

# “But I Will Tell of Their Deeds”: Retelling a Hasidic Tale about the Power of Storytelling

*Levi Cooper*

Faculty of Law, Bar-Ilan University

*levicoops@gmail.com*

## Abstract

A famous Hasidic tale that depicts the decline of mysticism in Hasidic circles also bespeaks the power of storytelling. This study tracks the metamorphosis of this classic tale over a century of its retelling by writers—including Martin Buber, S. Y. Agnon, Gershom Scholem, Walter Kaufmann, Elie Wiesel, and Abba Kovner—who each fashioned the tale in their own image. These authors affirmed but also challenged the tale’s message about the efficacy of storytelling. The use of the tale in Passover celebrations and other contemporary trends are also considered. The question is raised as to whether transmitters have a duty of care not to corrupt the story.

## Keywords

Hasidic tales – Besht – Israel of Ružyn – Martin Buber – S. Y. Agnon – Gershom Scholem – Haggadah

Hasidic lore is rich in tales of the exploits of saintly masters of Hasidism and their faithful disciples. In this study I recount not the adventures of a Hasidic master, but the adventures of a Hasidic tale. The tale discussed here has passed through the hands of philosophers, scholars, and storytellers—notably Martin

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Buber, S. Y. Agnon, Gershom Scholem, Walter Kaufmann, Elie Wiesel, and Abba Kovner—and each person who retold the story added their own voice to the narrative. A close reading of each variant facilitates explications of the changes wrought by each storyteller-interpreter.<sup>1</sup> The story itself spans the first century of the history of Hasidism, and here I present a further century of retelling of that very tale. Beyond tracing the various renditions of this particular tale, the study is a peregrination in Jewish literary history that illustrates how the malleable Hasidic tale may be shaped in the image of the storyteller. Differences among the recensions raise the question as to whether transmitters have a duty of care not to corrupt the story.

### The Story of the Decline of Mysticism

In 1906 Reuben Zak printed a Hebrew booklet in Warsaw entitled *Keneset Yiśra'el*. The subject of the booklet was the captivating Hasidic master Rabbi Israel Friedman of Rużyn (1796–1850).<sup>2</sup> Zak was a disciple of the Hasidic master Rabbi David Moses Friedman of Czortków (1827–1903), the eighth of the ten children of Israel of Rużyn and his wife Sarah. Zak provided the earliest

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- 1 This study is based on the understanding that when a story is retold, and the retelling departs from the original or previous version(s) in salient details, these changes may reflect the storyteller's own world. In this way, the storyteller also functions as an interpreter. This is true irrespective of whether or not the storyteller was conscious of the changes. As Robinson noted, Hasidic tales from the "Lemberg" period (1864–1912) "reflect the ideas and concerns of their latter-day reactors" rather than events they purport to depict; see Ira Robinson, "The Zaddik as Hero in Hasidic Hagiography," in *Crisis and Reaction: The Hero in Jewish History*, ed. Menachem Mor (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 1995), 94–95. For a study along these lines that explores Buber's reworking of a Hasidic tale, see Martina Urban, "Retelling Biblical Mythos through the Hasidic Tale: Buber's 'Saul and David' and the Question of Leadership," *Modern Judaism* 24 (2004): 59–78.
  - 2 On Israel of Rużyn, see David Assaf, *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin*, trans. David Louvish (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). On the historical value of *Keneset Yiśra'el*, see Assaf, *The Regal Way*, 23. On Zak and his work see also Gedalyah Nigal, *Hassidic Tales Collectors* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel, 1995), 167–168. It is likely that the tale existed in Hasidic circles in oral form prior to Zak's publication. I do not rule out the possibility that similar tales circulated in the surrounding non-Jewish culture. An investigation of such cross-germination, however, is beyond the present study. Similarly, this study does not obviate the need for a broader consideration of the phenomenon described herein, such as identifying similar trends in the retelling of the tales of the Brothers Grimm. This vector is also beyond the scope of this study.

published version of a story that was to be retold numerous times in the twentieth century:

Our holy master [Rabbi Israel of Ružyn] told a story of the Besht, blessed be his memory, that once there was a dire life-threatening matter where there was a certain only son, who was very good, etc.<sup>3</sup> And [the Besht] ordered that a candle of wax be made and he traveled to the forest and attached the candle to a tree and did various other things and performed *yihudim* [mystical unifications of the Divine name], etc., and brought salvation with the help of God, blessed be He. And afterwards there was such an incident involving [Rabbi Israel's] great-grandfather, the Holy Maggid, and he did likewise as described above, and he said: “The *yihudim* and *kawanot* [mystical intentions, sing. *kawanah*] that the Besht performed I know not, but I shall act on the basis of the *kawanah* that the Besht intended.” And that too was accepted. And afterwards there was a similar incident involving the holy rabbi R. Moses Leib of Sassów, blessed be his memory, and he said: “We do not even have the power to do that; I shall only tell the story, and it is up to God, blessed be He,<sup>4</sup> to assist.” And thus it was, with the help of God, blessed be He.<sup>5</sup>

The actual life-threatening matter is not detailed; clearly for the storyteller this was not integral to the tale. The focus of the story is the ability to affect

3 In the Hebrew: *ben yahid*—literally an only child, but the term also has the connotation of a beloved child. I have translated the Hebrew *ben yahid we-tov* as “a beloved and good son.”

4 The original Hebrew has the abbreviation *להשייך* (to God, blessed be He). Piekarcz suggested emending the text to read *והשייך* (and God, blessed be He). Other sources also give this emendation with no comment. Idel retained the original text and translated “I shall only tell the story to God,” explaining that “God may be the principle aim of the narration, preserving the theurgical nature of this activity.” See Mendel Piekarcz, *Ḥasidut Breslav* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1972; 2nd ed., Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1995), 103. Cf. Yisrael Yaakov (Klapholtz), *Kol sippurei Ba'al Shem-Tov* (Tel Aviv: Peer Hasefer, 1969; Bnei Braq: Peer Hasefer, 1976; Bnei Braq: Mishor, 1989), 3:44; Yoav Elstein, “Ha-sippur ha-ḥasidi: Transformatsya shel ma'arekhet 'iyun le-tahbir sippuri,” *Daat* 9 (1982): 34; Gedalyah Nigal, *Ha-sipporet ha-ḥasidit*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Hamakhon Leḥeker Hasafrut Haḥasidit, 2002), 21; Naftali Hirtz Flintenstein, ed., *Irin qaddishin ha-shalem* (Jerusalem: Siftei Tsaddiqim, 2009), 615; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 271, 397n96.

5 Reuben Zak, *Keneset Yiśra'el* (Warsaw: Y. Edelstein, 1906), 23, my translation. This work was reprinted a number of times during the twentieth century. Square brackets denote my additions or explanations. For slightly different translations, see Idel, *Kabbalah*, 270–271; Assaf, *The Regal Way*, 33; Yitzhak Buxbaum, *Storytelling and Spirituality in Judaism* (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1994), 183.

salvation using mystical unifications of the divine name. The theurgic capabilities of the Besht—Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (ca. 1700–1760), the inspiration for the nascent Hasidic movement—are at the center of the first part of the narrative. This part of the story may be drawing on an earlier Besht tradition:

Once the Besht traveled from Kamenka to his home. . . . The Besht said: “We will pray Minḥah in such and such a place.” . . . This was in the winter time and it was intensely cold. They were still a few versts from that place, and they were becoming chilled to the bone. They said: “It is impossible to reach that place. It is still far away and we will freeze.” Even the Besht’s servant said, “We will get very cold.” They were traveling through the forest. The Besht ordered them to stop. He touched a tree with his finger and the tree was enkindled. They warmed themselves by the fire.<sup>6</sup> . . . Then they traveled to such and such a place.<sup>7</sup>

In the second part of Zak’s tale the Besht’s successor (and great-grandfather of the storyteller Israel of Rużyn), Rabbi Dov Ber, known as the Maggid (preacher) of Mezritch (d. 1772; Polish: Międzyrzec Korecki) laments that he is incapable of performing the necessary mystical unifications and therefore has no choice but to imitate the Besht’s actions and rely on his master’s *kawanot*.<sup>8</sup>

The third stage of the story introduces a new character, Rabbi Moses Leib of Sassów (1745–1807), who bemoans that “we do not even have the power to do that.” What can Moses Leib of Sassów not achieve? Since the candle and the trip to the forest are not mentioned in the second act, it can be assumed that they are not central to the story. Moses Leib of Sassów bemoans that he cannot even mimic the Besht’s actions, as the Maggid had. All Moses Leib of Sassów

6 Idel noted that in the original version of the story the candle was never lit and on this basis he suggested a symbolic interpretation for the candle (see below, n. 35). If Assaf is correct in his assumption that this Besht story forms the background of Zak’s version, then we would have to assume that the candle was indeed lit. The motif of going to a tree in a forest appears in other Hasidic tales as well; see, for instance: *Gevurat ‘ari: Toledot . . . Leib Sarah’s . . .* (Lwow: R. Margulies, [1931]), 22.

7 Dov Baer ben Samuel of Linitz, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov [Shivḥei ha-Besht]: The Earliest Collection of Legends about the Founder of Hasidism*, trans. and ed. Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 131, section 106. I am following Assaf’s suggestion that this is the background of Zak’s version (Assaf, *The Regal Way*, 408n16).

8 For examples from Hasidic writings of *yiḥudim* being performed on their own, see Kalonymus Kalman HaLevi Epstein of Kraków, *Ma’or va-shamesh* ([Breslau: Hirsch Zaltsbakh, 1842]), *va-yetse*, s.v. *va-yiqah*; *nitsavim*, s.v. *’omnam*.

can do is to retell the account of days gone by. The tale concludes that this too sufficed.

Zak’s distance in time from the events he depicts, together with the nature of the genre, call the tale’s historicity into question.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding, the story expresses a theme in the collective memory of the Hasidic movement: the initial centrality of the mystical pursuit and its subsequent sidelining. For the Besht, mysticism was central. In a letter he wrote to his brother-in-law, Rabbi Abraham Gershon of Kitov (ca. 1710–1761), at the time residing in the Land of Israel, the Besht described a mystical experience he had in 1746.<sup>10</sup> The Besht detailed how he ascended to the heavens and met the Messiah. When he asked the Messiah when he would come to redeem the Jewish people, the Messiah responded by saying: “This is how you will know: when your teaching becomes famous and revealed in the world.” Then the Messiah quoted a biblical verse: “When your wellsprings sprout forth” (Prov 5:16), and added a word of explanation: “[That is,] what I have taught you and what you have attained; and other people will also be able to do *yihudim* and ascents like you. Then all the evil forces will expire and it will be a time of favor and salvation.” Alas, the lofty goal of mystical prowess was not attainable by most. The Besht knew this and therefore felt faint when he heard the words of the Messiah. The Besht’s fears were confirmed as subsequent generations forsook the centrality of the mystical endeavor, seeking mysticism-substitutes to fill the void. The tale told by Israel of Rużyn reflects this very narrative.

In analyzing the story, scholars have emphasized that all three heroes achieved their goal: the Besht by means of theurgic acts, the Maggid by his imitation of the Besht, and Moses Leib of Sassów by his account of the deeds of previous generations. Thus Moshe Idel noted that “if there is a decline, it is in the knowledge of theurgy. . . . The loss of theurgy. . . is compensated by the

9 Glenn Dynner, “The Hasidic Tale as a Historical Source: Historiography and Methodology,” *Religion Compass* 3 (2009): 655–675.

