
Three eighteenth-century Jewish leaders epitomize the trends which dominated most Jewish religious thought in the West until very recently. The lives of these three remarkable men overlapped by just over 30 years, from 1729 to 1760; but they never met. They were so different in both temperament and intellectual outlook that it is challenging to imagine how they might have conversed — had such a meeting ever taken place. The three were Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), the pioneer of Enlightenment Judaism; Elijah, the Vilna Gaon (1720–1799), the archetypal rabbinic scholar, mistrustful of religious enthusiasm but utterly devoted to Torah learning and piety; and Israel ben Eliezer (1700–1760), more commonly known as the Baal Shem Tov, abbreviated to Besht.

Immanuel Etkes published his influential Hebrew biography of the Vilna Gaon in 1998; an English translation by Jeffrey M. Green, *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and his Image*, appeared in 2002 (Berkeley, University of California Press). The present work, of which the Hebrew original was published in 2000, seeks the reality behind the legendary images of the Baal Shem Tov. The work is not quite a biography of the Besht: anyone who picks it up, expecting an ordered and carefully-documented life-story of Israel ben Eliezer, will be disappointed. On the other hand, it is more than a mere biography: its chapters explore in depth the principal issues surrounding the man and his life’s work, and offer a critical examination of the meagre available sources.

In the first chapter — ‘Magic and Miracle Workers in the Days of the Baal Shem Tov’ — Etkes takes issue with ‘Hasidic historiography’ (accounts of Hasidism by earlier historians such as Graetz and Dubnow) for the way its practitioners have denigrated magic and the
arts of the *baalei shem* (*baalei* is the Hebrew plural of *baal*) as exploitation of the crass superstition of the ignorant masses. He adduces a great deal of evidence to demonstrate that it was not only the ignorant masses who held such beliefs in the eighteenth century and earlier, but leading rabbis and scholars: the *Baal Shem Tov*, purveying cures through miracles, potions, spells, and the like was in harmony with the outlook of his time and place, distinguished only by the reputation that his cures had greater efficacy than those of his rival *baalei shem*. His historical description is broadly correct, although he does not explain how it was shown that the *Besht*’s cures were more efficacious than anyone else’s. However, the *maskilim* Etkes has in his sights were surely aware of the widespread belief in superstition, and if they castigated the *Baal Shem Tov* and hassidic leaders for preying on the ignorance and superstition of the masses, this was a veiled way of attacking what they believed to be the benighted ethos of Eastern European Jewry in general — both the leaders and the led.

In the second chapter, the author seeks to demonstrate the distinctive character of the *Besht*’s practice as a *baal shem*. A group of stories has been preserved narrating how the *Besht* acquired his great knowledge through secret writings he had received from a certain ‘Rabbi Adam’. Previous scholars have identified the mysterious ‘Rabbi Adam’ as a follower of the false messiah Shabbetai Zevi, or even as a Christian: in either case, his true identity would be concealed. Almost half a century ago, Khone Shmeruk undermined these theories by his discovery of a seventeenth-century Yiddish text containing fabulous tales of Rabbi Adam, though Ze’ev Gries could still maintain that the stories linking the *Besht* with Rabbi Adam were a cover for the connection he claimed with Isaac Luria, whose incarnation he believed himself to be. Etkes rejects the attempts at historical reconstruction and interprets the Rabbi Adam stories as an attempt to establish the *Besht*’s credentials — since the *Besht* had neither a distinguished ancestry nor any known teacher. Tales of the secret writings enhanced his reputation and bolstered his self-confidence as one who practised with authority, and enabled him to disparage the activities of rival *baalei shem* and so exercise the leadership rôle which forms the topic of the next chapter.

The *Besht* was obviously deeply concerned with the well-being of the Jewish people; when they were threatened with apostasy and persecution he was quite ready to intercede on their behalf with God, the Messiah, and the chief demon Samael, on his periodic excursions to the ‘Upper Worlds’. Two of these ‘excursions’ are graphically narrated by the *Besht* himself in letters to his brother-in-law Gershon of Kotov. His earthly interventions appear to have been confined within the Jewish community, and concern the lease-holding business and the supervision of *shehita*. Whether such interventions qualify
him as a ‘leader’ in a conventional political sense, or how effective they were, seems open to debate; however, the image they convey contributed to the model of later hassidic leadership.

