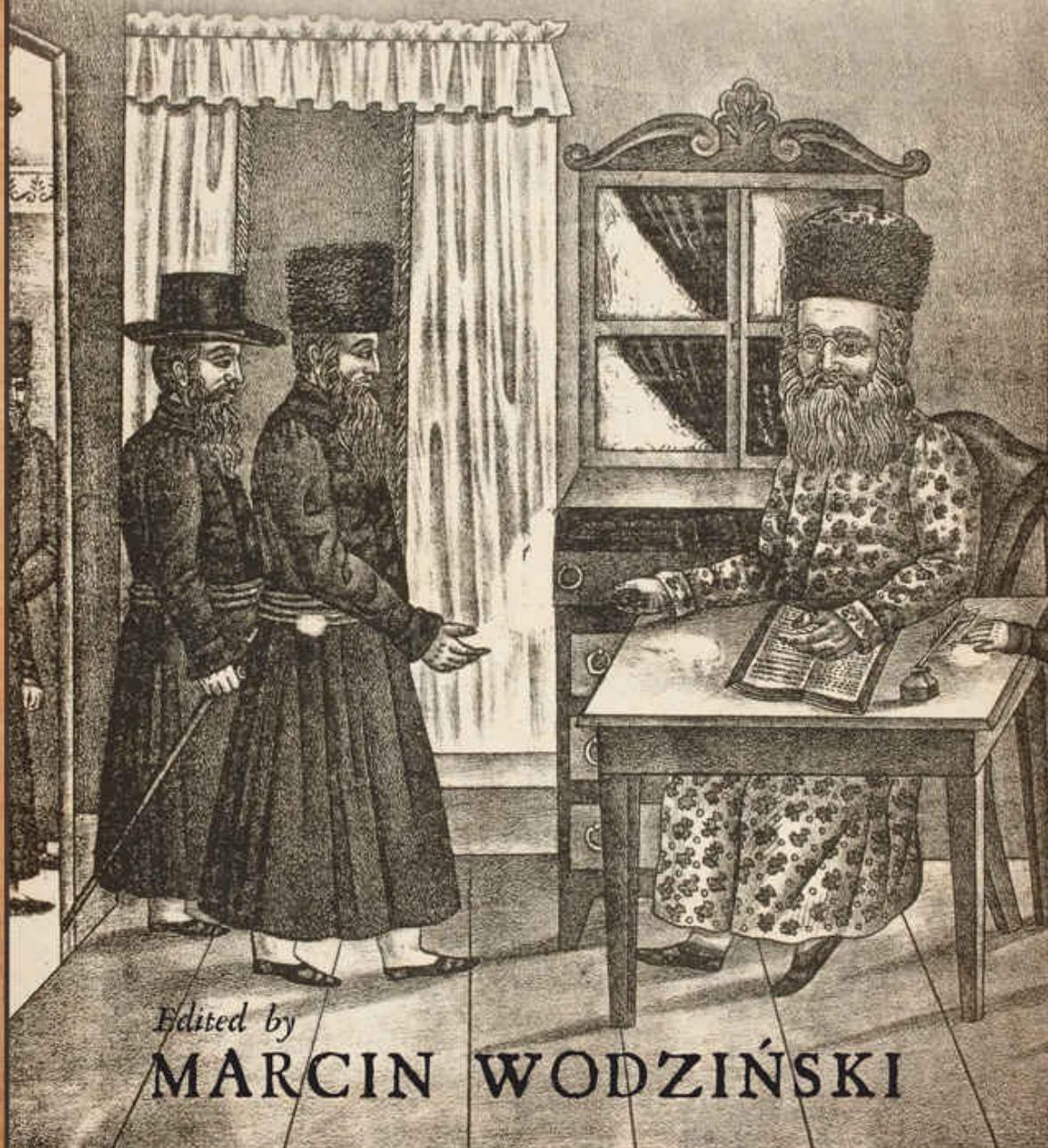


STUDYING HASIDISM

Sources, Methods, Perspectives



Edited by

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Stories

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The Hasidic story is an important dimension of Jewish folklore and modern Jewish literature. Alongside the Hasidic homiletic literature, which holds the main religious and spiritual messages of Hasidism, the Hasidic story presents the most important inner-Hasidic foundation for understanding its social and ethical worldview, and perhaps its history. This literary corpus encompasses hundreds of compilations containing thousands of Hasidic stories, legends, and tales, mainly in Hebrew and, to a lesser degree, in Yiddish, written or printed over the last two centuries. The development of the Hasidic tale as an important genre in the movement's literary production must be studied as part of modern Jewish literature written from the eighteenth through the twenty-first centuries.

As in other areas of the history of Hasidism and its literary development, one can notice how Hasidim tended to reinvent their forms of expression and their channels of public communication. They tended to alter their literature and spiritual message according to exterior challenges and the movement's internal developments. So it is with the Hasidic story as well. Through their immediate surroundings and more distant traditions, Hasidim were well aware of literary genres and styles, and they consciously adopted popular literary forms and means of expression while adjusting style and content to their own social-religious needs. We can see that the literary product in this genre was modified according to historical developments.

