

# Hasidic Relics

## Cultural Encounters



Pardes | פּרְדֵּס  
Institute of Jewish Studies



Levi Cooper

**HASIDIC**  
*Relics*

**CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS**

Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies  
Maggid Books

*Hasidic Relics*  
*Cultural Encounters*

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*Dedicated with love  
to our parents*

*Moshe and Libby Werthan*

*who have enabled and inspired  
a generation of Jewish educators and learners.*

*Happy 85th birthdays!*

*Dedicated to the memory of my brother*

*Greg Fox z"l*

*Hizkiyahu Moshe Yaakov  
ben Shlomo v'Mariassa*

*And to my parents*

*Sam and Marilyn Fox*

*whose families left Ukraine and Lithuania  
and brought their stories with them.*

*Cheri Fox*

*In appreciation for Levi's teaching, scholarship,  
friendship, hospitality, and humor.*

*Through his inspiration,  
Jon and Faith have dedicated their lives  
to Jewish values, community,  
and commitment to Am Yisrael Chai.*

*Gershon and Dina Leener*

*In memory of*

*Selig Hochberg*

*a gentle man from Lvov, who was deeply rooted  
in the Jewish traditions of Eastern Europe.*

*And in honor of*

*Rabbi Levi Cooper*

*whose prodigious scholarship keeps the  
history of this vibrant heritage alive.*

*Elaine and Arie Hochberg*



*With thanks to*

*Rabbi Levi Cooper*

*for his teaching excellence worldwide.*

*Elyse Rabinowitz and James Porter*

*Moshe and Leah Trebish*



*We are delighted to participate in sponsoring the  
publication of this book which we do in honor of*

*Rabbi Levi Cooper*

*The Maggid of Melbourne  
who has been our wonderful teacher and spiritual leader.*

*Also dedicated in honor of*

*Moshe Genauer*

*Marsha's brother, celebrating his 70th birthday.  
We wish him a long, healthy, and fulfilling life.*

*Yisrael and Marsha Donshik*



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## Preface

**T**he word *relic* comes from the Latin *reliquiae*, which can be translated as “fragment.” In religious contexts, the term has come to denote holy remains. Such sacred objects are precious; they are preserved with dedication. Relics serve as links to bygone days, as surviving traces of what once was: slivers of the past that can be held by us here in the present. *Hasidic Relics: Cultural Encounters* is a journey through lesser-known aspects of Hasidism. The chapters in this volume are fragments of the larger story of Hasidism – the movement, the thought patterns, the personalities, the communities, the narratives, the ideas, the inspiration, the history, and the culture.

This is not an attempt to provide a definitive history of the movement or its ideas, nor is this an exhaustive account of the phenomena explored. Each chapter offers a number of short essays organized around a particular cultural theme. Chapters are accompanied by images that add a visual element to the experience. The quest of this collection is to provide a different perspective on what we know about Hasidism by exploring fascinating – often overlooked – vistas,

and considering possible meanings for our contemporary reality and our own lives.

The volume opens by probing the tension associated with transcribing lofty ideas – a challenge that has accompanied me since I began to write about Hasidism in 2010. Following the first chapter's discussion of writing, chapter 2 moves to the next stage in the production of books – publishing. What can we learn from printing ventures? This chapter listens to the still, silent voice of the paratext of hasidic books, in an attempt to recover the narratives and tales of the printing process. One particularly interesting aspect of publishing is the role of women who owned and operated printing presses. This topic kicks off chapter 3, which searches for women's voices, and their influence on the story of Hasidism. The chapter concludes with women wearing the emblematic *shtrayml*, which then opens the door to chapter 4 – hasidic clothing norms and ideas that undergird the haberdashery. Chapter 5 pushes the classic spatial boundaries of Hasidism by considering its expressions in unexpected settings, such as Prague, Casablanca and Djerba, Hollywood and Baghdad. Lest these geographic outliers be seen as mainstays of Hasidism, chapter 6 brings us back to one of the staples of the Jewish experience – learning Torah – and considers hasidic ideas about this key enterprise. Hasidism is clearly not just an intellectual quest; it is also a setting for social and cultural interactions that are invested with religious and spiritual meaning. Chapter 7 acknowledges this angle by sampling culinary aspects of Hasidism. One setting where food appears in the rhythm of hasidic life is after the morning prayer service. Chapter 8 turns in that direction by presenting an array of hasidic teachings on prayer. The chapter concludes with the centrality of the *Ketoret* – the prayer that recounts the incense offering during biblical and Temple times. Jewish mystical thought recognized the spiritual efficacy of *Ketoret* in combating plagues. On this note, the final chapter explores hasidic encounters with past pandemics; a particularly poignant conclusion to the volume in light of the fresh scars of our COVID-19 experiences.

Hasidism happened in particular settings in time and space. While the messages of hasidic masters and the practices of their followers transcend those specific coordinates, it would be folly to ignore the historical and cultural contexts that birthed Hasidism and allowed it to flourish.

Yet so often, hasidic tales and teachings are recounted without regard for context. How often have we heard a speaker open with the words “There was a hasidic master in a small town”? Which master? Where is this town? And was it really so small?

In an attempt to defy this norm and rectify this practice, I have noted place-names according to their local spelling. Alas, frequent and drastic border changes in the region of Eastern Europe make this task a mission impossible. *Munkatch* is a great example of the nomenclature challenge. *Munkács* was part of Hungary until after the First World War. It was then included in the newly minted Czechoslovakia as *Mukačevo*. When it became part of Soviet Ukraine after the Second World War it was known as *Мукачеве* (Mukacheve) or *Мукачів* (Mukachiv). In 2017, the Ukrainian parliament renamed the city *Мукачево* (Mukachevo). Since the region was not ruled by Poland, the Polish name for the city, *Mukaczewo*, was never in official use. In Jewish parlance, the city was and is still called *Munkatsh* – spelled according to YIVO transliteration norms (YIVO is an acronym for the Yiddish name of the organization, *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut* [Yiddish Scientific Institute]). Having said all that, the name is most commonly rendered as *Munkatch*.

The real-life complexity of place-names gave rise to a quip expressed in a sign that used to hang on the wall of the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation:

It is possible to  
have been born in Austria-Hungary,  
have been married in Czechoslovakia,  
have given birth in Hungary,  
have lived with your family in the Soviet Union,  
reside currently in Ukraine,  
...and have never left the city of Mukachevo.

In general, I have opted for the Polish spelling in areas that at one time were under Polish rule. For places that were part of Hungary, I have used Hungarian spelling. Admittedly, this is not a great solution, but it achieves a specific purpose: each time readers encounter what might appear as strange orthography for place-names, they are immediately reminded

## *Hasidic Relics*

of the geographic context. Yet Hasidism was generally not site specific. Indeed, more often than not, a location became a brand name of a particular hasidic dynasty. Therefore, after giving the Polish or Hungarian spelling of place-names I immediately offer a more familiar alternative, which is then used in the continuation of the text.

To make the encounter with this book accessible and enjoyable, I have avoided copiously footnoting every line. At the back of the volume, readers will find references to my longer academic studies of the phenomenon discussed. The language and style of *Hasidic Relics* provide an opportunity for readers to fill the gaps in their knowledge and to supplement what they already know. In this sense, *Hasidic Relics* speaks to the readership of my previous two volumes, *Relics for the Present: Contemporary Reflections on the Talmud*. The chapters in this volume, however, go in a different direction than my previous work in that the essays draw on new studies and pioneering scholarship in the field of hasidic research – both from within the hasidic community and from academic circles. Thus, *Hasidic Relics* also speaks to people who have familiarity with Hasidism or even expertise in the field, as well as those who have only a rudimentary acquaintance with the movement.

The *Maggid of Melbourne* column in the *Jerusalem Post* formed the genesis of this book. I am grateful for this opportunity that I have to regularly share fragments of my research and studies with a broad readership. Readers who graciously added to my knowledge or corrected my mistakes will find their ideas embedded in the following pages. I was fortunate to be invited to write for the *Jerusalem Post* by my erstwhile editor Amanda Borschel-Dan. I thank Amanda for giving me my first writing opportunity when I was a whippersnapper back in 2005. I value the work of my subsequent *Jerusalem Post* editors – Laura Kelly, Rhona Burns, Terrance Mintner, and Erica Schachne – who all afforded me much latitude in choosing the subjects of each column.

The teachings expressed here may appear to be my own, and they are certainly expressed with my words, turns of phrase, and idiosyncrasies (not to mention Australian accent). Yet the ideas are often a product of the steely dialogues I have been fortunate to have had with teachers, peers, and students. Indeed, I have had the pleasure and the privilege to teach much of the content of this volume in two



places of sincere Torah study that are committed to intellectual rigor and to spiritual growth.

