

Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov

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Tales of rainmaking, healing, and the magical supply of provisions are part of the biblical narrative tradition. Elijah the Prophet, and later his disciple Elisha, end drought (1 Kings 18; 2 Kings 3:14–21), offer hope and cure to barren women, revive their children when they die (1 Kings 17:17–24; 2 Kings 4:8–37), and magically provide for the needy (1 Kings 17:8–16; 2 Kings 4:1–7). Elisha, whose reputation as a healer spread beyond the boundaries of Israel, cures a leper and transfers his disease to another, morally inferior, person (2 Kings 5). Trafficking with demons and ghosts in the Bible is restricted to non-Israelite mediators of the supernatural, and is forbidden to the Israelites (Exod. 22:17; 1 Sam. 28:7). The Book of Tobit (one of the books of the Apocrypha) provides accounts of magical cures and demonic exorcisms, yet it does not glorify any individuals as healers.

Talmudic and midrashic literature contains stories about pious men and miracle workers. For example, Honi the Circle Drawer and Nakdimon bin Gorion (Babylonian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 19b–20a, 23a) make rain, and Hanina ben Dosa's piety immunizes him against snakebites (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 33a) and enables him to bring provisions down to earth directly from Paradise (Babylonian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 25a). None of these saintly individuals occupied positions of religious or social leadership. Though admired for their piety and healing abilities, they are rather marginal in the rabbinic world of learning and politics. At that time, in spite of the biblical restriction, some rabbis and healers were known to exorcise demons, and they occasionally engaged in such activity on behalf of the Jewish community at large rather than for a particular individual (Babylonian Talmud, *Me'ilah* 17b).

With the spread of Islam to North Africa and Spain, and with the dispersion of Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean basin and Europe, miracle tales and stories of demons and spirit possession became an integral part of Jewish oral tradition, though only a few were committed to writing and subsequently published. The eleventh-century Jewish-Italian family history *Megilat Ahima'atz* includes stories of demonic possession, and the twelfth-century *Sefer Hasidim*,

composed in Germany, contains numerous narratives concerning demons and their harm to human beings. A few leading medieval Jewish figures became the subject of cycles of miracle stories, including, ironically, Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), the famous Jewish physician and rationalist philosopher.

It was not until the rise of the Hasidic movement in the southeast of Poland-Lithuania in the second half of the eighteenth century, and its spread to other east European countries during the nineteenth century, that these themes gained wide popularity and acquired renewed religious significance. Influenced by saint veneration in certain Jewish communities of the Mediterranean, Hasidism served as fertile ground for the resurgence of the miracle tale in east European Jewish culture. It offered the requisite ideological and social conditions in which this genre could flourish. At least three reasons might account for such a development: the social composition of the Hasidic movement; the rise of the *zaddik* (pl. *zaddikim*) as a charismatic communal leader; and the development of social occasions for the oral performance of such tales.

Hasidism was a popular movement that attracted the lower socioeconomic segments of east European Jewish society. For the petty traders and shopkeepers, the craftsmen, poor villagers, and tavern keepers, Hasidism offered sanction for religious life without the need for sophisticated learning. It provided venues for religious devotion in which rabbinic education was insignificant. As an ecstatic movement, Hasidism emphasized spiritual engagement with the divine through song and dance, for example, rather than through the intellectualized study of the Talmud, an activity more characteristic of traditional rabbinic culture. Hasidism bestowed dignity upon the wretched among the Jews and gave religious purpose and hope to the depressed and the desperate. For such individuals, stories constituted a prominent form of teaching, enabling the exploration of religious meaning through parables and tales rather than through the intellect.

The primary function of these narratives was to validate the charismatic leadership of the *zaddik*, the religious individual at the head of any particular Hasidic community. Thus, the tales extol his superior moral behavior and spiritual abilities over other types of religious leaders, his healing capabilities over professional physicians, and his magical powers over the most wicked sorcerers among the Gentiles. Transforming the *zaddik* into a social leader (rather than an isolated ascetic), the stories celebrate his magical ability to heal, to assure offspring to barren women and infertile couples, to combat evil witches and demons, and to defeat the enemies of the community. In addition, the tales recount the unique ability of the *zaddik*, as the pillar of his people, to engage in devotional prayers that enable his appeals for mercy on behalf of his community to ascend to the throne of God.

