who declares something kosher to be non-kosher is sinning against his fellow person. But one who declares something non-kosher to be kosher, is sinning against God. Now, ‘for sins against God – Yom Kippur atones; but for sins against one’s fellow person – Yom Kippur does not atone’ [Mishnah Yoma 8:9]. But for all that, do not be afraid, because, thank God, I ruled according to law.”

In both stories, characters voice doubt about the acceptability of the proceedings, expressing the cultural tension at work. One need not exaggerate the antinomian strains in these tales, as some storytellers do by leaving out the last sentence of the R’ Abraham Abish story. In keeping with its non-hasidic origin, the story of R’ Abraham need not involve any halakhic problem at all – only the massive coincidence of hundreds of questionable chickens all turning out to be kosher. He has presumably been examining every chicken properly and his justification for the sin of ruling something non-kosher to be kosher is purely hypothetical – “because, thank God, I ruled according to law.”

Compare the following account of decision-making from the mouth of an Orthodox rabbi (unfortunately his name and affiliation are not mentioned) cited in *Life Is with People*, 114 (all interviews in the book took place during or immediately after the years of the *khurbn*, before 1950):

When a person brings me a chicken which he bought for Sabbath, and has doubts whether it is kosher or not, I examine it. There is always a pos-

sibility of declaring it kosher or *treyf* [unfit]. You will always find in the books an authority you can refer to in order to take your decision either way. So your duty is to take into consideration the person who came to you. If it is a poor man who spent his last money to buy a chicken for Sabbath, or it is too late to buy another chicken and the person will be deprived of a chicken for the Sabbath, you will try to find in the books an opinion which will give you the possibility of declaring the chicken kosher. If, however, the person is rich, and would not be very much hurt, you may declare it *treyf*. That is why there is no possibility to appeal from the decision of a local Rabbi to a Rabbi in some other locality. The other Rabbi presumes that the local Rabbi knows the Law as well as he does, and if the local Rabbi rendered a specific decision he took into consideration not only the Law, but some specific reasons.

The story of R' Isaac Ayzik and his disciple is much more problematic since, as R' Isaac himself notes in a tone of apparent protest, the determination of the chicken's status is made without any examination at all. The story could be read as teaching that a poor person's chicken is always kosher – regardless of what “the Books” say.

R' Isaac Ayzik's certainty that “it is indeed kosher” may also involve a key concept that is less accessible to the outsider: the rebbe's supernatural knowledge, referred to in hasidic tales as *ruah haqodesh*, “the holy spirit,” i.e., the spirit of prophecy.

Law and Miracle

Drawing halakhic conclusions from supernatural insight is not an entirely new hasidic phenomenon. A famous example from a much earlier period is the work *She'elot UTshuvot Min HaShamayim* (“Responsa from Heaven”) by Jacob of Marvège (twelfth and thirteenth centuries), containing halakhic rulings received in dreams, some of which were eventually included in halakhic codes.²⁶ *Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:15 reports that R' Isaac Ayzik would eat cherries without checking them for worms (which are not kosher). When people looked at the cherries that were left over when he was finished eating, all of them were wormy. There follows a discussion of the halakhic implications of the story. By way of analogy, it is noted that the Ari, the great kabbalist of the sixteenth century, ate cooked eggs without trying to determine if they had blood spots – a halakhically permissible but lenient stance. The Ari cited reasons from the Talmud that this lenient stance was permissible. But in truth, says the narrator, he only cited talmudic rationales out of modesty, to

conceal the fact that he did not need to check the eggs, since he would have known by *ruah haqodesh* if they had any blood in them.²⁷

Despite precedents, however, the usual stance of the halakhic decisor, or of ordinary people who make halakhic choices in daily life, is not readily compatible with supernatural information. There is an awkward interaction between two fundamental assumptions of the stories – the binding nature of halakhic observance and the unbounded miraculous powers of the rebbes. Such stories do not involve the rebbes breaking halakhic rules but do put strain on the whole halakhic system.

Rebbe Jacob Isaac, the Seer of Lublin, features in a number of stories that express this tension, as in *Eser Orot* 6:5:

Once the butcher came to him and asked his advice: what was it proper to do with the cattle he had, to have them slaughtered for the upcoming holiday or to sell them (to non-Jews) because he was afraid that some of them would turn out not to be kosher. The holy rebbe instructed the butcher to write down for him a description of each cow, with its distinguishing marks, in writing, and he did so. Then the rabbi took the paper from his hand and read from it, and told him about each cow, “this one is kosher,” or “this one is not kosher” – or “about this one, there will be a question, and I do not know if the decisor will rule that it is kosher or not, because ‘it is Torah, and it is not in heaven.’”

The last sentence, an allusion to the talmudic story of the oven of Akhnai (Bava Metzia 59b; see the glossary for a summary), means that halakhic decision-making should be left in the hands of human beings following established procedures. This position follows the talmudic account where a voice from heaven is rejected by the sages as irrelevant to a halakhic determination. The story thus signals some basic incompatibility between the rebbe’s knowledge and the halakhic process of decision-making. Yet, as the story resolves this tension, the rebbe’s knowledge may be used for those instances where there would be no question, where the animal would clearly be kosher or clearly not.

In *Eser Orot* 6:8, the Seer of Lublin, in his rabbinic capacity, is asked about a married woman who had been in seclusion with another man. Must it be assumed that she has committed adultery, in which case her husband must divorce her?²⁸ The rebbe permits the couple to continue living together as husband and wife, citing the codified halakhah that a divorce is not required in this situation. Challenged on the basis of a commentary that suggests a *baal nefesh* (a spiritual person) should be more stringent with himself – that the husband should go beyond the letter of the law and divorce his wife –

the Seer answers, "In this case, where according to the law it is permitted to live with her, except for the scruples of a *baal nefesh*, we can rely on my *ruah haqodesh*. And I see that she has not been defiled. But if [living with her] were forbidden by the law, we could not rely on *ruah haqodesh*."

The Seer's answer evokes the tragic possibility of a case in which he might "see" that a woman was innocent of adultery; if the case were such that the halakhah required him to assume that adultery had taken place, or to proceed as if it had, the rebbe would not allow his supernatural knowledge to change the judgment. This is an acknowledgment that supernatural knowledge really has no place in the halakhic realm; the rebbe has allowed himself to draw on this knowledge only to resist pressure to go beyond the requirements of the law.

Even when the narrator signals no ambivalence, it may be felt by the reader, when, for instance, the Seer of Lublin tailors a miracle to halakhic specifications (*Eser Orot* 6:9). A wealthy wine merchant, a hasid of the Seer, is stopped at the border between Austria-Hungary and Poland. The border guards taste the wine – but it has turned to water, and the merchant is free to go. After he crosses the border it becomes wine again. Later the rebbe tells him, "Do not worry about *yayin neseikh* [wine touched by gentiles, which becomes non-kosher] – because it is not the same wine at all."

In principle, smuggling wine across the border, contrary to government regulations, is also a halakhic violation: *dina demalkhuta dina*, the law of the land is binding law. Like many hasidic tales, however, this one reflects a distrust of and detachment from gentile society. In this context it is the Jewish merchant's livelihood that matters, and that is bound up with keeping his wine kosher for Jewish customers; and so the rebbe, working at a distance, not only turns his wine into water to protect it from customs duties or confiscation but turns the water back into *different* wine to keep it kosher.

The Halakhic Process?

Tension can occur in stories where rebbes demonstrate their mastery of the process of halakhic decision-making – normally engaged in by learned rabbis who consult as many books as possible – in a way completely inaccessible to non-rebbes: by going directly to the sources. Such tension is often signalled by the reaction of other characters.

In *Meqor Hayim* no. 205, R' Hayim of Tsanz rules a chicken with a particular blemish to be kosher; but a few days later he rules a chicken with the same blemish not kosher. Asked by the ritual slaughterer about the contradiction, he answers, "Do you think I always rule like the Noda bYhudah!?"²⁹ The Noda bYhudah is Rabbi Ezekiel Landau of Prague (d. 1793), a mitnaged

and important halakhic authority who took lenient stances on certain issues.³⁰ As an explanation for R' Hayim's cryptic answer, the narrator adds a story about Rebbe Shalom of Belz. Asked if he always rules like the Noda bYhudah, after doing so in a particular case, R' Shalom answers, "No; but last night the Noda bYhudah came to me in a dream, a vision of the night, and asked me to rule like him in this case, and I wanted to grant his request this time."

These stories echo a tale of the Baal Shem Tov, found in three variants in the first book of hasidic tales, *Shivḥe HaBesht*, in which he too interacts with the halakhic authorities of previous generations.³¹ The Baal Shem Tov detects the sin of adultery in one of his disciples, who insists he has not done any such thing. The Baal Shem Tov then discovers, supernaturally, that the man took a vow of ascetic separation from his wife and did not keep it. This, say the stories, "is as if he had had relations with another man's wife, according to the halakhic opinion of Maimonides."³² Within the halakhic system, the "opinion" of a great authority such as Maimonides cannot be ignored.

In actual fact, as Rubinstein's edition of *Shivḥe HaBesht* notes, no such ruling of Maimonides is known.³³ This in itself testifies to the importance of halakhah in the stories: a halakhic decision is such a useful plot device that a non-existent one can be the crux of three stories! The last of the three parallel stories explains away this potentially embarrassing fact: "The Baal Shem Tov's soul ascended ... to the palace of Maimonides ... and [the Baal Shem Tov] argued with Maimonides (and I also heard that he called on [other early authorities,] the Rif and the Rosh, and they also joined him in the argument). Then Maimonides accepted their words ... and since then there is no trace of this to be found in Maimonides' book."³⁴

The Baal Shem Tov, like a master of the legal process, thus accesses halakhic information, and engages in halakhic discussion with the greatest authorities, causing them to reverse their conclusions; but he does it all in a way far removed from the rabbinical court or the yeshivah, through his travels in the supernal realms. The question whether one mode is compatible with the other simmers below the surface.

A Story in a Responsum

Such questions come to the surface when story material interacts with purely legal text. Berger's and Michelson's collections cite all kinds of earlier literature. *Dover Shalom*, for example, draws a substantial amount of its material from responsa. In general these citations involve halakhic teachings of R' Shalom of Belz, not stories. Still, the use of responsa as a source for a hagiographic collection testifies once again to the importance of halakhah in the world of the stories.³⁵

In the following instance a responsum is the source for an actual miracle story. *Dover Shalom* no. 36 cites “the great Rabbi of Brezon” on the subject of whether, on the Sabbath, one may have a non-Jew write and deliver a letter to a rebbe asking for prayers for a sick person:

In his responsa ... [the Rabbi of Brezon] concludes as follows: “As to sending [a message] to tzaddikim, for them to pray for a dangerously ill person, one could say that it is like a situation of saving life, in which case it is permitted to profane the Sabbath, even to transgress a Torah prohibition and certainly a rabbinic restriction, when an idolator is told [to write and carry the message]. But for all that, that tzaddik must be proven, one whose prayers bring results.

“I know of a case in my home town, Zloczow.³⁶ There was a dangerously ill person, and at the time our holy teacher, the great scholar and rabbi, Rebbe Shalom of Belz (of eternally blessed memory) was spending the Sabbath in Brody. A *dayan* [rabbinic judge] gave permission to write by the hands of an idolator, on the Sabbath, the name of the sick person and the name of his mother, and sent the note to Brody. The great scholar, Rabbi Solomon Kluger, was shocked, and reprimanded the *dayyan* severely.³⁷

“And his honour our holy teacher the Rebbe of Belz also complained about the writer [i.e., the *dayan* who had instructed that the note be written] and said, ‘Now I am obligated to exert myself so that healing will come to the sick person, so that he will not have caused a profanation of the Sabbath through me.’ And so it was; the sick person was healed.

“And in all such cases one should not be lenient; especially in this generation, heaven forbid that one be lenient, for many reasons.”

The issue here is specific to the hasidic milieu; already *Shivḥe HaBesht* mentions the sending of a message through a non-Jew to ask for the Baal Shem Tov's prayers for healing on the Sabbath.³⁸ There is somewhat of a parallel, though, between the lenient view and the codified halakhah (*Shulḥan Arukh Oraḥ Ḥayim* 301:25), that wearing an amulet on the Sabbath, normally considered as a prohibited act of carrying, is permitted if the amulet has been tested and found effective.

Despite such precedents, the uneasiness of maintaining a commitment both to halakhah and to belief in the rebbe's miracles is highlighted in this story by the paradox of R' Shalom's attitude: his halakhic strictness motivates him to work a miracle on the Sabbath, because he holds that it is halakhically wrong to ask him in this way to work a miracle on the Sabbath.

Further, the writer of the responsum shows an uncomfortable awareness

that “in this generation,” with the rise of Reform Judaism and of secularization, deviations from the law on supernatural grounds set a dangerous precedent for lawlessness.

A Responsum Addresses a Story

The inherent incompatibility of supernatural knowledge with halakhic observance is highlighted by a story in *Dover Shalom* (no. 123) that ostensibly depicts the former in the service of the latter. We read about an encounter between Rebbe Shalom of Belz and his rebbe, the Seer of Lublin, on Tisha B’Av, the day of mourning for the destruction of the ancient Temple. Tisha B’Av is the most important Jewish fast day except for Yom Kippur, which comes two months later.

Once when the holy rebbe, R’ Shalom, of blessed memory, was in Lublin, the rebbe [of Lublin] (may his merit protect us) called him on Tisha B’Av and commanded him to eat and drink, immediately, while he was in the rebbe’s house. And he did so.

[Later] when [R’ Shalom] had returned home, he became ill and was in great danger. As the holy day, Yom Kippur, was approaching, he asked the doctor in Lviv whether he would be able to fast.

[The doctor] answered that if he had not fasted during the previous two months, he could fast. Then [R’ Shalom] understood the words of his rebbe, may his merit protect us.

This is a salient example of the hasidic habit noted by Aaron Wertheim of placing the authority of the rebbe above halakhah. The Rebbe of Lublin does not explain to R’ Shalom why he is telling him to eat on the second most important fast day of the year; R’ Shalom does so simply because his rebbe has instructed him to. Paradoxically, this highly antinomian act turns out to be in the service of observance; without it, R’ Shalom could not have kept the most important fast day of the year, Yom Kippur.

A fascinating attempt to integrate this story into the discourse of halakhah is found in a 1968 responsum included in the important work *Tzitz Eliezer* by Rabbi Eliezer Judah Waldenberg.³⁹ The context is a halakhic question about another story. The questioner, R’ Israel Welts, is concerned about a passage in the Tosafot commentary on Talmud Eruvin 41a, according to which Rabbi Aqiva ate an egg on Tisha B’Av because he was dangerously ill. His question is why Rabbi Aqiva was not more strict with himself, since on a previous page, Eruvin 21b, the Tosafot state that Rabbi Aqiva was strict

with himself in ritual matters. R' Welts quotes the story about R' Shalom and the Seer of Lublin (as above, but from another source, *Darkhe Shalom*) with the suggestion that perhaps Rabbi Aqiva too wanted to make sure he would not have to eat on Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Waldenberg responds, citing various halakhic books:

It appears that these rebbes held the same halakhic opinion as the book *Ohel Mosheh* ... that someone who fears that fasting on the Fast of Gedaliah [a week before Yom Kippur] would make it impossible to fast on Yom Kippur, should certainly eat on the Fast of Gedaliah ...

Mahari Hagiz [another halakhic authority] made up his mind that if as a result of fasting on Tisha B'Av one would later have to transgress a prohibition of the Torah, it is better not to fast ...

But as for the incident of Rabbi Aqiva, who ate on Tisha B'Av ... he was already dangerously ill on that day of Tisha B'Av, as is written in the Tosafot there. If so, how is it relevant to say that he ate only so that he would be able to fast on Yom Kippur? If he had not eaten, it is possible that he would have died on the spot!

While dismissing the relevance of the hasidic tale to the original question, R' Waldenberg makes a valiant effort to analyze it halakhically, identifying and finding precedents for the halakhic stance of the rebbes in the story. His effort itself, however, shows that the story – though it revolves around concern for the observance of Yom Kippur – does not fit into a halakhic outlook. R' Waldenberg has to ignore its supernatural element and analyze it in terms of apprehensions and possibilities. In the story's own terms, there are no such issues. The Seer of Lublin knew what he knew. And R' Shalom did what he did not because of apprehensions or possibilities – not even out of concern about Yom Kippur, since he had no idea of the connection at the time – but because his rebbe told him to. The story is actually an eruption of antinomianism – in the service of law.

Resolutions

Growing Strictness

One way for storytellers to diminish the tension between halakhah and the other dimensions of a rebbe's person and practice is simply to submit the rebbe to the halakhah. Such a tendency manifests itself more frequently in the hasidic tales of later generations, which show a general trend toward

greater halakhic stringency, in keeping with most accounts of the history of Hasidism.

Berger's and Michelson's works include stories with contradictory tendencies in this regard. Thus, in contrast with the story cited at the beginning of this chapter about R' Hayim of Tsanz, apparently above the law, reciting an unusual blessing, two other stories in *Meqor Hayim* depict R' Hayim in the unusual position of being "caught" in violation of strict halakhic standards, rebuked, and complying with the rebuke.

Both stories involve the visit of a non-Hasidic rabbi, R' Hillel of Kolomeya, who refuses to eat with R' Hayim until the latter corrects a halakhic deviation. In *Meqor Hayim* no. 225 the problem is that "the entire house is plastered, without an empty spot in memory of the destruction of our holy Temple, as required by the *Shulhan Arukh*." In response, R' Hayim "ordered one of his servants to bring a ladder, and he himself climbed up and, with a trowel, removed all of the plaster [from one spot on the wall] down to the stones, according to the religious norm and halakhah; and he said that he was delighted that Rabbi Hillel had not flattered him [but rebuked him properly]."

In the next story, no. 226, the issue raised by R' Hillel is that R' Hayim's cat might have defecated somewhere in the house, making it an improper place in which to recite blessings and talk about Torah. In response the rebbe has the house thoroughly searched and promises in future to keep the cat outside. In these stories all the characters and the narrator seem to agree that halakhic norms, applied stringently, must constrain even the rebbe. At least on the surface any tension has been eliminated. Still, the very fact that the rebbe is depicted initially as being less than thoroughly strict betrays the existence of lenient strains within Hasidism.

In the next generation, a son of R' Hayim, Rebbe Ezekiel of Shinova, who died in 1899 and is the subject of many stories in *Meqor Hayim*,⁴⁰ is depicted as known for his halakhic stringency.⁴¹ Thus *Meqor Hayim* no. 281 relates:

Once on the night of the holy Sabbath, when he was on his way to his bed in the pitch darkness, not seeing, he put his foot in a container of water, soaking the socks on his feet. He did not want to take them off so as not to transgress the prohibition of squeezing out water on the Sabbath, and he was also afraid to sleep wearing them, lest by pressing his feet against the mattress he would also end up squeezing out water. So he held his feet out of the bed, hanging in the air, all night long.

This story of extreme halakhic punctiliousness is told in praise of the rebbe, with all the enthusiasm of a miracle story.

Another Strange Blessing

Even in the context of these restrictive tendencies in *Meqor Hayim*, it is somewhat surprising to find that this collection of tales includes the absence of a tale: a story that is not told, while the narrator insists that it never happened. Discomfort around tales of rebbes' deviations from halakhah could hardly express itself more acutely. The text is *Meqor Hayim* no. 23, part of a series of tales cited from a letter from "my relative, the rabbi and great scholar, our teacher Phinehas HaLevi Horowitz, long may he live, Rabbi of Kosov,"⁴² regarding the requirement of eating a "bitter herb" during the Passover seder:

The great scholar of Horodenka, of blessed memory, wrote in the book *Ho'il Mosheh*, no. 9, in the name of a man who told it to him, that our Master of Tsanz, may his merit protect us, would eat horseradish as the bitter herb on Passover. He also writes there something strange regarding the blessing that our Master, may his merit protect us, supposedly recited, a new blessing. But in truth, the storyteller misled the great scholar in two respects. For [R' Hayim of Tsanz] had the custom of eating lettuce as the bitter herb ... and also, regarding what he told him about the blessing – no such thing ever happened.

My friend the author of *Taame HaMinhagim* cites this in his book, in the name of *Ho'il Mosheh*. And I wrote to him, as above. But he answered that he had asked a number of God-fearing hasidim about this, and they had told him that it was true.

So, although I knew this was not so, nevertheless, last year, 5669 (1909), when I was in Tsanz for the anniversary of the rebbe's death, I inquired and investigated thoroughly, until I was convinced that everything that storyteller had told to the great scholar, the author of *Ho'il Mosheh*, of blessed memory, did not contain a grain of truth.

The entire subject of the stories not told in hasidic collections deserves further study, especially given the existence of many anti-hasidic jokes, reports of rebbes' failures and alleged misdeeds, and the like, which circulate around the peripheries of the world of the hasidic tale.⁴³ Here, Rabbi Horowitz's words, redolent of the distrust for "storytellers" and "jokers" touched on earlier in this study, are insistent in their attempt to keep out the story about the blessing – whatever it is. Michelson complies and does not include the story in his book, although it was readily available to him. He had already made use of the recently published *Taame HaMinhagim*; a story he cited from this work in *Dover Shalom*, regarding the hair pulled from R' Shalom

of Belz's moustache, is quoted above.⁴⁴ For Michelson not to include an available story is uncharacteristic indeed and underlines how fraught this matter was.

Fortunately for the researcher, the "suppressed" story is still in *Taame HaMinhagim* (p. 227, footnote to no. 519). *Taame HaMinhagim* is an anthology of Jewish laws and customs with interpretations of their meaning from many sources, including "stories of tzaddikim, holy men, rebbes, whose souls are in Paradise, may their merits protect us, relevant to the laws and customs,"⁴⁵ published in 1907 with approbations from rabbis including the Rebbe of Alesk.

The context of this anecdote is a halakhic question regarding the Passover seder. At this ritual meal, a blessing is recited over the eating of a bitter herb, "Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us about eating the bitter herb [*maror*]." There are varying customs regarding what bitter herb is eaten. One ancient custom is to eat lettuce; but the prevalent Eastern European practice was to eat horseradish, which has an intensely strong taste and would be very uncomfortable to ingest in any quantity.

In *Taame HaMinhagim* the difficulty is raised that most people do not eat a *kezayit*, an "olive's size" of the bitter herb – the minimum quantity over which it is proper to recite a blessing.⁴⁶ Perhaps, then, the blessing should not be said at all; it might amount to a wasted blessing, *berakhah levatalah*. It is forbidden to recite a blessing, mentioning God in prayer, unnecessarily. In this context, and with the primary purpose of showing that Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz would eat a full *kezayit* of horseradish, *Taame HaMinhagim* cites *Ho'il Moshe*:

In *Ho'il Moshe*, no. 9, the author wrote, "I heard about a great man, the tzaddik of Tsanz, the memory of a holy tzaddik for a blessing, that he was always stringent with himself, to the point of self-sacrifice, regarding the commandment of eating the bitter herb, and would eat uncrushed horseradish [the actual horseradish root rather than the ground horseradish commonly eaten]. In his old age, when his strength was weak, the doctor warned him not to do so because of the risk of danger to his health.

"When it was time for the seder, everything was ready before him, with the bitter herb according to his custom. When it was time to fulfil the commandment of eating the bitter herb, he took the bitter herb in his hand and recited the blessing over it, including God's name and sovereignty,⁴⁷ but when he came to 'and commanded us' he concluded the blessing, 'and commanded us "you shall take great care of your lives,"'⁴⁸ and put it down and did not eat any."

Thus far *Ho'il Mosheh*. And I have heard the same from trustworthy people who heard it from the lips of a God-fearing man who was there on that Passover and saw him do this, with his own eyes.⁴⁹

This is the story which Michelson, at R' Phinehas Horowitz's urging, agreed to suppress. It is not too different from the story with which this chapter opened, in which R' Hayim recited, over a fragrance, a blessing for food. Here too the halakhic problem is one of departure from the fixed norms of blessings. Specifically, it is halakhically forbidden to make up new blessings (i.e., new prayers beginning with the formula, "Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Ruler of the Universe"). If R' Hayim did so, he was breaking the law. The context of self-sacrificial devotion, and his difficult choice to put the commandment to preserve one's life ahead of the Passover ritual of the bitter herb, which he always practised so carefully, would not justify anything from a strictly halakhic viewpoint.

Likely, this departure from halakhic norms is more threatening than the strange blessing over fragrance because of its creativity. Interchanging two formulae from the existing repertoire is not nearly as dangerous to the system – in an environment where Reform Judaism with its many innovations was a known threat – as adding something altogether new.

The notes to *Taame HaMinhagim* include a letter from Rabbi Phinehas Horowitz, presumably Michelson's informant,⁵⁰ "who heard from several hasidim, who were in Tsanz the year before [the rebbe's] death, that [the rebbe] said before the eating of bitter herb, 'It is known [to God] ... that I cannot eat a *kezayit* of bitter herb. Nevertheless, since it is a commandment – even though it is [only] a commandment of our rabbis – behold, I am sacrificing myself and eating.' Then he recited the [standard] blessing 'about eating bitter herb' and ate. And after that (because of our many sins) he vomited immediately."

The author of *Taame HaMinhagim* continues:

In my opinion, on the occasion when he concluded [the blessing] with "and commanded us 'you shall take great care of your lives'" and put [the bitter herb] down and did not eat it, surely at the moment when he began the blessing his intention was to eat the bitter herb. But before he completed the blessing he remembered the warning of the doctor not to eat because of possible danger; and so, in order for the blessing not to be wasted, he concluded "you shall take great care of your lives." And this happened some years before his death.

The author prefers the very talmudic option of saying that both stories

are true; they simply happened at different times. Yet he too is troubled by the halakhic prohibition of creating a new blessing. His solution is that R' Hayim intended to recite the standard blessing; when he decided midway not to eat the horseradish, he was faced with another halakhic problem, the issue of *berakhah levatalah*, in this case, reciting a blessing over the horseradish and then not eating it. It is likewise forbidden to begin the formula "Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Ruler of the Universe" and stop without reciting the conclusion of the blessing. Either would be a wasted blessing, taking God's name in vain.

A conventional solution would have been to stop without a conclusion and recite the phrase "*barukh shem kevod malkhuto leolam vaed*" ("blessed is the name of His glorious sovereignty for ever and ever")⁵¹ which, praising and acknowledging God's name and sovereignty, provides an adequate context for having mentioned them. Willing, however, to allow the rebbe some creative leeway, the author of *Taame HaMinhagim* suggests that he provided a conclusion for the blessing that referred to what he was actually doing – putting down the horseradish and refraining from eating.

The controversy continues. The 1999 Jerusalem edition of *Taame HaMinhagim* includes a footnote from the editor reporting instructions to him from the current Tsanzer Rebbe, a descendant of R' Hayim of Tsanz:

The holy man and great scholar, his honoured holiness, our Master of Tsanz/Klausenberg, long may he live, commanded me to make a correction and told me, "What is written in the book *Taame HaMinhagim* about the blessing, 'you shall take great care of your lives,' which my great-grandfather, our master and rebbe, the holy man and great scholar of Tsanz, the memory of a holy tzaddik for a blessing, supposedly recited, is not true. For my great-grandfather, our master and rebbe, the holy man and great scholar, would not have recited a wasted blessing, heaven forbid. This matter should be corrected in the book *Taame HaMinhagim*."

It is fortunate for the researcher that the editor (Samuel Judah HaLevi Weinfeld) felt that inserting this note was enough of a correction, and did not expunge the text. There may be reason to be concerned about future editions of *Taame HaMinhagim*.

Conclusion

In the stories studied, the rebbes are the only persons whose individuality and relationships sometimes make the law irrelevant; for instance, the rela-

tionship between R' Hayim of Tsanz and R' Mendl of Rymanów takes precedence over the halakhic choice of blessings for fragrance. But only sometimes. The strange blessings of Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz, and the diverse responses of characters, narrators, and others, illustrate the tensions that accompany the interaction of the rebbes, the persons at the centre of hasidic tales, with the halakhic system that pervades the hasidic imagination as it does hasidic life. At times all is in harmony, though halakhah in the hands of rebbes takes on unexpected dimensions. At other times, the balance must tip one way or another – toward the power and freedom of the rebbe, or toward the demands of the law. One must submit to the other, or the story must be un-told.

This study now draws closer to the person of the rebbe, looking at his interactions with the material world and finally his own physical being.

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PART FOUR



“The World as It Is”: Materiality and the Body

“See life with the woman you love” [Ecclesiastes 9:9]. “The woman”: that is, the low levels, such as stories and conversation and material pursuits.

– *Toldot Yaaqov Yosef*, the first hasidic book,
cited in Piekarz, *Ḥasidut Braslav*, 94

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CHAPTER NINE



“Taste the Food on My Plate”: Tales of Food and Women

A common setting for hasidic stories is the *tish* (festive table) where male hasidim gather with their rebbe.¹ An important part of the ritual of the hasidic *tish* is *shirayim* (“leftovers”): food from which the rebbe has had a taste is distributed among the hasidim to eat.²

This practice of *shirayim* is treated as mysterious within the tales themselves.³ It can be understood, however, in light of various stories where eating together is a sign of unusual intimacy shown by a holy man to those he favours.⁴ Eating from the same plate is a particular sign of closeness: one such story, of Rebbe Isaac of Kaluv sharing meat and gravy with his disciple, was mentioned in the previous chapter.⁵ In *Ohel Naftali* no. 50, R’ Naphtali of Ropczyce always gives two joined pieces of challah to two close friends. When he gives them two separate pieces of bread, they realize it is a signal that something has gone wrong in their friendship. Thus, eating together connotes intimacy, and the *tish* and *shirayim* create and demonstrate a spirit of intimacy between rebbe and hasidim. This takes on echoes of the Christian eucharist in *Eser Tzahtzahot* 1:73, where we learn that “in the *shirayim* of a tzaddik there is the face of the tzaddik.”

In this religious culture, we might expect the enjoyment of food to play a positive role. Indeed, nostalgic depictions of Hasidism, such as the memoirs of Yekhezkel Kotik about his youth in the mid-nineteenth century, depict the lives of hasidic men as filled with joyous feasting.⁶ Early opponents of hasidim accused them of hedonism and gluttony.⁷ More idealistically, we might expect the hasidic imperative of spiritual engagement with the material

world to include appreciation of food. The late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan suggests as much in his popular book *Jewish Meditation*, which draws on hasidic sources: "It is taught that when a person eats, he should concentrate totally on the food and the experience of eating it ... One opens one's mind completely ... and fills the awareness with the taste and texture of the food. One then eats very slowly, aware of every nuance of taste."⁸

Neither gluttonous nor meditative enjoyment of food are to be found, however, in the hasidic tales collected by Berger and Michelson or the teachings that accompany them. This may reflect a change in attitudes from earlier to later Hasidism,⁹ although I am suspicious of approaches to hasidic history that edit out the asceticism and otherworldliness already present in the earliest generations. Alternatively, we may be looking at a disconnection between reality and imagination. While hasidic gatherings involve food and drink, and the average hasid probably enjoys eating and drinking as much as anyone else, this enjoyment is hardly acknowledged and certainly not celebrated in stories and teachings. In *Eser Qedushot* 3:10, Rebbe Moses of Sambur says that, in the service of God, eating is superior to fasting – because one strokes one's beard while eating. The narrator adds that the rebbe no doubt had in mind the "thirteen adornments of the holy beard" mentioned in the Zohar.

Like this one, some teachings and tales do reflect the fact that one of the innovations of the Baal Shem Tov was to discourage voluntary fasting.¹⁰ Others, on the contrary, praise holy men who engage in fasting.¹¹ To a degree this represents different approaches within Hasidism. There may, however, be less contradiction than first appears. In *Eser Qedushot* 4:4 the wife of Rebbe Alexander Sender of Komarno sends a disciple to remind the rebbe that he has not eaten from the Sabbath through Thursday. The rebbe replies, "My dear son, believe me that because of great longing for Torah I feel nothing whatsoever. But if I did have any feeling of lack of food or hunger, I would not starve myself, because that causes neglect of Torah and weakness." That is, depriving and weakening the body is discouraged, but detachment from food is praised.

In Rebbe Nakhmen of Breslov's *Sipure Maasiyot* no. 11, one character sells himself as a slave to another for bread, restoring their original destinies in life. The desire for food seems to be equated with slavery. This touches on the heart of the matter: closeness to God manifests itself in hasidic stories in freedom and power and contrasts with and opposes ordinary physical limitations and weaknesses – which are epitomized by the need for food.¹²

Rebbers, then, are expected to be detached from food, and their eating is

not supposed to involve simple enjoyment. Rebbe Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv, to whom many sayings about holy eating are ascribed, is said to have remarked "that if, heaven forbid, he took food or drink into his mouth without a *yihud* ["unification," kabbalistic meditation] of His Blessed Name, it would have been better for him to choke (heaven forbid)" (*Eser Qedushot* 2:18).

Hitgalut HaTzadiqim,¹³ a collection contemporary with those of Berger and Michelson, generalizes (no. 6, p. 37), "It is known that the eating of tzaddikim is not mere eating like the rest of human beings, because their desire and purpose does not revolve around physical enjoyment, but is only for God alone. Indeed, in their eating they are doing the service of God as in their prayer and Torah study, and meditating on great and holy meditations [*kavanot*], whose foundation is in Heaven, while they eat."

Such teachings have an apologetic side that could be seen cynically as justifying the gluttony of which early critics accused hasidim. Thus the same Rebbe Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv is cited as teaching, "The many meals which tzaddikim make a point of having – their intention is to draw down abundance for all Israel" (*Eser Qedushot* 2:79). There is no acknowledgment that these many meals might involve mundane enjoyment. The Apter Rebbe, known in hasidic traditions as "a big eater,"¹⁴ declares in *Eser Orot* 7:11 "that all the foods and delicacies and tasty dishes that he ate tasted bitter to him, with a taste like gall and wormwood." Rebbe Abraham Jacob of Sadgora had "a meal fit for a king" set before him every day; but he never actually ate more than a few bites of it (*Eser Orot* 9:4; cf. *Ohel Elimelekh* no. 17 regarding Rebbe Yehiel Michel of Zlochov).¹⁵

Even a sceptical reading of such reports must acknowledge that they reflect the values espoused by rebbes and hasidim. If hasidic thought affirmed Buber's "joy in the world as it is," there would be no need for such disclaimers about lavish meals. On the other hand, the hasidic outlook is not straightforwardly ascetic, which would lead to outright minimizing and degrading of food. Instead, eating emerges as a paradigmatic example of the rebbe's fraught interaction with the physical world.

Thus, in the story "A Journey with Rebbe Moses Leyb of Sasov" in the selection at the beginning of this book, R' Moses Leyb praises the good taste of food while chatting with a housewife; the conversation leads to his making the acquaintance of a gentile woman and converting her to Judaism. Thus three aspects of the material level of existence in the world view of the stories – food, women, and non-Jews – are brought together, and the "lowest" of them is lifted up by the rebbe's transformative involvement with the physical world.

Meditation While Eating

Many hasidic teachings and stories about holy men refer to meditation while eating. Unlike Aryeh Kaplan’s depiction of eating meditation, this never involves a focus on the experience of eating itself; rather, it involves directing the mind to something else while eating. Yitzhak Buxbaum’s compilation of hasidic material on holy eating includes the story of a holy man eating huge amounts of bread without being aware of ingesting anything, because he is meditating on the Name of God the entire time.¹⁶ This is consistent with stories in which holy study is a distraction from anything material, such as the following (*Meqor Hayim* 122):

The servant of Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz, Baruch, recounted that he used to sleep in the room next to the holy rebbe’s room. Once he woke up and saw a lot of smoke in the house. He went to the room where the holy rebbe was studying, and peeked in – the table was on fire. But the holy rebbe was standing with one foot on the ground and the other foot on his chair, deep in thought about something in a holy book, as if nothing had happened.

Baruch began to knock on the door, and finally he opened the door by force, breaking open the lock. The holy rebbe ran up to him and was going to hit him with his pipe, which was in his hand, for interrupting his studying. But people told him, “The table is on fire!” and then he saw and realized that the flames were leaping – but until that moment he had not noticed anything.

Spiritual work with food is a particular theme of several stories and teachings about R’ Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv. This rebbe’s saying that he would rather choke than eat without “unifying” the Divine Name was cited earlier. A number of teachings in his name suggest what these “unifications” might have involved. According to *Eser Qedushot* 2:72, since the gematria (numerical value) of *hateva*, “nature,” is the same as the divine name *Elohim*, “so even in matters of nature, like eating and drinking, let the *kavanah* [intention, meditation] be focused on the Name *YHVH* [the tetragrammaton; perhaps its letters are to be visualized] and thus one unifies the two Names *YHVH* and *Elohim*.”

More elaborately, *Eser Qedushot* 2:29 describes Rebbe Tzvi Hersh’s eating and drinking: “Even when he was going to drink a little water, he would wait and recite several ‘unifications,’ to the point that, as he was drinking the water, it was in the likeness of on high, drawing down the ‘upper waters’ to

the Shekhinah of our strength, from Him, to enliven the soul of all life; blessed is the Life of the Worlds. And so it was with everything he ate: every gesture and every tasting was in the likeness of on high. And as he ate, bit by bit, he drew down great good for the House of Israel.”

The rebbe’s practice of holy eating is not simply a meditation for his own uplift, but a theurgical act of drawing down blessings. Meditations on divine names before eating are followed by meditation on the symbolic connotations of the food being eaten and the act of eating, drawing on the mythic imagery of the Zohar. In this approach the food itself is incorporated into the meditation. It is not to be perceived in terms of enjoyment or nourishment, however, but in terms of its symbolic associations.

Sometimes the rebbe’s spiritual approach to eating gets in the way not only of enjoying food but of taking it in at all. As mentioned earlier, Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev, saying a blessing before eating, would be in such ecstasy that he would end up in the opposite corner of the room from where the food was (*Eser Orot* 3:20). Like descriptions of R’ Levi Isaac praying, this echoes the Talmud’s account of Rabbi Aqiva at prayer, beginning in one corner of the room and ending up in the opposite corner. Yet the difference between the talmudic and hasidic outlooks is highlighted by the potential halakhic problem of saying a blessing for food and not eating immediately – the issue of wasted blessings (*berakhah levatalah*) discussed in the previous chapter.

In any case, a rebbe does not actually need to eat in order to do what he does when eating. According to *Eser Qedushot* 2:77, R’ Tzvi Hersch of Zhydachiv taught “in his childhood” that “the tzaddik eats to his satisfaction¹⁷ and bestows good upon the world. If he were able to eat more, certainly God would bestow more and more. As it is said (Judges 14:14), ‘from the eater came forth food.’ But since he cannot [eat more] – he said – there is still more work to be done simply by looking, just as there is a certain bird that inseminates by looking.”

This remarkable passage is a hasidic transformation of the equation, already found in the Talmud,¹⁸ and drawn on in many hasidic teachings, of eating and sex.¹⁹ The connection is not, as one might think, physical enjoyment, but the (pro)creative power which the rebbe exercises in either act.

In light of all these depictions of otherworldly rebbes for whom eating is nothing but an opportunity for spiritual efforts, a story like the following strikes a note of realism that comes as a welcome relief:

When several tzaddikim were sitting together at the Rosh Hodesh [New Moon] meal of the month of Nisan, in Zhydachiv, the holy tzaddik Rebbe

Simeon of Jarosław remarked, "All of us are eating like simple people, and only the Rabbi of Rozdil is eating with *kavanot* [meditations]." And the Rabbi of Rodzil told someone else in a whisper that in truth, at that moment, one of the *kavanot* for eating had come into his mind, and the rebbe R' Simeon had immediately sensed it. (*Eser Qedushot* 7:33)

Souls in Food

One of the more distinctive themes of hasidic stories about rebbes and their food is that the food may contain a transmigrated Jewish soul which needs to be lifted up by proper eating.²⁰ In the hierarchical hasidic cosmology, such a soul has sunk low indeed:

Once [Rebbe Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv] took a very long time with the *Shemoneh Esreh* [quiet prayer]. One of the hasidim asked him the reason, and he said that he had ascended into the worlds on high and wanted to bring it about that his hasidim would not have to be reincarnated in the world. But he was not able to bring this about; he succeeded only in this, that they would not be reincarnated as animals, only as human beings. (*Eser Qedushot* 2:39)

It would be preferable, after death, not to be reincarnated – to remain in a non-physical state, the "highest" level. Transmigration into a human body is a lower state but is better than returning as an animal. At least a *kosher* animal has the chance to be eaten by a rebbe, redeeming its soul.

This may be going on at any time when a rebbe sits down to eat: Rebbe Isaac Ayzik of Kaluv abruptly refuses to eat the head of a carp, specially prepared for him, because he does not like the soul he perceives transmigrated in it (*Eser Tzahtzaḥot* 4:23) – it is the soul of a scholar of good family who became a sinner, and R' Isaac Ayzik is not willing to lift it up.

Perhaps this is because, as stories from other collections suggest, the lifting up of such a soul can be hard work for a rebbe. Again, enjoying the food has nothing to do with it. In a 1926 Yiddish collection which I have discussed elsewhere, *Bet Mordekhai*,²¹ the attendant of Rebbe Mordecai (Motele) of Chernobyl, is puzzled by his rebbe's concern about a partridge which has been provided for the Sabbath meals, since "the rebbe, R' Motele, was never interested in such things" (p. 4). The rebbe has the attendant roast the bird whole, but then has it put aside for the Sabbath lunch. In the middle of the night on Friday night, however, he wakes the attendant and has him bring the fowl, which the attendant discovers being nibbled by a mouse. He brings

it to the rebbe who devours it on the spot, bones and all, explaining to the puzzled attendant (7–8),

Know, then, that in that partridge, a hasid was transmigrated ... and he asked me to do him a favour and repair him. That is why I had to bend [from my usual stringencies about which fowl to eat] and eat a partridge in order to repair a Jewish soul. But ... I was very tired, and it would have been hard for me to repair that fowl, so I told you to leave it for the lunchtime meal the next day. But as I was going to sleep, that hasid came to me with great crying and screaming, wanting me to have mercy on him. For he had been through countless pains in order to manage to enter a kosher bird, and for a Jew to buy it, and when he had the great privilege of being brought to my table he had thought that his help was certain ... but in the end there were such accusations against him that they received permission for the mice to eat up that fowl ... And so, taking great pity on him, I summoned up great strength and ate it now, in the middle of the night. But because the wicked mice had already begun to eat it, they had made such a blemish in it that I could not have repaired it unless I ate even the bones, which are not fit for human consumption.

When a rebbe encounters a reincarnated soul in his food, he recognizes it. Other Jews lack this awareness, but are still capable of lifting up the souls that are in their food – or of dragging them down.²² In a teaching cited in *Eser Orot* 6:46 and *Ohel Elimelech* no. 259, the Seer of Lublin explains in the name of Rebbe Elimelech of Lizensk,

When a person eats food that has in it many Jewish souls that have been reincarnated, and afterwards he goes, with those lives and holy souls, and angers his Creator [by sinning] – he also causes to sin those souls that were in his food and are clinging to him, waiting for him to lift them up. Now not only has he not lifted them up, but he is adding sins to their sins ... So take heed of this advice: before a person goes to eat, let him examine his deeds, [regretting] how he has sinned, so that he *will* lift up those souls to a good place.

Repentance before eating makes it possible for even the ordinary hasid to lift up the souls which, in this version of this theme, are inevitably found in food. This fulfils the souls' highest aspirations, according to a joking but serious remark of Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczyce, "who once, after the Musaf prayer on Yom Kippur, said ... 'Oh, if only I could be reincarnated as a cow,

and a Jew getting up in the morning to serve God would squeeze out a little milk from me to drink before his prayers!" (*Ohel Naftali* no. 285).

Such stories dramatize hasidic concerns that apply to eating in general. Eating is seen as a process of food acting upon the eater, transforming the eater, and of the eater acting upon the food, transforming and hopefully elevating it. Concern about what food does to the eater expresses itself in stringencies about keeping kosher. Concern about what the eater does to the food expresses itself in such advice as examining one's conscience and repenting before each meal.

In these stories, food, containing souls, is functionally identical with the human body. The human body is as transitory as food which is eaten; the soul is the essential, lasting self. No wonder, then, that the rebbe's relationship with food epitomizes his relationship with the physical world as a whole. That relationship is primarily one of involvement without enjoyment, intended to connect with the spiritual in the material and free it from there.

Food and Women

The world of hasidic tales is a predominantly male one, centred on holy men and their male disciples. Women, seen as representing the material level of existence relative to men,²³ are thus represented as caring about food more than men do. A disturbing story of the Maggid of Mezritsh, seen as the Baal Shem Tov's successor, is told in *Eser Orot* 1:11 citing the book *Agra DeFirka*:

People told me a great deed of the holy rebbe Dov Ber, of blessed memory, when he was still living in isolation, in poverty and deprivation.

Once his wife came to him and began to tell him, in tears, about the great deprivation of her children, how hungry and thirsty they were, with nothing to cover them from the cold.

As he listened to her words, he sighed a little. Thereupon he heard a voice telling him from heaven that he had lost his portion in the world to come. So he stood shaken for a moment, reflecting that he lacked both worlds: he already had nothing in this world – he and his children were pierced with arrows of hunger – and the world to come was lost to him as well.

As he was reflecting in this way he ceased studying Torah for a little while – until he resolved in his heart, regarding his holy study: "On the contrary – starting now I will truly be serving God!" For the ulterior motive of gaining either world was gone, and his service would truly be exclusively to give pleasure to the Creator. So he returned to studying Torah in holiness.

Thereupon it was proclaimed to him from heaven that the life of the world to come had been returned to him – but from that day on he must be careful not to do such a thing. That is, he must not sigh again out of compassion for his children. For no compassion is greater than His compassion, blessed be His Name.

In a story mentioned above (*Eser Qedushot* 4:4) a rebbe's wife has to remind him that he has not eaten for days on end, to which he replies that he had not noticed. A similar motif is found in a story of Rebbe David Moses of Chortkiv, in which the rebbe's response to his wife's concern equates him with Moses on Mount Sinai (*Eser Orot* 10:9): "The holy rebbetzin entered the room ... and wept as she recounted that [her husband, R' Moses] had deprived himself of sleep for the last four nights. But [R' Moses] replied [in Yiddish], "Someone who is truly cleaving to the Infinite, blessed be He, can go *forty* days without eating or sleeping!"

Although there are stories that mention male hasidim preparing food,²⁴ the general assumption seems to be that food is provided by women from behind the scenes. In *Shemen HaTov* 2:46/*Eser Orot* 3:21, when Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev unexpectedly enters the kitchen, it is to talk with the wife of R' Shmelke of Nikolsburg about what she and the other women are cooking for the midday meal. In a story mentioned earlier, Rebbe Moses Leyb of Sasov chats with Rusi, the woman of the house, as she prepares his breakfast. The kitchen, generally, is the women's realm.²⁵

On the other hand, the practice of most rebbes as depicted in stories is to eat separately from women. Rebbe Uri of Strelisk is said to have taught (*Eser Tzahtzahot* 5:22), "Be careful to have a guest at your table for every meal. Then, even if you eat to satiety, like an utter heathen, it will be reckoned as if you were meditating on all the *kavanot* taught by the Ari, of blessed memory – on condition that you do not eat with your wife or daughters at your table."

A non-Jewish woman I know, inspired by Buber's hasidic tales with their uplifting scenes of conversations between rebbes and male hasidim at festive meals, told me that she had been contemplating conversion to Judaism until she asked herself who was cooking the meals.

Interesting things happen, however, when strong women characters come together with food. Berger's and Michelson's collections give a relatively large amount of attention to women, suggesting some influence from the European feminist movement before the First World War.²⁶ This was a time of growing activism for women's suffrage, and the period during which the word "feminism" was coined and became part of various European languages; there were feminist organizations in many European countries, including Russia

and elsewhere in Eastern Europe.²⁷ In the Zionist utopia of Theodor Herzl's *Altneuland*, published 1902, "Women have equal rights with men ... It goes without saying that they have the right to vote and use it."²⁸ Berger and Michelson include the names of women in genealogical lists, mention holy women in terms of honour, and include strong women characters in their books. These strong and holy women are sometimes "allowed" to enjoy their food.

An example with some spiritual resonance is *Dover Shalom* no. 61, in which Rebbetzin Malkah of Belz plays an active role. Its importance is indicated by the fact that two other variants of it appear in the same collection, no. 39 and no. 62, discussed earlier, where the focus is on the rebbe and his wife, Malkah, sitting together. Still, the tale is apparently controversial among Belzer Hasidim today.²⁹

In the version at hand, no. 61, the rebbe and his wife are in separate rooms. Nevertheless, the disciple of an older rebbe, R' Feyvish,³⁰ is shocked when he and his rebbe visit R' Shalom:

When they were sitting at the table, the rebbetzin came with the tablecloth and spread it on the table, and she herself served them the whole meal. When the disciple of the rebbe R' Feyvish saw what was being done, he was angry, and he did not like the conduct in the house of the rebbe R' Shalom, and thought that they were treating the honour of his rebbe, R' Feyvish, lightly, in that she herself was bringing the meal and not having it brought by a [male] servant, in holiness. But seeing that his rebbe said nothing, he also kept quiet.