The first is the biweekly Chassidus class in the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem. My dear colleagues, the faculty and staff at Pardes, are my partners in this enterprise. I hope they are proud of the product, and that they can perceive their own imprint on the pages of this volume. I have been fortunate to teach at Pardes since 1998, when the dean, Dr. David Bernstein, together with the director Rabbi Danny Landes, offered me my first teaching position. Over the years I have benefited greatly from the encouraging environment and the absorbing exchanges with students whose backgrounds and cultural contexts differ vastly from my own. Those intellectually inquisitive students, who journey to Israel with a thirst for knowledge, understanding, insight, and meaning, provide a fertile ground for in-depth learning.

The second is my own beloved community in Tzur Hadassa, where I have volunteered as the community rabbi and spiritual leader of Kehillat HaTzur VeHaTzohar since 2001. Together with my wife, Sarah, and our children – Itai, Yedidya, Choni, Neta, Aviya, and Adi – as well as other dedicated people, we have toiled to build a community from the foundations to the rafters.

“Fortunate is the one who speaks to listening ears” (Zohar 2:186b; see also *Degel Maḥanei Efrayim, vayeshev, s.v. veYisrael*). I am blessed to have these opportunities to study and teach on a regular basis.

Numerous people contributed to this project with feedback and suggestions. I express my gratitude to each person who commented; undoubtedly you will see your thoughts incorporated in some way. I am constantly appreciative of the steadfast support, encouragement, and critique of my dear family.

I am appreciative of the dedicated work of Koren Publishers and Maggid Books, in particular the vision of publisher Matthew Miller and editorial director Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, and I am thankful for the diligent efforts of Caryn Meltz, Aryeh Grossman, Tani Bayer, Tomi Mager, Debbie Ismailoff, and Rachel Miskin in bringing this book to press.

I am grateful to the Pardes supporters who made this project financially feasible. It is an honor to partner with them in making Torah more accessible and in expanding the Pardes bookshelf.

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Particular thanks goes to the Pardes students who read significant parts of the manuscript and offered constructive advice: Joseph Alfon, William (Velvel) Bergman, Alec Burroughs, Yisrael and Marsha Donshik, Jonah Mac Gelfand, Rakeea Chesick Gordis, Yaakov Harle, Alyssa Nathanson-Tanner, Aviva and Peter Turner, Dani Satlow, Carrie Watkins, and Avigal Weizman. One Pardes student stands above the rest in her dedication and contribution to the project: Felicia Schuessler. As part of her Hasidic Research Fellowship at Pardes in 2021–22, Felicia meticulously read and edited, sharpened and pushed me to sharpen, every page of this volume. The imprimatur of her efforts are present on every page.

While working on this project I was fortunate to have the benefit of support provided by the Jewish Galicia and Bukovina Organization.

The final manuscript was prepared while I was a visiting academic at the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory. I am grateful for this opportunity and for the kindness shown to me by all – at the Institute and in the Jewish community of Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

Levi Cooper  
Tzur Hadassa

## Chapter 1

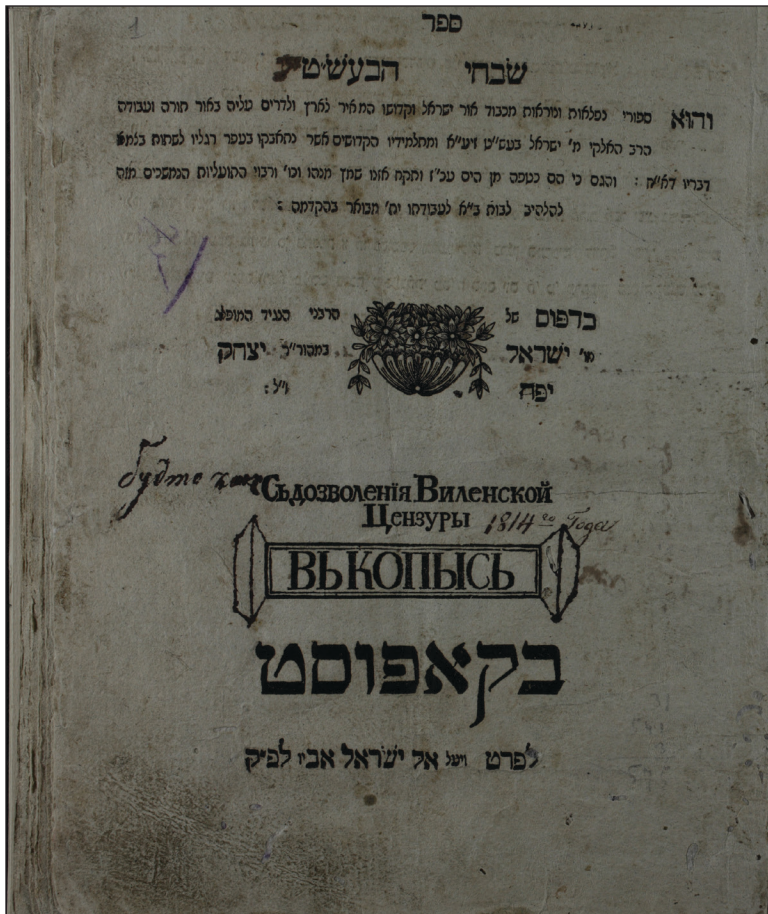
# Writing

### **OPPOSING THE WRITTEN WORD**

The hasidic movement was inspired by the Besht – Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov (ca. 1700–60). Alas, the Besht did not bequeath a volume of his thoughts. His ideas come to us, perforce, secondhand. To be sure, there are a small number of writings attributed to the Besht, but they are of dubious provenance and questionable reliability.

The Besht’s philosophical teachings were recorded by his students and descendants. Yet it was only in 1780 – twenty years after the Besht passed away – that one of his disciples published a volume with his master’s teachings. Even the exciting stories of his escapades that were published in a Hebrew work titled *Shivhei HaBesht* (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov) appeared in print only in 1814 – fifty-four years after the Besht had passed away. We can only wonder how many people could testify that they had seen the Besht with their own eyes and witnessed his exploits as described in this hagiographic collection of tales. This is most frustrating for those who yearn to know more about this seminal figure whose legacy continues to animate and to inspire.

Why didn’t the Besht bequeath a tome to posterity? Perhaps he saw his ideas as part of existing Jewish tradition, rather than innovative understandings that deserved to be recorded; perhaps he did not see his teachings as a break with regnant tradition that called for fresh canonical



*Shivhei HaBesht* (Kopys, 1814), title page. The title page describes the Besht's words as "the words of the living God," a biblical phrase (Jer. 23:36), that is used in the Talmud (Gittin 6b; Eiruvin 13b) to describe the validity of variant opinions in Jewish law. National Library of Israel, Gershom Scholem Collection, R<sup>o</sup>4145.

texts. Indeed, a new movement may require different texts, but in the case of the Besht, there is no contemporary evidence to suggest that he actually intended to found a new movement.

It is also possible that the Besht simply did not have the opportunity to write and publish a book. Transcribing lofty ideas is a particular skill, and bringing those words to the printing press is a serious

undertaking. The publishing enterprise takes time, energy, and funding – commodities that are often scarce. Alternatively, the Besht may have felt that his primary contribution was not via the written word, but by means of his oral teachings and his interactions with people.

Two tales in *Shivhei HaBesht* offer a hint as to why the Besht may not have left us with a treatise presenting his ideas. One story has the Besht telling his stepfather's son-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Ashkenazi, to read *Ein Yaakov*, a fifteenth-century digest of the aggadic material in the Talmud. According to *Shivhei HaBesht*, "He," referring to the Besht, "lay on his bed and listened to *Ein Yaakov*."

Indicatively, the Besht is not depicted as learning the text; he is not even described as reading it himself. Instead, he is portrayed as listening to a reading of *Ein Yaakov*. In the Yiddish version of *Shivhei HaBesht*, this interaction is cast as a regular practice of the Besht that occurred particularly on Saturday nights. The Besht appears in this tale to favor the auditory experience over delving into a written text. The second tale in *Shivhei HaBesht* goes further by vilifying the very notion of a book:

One time, a certain person transcribed the teachings of the Besht as he heard them from him. Once, the Besht saw a certain demon walking by and holding a book in his hand. [The Besht] said to [the demon]: "What is the book that you carry in your hand?"

[The demon] answered him: "This is the book that you authored."

The Besht then understood that there was a certain person who was transcribing his teachings. And he gathered all his people and asked them: "Who among you is writing down my teachings?"

The particular person admitted [to writing down the Besht's teachings] and brought the manuscript to [the Besht].

And the Besht examined it and said: "There is not even a single passage here that I said!"

This tale highlights inherent challenges in transcribing oral teachings, particularly when the writer is not the teacher. The written word,

eloquent as it may be, cannot fully capture every layer of the aural encounter. How can one transcribe a vibe, an atmosphere, or a mood?

Furthermore, the tale indicates that the Besht favored an oral tradition over a culture of transmitting ideas via writing. This may not have been merely a matter of preference or personal predilection; according to this tale the Besht demonized the book. Maligning the written word was a radical move, considering the Besht came from a tradition that placed such great value on text study.