The glorification of these *zaddikim* through such tales acquired the status of a meritorious act in and of itself. In Hasidic society it was a *mitzvah*, a religious act, to extol the *zaddik* as a holy man. The Hasidism engaged in conversations about their *zaddikim* while waiting for an audience with them, in the synagogues, and during the third meal of the Sabbath around the *zaddik's* table. The Hasidic rebbes

themselves told stories, as diviners in other cultures often do, in response to their supplicants' plight. In turn, these tales, in and of themselves, became the subject of stories about the *zaddikim* who told them.

Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700–1760)—known as well by the acronym Besht—is regarded by Hasidic tradition itself as the movement's founder. The Besht was himself a storyteller and was said to have elevated the art of storytelling from entertainment and ethical instruction to a level of mystical experience. The Besht himself became the subject of the most important collection of Hasidic tales. In oral tradition the Hasidim called their tales *sippurei zaddikim* (tales of saints), and described the act of narration with the adverbial phrase *le-saper be-shevaḥ* (lit., "to tell in praise of . . ."). This phrase may have been the basis for the adoption of the title *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, the collection of tales about the Baal Shem Tov, although it was also clearly modeled after the title of an earlier book about the Safed kabbalist Isaac Luria (1534–1572), which had been published in 1629 as *Shivḥei ha-Ari* (In Praise of the Ari).

As a generic term for tales of healing and other miracles, the noun, *shevaḥ* (praise) is a printer's innovation. Yet, Israel Yoffe, the printer of *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, who published the first Hebrew edition of the book in Kopyts in 1814, contributed more than just a title. He helped to remold the popular image of the Besht after the pattern of traditional Jewish cultural heroes by adding to his biography themes and motifs that appear in the life stories of earlier figures.

Prior to reaching the printing press, the tales had circulated orally among the growing Hasidic communities during the second half of the eighteenth century, probably during the Besht's lifetime and certainly following his death. Then, probably toward the end of the century, Rabbi Dov Baer ben Samuel, the son-in-law of a scribe, Rabbi Alexander the Shoḥet, who wrote amulets and who accompanied the Baal Shem Tov for eight years, wrote down a large number of tales that he himself heard from people he considered reliable. In most cases he was careful to note down his sources, and only in a few instances do the tales begin with the narrative formula *pa'am aḥat* (one time), indicating indefiniteness. The manuscript was copied numerous times and circulated widely. Earlier variations among the Hebrew and Yiddish printed editions had suggested the existence of such manuscripts, but the discovery of an eighteenth-century manuscript copy of the book confirmed this to be the case.

Israel Yoffe's printed edition opens with a tale about the Besht's parents, who were childless well into their mature years, calling to mind Abraham and Sarah and other prominent biblical figures. Rabbi Eliezer, the Besht's father, is taken as a war prisoner to serve in the court of a foreign king, where he advances to the position of a military advisor. Like the depiction of Moses in the medieval *Chronicle of Moses*, his military advice helps his king defeat his enemies. As a reward, again as with Moses in the *Chronicle*, under compulsion he marries a princess, but winds up revealing to her his Jewish identity and marital status. She releases him from this forced marriage and sends him home to his own wife. On the way he encounters Elijah, who promises him a son as reward for his virtuous behavior.

The circumstances of the Baal Shem Tov's birth also resonate with legendary motifs associated with the birth of Rashi (1040–1105), the great medieval French interpreter of Jewish tradition.

The printer thus transformed the collection of mostly hagiographic episodes into a narrative that follows a common biographical pattern that leading Jewish figures share, modified in the light of Hasidic traditions. The story begins with parental childlessness, and continues with birth as a reward for meritorious action, unpromising childhood, and the public assumption of leadership. The main corpus of the tales consists of a series of supernatural and mystical narratives extolling the Besht as a healer, exorcist, ecstatic, and revealer of events occurring in distant places and in the future. Toward the end of the collection we find a deathbed story describing the last hours of the Besht as he is surrounded by his disciples.

