The Death of the Baal Shem Tov

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Abstract
Legend, not history, tells the life story of the Baal Shem Tov. The chroniclers of his day hardly noticed the folk healer from Medzhibozh who wandered around the 18th-century Jewish communities of the Ukraine, and later achieved fame as the founder of the Hasidic movement. The rabbinical authorities made no mention of him in their writings and the community leaders did not consider him a force to reckon with. But there he was: a Besht (abbreviated from of Baal Shem Tov, "a master of good name") traveling with his small retinue of amulet writers from one small Jewish community to another, offering his mystical powers to cure the sick and the barren.

Disciplines
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The Death of the Baal Shem Tov

By DAN BEN-AMOS

LEGEND, not history, tells the life story of the Baal Shem Tov. The chronicle, therefore, could be accurately entitled ‘The Baal Shem Tov: a life story’. After his death at the age of 70, he was buried in a poor Jewish cemetery near the city of Lezhe in Albania. The tombstone is still there, and every year on his anniversary, family and friends gather there to pay their respects.

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But such a romantic sentiment is actually a double-edged sword. It involves both admiration and condescension. While the minagdim despised the tales about the Baal Shem and other rabbis because of their simplicity, literary writers loved them for the very same reason. Their conception of the tales has not changed much. They continue to consider them as unrefined and primitive literature. Hence any attempt to present the narratives before a modern literary audience allegedly requires textual improvements and modifications.

In a certain novel, the protagonist, a young scholar, discovers an ancient manuscript that contains tales of the Baal Shem. With a critical attitude toward oral tales, which combines blatant disdain with good intentions, he decides to rewrite them in a more literary form. But the experience of working with the tales leads him to question the nature of the stories and their place in the modern world. He begins to see that the tales are not just a collection of anecdotes but also a reflection of the values and beliefs of the community that produced them. He realizes that the tales are a valuable source of information about the past, and he sets out to preserve and share them with others.

In the case of the Baal Shem, it has been the intent of modern writers and philosophers to bring forward those aspects of thought and literary values which might be relevant to the problems of modern man, highlighting the piety of Hasidism. For example, in Tales of Shirei ha-Bashan the author describes the Baal Shem observing an incredible simple hula dance going on his way to the synagogue: “He looked through the window and saw the worker working to the synagogue.” In Buber’s rendition of the same text, the sentence reads as follows: “He . . . looked out of the window. Then he saw a man go by. He carried his prayer shawl and phylacteries in his hand and set his feet as intent and solemnly as though he were going straight to the doors of Heaven (my italics).” (Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters, p. 68) This interpolation reflects Buber’s conception of the Hasidic and is an alien element in their tales. Certainly, it is quite possible that modern man, whoever he is, is more interested in Buber’s interpretation of Hasidism and his interpolations in their tales than in the actual legends.

This example illustrates a modern religious philosopher addressing himself to his audience. But the tales of the Hasidim were not intended for the literate educated public that comprises the readership of Buber. Their primitive indigenous audience consisted of the followers of the Baal Shem Tov and other rabbis, and originally these people understood the tales within the context of their own social life and world of references. The attributes of crudeness, obscurity and primitiveness which are accorded to these legends might reflect the ignorance of the sophisticated reader, his lack of understanding of the Hasidic world and its allusions and connotations.

But in bringing modern readers closer to the understanding of the tales we should not modify the texts, rather we should try to read the legends as the Hasidim themselves listened to them. There is a need to find the clues for meanings, for allusions to traditional notions, and for the references to cultural facts and ideas. Above all, it is necessary to reveal for ourselves the narrative art which the Hasidim practiced so well every Shabbat afternoon around their rebbe’s table, in short, what is the message of a particular tale and how it is communicated.

These tales have a literary integrity of their own which becomes apparent in the context of Hasidic narrative art. Instead of reading into the tales what modern writers and philosophers think about Hasidism, we might attempt to find out what meanings can be found in the legends themselves. Let us then read the following legend from In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov:

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HILE within the Hasidic community Shirei ha-Bashan achieved the status of a holy book soon after publication, and continues until this very day to be the cornerstone of Hasidic narrative literature, the position of this volume in the outside circles changed radically throughout the years. The term ‘minagdim’ regarded the legends with contempt, as an illustration of the feeble-mindedness and superstitious nature of Hasidic beliefs. Later, when the conflict between the two camps of Hasidism and non-Hasidism intensified, the Baal Shem Tov’s followers, known as Hasidim, were criticized for their piety and strict observance of the commandments. However, the Baal Shem Tov himself was a man of great erudition and a respected figure in his community. He was known for his kindness and generosity, and his teachings were based on a deep understanding of the Torah and Talmud.