The pitfalls of transcribing ideas were not a phenomenon unique to eighteenth-century Eastern Europe. Scribal errors date back to the dawn of writing. The advent of the printing press may have helped avoid some mistakes, but the human factor in publishing still guaranteed the possibility of errors. In fact, a mistake that crept into the text during the printing process had exponential reach as it appeared in each copy of the book and could not be summarily corrected.

Of course, any idea that appears in a hagiographic work like *Shivḥei HaBesht* needs to be considered carefully. To what extent do the *Shivḥei HaBesht* tales accurately reflect the Besht's thought? Or perhaps are we reading ideas of the early-nineteenth-century storytellers, editors, and publishers?

With this qualification in mind, reading the two tales together suggests that collective memory about the Besht was not just that he was concerned about printing errors. The Besht was promoting a culture of aural interaction and oral transmission, rather than reliance on books.

It is unclear whether the Besht's position was advice for his own circle of initiates, or whether he had a broader cultural shift in mind. Whatever the original intention of the Besht, the practice of storytelling became an important cultural and spiritual element of Hasidism.

Similarly, the personal encounter with the hasidic master and the camaraderie of spending time with fellow adherents became emblematic of the hasidic experience. Those who were present in the hasidic court might transcribe their recollections and impressions for posterity or for the benefit of fellow Hasidim who could not be present. But it was clear to all that these notes, detailed as they may have been, did not recreate the authentic experience.

Despite the early disdain for the written word, Hasidism would evolve to embrace books. The still-growing library of printed works records the ideas, teachings, and tales of hasidic masters from the dawn of the movement to contemporary times. Nonetheless, the personal religious encounter, unmediated by texts, remains the lifeblood of the hasidic experience. While books are important repositories of hasidic culture, ideas, philosophy, history, anthropology, ethnography, and more, they can only attempt to convey the essence of Hasidism.

### **BESHT FLAGSHIP**

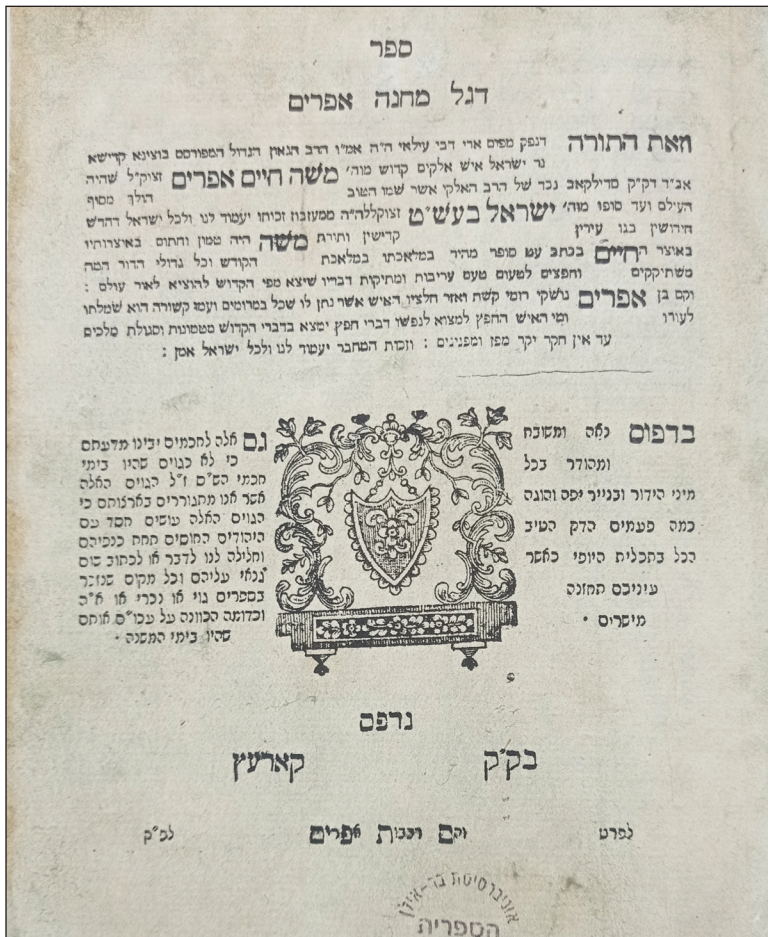
How would we go about the task of salvaging the oral teachings of the Besht? Which textual sources can we press, in the quest to reclaim his original ideas? The starting point for this venture might well be a family affair.

Rabbi Moshe Hayim Efrayim of Sudyłków (Sudilkov) was the son of Yehiel and Odel, the Besht's daughter. Efrayim – as his grandfather called him – grew up in Międzybóž (Mezhibuzh) in the Besht's circle. In a letter penned in the 1750s, the Besht boasted to his brother-in-law of the learning prowess of his young grandson. We will return to this fascinating letter below in chapter 6 and then more fully in chapter 8.

We do not know exactly when Efrayim was born. Scholars offer two possible birth years: 1742 and 1748. Dating the grandson's birth is significant when considering what young Efrayim may have heard and absorbed from his illustrious grandfather. Taking the later birth date, Efrayim would have been twelve years old when the Besht passed away in 1760 – old enough to have significant memories of his grandfather.

Rabbi Efrayim served in a rabbinic function in Sudilkov – a small town a hundred kilometers north of Mezhibuzh. Sometime around 1788, he returned to Mezhibuzh. He passed away in 1800 and was buried close to his grandfather. Ten years later, in 1810, Rabbi Efrayim's hasidic teachings were published under the title *Degel Maḥane Efrayim*.

In this volume, Rabbi Efrayim regularly refers to his grandfather's teachings, and as such the work is paramount to understanding the Besht's messages. This book would ensure Rabbi Efrayim's legacy, and he is widely referred to by an abbreviated title of the work: the Degel, that is, the flag.



Rabbi Moshe Hayim Efrayim of Sudilkov, *Degel Mahane Efrayim* (Korzec, 1810), title page. In addition to highlighting the author's name in a paragraph describing the work, the Besht's name is also emboldened. Courtesy of Jewish Studies Library, Bar-Ilan University.

In close to 150 instances Rabbi Efrayim cites teachings of the Besht, often introducing the relevant idea with words like: “And this is what my master, my grandfather, may his memory be a blessing for life in the world to come, said,” or “And I heard from my master, my grandfather, his soul in Eden, may his memory be a blessing for life in the world to come.” Alas, it



is often unclear whether the Degel was claiming that he personally heard the teaching. Perhaps he received the teaching from one of his grandfather's students, or perhaps he read the idea in manuscript or in print. Indeed, in many cases there are parallels to the Besht's teachings which the Degel shares, which can be found in early printed volumes of hasidic Torah. It is entirely possible that the Degel read those teachings in the writings of other early hasidic masters. Sometimes the Degel even says that an idea he heard also appears in print, vouching for the veracity of the printed word at least in that particular case. In some cases, he openly admits that he did not hear the teaching directly, while in other cases he unambiguously states that he personally heard the teaching.

When learning the Degel's accounts of his grandfather's teachings, there are three primary foils that can help us to begin to sketch a portrait of the Besht's intellectual and spiritual legacy. The first foil is the writings of one of the Besht's senior disciples: Rabbi Yaakov Yosef HaKohen of Polonne (Polonnoye) (d. 1779). His volumes – *Toledot Yaakov Yosef* (Korzec, 1780), *Ben Porat Yosef* (Korzec, 1781), *Tzofnat Pane'ah* (Korzec, 1782), as well the later *Ketonet Passim* (Lemberg, 1866) – provide the earliest collection of Besht Torah. Indeed, the Degel cites from the first three volumes in over forty instances.

The second foil appears in the writings of the school of a key Besht disciple: Rabbi Dov Ber (d. 1772), the Maggid of Międzyrzec (Mezritch). The Degel cites the Maggid's Torah on ten occasions. While the Maggid did not bequeath hasidic writings, his teachings reach us through his circle of students, who were avid writers.

The third foil comes from the Degel's family: his younger brother Rabbi Baruch of Mezhibuzh (ca. 1753–1811) and their nephew Rabbi Nahman of Braclaw (Breslov) (1772–1810).

What source might serve as the starting point in the quest to reconstruct the Besht's legacy? The student Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, the school of the Maggid, the grandsons Rabbi Efrayim and Rabbi Baruch, and great-grandson Rabbi Nahman were all bearers of the Besht's legacy. It could, however, be argued that the Degel is the best starting point for understanding the Besht and contemplating his original teachings.

