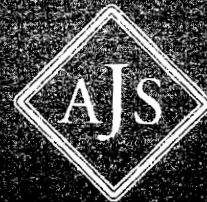


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REVIEW



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a wider audience among historians. It is to be hoped that the burst of interest in the Genizah witnessed in recent years will carry this trend further.

The emergence in Muslim lands of local Jewish leadership has long been associated with the decline of the Exilarchate and the yeshivot of Babylonia and Palestine. *Fustat on the Nile* compellingly argues that a precedent for local political leadership existed even as these institutions experienced renewed vigor during the first decades of the eleventh century. It is a point both well-taken and sure to stimulate further research.

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Vera Basch Moreen. *In Queen Esther's Garden: An Anthology of Judeo-Persian Literature*. Yale Judaica Series. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. xxiv, 392 pp.

This book is, without a doubt, a major contribution in the field of Judeo-Persian Studies. Judeo-Persian literature, which extends for about eight centuries, has been severely neglected except for the work of a small number of scholars. There are only four scholars in the United States who have dealt with any aspect of this field, and not many more elsewhere. The existing Judeo-Persian texts are a vast collection of all sorts of material and deserve much more attention. Vera Basch Moreen has made a great step forward by providing translation of a wide variety of literary texts. Especially valuable are her commentaries, explanations, and bibliography.

Jews who have lived in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia and for whom Persian is their spoken language have, until fairly recently, been able to read and write the language only in the Hebrew alphabet and not in Arabic script. It is clear, however, from the varied Judeo-Persian texts in this book and in others that Jews must have heard Persian poetry recited in public and have had many texts read to them. The texts represented in this book are a clear indication of their generally detailed familiarity with non-Jewish texts. Moreen's commentary and footnotes make this abundantly clear.

A listing of the chapters provides a good survey of the Judeo-Persian literature represented: 1. Earliest Judeo-Persian Texts; 2. Biblical Epics; 3. An Apocryphal Epic; 4. Didactic Poetry; 5. Mishnah and Midrash; 6. Biblical Commentaries; 7. Religious Festivals in Sermon, Commentary, and Poetry; 8. Historical Texts; 9. Polemics and Philosophy; 10. Mysticism; 11. Religious Poems; and 12. Panegyrics, Lyrical Poems, Quatrains.

Moreen's translations are masterful and accurate. Her notes and commentary are especially useful and provide enormously interesting information on Islamic, historical, and all sorts of textual background and information. Just reading through the footnotes and other explanations gives the reader fascinating information on the cultural context of the Persian world in various periods.

In going through the pages of this remarkable book, I am reminded that in 1973, Amnon Netzer published in Tehran an anthology of Judeo-Persian poetry transcribed into Arabic script. Soon after the book appeared, a review written by a very prominent Tehran University professor of Persian literature was published in a literary journal in Tehran. "Here is an anthology of Judeo-Persian poetry of almost 1000 years, of which we have known nothing," he began. He then praised the book and marveled at the nature of the texts provided in the anthology.

Vera Moreen's book, too, is truly to be welcomed as a most useful source for this marvelous but relatively unknown Jewish literature. Perhaps it will spark an upsurge of interest and research in this field.

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Immanuel Etkes, *Ba'al Hashem: The Besht—Magic, Mysticism, Leadership*. Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2000. 327 pp. (Hebrew).

During the past two decades, many important works have been published—mostly by Israeli scholars—on virtually every aspect of Hasidism. The writings of David Assaf, Rachel Elior, Zeev Gries, Moshe Idel, Gedalia Nigal, Ada Rapaport-Albert, and Moshe Rosman, to name only the most prominent contemporary scholars of Hasidism, range from sweeping critical re-evaluations of earlier Hasidic historiography and theology to close studies of major sects within the Hasidic movement. In the course of this outpouring of Hasidic scholarship, the pioneering work of Scholem and his disciples has been demolished and rehabilitated several times over. Beyond even more detailed studies of later and minor Hasidic sects, it would have seemed, at this late date, that there was little left to add to the discussion of the origins and theology of classical, or "Beshtian," Hasidism. Thus the appearance, in the year 2000, of a new book by Immanuel Etkes dedicated to the "Founder of Hasidism," R. Israel Baal Shem Tov, could hardly be greeted without the question with which the author himself begins his introduction: "Why another book on the Besht? What can this book hope to add to all that has already been written and published on this topic?" (p. 9).

The answers that Etkes' new study of the Besht provides to these self-imposed questions are, as it turns out, both substantial and rewarding. While *Baal Ha-Shem: Ha-Besht—Magiah, Mistikah, Hanhagah* does include much material with which Etkes has already dealt in previously published articles and reviews, the book presents a clear, comprehensive and delicately balanced overview of the earlier scholarship—in itself not an easy task—as well as the author's own compelling view of the "historical" Baal Shem Tov. Among the key questions that Etkes addresses are: (1) What can we know about the Besht based on the limited primary source material available, and (2) how are we to evaluate the Besht's disputed role in the emergence of the Hasidic movement in the decades immediately fol-

lowing his death? Etkes notes that he had already begun his research on the Besht before the appearance of Moshe Rosman's groundbreaking book, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Baal Shem Tov*¹, and indicates that it was his sharp disagreement with many of Rosman's methodological assumptions about the unreliability of Hasidic sources (mainly the *Shivhei Ha-Besht*), as well as his conclusions about the Besht's place in history, that stirred him to complete his work (p. 13; see also Etkes' detailed critique of Rosman's book on pp. 245–249).

One of Etkes' strengths as an intellectual historian is his ability to use his erudition to clarify rather than obfuscate complex matters that have long been mired in scholarly dispute. In reviewing the mass of previous scholarship on the Besht and early Hasidism, he paves a clear path through the thicket of books and articles that have sprouted in recent years. His conclusions are not only well argued and meticulously rooted in a sober analysis of the sources; they are, for the most part, very compelling.