After eating, R' Shalom went to the other room, where the rebbetzin was sitting with his mother, and the rebbetzin said to him, "Pray take a bit of meat from my portion, and you will see how good it tastes." So the rebbe R' Shalom took the meat and ate it. When the disciple of R' Feyvish saw all this, he could not restrain himself any longer, and he said to his rebbe, "Indeed, you see the conduct of these new leaders!" But R' Feyvish said: "Be quiet and stop talking! Do not say a word, but truly understand what is before you. For all his deeds are for the sake of heaven, and all his conduct with the rebbetzin is as Adam and Eve conducted themselves before the sin."

By coming out of the women's separate room and serving the food, the rebbetzin transgresses the usual assumption of the stories that the woman who provides the food stays in the background; her actions challenge hasidic norms of gender segregation. By sharing food with her husband, she then engages in a kind of public intimacy. As noted above, sharing food is a com-

mon image of intimacy in the tales (though normally of intimacy between men). Teachings around food and sex, as mentioned earlier, are related. Further, in the world of the stories, informed by halakhah, sharing food would be forbidden if the rebbetzin were in *niddah* (her monthly ritual impurity through menstruation, when any physical contact with her husband would be forbidden). Her actions thus openly indicate that she is sexually available to her husband.³¹

Like several of the wonder tales of Rebbe Nakhmen of Breslov, this story works with biblical imagery of food.³² The interaction of the holy husband and wife is explicitly compared to that of Adam and Eve. In fact, Malkah’s every action in the story can be seen as a re-enactment of Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden, giving the fruit to her husband for him to eat. Malkah re-enacts this first by preparing the table and serving the food, and then in a more intimate and specific way by inviting her husband to taste her food – which could be seen, as is the action of Eve in the garden in some interpretations, as an invitation to sexual relations. R’ Shalom, by tasting it, re-enacts Adam’s sin. But the couple’s re-enactment of the archetypal sin is identified by the visiting rebbe as transforming it to the holy and pure state before anything went wrong.

This reading of the story is supported by the description, quoted earlier, of R’ Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv’s meditative practice of “drawing down the upper waters” when having a drink of water. That clear depiction of an act of eating being carried out for its symbolic/mythic connotations supports the idea that R’ Shalom and Rebbetzin Malkah are presented as deliberately re-enacting the story of the Garden of Eden as a *tiqqun*, a transformation and healing.

If so, while the biblical story depicts the enjoyment of food as a temptation, this hasidic story transforms the enjoyment of food into something mysteriously holy. This contrasts with the many tales in which the enjoyment of food is irrelevant or repudiated. Here Rebbetzin Malkah draws attention to the good taste of the food, and her husband shares it with her. Despite the heavy overlay of symbolism, they are shown acting in a relaxed way, like a young couple enjoying each other’s presence and enjoying life. This difference from other stories of food can be traced to the fact that in this story a central role is played by a woman, Rebbetzin Malkah.

I will conclude with a story with quite a different tone, *Ohel Naftali* no. 12, involving a husband and wife sharing food in frank enjoyment. It is one of a series of stories about Beyla, the mother of Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczyce:

Once on the eve of the holy Sabbath a fisherman brought [Beyla] a large fish, wanting to sell it. He wanted a large sum for it, and she went to ask

her husband, the holy scholar, if she should buy it. He answered that she should not buy it, saying that it would be a great desecration of God's name [*ḥilul HaShem*], in the eyes of the people, for a rabbi as poor as himself to buy a large fish for such a substantial sum. But that holy woman did not pay attention to his words, and she bought that fish.

On the night of the holy Sabbath, when the plate with the fish was placed on the table, the rabbi was searching around in the plate, and the rebbetzin asked him, "My husband, what are you looking for?"

He told her that he was looking for the *koved* [Ashkenazi/Yiddish pronunciation of *kaved*, "liver"] of the fish. And she answered [quoting Talmud Berakhot 19a], "*Bemakom sheyesh ḥilul HaShem en ḥolkin 'koved' lerav*" ["Where there is desecration of God's name, one does not give *koved* (Ashkenazi/Yiddish pronunciation of *kavod*, 'honour') to the rabbi"].

Part of the charm of this story is that Beyla, unexpectedly in the traditional context, is learned enough to quote a talmudic phrase and poke fun at it. The story might have downplayed or criticized her talmudic learning but does not do so.

This story partakes of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque³³ in its earthiness, laughter, parody of the sacred (reworking a talmudic saying into teasing about food), and celebration of extravagance in the service of appetite. It is unlike any hasidic tale about food involving a male hero. Bakhtin saw carnivalesque humour as a creation of the common people, socially subversive, and potentially revolutionary; other critics see it more as a safety valve: a society that does not allow real change does periodically allow laughter. In any case, a story like this shakes up the restrained and otherworldly assumptions of most hasidic tales about food.

Conclusion

Despite its pervasiveness in the background of hasidic stories, food is generally repudiated as a source of enjoyment, and turned into a test of the holy man's ability to avoid being trapped by low materiality and instead to lift it up and transform it.

Something different can happen, however, when a strong female character is involved. Enjoyment of food can be affirmed, acquiring holiness or playing a part in subversive humour. The role of strong women in hasidic tales calls out for further exploration; the next chapter deals with women as protagonists and narrators.

CHAPTER TEN



The Changeling: Women as Protagonists and Narrators¹

Rebbetzin Sarah Freydl's Story

Eser Tzahtzahot 8:3 is a story attributed to a woman:

This was told to me by my second wife, the rebbetzin and holy woman Madam Sarah Freydl, long may she live, daughter of the rabbi and great scholar, the well-known hasid, descendant of holy ancestors, our teacher Rabbi Ben Zion Isaac Vestraykh (the holy man of eternally blessed memory), who was the head of the rabbinical court of the community of Kanczuga, near Yavornik and Lizensk.²

She heard the story from her father, who was devoted to our rebbes, the righteous ones of the world. He told her that when the wife of Rabbi Pesach (mentioned in a previous story) gave birth to her son our teacher Rebbe Tzvi Elimelech [of Dynów], on the night after he was born the child was roaring and crying very, very much. His mother (who was the daughter of the sister of Rebbe Elimelech [of Lizensk], as mentioned in a previous story), did not want to offer her breasts to the child to nurse, because she said this child was not hers, it had been exchanged for another one. The child did not quiet down from his screaming and crying, and his mother insisted this was not her child, it had been exchanged.

So R' Pesach, the child's father, hurried, riding on horseback, to Lizensk, to the rebbe R' Elimelech, to ask about this. [R' Elimelech] answered that the woman was right; this child was not theirs, for "those who were created

at twilight" had exchanged it. So he commanded him,³ "Travel right back to your house, take the crying child out of the bed and go into the forest by Yavornik with him. Stand in the midst of the forest, take your staff, and hit the child with it, blow after blow. Have no mercy and take no pity on his crying and screaming, until an old woman comes to you with your child, gives him to you, and says, 'Here is your child for you, give me mine.' Then take your child and flee to your house."

So R' Pesach fulfilled all this, and then the mother recognized that this one was her child.

Years later, when our teacher Rebbe Tzvi Elimelech grew up, he himself said he remembered that night he spent in the hands of those bandits, the "naked spirits" [demons who threaten children, a term from the Zohar (I, 14b)] – may The Blessed Name protect us!

(And it is plain to see that whenever a great soul comes into this world, "that one" engages in all kinds of intrigue against it, fearing that this soul may fill the world with Torah and piety, as in the well-known teaching of the Baal Shem Tov on the verse, "Why should You have created every man in vain?" [Psalm 89:48.])

"Those created at twilight," just before the Sabbath at the end of the six days of creation, according to Avot 5:6 and other rabbinic sources, are the demons. In Jewish lore these are not necessarily evil beings but more like the wild animals of the spiritual world;⁴ the comments at the end of the story, however, frame them as part of the forces of evil. The teaching of the Baal Shem Tov, found in *Toldot Yaaqov Yosef*, the first hasidic book, suggests that whenever a great soul is about to be born into the world, the tempter (the devil) objects that the world will soon be completely filled with wisdom and piety. God placates him by bringing an evil soul into the world at the same time.⁵ In the Baal Shem Tov's teaching, this evil counterpart of the holy man is a false rebbe who will lead many followers astray. Berger relates it, however, to the changeling substituted for R' Tzvi Elimelech.

Berger's inclusion of a story told to him by his wife, his highly respectful reference to her, and the strong role played by the mother in the story support characterizations of his culture such as the following: "In Hasidism, the woman ... occupied an honored position ... Openly and appreciatively, hasidic writers and rebbes acknowledge the vital part played by women in Jewish life. No wonder many women responded with such instant warmth to Hasidism."⁶

This romanticized view, common in earlier scholarship on Hasidism,⁷ is, however, hard to sustain. It contradicts some first-hand accounts of hasidic

life.⁸ Ruth Berger has published an important article drawing on hasidic and other tales to form a socio-historical picture of women's role in traditional Eastern European Jewish society.⁹ She emphasizes the infrequent appearance of female characters of any kind, as well as the overwhelmingly male picture of religious and social life presented in the tales.¹⁰

This chapter explores the role of women in the works of Berger and Michelson (which were not included in Ruth Berger's sample of books),¹¹ taking a primarily literary perspective. How do female characters function in the key roles of narrators and protagonists, so fundamental in shaping stories?

The Famous Holy Woman Malkah of Belz

Berger and Michelson chose to include women characters in their books, more so than many collections before or since. Rebbetzin Malkah of Belz is a striking example of a female protagonist; she plays a leading role in several tales in *Dover Shalom*, including the story of sharing food with her husband, R' Shalom. Of the 410 numbered stories or teachings in *Dover Shalom*, Malkah figures significantly in about ten¹² – a tiny percentage but still much higher than the place allotted to women in most of Jewish religious literature.

Rebbetzin Malkah died in 1852.¹³ *Dover Shalom*, published in 1910, was apparently the first book to gather stories about her; none of its stories about Malkah are credited to printed sources, and most are ascribed by Michelson or his correspondents to oral tradition ("I have heard").¹⁴ The first mention of Malkah states, "The whole world knows of the greatness of her righteousness" (*Dover Shalom* no. 5). *Ohel Naftali* (no. 42) mentions her as "the famous holy woman, of eternally blessed memory" (*harabanit hatzadeqet hamefursemet zll"h*). Thus we learn that about sixty years after Malkah's death, people were still telling stories about her – and that, until then, no one had seen fit to compile these stories. In contrast, Michelson cites many stories about Malkah's husband, R' Shalom, from a variety of printed sources.

Evidence that there were still other stories in oral circulation about Rebbetzin Malkah comes from *Nine Gates to the Chasidic Mysteries* by Jiri Langer. An assimilated Czech Jew, Langer travelled east in 1913 and became a Belzer hasid. After returning to Prague and a more Western way of life, he wrote *Nine Gates*, retelling stories he had heard and read in Belz. One of them, concerning a heavenly curse that Malkah was able to transfer from the Jews' poultry to the wild crows and owls,¹⁵ is not in *Dover Shalom* or any other written source that I know of. There are printed versions of the story in which Malkah's husband, R' Shalom, is the miracle worker.¹⁶ Since many

more stories are told of holy men than of holy women, it does not seem likely that anyone would have changed a story about R' Shalom into a Rebbetzin Malkah story; but a Rebbetzin Malkah story might well have turned into a R' Shalom story, because that would be more expected. I suspect, therefore, that Langer's version is original and based on oral tradition.

Another hasidic book that specifically gathered stories about Malkah would not appear until sixty years after *Dover Shalom*, in 1972, when feminism was making itself felt strongly in the general culture, as it had in the early twentieth century. This book, *Admore Belz*, published by an important Belzer hasid, Israel Klapholz, includes a whole chapter about Malkah,¹⁷ with a number of stories about her that are not in *Dover Shalom*.

Thus it seems that people were continuing to tell stories about Malkah 120 years after her death, but for generations no one in the hasidic community had gathered the stories in written form. (An alternative possibility is that the previously unpublished stories in *Admore Belz* are recent fabrications; in that case they would be evidence for a *desire* within the traditional community to have stories about Malkah.)

In another sixty years, however, it may be too late for more stories to be compiled. Student and hasid Dovid H. notes that stories about Malkah are still told among Belzer hasidim, and her memory is honoured: "Her *yortsayt* [anniversary of her death] is commemorated (as are the *yortsayts* of all the other rebbetzins) ... and the network of Belzer girls' schools in Israel is named after her, 'Beys Malke.'" However, Dovid H. continues, "even with her I can see revisionism creeping in ... There is a story of Reb Hayim of Tsanz coming to visit Reb Sholom [see *Dover Shalom* no. 39 and the variant discussed in the previous chapter] and finding him sharing his plate with his wife. The Tsanzer Rov commented that they look like Adam and Eve prior to the sin. The nuance to this story is that only in that state would a Tzaddik be so intimate with his wife. However, I have recently heard disapproval of this story and that one cannot believe it. Another one is a *tatsh* [hasidic interpretation] of the [biblical phrase] '*umalki tsedeq melekh shalem*' (Genesis 14:18): because Malkah is a *tsadeqet*, Shalom is a *melekh*. [The phrase is translated, 'And Melchizedek, king of Shalem.' In Ashkenazi pronunciation the words sound more or less as if they meant 'Malkah is a *tzadeqet* (righteous woman, female tzaddik) so Shalom is a *melekh* (king).'] Again I have seen this being *avekge-makht* (dismissed)."¹⁸

We may thus be grateful to Michelson and Berger for including stories of women in their compilations at all, preserving some of them from the vagaries of oral tradition and making them accessible beyond hasidic circles.

Women among Men

Nevertheless, these collections confirm the conclusions of Ruth Berger, Nigal,¹⁹ and others concerning the overwhelmingly male world of hasidic tales. Further, the limited presence of women characters is still under the shadow of a hierarchical world view.

Thus, in *Eser Orot* 1:15 the Maggid of Mezritsh declares that “he has a great soul, from the [mystical] world of restoration [*olam hatiquin*] to give to one of his disciples.” After allowing for the passage of some time, the story mentions a young girl, the daughter of R’ Aaron of Karlin. For a moment it may appear to the reader as if the “great soul” is hers, or will be bestowed on her. Not so: “Since the holy rebbe R’ Aaron has left behind [at his death] a little daughter, named Hayah Sarah, the Maggid will make a gift of the soul from the World of Restoration, and from this soul there will be born a male child to [the Maggid’s] disciple the holy rebbe R’ Nahum, and that male child who will be born will be the husband of [R’ Aaron’s] daughter.”

The “great soul” thus becomes that of a male – as it turns out, the future rebbe Motele (Mordecai) of Chernobyl – and little Hayah Sarah is left in the realm of the body.

Correspondingly, the spotlight, the focus of the telling, which for a moment shone on her, passes over to her husband and then to her sons, as the story concludes with a genealogical notice:

That year, there was born in [R’ Nahum’s] house the holy rebbe R’ Motele of Chernobyl, and he married the aforementioned daughter of the holy rebbe R’ Aaron of Karlin, and he begot by her three sons: the rabbi and tzaddik R’ Aaron of Chernobyl; the rabbi and tzaddik R’ Moses of Korostyshev, and the rabbi and tzaddik R’ Jacob Israel of Cherkassy. And also one daughter, who was the daughter-in-law of the holy tzaddikim Rebbe Baruch of Medzhibozh and [in a second marriage] the holy rebbe R’ Joseph of Yampoli, may their merit protect us.

In the end both Hayah Sarah (whose name is not mentioned in this concluding paragraph) and her unnamed daughter are relevant to the story only as links between great men. This is the normal position of women characters.

Berger’s and Michelson’s books stand out in including a number of women in genealogical lists. For example, in a representative sample of the complex family tree compiled by Moses Berger at the end of *Eser Qedushot*, several women appear (p. 114):

(no. 158) My relative by marriage the holy man and great scholar R' Abraham Mordecai of Pintshuv, who was the son-in-law of my relative the holy man and great scholar, our master rebbe Isaac Ayzik of Komarno, mentioned above in no. 102. (159) My relative by marriage, the holy man and great scholar R' Joseph of Zmgirod, brother of R' Abraham Mordecai. (160) My relative by marriage the holy man and great scholar R' Jacob Kopl of Lukova, the memory of a holy man for a blessing: he was the father of the mother of the mother of my relative our holy master Rebbe Isaac Ayzik of Komarno, mentioned above. (161) My relative by marriage the holy rebbe, rabbi of all the Diaspora, Rebbe Jacob Isaac of Lublin: my relative by marriage, just mentioned, the holy man and great scholar Rabbi Jacob Kopl of Lukova, was the father of his mother. Also, the husband of my relative the rebbetzin Madam Dinah, long may she live (she is the daughter of my great-uncle the rabbi and holy man R' Yehiel Mikhl of Strazinits, mentioned earlier in no. 99), that is, my relative, the great light, the pious man, descendant of holy ancestors, our master R' Mordecai Landman, long may he live, the rabbi of the community of Odzhar, is the son of Rebbetzin Deborah, daughter of Rebbetzin Matl, daughter of Rebbetzin Sarah Tsirl, who was the daughter of our Master of Lublin.

The pattern visible here continues through the family tree and other genealogies. The family ties being established are between men. Women appear exclusively as links between men. Sometimes their existence is only implied – “who was the son-in-law of” could have been worded “who was the husband of the daughter of.” Sometimes they are mentioned but not named, as in the phrase “since he was the father of the mother of the mother of.” Occasionally they are named, as in the sequence of three generations from Rebbetzin Sarah Tsirl to Rebbetzin Deborah. Presumably those women who are named were outstanding personalities in some way. Yet their presence here – even for this rare sequence of three generations in the maternal line – is only to establish that the Bergers are indeed relatives of Rebbe Jacob Isaac of Lublin. Therefore, while every male ancestor from previous generations is assigned a number in this list, most of the women are not. Literally, they do not count.

Women Protagonists

The same, essentially, is true of the women who appear as significant characters in tales in these collections. Rebbetzin Malkah can appear in *Dover Shalom* only because she was the wife of Rebbe Shalom, the subject of the book. A woman of wit and intelligence like Rebbetzin Beyla of Linsk,

mentioned in the previous chapter, can appear in *Ohel Naftali* only because she was the mother of Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczyce. There is no instance in Berger's and Michelson's books of a woman as the subject of stories in and of herself.

This is even the case with a woman character so remarkable that she disrupts the standard hierarchy, as a "spiritual" woman juxtaposed with, and ranking higher than, a "material" man. In *Eser Tzahtzahot* 5:2, R' Abraham Segal Itinga of Dukla, who contributed many stories to both Berger and Michelson, tells of the mother of Rebbe Uri of Strelisk: "[R' Uri's] father was a tailor, a very simple man, but his mother was a greatly righteous and learned woman." The righteous woman wants to divorce her simple husband, but the Maggid of Mezritsh tells her not to, because she will have a great son by this husband. "When that righteous woman heard the words of the holy rebbe, she began to sanctify and purify herself with every kind of purity and holiness [*taharah uqedushah*, key words often applied to rebbes] ... All the days of her pregnancy she guarded herself from everything impure, and after she gave birth to him she guarded him from everything impure and from being seen by an ignorant person; and she would not allow her husband to see him either."

Clearly the holiness and importance of this unnamed woman is much higher than that of her ignorant husband. The hierarchy of learning and observance has trumped that of gender – yet there are limits. One limit is that this woman is indeed unnamed. Adele Reinhartz has shown that in the Bible, at least, anonymity need not mean unimportance;²⁰ however, in a context where every rebbe is named, this woman's anonymity stands out. At least her ignorant husband remains unnamed too.

In the full text of this story, the Maggid of Mezritsh has direct speech several times, but the unnamed holy woman never speaks. In general, tales report the spoken words of women protagonists less often than those of male characters. One wonders if a sense of uncanniness around the voices of women is one of the reasons for their suppression in the tales. A stray bit of evidence for this comes from a charm (*lahash*) against the evil eye, quoted in *Shemen HaTov* 2:52 from a book by R' Shmelke of Nikolsburg, which begins, "Three women are standing on a crag. One says, 'he is sick,' and one says 'he is not sick,' and one says 'he is not sick, and he shall have no sickness or weakness, and if any man does anything to him (or her), the hair of his head and his beard will fall out, and if any woman does anything to him (or her), her teeth and her breasts will fall.'" The spell goes on with curses for opponents and blessings for the man or woman being protected, all in the voice of this mysterious woman with her two female companions.

Returning to the story of the unnamed holy and learned woman, when

she conceives, she visits the Maggid of Mezritsh again. "When she came to the threshold of the rebbe's house, he stood up from his chair. The holy Rebbe of Neskhiz, who was there with him at the time, asked him, 'Why did our rebbe experience such awe, and stand up, before a woman?' But the rebbe said to him, 'It is before the fetus in the womb of the woman that I am standing up, for he will be a light that will illuminate the whole world.'"

Similarly, in *Eser Tzahtzahot* 9:6, Rebbe Moses Leyb of Sasov rises to greet the mother of the (as yet unborn) R' Hayim of Tsanz, and tells her, "It is not before you that I am standing up, only before your son who is in your womb." For a rebbe to show reverence and respect before a woman, even a holy one, would be out of place. The male fetus in her womb, however, commands reverence already. It is, after all, the only reason she is in the book.

Rebbetzin Malkah in the Background

Since a woman protagonist is in the story because of a man, her role will often be defined in relation to him, as his support ("behind every good man there's a woman"). In *Dover Shalom* no. 5 we read: "I heard that every night [Rebbetzin Malkah] would wake [Rebbe Shalom] from his sleep, and say to him: 'Rise, Shalom, from your bed, to do the service of the Creator. Lift up your eyes and see that all the working men have already risen from their beds to do their work. You, also, rise to do your service, holy service.'"

Malkah's husband, Shalom, is doing the service of the Creator – religious study and prayer. She is in the background, making sure he wakes up in good time to do it. In further stories on the same theme (included in the same section, *Dover Shalom* no. 5) she lets her husband in and out of the house by the window so that he can study all night in secret; she also sells her jewellery so that R' Shalom can continue in full-time religious study when her father, his father-in-law, cannot continue to support him.

In several other stories Malkah's role is as an advice-giver to her husband. In *Dover Shalom* no. 364, for example, R' Shalom goes to Malkah, who is ill and resting, to ask her advice about how to treat a Sabbath guest, a rebbe whose powers are unholy. She advises him to treat the unholy visitor as an honoured guest, and he does so.

Sometimes, however, as in *Dover Shalom* no. 42, Malkah can emerge as a healer or teacher in her own right:

Once a sick man came to the holy rebbe [R' Shalom], and the rebbe was sleeping at the time. So the rebbetzin [Malkah] asked [the sick man] what the reason for his petition would be. He told her that for about a year his

foot had been hurting badly. She told him to take upon himself to light a candle every day in the synagogue, and then he would be restored and healed; and her blessing was fulfilled for that man. When the matter became known to the holy rebbe (may his merit protect us), he asked her, “Where did you draw that from?” And she answered saying, “Did not the Sweet Singer of Israel say, ‘a light for my foot!’” (Psalm 119:105)

The tone in which a story is told is hard to gauge from a concise written version. This could be read as a joke about Malkah’s ignorance of the plain meaning of a phrase from the Psalms. Langer’s retelling in *Nine Gates* (38–9) certainly has that nuance – though Langer, positioned ambiguously between Hasidism and modernity, often has his tongue in cheek when telling stories of holy men.

It should be noted, however, that in the hasidic context Malkah’s use of scripture is by no means unusually far fetched. In *Eser Orot* 2:18, for example, someone heals a persistent nosebleed by giving the bleeder strong wine to drink. R’ Phinehas of Korets explains that this cure – like all cures – is hinted at in the Torah: *uvedam anavim sutoh* (Genesis 49:11: “in the ‘blood’ of grapes, his robe [is dipped]”) means that for an illness involving blood, grapes are the cure. For *sutoh* (“his robe”) is connected with the Aramaic *asvata*, “cure.” Similarly, in *Eser Atarot* 5:28 Rebbe Meir of Premishlan comforts a fur merchant distressed by falling prices by citing the verse, “the Jews had light and gladness and joy and honour” (Esther 8:16) and, through puns, interpreting it, “the Jews who have fur will have gladness and joy as the price goes up” – which, of course, comes true. There is no hint of mockery in these anecdotes about male rebbes. In any case, Malkah’s power to heal is clear.

In the first tale, Malkah woke her husband from his sleep so that he could do his holy work, while she stayed in the background; in this latter story, as he sleeps, she can step into the foreground and be powerful in her own right in a way that will take him by surprise.

Women as Narrators

Eser Tzahtzahot 1:46 refers to an old woman “who had been a servant in the home of Rebbe Elimelech, and she knew how to tell stories and wonders of Rebbe Elimelech, which she had seen.” Since hasidic women can and do tell stories, the potential exists for women’s voices to enter Jewish sacred literature, insofar as hasidic tales have a precarious place there. Berger and Michelson, however, like the authors of all traditional books of hasidic tales, were men.²¹ Few women in their culture would be able to write a Hebrew letter, and there

are no women among their correspondents and contributors. Even when women storytellers are introduced as characters, we may not get to "hear" what they tell – no stories told by the old woman just mentioned are actually transmitted to us. When a woman storyteller *is* cited, she is always a secondary narrator, in a framework shaped by men. The final form of the story has been taken out of her hands.

The story "The Candle," from Michelson's *Shemen HaTov*, included at the beginning of this book, is an example. The female storyteller, Miriam of Mahluv, is named, the story she tells is cited at length, as if in her own words, and the circumstances of her storytelling are described, including the presence of women in the audience. But Miriam's words are given in translation, in literary Hebrew. Further, they are transmitted through the male narrator within the story, Rabbi Ephraim Yehiel Mikhl – whose words are transmitted to the reader through a series of other men. And the last word about the meaning of the story is given to a male, the Apter Rebbe.

In this light, it is not surprising that there are practically no chains of transmission involving more than one woman narrator, or stories told by women about other women. As in "The Candle," stories ascribed to women narrators are about men. *Dover Shalom*, for example, includes a story told by Rebbetzin Malkah about her husband (*Dover Shalom* no. 25); a story told by Malkah's daughter Eydl about her father (discussed below); and a story told to an informant by his own mother about her father's encounters with two great rebbes (*Dover Shalom* no. 352).²²

The following story (*Meqor Hayim* no. 123) epitomizes the situation of the female narrator in a male compilation:

Once when [Rebbe Hayim of Tszanz] was travelling home from the city of Bardiu, he was passing through a village called Mokoli, and he gave orders to stop. He got down from the carriage and went into the inn, and asked if there was any old man, or old woman, there. They told him that the innkeeper had an old mother, ninety years old. He told them to bring her to him, and he asked whether any holy man had been in this inn. She answered that the holy Rebbe of Berdichev had been there; when he was passing through the land of Hungary, he went by way of that village, and he stayed in the inn for two weeks.

And the holy rebbe [of Tszanz] stood with one foot on the ground and the other foot on a bench, and listened to everything the old woman narrated to him about the holy Rebbe of Berdichev.

Then he said to the hasidim that as he was going along that road he had sensed the good fragrance of a holy man, and it was a marvel in his

eyes – how would a holy man have come to be there? But now he knew and understood why he had sensed that fragrance, since the holy Rebbe of Berdichev had been there.

The old woman is sought out as a narrator. The Tzanzer Rebbe pays close attention to her storytelling. His listening posture is identical to his posture during intensive religious study as described in the immediately previous story (*Meqor Hayim* no. 122), indicating that he listens to her story with utmost seriousness. So what does the old woman tell?

First of all, what she tells is about a man, the Rebbe of Berdichev. Even so, the content of her telling is irrelevant to the male narrator, the teller of the story within which she finds herself framed. His interest is in the Tzanzer Rebbe, the subject of the book. The old woman, with so many stories to tell, literally has her voice taken away. Though, as a rule, a story is shaped by its narrator,²³ her narrating is not allowed to function in that way.

The Changeling

Folklorist Dov Noy asserts, “You can surely distinguish between stories told from generation to generation by women and those that are told from generation to generation by men.”²⁴ Rebbetzin Sarah Freydl’s story, which began this chapter, is a likely candidate to be considered a women’s story, and not only because she told it. Unlike the tales discussed in part 3, the story-line is not dependent in any way on Jewish texts studied by men. Women generally did not have access to Jewish textual learning, but they did know folk traditions. The rebbetzin’s tale is readily recognizable as a changeling story, a folk-tale type found frequently in northern Europe and in various cultures across Europe and beyond.²⁵ I do not know of another Jewish changeling story, and there is nothing distinctively Jewish about the basic story-line of this one. Such a story could have been transmitted through friendships between Jewish and non-Jewish women, such as the one between Rusi and the miller’s wife in “A Journey with R’ Moses Leyb of Sasov” at the beginning of this book.

In at least some hasidic communities, a folktale like this one would be seen by men as particularly appropriate to women. Dovid H. notes regarding male tastes in today’s Belz community, “Despite a literary heritage that points to the contrary, hasidim prefer anecdotes, vignettes and epigrams rather than the folk tales that have grown up around rebbes. Many of the tales are seen as *vaberish* [“womanish”] and too folksy to be discussed by highbrow hasidim.”²⁶

Changeling stories, being about trouble with babies, almost inevitably

involve the mother in a major role. Further, in many changeling stories the mother is taught how to get her true child back by another woman – a neighbour woman, perhaps, or a wise woman.²⁷

Is Rebbetzin Sarah Freydl's story, then, a story "told from generation to generation by women"? Not as we have it in her husband's collection. First of all, her source, at least according to our text, is not another woman but her father. And though she is introduced with respect, her father gets a much longer introduction, building him up as the trustworthy source of the story.

Though the story-line is rooted in European folklore rather than Jewish texts, the language in which it is presented requires knowledge of Jewish texts to be understood. The Hebrew of the story is highly formal in places; for example, the phrase I have translated, for the sake of clarity, "gave birth to her son," is closer to "delivered the fruit of her womb." This is not likely how Rebbetzin Sarah Freydl would have written down her own story.

Further, the fairies of most changeling stories are re-imagined here as demons known from rabbinic literature and the Zohar and described in language drawn from those sources.²⁸ The concluding comment citing a teaching of the Baal Shem Tov makes the story a subject of study based in texts. In the process, those who took the child, rather than having the morally neutral character of fairies and even of demons in many Jewish sources, are depicted as part of the realm of evil that seeks to prevent goodness in the world.

The characters in the tale do include a mother who is both stubborn and right. She remains unnamed, but that is common in folktales. Unlike in folktales, however, her husband, the rebbe who provides advice, and her male baby are all honoured with names. And the baby remembers the experience in later years, one of his wondrous accomplishments as a rebbe.

Help does not come to the mother from a neighbour woman or wise woman. Rather, the rescue of the true child is taken out of her hands altogether and dealt with by her husband and the rebbe. They take back the true son from the other unnamed woman in the story, the old woman who is classified by the male textual voice as part of the realm of evil.

In short, not out of any lack of love or respect for women, but in accordance with the workings of the male hasidic imagination, what might have been a story passed on from woman to woman has been transmitted to us as a story by and about men. Men have spirited away a woman's story, and left us a changeling.

The transmission of women's stories through men creates many difficulties in trying to imagine and understand outstanding hasidic holy women. The following chapter considers one such woman, Malkah of Belz's daughter Eydl, as depicted by a number of male narrators.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



*Eydl of Brody: Stories against Stories*¹

Four Literary Versions of a Woman Who Was Almost a Man

Dover Shalom

With the one story about her in *Dover Shalom*, Eydl of Brody,² beloved daughter of Rebbe Shalom and Rebbetzin Malkah, takes her place among a number of hasidic women who have apparently taken on the role of rebbe, otherwise reserved for men.³ Eydl seems to be the first of these women to be memorialized in a traditional hasidic book of tales, and she remains almost the only one. Yitzhak Buxbaum writes, “I have read scores and scores of Hebrew books of hasidic and other traditional Jewish tales, and the number of stories about holy women is minuscule, almost negligible.”⁴ Nigal, the bibliographer of the hasidic tale, notes that there is no compilation of hasidic tales about a female spiritual leader, and practically no individual stories about such women in hasidic books.⁵

The most famous of these women today is not mentioned in hasidic literature at all:⁶ Hannah Rachel, the Maiden of Ludmir, who rose to prominence through her own charisma. Her career was at its peak in the 1820s;⁷ it continued in some form, according to Nathaniel Deutsch’s magisterial study, until her death toward the end of the nineteenth century.⁸

Another nineteenth-century figure, Miriam Hayah of Shotz (d. 1903), daughter of Rebbe Meir of Premishlan and wife of Rebbe Joel of Shotz, is said to have acted as a rebbe in partnership with her husband and, after his

death, in her own right.⁹ Yitzhak Buxbaum has found several stories about Miriam Hayah describing her acting as a rebbe in a recent hasidic book of tales, *Aspaklaria HaMeira*, published in 1997.¹⁰ Another contemporary of these women, the Chentshiner Rebbetzin, Sarah Horowitz Sternfeld (1838–1937), became a respected holy woman in interwar Poland as a widow in her old age, accepting *kvitlekh* and bestowing blessings. Written sources about her are mostly found in newspaper accounts rather than hasidic books.¹¹

Of all these women, Eydl of Brody has left particularly troubling and contradictory traces in history and legend. Elsewhere, I have tried (inconclusively) to assess the historicity of contrasting accounts of her.¹² My focus here will be primarily literary, looking at Eydl as she appears as a character in various stories.

In a recent article, James Phelan suggests that the notion of a contest between alternative stories is a neglected key to the understanding of how stories work. "Every story is potentially contestable by multiple alternatives ... tellers are likely to construct their tales at least partly in response to or anticipation of one or more possible alternatives."¹³ Both *Dover Shalom* and other sources tell stories about Eydl, and several of these stories depict her as a woman who was almost like a man and did things ordinarily reserved for men. What the texts do with this character, however, is a good example of alternative stories in contest with each other. The struggle between them concerns at least two issues. First, how is Eydl of Brody, the daughter of R' Shalom and Rebbetzin Malkah of Belz (d. 1885), to be remembered? More generally, what kind of stories shall we tell about women who take on roles considered to belong to men?

Dover Shalom no. 26, about Eydl, is one of many contributions to Michelson's collections by his friend and relative Rabbi Abraham Itinga of Dukla. Itinga was from Brody, the birthplace of Eydl's parents as well as her home in adulthood, and perhaps heard the story there. Following its appearance in *Dover Shalom*, it has been retold along similar lines in various hasidic and non-hasidic sources.¹⁴

The second daughter of the holy rebbe, our master R' Shalom of Belz, was the famous rebbetzin and holy woman Madam Eydele of blessed memory, of Brody. She conducted herself as a rebbe [*vehi hayta mitnaheget berabanut*] and people gave her *kvitlekh*. I heard that her father said about her [in Yiddish], "*Mayn Eydele felt nor der spodek*" [My Eydele is lacking only the fur hat (worn by hasidic men)].

I also heard that a man from Brody was sick with a disease of the lungs and the chest, and the doctors despaired of his life. Once, the blood was

flowing from his throat and the doctors said that this blood was the last remaining piece of his lungs, and the moments of his life were numbered. His family rushed tumultuously to [Eydele] and told her the words of the doctors.

She answered saying: "Behold, with my holy father, the memory of a holy man for a blessing, a story like this happened. My holy father said, 'First of all I do not believe the words of the doctors who say that he has no lungs left. Secondly, even if he has no lungs left, who says that a person needs lungs? The One who said that we can live with lungs will say that he will live without lungs!' That man was restored to health, and I hope to the Blessed Name that this person too will return to health."

And so it was, for he was healed and lived for many years after this story.

Like other stories discussed in chapter 7, this one is built around an allusion to the Talmud. In Taanit 25a, R' Hanina ben Dosa finds that his distraught daughter has poured vinegar instead of oil into the Sabbath lamp. He responds, "The One who said [*mi she-amar*] to the oil that it should burn will say [*yomar*] to the vinegar that it should burn!" The lamp indeed burns, throughout the entire Sabbath.

The talmudic parallel is verbally indicated only by three words, *mi she-amar* ... *yomar* (the One who said ... will say), but structural similarities run deeper. In both stories a particularly far-fetched miracle is called for and takes place. The possibility of someone remaining alive with no lungs might strain even the pious reader's credibility; the text hedges its bets by having R' Shalom say that he does not believe the gloomy diagnosis. But the parallelism with the story about R' Hanina lends credibility to the story about R' Shalom, while lending to R' Shalom the status of R' Hanina.

More subtly, in the talmudic story a distraught daughter turns to her holy father for help. That is exactly what Eydl does by appealing to her late father, through telling a story about him, in a time of desperate need. Both verbally and structurally, the story thus sets up an equivalence between R' Shalom and the great sage R' Hanina.

In its context in *Dover Shalom*, the purpose of this story is to glorify R' Shalom. He performed miraculous healing. Eydl's own act of healing is implicitly ascribed to his merit (there are similar tales of male rebbes who re-enact the deeds of great rebbes of the past through storytelling—for example, "Wedding Presents" in the selection at the beginning of this book¹⁵). And R' Shalom produced an exceptionally gifted daughter. Eydl is presented as so gifted that she is able to function as a rebbe, accepting *kvitlekh*, written

petitions for advice or blessing, which is the prerogative of a rebbe in hasidic culture,¹⁶ and drawing on the merit of her father to act as a storyteller and a powerful healer.

The fact that this gift does not conform with gender roles in hasidic society is acknowledged in the remark that she is only lacking the *spodek*. Variations of R' Shalom's words about his daughter appear in other sources,¹⁷ and similar phrases occur in stories about other powerful hasidic women.¹⁸ The expression is related to the idiom *zi geyt in spodek* ("she goes around in a *spodek*" or "she wears the *spodek*"), which is like the English "she wears the pants." It should be read as jocular and, in this context, admiring and affectionate.

Dover Shalom follows this story with a bit of information on Eydl's family. This and other sources, some of them discussed below, provide some biographical context for Eydl. She had an older sister, Freyde,¹⁹ and five brothers; the youngest brother, Joshua, succeeded their father, R' Shalom, as Rebbe of Belz.

Apparently Eydl was well integrated into her prestigious family and the endogamous aristocracy of Eastern European rabbis. She married Rabbi Isaac Rubin, a descendant of the famous Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczyce. The couple settled in Brody, the home town of Eydl's parents. In addition to one or more children who died young,²⁰ apparently including a daughter, Malkah,²¹ they had three sons, Samuel Shmelke, Naphtali Tzvi, and Elimelech, and three daughters, Dinah, Ella, and Hannah Rachel. All three sons became rebbes—Elimelech in spite of being blind from birth. Samuel Shmelke, born in 1840, became a particularly well-known rebbe and miracle worker in Siret, Bukovina; he died in 1901.²² All three daughters married rebbes or rabbis.²³ Ella married a grandson of one of Eydl's brothers,²⁴ and Hannah Rachel married a son of Eydl's brother R' Joshua, the Belzer Rebbe.

Eydl's husband, R' Isaac Rubin, died in 1874; Eydl's date of death is the fourteenth of Kislev, 5644, that is, 22 November 1885.

*From the Realm of Childhood,
by Dov Sadan*

The second primary source for stories about Eydl is a memoir by the Israeli author, critic, and folklorist Dov Sadan.²⁵ Like Rabbi Itinga, Sadan grew up in Brody, where he was born in 1909; he heard stories of Eydl from his family and others. In 1925 he emigrated to Palestine, where his memoir *Mimeḥoz Hayaldut* (From the realm of childhood) was published in 1938. Sadan makes

Eydl the main subject of a chapter titled "A Little about the Klezmer Musicians of Our Town and a Lot about Eydele the Rebbetzin."²⁶

The chapter begins with the musicians who would play for Eydl at the close of the Sabbath, and continues with legends about Eydl's blind son R' Melekh'l (Elimelech), who could see many things miraculously. In a poetic Hebrew style echoing traditional religious literature, Sadan interweaves his account of Eydl herself with hasidic, talmudic, and historical material. His own compassionate reflections about Eydl and her father appear throughout. The pervading tone is one of sadness and longing. This is skilful literary work, using oral traditions about Eydl as raw material. The following are the kernels of story about Eydl, extracted from Sadan's much longer chapter.²⁷

Reb Sholom'tse [Sadan refers to R' Shalom of Belz by this affectionate diminutive] had a lot of sons; his son who inherited his leadership, R' Joshua, was the dearest to him; but his daughter, Eydele, was dear to his heart, even more than his son. He would even say, "The light that was stored away, which was to illuminate the whole world,²⁸ is stored away in my daughter Eydele. If she were male, what holy man could have been as great as she! She would certainly have brought the redemption near. But it is one of the deeds of Satan, the accuser, that she was not born male." In truth, her father was pained by this for most of his life. Even as he was dying, when they chased away the daughters from his bed, so that their wailing would not disturb the moment of his death, he said, "Eydele will stay, because Eydele is not a daughter to me, she is a son to me." To what point he treasured her and held her dear can be seen from the story of the gift. Once a man was going from Belz to our town, and R' Sholom'tse said to him: "Take this little package; I have wrapped up in it a silk shawl, a present for my daughter." That man brought the package to Rebbetzin Eydele; she untied the cord around the package, opened the paper, and there was not a silk shawl wrapped up in it, but a *parokhet* [curtain for the ark where the Torah is kept] was wrapped up in it. A few days later, when that man went back to Belz, Eydele sent the package back with him to her father. The man came to the rebbe and said, "Your holiness made a mistake; you said you would wrap up a silk shawl and you wrapped up a silk *parokhet*." The rebbe laughed and said: "A mistake about what? Is not my Eydele a scroll of the Torah?"²⁹

The memory of this noble woman was treasured in our family, not only in the last generation, when a grandson of her blind son married a granddaughter of my grandmother's father, Reb Yoshi the shochet,³⁰ but

in the generation before that, during the lifetime of Reb Yoshi himself. During the thirteen years that he studied in the rebbe's house in Belz, he learned a lot about the ways of the household and the members of the family. That the accusing Satan had prevented Eydele from being born male was an article of faith to him.³¹

The hasidim who gathered around Rebbetzin Eydele's table were many. They spoke in praise of her teachings,³² they spoke in adulation of her responses to *kvitlekh*, there was much admiration of her wisdom, and even from her nickname, *Eydele der Rebe* [Eydele the (male) rebbe]³³ you can tell how greatly she was honoured.³⁴

[There are] light-hearted stories that are told about [R' Sholom'tse] – that in her childhood he would dress her in a skullcap, or that he would jokingly say to it, "Skullcap, skullcap, if only you were worthy, I would be worthy, and my Eydele would be worthy of you, and you would be worthy of her." (Shtok 296/Sadan 263)

Besides these anecdotes, Sadan gives a tragic account of Eydl's career.³⁵ He says that she saw herself as the true successor to her father, R' Shalom, and bitterly criticized her brother R' Joshua, the actual successor, who had many more followers. In time this resentment came to dominate her life. She denounced the opulence of her brother's court on every possible occasion. Two words, *vebene hemder* (woven shirts – luxuriously expensive clothing), recurred in every denunciation and gradually became an obsessive refrain which those around her heard over and over again.³⁶ Then, at least in the perception of the townspeople, matters took a fearsome turn: Eydl was possessed by a dybbuk (the wandering soul of someone deceased). Her brother, the Belzer Rebbe, R' Joshua, performed an exorcism. Eydl, or the dybbuk in her, cursed her brother in a male voice which, to the shock of those present, had some of the music of her father R' Shalom's voice. Taken aback at first, R' Joshua rallied and called down anathemas on the dybbuk, until Eydl collapsed. Exorcised, she sank into a life of melancholy, which Sadan compares to the darkness in which her blind son lived.

The end of the chapter returns to the musicians who played for Eydl after the Sabbath. She would sing along with a melody called *Hirschenjagd*, the stag hunt, identifying with the hunted deer. Her son, R' Melekh'l, the blind rabbi, would praise their music, but Eydl said nothing.

This sad and beautifully told view of Eydl is startlingly different from that of *Dover Shalom*, where there is no hint that hasidim remembered Eydl as an aberration or failure.

The fact that both primary sources, *Dover Shalom* and Sadan, indicate that Eydl's role as a rebbe was seen as masculine cries out for a brief comment. Taking these accounts together, Eydl conducted festive meals with followers, taught, responded to written requests for blessings (*kvitlekh*), told stories, and offered healing. In many other cultures these actions would not be coded as masculine, and some might be distinctly feminine. Indeed, telling stories and offering blessings are conventional parts of traditional Eastern European Jewish women's roles as well,³⁷ and women healers certainly existed in this culture.³⁸ It is the combination of these actions with others in a certain social context that results in Eydl being seen as acting like a male rebbe. This highlights the culturally constructed and arbitrary nature of gender roles.³⁹

In Sadan's account of Eydl, tension around gender is strong. *Dover Shalom* presents Eydl as going beyond conventional gender roles, acting like a rebbe. For Sadan the problem of gender is deeper and more pervasive. Thus, where *Dover Shalom* includes an idiom with an image of male headgear (the *spodek*), Sadan's account literalizes this, as R' Shalom dresses the young Eydl in a yarmulke. Sadan adds that R' Shalom longed to put his tefillin on little Eydl.⁴⁰ In the story of the gift, R' Shalom appears to be offering his daughter an item of female clothing, but when the gift is opened, the clothing is not there. Thus R' Shalom both dresses Eydl as a boy and draws back from dressing her as a woman.

In Sadan's account, Eydl appears to accept that her gender classification is different from that of other women. This is dramatized when her father keeps her at his bedside, sending other women away, declaring that "Eydl is not a daughter to me, she is a son to me." It is certainly possible to analyze this story from feminist perspectives, but Eydl in this telling does not appear to be a feminist. She does not express any solidarity with other women, apparently content to have exceptional privileges. Her significant relationships in this telling are with men, especially her father and son.

Intriguingly, in one of his reflective asides, Sadan anticipates Judith Butler's new paradigm of gender as performance,⁴¹ implying that Eydl performed maleness—but ultimately failed to convince her audience: "When a magician builds a house before you in an instant with its halls and its rooms, you do not ask him to build you a house that you will really live in ... All the attributes of a holy man were hers, she even had a throng of devotees who believed in her, but for all that the core of reality was missing from the book of her life."⁴²

It is not clear on what Sadan bases this assessment. Perhaps there is a clue in the nickname "Eydele der Rebe," which could be understood as teasing or derogatory. A male rebbe would not be referred to as, say, "Shalom the rebbe," but as "Rebbe Shalom" or "the rebbe Reb Shalom." Though Sadan

himself states that the nickname shows that she was held in honour, much would depend on how it was spoken, and by whom.

Gender is also highlighted by three further aspects of Sadan's account. Eydl identified with her *father* and saw herself as his successor. Her father, and Belz hasidim after him (like Sadan's ancestor Reb Yoshi), believed that she "should have been born male." Finally, she experienced possession by a male dybbuk, or, perhaps, the spirit of her father.

While the notion of struggle between alternative stories does not depend on the teller of one alternative being aware of another, Sadan did know *Dover Shalom*⁴³ and was likely quite aware of the ways in which his account challenges and contradicts the one found there.

In *Dover Shalom*, everything is positive. Because of her greatness, Eydl was almost like a man, and could do male things. Others, the narrator included, recognize her greatness and celebrate it. Though her father says "she is lacking only the *spodek*," the emphasis is not on lack but on accomplishment – though a woman, Eydl is almost a rebbe.

In Sadan's memoir, lack becomes the overarching theme. Eydl is almost like a man, but others around her believe that she should have *been* a man. She does male things because she is apparently trying to be a man – not just any man, but specifically her father's successor as rebbe, or even her father himself. But because she is not really male, the things she does lack reality, and in the end everything collapses into psychic darkness.

Along with its preoccupation with gender, Sadan's account challenges the story in *Dover Shalom* by probing into the private emotions of his characters in a way that a hasidic teller would never do. Hasidic tales told by hasidim do not psychologize. Characters act out their emotions straightforwardly, dancing with joy or crying with sorrow, or they state them forthrightly. A rebbe may expose someone's ulterior motives,⁴⁴ but narrators do not speculate about rebbes' ulterior motives. Whenever Sadan speaks of R' Shalom's or Eydl's yearnings and desires, we can assume that these are his own speculations, not taken from oral tradition. Sadan's approach thus challenges not only the specific version of Eydl's story in *Dover Shalom* but the entire hasidic mode of telling a holy person's story. He is not working within the folkloric conventions of hasidic hagiography, nor is he restrained by the hasidic sense of awe for holy people. Yet his account of "this noble woman" remains markedly respectful, even while speculating about her and her father's inner lives.

Sadan's chapter includes a great deal of such speculation, which I have not translated here. He states that he has attempted to understand Eydl through "*darkhei haheqer shel torat hanefesh*," "the investigative methods of the theory of the psyche" (or more literally and traditionally, "the ways of

the philosophy of the Torah of the soul").⁴⁵ Sadan was writing at a time when psychoanalysis was a cutting-edge science, which some in the Zionist movement had embraced as part of the project of building a stronger, healthier Jewish people.⁴⁶ The decades before the publication of his memoir had seen a great deal of attention to sexual and gender variance. The German Jewish sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935) theorized about "intermediate levels" (*Zwischenstufen*) between male and female and coined the word "transsexualism."⁴⁷ Thus, concern with psychology, sexuality, and gender was in the air for Sadan as a Jewish intellectual of his time, and played a part in shaping his story of Eydl.