For many years *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, together with selected writings of his disciples that appeared after his death, were the only sources upon which it was possible to construct the biography of the founder of Hasidism. Well aware of the precarious nature of oral tradition as an historical source, scholars of Hasidism have tried to read between the lines for the purpose of establishing biographical information about the Besht. Evidence from Polish archival documents recently studied by Moshe Rosman, which attest to the residence of the Baal Shem Tov in the town of Miedzyboz, has added significantly to our historical picture of this figure. Instead of a religious revolutionary at odds with the communal establishment, as some historical studies attempted to portray him, he appears to have been accepted by the established community hierarchy in Miedzyboz, and even was supported financially. The Besht appears to have been a charismatic itinerant healer, a *baal shem* (master of names), who knew how to manipulate and combine holy names for magical purposes and who, according to his followers, exhibited ecstatic inclinations. Others like him traveled through the Jewish villages of Poland-Lithuania and other regions.

Hasidic-type groups existed even before the Baal Shem Tov, as attested in *Shivḥei ha-Besht* itself. As such, the Besht was not Hasidism's founder in a strict sense, although the movement's identity is bound up with him. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the Hasidic movement had gained considerable momentum by drawing a significant number of adherents. By the time the tales were published, Hasidism had become a widespread movement geographically, and was characterized by a certain degree of internal conflict and tension. The oral tales that found their way into the manuscript collection already contain information, for example, about the rivalry between Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezhirech, "The Great Maggid" (1704–1772), who became the Baal Shem Tov's successor following the latter's death in 1760, and another prominent disciple of the Besht, R. Jacob Joseph of Polnoyye (d. 1782). For a movement that had experienced such tensions, the figure of the Besht as portrayed in the tales may have served as a unifying force.

The following texts are a selection from *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* [*Shivḥei ha-Besht*]: *The Earliest Collection of Legends about the Founder of Hasidism*, translated

by Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970; reprint editions: New York: Schocken Books, 1984; Northvale, N. J.: Jason Aronson, 1993), pp. 22–23, 28–31, 35–36, 37, 61–62, 81–84, 129–31, 192, 224–25, 241–42, 253.

Further Reading

The original Hebrew edition of *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, first published in 1814, appeared in numerous reprints and several editions, the latest of which, based on a newly discovered manuscript, is Yehoshua Mondshine, ed., *Shivḥei ha-Besht: A Facsimile of a Unique Manuscript* (Jerusalem, 1982), and an annotated edition by Avraham Rubenstein, ed., *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1991). Moshe Rosman casts new light, supported by eighteenth-century documents, about the historical personality of the Besht in his study *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Baal Shem Tov* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996). More generally, the study of Hasidic thought and literature has generated voluminous scholarship. An article that surveys the major trends and issues of this research is Zeev Gries, "Hasidism: the Present State of Research and Some Desirable Priorities," *Numen* 34 (1987): 97–108, 179–213. Important studies are found in Gershon David Hundert, ed., *Essential Papers on Hasidism* (New York: New York University Press, 1991). Studies that focus on the magical dimensions of Hasidic belief and practice include Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), and Gedalyah Nigal, *Magic, Mysticism and Hasidism: The Supernatural in Jewish Thought* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1994). Among the studies of Hasidism and the Hasidim in the New World are Janet S. Belcove-Shalin, ed., *New World Hasidim: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Jerome R. Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim: An Introduction to Hasidic Culture and Oral Tradition in the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), and Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

Shivḥei ha-Besht

THE BESHT AND ROBBERS

The mountains were immense. Between them a deep ravine, and the sides of the cliffs were steep. Once the Besht was walking deep in meditation. There were robbers standing on the other mountain. When from afar they saw him walk to the edge of the mountain engrossed in his meditations, they said, "He will probably fall to the bottom and break his bones, God forbid." When he came near the edge, the other mountain moved toward him and the ground

became level. He continued to walk and the two mountains were divided behind him as they were previously. On his return, when he came to the edge, one mountain moved toward the other and it became flat. And so it happened several times during his walking back and forth. The robbers saw that he was a holy man and that God was with him, and they made peace with him. They came to him and told him what they had seen, and they said: "With our own eyes we saw that you are a holy man. We appeal to you to pray for us that God will make us successful in our chosen path of endeavor, for which we are sacrificing our lives."

The Besht told them: "If you swear to that you will not hurt nor rob a Jew, then I will do as you ask." They swore to him. From that day on if there was any quarrel or disagreement among them, they came to him and he arranged a compromise.

