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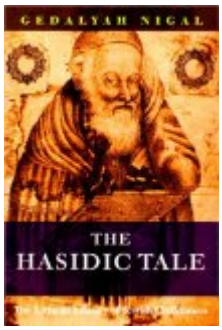
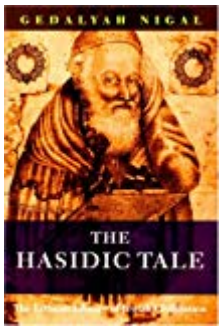


Justin Jaron Lewis. *Imagining Holiness: Classic Hasidic Tales in Modern Times.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. x + 351 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7735-3519-0.



Gedalyah Nigal. *The Hasidic Tale.* Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008. viii + 383 pp. $65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-904113-07-2.

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Martin Buber created a genre called the “Hasidic Tale,” which consisted of folktales told of Hasidic rabbis teaching the hallowing of the everyday and living in the ineffable moment. In his important book *Imagining Holiness*, Justin Jaron Lewis argues against the very existence of such a genre. In the past, critics of Buber took issue with his romantic rereading of the stories. In contrast, Lewis points out that the correct genre was “praises of rabbis and holy men,” a genre of hagiography that incorporated stories and teachings of non-Hasidic rabbinic figures, including Rabbi Moshe Isserles, Rabbi Shlomo Luria, the Vilna Gaon, and other halakhic greats.

Lewis shows that these stories do not reflect folk wisdom or the ineffable moment. Rather, they spring from a world that Lewis could refer to as “Hasidic-maskil.” The authors were communal rabbis raised in the Talmudic world of Gur, Belz, and Satmar who practiced scrupulous ritual performance, but who read Haskole, Yiddish, and German literature on the side.

Lewis focuses on two authors whose works served as major sources for Buber. Rabbi Israel Berger, born in 1855, served as rabbi in Bucharest whereas Rabbi Abraham Hayim Simhah Bunem Michelson, born in 1886, served as rabbi in Plotzk. Both served on rabbinic courts and had to deal

with rapid secularization, fractional differences, and relinquishment of observance among youth raised in traditional communities. Rather than focus solely on traditional values, their books both resisted and mediated modernity, positioned Hasidism as authentic even as they integrated modern themes, and were part of a literature for the rabbinic class that incorporated modern literacy trends. Berger took liberties to occasionally mention such books as Eliezer Zweifel's ***Shalom al Yisrael*** (Peace in Israel [1873]) and Aron Marcus's German volume ***Der Chassidismus*** (Hassidism [1901]). Lewis approvingly cites Karl Erich Grozinger, who argues that the source of the stories is pre-Hasidic folklore; therefore, the stories can still address broader cultural themes

The first part of Lewis's book, consisting of thirty-five pages of translated, selected, and explained stories and poems, would have better served as an appendix. The second part consists of a discussion of previous scholarly literature on historical, literary, and editorial questions on Hasidic tales asked by Gershon Scholem, Jospeh Dan, Chone Shmurek, David Assaf, Gedalyah Nigal, and others. The basic thesis of the book is that these stories were literary constructs portraying the way the authors imagined holiness. They convey an imaginary sense of unity among the Jewish rabbinic leadership and suggest overcoming ideological difference. The stories clearly had a very different status than holy books. They were the literature of a disempowered minority, not true folklore nor scholarship. The same stories were told about different rebbes because there was a single ideal of the holiness. It is only in later generations of retellings that there is an emphasis on the individuality of each rebbe.

As authors, both began publishing at the start of the twentieth century. And the motivation seems to have been financial. There was a market among the newly literate for popular literature. Lewis compares it to the penny literature or chapbooks in England and India, where the masses consumed poorly edited tales of murder and the supernatural. Here too, the Hasidic tale has blurred lines of vulgar Yiddish literature (***shund***), romance, and Hasidic teachings. Berger and Michelson solicited their rabbinic acquaintances to mail them stories of great rabbis to be printed. The editors did not concern themselves with prior publication of the stories or modernist elements in the story. Lewis notes that both authors were still writing from this perspective despite the major ideological changes of their era. They were looking backwards to the older order, the great era of oligarchic, rabbinic families and not to the new answers of Zionists, Bundists, the civil rights party, or communists.