*"The Woman Who Wanted to Be Her Father":
Yoram Bilu*

The next two sources, an article by Yoram Bilu and my own work, present themselves as studies of Eydl as she is depicted by Sadan and in *Dover Shalom*. Each of them, however, can also be seen as telling a different story about her. Bilu, a professor of anthropology at the Hebrew University, born in 1942, advances a psychoanalysis of Eydl and her father. His article "The Woman Who Wanted to Be Her Father: A Case Analysis of *Dybbuk* Possession in a Hasidic Community," which first appeared in the *Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology* in 1985, has been reprinted a number of times.⁴⁸

Primarily based on Sadan's account,⁴⁹ Bilu's article shares Sadan's focus on gender and interest in probing the characters' emotions, but pushes further in both these areas. While *Dover Shalom* shows Eydl taking on a male gender role, and Sadan depicts other people wishing or wanting her real identity to be male, Bilu's argument addresses Eydl's own sense of gender identity. Where Sadan was poetic and allusive in probing the emotions of his characters, Bilu is unrestrained, delving into the unconscious psychosexual motivations of his versions of R' Shalom and Eydl. His account lacks not only hasidic awe in the presence of these characters but Sadan's respect and sense of poetry; Bilu's tone is clinical. Basically, though he does not use this terminology, Bilu reads Eydl as transsexual ("having physical characteristics of one sex and psychological characteristics of the other"⁵⁰ with her identity shaped by the psychosexual struggles of her father.⁵¹

While Bilu's article presents itself in the voice of a scientist, I would like to point out that it is also the voice of a storyteller, selecting and even inventing details to create yet another story of Eydl to contest alternative versions. For example, *Dover Shalom* has a metaphorical reference to cross-dressing, the missing *spodek*; the expression of course assumes that in reality Eydl dressed like any other woman. Sadan's account includes literal cross-dressing,

with R' Shalom putting his yarmulke on little Eydl. Bilu's article takes this further. Sadan wrote, "Whenever [R' Sholom'tse] looked at his tefillin, he wanted to see her head crowned with them."⁵² Bilu writes, "When she was young, he used to decorate her head with his phylacteries,"⁵³ turning a presumed desire into an action. Bilu also refers to "the fact that she was raised as a boy,"⁵⁴ a claim that goes well beyond the traditions reported by Sadan.

Analyzing Eydl's relationship with her father, Bilu writes that after Rebbetzin Malkah's death, "For many years [R' Shalom] could not be consoled ... His only ray of comfort in his anguish was his daughter, Eidel." "Many years" is a quotation from Sadan, where the point is that R' Shalom's deep mourning went on longer than Jewish custom allowed for.⁵⁵ In that context the "many years" need not be more than the three which the historical record allows for between the death of Rebbetzin Malkah and R' Shalom's own death (from 23 August 1852 to 10 September 1855). Bilu, however, is arguing that these "many years" of being her father's only female love object had a profound effect on Eydl's psyche.⁵⁶ This storytelling ignores the historical time frame, and the fact that Eydl was not an impressionable child when her mother died but already a mother herself.

Bilu also recounts, without citing evidence, that Eydl's husband, R' Isaac Rubin, "refused to behave as an *admor* [rebbe],"⁵⁷ so that Eydl took on this role instead.

Bilu's article reflects the historical context of the time in which it was written, in which transsexual people were becoming ever more visible. In the preceding decades, transsexuals such as Wendy Carlos, Christine Jorgensen, Jan Morris, and Renée Richards were in the public eye. Sex reassignment through hormones and surgery was increasingly available. Social and legal recognition of trans people took its first steps. A leading figure in these changes was Harry Benjamin (1885–1986), a Jew from Germany who was influenced by Magnus Hirschfeld.⁵⁸ Benjamin performed and advocated sex reassignment surgery, published his groundbreaking study *The Transsexual Phenomenon* in 1966, and has been called "the founding father of transsexualism."⁵⁹

In this context, it had become possible to focus overtly on gender identity as a key to understanding Eydl. Bilu's retelling of Eydl's childhood resembles a classic story of transsexuality as depicted in psychiatric literature. As Harry Benjamin wrote, "In the scientific literature, the psychologically harmful influences in childhood, so-called 'conditioning,' are the most frequently mentioned and most widely accepted causes of transvestism, transsexualism, as well as homosexuality. Literally, or in substance, here are statements that were made to me by transsexual patients ... [for example:] My mother wanted me to be a girl and secretly dressed me as a girl and brought me up that way

till I was old enough to go to school.”⁶⁰ Such stories provided a model for Bilu’s depiction of an Eydl whose father put his tefillin on her and raised her as a boy – Bilu’s own additions to Sadan’s account.

In Bilu’s story, as in its predecessors, Eydl is almost like a man and does male things. In his version, however, this is not a sign of her greatness, as in *Dover Shalom*, or her nobility and yearning emotions, as in Sadan, but of psychological complexes beyond her own understanding.

“A Jewish Gender Transgressor”:
My Own Suggestions

In two conference papers and a published article, “‘Rebbe Eydele’: Shifting Perspectives on a Jewish Gender Transgressor,” I have suggested that the thought and experience of trans people today could provide a useful perspective for understanding Eydl.⁶¹ In so doing I have built on Bilu’s approach to Eydl’s gender identity, while contesting it by suggesting that a transgressive gender identity could be affirmed as Eydl’s own rather than lamented, or analyzed, as something inflicted upon her by others.

The historical context for this reading is clear. Since Bilu’s article was first published, there has been an explosion of transgender activism, and gender-related discourse has changed radically. Overcoming strong opposition,⁶² trans people entered and transformed the movement for gay and lesbian rights. The word “transgender(ed)” itself came into use in the 1980s, connoting a broader range of possibilities than the binary connotation of “transsexual,” and both have been superseded to some extent by the umbrella term “trans.” Gender studies and queer studies have taken their place in the academy. Israeli trans singer Dana International gained widespread renown in the 1990s; in the early 2000s, trans activist Nora Greenberg became a leader of the (renamed) Agudah of Gay Men, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Transgender. In Israel rabbis grappled with new questions, and the Reform movement admitted an “out” transsexual, Reuben Zellman, to its rabbinical school in 2003. Jewish trans activists such as Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg made intellectual contributions to an increasingly diverse and challenging movement. Feinberg and others searched history to find predecessors for today’s trans struggles.⁶³ My work on Eydl is an attempt to respond to this search. Like Bilu, I have suggested that Eydl could be understood as transsexual; in my telling, however, this would be an aspect of her own strong individuality.

Drawing on Jay Prosser’s suggestion that “transsexuality is always narrative work,”⁶⁴ I suggested that Eydl as a narrator, as depicted in *Dover Shalom*, can be seen as exploring and laying claim to a male identity as she tells about her father and re-enacts his miracle.⁶⁵

Contesting the depiction in Sadan and Bilu of Eydl's father shaping her sense of self, I emphasized Eydl's evident strength of personality and depicted her as an active agent. Reversing the perspective of previous tellers, I presented other characters' words and gestures about Eydl's masculinity not as forces that shaped her but as responses *to* her.⁶⁶

Contesting other narrators' focus on Eydl and her father, I have tried to introduce her mother, Malkah, into my tellings of Eydl's story. This has been hard for me, however, as a storyteller working in the tradition of academic scholarship, which requires sources and evidence: I have not found any existing stories in which Eydl and Malkah appear together. The best I have been able to do is to infer a good relationship between Eydl and her mother from hints of particular closeness between Malkah and R' Isaac Rubin, Eydl's husband. Thus *Dover Shalom* 364 depicts R' Isaac Rubin "sitting in the room of his mother-in-law the rebbetzin [Malkah], because she was ill and he was keeping watch there to attend to her needs."

Nevertheless, I have suggested that in her mother Eydl had a role model of how to be a spiritually powerful, respected woman while remaining within a clear female gender role. As discussed in the previous chapter, Malkah is consistently depicted as R' Shalom's partner and supporter, an ideal wife, never as taking on a male role. Yet the sources agree that Eydl did not follow this path. If she followed her father's way rather than her mother's, I argued, perhaps this was truer to her own identity.

Since many biographical and autobiographical accounts of trans experience include the motif of cross-dressing, my conference papers followed in the footsteps of Sadan and Bilu by adding this motif to Eydl's story. I argued that since a rebbe often wears distinctive clothing (in the early generations of Hasidism, rebbes wore white), Eydl likely wore distinctive, perhaps masculine garb in her role as rebbe. Further, according to Sadan, Eydl's repeated complaint about her brother's followers was a reference to clothing. This gives us a glimpse, I argued, of choice of clothing as a central concern in Eydl's mind. Retrospectively, I recognize that these imaginative additions to my story of Eydl lacked any basis in evidence.

Finally, I approached Sadan's account of Eydl's exorcism in the context of anti-trans violence today, "the extraordinary threat of violence that transgendered people face just living their daily lives."⁶⁷ A video of the exorcism of a young woman, conducted by Rabbi David Basri in Jerusalem in 1999,⁶⁸ helped me to form a vivid picture of R' Joshua calling down curses on his sister. The gruelling procedure shown in the video largely consists of a group of men shouting the "possessed" woman into submission, a sustained onslaught of verbal violence. The video presents only an edited version of the exorcism, which lasted more than six hours.⁶⁹ It was easy for me to imagine

that such an onslaught, especially from a brother, could “succeed” in causing a psychic breakdown.

Retelling the exorcism in this way could be relevant to Eydil’s story whether or not she is understood as transsexual. The group Gender Education and Advocacy states, “Violence based upon gender variance does not solely affect the transgendered. Anyone just perceived as crossing gender lines can become a victim.”⁷⁰ In this light, the exorcism could be seen as a punishment of Eydil’s disregard of conventional gender roles. To perpetrators of such violence, distinctions between gender role and gender identity are irrelevant.

Violence against trans people functions as a deterrent to potential transgressors of gender roles or identities. Eydil’s exorcism, a public event, could similarly have prevented others from following in her footsteps.⁷¹

I see much value in my academic storytelling about Eydil, but I want to comment on its limitations as well. My 2002 conference paper on Eydil was titled “The Soul of a Rebbe in the Body of a Rebbetzin.” I noted at the time that the “soul of one gender in the body of another” motif is seen by some (though not all) trans people as dated and limiting.⁷² I would now add that this title completed a pattern leading from one story about Eydil to the next. In *Dover Shalom*, Eydil is a woman almost as accomplished as a man. To Sadan, she is a woman whom others want to be a man; to Bilu, she is a woman who wants to be a man; and finally in my paper she is a man in the body of a woman.

I am troubled at this pattern of male authors increasingly masculinizing Eydil. Nathaniel Deutsch has identified a similar phenomenon regarding the Maiden of Ludmir: “Her biographers ... consistently sought to portray the Maiden as consciously embracing a male identity ... while her self-conception remains more elusive.”⁷³ Perhaps we would have been more comfortable if Eydil had not lived out a female gender role, marrying a man and having children. Interestingly, both *Dover Shalom* and Sadan minimize the number of Eydil’s children, with *Dover Shalom* apparently considering R’ Elimelech as her only son and Sadan leaving the impression that he was her only child.

Paradoxically, recent developments in trans culture could help us to imagine Eydil as both feminine and masculine, in more nuanced ways.⁷⁴ There is increasing comfort with broad gender identities that do not require renouncing femininity to claim masculinity.⁷⁵ New possibilities include child-bearing and breastfeeding for trans people with a primarily male identity.⁷⁶ A more sophisticated approach to Eydil through the lens of gender may yet have much to teach us. A first step in such an approach would be to see Eydil’s gender identity as normal, and gender definitions in her society and ours as possibly in need of revision – rather than the other way around.⁷⁷

From the literary perspective that is the focus of this book, the stories

discussed so far remain in contest with one another. From a historical perspective, however, transgender readings of Eydl remain at best unproven. Both Bilu's psychoanalytic perspective and my own suggestions grounded in today's trans activism are largely based on imaginative extrapolations from Sadan's account rather than additional evidence. They are not supported by other sources discussed below. The question of gender roles and boundaries, however, remains salient in these other sources, which I now explore.

Beyond the Printed Word: Three Non-Literary Accounts of a Famous Holy Woman

A Letter from Eydl's Brother

While the four competing stories of Eydl discussed so far all depict her as taking on a gender role construed as male, some briefer, non-literary sources contest this way of remembering her altogether, and tell about her straightforwardly as a great woman.

A facsimile and transcription of a letter ascribed to Rebbe Joshua of Belz, dated Friday, 30 October 1874,⁷⁸ is printed, apparently for the first time, in a 1993 Belz publication. There it is titled as an invitation to R' Joshua's son Isaac Meir's wedding to the daughter of R' Joshua's brother-in-law, R' Isaac Rubin (Eydl's husband). The letter itself, however, does not mention R' Isaac Rubin but speaks of "the praiseworthy bride, Miss Hannah Rachel, long may she live, daughter of my sister, the famous holy woman, Madam Eydl, long may she live."⁷⁹ Except that it contains no hint of Eydl acting as a rebbe, this is consistent with the picture in *Dover Shalom* and other hasidic sources: Eydl is a great, accomplished woman, on excellent terms with her family. Whether or not R' Joshua, in writing this letter, was contesting other stories about his sister, the editor who printed it in 1993 can certainly be seen as contesting stories like those of Sadan and Bilu. In this context, the editor chose to subordinate Eydl to her husband by mentioning him and not her in the title assigned to the letter, though the letter itself does the opposite.

A Legal Document

Karen Roekard is studying documents in Polish and German, largely concerning real estate transactions, related to the family of R' Shalom and Rebbetzin Malkah of Belz, contained in the Tabula Register Collection in the Lviv Archives. She has showed me photographs of a document (not yet fully translated), dated 12 July 1855 and referring back to August and November

1852, concerning a purchase of property in Belz by EydI and her husband, R' Isaac Rubin.

In a context in which I am discussing EydI as a literary character, a mundane document like this is a salutary reminder that she lived in a concrete geographical, historical, and economic setting. From other stories, we might have remembered EydI as if her life was entirely about religion. Telling a brief story in its own right, this real-estate document challenges other stories by highlighting an aspect of EydI's life – the practical, economic dimension – which they neglect. Otherwise, this document confirms impressions from other stories of EydI as a strong woman. Here, she is involved in business transactions apparently on an equal basis with her husband. The fact that the property is in Belz also suggests her ongoing connection with the town where her father was rebbe.

EydI's Tombstone

Through a resource not available to my predecessors – the Internet – I have recently been in touch with two descendants of EydI. This in itself gives me a new sense of connection with this holy woman as a person of flesh and blood.

Moshe Yosef Rubin, of Borough Park, Brooklyn, is a hasid and ordained rabbi who is a great-great-great-grandson of EydI through the line of her son Rebbe Samuel Shmelke Rubin of Seret.⁸⁰ He has visited EydI's grave in Brody in today's Ukraine, and has provided me with a photograph and transcription of the inscription on her tombstone, which appears to be the original; the cemetery it is in has not suffered destruction.

The reverse side of the tombstone has a brief inscription: "The Rebbetzin Madam EydI daughter of the holy rebbe, our teacher Rebbe Shalom of Belz, of blessed memory." The main inscription, on the front of the tombstone, begins by stating the date of EydI's death, the fourteenth of Kislev, 5644 (22 November 1885). The inscription continues, "Here rests the rebbetzin and holy woman famous all over the world for her righteousness and for her kindness with people: Madam EydI (her soul is in Eden) – daughter of his honoured holiness [Rebbe Shalom of Belz]."

A great many praises and honorifics surround the name of EydI's father, Rebbe Shalom, taking up most of seven lines of the inscription (as compared to just over three for the phrase about EydI herself beginning "Here rests"). Then the text returns to EydI: "She was important and dear to her father; he took pride in her very very much, and said great things about her."

Finally, the inscription identifies EydI as the wife of R' Isaac; two lines of

the inscription primarily consist of honorifics for him, and the final three lines of the tombstone are in praise of his illustrious ancestor, R' Naphtali of Ropscycze.

Here, then, is another story of Eydl, contesting others as to how she is to be remembered. Like Berger's and Michelson's tales about great women, the tombstone inscription gives more attention to the men to whom Eydl was related than to her. In agreement with both *Dover Shalom* and Sadan's account, it emphasizes her father's love of her and expressive pride in her. It also refers extravagantly to her fame as a holy woman. At the same time, if the "great things" her father said about Eydl were like those passed on by Sadan, that is not stated here. Her fame is not ascribed to anything potentially controversial but to her righteousness and her kindness with people – a characteristic other accounts do not highlight.

Living Hasidic Stories of "Grandmother Eydele"

To my delight, Moshe Yosef Rubin has also heard traditions about "*di babeh Eydele*"⁸¹ – "grandmother Eydele" – from his father, Yaakov Rubin, and his father's brother Schmelke Rubin. I am thrilled to know that Eydl is a living presence in the imagination of some of her descendants, and to hear these stories that bring her to life for me. These traditions, which offer a distinctive answer to the question of how Eydl shall be remembered, have not, to the knowledge of Moshe Yosef Rubin and myself, appeared in print before:

- "She ran her father's household."
- When Eydl's blind son Elimelech was a little boy, Rebbe Shalom asked Elimelech's *melamed* (tutor) to make him the letters of the Hebrew alphabet out of wax, so that he would learn the shapes of the letters. Eydl broke down crying, because until then she had clung to the hope that her father would heal her son's blindness. Her father responded, "*S'vet em gurnit shatn*" (It won't do him any harm), meaning that Elimelech would be great in spite of his blindness.
- The third Belzer Rebbe, R' Issachar Dov, would say that although in those days only sons inherited money and property, there was an exception made in Eydl's case. She inherited equally with all her brothers, unlike her sister, Freyde.
- Eydl inherited her mother Malkah's Sabbath candlesticks. From her father, among other things, she inherited his precious wall clock and the table on which he received *kvitlekh*. In general, she seems to have inherited the most coveted items of her parents' household.
- When Eydl's brother R' Joshua had succeeded their father as Belzer Rebbe,

Eydl became annoyed whenever he made changes from any of their father's customs.

- Nevertheless, relations between Eydl's and Joshua's families were excellent. There is no tradition of any strife, nor any hint of Sadan's dybbuk story. Eydl's son Elimelech, who apparently lived with his mother in Brody until her death, was a Belzer hasid all his life, even when he later became a rebbe and wonder-worker in his own right, in the town of Yabrov. (He was called R' Meylekh Yabrover, a name well known to this day among Belzer hasidim.) There are stories from later generations as well, to the present day, pointing to good relations between descendants of Eydl and of her brother Joshua.
- According to the Rubin family's tradition, Eydl's husband, R' Isaac Rubin, was a rebbe (not merely a rabbi) in Brody and in the town of Radichev, and Rebbetzin Eydl only began acting as a rebbe after his death in 1874.
- *Di babeh Eydele* was a very holy woman. Men would line up at her door to ask blessings from her. (By contrast, the Belzer Rebbetzin today gives blessings, but only to women.)
- Once when Eydl was ill, she spent some time on a visit to Rebbe Hayim of Tszanz, and was there during the Sukkot holiday. In Tszanz, women were excluded from the most distinctive rituals of Sukkot: "dwelling" (especially, eating meals) in a sukkah, a thatched hut built for the holiday, based on Leviticus 23:42, and waving the lulav. Nevertheless, the Tszanzer Rebbe instructed that a special sukkah, large enough for one person, be built for Eydl, with a small window that opened into his own sukkah. During her visit he would also send her his own lulav to wave.

Besides these stories, the Rubin family has physical mementos of *di babeh Eydele*. Her *tikhl* (kerchief) is in Moshe Yosef's possession. It is a yellowed silk shawl which must have been white originally. Another member of the family has Eydl's apron.

Both of these items are known as *gebentshte zakhn* (blessed objects) and *segules* (see glossary) especially for fertility. There are recent stories about this, not repeated here to protect the privacy of the people involved.

Although I have selected material specifically about Eydl from my conversations with Rabbi Rubin, I must note that this goes against the grain of the conversations themselves. For Rabbi Rubin, stories about *di babeh Eydele* come to mind among stories of her parents, her husband, her children, and ancestors of his in later generations of the family. Like Berger and Michelson, he tells stories of holy people in a context of family history. This approach, rooted in hasidic culture, implicitly contests the focus on the individual in my non-hasidic research approach.

These Rubin family traditions are consistent with *Dover Shalom* and Sadan in depicting Eydl as taking on the role of a rebbe. The detail that she did so only after her husband's death adds to the acceptability of this choice in the hasidic cultural context. In this version Eydl could not be seen as competing with her husband. Nor is she filling in for any inadequacy of his, as in Bilu's account. When she takes on the role of rebbe, she is in effect carrying on her husband's work – rather than trying to succeed her father, as in Sadan's story. Nevertheless, a sense that she is a successor of her father is conveyed in her inheritance of his most valued possessions, including, symbolically, the table at which he exercised his prerogative as a rebbe to accept *kvitlekh*. At the same time, there is a hint of a close relationship with her mother in Eydl's inheritance of Malkah's Sabbath candlesticks. These also affirm Eydl's identity as a traditional Jewish woman, responsible for home rituals such as candle-lighting. Her traditional womanhood is also affirmed by the physical evidence of her *tikh* and apron, confirming that she dressed like other women of her culture.

Rabbi Rubin disagrees thoroughly with any suggestion of understanding Eydl as a trans person. He considers any such suggestion to be disrespectful to the rebbetzin's memory; and, like many academic colleagues with whom I have explored this topic, he sees it as an unfounded anachronistic imposition of today's categories on a nineteenth-century figure whose life was lived in a traditionalist Eastern European Jewish milieu.

Otherwise, these traditions confirm and amplify many impressions of Eydl from other sources, including her strength of personality, her reverence for her father and attachment to his memory, the esteem in which she was held, and her healing power, which is still active today through items that she wore. The story about her interaction with her son and her father gives an affecting glimpse of her emotional life which I find more touching than all the speculation of psychologically oriented authors.

Eydl in Her Own Words

The second descendant of Eydl who has contacted me is the scion of a family of rabbis in Jerusalem, connected to Eydl by lines of descent from two of her children. He has provided me with a text apparently written by Eydl herself. It is a letter congratulating her daughter Dinah on the birth of her first child, apparently named for Eydl's mother, Malkah.⁸²

Typically for its time, the letter moves back and forth between rabbinic Hebrew, filled with formulaic honorifics, and Yiddish, which is also permeated with pious phrases. Discerning Eydl's own voice through the layers of con-

vention may not be easy, but is worth the effort. Stubbornly maintaining my focus on Eydl as an individual, I have not translated the brief greetings in Hebrew written by her husband, R' Isaac Rubin, which come after (interestingly, not before) Eydl's letter.⁸³

[*The letter begins in Hebrew:*] With the help of God.⁸⁴ The fourth day of the week of the Torah portion *Tetsaveh*, 5626 [Wednesday, 21 February 1866], here in Brody.

Mazel tov, mazel tov, mazel tov, peace and everything good to my beloved, cherished, treasured daughter, the worthy, modest, intelligent, dear Madam Dinah *leb* [Yiddish endearment, see glossary], may she live for many long and good days and years. With greetings to her husband, my dear son-in-law, distinguished in Torah and piety, of holy ancestry, honoured, etc.,⁸⁵ our teacher and rabbi, Meir,⁸⁶ long may he live.

[*Yiddish*] We wish you mazel tov. May the Blessed Name help everyone, so that for all of you and for all of us there may be good fortune [*mazal tov*]. May we all merit to raise the precious daughter, Malkah *lebn* [an endearment, like *leb*] with many more good, pious children, to Torah and the wedding canopy and good deeds. I very much want the Blessed Name to help so that you will be able to breastfeed her yourself, in good health, easily.

We are very surprised that we weren't telegraphed.

Praised be the Blessed Name for His great kindness; may He always do ever more undeserved kindness with us. May you all be healthy and strong.

[*Hebrew*] From your mother who looks forward to always hearing good news from one another, and to seeing you with much joy, Eydl, daughter of the holy rebbe, the righteous man of blessed memory for the life of the world to come, may his merit shield us, [and from] Elimelech (long may he live), Malkah (long may she live),⁸⁷ and Hannah Rachel (long may she live); with his honour the rabbi [R' Isaac Rubin], we bless you with a blessing of good fortune.

Greetings to my beloved *makheteneste* [child's spouse's mother],⁸⁸ the worthy, modest rebbetzin, the righteous woman, of holy ancestry – may God be our help – Madam Miriam Hayah (long may she live). [*Yiddish*] We wish you mazel tov and we request of you to continue to befriend our good dear child *leb* and care for her.⁸⁹ May your ancestral merit and ours stand by us forever. I greet your children⁹⁰ (long may they live) and we wish them mazel tov. From your *makheteneste* who wishes you everything good and much joy from all the children (long may they live), Eydl daugh-

ter of the holy rebbe, the righteous man of blessed memory for the life of the world to come, may his merit shield us.

Through all the pious stock phrases, this letter lets us hear enough of an individual voice to challenge other stories of Eydl. Except for her proud identity as her father's daughter, this Eydl contrasts with all the literary depictions of her by male authors. This Eydl is at home in her own skin as a woman. Rather than being like a man in any way, she is a familiar Ashkenazi Jewish maternal figure, showering her daughter and granddaughter with blessings while allowing herself the complaint that she would have liked to get the good news sooner, by telegraph.

In contrast to the individual focus of authors like myself, Eydl in this letter rarely speaks as "I," and almost always as part of a "we," including, at different points, herself and her husband, their whole nuclear family, and the wider extended family or community ("may we all merit to raise the precious daughter").

Unlike either Sadan's literary account of Eydl or the Rubin family traditions, in both of which she accepts special treatment as compared to other women, this letter allows the possibility of reading Eydl as a proto-feminist, in solidarity with other women. As Rabbi Léah Novick has observed, "We really don't know how any of these [hasidic holy] women related to other women!"⁹¹ From this letter we know a little more, glimpsing loving relationships among women. Eydl asks her *makheteneste* to befriend and look after her young daughter. She extends to her daughter an intimate blessing about breastfeeding.

Additionally, Eydl blesses her granddaughter to grow up "to [the study of] Torah and the wedding canopy and good deeds" (*letorah ulehupah ulemaasim tovim*). This is the standard wording of a blessing for baby boys; the mention of Torah is conventionally left out for girls, who were not expected to engage in sacred study. Eydl has not made this distinction for her granddaughter (though one could argue that this is only because, at that point in the letter, she is expressing a grandmotherly wish to have more grandchildren, who might include boys).

Eydl's *makheteneste* Miriam Hayah is none other than the daughter of Rebbe Meir of Premishlan mentioned toward the beginning of this chapter – a holy woman who is said to have taken on the role of a rebbe in partnership with her husband, the Rebbe of Shotz, and later on her own. The relationship between these two mothers, then, can also be seen as a relationship between two powerful women who went beyond their society's usual gender distinctions.

Powerful Women in the Imagination of Hasidic Men

Hasidic holy women such as Eydl, who in history and legend have taken on the role of rebbe, have been the topic of a number of important studies. The primary question in these studies is not the gender identity, the sense of self, of such individuals but the hasidic community's capacity to accommodate them.⁹² Given the gender segregation, role distinctions, and hierarchy reflected in hasidic tales, how are stories of women like these even possible?

The hasidic personalism noted by Martin Buber, touched on in the chapter on halakhah (chapter 8), provides a key. Occasionally, a woman's strong and charismatic personality is enough to allow hasidic culture to set aside some of its standard distinctions and limitations. Strikingly, accounts of such women from hasidic and non-hasidic sources generally do not involve controversy or attempts to stop them. Hannah Rachel of Ludmir is an exception, but the controversy that dogged her early career seems to have centred around her preference for remaining unmarried and the fact that she was neither the daughter nor the wife of a rebbe. A male would-be rebbe who had no family ties to rebbes and who defied the norm of marriage and procreation would also have faced controversy.⁹³ Eydl, a wife, mother, and grandmother, linked to great male rebbes by birth and marriage, is a figure of controversy only in Sadan's account (among the primary sources), and that is because she challenges her brother's succession to their father's place as rebbe. Such a challenge would have had difficult consequences for a male sibling as well. Without such defiance of social norms applying to both women and men, the fact of a woman acting as a rebbe seems to be non-controversial in itself.

Though this degree of flexibility must be noted, it is also worth taking a hard look at how the hasidic imagination – to be clear, the imagination of hasidic men – responds to such women through various forms of storytelling.

First of all, Eydl seems to be the first such woman to be honoured by a story printed in a traditional compilation of hasidic tales, and she is nearly the only one to be honoured in this way to this day. Non-hasidic books include a few more stories about such women, often ascribed to hasidic oral tradition; the Rubin family's stories about Eydl are examples of such traditions that have never been put into print. Hasidic tale collectors' primary response to women who act as rebbes, then, has simply been not to collect stories about them. In this regard compilers of tales have acted as cultural gatekeepers. Those wishing to learn more about hasidic holy women must go beyond books of tales.⁹⁴ Even other printed sources from within the hasidic world may be useful. For example, an article published by Satmar hasidim in the Yiddish newspaper *Der Yid* of 30 July 1999 mentions that Rebbetzin Pesya

Leah, daughter of R' Moses Leyb of Sasov, took *kvitlekh* with accompanying donations.⁹⁵ The article also states that miracle stories are told about her, but does not itself tell any – a reminder that oral traditions about such women may be richer than anything allowed into print.

The wording used in *Dover Shalom* about Eydl's role is significant. The text tells us "*vehi hayta mitnaheget berabanut*." Understanding hasidic Hebrew often depends on reconstructing the underlying Yiddish.⁹⁶ This phrase could be a Hebrew equivalent of *zi hot gefirt rebistve*,⁹⁷ which would mean "she was a rebbe";⁹⁸ but that idiom is rendered differently in another story in *Dover Shalom*.⁹⁹ I have translated the Hebrew phrase as the equivalent of the Yiddish *zi hot zikh gefirt vi a rebe*, "she conducted herself as/like a rebbe."¹⁰⁰ In 1937, exactly this Yiddish phrase appeared in an obituary for the Chentshiner Rebbetzin; Nehemiah Polen comments that it was a way of referring to her role "circumspectly," rather than fully acknowledging her as a rebbe.¹⁰¹ Neither *Dover Shalom* nor any other hasidic account actually states that Eydl was a rebbe.¹⁰² Yet there would have been no question that a man of her lineage and abilities was a real rebbe. This is another way in which the imagination of hasidic men keeps a woman like Eydl within bounds.

From his perspective within hasidic culture, Moshe Yosef Rubin sees the significant categories for understanding Eydl and her treatment by others as greatness, honour, and *hashivut* (importance, respect) rather than gender. Without disagreeing, I note that in the stories Rabbi Rubin tells, honour is given to Eydl by distinguishing her from other women and grouping her with men. Unlike her sister, she receives an equal inheritance with her brothers. In Tsanz, only men wave the lulav on Sukkot, but when Eydl comes to visit, the rebbe sends her his own lulav to wave. As in *Dover Shalom* and the stories transmitted by Sadan, hasidic men describe the greatness of a woman like Eydl by comparing her to men.

In the story of Eydl's visit to Tsanz, a distinction remains. Eydl is not invited into the Tsanzer Rebbe's sukkah, as an honoured male guest would have been. She is given her own sukkah, just large enough for her, in communication with the Tsanzer Rebbe's sukkah through a window, but separated by walls. I would argue that this is a most appropriate image for the status of someone like Eydl in the imagination of hasidic men. As Polen notes, a "charismatic woman leader" in Hasidism had to be seen as a special case, setting no precedent for other women.¹⁰³ There is no category of women spiritual leaders; every such woman is treated as an exception.¹⁰⁴

Eydl sits in her sukkah alone, sharing the holiday meals neither with women nor with men. It is as if there is a special gender role for people like her, who have risen above the hierarchical level of women and approached, but not fully entered, the higher level of men.

This model of a distinct gender role, midway in the hierarchy between male and female, makes sense for many of the tellings of Eydl's story that we have looked at. *Dover Shalom* celebrates the greatness of R' Shalom of Belz, who produced a child who rose from her expected female gender role into the higher category of almost-man. This celebratory tone is also that of the Rubin family's stories about Eydl: she was so great that under some circumstances she was treated differently from other women and more like men. The stories in Sadan's chapter on Eydl, conversely, lament the biological facts that kept Eydl on the lower level of almost-man rather than the higher level of male.

The brief non-literary sources we have looked at, in particular the letter from Eydl's brother R' Joshua and the inscription on her tombstone, take a different approach, emphasizing her greatness while encompassing her within a traditionally female gender role. The letter ascribed to Eydl herself is the fullest source we have for a view of her as simply a powerful and accomplished woman. Notably, however, none of these sources mention that she took on the role of a rebbe, or any sayings or incidents in which others treat her as more like a man than like other women.

Finally, *Dover Shalom*, the stories transmitted by Sadan, Eydl's tombstone, and the Rubin family traditions all group Eydl with men – her father, her husband and his ancestor R' Naphtali of Ropczyce, her brothers, the men who seek her blessings, her sons. Like any other woman mentioned in Michelson's or Berger's collections, she owes her appearance in *Dover Shalom* to these connections. The reader can thus ascribe her greatness to the men she is associated with, while her greatness reflects on them and adds to their honour.

Expressions of hasidic imagination around Eydl, therefore, remain within the familiar narrative of hasidic tales in general.

Narratives and Misreadings: How Shall We Remember Eydl?

Stories about Eydl from hasidic sources have nothing to say about her gender identity, her sense of self. Their references to maleness are ways of acknowledging her greatness without abandoning a hierarchy in which men are above women.

Therefore, Sadan, to the extent that he speculates about Eydl's psychology, and Bilu and myself to a far greater extent, can be said to have misread these sources. We have wanted them to reveal some of Eydl's inner life, when that is not what they are intended to do.

This distinction points beyond the contest between the individual stories

to a clash of narratives. Each of us has wanted the stories of Eydl to fit into a narrative already established in our own minds. Simply put, Bilu tries to fit Eydl into a Freudian narrative in which people are driven by unconscious motivations rooted in sexuality and close family relationships. I try to contain Eydl in a narrative in which individuals struggle against conformist society to find their authentic selves and realize their aspirations. Our stories clash with those in hasidic sources because the underlying narratives clash.

Phelan's article on stories in contest, cited at the beginning of this chapter, notes that such conflicts often have winners and losers. The winning stories are those that are remembered and retold.

Regarding stories of Eydl, it seems that the version in *Dover Shalom* has had the most circulation in hasidic circles and, to some extent, beyond, while Bilu's article has made the strongest impression in more secular circles.¹⁰⁵ The other sources I have cited have not been as accessible – some of them never printed, and Sadan's compelling account limited to readers of modern literary Hebrew.

I hope that this chapter will make a difference by bringing a wider selection of stories of Eydl to readers. Though I have discussed ways in which these stories contest each other, I personally would not want any particular story to "win." Rather, I would be pleased if each reader's imagination draws on many of these stories. One decisive question in absorbing the stories in this way is whether we accept or reject Sadan's story of the exorcism; this colours everything else, and the decision must be left to each reader.

It is also my hope that yet more sources about Eydl may come to light, and that other descendants of Eydl who encounter this chapter will come forward with what they know. In the meantime, I would argue that the challenge to readers of all these stories is to find ways of reading the sources that honour Eydl and make her more vivid rather than more obscure. In this way, perhaps, we can approach Eydl's table, rub shoulders with her disciples, receive her blessing, and listen to her teach.

Turning from Eydl and Malkah, whose appearances in these tales are so powerful yet so incomplete, I return to the central figures of the tales, the male rebbes. I want to approach the "low and material" dimension of the tales' world view from one more perspective, contemplating the bodies of the rebbes themselves.

CHAPTER TWELVE



The Naked Rebbe: Stories of Rebbe Isaac Ayzik¹ of Kaluv and the Holy Body

The Body in Hasidism

As Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The Storyteller" (1936) implies, there is an intrinsic relationship between storytelling and "the tiny, fragile human body."² Storytelling is a corporeal activity, built into our bodies.³ I am especially fascinated by stories of the body, like many of those the remaining chapters of this study consider.

Physical, bodily human existence is often a problem for religion. The Hasidism of the Baal Shem Tov emerged in a context of an existing "hasidic" – that is, pietistic – tendency, which was strongly ascetic, emphasizing fasting, self-mortification, and sexual restraint.⁴ This ascetic trend can be seen as rooted in dualism and antipathy to the body.⁵ By contrast, early observers and opponents saw non-asceticism as a distinguishing characteristic of the new Hasidism of the Baal Shem Tov and his followers.⁶ Thus, *Shivhe HaBesht* includes a letter of the Baal Shem Tov to his disciple R' Jacob Joseph of Polonne, discouraging voluntary fasting.⁷ Moshe Rosman, though often sceptical about hasidic sources, considers this letter authentic and an important statement of the Baal Shem Tov's anti-ascetic stance.⁸

Such considerations could lead to the conclusion that Hasidism is at ease with bodily existence, along the lines of Buber's "joy in the world as it is, in life as it is."⁹ Yet such is hardly the case. In the language of hasidic texts, *gashmiyut* – materiality or corporeality – is one of the most negatively laden words. In hasidic "theoretical literature," one of the most positive expressions

for a change in consciousness is *hitpashtut hagashmiyut* – stripping away corporeality. This concept is illustrated revealingly in *Eser Orot* 2:3, an anecdote about Rebbe Phinehas of Korets:¹⁰

People asked the holy rebbe, R' Phinehas, why his voice was not heard when he prayed, and no gestures or strength or fiery enthusiasm were to be seen in him. He answered them, "My brothers, know that the essence of prayer is *devequt* [attachment, clinging] to the creator of all worlds, and the essence of *devequt* is *hitpashtut hagashmiyut* [stripping away the physical]. And that is truly like the departure of the soul from the body, concerning which our sages of blessed memory said in the Talmud, Berakhot (8a), that it is like a ship's rope being dragged through a ring. But death by a 'kiss' is like pulling a hair out of milk. So there are those whose prayer, to strip away the physical, is like a ship's rope being dragged through a ring. But there are those for whom it is a 'kiss,' which is like pulling a hair out of milk."

Thus, the essence of hasidic prayer, whether demonstrative or quiet, is in "stripping away the physical," which truly means an attempt to get the soul out of the body, as in death. The dualistic and hierarchical understanding of soul and body is fundamental.

Indeed, the hasidic world view that appears in both teachings and stories is a strongly hierarchical one. God is above, the earth below. The soul is on a higher level than the body. The classic attempt at an anthropological recreation of Eastern European Jewish life, *Life Is with People*, suggests that a hierarchical outlook pervaded traditional Eastern European Jewry as a whole. Torah scholars were above working men, who were above women, who were above gentiles.¹¹

The "lowliness" of gentiles has a number of aspects beyond simple mutual enmity. The evidence of hasidic tales is that Jews saw the Christians among whom they lived, with their use of icons and images, as idolators in the full biblical sense.¹² Theologically, based on kabbalistic motifs, gentiles are associated with demonic powers.¹³ Theological concerns mingled with fear of gentile sexuality.¹⁴ In the mid-1860s tale collection *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim* no. 24 (Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 103), a Jewish man describes his illicit relationship with a gentile woman: "I rendered myself impure by lying with and having intercourse with 'the daughter of a foreign god.' She became attached to me, and I remained there in her impurity."

In general, gentiles were seen as more involved in the physical than Jews were, as a result of longstanding cultural stereotypes (as in the midrash on Genesis 27:22, associating "voice" with Jews and "hands," physical force, with

gentiles),¹⁵ and because much Eastern European Jewish contact with non-Jews was with uneducated farmers.¹⁶ Gentiles are associated with the lower pole of existence, designated as *gashmiyut*, “materiality,” or – pejoratively – *tumah*, “impurity.” The higher pole is sometimes referred to as *ruḥaniyut*, “spirituality,” but more commonly through associated terms such as *qedushah* and *taharah* – “holiness” and “purity,” frequently mentioned together.

In hasidic theoretical literature, particularly in the first published hasidic works, those of R' Jacob Joseph of Polonne, the Aristotelian terms “matter” (*homer*) and “form” (*tzurah*) are also used: “The division into [matter and form] runs through three categories: the individual, divided into body and soul; Israel, divided into the people and the zaddikim; the world, divided into the seventy nations [i.e., all non-Jews] and Israel.”¹⁷

In general, the “material” pole in the hierarchical world of the tales is characterized by lack of freedom, limitation. At the spiritual pole there is the possibility of going beyond natural limits, even the possibility of miracles. Freedom and power, so limited in the material world, especially in the existence of Eastern European Jews living with widespread poverty, oppression, and uncertainty, become identified with the higher realms of existence.¹⁸

Where do the rebbes, the central figures of hasidic hagiography, stand in this hierarchical world? Clearly a rebbe is on the highest level; so he is characterized by freedom and power. Yet he must interact with the material world. This is both a spiritual imperative of hasidic teachings and a practical necessity of hasidic life, where a rebbe is expected to be involved with his community of hasidim and responsive to their needs.

In spite of all doubts about the historicity of hasidic tales, the characters of different rebbes often emerge with relative consistency from the different stories about them; and in the tales, different rebbes are involved in differing ways with the material pole of existence. This chapter focuses on Rebbe Isaac Ayzik of Kaluv (d. 1821), since nearly all the stories about him in Berger's *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* (section 4) have some connection with his involvement with materiality, and illuminate the fraught nature of this involvement in the imagination of the culture that produced these stories. I cite a number of stories of other rebbes as well, in particular stories of his contemporary the Maggid of Kozienice (R' Israel Hapstein, d. 1814), as the depictions of these rebbes share important similarities.

The Rebbe in the Material World

Berger's last story about Rebbe Isaac Ayzik (*Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* 4:28) depicts him consciously engaging in a practice of “lifting up” the material to higher levels:

[Rebbe Isaac]’s way was to go barefoot, or sometimes only in shoes made of straw, because of his great weakness. But sometimes he would put on leather shoes, and then stand on pieces of wood, and the pieces of wood would be lying on the ground – so as to hint at the mineral, vegetable, animal and human [*domem, tzomeah, hai, medaber*], to raise the earth, mineral, to the wood, vegetable, to the leather, from an animal, to the human being who rules.

This conscious involvement with the material world is a key to several other stories about Rebbe Isaac Ayzik. For example, he is said to have written out the entire Torah by hand, although he was not a scribe who could write a scroll for public use (*Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:16). In the story itself this is a mysterious act and the subject of speculation, but in the context of the other tales, it shows his involvement with the physical dimension, even of words of Torah.

This characteristic even sheds light on his name, Yitzḥaq Ayzik, a Hebrew name and its everyday Yiddish equivalent. Language may appear non-material, but in the hierarchical hasidic outlook, different languages have different places on the scale of materiality or spirituality. Hebrew is above Yiddish (and this is why Hebrew is literally above Yiddish in bilingual books of tales such as Rebbe Nakhmen’s *Sipure Maasiyot*). Going by a combination of a Hebrew name and its Yiddish counterpart shows that the rebbe bridges the two poles.

Of course, other rebbes (and many Jews in general) went by such a double name. R’ Isaac Ayzik’s involvement with the realm of non-Hebrew language, however, goes beyond most. The first story about him in *Eser Tzahtzahot* (4:3; 4:1 and 4:2 do not include stories) says that he would often sing love songs in Yiddish and Hungarian. On the surface they were about a bride and groom searching for each other, but their inner meaning was about the union of the Blessed Holiness and the Shekhinah, masculine and feminine aspects of the Divine. In the same story, his own teacher, Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg, remarks that he could not hear R’ Isaac’s recitation of the Passover Haggadah – referring to supernatural hearing over a great distance – because it was in Hungarian. Non-Jewish languages such as Hungarian are at the low end of “materiality.” R’ Shmelke’s supernatural hearing cannot perceive the Hungarian Haggadah because it is below his high level. But R’ Isaac, choosing to pray in a gentile language, is comfortable working with the low material level of existence. Similarly, the Maggid of Kozienice is said to have sung prayers in Polish (*Eser Orot* 5:39).

R’ Isaac’s ability to work with materiality is further shown by his choice of lyrics involving human, sexual love. But it is understood that in his mouth

the words really refer to divine mysteries. He is not sinking into the material realm but transforming it, just as his practice of standing on wood and earth lifts up those realms of existence.

This is demonstrated by the effects of his Yiddish love lyrics on his disciple, Rebbe Hayim of Tsanz, who would sing them every Sabbath evening “until his bodily powers were altogether nullified in his transport” (*Eser Tzahtzaḥot* 4:3). This is not about the embrace of the physical and material but its nullification, and supports Scholem’s rather than Buber’s view of Hasidism – even in the tales, Buber’s preferred domain.

Another story of prayer and song works with the same underlying imagery (*Eser Tzahtzaḥot* 4:18):

The holy Rebbe of Kaluv had a beautiful melody for the hymn “Mighty in Dominion” [*Adir bimlukhah*] in the haggadah for Passover, which he inherited from the rebbe R’ Ber of Mezritsh (may his merit protect us). He said that the rebbe R’ Ber took it from a shepherd in the field, and that this song was the song that the Levites would sing in the Holy Temple. And it is already known in the world how the holy Rebbe of Kaluv took the melody for “By the Rivers of Babylon” from a shepherd in the field.

A song sung by a shepherd – in the Hungarian context most likely a non-Jew – is on a low level. A rebbe can raise it up. These anecdotes illustrate the kabbalistic concept of finding and raising up the sparks of divinity mingled in the materiality of the world, in this case restoring ancient Jewish songs out of their degrading transformation into gentile shepherds’ melodies.

Rebbe Isaac Ayzik is even able to describe his spiritual work by comparing it to the physical work of the “lowest” possible human embodiment of materiality, a gentile woman (*Eser Tzahtzaḥot* 4:22): “A great scholar and tzadik, one of the greatest of [Rebbe Isaac’s] disciples, related that once his rebbe, the holy Rebbe of Kaluv, said to him [in Yiddish], ‘Do you know how I made you into a [real] Jew? I took out your little soul [*neshomele*] and I washed it out, the way the gentile maid [*di goye*] washes out laundry by the river, and I gave it back to you clean.’”

Rebbe Isaac can see the holiness concealed in the trappings of materiality and engage with it in that guise. This is expressed dramatically in a story that juxtaposes R’ Isaac with an unaware witness (*Eser Tzahtzaḥot* 4:19). Reyzl, daughter of Rebbe Tzvi Hirsh of Zhydachiv, rather unwillingly spends the beginning of Passover at the house of her father-in-law, R’ Isaac Ayzik. Unhappily she waits for the seder to begin as her father-in-law, walks back and forth in the house until eleven o’clock at night:

Suddenly she saw her father-in-law open the window, and there was a carriage with two horses coming, and in it were sitting noblemen and noblewomen. The holy rebbe went to welcome them in a friendly spirit. They embraced and kissed each other, and after that they gave a crack with the whip and travelled on from there, and the rebbe shut the window and sat down for the seder.

When the rebbetzin [Reyzl] saw this, her soul almost left her in great anguish, for she did not understand what this meant, and she could not raise questions about his conduct. Immediately after the holy day she travelled home, and her father asked her, "What did you see at your father-in-law's?" She told him: "Such things!"

He said to her, "Know that those noblemen and noblewomen whom you saw were the [biblical] patriarchs and matriarchs. For that holy rebbe did not want to sit down to the seder until the final time of redemption had come, and he was causing worlds to tremble, until the patriarchs and the matriarchs came and said to him that the appointed time had not yet come."

To R' Isaac, the biblical ancestors appear in the lowly guise of gentile nobles – including women – whom he embraces and kisses in a seeming act of intimacy with people who represent materiality. Yet this is only apparent. His eyes can discern that these are the holy ancestors. Not surprisingly, the female character in the story, identified with materiality rather than with the ability to go beyond it and transform it, cannot perceive this.

The equation of women with materiality in hasidic tales is so pervasive that it applies even to Rebbetzin Malkah of Belz. As seen above, in *Dover Shalom* no. 62 R' Shalom would sit with his wife, something many others rebbes would avoid, *only* because of his obligation "to do some physical deed in this world ... to bring something physical to actualization." As in that story, a rebbe's involvement with materiality is supposed to be in direct proportion to his detachment from it.

Concerning R' Isaac Ayzik, we are told that his children did not turn out well. As the most direct products of his physical being, such children could be taken to represent the rebbe's closeness to low levels of materiality. A tale, however, (*Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:24) stresses the rebbe's detachment in this context: "His second wife, the holy rebbetzin Madam Zisl, may she rest in peace, had merited to bear holy children, hasidim who served God, with her first husband. Once she was wondering in her heart why her second husband, the holy Rebbe of Kaluv, did not have good children like them. The holy rebbe sensed what was in her thoughts, and he said to her [in Yiddish], 'Go

on, child! (*Gey, gey, du kind!*) I do not need my children, and you do need your children.”

Madam Zisl is called “holy” in her own right; yet, as the rebbe’s wife, she represents materiality. So do the children. Put another way, they all are extensions of the rebbe’s own body. This equivalency explains the stories in which a rebbe, for one spiritual reason or another, starves his family along with himself (e.g., *Eser Qedushot* 4:5, 4:6, 9:12; *Eser Orot* 1:11, cited above in the chapter on food and women). Depriving himself physically implicates his children (and wife) whether they like it or not, and the appropriateness of this is not questioned.

The equivalence of wife and children is further underlined here by the rebbe’s calling his wife “child.” The point of his answer – which he can give because he perceived the question telepathically, beyond corporeal bounds – is that she is attached to her children, trapped in material (and maternal) bonds; he is free of them.

