

Ba'al Shem Tov

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(Yisra'el ben Eli'ezer, "the Besht"; ca. 1700–1760), healer, miracle worker, and religious [mystic](#); leader of Hasidim in Międzyboż (Yid., Mezhbizh; mod. Ukr., Medzhbizh); recognized as founder of the modern [Hasidic movement](#). Yisra'el Ba'al Shem Tov was born in tiny Okopy Gory Świętej Trójcy (a town whose name means Hill Fortification of the Holy Trinity, referred to in Jewish sources as Okopy), a then recently civilianized military outpost near the southern border of [Ukraine](#) (then part of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth). He spent his early life mainly in various towns of Podolia—one of which was the minor commercial center of Tluste—finally settling in 1740 in the prosperous regional military, administrative, and trade emporium of Międzyboż (owned by the Czartoryski family), whose Jewish community was dominated by wealthy commercial families.



Pilgrims at the grave of the Ba'al Shem Tov, Medzhbizh, Ukraine, 1991. Photograph by Dmitry Peysakhov. (© 1989–2006 Dmitry Peysakhov)

As a young man, Yisra'el apparently worked at a variety of jobs, including ritual slaughterer, elementary school teacher, and circumciser. He mastered rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic and, though not a Talmudist, did become conversant with [rabbinic literature](#). He also set himself to learning both practical and contemplative [Kabbalah](#), associating with such mystical, ascetic types as Mosheh of Kitev (Pol., Kutv) and learning about herbal remedies, even from non-Jews. His wife, Ḥanah, was a divorcée and sister of the prominent scholar Gershon of Kitev. Yisra'el had two children: a son, Tsevi Hirsh, who never became prominent, and a daughter, Odli (Hodl), whose descendants, including [Barukh ben Yehi'el of Mezhbizh](#), [Mosheh Hayim Efrayim of Sudilkov](#), and [Nahman of Bratslav](#), played significant roles in the later Hasidic movement.

At some point in the 1730s, Yisra'el began using the title *ba'al shem* or *ba'al shem tov* (interchangeable terms meaning that he was a "master of God's name," which he could manipulate for theurgic purposes), denoting his skills as a healer—one Polish source refers to him as *ba'al shem doctor*—and his general qualifications as a shaman, a figure who could mediate between this world and the divine spheres in an effort to help people solve their health, material, and social problems. Yisra'el had a charismatic personality, great self-confidence, a sense of humor, a clever intellect, and the conviction that he had a key role to play as a leader of the people of Israel, working for their redemption and that of the *shekhinah* (the divine presence).

Yisra'el's success as a *ba'al shem tov* brought him to the attention of Mezhbizh's Jewish elders, who evidently invited him to settle in their community (giving him a house to live in rent- and tax-free) as the resident kabbalist—filling what was a conventional role in Jewish communities of the time. As such, he would function as both *ba'al shem* and head of the local *bet midrash*, which was populated by a group of scholarly mystical and ascetic followers such as Ze'ev Volf Kitses and David Purkes. The Besht's activities in Mezhbizh included writing [amulets](#), prescribing cures, and interpreting the unseen and the unexplained. An individual's misfortune, a community's persecution, or a general epidemic was a symptom of disruptions in the harmonious relationship between the divine and the human. Through ascents of his soul to the divine spheres and other mystical techniques, the Besht learned the etiology of these symptoms, and it was his job to restore harmony and ameliorate problems—or, at least, to explain reasons for disharmony and consequent suffering.

By taking responsibility for the welfare and redemption of all of the House of Israel, the Besht moved beyond the normal role of a *ba'al shem*, who would typically focus on troubles of individuals. In the *bet midrash*, the Besht led his circle in kabbalistic rituals, such as adding special prayers (*kavanot*) to the normal prayer ritual. His associates considered him "expert in the wisdom of the divinity" and knowledgeable in the metaphysics of the human soul, and reported that he was capable of moving them to a higher, more vital and divinely suffused level of experience. The Besht was also involved in the public life of the Jewish community—taking sides, for example, against the butchers and the rabbi in their power struggle with the Mezhbizh Jewish community in the early 1740s. He also had contact with various Christians—from noblemen and priests to robbers—both as a healer and in the course of his efforts to protect Jews and Jewish interests. The Besht's reputation as an effective *ba'al shem* and mystic spread beyond Mezhbizh and even beyond Podolia: he was known in [Lithuania](#), and his brother-in-law impressed the kabbalists of Jerusalem with tales of his talents.

