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REVIEW

Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*, translated by Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press/Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2005), xii + 342 pp.

The lives of great mystics seem always to be shrouded in mystery, so scholarly biographies of these individuals are beset with methodological hurdles. The very factors that contribute to the interest and importance of mystical leaders—charismatic attraction, paranormal powers, and the like—leave behind a veil of unclarity that makes assessment of historical evidence more difficult than usual. These issues have beset attempts to reconstruct the figure of the founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov. The appearance of Immanuel Etkes's *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader* is thus a cause for celebration, for Etkes, a highly regarded Israeli historian, has produced a study of the Baal Shem Tov which is methodologically sound, firmly grounded on historical evidence, and—most importantly—succeeds in bringing the personality of this mystical leader to life.

As the title indicates, Etkes's portrait focuses on three main areas of the work of the Baal Shem Tov (often abbreviated to 'Besht'): magician, mystic and leader. Under the first rubric, Etkes discusses the Baal Shem Tov as a practitioner of applied kabbalah, that is, an adept at theurgic use of divine Names. This is perhaps the most well-known aspect of the Besht's activities, hardly unique to Israel ben Eliezer but shared with a number of other *baalei shem* of this historical period. However, Etkes points to the decisive element of personal charisma in the case of the Besht. As Etkes writes, the Besht's charisma "was expressed through such near-prophetic powers such as the ability to see from afar, to tell futures, to discover a soul's previous incarnations, and so forth." (p. 78) While some of these powers may have been shared by other *baalei shem*, "we do not know of any *baal shem* to whom so full a range of traits could be attributed." (Ibid.)

As a leader, the Baal Shem Tov saw himself as "bearing responsibility for the Jewish people as a whole." (p. 79) In the face of attacks from outside the Jewish community and social tensions

within, the Besht defended the interests of Jews and worked to enhance their economic and religious situation. While much of this activity involved relatively conventional leadership efforts, some of it involved heavenly intercession in the pattern of a biblical prophet. On celestial journeys, the Besht intervened to save individual souls, and attempted to avert calamities threatening the Jewish people. In these activities he meets and converses with various extraordinary figures such as the Messiah and even Satan. By his own account, the Besht's intercessory efforts were not always successful, and skeptics would naturally dismiss these episodes as pious fantasy and delusion. But the point is that the Besht believed in his own cosmic role and heavenly influence, and his disciples did as well. As Etkes shows, the image of the Baal Shem Tov as concerned and confident intercessor for Jews in both the terrestrial and supernal realms was decisive for the development of Hasidism, and nurtured the ideal of the hasidic zaddik in later generations.

Etkes's depiction of the Besht as mystic is particularly strong. Placing ecstatic prayer at the center of the Besht's religious life, Etkes argues that *dvekut* (union with God) was an experience that permeated the Besht's outlook at all times. While ecstasy, involving involuntary shaking of the body, was by nature brief and episodic, it nevertheless colored the Besht's view of reality, since it was the experiential correlate to the doctrine of Divine immanence and the presence of God in all things. The Besht's *Dvekut* was an experience of intense pleasure which undergirded his robust affirmation of the world as permeated with divinity, his confident embrace of the physical, and his denial that evil had independent metaphysical reality.

Not only does Etkes provide vivid portrayals of the three major domains of the Besht's functioning, he convincingly demonstrates how the three areas nurtured and reinforced each other. Because the Baal Shem Tov was a successful applied kabbalist, he had reason to travel widely, visiting many communities and meeting individuals of all stations. With an intimate knowledge of the Jewish world of his day, he was aware of the problems Jews faced and was well positioned to serve in a leadership role. Similarly, his charismatic powers gave him the self-confidence and fearlessness necessary for bold spiritual innovation. And there was a deeply emotional aspect to the Besht's personality. His feeling for common folk and identification with the suffering of his fellow Jews, individually and collectively, spurred him to utilize his charismatic powers for the benefit of his people.

The recent tendency in historiography has been to downplay the narrative of crisis which earlier historians once used to help explain Hasidism's emergence. Current thinking emphasizes Polish Jewry's rather quick recovery from the Chmielnicki massacres, the robustness

of its economic life, and even the relative security of its political situation. While Etkes is surely aware of this trend, he reverts to the earlier approach. Thus he writes that ''The backdrop for the Besht's labors on behalf of the Jewish people was the bleak social and political reality of Jewish life in the eighteenth century.'' This included blood-libels, Heidemak massacres, outbreaks of plague, economic upheavals, the threat of the antinomian Frankists and even the burning of the Talmud. (p. 110) Etkes's renewed foregrounding of the dangers besetting the community allows him to highlight the significance of the Besht's career, instilling hope and comfort and a sense that Jewish interests were being championed and protected by a figure of true stature and courage.

In returning to the emphasis on early Hasidism as a response to crisis, Etkes's presentation must be contrasted with another important study of the Baal Shem Tov, Moshe Rosman's *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov*.[1] Based on breakthrough work in Polish archives, Rosman asserts that the Jews of the Besht's geographic region ''were suffering neither mass poverty nor mass melancholia.''[2] And the Baal Shem Tov was not an outsider struggling against ossified communal structures. As Rosman puts it, ''the Besht was much more a representative and perpetuator of existing religious, social, political, and even economic realities than he was an innovator. He certainly was no rebel against the establishment, whether religious or social.''[3] Rosman is keen to show the Besht as ''a person of his time.''