STORYTELLING AND STORY WRITING

As part of the ritualization process that took place in early Hasidism, many extra-religious elements were incorporated into Hasidic religious tradition. Various traditional, formerly esoteric customs and norms were adopted within Hasidic circles as exoteric religious rituals performed by the greater community, while

other “new” rituals were invented as part of Hasidic spiritual renewal. These rituals were redefined and integrated into Hasidic customs and became part of the movement’s ethos. This ritualization process initiated the sanctification of otherwise neutral routines, including dancing, singing, and preaching, that developed into the essential cultural characteristics of Hasidism. Storytelling, too, ceased to be just a means of entertainment or a way to communicate norms and ideals, but became a central part of the religious sphere and of Hasidic culture as well.

Hasidim started telling stories during the very first appearance of Hasidic groups in the mid-eighteenth century, before the institutionalization of Hasidism into a movement. The Baal Shem Tov and his associates made extensive use of parables and stories in their sermons as a literary tool and as a means of orally disseminating their ideas and theologies. They did so in private conversations as well as in public, official gatherings within these early Hasidic circles. As Hasidism developed into a movement, storytelling was refined in its ritualistic performances and literary narrative sophistication. Distinct styles of stories gradually developed as they became distinctively Hasidic and gained stronger social, theological, and sometimes political meanings.

In his introduction to the very first collection of Hasidic stories, *Shivhei ha-Besht* (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov), which was printed first in Hebrew and soon in Yiddish, in 1814 and 1815, the printer cited the following saying attributed to the Besht himself: “When one relates the praises of the tsadikim, it is as if he concentrates on *Ma’aseh Merkavah*”—that is, on the esoteric story of the divine chariot from the prophet Ezekiel.¹ This saying echoes the aforementioned transformation of storytelling into a religious resource in early Hasidism. Like the highest theological discourse, Torah learning, or prayer, so does telling a story, particularly if it is told about a great tsadik, have great spiritual value that surpasses any literary value it may have or any additional social implications it sheds on its listeners.

The following Hasidic story, with which Gershom Scholem chose to end his famous book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, gives us an insight into the process storytelling went through in the history of Hasidism:

When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer—and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the “Maggid” of Mezrich [Międzyrzecz] was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers—and what he wanted done became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov [Sasów] had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in

the woods to which it all belongs—and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin [Rużyn] was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And, the story-teller adds, the story which he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three.²

Scholem defined this tale as “the very history of Hasidism itself” since it tells the essence of the actual action of storytelling for generations who did not see themselves capable of the great magical and religious deeds of their predecessors.³

There are two basic categories of storytelling. First are the hagiographical stories told about famous Hasidic sages, their lives, wisdom, moralities, and miracles. These stories were narrated and delivered in order to set an example of piety for generations of Hasidim and to create a sense of kinship with Hasidism in general or with a specific dynasty within it. There were stories told about so-to-speak “founders” of the movement, and each Hasidic group may have had its own stories devoted to its renowned leaders. These stories may have historical background or might be merely legendary.

The second type of stories was told by the tsadik himself. This category usually contains more allegoric and fantastic elements and is basically a literary alternative to the more widespread homilies spoken by nearly all Hasidic masters.⁴ Some Hasidic thinkers were well-known as inspiring storytellers, the most famous of them certainly R. Naḥman of Bratslav (Braclaw; 1772–1811), the great-grandson of the Besht and one of the most charismatic Hasidic leaders.⁵

Some of the stories told by the tsadik might consist of very short sayings that hold condensed meanings or that are aimed at hinting to other well-known aspects of his teachings. Other stories can contain a complex narrative or a tangled plot, sometimes delivered over several occasions by the tsadik to his audience. The inventing and performing of a story of such complexity required creativity on the part of the tsadik and depended on his ability to convey the story in a theatrical manner. Both types of stories, those *about* tsadikim and those told *by* tsadikim, were first articulated and then circulated orally in Yiddish—the spoken language of the Jews in Eastern Europe—just as the oral sermon was first formed in this vernacular. Thus, the story bridged over social and cultural gaps within a Hasidic group. The story, more than other means of communication, may be understood throughout the congregation in all its social strata, regardless of the diverse literacy, cultural capital, and religious devotion found among its members.

For these oral stories to be preserved and transcribed, there needed to be an initiative to record them in writing, which obviously did not always exist.

A VERY SHORT HISTORY OF HASIDIC STORIES

In the first Hasidic hagiography, *Shivhei ha-Besht*, we find the following story that deals with the problem of inscribing the mystical teachings of the Besht:

There was a man who wrote down the torah of the Besht that he heard from him. Once the Besht saw a demon walking and holding a book in his hand. He said to him: "What is the book that you hold in your hand?"

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

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

The man admitted it and he brought the manuscript to the Besht. The Besht examined it and said: "There is not even a single word here that is mine."⁶

This story clearly seeks to explain to the reader, who did not personally know the Besht, why the Besht had left no written record of his teachings, based, it seems, on the preference for oral instruction over providing written texts. As in analogous traditions surrounding many other religious leaders, including Buddha and Jesus, the absence of writings seems to arise from a rather typical tension between an older, more archaic oral culture and a new attempt at canonizing written traditions. Following this view, the spiritual message of the Baal Shem Tov may not be transcribed whatsoever, and anyone who initiates to deliver his teachings in the form of a written book misses the eminence of his divine wisdoms.

