

JEWISH THOUGHT

Erudition that allows us to soar

Two hundred and fifty years after the Baal Shem Tov's death, English readers finally have a scholarly compilation of some of his most important teachings. The collection is testimony to the brilliance of Hasidism's founder and of the man who prepared the edited translation

Pillar of Prayer:

Guidance in Contemplative Prayer, Sacred Study, and the Spiritual Life, from the Baal Shem Tov and His Circle, translated and annotated by Menachem Kallus. Fons Vitae Press, 372 pages, \$24.95

By Micha Odenheimer

It is a rare, almost miraculous, event when a spiritual trove is recovered from the bottom of the historical ocean – when powerful teachings we were unaware of, or which we thought were lost in the mists of time, are suddenly available for all to see. When the teachings are those of Rabbi Yisrael Ben Eliezer, known to posterity as “the Baal Shem Tov” (or by the acronym “Besht”), the legendary founder of the Hasidic movement, and arguably the most influential Jewish leader of the past 700 years, their appearance is a cause for celebration.

The life of the Baal Shem Tov holds many of us in thrall. Like the cherubim with their flaming swords who, the Book of Genesis tells us, guard the path to the Tree of Life, the Besht, who lived in the backwaters of the Carpathian mountains, in what in the 18th century was part of Poland and is now in Ukraine, stands at the brink of the modern period, his death in 1760, at the age of 60 (or 62, his date of birth is unclear) coming a few short decades before the beginning of the Jewish enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and other historical watersheds that would irrevocably alter Jewish – and human – consciousness. But unlike the cherubim, or angels, charged with keeping humankind outside of Eden, the Baal Shem Tov's teachings – the democratized spiritual instruction he seeks to convey to all, and the paradigm he created as a religious exemplar, are an invitation inward, a map that allows us access to premodern and even prehistoric modes of religiosity, and to the transforming secrets of the Jewish esoteric tradition. With patience, compassion and fervor, the Baal Shem Tov demonstrated how these secrets were carved into the very stuff of our innermost longings and our sense of self, and thus how they could be teased out of the dark matter of collective and individual experience.

In “Pillar of Prayer,” Dr. Menachem Kallus gives us these teachings, with an English translation and copious footnotes and commentary, revealing the Baal Shem Tov's spiritual exercises as well as his unique and masterful voice, his adept grasp of earlier Jewish mystical traditions, and his synergetic mixing of a compassionate and sober grasp of the human condition with a soaring vision of a God-soaked cosmos.

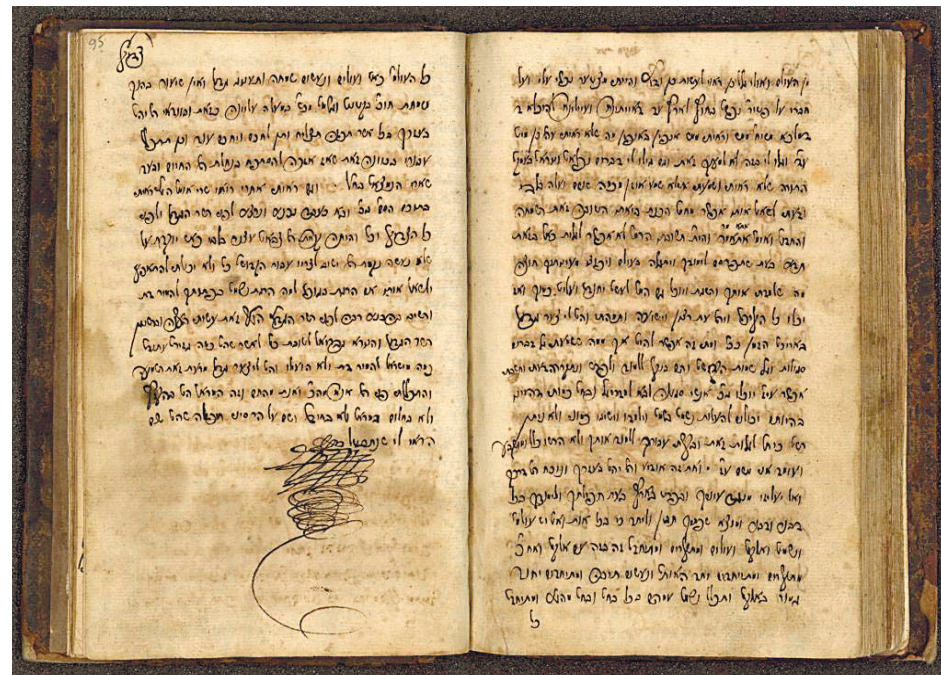
The teachings of the Besht were never totally lost. True, except for a few short texts – notably his famous letter to his brother-in-law, in which he describes his soul's ascent to “the Palace of the Messiah,” and a spiritual will – the Besht left no written record of his teachings. Martin Buber, in his “Tales of the Hasidim,” recounts a story in which the Baal Shem Tov upbraids someone whom

he catches recording his words; “There is nothing here of what I said,” the Besht says to the writer, after glancing at the notebook. The implication is that mere written words could in no way express the living encounter between master and disciple. And yet in the writings of the second, third and fourth generation of Hasidic masters, quotations from the Besht, introduced by phrases such as “I heard it from my teacher” or “It was said in the name of the Holy Baal Shem Tov,” are fairly numerous.