10 For the current discussion, it is not necessary to consider the different versions of this letter that have reached us. I have used the version printed at the back of the early Hasidic work by Yaakov Yosef HaKohen of Polonnoye, *Ben porat Yosef* (Koretz: Tsevi Hirsh b. Aryeh Leib and Shmuel b. Yissakhar Ber Segal, 1781), for this is the version that circulated in the Hasidic milieu of the time and therefore is most appropriate when considering Hasidic collective memory. For a discussion of the different versions, see Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba’al Shem Tov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996; reprint, with new introduction, Portland, OR: Littman Library, 2013), xlvi–lv, 99–113.

discovery of forms of personal mysticism.”<sup>11</sup> In the final act of the story the mysticism-substitute is storytelling; thus the tale tells of a decline in the efficacy of mystical acts, but not a decline in the ability of subsequent generations.

In the first half of the nineteenth century—the period when Israel of Rużyn was active—mysticism was no longer on the program for many Hasidic groups. Israel of Rużyn, whose lasting contribution did not take the form of Hasidic homilies or kabbalistic treatises, hardly developed mystical ideas in the terse statements he bequeathed. *Keneset Yiśra’el* therefore describes how mysticism receded from the center of Hasidic practice to part of the collective memory of the Hasidic movement.<sup>12</sup> In the *Keneset Yiśra’el* narrative, the mysticism-substitute is storytelling. Appropriately, Hasidic lore associates Israel of Rużyn with the art of storytelling, its centrality, and its effectiveness in mystically shaping the course of events.<sup>13</sup>

It would seem that the *Keneset Yiśra’el* version—the oldest version to reach us—accurately depicts one aspect of the history of Hasidism.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the *Keneset Yiśra’el* version afforded opportunities for the metamorphosis of the tale into different narratives, each containing a nuanced message.

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- 11 Idel, *Kabbalah*, 271. This point was made earlier by Elstein and later by Assaf; see Elstein, “Ha-sippur ha-ḥasidi,” 35; idem, *Pa’amei bat melekh* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1984), 78–79; Assaf, *The Regal Way*, 331.
- 12 In 1969, Zak’s 1906 version of the story was included almost verbatim in a four-volume compilation of tales of the Besht published in Tel Aviv; see Klapholtz, *Ba’al shem tov*, 3:43–44. There is a solitary difference between this version and Zak’s rendition: ת”ש”ה instead of ת”ש”ה (see above, n. 4). In this new setting the tale takes on a different significance. In the context of *Keneset Yiśra’el*, the tale is part of a larger narrative that depicts the decline of mysticism in subsequent generations. In the 1969 collection, the compiler was attempting to reconstruct the biography of the Besht, and in this context Zak’s story testifies to the theurgic capabilities of the Besht.
- 13 According to Scholem, “not a few great Zaddikim, above all Rabbi Israel of Rishin, the founder of the Eastern Galician Hasidic dynasty, have laid down the whole treasure of their ideas in such tales. Their Torah took the form of an inexhaustible fountain of storytelling.” Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1941; New York: Schocken, 1946), 349. See also Joseph Dan, *Ha-sippur ha-ḥasidi* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), 54; Piekarz, *Breslav*, 102–104; Rivka Goldberg, “Ha-sippur ha-ḥasidi she-be-fi ha-tsaddiq: Bein ‘itsuv sifrut le-meser ‘ide’iy—‘iyun be-midgam meyatseg shel sippurim be-hedgash ‘al sippurei rabbi Yisra’el me-Ruzhin” (PhD dissertation, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1997).
- 14 As to how accurately this narrative fits the self-perception of Israel of Rużyn, see Piekarz, *Breslav*, 102–104.

### The Story of Individual Religious Experience

Some twenty years after the story first appeared, Martin Buber (1878–1965) offered the tale to the German-speaking world when he published *Die Chassidischen Bücher* in Berlin 1927. Buber’s work was later translated into Hebrew (1946) and into English (1947–1948).

Buber encountered Hasidism sometime in late 1903 and was stirred by what he grasped as the religious essence of Judaism.<sup>15</sup> As a call for Jewish renaissance, Buber undertook to convey this message by retelling Hasidic stories in the vernacular. Scholars have noted that anthologizing Jewish literature was regarded by cultural Zionists as a means of Jewish cultural renewal, and Martina Urban has demonstrated this to be true of Buber’s Hasidic anthologies.<sup>16</sup>

After an initial attempt to translate the tales of Rabbi Naḥman of Braclaw (1772–1811) into German, he decided to offer them in a free adaptation in his first compilation of Hasidic tales, entitled *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (1906), which was soon followed by *Die Legende des Baalschem* (1908).<sup>17</sup> Buber’s preference for free adaptation over translation guaranteed that his imprint

15 Martin Buber, *Werke* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1962–1964), 3:967–968; idem, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon Press, 1958), 59; Pamela Vermes, *Buber on God and the Perfect Man* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), 15; idem, *Buber* (London: Halban, 1988), 8–9.

16 Martina Urban, “The Jewish Library Reconfigured: Buber and the Zionist Anthology Discourse,” *New Perspectives on Martin Buber*, ed. Michael Zank (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 31–60; idem, “Retelling Biblical Mythos,” 72; idem, *Aesthetics of Renewal: Martin Buber’s Early Representation of Hasidism as Kulturkritik* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4, 13–14. On the broader Jewish context, see Zeev Gries, “The Jewish Background for Buber’s Rewriting of Hasidic Tales” [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 11–12 (1990): 46–56. Urban also demonstrated that Buber’s call for Jewish renaissance, as expressed in his Hasidic anthologies, should be understood as part of a larger conversation among German intellectuals about language, representation, and perception. This context is beyond the scope of the present study.

17 Both works were later translated into English: Martin Buber, *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (Frankfurt a.M.: Verlag der Literarische Anstalt Rütten & Loening, 1906) = idem, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon Press, 1956); Martin Buber, *Die Legende des Baalschem* (Frankfurt a.M.: Literarische Anstalt Rütten & Loening, 1908) = idem, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper, 1955). On the writing of *Die Legende des Baalschem* and its sources, see Urban, “Retelling Biblical Mythos,” 75n28; idem, *Aesthetics of Renewal*, 164–168.

would be left on the tales he recorded. Indeed, Buber freely shared with his readership that he was presenting interpretive retellings.<sup>18</sup>

Buber's source for the story was the *Keneset Yiśra'el* version; thus Buber offered the earliest remodeling of the tale:

The Rabbi of Rizhyn related:

Once when the holy Baal Shem Tov wanted to save the life of a sick boy he was very much attached to, he ordered a candle made of pure wax, carried it to the woods, fastened it to a tree, and lit it. Then he pronounced a long prayer. The candle burned all night. When morning came, the boy was well.

When my grandfather, the Great Maggid, who was the holy Baal Shem's disciple, wanted to work a like cure, he no longer knew the secret meaning of the words on which he had to concentrate. He did as his master had done and called on his name. And his efforts met with success.

When Rabbi Moshe Leib, the disciple of the disciple of the Great Maggid, wanted to work a cure of this kind, he said: 'We have no longer

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18 Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1947–1948), 1:viii–xi. Buber, however, felt that the method employed in his first two attempts—*The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* and *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*—“was too free” (p. xi) and he therefore rejected his original method, opting for a tighter approach that still bore his imprint. See Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal*, 16, 20. Urban also pointed to the fact that in his *Die Legende des Baalschem*, Buber did not cite sources, nor provide any context for the tales he recorded. Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal*, 164–166. For an exploration of Buber's reworking of Hasidic material for his later Hasidic work, see Avraham Shapira, “Shetei darkhei ge'ulah be-ḥasidut ba-'aspaqlarya shel Martin Buber,” *Massu'ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb* [Hebrew], ed. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), 432–445; Ron Margolin, “Inner Redemption as the Way to Amend the World: How was Buber's ‘Gog and Magog’ Written?” [Hebrew], *Zionism: Studies in the History of the Zionist Movement and of the Jewish Community in Palestine* 21 (1998): 99–120. The Buber-Scholem controversy about Hasidism is clearly beyond the scope of this paper; suffice it to point out that Scholem and others charged Buber with offering his own original ideas rather than truly presenting Hasidic thought. Kepnes argued that Buber did this purposefully as part of his interpretive methodology. Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 32–40. Borrowing Hans-Georg Gadamer's term, Kepnes called Buber's method “performative interpretation” (*ibid.*, 10–15). See also below, n. 27.

the power even to do what was done. But I shall relate the story of how it was done, and God will help.’ And his efforts met with success.<sup>19</sup>

For Buber, Moses Leib of Sassów is the central personality in the tale; indeed, the story is included in the chapter about this Hasidic master. The tale, it would appear, is not intrinsically connected to the legacy of Israel of Ružyn; he is merely the narrator. This is emphasized in the 1949 German reworking of four of Buber’s titles on Hasidic lore, where the title of the story is “Drei Geschlechter” (Three Generations).<sup>20</sup>

In Buber’s eyes, the Hasidic ideal focused on a life lived in the unconditional presence of God. Daily living was to be permeated and indeed invigorated by personal religious consciousness. Buber sought to convey to his readership that Hasidism, as an expression of a universal mystical experience, was a manifestation of Jewish national vitality; as such, Hasidism contained a relevant message.<sup>21</sup> Hasidism according to Buber demonstrated that individual religious experience was not dependent on law,<sup>22</sup> dogmas or creeds, or Kabbalistic mysticism; it was a message that transcended a specific personality or historical context.<sup>23</sup> In 1909–1911, Buber delivered lectures on Judaism to the Bar Kochba

19 Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 2:92–93. For the original German: Martin Buber, *Die Chassidischen Bücher* (Berlin: Schocken, 1927), 517; for the Hebrew: idem, *’Or ha-ganuz: Sippurei ḥasidim* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1946), 390. At the back of the Hebrew edition Buber offered a list of sources and noted that this story came from Zak’s volume (Buber, *’Or ha-ganuz*, 612). The Hebrew and English translations differ greatly. Thus, for instance, “einen langen Spruch,” freely translated into English as “a long prayer,” is given in Hebrew as *מאמר ארוך* (a long statement). While the Hebrew translation of the German may be accurate, it distances the tale from the language and atmosphere of Zak’s Hebrew version.

20 Martin Buber, *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim* (Zürich: Manesse Verlag, 1949), 543.

21 Boaz Huss, “Martin Buber’s Introduction to *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* and the Early 20th Century Construction of ‘Jewish Mysticism,’” e-lecture, Goldstein-Goren International Center for Jewish Thought, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, <http://hsf.bgu.ac.il/cjt/files/electures/Buber3.htm>.

22 Cf. Kepnes, *The Text as Thou*, 158–159n84. Regarding Buber’s own aversion to religious institutions and relationship to Jewish law, see 122 and 175n82. See also Dynner, “The Hasidic Tale as a Historical Source,” 655.

23 Martin Buber, “Das Chassidismus ist die Ethos gewordene Kabbala,” in *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman*, 13; “Hasidism is the Kabbalah Become Ethos,” in *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, 10. On Hasidism according to Buber, see Efraim Meir, “‘Gog u-Magog’: ‘Al ge’ulah u-qedushah be-ḥayei ha-yom-yom,” in Martin Buber, *Gog u-Magog: Megillat ha-yamim*, ed. Dov Elbaum (Tel Aviv: Mishkal, 2007), 288–303. On Buber’s experience as a Hasidic master, see Vermes, *Buber on God*, 150–151; idem, *Buber*, 19–20.