Despite the claim of the story, we know that some of the Besht's disciples, such as R. Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoe (Połonne) and others, did write down the Besht's teachings, perhaps even during his lifetime, although they were only published long after his death. So did the compiler of the first hagiography, in which the prohibition was recorded, put the Besht's life down in writing, forming the Besht's image as the protagonist of Hasidism for future generations. Regardless of the historicity and credibility of this type of legend (which we will discuss later), which for an average Hasid may be a reflection of the Besht's real experience, we may see this story as an attempt at an apologetic, even anachronistic presentation of Hasidic culture as cardinal an oral phenomenon. This specific story clearly tries to explain the relevant absence of any kind of Hasidic literature in the time when the story was written and printed. In this early stage of the formation of Hasidism, there was scarcely any attempt initiated by the tsadikim themselves to reveal their own theology in writing; rather, the vast majority of Hasidic teachings were scribed and distributed by their students or later admirers.

Despite such attempts, stories about early Hasidim, especially the Baal Shem Tov and his circle, began to be written down during the final years of the

eighteenth century, and most likely even before that—perhaps even during the Besht's lifetime—but we lack evidence of anything prior to a manuscript written in the 1790s. However, the first printing of a collection of stories did not occur until 1814, with the publication of *Shivhei ha-Besht* in Kopyś (Kapust), Belarus. The first version of this work, from the 1790s, took the form of a manuscript written by the compiler and transcriber of the originally oral stories, Dov Ber of Lintits (Ilińce), who claimed to have personally heard the stories from their firsthand sources. The printed version was intensely edited by Israel Yaffe, a Chabad Hasid, who changed, rearranged, and added to the original text in accordance with his agenda and with the state of the Hasidic movement in the early nineteenth century. The next year, a somewhat differing Yiddish version of the book was published.⁷

In the same year, 1815, a first collection of R. Naḥman of Bratslav's original stories, *Sipurei ma'asiyot*, was also printed. Thus, the first printing of Hasidic stories occurred thirty-five years after the first Hasidic homiletic work was printed (1780) and a total of fifty-five years after the death of the Besht, the protagonist of the first Hasidic hagiography.

For nearly fifty years after the printing of *Shivhei ha-Besht*, no other Hasidic hagiographies were published. Nevertheless, stories were still being retold and inscribed by Hasidim during that period, but there was no attempt to produce or publish new collections for a wider audience of Hasidim.

Several causes are credited for this long silence involving Hasidic legendary and hagiographic publications: some relate it to the low reputation the legendary genre possessed within Hasidic ethos as popular culture, which prevented later authors from taking part in its dissemination. Others oppose this view and claim that on the contrary, the reception of *Shivhei ha-Besht* as a sacred Hasidic text was so great that later authors refrained from imitating it. Yet other historians claim that Hasidim were hesitant about printing further hagiographic works after the maskilim mocked *Shivhei ha-Besht* so strongly. These explanations are not entirely convincing, however, because *Shivhei ha-Besht* was actually reprinted many times during these years, in Hebrew as well as in Yiddish, and certainly fit Hasidic norms. Nor were restrictions of Austrian or Russian censors responsible for the fifty-year hiatus. Restrictions were not enforced uniformly in all countries, and there were always printing houses that were able to publish Hasidic books. And indeed, Hasidic homiletic works were printed continuously, some of them containing Hasidic tales. Oral and written storytelling continued, even if it did not do so as a separate genre with separate collections of stories. Therefore, the true basis for the half-century-long lack of hagiographic printing remains somewhat unresolved.⁸ It can be assumed that there was no single reason for the long respite in the publication of Hasidic stories; rather, there existed a combination of reasons, including more technical reasons, such as the high costs of printing and the growing regulation by the authorities, com-

bined with cultural reasons, such as the fear of internal Jewish criticism, or even some level of indifference by Hasidim themselves as their movement grew larger and assumed an important political position.

An important cultural turn brought about a wave of printing of new collections of Hasidic stories after this long pause. Starting in the mid-1860s, printing of Hasidic hagiography (as well as other genres of Hasidic literature) increased dramatically, enabled perhaps also by a gradual easing of censorship first in Galicia and then in Russia. The most important author-compilers, or “cultural agents,” as Zeev Gries called them, who propagated hagiographical works of the Hasidim in this early phase of its development—the later nineteenth century—were Menaḥem Mendel Bodek (1825?–1874), Aharon Walden (1838–1912), and Michael Levi Frumkin-Rodkinson (1845–1905).⁹ These authors worked separately but borrowed blatantly from each other. They, and many other less prominent propagators of Hasidic stories, collected material about many figures, Hasidic and pre-Hasidic, which indicates the level of Hasidic institutionalization at this point in its history.