It was not until the beginning of the 20th century, however, some 140 years after the Baal Shem Tov's death (the 250th anniversary of his death was marked in 2010 and “Pillar of Prayer” is one product of that commemoration), that two Hasidic scholars from Warsaw, Rabbi Natan Nata Dunner and Rabbi Shimon Mendel Wodnik, began to systematically collect these quotations. They spent 16 years at the task, poring over more than 210 books and manuscripts. By comparing nearly identical teachings, gleaned from sources disparate in geography and lineage, so that one's versions could not have influenced the other's, they were able to convincingly demonstrate that these words did in fact authentically reflect the words of the Besht himself.

Mysteriously, their work, finished by 1916, was not published in Eastern Europe until 1938, just as the world began to collapse around Eastern European Jewry. Republished in 1948, in Brooklyn, as “Baal Shem Tov on the Torah,” the implications of the collection were largely ignored by scholars. Although the reigning scholarly authority of the past generation, Gershom Scholem, refers to their opus as “the most thorough anthology of all the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov whose value will doubtless be appreciated by any serious investigator of this literature,” almost no academic writing on his teachings, as they appear in the material culled by Dunner and Wodnik, has been published (though important biographical studies of the Besht have appeared). Moreover, despite the hunger for Jewish spiritual

Both the translation and the commentary are evidence of the potential gains for all of us when a scholar of Jewish mysticism is also learned in other traditions. In this case, it's Tibetan Buddhism, which has a highly developed language for states of consciousness.



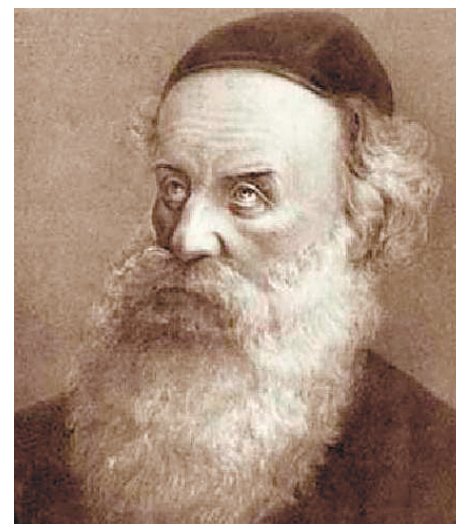
Letter of the Baal Shem Tov (pictured below) from 1746 to his brother-in-law in the Land of Israel. “When will you come, sir,” he describes asking the Messiah, when he ascended to his palace.

teachings and meditative practice – almost an outcry – that rose up from the Jewish grassroots, particularly in the United States, beginning in the late 1960s, there was virtually nothing written (except for a poetic translation and rendering of some of the teachings in a slim but lovely volume called “Your Word is Fire,” by Arthur Green and Barry Holtz) about the collection's most striking feature: a long section called “Amud Hatefila” (Pillar of Prayer). Taken together, the teachings collected in “Pillar of Prayer” provide a foundation for intensive and unique spiritual practice.

Jumping into the Danube

It took another dedicated Hasid, an unusual one, to raise the Baal Shem Tov's teachings from obscurity. Menachem Kallus was born to Hungarian Hasidic Holocaust survivors – his father, who saved numerous Jewish lives by distributing forged visas, himself escaped a Nazi firing squad by jumping from a bridge into the Danube, and hid beneath the bridge until finally swimming to freedom. Menachem, whom I have known for some 25 years (we were both members of the circle around Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach in New York and Israel), was raised in the post-war ultra-Orthodox milieu of Brooklyn, New York. Restless and intellectually curious, he spent his teenage years being thrown out of numerous yeshivas for asking provocative questions; he began studying surrealism, anarchism, Tibetan Buddhism and anthropology, and eventually moved in and out of Chabad, where at one point he was the editor of the English edition of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's sichot, or Torah discussions. He also began to study kabbala and Hasidism with an obsessive seriousness, becoming not just familiar with, but adept in, Lurianic kabbala.

This did not stop Kallus from seeking truth in other religious traditions as well, as he told me in conversations we had as I prepared to write this article. One fateful journey in search of authentic spiritual experiences, at the age of 22, led him down the Amazon in search of hallucinogenic drugs used by indigenous tribes, whose secrets he believed these tribes held.



Through a series of mishaps, he ended up alone and abandoned on the banks of the mighty river with his tefillin, a copy of Chabad's mystical primer the Tanya, and a classical Tibetan Buddhist text. Certain he was going to die, he put on his tefillin and began to meditate. At the same time, his mother, back in Brooklyn, struck by a premonition that he was in danger, began to recite Psalms for him.

Kallus survived, moved to Jerusalem and eventually completed a Ph.D. on Lurianic kabbala as well as receiving rabbinic ordination from a fellow Hasidic rebel, Rabbi Zalman Schachter, the sage of the Jewish Renewal movement. Unlike most scholars, Kallus is a practitioner as well, and he sometimes prays and meditates for several hours a day.

An earlier generation of academics had sometimes dismissed the Baal Shem Tov's accomplishments as a scholar or theoretician, seeing him as an unschooled folk hero; Joseph Weiss, an important disciple of Scholem, surmised in one paper that the Besht was largely an ignoramus. Kallus' commentary on “Pillar of Prayer” undermines any such notion, demonstrating the Besht's mastery of Lurianic kabbala, the intricate, abstract theoretical system of Rabbi Isaac Luria, of 16th-century Safed, as