THE BESHT'S JOURNEY TO THE HOLY LAND

Once the robber came to him and said, "Sir, we know a short way to the land of Israel through caves and underground passages. If you wish, come with us and we'll show you the way." He agreed to go with them. While they were on their way they came to a wide ditch full of water mud, and mire. They crossed it on a board that was extended from one bank to the other. While crossing it they leaned on a pole that they stuck into the mud. The robbers went first. When the Besht wanted to step on the board he saw there the flaming sword that turned every way [Gen. 3:24], and he turned back, since there would have been great danger for him if he had crossed. And the Besht said in his heart: "There is surely a reason why I have come to this place."

THE BESHT REVEALS HIMSELF TO THE SECT OF THE GREAT HASIDIM

When the time for him to reveal himself approached, it happened that one of the students of our master and rabbi, Rabbi Gershon, went to him. On Tuesday he stayed with the Besht, who received him with great honor, and after dinner the guest said: "Israel, prepare the horses for me so that I can leave immediately." The Besht harnessed the horses to the wagon.

Afterwards, the Besht said: "What would happen if you, sir, stayed here over the Sabbath?" The visitor laughed at him. But he had gone only half a verst [about two-thirds of a mile] when one wheel broke. He returned and replaced it with another wheel and started off again. The second time something else broke, and he had to stay over on Wednesday and Thursday, as well. On Friday other things happened to him, and he finally had to remain at the village for the Sabbath. He was very unhappy about it and wondered what he would do there with the peasant. In the meanwhile he was surprised to see the Besht's wife prepare twelve loaves of *hallah*, and he said to her, "What need have you for twelve loaves of *hallah*?"

She answered him: "What does it matter if my husband is a simple man; he is still observant. Since I saw my brother saying the *kiddush* blessing over the twelve loaves of *hallah*, I prepare them in the same manner for my husband."

He asked her if they had a bathhouse, and she answered, "Yes, we have, and we have a *mikveh* [ritual bath] also."

He said: "What need do you have for a *mikveh*?"

She answered: "My husband is an observant man and he goes daily to the *mikveh*."

Nevertheless, the guest was sad because of his delay there. Soon it came time to pray the *Minḥah* [prayer] and he said, "Where is your husband?"

"He is in the field with the sheep and the cows," she said. He prayed *Minḥah* and the Reception of the Sabbath and the *Ma'ariv* [all prayers] by himself.

The Besht did not return home for a time, as he was praying in his house of seclusion. When he came home he changed his manners and dress and speech, and he said: "Good Sabbath!" He said to his guest: "see, I said that you would remain here for the Sabbath and here you are."

The Besht stood at the wall to make it appear as if he were praying. After that the Besht said to himself that if he were to make the *kiddush* himself with his customary special devotion, the guest would realize the truth. Therefore, he honored his guest by asking him to make the *kiddush*. They sat down at the table to eat, and in the way of peasants his wife sat next to him. They ate the evening meal with joy and good feeling, but the guest could not remove his sadness from his heart. The Besht said to him: "Rabbi, let us hear some Torah from you." On that Sabbath the reading of the Torah was the portion of Exodus, and so in a simple way the guest related to him the story of the Egyptian exile under the rule of Pharaoh. Then they made the bed for their guest near the table, and the Besht slept next to his wife.

At midnight the guest awoke and saw a large fire burning on the oven. He ran to the oven because he thought that the wood on the oven was burning. He saw that it was a great light—then he was hurled backward and he fainted. The revived him and the Besht said: "You should not have looked at what is not permitted you." The guest marveled at what had happened.

In the morning the Besht went to praying house of seclusion as usual, and afterward he returned home joyfully with his head held high. Inside the house he walked back and forth singing *Asader le-Se'udata* and he made *Kiddusha Rabbah* in his customary way with wonderful devotion. In the course of the meal he asked the guest to say Torah but the guest was perplexed and did not know what to say. He cited a phrase and interpreted it. The Besht responded: "I heard another interpretation of this phrase." After the meal he went to his house of seclusion, and after *Minḥah* he returned and revealed himself. He said Torah and revealed such secrets of the Torah that no one had ever heard before. They prayed *Ma'ariv* and he made the *Havdalah* in his usual fashion. Afterwards, he commanded his guest to go to our master and rabbi, Rabbi Gershon, but he was not to reveal anything. He was to go instead to the Sect of the Great

Hasidim in the town, and also to the rabbi of the community, and say these words: "There is a great light living near your community, and it will be worthwhile for you to seek him out and bring him to town."