The renewed awakening of the Hasidic tale as a literary genre took place simultaneously with the rise of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature in Eastern Europe. Hasidic publishers may have sought to create cultural alternatives to modern fiction aimed instead at a traditional audience. The new tales of the *tsadikim* would compete with modern, mostly secular literature. The Hasidic literary revival was related also to the emergence of Orthodox Jewish historical writing that began midcentury in the wake of the new German Jewish movement of scientific historiography (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*). Orthodox writers reprinted genealogical literature, chronographic works, and old rabbinical lexicons, while adding new books about rabbinical figures from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The center of this Orthodox-historiography activity was in Galicia, mainly in Żółkiew (Zovkva) and Lwów (Lemberg/Lviv), and later in Warsaw—moving along with the changing centers of the Hebrew press. Such historical work, which straddled the border between traditional rabbinic literature and modern historiography, created the climate for Hasidim to write their own quasi-historical, quasi-legendary stories about their venerable ancestors. The reappearance of Hasidic stories in print was motivated by these external evolutions and served as a countercultural instructive tool within Hasidic society.

Another wave of printing Hasidic stories was conducted at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially during the interwar period. In the printing centers of Poland, many volumes of Hasidic stories were produced, making the Hasidic bookshelf relevant once again for the contemporary Jewish Orthodox reader. The compilers and printers of this phase were the heirs of the nineteenth-century Hasidic cultural agents. They came from different strata of Jewish society; some were well-known rabbis or famous Hasidic figures. Among the most significant author-compilers from this stage was Israel Berger (1855–1919), who

served as a rabbi in several communities in Transylvania and later in Bucharest; he published a four-volume series of hagiographic works titled *Zekhut Yisrael*. Similarly, Tsevi Yehezkel Mikhelson (1863–1942), who served as rabbi in Płońsk (Central Poland) and then was a member of the rabbinical court in Warsaw, compiled biographies of many tsadikim. His son Avraham Ḥayim Simḥah Bunem Mikhelson did so as well, even more prolifically. Their relative, Yosef Lewinstein (1840–1924), rabbi of Serock, alongside many other less distinguished authors, joined them in producing a wide body of Hasidic knowledge by collecting and printing Hasidic stories and sermons of a number of tsadikim. To be sure, their choices were not necessarily motivated by the “objective” importance of a selected tsadik. In fact, the early twentieth century was an age of inner-Hasidic political competition over prestige and political influence; every dynasty and group strove to position itself as an important successor of the Hasidic tradition. Collections of Hasidic stories praising the holy deeds of the founder of a dynasty were potent instruments in such a conquest for power.¹⁰

A good example of such a compilation of stories is the aforementioned work by Israel Berger, *Zekhut Yisrael*, which actually consists of a series of books in praise of holy men titled *Eser kedushot*, *Eser orot*, *Eser tsaḥtsaḥot*, and *Eser atarot*. The four parts had apparently been written by 1906, when *Eser kedushot* was first published, but the other volumes had come out by 1910. Each volume contains teachings, stories, letters, and biographical data of about ten different tsadikim. The first volume is dedicated to the specific house of tsadikim to which Berger belonged—the Ziditshov (Żydaczów)-Komarno dynasty, a well-known kabbalistic-oriented Hasidic branch in Galicia. The other volumes contain hagiographies of many other tsadikim, starting with the Maggid of Mezrich and his most prominent disciples and concluding with some lesser known figures whom Berger found important enough to present in his book. Berger attempted to combine historical documents and testimonies with legends and glorifying traditions. His writing style suggests that he was well aware of the new historiographic tendencies in his environment, and that he tried to adopt a modern writing style while framing it in the spirit of inner-Hasidic narrative and traditional hagiography.

But not all the Hasidic story compilers were so skilled and proficient in this task. Many books containing less famous or less well-known Hasidic stories were published by rather mediocre and little-known author-compilers who gathered anything they could recall from Hasidic legends. The growing demand for this type of book in the first half of the twentieth century served chiefly as a countercultural literary body for the Hasidic Orthodox public opposed to secular reading. This resulted in a significant growth in the numbers of these publications, which were not all of high quality; nor did they always carry a deep moral message for the readers. Some less qualified authors, sometimes lacking affiliation with Hasidic doctrine and history, attempted to produce collections that

eventually became part of the general body of Hasidic legendary literature and have been recognized as such by the Hasidic community itself, but that lacked much literary quality or credibility.¹¹

The real scope of this Hasidic literary body was somewhat unknown until rather recently (for a bibliography of these books, see the end of this chapter). It is clear that there have been ups and downs in the production of story collections in accordance with both cultural contexts and historical events. However, it is now possible to estimate that no fewer than 260 books containing Hasidic stories were printed from 1815 up to the destruction of Eastern European Jewry during the Holocaust. This number includes a relatively wide range of types of compilations and is not limited just to works dedicated entirely to classical Hasidic stories.