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye – or the *Toledot* as he is often called – was already an accomplished scholar who served in rabbinic

positions before he joined the ranks of the Besht's followers. His works, therefore, include his own pre-hasidic ideas, as well as those of his esteemed teacher. There is no reason to doubt the veracity of the Toledot's account of the Besht's teachings, but there is much in his works besides those reports. The Toledot's sermons may well include his ideas from before he came under the Besht's influence. By contrast, the Degel was born into the circle of the Besht and grew up under the watchful eye of his grandfather. Even when the Degel does not cite the Besht, it is likely that his outlook was influenced by his grandfather.

Thus the Degel might be preferred as the most accurate source of the Besht's teachings for the simple reason that he lived closer than anyone else to the Besht. Works penned by the disciples of the Maggid are mostly removed by a generation or more from the Besht, and they often reflect the Maggid's understandings of the Besht's messages. Rabbi Nahman of Breslov was born twelve years after his great-grandfather passed away and never had the opportunity to personally learn from his venerated ancestor.

Rabbi Baruch of Mezhibuzh was a young boy of seven when the Besht died. It is possible that Rabbi Baruch remembered ideas that he heard as a young boy from his grandfather, yet he did not prepare a collection of his own teachings. The work that preserves Rabbi Baruch's teachings, *Butzina DeNehora*, was first published in Lemberg in 1879 – over fifty years after his demise and over a century after the Besht passed away. Moreover, there were rabbinic authorities who questioned the authenticity of the collection, voicing harsh words against the publisher and accusing him of deception and forgery for the sake of financial gain.

Even if we accept the suggestion that the Degel is the most reliable source, the foils serve two important functions. First, a teaching that appears in the Degel as well as in other works suggests the hasidic authenticity of the idea. This does not mean that the particular idea perforce is a *hasidic* idea, since it might be a broader Jewish, religious, or spiritual notion. Indeed, not every idea that appears in a work penned by a hasidic master is necessarily hasidic in form or content. Considering this caveat, we might say that teachings that appear in the Degel and in other early hasidic volumes *might* be hasidic ideas. At the very least, we can say that these ideas were accepted by Hasidism.

The second way that the foils help to distill the Besht's teachings is by allowing us to read teachings in different works as though they were in conversation. To be sure, *Degel Maḥane Efrayim* does not have a polemic style. In his teachings, the Degel voices critique, though he does not clearly identify who he is chiding. Such passages suggest deliberations over the Besht's messages by the bearers of his legacy.

For example, in one passage the Degel heavily criticizes the decentralized nature of hasidic leadership. Without mentioning names, the Degel appears to be critiquing the leadership structure that first emerged from around the table of the Maggid of Mezritch. With time, this decentralized structure became a hallmark of the hasidic movement, as no one person served as the head of Hasidism or the central hasidic authority. We will return to the decentralized ethos of Hasidism in chapter 6. For now, let us focus on the Degel's appraisal. In this passage, the Degel denounced those who sought "to conquer villages and rule over them" in order to make for themselves a name. This is a prescient accusation, for later in hasidic history, town names evolved into brand names of hasidic groups.

At times, reading the Degel in conversation with other hasidic teachings allows us to hear different strands of similar ideas. For example, the Degel acknowledged clapping hands as a spiritual practice, though he scolded fake clappers. In the Degel's eyes, people who clapped with excitement just to mimic the righteous were fakers. The Degel's nephew, Rabbi Nahman, is famous for promoting the mystical efficacy of clapping, and the act was part of his own religious practice. Read together, the two sources suggest that clapping may have been part of the Besht's spiritual world, although it is not clear just how central the practice was.

Thus, in addition to being an important early collection of hasidic teachings, the Degel is an irreplaceable touchstone for distilling the innovative ideas of the Besht and the authentic legacy of Hasidism in its formative years. The Degel's teachings provide a baseline for considering how Hasidism has evolved over two and half centuries.

Even the Degel was conscious of the challenges he faced in transcribing the Besht's teachings. In a telling passage, the Degel introduced "deep matters" that he received from his grandfather by noting:

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Alas, I have yet to merit to clothe the matters in a manner that I am able to communicate them and transcribe them. And if God wills it, when God graces me with knowledge, with the help of God, may He be blessed, perhaps I will merit to put it down in writing.

The Degel was aware of the impossible task at hand, a mission that could succeed only with the Almighty's assistance. Despite the difficulties, the Degel did not shy from embarking on an attempt at this spiritually charged task: "And I will write a little, very concisely, that which God graced me."

This conundrum and its resolution reflect the hasidic ethos: it is impossible to write, but write we must. And we do so knowing well the inherent limitations of the enterprise, and relying on divine guidance for success.

### **HAGIOGRAPHIC HISTORY**

The first collection of hasidic tales that recounts the adventures of the Besht was titled *Shivhei HaBesht* (see image on page 2). As noted above, the volume was published in 1814 – fifty-four years after the Besht's demise. Despite the significant time lapse, this volume did much to fashion the collective perception of the hero who inspired the hasidic movement. While the tales may be historically unreliable, they capture the 1814 image of the nascent movement.

One such tale recounted the tension surrounding prayer rites – an issue that was repeatedly mentioned in the eighteenth-century bans issued against the Hasidim. The tale describes how Rabbi Nahman of Kosów (Kosov) (d. 1741), a colleague of the Besht, was traveling through Żółkiew (Zholkeva) at the time of the morning prayers. He stopped his wagon outside the synagogue, and together with his tallit and tefillin, he entered and stepped up to lead the prayers without being asked and without asking permission.

The locals were incensed: how dare this visitor lead the service without first asking permission! Yet as they heard the sweetness of Rabbi Nahman's prayer, they held their tongues. While they did not remove Rabbi Nahman, they were still uncomfortable with the fact that he chose

the prayer rite favored by the Hasidim rather than the traditional rite followed by Ashkenazic Jews that was the norm in Żółkiew.

The people in Żółkiew were torn that morning: Should they continue enjoying Rabbi Nahman's piety as his moving prayers swept them away? Or should they remove this interloper for his brazen disregard for propriety and prayer customs?

The dispute continued through the service, and at the end, some of those present turned on Rabbi Nahman: "How dare you lead the services without permission and change the prayer rite that our illustrious forefathers used!"

Rabbi Nahman retorted, casting aspersions on those very forebears: "Who said that they are in the Garden of Eden?" It is easy to imagine how such an audacious response further angered those present in the Żółkiew synagogue that morning.

One of the Besht's most senior disciples, the aforementioned Rabbi Yaakov Yosef HaKohen of Połonne (Polonnoye) (d. 1779) was, according to the tale, "very elderly," and he had appointed one of his students, whose name was Reb Zalman, to replace him as *maggid meisharim*, the local preacher. This Reb Zalman was the most vociferous of those berating Rabbi Nahman.

According to the tale, Reb Zalman's student Reb Alexander jumped to Rabbi Nahman's defense: "Let the man be, for he is always with God."

The tale vividly describes the tension surrounding hasidic innovations: the excitement at new spiritual practices, coupled with a sense of disregard, perhaps even disdain, for entrenched, time-honored customs. In this sense, the tale is a true reflection of the spirit of historical events unfolding in the early days of the hasidic movement. The partisan narrative is complete with the ultimate approval for the authentic spiritual path of Hasidism that is recognized as being "always with God."

Notwithstanding the "truth" of the tale, it contains several puzzling details. We have no evidence of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye serving as preacher in any city, nor in any official rabbinic capacity in Żółkiew. Moreover, if this was the synagogue of one of the prime disciples of the Besht, why would the prayer rite favored by the Hasidim be so revolutionary and so despised? Also, when the fight broke out,

why didn't Rabbi Yaakov Yosef himself jump into the fray? True the tale describes him as "very elderly," but surely his wisdom would have been valuable and respected by those in attendance. It is also strange that Reb Alexander, the student of Reb Zalman, would publicly oppose his teacher.

Even describing Rabbi Yaakov Yosef as "very elderly" is strange; he passed away in 1779, while the hero of the tale, Rabbi Nahman of Kosov, died many years before that. According to the scholar of Hasidism, Yitzchak Alfasi (b. 1929), Rabbi Nahman of Kosov died in 1756. Other scholars have suggested different years. A photograph of Rabbi Nahman's tombstone in Międzyrzecz (Mezritch) settles the matter. The image was held in the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem, and it is dated to before the First World War. In 2010, the journal of Machon Sifsei Tzadikim, a hasidic research institute and publishing house, reproduced the photograph. Understandably, the image is not of particularly good quality, but the date of death can be made out: 7 Av [5]501, that is July 20, 1741. If the Zólkiew encounter must be dated before 1741, then Rabbi Yaakov Yosef who died in 1779 could hardly have been considered "very elderly."

Some of these questions were detailed in 1981 by Rabbi Haim Liberman (1892–1991), the personal secretary of Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn of Lubawicze (Lubavitch) (1880–1950) and the longtime librarian of the Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad – the Lubavitch Library in New York. Liberman opened his short article by stating: "For many days I have been troubled by one story in the volume *Shivhei HaBesht*, for it was clear to me that it was very corrupted. But I was not able to guess how to correct it." With that introduction, Liberman transcribed the story and listed the questions that troubled him.