Lewis considers stories that denigrate enlightened Jews or that strain credibility in the use of unbelievable miracles as proof that the stories still addressed a religiously observant audience. In contrast, we should consider how similar miracle tales served Catholics as nostalgia points for modernizing believers eager to affirm that they still believed in miracles despite dropping religious practice or adopting a scientific worldview that precludes miracles. In this case, the miracle tale spoke to the Jews who wanted to show that their secularism was not as a brazen skeptic rather as one who retains ***yiddishkeit*** (Jewishness) in their hearts.

This introduction is followed by eight short chapters on themes useful for dispelling the genre of Hasidic stories, overcoming myths of Hasidic culture as equalitarian, this-worldly, or anti-rabbinic. Lewis offers three chapters showing the importance of Torah study, halakhah, and the rabbinic orthodox culture for the stories. He also shows that the stories are vehement in their denouncement of the nonreligious and the nonobservant. He spends four chapters showing that rabbis are not similar to Buber's portrayal of them as life affirming and living in the present moment. In Hasidic stories, materiality or corporeality (***gashmius***) "is one of the most negatively

laden words" (p. 207). It is "a particular kind of engagement with material existence, aiming for transformation of one's sensory being, in line with a profoundly vertical, hierarchal cosmology and a judgmental stance toward human activities and emotions" (p. 263).

Hasidic rabbis are portrayed as using food for magical and supernatural purposes. They sought an otherworldly purity and engaged in "bodily action which produce[d] a physical result through mysterious means" (p. 215). Since the Hasidic stories model themselves on Talmudic tales, it was natural for Lewis to make use of Daniel Boyarin's method for explaining them.

Lewis points out that the stories portray a male-dominated world in which women were of a lower order. In the same vein, the attitude in the stories toward non-Jews was hostile and dismissive. It is important to note also that "the Hasidic imagination accepts some level of cruelty to children" (p. 253). In addition, Lewis shows that Hasidic rebbes acted toward each other with anger, spite, rivalry, and controversy.

One of the more interesting chapters in this section includes stories reflecting on anxiety about circumcision and the views of it as dangerous. They dealt with their doubts and tensions about circumcision, which could scarcely be expressed openly in Hasidic culture through stories. Lewis cites anthropologists who claim stories can express doubts in a community without causing a religious crisis.

Lewis's book is a valuable study, however, as a revised dissertation there is little follow-up on the many ideas proposed in the book. Lewis works from a folkloric perspective and, unfortunately, does not have the background in the thick forest of Polish Orthodox rabbinic culture to fully and accurately document his ideas. These same authors wrote responsa and sermons, and were engaged in community work at the rabbinic court.

In contrast to Lewis's work, Nigal's book ***The Hasidic Tale*** has the needed erudition in Eastern European culture and can also provide parallels in earlier Jewish literature. Nigal, emeritus professor at Bar-Ilan University, has already edited several annotated editions of early twentieth-century collections of Hasidic tales. His book was originally published in Hebrew (2005) and expanded into an English edition.

The majority of the work is the index card collection of a senior scholar who has clearly devoted his life to the topic, combing the treasures of the Jewish National and University Library. The minutia in the text even includes discussions of how the copies are bound together in the library. The introduction on the nature of Hasidic storytelling and chapter 1, which is concerned with the history of the Hasidic story, are the sole theoretical sections of the book.

In the introduction, Nigal devotes himself to defining the genre of Hasidic tales. He defines the innovation of the Hasidic tale as "the first Jewish literary genre to focus on exemplary individuals and their followers" (p. 1). These stories are about the Hasidic zaddik, who is held in sanctified status by the masses for his ability to help simple folk. For Nigal, the important parts of these stories are the wondrous acts and powers of the rebbe. Simple people come with a problem and it is thus solved by the zaddik. These stories brought hope to the common people who could not see a way out of their predicaments. Tales about Hasidic leaders and their mystical powers attracted followers to the Hasidic court and maintained their devotion. Since the focus is on the rebbe, the stories contain no landscape or nature. They do, however, contain universal human desires and a quest for returning wonder to those skeptical of the rebbes.