READINGS INTO HASIDIC STORIES

Some Hasidic stories are very specific, condensed, or brief, and yet are able to deliver a precise sharp spiritual or social message. For example, the following famous short story, not found in Hasidic collections, was characterized by Martin Buber as part of the Hasidic oral tradition:

Near his passing, Rabbi Zusya of Hanipoli said: “If they ask me [in the next world], why wasn’t I [like] Moses, I’ll know what to answer, but if they ask me why wasn’t I [like] Zusya, I will have no answer.”¹²

It is obvious that the purpose of such a story was not merely to document a specific event, but primarily to provide a spiritual existential message for a Hasid seeking meaning in his life. The personality of R. Meshulam Zusya of Hanipoli (Annapol) (1718–1800) was chosen because of his image in Hasidic literature as one of the humblest tsadikim of his day.¹³

But there are other varieties of stories. Some have a genuine historical narrative and are designed to portray an inimitable past of the Hasidic movement or to fulfill the reader’s curiosity and senses.

Another type of story is the classic hagiographical “praise,” designed to glorify and elevate the image of a particular tsadik, to give him an important place in the movement’s historical leadership strata or to celebrate his dynasty.

As a rich and heterogeneous literary corpus, which has also altered and evolved over the many phases of its development, Hasidic stories offer a wide range of approaches, interpretations, and readings. The way these stories are read depends, undeniably, on the reader’s background and his or her identity. An ordinary Hasid would approach the stories with a mindset quite different from that of the historian, while the latter’s perspective would differ from that of the literary scholar, the folklorist, or the bibliographer. Therefore, these stories have often generated discrepancies among their various commentators, who have debated

how one ought to approach them, read them, and derive from them anticipated (historical or any other) information about Hasidim and their literature. (For a selection of readings, see the list at the end of the chapter.)

In their anti-Hasidic satires, maskilim mocked Hasidism by manipulating Hasidism's own legendary repertoire and setting it in a ridiculous context, or by presenting fictitious stories with exaggerated meanings that ridiculed tsadikim and their "foolish" followers. By doing so the maskilim demonstrated the great influence these traditions had upon the Jewish mass on the one hand, and used the very same genre to defeat Hasidism by their own capital on the other. The Hasidic story was thus a dominant literary form used in the ideological battlefield between modernists and traditionalists in Eastern Europe.

It was only toward the end of the nineteenth century, and even more so at the beginning of the twentieth century, that Hasidic stories aroused the curiosity of people outside Hasidic circles or other than hostile anti-Hasidic authors. This encounter was part of the rediscovery of Hasidism—often called "neo-Hasidism"—by a group of modern Jewish thinkers, often nationalists, who found in it a model of pure romantic religiosity. By this period the stories and legends told and written by Hasidim had gradually become a legitimate part of the modern Jewish literary canon for non-Hasidic and even non-Jewish readers, and they grew to be widely appreciated by an ever widening spectrum of readers.¹⁴ The reception of neo-Hasidic literature was certainly different from the original, inner-Hasidic reception of the stories. The stories differed from the original religious and moral works designed to define Hasidic society, and they presented an entirely different literary body whose message was more universal, modern, and moral. They were aimed for the modern reader who did not consider himself or herself part of the authentic experience of the story.

From the earliest stages of modern scholarship of Hasidism, scholars disagreed on how to read the legendary sources of Hasidism and how to properly integrate them into the more general understanding of the movement and its ideological-cultural message. Martin Buber, one of the most prominent initiators of neo-Hasidism, was renowned for his refashioning of Hasidic tales and for presenting them to modern readers, first in German and then in modern Hebrew. For him this literary treasure was the most important element for understanding the religious culture of Hasidism, and he saw it as a living tradition that influenced all the Hasidic groups and divisions throughout all periods. So did many other Hebrew and Yiddish novelists, including Yitzhok Leibush Peretz and Shmuel Yosef Agnon, to mention only two of the most prominent, who retold and refashioned Hasidic legends in a modern and most appealing manner. Gershom Scholem, by contrast, as a historian of ideas and mysticism, objected to Buber's view and pointed to homiletic literature, rather than legendary stories, as the fundamental ground for understanding the world of

Hasidism.¹⁵ Still others have presented more complex paths to reading Hasidic stories.

Students of Jewish literature may approach the vast body of Hasidic stories through literary tools that allow them to analyze the stories' symbolic or allegoric meanings. Folklore or ethnographic scholars may derive from the stories valuable information about the culture and traditions of the storytellers and writers of the Hasidic legends. However, one principal approach to Hasidic stories is to read them as historical documents. After all, as mentioned, many of the stories describe (real or fictitious) historical events or present narratives. Therefore, the reader of these stories is naturally tempted to read them as recollections of the historical reality and dramatic events in the history of Hasidism. The historical reading of Hasidic traditions is one issue that has been extensively deliberated in recent scholarship of Hasidism, corresponding to general methodological issues vis-à-vis other Jewish and non-Jewish legendary/hagiographic traditions.

Obviously, among the Hasidim themselves, legends and stories were generally perceived as more reliable and as more trustworthy historical sources than they were by non-Hasidic readers who were not inclined to admire the stories' protagonists. However, many scholarly studies of the history of Hasidism did not adopt sufficiently critical standards in relating to Hasidic legends and drew far-reaching conclusions that contradict other, more reliable historical sources.

