
Reviewed by Israel Drazin, Boca Raton, Florida, USA

There are many books that retell Hasidic tales; the most famous of which are the several volumes by Martin Buber (1878-1965), especially his *Tales of the Hasidim* that is still popular. Buber rewrote the stories elegantly in his own idiom, but he was very selective in choosing the tales to tell and was criticized by scholars, such as Gershom Scholem for improper romanticism. Scholem and others pointed out that Buber overlooked the obscurantism of the Hasidim, their many superstitions, pietistic excesses, reliance on and devotion to their rebbes, the name they gave their rabbis, mysticism, general ignorance of Jewish law, and that they lived lives that secluded them from and made them ignorant of the general culture. But Buber is not alone. In fact most of the books on Hasidic tales are equally romantic, seek to glorify the Hasidim and their rebbes, and attempt to show that the rebbes teach delightful insights of life.

Lewis takes a scientific approach to the Hasidic tales and does so in a readable and interesting fashion. He examines the history of the Hasidic narratives and compares them to other Jewish and non-Jewish writings. He also writes about the social conditions of the times the stories were composed and the impact of various social changes, such as the period of the enlightenment and the refusal of the Hasidim to participate in secular culture.

He tells the origin of the Hasidic tales and how they developed. The first reports were about the founder of the Hasidim Israel Baal Shem Tov (about 1698-1760), a book called *Shivhe HaBesht* (Praises of the Baal Shem Tov), which was published in 1814, two years after the Brothers Grimm first published their collection of retold folktales in 1812. The Baal Shem and all Hasidic narratives are similar in many respects to the Grimm tales. They tell about Baal Shem’s unnatural miraculous acts, the very superstitions that Scholem and others decried. Interestingly, the 1978 Nobel Prize winner for literature...
Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-1991), in his short novel about Baal Shem Tov, writes ironically that Baal Shem heard people tell about his miracles, but he was surprised because he knew they weren’t miracles at all.

Lewis points out that while the writers of these tales present them as facts and may even believe them to be true, the miraculous elements in their stories belies this claim. Also, they really didn’t know what had occurred in the past. There is no true history of the lives of the Hasidic rebbes. What they present is “imaginings,” hence the title of the volume, Imagining Holiness.

The stories were not always well written. Buber saw this and this is why he rewrote them in his own elegant style. Lewis demonstrates this fault at the beginning of his volume when he offers his own version of his favorite story, which is quite moving, and then gives an English translation of its original Hebrew. The later is awkward and, more significantly, its main point is almost lost.

Lewis focuses on the writings of two Hasidim, relatives by marriage, both rabbis, both descendants of famous Hasidic rebbes, and both writers of several books. Thus, unlike Buber’s tales and the tales by many others, we have here stories told by Hasidim themselves, not scholars like Buber, and not selections that satisfy the collector. Israel Berger was born in 1855 and Abraham Hayim Simhah Bunem Michelson in 1886. The two began publishing their books on Hasidic tales in the start of the twentieth century.

Both writers focused on extolling the leaders of the Hasidic movement. Both maintained that the rebbes were as holy as the founding figures of rabbinic Judaism. Both collected their stories from fellow Hasidim. Each wrote his own book, but some of the stories appear in both volumes, since both used the same sources. Neither rewrote the stories they received but retained the raw and unformed memories of Hasidic folklore in their printed volumes.

The two differ slightly. Berger usually adds the biographical data of the rebbes and Michelson divides his volumes into a section on teachings and stories. Berger portrays the rebbes with near sycophantic adoration, while Michelson gives them a
somewhat mixed reception. Berger is more emphatic in describing the miraculous nature of the rebbes. He counters his readers’ skepticism in his introduction by listing forty miraculous stories associated with talmudic rabbis in the Talmuds. Thus, the rebbes are like the talmudic rabbis. In fact, many Hasidim claim that the rebbes have the transmigrated souls of the talmudic rabbis.

Unlike the Buber tales, Berger and Michelson point out the violent fights between different rebbes and how they cursed one another and how they miraculously inflicted physical and mental harm, and even death on other rebbes. There are also startling and counterintuitive tales. For example, in a story of Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, contrary to most Jews and many Hassidim, circumcision is seen as a dangerous ceremony that could result in death, and did so in the story. However, Levi Yitzchak miraculously resurrected the child.

Another tale shows the misogynistic nature of Hasidism. Lewis presents two versions of the Eydl of Brody story and describes how various scholars interpreted them. Eydl was a very learned woman who wanted to lead Hasidim as a rebbe. This shocked and appalled the Hasidim to the extent that they forced her to undergo exorcism because she was asserting herself as a man.

Some tales depart from halakhic norms and are filled with superstition. For example, Rebbe Naphtali of Ropczuce blew the shofar on Rosh Hashana so quietly that hardly anyone could hear it. This stopped demons from listening to the blasts and interfering with them, so that the blasts could ascend straight to heaven.

Interestingly, Lewis points out that it is possible that Michelson was so affected by the pathetic nature of the stories that he collected and the unnatural superstitions and miraculous occurrences that pervade them that he may have abandoned Hasidism.

Thus, Lewis’ easy to read, informative, and interesting analyses of the Hasidic tales opens a new window into the art of story telling generally and the truth about Hasidic tales in particular.