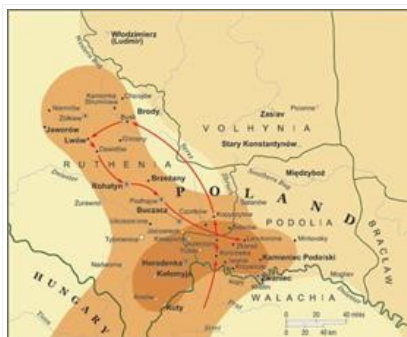
In addition to his status as a key member of the community and an important spiritual figure, the Besht was the head of his extended family and household, responsible for their material and spiritual well-being. His brother-in-law, Gershon, in the [Land of Israel](#), expected him to send both prophylactic amulets and financial support, and other family members relied on Yisra'el's generosity. In addition to his own extended family, individuals such as Hersh the scribe, Jankiel (Jokel)—apparently a major-domo type), and his stepson Szmoylo (Shmuel) are identified in Polish sources as being "of the Besht."



Family tree of the Ba'al Shem Tov, Warsaw, 1927. (The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary)

The Besht was also a teacher, whose disciples and occasional associates included members of the learned elite such as his brother-in-law Gershon, members of the Margoliot rabbinic family, [Pinhas of Korets](#), [Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye](#), Volf Kitses, David Purkes, Nahman of Horodenka, Nahman of Kosov, Yitshak of Drubitsh (Drohobycz), [Dov Ber](#) (the [Magid of Mezritsh](#)), and other rabbinic figures mentioned in the sources. He also taught the general public through storytelling, popular preaching, and personal example.

In his teaching the Besht adapted and emphasized several older kabbalistic concepts, such as *let atar panui mineh* (the idea that all creation contains the divine presence) and that one can therefore worship God through *'avodah be-gashmiyut* (material methods). Food, work, and even sex could be means toward establishing a relationship with God. On the other hand, a person should practice *hishtavut* (indifference) to the exigencies of material fortune. One must focus perpetually on contemplation of the divine and never lose sight of the real goal of life: achieving *devekut* (communion) with God in order to be graced with the *ruah ha-kodesh* (divine spirit).



Areas of Sabbatian, Frankist, and Beshtian activity, eighteenth century. (Based on map 46, prepared by Michael K. Silber, in Evyatar Freisfel, *Atlas of Modern Jewish History*, rev. ed. [New York, 1990], p. 50)

The Besht's technique for attaining this state of communion centered on ecstatic prayer, which entailed spiritual attachment to the holiness inherent in the letters of sacred texts. Communion attained via the letters could induce the *shefa'* (divine light) to descend through the various worlds and shed its splendor on human existence. The sounds created by pronouncing the letters of prayer or of sacred texts in a state of ecstasy, with the proper intent and concentration, would become virtual sanctuaries for housing the divine light in this world. Moreover, the Besht utilized the divine light in the holy letters to see beyond the here and now—"from one end of the world to the other"—and to hear the metaphysical and the supernatural. The aforementioned ascents of his soul, which he accomplished in his ecstatic state, brought the Besht up to the *hekhhalot* (heavenly sanctuaries). In addition to teaching techniques for achieving an ecstatic mystical experience leading to divine communion, the Besht gave moral instruction, provided explanations of divine decision making and mystical doctrines, and imparted theurgic skills.

The relationship of the Besht to [Hasidism](#) is not a simple one to describe. Spiritually, Yisra'el Ba'al Shem Tov was a product of the tradition of mystical ascetic Hasidism traceable at least as far back as the twelfth–thirteenth-century Haside Ashkenaz and revived in Safed in the sixteenth century, whence it returned to Europe and became popular among Poland's Jewish spiritual avant-garde in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. These Hasidim, organized in small *havurot* (religious fellowships) in various communities, were elitist learned mystics whose spiritual practice included such ascetic features as frequent fasts, isolation, and flagellation. They were the type of people that the Besht taught and led in his study circle in the Mezhbizh *bet midrash*. Both in this role and as community *ba'al shem*, the Besht functioned within recognized communal institutions—the *bet midrash* and *kehilah* (Jewish communal authority)—and never declared that he was starting a new populist style of Hasidism aimed at the unlearned masses, never discouraged strict halakhic observance, and never discounted the importance of [Torah](#) study. Nor did he create any new institutions, enjoy a mass following of formal devotees, or suffer from an organized, ideologically based opposition to his doctrines and activities. The opposition to Hasidism—as personified by Eliyahu, the [Gaon of Vilna](#)—and the so-called [Misnagdim](#), did not arise until more than a decade after the Besht's death.