Verein, the Zionist student organization in Prague. In these lectures, Buber emphasized Jewish renewal, focusing on true religiousness.<sup>24</sup> The tale is told in this very spirit. The prayer of the Besht is a personal, heartfelt prayer that is not contingent on a set text or on Kabbalistic rituals. Gone are the *yihudim* and *kawanot* mentioned in the *Keneset Yiśra'el* version.<sup>25</sup> Buber first entitled the story “Vom Weg der Geschlechter” (Along the Path of Generations);<sup>26</sup> in Buber’s Hasidism each generation could find its own religious voice.

Buber’s version differs from the *Keneset Yiśra'el* version on a further salient point. In *Keneset Yiśra'el* the plight of the boy is given cursory attention. We know that the boy is in a life-threatening situation; we know that he is a worthy child and that he is an only child. *Keneset Yiśra'el* gives us enough information to know that the situation is grave, but it does not furnish details that might divert the reader’s focus from the Hasidic heroes of the tale and the central message of the story. Buber, however, adds that the Besht was “very much attached” to the boy whose life lay in the balance. This small addition reminds us of Buber’s synthetic thesis of dialogical existence. For the Besht to fully engage with the boy’s plight, to be conscious of the boy’s needs, there must be an I-Thou relationship. By telling us of the prior relationship of the Besht and the boy, Buber has recast the mode of interaction into a concrete encounter. The exact nature of the relationship is left untold; the structure of the relationship is not stated, there is no content that can be quantified in any way. All the reader is told is that the Besht “was very much attached” to the sick boy; that is, he had an I-Thou relationship with him.<sup>27</sup>

24 These lectures were published in Martin Buber, *Drei Reden über das Judentum* (Frankfurt a.M.: Literarische Anstalt Rütten & Loening, 1911). See Vermes, *Buber on God*, 19–21; Vermes, *Buber*, 31–33.

25 See also Steven T. Katz, “Martin Buber’s Misuse of Hasidic Sources,” in *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 52–93.

26 The Hebrew title is given as על דרך הדורות; the later German title is “Drei Geschlechter”; the English translation simply gives “Generations.”

27 Buber’s work on *Die Chassidischen Bücher* (published in 1927) was conducted concurrently with his work on *Ich und Du* (published in 1923); see Margolin, “Inner Redemption,” 100; cf. Israel Koren, *The Mystery of the Earth: Mysticism and Hasidism in the Thought of Martin Buber* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 101. Scholem acrimoniously noted that Buber infused his Hasidic tales with his own philosophy; see Gershom Scholem, *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), 452. Buber’s use of Hasidic tales need not be criticized, if adjudged by his own objectives and standards (as opposed to Scholem’s); see Koren, *Mystery of the Earth*. For a detailed analysis of the three stages of development in Buber’s thought, see Elliot

In the *Keneset Yiśra’el* version, we learn nothing at all about the boy, and we are not even told that he was cured; we simply learn that the Besht “brought salvation with the help of God.” The boy is objectified as the beneficiary of the Besht’s actions; an I-It relationship is presented as the Besht is in monologue vis-à-vis the object of his prayer. The existence of the boy is entirely secondary to the description of the Besht’s mystical competence. Buber, in contrast, added a personal dimension by telling us that when morning came “the boy was well.” For Buber, the subject is the boy, not the salvation. Buber’s Besht is in dialogue with the sick boy. As Buber wrote elsewhere: “Realization of the Divine on earth is fulfilled not within man but between man and man. . . . It is consummated only in the life of true community.”<sup>28</sup> Even for the readers of Buber’s version, perhaps, an I-Thou relationship has been formed with the sick boy.<sup>29</sup>

This relationship is significant not just for the tale of salvation, but for Buber’s narrative of Hasidism. In Buber’s eyes this I-Thou relationship was the quintessence of Hasidism. In the preface to his collection of Hasidic sayings—also published in English in 1947—Buber described adherents to Hasidism as

those “devout” souls who knew that no one can be really devout in relation to God, if he is not devout toward His creation, and that the love of God is unreal, unless it is crowned with love for one’s fellow men.<sup>30</sup>

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Wolfson, “The Problem of Unity in the Thought of Martin Buber,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27 (1989): 419–439. Regarding the three different stages of Buber’s Hasidic writing, see Margolin, “Inner Redemption,” 99–101.

28 Martin Buber, “The Holy Way: A Word to the Jews and to the Nations,” in *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer and trans. Eva Jospe (New York: Schocken, 1967), 113; see also Shapira, “Shetei darkhei ge’ulah,” 446. On Buber’s notion of the place of the Hasidic master as the Center, see Robert E. Wood, *Martin Buber’s Ontology: An Analysis of I and Thou* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 76; Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber’s Transformation of German Social Thought* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1989), 120–121 and 182n292. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss Koren’s response to Mendes-Flohr; see Koren, *Mystery of the Earth*, especially chap. 3.

29 In her study of Buber’s retelling of a different Hasidic tale, Urban noted: “It needs to be added that most of Buber’s readers were presumably unfamiliar with R. Nahman and his complex personality and thus were not in the position to appreciate the polysemous meaning of the retold legend.” Urban, “Retelling Biblical Myths,” 72.

30 Martin Buber, *Ten Rungs: Hasidic Sayings*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 7. In this compilation, Buber not only selected and edited the passages, but he recast them in his own words, seldom attributing the passages to specific Hasidic masters and never noting his sources. The compilation, therefore, can be seen as reflecting Buber’s ideas.

A final note about Buber's contribution to the tale of this Hasidic tale: Buber's publication set a trend for the story, as it—together with so many other Hasidic tales—left the confines of the Hasidic community and became available to a wide readership.<sup>31</sup> Buber's publication can thus be seen as a significant stage in the dissemination and popularization of this Hasidic story.

### The Power of Telling the Story

The most significant and influential change to the story must be credited to the novelist and Nobel laureate S. Y. Agnon (1888–1970), who bequeathed a number of renditions of the tale.<sup>32</sup> I begin with the version that Agnon himself published in the *Haaretz* newspaper in 1960 on the eve of Shavuot, exactly two hundred years after the death of the Besht:

In the days of the *tsaddiq* [Hasidic master, lit. “righteous,” pl. *tsaddiqim*] Rabbi Israel of Ružyn there was a life-threatening matter where a [certain] person had an only son who was good, and what happened to him happened to him. They came to visit that *tsaddiq*. That *tsaddiq* said: “In the days of the Baal Shem Tov, may his merit protect us, a case like this happened. The Baal Shem Tov instructed to make a candle of wax. They made a candle of wax. He took the candle and went to the forest and attached it to a certain tree and lit the candle and laid a fire and he did there a number of other things, and with God's help brought salvation.

Once again a case like this happened. They came to my great-grandfather the holy Maggid, that he should beseech for mercy. The holy Maggid instructed that they should make a candle of wax. They made a candle of wax. He took the candle and went to the forest and lit the candle, but did not lay a fire. And he said thus: “Those *yihudim* and *kawanot* that

31 Scholars have noted that Buber's target audience for his Hasidic anthologies included Jews and non-Jews, Zionists and anti-Zionists. See Kepnes, *The Text as Thou*, 11; Huss, “Martin Buber's Introduction”; Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal*, 9–10, cf. 61; Claire E. Sufrin, review of *Aesthetics of Renewal*, by Martina Urban, *AJS Review* 35 (2011): 189.

32 Agnon's approach to reworking Hasidic tales has been discussed by scholars. See, for instance, Hillel Barzel, *Shemuel Yosef Agnon: Mivhar ma'amarim 'al yetsirato* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982), chap. 7; Naomi Tene, “Ha-tsedef ve-he-ḥai: Darkhei 'avodato shel Agnon be-qovets 'Sippurim na'im shel R. Yisra'el B'esht” (master's thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 1982); Gedalyah Nigal, *Shai Agnon u-meqorotav ha-ḥasidiyim: Iyun be-'arba'a mi-sippurav* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1983), 2, 34; Zvi Mark, “Ma bein sippurai le-'otam she-kol yad kotevet,” *Reshit* 1 (2009): 209–229.

the Baal Shem Tov invoked, I know not. But I can act on the basis of those *yihudim* and *kawanot*.’ And he too with the help of God, may He be blessed, brought salvation.

And once again, a case like this happened in the days of the rabbi, the *tsaddiq* R. Moses Leib of Sassów, may his merit protect us. They came to him that he should beseech for mercy. That *tsaddiq* went out to the forest and stood by that very tree where the Baal Shem Tov and the great Maggid had stood, and said: ‘As for us, we have not the power to do all that our rabbis did, but I will tell of their deeds to God, blessed be He.’ He stood [there] and told the entire story. And he too, with the help of God, brought salvation.

And the rabbi, the *tsaddiq* of Rużyn, said: “And as for us, we have not the power even to do that; all we can do is to tell the deeds of the *tsaddiqim*, and God, may He be blessed, will act.” And so it was, with the help of God, may He be blessed, he brought salvation.<sup>33</sup>

Agnon did not reveal his source for this story; perhaps it came from an independent source, but most likely he drew on *Keneset Yiśra’el*, a work he had certainly consulted.<sup>34</sup> Yet, right from the beginning of the story, it is clear that Agnon tells a different tale. Israel of Rużyn has turned from storyteller to hero, as the background for the tale is a challenge that confronts him personally. Israel of Rużyn tackles the challenge by telling the tale. This context is entirely missing from previous versions (even though Zak’s 1906 version was included, as we recall, in a compilation about Israel of Rużyn).

Agnon then turns to the three stages of the story. The first stage lacks any mention of the Kabbalistic *yihudim*. That is not to say that Agnon sought to excise mysticism from the tale. It is likely that when the Besht “did there a number of other things” he was performing mystical unifications; in the second stage, when the Maggid laments his inability he clearly states that the Besht

33 S. Y. Agnon, “Sippur shel yeshu’ah,” *Haaretz*, May 31, 1960, 10, my translation. That same issue carried the first installment of a two-part series entitled “Sifreihem shel tsaddiqim me’ah sippurim va-ehad”; see below, n. 47. On the authenticity of Agnon’s printed version of the story and his oral version cited by Scholem (below, near n. 50), see Elstein, “Ha-sippur ha-ḥasidi,” 35–36.

34 In Agnon’s posthumous *Sefer sofer ve-sippur*, Zak’s volume is listed in the bibliography at the back of the book. S. Y. Agnon, *Sefer sofer ve-sippur* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1978), 452. The National Library of Israel holds a copy with a dedication by the author and a type-written list of the stories with their sources. The list also contains two handwritten additions by Agnon. As with some of the other stories, “Sippur shel yeshu’ah” is listed without its source (National Library of Israel, Scholem Reading Room, R18120, [p. 6]).

had performed *yihudim* and invoked *kawanot*. It would appear that Agnon was directing the reader's attention away from theurgic practices because, as shall become clear, that is not why Agnon told the story.