In general, Nigal leaves it to the early twentieth-century editors of the volumes to provide their own internal definitions. The editors thought these volumes of stories contained profound ideas, caused repentance, strengthened the service of God, and fortified belief in miracles. Ni-

gal cites those editors who rejected any connection of these stories to the ***haskole*** (Enlightenment) or Yiddish literature, and those who even rejected seeing an analogous collection process. Yet he also cites Abraham Hazan, the collector of Breslov traditions, who stated about the other early twentieth-century collections that "most of the stories were told while drinking wine with the teller standing between the third and fourth cup--nine parts are false" (p. 69). Nigal simply cites the criticism and does not investigate or weigh claims about stories because "it is difficult to identify innovations" (p. 75). Nigal seems to favor the explanation given by the twentieth-century editor, Menachem Mendel Bodek, that these stories offer a remedy for sadness, giving hope and solace to those suffering economic or social calamity.

The first chapter is on the history of the Hasidic tale. Rather than viewing the stories as an urban literary invention, Nigal sees an ideology already implicit in early Hasidism of the holiness of mundane talk, preachers using parables, and the influence of the stories of the Besht and Rav Nahman. Nigal also emphasizes the stories told in the courts of Rizhin, and Komarno, as well as the reliability of the modern genre created by Michael Levi Rodkinsohn (Frumkin). Nigal casts his net wider among twentieth-century collectors than Lewis by including among others Menachem Mendel Sofer, Berger, Michelson, Abraham Isaac Sobelman, Shlomo Gavriel Rosenberg, and Aaron Walden. Nigal leaves out biographies of the editors and bibliography of tales from Chabad and Breslov even though he freely cites them in the notes.

Nigal repeatedly writes that he takes these stories as true, especially if the editors stated that they personally heard it. Nigal takes these professions of veracity at face value, then proceeds to provide copious references showing the parallels and almost word-for-word similarities in Midrashic texts, ***Sefer Hasidim*** (The Book of the Pious), Maaseh Books (Judeo-German books of tales), Christian folktales, tales of Isaac Luria, or Yiddish literature. He acknowledges direct and indirect influence of narrative material from Jewish and non-Jewish sources, but he does not think that this deflects from their veracity. Nigal ignores his own footnotes on the percentage of stories told about non-Hasidic rabbis in these collections.

The majority of the book consists of thematic studies reflecting the social reality. Chapter 2 is on the prophetic powers of the zaddik. Chapter 3 is on matchmakers, marriage, and collecting for bridal dowries. Chapter 4 is on the blessing of having children including the difficulties of labor, and chapter 5 is on ***agunot***, women chained by the abandonment of their husbands. The other fifteen chapters are on topics as diverse as the life of sin, illness, the dead and transmigrations, apostasy, converts, ritual slaughterers, hidden zaddikim, and Elijah. Since Nigal likes these stories and trusts these stories, he relies on the later retellings and topical arrangements of S. Y. Zevin and S. A. Horodetsky without seeing any methodological problems.

On a negative note about the usually fine job done by Littman Library, Nigal's volume is an exception. In a word-processing age, there was no excuse for having over twenty pages of additions to the original footnotes of the Hebrew edition as an appendix. They should have been cut and pasted into the correct location.

Both volumes are valuable contributions needed to make an assessment of Hasidic stories. Lewis considers the stories as literary creations and Nigal considers them authentic. Nigal accepts Buber's category of the Hasidic story but leaves us with a more pious version, whereas Lewis completely shatters the category. Lewis directly takes issue with Nigal who rarefies out the stories from these books and does not mention that these collections also contained magic spells, personal letters, sermonic material, halakhah, and events in the community.

Jack Zipes, an important scholar of folklore cited by neither author, thought that tales reflect the conditions, ideas, tastes, and values of the societies in which they were created. They show the ideals and utopias to which they aspired and they "reveal the gaps between truth and falsehood in our immediate society."[1] The stories of the holy ones, the Hasidic tales, are still an untapped gold mine for those seeking to understand Eastern European Jewish society and more so for their imagined utopias. To truly evaluate Hasidic stories, more books will need to be written on the subject.

Note

[1]. Jack Zipes, "The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale," ***The Lion and the Unicorn*** 12, no. 2 (December 1988): 29.