According to *Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:6, in Isaac Ayzik’s own childhood he was immersed in a material environment. R’ Leyb Sarah’s, a mysterious wandering tzaddik,

travelled to Hungary to seek out some great soul; and he arrived and found the holy rebbe, our master R’ Isaac Ayzik – and he was a boy about eight years old and was driving the geese. He asked him, “whose are you?” and he answered, “the son of a certain widow.” The rebbe R’ Leyb Sarah’s asked the widow to place him upon his shoulders and his neck, and he would raise him as a father does his son, and she gave him to him. [R’ Leyb Sarah’s] took him to the holy rebbe, R’ Shmelke of Nikolsburg, and he studied there and became great.

Here R’ Isaac is essentially a soul, a “great soul.” Yet he is found among symbols of materiality: in a typically gentile occupation, herding (female) geese, edible birds characterized as foolish, and living without a father. The equation of women and materiality underlies this story; R’ Leyb Sarah’s removes the boy from the female realm of his widowed mother and lifts him into the masculine realm of Torah study. He does this by a physical action: taking the boy onto his shoulders, lifting him out of the low materiality where he finds himself and transporting him to a realm removed from the female and corporeal. R’ Leyb Sarah’s himself is known by his mother’s name, suggesting an ongoing degree of connection with the feminine/physical. In the world view of the tales this connection allows R’ Leyb Sarah’s to work with materiality in order ultimately to nullify it.

The same can be said of R' Isaac Ayzik as the stories present him. Thus he too is able to lift up others, as stated in *Eser Tzahtzaḥot* 4:9: "The godly Rebbe of Kaluv caused thousands of Jews to repent. He repaired many souls that were sunk, heaven help us, in the depths of the evil powers [*qelippot*], in various grievous sins; he turned them around in such repentance that they merited later to become well-known tzaddikim."

The imagery of sinking into the depths is in keeping with the vertical, hierarchical nature of the hasidic world view. Rebbe Isaac is able to lift sinners up and out and into higher realms; like R' Leyb Sarah's or the Kozienicer Maggid, he has the spiritual power to be involved with the physical in order to remove others from its clutches.

This does not imply any embrace of the material world and its pleasures. The only "grievous sin" actually mentioned in this story is dancing at weddings. The reference is probably to mixed dancing, men and women together, which the next story (*Eser Tzahtzaḥot* 4:10) describes R' Isaac stamping out:

The holy rebbe completely eliminated, in his territory, the bad and bitter custom of unmarried men and women dancing at weddings, for when the unmarried men and women were gathered together and the instruments were playing loudly, he would command the musicians how to sing and how to play; and he showed them his dances, and showed them that they did not know or understand how to dance and how to rejoice in the joy of a commandment. Self-evidently, fear and terror fell upon all of those sinners, and they ran for their lives, for they were deeply ashamed, and they did not come back to any weddings, knowing that the holy rebbe would be there.

The hasidic cultivation of dancing as a spiritual practice might seem to indicate an acceptance of physical pleasures. This story shows that such is not the case. Here, the rebbe's dancing is a descent to a low, material level: he engages in the same physical activity as the "sinners." Yet his solitary dancing is something completely different from the sinful dancing of the young men and women. It is beyond them; they cannot join in but must cease to dance.

It is striking that in this story the "sinners" are not transformed, do not repent, but are driven away. This is related to the image in some stories of a rebbe's pure body physically driving away ritual impurity. For example, there is a tale of a disciple of R' Isaac, R' Avli Tirnoyer, who generally set aside his extreme concern about whether food was kosher when he ate with his rebbe (*Eser Tzahtzaḥot* 4:17):

All his life he never ate the meat of cattle, only fowl that the ritual slaughterer would slaughter in his presence, and he would examine the knife first. But when he came to the holy Rebbe of Kaluv he would eat meat and gravy with him from one plate (so honoured was he by the holy rebbe). Once when he was with him after they had eaten the midday meal, a plate of cherries was brought to them, and the rebbe took some and ate them without examining them (for worms) but R' Avli did not want to eat any. The rebbe said to him, "You eat meat with me in one plate without any concerns, and about this you are concerned?"

R' Avli answered him wisely: "With meat and gravy, the piece I am eating from is the same piece the rebbe is eating from – and if the rebbe is eating it, there is surely nothing to be concerned about. Not so with cherries – the one the rebbe eats is not the one I eat. The rebbe can eat without examining, because in the presence of the rebbe the worm will go down and flee from his presence – but the worm will not flee from my presence; so I am holding back my hand from the food."

And the holy rebbe acknowledged that he was right and said, "You have spoken well."¹⁹

This sort of interaction with the physical world is not far from outright magic, in which a bodily action produces a physical result through mysterious means or at a distance. So indeed we find R' Isaac (like the Maggid of Kozi-enice and many other rebbes) engaged in magical practice. *Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:12 recounts:

It is known that when he was old and always lay on his bed, he had a whip, and sometimes he would hit the wall with it this way and that, saying "Teh! Teh!" Once a man came to him, and he said [in Yiddish], "Didn't I pull you out of the water!" For that man had been sinking in the water with his horse and wagon, and the holy rebbe saw it through his spirit of prophecy and through his hitting with the whip he pulled him out of the water.

Stories themselves, as noted earlier, are considered part of the low, material world. Though themselves intangible, they deal with mundane matters and are not in the higher realm of religious study. Telling a story can therefore have a magical effect in the same way as performing a physical action: that which is acted out physically, or that which is told in a story, replicates itself. The double meaning of the Hebrew *maaseh*, "deed" and "story," is significant here.

Thus in *Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:20, R' Isaac, as a fire rages, tells a story about R' Zusya of Annopol who quenched a fire by citing the words "the fire sank [subsided]" from Numbers 11:2. As he finishes telling the story, R' Isaac repeats the same biblical words and the fire ceases. For his way of working, simply repeating the holy biblical words was not enough: he had to join them with the "material" action of telling a story.

The story then materializes or concretizes the words of the Torah even further: "After that it was found that inside the granary [which had been threatened by the fire] there was burned a sort of deep pit all around – 'the fire sank.'" The fire, so to speak, took the words of the Torah cited by R' Isaac as concretely as possible, and physically sank into the ground.

Like the rebbe's physical actions and storytelling, the rebbe's body itself, the touch or even the sight of it, has a transforming impact. In *Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:9, two young sinners go to see R' Isaac in order to make fun of him:

And as they entered, on the eve of the holy Sabbath, the room where the holy rebbe was sleeping during the daytime in honour of the [approaching] Sabbath,²⁰ with his face to the wall – the two men testified [later] that in the instant that they saw just the hair of the head of the holy man, from behind, their hearts were turned over, to return in repentance. They stayed with him after the Sabbath and did not go home again; they repented to the degree that they became tzaddikim well-known in the world.

A glimpse of the rebbe's physical presence, in his sleep, is enough to transform souls. A rebbe's physical touch can transform bodies. We are told concerning a disciple of R' Isaac's, R' Jacob Fish, that "the Baal Shem Tov blessed him with both hands – and he lived to a great old age, a hundred and thirteen years, and he was still like a twenty-year-old" (*Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:8). The blessing conveyed by the hands of the Baal Shem Tov transforms R' Jacob's body.

Several stories of R' Shalom of Belz (*Dover Shalom* no. 28, no. 30, no. 73, no. 249) depict him as healing physical ailments with only the touch of his hands. His hands are able to heal because they are holy and pure. In *Dover Shalom* no. 21, the rebbe "began to handle [the patient's] body with his holy hands, asking him, 'are you hurting here?' At every spot that his pure hands touched, the man said that it no longer hurt. [The rebbe] handled his entire body with his hands, and that man left the holy rebbe's house healthy and strong."

In another story, R' Shalom of Kamenka, a hasid of R' Shalom of Belz, discusses his rebbe's power with R' Israel of Ruzhyn (*Dover Shalom* no. 29):

The holy rebbe, the Ruzhyner, said to him, “I have heard that your rebbe, the holy Rebbe of Belz, works miracles. Would your excellency tell me in what is his power, in amulets or charms and medicine or the like?”

R’ Shalom of Kamenka answered him, “My holy rebbe has purified his limbs to such a degree that when his hand touches a sick person, [the patient] is healed immediately. And this is alluded to in that which King David, peace be upon him, wrote: the initial letters of [the Hebrew words] *yishlah devaro vayirpaem* [‘He sent His word and healed them,’ Psalm 107:20], make *yado*, ‘his hand.’”

The holy Rebbe of Ruzhyn answered: “Ah, but the final letters [of the same words can be rearranged to spell] *moah*, ‘brain’ – hinting that a person can work [miracles] with the brain alone, without needing to touch with the hands.”

The concept of the rebbe “purifying” his body is an important one. Through this spiritual process, a body can become a spiritual entity. Thus R’ Menahem Mendl of Rymanów could see and hear happenings in supernatural, heavenly realms, “through having purified his ‘matter’ to make it spiritual ‘form,’ to the point that there was no curtain or division whatsoever blocking his pure eyes.”²¹

The Ruzhyner Rebbe’s comment, however, underlines the fact that R’ Shalom is indeed working with the physical, with the body, to a degree that could be controversial in the hasidic context.

Another dimension of controversy around a rebbe’s involvement with the material pole of existence – in this case, socializing with “sinners” – is seen in a comment (from R’ Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson) at the end of *Eser Tzaht-zahot* 2:3: “Now, if it should occur to a person to do as Rebbe Moses Leyb [of Sasov] of blessed memory did, mixing with sinners in order to rescue them from sin, he would be putting himself in danger ... Only a man who ... has been guarded from even trivial sins since his youth, holy from the womb [may do this].”²²

A rebbe may involve himself in the bodily realm in ways that others may not. What can be said about the rebbe’s own body?

The Holy Body

It is standard in hasidic tales that a rebbe and his words are referred to as “holy” (*qadosh*). In the same formulaic way, the limbs of a rebbe’s body are often referred to as holy. The stories are filled with such expressions as “the words of his holy mouth,” “his holy hands,” “his holy beard” and “his holy

feet." Yet the stories above illustrate that this is not merely formulaic: holy limbs, such as R' Shalom's hands, have powers that ordinary ones do not.

While some such expressions are occasionally used of ordinary rabbis as well as rebbes, they would never be used of an ordinary hasid. This is so obvious to the readers of these texts as not to need stating—but what is obvious from the inside may prove most significant when looking for understanding from the outside. These recurrent expressions point to the underlying assumption that the rebbe's body is holy. Their absence regarding ordinary people points to the equally strong assumption that an ordinary person's body is not.

What, then, is a holy body like? This question is not an inappropriate one to address to hasidic tales. The tales are typically centred on the person of the rebbe, the holy man. In their fascination with the rebbe, the tales follow him everywhere, into private moments as well. The fascination with the person of the rebbe sometimes culminates in glimpses of his naked body.

For example, in *Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:8, it is told that one year as Yom Kippur was about to begin R' Isaac suddenly had a wealthy disciple, R' Jacob Fish, take him in a wagon to R' Jacob's fields:

And there was a little water there, and the holy Rebbe of Kaluv stripped off his clothes with great speed, in one moment, and immersed himself many times. As R' Jacob stood, not knowing what to do, the rebbe was already putting on his clothes. It was a great wonder to R' Jacob Fish since he knew that there had never been any water there, in that place in his fields. After Yom Kippur he went and rode out to the fields, and there was no water there any more, and he asked the holy rebbe. And he answered [in Yiddish], "R' Jacob wasn't smart enough to immerse himself. Miriam's Well was passing through at that time, so I immersed myself."

R' Isaac strips naked in order to use the legendary Well of Miriam as a mikveh, a bath for ritual purification, which must be entered with nothing interfering between the water and the body. There are many stories that mention a rebbe going to the mikveh, but most do not directly mention the rebbe's stripping off his clothes as this one does, drawing attention to his nakedness.

R' Isaac Ayzik's stripping away of his clothes recalls the metaphor of stripping away the physical. The same verb root is used for both. The equation of clothing with the body itself is supported by words ascribed to the Maggid of Kozienice in *Eser Orot* 5:39, sung, significantly, in a "material," gentile language: "It was the way of the Maggid to sing in the language of the gentiles. On Purim after the celebrating, he said that it should be with nullification

of the powers of the body [and sang, in Polish] ‘A naked one goes without a shirt’ [and explained] ‘the shirt is the body.’”²³

If the “shirt” is the body, then the “body” is the soul. The image of R’ Isaac Ayzik stripping off his clothing suggests that for him, as a rebbe, this metaphor is realized. His body is soul-stuff. This is stated directly about the Maggid of Kozenice in *Eser Orot* 5:11: “His body had the radiance of a thousand Jewish souls.”

What is the purpose of R’ Isaac’s immersions in Miriam’s Well? While traditional halakhah requires married women to go to the mikveh for purification after the menstrual cycle, the optional practice of men going to the mikveh is much more prominent in hasidic tales.²⁴ In talmudic tradition the primary function of men’s mikveh immersion is cleansing from the ritual impurity caused by emission of semen.²⁵ This reason for male mikveh use is indeed found in some hasidic teachings.²⁶ But hasidic tales that mention men’s mikveh rarely connect it with ritual impurity from semen or any other source. (This is not because of any reticence about the topic of ejaculation – see the story “The Spot of Sugar,” at the beginning of this book, which revolves around a putative nocturnal emission.) In light of stories in which the rebbe’s holy body itself drives impurity away, such use of the mikveh would in any case be superfluous. Some other purpose is at work when, for example (as mentioned in part 3), R’ Hayim of Tsanz goes repeatedly to the mikveh in the course of a single night spent dictating responsa (*Meqor Hayim* no. 13). R’ Hayim’s purpose is “to utter words of Torah in purity,” but this concept of purity is not one of removing impurity. “Purity” in the tales does not have to do with avoiding or getting rid of something “lower,” but with striving for something “higher.” It is an aspect of the spiritual transformation of the material.

Thus, “the holy rebbe Uri [of Strelisk] said about himself that if his father had gone to the mikveh once before he conceived him, it would have been easy for him to serve God; but not so now, for the divine service was very hard for him” (*Eser Tzahtzahot* 5:3). If the father’s body had had the benefits of the mikveh, the body that he conceived would have been more spiritualized.

A teaching of R’ Shalom of Belz, in *Dover Shalom* no. 52, suggests that the mikveh endows the body with a new soul (kabbalistic thought allows for the coexistence of more than one soul in the same body):

I heard in the name of R’ Shalom, of blessed memory, of Belz that in the matter of preparing a kosher mikveh one should be punctilious about all stringencies and meet the requirements of all halakhic opinions. For the soul [*haneshamah*] will not want to leave a holy and pure place in order to enter a coarsely physical [*megusham*] place. So it [the soul] will want

to find any kind of libel, and say "the mikveh was unacceptable, according to such and such a halakhic opinion." Therefore one should be punctilious and make the mikveh kosher according to all opinions.

This soul initially dwells in heaven, "a holy and pure place," and immersion in the mikveh draws it down into the hasid's body – "a coarsely physical place." This descent is hard on the soul, and if it can find a flaw in the mikveh, it can be excused from the descent; in that case, presumably, the immersion does not work and the new soul is not achieved. But if the mikveh is halakhically proper in every possible way, immersion leads to transformation, imbuing the physical with a new degree of spirituality. How much more so when the mikveh is a miraculous one, such as R' Isaac finds in his disciple's field.

To return to R' Isaac Ayzik's body, Berger's first story about him (*Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:3, cited from Michelson's *Shemen HaTov* 2:23) is already exploring the rebbe's body, drawing attention to his skimpy clothing and even looking under his skin: "He bore suffering [*hayu lo yisurim*], lice [*kinim*] under the skin. He was dressed in a shirt and *tallit qatan* [a garment with ritual fringes], and the head coverings he wore were made of paper. Everyone who heard him praying was removed from corporeality."

In this tale, as often, the holy body is a suffering body. It is as if there were a basic incompatibility between the rebbe and the material world; his own material existence causes him pain. This incompatibility is painfully illustrated in *Ateret Menahem* no. 163. Of fourteen children born to R' Tzvi Hersh of Rymanów, all but one daughter die young. Their heartbroken mother speaks to Rebbe Menahem Mendl of Rymanów. He rebukes R' Tzvi Hersh: "How long are you going to keep drawing down souls so holy that they cannot exist in this world!"

The word for R' Isaac Ayzik's suffering or pain, *yisurim*, would recall to a reader with even slight Jewish learning the aggadic passages in Talmud Berakhot (5a–b) about *yisurin shel ahavah*, "suffering of love," that is, suffering brought about by God out of love or accepted by the sufferer in a spirit of love for God. This echo in itself takes the suffering out of the mundane realm.

In the present context, the justification, perhaps, for such suffering is that it allows the rebbe to enable others to depart from their bodies. The word used here and in several of the Rebbe Isaac stories for "corporeality," *gufaniyut*, less common than its synonym *gashmiyut*, emphasizes the focus on the body, *guf*.

The suffering and frailty of rebbes is often described in the most extreme terms. In other stories, a rebbe's body is capable of supernatural physical

feats. In fact the two are not contradictory. Both are ways in which the holy body goes beyond normal human limitations. In *Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:5, “once a doctor asked [R’ Isaac Ayzik] how he was able to bear his harsh suffering [*yisurim haqashim*], and how it was within the bounds of human possibility [*begeder ha-enoshi*] to bear such suffering.” Sometimes the body’s more-than-human suffering and more-than-human power appear in the same character in the same stories. This is a major theme of the stories about the Maggid of Kozienice in *Eser Orot*:

[The Maggid of Kozienice] lay on his bed, because he was ill and extremely lean of flesh. In spite of that, at the time of prayer, he would burn like a fiery flame in great enthusiasm the like of which has never been seen. He was so lean that the doctors were amazed – how was it in his power to live? His legs were like the legs of a deer. He would be carried in a chair. But when they brought him to the door of the House of Study, he said in a loud voice, “How awe-inspiring is this place!” and he stood up on his feet and it was as though he flew through the air to the lectern. (*Eser Orot* 5:10)

The body of the Maggid of Kozienice was almost like a dried-up stick, because he was born in his father and mother’s old age, as is known (through the promise of the Baal Shem Tov), and he always wrapped his body in rabbit skin and pillows and blankets so that it would look like some kind of human body and form. He always lay on his bed, like a weak and sick man. But in the mornings, when the holy rebbe came to pray, he walked with emotion, and with joy, with a Torah scroll on his arm. He would dance one dance to the Holy Ark, and there he would place the Torah scroll, and he would dance another dance to his place at the lectern, where the lamp-stand was, and set the candles in it; and there he would sit and stand and pray. Also, during the standing prayer, he would go back and forth on his pure table, which was by his lectern; and after the standing prayer, he would dance down from the table onto the ground. But there he had a fur mat spread out, and he would lie down on it to finish his prayers, and after that they would carry him to his house. This was his holy way all day long: at the time of prayer, he would gird himself like a warrior, but after that he would go back to his place like an ill person on his sickbed.

Once he was invited to a circumcision feast. When he had to step into the carriage, people wanted to help him, but he said to those standing there [mostly in Yiddish], “Simpletons! Fools! Why would I need your

strength? I have, thank God, better strength than that. It is written, "Those who hope in God exchange their strength" (Isaiah 40:31). We exchange our strength with God's. God has enough strength!" And he danced onto the carriage by himself, like a man of might. (*Eser Orot* 5:12)

The rebbe's holy body is imbued with power when it comes to holy things – prayer and ritual – but weak beyond normal limits with respect to everyday, this-worldly life. This dichotomy underlines how far the Hasidism of these tales is from Buber's encounter with God in the everyday.

It is in the context of the rebbe's everyday weakness that one story about R' Isaac Ayzik centres on the unusual situation of a disciple looking at his rebbe's naked body.

It is known that the holy rebbe had so much suffering in his body that in his old age he could not bear even the weight of clothing on himself, and sometimes he would strip all his clothes from his body and he would be lying naked. Once his disciple, the holy rabbi and scholar R' Saul, came to him and found him naked. The rebbe asked him [in Yiddish], "What do I look like?" And Rabbi Saul answered him, "Like primordial Adam before the sin." He said to him, "True, so it is." (*Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:4)

"Like primordial Adam [*adam harishon*] before the sin" is a comparison pregnant with meaning. In rabbinic and kabbalistic texts, the body of Adam before the sin was without the limitations of materiality – giant, luminous, divine in appearance. "Primordial Adam stood from the earth to the sky; primordial Adam filled the world from one end to the other" (Talmud Hagigah 12a). "His heel outshone the orb of the sun" (Midrash Tanhuma, *Ahare Mot* 2). "When God created primordial Adam, the ministering angels were confused and wanted to say 'Holy!' before him [in worship]" (Genesis Rabbah 1:8). Like R' Isaac who is able to see the patriarchs and matriarchs through their guise as gentile nobles, the disciple R' Saul can see through his teacher's exaggeratedly frail body to that body's actual physical reality, which is beyond all limitations.

Similar to this are the visions granted to various hasidim of the true nature of the body of Rebbe Uri of Strelisk, called the Seraph, in the next chapter of *Eser Tzahtzahot*. In *Eser Tzahtzahot* 5:16, a hasid sees two faces on R' Uri, in front and behind. This is confirmed by the great visionary rebbe, the Seer of Lublin. But R' Uri himself declares that he has four faces like the Seraphim.

In *Eser Tzahtzahot* 5:5, R' Uri "commanded one of his hasidim to tell what he had once seen. And that hasid told that once the holy rebbe had called

him to go with him outside the city; and he saw how his holy rebbe began to grow bigger, step by step, until he saw him actually touching the sky. Great fear fell upon him, and he took hold of the holy rebbe's hem, and he began to get smaller, as he was before."

Eser Tzahtzahot 5:12 recounts: "Once before Kol Nidre, the rebbe R' Uri was standing at the lectern to pray. His disciple R' Judah Tzvi said to [a hasid who had just done him a favour], 'Let me show you something.' He placed a cloth over the hasid's eyes, and he saw that in the place of Rebbe Uri, where he was standing, there was a pillar of fire into the heart of the heavens, and the whole house of prayer was filled with souls from the world above."

On a smaller scale, various rebbes are described as taking on a fiery appearance at times of spiritual exaltation. Thus, as R' Shalom of Belz told a story with enthusiasm (*Dover Shalom* 16 no. 28), "he was filled with love for God, and his face was burning like a fiery torch." Rebbe Elimelekh of Lizensk in cleaving to God is described in the same way.²⁷

These visions of transformed physicality illuminate and are illuminated by one of the strangest images of the human body in Rebbe Nakhmen's *Sipure Maasiyot*, in the fifth story, titled "The Prince Who Was Made of Precious Stones." In this wonder tale, a holy man promises a king and queen that they will have a son made of gems. There is disappointment when he is born apparently a person of flesh and blood. But at the end of the story, following a bout of leprosy, his skin peels off, and "then it was revealed and visible that the prince was entirely of gems, as that holy man had said."²⁸

People to whom I have told this story tend to have an unpleasant feeling about the image of a person made of gems; it seems cold and inhuman. But it is quite clear in the story that this state is beautiful and desirable. The story emphasizes the powers believed to inhere in precious stones: "and he had all the special powers [*segulot*] of all precious stones" (47). It is also surely significant that precious stones are beautiful, luminous, hard and strong, and, halakhically, not subject to ritual impurity. In every way, the image of the prince of gems is one of a body transformed altogether, removed completely from the weakness and limitations of flesh and blood. As such, in the context of hasidic tales, it is indeed an image of a desired state, inhuman as it may be.

One more story of Rebbe Isaac Ayzik, the last in Berger's chapter about him (*Eser Tzahtzahot* 4:21), should be noted in this context:

It is known to all that one of [R' Isaac's] sons went wrong. All the rebukes with which those who had been close to his holy father rebuked him did not help (this was after his father's death). Once his father even came to

him in a dream, on the holy Sabbath, and warned him to turn back from his evil ways, for his end would be bitter; but this too did not help. But once a tzaddik from among [R' Isaac's] disciples, the great scholar Rabbi Saul (mentioned in no. 4 above) went to the holy grave of his rebbe and cried out bitterly that he should act, with a strong hand, so that his son would repent.

And his prayer bore fruit, for the end of it was that that wayward son, being wealthy, got up one morning from his bed and went for a walk in the splendid orchard by his courtyard; and there in the orchard his holy father came before him, living and in a rage, and pulled up a tree by its roots and beat him about his legs and his body, until he was broken to pieces, heaven help us. And [his father] said to him that now he would have to leave behind his evil deeds and turn in complete repentance.

He lay on his sickbed for several years, and all his property was lost, and he became a complete penitent, and the tzaddikim of the generation honoured him greatly. I remember that in my childhood I saw him once in the home of my honoured father, the rabbi, of blessed memory.

Rebbe Isaac Ayzik's body is so much beyond normal limits – and he is so much involved with materiality – that he can manifest himself in solidly corporeal form after his death. While his attack on his son is brutally physical, it also highlights the basic incompatibility of spirituality and physicality under normal circumstances: for the wayward son's soul to be restored, his body must be "broken to pieces."

Conclusion

Despite the anti-ascetic tendencies of Hasidism, and its imperative for involvement with the material world, an accepting view of physical being is hard to find in the tales. On the contrary, the more intense a rebbe's involvement with the physical, the more intense, even, the focus on his own body, the further we enter into a realm of magical transcendence that scorns the limited, everyday existence of flesh and blood.

With the last story discussed above we entered the realm of the destructive power of the rebbe. This is a theme of the final part of this study.

PART FIVE



The Wounded Body

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Scorched by His Glowing Coal

A Story of Hurt and Anger

The following unsettling story is found in Berger's *Eser Atarot* in the chapter on Rebbe Solomon Leyb of Lentshna (3:21) and, more or less verbatim, in *Ohel Naftali*, Michelson's collection devoted to Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczyce, no. 113. My translation follows the text in *Eser Atarot*:

My dear friend, the great rabbi, the wonderful researcher,¹ the great scholar, Rabbi Abraham Segal Itinga, long may he live (grandson of our master the preacher Rabbi Solomon Kluger of Brody, the holy man of blessed memory) wrote to me as follows:

The holy Rebbe Solomon Leyb of Lentshna lived for some years in the city of Bukavsk, near the community of Sanik. It is well known that the holy Rebbe of Ropczyce opposed him very much; and, naturally, [the Rebbe of Ropczyce's] hasidim, who gathered in his presence, opposed [R' Solomon Leyb] and caused him distress.

The holy Rebbe of Ropczyce had a hasid whose name was Rabbi Moses Linsker (since in his youth he lived in the city of Linsk; but when the city burned up, he "pitched his tent" in the city of Sanik). "Now the man Moses" [Numbers 12:3] was a great hasid and pious man, and he was very important to the holy Rebbe of Ropczyce, who wanted to ordain him as a rebbe; but he was not willing, and he travelled through the country for money.

Once [Rabbi Moses] came to the city of Bukavsk, while the holy rebbe R' Solomon Leyb was living there. That day there was to be a circumcision, and the holy rebbe R' Solomon Leyb was to be honoured as sandek [holding the baby on his lap during the circumcision].

Rabbi Moses Linsker used to pray every day at dawn, alone, in the synagogue. When there was a circumcision, he would wait after prayer in the synagogue, and stay there until after the circumcision. This was his practice all his days.

This time, too, when he heard that there would be a circumcision, [Rabbi Moses] waited in the synagogue in order to be there at the time of the circumcision. Several hours went by. The child had already been brought to the synagogue, but the holy rebbe R' Solomon Leyb had not arrived.

Rabbi Moses grew angry, and he took a sharp knife from his bag and circumcised the child's foreskin. The people who were there did not protest, knowing that he too was indeed a holy man; and they feared lest they be scorched by his glowing coal [talmudic expression: they were afraid he would do them harm by his supernatural power].

After this incident, Rabbi Moses fled from there; he lifted up his feet and went to the city of Ropczyce, to his master, the holy rebbe. As he arrived in the city, his rebbe came out to meet him, and said, "I am very distressed for you, my dear. (He ran ahead and took the slap in the face for me!) But pray listen to my advice: Come, go into the room next to my room. Stay there, closed in and enclosed, for eight days. I will give you a servant to be with you. Do not stay alone even a moment. If you do as I say, you will be saved, 'like a stag from the [hunter's] hand' [Proverbs 6:5]."

Rabbi Moses did so. And on the eighth day Rabbi Moses reckoned that the eight days were already over; for he did not know that his rebbe's intention was eight full, twenty-four-hour days. He went out of the room alone. He went into the outhouse, and there was no one with him.

While he was sitting in the outhouse, with the door open, then it was that a wild ox [*buflik* in Yiddish] escaped from the stables of cattle near there, and ran in raging anger at the hasid Rabbi Moses and trampled him with its feet and broke all his bones; not one was left whole.

There was a great tumult, and with great difficulty they chased away the wild ox from him. The holy Rebbe of Ropczyce sent for the doctors from the city of Risha, and after great effort they managed to arrange his bones, to put them back in place. But for all that, he limped on his feet until the day of his death. Besides, he had fallen from his high level; he had taken away from him all his capacities.² The holy Rebbe of Ropczyce

said that if he had not taken away his capacities, he would have been able to stand up against him.

This story is true, and it was told to me by one of the grandchildren of Rabbi Moses. Thus far the words of Rabbi Abraham [Itinga].

The two sentences toward the end, beginning “Besides,” use the pronoun “he” too often for clarity. The most likely meaning is “Besides, R’ Moses had fallen from his high level; R’ Solomon Leyb had taken away from R’ Moses all his capacities. The holy Rebbe of Ropczyce said that if R’ Solomon Leyb had not taken away R’ Moses’ capacities, he himself, R’ Naphtali, would have been able to stand up against R’ Solomon Leyb.” The ambiguity left by the original wording as to who attacked whom and who is responsible is, however, appropriate; more on this below.

The reference to ordination as a rebbe is unusual. A rebbe is more often acclaimed as such by hasidim. In *Ateret Menahem* no. 138, however, we find the two sons of Rebbe Menahem Mendl of Rymanów, after his death, travelling to R’ Naphtali of Ropczyce to ask him “to choose one of them as the leader of the generation, succeeding their father, and ordain him.” When R’ Naphtali chooses the family’s servant, R’ Tzvi Hersh of Rymanów, they accept his choice.

This story of Rabbi Moses is a particularly violent example of a type of hasidic tale in which two holy men, around whom the world of the tales revolves, are pitted against each other. The images of R’ Moses’ circumcising a baby in anger, and of his own trampling by the wild ox, which leaves him physically and mentally broken, are particularly graphic. The fact that R’ Moses is caught in what the narrator presents as a supernatural combat between his rebbe, R’ Naphtali, and R’ Solomon Leyb, is also disturbing.

This chapter places the story of R’ Moses in the context of other stories about controversy, anger, dangerous power, and supernatural combat between rebbes. I cite several examples from collections earlier than those of Berger and Michelson, to illustrate the prevalence of these themes.

Controversy, Hurt Feelings, Dangerous Power

“The Holy Rebbe of Ropczyce Opposed Him Very Much”

The aggressive opposition of R’ Naphtali Tzvi of Ropczyce to R’ Solomon Leyb of Lentshna is likely to have been a historical reality. It is the topic of several stories in both Berger’s and Michelson’s collections, some drawn from earlier published sources.

Ohel Naftali no. 131, citing the book *Em LaBinah*, recounts, “During the

quarrel between the holy Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczyce and R' Solomon Leyb of Lentshna, R' Naphtali asked Rebbe Tzvi Elimelech of Dynów to persecute R' Solomon Leyb." "Persecution" of one rebbe by another might include negative propaganda, attempts to turn adherents against the rebbe, appeals to Jewish and gentile authorities to exercise their power against the rebbe and his followers, acts of violence, and, at least in the imaginary world of the stories, supernatural intervention.³

In response to R' Naphtali's request to persecute R' Solomon Leyb, R' Tzvi Elimelech refuses. He reminds R' Naphtali, "I remember when we were sitting at the table of our rebbe R' Menahem Mendl of Rymanów – sitting in awe and fear to the point that we were too terrified to raise our eyes. But R' Solomon Leyb of Lentshna took off his shoes and danced on the table in his socks, and our rebbe R' Menahem Mendl sat at the table watching, without saying a word." R' Solomon Leyb's boldness in the presence of R' Menahem Mendl stands out in contrast with *Ohel Naftali* no. 69; in that story, R' Naphtali reminisces about a time when R' Menahem Mendl intimidated a whole crowd of the Seer of Lublin's hasidim so that their "shouting and dancing on the table, following their custom" turned to silence.

In another story, *Eser Atarot* 3:20/*Ohel Naftali* no. 111, R' Solomon Leyb, facing the opposition of R' Naphtali, concludes that his own spiritual path must be wrong and asks another rebbe for help. That rebbe reassures him and explains that the Ropczyce Rebbe's opposition has the good purpose of giving him just enough trouble that the angels will not harm him out of envy. (This idea that a rebbe's anger can save a person from worse trouble is found in other tales.⁴) *Eser Atarot* 3:24 concerns R' Solomon Leyb's gentle response to harsh words from "his persecutor" – probably R' Naphtali.

Other stories present the controversy as a wide one involving various rebbes, but with R' Naphtali as instigator. *Ohel Naftali* no. 112, citing the earlier work *Ramatayim Tzofim*, refers to it as "the well-known controversy of the Rebbe of Ropczyce, of blessed memory."

The Ropczyce-Lentshna conflict is depicted as continuing in the next generation. Rebbe Shalom of Kamenka, disciple of the Ropczyce, attempts to dissuade another rebbe from honouring R' Joshua, son of R' Solomon Leyb (*Eser Atarot* 3:22). In *Dover Shalom* no. 65, R' Shalom of Kamenka distresses this R' Joshua with harsh words.

Other Controversies between Rebbes

The Ropczyce-Lentshna controversy is hardly unique. Various hasidic tales compiled by collectors other than Berger and Michelson refer, though usually

only briefly, to controversy (*maḥloqet*) between rebbes. For example, *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim* no. 9 (Nigal, *Menahem Mendl Bodeq*, 89) begins: “During the controversy – which was for the sake of heaven – between the holy rabbi and tzaddik, our master Rebbe Israel of Ruzhyn, and the rabbi and tzaddik, the Rebbe of Savran . . .”

In *Shivḥe Tzadiqim* 115 no. 58, a mitnaged challenges a rebbe: “Why is it that when several mitnaged Torah scholars gather, and sit together, they love each other with powerful love and there is great closeness of hearts between them; but when several tzaddikim, called *gute yidn* [‘good Jews,’ a common expression for ‘rebbes’] gather, there is always strife between them and they hate each other?”

The rebbe answers with a parable whose point is that the mitnaged should mind his own business; but the premise of the question is not denied. As noted earlier, I have doubts about the hasidic provenance of this book; but the assertion of the mitnaged finds support in stories in other collections. In hasidic history, examples of controversies from the early generations into our own time could be multiplied.⁵

Reasons for Controversy

The stories about the Ropczyce-Lentshna controversy do not mention any reason for it, but other stories in Berger’s and Michelson’s collections provide clues. *Eser Atarot* 3:1 states that R’ Solomon Leyb was a leading disciple of the “holy Jew” of Pshiskhe. As mentioned earlier, one of the major controversies in hasidic history was between the Seer of Lublin and those loyal to him, including R’ Naphtali, and the Seer’s former disciple the “holy Jew” and his circle.⁶ Stories in *Ohel Naftali* mention that R’ Naphtali was among those who persecuted the holy Jew, and that he was opposed to the holy Jew’s successor, Rebbe Simhah Bunem of Pshiskhe (no. 134; end of no. 80). R’ Naphtali’s controversy with R’ Solomon Leyb thus appears as part of his general opposition to the Pshiskhe school.

One story in our sources suggests a nuanced ideological reason for this conflict (*Ohel Naftali* no. 81): “A young man travelled from the region of Pshiskhe and came to Ropczyce and received a blessing [from R’ Naphtali, who] said to him: ‘I am not an opponent of the rebbe there [personally] for he is a holy man. But his way is dangerous for the disciples who follow him. We have to serve [God] for several years to attain a high level and intensity. But there, they reach it in a short time – and the other side [demonic forces] may mix themselves in, through the *qelipat nogah* [radiant shell], heaven forbid.’”

The kabbalistic concept of *qelipat nogah* refers to an aspect of the spiritual world in which good and evil are mingled. We could paraphrase R' Naphtali as expressing concern that rushing into intense spiritual experiences is likely to involve unconscious motives and can lead to psychological problems.

Hasidic stories in various collections highlight ideological differences between holy men.⁷ For example, *Eser Tzahtzahot* 6:17/*Ohel Naftali* no. 52 depicts a controversy with messianic motivation between the Rebbe of Rymanów, on one side, and the rebbes of Lublin and Koźienice, on the other, as to whether they should use their supernatural powers for or against Napoleon. Messianism is also at issue between R' Solomon Leyb of Lentshna and the Kotsker Rebbe, in *Eser Atarot* 3:17: "Once a hasid of Lentshna came to the holy man and great scholar, Rebbe Menahem Mendl of Kotsk. [R' Menahem Mendl] asked after the welfare of the hasid's rebbe, and said, 'I like him very much. But why does he cry out to God about the Messiah? Why does he not cry out about the Jewish people, so that they will repent?'" Whether to press for the coming of the Messiah without delay or to attempt to bring the redemption through a process of repentance is a controversy with ancient antecedents.⁸

Controversy, however, need not have ideological motives; it can be caused by hurt feelings as well. *Ohel Naftali* no. 46 raises the possibility (though ultimately rejecting it) that R' Naphtali's fraught relationship with his disciple R' Tzvi Elimelech of Dynów had to do with R' Tzvi Elimelech's becoming a rebbe in R' Naphtali's lifetime.⁹ *Ohel Naftali* depicts intense, though short-lived, resentment between rebbes as a result of remarks which, though apparently intended otherwise, sound crudely insulting; R' Mendl of Rymanów becomes angry at his disciple R' Naphtali (no. 70), and R' Naphtali at his rebbe the Seer of Lublin (no. 71).

In the story of Rabbi Moses, while the ongoing Ropczyce-Lentshna controversy may have ideological roots, the immediate issue is presumably R' Solomon Leyb's hurt feelings upon finding the honour of being *sandek* at the circumcision taken away from him.

Dangerous Power

The theme of controversy between rebbes, which has historical foundation, mingles in the story of Rabbi Moses with the historically unverifiable theme of the dangerous power of the rebbe. Supernatural power to do harm is part of the hasidic concept of a holy person, part of his power over the material world.¹⁰ Everyone in the story of R' Moses has this belief: the guests at the circumcision are afraid of R' Moses; R' Moses flees to his rebbe for protection

from R' Solomon Leyb; the Ropczyer Rebbe is certain that R' Solomon Leyb's dangerous power is indeed at work. To all appearances, this belief is shared by all the transmitters of the story – by R' Abraham Segal Itinga, by the descendant of R' Moses who told him the story, and likely also by Berger and Michelson in their role as collectors. Belief is of the essence, since there is nothing in the actual prosaic events of the story to implicate R' Solomon Leyb in the fate of R' Moses.

The power of the rebbes to do serious harm already figures with the Baal Shem Tov in *Shivhe HaBesht*. For example, the Baal Shem Tov transfers paralysis from the hands of a sick woman to those of a gentile who is attacking him.¹¹ This story has echoes in several tales in Michelson's *Dover Shalom*. In story no. 75, a mitnaged milkman demands an inflated price from Rebbetzin Malkah; when she tells her husband, the milkman is paralyzed and has to be brought to R' Shalom for healing. In no. 72, R' Shalom transfers insanity, caused by a dybbuk, from one person to another. In no. 74, a Jewish man is faced with a choice of marrying an ugly Jewish woman or a beautiful non-Jewish woman; R' Shalom causes their physical appearances to be reversed so that the Jewish man will marry the Jewish woman.

One of the most terrifying images of a rebbe's destructive power is in *Eser Tzahtzahot* 6:17/*Ohel Naftali* no. 52, a story of messianic controversy:

At the time of the war of Napoleon I, the rebbe R' Mendele [of Rymanów] wanted to make him into Gog and Magog [the cataclysmic battle before the final redemption, "Armageddon"] and worked, by his prayers, for him to be victorious in battle, so that the redemption would come. He said that in his opinion it was good for Jewish blood to be spilled, until from Pristik to Rymanów people would be walking in Jewish blood up to their knees, in order to bring our final redemption ... On the day before Passover there was a great and intense battle. At that time the rebbe R' Mendele was standing and putting matzahs in the oven, and each time [he put in more matzahs] he would say, "Let another five hundred Russians fall"; and so it was in that battle.

Oral tellers of hasidic tales were apparently more unrestrained on this theme than were the authors of written collections. In the 1908 collection *Sipurim Nifla'im UMaamarim Yeqarim* (no. 2), we find regarding the sons of the Maggid of Chernobyl, "Many times, someone who transgressed their will ... would immediately be punished in the sight of all. This is well-known and famous, and there are many clearly true stories about this, famous in the world; but it is not appropriate to put everything into writing."¹²

Stories of this nature were still being told to Jerome Mintz in New York at the beginning of the 1960s: “Mrs Rothman argued with [a particular] rebbe because she felt that he had not acted properly when he purchased his shul. Now some say: ‘Look what he did to that woman’s son [who died of cancer].’”¹³

The main point of some stories of holy men is that the protagonist is dangerous. In *Shivḥe HaBesht* there are stories about Rabbi Isaac Drabizner, father of Rebbe Yehiel Mikhl of Zloczow,¹⁴ focused entirely on his power to cause the death of those who oppose his authority as a rabbi, or to cause the deaths of their children.¹⁵

R’ Isaac’s deadly power is wielded in support of his halakhic authority. In other stories, however, personal pique arouses the powerful anger of a holy man.¹⁶ This seems to be the case in “The Reluctant Rabbi,” included in the selection at the beginning of this book, and some other stories in Michelson’s *Ohel Avraham* (no. 40 and no. 57).

Rebbe against Rebbe

Within this context of stories of controversy and dangerous anger, it is still unsettling to find stories in which the dangerous power of a rebbe is directed against a fellow rebbe or holy man. Mintz cites a story told by a Lubavitcher hasid: “The Satmarer [Rebbe] had a daughter and she died. At that time he had an argument with the Munkaczer hasidim and the Munkaczer [Rebbe] said to the Satmarer: ‘Your children won’t live.’ It was a curse.”¹⁷

In *Eser Qedushot* 2:34, Rebbe Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv narrowly escapes supernatural harm from Rebbe Isaac Ayzik of Kaluv and another rebbe at their children’s wedding:

When the holy brothers, the fathers of the bride and groom, were together, with hasidim standing in attendance before them, the famous hasid R’ Ber of Siskin came in and proclaimed in a loud voice, “Everyone – the rebbe is on his way!” So everyone went out to greet Rebbe Tzvi [Hersh of Zhydachiv], abandoning the holy fathers of the bride and groom.

When they saw that they had been left alone, they were upset and asked, “Who is this famous rebbe who is coming?” And they found out that it was R’ Tzvi Hersh.

As R’ Tzvi Hersh entered the city, he sensed that these holy men wanted to do him harm. He ran immediately to the inn where they were staying – and all the doors were locked. R’ Tzvi knocked on the door until they opened it and let him in (but there is another version that says he climbed in through a window).

He began to plead with them that they should not judge him in his absence, and told them that he was already forty-one years old [and not a young upstart].

Then they welcomed him cheerfully – and asked him how he had dared to come to this country so proudly.

He answered, “Why don’t you ask me if I know the guardian angel of this country?” So they asked him. He answered, “Yes, I know him. And here is a sign of it: there is a cleft in his forehead.” Then they forgave him for coming to the land of Hungary so grandly.

In this story, all ends well, as the rebbes agree to another wedding, marrying R’ Tzvi Hersh’s daughter to R’ Isaac Ayzik’s son.

A rich example of such a story pitting one rebbe against another is in the 1860s compilation *Maaseh Tzadiqim*, no. 7 (Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 33–7), a long story about the Seer of Lublin and R’ Baruch of Medzhibozh. This story is attributed to R’ Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv, concerning his youth as a disciple of the Seer of Lublin.

The story begins with R’ Tzvi being deeply impressed with R’ Baruch of Medzhibozh, and bringing his own rebbe, the Seer, to visit him. The two rebbes are initially pleased with each other. At the Sabbath table, however, the Seer is displeased by R’ Baruch’s light conversation with his family, and deeply offended when R’ Baruch’s daughter is given a seat of honour at the table.

In response, exercising his transformative power over the corporeal realm, the Seer causes his host’s daughter to begin menstruating so that she has to leave the table; “and then the hearts of these two holy men were divided.”

The next episode takes place on the following Sunday morning, in an episode closely parallel to the circumcision scene in the story of Rabbi Moses. The Seer of Lublin arrives at the circumcision dressed as he does for the Sabbath, while R’ Baruch, following his own custom, is in ordinary weekday clothing.

R’ Baruch interprets the Seer’s clothing as expressing his status as a rebbe, “and the Rebbe of Medzhibozh took this to heart – that the Rebbe of Lublin was conducting himself as a rebbe in his town, while [staying] with him in one house; and he grew very very angry at this. So the Rebbe of Medzhibozh took a flint knife and he himself cut off the flesh of the foreskin, so as not to give to the Rebbe of Lublin either stage of the circumcision.” (On the two stages of ritual circumcision, cutting the foreskin and completely uncovering the corona, see the next chapter.)

The Lubliner and his disciple R’ Tzvi leave town. On their way home, as they are crossing a sea, “one wave in the sea rose against him to drown them,

and in another moment they would have drowned, had not the holy Rebbe of Lublin called on the merit of his holy and pure rebbe, our master Rebbe Elimelech [of Lizensk], on whose hands he had poured water; this [merit] stood by them so that they remained alive.”

The end of the story returns to R' Tzvi Hersh, who feels an intense desire to return to Medzhibozh and become a disciple of R' Baruch. He asks his rebbe's permission, but the Seer angrily forbids him.

Unwilling to go without his rebbe's permission, R' Tzvi keeps asking, “until [the Seer] said to him in a rage, ‘I can promise you that you will not attain any new [spiritual] levels in Medzhibozh whatsoever. And all the levels and attainments which you had, which you received with me, I will take away from you and you will be like a simple person.’ Then the holy rebbe [R' Tzvi] of Zhydachiv was afraid because of these holy words, and he resolved that he would not travel to Medzhibozh again; and he remained in the holy discipleship [of the Seer] until the day of his death.”

The unfulfilled yearning of this ending contrasts with a parallel motif in *Dover Shalom* no. 7, in which the young R' Shalom of Belz is drawn to study with the Seer of Lublin:

While he was studying with his rebbe, the holy rabbi the author of *Dibrat Shlomoh*, there were suddenly aroused in his heart fiery flames of longing to travel to the holy Rebbe of Lublin (may his merit protect us), to receive Torah from his mouth ... But his rebbe said to him, “If you travel to Lublin, then I will take away from you all the perfection which you have received with me.” But he, because of his great longing, did not pay attention to this ... and travelled away from him. [Later] when [R' Shalom] was coming home from the community of Lublin, he went past the house of his [former] rebbe. His rebbe was standing by the window at that time, and when he saw [R' Shalom], he said to his wife the rebbetzin, “Come and see my disciple R' Shalom, how his face is radiant with light, and how the light of Torah is glowing above his head!”

Taking the liberty of reading stories published fifty years apart as happening in the same imagined world, it is striking that the Seer of Lublin, who was willing to receive a disciple who had left his rebbe for him, was unwilling to let his own disciple leave him for another rebbe. Further, the Seer's threats to R' Tzvi build on and surpass those that failed to stop R' Shalom from coming to him.

The story of the Seer of Lublin and R' Baruch of Medzhibozh in *Maaseh Tzadiqim* ends on a note of prayer in the narrator's voice: “May the merit

of these holy men, and the merit of their intense worship – how they burned like fire for the blessed God all the days of their lives – stand by me and all Israel, for me and my children and my children’s children, that [God’s] worship and Torah never be removed from us. Amen.” This closing passage is typical of such stories: rebbes on both sides of a bitter controversy are treated with nothing but respect, and the narrator avoids taking sides.

Publishing Disturbing Stories

The Narrators’ Feelings about This Story

Despite the existence of many stories with related themes, there are signs that the story of Rabbi Moses and the ox was as uncomfortable to its narrators as it may be to us. Berger’s opening note crediting Rabbi Abraham Itinga as the informant is longer than most of his notes of this nature, piling on honorifics as if to delay beginning the story itself. In the context of Berger’s and Michelson’s work, the story is long, and the complexity of the plot is not what creates the length; it could readily have been told more economically. (For example, the information about R’ Moses Linsker’s name and places of residence could have been dropped or shortened.) It is as if the narrator was reluctant to get through the story.

The concluding assertion that “this story is true” is also unusual. On the face of it, it suggests that this story is particularly hard to believe. That is not the case, however: everything that actually happens in the story is completely plausible. It does not take a miracle for an ox to trample a person. The cause-and-effect explanation that the attack of the ox was caused at long distance by R’ Solomon Leyb does require belief, but this is not exceptionally implausible. In the hasidic context this story is not hard to believe – but it is, perhaps, hard to accept.