When all the Hasidim and the rabbi heard these things, they decided that it must refer to the Besht. They recalled their questions about him, which now seemed clear. All of them went to his village to invite him to come to town. The Besht had foreseen what would happen, and he went toward the town as they were going out to see him. When they encountered each other they all went to a place in the forest where they made a chair out of the branches of trees. They placed him on the chair and they accepted him as their rabbi. And the Besht said torah to them.

Up to this point I heard the unfolding of these events in the name of Admor, may his soul rest in heaven. The other events and miracles that occurred I shall print according to the manuscript that I obtained.

THE BESHT'S PRAYER PRODUCES RAIN

There was a time when there was no rain. The Gentiles took out their idols and carried them around the village according to their custom, but it still did not rain. Once the Besht said to the *arrendator*: "Send for the Jewish [people in] the surrounding area to come here for a *minyán* [quorum of ten]." And he proclaimed a fast. The Besht himself prayed before the ark, and the Jews prolonged the prayer.

One Gentile asked: "Why did you remain at prayer so long today? And why was there a great cry among you?" The *arrendator* told him the truth—that they prayed for rain—and the Gentile mocked him sharply, saying, "We went around with our idols and it did not help. What help will you bring with your prayers?"

The *arrendator* told the words of the Gentile to the Besht, who said to him: "Tell the Gentile that it will rain today." And so it did.

THE BESHT EXORCISES DEMONS FROM A HOUSE

Once an *arrendator* from a small town came to the Besht. The *arrendator* was bewitched. Anything left inside his house, in a utensil, or even money in his pocket, was reduced to half overnight. He went to the Besht, and the Besht ordered his scribe to write protective amulets for all his rooms. And he returned with the *arrendator* to his home. When they arrived at the house, the Besht collected all the amulets on the table and then he went to the market. The members of the household saw the spirit whirling like a whirlwind from the corner until it quit the house. There was a big fenced yard around the house that had a small gate. When the Besht went to his inn, it seemed to him that there was a huge Cossack at the gate. The closer he came to the yard, the

smaller the demon became, and when he came very near the demon disappeared. The Besht placed protective amulets there. The people of the house told him how the spirit had whirled around and then left the house. He searched in the bed, in the rooms, and between the barrels that were there, because this was his way of driving the demon from his hiding places. Then he returned home.

Immediately, a Gentile woman, the miller's wife, came to the *arrendator* in tears, and she said to the *arrendator* in Russian: "I am smart, but you are smarter." It was because the spirit had gone to her house sullen and angry. "I was not at home and he killed two snakes."

RABBI JACOB JOSEPH RECOGNIZES THE GREATNESS OF THE BESHT

I heard this from the famous Hasid, the wise rabbi of the holy community of Polonnoye, who was the head of the court in the community of Shargorod. When he had heard that the Besht had come to the holy community of Mohilev, since then he was not yet a *Hasid*, he had said to himself: "I will go there also."

He traveled so that he would come to the Besht before the morning prayers on Friday. When he arrived, he saw that the Besht was smoking a pipe. This seemed strange.

"Afterward, during the prayer, I wept as never before in my life, and I realized that it was not my weeping.

"Later, when the Besht traveled to the land of Israel, I was left desolate until he returned. Then I began to travel to him and remained for some time with him. The Besht used to say that it was necessary to elevate me. After I had been with him for about five weeks, I asked, 'When, sir, will you elevate me?'"

THE GREAT MAGGID AND THE BESHT

I heard from the rabbi of the holy community of Derazne, who formerly was the head of the court in the holy community of Pavlysh, the story of how the rabbi, the Great Maggid, was attracted to the Besht. The Great Maggid fasted from one Sabbath to another seven or eight times successively, and he became seriously ill. Once, Rabbi Mendle of the holy community of Bar came to the community of Torchin, where he stayed with an elder of the community. The Maggid lived in a small house, which was attached to that of the elder. Rabbi Mendel entered the passageway of his host and he heard the Maggid studying with a pupil. The Maggid's explanations appealed to him. He entered the room and saw that the Maggid was very sick. He said to him: "Have you not heard that there is a Besht in the world? You, sir, should go to him and he will cure you."