A further addition in the Agnon version is that not only is the candle lit, but the Besht is said to have "laid a fire" (*'arakh*). This phrase reminds the reader versed in Jewish texts of a sacrifice, for the Hebrew root עָרַךְ is often employed in the Bible, particularly in Leviticus, to describe the preparation of the altar for sacrificial purposes. Agnon may be responding to the mystery of the candle. Jewish mystical practice does not focus on the theurgic valence of lighting candles and its mention in *Keneset Yisra'el* is cryptic.<sup>35</sup> Agnon refashions the candle as part of a sacrifice ritual performed by the Besht in the forest. Furthermore, the life-threatening situation endangered a certain *ben yahid*, an only child. This term may hint at God's instruction to Abraham: "Take now your son, *yehidkha* (your only son), whom you love, Isaac . . . and offer him there for a burnt offering" (Gen 22:2). Here too, as father and son reach the top of the mountain, Abraham built an altar "and he laid out (*wa-ya'arokh*) the wood and he bound Isaac his son" (v. 9). When the Maggid takes the candle to the forest he lights it but he explicitly does not set a fire. This is indicative of the Maggid's inability to perform the sacrifice ritual that the Besht performed. The Maggid is a shadow of his master both as he lights the flame and as he prays. Thus the Besht invoked not only Temple sacrifice, but also the binding of Isaac. The goal

35 Cf. Buxbaum, who explained that "to properly understand . . . the Baal Shem Tov burning a candle on a tree, it must be remembered that the Baal Shem Tov was not only a theoretical but a practical kabbalist. . . . Attaching a candle to a tree branch at a specific location in the forest and praying using mystical unification meditations are practical Kabbalah." Buxbaum, *Storytelling and Spirituality*, 185. Idel suggested "that the candle is a substitute for the soul of the son. . . . The tree presumably stands for the tree of souls, while the link between the candle and the tree is accordingly an act of sympathetic magic, intended to strengthen the affinity between the son and his family." Idel, *Kabbalah*, 397 n 94. Shemesh offered a different explanation: "It would appear that in a most remarkable fashion this story contains the motif of identity between human and tree. Attaching the candle to the tree is not intended to light up the darkness, rather it symbolizes the connection between the candle—the soul ('the candle of God is the soul of man' [Prov 20:27])—and the tree, in this case the human body. The sick boy needs 'life,' and his illness is interpreted by the Besht as a situation of the soul leaving the body. To this end, the magician understood that he needed to 'attach' the candle to the tree; that is, the candle that symbolizes the soul to the tree that symbolizes man—'For man is a tree of the field' [Deut 20:19]." Avraham Ofir Shemesh, "Hashḥatat 'eitsim be-re'i ha-yahadut: Bein mistiqah le-halakhah normativit," *Siach Sade* 1 (January 2007), <http://siach-sade.macam.ac.il/siach/archive/1/index.asp?id=trees, my translation>.

of these invocations was to provide salvation for the Isaac-like beloved only child whose life was in danger.<sup>36</sup>

At the end of the tale Agnon returns to the beginning, telling us that the story has a fourth stage: Israel of Rużyn was not able “even to do that,” meaning that he could not even go to the forest as his predecessor Moses Leib of Sassów had. All Israel of Rużyn could do was to tell the tale of his saintly predecessors, far from the efficacious magical location. The story concludes that this too brought about salvation.<sup>37</sup>

Robert Alter read the Agnon story with scant optimism. Comparing three writers—Agnon, Franz Kafka (1883–1924), and Walter Benjamin (1892–1940)—Alter opined that the writer is “left to tell stories when what is urgently needed is the secret path, the holy fire, the divine words,” adding that Benjamin “understood in all its ramifications the condition of being bereft of fire in the trackless dark of this world.”<sup>38</sup> It is my contention that Agnon retold the tale in a different tone. Being bereft of fire did not mean that salvation could not be attained; indeed the story itself could be the beacon of light in what Alter termed “the trackless dark of this world.” While the *Keneset Yiśra’el* version tells the story of the decline of mysticism and its concomitant search for mysticism-substitutes, Agnon offered a narrative that brought one of those mysticism-substitutes into sharp relief: storytelling and the power of the tale.

Despite the alterations to the tale, Agnon’s narrative is true to Hasidic lore both in its repositioning of Israel of Rużyn as the hero of storytelling and in its assertion of the effectiveness of retelling a story of the Besht’s miracle-working. In a publication that appeared a year later in 1961, Agnon himself juxtaposed the tale with another statement attributed to Israel of Rużyn:

Rabbi Israel of Rużyn said: When the early *tsaddiqim* needed to benefit the world they would do so through Torah and prayer, for the world was in a state of “greatness.” Alas, now that the world is in a state of “smallness,”

36 Idel commented that in Agnon’s version, “the fire in the woods is hardly understandable.” Idel, *Kabbalah*, 397n94. I have attempted to address this aspect of the story. For another approach to the fire based on literary comparisons, see Dov Sadan, *‘Al S. Y. Agnon*, rev. ed. ([Tel Aviv]: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1978), 117–118.

37 Sadan concluded his analysis of this story and other tales of this genre by declaring: “This is the power of the story: The ability to make the end like the beginning.” Sadan, *Agnon*, 118, my translation. Sadan reached this conclusion by comparing various writings of Agnon with other writers who wrote about the decline of generations. Sadan, *Agnon*, 112–118.

38 Robert Alter, *Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and Modern Historical Crisis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1977), 61.

when the *tsaddiq* needs to benefit the world he does so only through telling stories and ordinary conversation.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, the efficacy of retelling a Besht tale was recognized in other Hasidic circles. In 1910 Abraham Ḥayim Simḥa Bunim Mikhelsohn published a short work about the first two leaders of the Belz Hasidic dynasty, the founder Rabbi Shalom Rokeaḥ (1779–1855) and his son and successor Rabbi Joshua (1825–1894). The work included a story about how the Besht instructed one of his disciples that hemorrhaging after circumcision could be stemmed by treating the wound with ground-up frog ashes. The disciple later effectively employed this remedy. When Joshua of Belz was faced with a similar scenario in autumn, he knew he would not be able to find a frog at that time of year; instead, he successfully stemmed the hemorrhage by telling the story of the Besht incident.<sup>40</sup>

To be sure, the Belz ethos is far removed from Rużyn. This is true in general of the two Hasidic circles and specifically of the two tales under discussion. The Belz tale focused on the Besht's knowledge of folk medicine; the Rużyn tradition acknowledged the Besht's theurgic capabilities. In the Belz story it was only the season of the year that prevented Joshua of Belz from procuring the necessary frog; had it not been autumn, Joshua of Belz presumably would have burned a frog and pulverized the ashes in order to stem the bleeding.

39 S. Y. Agnon, *Sifreihem shel tsaddiqim: Me'ah sippurim va-'ehad* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1961), 48; idem, *Sefer sofer ve-sippur*, 438, my translation. As Agnon indicated, this tradition is drawn from Ḥayim Abraham Deitchman, *Shemu'ot tovot razin de-oraita* (Czernowitz: Wohl, 1885; expanded edition, Warsaw: Alafin, 1890), 25. The original source continues with the tale of a Jew who came to Rużyn after his *arenda* (lease) was terminated. Israel of Rużyn "told him a number of tales about other matters and when he finished the tales the lessee asked him: 'With what shall I return to my home?'" Israel of Rużyn responded: "Travel home in peace for I have already benefited you." The implication is that the stories told by Israel of Rużyn miraculously remedied the situation. See also *Irin qaddishin*, 400; Nigal, *Ha-sipporet ha-ḥasidit*, 23–24 (n. 52 lists other Hasidic works that cite this tradition); Assaf, *The Regal Way*, 90; Goldberg, "Ha-sippur ha-ḥasidi," 164. For further examples from the Rużyn corpus, see *Irin qaddishin*, 40–41, 122–123, 366, 545, 613–616; Goldberg, "Ha-sippur ha-ḥasidi," 193–199. Regarding the work *Sifreihem shel tsaddiqim*, see Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal*, 60–62.

40 Abraham Ḥayim Simḥa Bunim Mikhelsohn, *Dover shalom ve-ohel Yehoshu'a* (Przemyśl: Amkroiyt & Fraynd, 1910), 172–173, section 6. The story also appeared in Yiddish: *Dover sholem* (Przemyśl: S. Fraynd, [192-?]), 49–50, section 82; *Dover shalom 'admorei B'elz* (Jerusalem: Hershkowitz, [1954]), 84–87, section 82. The story was reworked into Modern Hebrew prose and embellished in the Belz-sponsored weekly *Ha-maḥane ha-ḥaredi* and then reprinted in a Belz publication, *Qovets ma'amarim, sihot ve-sippurim* (Jerusalem: 'Or ha-tsafun, 1987), 147–149.

In contrast, Israel of Ružyn was at a loss; he did not have the power to act as his predecessors had acted. Nevertheless, the two stories intersect: retelling a story of the Besht’s miraculous escapades can have miraculous consequences. Agnon—ever the storyteller—picked up on the storytelling element in the original, and then emphasized and embellished that aspect.

Agnon’s use of the Hasidic tale is ironic, in light of his comments on the occasion of Buber’s eightieth birthday. Agnon offered a critique of those who employed Hasidic tales for their own literary goals:

Since I have touched upon [Hasidic] tales, I will say something about them. Any [story] that has a source—read the source and discard the literary reworking. And any [story] that does not have a source—if it was created by a poet, it should be treated as words of poetry; [if] it was created by a nondescript writer, take your eye from it—because of the lack of ability of the writer to create a story, he has credited it as belonging to Hasidim or folk tales.<sup>41</sup>

While the story under discussion here had a source, as we have seen, we would be remiss to follow Agnon’s advice and discard Agnon’s own rich literary reworking.<sup>42</sup>

Agnon’s addition was in a sense autobiographical. Far from his native Buczacz in the heartland of Hasidism, Agnon could not tell the stories of the *shtetl* where they happened.<sup>43</sup> Sitting in Jerusalem he did not have the power to go to that very forest, to stand by that very tree, as Moses Leib of Sassów had

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41 S. Y. Agnon, *Me-‘atsmi ‘el ‘atsmi* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1976), 262, my translation. The occasion did not prevent Agnon from critiquing Buber’s approach to Hasidic story retelling.

42 At the end of an earlier work, Agnon offered an “Apology” where, *inter alia*, he acknowledged the difficulties of retelling Hasidic tales. Agnon noted: “But I rely on individuals who will discern between my stories and those that any hand transcribes.” S. Y. Agnon, *Ha-‘esh ve-ha-‘eitsim* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1962), 366, my translation. I follow here Mark who noticed this irony in his study of another Hasidic tale that Agnon adapted. Mark accepted Agnon’s challenge to identify the differences between the tale that Agnon retold and other literary reworkings. Mark, “Ma bein,” 210. See also Mark’s concluding sentence: “Agnon attempts to create a continuum of literary tradition and conceptual tradition from the Hasidic and venerating prose to his stories, and thus he establishes the revolution that he is creating as a further link in the Jewish tradition.” Mark, “Ma bein,” 225, my translation.

43 In 1908 Agnon left his native Buczacz, Galicia (today Бучач, Ukraine), and immigrated to Jaffa. In 1913 he moved to Germany, living first in Berlin and from 1921 in Bad Homburg vor der Höhe. After a fire in his home destroyed his writings and extensive library, Agnon

done. Like Israel of Ružyn, Agnon was consigned to just telling the story. In this vein, Agnon called the tale “A Story of Salvation” (Sippur shel yeshu’ah); in the final act it is the retelling of the story far from where it happened that provides the miraculous salvation.<sup>44</sup>

For Agnon the story is the story of a story. The emphasis on the power of the story is eminently appropriate for Agnon’s forum—a work about stories—and is a masterful revision of the original tale by a literary genius. Indeed Buczacz of old and life in the cradle of Hasidism were gone; Agnon’s lot was to tell the tales of a distant land and of a distant reality, and to hope that the stories would bring salvation.<sup>45</sup>

### Tell the Story and God Will Assist

Ten days after Agnon first published the story it was printed again in the *Haaretz* newspaper. Agnon reproduced the same text but added that he had identified an antecedent of the Hasidic story in a midrash, which he included with the story.<sup>46</sup>

The midrash offers a tale of four kings of the house of David who had been victorious in battle thanks to God. The first was King David himself, who pursued and overcame the Amalekite enemy thanks to God’s assistance. Later King Asa was aware that he could not overcome Zerah king of Kush, but relying on God he went out to chase his foe and God struck down the enemy. King Jehoshaphat knew that he had not the power to overcome the enemy, nor even to chase them. All he could do was to sing the Almighty’s praises and God took

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returned to Jerusalem and settled in the neighborhood of Talpiyot, where he lived until the end of his life.