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The Besht’s Death

I will write a little about his death. His passing away was on the first day of Shavuot. On the Passover before that, the rabbi, our teacher Pinhas of Korets, visited with the Besht, and Rabbi Pinhas felt a little weak. Because of this he hesitated to go to the mikveh on the eve of the last holiday of Passover, and finally he decided not to go. On the seventh day of the Passover Rabbi Pinhas perceived within the prayer that it was decreed that the Besht would soon pass away because of his fight against the sect of Shabbetai Tzvi, as is told above in the story when they wanted to burn the Babylonian Talmud on Yom Kippur. (Tale 47 in In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov) The rabbi, our teacher and rabbi, Rabbi Pinhas, began to strengthen his prayer, but it did not help, and he regretted that he had not gone to the mikveh. He thought that if he would have seen this while he was in the mikveh it would have helped. After the prayer the Besht asked him whether he went to the mikveh on the previous day, and he said, “No.”

The Besht said: “The deed has already been done and there is nothing that can alter it.”

After the Passover the Besht was sick with diarrhea, but in spite of that he gathered his strength and went to pray before the ark. He did not say anything about it to his students, who were known to have powerful prayers, and he sent them elsewhere. The rabbi, our teacher and rabbi, Pinhas, did not return home. On the eve of Shavuot all his followers gathered to spend the night saying prayers, such as the redemption prayer of the Ari, God bless his memory. The Besht said torah before them concerning the biblical portion of the week and the giving of the Torah. In the morning he sent for all his followers to gather and he told Rabbi Leib Kessler and someone else, I have forgotten his name, to handle his burial. Because they were members of the funeral society and needed to know about diseases, he showed them the signs on each of the members of his own body, and he explained how the soul emanates from this member and from that member. He told them to gather a minyan to pray with him. He told

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them to give him a prayer book and he said: "Soon I shall be with God, blessed be He."

The young rabbi, Rabbi Nahman of Horodenka went to the Bet-Hamidrash to pray for him. The Besht said: "He shouts in vain. If he could have entered in the gate where I was accustomed to enter, his prayer would have helped." At that moment the soul of a dead man came to him asking for favor. He called out to it in his name, saying: "For 80 years you have wandered, and you have not heard until now that I am in this world. Get out, wicked one." He immediately addressed to the servant: "Rush outside and shout for everyone to clear away from the road because I angered him and he may harm a child."

And so it was that he hurled a maiden, the daughter of the shammes, into the river together with the rest of the Besht saying: "I grant you these two hours. Do not torture me."

The servant said: "Who are you talking to, sir?"

He said: "Do you not see the Angel of Death who always runs from me? And people think that black peppers grow in the Besht's garden."

Not that they have given him control over me his shoulders have broadened and he feels joyous.

Then all the people of the town came to see him on the holiday, and he said to them. After that, during the meal, he told the servant to put meat in a large glass, but the servant put it in a small glass. The Besht said: "Man has no power on the day of death." (Ecc. 8:8, in the biblical context this phrase means that man has "no power over the day of death"). "even the gabbai does not obey me." Then he said: "Until now I have done favors for you. Now you will do a favor for me." Then he went to the toilet and the servant wanted to follow him. He asked him: "Is today different from any other day that you want to follow me?"

He also gave them a sign that when he passes away the two clocks will stop. When he washed his hands the big clock stopped, and his followers stood around it so that he would not see it. He said to them: "I am not concerned with myself because I know clearly that when I leave through this door I immediately enter another door." He sat on his bed and he told them to gather around him. He said to them about the column on which one ascends from lower paradise to upper paradise, and how this was described in his visions. He described it as if it were the door of the souls, and he interpreted the order of worship. He told them to say, "Let the pleasantness of the Lord our God be upon us." He lay down and sat up several times. He concentrated on Karvansat until they could not distinguish the syllables in his praying, that is to say, to pronounce them with a shebet, and he began to tremble as one saying the 18 benedictions. Then slowly he became quiet and they said that the small clock had stopped. They waited for a long time. Then they put a feather under his nose and they realized that he was dead.

I heard all this from Rabbi Jacob of the holy community of Medzhizhbor, who passed away in the Holy Land. The rabbi said that Rabbi Leib Kessler saw the departure of his soul as a blue flame. (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, pp. 259-57)

This tale is hardly "typical" of the legends in Shhevii ha-Besht. Obviously, a description of the death of the central character could not be a recurrent theme. But its subject matter is not the only reason for the uniqueness of the tale. The form of the narration, starting with the opening sentence: "When he washed his hands the big clock stopped, and his followers stood around it so that he would not see it." The relation of the tale to the preceding is not evident, and it is in inherent contrast with the other legends. Most tales start with a formula that validates the authenticity of the events in the narration by reference to a known personality as a source: "I heard this from..." The writer also evokes the sanction of oral transmission as a testimony for the historicity of the incidents. In such cases the writer serves in the role of a mediator between the oral teller of the story and the reading public. He transforms the legend from the oral to the written medium and becomes merely a transmitter of cultural knowledge.

