

Ba'al Shem Tov

Ba'al Shem Tov, (Hebrew: “Master of the Good Name”,) byname of **Israel Ben Eliezer**, acronym **Beshṭ**, (born *c.* 1700, probably Tluste, Podolia, Pol.—died 1760, Medzhibozh), charismatic founder (*c.* 1750) of Ḥasidism, a Jewish spiritual movement characterized by mysticism and opposition to secular studies and Jewish rationalism. He aroused controversy by mixing with ordinary people, renouncing mortification of the flesh, and insisting on the holiness of ordinary bodily existence. He was also responsible for divesting Kabbala (esoteric Jewish mysticism) of the rigid asceticism imposed on it by Isaac ben Solomon Luria in the 16th century.

Life

The Beshṭ's life has been so adorned with fables and legends that a biography in the ordinary historical sense is not possible. He came from humble and obscure beginnings in a village known to contemporary Jews as Okop or Akuf, depending on the Hebrew vocalization. As a young orphan he held various semi-menial posts connected with synagogues and Hebrew elementary religious schools. After marrying the daughter of the wealthy and learned Ephraim of Kutu, he retired to the Carpathian Mountains to engage in mystical speculation, meanwhile eking out his living as a lime digger. During this period his reputation as a healer, or *ba'al shem*, who worked wonders by means of herbs, talismans, and amulets inscribed with the divine name, began to spread. He later became an innkeeper and a ritual slaughterer and, about 1736, settled in the village of Medzhibozh, in Podolia. From this time until his death, he devoted himself almost entirely to spiritual pursuits.

Though the Beshṭ gained no special renown as a scholar or preacher during his lifetime, he made a deep impression on his fellow Jews by going to the marketplace to converse with simple people and by dressing like them. Such conduct by a holy man

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was fiercely condemned in some quarters but enthusiastically applauded in others. The Besht defended his actions as a necessary “descent for the sake of ascent,” a concept that eventually evolved into a socio-theological theory that placed great value on this type of spiritual ministrations.

While still a young man, the Besht had become acquainted with such figures as Rabbi Nahman of Gorodënka and Rabbi Nahman of Kosov, already spoken of as creators of a new life, and with them he regularly celebrated the ritual of the three sabbath meals. In time it became customary for them to deliver pious homilies and discourses after the third meal, and the Besht took his turn along with the others. Many of these discourses were later recorded and have been preserved as the core of Hasidic literature. When the Besht's spiritual powers were put to a test by other members of the group—an indication that he probably was not yet recognized as the “first among equals”—he reportedly recognized a mezuzah (ritual object affixed to a doorpost) as ritually “unfit” by means of his clairvoyant powers.

The Besht gradually reached the point where he was prepared to renounce the strict asceticism of his companions. In words recorded by his grandson Rabbi Baruch of Medzhibozh, he announced:

I came into this world to point a new way, to prevail upon men to live by the light of these three things: love of God, love of Israel, and love of Torah. And there is no need to perform mortifications of the flesh.

By renouncing mortification in favour of new rituals, the Besht in effect had taken the first step toward initiating a new religious movement within Judaism. The teaching of the Besht centred on three main points: communion with God, the highest of all values; service in ordinary bodily existence, proclaiming that every human deed done “for the sake of heaven” (even stitching shoes and eating) was equal in value to observing formal commandments; and rescue of the “sparks” of divinity that, according to the Kabbala, were trapped in the material world. He believed that such sparks are related to the soul of every individual. It was the Besht's sensitivity to the spiritual needs of the unsophisticated and his assurance that redemption could be attained

without retreat from the world that found a ready response among his listeners, the common Jewish folk. He declared that they were, one and all, “limbs of the divine presence.”

The Besht and his followers were fiercely attacked by rabbinical leaders for “dancing, drinking, and making merry all their lives.” They were called licentious, indifferent, and contemptuous of tradition—epithets and accusations that were wild exaggerations, to say the least.

An understanding of the Besht’s view of the coming of the Messiah depends to a great extent on the interpretation of a letter attributed to, but not signed by, the Besht. It affirms that the author made “the ascent of the soul,” met the Messiah in heaven, and asked him when he would come. The answer he received was: “when your well-springs shall overflow far and wide”—meaning that the Besht had first to disseminate the teaching of Hasidism. According to one view, the story indicates that the messianic advent was central in the Besht’s belief; according to another, it effectively removes messianic redemption from central spiritual concern in the life that must be lived here and now.

Influence

During his lifetime, the Besht brought about a great social and religious upheaval and permanently altered many traditional values. In an atmosphere marked by joy, new rituals, and ecstasy, he created a new religious climate in small houses of prayer outside the synagogues. The changes that had occurred were further emphasized by the wearing of distinctive garb and the telling of stories. Though the Besht never did visit Israel and left no writings, by the time he died, he had given to Judaism a new religious dimension in Hasidism that continues to flourish to this day.

Among the Besht’s most outstanding pupils was Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, whose books preserve many of the master’s teachings. He speaks with holy awe of his religious teacher in tones that were echoed by other disciples, such as Dov Baer of

Mezrechye, Rabbi Nahum of Chernobyl, Aryeh Leib of Polonnoye, and a second grandson, Rabbi Ephraim of Sydolvka, who was but one of many to embellish the image of his grandfather with numerous legends.

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