Why, then, did both Berger and Michelson choose to publish it? As mentioned above, another collector noted, in reference to stories of dangerous power, that “it is not appropriate to put everything into writing.” Michelson’s *Meqor Hayim* 92, a story about R’ Hayim’s opposition to the hasidim of Kotsk, ends, “I have further information on this subject, but it is not appropriate to be written and printed, as is understood.”

One of the major internal conflicts in hasidic history was between R’ Hayim of Tsanz and the sons of R’ Israel of Ruzhyn; the after-effects of this controversy were still painfully felt when Michelson’s book about R’ Hayim, *Meqor Hayim*, was published.¹⁸ Yet only three tales in *Meqor Hayim* (191, and 196, and 233, which implicitly equates this conflict with the struggle

of the Gaon of Vilna against the early hasidim) touch on this great controversy. The first of these stories manages to do so without mentioning who it was that R' Hayim was opposed to.

Berger is even more reticent than Michelson in including material related to controversy, at least regarding R' Naphtali of Ropczyce. In his stories about R' Solomon Leyb of Lentshna, the three stories involving the controversy around him avoid naming R' Naphtali.¹⁹ Berger's own chapter about R' Naphtali likewise avoids the controversy.

From a literary point of view, it was not necessary to fill out the portrait of R' Naphtali by including such stories. His sarcastic humour and attention to hiding his spiritual attainments and powers already make him an exceptionally interesting character.

A search for stories of controversies and dangerous anger in compilations by other collectors yielded several tales in some books, but none at all in others. A hasidic author might well choose to omit such stories, which could tend to reduce the reader's high regard for the rebbes. The possibility arises that some of the books that do emphasize these themes were not by hasidic or even traditionally religious authors, as suggested earlier about *Shivhe Tzadiqim*. Why then did pious collectors such as Berger and Michelson publish any stories of this type?

Talmudic Concepts of the Power of Anger

One reason is that the motifs of such stories would not be new or shocking to literate Jews. The idea that a holy person may be easily provoked and wield dangerous power is present in the Jewish tradition from early on. The story of Elisha, who caused little boys to be mangled by bears for insulting him, comes to mind (2 Kings 2:23–24). Hasidic stories do not restrict such power to hasidic rebbes; it is attributed to leaders contemporary with the Baal Shem Tov, and to earlier rabbis as well. Thus a long story in *Dover Shalom*, no. 343, begins with the mistreatment of the Baḥ, Rabbi Joel Serkes (1561–1640); he responds with a curse that causes his persecutors to suffer in Gehenna and, centuries later, to be disinterred from their graves (at which point their souls appeal to R' Shalom of Belz).

The story of the Baḥ's curse and others in the same collection include phrases alluding to relevant concepts from the Mishnah and Talmud. *Dover Shalom* no. 343 mentions "the serpent of the rabbis which has no cure." Used metaphorically in the hasidic tale, this is a citation from the Talmud, where it is meant literally: someone who transgresses the words of the sages may be killed by a snake whose poison is incurable.²⁰ *Dover Shalom* no. 65 mentions

“the curse of the rabbis which has no cure,” blending the phrase about the serpent with a reference to “the curse of the rabbis” in Talmud Bava Metzia 48b. *Dover Shalom* no. 75 refers to “the words of the sages: ‘and beware of their coal,’ and so on.” This is a citation from Avot 2:10: “And keep warm at the fire of the sages, but beware of their glowing coal lest thou be scorched; for their bite is the bite of a jackal, and their sting the sting of a scorpion, and their hiss the hiss of a serpent – moreover all their words are like coals of fire.”²¹

The standard commentator on Avot, Rabbi Obadiah of Bartinoro, interprets: “‘Lest thou be scorched’ [means] lest you be punished by them ... ‘The hiss of a serpent’ ... this refers to a kind of snake which will not be charmed like other snakes ... and if you annoy a Torah scholar and come to appease him, he will not be appeased.” This passage is the source of the expression in the story of Rabbi Moses: the guests “feared lest they be scorched by his glowing coal.” Concepts like these presumably would not shake a reader’s faith or reduce his reverence for the sages; nor, therefore, need hasidic stories of rebbes acting like jackals, scorpions, and serpents.

Talmudic Stories

It is also not hard to find talmudic stories in which the destructive power of the sages is used in internecine quarrels, with deadly results. These stories create mental space, so to speak, for similar hasidic tales.

One of the most striking of these talmudic stories concerns the aftermath of the debate over the “oven of Akhnai” (see glossary). After the sages reach a decision contrary to the view of Rabbi Eliezer, they excommunicate him. Rabbi Eliezer weeps in distress, and the world is smitten: crops are devastated and everything R’ Eliezer looks at burns. When Rabban Gamliel, the leader of the sages, is travelling in a ship, “a wave rose against him to drown him.” He survives, for the moment.

Rabban Gamliel’s sister, Ima Shalom, is R’ Eliezer’s wife. She begins to stop her husband from saying personal prayers, out of fear for her brother’s life. One day, however, she neglects to stop her husband from praying, and Rabban Gamliel dies.

Another story with a similar theme in the same tractate of the Talmud, Bava Metzia (84a), is about the intensely close relationship between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Laqish, which ends when the two speak to each other insultingly; R’ Yohanan’s feelings are hurt, he refuses to forgive Resh Laqish, and Resh Laqish dies. R’ Yohanan goes mad with grief, and the sages pray for him so that he too dies.

Thematically, these stories are closely related to the hasidic tales we are considering. They deal with ideological controversy and sheer personal pique that have devastating consequences. All the sages are depicted as great men; the stories do not side with one against the other.

These talmudic stories were certainly known to many tellers and readers of hasidic tales. Bava Metzia was among the most widely studied tractates, and these stories were also included in the popular anthology *En Yaaqov*. In the story of the Seer of Lublin and R' Baruch of Medzhibozh, the incident in which the Seer is almost drowned makes little sense geographically (with the appearance of a "sea" between Ukraine and Poland), but does make sense artistically since its wording and plot allude to the attack of the wave against Rabban Gamliel.

Such talmudic precedents would resonate with the literate reader and prevent the hasidic tales from seeming entirely strange. Indeed, hasidic tales do not go as far as their talmudic predecessors; I have not come across any hasidic story where one rebbe's power actually kills another rebbe.

Underlying Issues

Talmudic precedents do not entirely answer the question of why stories of dangerous conflict between rebbes were told and published. After all, the same question can be asked of the talmudic stories themselves.

Judah Goldin discusses aspects of the Rabbi Eliezer story in "On the Account of the Banning of R. Eliezer ben Hyrkanus," and Daniel Boyarin analyzes the Resh Laqish story in a chapter of *Carnal Israel* (212–19). A reading of both these studies suggests a hypothesis: the extreme and surprising plot element of the deadly anger of one sage against another is a sign of an underlying issue, not openly expressed, that is particularly fraught with cultural tension.²² The story of Rabbi Moses, one of the more extreme in the hasidic literature, can be a good test case for this hypothesis. What underlying issues can be discerned in this story?

My premise here is that a close reading of the story of R' Moses can discern issues that the narrators did not express openly. In a different cultural context, folklorist James M. Taggart notes, "Narrators generally did not offer many clues when asked to interpret their own stories, because their metaphorical meaning is often unconscious or subconscious and the storytellers prefer to reflect on themselves through storytelling."²³

This approach is ultimately rooted in Freud's insight that the imagery found both in a person's waking conversation and in dreams can reveal concerns that the person is unconscious of or unwilling to confront. Although much of Freud's system has been called into question, this basic insight seems

to have stood the test of time and to be verifiable by experience.²⁴ I do not think it matters whether we are dealing with issues that actually remain unconscious in a Freudian sense, or simply with issues that cannot be talked or written about openly. Experience suggests that concerns that are not talked about tend to drift in and out of consciousness and that the distinction between expressing something deliberately in a hidden way or inadvertently letting it slip out is not so clear.

Whose deeper concerns are reflected in a hasidic story? Though I have emphasized the individual writers' role in shaping published hasidic tales, most of the tales are rooted in oral transmission through several different people. I consider the story of R' Moses as originating from a community – narrowly, the circles of hasidim associated with Ropczyce, from whom the story originated (such as R' Moses' descendant who told the story to R' Abraham Itinga), and more broadly, the wider hasidic community that Itinga, Berger, and Michelson were part of. I look for indications that something is being avoided, or that something is being expressed in a less than open manner; and for striking images that carry a weight that goes beyond what is openly expressed in the telling.

A Transgressed Taboo

The first sign that the narrator is being less than completely open is the reference to the participation of the Ropczyce hasidim in the persecution of R' Solomon Leyb as something to be expected (“naturally,” *kamuvan*). In fact, in the context of hasidic stories on this theme, it is *not* to be expected.

In *Shivhe HaBesht* there is a series of stories about antagonism between the Baal Shem Tov and a great rabbi, R' Nakhmen of Kosov.²⁵ Although no harm actually happens to anyone in these stories, the sense of potential danger is high; the Baal Shem Tov says that R' Nakhmen, through his prayers, is pursuing him to kill him, alluding to the death of Rabban Gamliel caused by R' Eliezer's prayers.²⁶ The narrator invokes biblical and talmudic archetypes for this antagonism: the conflicts between David and Saul and between the academies of Hillel and Shammai.

This highly charged sequence of stories concludes, however, with R' Nakhmen becoming enraged at his followers for speaking badly about the Baal Shem Tov, and ordering them to stay out of the quarrel: “And how dare you stick your heads into this?”²⁷

This theme recurs in the mid-1860s collection *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim* no. 9 (Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 89), mentioned earlier for its reference to “the controversy, which was for the sake of heaven” between the rebbes of Ruzhyn and Savran. The story relates that the Ruzhyner Rebbe was heard

calling the Savraner Rebbe “*nar*,” Yiddish for “fool.” An insightful disciple explains that the Ruzhyner Rebbe was actually calling him *naar*, Hebrew for “a youth,” because “*naar* is an appellation of [the great angel] Metatron, as is known.”²⁸

The narrator concludes with the admonition: “From this, one should consider well that we do not need to stick our heads in, to mix ourselves into their controversies, or, heaven forbid, to say words that are not good about a tzaddik who is against [our rebbe].”

This awed neutrality is observed by the narrators of all the stories of this nature about hasidic rebbes in the books studied. The story of Rabbi Moses might be easier to digest if it had a villain. Instead, the narrator goes to some length to build up R’ Moses as a great holy man – using a phrase, *ha’ish Moshe* (“the man Moses”), instantly recognizable as an allusion to the biblical Moses, and noting that he was worthy to be a rebbe but humbly declined such a position. The narrator also consistently refers to both rebbes, R’ Moses’ ally R’ Naphtali and his enemy R’ Solomon Leyb, with respect, and with all the standard honorifics indicating their holiness. Although the story is said to derive from Ropczyce circles, the extent to which the narrators successfully avoided taking sides is shown by the fact that Berger included the story in his chapter on R’ Solomon Leyb of Lentshna, while Michelson included it in his book on R’ Naphtali of Ropczyce.

Therefore, by taking an active part in the controversy between their rebbe and R’ Solomon Leyb, the hasidim of Ropczyce, and Rabbi Moses himself in particular, are actually transgressing a deep-seated proscription.

The Story of the Fearsome Rabbi

The danger of such transgression is illustrated in Berger’s work (*Eser Qedushot* 10:3) in a horrific story about R’ Avraham Moses of Ostra, called *harav hanora* – which could be translated as “the awe-inspiring rabbi” but in the context of the story means “the fearsome rabbi.” The story begins when this rebbe is visiting his relative, Rebbe Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv, grandfather of the narrator:

His conduct was expansive, befitting his status as a rebbe. Rabbi Joseph Wolf (Rebbe Tzvi’s stepson, that is, the son of his wife, our grandmother, the holy woman Madam Pearl, may she rest in peace) went and hid the walking-stick of the fearsome rabbi in the synagogue; and when the fearsome rabbi wanted to leave the synagogue, he looked for his walking-stick and could not find it.

Immediately R’ Joseph Wolf was called to his house in a panic (God

protect us!) because one of his children had fallen to the ground; and because of fear and hurrying R' Joseph Wolf forgot what he had done with the walking-stick. And by the time he arrived home, that child had already passed away, and suddenly, that instant, the second child became weak (God protect us!).

His wife went to his holiness, our grandfather, the holy man R' Tzvi, weeping bitterly ... But while she was still in the house of our grandfather the rebbe, and still speaking from her heart, the news reached her that the second [child] had also passed away, and the third had suddenly become weak.

When our grandfather R' Tzvi heard this, he immediately sent for his stepson, R' Joseph Wolf, to have him examine his conscience, for this was no [empty] matter. Immediately he remembered that incident with the walking-stick and told R' Tzvi, and he immediately sent him to appease his relative by marriage, the holy rebbe R' Avraham Moses, for he was fearsome.

But by the time he had appeased him, the third [child] too had passed away (God protect us!) and only his daughter Mindl remained of the four children he had. The hairs of one's head stand on end!

The brutality of the story is somewhat less senseless than it might appear at first glance. The children die because of their father's prank in hiding the walking-stick, but the prank takes place in the context of a territorial conflict. The story opens with R' Avraham Moses conducting himself as a rebbe while in Zhydachiv, the home and territory of his relative R' Tzvi. (In the story of the rebbes of Lublin and Medzhibozh, R' Baruch of Medzhibozh deeply resents what he sees as this kind of behaviour by the Seer of Lublin.)

Here there is no indication that R' Tzvi has such resentment, but his stepson, R' Joseph Wolf, apparently does. He hides R' Avraham Moses' walking-stick – which has connotations of power, like the staff of Moses or a king's sceptre. (One version of R' Shalom of Belz's saying in praise of his daughter Eydl is “my Eydele is lacking only a *spodek* and a walking-stick [*shtekn*] to be a rebbe.”)²⁹ In the context of the taboo against getting involved in rebbes' conflicts, the consequences are so terrible because R' Joseph Wolf has not only stuck his head into a conflict but has acted as if there were such a conflict when there was not – at least on the surface. The fact that his children who die are also Rebbe Tzvi's grandchildren may suggest that R' Tzvi himself was the ultimate target.

In the story of Rabbi Moses, open controversy exists, and the consequences for R' Moses of sticking his head into it are not quite so extreme – at least, no one dies.

R' Naphtali's Own Transgression

Strikingly, the taboo on taking part in rebbes' controversies is one that R' Naphtali himself is depicted as transgressing in his youth. This happens in the story of R' Mendele Rymanówer's efforts on behalf of Napoleon, mentioned earlier, also from the pen of R' Abraham Segal Itinga (*Eser Tzahtzahot* 6:17/*Ohel Naftali* no. 52). In that story, R' Naphtali, while still a young man, sides with the rebbes of Kozienice and Lublin against the Rymanówer's efforts, and disrupts his deadly matzah-baking. He incurs the dangerous wrath of the Rymanówer Rebbe as a result and resorts to the Kozienicer for protection. Perhaps there is a hint that R' Naphtali's survival of his own transgression left him with a diminished awareness of the prohibition.

Displacement and Guilt

Is Rabbi Moses the appropriate victim of R' Solomon Leyb's dangerous power? It is indeed he who transgressed the proscription of disciples becoming involved in their rebbes' conflicts. On the other hand, R' Naphtali, greeting Rabbi Moses, interjects: "He [Rabbi Moses] ran ahead and took the slap in the face for me!"³⁰ That is, Rabbi Moses has exposed himself to the dread anger of R' Solomon Leyb, whose target should really be R' Naphtali.

In the same conversation, R' Naphtali uses a phrase from Proverbs, "You will be saved, like a stag [*tzvi*] from the [hunter's] hand." The reader of other tales would know that the name of the Ropczycer Rebbe was Naphtali *Tzvi*. In this particular story, he is referred to only as the Rebbe of Ropczyce. This reference to escaping like a hunted stag, then, is the only time that his name appears in the story.

After the disaster, R' Naphtali says that "if he had not taken away his capacities, he would have been able to stand up against him." It is R' Solomon Leyb who has taken away Rabbi Moses' capacities, and it must be R' Solomon Leyb whom it would have been desirable to stand up against. But it is not clear who would have been doing the standing up. It does not quite make sense that it would be Rabbi Moses; he would have wanted to stand up against R' Solomon Leyb before the attack of the wild ox, resisting it, rather than afterwards. The idea seems to be that, if not for the damage done to his ally Rabbi Moses, R' Naphtali himself would have been able to stand up against R' Solomon Leyb.

All this points to R' Naphtali as ultimately responsible for the disaster. Rabbi Moses was acting as his surrogate, motivated by R' Naphtali's opposition to R' Solomon Leyb. Certainly Rabbi Moses, and other Ropczycer hasidim, were transgressing a deep-seated norm in taking up their rebbe's quarrel;

but so was R' Naphtali in allowing them to do so. Indeed *Ohel Naftali* no. 131, mentioned earlier, depicts R' Naphtali as demanding from a disciple that he persecute R' Solomon Leyb. Did R' Naphtali foresee such dangers as he pursued this controversy?

One would expect R' Naphtali to be left with a burden of guilt: "survivor's guilt," because Rabbi Moses was harmed instead of him, and a guilty conscience because he actually caused the disaster. The story does not express this guilt. This is not because it avoids his emotions; the story emphasizes his attachment to Rabbi Moses. R' Naphtali expresses strong emotions in other stories compiled by Berger and Michelson; "The Spot of Sugar," included at the beginning of this book, is a good example. The fact that R' Naphtali's guilt remains completely unexpressed in the present case is surely part of what makes this story so difficult to digest.

Circumcision and the Outhouse

A striking displacement of guilt and responsibility occurs when we are told that Rabbi Moses left his seclusion too early because he misunderstood his rebbe's intention about "eight days." His misunderstanding was natural, and surely more his rebbe's fault than his own: "eight days" (*akht teg*) is a normal Yiddish expression for a week. If R' Naphtali intended to protect him, he should have been much more careful about his instructions.

Symbolically, the "eight days" are one of the elements in the story that connect the incident in the outhouse with the incident at the circumcision, which caused it. The circumcision is placed at the centre of the story. Underlining its importance, the term "circumcision" (*brit* or the abbreviation *b"m* for *brit milah*) is repeated over and over in that part of the story. Rabbi Moses's impatience about the circumcision – performed on the eighth day of the child's life – is echoed by his impatience about the eighth day of his seclusion. The former leads to his rash act, and the latter leads to his punishment.

The wild ox's attack on Rabbi Moses as he sits in the outhouse is acutely degrading. Alone in the outhouse, his genitals were exposed and unprotected. The detail that the door was open makes him completely unprotected. The wounding of Rabbi Moses in such a position parallels, or parodies, the circumcision of the child's penis.

This interpretation is strengthened by the story's description of Rabbi Moses' action at the circumcision. As in the story of the Lubliner and the Medzhibozher, he turns the circumcision into a struggle about honour. It would be more accurate to say that both stories expose an underlying dynamic: a circumcision would in fact typically be an occasion for giving honour

and therefore for conflicts about honour, and this dimension could easily override attention to the commandment and to the child himself. *Ateret Menaḥem* includes a story in which a disagreement over who will sing a particular prayer at a circumcision degenerates into physical violence and a denunciation to gentile authorities.³¹ The story of Rabbi Moses is distinguished, however, by the harsh emotional tenor of the act of circumcision. Rabbi Moses is angry as he cuts the child's foreskin, and people are afraid of him at that moment: "Rabbi Moses grew angry, and he took a sharp knife ... the people who were there ... feared lest they be scorched by his coal." In effect, the story depicts the circumcision as an act of violence – like what happens to Rabbi Moses in the outhouse on the eighth day.

The Wild Ox

The liturgy of a circumcision is replete with Messianic associations, especially, in popular awareness, in the emphasis on the presence of Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah. There is a messianic allusion in what happens to Rabbi Moses as well. It is unclear what a wild ox (*shor bar* in the Hebrew text) rather than, say, a fierce bull, would be doing in a Polish stable. The Hebrew text of the story inserts the Yiddish term *buflik* as if to clarify this, but it is translated by the Harkavy dictionary only as "wild ox" and by the Weinreich dictionary as "buffalo," an equally unlikely denizen of the stable.

The wild ox, however, bears a specific symbolic weight in the Yiddish-speaking context. Harkavy's dictionary lists *shor ha-bar* as a Yiddish word (*shor-habor* in standard transliteration reflecting Yiddish pronunciation). It is defined as "the wild ox (legendary bull which, like the leviathan, is preserved as food for the pious at the time of the Messiah)." The messianic banquet is described in various midrashic sources. The inclusion of the Wild Ox on the menu of this banquet was a widespread folk concept in the Yiddish-speaking regions.³²

A well-known Yiddish folk song says:

*Az Meshiakh vet kumen, veln mir makhn a sude-nyu ...
Dem yayin hamishmer veln mir trinken,
dem shor-habor mitn livyosn veln mir esn –
oyf der sude-nyu!*³³

(When the Messiah comes, we'll have a dear banquet ...
We'll drink the stored-up wine,
We'll eat the Wild Ox and the Leviathan,
At that dear banquet!)

The appearance on the scene of the *shor bar*, then, has Messianic overtones paralleling those of the circumcision. The irony is bitter: the Wild Ox should be a supernatural being, it ought to herald the arrival of the Messiah, and the reason for its appearance should be to let itself be eaten. This wild ox certainly appears for supernatural reasons, but it brings disaster, not redemption, and it is not the victim but the destroyer.

A wild ox, as opposed to a domesticated one that would be castrated,³⁴ is also a symbol of virility and power. Here it overpowers Rabbi Moses when his genitals are exposed and leaves him weakened in every way. Rabbi Moses at the circumcision can be seen as acting like the wild ox, showing off his own power and virility (with the knife as its symbol) over the helpless baby.

The general Yiddish expression for cattle is *beheymes*. This term is feminine; the story's choice of a masculine term, *shor*, reinforces the connotations discussed above. Still, the more common word might enter the Yiddish-speaking reader's mind, adding other levels of meaning. *Beheymes* is the Yiddish pronunciation of the Hebrew *behemot(h)*, which, besides meaning "cattle" in the plural, is the biblical word for the supernatural "wild ox" (Job 40:15–24; Genesis Rabbah 7:4, etc.). But the Yiddish *beheymes* also means "stupid people."³⁵ Rabbi Moses at the circumcision plays the same role as the wild ox/cattle/behemoth that attacks him; but given the power of R' Solomon Leyb, Rabbi Moses is acting like a *beheyme*, a fool.

R' Naphtali: Persecutor, Protected, Protector

Although all the stories in Berger's and Michelson's works about the Ropczyce-Lentshna controversy agree in depicting R' Naphtali as the persecutor, it is R' Solomon Leyb who is depicted as supernaturally dangerous. Besides the story of R' Moses, *Eser Atarot* 3:12 relates that the wife of the Kotsker Rebbe became ill because her husband gave advice contrary to R' Solomon Leyb's. In *Eser Atarot* 3:18, someone who took credit for an idea of R' Solomon Leyb's is punished in the afterlife and has to beg his forgiveness. In the next generation, when R' Shalom of Kamenka distresses R' Solomon Leyb's son (*Dover Shalom* no. 65, mentioned earlier), R' Shalom of Kamenka becomes paralyzed, and R' Shalom of Belz has to heal him.

By contrast, we do not find stories of R' Naphtali hurting anyone by his supernatural powers. In *Eser Tzahtzahot* 8:21, he warns rather convincingly that he could do so. Drawing on a central tenet of hasidic thought, R' Naphtali reminds R' Tzvi Elimelech of Dynów, whom he is angry at, that there is a holy life-force in everything, even inanimate objects – and anything deprived of its life-force would cease to exist. He then points out to R' Tzvi Elimelech a wine glass on the table, and says, "It is within my power to withdraw the

life-force from it and make it nothing but dust” – and the glass turns to dust. R’ Tzvi Elimelech, nonetheless, escapes unscathed.

Regarding another controversy, *Ohel Naftali* no. 134 notes (as mentioned earlier) that R’ Naphtali was one of the persecutors of “the holy Jew,” but the story revolves around his fear of the holy Jew’s supernatural power: the holy Jew once came to Ropczyce with the intention of provoking R’ Naphtali and then punishing him supernaturally. R’ Naphtali, with the help of his mother, Rebbetzin Beyla, foiled this plan by welcoming the holy Jew and treating him with honour.

In the story of Rabbi Moses, even R’ Naphtali’s purely defensive power is called into question. Rabbi Moses’ flight to the Ropczyce for protection echoes an incident in the story mentioned earlier, also contributed by R’ It-inga, about R’ Mendele of Rymanów’s efforts to bring victory for Napoleon (*Eser Tzahtzahot* 6:17 / *Ohel Naftali* no. 52). The young R’ Naphtali interrupts R’ Mendele’s deadly matzah-baking and runs away. He flees to the Rebbe of Kozienice and lies down on his bed while the rebbe is in the mikveh. The Rebbe of Kozienice, a weak man who spends most of his day in bed, returns and finds the bed occupied by R’ Naphtali; “but the Rebbe of Ropczyce said that he would not let him lie down on the bed until he promised him that the anger of the rebbe R’ Mendele would not harm him. He promised him, and then [R’ Naphtali] got out of the bed.”

The simplicity and apparent efficacy of the Kozienicer Rebbe’s protection of R’ Naphtali contrasts with R’ Naphtali’s complicated and ultimately bungled attempt to protect his own disciple in the story of Rabbi Moses.

The portrait that emerges from the aggregate of stories about R’ Naphtali in controversy is of a quarrelsome man but not one who wields dangerous power against opponents. If Rabbi Moses can be compared to a baby wounded at its circumcision, R’ Naphtali appears in these stories like a baby that cries and gets angry at the drop of a hat but does nothing about it. At the end of the story of Rabbi Moses, R’ Naphtali appears to be conceding victory to R’ Solomon Leyb. Yet, as we have seen, the stories depict the controversy continuing into the next generation with the aggression still coming from the Ropczyce camp.

Conclusion

Thus, connections with other tales and with themes in Yiddish-speaking culture cast a harsh light on the events of the story and the characters of Rabbi Moses and R’ Naphtali. The hypothesis suggested by Goldin and Boyarin’s articles on talmudic stories of deadly controversy was that aspects

of such stories point to underlying issues particularly fraught with tension.

This hypothesis tests out well with the story of Rabbi Moses. To sum up the above explorations, the story is motivated by, and derives much of its disturbing power from, the displacement of guilt. This displacement functions on two levels, one fairly specific and one more general.

The first level is the guilt that must have been felt by hasidim and partisans of Ropczyce concerning their rebbe's and their own aggressive, persecuting role in conflicts with other rebbes. The story of Rabbi Moses, which comes from the Ropczyce camp, displaces responsibility from R' Naphtali to Rabbi Moses, while hinting in several ways at R' Naphtali's key role. Like other stories that depict the persecuted adversaries of Ropczyce as dangerous men, wielding destructive power, the story of Rabbi Moses depicts R' Solomon Leyb as supernaturally responsible for brutal injury, while acknowledging that R' Solomon Leyb was the injured party in the conflict in terms of verifiable fact.

The second level of displaced guilt – or at least deep unease – has to do with circumcision. The story of Rabbi Moses, like that of the Lubliner and the Medzhibozher, openly depicts circumcision as an arena for petty conflict about honour. When Rabbi Moses takes the knife and circumcises the child, there is no hint of *kavanah*, the spiritual intentionality that should be brought to the act of fulfilling a commandment. Instead, pride and anger are the determining motivations.

More subtly, through choice of words and imagery, the story depicts the circumcision of a child as an act of angry violence on a helpless victim, aptly parodied later in the story by a raging beast trampling a helpless man with exposed genitals. I would contend that this imagery expresses deep discomfort about the pain inflicted on babies by ritual circumcision. A medieval Yiddish manuscript (ca. 1500) depicts women worrying on the night before a circumcision because the baby “might get too much cut off.”³⁶ My next chapter shows that other hasidic tales in Berger's and Michelson's collections depict circumcision as bloody and dangerous and testify to profound unease about it.

These insights allow for a fuller appreciation of the story of Rabbi Moses and support the hypothesis derived from Goldin and Boyarin. Talmudic concepts and models of the conflicts and dangerous powers of holy men provided hasidic narrators with a type of story well suited to express the tension around particularly fraught issues of their culture.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



A Paradox That No One Can Solve: A Tale of Circumcision

Myths derive a great deal of their power and endurance from their ability to express a deeply troubling paradox that everyone in the community shares and no one can solve.

– Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference*, 5

A Strange Story of a Beloved Rebbe

Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev, of the third generation of Hasidism at the beginning of the 1800s, is one of the most beloved figures in hasidic history, known for his compassion and his ecstasy in prayer.¹ Chapter 3 of Berger's *Eser Orot* is devoted to R' Levi Isaac, and the selection of stories at the beginning of this book includes sections 3–4 and 6–9 of that chapter, under the title “The Ecstasies of Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev.” I will now present the story I left out of that selection, *Eser Orot* 3:5.

Berger's source for this story appears to be the book *Dvarim Arevim* (Sweet words) published in Munkács, Hungary, in 1903.² There, the story is ascribed to the Munkatsher Rebbe, Solomon Spira, who told it at a festive Rosh Hodesh (New Moon) meal on 21 April 1890. Berger follows the wording of this source fairly closely while leaving out the attribution, perhaps an indication that the story was widely known. This is supported by the fact that the gist of the story appeared in print in a different wording a few years later (1909) in a hagiographic compilation about R' Levi Isaac by a descendant of his.³

To understand this story, one needs to know that Jewish ritual circumcision involves two stages: *hitukh*, “cutting,” that is, cutting off the foreskin, and then *pri'ah*, “uncovering,” in which the inner membrane surrounding the corona is drawn back. In the story, R' Levi Isaac says that he wants to “be” both the cutting and the uncovering. When I first translated the story, I paraphrased this as “to do” the cutting and uncovering; but a closer look at the

wording of the story and related texts has inclined me to think that the rebbe is speaking in an unusual way which should in fact be translated literally.

Here is the story.

Once the holy rebbe was performing a circumcision, and he said that he wanted to be the “cutting” and the “uncovering.” But after the cutting of the foreskin, he threw himself under a bench that was there in the synagogue, holding the knife in his hand, and the boy was crying very much. The people stood dumbfounded, mortally afraid of interrupting [the rebbe] or pulling him out of his mystical state. Nor did they want another man to do the uncovering, for [the rebbe] had said that he wanted to be the uncovering as well.

At last they saw with their own eyes that the circumcised boy no longer had his soul in him, for he was rolling in his blood and his soul had flown away from him. Then they wanted to approach the holy rebbe to wake him up from his mystical state; and at that moment he stood up and went to the boy and saw that he was dead.

The holy rebbe said: “I was the cutting, and I desire to be the uncovering!” and the soul came into [the boy], and the boy was alive, and [the rebbe] *was* the uncovering.⁴

I find this story disturbing. If I had come across it in isolation, I would have thought it was told to attack Hasidism. There *are* anti-hasidic tales, some of them quite powerful.⁵ But this story is not one of them. It comes to us from a devout hasidic author in the context of praise for a great holy man.

Hasidism and Circumcision in Today's Jewish Narrative

The story contradicts some common assumptions of modern non-hasidic Judaism. One is the romanticized Buberian view of Hasidism as a “life-affirming” movement. As mentioned earlier, Buber argued that the “hallowing of all life” might have been diminished in later Hasidism but was certainly there in the first generations, at least among certain leading figures, such as R' Levi Isaac of Berdichev.⁶ In his *Tales of the Hasidim*, Buber included several of the stories of R' Levi Isaac which surround this one, but he left this story out.⁷

Another mainstream modern Jewish assumption is that infant circumcision is safe, healthy, and basically painless.⁸ This can be seen, along with the romanticized view of Hasidism, as part of a narrative of Judaism as a healthy, this-worldly, life-affirming religion. In his popular book *This Is My*

God, first published in 1959 and still in print, Herman Wouk took pride in how circumcision had become medically recommended and thus common among non-Jewish Americans. He added that this should be no surprise: "We expect the symbols of a lasting faith, when they touch the body, to be safe and intelligent in themselves, not to kill the faithful off. The Jews have followed the Mosaic law with a confidence which modern medicine progressively ratifies ... We circumcise our sons on the eighth day after birth, as Abraham did Isaac ... The ordinary infant of eight days passes through the operation easily, sleeping most of the time. Done with skill, the cut causes little pain, and it heals in a couple of days."⁹

The classic attempt at an anthropology of Eastern European Judaism, *Life Is with People*, a post-*khurbn* project based largely on the memories of immigrants to North America, retrojects this attitude into traditional culture: "The operation itself [ritual circumcision] is so trifling that in a society where any physical symptom produces exaggerated anxiety, it arouses no concern."¹⁰

Hasidic Jews today, at least in the branch of Hasidism that pays most attention to public relations, Lubavitch, seem to have embraced this view as well. The main Lubavitch website includes an article titled "Almost Painless," which states: "A common misconception is that the baby experiences a great deal of pain from circumcision. In truth, the performance of RITUAL circumcision is almost painless for the child ... especially since the nerves in a newborn are not fully developed ... Why then does the infant cry? A newborn will tend to cry as soon as his diaper is opened and he is uncovered. This may be due to a need to feel enclosed or merely due to feeling cold."¹¹

Whatever the medical facts may be – not something I am competent to judge – in Berger's story, the infant is not crying because he feels chilly.

The Story and Hasidic Readers

Existing Expectations

This story, then, is disturbing to a modern, non-hasidic reader in part because it challenges a contemporary Jewish narrative. Would it also be disturbing to its intended hasidic readership?

An argument that it would *not* be would take into account that the Bible, the Talmud, and other traditional Jewish sources, as well as specifically hasidic teachings, take for granted that circumcision is painful and sometimes mortally dangerous.

The pain of circumcision for adults plays a role in the biblical story of Dinah (Genesis 34:25) and in midrashim on God's communication with

Abraham after his circumcision (Genesis 18).¹² The commentator Sforno (Italy, ca. 1475–1550), whose annotations are included in many traditional editions of the Hebrew Bible, sees a reference to the infant's pain from circumcision in the birth story of Isaac, in Genesis 21.¹³ The Mishnah, the foundational text of Jewish law compiled in the third century CE, states that infants are in particular pain and danger on the third day after circumcision.¹⁴

In the hasidic milieu, Nathan of Nemirov, the disciple of Rebbe Nakhmen of Breslov, begins one of his meditations on the laws of circumcision with the words, "The infant must bear great suffering and pain when the foreskin is being cut away from him" (*Liqute Halakhot, Hilkhhot Milah* 5:1). Rebbe Abraham Jacob of Sadgora asks, "Why do we not recite *Sheheḥeyanu* [the prayer of thanks for something new or a joyful occasion] at a circumcision?" and answers, "Because of the pain of the child."¹⁵

Acknowledging the danger of circumcision, the *Shulḥan Arukh*, the authoritative code of Jewish law, states, based on talmudic sources, "One must be very careful not to circumcise an infant who may possibly be ill, for danger to life sets everything aside. It will be possible for him to be circumcised later, but it is impossible ever to bring back a Jewish life" (*Yoreh Deah* 263:1). It continues with the ruling that if either a mother or a father has experienced the death of two sons from circumcision, any further sons are not to be circumcised "until they are grown and stronger"; and the same rule applies if two sisters have had sons who died from circumcision (*Yoreh Deah* 263: 2–3).

Regarding a healthy child, Rebbe Hayim of Tszanz, in a responsum, discusses the question of what should be done if some shreds of the foreskin or membrane remain after a circumcision has otherwise been completed. Should they be cut away? R' Hayim supports the prevalent custom of leaving these shreds alone, writing emphatically: "To make the child suffer . . . is not the fulfillment of a commandment, but a sin, and endangers the offspring of the Jewish people for nothing."¹⁶

Thus the mere fact that our story depicts a child crying in pain, with its survival at stake from circumcision, would not be surprising in the traditional hasidic milieu.

Some tales discussed earlier might also suggest that the hasidic imagination accepts some level of cruelty to children. The Maggid of Mezritsh is rebuked by heaven for sighing with compassion for his hungry children (*Eser Orot* 1:11, see chapter 9). That tale is not the only one that approves of rebbes letting their children go hungry.

Further, there are ways in which our story is a typical hasidic tale. A rebbe works miracles. He can even raise the dead. A rebbe is not to be questioned; strange as his ways may sometimes seem, all will work out in the end if you

trust his wisdom and power. In these ways the story fits a pattern familiar to hasidic storytellers and listeners. Most communities have familiar patterns that stories can fit into; such “culturally generated narrative templates” allow stories to be told and accepted comfortably.¹⁷

I would also argue that the structure and wording of this story and those around it tend to identify Rebbe Levi Isaac with God. For example, the introductory story in “The Ecstasies of Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev” (no. 3) describes people’s fear of the rebbe’s ecstatic prayer in the words used in the Bible for the Israelites’ fear of the divine presence at Mount Sinai. This sense of the rebbe as a reflection or manifestation of the divine is a deep, though rarely explicit, part of the hasidic narrative.

Finally, the story of R’ Levi Isaac as circumciser has a happy ending; the baby is alive at the end. Is it possible, then, that a hasidic listener or reader would take this story in stride, finding it not at all disturbing?

It certainly is possible that any given reader might gloss over disturbing aspects of the story. I would argue, however, that the way this story is told might make it unsettling, disturbing, *especially* to a sensitive hasidic listener or reader.

Drama and Emotion

In stories in which a rebbe and his children are going hungry, the rebbe’s children function as extensions of his own body (as noted in chapter 12). In this tale the child is not R’ Levi Isaac’s own son. And in stories of hungry children, no one dies.

Further, while hasidic culture indeed considered circumcision painful and acknowledged the danger of death through loss of blood, this story does not merely acknowledge these concerns but vividly dramatizes them. Its depiction of the baby’s intense crying and bloody death as people look on in fear resembles stories told by anti-circumcision activists today, such as the opening of Leonard B. Glick’s *Marked in Your Flesh*, in which a baby struggles and shrieks as a doctor “crushes” and “tears” at his penis.¹⁸

As Harold Scheub argues in his book *Story*, grounded in his ethnographic research: “What meaning is conveyed by story? . . . On the most obvious level is the didactic message that flows easily across the surface of the tale. That is the one that audiences may take away with them intellectually, but it is not the one that touches them emotionally. The fact is that meaning or message is essentially constructed of feeling.”¹⁹ The *emotional* meaning of Glick’s story and Berger’s may be similar.

I want to build on this with an insight about audience experience from

an article by Joanna Dewey that applies performance theory to New Testament studies. Dewey argues that a story which is told orally, or is based on oral telling, invites “empathetic identification” with each event in turn.²⁰ She emphasizes that, in this kind of emotional experience, what comes later does not cancel out what is earlier. For example, if the earlier chapters of the Gospel of Mark have many miracles and its later chapters have no miracles and much suffering, a listener having heard the whole Gospel would still come away with an impression of the wonder and power of the miracles.²¹

This suggests that for hasidim hearing the Munkatsher Rebbe telling this story, and perhaps for those reading it, the happy ending, which suits didactic purposes, would not cancel out the horror that comes before.

Casting

This horror could only be increased for a hasidic audience by the “casting” of Rebbe Levi Isaac as the story’s central figure. The previous chapter in this study cited stories of rebbes who are harsh, judgmental characters, who make use of their supernatural powers to hurt or kill those who have offended them. In this story, however, the baby has done nothing to offend R’ Levi Isaac. More importantly, R’ Levi Isaac of Berdichev normally appears in hasidic tales, including those in Berger’s compilation, as exceptionally compassionate and concerned for his fellow Jews. Known by the surname *Derbaremdiker* – compassionate or merciful – he is their great defender and advocate before God (*Eser Orot* 3:1), whose prayers for divine compassion are “sweeter than honey” (*Eser Orot* 3:16), to the extent that even speaking about him causes a “sweetening” or amelioration of divine judgment (*Eser Orot* 3:33). It is shocking to see him, of all rebbes, causing the bloody death of an innocent child.

Pacing

One of the elements of story emphasized by the scholarly discipline of narratology, the study of how stories work, is pacing.²² In our story, when the child is cut and the rebbe enters a trance, the story, as it were, goes into slow motion as the people stand by watching the child die. Based on a word count of the Hebrew text, the portion of the story when all that is happening is that people are standing in fear and hesitation witnessing the child’s bleeding to death – from “the child was crying very much” until just before the rebbe gets up – is a full half of the story, 54 out of 108 words. This slow pacing adds to the story’s excruciating emotional weight.

Circumcision and Sacrifice

As the story slows down, the circumcision becomes, in effect, a human sacrifice. This “uncovers” an underlying dynamic of every ritual circumcision: that it is a displacement of child sacrifice, which scholars such as Jon Levenson have convincingly argued was a deep-rooted practice among early Israelites.²³ Jewish tradition itself acknowledges this connection. There is a long-standing parallelism between circumcision and Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac²⁴ – which, according to various midrashim and the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, included Isaac’s actual death.²⁵ In the liturgy of circumcision, both the father and the circumciser recite, “Master of the Universe, may it be Your will that this child be worthy, favoured, and acceptable before You as if I had sacrificed him [*ke-ilu hiqravtihu*] before the throne of Your glory.” Our story, however, literalizes what ordinarily remains on the symbolic level. And literal human sacrifice has been forbidden in Judaism for thousands of years.

Recognizing the circumcision as a sacrifice can help account for the emotional distress I feel in our story. As my colleague William Morrow notes, “the story of the Berdichever evokes for me the anxiety implicit in the sacrificial act. Such feelings are frequent components of sacrificial rituals and have been widely observed.”²⁶ This emotional dimension is emphasized in Kees W. Bolle’s article “A World of Sacrifice” on Hindu animal sacrifices in India: “Quite literally, the anxiety of the devotees and the agony of [the sacrificial victim’s] death coincide.”²⁷

There is even more going on in our story, however. The same circumcision liturgy that designates the child as a sacrifice refers to him gently as “the tender circumcised boy” (*hayeled harakh hanimol*) and blesses him to heal and grow. This may be the place to evoke my own experience of my only son’s circumcision, during which I was touching and comforting him and immediately after which he was brought to his mother’s breast. For me, his circumcision was a disorientingly powerful experience, which I could best understand afterwards as an experience of participating in a blood sacrifice, but a sacrifice that was conducted with care and compassion by everyone involved.

This gentleness and compassion is disturbingly absent from our story, at least on the part of R’ Levi Isaac, who does not appear to see the child as anything but a ritual object. This was brought home to me when I reviewed my translation of the story. After the rebbe stands up and goes to the boy and sees that he is dead, I originally translated his words as, “I cut your fore-skin!” But in fact, he is not speaking to the child at all.

René Girard, the theologian of violence and the sacred, argues that compassionate concern for victims and recognition of the sacrificial victim’s

innocence distinguishes the biblical religions from their predecessors.²⁸ Whether or not this is historically accurate (which I doubt), it rings true on some level: a *pitiless* sacrifice of a helpless child is alien to the compassionate spirit valued by Judaism. Thus, the unease revealed by the story's depiction of the rebbe's complete lack of concern for the child is profound.

An Uncanny Biblical Echo

Remembering that the rebbe in Hasidism is a representative of God, my student Rachel Rastin insightfully compared this story to the mysterious episode early in the Book of Exodus where God suddenly tries to kill Moses:

THE LORD said to Moses in Midian, 'Go back to Egypt, for all the men who sought to kill you are dead.' So Moses took his wife and sons ... and went back to the land of Egypt ... At a night encampment on the way, the LORD encountered him and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, 'You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!' And when he let him alone, she added, 'A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision.' (Exodus 4: 19–20, 24–26, JPS)

In the biblical story circumcision saves life, but the uncanniness remains such that this is a story which Jewish tradition has almost completely suppressed; when it is referred to in traditional sources, it is with the textually unwarranted assumption that Moses was not attacked by God but by an angel or indeed Satan. In our story as well, though the completion of the circumcision brings with it life, resurrection, the image that endures may be that of the compassionate rebbe, image of the compassionate God, inexplicably becoming a pitiless killer.

A Parody of the Liturgy of Circumcision

The sense of fear and mistrust toward God that this echo of the Bible suggests may account for a parody of the liturgy of circumcision in our story. That liturgy includes a biblical verse from Ezekiel (16:6): "When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you, 'In your blood, live!' Yes, I said to you, 'In your blood, live!'"²⁹ In our story, this verse is ironically re-enacted: we see the baby rolling in his blood,³⁰ but instead of living in his blood, he dies in it: "the circumcised boy no longer had his soul in him, for he was rolling in his blood."

A Context of Fear and Comic Relief

Berger makes this story part of a sequence (“The Ecstasies of Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev”) in which R’ Levi Isaac’s mystical trances, stimulated by ritual practices, become destructive. In the preceding two stories (3:3 and 3:4), other people react to Rebbe Levi Isaac’s ecstatic behaviour with mortal fear – fear of death. This culminates in the actual death of the infant in our story, 3:5. The stories that follow lack this element of fear; they slide into comedy, with R’ Levi Isaac knocking tables over and falling into a well. Of course, this is a classic way of relieving accumulated tension – including at ritual circumcisions themselves: “There’s a point in the *bris* [circumcision ceremony] when the baby always starts to cry ... In the States, people panic when the baby cries, and the *mohel* [circumciser] almost always makes some sort of joke to put people at ease.”³¹

Point of View: Fear and Judgment

In the last of this sequence of stories (3:9), other revered and famous rebbes look askance at Rebbe Levi Isaac’s behaviour, and one of them makes him conduct his Passover seder by himself (as my students phrased it, he gets put at the kids’ table).

The point of view³² in all these stories is never that of R’ Levi Isaac himself. We are told only as much about him as others see and hear. We get no glimpse of his inner life except for the information that he is in ecstasy or cleaving to God – which is, almost by definition, beyond our comprehension. Thus, even though most of the stories end with some reassuring closure, the structure of the telling invites us to “empathetic identification” with the observers, who see the rebbe’s actions as terrifying or as dangerously incompetent.

This undermines the basic premise of hasidic tales that a rebbe’s ways are not to be questioned, his righteousness and rightness not to be doubted.

Cutting and Uncovering

Continuing with this form-oriented analysis of the story, I want to sketch out a structuralist approach. Following the method of Claude Lévi-Strauss in his influential studies of myth,³³ I have looked for pairs of opposites or complements in the story that line up with each other. This story itself invites such an approach with its highlighting of the binary of “cutting” and “uncovering,” the two stages of circumcision. The rebbe, and by implication God, whom he represents, encompass both sides of the binary.

Rebbe

Cutting

low [spatially: under bench]
 crying
 fear
 bleeding
 death

Uncovering

high [standing]
 (quiet)
 (relief)
 healing
 life

(God)

*Cleaving to God**Normal consciousness*

A variety of Jewish traditions indicate that “uncovering” is symbolically more Jewish than “cutting”: “Cutting removes the foreskin from him, taking him out of the category of non-Jews, who are called ‘foreskinned’ ... and after that comes uncovering, which is the sign of the holy covenant, connecting him and sanctifying him with the holiness of Israel.”³⁴ In this light, lining up the other dichotomies in the story as they cluster around these two elements initially reveals a pattern reassuringly typical of the imaginary world of hasidic tales.

The cutting, the less “Jewish” stage of the process, places the rebbe low down – on the floor – and leads to crying, fear, bleeding, and death. For the uncovering, the completing, “Jewish” stage of the ritual, the rebbe is high – standing up – bringing quiet, relief, healing, and life. The rebbe, who *is* both the cutting and the uncovering, unites both polarities – indicating that he corresponds to God, who, as Jewish liturgy affirms daily, brings death and life.³⁵

The exception that disrupts all this is the place of the rebbe’s state of consciousness in the binary scheme. When he is in a mystical trance, *devequt*, cleaving to God, there is crying, fear, bleeding, and death. Only when he returns to an ordinary, non-mystical state of consciousness, removed from his cleaving to God, is there peace, healing, and life.

In the story of Rabbi Moses discussed in the previous chapter, the sense that something is wrong at the circumcision might be ascribed to R’ Moses’ lack of *kavanah* (holy intention), his fulfillment of a commandment with improper motives. Here, R’ Levi Isaac’s *kavanah* itself is destructive. Instead of the rebbe’s spiritual work transforming and uplifting corporeal life, it destroys it. This set of correspondences is all wrong; yet it is integral to the structure of the story.

Disturbing Story, Happy Ending

I have argued from a number of perspectives that the story of Rebbe Levi Isaac as circumciser is designed, as it were, to be disturbing to a hasidic reader or listener even more than a non-hasidic audience. This is because it does not fit the hasidic narrative of the rebbe as a righteous intermediary with the benevolent, compassionate God of the Jewish people, bringing spiritual and material blessings to his followers. Rather, one of the most beloved rebbes appears in this story as incompetent, pitiless, and mortally dangerous, precisely when he is most connected with God. And circumcision, a central ritual commanded by God, is depicted as a violation of Jewish law and values, a pitiless human sacrifice.

In this context the happy ending of the story is simply the “pious wrapping” that allows it to be told at all.³⁶ This kind of “wrapping” can already be found in the Bible, where the Book of Ecclesiastes begins with an ascription to the wise king Solomon and ends with an admonition to fear God and keep his commandments – framing a notably pessimistic, sceptical book in ostensible piety. Without such a pious wrapping, our story could never be told in a hasidic context; it would become an outright anti-hasidic tale.