Liberman then announced that he had solved the mystery: "One day, just recently, my fortune was favored, and I chanced upon a manuscript of the volume *Shivhei HaBesht*, that obviously was [written] before the volume was brought to press." The manuscript had arrived at the Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad in the summer of 1980, and Liberman described his exhilaration: "And first, I peeked inside it at this story, and my eyes lit up." The manuscript was incomplete and its provenance unclear, yet these details did not temper Liberman's excitement.

Soon after the discovery, Professor Avraham Rubinstein (1912–83) visited New York and saw the manuscript in the Lubavitch Library. Rubinstein returned to Israel with a copy of the manuscript that he had received from the librarians, and in 1982 he published an article examining three tales in what he dubbed “the Lubavitch manuscript.” Rubinstein then used the manuscript as he prepared what was to be the first annotated edition of *Shivhei HaBesht* that compared the different recensions. Sadly, Rubinstein passed away before he completed his work, though his family saw to it that his annotated *Shivhei HaBesht* was published in 1991.

In the meantime, Rabbi Yehoshua Mondshine (1947–2014) – a Lubavitch Hasid who worked in Jerusalem at the Jewish National and University Library (now known as the National Library of Israel) – was given a facsimile of the manuscript that had arrived at Lubavitch headquarters in 1980. In 1982, Mondshine reproduced the manuscript in a volume comparing the text with the early printed editions. In his introduction, Mondshine credited Rabbi Sholom DovBer Levine (b. 1948) – Liberman’s understudy and eventual successor in the Lubavitch library – as the first to identify the manuscript as a pre-print version of *Shivhei HaBesht*.

None of the scholars who wrote about the manuscript – Liberman, Rubinstein, Mondshine, or Levine – added significant information about the provenance of the mysterious treasure. However, thanks to the investigative work of Shmulik Shir, we now know that it was Rabbi Yechiel Yosef Ceitlin (b. 1961) who brought the manuscript to the Lubavitch Library.

Young Ceitlin, a Lubavitch Hasid from Montreal, was studying at the Lubavitch Yeshiva in New York and had developed a heavy cough. The yeshiva administration sent him to a doctor who had recently moved to Crown Heights. The doctor mentioned the manuscript and on a subsequent visit he gave the manuscript to Ceitlin, who brought it to the Lubavitch Library.

The doctor’s identity is unknown, and the origins of the manuscript remain a mystery: When and where was the manuscript penned? Who was the scribe? How did the manuscript reach the doctor? These questions are yet to be answered. To this day, the manuscript is sequestered in the Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad in New York.

Liberman's initial enthusiasm at the discovery of the manuscript stemmed from the fact that one of the key personalities mentioned in the tale of Rabbi Nahman of Kosov was entirely different. Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye, author of *Toledot Yaakov Yosef*, does not appear in the story. In his stead, it is the very elderly author of a work solely denoted by the initials "T.S." As per common practice, the tale used the title of the book – in this case just the initials of the title – to identify the character. The ageing "T.S." had appointed Reb Zalman to replace him. Liberman confidently identified "T.S." as *Tevuot Shor* by Rabbi Alexander Shorr (ca. 1673–ca. 1773). *Tevuot Shor* was first published in Żółkiew in 1733, buttressing the link between the encounter and the location.

Moreover, in the manuscript version, the person who jumped to Rabbi Nahman's defense was the same elderly "Reb Alexander T.S." – that is, Reb Zalman's venerable teacher, not his student. It was therefore entirely appropriate that the senior teacher, Rabbi Alexander Shorr, should publicly correct the impetuous disciple.

In a footnote to his edition, Rubinstein quietly pointed out that we have no evidence that Rabbi Alexander Shorr ever served in an official capacity as a preacher. This raises the possibility that Liberman's identification may not have been accurate.

Other unanswered questions also remain. It is not clear how the Lubavitch librarians and Rubinstein determined that the manuscript predated the printed editions of *Shivhei HaBesht*. We can understand Liberman's excitement at the discovery of a *Shivhei HaBesht* manuscript, yet the tale may still have wrinkles that remain to be ironed out.

The tales in *Shivhei HaBesht* cannot be read as historical records. In the case discussed here, the accounts – whether they come from a printed edition or a suddenly-discovered manuscript of unexplained origins – are riddled with inaccuracies. In other cases, it is more difficult to identify flaws. Either way, it would be foolish to read any hagiographic work as historical fact. Yet even inaccurate stories can include an element of truth if they manage to give voice to the tensions and the challenges of a period and a place. Thus, the value of hasidic tales lies not in their historicity, but in the narratives they manage to communicate as part of the quest to fashion collective memory and communal identity.



**MESSY WRITING**

Chancing upon a manuscript can be an electrifying moment, as we saw from the reaction of Rabbi Haim Liberman. Whether the manuscript contains an unknown text or an alternative version of a famous tract, new perspectives and exciting prospects unfold before the reader. Alongside the content, the manuscript may also hold other secrets: the style of the script, incipits or illustrations, the paper or parchment, the ink – each facet adds a layer to the tale of the manuscript.

With the advent of the printing press, the manuscript world is often consigned to the province of antiquarians and scholars. Manuscripts are deposited for posterity in archives, libraries, museums, or private collections. Despite embracing the printing press, Jewish tradition continues to insist on preserving a remnant of the manuscript world: Torah scrolls.

When discussing the laws of writing Torah scrolls, a contemporary hasidic master recounted a tale about handwriting. Rabbi David Yerahmiel Zvi Rabinowicz serves as hasidic master in the Ramat Aharon neighborhood of Bnei Brak, Israel. He is one of a number of hasidic leaders who are descendants of Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak Rabinowicz of Biala Rawska (Biala) (1847–1905). The various contemporary Biala hasidic masters are referred to by the name of their ancestral home, as well as an additional identifying place. For example, Rabbi David Yerahmiel Zvi Rabinowicz is referred to as the Biala Rebbe of Ramat Aharon, while his brother is the Biala Rebbe of Har Yona.

The Biala Rebbe of Ramat Aharon authored the three-volume *Iyunei Halakhot* (Bnei Brak, 2009) – a work that explores various Jewish laws and customs. In this compendium, the author recounted the story of a Torah scroll that was found abandoned in a field. A question arose as to whether this scroll could be used. Perhaps the scroll was discarded because it was not written by a reliable scribe. Indeed, Jewish law rules that a scroll written by a non-Jew or by a non-believer should not be used (*Shulḥan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 281). How should this scroll be treated?

The question was brought to the great talmudic scholar Rabbi Akiva Eger (1761–1837). Rabbi Akiva Eger will take center stage in chapter 9; for now, suffice it to say that he was unaffiliated with the hasidic movement, though some of his descendants would join the ranks of

the Hasidim. More importantly, Rabbi Akiva Eger's stature transcended partisan loyalties.

Rabbi Akiva Eger noted that it was common Jewish practice for many people to participate in the writing of a Torah scroll. This practice is still widespread. There is often a donor who employs a qualified scribe to write the scroll, but people are invited to purchase a letter and to take part in writing the final lines. Often people purchase the first letter of their Hebrew name. Someone named Levi, for example, might purchase a *lamed*. In preparation for the completion of the scroll, the scribe outlines the letters of the final lines but leaves them to be filled in or completed by others. In this way, other individuals are able to participate in the fulfillment of the commandment to write a Torah scroll without incurring the appreciable expense of writing an entire scroll. In the most practical terms, the result of this custom is that the final lines of the scroll may not be in the same crisp, professional script as the rest of the scroll.

With this in mind, Rabbi Akiva Eger ruled that the reliability of the scroll could be determined by the final lines of the Torah. If they are noticeably less professional than the other letters in the scroll, and perhaps even a mixture of scripts, we can surmise that these final lines were written in accordance with the accepted Jewish custom. Furthermore, we can assume that the scribe is a reliable person, for he sought to comply with this communal norm; ergo, the scroll can be assumed to be kosher.

If, however, the final lines show no signs of a different scribe, and the final column of the scroll is presented in a uniform – perhaps even aesthetically beautiful – script, we have no choice but to doubt the scroll's reliability. In such a case, the scroll should not be used in communal service.

Rabbi Akiva Eger's ruling found praise in the twentieth century. Rabbi Yitzhak Weiss – born in 1870 and killed in the Holocaust in 1942 – was a Hungarian rabbi who recorded many anecdotes from chance meetings and interactions with a wide variety of rabbis and hasidic masters. On 20 Adar Sheni 5687 (March 24, 1927), Rabbi Weiss recorded the reaction of Rabbi Mordechai Shlomo Friedman of Bojan (Boyan) (1891–1971) to Rabbi Akiva Eger's famed decision. Besides the

exact date, Rabbi Weiss did not provide any context for the Boyaner Rebbe's commentary.

