

David Assaf. *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of R. Israel of Ruzhin*. Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1997. Pp. 538 (In Hebrew).

Hagiography and history tell their stories at cross-purposes. While hagiography glorifies, even sanctifies its heroes, history strips them of their traditional greatness, seeking to bare the factual truth to which documents and testimonies attest. Nowhere is this contrast more evident than in the history and study of Hasidism. Legends (*shevachim*) are the building blocks of the Hasidic tradition, in which the rabbi is a leader, a miracle worker and a storyteller. He is the narrating subject, who, in turn, becomes the object of stories subsequent generations tell. As episodic biographies these narratives bring the contrast between hagiography and history into a clear focus. Yet, the scarcity of documents and the tendentiousness of even contemporaneous testimonies make the explicit, or even implicit, comparison between collective hagiographic memory and history extremely rare.

Now David Assaf has written a biographical study of one of the most colorful figures in the Hasidic movement of the nineteenth century. R. Israel of Ruzhin (1796 -1850) who was the great-grandson of Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritch, led a life full of contradictions and drama that would befit a Hollywood hero more than a Hasidic rabbi. A non-literate who could barely sign his name, he headed a Hasidic court and dispensed advice steeped in tradition to community leaders and commoners alike. Rubbing shoulders with government officials and Jewish *maskilim*, he led a life of glamour and wealth that made him a king among the Hasidim, hence the title of Assaf's book. At the height of his popularity he was arrested, and he lingered in a Russian jail for twenty-two months, charged in a conspiracy to commit murder. After his release he escaped across the border to Romania and settled in Sadgora where he renewed his life of glamour. R. Israel of Ruzhin was certainly not a run-of-the-mill miracle worker.

Hasidic oral tradition retains his image and narratives of his adventures. More than a hundred years after his death, Jerome Mintz recorded Hasidic narrators in New York who told him how R. Israel of Ruzhin sneaked over the border [*Legends of the Hasidim* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968), pp. 192-3, 264-6].

However the pietistic Hasidic tradition in which saintliness retains a higher value than royalty, demoted him from his throne and marginalized him as a historical curiosity.

In his historical study, David Assaf restores R. Israel of Ruzhin to his full glory and in describing his life and time, explores the emergence of the rabbinical dynasties and their courts in the Hasidic movement during the first half of the nineteenth century, and its impact on subsequent generations. The concluding chapters amount to a historical ethnography in which, relying on documents, descriptions and recollections, Assaf makes the Hasidic courts and their inhabitants come alive. The relevance of this book to history, hagiography, folklore, and anthropology of Hasidism makes it indispensable reading.

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Hasan-Rokem, Galit, Guest Editor. *Folk Culture and Popular Culture. Theory and Criticism: An Israeli Forum* 10. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad/The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 1997 (Hebrew with English summaries).

At a time when folklorists flounder in America, they flourish in Israel. Being under the perennial threat of department closures, American folklorists have ventured into the fields of public folklore that politicians have mined. In contrast, in Israel, while making slow and modest progress at the universities, folklorists have joined forces with non-academic intellectuals and scholars in other disciplines to present before the public their latest research analyses and their explorations of new directions. *Theory and Criticism* ("Teoria uvikoret") is one of Israel's leading forums for ideas and scholarship. It is an interdisciplinary journal that appeals to a growing public of academically educated readers and adheres to scholarly standards and format. The publication of a special issue devoted to "Folk Culture and Popular Culture," following shortly the appearance of a volume edited by Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Studies in the History of Popular Culture* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1996), attests to the strengthened position of folklore in Israel.

In her introductory essay, Galit Hasan-Rokem establishes the theoretical framework for the issue, drawing upon recent trends in folklore, anthropology, semiotics, and history in Europe and America. The two articles by the Michel de Certeau and by Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, the only translated texts in this collection, assist her in fine-tuning her introduction of folklore scholarship to a broader readership by focusing on the study of everyday life. Her synthesis offers a new way to approach folklore and popular culture in Israel, conceptualizing the subject in terms of the emerging Israeli social reality and the discourse of post-modernism.

In his actions, research, and teaching, Dov Noy formulated the scholarly paradigm for folklore research in the post-independence era of Israel. This was an inherently modernist study of folklore that sought to record, document and preserve Jewish traditions (particularly narrative) at the initial point of inter-ethnic contact. Aware of the impending cultural disintegration of the immigrating Jewish communities, Dov Noy's goal was to reconstruct the historic narrative traditions as they were in their countries of origin, before the onset of the acculturation process into modern life and Zionist ideology.

Implicit in Galit Hasan-Rokem's synthesis is an approach that considers the present tradition not just as a reduction of the past, but also as an emergent, interactive, and interdependent set of social and cultural forces that are valid in their own right. This emergent tradition is constructed out of the fabric of everyday life in modern Israel. The political protest of Jewish women, "women in black," and the political behavior of Palestinians bring forward new symbols for the public domain. The collective memory that children's literature fostered in the pre-State and early-State periods clashes with the one that is represented in the "cassette music" of immigrants from countries under Islam. The researchers of culture themselves have become cultural agents who mediate between past and present for the communities they study. In addition to these cultural currents, voices from the ancient and medieval past resonate in a modern Israel in which the images of the film industry and the popular press have their visual impact on society. The additional contributors to this issue are: Yoram Bilu, Daniel Boyarin, Esther Cohen, Sarah

Hellman, Steve Kaplan, Ilana Pardes, Tamar Rapoport, Motti Regev, Ahmad Sa'di, Noam Yaron, and Yael Zerubavel.

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Hayyim Pesah and Eli Yassif, eds. *The Knight, the Demon and the Virgin: An Anthology of Hebrew Stories from the Middle Ages.* H. Pesah, "Foreword," pp. 7-9. Eli Yassif, "Postscript," pp.194-212. Jerusalem: Keter, 1998. Pp. 213 (In Hebrew).

In the currently charged world of Israeli public opinion, the publication of this book is a political act. The editors have crammed well known medieval Hebrew texts into a cheap, paperback format, using paper the acidity of which is more fitting for traditional "folk books" than for typical scholarly tomes designed for the library shelf. In this book readers will encounter the classics of Jewish folk literature—such as "The Story of the Jerusalemite," "Joseph Della Reina," and principle texts from Hebrew medieval romance literature such as "The Alexander Romance," a selection of "Tales of Sendebat," and a "Hebrew Arthurian Romance." A few texts such as "The Story of a Rich Man and a Beautiful Woman" and "The Defamed Innocent Woman" come from the famous manuscript OR. 135 in the Bodleian Library of Oxford—a manuscript Eli Yassif continues to study.

The importance of the collection is neither in the discovery of any new versions nor in the scholarly annotations of familiar stories. These annotations are brief, precise, and adequate for the present format. Rather, the message of the book is in its very publication, its timing, and its target readership. The transfer of these narratives from academic to popular readership aims at educating the public about the nature of historical Jewish society and literature and at extricating Jewish tradition from the prison-house of piety and religiosity. In the formative years of Jewish religious philosophy (at the time of Maimonides, Nachmanides, and other great interpreters of the Mishnah and the Talmuds), Jewish people had sex on their minds, and they desired each other and feared demons much as other peoples did, then and now. European culture and literature, to