While Etkes agrees with much of this, he nevertheless portrays the Besht in bolder strokes. He also has a more positive opinion of the historicity of *Shivhei Habesht*, a collection of hagiographic tales about the Baal Shem Tov and his circle, first published in 1814. In contrast to Rosman's skepticism, Etkes notes that details of these stories have been corroborated in external sources. Although published decades after the death of its subject, this collection mentions episodes and facts that can now be verified by archival discoveries; therefore, Etkes concludes, ''many stories collected in the book *Shivhei Habesht* reflect the genuine historical experiences of the Besht and his associates.'' (p. 223) And in contrast to some of his fellow historians, Etkes does not dismiss the accounts of paranormal phenomena out of hand. He writes, ''it is not the historian's business to establish whether the Besht indeed was endowed with the powers of prophecy and far-sightedness. What the historian is to do is to determine whether these abilities of the Besht played a substantial part in how he perceived himself, in how his associates viewed him, and perforce also in the relations formed between him and those who surrounded him.'' (p. 223)

To augment his portrait, Etkes makes use of the published homilies and sermons of the Besht's disciples, notably the writings of Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonne. Once again there is a contrast between Etkes and Rosman, who asserts that "the possibility of connecting with the Besht the sayings cited in the Besht's name in Jacob Joseph of Polonne's books is very small."[4] Etkes uses the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov to construct a convincing intellectual portrait of Hasidism's founder, for example on the key topic of *avodah be-gashmiyyut*, that is, robust affirmation of this physical world, with its joys and pleasures, as a worthy vehicle for sacred service. His willingness to use tales and teachings as well as archival materials enables Etkes to triangulate his portrayal, each source serving to enrich, complement and correct the others. What emerges is a three-dimensional, multi-hued picture of a genuine illuminate. All this leads to Etkes's conclusion that Israel ben Eliezer was indeed the founder of Hasidism, even though the rise of an organized movement took place after his death. This is because the Besht's charisma, paranormal powers, teachings on ecstatic prayer and serving God with joy were the centerpieces of the spiritual lives of his disciples such as Rabbi Dov Ber the *maggid* of Mezerich, Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonne, and other leaders of great stature. The early disciple circle cherished their master's life and teachings and lived their lives energized by the inspiration of his person, and sought to share that inspiration with others. So the question of whether "the Besht set in motion a process that ultimately resulted in the launching of Hasidism as a movement" (p. 5) is answered in the affirmative.

Immanuel Etkes has set a solid and lasting foundation for further work on the Baal Shem Tov and early Hasidism. One open line of research is to continue the analysis of the Beshtian teachings as cited in the writings of disciples, especially Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonne. I believe that careful textual work can distinguish the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov from that of his earnest follower. This is especially so because the voices are so different. Rabbi Jacob Joseph was immensely learned, and it shows on every page of his published works. But the labyrinthine intricacy and dense complexity of his own teachings contrast sharply with the lapidary brilliance of the Baal Shem Tov's insights. The Besht's scriptural apercus arrive in a flash, capturing the blaze of sacred words in stop-motion freeze-frame. Rabbi Jacob Joseph actually did a good job of preserving his master's aphoristic style along with his mystical insights, and further research in this area promises to be richly rewarding.

While the English translation of Etkes's book, which originally appeared in Hebrew, is generally clear and accurate, it tends to stumble where the original quotes an earlier source, sometimes in

Aramaic. For example, the famous aphorism of *Tikkunei Zohar*, ''*Leyt atar panui mineih*,'' is a main source for hasidic views on divine immanence and omnipresence. The translation ''no site is clear of him'' (p. 135 and elsewhere) betrays the influence of modern Hebrew and misses the sense of the Zoharic Aramaic. And the prophet Ezekiel's chariot-vision has a phrase that became central in early Hasidism, *ve-ha-hayyot ratzo va-shov* (Old JPS: ''And the living creatures ran and returned''; Ez. 1:14). Early hasidic writers adopted a creative misreading, as if the Hebrew was *ve-ha-hiyyut ratzo va-shov*, meaning, ''the spiritual vitality ran and returned.'' This yields the idea that ecstatic experiences could not endure constantly; their nature was to ebb and flow. The reader would be hard-put to grasp this from the English translation, however, which renders, ''and the animals run and return.'' (p. 135)

Immanuel Etkes has immeasurably enriched the study of Jewish mysticism with his landmark work on the Baal Shem Tov. It shows what can be done when all the available sources are used judiciously, responsibly, and with great insight and sensitivity. It points the way for further studies on the personalities and ideas of early Hasidism, and helps to explain why this seminal movement continues to flourish and surprise observers until the present day.

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NOTES

1. (Berkeley, 1996).
2. Rosman, *Founder*, p. 178.
3. Rosman, *Founder*, p. 174.
4. Rosman, *Founder*, p. 140.