44 The Hebrew title may have a double meaning: a story about salvation and a story that brings salvation.

45 See also Urban, “Jewish Library Reconfigured,” 52–54; idem, *Aesthetics of Renewal*, 60–61.

46 S. Y. Agnon, “‘Al sippur mi-sippurei ha-ḥasidim,” *Haaretz*, June 10, 1960, 10. The midrash appears in a number of compilations with slight variations (*’Eikha rabbah*, *petihta* 30; *’Eikha rabbah* 4:15; *Midrash tehillim* 79; *Yalqut Shim’oni*, 2 Sam, section 163. Agnon quoted the version from *Yalqut Shim’oni*). On this trend in Agnon’s work, see Urban, “Jewish Library Reconfigured,” 53 and the sources cited in n. 92; idem, *Aesthetics of Renewal*, 60. As Urban noted, Agnon’s attempts to anchor Hasidic tales in earlier textual sources can be contrasted with Buber’s presentation of Hasidic tales without reference to earlier texts. Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal*, 12, 61. Elstein picked up from Agnon the idea of a midrashic source for the four-part structure, and this led him to imply that versions presenting four stages were more authentic. Elstein, “Ha-sippur ha-ḥasidi,” 36.

care of the enemy. The fourth monarch, King Hezekiah, could not even sing the Almighty’s praises; all he could do was rely on God and indeed God defeated Sennacherib.

The midrash lacks any reference to the power of storytelling and at first blush it is not entirely clear why Agnon identified the tale of the four kings with the Hasidic tale. Did he perceive a thematic link between the texts, or was it merely the parallel four-part structure that caught Agnon’s eye? It seems to me that by reprinting his story along with the midrash, Agnon was foregrounding a different theme in the Hasidic tale, a theme other than Israel of Ružyn and his storytelling dexterity. Agnon may have been suggesting that behind salvation—whether it comes in the form of cures for the sick or victories in battle—is the real hero: God.

To be sure, the element of faith in God was already present in Agnon’s original presentation of the tale. But his juxtaposition of the midrash with the Hasidic tale draws the reader’s attention to the theme of faith, transforming how the story is read. In effect, within a mere ten days, and without changing a word, Agnon told the same tale in two different ways: first as a story about storytelling, then as a story about faith.

In Agnon’s retelling of the story, is the midrashic source central to the tale or merely an addendum? It can be said with certainty that for Agnon, this midrash *became* integral to the narrative, for following its second publication in *Haaretz* the original Hasidic tale always appeared in Agnon’s writings with the accompanying midrash.<sup>47</sup>

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47 This is true for the three times the story appeared in Agnon’s printed works, once in his lifetime and twice posthumously:

- (1) A year after the articles first appeared in *Haaretz*, Schocken Publishing House printed the original two-part series under the title *Sifreihem shel tsaddiqim: Me’ah sippurim va-ehad* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1961). This work included the tale *Sippur shel yeshu’ah* on pp. 48–49, as well as the midrash.
- (2) The second *Haaretz* article containing the suggested midrashic source was printed posthumously in a compilation of Agnon’s letters and essays: Agnon, *Me-atsmi ’el atsmi*, 388–389.
- (3) In 1978, the grand work that Agnon had repeatedly referred to—*Sefer sofer ve-sippur: Sippurim ’al sefarim ve-’al soferim*—was published. The story appeared on p. 439 and the midrash followed immediately on pp. 439–440. An earlier version of this work was published in Jerusalem 1938 under the same title, in honor of Solomon Schocken’s sixtieth birthday. The early version was incomplete and did not include the tale under discussion here. The National Library of Israel holds a number of copies of this edition, one of which contains Agnon’s dedication to

The theme that is brought into relief as a result of Agnon's coupling his own story with the midrash of the four kings was voiced lucidly by contemporary storyteller Yitzhak Buxbaum, albeit without reference to Agnon or to the midrash. Buxbaum recounted the tale, first in his book *Storytelling and Spirituality in Judaism* (1994), then again on his website, and more recently in his work *The Light and Fire of the Baal Shem Tov* (2005). Buxbaum returned to the *Keneset Yiśra'el* original, offering a translation rather than an adaptation. Israel of Rużyn appears as the narrator and the story is retold in Buxbaum's first book in the context of Israel of Rużyn's emphasis on storytelling as a spiritual pursuit. Buxbaum often suggests how to use Hasidic tales as educational tools, and as is his wont, he followed the story with a suggested lesson that can be derived from the tale. It is this aspect of Buxbaum's presentation that stands out:

The repeated "with God's help" in this tale indicates why storytelling by itself can be effective. Because what ultimately causes a miracle is not esoteric, mystical knowledge of Kabbalah (such as the candle and other mystical actions and meditations), but simple—though total—faith and trust in God's help. Storytelling that saves is like a prayer saying: "God, I know that You've performed this miracle before in the past and I believe, with perfect faith, that You can perform it again now!"<sup>48</sup>

While this is far from the reading of the *Keneset Yiśra'el* version I suggested, it can hardly be discounted for indeed God is mentioned three times in the original tale.

Buxbaum opted for the original story in three acts, but as Agnon did in his original rendition he focused on the efficacy of storytelling. On his website Buxbaum entitled the tale "Stories Save," echoing Agnon's title, and in his 2005 book the tale appears under the heading "Stories of the Besht Save." A slight difference of emphasis nevertheless emerges: Agnon originally focused on the power encapsulated in the telling of the story, whereas Buxbaum explained that the power lay in the lesson drawn from the story—a lesson about faith in God. All deeds, even storytelling, are secondary to pure trust in God.

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Scholem and his handwritten additions (National Library of Israel, Scholem Reading Room, R18103).

48 Yitzhak Buxbaum, "Storytelling and Spirituality in Judaism," March 10, 2003, [www.hasidicstories.com/Articles/Hasidic\\_Theories/spirit.html](http://www.hasidicstories.com/Articles/Hasidic_Theories/spirit.html); idem, *Storytelling and Spirituality*, 183; idem, *The Light and Fire of the Baal Shem Tov* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 4. I have quoted from the online version; the printed text of this passage differs slightly.

### All We are Able to Do is Tell the Story

In 1938 the great scholar of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) delivered a seminal series of lectures at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. These lectures were published in Jerusalem 1941 in his monumental *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, a volume that remains a classic.<sup>49</sup> The final lecture was entitled “Hasidism: The Latest Phase,” and Scholem concluded the lecture by relating the story as he had “heard it told by the great Hebrew novelist and storyteller S. J. Agnon”:

When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire, and meditate in prayer—and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the “Maggid” of Meseritz was faced with the same task, he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers—and what he wanted became a reality. Again, a generation later, Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light the fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs—and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his gold chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And, the storyteller adds, the story he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three.<sup>50</sup>

Scholem received this version from Agnon, though it differs from Agnon’s published tale described above. I will refer to this recension as the Scholem

49 “Possibly Scholem’s most important if not his most influential book.” Daniel Abrams, “Presenting and Representing Gershom Scholem: A Review Essay,” *Modern Judaism* 20 (2000): 238.

50 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 349–350. According to Scholem, all the published lectures were printed in an enlarged form, except for the final chapter—the chapter relevant to our study—which appears “almost in the original form.” Scholem, *Major Trends*, preface. This chapter was translated into Hebrew by Tsivia Nardi and published in *Peraqim be-torat ha-ḥasidut u-ve-toldoteha*, ed. Avraham Rubinstein (Jerusalem: Shazar, 1977), 31–51. The Hebrew translation was recently reprinted with corrections and without the footnotes in a collection of Scholem’s studies on Hasidism: *Ha-shlav ha-’aharon*, ed. David Assaf and Esther Liebes (Jerusalem: Am Oved and Magnes, 2008), 1–22.

version because he is the one who shared it with us; because we have no way of knowing what, if any, embellishments should be credited to Scholem; and most importantly, because Scholem preferred this version over Zak's 1906 version, as we shall presently see.

The Scholem version has a number of subtle changes, some of them striking. Scholem includes the fourth stage—apparently introduced by Agnon—but begins where the original *Keneset Yiśra'el* version begins, not where Agnon began. The Besht is said to “meditate in prayer,” as opposed to the Maggid who is merely able to “speak the prayers,” indicating Scholem's sensitivity to the different mystical capabilities of the two masters.

Scholem's version is missing two central personalities, one whose absence is significant and one whose lack of significance precipitates his absence. Scholem has the Besht faced with “a difficult task.” There is no mention of the beloved boy who is in a life-threatening situation. We have seen that the boy is not the focus of the tale, and indeed in the *Keneset Yiśra'el* version the tale of his plight is curtailed with a nondescript “etc.” Going one step further, Scholem eliminates the boy entirely.

The absence of God from the tale, however, is more conspicuous. Previous versions attributed the salvation to the Almighty, while for Scholem theurgic practices bring about the change in destiny.<sup>51</sup> On this point, Scholem's version is best contrasted with Buxbaum. While Scholem excised any explicit mention of God, Buxbaum not only brought God back into the tale but declared that God is the hero of the story. Thus, concluded Buxbaum, it is God who is and always has been the source of salvation, not mystical practices.

The candle is also conspicuous by its absence from the Scholem version. While a fire is lit, no mention is made of the candle. Perhaps for the great scholar of Kabbalah, mentioning the candle—an object that is not central in Jewish mystical rituals—was anathema. A different possibility is that Scholem recalled that it was only fire, not a candle, that featured in the original Besht-in-the-forest narrative.<sup>52</sup>

In the fourth stage of Agnon's version, Israel of Rużyn is presumably sitting at home. Scholem went further, describing Israel of Rużyn as sitting in “his gold chair in his castle,” an image that is not hard to conjure up for those familiar with the colorful biography of the regal Israel of Rużyn. This addition ever so slightly alters the tale: for Agnon, Israel of Rużyn remained at home

51 See also Boaz Huss, “Ask No Questions: Gershom Scholem and the Study of Contemporary Jewish Mysticism,” *Modern Judaism* 25, no. 2 (2005): 144.

52 Recounted above, near n. 7.

apparently because he didn't know where the forest was; for Scholem, Israel of Rużyn chose to remain at home because he was comfortable.