The Besht did, however, institute some innovations within traditional, mystical, ascetic Hasidism that paved the way for its transformation, primarily following his death, from elitist asceticism to popular spiritualism, and from a collection of small religious fellowships to a mass movement. Perhaps most important among these innovations was his insistence that the path to communion with God lay not in the suffering of asceticism but in the joy of performing the commandments, and of studying and praying with the proper intention (*kavanah*). Removing asceticism as a requirement of devotion opened up kabbalistic practices as a realistic option for those not willing to punish their flesh; and if the letters, as opposed to the words, were the key element of sacred texts, then intellectual achievement was not necessarily required in order to achieve textual mastery. Also, the Besht's taking both material and spiritual responsibility for his extended family and household may have set an important precedent for the development of the later Hasidic court (*hof*) centered on the figure of the *tsadik*.

Sources about the Besht include some references to him and those close to him in Polish archival records; copies of four letters he wrote to Me'ir Margoliot, Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye, Mosheh of Kitev, and, especially Gershon of Kitev, known as *Igeret ha-kodesh* (The Holy Epistle); various testimonies by contemporaries about him, recorded during his lifetime or posthumously; hearsay evidence; and recorded oral traditions. Chief among the last are the more than 200 stories about him and his associates published in the hagiographic collection *Shivhe ha-Besht* (In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov), first compiled in manuscript by Dov Ber of Linitz in about 1795 and then reedited and printed by the Lubavitch Hasid Yisra'el Yoffe, in Kopyts (Kapuste) in 1814/15. There are also hundreds of sayings cited in his name in the four books of Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye.

While the Besht's spiritual legacy was mostly unwritten and inchoate, it inspired prodigious religious creativity in his name. Those who built the ideology and institutions of the new Hasidic movement as a popular, mass movement in the latter part of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including the Magid of Mezritsh and Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye and their disciples, invoked both the Besht's innovations and his reputation as their teacher as the foundation of their efforts, citing him as the authority for ideas and practices they promulgated. Even the paratexts and typography of their books underscored their connection to the Besht. Their success resulted in Yisra'el Ba'al Shem Tov's attaining the status of the founder of Hasidism, an important architect of modern Judaism, and one of the most famous figures in Jewish history. The attempts of a spectrum of subsequent Jewish groups—Hasidic, liberal religious, nationalist, **Haredi**—to appropriate the Besht's image and teachings are testimony to the tremendous ongoing impact of his life.

Suggested Reading

Dov Baer ben Samuel of Linitz, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov [Shivhei ha-Besht]: The Earliest Collection of Legends about the Founder of Hasidism*, trans. and ed. Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz (Bloomington, Ind., 1970); Rachel Elijor, "R. Yosef Karo ve-R. Yisra'el Ba'al Shem Tov: Metamorfozah mistit, hashra'ah kabalit ve-hafnamah ruhanit," *Tarbits* 65.4 (1996): 671–709; Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic and Leader*, trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, Mass., and Hanover, N.H., 2004); Arthur Green, ed., "Typologies of Leadership and the Hasidic Zaddiq," in *Jewish Spirituality*, vol. 2, *From the Sixteenth Century Revival to the Present*, chap. 5 (London, 1987); Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov: Studies in Hasidism*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (Chicago, 1985); Moshe Idel, "Jewish Magic from the Renaissance Period to Early Hasidism," in *Religion, Science and Magic in Concert and in Conflict*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher, pp. 82–117 (New York, 1989); Moshe Idel, "Ha-Besht ke-navi' uke-magikon talisma'ni," in *Ma'aseh sipur: Mehkarim ba-siporet ha-yehudit mugashim le-Yo'av Elshtain* (Ramat Gan, Isr., 2006); Haviva Pedaya, "Ha-Ba'al Shem Tov, R. Ya'akov Yosef mi-Polno'eh veba-magid mi-Mezritsh: Kave yesod le-gishah tipologit datit," *Da'at* 45 (2000): 25–73; Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov* (Berkeley, 1996); 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.

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