The Great Maggid answered: "It is better to seek God's protection than to put one's trust in a human being."

When Rabbi Mendel came to the Besht, he praised the Maggid and said: "I have been to the community of Torchin and I saw there a holy vessel."

The Besht said: "I have known of him for several years and I long for him to come to me."

There are several versions of how the Maggid came to the Besht. But I heard that his relatives pressed him to go to the Besht. When he came to the Besht, he found him sitting on his bed studying, and he shook his hand. The Maggid asked the Besht to cure him.

The Besht scolded him and said: "My horses do not eat *matzoth* [unleavened bread]."

The Maggid began to perspire from weakness. He went outside and sat on the step in front of the house in order to rest. He saw a very young man, and he called him over and said to him: "Please go to the Besht and tell him: 'Why do not you follow the phrase: 'Love ye therefore the stranger?'"

The young man was Rabbi Jacob of Annopol. He felt pity for the Maggid and so he went to the Besht. He was afraid to talk with him, and so he wisely managed to go to the end of the house and then immediately turned back to leave. On his way out he said: "There is an unhappy man sitting in front of the house and he asked me to ask you, sir, why you have not fulfilled the phrase 'Love ye therefore the stranger?'" And he left the house.

The Besht immediately gathered ten men and went to the Maggid to appease him. He wanted to cure him with words. I heard from Rabbi Gershon of the community of Pavlysh that the Besht visited him daily for about two weeks and sat opposite him and recited psalms. After that the Besht said to him: "I wanted to cure you with words alone since this is an enduring remedy, but now I have to cure you with medication." The Besht gave him an apartment and for each Sabbath he gave him twelve golden coins for his expenses.

Rabbi Jacob of Annopol and Rabbi Elijah visited him often. Sometime they argued about problems in the Gemara and in the Tosaphoth.

The Maggid could not go to the Besht because he was so weak. After a little while he began to recover, and he used to go to the Besht to sit at his table. Once he fainted, and they tried for half a day to revive him. The Besht went three times to the *mikveh*, and he sent for a certain man who lived three versts away in order to buy from him a precious stone, a diamond, for thirty red coins, and they ground the stone and gave it to the Maggid to drink.

After that, Rabbi Jacob and his friend came to visit him and they asked him why he had fainted, but he did not answer them at all. They asked the people of the household whether he had left the house during the night. They said, "He went outside and stayed there, and when he returned home, he began to feel faint. They asked him where he had been."

He said, "The Besht sent his *gabbai* [synagogue assistant] to me at midnight. I found the Besht sitting with a small candle on his head. He was dressed in a coat of wolf fur turned inside out, and he asked me whether I had studied Kabbalah. I answered that I had. A book was lying in front of him on the table

and he instructed me to read aloud from the book. The book was written in short paragraphs, each of which began: "Rabbi Ishmael said: 'Metatron, the Prince of Presence, told me.'" I recited a page or half a page to him.

"The Besht said to me: It is not correct. I will read it to you.' He began to read, and while he read he trembled. He rose and said: 'We are dealing with *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and I am sitting down.' He stood up and continued to read.

"As he was talking, he lay me down in the shape of a circle on the bed. I was not able to see him any more. I only heard voices and saw frightening flashes and torches. This continued for about two hours. I was extremely afraid and that fear caused me to feel faint."

And let me, the writer, say that it seems to me that that was the way his torah [personal understanding of Torah] was revealed to him. I heard from the Hasid, the rabbi of the holy community of Polonnoye that he received his soul's torah from the Besht amidst thunder and lightening. Moreover, he said that this revelation was accompanied by musical instruments, as it is said in the holy *Zohar*. But I have not seen in the *Zohar* any mention of musical instruments accompanying the giving of Torah." I did hear from the rabbi this explanation: "As all the Israelites received the Torah as one people in the same way the Besht received it as an individual."

Once, after the Besht's followers asked him the meaning of a sentence in the *Zohar* and he explained it to them, they asked the Maggid, God bless his memory, the same question, and his explanation amplified the answer of the Besht. They told this to the Besht and he said: "Do you think that he learned the Torah by himself?"