The chapter on the Besht ‘as Mystic and Pioneer in Divine Worship’ forms the kernel of the work. Etkes poses the question: in what way did the Besht’s mysticism differ from that of other Jewish mystics — for instance, from the path of devequt (‘cleaving’ to God) practised by the Safed mystics? He identifies four distinctive aspects of the Besht’s path: devequt is an ecstatic episode, brief and intense, not a continual focus of thought on God; unlike the Safed mystics, he talks of a direct devequt with God, not with some kabbalistic emanation; the Besht implies that God’s immanence in the world is absolute, without gradations; finally, the Besht did not seek an elevated state through ascetic practices, but adopted gratification of the body as a means of elevating the soul (p. 123).

Etkes cites (on p. 125) a seminal passage in the Shivhei Habesht which describes, though not at first-hand, the way the Besht entered a mystical state through intense prayer:

The Besht was seized with a violent shaking and trembled and went on trembling as he always did during his prayer... [when] the Besht remained in his place and did not move onward toward the Ark, R. Wolf Kotses the Hasid came and looked at his face and saw that it was burning like a torch and that his eyes were bulging out and were open and motionless as if he was dying heaven forbid... they had to put off reading from the Torah until he calmed down from his trembling.

After such states the Besht would often report a journey to the ‘Upper World’, where he would converse with figures such as the Messiah, interceding where he could on behalf of threatened and persecuted Jews. Now of course the Besht’s contemporaries, at least those who had confidence in his powers, would accept such reports and marvel at them; the reports accorded well with their world-view, and it is for the historian to note this. But surely the modern historian needs to offer some comment on the psychological state of a man who behaved in this strange way. There is of course insufficient evidence for a proper diagnosis, though one suspects catatonia, or a hysterical conversion syndrome; the latter would account for the bulging eyes and ‘shining’ face, especially if he held his breath. Etkes, however, does not consider the psychological aspects, but takes the reports at their face value as accounts of journeys of the soul to God, conceding only that since the experience cannot be properly described in words, the Besht would simply have done the best he could with the language available to him.

Other than his own letters, the main source for a life of the Besht is the hagiography known as Shivhei Habesht; this is an anthology of about 250
stories, many of them fanciful in the extreme, first printed close to half a century after the Besht’s death — having been edited both by the compiler of the stories, Dov Ber of Lince, and by the printer, Israel Jaffe. It tells us more about the editors and their intended audiences than it does about the subject. In Chapter Six, Etkes takes issue with Moshe Rosman on the value of this work as a historical source. Rosman considers it of little worth, but Etkes has little difficulty in demonstrating that the number of stories apposite to the agendas of either the compiler or the printer is quite small and he adds (p. 241) that ‘the origins of the majority of the tales are well-known figures who were members of the rabbinical elite or who held religious offices. Moreover, a few of the storytellers knew the Besht and his associates in person’. Etkes concludes that the stories of healing the sick, of exorcising dybbuks and demons, and of ecstatic prayers and ‘performances in the Upper Worlds’ are to be acknowledged by the historian if he is not to fail ‘in his obligations to understand and describe the figure of the Besht as the Besht himself and those surrounding him perceived it’ (p. 243). We can, in addition, learn from them the geographic range of the Besht’s circuit as a baal shem (itinerant healer), the nature of the circle with which he was most involved, and a good deal about the society in which he lived and his relations with it.

The Besht himself, writing to his brother-in-law, refers to havura sheli (‘my group’). Was this a circle like the other known pietistic (‘hassidic’, though not in the later sense) fraternities which are known from that period and earlier? Etkes argues that the havura was the innermost ring within such a circle, formed of the Besht’s constant companions with whom he prayed regularly in Medzhibozh (Volhynia, Ukraine); yet the circle differed in significant ways both from the earlier fraternities and from the later hassidic ‘court’. Hassidism as a movement did not crystallize until a decade or two after the Besht’s death, but it was the members of his circle who carried his reputation as a mystic of the highest rank, and his new style of ecstatic worship, into the new movement; it was to this circle, rather than to the broader public, that the Besht entrusted his ‘message’.

Etkes’s work is an important addition to the literature, well-documented and soundly argued; it both complements and challenges Moshe Rosman’s biography, Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba’al Shem Tov, published by University of California Press in 1996. If any criticism is to be made, it is of a type of tunnel vision which characterizes much Jewish scholarship, and tends to see Judaism as evolving in isolation from religious developments elsewhere. It would be interesting to have the author’s thoughts, for instance, on the relationship of the Besht’s attitudes to prayer, mysticism, and leadership with those of local Christian charismatics such as the Philopowcy...
and the Doukhobors, sects deriving from the Old Believers, a matter to which attention was drawn by Yaffa Eliach already in 1968. Indeed, eighteenth-century Europe was plagued or blessed, depending on your point of view, by a wide range of mystical and charismatic sects. Hassidism did not evolve in a vacuum.