Scholem knew about Zak's earlier version of the tale. In his footnotes Scholem could not cite Agnon's version, since it had not yet been published; hence, Scholem referenced *Keneset Yiśra'el*, noting that “the core of this story is to be found already in a Hasidic collection on Rabbi Israel of Rishin.”<sup>53</sup> Scholem's choice to retell the version he heard from Agnon was therefore premeditated and intentional. Why did Scholem quote Agnon and not the earlier Hasidic rendition? The *Keneset Yiśra'el* original would have reinforced Scholem's account of Hasidism's atrophy since the early nineteenth century. In this vein, Scholem introduced the tale thus: “Perhaps I may also be permitted to close these lectures by telling you a story of which the subject, if you like, is the very history of Hasidism itself.” Scholem concluded his lecture by telling his audience what he believed could be drawn from the story: “You can say if you will that this profound little anecdote symbolizes the decay of a great movement.” Indeed the story symbolized decay; yet that was already apparent from the *Keneset Yiśra'el* version.<sup>54</sup> Scholem chose to relate a different version in order to highlight a further aspect:

You can also say that it reflects the transformation of all its values, a transformation so profound that in the end all that remained of the mystery was the tale. That is the position in which we find ourselves today, or in which Jewish mysticism finds itself. The story is not ended, it has not yet become history, and the secret life it holds can break out tomorrow in you or in me.<sup>55</sup> Under what aspects this invisible stream of Jewish mysticism will again come to the surface we cannot tell. But I have come here to speak to you of the main tendencies of Jewish mysticism as we know them. To speak of the mystical course which, in the great cataclysm now stirring the Jewish people more deeply than in the entire history of Exile, destiny may still have in store for us—and I for one believe that there is such a course—is the task of prophets, not professors.

53 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 424n36.

54 Assaf emphasized this aspect: “[Scholem] interprets the story as symbolic of the decline of Hasidism and the transformation of all its values, whereby ‘in the end all that remained of the mystery was the tale.’” Assaf, *The Regal Way*, 408n17. I am suggesting that Zak's version sufficed for this message; Scholem's preference for the Agnon version indicates that he was communicating more than the decline of mysticism.

55 Regarding the phrase “in you or in me,” see Huss, “Ask No Questions,” 152n17.

Scholem chose the Agnon version for it provided a better finale for his lectures: all academics can do is to tell the story of Jewish mysticism. This version brought into focus an element of Scholem's work and its limits; in his own words, "To speak of the mystical course . . . is the task of prophets, not professors." Professor Scholem could sit in his golden chair—or his ivory tower—and tell the story; that was his lot. Nine lectures and indeed a lifetime dedicated to the study of Jewish mysticism, and yet Scholem acknowledged that his destiny was merely to tell the story. Pinning the tale on the great Hasidic storyteller Israel of Rużyn, retelling the story in the name of a great contemporary storyteller, and pronouncing the words "but *we* can tell the story of how it was done"—all of these choices served to reinforce Scholem's sobering message that his province was that of the storyteller of mysticism.

As scholars have noted, Scholem's depiction of the decline of mysticism and his vision of a rebirth echoed Buber.<sup>56</sup> Scholem, however, went further when he acknowledged the mystical adroitness of the late chief rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook (1865–1935), describing his *'Orot ha-qodesh*, which was published posthumously in Jerusalem 1938, as "the last example of productive Kabbalistic thought of which I know."<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Scholem concluded his lectures with the belief that Jewish mysticism had yet to run its course and that

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56 Buber considered Naḥman of Braclaw as "perhaps the last Jewish mystic" and saw Hasidism as "the last and highest development of Jewish mysticism." Nevertheless, he opined: "It is not given to us to know whether a resurrection will be granted it. But the inner destiny of Judaism seems to me to depend on whether—no matter if in this shape or another—its pathos will again become deed." Buber, *Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, 3, 10, 34. See also Ron Margolin, *The Human Temple: Religious Interiorization and the Structuring of Inner Life in Early Hasidism* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005), 8; Huss, "Martin Buber's Introduction," 2n16, 3.

57 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 354n17; see also p. 18. For more on Scholem's thoughts on the possibility of the next phase of Jewish mysticism, see Gershom Scholem, "Krakowski, L. I., *Kabbalah—The Light of Redemption* (Book Review)," *Jewish Social Studies* 15 (1953): 312; idem, "Hirhurim 'al 'efsharut shel mistiqah yehudit be-yameinu," *'Amot* 8 (October–November 1963): 11–19 = idem, *Explications and Implications*, 71–83; idem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 85; idem, *Mi-Berlin li-Yrushalayim* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982), 203–204, 206 (as Scholem noted in the introduction, the Hebrew edition was more detailed than the original German *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, or its English translation *From Berlin to Jerusalem*). See also Abrams, "Presenting and Representing Gershom Scholem," 23; Yoni Garb, "Teḥiyatah shel ha-mistiqaḥ be-yameinu: Muzarah 'o muvenet?," in *Jewish Culture in the Eye of the Storm: A Jubilee Book in honor of Yosef Ahituv*, ed. A. Sagi and N. Ilan (Ein Zurim: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Press and Yaakov Herzog Center, 2002), 175; idem, *Yehidei ha-segulot yihiyu le-'adarim: Mehqarim be-kabbalat ha-me'ah ha-'esrim* (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2005); Huss, "Ask No Questions," 141–148, 155–156nn37, 38.

“destiny may still have in store for us” the next phase of the mystical course.<sup>58</sup> Alas, all the professor could do was to tell the story—even of contemporary mysticism and of a vision of future mysticism—and tell it well he did, with more dexterity than his contemporaries.

### We No Longer Believe the Story

The story appeared again in the writings of Walter Kaufmann (1921–1980), the German-American philosopher, translator, and poet. In 1958 Kaufmann published his *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* and included the story when discussing Jewish and Christian faith in the face of what he termed the awakening of the Socratic conscience—that is, critical, scientific thinking.

Kaufmann summarized the provenance of the tale, acknowledging that it “has come down to us in several versions.” He appreciated Buber’s existentialism, and perhaps because of this connection he mentioned Buber’s German account of the story as “one of the variants” and then went on to retell the Scholem version. The different recensions of the story and the knowledge that subsequent interpreters had added a fourth act to the story may have given Kaufmann the license to add a fifth, namely what he envisaged the next generation said:

The fire we cannot light, the prayer we do not know, and the place we do not know. We can still tell the story, but we do not believe it. Indeed, a little research might recover the prayer and determine the place, but we do not think that knowing both would help. We do not think it ever did help. It is a beautiful story, full of significance, but it is only a story.<sup>59</sup>

Kaufmann continued: “And a yet later generation might add for good measure that the story illustrates the nature of Jewish piety as opposed to Christian piety.” At this point, the story enters the realm of interfaith polemics, far from its original home.

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58 For the resurfacing of Jewish mystical practices in ways that Scholem surely did not anticipate, see Boaz Huss, “All You Need Is LAV: Madonna and Postmodern Kabbalah,” *JQR* 95 (2005): 611–624; idem, “Admiration and Disgust: The Ambivalent Re-Canonization of the *Zohar* in the Modern Period,” *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006), 235–236.

59 Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper, 1958), 202, section 65.

For Kaufmann critical thinking was a liberating and empowering force, though once the world of critical thought is entered, Kaufmann opined that “we cannot return to the precritical state of mind without becoming dishonest,” without becoming “little children.” The story—aesthetically beautiful as it may be—was nearing the end of its life. Kaufmann’s conclusion, which hints at an academic critique of the story itself, is a death knell.<sup>60</sup>

### God Loves Stories, but They No Longer Help

While Kaufmann had suggested that the tale was in its last throes, another writer would soon pronounce its death. In 1964, Elie Wiesel (b. 1928) published his *Les portes de la forêt*, which appeared in English two years later under the title *The Gates of the Forest*, and a year after that in Hebrew. At the front of the book, on the first four leaves before the first chapter, Wiesel told the tale as a prologue, appending to the story one line that appears as a postscript on its own page: “God made man because he loves stories.”<sup>61</sup> This addition echoes Agnon’s focus on storytelling, and has been used by many modern storytellers.<sup>62</sup> Eight

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60 Canadian storyteller Dan Yashinsky appended a different bleak stage to the story (after citing Buber’s version): “Time passed, and generation followed generation. The world entered a time of forgetfulness, a time when the link to the past was broken and the future seemed unreal. The child’s cry for help was impossible to hear in that violent, amnesiac world. Yet some people heard it, and wanted more than anything to offer succour to that sick and frightened soul. But they did not know what to do. They hadn’t heard of the Baal Shem’s prayer, or the forest, the tree, the trail, the candle of purest wax. They didn’t even remember how to pray. Everything had been lost.” Unlike Kaufman, Yashinsky added a glimmer of optimism: “The only thing that remained was a distant memory of a good man who had once upon a time told stories to comfort a lonely child. And so they tried to become storytellers.” Dan Yashinsky, *Suddenly They Heard Footsteps: Storytelling for the Twenty-first Century* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 14. For more on twenty-first-century renditions of the tale, see below.

61 Élie Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964); *The Gates of the Forest*, trans. Frances Frenaye (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966); *Sha’arei ha-ya’ar*, trans. Yaakov Hason (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1967).

62 Steve Zeitlin, ed., *Because God Loves Stories: An Anthology of Jewish Storytelling* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 297. At the front of the book before the acknowledgments, Zeitlin wrote “Why were human beings created? Because God loves stories” and identified the quote as a “Traditional Jewish Saying adapted from Elie Wiesel.” See also Norma J. Livo and Sandra A. Rietz, *Storytelling: Process and Practice* (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1986), 1, where the line “That is really the reason God made human beings—because He loves to listen to stories” carries the attribution “traditional Hasidic story.” Zeitlin did not

years later, Wiesel printed his version of the story with minor changes in his *Célébration hassidique: Portraits et légendes* (1972). This book was immediately translated into English by Wiesel’s wife, Marion, and published under the title *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters*. The book was further translated into a host of other languages including Dutch (1972), Spanish (1973), German (1974), Swedish (1978), Italian (1987), and more recently Romanian (2001) and Hebrew (2004).<sup>63</sup> In this work, Wiesel wove Hasidic stories together with his own memories, insights, lingering thoughts, and vignettes.

Like Agnon, Wiesel offered a four-act version of the tale, but the mystical components were largely neutralized. Wiesel’s rendition of the tale in *Célébration hassidique* stands out because of a comment that he appended to the story, a short paragraph that replaces the note about God’s love for stories and provides a new conclusion. This new conclusion follows the most significant change Wiesel made to the storyline in his first rendition (and then again in the second rendition). Wiesel offered a new explanation of what precipitated the Besht’s journey to the forest: “When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews.” Gone is the boy and in his place Wiesel has inserted a “misfortune” that threatens the entire Jewish people. In the second act, the Maggid would have occasion “for the same reason” to turn to Heaven; later Moses Leib of Sassów would try “to save his people once more,” and finally Israel of Rużyn would try “to overcome misfortune,” presumably of a similar magnitude. Consecutive generations were able to avert the misfortune:

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include Wiesel’s version in this anthology; he just used the punch line. Zeitlin did, however, include a version in a later work (see below, n. 70). Wiesel’s version has been widely quoted in English literature. See also below, near n. 72.

63 Élie Wiesel, *Célébration hassidique: Portraits et légendes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), 173; English translation, *Souls On Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Summit Books, 1972), 167–168. Translations into other languages: Dutch, *Vuur in de duisternis: Chassidische portretten en legenden* (Bilthoven: Amboboeken, 1972); Spanish, *Retratos y leyendas jasídicos*, trans. Amalia Castro and Alberto Manguel (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1973); German, *Chassidische Feier*, trans. Margarete Venjakob (Vienna: Europaverlag, 1974); Swedish, *Porträtt och legender: Om chassidismen*, trans. Kerstin Hallén (Stockholm: Forum, 1978); Italian, *Celebrazione hassidica*, ed. Angela Musso, trans. Aldo Miani (Milan: Spirali, 1987); Romanian, *Celebrare hasidică: Portrete și legende*, trans. Alexandru and Magdalena Boiangiu (Bucharest: Editura Hasefer, 2001); Hebrew, *Be-lahat ha-neshamah: Deyuqanot va-’aggadot hasidim*, trans. Michal Zukerman (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2004). The translation into Romanian may have been connected to Wiesel’s work in leading a commission organized by the Romanian government to research the history of the Holocaust in Romania and the involvement of the Romanian wartime regime in perpetrating atrocities against Jews, Roma, and other groups. The report of the commission was released in 2004.

miracles were wrought and the actions of the righteous were sufficient to stave off the threat—that is, until now:

It no longer is [sufficient]. The proof is that the threat has not been averted. Perhaps we are no longer able to tell the story. Could all of us be guilty? Even the survivors? Especially the survivors?