When the Maggid, God bless his memory, was ready to leave the Besht, the Besht blessed him. Afterward, the Besht bent his head for the Maggid to bless him, but the Maggid refused. So the Besht took the Maggid's hand and put it on his head, and the Maggid blessed him.

This is as far as it goes.

THE BESHT RESUSCITATES A CHILD

I heard from Rabbi Pesah, the son of Rabbi Jacob of Kamenka, that while the Besht was traveling he came to a city, and a herald told him that he should stay as a guest in a certain house. He came to that house, and they refused to receive him as a guest because the son of the householder was seriously ill. The Besht sent his scribe to the house, and the woman said, "How is it possible for you to stay here overnight? Don't you see that the boy is sick and I am in great sorrow?" And she cursed the Besht.

The householder did not dare interfere. He went out to appease the Besht and told him that it was impossible to stay there. The Besht promised that if he remained with him as a guest the boy would live, and so he was received in the home.

The Besht went immediately to the *mikveh* and he perceived that the boy's condition was poor. He ordered that no one remain in the house. Everybody went to another house. He ordered his scribe to leave the house, as well. He would call him to ask for wine for the *kiddush* [blessing] since this took place on the eve of the holy Sabbath.

The Besht remained alone with the boy. He prayed *Minḥah* near him. He remained awake long into the night.

The scribe was afraid that the Besht would endanger himself, God forbid, by his great efforts in praying for the sick boy, since it was a dangerous situation. The scribe went to the door and slowly opened it, and he heard the Besht saying to the boy's soul: "Enter this body. You must enter it because I cannot swear a false oath."

The scribe did not know whether the boy was dead or still alive. The boy had a little bit of life in him. The scribe went away from the door, and after a short while he returned and entered. He found the Besht lying on the floor with his arms and legs stretched out.

The Besht stood up and said: "I told you, didn't I, to enter the boy's body?" And he shouted: "Hirsh, bring me wine for the *kiddush*." He ate with the scribe, and he did not sleep the entire night. In the morning he gave the scribe instructions and medicines, and then he went to pray in the *beth-hamidrash* [study house].

The boy's mother gathered that the child had recovered, and she began to sob. The scribe heard her and asked: "Why are you crying?"

She said to him: "How can I not cry after I cursed such a pious man?"

He answered her: "Do not cry. My rabbi is a good man and he will forgive you."

When the Besht returned from prayer he also heard her crying. He asked the scribe about it and learned the reason. He sent the scribe to her and told him: "Tell her not to cry. She should prepare a good dinner for the third meal. I promise her that the boy will sit with us at the table."

The reason why the Besht lay on the floor with his hands and legs extended was his agreement to accept "fiery lashes" for his oath to cure the boy. The soul was compelled to reenter the boy's body. His action ensured that the boy would live more than sixty years and that he would have sons, and he would earn a good living all his life. From this we see that the time for the boy's death had come, and therefore the Besht had to pray for the number of years he would live, for his livelihood, and for his having children.

RABBI GERSHON IN THE HOLY LAND

I heard from the rabbi mentioned above [the rabbi of our community] that once the Besht said: "I am puzzled. On Sabbath eve during prayer I looked for Rabbi Gershon, and I did not find him in the land of Israel. On Sabbath morning during prayer I saw him in the land of Israel, and I do not know what happened,

unless he went outside the border." Several years later Rabbi Gershon came to him, and the Besht asked him about this matter, and Rabbi Gershon did not know either. Later he recalled that they had honored him with the *mitzvah* [precept] of the *berith* [circumcision] in Acre, and he had kept the Sabbath there. In Acre there are two synagogues, one in the land of Israel and one outside. "On Sabbath Eve I went to pray in the synagogue outside, but later it hurt my heart that I had not prayed in the land of Israel, and so the following day I prayed in the synagogue in the land of Israel."

STORYTELLING AND MA'ASEH MERKAVAH

When there was a *berith* at the house of the head of the court of the holy community of Horodnya, I heard from the rabbi of the holy community of Polonnoye, and then from the rabbi of our community that the Besht said: "When one tells stories in praise of the *tsaddikim* [hasidic masters], it is as though he were engaged in *Ma'aseh Merkavah* [Account of the "Chariot"]."

"THE HOUR HAS COME BUT NOT THE MAN"

In the holy community of Old Konstantynow there was a man who did not have children. He visited the Besht several times. Once the Besht promised him that his wife would give birth to a baby boy, and he told him to let him know when she had delivered.