The Hasidic story in general is meant mainly to present a moral message, and therefore often includes mythical elements and persuasion to make people think in a certain manner or to adopt particular values. Hence, one ought to regard the Hasidic story as "sacred biography" or "hagiography," and not relate to it simply as a source originally intended to provide a reliable historical narrative nor a realistic reflection of the past. That said, one may still offer a set of methodological tools for retrieving historically reliable data from Hasidic tales.

Scholarly debates over the historicity of Hasidic stories were traditionally held over *Shivhei ha-Besht* and its historical image of early Hasidism. The issues raised by these debates regarding the first hagiography can be applied to the historical reliability of later collections as well.

Early scholars, starting with Simon Dubnow (1860–1941), tended to treat *Shivhei ha-Besht* by sifting through its content, disregarding any stories that contained miracles or fantastic tales while accepting other information that seemed more "real" as historical factual material.¹⁶ However, these apparently critical historians, guided by their rational worldview, tended to accept large portions of the book that did not conflict with their own beliefs, with no real source criticism or clear parameters. And so miracles were rejected while "mundane" interventions were assumed to be true, even if they may have violated historical reality. The adherents of this approach actually failed to read *Shivhei ha-Besht*

in its original context, instead imposing modern, skeptical concepts on a cultural trend that saw the supernatural abilities of its heroes as their chief qualities. The authors, publishers, and readers of *Shivhei ha-Besht* definitely did not see those supernatural events as unrealistic, and precisely the elements that may seem unreasonable to a modern reader were most probably held by many Hasidim as important parts of the book and its cultural message. Hasidim equally tended to sift through *Shivhei ha-Besht* and admit anything that preserved their own cultural point of view, which was obviously very different from those of the aforementioned historians.

Later historians wished to verify the veracity of tales in *Shivhei ha-Besht* in light of external sources that may have supported some traditions in the work. Israel Bartal, for example, found external evidence to support the story of the immigration of R. Elazar of Amsterdam to the land of Israel, while Adam Teller pointed out the two wealthy Jewish arrendators called Ickowicz who were also mentioned in a story in *Shivhei ha-Besht*.¹⁷ However, besides the validation of some realistic background upon which several stories were narrated, these new findings do not actually confirm the truthfulness of the stories themselves or the involvement of the Baal Shem Tov in any way. The external sources do affirm some realistic details known to the compiler, but actually are ineffective in confirming the more specific traditions constructed around the Besht and his associates.

Contemporary scholars differ on the extent to which we can or cannot depend on this collection of stories as a whole or on its specific elements. Moshe Rosman, author of the most important biography of the Besht, holds a very skeptical approach toward *Shivhei ha-Besht*, regarding its contents as nearly useless in historical terms: “Plausibility, realia, and even historicity are not sufficient criteria, then, for assessing authenticity. . . . Hagiography is primarily concerned with turning the exemplary life into a proof text for a position advocated in the present. *Shivhei Ha-Besht* is no exception.”¹⁸ Rosman therefore preferred to contextualize Hasidism in contemporaneous, more reliable, independent documentary sources. Immanuel Etkes, in his likewise important biography of the Besht, opposed the apparent radicalism of Rosman’s position and proposed to contextualize the Besht within Jewish mystical traditions.¹⁹ For him *Shivhei ha-Besht* may hold some reliable historical data that can be extracted cautiously through historical tools despite its obvious disadvantages: “These are, consequently, tales that express and reflect the cultural and social world of the Besht and his associates.”²⁰ Yet other scholars sought to develop a critical apparatus for categorizing Hasidic compilers or books by rating their reliability and credibility. The reliability of authors or works is examined in accordance with the proximity of the specific compiler of the story collection and the subject of the stories themselves, and according to the chain of transmission of the events described in the stories.²¹

Regarding Hasidic stories, we should have in mind two very different categories of historical reality and literary reliability, which should be treated with idiosyncratic tools. On the one hand, there is the factual level of the story narrated: Did it happen? How did it actually accrue? And what parts of it can be regarded as reliable historical information? On the other hand, there are very different inquiries relevant to these texts: How does the story reflect the cultural mentality of the narrator (not of the protagonist of the story!), or, in more contemporary terms, what is the story's representation of the tsadik rather than what we learn about the tsadik himself? In terms used by Rosman in this regard, we may depict the difference between the two historical readings of Hasidic stories as "usability vs. reliability."²² Needless to say, every historical source has limitations and advantages. Depending on the approach one takes or the information one pursues, the same document may reflect distinctively different data. In approaching any source, we should be asking how it may, and how it may not, be used.

All of this is true not only for Hasidic stories or narratives, but also for the sayings and short religious messages attributed to Hasidic masters. These sayings were often transmitted in the same way in which the stories were transmitted, and occasionally even were delivered side by side in the same collections. Here, too, the reader must examine carefully the attribution of traditions and the nature of the statement attributed to any specific tsadik. Good examples are the aphorisms attributed to the enigmatic tsadik Menaḥem Mendel of Kock (1787–1859). R. Menaḥem Mendel did not deliver sermons or leave any writings. Sayings attributed to him were very concise, at once paradoxical and obscure, transmitted orally by his disciples. However, most of the sayings cannot be reliably attributed to him and have more to do with his later image than with historical reality. Surprisingly, the number of sayings attributed to R. Menaḥem Mendel increased as the years passed following his death, which puts into doubt the authenticity of all his sayings. The credibility and attribution of his teachings turn out to be very problematic, although they are usually very inspiring and attractive.²³

On the whole, in recent years there has been a steady increase in the study of the Hasidic story and legends as a literary category and as an expression of the popular culture of the storytellers, writers, compilers, printers, and readers of the many varieties of Hasidic literary products. Regardless of their historicity, authenticity, or credibility, they remain a good read and a very important division within modern Jewish literature.