What is going on? What is behind such a contrary story? I suggest that the story is an expression of an unresolvable paradox around circumcision. For men who circumcise their sons while believing that this causes pain and danger to “the tiny, fragile body,”³⁷ on some level the constant affirmation that this is the will of God is not enough. Doubt seeps in – doubt about the divine will or, to highlight a key word in the story, “desire”; or about what kind of God could desire this; or about what kind of leaders would claim that he does.

Tension around Circumcision in Hasidic Culture

There are other hasidic tales in which circumcision becomes fraught, becomes violent. In *Ohel Yehoshua* (part of *Dover Shalom*) no. 6, a family has had five sons die from circumcision – dramatizing the mortal danger of circumcision more than would actually be possible under Jewish law, where if two sons have died from circumcision, the others are to be left uncircumcised.³⁸ Stories discussed in the previous chapter highlight circumcision as an occasion for struggle over honour, which may be violently enacted on the baby’s body.

A brief story, *Ohel Naftali* no. 330, combines this theme with the motif of dangerous spiritual transport found in the tale that has been the focus of this chapter. The Seer of Lublin and the Preacher of Lublin, an opponent of Hasidism, were both at a circumcision. The Seer was honoured with holding

the baby on his lap, and the Preacher with circumcising, “and the rebbe [the Seer], as was his way, all his bones were trembling. His holy disciples used to say that it was easy for them to imitate all his movements except the trembling. Then the Preacher screamed, ‘Itzik’l [a diminutive of the Seer’s name], what are you shaking for? What do you see? Why don’t I see it?’ Because of [all] this, the belly of the infant was cut with the circumcision knife. But the rebbe promised that the boy would live sixty-two years and be survived by five sons, and be rich; and so it was.”

A rare glimpse of the feelings of women on this subject occurs in a long, story-filled teaching of Rebbe Shalom of Belz (*Dover Shalom* no. 293). Speaking about the greatness of circumcision, R’ Shalom observes, “We have heard many stories of how a mother, out of compassion, said, ‘Why should I hand over my son for pain to be inflicted on him, for him to be cut!’ But nevertheless, this was overpowered for the mother by the commandment of the king, the Holy One blessed be He.”

Conclusion: Stories against Narrative

The tension and doubt manifested in these stories could scarcely be expressed openly in hasidic culture, as intellectual arguments or calls for change. But stories, functioning emotionally, bypass the intellect in some respects, do not commit the teller to a position, and so do not incite counter-arguments.³⁹ As an Ashanti listener in a traditional West African storytelling context explained to a folklorist in the 1920s, stories “gave every one an opportunity of talking about . . . things about which everyone knew, but concerning which one might not ordinarily speak in public.”⁴⁰ The quintessentially hasidic activity of storytelling, especially in (ostensible) praise of holy men, provides an ideal means for the indirect expression of doubts that contradict a pillar of the hasidic narrative, of the accumulated wisdom of hasidic culture, namely, the goodness and binding force of a central ritual. Doubt about this key ritual is intertwined with others – even with doubt about the goodness of God and his representatives, the rebbes. Stories can express such doubt without causing a religious crisis in the way that an overt attack on tradition would. This is part of the power of stories.

Postscript

At the same time, for non-hasidic readers, stories like these contradict the common negative stereotype of hasidic Jews as mindless fanatics and reveal them as reflective and self-critical through their characteristic practice of storytelling.

AFTERWORD



“Our approach to the world informs our understanding of the holy and, conversely, our understanding of the holy informs our approach to the world.”

– Tracy Trothen¹

The chapter in *Eser Orot* on the great Maggid Dov Ber of Mezritsh, the second founding figure of Hasidism after the Baal Shem Tov, precedes its stories with the following summary of core hasidic teachings (*Eser Orot* 1:3):

Our rebbe, Duber [Dov Ber], the memory of a holy man for a blessing for the life of the world to come, of Mezritsh, taught the people to know how the awe of God could be upon them, recognizing and seeing face to face the existence of the blessed divinity.

Behold, “the whole earth is full of His glory,”² and “there is no place empty of Him.”³ For in every single thing there is the life-force of the blessed Creator, proceeding from world to world to the lowest world.

For it is known that nothing in the world is without life-force – even the most material things, like stones and inanimate objects, have some life-force in them. For without their life-force they would, without a doubt, be nothing whatsoever ... This life-force is also the life-force of the blessed Creator, proceeding from the worlds above to the worlds below, from world to world, until the last of all the worlds ...

So too regarding emotional qualities [*midot*], like love and fear and so on – there is nothing in the world without something corresponding to it on high, worlds without end, which are the root and life-force for what is below ...

But to know all this with the mind alone is not enough to cause a person to stand in awe of the blessed Creator ... Rather, it should be a sensed

recognition, knowledge actually revealed to the eye, like the sensing of the eye which sees everything that comes before it ...

A person whose conduct is like this will undoubtedly be in awe and afraid of sinning, because the blessed God is always standing before him ... When some extraneous and evil thing, or licentiousness, comes before his eyes, he will immediately recognize the power and life-force that has proceeded from world to world into the world of the *qelipot* [the realm of evil] ... and he will sigh and worry about the holy life-force that has proceeded into a place of filth and uncleanness. So if a person himself falls into lust and the like, he will quickly be able to escape by thinking in this way.

For example, if he falls into extraneous and evil lust, he will think: this love is the life-force of the blessed Creator, from the world of love – and I am bringing down this holy power into a place of filth, God protect us!

Rooted in Kabbalah but with a distinctly hasidic emphasis on the presence of the divine in the material world and in the human psyche, these teachings contrast powerfully with the developing political and scientific ideas of the twentieth century. The hasidic way set out here demands a particular kind of engagement with material existence, aiming for a transformation of one's sensory being, in line with a profoundly vertical, hierarchical cosmology (God on high, we below) and a judgmental stance toward human activities and emotions.

Such an approach contains inherent tensions. Those tensions express themselves in hasidic tales, which are imaginative expressions of the attempt to embody such an approach to life in the physical world. Images of wounded and transformed bodies express the ultimate incompatibility of the vertical orientation with physical existence. Strong women disrupt the hierarchy, accentuate the physical, and are a deeply unsettling presence in the stories when they are admitted into them at all.

With all its tensions, this view of the spiritual and the physical remains a powerful aspect of the hasidic narrative, which is a narrative of imagined continuity with the Jewish past and of resistance to modernity. As part 2 of this study showed, hasidic tales overlap with broader cultural phenomena in Eastern European Judaism and beyond. The rest of this book has studied the tales as expressions of tensions within Hasidism itself. The fact that both approaches “work” suggests that Hasidism cannot accurately be viewed as a self-contained phenomenon. Hasidism has always been part of the cultures surrounding it, influencing them, influenced by them, and experiencing many of their ups and downs. At the beginning of the twentieth century,

hasidim were not alone in responding to a time of upheaval by imagining and clinging to a powerful narrative of their own, and they are not alone in doing so today.

Key to this hasidic narrative are the holy men, and a few holy women, who are the organizing focus of Berger's and Michelson's compilations. These central characters, mostly rebbes, differ from one another in particular traits, and some emerge as memorable and distinct personalities. At the same time they are manifestations of one role, "the rebbe." As in Christian and pagan biographies of late antiquity, "the many lives narrated in a serial fashion are in fact only variants of one life, the holy life . . . diversity is in the descriptive detail, sameness in the core."⁴

It is in "the rebbe" that the imagination nurtured on a vertical view of existence, on visions of *yene velt*, "the world beyond," expresses itself. Associating the world beyond, in contrast to this one, with freedom and power, the imagination explores the possibilities of the rebbes' freedom, to the point of letting them break both the laws of nature and, sometimes, the laws of religion; it explores the possibilities of their power, both in angry punishment and in compassionate healing.

At the same time, the storytelling imagination is realistic enough to acknowledge that freedom and power are not unlimited for anyone, and to explore their limitations. The law asserts itself. The power of opponents asserts itself. Corporeality asserts itself. The rebbe too submits, worries, suffers. While larger than life, the rebbe also functions as "everyman," or at least "every Jew," bearing the burdens and tensions of widening circles of tellers, listeners, writers, and readers.

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 Rebbetzin [of Chęciny, Poland] Sarah Horowitz Sternfeld, d. 1937.

David Moses of Chortkiv [Ukraine], d. 1900.

Dov Ber (or Duber). See 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 Neskhiz [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, d. ?
- Jacob Isaac of Lublin [Poland]. See 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 Kozienice [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, d. ?
- Mordecai (Motele) of Chernobyl [Ukraine], d. 1837.
- Mordecai of Neskhiz [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, d. ?
 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.
 Yequtiel Judah Teitelbaum of Sighet [Sighetu Marmatiei, Romania] (the *Yetev
 Lev*), d. 1883.
 Zusya (Meshulam Zusya, Zusha, Zisha) of Annopol [Ukraine], d. 1800.

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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 (*plural*: HASKAMOT) Approbation. (See p. 103.)

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 or **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.

- MAZEL TOV** Congratulations; (a blessing for) good fortune.
- MELAMED** (*plural*: MELAMDIM) A children's tutor in Hebrew reading and early Jewish learning, or a teacher in a cheder.
- MEMORIAL BOOKS** Books published in the years after the *khurbn* in memory of destroyed Jewish communities.
- MIDRASH** A genre of classical Jewish literature characterized by imaginative interpretations of biblical verses.
- MIKVEH** A natural or artificial body of water meeting halakhic conditions, used for ritual purification.
- MISHNAH** One of the core texts of traditional Jewish religious study, a compilation of halakhic traditions dating from the third century CE.
- MITNAGED** (*plural*: MITNAGDIM) A traditionalist religious Jew opposed to Hasidism.
- MITZVAH** A divine commandment; in Jewish usage this word is applied both to ritual observances and good deeds and has warm, positive connotations.
- MODERNITY** In this context, the situation of rapid change and the decline or breakdown of many traditional social structures affecting Eastern Europe (somewhat later than Western Europe), particularly since the early nineteenth century.
- OBSERVANCE** (*adjective*: OBSERVANT) In this context, adherence to halakhah.
- OVEN OF AKHNAI** The Talmud (Bava Metzia 59b) describes a debate over the ritual purity of this type of oven. The view of Rabbi Eliezer is supported by miracles and a voice from heaven. The other sages ignore this view, because the Torah is "not in heaven" (Deuteronomy 30:12) but given to human beings to interpret. God laughs approvingly.
- PHYLACTERIES** See TEFILLIN.
- PRAYER SHAWL** (Hebrew *tallit*) A shawl with fringes fulfilling a biblical commandment (Numbers 15:37–41); traditionally a part of Jewish male garb, worn especially during morning prayers.
- QEDUSHAH** Holiness; also the name of a prayer, recited in a call-and-response form by prayer-leader and congregation.
- R'** Before a name, abbreviation for "Rabbi," "Rebbe," or "Reb." It can be pronounced "Reb" in any case. See below.
- RABBI** A scholar and authority in Jewish religious law.
- RABBINIC** Pertaining to classical Jewish texts such as the Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmud, ascribed to the rabbis of the Land of Israel and Babylonia from approximately the first to seventh centuries CE, also known as "our sages."
- RASHI** Rabbi Solomon, son of Isaac, of eleventh century France, author of the most widely studied commentaries on the Bible and Talmud.
- REB** A general title of respect for a Jewish man.
- REBBE** Teacher; the spiritual and communal leader of a hasidic group.

- REBBETZIN The wife of a rabbi or rebbe; a Jewishly learned woman.³
- RESPONSA (*singular*: RESPONSUM) Written answers by learned rabbis to difficult questions in halakhah.
- RUAH HAQODESH The spirit of holiness, i.e., the spirit of prophecy that enables some rebbes to see the future, access hidden information, etc.
- SAGES See under RABBINIC.
- SANDEK The honoured guest on whose lap a baby boy lies while being circumcised.
- SEGULE (*or* SEGULAH; *plural*: SEGULES/SEGULOT) An object or action that is believed to bring a particular kind of blessing: for example, “giving charity is a *segule* for making a good living.”
- SHEMONEH ESREH The central prayer of Jewish liturgy, recited quietly while standing and facing in the general direction of Jerusalem.
- SHTIBL A small synagogue, a hasidic prayer-house.
- SHUL Synagogue.
- SHULHAN ARUKH (the set table) A sixteenth-century work that remains the most authoritative compilation of halakhah, covering essentially all areas of Jewish life.
- SPODEK A type of fur hat, part of the traditional garb of male hasidim in some communities.
- SUKKAH A thatched hut in which meals are eaten during Sukkot, based on Leviticus 23:42.
- SUKKOT A joyful fall holiday lasting a week, marked by the rituals of lulav and sukkah (see definitions above).
- TAHARAH Purity, opposite of *tumah*.
- TALMUD (*adjective*: TALMUDIC) A classical and authoritative work of Jewish law and lore, the traditional focus of religious study among Eastern European Jews. See the beginning of chapter 7. Citations from the Talmud give the title of the tractate (volume), such as Bava Metzia, Taanit, etc., and a folio number.
- TANNAIM (*singular*: TANNA) (1) The early sages of rabbinic Judaism whose teachings are cited in the Mishnah. (2) In the time of the Talmud, individuals who knew oral traditions by heart and repeated them as “texts” for study.
- TEFILLIN Small leather boxes containing passages from the Torah, attached to leather straps, traditionally worn on the head and left arm by men during weekday morning prayers; sometimes called “phylacteries” in English, based on Greek references in the New Testament.
- TIKHL Kerchief or head scarf traditionally worn by Ashkenazi women.
- TORAH The Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, read from a scroll in Jewish liturgy; by extension, Jewish sacred texts generally; in hasidic usage, a rebbe’s teachings.
- TOSAFOT “Additions”: a difficult and much-studied medieval commentary on the Talmud.

TRACTATE A section (volume) of the Talmud.

TRANS I use this as an umbrella term for people whose gender identity crosses the conventional boundaries (such as “male” versus “female”) of the society they find themselves in.

TRANSGENDERED I use this term in the sense of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition: “Having an identity which does not conform unambiguously to conventional notions of male or female gender” (draft entry, March 2004, www.oed.com).

TRANSSEXUAL “Having physical characteristics of one sex and psychological characteristics of the other” (*OED*, second edition, 1989); for example, someone who is physically female but psychologically male.

TUMAH Impurity in a ritual sense (as in biblical purity laws); moral or spiritual impurity or degradation.

TZADDIK (*plural*: TZADDIKIM) “Righteous one”; a holy man; a hasidic rebbe. (This word is also spelled “zaddik” in English; it appears as *tzadiq* in transcriptions from Hebrew.)

YARMULKE A skullcap, part of the traditional garb of Eastern European Jewish men.

YESHIVAH (*plural*: YESHIVOT) An academy for intensive study of rabbinic texts, primarily the Talmud, typically attended by unmarried young men.

YIḤUD “Unification”: a kind of kabbalistic meditation that may involve the visualization of the Hebrew letters of names of God; the supernatural processes of unification in the divine realms brought about by such meditation.

YIVO (acronym for Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut) An important centre for linguistic and cultural research founded in Vilnius and now based in New York.

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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 Tzahtzaḥot* (published under the collective title *Zekhut Yisrael*) and *Simḥat Yisrael*; and by Abraham Hayim Michelson: *Ateret Menaḥem*, *Dover Shalom* (including *Ohel Yehoshua*), *Meqor Ḥayim*, *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*, “rebbes 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 to 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 Yihudim.”
- 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 *het*, “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 *ba*Lvanon *yisgeh*, *shetulim* (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 *Simhat 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* (*badhan*), 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 Hyrkanus.”
- 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

disciple Jacob Joseph of Polonne. The Baal Shem Tov's grandson Moses Hayim Ephraim of Sudilkov describes the Baal Shem Tov telling stories to him (*Degel Maḥaneh Ephraim*, 257, *Likutim*, *Eleh hadevarim sheshamati mipi adoni mori zeqeni zllh*"h). The Baal Shem Tov's "Holy Epistle," its authenticity accepted by the current scholarly consensus (see Petrovsky-Shtern, "*Hasidei de'ar'a*," 149–50), tells a story of an ascent into heaven.

- 14 In English, see especially Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, on tales in print; Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim*, on the oral tradition; and Buxbaum, *Storytelling and Spirituality*, for a well-informed religious perspective.
- 15 Citations from this work in this study are from Kaplan, *Rabbi Nachman's Stories*, a translation and commentary based on hasidic sources.
- 16 The Yiddish transliteration "Nakhmen" represents the pronunciation more accurately than the scholarly standard "Nahman" or the popular "Nachman." "Breslov" is the town of Bratslav, in Ukraine, in the Yiddish-based spelling used by hasidim today.
- 17 These were later published separately in Sternhartz, *Shivḥe HaRan*, "Praises of Rebbe Nakhmen."
- 18 See Nigal, "New Light on the Hasidic Tale."
- 19 According to Dan, *HaSipur HaḤasidi*, 237.
- 20 This is still the primary role of hasidic tales in such recent and sophisticated works as Assaf, *Regal Way*, or Etkes, *The Besht*.
- 21 See Rosman, "Shivhei ha-Besht: Document historique?" 18.
- 22 For a contemporary hasidic hagiographer's acknowledgment of this, see Auerbach, *Reb Meir Premishlaner*, x.
- 23 Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, 6 (all italicized in the original).
- 24 See, for example, Lerner, *Why History Matters*, 132; Joseph M. Kitawaga's introduction to Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, ix. This trend involves whole movements such as postcolonial studies and subaltern studies.
- 25 See Heilman, *Sliding to the Right*, 73.
- 26 Archival research suggests that early nineteenth-century hasidim in Poland were statistically better off than non-hasidic Jews (Wodzinski, "The Socio-Economic Profile of Hasidism Reconsidered").
- 27 See, for example, the citations in Wodzinski, *Haskalah and Hasidism*, 259–63.
- 28 See, for example, Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, 9–10.
- 29 Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 1, xix–xx.
- 30 See Grözinger, *Geschichten*, xix–xxii; Yassif's chapter on hasidic tales in *Hebrew Folktale*, 371–407; Shmeruk, *Prokim*, 217–38; Ben-Amos and Mintz's index of folkloric tale types, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, 290–305.
- 31 See Jacobson, *Modern Midrash*, 19–43, on the hasidic tales of Micha Yosef Berdyczewski and I.L. Peretz.
- 32 Heard from Arthur Kurzweil in several lectures.
- 33 Hallamish, *Haqabalah bitzfon Afrika*, 119.

- 34 Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 262n122, citing an ethnographic study by Helena Gruchowska, “Srul Rabi Bal-Szem,” 1904.
- 35 For example, a “Super Jew” T-shirt purchased in 2008 from the Israeli company ZaraMart; a poster for a play, *Jew for a Day*, at the Toronto Fringe Theatre Festival, July 2008.
- 36 See Gutwirth, *Rebirth of Hasidism*; Heilman, *Sliding to the Right*.
- 37 In particular, the series *Siah Zeqenim* [Conversations of the elders], edited by Asheri and Lifshits.
- 38 See Benford, “Controlling Narratives”; Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim*, 7.
- 39 Dan, “A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism,” 185–6; cf. Gries, *Book in the Jewish World*, 123.
- 40 See Schacter, “Facing the Truths of History,” 214–17, 223–5; on related issues, see Assaf, *Neeḥaz BaSvakh*, 19–47. For example, compare *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim* no. 15 (Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 94–5), where the Baal Shem Tov causes Rebbe Yehiel Mikhl of Zloczow to violate the Sabbath, with the version in Twer-ski, *Generation to Generation*, 182.
- 41 Care is required, since the printed texts of books are also subject to censorship. See Assaf, “One Event, Two Interpretations,” 190–1, on a deletion from all but the first edition of *Eser Orot*.
- 42 See Amodio, “Introduction: Unbinding Proteus,” in Amodio, *New Directions in Oral Theory*, especially 2–4.
- 43 Yassif, *Hebrew Folktales*, 377–8.
- 44 Including hasidic authors who aimed for a broader audience, such as Israel Jacob Klapholz (see Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 265), who cites several of Michelson’s books in *Kol Sipure Baal Shem Tov*, 6, 7, 50, and *Lamed-Vav Tzadiqim Nistarim*, 138; and Shlomo Yosef Zevin, who cites Berger and Michelson in his lists of sources, for example, *Sipure Hasidim: Torah*, 572.
- 45 On the importance of Berger’s *Zekhut Yisrael*, see Alfassi, *Haḥasidut BeRumeniya*, 120; Dan, *HaSipur*, 236–7. Michelson’s *Ohel Naftali* is the major source for a modern religious monograph, Tal, *Rabi Naftali Tzvi MiRopshitz*, and for Salmon, “R. Naphtali Zevi of Ropczyce.” See Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 41–2.
- 46 Contrast, for example, Jacob Drikerman’s *Temime Derekh* (1871; see Nigal, *Magic, Mysticism*, 179), or the publications of the bookseller Eliezer Shenkel (see Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 38, and the bibliography of the present volume), which are story-books with some hasidic content.
- 47 Works that I have found illuminating in this genre include Belcove-Shalin, *New World Hasidism*; Eisenberg, *Boychiks in the Hood*; El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant*; Epstein, “Going Far Away”; Gutwirth, *Vie juive traditionnelle*; Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith*; Levine, *Mystics, Mavericks and Merrymakers*; Rubin, *Satmar*; Shaffir, “Doing Ethnography.”
- 48 See the works by these authors listed in the bibliography.
- 49 Idel, *Hasidism*, 3.

- 50 See chapter 13 of this study.
- 51 Rackover, “Martin Buber and Hasidism.” See Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 68, on Buber’s and Scholem’s conflicting attitudes toward language, and Oppenheim, “Meaning of Hasidut,” 409–10, on their theological stances.
- 52 In *Commentary* and in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. I cite the expanded version, Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation of Hasidism,” in *Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 227–50. See also Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 165–70.
- 53 Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation of Hasidism,” in *Messianic Idea*, 230–1, 235, 247–9.
- 54 Schatz-Uffenheimer, “Man’s Relationship to God and World in Buber’s Rendering of Hasidic Teachings” (written in 1960). On critiques of Buber before Schatz-Uffenheimer, see Bender, “Concept of ‘World,’” 123.
- 55 Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 1, 3.
- 56 Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation,” 240.
- 57 See, for example, Idel, *Hasidism*, 8; Dvir-Goldberg, *HaTzadiq HaHasidi*, 9.
- 58 Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation,” 230.
- 59 Ibid., 246–7. See *Ateret Menaḥem* no. 241, which contrasts *yihudim* with the more accessible practice of fervent prayer.
- 60 Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation,” 250. Regarding Buber’s selectivity, see Schaeder, *Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber*, 240; Katz, “Martin Buber’s Misuse of Hasidic Sources,” in *Post-Holocaust Dialogues*, 68–87; Robinson, “Zaddik as Hero in Hasidic Hagiography,” 39.
- 61 Buber’s reply to Scholem and Schatz-Uffenheimer was published in several versions. Citations here are from Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism.”
- 62 Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” 218, 221.
- 63 Ibid., 218–19, 220.
- 64 Ibid., 220–1.
- 65 Ibid., 224.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 See Levenson, “Hermeneutical Defense of Buber’s Hasidism,” 299; Friedman, *Martin Buber’s Life and Works*, vol. 3, 299.
- 68 Gries, “Hasidic Managing Editor,” 73–81.
- 69 Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 7–15; Shmeruk, *Prokim*, 217–19.
- 70 This is a theme of Buxbaum’s *Storytelling and Spirituality* and Elstein’s *HaEqs-tazah*. See also Shmeruk, *Prokim*, 216.
- 71 See, for example, Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*; Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*.
- 72 Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 3–5, 217–21. For other revisions of Scholem’s and Buber’s views, see Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yidish BePolin*, 119–46; Idel, *Hasidism*, 3–15; Faienstein, “Gershom Scholem and Hasidism” and “Hasidism – The Last Decade in Research”; Grözinger, “Gershom Scholems Darstellung.”
- 73 For example, Götzinger, *Martin Buber und die chassidische Mystik*, 125.
- 74 See Bender, “Concept of ‘World,’” 136–42.

- 75 See Schatz-Uffenheimer, in Schilpp and Friedman, *Philosophy of Martin Buber*, vol. 3, 405.
- 76 See Hodes, *Martin Buber*, 55.
- 77 See Friedman, vol. 2, 323, citing Buber's introduction to *For the Sake of Heaven*.
- 78 See Maimon, *Autobiography*, 151–75; Taylor, *Joseph Perl's Revealer of Secrets*.
- 79 See Davidowicz, *Gershom Scholem und Martin Buber*, 104–8; Gries, *Sefer Sofer VeSipur*, 22; Kepnes, "A Hermeneutic Approach to the Buber-Scholem Controversy"; "Buber as Hermeneut"; *Text as Thou*, 32–40; Silberstein, *Martin Buber's Social and Religious Thought*; Levenson, "Hermeneutical Defense," 309, 312; for a positive comment from Dan, "A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism," 391n8. Yitzhak Buxbaum argues that Buber's hasidic tales are based on authentic sources, and that his rewritings are appropriate to making the stories meaningful to modern secular readers (oral communication).
- 80 See Grözinger, "Gershom Scholems Darstellung des Hasidismus"; Hammer, "Resolving the Buber-Scholem Controversy in Hasidism"; Idel, *Hasidism*, 8–9; Kepnes, *Text as Thou*. Maurice Friedman (*Martin Buber's Life and Work* [vol. 3, 280–1]) has noted that Scholem's and Buber's earlier positions on Hasidism were not so polarized.
- 81 See *Eser Orot* 3:13–17.
- 82 See Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 300, 303–5.
- 83 Compare Galley, *Der Gerechte*, 468.
- 84 Scholem, "Martin Buber's Interpretation," 244. See also Scholem, "Martin Buber's Conception of Judaism," in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 169.
- 85 See Assaf, *Regal Way*, 26–7; Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov*, xxx; Grözinger, "Source Value of the Basic Recensions of Shivḥei HaBesht" and comments throughout his German translation of *Shivḥe HaBesht*; Petrovsky-Shtern, "*Hasidei de'ar'a*," 167; Moshe Rosman, in articles on *Shivḥe haBesht* and in *Founder of Hasidism*. Yoav Elstein applies this principle even to a hasidic story in which he has demonstrated Christian roots: Elstein, "Gregorius Legend," and chapter 2 of *HaEqstazah*.

Chapter Two

- 1 See Tziqernik, *Maasiyot UMaamarim Yeqarim* no. 21; translation in Buxbaum, *Storytelling* 19–21.
- 2 My approach owes much to Ira Robinson; see his articles in the bibliography.
- 3 "Toldot Yitzḥaq" at the beginning of *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot*.
- 4 See Feder, *Mishpokhes Rabonim*, 367. Letters from this rebbe to his "beloved disciple" Berger are printed near the beginning of Berger's *Retzon Yisrael* on the months and holy days.
- 5 For more on Berger's life story, see his memories of his father in "Toldot Yitzḥaq" and the chapter on him in Feder, *Mishpokhes Rabonim*.
- 6 Among them: *Ateret Yaaqov VeYisrael* on the holy days, and works on the months

and holy days of the year, on the Psalms, and on the Sabbath, circumcision, and tefillin, under the general title *Retzon Yisrael*. In the present study, general references to Berger's books have only his books of hasidic tales in mind.

- 7 To be fair, western medicine was not yet successful in treating epilepsy. See Friedlander, *History of Modern Epilepsy*, 151.
- 8 Information from *Bibliography of the Hebrew Book* electronic database.
- 9 See the approbations (*haskamot*) to Berger's books, as well as the fundraising appeal to be discussed later. Berger refers to kabbalistic ideas and texts in his comments on some stories, for example, *Eser Tzahtzahot* 1:16, 3:8.
- 10 Berger included this letter, as a kind of character witness, in his books (*Eser Qedushot* 7–8 and elsewhere).
- 11 *Eser Tzahtzahot* 9:1.
- 12 Tzvi Ezekiel is the subject of a Yiddish biography by N. Shemen (thanks to Alan Brill for drawing my attention to this), as well as biographical articles in a variety of sources (e.g., Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 313–14; *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, "Michaelson, Ezekiel Zevi," by Itzhak Alfassi, vol. 11, 1491–2; notices in Fridman, *Otzar HaRabanim*, 362, no. 17528; Halperin, *Atlas Etz-Hayim*, vol. 13, 293, no. 3335.) There is an important autobiographical section, "Petaḥ HaBayit," in his responsa collection *Shut Bet Yehezqel*.
- 13 See Michelson, "Petaḥ HaBayit," in *Shut Bet Yehezqel*, 10.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 14–15, 18.
- 15 Some sources refer to him as the head of the council (e.g., Shtokfish, *Sefer Zgierz*, vol. 2, 18).
- 16 *Eleh Ezkerah*, vol. 2, 201.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 195 (my translation).
- 18 Michelson, "Petaḥ HaBayit," in *Shut Bet Yehezqel*, 11, 21.
- 19 See Shtokfish, *Sefer Zgierz*, vol. 1, 495, vol. 2, 82. Michelson's wife's name is not mentioned. Beginning with *Ohel Elimelekh* (1910), Michelson's introductions to his books end "here in Zgierz."
- 20 *Eser Tzahtzahot* 1:17. Compare 1:53, 1:55, 9:24.
- 21 Thus Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson, writing after the First World War, refers to "My son Abraham Hayim Simhah Bunem of Zgierz" ("Petaḥ HaBayit," in *Shut Bet Yehezqel*, 21).
- 22 Halpern, *Atlas*, vol. 13, 39, no. 162.
- 23 Shtokfish, *Sefer Zgierz*, vol. 1, 594.
- 24 The first three in Hebrew year 5670 and *Ohel Naftali* in 5671. Calculation of the civil year takes into account the Hebrew month and day noted at the end of Michelson's introductions.
- 25 The primary meaning of the Hebrew *ohel* is "tent"; in the hasidic context it usually refers to a structure built around the tombstone of a holy man to facilitate prayer at his gravesite.
- 26 The first in Hebrew year 5671 and the second in 5672.

- 27 *Ohel Rabi* is mentioned both by Shemen, *Biografye fun a Varshever Rov*, 13, and Shtokfish, *Sefer Zgierz*, vol. 1, 594. Neither mentions a publication date. Nigal, the bibliographer of the hasidic tale, does not mention this book, nor does it appear in the *Bibliography of the Hebrew Book* database, the Israeli library catalogues, or the new edition of Michelson's books (Brooklyn: Ner Lamoer, 2002).
- 28 Publication data for the other two Yiddish books have been deleted in the photo-offset reproduction in *Vunderlekhe Mayses BeYidish*. I think that *Ohel Naftali*, at least, is from the same publisher around the same time; the title pages have identical border designs and similar wording, and the typeface and layout of the books is similar. *Dover Shalom* is also similar in appearance, spelling, etc., and could be from the same press.
- 29 Hebrew years 5666, 5667, and 5670.
- 30 This book is mentioned in the introductory materials in *Zekhut Yisrael*: see in *Eser Atarot* the author's short introduction, 2, and the publisher's introduction, 17. Nigal and Feder do not mention it, nor does the *Bibliography of the Hebrew Book* CD-ROM database listing of Berger's works. The Israeli library catalogue has a number of books with the same title but none under Berger's name or concerning R' Shalom of Belz.
- 31 The *Bibliography of the Hebrew Book* database lists reprintings until 1960. These and more recent reprintings can be found by searching the on-line catalogue of the Jewish National Library (which endeavours to collect a copy of every Hebrew book in existence) and other Israeli libraries at <http://aleph1.libnet.ac.il>.
- 32 See Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 155, regarding the 1948 printing of *Ohel Elimelekh* in the DP camp at Landesberg. The Israeli National Library catalogue and the *Bibliography of the Hebrew Book* database show printings of *Zekhut Yisrael*, volumes 1, 3, and 4 in 1947 and *Ohel Naftali* in 1948, both in Germany.
- 33 These are quality hardcover editions, in standard typeface ("square letters") rather than Rashi script. Punctuation has been revised, and indices and notes have been added. *Zekhut Yisrael* appeared in two such editions in 2000 and 2001. The first (Manchester) includes an approbation from the current Belzer rebbe. The second (Brooklyn) is edited by the son of the current Shinover rebbe, whose approbation is included. This edition includes a list of subscribers belonging to a variety of hasidic groups. The same editor, with his father's approbation, has also reprinted Michelson's books (under the overall title *Ohole Tzadiqim*, previously used for a compilation of some of them with other material). A less elaborate re-edition of *Simḥat Yisrael* by Berger appeared about two decades earlier in Jerusalem, in square letters, "corrected and proofread." Concurrently, photo-offset reprints of earlier editions of Berger's and Michelson's books have continued to appear.
- 34 See Shmeruk, *Protim*, 214.
- 35 See Assaf, *Derekh HaMalkhut*, 41.

- 36 See Stern, *Anthology in Jewish Literature*.
- 37 For example, Zinberg, *History of Yiddish Literature*, vol. 9, 170.
- 38 See Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 45, and Robinson, “Literary Forgery,” 74, regarding the works of R’ Yudel Rosenberg.
- 39 “The translators no doubt felt they were enhancing for better effect as a religious act when in fact it was the esthetic urge manifesting itself” (Seth L. Wolitz, email to the author, 24 December 1999).
- 40 See Alter, *Invention of Hebrew Prose*, especially chapter 2 on Mendele Moykher-Sforim.
- 41 *Meqor Hayim* (Hebrew) 35, no. 124; Yiddish version, 36.
- 42 For a striking example from an earlier source, compare Rubinstein, *Shivhe HaBesht* no. 189, 287–9 (translated in Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, 230) with the Yiddish version cited in Rubinstein, 288n10.
- 43 *Eser Orot*, 25.
- 44 *Eser Qedushot*, 12–13, at the end of the *haskamah* section; *Ohel Avraham*, 4.
- 45 A. Wagschal in his edition of *Ateret Menaḥem* (2002), 7 (my translation; exclamation mark in original). The two books by Frenkl are included in the earlier compilation *Ohole Tzadiqim*. See Nigal, *Melaqte HaSipur HaHasidi*, 261–2.
- 46 This at least is a likely explanation for the many stories that appear in letters from the same informants, with minor variations, in both collectors’ books, for example, *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* 6:31 and *Ohel Naftali* no. 41, both attributed to R’ Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson.
- 47 See Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 314, apparently based on Shemen, *Biografye*, 31.
- 48 Shemen, *Biografye*, 31, mentions *Eser Orot* 1:16 and 6:17 as examples; see also *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* 6:4 and elsewhere. Shemen also argues that when *Shemen Hatov* was published, Abraham Hayim, at nineteen, was too young to be the real author – but this is not convincing in a culture that celebrated youthful prodigies, including R’ Tzvi Ezekiel himself. Shemen also points out that the father’s and son’s books are written in similar styles – but this is only to be expected in their culture, and in any case Abraham Hayim’s books are compilations including a whole variety of styles.
- 49 Robinson, “Literary Forgery,” 66n24.
- 50 *Shemen HaTov* 2:18; 2:29; 2:165.
- 51 For example, *Shemen HaTov* 2:25.
- 52 “Besidur sifri zeh,” *Meqor Hayim*, 3.
- 53 “Beavodat sifri zeh,” *Meqor Hayim*, 4.
- 54 *Ohel Naftali*, 4.
- 55 See *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* 5:7–12.
- 56 See Nigal, *Melaqte*, 230, on Itinga’s contributions to R’ Yudel Rosenberg’s books.
- 57 Data from Wunder, *Meore Galitziyah*, vol. 1, 131. Thanks to Ilan Ganot, who is

researching ancestors and relations including Rabbi Itinga, for help in finding this information.

- 58 See the Israeli library catalogues (author search for Itinga, *aleph yud tet yud nun gimel aleph*, Avraham ben Yonah).
- 59 And of R' Abraham Abish, the non-hasidic subject of *Ohel Avraham*.
- 60 The Israeli library catalogue's first listed edition of *Imre Tzadiqim* was printed in "568–" (= "192–") in Lwow (Lemberg), and subsequent editions are listed from 1930, 1985, and 1991.
- 61 See *Eser Tzahtzaḥot* 6:2, *Ohel Naftali* no. 47. The title ("The Third 'Renown of Great Men'") derives from two well-known earlier hagiographies. It seems that this book was never published; it does not appear in the *Bibliography of the Hebrew Book* database or in the Israeli library catalogues.
- 62 See Nigal, *Mehqere Mizraḥ UMaarav*, 206, regarding the collection *Qehal Ḥasidim*.
- 63 *Meqor Ḥayim* (Yiddish), 68.
- 64 See *Eser Orot* 5:9, 5:51, 3:49, 3:35, 4:3.
- 65 Nigal, *Melaqte*, 207.
- 66 The letter extends from no. 43 to no. 81; in this case, each paragraph is carefully headed *od mehanal*.
- 67 This does not quite match the numbering in *Eser Tzahtzaḥot*, where the "*ad kan leshono*" comes at the end of no. 20.
- 68 Thanks to Harry Fox for this comparison.

Chapter Three

- 1 See, for example, Gries, *Sefer*, 21; Dan, "Hasidism: The Third Century," in Rapaport-Albert, *Hasidism Reappraised*, 420; Taylor, *Joseph Perl's Revealer of Secrets*, xxvi.
- 2 Gries, *Book in the Jewish World*, 117.
- 3 See Green, *Language of Truth*, xvi, xxi–ii.
- 4 See Aescoly, *Haḥasidut BePolin*, 124–5.
- 5 Michelson, "Petaḥ HaBayit," in *Shut Bet Yehezqel*, 5–6.
- 6 Ibid., 7. R' Zeev Nahum is mentioned in *Meqor Ḥayim* no. 92. Specifically hasidic yeshivot were not established until the 1890s, according to Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 546.
- 7 On this important rabbi, see my article "Women's Voices, Men's Laws."
- 8 Based on Proverbs 25:2.
- 9 See Assaf, *Derekh HaMalkhut*, 173; Vilenski, *Hasidim UMitnagdim*, vol. 1, 35.
- 10 See, for example, Madison, *Yiddish Literature*, 30–1; Taylor, *Joseph Perl's Revealer of Secrets*, xxiv. For a nuanced view see Bartal et al., *Jews of Eastern Europe*, 4–5.
- 11 See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 16:1007 and Katsenelson-Nakhumav, *Yitskhok Katsenelson*, 36.

- 12 See Teveth, *Ben-Gurion*, 11.
- 13 Zemach, *Sipur Hayai*, 12, 29, 61.
- 14 Shemen, *Biografye*, 12.
- 15 Shtokfish, *Sefer Zgierz*, vol. 2, 28. These young men were among a group who left the Ger *shtibl* for the religious-Zionist Mizrahi movement after the First World War. *Sefer Zgierz* is not precise as to chronology, and this reference to Haskalah may apply to the postwar period.
- 16 Compare the traditional joke about the would-be *apikoros* (heretic) and the great (and learned and observant) *apikoros*, in Novak and Waldoks, *Big Book of Jewish Humor*, 224.
- 17 On the history of Reform Judaism (beginning at the end of the 1700s), see Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, and for quick reference, Gribetz et al., *Timetables of Jewish History*, items indexed under “Reform Judaism.”
- 18 Miller, *Olamo Shel Aba*, 239–40, 243.
- 19 Zemach, *Sipur Hayai*, 28.
- 20 Teveth, *Ben-Gurion*, 43.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 22 Zemach, *Sipur Hayai*, 28; Teveth, *Ben-Gurion*, 34.
- 23 Zemach, *Sipur Hayai*, 31.
- 24 Teveth, *Ben-Gurion*, 53.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 31–2.
- 26 Zemach, *Sipur Hayai*, 29, 25.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 28 Krutikov, *Yiddish Fiction and the Crisis of Modernity*, 1.
- 29 *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 13:735.
- 30 Michelson, “Petaḥ HaBayit,” in *Shut Bet Yeḥezqel*, 11.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 13, 21.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 12–13.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 Teveth, *Ben-Gurion*, 21.
- 36 Michelson, “Petaḥ HaBayit,” in *Shut Bet Yeḥezqel*, 14–15.
- 37 *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 8: 1090–91.
- 38 Parkinson, *Twenty Years in Roumania*, 28; for further details see Culiner, *Finding Home*, 15–20.
- 39 See Gutwirth, “1945–2000: Les conditions d’une renaissance,” 211; Krutikov, *Yiddish Fiction and the Crisis of Modernity*, 4.
- 40 Zemach, *Sipur Hayai*, 8.
- 41 See the articles by Robinson listed in the bibliography.
- 42 *Pinqas HaQehilot, Rumeniyah*, vol. 1, 40.
- 43 Miller, *Olama Shel Aba*, 244.

- 44 Ibid., 238.
- 45 See glossary.
- 46 Miller, *Olama Shel Aba*, 244.
- 47 Ibid., 259. After the First World War, Miller's own region of Transylvania was within Romania.
- 48 Miller, *Olama Shel Aba*, 251.
- 49 Ibid., 245.
- 50 See Berger's "Toldot Yitshaq" in *Eser Tzahtzaḥot*, 9–12.
- 51 Miller, *Olama Shel Aba*, 252.
- 52 In the library of the YIVO Institute, New York.
- 53 See Zemach, *Sipur Ḥayai*, 42, regarding emigration from Plonsk.
- 54 *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 41: 093. On these emigrants from Romania see Culiner, *Finding Home*.
- 55 See Michelson, "Petah HaBayit," in *Shut Bet Yehezqel*, 7; Alfassi, *Haḥasidut BeRumeniyah*, 108.
- 56 Gutwirth, "1945–2000," 112, 119; Ira Robinson's articles listed in the bibliography.
- 57 On the crisis in Hasidism caused by the war, see, for example, Stampfer, "Hasidic Yeshivot," 11, and the stories with hasidic characters in Babel, *Red Cavalry*.
- 58 *Ohel Yehoshua* (appended to *Dover Shalom*) no. 4.
- 59 *Ohel Naftali*, introduction, 3. See also *Dover Shalom*, introduction, 3, first paragraph.
- 60 *Eser Qedushot*, 110.
- 61 Assaf, *Regal Way*, 390n9.
- 62 Thanks to Yitzhak Buxbaum for introducing me to this concept.
- 63 See Rabinovich, *Jerusalem on Earth*, 72–3.
- 64 *Eser Orot*, 4.
- 65 See Alan Mintz's study, "Banished from Their Father's Table."
- 66 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.
- 67 Ibid., 205.
- 68 Hobsbawm and Ranger, introduction to *Invention of Tradition*, 2.
- 69 Thanks to Miki Makihara for introducing me to this cluster of concepts. In the context of the study of hasidic tales, see Robinson, "Zaddik as Hero," 96.
- 70 On imagined pasts in Judaism more generally, see Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, and the essays collected in Carlebach et al., *Jewish History and Jewish Memory*.

Chapter Four

- 1 See the chronological chart in Dan, *HaSipur HaḤasidi*, 36; Piekarz, *Ḥasidut Breslav*, 89; Roskies, *Bridge of Longing*, 67, 71, 90; Taylor, *Joseph Perl's Revealer of Secrets*.

- 2 See Assaf, *Regal Way*, 25; Gries, “Hasidism: The Present State of Research,” 102–3; Mondshine, *Shivḥe HaBesht*, 56; Robinson, “Zaddik as Hero” and other articles in the bibliography; Liberman, *Ohel Raḥel*, vol. 2, 10, regarding hasidic books in Yiddish.
- 3 Zemach, *Sipur Ḥayai*, 25.
- 4 *Ohel Avraham*, no. 16, 14.
- 5 Thanks to Jackie Davies for this insight.
- 6 See Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 67–9.
- 7 Playing on a phrase from Talmud Gittin 13a.
- 8 *Eser Atarot*, 61. This is a common theme in *haskamot* and introductions to books of tales, notes David Assaf in *Regal Way*, 344–5n70.
- 9 Perl’s *Megaleh Temirin* imitated a hasidic book in its layout and language, in an attempt to fool and influence hasidic readers; see Taylor, *Joseph Perl’s Revealer of Secrets*.
- 10 See Pelli, “On the Role of Melitzah in the Literature of Hebrew Enlightenment.”
- 11 Republished in Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq: Sipurim Ḥasidiyim*. I am dubious about Nigal’s attribution of all four collections compiled in this volume to the same author, Bodeq, because of differences in style and duplications of material.
- 12 Alfassi calls Berger the first author to write about Hasidism in an ordered manner (*Haḥasidut BeRumenyah*, 120). However, Berger was preceded by Heilman’s *Bet Rabi* and Rodkinson/Frumkin’s *Toldot Baale Shem Tov*, both influenced by Haskalah.
- 13 See Rapaport-Albert, “Hagiography with Footnotes.”
- 14 Analysis and examples from Karlinsky, *Historiyah Shekeneged*, 109–65, especially 110, 164; see also Karlinsky, “Haredi Counter History.” As Berger’s and Michelson’s later books appeared, authors somewhat further from the hasidic fold were publishing more “modern” works of hasidic biography, for example, Teitelbaum, *HaRav MiLyady*; Zeitlin, *Rabi Naḥman MiBraslav*.
- 15 Beginning of *Eser Orot*, 1, 3.
- 16 For example, *Eser Orot*, 5:37.
- 17 See the beginning of Michelson’s introduction to *Ohel Elimelekh* and the conclusion of his father’s talmudic comments there for a good example of these contrasting styles.
- 18 *Ateret Menaḥem* no. 127. On Marcus, see Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 305–6.
- 19 A few examples found near the beginnings of some of the books under discussion: *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* 1:15; *Eser Qedushot* 2:25; *Ohel Elimelekh* no. 8; *Ohel Naftali* no. 8; *Meqor Ḥayim*, no. 7 and no. 8.
- 20 See the discussion of Hebrew literacy and hasidic literature in Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 209–11.
- 21 See the nuanced discussion in Parush, *Reading Jewish Women*, 218–26.
- 22 Stampfer, “What Did ‘Knowing Hebrew’ Mean.”

- 23 Ibid., 135.
- 24 Ibid., 136.
- 25 Lederman, “Érudition et vulgarisation,” 97, 99.
- 26 Thank you to Moshe Yida Leibowitz, of blessed memory, for this point. I have not found a written source, but it appears related to the long-established halakhah that only *ashurit* script, a version of “square letters,” may be used for the writing of sacred scrolls; see Talmud Megillah 9a.
- 27 My teacher Rabbi Meir Uri Gottesman estimates that Rashi script reads about 30 per cent more slowly than square letters (oral communication).
- 28 Noted by Allan Nadler, email to H-Judaic list, 29 June 1999.
- 29 Noted by Gilad J. Gevaryahu, email to H-Judaic list, 6 July 1999. Roskies in *Bridge of Longing*, 60, says that square letters began to replace *vaybertaytsh* in Yiddish books in the 1830s. The 1853 Yiddish *Sipurey Haploes* in the YIVO library (see bibliography; it is a version of the classic *Mayse-Bukh*) is in *vaybertaytsh*.
- 30 All the Yiddish books of tales I looked at for this study, dating from the 1880s onward, appeared in square letters. Earlier, the Hebrew book of tales about the Gaon of Vilna, *Aliyot Eliyahu*, 1855–56, has the main text in square letters together with extensive footnotes in Rashi script. Roskies, *Bridge of Longing*, 58, dates the use of square letters in Hebrew publications by maskilim to the early 1880s. Conversely, Allan Nadler says that “at least until [the twentieth] century much of the *haskala* literature was published in Rashi script as well” (email, H-Judaic list, 30 June 1999). By the 1930s even some works of hasidic “theoretical literature” were being printed in square letters; see Lederman, “Érudition et vulgarisation,” 99.
- 31 Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 24.
- 32 Noted by Gilad J. Gevaryahu (email, H-Judaic list, 25 June 1999).
- 33 Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 211.
- 34 *Meqor Hayim* (Hebrew), 54, Yiddish version, 53.
- 35 Ibid. (Hebrew) no. 82, 25, Yiddish version, 24.
- 36 Ibid. (Hebrew) no. 203, 57, Yiddish version, 57, bottom.
- 37 Ibid. (Hebrew), no. 35, and (a different variant) no. 55. The latter variant, the basis of the Yiddish version, specifies this chapter of the Mishnah but does not add “fluent in everyone’s mouth.”
- 38 *Meqor Hayim* (Yiddish), 14–15.
- 39 For a nuanced look at these literary-linguistic issues, see Miller, “Artificiality of German.”
- 40 *Meqor Hayim* (Yiddish), 15, 15–16, 23–4, corresponding to Hebrew no. 56 (beginning, 19–20), no. 56 (continuation, 20), and no. 79.
- 41 See Dan, “A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism.”
- 42 The notion of hasidic tales as propaganda or “outreach” is particularly relevant to Lubavitch Hasidism. See Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, and various articles; Buxbaum, *Storytelling*, 216.
- 43 Liberman, *Ohel Raḥel*, vol. 2, 9.