The Boyaner Rebbe explained that a justification for Rabbi Akiva Eger's ruling could be found in the very words that express the commandment to write a Torah scroll. The verse says: "And now write for yourselves this song and teach it to the children of Israel, put it in their mouths, so that this song will be for Me as a witness regarding the children of Israel" (Deut. 31:19). The Boyaner Rebbe explained that the directive to "write for yourselves" indicates that each person should actively take part in the writing of the Torah scroll.

Jewish law also requires that when writing a Torah scroll, the words about to be written should be enunciated. This is indicated in the continuation of the verse – "put it in their mouths." Here we have a link between the act of writing and oral expression. These two modes of experience and the possible tension between them were considered in the nascent years of Hasidism – as we have seen and as we will continue to ponder below.

The Boyaner Rebbe continued, explaining that the conclusion of the verse teaches us about Rabbi Akiva Eger's ruling: "So that it will be for Me as a witness regarding the children of Israel" – the fact that people are invited to take part in the writing of a Torah scroll means that the different scribes can serve as witnesses who testify to the reliability of the scribe and allow us to declare the scroll kosher for use.

Thus, Torah scrolls are a cultural remnant of the manuscript tradition in Judaism. This surviving expression of the pre-printing press world is widely used and easily accessed. Moreover, messy writing at the end of a Torah scroll is not a blip, but a sign of trustworthiness – in the hasidic tradition and beyond. Besides halakhic reliability, messy writing also demonstrates viability, engagement, and participation, all of which are key elements of hasidic life.

#### **OPENING DOORS WITH THE PEN**

Writing – neat or messy – continued to remain a contentious issue as Hasidism evolved. The writing history of Kotzk Hasidism is a prime example of the liminal space that the written word held in hasidic culture.

In hasidic collective memory, the name Kotzk is forever linked to Rabbi Menahem Mendel Morgensztern (1787–1859) – a somewhat enigmatic leader, who was an important hasidic master as the movement flourished in central Poland. Rabbi Menahem Mendel – or as he is sometimes called the Seraph of Kotzk – had a peculiar style of hasidic leadership, discouraging those who flocked to hear his teachings and secluding himself from his followers. He is remembered as being disdainful of any hint of falsehood or lack of authenticity, as well as being uncompromising and elitist.

Rabbi Menahem Mendel did not leave any writings; according to one tradition, he burned his Torah notes together with the *hametz* before Passover. Instead, we are left with collections of pithy aphorisms and curt teachings, many of dubious or at least unconfirmed origins.

While there are no Kotzk canonical texts, the Seraph's legacy lived on as he was succeeded by disciples and descendants. His students led famous Polish hasidic dynasties in Sochaczew (Sochatchov), Góra Kalwaria (Ger), and elsewhere throughout Poland. His descendants served as hasidic masters in various Polish towns. Indeed, right up until the Destruction of European Jewry, one of Rabbi Menahem Mendel's descendants served as hasidic master in the Polish town of Kock – *c* in Polish is pronounced *tz*, like the Hebrew letter *tzadi*, so the town name is pronounced Kotzk. Today, all that remains of Jewish Kock is the cemetery with the gravestones of some of the Kotzker Rebbes and a house identified as the home of the Morgensztern family.

While descendants and disciples continued the Kotzk legacy, in successive generations the writing reticence softened. This is apparent if we track the Seraph's descendants in Kock and beyond, paying attention to their attitudes toward transcribing their teachings.

After Rabbi Menahem Mendel's demise, his son Rabbi David Morgensztern (1809–73) filled his father's position in Kock. Rabbi David's leadership style differed from his father's obdurate approach. Notwithstanding this difference, the second Kotzker Rebbe – also known as the *Admor HaEmtza'i*, the middle rebbe – left no organized body of writings. Kotzk tradition, however, recalls that there were manuscripts that were regrettably lost during the Second World War.

A collection of Rabbi David's teachings, gleaned from different printed and manuscript sources, was published in 2007. This volume provides access to the residue of Rabbi David's lost teachings. The title of the volume – *Ahavat David HaShalem* (The Complete Love of David) – was taken from a manuscript penned by Rabbi David's oldest son, Rabbi Hayim Yisrael (1840–1905), who had started to transcribe his father's teachings. It seems that it was Rabbi Hayim Yisrael who began the change in the family custom, first by jotting down his father's teachings, and then later by putting his own ideas on paper.

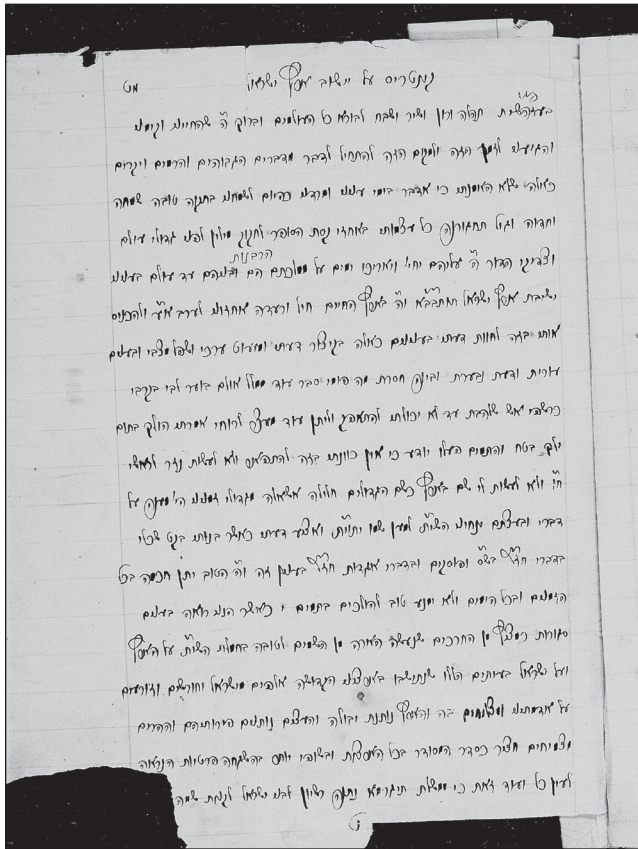
Rabbi Hayim Yisrael served as hasidic master in Puławy (Pilov). He is remembered as an ardent proponent of settling the Land of Israel. In 1886 he penned *Kuntris al Yishuv Eretz Yisrael* (Pamphlet Regarding the Settlement of the Land of Israel), part of which was included in the aforementioned manuscript that he penned.

In this treatise, Rabbi Hayim Yisrael argued for an agricultural settlement of one thousand God-fearing Jews who would work the land and keep the special commandments that apply only in the Land of Israel. In his eyes, this was the path to the beginning of the redemption.

Furthermore, Rabbi Hayim Yisrael did not shy away from cooperation with non-religious Jews, confidently declaring that we cannot know who the Almighty chooses to be the catalyst for the sanctification of the divine name. It was the tradition of Kotzk predecessors that we do not know who serves as the Almighty's messengers in the redemption process. Thus, even people who were not paragons of religious values might serve as divine vehicles. For the sake of honesty, it should be noted that not all the bearers of the Kotzk legacy agreed with Rabbi Hayim Yisrael's vision.

Rabbi Hayim Yisrael ended with a summary of ten halakhic conclusions that emerged from his discussion. This list included purchasing agricultural plots in the Land of Israel and obtaining permission from the authorities to make aliya. Those who moved to the Holy Land were to undertake meticulous adherence to the agricultural mitzvot, such as leaving the land fallow during *Shemitta* – the seventh-year sabbatical. The righteous people and Torah leaders who were living in the Land of Israel were to make rules in order to avoid infighting and squabbling.

Hasidic Relics



Rabbi Hayim Yisrael Morgensztern of Pilov-Kotzk, *Kuntris al Yishuv Eretz Yisrael*. The undated autograph manuscript includes the first seventeen pages of *Shalom Yerushalayim* (Warsaw, 1925), as well as teachings of Rabbi David Morgensztern as recorded by his son. National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8°4432.

Presciently, Rabbi Hayim Yisrael singled out the need to avoid splits between Ashkenazim and Sephardim who moved to the Holy Land.

Rabbi Hayim Yisrael's groundbreaking and inspirational treatise was copied by hand and distributed amongst Kotzk Hasidim. The work remained in manuscript form until 1925 when it was published posthumously as a fifty-page booklet, under the title *Shalom Yerushalayim*.

Rabbi Hayim Yisrael's sons continued the Kotzk dynasty, serving as hasidic masters in various Polish towns. The oldest son, Rabbi Zvi



Rabbi Hayim Yisrael Morgensztern of Pilov-Kotzk, *Shalom Yerushalayim* (Piotrków Trybunalski, 1925), title page. Dots appear above two words: מארץ (from the land) and מקאצק (from Kotzk). These two words have the same *Gematria* – the numeric value of the Hebrew letters – in this case: 331. Highlighting these words suggests a link between the author's Kotzk heritage and commitment to settling the Land of Israel as described in the volume. National Library of Israel.