SUGGESTED READING

The most important general studies on Hasidic stories are: Joseph Dan, *Ha-sipur ha-ḥasidi* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1990); Dan, *Ha-novela ha-ḥasidit* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1966); Gedalyah Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, trans. E. Levin (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish

Civilization, 2008). Nigal also published a biographical lexicon of compilers of Hasidic stories: *Melaktei ha-sipur ha-ḥasidi* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 1996), as well as several collections of stories (organized according to subject), and annotated editions of original collections of Hasidic stories (especially those from the late nineteenth century)—e.g., *Sipurim ḥasidiyim mi-Lemberg-Lvov* (Jerusalem: Ha-makhon le-ḥeker ha-sifrut ha-ḥasidit, 2005).

The largest collection of R. Naḥman of Bratslav (Braclaw) stories is Zvi Mark, *Kol sipurei rabi Naḥman mi-Bratslav* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Aḥronot and Mosad Bialik, 2014). An English translation of some of these stories is *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*, trans. A. J. Band (New York: Paulist, 1978). On these tales, see also Marianne Schleicher, *Intertextuality in the Tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav: A Close Reading of Sippurey Ma'asiyot* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

Stories told by tsadikim are treated by Rivka Dvir-Goldberg, *Ha-tsadik ha-ḥasidi ve-armon ha-Livyatan: Iyun be-sipurei ma'asiyot mi-pi tsadikim* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003).

For bibliographical surveys of Hasidic stories, see Yoav Elstein, “Bou litkon: Bibliographia shel ha-sifrut ha-ḥasidit,” in *Ma'ase sipur*, ed. A. Lipsker and R. Kushelevsky (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2006), 99–118; and a more updated list by Ze'ev Kitsis, “Sifrut ha-shevaḥim ha-ḥasidit: Me-reshitah ve-ad le-milḥemet ha-olam ha-sheniyah” (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2015), 217–310. This work deals especially with the later phase of Hasidic stories, as do Jonatan Meir, *Literary Hasidism: The Life and Works of Michael Levi Rodkinson*, trans. J. G. Amshalem (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2016); Justin Jaron Lewis, *Imagining Holiness: Classic Hasidic Tales in Modern Times* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

An interactive website of Hasidic stories is Zusha: <http://www.zusha.org.il/>. This collection includes discussions and contemporary interpretations of Hasidic tales.

The first scholarly edition of *Shivḥei ha-Besht* is the English translation by D. Ben-Amos and J. R. Mintz, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1984). This edition includes notes and an index of parallel motifs in international folklore. The most useful Hebrew edition is the one by Avraham Rubinstein (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1991). Yehoshua Mondshine published an edition of a newly discovered manuscript version of the book, comparing it to the first printed edition (Jerusalem: Mondshine, 1982). On the editions, see also: Moshe Rosman, “In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov: A User's Guide to the Editions of Shivhei haBesht,” *Polin* 10 (1997), 183–199. The historicity of this compendium of stories was addressed by Moshe Rosman, “Le-toledotav shel makor histori: Sefer Shivḥei ha-Besht ve-arikhato,” *Zion* 58 (1993), 175–214.

On the engagement of neo-Hasidic authors in rewriting and popularizing Hasidic stories, see Nicham Ross, *Masoret ahuvah ve-senu'ah: Zehut yehudit modernit ve-ketivah neo-ḥasidit be-fetah ha-me'ah ha-esrim* (Beersheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2010); Ross, *Margalit temunah ba-hol: Y. L. Peretz ve-ma'asiot ḥasidim* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2013).

On the Hasidic story in the literary framework of Hasidism, see Zeev Gries, *Sefer, sofer ve-sipur be-reshit ha-ḥasidut* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1992). For some new reading into Hasidic stories, see Tsippi Kauffman, “The Hasidic Story: A Call for Narrative Religiosity,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 22 (2014), 101–126; Kauffman, “Two Tsadikim, Two Women in Labor, and One Salvation: Reading Gender in a Hasidic Story,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101 (2011), 420–438; Zeev Kitsis, *Hamishim kriot be-sipurei ḥasidim* (Tel Aviv: Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir, 2017).

NOTES

1. *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov: The Earliest Collection of Legends about the Founder of Hasidism*, trans. and ed. D. Ben-Amos and J. R. Mintz (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1970), The Printer's Preface, p. 1; see also 199.

2. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 349–350.
3. For more on this, see Levi Cooper, “‘But I Will Tell of Their Deeds’: Retelling a Hasidic Tale about the Power of Storytelling,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 22 (2014), 127–163.
4. On stories told by the tsadikim, see especially Rivka Dvir-Goldberg, *Ha-tsadik ha-ḥasidi ve-armon ha-Livyatan: Iyun be-sipurei ma’asiyot mi-pi tsadikim* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003).
5. The best collection of R. Naḥman’s stories in Hebrew is Zvi Mark, *Kol sipurei al Naḥman mi-Bratslav* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Aḥronot and Mosad Bialik, 2014).
6. *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (1993), 179.
7. Jonatan Meir, “Ha-mahadurot ha-avudot shel sefer *Shivḥei ha-Besht* be-yidish (1815–1817),” *Kabbalah* 39 (2017), 249–271.
8. For different opinions on this, see Chone Shmeruk, *Sifrut yidish: Perakim le-toledoteha* (Tel Aviv: Mif’alim Universitaim, 1978), 211; Joseph Dan, *Ha-sipur ha-ḥasidi* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1990), 189–195; Yehoshua Mondshine, *Shivḥei ha-Besht* (Jerusalem: Mondshine, 1982), 52–58; Zeev Gries, “Ha-omnam meitiv ha-sipur ksavo? Makom sifrut ha-shevaḥim be-toledot ha-ḥasidut,” *Da’at* 44 (2000), 85–94; Jonatan Meir, *Literary Hasidism: The Life and Works of Michael Levi Rodkinson*, trans. J. G. Amshalem (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2016), chapter 2.
9. On the concept of cultural agents, see Zeev Gries, “The Hasidic Managing Editor as an Agent of Culture,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. A. Rapoport-Albert (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996), 141–155.
10. For more on this, see Justin Jaron Lewis, *Imagining Holiness: Classic Hasidic Tales in Modern Times* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009); Ze’ev Kitsi, “Sifrut ha-shevaḥim ha-ḥasidit: Me-reshita ve-ad le-milḥemet ha-olam ha-sheniyah” (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2015).
11. On this, see Uriel Gellman, “An Authors’ Guide: Authorship of Hasidic Compendium,” *Zutot* 9 (2013), 85–96.
12. Martin Buber, *Or ha-ganuz* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1968), 231. Translation and brackets after David Biale et al., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 145.
13. Tsippi Kauffman, “Hasidic Performance: Establishing a Religious (Non)Identity in the Tales about Rabbi Zusha of Annapol,” *Journal of Religion* 95 (2015), 51–71.
14. Nicham Ross, *Masoret ahuvah ve-senu’ah: Zehut yehudit modernit ve-ketivah neo-ḥasidit be-fetah ha-me’ah ha-esrim* (Beersheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2010).
15. On the Buber-Scholem polemic regarding Hasidic stories, see Gershom Scholem, *Ha-shelav ha-aharon: Meḥkarei ha-ḥasidut shel Gershom Scholem*, ed. D. Assaf and E. Liebes (Jerusalem: Am Oved Publishers, the Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2008), 325–355, including a bibliographical essay on this topic; Karl Erich Grözinger, “The Buber-Scholem Controversy about Hasidic Tale and Hasidism: Is There a Solution?” in *Gershom Scholem’s “Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism” 50 Years After*, ed. P. Schäfer and J. Dan (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 327–336; Steven Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 52–93.
16. Simon Dubnow, “The Beginnings: The Ba’al Shem Tov [Besht] and the Center in Podolia,” in *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present*, ed. G. D. Hundert (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 25–57; Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, trans. and ed. B. Martin (Cleveland, OH: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1976), 9:27–61.
17. Israel Bartal, “Aliyat r. Ele’azar me-Amsterdam le-erets Yisra’el bi-shenat [1740],” in *Galut ba-’arets*, ed. I. Bartal (Jerusalem: Hasifria Hatziyonit, 1994), 23–40; Adam Teller, “Masoret Slutsk al reshit darko shel ha-Besht,” in *Meḥkarei ḥasidut*, ed. I. Etkes et al.

(Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1999), 15–38. See also Yaakov Barnai, “Some Clarifications on the Land of Israel Stories of ‘In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov,’” *Revue des études juives* 146 (1987), 367–380.

18. See Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Baal Shem Tov* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013), 153. See also Rosman, *Stories That Changed the History: The Unique Career of Shivhei ha-Besht* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

19. Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*, trans. S. Sternberg (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005). See also Etkes, “The Historical Besht: Reconstruction or Deconstruction?” *Polin* 12 (1999), 298–306.

20. Etkes, *The Besht*, 248.

21. See Glenn Dynner, “The Hasidic Tale as a Historical Source: Historiography and Methodology,” *Religion Compass* 3–4 (2009), 655–675.

22. Moshe Rosman, “Hebrew Sources on the Baal Shem Tov: Usability vs. Reliability,” *Jewish History* 27 (2013), 153–169.

23. The teachings attributed to the Rebbe of Kock are analyzed for their authenticity by Yaakov Levinger, “Imrot otentiyot shel ha-rabi me-Kotsk,” *Tarbiz* 55 (1986), 109–135; Levinger, “Torato shel ha-rabi me-Kotsk le-or ha-imrot ha-meyuhasot lo al yedei nekhdo R. Shmuel me-Sokhachev,” *Tarbiz* 55 (1986), 413–431.