- 44 Found in the YIVO Institute library, New York.
- 45 Zweifel, *Shalom Al Yisrael*, vol. 1, 2:61, cited in Wiederkehr-Pollack, *Eliezer Zweifel*, 223. Nigal shares this view (*Hasidic Tale*, 75).
- 46 Most stories appear only in the extensive footnotes; all the supernatural tales are in footnotes, 65–7. See Nigal, “HaGaon miVilna beSifrut HaHasidit,” *Mehqere*, 293–4. There are some mitnagdic traits in *Aliyot Eliyahu*. The preface is pessimistic in tone; see Nadler, *Faith of the Mithnagdim*, 49, 77, 174–5. The praises of the Gaon focus on his achievements in Torah study; there is very little about interactions with people.
- 47 See Baumgarten, *Récits hagiographiques juifs*, 497; the title of the 1907 work in Baumgarten’s transliteration is *Seyfer shifhe meha-goen mi-vilne, vunderlekhe mayes fun vilner goen*.
- 48 Nigal, *Mehqere*, 294–7.
- 49 See Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 23, 29, 33, 34.
- 50 According to *Eser Qedushot* 1:3.
- 51 See Nigal, *Melaqte*, 200.
- 52 See Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 82–5.
- 53 This term and the ideas in the following two paragraphs derive from Engelsing, *Bürger als Leser*, chapters 12 and 13. See also Chartier, *Cultural Uses of Print*, especially chapter 6, “Urban Reading Practices, 1660–1780.”
- 54 For example, Darnton, “First Steps toward a History of Reading,” 167; Kloek, “Reconsidering the Reading Revolution,” 289.
- 55 See Wittman, “Was There a Reading Revolution”; Lovell, *Russian Reading Revolution*, 5.
- 56 Gries, *Book in the Jewish World*, 16.
- 57 See *ibid.*, 123–5, 173, 181–90.
- 58 See Chartier, *Cultural Uses of Print*, chapters 7 and 8, on such literature in France.
- 59 See Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917*, especially chapter 11; McAleer, *Popular Reading in Britain*, introduction and chapter 1, “Popular Reading and Publishing, 1870–1914.
- 60 *Trivialliteratur* is a more neutral term than the English use of “trivial” would suggest; see Nusser, *Trivialliteratur*, 1–2.
- 61 Especially from the 1960s to 1980s.
- 62 See Nusser, *Trivialliteratur*, 5–7.
- 63 For examples of *shund* titles and authors at the time when Berger’s and Michelson’s books were being published, see Cohen, “Yiddish Press,” 6–7, 9–10.
- 64 “The hasidic story collections begin [in large numbers] in the 1860s ... Their model was not earlier hasidic books, but chap books of the larger culture.” Morris Faienstein, email to the author, 17 April 1999.
- 65 Darnton, “Un-British Activities,” 85.
- 66 Baumgarten, *Récits hagiographiques juifs*, 493–6.
- 67 Ehrlich, *Leadership in the HaBaD Movement*, 386.
- 68 Morris Faienstein, email to the author, 24 June 1999.

- 69 As noted by Band, *Nahman of Bratslav*, 92. On later connections between European interest in folklore and hasidic hagiography, see Assaf, *Regal Way*, 25; Roskies, *Bridge of Longing*, 97; Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yidish BePolin*, 292.
- 70 Israel Bartal, “Kinnus Project,” 313.
- 71 Weinreich and Wolf, *Yiddish Folktales*, xxii; see also Bartal et al., *KeMinhag Ashkenaz VePolin*, 413.
- 72 Between *Eser Orot* 1:17 and 1:18 regarding the Maggid of Mezritsh; *Eser Tzahtzahot* 8:31 regarding R’ Tzvi Elimelech of Dynów.
- 73 *Eser Qedushot*, 11.
- 74 Gries, *Sefer*, 36.
- 75 Thanks to Eva Frojmovic for this information on Kaufman.
- 76 Robinson, “Zaddik as Hero,” 96.
- 77 Roskies, *Bridge*, 118.
- 78 See Grossman, “Translating Perets in Germany.”
- 79 Jacobson, *Modern Midrash*, 19.
- 80 See Buber’s source notes at the end of *Or HaGanuz*.
- 81 This is the wording used, for example, on the title page of Klapholz’s *Kol Sipure Baal Shem Tov* and *Lamed Vav Tzadiqim* – works that cite dozens of books of tales, including some that the academic scholar would consider of dubious authenticity.

Chapter Five

- 1 See Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 25. There is no disagreement between Nigal and Dan on *Toldot Baale Shem Tov* (1876), which Rodkinson openly published as a maskil.
- 2 Dan, “A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism.”
- 3 See *Eser Orot* 2:13, which quotes a denunciation of a saying attributed to Rebbe Phinehas of Korets in another book, concluding, “but some joker printed vain words.”
- 4 See Taylor, *Joseph Perl’s Revealer of Secrets*; Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs*, 10, 37, on *tekhines* (prayers for women); Roskies, *Bridge of Longing*, 73, 77–8, on a book by I.M. Dik depicting Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg as a “proto-maskil.”
- 5 Nigal, *Melaqte*, 106.
- 6 Tzitrin, *Shivhe Tzadiqim*, no. 58, 115.
- 7 *Ibid.*, no. 8, 25.
- 8 Shtokfish, *Sefer Zgierz*, vol. 1, 495.
- 9 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 82.
- 10 See Raphael, *Entsiqlopediyah shel HaTzionut HaDatit*, 407. Did Israel Berger also support Zionism? Miller, *Olama Shel Aba*, 252, introducing his list of the few good rabbis of Bucharest, including Berger, adds, “although most of them were members of the Zionist party and sent their children to university.”
- 11 Dated 1 November 1918. Shtokfish, *Sefer Zgierz*, vol. 1, 129.
- 12 See, for example, *ibid.*, 154, a facsimile of a document in Michelson’s handwriting.

- 13 Beginning of the introduction to *Dover Shalom*.
- 14 See Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 67–71.
- 15 *Ohel Avraham*, introduction, 3.
- 16 Dan, *HaSipur*, 58–63.
- 17 Referring to Newman and Spitz, *Hasidic Anthology*.
- 18 Dan, *HaSipur*, 63.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 20 Later published as Sternhartz, *Shivḥe HaRan* and *Siḥot HaRan*.
- 21 *Ohel Avraham* no. 85–107 and no. 115.
- 22 See, for example Padva, *BeOhole Tzadiqim*, cited in chapter 11.
- 23 Shmeruk, *Prokim*, 215 (my translation).
- 24 Dan, introduction to Weiss, *Studies*, xvii; see also Dan, *HaSipur HaḤasidi*, 235–8.
- 25 See Gries, *Sefer Sofer VeSipur*, 24–7, on hasidic manuscripts and books that contain teachings from two or more rebbes without any clear distinction about who said what; see Miller, *Olam shel Aba*, 259, on the honour accorded every rebbe by every Romanian hasid. Today, as mentioned earlier, marriages between children of rebbes are arranged to cement alliances between different hasidic groups. On the Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage to Rebbe Nakhmen's grave in 2007, I encountered hasidim of Lubavitch, Satmar, Tosh, and other groups taking part in this Breslov gathering.
- 26 Dan, *HaSipur*, 236.
- 27 In *Shemen HaTov* 2:4, Michelson cites a manuscript of Rebbe Isaac Meir Alter of Ger (d. 1866). Berger cites the Komarno Rebbe's manuscript "book of secrets" (*Megilat Setarim*; see chapter 6 of this volume) in *Eser Qedushot*, chapter 9 and elsewhere.
- 28 See Nigal, *Melaqte*, 197.
- 29 *Meqor Ḥayim* no. 163.
- 30 *Eser Tzahtzahot*, 14.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 32 *Eser Qedushot*, 6.
- 33 Feder, *Mishpokhes Rabonim in Ungarn*, 367.
- 34 Thank you to Ira Robinson for this insight. On these developments see Vincent, "Progress of Literacy."
- 35 Dan, "A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism," 185.
- 36 Thanks to Morris Faierstein for this insight (email to the author, 17 April 1999). See Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, 139, on improved printing presses; 140–1 on wood-pulp paper, which became practical in 1843 and "within a decade ... spread everywhere." Jewish printers caught up with these technological developments in the mid-nineteenth century, according to Gries, *Book in the Jewish World*, 129.
- 37 Zinberg, *History of Jewish Literature*, vol. 12, 88–9, quoting Alexander Zederbaum, *Qol Mevasser*, 1869, no. 22, 247.

- 38 This book is in the YIVO library, the price printed on the cover. On the publisher and printer, see below.
- 39 It is catalogued under the title *Qol qore baharim*.
- 40 *Vehithazaqtem*. This is not the name of any weekly portion, but the word occurs only in Numbers 13:20, near the beginning of the weekly portion *Shelah*. This word from the portion was evidently chosen for its appropriateness as a reminder to “strengthen” and support Rabbi Berger.
- 41 The last letter in the date is blurred, so the date might possibly be 5662 or 5663 – 1901/1902 or 1902/1903.
- 42 Miller, *Olamo Shel Aba*, 246; *Pinqas HaQehilot, Rumeniyah*, vol. 1, 47, 49.
- 43 *Eser Qedushot*, first *haskamah*, 2. Similarly, the publisher’s introduction to *Eser Atarot* (16) asks readers “to strengthen the hands of a Torah scholar.”
- 44 See author’s short introduction to *Eser Orot*, 2; publisher’s introduction to *Eser Atarot*, 17.
- 45 Email, 2 May 1999.
- 46 Compare the terminology in *Eser Qedushot*, 12, and in *Eser Atarot*, 16.
- 47 See *Eser Orot*, 2; *Eser Atarot*, 17.
- 48 Newman’s and Spitz’s bibliography to *Hasidic Anthology*, 537, mentions other books published by Kleyman: *Nifleot Elimelekh*, *Nifleot HaYehudi*, *Nifleot Rabi Bunem*, *Siḥot Ḥayim*, *Sipure Besht*, and *Nifleot HaTzadiqim*, the last published in Hebrew and later in Yiddish, the others mentioned only in Yiddish editions.
- 49 See Kleyman’s note in *Eser Qedushot*, 12.
- 50 *Eser Orot*, 25, *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot*, 6, and in the same *haskamah* reprinted in *Eser Atarot*, 5.
- 51 See, for example, Siegmundfeldt, “Judaization of Postmodern Theory,” 822.
- 52 The formulation is from Talmud Berakhot 55a and becomes highly significant in Kabbalah.
- 53 Robinson, “Literary Forgery,” 63.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Ibid., 62–3, noting that Solomon Schechter remarked on this at the time.
- 56 Robinson, “Literary Forgery,” 66–7.
- 57 *Shemen HaTov* 2:128.
- 58 For example, *Eser Orot* 6:1 (148); *Eser Orot*, short introduction, 1.
- 59 See the sources listed above, chapter 1, note 30 (p. 278).
- 60 *Meqor Ḥayim* no. 20.
- 61 *Eser Orot* 3:13, 83.
- 62 Ibid., 84.
- 63 See also Idel, *Hasidism*, 242, on hasidic sermons.
- 64 In the YIVO library.
- 65 See Nakhmen of Breslov, *Sipure Massiyot*, no. 13, the third day, 210, on *ish ḥesed haemet*.
- 66 As they are in *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* 3:10.
- 67 *Eser Qedushot* 1:6 (19).

- 68 *Shemen HaTov* 2:47, 76.
 69 *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim*, in Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 73.
 70 See Nigal's note ad loc.
 71 For a nuanced discussion of these issues in rabbinic through medieval Judaism, see Elman and Gershoni, "Transmitting Tradition: Orality and Textuality in Jewish Cultures," in their *Transmitting Jewish Tradition*, 1–26.
 72 "Ershinen ferter band fun bavustn seyfer 'Siaḥ Zeqenim,'" 32.

Chapter Six

- 1 See Dan, *HaSipur*, 40–52, 219–20.
 2 For example, Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 220–1; Dvir-Goldberg, *HaTzadiq HaḤasidi*, 16; Galley, *Der Gerechte ist das Fundament der Welt*, 17–18; Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 50–61.
 3 Dan, *HaSipur HaḤasidi* 195–6, 235–6.
 4 Dan, "A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism" (1991); introduction to Weiss, *Studies in European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism*, xvii; "Qitzah shel HaḤasidut Ha-Frumkinianit" (1999).
 5 Mondshine, *Shivḥe HaBesht*, 56.
 6 See Liberman, *Ohel Raḥel*, vol. 1, 1; Heschel, *Kotsk*, vol. 1, 8–9; see also Dresner, introduction to Heschel, *Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, xiii.
 7 See Stone, *Burning Brightly*, for a participant-observer's study of this community (in Toronto and elsewhere).
 8 This was mentioned as part of Lottridge's introduction as a speaker at a seminar on "Spirituality and Religion" held by the Company of Familiars, Toronto, 26 November 2002.
 9 There is a contemporary Jewish saying that "God loves stories." Buxbaum, in *Storytelling and Spirituality*, 13 and 215n20, gives three sources for versions of this idea: Elie Wiesel in *Gates of the Forest*, Shlomo Carlebach (orally), and Buxbaum himself. These three teachers are late twentieth-century figures who, while connected with Hasidism, do not speak fully from within hasidic thought.
 10 Morris Faierstein, email to the author, 25 June 1999; confirmed by hasidim Yaakov S. (tentatively, email, 6 June 1999) and Dovid H. (email, 7 June 1999). Modzitz hasid Yitzchak D. writes (email, 6 June 1999), "as far as I know, stories do not occupy a primary place in Modzitz – the focus is mainly on Torah and Neginah [singing, music]." Miller, *Olamot shel Aba*, 245, mentions a visit with a minor rebbe who told miracle stories about his ancestor, *along with* words of Torah and Sabbath songs.
 11 See Sears and Zeitlin, "Breslov Minhagim," 43, "Nittel Nacht"; Band, *Nahman of Bratslav*, 38.
 12 Idel, *Hasidism*, 185–7.

- 13 Brill, "Spiritual World of a Master of Awe," 57–8.
- 14 Cited from *Siḥot HaRan* no. 138 and discussed by Shmeruk, *Prokim*, 218; Sternhartz, *Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom*, 268.
- 15 Dovid H., email to the author, 7 June 1999. Dovid H. is cited several times in this study. His comments are valuable as those of a thoughtful individual reflecting critically on his community. See also Polen, "Hasidic Tales and Interdynastic Polemics."
- 16 Habad, an acronym for the Hebrew phrase "wisdom, understanding and knowledge," is used today as an alternate name for Lubavitch Hasidism, though it properly refers to a broader stream in Hasidism of which the Lubavitch dynasty forms a part.
- 17 Ehrlich, *Leadership in the HaBaD Movement*, 384–5.
- 18 Ibid., 350, 383.
- 19 Ibid., 386.
- 20 Loewenthal, "Habad Messianism," 305.
- 21 Ehrlich, *Leadership in the HaBaD Movement*, 384.
- 22 Ibid., 348, 382. Compare with Kotik, *Journey*, 126, describing mid-nineteenth-century storytelling about holy men alongside gossip and political chat.
- 23 Ehrlich, *Leadership in the HaBaD Movement*, 299–300, 384–5.
- 24 Ibid., 384–5.
- 25 Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim*, 8.
- 26 Ibid., 7.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 See Idel, *Hasidism*, 187, on "the preference for speech" in hasidic teachings on stories.
- 29 See the remarks of Rebbe Hayim Eleazar Shapira of Munkatsh, in *Divre Torah* (1929), cited in Assaf, *Regal Way*, 24.
- 30 Dovid H., email to the author, 7 June 1999.
- 31 Huss, "Sefer ha-Zohar as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text," 257–64.
- 32 Huss, email to E-Idra list, 7 August 2001.
- 33 See Gutwirth, *Vie Juive traditionnelle*, 219–20.
- 34 Oral communication.
- 35 In Hebrew: *sifre qodesh*. See Cohen, *Baḥanuto shel Mokher Hasfarim*, 108.
- 36 Noted by Mondshine, *Shivḥe HaBesht*, 55, regarding positive sayings about *Shivḥe HaBesht* in particular.
- 37 Roskies, *Bridge*, 24, referring to the *Mayse-Bukh* (see below); Shmeruk, *Prokim*, 219, referring to *Shivḥe HaBesht*.
- 38 Roskies, *Bridge*, 24.
- 39 Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, vol. 11, 151–2.
- 40 Ibid., vol. 12, 82.
- 41 Morris Faierstein, email to the author, 25 June 1999.

- 42 *Der Yid*, 27 April 2001, 6.
- 43 On this literature see Isaacs, “Contemporary Hasidic Yiddish Literature.”
- 44 Piekarz, *Hasidut Breslav*, 84.
- 45 *Shemen HaTov*, 119, near the end of the second column.
- 46 This applies to many teachings cited by Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 51–3, and to Brill, “Spiritual World,” 57–8.
- 47 *Meqor Hayim*, 3.
- 48 Such research should consider contemporary publication of hasidic stories in various contexts. For example, Burton (Berel) Leiser reports that in the annual religious calendar published by the Bobov yeshivah in Brooklyn, “on the back of each page is a *mayse* [tale] – in Yiddish, of course – related to the Bobover dynasty” (email to “Mendele” list, 5 May 1999). The Satmar newspaper *Der Yid* includes hasidic tales in each issue in a variety of contexts, and “stories of tzad-dikim” is often one of the headings in the table of contents.
- 49 Faierstein, *All Is in the Hands of Heaven*, 11.
- 50 Email to the author, 6 June 1999.
- 51 Email to the author, 17 April 1999.
- 52 Berger remarried; see chapter 10 for a story ascribed to his second wife.
- 53 Similarly, the title page of Berger’s homiletic work *Retzon Yisrael* on the months and holy days notes that his choice of what to include was determined by “a matter relating to the repair of my soul (*letiqun nafshi*).”
- 54 Berger does not depict his father as a miracle-worker, but neither are there miracle stories about all the rebbes in *Zekhut Yisrael*. Miracles do happen to his father.
- 55 Berger, “Toldot Yitzḥaq,” in *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot*, 15.
- 56 *Musmakh*, also connoting rabbinic ordination: “authorized,” “endorsed.”
- 57 *Eser Qedushot*, 6.
- 58 See Faierstein, *Jewish Mystical Autobiographies*, 267–71.
- 59 Translation in *ibid.*, 294.
- 60 On *haskamot*, see Gries, *Book in the Jewish World*, 117–19.
- 61 See Faierstein, *All Is in the Hands of Heaven*, 8, 100.
- 62 *Haskamah* of R’ Shalom Mordecai HaKohen of Berzon to *Eser Qedushot*, 1.
- 63 *Haskamah* of R’ Elijah David Teomim Rabinovits to *Eser Qedushot*, 3.
- 64 *Haskamah* of R’ Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson to *Eser Orot*, 32.
- 65 *Haskamah* of R’ Joshua Horowitz of Dzikov to *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot*, 3; similar wording in *haskamah* of R’ Shalom Mordecai HaKohen of Berzon to *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot*, 7.
- 66 See Roskies, *Bridge*, 24, on the *Mayse-Bukh* and its successors.
- 67 Michelson, “Petaḥ HaBayit,” in *Shut Bet Yeḥezkel*, 5.
- 68 Sadan, *Mimeḥoz HaYaldut*, 258.
- 69 Email to the author, 7 June 1999.
- 70 Assaf, *Regal Way*, 24. This protest was printed in 5672 (1911/1912), the same Hebrew year as *Meqor Hayim*.

- 71 See *Ateret Menaḥem*, 3, introduction, second paragraph; *Ohel Naftali*, 3, introduction, third and fourth paragraphs.
- 72 Mondshine, *Shivḥe HaBesht*, 56, arguing (with some exaggeration of Shmeruk's point) against Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yidish BePolin*, 130–1.
- 73 Such carelessness continues today: the list of contents on the cover of *Vunderlekhē Mayses BeYidish*, the compilation in which I found the Yiddish *Meqor Ḥayim*, does not include *Meqor Ḥayim* among its titles.
- 74 For example, *Meqor Ḥayim* (Hebrew) 56 (second part, 20) compared to the Yiddish equivalent, 15–16.
- 75 For example, *Ohel Naftali* (Yiddish), 6–7.
- 76 *Meqor Ḥayim* (Yiddish), 53.

Chapter Seven

- 1 See Nigal, “Storytellers,” in Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 470.
- 2 Galley, *Der Gerechte ist das Fundament der Welt*.
- 3 See Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 18–21.
- 4 See Rebbe Nakhmen's remarks on the sources of his *Sipure Maasiyot* (ends of stories no. 3, 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13.)
- 5 Hasidic thought is generally seen as a development of Kabbalah, and stories often mention the Zohar and other mystical texts.
- 6 In *Magic, Mysticism and Hasidism*, Nigal traces several prominent motifs in hasidic stories through earlier Jewish literature. In almost all cases the earliest sources of these motifs are in medieval sources.
- 7 See Elstein, “Gregorius Legend.”
- 8 See Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 18 and sources cited there; Nakhmen of Breslov, *Sipure Maasiyot*, introduction (Kaplan, *Rabbi Nachman's Stories*, 8). *Eser Orot* 3:38 is one obvious example of a universal folktale plot put into a hasidic setting; for an English retelling of this story, see “The Three Advices of Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev,” in Carlebach and Mesinai, *Shlomo's Stories*, 123–30.
- 9 *Shivḥe HaBesht*: Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 173 (Rubinstein 223 no. 113).
- 10 Compare Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 8–9, on the equation of hasidic rebbes with biblical heroes in hasidic homiletics, and Baumgarten, *Récits hagiographiques juifs*, 494–5, on displays of pictures in hasidic homes combining the portraits of rebbes with those of great medieval rabbis.
- 11 Nadler, *Faith of the Mithnagdim*, 133.
- 12 In *Shivḥe HaBesht*, see Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 59 (no. 44), 65, 199.
- 13 For example, Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 89–90.
- 14 See, for example, *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* 3:29, *Dover Shalom* no. 135.
- 15 As noted in Nigal's annotated edition of *Shemen HaTov*.
- 16 In Rebbe Nakhmen's *Sipure Maasiyot* no. 11, 116, the phrase *nashim daatan qalot* (“women are light-minded”) is used to describe a gossipy midwife. Kaplan,

Rabbi Nachman's Stories, 236, emphasizes that Rashi on Genesis 3:15 uses this expression about Eve. It appears, however, in earlier sources relating to the wife of R' Simeon ben Yohai (Talmud Shabbat 33b), to the matriarch Sarah (Midrash Tanḥuma Vayera 22), and to women in general (Talmud Qiddushin 80b). The story may simply be using a handy stock phrase.

- 17 On teachings placing the rebbe in the realm of the divine, see Brill, "Spiritual World of a Master of Awe," 49–51; on extreme developments of this theme among some Lubavitch hasidim today, see Berger, *The Rebbe, The Messiah*, 83.
- 18 In earlier collections see, for example, *Maaseh Tzadiqim* no. 32 (Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 60) where R' Uri of Streisk is reading from the Torah and R' Shalom of Belz "saw the portion as black fire upon white fire," a reference, based on several midrashic sources and commentaries, to the Torah mysteriously present with God before the creation of the world.
- 19 Compare to *Maaseh Tzadiqim* no. 29 (Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 58), where R' Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt says about himself, "No one ever bested me, except one woman."
- 20 Literally, "may your strength be straight."
- 21 Actually, Rashi's commentary, Bava Metzia 39b, 109b, etc.
- 22 "*Shtus*" is "*shtut*" in modern Israeli pronunciation.
- 23 Rabbi Mattathias Ezekiel Gotman.
- 24 On Avot, see the glossary.
- 25 The original source for both is the earlier *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim* no. 14 (Nigal, 93–4). The text quoted here follows *Eser Orot*, which is closer to the earlier version than the somewhat abridged text in *Shemen HaTov*.
- 26 This is the text in *Eser Orot*, following the source in *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim*. The phrase in the Talmud actually refers to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, not Rav. On the apparent hasidic view of Rav as on the highest spiritual level, see *Dover Shalom* no. 62, discussed below; Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 131n23; Jacobs, *Holy Living*, 78.
- 27 Strictly speaking, Rav is not categorized as a tanna, but doing so increases his stature here.
- 28 For sources on this hasidic practice of complex meditation during ordinary conversation, see Buxbaum, *Jewish Spiritual Practices*, 464–8.
- 29 R' Kahana is properly called Rav Kahana, where Rav is the title of a Babylonian rabbi. I have used the abbreviation R' to avoid confusion with the other sage in this story, who is simply called Rav because of his greatness as a scholar and teacher.
- 30 The Talmud uses an Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew *derekh eretz*.
- 31 *Guzma qa-tane*, Talmud Betzah 4a.
- 32 In addition to the texts discussed here see *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* 1:27 (which plays on the story of R' Kahana under Rav's bed discussed in part 4); *ibid.* 9:24 (cf. Talmud

Ketubot 67b); Gries, “La littérature hagiographique,” 35, on *Maaseh Tzadiqim* no. 34 (Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 61); and R’ Nakhmen of Breslov’s comments on his sources at the end of *Sipure Maasiyot* no. 11.

- 33 Cf. the similar story in Talmud Taanit 25a, echoed in the Hebrew *Shivḥe HaBesht*, though not in the parallel Yiddish version. In this case the Yiddish might represent an earlier tradition and the Hebrew version an example of literary creativity based on knowledge of talmudic texts. See Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 310, no. 6n1; Rubinstein, *Shivḥe HaBesht*, 43n33.
- 34 See, for example, Etkes, *Gaon of Vilna*, 153–78; Nadler, *Faith of the Mithnagdim*, 29–34, 50–5; Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, 17–21.
- 35 Kotik, *Journey*, 190; cf. 201.
- 36 *Eser Orot*, 13 (Petiḥta Ravta, “tshuvah sheelah hareviit”).
- 37 Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 117; other references to study of *En Yaaqov* appear on 124–5, 198.

Chapter Eight

- 1 See especially Buber, *Way of Man*.
- 2 See Louis Jacobs, “Halakhah,” in Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 169–71; Norman Lamm, “Mitnaggedim,” *ibid.*, 318–19; Wertheim, *Law and Custom in Hasidism*, 94–5.
- 3 *Mi yomar lo mah taaseh* – a phrase applied to God in the *Tziduq HaDin* prayer recited at funerals.
- 4 Citing Michelson’s own *Ohel Elimelekh*, in a footnote to no. 133, attributed to R’ Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson.
- 5 Bascom, “Four Functions of Folklore,” 338.
- 6 Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 1.
- 7 Relatively speaking; note the comments of Miller, *Olamo Shel Aba*, on early twentieth-century Romanian hasidim, cited in chapter 4.
- 8 For example, *Shivḥe HaBesht*, Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 188.
- 9 He would call out the name of each sound before the rebbe blew it on the shofar.
- 10 Of Frankfurt am Main, 1742–1800, a non-hasidic kabbalist.
- 11 Modified from the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation.
- 12 Thank you to Harry Fox for noting these allusions.
- 13 For an earlier precedent, see Jacobs, *Tree of Life*, 77–8.
- 14 Contradicting others, in which R’ Shalom heals by laying on of hands. See “The Butcher’s Blessing” at the beginning of this book.
- 15 See, for example, Elstein, *HaEqstazah*, 170–99; Schwarzbaum, “Charity Thwarts Fate,” in *Studies in Jewish Folklore*, 278–80; notes on the international tale-type AT809*, “Rich Man Allowed to Stay in Heaven for Single Deed of Charity,” in Haboucha, 273–4; Gaster, trans., *Maaseh Book*, story 8, “Sabbath Observance Rewarded,” based on Talmud Shabbat 150b.

- 16 *Shulḥan Arukh Oraḥ Ḥayim*, *Hilkhot Tefillah* 90:24, and *Yoreh Deah*, *Hilkhot Kevod Rabo veTalmid Ḥakham* 242:16.
- 17 In this literature, if “rabbi” (scholarly authority on Jewish law) rather than “rebbe” (hasidic spiritual leader) were meant, the Hebrew word *rav* would be used.
- 18 Indeed, there is a hasidic saying, “*a rebe meg*,” “a rebbe can [do as he pleases].”
- 19 See Wertheim, *Law and Custom*, 134–43, and Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, 46–53.
- 20 Traditional halakhah exempts women from the obligation to hear the shofar; see Maimonides, *Hilkhot Shofar* 2:1. The rebbetzin, or women in general in her community, might have taken this on as a voluntary obligation. In any case the implication is that many men could not hear it either.
- 21 *Meqor Ḥayim*, 12, in a footnote to story no. 25.
- 22 Cf. *Eser Orot* 3:21, cited in the previous chapter.
- 23 This kind of story supports Yoav Elstein’s thesis in *HaEqstazah* on the centrality of ecstasy to the hasidic tale.
- 24 See Talmud Hagigah 16a: “Whoever gazes at three things, his eyesight shall weaken: the rainbow, the nasi, and the kohanim [when they are blessing the congregation].” What in the Talmud appears as a quasi-medical warning is understood as a prohibition here, and also in the Torah commentary *Torah Temimah* by Rabbi Baruch Epstein, published 1902, in a note on Numbers 27:20 (consulted on Bar-Ilan *Responsa* database).
- 25 On this concept see Mondshine, “Fluidity of Categories in Hasidism.”
- 26 See Jacobs, *Tree of Life*, 71–2. For more recent pre-hasidic examples of supernatural considerations affecting halakhic choices, see *Peer MiQedoshim* no. 4 (in Nigal, *Menahem Mendl Bodeq*); Rosman, *Founder*, 30.
- 27 As noted in chapter 11, another story suggests that there were no worms in the rebbe’s cherries because the worms would flee from his presence.
- 28 On this law, see Lewis, “Women’s Voices, Men’s Laws.”
- 29 The *Noda bYhdah* is the title of a book, by which the author is also known.
- 30 See my “Women’s Voices, Men’s Laws.”
- 31 Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 71–2, 140, 231–4.
- 32 My translation from Rubinstein, *Shivḥe HaBesht*, 290 (Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 233.)
- 33 Rubinstein, *Shivḥe HaBesht*, 113n4.
- 34 My translation from Rubinstein, *Shivḥe*, 290 (Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 232–3).
- 35 See *Dover Shalom* nos. 116, 119, 132, 133, 143, 145, 160, 267, 299, 307, 335, and 383.
- 36 Today’s Zolochiv, near Lviv, Ukraine.
- 37 This same incident, apparently, is referred to by Jacobs, in *Tree of Life*, 84–5.
- 38 Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 78.
- 39 *Responsa Tzitz Eliezer*, vol. 10, 145 (25:14:8).
- 40 *Meqor Ḥayim* no. 250 is preceded by a title, *Quntres Zikhron Yehezqel*, as if all

the stories thereafter would be devoted to R' Ezekiel, but that is not followed through.

- 41 See, for example, *Meqor Hayim* no. 251, no. 264.
- 42 *Meqor Hayim* no. 20.
- 43 See, for example, Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (first published in 1922), 63; “Water Couldn’t Hurt,” Weinreich and Wolf, *Yiddish Folktales*, 195; “Prophecy” (identified as a mitnaged’s tale), Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim*, 413.
- 44 *Ateret Menaḥem* no. 198 is another story Michelson cites from this book. Berger too cites *Taame HaMinhagim*, for example, *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* 9:59–60.
- 45 Ish Shuv, *Taame HaMinhagim*, title page. The edition consulted includes a table of contents for the stories and parables (hasidic and non-hasidic) occupying ten columns of small print (652–6).
- 46 Ish Shuv, *Taame HaMinhagim*, Inyane Pesah, Quntres Aḥaron, note 29 (p. 227 in the edition consulted).
- 47 “Eternal our God, Ruler of the Universe.” The inclusion of these words means that it really was a blessing by halakhic definition. This in turn means that the words of the blessing are halakhically required to follow an established wording.
- 48 A biblical phrase, *venishmartem meod lenafshotekhem*, Deuteronomy 4:15. In rabbinic interpretation, though not the biblical context, this is a commandment to take care of one’s life and health.
- 49 Ish Shuv, *Taame HaMinhagim*, Inyane Pesah, Quntres Aḥaron, note 29 (p. 227 in the edition consulted).
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 There are conflicting views about the most accurate translation of this phrase.

Chapter Nine

- 1 See, for example, *Shemen HaTov* 2:7, 2:10, 2:45; *Ateret Menaḥem* nos. 100, 166; *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* 6:9, 6:60, 9:16, 9:23, 9:25, and many others. On the tish and its history, see Nadler, “Holy Kugel,” 195–202.
- 2 On *shirayim* and its history, see Nadler, *ibid.*, 198–202.
- 3 See the cryptic reference to “the mystery of *shirayim*” in *Eser Qedushot* 8:12/*Ohel Naftali* no. 100.
- 4 For example, *Ohel Elimelekh* no. 173 (beginning; translated in Buxbaum, *Jewish Spiritual Practices*, 256); *Ohel Naftali* no. 14; *Eser Qedushot* 1:3 (R' Ayzik of Safrin had the unusual custom of eating with his household servants out of love for his fellow Jews).
- 5 Cf. Langer, *Nine Gates*, 124.
- 6 Kotik, *Journey*, 198–200. Kotik also depicts Hasidism as having a distinctly ascetic side; see *Journey*, 189, on his father’s immersions in an icy mikveh.

- 7 See, for example, Wodzinski, *Haskalah and Hasidism*, 14, 17, 122, 220.
- 8 Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 143, 146. 9 See Nadler, “Holy Kugel,” 198–201.
- 9 See Nadler, “Holy Kugel,” 198–201.
- 10 For the Baal Shem Tov’s position, see Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 65; Rosman, *Founder*, 114–15. In Berger and Michelson, see, for example, *Dover Shalom* no. 15, *Ohel Naftali* no. 60 (the rebbe tricks a man into revealing that he fasts out of spiritual pride), *Eser Orot* 3:30 (R’ Levi Isaac of Berditshev disapproves of fasting because it weakens the brain and makes one vulnerable to temptation).
- 11 For example, *Eser Qedushot* 2:23.
- 12 *Sipure Maasiyot* no. 11, “The Exchanged Children,” Kaplan, *Rabbi Nachman’s Stories*, 253.
- 13 Rosenthal, 1901.
- 14 Heard from Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (Elat Chayyim retreat centre, summer 1996). See Nadler, “Holy Kugel,” 202. Cf. Buxbaum, *Jewish Spiritual Practices*, 265.
- 15 Cf. Assaf, *Regal Way*, 15, on R’ Abraham Jacob’s father, Rebbe Israel of Ruzhyn.
- 16 Buxbaum, *Jewish Spiritual Practices*, 242; see the entire chapter 10, “Eating and the Holy Meal,” esp. 259–71.
- 17 This phrase is taken from Proverbs 13:25.
- 18 For example, Talmud Berakhot 62a: “It seems as if Abba’s mouth has never tasted this dish,” discussed elsewhere in this study.
- 19 Cross-culturally, cf. Kripal, *Kālī’s Child*, 265–77.
- 20 Nigal, *Magic, Mysticism and Hasidism*, chapter 3 (especially 55–61) lists and discusses many such stories. On the history of the ideas involved, see Scholem, “Gilgul: The Transmigration of Souls,” in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 197–250. These ideas are still relevant in Hasidism today.
- 21 On this compilation, see my article “Miracles and Martyrdom.” An earlier version of this story is in a collection contemporary with Berger’s and Michelson’s books, Rosenthal, *Hitgalut HaTzadiqim* no. 21.
- 22 See two stories about this in *Shivḥe HaBesht*, Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 133–4, 258–9.
- 23 In collections of tales other than Berger’s and Michelson’s, see, for example, Tzitrin, *Shivḥe Tzadiqim* 49n22, where Rebbe Meirl of Sheps makes sure that his wife keeps no money in the house overnight, and *Maasiyot UMAamarim Yeqarim* (Tziqernik, *Sipurim UMAamarim Yeqarim*, 116–17), where Rebbe Moses Hayim Ephraim of Sudilkov, seeing his wife’s pleasure in a silver Sabbath candelabrum acquired when they become wealthy, says, “Things are bright for you now, but they were bright for me before.”
- 24 For example, *Ohel Naftali* no. 42, *Eser Qedushot* 3:4, *Ateret Menaḥem* no. 123.
- 25 Cf. *Shivḥe HaBesht*, Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 132.

- 26 Cf. Loewenthal, “Women and the Dialectic of Spirituality,” *21, on *Bet Rabi* (Heilman, 1902).
- 27 See Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950*, especially chapter 7, “Feminist Challenges and Antifeminist Responses, 1890–1914.”
- 28 Herzl, *Altneuland*, Arnold translation, 58.
- 29 See the comments of my informant Dovid H., cited in the next chapter.
- 30 This name is sometimes rendered as “Phoebus” from which the Yiddish form apparently derives.
- 31 Thanks to Tirzah Meacham for pointing this out.
- 32 See Kaplan, *Rabbi Nachman’s Stories*, 41, 86, 169–70. Cf. *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim* (in Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*) no. 5, involving the fruit of the actual earthly Garden of Eden, and a protagonist explicitly described like Esau in Genesis 25:25 and characterized by his crude and excessive eating.
- 33 See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*; Klaniczay, “The Carnival Spirit,” in *Uses of Supernatural Power*, chapter 2, 10–27.

Chapter Ten

- 1 An earlier version of some of this material has been published as Lewis, “Great Holy Woman Malka of Belz.”
- 2 Today’s Jawornik Polski and Lezajsk, Poland.
- 3 The rebbe’s instructions are in indirect speech in the original (“he commanded him to travel right back to his house,” etc.)
- 4 Thank you to Yitzhak Buxbaum for this comparison. On Jewish demons, see Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 25–8, 29 (on their creation), 44–9.
- 5 Jacob Joseph of Polonne, *Toldot Yaaqov Yosef, Shoftim*, section 10.
- 6 Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 539, 541, s.v. “Women.”
- 7 For example, Horodecky, *HaHasidut VeHaHasidim*, especially vol. 4, 60, 70–1; Shemen, *Batsiyung tsu der froy*, 328–38.
- 8 See, for example, Kotik, *Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl*, 409, on hasidic men’s neglect of their wives; Kotik, *Mayne Zikhroynes*, chapter 2, 26–8, on a rebbe’s foolish command that a loving husband and wife divorce.
- 9 Berger, “Frauen in der ostjüdischen Volkserzählung.”
- 10 Ibid., 400–11.
- 11 Ibid., 381n2, listing her sources (some twenty books of tales).
- 12 *Dover Shalom* no. 5 (three stories, starting in the middle of this section), no. 25 (a story told by Malkah), no. 39, no. 41, no. 42, no. 61, no. 62, no. 364; no. 67 is about R’ Shalom’s longing for Malkah after her death.
- 13 Klapholz, *Admore Belz*, 87.
- 14 Three anecdotes in *Dover Shalom* no. 5; *Dover Shalom* no. 39, no. 41, no. 61, no. 62, no. 364.

- 15 Langer, *Nine Gates*, 39–40.
- 16 Thanks to Yitzhak Buxbaum (email, 6 July 1999); see Buxbaum, *Jewish Tales of Holy Women*, 286n8.
- 17 “Harabanit,” Klapholz, *Admore Belz*, 80–9.
- 18 Dovid H., email, 7 June 1999.
- 19 Nigal, *Nashim BeSiporet HaHasidit*, 11.
- 20 Reinhartz, *Why Ask My Name?*, especially 190.
- 21 See Nigal, *Nashim BeSiporet HaHasidit*, 11. A modern exception outside the traditional hasidic world is Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*.
- 22 One exception from an earlier source, where a woman tells about her own spiritual experiences, is found in *Shivhe HaBesht*, Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 94, 96–8.
- 23 See Bal, *Narratology*, 19.
- 24 Lecture, University of Toronto, 29 January 2002.
- 25 See Munro, “Invisible Made Visible,” 251. The changeling is motif number F321 in Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*.
- 26 Dovid H., email to the author, 7 June 1999.
- 27 A woman neighbour as in Grimms’ Fairy Tales no. 39 (“Die wichtelmänner [The elves], third tale), or “a cunning woman” and healer as in T. Crofton Croker’s “The Brewery of Egg-Shells,” in Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, 49. See Munro, “Invisible Made Visible,” 260.
- 28 However, the expression “those created at twilight” is given here in Aramaic rather than in the simple Hebrew of the rabbinic sources, making it even more “literary.”

Chapter Eleven

- 1 An earlier version of much of this chapter has been published as Lewis, “Eydele, the Rebbe.”
- 2 The spelling “Eydl” is a transliteration, using the standard YIVO system, from her name as found on her tombstone and in a letter ascribed to her (see below on these sources), *aleph yud yud dalet yud lamed* in old Yiddish spelling. An alternative English spelling is “Eidel,” also used in the Polish-German archival records discussed below. “Eydele” is an affectionate diminutive.
- 3 For one list of eleven such women, see Rapaport-Albert, “On Women in Hasidism,” 519n39.
- 4 Buxbaum, *Jewish Tales of Holy Women*, xix.
- 5 Nigal, *Nashim BeSiporet HaHasidit*, 101; cf. Deutsch, *Maiden of Ludmir*, 217.
- 6 Deutsch, *Maiden of Ludmir*, 54–6.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 186.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 190–210.
- 9 See Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 329.

- 10 Buxbaum, *Jewish Tales of Holy Women*, 140–5, 287. *Aspaklaria HaMeira* is “two volumes about Rebbe Meir of Premishlan, by Mordechai Gorelitz, published in Bnei Brak, Israel by Machon Mayim Hayim in 1997” (Buxbaum, email to the author, 14 July 2008).
- 11 Polen, “Miriam’s Dance,” 10–13.
- 12 In my article “Eydele, the Rebbe.”
- 13 Phelan, “Narratives in Contest,” 168.
- 14 See the Belz publications *Admore Belz* (Klapholz), 100–1, and *BeOhole Tsadiqim* (Padva), 62–3; Buxbaum, *Jewish Tales of Holy Women*, 137–8; Novick, tape 3; cf. Brayer, *Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature*, 44. Moshe Yosef Rubin (see below) tells me that Eydl is often mentioned briefly in sources that praise R’ Shalom, and that knowledgeable Belz hasidim speak of her with great respect. Conversely, my informant Dovid H. had never heard stories of Eydl among Belz hasidim (email to the author, 7 June 1999). Eydl is not mentioned in Eichler’s 1995 Belz hagiographic work about R’ Shalom, *KeMalakh HaNitzav al Rosh HaDerekh*, or in the memorial book for Brody (Gelber, *Arim VeImahot BeYisrael: Brody*).
- 15 For a well-known example see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 349–50.
- 16 See Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 108; Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 272; *Ateret Menaḥem* no. 138.
- 17 For example, Alfassi, *HaḤasidut*, 241, has her lacking a *shtrayml*, a different style of fur hat.
- 18 Buxbaum, *Jewish Tales of Holy Women*, 140, 287n1.
- 19 According to *Dover Shalom* no. 25, Freyde died in her parents’ lifetime; this does not, however, match some other versions of Eydl’s story mentioned below.
- 20 Moses Joseph Rubin family tradition.
- 21 Mentioned in the letter ascribed to Eydl, cited below.
- 22 See “MIB,” “More on *Di Bukovina*.”
- 23 See Padva, *BeOhole Tzadiqim*, 66–7.
- 24 Moses. See *Dover Shalom* no. 24; Klapholz, *Admore Belz*, 89; Wagschal, *Yud Gimel Orot*, 249.
- 25 Thank you to David Assaf for drawing my attention to this source. Sadan appears to be the source for the mentions of Eydl in Rubin, *Belz: Sefer Zikaron* 62, 117–18, and Wunder, *Meorei Galitziyah* vol. 4, 703.
- 26 *Mimeḥoz HaYaldut*, Shtok, 287–97/Sadan, 256–64. Shtok was Sadan’s original family name, used in the 1938 edition.
- 27 Much of this material also appears in Buxbaum, *Jewish Tales of Holy Women*, 135–7, paraphrased from Sadan.
- 28 The light of the first days of creation, before the creation of the sun and stars, often understood as divine radiance, to be revealed again in messianic times.
- 29 *Mimeḥoz HaYaldut*, Shtok, 290/Sadan, 258–9.
- 30 The 1938 edition has “my grandfather [*avi zeqeni* rather than *avi zeqenti*] Reb

Yossi”; I am assuming that the later reading is correct since it is more unusual. Otherwise, when there are slight variations, the translation follows the 1938 edition.

31 *Mimehōz HaYaldut*, Shtok, 291/Sadan, 259.

32 *Torot she-amra*, “the torahs she said,” from the Yiddish expression used for a rebbe’s oral teachings.

33 The 1981 edition has “even from her nickname, as she was called by most people, Eydele the rebbetzin, and especially from her nickname as she was called by a few people, *Eydele der Rebe*” (260). This involves inserting ten words into the text, and perhaps they were left out by error in the first edition. On the other hand, the later version weakens the point considerably. It also makes less sense: there is nothing impressive about the nickname used by “most people” in this version, Eydele the rebbetzin, since she obviously was a rebbetzin, a rabbi’s wife.

34 *Mimehōz HaYaldut*, Shtok, 292/Sadan, 260.

35 *Mimehōz HaYaldut*, Shtok, 292–7/Sadan, 260–4.

36 *Mimehōz HaYaldut*, Shtok, 293/Sadan, 261.

37 This is a point emphasized by Moshe Yosef Rubin (see below) in our conversations.

38 See Deutsch, *Maiden of Ludmir*, 141–3.

39 See, for example, Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 10.

40 *Mimehōz HaYaldut*, Shtok, 296/Sadan, 263. This comes just before the paragraph about the skullcap, translated above. I have not included it there, because I believe it is mere speculation about R’ Shalom’s psychology rather than a story Sadan had heard.

41 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 171–90.

42 *Mimehōz HaYaldut*, Shtok, 293/Sadan, 260)

43 See *Mimehōz HaYaldut*, Shtok, 290/Sadan, 258.

44 For example, in *Ohel Naftali* no. 60, Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczyce tricks a man into revealing that he fasts out of self-righteous pride.

45 *Mimehōz HaYaldut*, Shtok, 294/Sadan, 262.

46 See Liban and Goldman, “Freud Comes to Palestine.”

47 Pfaefflin, “Sex Reassignment, Harry Benjamin, and Some European Roots.” See also Steakley, introduction to *Writings of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld*, and Prickett, “Magnus Hirschfeld.”

48 My citations follow Klass and Weisgrau, *Across the Boundaries of Belief*. More recent reprints: in Castelli, *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, 331–45; in French translation, “La femme qui voulait être son père,” *Cahiers du Judaïsme* 13 (2003) 54–65.

49 See Bilu, “Woman,” 200. There is an apparent reference to *Dover Shalom*, without a source note, in Bilu, 205.

50 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., 1989. Definitions of “transsexual,” “transgender(ed)” and “trans” vary and sometimes become political flashpoints.

- 51 See Bilu, “Woman,” 202, 205–7, cited in Lewis, “‘Eydele, the Rebbe,’” 28.
- 52 *Mimeḥoz HaYaldut*, Shtok, 296/Sadan, 263.
- 53 Bilu, “Woman,” 202.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 207.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 201; *Mimeḥoz HaYaldut*, Shtok, 295/Sadan, 262. I did not translate above the parts of Sadan’s chapter that are not about Eydl directly; most of the stories can be found in other sources.
- 56 Bilu, “Woman,” 205.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 209.
- 58 On Benjamin, see Pfaefflin, “Sex Reassignment”; Wheeler and Schaefer, “Harry Benjamin’s First Ten Cases”; on his Jewishness, Vanderberg, “Gender Dissonance,” 3.
- 59 Elkins, “Science, Politics and Clinical Intervention,” 309.
- 60 Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, 67–8.
- 61 In conference papers delivered in 2002 (University of Toronto) and 2005 (Association for Jewish Studies) and my article “‘Eydele, the Rebbe.’”
- 62 Epitomized by Janice Raymond’s 1979 diatribe *The Transsexual Empire* (see Rudacille, *Riddle of Gender*, 143ff, 168ff). See also Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 143–4; Prosser, *Second Skins*, 14.
- 63 See Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*; Devor, *FTM*, chapter 1, “Have Female-to-Male Transsexuals Always Existed?” (3–36); j wallace, “Jewish Gender Transgressors.”
- 64 Prosser, *Second Skins*, 4.
- 65 See Lewis, “‘Eydele, the Rebbe,’” 30–1.
- 66 See *ibid.*, 30. Benjamin, *Transsexual Phenomenon*, 69, raises this as a general possibility.
- 67 Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow*, 387; see sources cited in Lewis, “‘Eydele, the Rebbe,’” 37n50.
- 68 Shown by Tamar Alexander at a lecture at the Jewish Theological Seminary, 14 December 2000.
- 69 Alexander, “Love and Death,” 319.
- 70 From www.gender.org/resources/dge/geao2001.pdf, accessed 13 December 2005.
- 71 j wallace, email, 21 December 2005.
- 72 See, for example, Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 12. For recent affirmations of the “trapped in the wrong body” perspective, see the sources cited in Lewis, “‘Eydele, the Rebbe,’” 38n62, and Crawford, “Woman Interrupted,” 15: “She realized she was a woman trapped in a man’s body in what is known as gender identity syndrome.”
- 73 Deutsch, *Maiden of Ludmir*, 125. Deutsch devotes a chapter to this issue, “False Male and Woman Rebbe?,” 124–43, and notes that this pattern has cross-cultural precedents (260n4).
- 74 Cf. Deutsch on the Maiden of Ludmir, *Maiden* 125.