Other tales, in which the authenticating formula is missing, open with a beginning which is common to Hebrew popular literature: "Once..." Joseph Dan of the Hebrew University contends that there is a greater presence of magical motifs and elements of the miraculous in this last group of tales.

However, the present tale is mostly realistic, even earthy in details, and above all it does not lack a validating statement, even if the final statement appears very similar to all this from Rabbi Jacob of the holy community of Medzhizhbor." The authenticity of the story is reinforced by the fact that its source is a person from the Besht's own town, making it a local version of the legends of the death of the Baal Shem Tov. The writer in that case achieves the impression of a relatively fictitious and undocumented account. The subject matter is too important to be tampered with.

In fact there is reason to assume that the choice of the opening sentence, "When he washed his hands the big clock stopped, and his followers stood around it so that he would not see it..." is not accidental. In the entire collection there is only one other tale where the writer opens in a similar form, and the examination of this story and its unique qualities may cast some light on the rhetorical intent and function of the present opening formula.

As just mentioned, in most tales the author functions as a mediator between oral tradition and his readers. There are only two stories in which he reports events he personally witnessed, both of which concern Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonoye. One of these legends is an account of the righteous conduct of the rabbi, to which the writer was but a passive observer (Tale 144, “Feeling the Tefillin”), but the other is a story about an incident in which the writer was actively involved as a young man (Tale 51, “The Protective Prayers”) serving as a messenger for the rabbi. This lends support to the claim that the writer is responsible for the narrative as a whole.

In contrast with the more common opening formula in the past tense, "I heard from...", which is passive, he begins the present story with the future tense intensive verb, "I will write..." Consequently there is a double indication of the author in the story: first, as a character partaking in the episode and, secondly, as a writer communicating with his readers. This opening formula suggests that it introduces a personal narrative. Although the writer himself was not present at the Besht's death scene, he introduces himself as an active presence there as if he were in the room being able to follow every single move the Baal Shem Tov made in his last hours. Secondly, the phrase "I will write..." also establishes a relationship of communicative intimacy and confidentiality between the writer and his reader which is absent from all other tales in the collection.

Once begun, the narration of the Besht's death scene becomes a story which develops along two intertwined themes: a general reversal of relationships and a gradual resignation from life. The reversal of relationships becomes apparent by comparing the situations in this story with other tales. The early death of the Besht as a person who prays for the welfare of the Jewish community and its individual members. He produces rain and cures the ailing; he redeems wandering souls and combats Satan. In critical situations he925

The sequence of prayers in Alasheev means both an individual and a communal appeal for the well-being of the Baal Shem Tov, yet neither is effective. The reversal is situational and not absolute for the disciples do not possess the necessary spiritual force the leader had had. There is a growing awareness of the irreplaceability of the Baal Shem Tov; neither of his disciples could do what he could have done. The recognition of the ineffectiveness of the prayers amounts to a gradual resignation from life, a sense of futility. The plot is punctuated by two statements of despair that the Besht is no longer to blame for the failure of each of his disciples. After the prayer of Rabbi Pinhas, the Besht says: "The deed has already been done and there is nothing that can alter it." And after the prayers of Rabbi Nahman, he says: "He shouts in vain. If he could have entered in the door where I was accustomed to enter, his prayer would have helped.

Each of these statements is followed by a narrative manifestation of a gradual resignation from life, first a corporal and later a socio-religious one. The Besht's death means the end of the leadership of the community, the emancipation of the souls from the members of the body, and later he refuses to redeem a wandering soul, an act which he performed throughout his adult life. Previously he was capable of saving souls "by the thousands and the tens of thousands" (Tale 46), but this time he rejects the soul that appeals for him to invoke his special powers. By refusing the spirit of the dead this last favor, the Besht renounces his socio-religious role in life and this act leads to a further reversal of relations which occur on the levels of religious belief and social order respectively.

First, the Angel of Death, whom he successfully harangued "to where black peppers grow," is now looming behind him ready to take control of him. Secondly, on the social level, the servant disrupts the master-servant relationship the Besht has maintained between them previously, and now he is out of concern for the Besht, he disobeys orders and takes command of the situation. Finally, the social reversal of relationship occurs within a biographical dimension. The people that surround the Besht take away from him his role as an adult male and treat him like a child by attempting to violate his privacy in the toilet.

Yet the death scene is a final glorious moment in which the Besht appears the way he was: surrounded by his followers. Rabbits die the way they lived, with their disciples around them. And in this way, he is saying a truth about the upper worlds and the ascension of the souls and his followers listen and observe; except this time, for him, teaching and reality unite.

The reversal of relationships, the gradual withdrawal from life and society, and the gradual renunciation of the community's all-consuming obligations in the final moment of his life. When death comes, the termination of corporal and social existence becomes an event of cosmic dimension. The world comes to a total halt. Death is the end of the time.

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