## *Hasidic Relics*

Hirsh (1858–1920) served as hasidic master in Łuków from 1906. With the outbreak of the Great War, he fled to the relative safety of Warsaw, returning to Łuków once the war ended.

Rabbi Zvi Hirsh was succeeded by two sons: Rabbi Moshe Baruch (d. 1939) and Rabbi Yosef Aaron (1891–1942). The older son, Rabbi Moshe Baruch, served as rabbi in Grabów. He succeeded his father as the hasidic master of Łuków. Later, he moved to Włodawa before moving to his ancestral hometown to serve as hasidic master in Kotzk in 1939. Rabbi Moshe Baruch was murdered in Sobibor. He was the last hasidic master in the Polish town of Kock.

The second son, Rabbi Yosef Aaron, also served as hasidic master in Łuków. In 1933 he moved to Warsaw. Like his older brother, Rabbi Yosef Aaron was killed during the Holocaust.

Despite not living out their days, the two brothers bequeathed a slender work of hasidic teachings. In 1934, Rabbi Moshe Baruch and Rabbi Yosef Aaron published *Ateret Zvi* – the teachings of their father on the book of Genesis. The volume also included *Maaseh HaMenora* – the teachings penned by their grandfather Rabbi Hayim Yisrael on the festival of Hanukka. The title page indicates that this was to be the first part in a multivolume work. Further volumes were to include their grandfather's teachings on Shavuot, Rosh HaShana, and Purim. Presumably, subsequent volumes would have included their father's teachings on the other four books of the Pentateuch. Alas, no further volumes were ever released. Whatever writings were intended for the printing press appear to have been lost.

The foreword to *Ateret Zvi* was signed by both brothers, though the preface was signed by Rabbi Moshe Baruch alone. In that preface, Rabbi Moshe Baruch set out to explain why he was publishing hasidic teachings, even though his saintly predecessors had not brought their Torah to the printing press, and they may have even been hesitant about committing their teachings to writing.

Just to recap: Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk allegedly burnt his writings, his son Rabbi David left no organized body of writing, the grandson Rabbi Hayim Yisrael made notes of his father's teachings and later wrote down his own hasidic teachings, as well as preparing a treatise on settling the Promised Land. Rabbi Zvi Hirsh – the fourth



generation in the Kotzk dynasty – went further. According to Rabbi Moshe Baruch, his father would transcribe his public teachings after each Shabbat and each festival. Rabbi Zvi Hirsh explained that the goal of his writing was that his children – and perhaps more generally, future generations – would one day be able to delve into his Torah.

Rabbi Moshe Baruch was perplexed. An heir to seemingly contradictory traditions, he sought to explain the transformation in his own family practice, as well as his own choice to go further by bringing the manuscripts to the printing press.

According to Rabbi Moshe Baruch, transcribing Torah was a necessary step in the evolution of Jewish tradition. Writing is like opening a door to a new horizon, he explained. Such a door allows others to enter intellectual, spiritual, and emotional spaces that were previously inaccessible. Through the writing of previous generations, subsequent generations can enter different realms, encounter new meanings, and find relevance in the boundless vistas of Jewish tradition. This, explained Rabbi Moshe Baruch, is the importance of transcribing Torah.

#### **TRANSCRIBING ORALITY**

Despite offering a stirring justification for writing, Rabbi Moshe Baruch also sought to explain why he was departing from the tradition of his Kotzk ancestors and publishing those writings. It is not clear what sparked Rabbi Moshe Baruch's defense of his decision. Perhaps he was questioned by one of the older Kotzk Hasidim, or perhaps the rationalization was a response to a visceral personal need.

Whatever the trigger, the fact was that the previous four generations of Kotzker hasidic masters had not published their Torah. Why then was the bearer of this legacy turning to the printing press? To explain this move, Rabbi Moshe Baruch cited a previously unknown teaching from the founder of the dynasty – the Seraph of Kotzk – about transcribing Torah.

According to Jewish tradition, there is a sacred distinction between Written Torah and Oral Torah: what is written may not be transmitted orally and what is oral may not be written down. Over time, the sharp distinction was considered untenable, and the sages permitted transcribing Torah that had been transmitted orally up until that time. As

a result of this momentous permit, today much of the Oral Tradition is preserved in hallowed tomes. Works like Mishna, Midrash, and Talmud are studied earnestly and piously as foundational texts of the so-called Oral Tradition, even though they are now preserved, accessed, and transmitted in written form.

The sages linked this tectonic change in Jewish practice to the verse, “It is a time to act for the Lord; they have violated Your teaching” (Ps. 119:126). The sages’ use of this verse indicates that the violation of the orality of the Oral Law through its transcription reflected time-sensitive needs and was done for the sake of the Almighty.

According to the tradition reported by his descendant, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk had difficulty accepting this idea: Could this verse really be the source of such a seismic change in Jewish tradition? The aftershocks of this revolution continue to reverberate, as they shape the experience of our encounter with Jewish law and lore. Could this new order truly be traced back to a creative reading of one biblical verse?

In its original context, the biblical verse talks disparagingly of those who violate God’s teachings. Rabbi Menahem Mendel may have been troubled that such a verse could be the source for uprooting a mainstay of Jewish tradition, namely, that the Oral Law should indeed be oral and not written down. Rabbi Moshe Baruch continued with his great-great-grandfather’s laconic explanation: “And he – of blessed memory – said that it appears that in truth not everything was yet written.”

It is difficult to definitively say what Rabbi Menahem Mendel had in mind. The explanation, presented in a mere six Hebrew words, is not fleshed out. Moreover, over the years the exact language may have been inadvertently altered. Additionally, it stands to reason that the remark was originally offered in Yiddish. So, it is likely that the exact wording and perhaps even the precise meaning may have been eroded with translation and the sands of time. Notwithstanding these caveats, we might still try to understand the Kotzker Rebbe’s response to his own strong question.

From the words as they appear before us, it sounds like the Kotzker Rebbe was describing the transcription of the Oral Tradition as an ongoing process. Writing down the Oral Law was not a onetime historical event; it is a continuous endeavor. Despite the sages’ license

to write, not everything was transcribed; some portion of the Oral Tradition remained oral.

By saying that “not everything was *yet* written,” the Kotzker Rebbe may have suggested that it was in the realm of possibility that the entire Oral Torah could be transcribed at some time in the future. The circumstances of when and how the transcription process would be complete are not fleshed out.

Later works associated with Kotzk would cite Rabbi Moshe Baruch’s tradition, though on occasion they would slightly alter the emphasis of the pithy remark. Thus, for example, a 1940 collection of Kotzk teachings entitled *Emet VeEmuna* cited Rabbi Menahem Mendel as saying: “And it appears that even though they permitted transcribing the Oral Law, nevertheless it is still in oral form.”

This version does not speak to the rabbinic enterprise of transcribing the Oral Law; rather, it suggests that despite the sages allowing tradition to be written down, it remains oral. It is unclear if this is inevitable or by choice. There may even be an antinomian chord being struck here: despite the permit granted by the sages, we defy their instruction and continue to preserve the Oral Torah as God intended.

A different reading comes from further in the preface of the 1934 *Ateret Zvi*. Rabbi Moshe Baruch explained that the ongoing enterprise of person-to-person study of Jewish texts and traditions – a venture embodying the very notion of orality – is part of the perennial quest for greater depth and new meaning in Jewish tradition. This inspiring approach suggests that Oral Torah is a never-ending endeavor that cannot be fully written down. A component of Jewish tradition will always remain oral, even as we continue to write. The Torah is not a finite corpus; it continues to blossom as successive generations plumb the depths of our heritage. In this way, the sacred distinction between Written and Oral is never erased, as an element of the Oral Tradition remains – perforce – oral.

A similar line of explanation appears in the writings of the theologian and social activist, Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72). Heschel was no outsider to the hasidic world. He was a scion of famed hasidic dynasties and grew up steeped in the hasidic ethos. Kotzk was particularly close to his heart: Heschel’s two-volume Yiddish work *Kotzk: In*

*Gerangl far Emestikeit* (Kotzk: In Struggle for Truth) – was published posthumously in 1973.

In his 1955 work *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, Heschel referred to the Kotzker Rebbe's teaching. First, he changed the emphasis of the question: "Rabbi Mendel of Kotsk asked: How could the ancient Rabbis abolish the fundamental principle of Judaism, not to write down what is to be kept as an oral tradition, on the basis of a single verse in the book of Psalms?"

The problem, according to Heschel, was not the creative interpretation that divorced the verse from its biblical context. Rather, it was the fact that a lone verse seemed to have the power to overturn sacred tradition. According to Heschel's rendition, Rabbi Menahem Mendel's answer was fuller than is indicated in the sources we have seen thus far: "The truth is that the oral Torah was never written down. The meaning of the Torah has never been contained by books."