- 75 See Gwendolyn Ann Smith's interview in Ellis et al., *Harvey Milk Institute Guide*, 69.
- 76 See Gorton et al., *Medical Therapy and Health Maintenance for Transgender Men*, 56.
- 77 Thank you to my student Allyson Lee for this formulation.
- 78 In the original: Friday of the portion *Vayera*, 5635.
- 79 Padva, *BeOhole Tzadiqim*, 188, using the same expression, *hatsadeqet hamefursemet*, as *Dover Shalom*.
- 80 R' Shmuel Shmelke died in 1901. His son Rebbe Mendele Rubin of Seret (1871–1941) was the father of Rabbi Moshe Yosef Rubin (1895–1980), who served as chief rabbi of Campulung Moldovenesc in Bukovina, and later as head of the rabbinical court in Borough Park. This rabbi's son Yaakov is the father of today's Moshe Yosef Rubin, born 1985. Today's Moshe Yosef, among other efforts, runs a foundation for restoring the gravesites of tzaddikim. He has written a biography of his paternal grandfather, *Der Cimpulenger Rav*, and is currently working on a genealogical book. He and his immediate family are Lubavitcher hasidim, following his mother's 200-year-old family tradition.
- 81 I have modified the transliteration from the standard *babe* to to avoid confusion. This Yiddish word is often anglicized as "bubby."
- 82 I received a facsimile of the handwritten letter and a typed transcription of the text electronically on 23 October 2006; my translation incorporates occasional corrections of the transcription.
- 83 A facsimile of these lines, without the letter from Eydl, appears in Padva, *BeOhole Tzadiqim*, 66.
- 84 The standard pious opening to a letter.
- 85 The honorifics were so standard that it was not considered necessary to write them all out.
- 86 Meir Moskowitz of Shotz (Padva, *BeOhole Tzadiqim* 132, Rabinowicz, *Encyclopaedia of Hasidism* 272). These titles may be purely formulaic since, according to the dates in Rabinowicz, Meir was thirteen at this time. Such young marriages were not unusual.
- 87 This daughter is not mentioned in the sources cited earlier. Moshe Yosef Rubin's family tradition is that Eydl lost several children in their infancy.
- 88 I am using the Yiddish term in my translation of the Hebrew here, because it is most likely to be used in "Jewish English"; there is no standard English equivalent.
- 89 Newlyweds often lived with the bride's parents. Here it seems the young couple were living in Meir's parents' home or nearby; this merits further investigation.
- 90 *Kinderlekh*, an affectionate diminutive.
- 91 Email in a discussion of Eydl, 28 July 1999.
- 92 See Polen, "Miriam's Dance"; Rapaport-Albert, "On Women in Hasidism"; Deutsch, *Maiden of Ludmir*.

- 93 See Deutsch, *Maiden*, 218–19; Polen, “Miriam’s Dance,” 19n38.
- 94 See Levine, “‘Nashim BeSiporet HaHasidit’ Mabat nosaf.”
- 95 *Der Yid*, 30 July 1999, section 2, 27, under the heading *Eshet Haver*. Pesya Leah is mentioned with respect, but without these details, in *Eser Tzahtzahot* 2:23 and 2:50.
- 96 See Heschel, *Kotsk*, vol. 1, 7.
- 97 This phrase is used about Malkah of Trisk in Shemen, *Batsiung tsu der Froy*, vol. 2, 330.
- 98 The masculine equivalent (*er hot gefirt rebistve*) is a common Yiddish idiom.
- 99 *Lenahel et harabanut* (*Dover Shalom* no. 61), a literal translation of the Yiddish infinitive *firn rebistve*.
- 100 The masculine form of the same expression (*hayah . . . mitnaheg berabanut*) appears in another hasidic hagiographic work, *Siaḥ Sarfe Qodesh*, where a hasid, out of financial need, acts as a rebbe by accepting money to bless women to have children (Qadish, *Siaḥ Sarfe Qodesh*, “Vehevei Zahir BeGaḥalatan” no. 28).
- 101 Polen 13, quoting the Yiddish newspaper *Der Moment*. “She conducted herself as a rebbe” is Polen’s translation of the Yiddish phrase there.
- 102 Padva, *BeOhole Tzadiqim*, says only that Eydl “took *kvitlekh* like one of the rebbes” (Padva 63). Buxbaum, *Jewish Tales of Holy Women*, bestows the title “rebbe” on Eydl and some other hasidic women (135, 140, 145), but this is from a perspective outside hasidic culture.
- 103 Polen, “Miriam’s Dance,” 15; cf. Bilu, “Woman,” 203.
- 104 Thanks to Jane Enkin for this insight.
- 105 Thus Halperin, “Priests, Rabbis, Rebbes,” implies that Bilu’s article is *the* source on Eydl.

Chapter Twelve

- 1 Although the Yiddish “Ayzik” sounds like the English “Isaac,” the first “Isaac” here represents the biblical Hebrew name Yitzḥaq.
- 2 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 144.
- 3 See Jackson, *Politics of Storytelling*, 28; Scheub, *Story*, 97–100. Regarding written stories, note Scheub’s assertion, “Literary story is essentially the same as oral” (22), and the book-length study of the physicality of reading, Spire, *Plaisir poétique et plaisir musculaire*.
- 4 See Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*, 29–36, “Hasidism before Hasidism”; Nadler, *Faith of the Mithnagdim*, 84–100; “Mithnagdic Asceticism.”
- 5 See Nadler, *Faith of the Mithnagdim*, 79, 94–6.
- 6 Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*, 34–6; Nadler, *Faith of the Mithnagdim*, 84–7.
- 7 Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 65.
- 8 Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*, 114–15.
- 9 Buber, *Tales*, vol. 1, 3.

- 10 A briefer, somewhat garbled version is in the earlier *Maaseh Tzadiqim*, no. 15 (Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 50).
- 11 See Zborowski and Herzog, *Life Is with People*, chapters 4 and 5, 124–65.
- 12 Thus in *Shivḥe HaBesht* churches are referred to as “houses of idolatry” or “impurity” (Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 110; Rubinstein, *Shivḥe* 157 story no. 53 and note 5).
- 13 See, for example, *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* 9:65, *Ateret Menaḥem* no. 173.
- 14 Conversely, East European Christian folk beliefs saw Jews as hypersexual. Thanks to Anna Shternshis for this information.
- 15 Midrash Genesis Rabbah 65:20 and parallels.
- 16 See Zborowski and Herzog, *Life Is with People*, 152–8.
- 17 Dresner, *Zaddik*, 280–1.
- 18 Cf. Elior, *Jewish Mysticism: The Infinite Expression of Freedom*. “Elior’s overall theory of Kabbalah [is] that it creates a cosmic zone of freedom and power for an oppressed and marginalized people” (Michaelson, “Kabbalah”).
- 19 For a dramatic version of this theme of the rebbe’s physical presence driving away impurity, see *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim* no. 52 (Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*, 118–19).
- 20 See Buxbaum, *Jewish Spiritual Practices*, 403.
- 21 *Ateret Menaḥem* no. 74; cf. *Eser Tzaḥtzaḥot* 7:2.
- 22 R’ Tzvi Ezekiel continues that this is a refutation of those who “would go to the meeting place of the lawless to teach them how to act” – likely a reference to cooperation with non-Orthodox Jews in communal affairs.
- 23 Thanks to Andrew Halama for help in deciphering and translating the Polish (in Hebrew letters) here.
- 24 See, for example, *Shivḥe HaBesht*, Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 29.
- 25 See Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 26b; Talmud Berakhot 22a and Rashi, ad loc.
- 26 See Wertheim, *Law and Custom in Hasidism*, 104.
- 27 Ohel Elimelekh no. 115, towards the end. Cf. the Baal Shem Tov in *Shivḥe HaBesht*, Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 50.
- 28 My translation from Nakhmen of Breslov, *Sipure Maasiyot*, end of story no. 5; Kaplan, *Rabbi Nachman’s Stories*, 126.

Chapter Thirteen

- 1 *Mevaqer*. This could also be translated “critic” or “examiner” (of students?) or “visitor” (especially, of the sick). In context I think it refers to R’ Itinga’s seeking out of hasidic tales and traditions.
- 2 Hebrew *kelim*. Cf. *Meqor Hayim* no. 191, where R’ Hayim of Tsanz in anger temporarily takes away the *kelim* – the mental and spiritual capacities – of R’ Yequitiel Judah of Sighet.

- 3 For a famous example of the persecution of one hasidic group by others, see Rapaport-Albert, “Bratzlav Controversy,” in Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia*, 54–6; Assaf, *Neehaz BaSvakh*, 179–234.
- 4 For example, *Meqor Hayim* no. 97 and no. 107.
- 5 See Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim*, 145–51, on tensions between hasidic groups in New York. In 2008, conflicts between rival rebbes within Bobov and Satmar were in the news.
- 6 See Buber’s novel based on hasidic stories, *For the Sake of Heaven*.
- 7 See *Shivhe HaBesht*, Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 63–5; *Maaseh Tzadiqim* (in Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*), no. 10; *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim* (in Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*), nos. 15, 18, 23, 24, 41; Rosenthal, *Hitgalut HaTzadiqim* no. 33; Tzitrin, *Shivhe Tzadiqim* nos. 6 and 20; Tziqernik, *Sipurim UMaamarim Yeqarim*, 27–8.
- 8 See, for example, Talmud Sanhedrin 97b–98a.
- 9 On this theme see Buber, *Tales*, vol. 2, 11–12.
- 10 See Jacobs, *Their Heads in Heaven*, 160–9, “The Zaddik as a Source of Danger.”
- 11 Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 240.
- 12 Tziqernik, *Sipure Ḥasidut Chernobyl*, 165.
- 13 Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim*, 115.
- 14 See Rubinstein, *Shivhe*, 134n1.
- 15 Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 87–9.
- 16 See, for example, Kaidener, *Sipurim Noraim* nos. 31 and 32.
- 17 *Legends of the Hasidim*, 211.
- 18 See Assaf, *Regal Way*, 13, 337; Buber, *Tales*, vol. 2, 10; Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia*, 173–4; Sadan, *MiMeḥoz HaYaldut*, 259.
- 19 *Eser Atarot* 3:20, 3:24 (both cited above), 3:25 (a version of *Ohel Naftali* no. 131, cited above).
- 20 Talmud Shabbat 110a, Avodah Zarah 27b, and Rashi there.
- 21 Translation: Judah Goldin, *Living Talmud*, 102.
- 22 See Goldin, “On the Account,” 88; Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 218–9.
- 23 Taggart, *Enchanted Maidens*, 9, regarding storytellers in Cáceres, Spain, in the early 1980s.
- 24 Cf. Wendy Doniger’s introduction to Kripal, *Kālī’s Child*, x.
- 25 Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 234–7; on this R’ Nakhmen see Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia*, 338–40.
- 26 Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 234.
- 27 My translation from Rubinstein, *Shivhe*, 292 no. 194; Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, 235.
- 28 See III Enoch: Schäfer, *Synopse*, paragraph 4.
- 29 I heard this from a trustworthy informant, Rabbi Moses Rubin, who saw it in a book.

- 30 Thanks to Adele Reinhartz and Dov Noy for help with the translation of the Yiddish phrase.
- 31 *Ateret Menaḥem* 53, the fourth of several footnotes to no. 152.
- 32 For an example see *Beur Halakhah* on *Orah Hayim Hilkhoh Shabbat* 242.
- 33 Vinkovetzky et al., *Anthology of Yiddish Folksongs*, vol. 3, 106–7.
- 34 By non-Jewish farmers, at least; Jewish tradition forbids castration.
- 35 See Harkavy, *Yiddish-English-Hebrew Dictionary*, 113, s.v. *beheyeme*.
- 36 An edition of this manuscript with my translation is forthcoming from the Jewish Publication Society under the tentative title *Many Pious Women*.

Chapter Fourteen

- 1 See Dresner, *Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev*.
- 2 This version is reprinted in *Maaseh HaShem HaShalem: Dinov*, 131–2. Munkács is the Yiddish Munkatsh, now Mukachevo in Ukraine. On *Dvarim Arevim* see Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 39–40.
- 3 Guttman, *Tiferet Bet Levi*.
- 4 *Ve-haya priyah*; given the “ungrammatical” nature of hasidic Hebrew, “and the uncovering took place” is also a possible translation.
- 5 For a dramatic example see Weinreich, *Yiddish Folktales*, 361–7.
- 6 Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” 224.
- 7 Buber’s source notes for his chapter on R’ Levi Isaac mention *Eser Orot* several times (*Or HaGanuz*, 437).
- 8 For examples of such views including statements by doctors and rabbis, see Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 206, 244, 248, 326, 332.
- 9 Wouk, *This Is My God*, 123, 124.
- 10 Zborowski and Herzog, *Life Is with People*, 319.
- 11 Heber, “Almost Painless.”
- 12 This is most explicit in *Pirke de-Rabi Eliezer* 29: “When our father Abraham had been circumcised, on the third day he was in great pain.”
- 13 Sforno interprets Sarah in Genesis 21:6 as saying, “Although the infant suffers from circumcision ... everyone who hears will laugh with me and rejoice for me, and not worry about the suffering of circumcision.”
- 14 Mishnah Shabbat 19:3, quoting Genesis 34:25.
- 15 *Eser Orot* 9:22.
- 16 Cited in *Dover Shalom*, no. 336, which also states that R’ Hayim had heard that R’ Shalom of Belz insisted on additional cutting, but concluded, “I will not believe that such words came from his holy mouth.”
- 17 Ochs and Capps, *Living Narrative*, 221; see all of chapter 6, 201–24.
- 18 Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh*, 3–4, citing Marilyn Fayre Milos.
- 19 Scheub, *Story*, 3.

- 20 Dewey, “Gospel of Mark as an Oral-Aural Event.”
- 21 Dewey, *ibid.*, 149–50. This can be tested by experience since Alec McCowen turned the whole text of Mark’s Gospel into a one-man oral performance (1978). My experience from hearing Matthew Gibson tell this gospel at the Wellington Street Theatre in Kingston, Ont., spring 2006, supports Dewey’s argument.
- 22 See Bal, *Narratology*, 99–111, on “rhythm.”
- 23 Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*.
- 24 See the medieval illustration reproduced in Frojmovic, “Reframing Gender,” 224.
- 25 See Spiegel, *Last Trial*.
- 26 William Morrow (Queen’s University), email to the author, 13 February 2008.
- 27 Bolle, “A World of Sacrifice,” 62.
- 28 See, for example, Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, xvii–xxiii, 106–69.
- 29 The liturgy, like Rashi’s commentary and its midrashic sources, takes the infant to represent the Jewish people and celebrates the blood as that of circumcision, ignoring the biblical context. See Boyarin, “‘This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel,’” 496.
- 30 The wording is different from Ezekiel (*mitbošeset* in Ezekiel, *nitgolel* in our story), but the image is the same.
- 31 Gordis, *Home to Stay*, 278; the text insists that the baby’s crying “has nothing to do with pain.”
- 32 See Bal, *Narratology*, 142–61, on “focalization.”
- 33 See especially Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*.
- 34 *Bet HaLevi* commentary on the Torah (Rabbi Joseph Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik, 1820–92), on Genesis 17:1.
- 35 See the second blessing of the *Shemoneh Esreh*.
- 36 See Newman and Rubin, “Pious Wrappings.”
- 37 Borrowing from Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller,” cited at the beginning of chapter 11.
- 38 Translated in Buxbaum, *Storytelling and Spirituality*, 184–5. Other hasidic stories on this theme include, from the 1860s, *MiPeulot HaTsadiqim* (in Nigal, *Menaḥem Mendl Bodeq*) no. 23, and from the 1920s, Qaddish, *Siah Sarfei Qodesh* no. 3 in the section on Rebbe Levi Isaac of Berdichev.
- 39 See Benton, *God of Desire*, 7.
- 40 R.S. Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folktales* (1930), xi, cited in Bascom, “Four Functions of Folklore,” 342.

Afterword

- 1 Lecture, Queen’s University, 9 October 2002.
- 2 Isaiah 6:3, also in the *Qedushah* prayer.

- 3 From the kabbalistic text *Tiqune HaZohar* 122b, often quoted in hasidic literature.
- 4 Hägg and Rousseau, *Greek Biography*, 12.

Appendix

- 1 Most of the data is from the chart “Hasidism” in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (vol. 1, 160–7), which is worth consulting for its information on family relationships and discipleship. Much of the same information is included in point form in Newman, *Hasidic Anthology*, 546–56. Identification of place names has been helped by the gazetteer included in Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 337–42, and by the web site “The JewishGen Communities Database,” <http://www.jewishgen.org/Communities/>.

Glossary

- 1 On Avot see Akenson, *Surpassing Wonder*, 329–39.
- 2 See Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*, 86–9.
- 3 This is the common English spelling of the Yiddish *rebetsn*; in Hebrew texts it is *rabanit*.

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INDEX



- Abraham Abish of Frankfurt am Main, 22–5, 49, 67, 70, 77, 86, 142
- Abraham Jacob of Sadgora, 55, 151, 263, 265
- anti-hasidic stories, 151, 251
- anti-Semitism, 60–2
- approbations (*haskamot*), 103; and Berger's and Michelson's books, 50, 71, 89, 91–2, 102–5, 282n7; by Israel Berger, 48; for *Taame HaMinhagim*, 152; by Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson, 48, 296n64
- Aqiva, 13, 125–6, 148–9, 163
- Ari (Isaac Luria), 47, 270; and eating, 143–4, 167; *Praises of*, 50, 112; soul of, 122
- Assaf, David, 278n20, 288n8, 291n69, 295n29, 302n15, 305n25, 311n3; on Berger family tree, 66–7; on self-censorship, 279n40–1
- attributions, 25, 51–6, 93–5, 171–2, 250
- authenticity, 81–96
- authorship of hasidic tales, 51–6, 82–3, 87–8, 93, 95, 238. *See also* Berger; Michelson
- Avot, 269; on dangerous power, 239; on demons, 172; on honour, 117–19
- Ayzik Isaac of Kaluv, 15, 141–3, 164, 207–26, 234–5, 266
- Baal Shem Tov, 265; anti-asceticism of, 160, 207; Buber's view of, 43; as founding figure of Hasidism, 36, 47–8; mentioned by Berger, 216, 221; other collectors' stories about, 27, 37, 39, 47, 103, 146–7, 233, 241, 279n40; in Polish Christian folklore, 39; as storyteller, 25, 36, 47; a teaching attributed to 172. *See also* *Shivḥe HaBesht*
- Baruch of Medzhibozh, 15, 175, 235–6, 265
- Belz: hasidic group, 21, 36, 98, 106, 168, 173–4, 181, 190, 196, 198–9, 283n33; town, 22, 20, 197. *See also* Eydl of Brody; Joshua of Belz; Malkah of Belz; Shalom of Belz
- Ben-Amos and Mintz translation of *Shivḥe HaBesht*, 278n30, 299n37, 302n10, 302n22, 304n23, 310n12

- Berger, Israel, 41–2, 47–8, 50, 90–1;
characteristics of his books, 50–3,
55; family tree, 54, 65–7, 175–6; long
introduction to his *Eser Orot*, 58,
63, 112, 127, 277n1; stories from his
compilations, 8–9, 13–18, 55–6, 116,
119, 121–2, 124–7, 136, 140–2, 144–5,
160–1, 162–7, 171–2, 175, 177–9, 208–
16, 218–24, 227–35, 242–3, 247–8,
251, 262
- Bet Rabi*, 71–2, 101, 288n12
- Beyla of Linsk, 169–70, 176–7, 248
- Bilu, Yoram, 191–6, 205–6
- blessing (*berakhah*, liturgical for-
mula), 150; in daily prayers, 123,
130; over food, fragrance, etc., 5,
15, 124, 126, 130, 151–4, 163; for
performance of a ritual, 15, 131,
151–4; omitted, 140; unusual, 115,
130, 151–4, 163
- blessings bestowed by holy people,
11–12, 22, 26, 31, 124, 136, 163, 178–
9, 184, 185–6, 189, 199, 201–2, 216,
231, 256, 260
- blessing the moon (*qidush levanah*),
5–6, 8–9, 113
- body, 157–261; appearing after death,
116; associated with women, 175,
233; drowned, 124–5; healed, 21–2;
in Hasidism, 160, 164, 166, 207–9,
263; parts of rebbe's called holy,
9–10, 118, 123, 131; rebbe's as soul-
stuff, 56; transsexual, 195. *See also*
hands; healing; soul
- Buber, Martin: author's critique of,
100, 161, 207–8, 211, 222, 251; and
Berger's and Michelson's collec-
tions, 39, 81; debate with Gershom
Scholem, 42–5, 211; and hasidic
tales, 38–9, 76–7, 79, 81, 88; on
Hasidism, 129, 203; Joseph Dan's
criticisms of, 85, 87, 96
- Bucharest, 47, 59, 62–3, 73, 90
- Buxbaum, Yitzhak, 287n62, 289n42,
294n9, 303n4; on Buber, 281n79;
on hasidic tales, 44, 278n14; on
hasidic spiritual practices, 162,
298n28, 302n14, 302n16, 310n20;
on stories of hasidic women, 183–
4, 304n16, 305n14, 309n102; stories
available in translations by, 281n1,
301n4, 305n27, 313n38
- changeling(s), 171–2, 181–2
- Chassidismus*, 72
- Chentshiner Rebbetzin, 184, 204, 265
- child(ren): as audience for stories, 11,
37, 76; as characters in stories, 21,
114–15; couple blessed to have, 133–
4; education of, 58–9, 61–4; of Eydl
of Brody, 186, 195, 200–2; of Israel
Berger, 91; of a narrator, 237; of
rebbe, 212–13, 220; starving, 166–7,
213; as victims of holy men's
power, 234, 242–3; woman identi-
fied with, 213. *See also* changeling;
childhood; circumcision; daugh-
ters of rebbes; sons of rebbes
- childhood: of Eydl of Brody, 188, 192–
3; of Israel Berger, 224; of rebbes,
75, 103, 163, 213; of Tzvi Ezekiel
Michelson, 48, 58
- circumcision, 21, 245–7, 249–61, 281,
282n6; celebration attended by
holy men, 25, 221; celebration as
occasion for conflict, 228, 232,
235, 246; as commandment, 20,
133; as sacrifice, 256–7
- conflict: between Hasidism and
opponents, 57–60, 65; within
Hasidism, 227–49
- copyright, 52–3
- Dan, Joseph, 40, 43, 278n19, 279n45,

- 287n1; on authenticity of hasidic tales, 85–92; on their authorship, 82; on their readership, 75; on their holiness, 96–7. *See also* Buber
- dancing, 5–6, 15, 221–2, 230; in the air, 132; sinful, 214
- dangerous power of holy men, 227–9, 232–44, 247–9, 251; causing death, 25, 133, 233–4, 239, 243
- daughters of rebbes, 175–6, 203–4, 211–12, 234–5. *See also* Eydl of Brody; Miriam Hayah of Shotz
- death: anniversary of holy person's, 56, 151, 174; of brother of Abraham Abish, 25; of children, 186, 220; from circumcision, 251, 253, 260; compared to prayer, 208; of Eydl of Brody, 186; of famous tzaddik, 141; fear of, 14, 133, 258; of Freyde of Belz, 305n19; and God, 259; for hand-washing, 137; of Herzl, 60; of Hinde Serl, wife of Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson, 61; holy man's power outlasts, 11–12; of holy woman's husband, 183–4, 199; of Isaac, 256; of Israel Berger, 47; of Joseph Isaac of Lubavitch, 80, 97; and Kaddish, 62; of Malkah of Belz, 173, 192; and small-town synagogue, 114; of Moses, narrowly averted, 257; nobleman saved from, 30; presumed, 12; return of holy man after, 116, 124, 223–4; and soul of R' Aqiva, 126; of sacrificed animal, 256; of Shalom of Belz, 187; of Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson, 48; of R' Yohanan, 239; of women, 130. *See also* dangerous power; heaven; resurrection; transmigration; world to come
- Dov Ber of Mezritsh. *See* Maggid of Mezritsh
- Dovid H., 295n15; on Eydl of Brody, 305n14; on Malkah of Belz, 174; on reception of *Dover Shalom*, 106; on storytelling, 97–8, 181; on status of stories, 294n10
- dybbuk, 21, 233, 269; and Eydl of Brody, 188, 190–1, 194–5, 199, 206
- Dynner, Glenn, 44, 277n12, 279n34, 288n20, 297n10; on holiness of stories, 294n1; on readership of stories, 73; on tensions in stories, 275n1
- eating: blessing before, 126; by holy men, 161; meditation during, 162–4; messianic banquet, 246–7. *See also* food; Malkah of Belz; meal
- Elijah, 10–11, 23–4, 116–17, 135, 246
- Elimelech of Lizensk, 27–31, 49, 171–2, 266; appearance of, 113, 223; disciples of, 77, 88, 236; teaching attributed to, 165; woman telling stories of, 179
- Elstein, Yoav, 44, 97, 281n85, 300n23
- emigration, 64
- En Yaaqov*, 62, 128, 240
- family chronicles, 65–9, 98, 198–200
- “fearsome rabbi,” 242–3
- feminism, 167–8, 174, 189, 202
- fiction, 51, 70–1, 93
- food, 123, 159–61; given to poor couple, 29–30; lacking for Israel Berger family, 90; served to rebbe, 10, 16–17; souls in, 164–6; women and, 166–70. *See also* eating; kosher food laws; meal; *shirayim*
- Frumkin. *See* Rodkinson
- Galley, Susanne, 111, 276n19, 281n83, 294n2

- Gaon of Vilna, 265; conflict with Hasidism, 237–8; tales about, 76–7, 79, 289n30
- gender, 269; grammatical, 72; hierarchy, 208. *See also* Eydl of Brody; Malkah of Belz; women; transsexuality
- gentile(s): attitudes toward Hasidism, 38; biblical figures in guise of, 212; characters in stories, 21–2, 29–31, 233; conversion of, 161; governing authorities, 145, 230, 246; hasidic attitudes toward, 64, 68; in hasidic imagination, 208–9; languages of, 210, 218; occupations, 213
- Gries, Zeev, 43, 78, 81, 94
- Grimms' fairy tales, 80, 304n28
- Grözingen, Karl Erich, 38
- Habad Hasidism, 295n16. *See also* Lubavitch
- halakhah ("Jewish law"): in hasidic stories, 75, 129–55, 163, 169, 234; and mikveh, 219–20; and precious stones, 223; Reform Judaism, 59; Romanian Jews and, 62–4; in works by hasidic authors, 48, 57
- hand(s): disciple leads rebbe by, 8; of Elijah, 10; in gesture of blessing, 216; heavenly, 122; in inadvertent transgression, 131–2; in midrash, 208–9; of rebbe, called "holy," 21, 216–18; of R' Levi Isaac of Berdichev, 14; paralysed, 233; in ritual of solemn promise, 28; various mentions of in stories, 141, 144, 147, 152, 162, 210, 215, 228, 236, 251; washing, 137. *See also* healing
- hasidic tales, 6–8; in books, 40–1; Buber-Scholem debate about, 42–5; as a genre, 79; and Eastern European Jewish culture, 38–9; and folktales, 38, 51; in Hasidism, 36–7, 39–40; told by rebbes, 25; and spiritual work with materiality, 7, 45, 100, 157; and study of marginalized cultures, 37–8; in world literature, 39. *See also* oral storytelling; stories; story within a story
- Haskalah, 57–9, 63–4, 80, 93, 270; and hasidic literature, 70–3, 82–3, 90, 100; and Yiddish, 75
- Hayim of Tsanz 48–9, 51–2, 88–9, 113; and circumcision, 253; descendants of, 106, 154; and ecstatic singing, 140, 211; and Eydl of Brody, 199; and halakhah, 131, 134–5, 140–1, 145, 150; and intra-hasidic conflict, 237–8; and Malkah of Belz, 174; on mitnagdim, 58; and modernizing Jews, 75, 115, 136; and unusual blessings, 130, 151–4; as story-listener, 180–1; as storyteller, 25–31; and Torah study, 127, 162; and transmigration, 126; in Yiddish stories, 107; in the womb, 178
- healing, 36, 48, 264; after circumcision, 252, 256, 259; and Eydl of Brody, 184–6, 189, 198, 200; and halakhah, 133–6; through laying on of hands, 21–2, 117, 216–17; by Malkah of Belz, 178–9; of sin of Adam and Eve, 169; after supernatural punishment, 233, 247; through simple man's prayer, 130; and Sabbath, 147. *See also* *segulah*
- heaven: accusations in, 105, 130, 133–4; ascent into, 25, 77, 146, 164; harsh decree from, 130, 173; gift from, 122–3; making an impression in, 102; Sabbath in, 142; souls from, 127, 146, 223; as source of information, 13, 25, 76, 143–4,

- 166–7; shofar blasts rise to, 140; uproar in, 10, 29, 137. *See also* spiritual realms; world to come
- Hebrew: book titles, 276n8; and Haskalah, 58–9; as language of hasidic tales, 7, 52, 72–3, 312n4; liturgical, 62; modern literature in, 38–40, 64, 67–8, 70–1
- Hirschfeld, Magnus, 191–2
- Hobsbawm, Eric, 68
- holy Jew (Jacob Isaac of Psishkhe), 88, 125, 231, 248, 266
- illness, 126, 177–8, 194, 199, 221–2; epidemic, 27. *See also* healing
- imagination, 3; in autobiography, 105; and community and history, 68–9, 88–9, 112, 128; contrasted with reality, 9, 68, 160; and controversy between rebbes, 230; of Eastern European Jews, 39; and Eydl of Brody, 195–6, 198, 206; Hasidic, 8, 39, 46, 253, 259; hasidic male, 182, 203–5; and law, 131–9, 155; in Midrash, 111; and “narrative,” 35, 263–4; and physical existence, 209, 263; power of, 3; in reading stories, 8, 95, 194–5, 236. *See also* rebbe in hasidic imagination
- information received by supernatural means (examples in stories), 13, 17, 21–2, 25, 26, 76–7, 127, 141, 144, 146, 148, 159–60, 163–4, 166–7, 178, 180–1, 210, 212, 235. *See also* spirit of prophecy
- Isaac Ayzik of Kaluv, 141–3, 164, 234–5, 266; and physicality, 207–24
- Israel of Ruzhyn, 43, 56, 89, 266; controversies with other rebbes, 216–17, 231, 241–2, 266; sons of in controversy, 237–8
- Itinga, Abraham Segal, 51, 54; desire for credit, 55; stories by 26, 177–8, 184–5, 227–9, 233, 244
- Jacob Joseph of Polonne, 209, 266, 277, 278n13; citations from his *Toldot Yaaqov Yosef*, 157, 172
- joke(s): 114–16, 137–8; anti-hasidic, 151; during circumcision, 258; and hasidic tales, 98; about heretic, 286n16; miracle mistaken for, 29; possible, 178–9; as story, 97
- jokers, fabricators of tales and sayings, 82, 151
- Joshua Heschel of Apt, 121, 180, 266, 298n19; big eater, 161; visit to Miriam of Mahluv, 9–11
- Joshua of Belz, 49, 65, 266; and sister Eydl, 186–8, 196, 198–9
- Kabbalah, 270; on Adam, 222; and gentiles, 208; in Hasidism, 127, 263; Israel Berger and, 47–8, 50, 101–3; and materiality, 211; practitioners of, 77; and roofing, 104–5; and sexuality, 17; and souls, 13, 219; technical terms, 43, 74–5, 231–2; and Torah, 25; and troubles, 134. *See also* Ari; yihud
- kavanah*, *kavanot*, 270; as spiritual intention, 249, 259; as kabbalistic meditation, 161–2, 164, 167
- kosher food laws, 23–4, 135–6; and chicken, 141–3; and eating with rebbe, 214–15; in Israel Berger’s environment, 63; and rebbe’s powers, 143–5; and souls, 164–6
- kvitl*, *kvitlekh*, 198, 200; definition, 270; taken by holy women, 184–6, 188–9, 204
- Landau, Ezekiel. *See* Noda bYhudah
- Langer, Jiri, 173–4, 179

- Levi Isaac of Berdichev, 13–15, 43–4, 119, 127, 250–61, 266; ecstasies of, 13–15, 251; and eating, 136, 163, 302n10; maskil in the time of, 59; old woman tells about, 180–1; singing, 94; son of, 15–17; soul of, 126; and views of Buber and Scholem, 44
- Loewenthal, Naftali, 42, 97–8, 289n42, 303n26
- Lubavitch, hasidic group, 234, 266, 292n25, 295, 298n17, 308n80; on circumcision, 252; collectors of tales affiliated with, 71–2, 101; and hasidic tales, 40, 97–8, 289n42; scholars affiliated with, 76, 96. *See also* Habad Hasidism; Loewenthal; Rodkinson; Schneerson
- Maaseh Tzadiqim*, 298n18, 298n19, 311n7; story of Rebbes of Lublin and Medzhibozh, 235–7; versions of stories in Berger/Michelson, 118, 138–9, 310n10
- Maggid of Kozienice, 116, 126–7, 266; body of, 55–6, 218–19, 221–2; and Napoleon, 140
- Maggid of Mezritsh, 266; apparition of, 116; Buber on, 43; compassion of, 166–7; disciples of, 126, 211; as storyteller, 101; teachings attributed to, 262–3, 291n72; and women 175, 177–8
- Maiden of Ludmir, 183, 195, 265
- Malkah of Belz, 173–4, 178–9, 266; and daughter Eydl, 192, 194, 198, 200; eating with husband, 120, 168–9; and materiality, 212; and greedy milkman, 233; as storyteller, 180
- maskilim. *See* Haskalah
- materiality, 207–9; holy study as distraction from, 162; rebbes and, 209–17, 220, 222–4, 232, 260; spiritual work with, 7, 45, 166, 219–20, 262–4. *See also* body; food; gentiles; hasidic tales; women
- meal: for bride and groom, 27, 29–30; conducting as role of rebbe, 189; grace after, 64; New Moon, 163–4, 250; Sabbath, 63, 140, 164–5; Sukkot, 199; before Yom Kippur, 17–18. *See also* eating; food; Passover
- Menahem Mendl of Rymanów, 49, 266; angry, 232; eyes of, 217; intimidating presence, 230; and Napoleon, 125, 232–3, 244, 248; and Seer of Lublin, 88; and transmigration, 125–6; and unusual blessing, 130, 154–5. *See also* Tzvi Hersh of Rymanów
- menstruation, 169, 219, 235. *See also* mikveh
- Messiah, messianism: aspirations, 103; controversy, 232; and Eydl of Brody, 187; imagery, 246–7; prophecy, 83; and resurrection of the dead, 123–4; suffering, 135. *See also* Menahem Mendl of Rymanów, and Napoleon
- Michelson, Abraham Hayim Simhah Bunem, 41, 49–50, 57–8, 64, 83–5; authorship of books, 53–4; characteristics of books, 50–6, 58–9, 65–9, 70–4, 77, 79, 81, 85–9; reception of books, 50, 106–7; stories from his compilations, 9–11, 11–13, 17–31, 58, 75, 88, 114–15, 117–21, 123, 125–7, 130–6, 136–8, 140–2, 145–8, 150–1, 159–62, 165, 167–70, 178–81, 184–5, 216–17, 220, 223, 227–33, 236, 248, 260–1; Yiddish translations of his books, 54–6, 74–6

- Michelson, Tzvi Ezekiel, 48–9, 59–61, 104–5; and authorship of son's books, 53–4; as contributor to story collections, 41, 51, 91–2, 284n46; discourses in son's books, 72, 74, 86; and family, 66–7; letterhead, 275n4; on mixing with sinners, 217; stories by, 55–6, 116–17, 130; and unpublished manuscripts, 93; and Zionism, 84
- mikveh (ritual immersion), 134–5, 218–20, 248, 271, 301n6; women's, 23, 63, 219
- Mintz, Jerome, 98, 234, 278n14, 301n43, 311n5. *See also* Ben-Amos and Mintz
- MiPeulot HaTzadiqim*, 208, 279n40, 303n32, 310n19, 313n38; stories of controversy, 231, 241–2, 311n7; versions of stories in Berger/Michelson, 138–9, 298n25
- miracles, 8, 36, 68, 77, 90, 199; in autobiographical accounts, 106; belief in, 84–5, 103, 112; examples of in stories, 6, 8–9, 10, 11–12, 29–31, 122–5, 132, 145, 173, 212, 215–16, 218, 221–4, 233, 235, 242–3, 247, 251, 261; in rabbinic stories, 239. *See also* dangerous power of holy men; Elijah; food, souls in; healing; information received by supernatural means
- Miriam Hayah of Shotz, 183–4, 201–2, 266
- Miriam of Mahluv, 9–11, 180
- Mishnah, 75, 111, 271; on circumcision, 253; ignored by later maskilim, 59; misremembered by scholars, 18–21; R' Judah, reputed compiler of, 116, 124; on Yom Kippur, 135, 142. *See also* Avot; tannaim
- mitnaged, mitnagdim, 57–8, 76, 112, 127, 270; in hasidic stories, 58, 145–6, 231, 233
- modernity: and Abraham Michelson, 84; and Israel Berger, 48; and Berger's and Michelson's books, 65–9, 89, 112, 128; and hasidic tales more generally, 7, 115–16; and Hasidism, 27, 42, 44, 57–65, 72–81, 179, 263. *See also* modern Jewish literature
- modern Jewish literature, 112, 206; and Berger's and Michelson's books, 67–8, 70–2; and hasidic tales, 38, 40, 79, 89; and Yiddish and Hebrew, 52
- Moses Leyb of Sasov, 15–17, 43, 161, 178, 266; Leah, daughter of, 203–4; mingling with sinners, 217
- mother: of Abraham Michelson, 49; of children stricken by holy man's anger, 243; of hungry children, 166; of Moshe Yosef Rubin, 308n80; name mentioned in prayer for son, 147. *See also* Beyla of Linsk; wives; women
- Nakhmen (Nachman, Nahman) of Breslov (Bratslav), 37, 41, 81, 85, 97, 99, 101, 131, 160, 169, 210, 223, 253
- Naphtali of Ropczyce, 17–18, 49, 159, 227–49, 266; ancestry, 11; bested by girl, 114–15; descendants, 186, 197–8; as disciple and as rebbe, 88; on reincarnation, 155–6; as young hasid, 27, 29; and wife, 140
- Napoleon: as source for a hasidic tale, 125; supported and opposed by rebbes, 125, 140, 232–3, 244, 248
- narrative: definition in this book, 35–6; hasidic, and hasidic stories, 40, 98, 205, 253–4, 260–1, 263–4;

- hasidic, and Buber, 45; hasidic, and other authors, 205–6; modern non-hasidic Jewish, 251–2. *See also* story
- Nigal, Gedalyah, 97, 175, 276n18, 276n20, 278n14, 283n27; on attributions, 54–5; on authors of books of tales, 82; editions of books of tales, 85–6, 88, 288n11; on history of hasidic tales, 43. *See also* *Maaseh Tzadiqim*, *MiPeulot HaTzadiqim* (1860s tale collections edited by Nigal).
- Noda bYhudah, 58, 145–6, 266
- North Africa: hasidic tales published in, 39
- orality, 73, 92–5
- oral storytelling, 19, 27, 37–41, 101, 207, 241; in attributions, 51, 53, 55, 76, 173; author's own, 8, 223; Buber on, 43–4; about holy women, 173–4, 187, 203–4; about dangerous power, 233; and empathic identification, 255; and folklore collection, 80; functions in hasidic culture, 97–9; and literary storytelling, 52, 139, 190, 309n3; non-hasidic, 112; Toronto community, 96–7; to work miracles, 27–31, 185, 215–16. *See also* hasidic tales
- oral teaching. 43–4, 48, 121, 128
- Passover: preparations, 137, 233; seder, 13–15, 152–4, 210–12
- Peretz, I.L., 27, 81
- personalism, 129, 203
- pictures of holy men, 80
- Plonsk, 58–62. *See also* Michelson, Tzvi Ezekiel
- postal service, 89
- praven*, 26
- printers and publishers, 50, 52–3, 64, 73–9, 90–3, 101, 105–6
- purity and impurity, 177, 209, 219; and gentiles, 21, 208–9; and kohanim, 123, 270; and physicality, 120–1; and rebbe's body, 214, 216–17; of rebbe, 236; of rebbe's table, 217, 221; and righteous woman, 177; and soul, 219; and words of halakhah, 135; and precious stones, 223. *See also* menstruation; mikveh
- Ranger, Terence, 68–9
- Rashi script, 73–4, 283n33
- reading revolution, 78
- rebbe in hasidic imagination, 37, 114, 120, 131, 258, 263–4. *See also* dangerous power of holy men
- Reform Judaism, 59, 129, 148, 153, 193
- resurrection, 123–4; metaphorical, 132; of dead child, 251. *See also* death
- Robinson, Ira, 42, 53, 91, 93, 281n2; on fiction in hasidic tales, 284n38; on postal service, 292n34
- Rodkinson, Michael, 82, 101, 288n12
- Sabbath, 59, 160; candlesticks for, 198, 200; clothing for, 235; day before, 20, 25, 172, 216; dream on, 224; food for, 141–3, 164, 169–70; guest for, 178; in heaven, 141–2; home rituals of, 116, 124, 211; lamp, 185; letters to rebbe on, 147; night after, 5, 8, 187–8; observance and non-observance of, 23, 60, 63–4, 131, 136–8; reading hasidic tales on, 99, 104; stringency about, 150; with a rebbe, 22, 63, 115, 130, 140, 235

- Schneerson, Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, 80, 97–8
- Scholem, Gershom, 302n20, 305n15; debate with Martin Buber, 42–5
- Seer of Lublin, 25–6, 144–5, 148–9, 267; and Baruch of Medzhibozh, 235–7, 240; and blessing of the moon, 5–6, 8–9; and circumcision, 260–1; on distributing combs, 20; on eating, 165; hasidim of, 77, 230; and intra-hasidic controversy, 88, 231; and Naphtali of Ropczyce, 232; on roofing, 104; and Uri “the Seraph,” 222; Yiddish book about, 90
- segulah* (plural, *segulot*), 48, 199; for epidemic, 27; of precious stones, 223
- self-censorship, 41, 58, 151–4, 279 n40–1
- Shalom of Belz, 88–9, 102, 267; books about, 49–51, 106, 174, 305n14; and daughter Eydl, 183–202; as healer, 117, 216–18, 247; and wife, Malkah, 120–1, 168–9, 173–4, 178–80; Michelson, stories about, 19–22, 123–4, 131–2, 135–9, 146–9, 223, 233, 236, 238, 298n18; teachings attributed to, 219–20, 243, 261, 312n16
- shirayim*, 159
- Shiv'he HaBesht*, 37, 41; contemporary with Grimms’ fairy tales, 80; *En Yaaqov* in, 128; lacking *haskamot*, 103; and Lubavitch Hasidism, 101; in scholarship, 50; stories borrowed from, 94; includes teachings and stories, 85–6; in Yiddish, 106, 299n33. *See also* Baal Shem Tov; Ben-Amos and Mintz
- Shmelke of Nikolsburg, 9–11, 117–20, 132–4; Abraham Michelson and, 21, 49, 65; family of, 77, 88, 266–7; and Isaac Ayzik of Kaluv, 210, 213; maskilic author’s depiction of, 291n4; spell prescribed by, 177; writing style of, 113
- Shmeruk, Khone, 43–4, 86, 280n72, 291n69, 297n72
- Sholom Aleichem, 70–1, 113
- shund*, 11, 79
- Solomon Leyb of Lentshna, 125, 227–30, 231–2, 238, 247, 267
- sons of rebbes, 16–18, 223–4
- soul(s), 97–8, 103, 163, 212, 251; ascents of, 77, 146; contrasted with body, 166, 208–9, 218–19, 224; of deceased holy people, said to be in paradise, 55, 152, 197; of the deceased, uplifting, 102; of the deceased, visiting holy men, 76–7, 223, 238; great/holy, 172, 175, 213, 220; holy, given to a rebbe, 122; and mikveh, 219–20; rebbe’s body as soul-stuff, 56, 219; rebbe’s work with, 211, 214, 216; in transsexuality, 195. *See also* food; dybbuk; transmigration
- speech: of traditional Jews, 112–13. *See also* orality
- spirit of prophecy (*ruah haqodesh*), 29, 48, 124, 143–5, 215, 272
- spirituality, 121, 127, 209, 217, 223; Buber and, 42–3; capacities for, 236, 238; conflicting paths in, 230–2; dangerous, 260; of Israel Berger, 91, 101–3; and physicality, 224, 263; and sacred study, 134–5; sin for the sake of, 140–1; and stringency, 144–5. *See also* *kavanah*; materiality, spiritual work with
- spiritual practice(s), 119–20, 213–14, 259; mikveh as, 218–20; story-telling as, 97–8

spiritual realms, 74–5, 122–3, 172, 232
 stories, 3, 35–6, 250; in contest with
 one another, 184, 191–9, 205–6;
 loved by God, 294n9; meaning
 conveyed by, 254–5, 261; patterns
 of, 254; pacing of, 255; point of
 view in, 258; pre-hasidic, 112, 143–
 4, 237–40, 249, 252–3, 255; struc-
 turalist approach to, 258–9; told
 by women, 181–2. *See also* anti-
 hasidic stories; hasidic tales;
 jokes; narrative; oral storytelling;
 storybooks; story within a story
 storybooks (non-hasidic), 64, 76–9,
 99–100
 story within a story, 18, 20, 27–31, 126,
 131–2, 140–2, 184–5, 215–16
 Sukkot, 55, 132, 199, 272

Taame HaMinhagim, 131–2; contro-
 versial story in, 151–4

Talmud, 19, 36, 47, 92, 111–128; allu-
 sions to, 135, 144, 163, 185, 220, 222;
 on circumcision, 253; citations
 from, 170, 208; cited in family
 tree, 66; and conduct in presence
 of rebbes, 138–41; and eating eggs,
 143; expressions from, 228; hasidic
 interpretation of, 105, 133–4; and
 mikveh, 219; and powerful anger,
 238–41. *See also* *Eyn Yaaqov*;
 Mishnah; Torah study; Tosafot
 tanna(im), 119, 121, 272, 298n27; as
 ancestors of Israel Berger, 66. *See
 also* Aqiva

Toldot Yaaqov Yosef. *See* Jacob Joseph
 of Polonne

Torah study, 9, 57–8, 127; subject
 of story, 19–21. *See also* Talmud;
 Tosafot

Tosafot, 66, 127, 148–9, 272

traditional Judaism, relationship of

Hasidism to, 47–8, 57–8, 68–9, 89,
 111–12, 115–1. *See also* halakhah;
 Talmud

transmigration, 13, 124–6. *See also*
 food, souls in

transsexuality, 191–6, 200

Tzvi Elimelech of Dynów, 267; and
 changeling, 171–2; and Naphtali of
 Ropczyce, 230, 232, 247–8; talks to
 river, 124–5; teachings of, 291n72,
 330

Tzvi Hersh of Rymanów, 220, 229

Tzvi Hersh of Zhydachiv, 122, 211–12,
 234–5, 267; and “fearsome rabbi,”
 242–3; and holy eating, 161–4; and
 Seer of Lublin, 5–6, 8–9, 235–6; on
 transmigration, 125

Well of Miriam, 218–19

wife, wives: of Abraham Abish of
 Frankfurt am Main, 23–4; of
 Abraham Michelson, 49; ascetic
 separation from, 146; of gentile
 miller, 16–17, 181; of Isaac Ayzik
 of Kaluv, 212–13; of Israel Berger,
 102, 171–2; of generous man, 133;
 mistakenly remarried, 12–13;
 of Moses, 257; of Naphtali of
 Ropczyce, 140; of a rebbe in
 Bucharest, 63; of rebbes, 119, 160,
 166–7, 213, 220, 236, 242, 247; of
 talmudic sages, 120–3, 239; under
 suspicion, 144–5. *See also* mother;
 women

women, 263–4; in charm against evil
 eye, 177; and circumcision, 249,
 253, 256, 261; dancing with men,
 214; exorcised, 194–5; in genealo-
 gies, 176; gentile, 208, 211–12, 136;
 lack of stories of, 176–7; and male
 narrators, 115, 195, 202; and mater-
 iality, 157, 161, 166–7, 177, 212–13;

- prayerbooks for, 64; as readers, 73–4; relations among, 181, 202; and role of rebbe, 183–4, 186, 189, 203–4; in Reform synagogue, 59; in scholarship on Hasidism, 172–3; as significant characters in stories, 16–17, 27–31, 133–4, 166–72, 233–4; souls of, 21, 141–2; as storytellers, 9–11, 38, 179–82; and unborn sons, 178; in Talmud, 114; unlearned man prays for, 130. *See also* Eydl of Brody; daughters of rebbes; Malkah of Belz; Miriam Hayah of Shotz; mother; wife
- world to come: honour and, 118; portion in, 123, 166–7; as reward for observance, 137
- Yiddish: associated with materiality, 210–11; hasidic tales in, 90–2, 99, 164, 293n48, 299n33; folklore, 80; and German, 75, 115; and Hebrew, 52, 93–4, 204; in Hebrew texts of stories, 8, 26, 116, 125, 167, 184, 211–13, 215, 218, 221–2, 228; as “holy language,” 94; in a letter of Eydl of Brody, 200–2; literature, 27, 38, 78, 81; place names, 7–8; non-hasidic storybooks, 77, 79, 100; and orality, 92–5, 139; texts in, 203, 249; versions of Michelson’s books, 49–50, 52–6, 106–7; word associations, 99, 170, 242, 245–7
- yihud* (man and woman alone together), 29, 144–5
- yihud*, *yihudim* (kabbalistic practice), 273, 276n9, 280n59; Buber interpretation, 43; during conversation, 119; while eating, 161–3; to receive knowledge, 10
- Zadok HaCohen of Lublin, 18–20
- Zemach, Shlomo, 59–60, 62, 70, 287n53
- Zgierz, 49, 58–9, 83, 335
- Zionism, 38, 59–60, 73, 80; and Abraham Michelson, 83–4; and feminism, 168; and Israel Berger, 291n10; and psychoanalysis, 191; and Tzvi Ezekiel Michelson, 60