And so it was that his wife gave birth to a baby boy, and he went to the Besht with great joy to tell him of his wife's delivery. But when he came to the Besht and broke this news to him, the Besht restrained himself for a long while, and then he began to weep uncontrollably and his hands hung limply at his side.

The man asked him: "Why are you crying, sir?"

He said: "Because I see that on the day that the boy will be *bar-mitzvah* he will be drawn into the river, God forbid." And the Besht said: "You will probably forget completely about it, but here is a sign for you to remember. On that day the boy will put two stockings on one foot and he will search for the second. You must guard him very carefully the entire day and prevent him from seeing water. 'If the verdict is postponed overnight it comes to naught.' But if you do not watch him then he certainly will be drawn into the river, God forbid."

In the course of the time the whole matter was completely forgotten.

On the day that the boy became *bar-mitzvah* the man went to pray in the synagogue while the boy was still asleep. When he returned from the synagogue the boy was searching in every corner of the house. His father asked him: "What are you looking for?"

He said to him: "I lost a stocking."

His father saw that he was wearing two stockings on one foot. When he saw this he recalled the warning, and he was careful to watch the boy that day.

During the day the sun was very hot and all the people of the town ran to swim in the river. The boy sneaked out as well, and ran to the river. They immediately ran after him and brought him back home. When his father realized that the boy fought to swim in the river, and it was impossible to keep him from it, he put him in a room and locked the door. All day long the boy cried bitterly: "Let me out! Where is the compassion a father should have for his children? I am hot from the sun."

But they did not pay any attention to him, and they did not give him even a drop of water to drink.

After the *Minḥah*, when all the people of the town were near the river, a creature with a head and two hands came out of the water, slapped his hands on the water and said: "The one who is mine is not here." Then it sank and disappeared.

At once the fever subsided, and the boy slept. And with the help of God he grew up well, and he had a long life, as the Besht, God bless his memory, had said.

THE BESHT PREVENTS A BLOOD LIBEL

Once the disciples of the Besht came to his house on the afternoon of Passover eve to fulfill the *mitzvah* of baking *matzoth*. It was their custom to bake as a group while singing the Hallel. The Besht was walking back and forth in the yard of the synagogue absorbed in deep thought. As the disciples had to wait for a few hours, they became very upset. Meanwhile, they saw that the Besht had recognized the priest from afar and had approached him. He began to talk with him and they strolled together for a long time. Afterward, the Besht invited him home, he offered him a seat, he treated him with Passover mead, and he continued to talk with him. Then the priest left and the Besht saw him out. Afterward, the Besht said: "Now we will soon begin to bake the *matzoth*. The day has begun to wane."

The disciples asked him: "Why did you have to talk with the priest for so long?"

He said that the priest had planned to throw a murdered bastard into the synagogue street on Passover night and then blame all the people of the town. By talking with him so long and by treating him well, he had erased the plot from the priest's mind.

THE DOCTOR

Once a well-known, great doctor came to the duchess of the town. The duchess praised the Besht highly, saying that he was a great man and knowledgeable in medicine.

The doctor said: "Tell him to come here."

She said: "Since he is a great man, it would be in keeping with his honor if we send a carriage for him as one does for governors." She sent for him and he appeared before them.

The doctor asked the rabbi whether it was true that he was knowledgeable about medicine.

He answered him: "It is true."

He said: "Where did you study and with what expert?"

He said: "God, blessed be he, taught me."

The doctor laughed at him.

The rabbi immediately asked him whether he could diagnose an illness from one's pulse. The rabbi said: "I have a deficiency. You try to diagnose my pulse. I will take your pulse and diagnose your condition."

The doctor took the rabbi's pulse. He could tell that there was something wrong, but he did not know what it was, because he was lovesick for God, blessed be He, and this was beyond the grasp of the doctor.

The rabbi took the doctor's pulse, and he returned his face to the duchess and asked her: "Were such and such precious objects stolen from you?"

She said: "Yes. It has been several years since they were stolen from me, and I do not know where they are."

The rabbi said: "Send someone to his inn and open his trunk. There you will find all of these objects."

She immediately sent someone and the objects were found there according to his holy words. The doctor left there in disgrace and contempt.

JUDAISM

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