This chilling conclusion is recounted by Elie Wiesel the Holocaust survivor, grappling with the tragedy that he witnessed and experienced. The lone beloved boy is really the entire Jewish people, and the life-threatening situation has been realized in all its catastrophic force. The bitter experience of the Holocaust has taught that the efficacy of the story is no more, or perhaps we have just lost the ability to tell it. God may have made humans “because He loves stories,” but God no longer seems interested in hearing those stories. Either way, the story no longer helps, states the great storyteller of the Holocaust era.

### Tell the Story!

Another famous Holocaust survivor and writer, Abba Kovner (1918–1987), also retold the story in a short address in the 1980s. Kovner’s address focused on the place of the Holocaust in the historical consciousness of Jewish generations everywhere.<sup>64</sup> Kovner announced: “We found, in the notebook of the author Shmuel Yosef Agnon, a version of an old hassidic tale.”<sup>65</sup> While the version he retold was Scholem’s recension, with slightly more color added, Kovner told the story in an entirely different context, far removed from Scholem’s ivory tower.

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64 This address was first published in Hebrew in *Yalkut moreshet* 50 (April 1991): 13–16. Details of the address are not given, though from the content it is apparent that the address was delivered after 1981. The address was translated into English by Yehuda Bauer and printed in “From Generation to Generation,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 8 (1994): 107–113. Alas, the English translation identifies the hero’s town as Radzyn and in the notes states that he succeeded his father as rabbi of the town. The Hasidic master under discussion is associated with the town Ружин (Ruzhyn), today in northern Ukraine, which was called Ružyn when under Polish rule; he is not associated with either of the two Polish towns that carry the name Radzyń: Radzyń Chełmiński (today in north-central Poland) or Radzyń Podlask (today in eastern Poland). Israel’s father was Rabbi Shalom Shakhne of Prohobisht (1769–1827).

65 Kovner, “From Generation to Generation,” 109–110.

In Kovner's retelling, subsequent generations of Hasidic leaders asked themselves how they could help avert disaster. Each master acknowledged that in comparison to his predecessor his power had diminished. At the same time each master did what he could to intercede after a moment of contemplation and self-examination.

Forty years after the Holocaust, Kovner saw—and feared—that those telling the story, the survivor-witnesses, were disappearing:

Those who can come to meetings and lift their sleeves... are getting fewer and fewer. And the memories of those who are left are getting dimmer. Another generation, and there will no longer be among us those who know the way into the forest, who remember the place where these things happened and it is doubtful whether there will be anyone who will testify as to the purposes and directions of their prayers.

For Kovner the forest had added significance, as it was he who had commanded a detachment of the Farainikte Partisaner-Organizatsiye (FPO, the United Partisans Organization) in the Rudniki forests after the Nazis liquidated the Vilna ghetto:

I also had a forest there... At the end of the great swamp in the partisan's forest I knew of an old tree under whose branches I used to sit sometimes, in summer and in winter. There I used to come, secretly, to sit for awhile, alone, removed from the fighter's encampment, close my eyes and pray silently.<sup>66</sup>

Years later when Kovner's son asked his father to take him back to Vilna to show him the places of his youth, the father responded harshly: "No such place exists anymore!" Even that forest and that tree were no longer accessible to Kovner:

I can no longer walk that path to the trunk of the old tree, and I no longer remember the contents of those hidden prayers in the winter of 1943. If I could remember, I fear I would no longer have the courage, today, to express them in words. For even our genuine supplications appear to us differently after the passage of time. For we no longer can light the fires that we lit then, or stand in that unique place again. And so, before our

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66 Eventually the Soviet commissars removed him from a leadership position, considering him politically unreliable.

old prayers are completely forgotten, let us tell our children the story as it is. For that is a story that my generation knows how to tell.

Kovner's self-examination led him to the bold suggestion to suspend the historical, philosophical, and theological inquiries that he perceived as pervading Holocaust studies. Instead, the focus should be shifted to telling the story. Kovner retold the Hasidic tale and then retold a story from the Vilna ghetto. The experiences of the Shoah can never be replicated, Kovner implied, but at least the witness can retell the story. Kovner turned to the audience, his fellow survivors, calling upon them to tell the story: "Let us neither forget nor allow to be forgotten what the story is."

### All We Need to Do is Tell the Story

Contrary to the dire prognoses of the death of the tale, the story still had another life to live as it entered the hallowed realm of ritual in liberal Jewish-American circles. In this context the story would be liberated from the pessimism of Scholem, Kaufmann, and Wiesel, and the desperate call of Kovner, to become a story of comfort and hope, a narrative of openness and inclusiveness.

In 1988, Ron Wolfson published a Passover Haggadah companion. His goal was to make the Passover seder experience accessible in English to Jews who lacked a tradition for this annual ritual that is so central to Jewish life. Wolfson, a professor of education at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, has published a number of titles aimed at making Jewish ritual more accessible to the modern American Jew and his Haggadah companion is part of this project.

Before turning to the actual seder, Wolfson included much introductory material in an attempt to assist the uninitiated. The first chapter of Wolfson's book is entitled "The Art of Passover: On 'Making' *Pesah*," and he records five different modern Passover experiences. As an introduction to this section, Wolfson retells the Hasidic tale under the heading "On Recapturing the Past":

When the Baal Shem Tov had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire, and meditate in prayer. And then, he was able to perform the task.

A generation later, the Maggid of Mazrich was faced with the same task. So, he went to the same place in the woods, but he had forgotten exactly how to light the fire as the Baal Shem Tov had done. He said: "I can no longer light the fire, but I can still speak the prayers." And so he prayed as the Baal Shem Tov had prayed, and he was able to complete the task.

A generation later, Rabbi Moshe Lev had to perform the same task. He too went into the woods, but he had not only forgotten how to light the fire, he had forgotten the prayers as well. He said: “I can no longer light the fire, nor do I know the secret meditations belonging to the prayers. But, I do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs and that must be sufficient.” And sufficient it was.

But, when another generation had passed, Rabbi Israel Salanter was called upon to perform the task. He sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said: “I cannot light the fire. I cannot speak the prayers. I do not know the place in the forest. But, we can tell the story of how it was once done, and that must be sufficient.” And sufficient it was.<sup>67</sup>

Wolfson included the detail of the golden chair in the castle, indicating that he took the tale from Scholem. Indeed, Wolfson closely followed Scholem’s text: he made no mention of God, but instead of using the passive “and what he had set out to perform was done,” Wolfson wrote, “he was able to perform the task.” Where Scholem removed God from the story, Wolfson further removed esoteric mysticism surrounding the act. Wolfson’s change is understandable, given that his goal of creating an accessible Passover experience is hardly suited to a discussion of theurgic practices. Thus in Wolfson’s version, it was human action—not prayer or meditation—that saved the day, an alteration that sends a powerful, religious message of responsibility.

Another emendation in the Wolfson version, however, is jarring. The third stage is associated with “Rabbi Moshe Lev”: the name *Leib* (Yiddish: “lion”) has become *Lev* (Hebrew: “heart”) and his accepted title “of Sassów” has been excised. Wolfson’s version becomes even more disturbing when he turns to the fourth stage of the story, where Rabbi Israel *Salanter*—that is, Rabbi Israel Lipkin (1810–1883), whose epithet refers to the Lithuanian town Salantai, where he received his schooling—sits on his golden chair in his castle! This is an error that appears in both editions of Wolfson’s volume.<sup>68</sup> Israel Salanter is recognized as the father of the Mussar movement, the Jewish ethical movement that

67 Ron Wolfson (with Joel Lurie Grishaver), *The Art of Jewish Living: The Passover Seder* (New York: Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs, 1988; reprint, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publications, 1996), 24; idem, *Passover: The Family Guide to Spiritual Celebration* (2nd ed., Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publications, 2003), 2–3. It is unclear whether Wolfson was the first to introduce this idea. Wolfson himself was doubtful as to whether he was the first, assuming that someone must have included this story previously in one of the myriad of published Haggadot (author’s correspondence with Ron Wolfson, March 8, 2010).

68 Author’s correspondence with Ron Wolfson, March 8, 2010.

developed particularly among non-Hasidic Lithuanian Jewry. It is beyond the scope of this study to offer a biography of Israel Salanter or a profile of the Mussar movement; suffice it to point out that the cultural milieu and ethical philosophy of Israel Salanter and the Mussar movement could hardly be further from the spirit of the Hasidic tale under discussion and the Hasidic lore surrounding Israel of Rużyn.<sup>69</sup>

For the reader familiar with Hasidic tradition, the names “Rabbi Moses Leib of Sassów” and even more so “Rabbi Israel of Rużyn” evoke rich images that are integral to the tale. Undoubtedly, Wolfson was not concerned with a discussion of Hasidism (or the Mussar movement, for that matter), and thus such errors could creep into his text unnoticed.<sup>70</sup> For Wolfson’s project, the particular personalities were entirely unimportant to the tale.

Despite this regrettable lack of caution, Wolfson’s use of the tale is exquisite. At the end of the tale, Wolfson added: “Passover asks us to do one simple thing: tell the story.” And then he explained:

The Seder night is our vehicle for telling this story. . . . Although we can no longer engage in the ancient sacrifices, and though we may not know the secret meditations of our ancestors, we can tell the story.

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69 On Israel Salanter, see Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993).

70 The errors are repeated in the explanation of the story where the names are mentioned again, as will be apparent below. Wolfson’s book is in its second edition. According to Wolfson, if the book should be reprinted the error will be corrected (author’s correspondence with Ron Wolfson, March 8, 2010). In another version of the tale recorded by anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1935–1985), a different alteration, somewhat less jarring, replaces Israel of Rużyn with the unknown “Rabbi Ben Levi” who “sits in his study in Chicago.” Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979; New York: Meridian Books, 1994), 112. This book grew out of Myerhoff’s 1976 ethnographic documentary film about the Jewish community in Venice, California. Myerhoff’s version of the tale is told by one of the elderly subjects of her study, who used the tale to illustrate “poor lost souls trying to get back to what they saw in others but themselves never really had.” In this vein, the story ends with the final character turning to God and saying: “So Lord, now that must be sufficient”; the reader is left wondering whether the faint memory was indeed sufficient. Incidentally, the storyteller had heard of Israel of Rużyn, for he mentioned the Hasidic master only a few sentences earlier. The version recorded by Myerhoff appeared again in Nina Jaffe and Steve Zeitlin, *While Standing on One Foot: Puzzle Stories and Wisdom Tales from the Jewish Tradition*, illus. John Segal (New York: Henry Holt, 1993); author’s correspondence with Steve Zeitlin, March 23, 2010.