It is unclear whether the second sentence is part of Rabbi Menahem Mendel's answer or Heschel's explanation of the Kotzker Rebbe's answer. Regardless of who should be credited with the extra sentence, we have a slightly different take on the eternal orality of Oral Torah: even if the entire Oral Tradition could be and was indeed transcribed, this complete written rendition of the Oral Tradition could never contain its full meaning.

The words offered by Heschel echo a line in the continuation of Rabbi Moshe Baruch's preface to *Ateret Zvi*. The Talmud declares that the Torah is boundless (Eiruvin 21a), yet we see that the tradition is circumscribed by books that have a beginning and an end. Rabbi Moshe Baruch explained this apparent paradox, saying that the texts may be finite, but Torah is infinite in its depth and inner substance.

The written word serves as an important repository of teachings, a starting point, and a springboard for further discussion. But books, which are limited by nature, cannot contain all that there is to learn. Written Torah alone lacks a component of human interaction: a text can be read, considered, and interpreted without recourse to another person. By contrast, Oral Torah involves elements that are essential to Jewish tradition and continuity, and to the enterprise of learning and growing. These elements include human interaction, cooperation and pooling of

resources, companionship, and even intimacy. There is no substitute for the interpersonal nature of imbibing Jewish tradition. Indeed, an oral portion of Torah is always necessary.

The Kotzk tradition may be taken even further: The essence of the Oral Tradition is not in words transcribed and not even in orally transmitted teachings. Rather, Torah lies in the depth, significance, and ongoing relevance of those words. Thus, Jewish tradition can never fully be encapsulated by the written word because the life force of Torah is to be found in the evergreen quest for meaning.

### **SPEAK, WRITE, PUBLISH**

In 1931, the Yiddish and Hebrew writer Ben-Zion Alfes (1850–1940) published his autobiographical *Hadar Zekeinim*. Alfes sent the work to Riga to Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn of Lubawicze (Lubavitch) (1880–1950). Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak – or Rayatz as he is often called – was in Poland when the book arrived in Riga. He received the book upon his return to Riga in the autumn of 1931, and a few months later, he wrote to Alfes acknowledging receipt of the work and expressing his disapproval.

Rayatz castigated Alfes for his decision to include a critique of Hasidism from his youth. Rayatz wrote that Alfes’s recollections “hurt me greatly to hear such things.” Harsh words are unbecoming of even hot-headed youth – opined Rayatz – and they are certainly inappropriate for venerable people.

It is noteworthy that Rayatz did not argue that what Alfes had written was false. Rather, Rayatz’s stance was that Alfes should not have committed such unsavory details to writing.

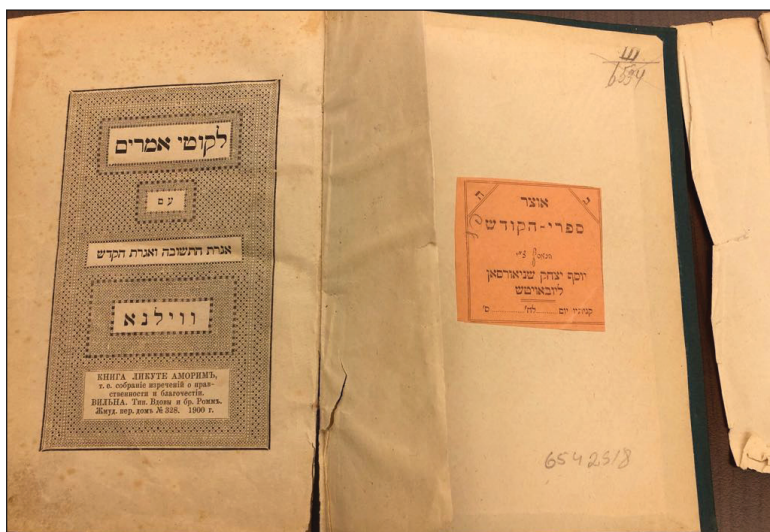
To bolster his position, Rayatz cited a heretofore unknown tradition from his great-grandfather, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn of Lubawicze (Lubavitch) (1789–1866) – more commonly known by the title of his multivolume scholarly work of responsa and talmudic novellae: *Tzemaḥ Tzedek* (Vilna, 1870–84). According to Rayatz, the *Tzemaḥ Tzedek* had once said

that when a Jewish person speaks he must know that a word spoken – is public; and a word in writing – is [placed] before the world; and a word in print – is for generations after generations.

## Hasidic Relics

The original context of the Tzemaḥ Tzedek's epigram is unknown. Rayatz recalled the maxim as he chastised Alfes for recounting disputes of yesteryear that in his eyes should have been omitted. Rayatz explained that since it is so difficult to find the correct words to express critical ideas, it is preferable to leave them unsaid, unwritten, and certainly unpublished. Rayatz recommended that Alfes correct his account in an addendum to a subsequent work.

Ironically, despite his wariness of the written word and printed volumes, Rayatz was an eager and avid collector of manuscripts and books, who amassed a significant library over the years. Besides foundational hasidic works, the collection included all types of volumes. In this vein, he added a postscript to his letter to Alfes noting that he had yet to receive two other works Alfes had written. "And it would be nice for all of [your] books to be in my library." It seems that Rayatz's love of books and his drive as a collector overpowered his content critique.



*Likkutei Amarim*, commonly known as *Tanya*, the seminal work of Chabad hasidic thought by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (ca. 1745–1812). This edition was printed in Vilna in 1900. The bookplate states that this volume is part of “the trove of holy books collected by Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson [of] Lubavitch.” The bottom line has blank space for recording when the book was purchased in the first decade of the twentieth century. Russian State Library, Schneerson Collection.

Rayatz was succeeded at the helm of Lubavitch Hasidism by his son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–94), known early in his career by the acronym Ramash. In November 1960, Ramash wrote a letter to Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin (1888–1978) in Israel. Rabbi Zevin had written to Ramash with the idea of compiling a new commentary to the Bible. The proposed commentary would be based on traditional sources, but it would be phrased in language that young people could easily access. Rabbi Zevin had asked Ramash to participate in the venture, and more importantly to give his imprimatur to the entire project.

Ramash declined, explaining that such an enterprise was a mine-field, for one false move would invalidate the entire effort. The head of the project, therefore, needed to be a person who had the time to fully dedicate himself to the task. That person would need to meticulously comb through every word of the commentary to ensure that there was no departure whatsoever from tradition. The person taking responsibility could not appoint an agent or emissary; that person needed to do this alone. Ramash therefore decided not only to decline the offer of stewardship, but he disassociated himself from the project entirely.

In order to explain how hesitant one should be when undertaking such a writing project and publication venture, Ramash cited the aforementioned maxim of Tzemaḥ Tzedek – his illustrious great-great-grandfather, after whom he had been named.

In a public talk just over a year later, in January 1961, Ramash returned to the Tzemaḥ Tzedek's maxim but employed the idea in a different manner. Citing a hasidic tale recounted by his predecessor, Ramash noted that a story one chooses to commit to writing must be of great import. Rayatz chose to retell a particular tale, transcribe it, and publish that story, so its significance must be patent. With that introduction, Ramash then set about considering a particular tale that Rayatz had published and expounding its meaning.

Nowadays, so many issues are discussed online. This medium is in many ways fleeting. Ideas, images, notices about events, researched articles, opinion pieces or policy statements, advice, encouragement or critique, and directives that are posted online or sent out via electronic media are quickly superseded by new content. Only avid collectors of

## *Hasidic Relics*

ephemera might try to preserve yesterday's posts, as the conversation quickly moves to the next issue or the new reality, and fresh ideas are posted and debated. From this angle, it would seem that we have stepped back from the eternity of the printed word.

Yet from a different vantage point, the online word reaches further than the printed word. Not only can it reach new audiences, but it is often stored in online repositories and is locatable with search engines. From this perspective, we could add to the adage of the Tzemaḥ Tzedek: the spoken word has indeed entered the public sphere, the written word has in fact been placed before the world, and the printed word is certainly bequeathed for generations to come. Yet the reach of the online word goes further than all other forms of communication that we have experienced. As such, we need to be even more careful before sending a word out into cyberspace.

Herein lies a fascinating paradox in the annals of Hasidism: The Besht preferred oral and auditory religious experiences, balking at the written word. Lubavitch Hasidism preserved an element of this tradition, warning of the dangers of writing and publishing. Yet no branch of present-day Hasidism has a larger library than Lubavitch, no hasidic publishing house is more active than the one affiliated with Lubavitch, and no hasidic group can boast a comparable online presence.

To be sure, it is not just Lubavitch Hasidism that is bent on publication of hasidic works. Across the board, the hasidic movement has taken up printing, with many hasidic groups operating their own publishing houses. A panoramic look at two and half centuries of Hasidism reveals a radical development: what began as a critique of writing evolved into a full embrace of publishing. We therefore now turn to cultural elements and historical accounts of publishing in the annals of Hasidism.