Wolfson took the depressing story that Scholem related and filled that very tale with hope for all: everyone can take part in the endeavor, no matter how faint the memory of tradition may be, for all we have to do is “one simple thing.” Wolfson went further, relating each of the four stages of the tale to degrees of Jewish assimilation:

For some, Passover was a ritual performed by grandparents and, like the *Maggid* of Mazrich, we no longer remember how to “light the fire,” how to perform most of the ritual choreography—sometimes not even the most basic steps. For others, the words of the *Haggadah* are no longer fluent to us. Like Rabbi Moshe Lev, we know the place to go, but the words have failed us. And certainly, there are those of us who cannot perform the ceremony, do not know the words, and have even forgotten the Seder’s meaning—except as an important family meeting time. Like Rabbi Israel Salanter, we try to tell the story in whatever way we can.

Befitting the goal of his book, Wolfson frames the Passover seder in the most accessible terms: on this night all participants are asked to do is to tell the story. Perhaps Wolfson’s incorrect identification of the hero of the Hasidic tale serves to demonstrate his point with sharper resolution: even the details of the story are not prescribed, as long as *a* story is told, for “we try to tell the story in whatever way we can.”

The critical reader is left to ponder the limits of Wolfson’s exhortation: To what extent can details of the story be changed while still telling the same story? While Wolfson encouraged his readers “to tell the story in whatever way we can,” should some tales be beyond the Passover pale? To illustrate the point: while Wolfson might look with favor on a *Freedom Seder*<sup>71</sup> or endorse

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71 In February 1969, a new version of the Passover Haggadah was compiled by Arthur Waskow (b. 1933) and published by *Ramparts*, an American political and literary magazine that appeared from 1962 until 1975, where Waskow served as a contributing editor. Waskow is associated with the Jewish Renewal movement and is a political activist and author. Waskow’s Haggadah was the first widely circulated Haggadah to celebrate the liberation of other peoples as well as the exodus of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery. It was used in what was termed a “Freedom Seder” that was held in the basement of an African-American church in Washington, DC, on the third night of Passover, April 4, 1969, the first anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King. According to Waskow, eight hundred people took part in the event; half were Jews and the remainder African-Americans and white Christians. Waskow’s original 1969 *Freedom Seder* can be found at the website of The Shalom Center ([www.theshalomcenter.org](http://www.theshalomcenter.org)), an organization he founded in 1983 to confront the threat of nuclear war from a Jewish perspective. Since the end of the Cold

the depiction of the Exodus in the animated musical film *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), I imagine that he would not encourage recounting “The Frog Prince” of the Brothers Grimm as part of a Passover rite. The accidental replacement of Israel of Ruzyn with Israel Salanter, while not a major alteration of the theme of the story, changes the tale in a way that is scarcely acceptable to one familiar with Hasidism. Perhaps it is the fate of well-loved, oft-retold stories to suffer rough handling on occasion.

The introduction of the Hasidic story into the Passover seder ritual has defied Kaufmann’s prognosis. To be sure, critical minds searching for absolute truth may not be able to read the story with true piety. But creative spirits that can grasp multiple truths are able to draw inspiration from the tale, without becoming what Kaufmann termed “little children.”

### Retelling the Tale in the Twenty-First Century

I have recounted a hundred years of retelling a Hasidic tale that itself depicts the first one hundred years of the Hasidic movement. It is too early to describe what will happen to the story in the twenty-first century, though students of contemporary Judaism may have noticed some developing trends. It is to three of these yet-to-ripen trends that I briefly turn: musical settings, Israeli adaptations, and Passover proliferation.

In 1996, Mark Novak and Renée Brachfeld recorded an oral version of the tale with musical accompaniment on their album *King Solomon’s Daughter: Stories and Songs from the Jewish Tradition*. In the opening track, “The Place in the Forest,” Brachfeld retold Wiesel’s version of the story with minor changes. The concluding line, “God made man because he loves stories,” was restated in gender-neutral language: “They say that God created human beings because God likes to hear stories.”<sup>72</sup> In addition to gender sensitivity, Novak and Brachfeld’s performance reflects a move toward music. This trend has continued as the tale has been retold in different versions with a musical twist: the

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War, the organization has shifted its focus toward ecology and human rights. Arthur I. Waskow, *The Freedom Seder: A New Haggadah for Passover* (Washington, DC: Micah Press, 1969, 1970), preface; Arthur Waskow, *Godwrestling—Round 2: Ancient Wisdom, Future Paths* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996), 9–12.

72 As of June 2014, “The Place in the Forest” can be heard at Novak and Brachfeld’s website, <http://www.jewishstorytelling.com/listen.html>.

story is accompanied by music, or involves the Besht singing a certain tune, or even has the Besht singing and dancing around the fire.<sup>73</sup>

In Israel during the winter of 2011, radio broadcaster Kalman Ber related the story in Hebrew on the Kol Chai radio station.<sup>74</sup> The dire need at the center of the story in the version Ber related was a lack of rain. I am unfamiliar with a source for this version, though it is fascinating that in a country where the need for rain is part of national identity, during a winter when rainfall was dangerously low, and at a time when the chief rabbinate of Israel called for an additional request for rain to be inserted in the daily prayers, the catastrophe facing the Besht was drought.<sup>75</sup>

Following Wolfson, or independently of his work, the story has appeared in other Haggadot in a similar context: the centrality of storytelling. In some Haggadot, the story has migrated from the introductory pages to the beginning of Maggid, the portion of the Haggadah where the story of the Exodus is recounted. Thus the tale has gone from framing the Passover experience to being part of the Haggadah text.<sup>76</sup>

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73 In Steve Klaper’s musical adaptation, the story entitled “Holy Fire” is accompanied by music ([www.klaper.com](http://www.klaper.com), [www.jewishtroubadour.com](http://www.jewishtroubadour.com)). Adalah Caplowe’s rendition has the Besht singing and dancing around the fire (<http://rabbiwithoutborders.org>). In June 2011 in London, storyteller Marc Soloway recorded three Hasidic tales with musical accompaniment—vocal and instrumental—by Chani Haran Smith. One of the three tales was “Fire in the Forest” (<http://vimeo.com/25243254>). In this version, the Besht went to the forest and “in a special way he would light a fire,” while in the fourth act Israel of Rużyn “sat in his armchair in his living room.”

74 Kol Chai broadcasts in Israel on 93 FM and 92.8 FM and online at [www.93fm.co.il](http://www.93fm.co.il).

75 While droughts exist in Eastern Europe and pose economic, social, and environmental problems, they are not central to Hasidic lore. See, for instance, Epstein, *Ma’or va-shamesh, be-ḥuqotai*, s.v. *’o yo’mar* (second appearance). The writer, a Hasidic master, described timely rain as a minor reward unbecoming the lofty nature of Torah study. For studies on droughts in Poland, see R. Farat, M. Kepinska-Kasprzak, P. Kowalczyk, and P. Mager, “Droughts in Poland, 1951–90,” *Drought Network News* 10, no. 1 (October 1997–February 1998), <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/droughtnetnews/42>; Leszek Łabędzki, “Estimation of Local Drought Frequency in Central Poland Using the Standardized Precipitation Index,” *Irrigation and Drainage* 56 (2007): 67–77, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ird.285/pdf>.

76 I do not propose to present a list of Haggadot that include the story, but I will share a few that have come to my attention. Wolfson’s version was copied verbatim in a Haggadah compiled in 2009 by Ben Freedman for Bowdoin College Hillel in Maine. Other Haggadot have preferred Wiesel’s version, albeit without Wiesel’s chilling later addition. The Wiesel version of the story has been included in the *Rheingold Family Haggadah*, with the following addition: “So some people say God made men because He loves stories. And we tell

The continuing attraction of the tale may be connected to the interest in Hasidic lore so prevalent amongst contemporary modern Jews. It may also be connected with postmodern thought that recognizes truth in different narratives: there is more than one way to avert tragedy and each of those paths is valid.

### Taking Stock of a Century of Storytelling

Each of the storyteller-interpreters discussed in this study employed the Hasidic tale as a vehicle for narrative. Consciously or not, they grappled with the decline of theurgy and mysticism, on the one hand, and the rise of the Hasidic tale on the other. Can the theurgic mysticism of old be replaced? Might storytelling prove a viable alternative? Through their renditions of the story, the storyteller-interpreters voiced their responses to the question of what the role of the Hasidic tale might be today. Is it a mysticism-substitute, a paradigm for religious experience, an opportunity to promote faith in God, a lamentation for a lost era, academic fodder, a medium for preservation of collective memory, or an invitation to participate?

It is likely that the Hasidic tale's longevity and appeal is intrinsically tied to its malleability, for it is the pliability of the medium that makes it a perfect vehicle for fashioning and expressing collective memory. Yet how are we to view the adaptations of the tale? Are they corruptions or valid—perhaps even desirable—reinterpretations? When, if ever, has a storyteller crossed the boundaries of legitimate transmission of a tale?

This question speaks to the root of the storytelling enterprise and I do not presume to have an answer to the conundrum. Nonetheless, the elasticity of *this* Hasidic story is eminently appropriate for a tale ascribed to Israel of Ruzyn.

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the story of Passover every year before this holiday meal because this is the story of how we got to where we are. This is the story, as far back as we can remember, of our beginning." The *Rheingold Family Haggadah* is a liberal Haggadah that celebrates freedom from oppression for all religious and political groups. It is available on the web and is often cited ([www.mishkan.com/haggadah.html](http://www.mishkan.com/haggadah.html); for more information about the *Rheingold Family Haggadah*, see [www.amarillo.com/stories/041300/bel\\_find.shtml](http://www.amarillo.com/stories/041300/bel_find.shtml)). From the *Rheingold Family Haggadah* the story entered the *Open Source Haggadah Project* as part of the preparation section and is entitled "A Story about Stories" ([www.opensourcehaggadah.com/index.php?section=20&tab=readings](http://www.opensourcehaggadah.com/index.php?section=20&tab=readings)); it also appears in Rachel Barenblat's *The Velveteen Rabbi's Haggadah for Pesach* (as of June 2014, version 8 is available online at <http://velveteenrabbi.com/VRHaggadah.pdf>). In this rendition, the story appears at the beginning of Maggid with no explanatory material (p. 19).

A mere two years before Zak first published the story, another author recorded the following from Rabbi David Moses Friedman of Czortków (1827–1903), who, as noted above, was the eighth of the ten children of Israel of Rużyn and his wife Sarah, and the Hasidic master to whom Zak affirmed his allegiance:

One time they recounted before him regarding a certain tale that the *ʾadmor* [Hasidic master] of Rużyn, may his merit protect us, had retold one time in this fashion and another time in a different fashion. Regarding this, our master the *ʾadmor* [David Moses], may his merit protect us, said that tales that the *tsadiqqim* recount are [told] according to the need of that moment. And I too the writer, I myself heard a number of times that our master the *ʾadmor*, the righteous one who is a foundation of the world, may his merit protect us, recounted a certain tale with a number of changes.<sup>77</sup>

The power of the Hasidic story to move hearts is appreciated across a broad gamut. Academics study the phenomenon, Hasidim attempt to perpetuate it, and Neo-Hasidim seek to relive and revive its glory. A tale that tells the story of the first century of Hasidism chanced to live, to grow, and to evolve for a second hundred years through the twentieth century. The fate of the tale as it enters its third century remains a story that will unfold, as it continues to be reworked and retold in new adaptations. The final chapter in the tale of this Hasidic tale may always remain to be told.

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77 Yisrael Rappaport, *Divrei David* (Husiatyn: Kawalek, 1904), 59; reprinted in *Trin qaddishin*, 615n253, my translation.