The first chapter ("*Magiah U-Vaalei Shem Be-Yamav Shel Ha-Besht*"), in many ways the most original part of the book, examines in rich detail the development in seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century East European Jewish society of an elaborate culture of folk-superstition rooted in the fear of the tangible evil and demonic forces at work in the world. The most significant aspect of the widespread superstitious beliefs of the Jewish masses in the forces of evil, for our understanding of the life of the Besht and the subsequent emergence of Hasidic leadership, was the important place it allowed for the emergence of a new class of religious professionals in Polish Jewish society, the *Baalei Shem*. Etkes analyzes a rich selection of primary texts that document the activities of these Jewish magicians and healers, focusing in particular on the career of R. Joel Baal Shem who, in many ways, typified the pre-Beshtian model (pp. 41–51). He shows that by the middle of the eighteenth century, Baal Shemism had become a surprisingly well-defined profession, characterized by magical practices consisting mainly of a variety of exorcisms directed at combating an array of evil forces that had taken root in individuals, properties, and sometimes entire communities. What is most striking about the work of the *Baalei Shem*—and what differentiates it from the path later taken by the Besht—was its self-imposed limitations. These men were, essentially, contractors who responded to calls for their services to heal individuals of demonic possession or to cleanse homes that had become haunted by *hitsonim*, or the forces of evil. They had a limited repertoire of tricks, the most common of which were the writing of *kamei'ot* (amulets); prescription of *lehashim* (magical incantations); and performance of *segulot* (voodoo-like ceremonies) directed at combating the various agents of the *Sitra Ahra*, or .

In Chapter Two ("*Yisrael Baal Shem*"), Etkes describes the ways in which the Besht conformed to the earlier model of the Baal Shem and, more significantly, how he expanded that role and broke with its self-imposed limitations. While he, like R. Joel, responded to individual calls for exorcism, the Besht had a far grander perception of his role and powers. Thus, the Besht addressed issues of much broader communal concern than his predecessors, reflecting his own self-

assessment as the spiritual leader—though never chosen or formally appointed by any Jewish community—of the entire Jewish people. One of the striking features of the Besht's personality that emerges here is his astonishing grandiosity, boastfulness regarding his supernatural powers, and arrogant sense of superiority vis-à-vis other rabbis and *Baalei Shem*. The Besht harbored absolutely no self-doubt when it came to his divine calling to minister to East European Jewry as a whole or his powers to fulfill that formidable mission.

Among the major problems facing the Jewish communities of the Ukraine during the Besht's lifetime were violent anti-Semitic persecutions by the Haidamaks, the economic crisis that faced many Jewish leaseholders of Polish estates, and the declining standards of *shehitah*. Skillfully using the Hasidic sources that he deems reliable, most notably *Sefer Shivhei Ha-Besht*, Etkes demonstrates in Chapter Three ("*Manhig Shel Klal Yisrael*") how the Besht uniquely addressed these major communal concerns. In addition to extending his mandate beyond responding to calls from individuals desiring the benefits of his magical services, the Besht also used mystical prayer and ecstatic experiences (most notably heavenly ascents) to solve problems tackled by earlier *Baalei Shem* through a more limited repertoire of magical techniques.

Having established the Besht's boldness and self-confidence as a Baal Shem and his expansive vision of both his mystical powers and communal mission, Etkes goes on in Chapter Four ("*He-Besht Ke-Mistikan U-Vaal Besorah Be-Avodat Ha-Shem*") to re-visit in impressive detail his innovations as a mystic. While, as Etkes points out, there have been many fine studies of early Hasidic mysticism—mostly by Scholem's disciples, such as Rivka Shatz and Joseph Weiss—none have focused exclusively on the teachings of the Besht himself. What we know of "Beshtian" Hasidism is mostly gleaned through the writings of key disciples such as the Maggid of Mezeritch and R. Jacob Joseph of Polnoe, thus, the Besht's own originality as a mystic is lost in the forest of their writings (p. 128). Etkes points to several key elements of the Besht's mystical theology that later became salient features of Hasidism. Most important among them is his deep faith in the absolute immanence of God in the material universe, out of which flowed the Besht's denial of tangible reality to evil and his rejection of ascetic religious practice. And, Etkes insists, unlike many earlier Kabbalists, the Besht's mysticism grew out of his life experience:

It seems to me that it was the Besht who cleared the path for the revolutionary conception of Divine immanence in Hasidism. Moreover, it would seem that this new conception did not emerge from the perplexities of a theoretician bound by the four cubits of theosophical speculation, but that it reflects the actual mystical experience enjoyed by the Besht (p. 146).

The final chapter of this fine book ("*Sefer Shivhei Ha-Besht Ke-Makor Histori*") deals with methodological questions about Etkes' sources for reconstructing the life of the Besht, most importantly, the degree to which the historian can rely on the tales in *Shivhei Ha-Besht*. Etkes here expands on his devastating review of Rosman's aforementioned book ("*Ha-Besht Ha-Histori: Beyn Rekonstruktsia Le-Dekonstruktsia*" *Tarbiz*, 66 [1997]: pp. 425–42), in which he compellingly argued

1. Berkeley, 1996.

that one need not believe in the truth of the details of these tales in order to accept their authenticity and value as sources for understanding the life and times of the Besht and his impact on the subsequent development of Hasidism. Etkes demonstrates how these tales can be parsed and used analytically to great advantage by the historian who is sensitive to their linguistic and theological nuances.

There are times when Etkes' study slips into a somewhat pedantic reading of seminal Beshtian texts that have already been overanalyzed by scholars of Hasidism. One conspicuous example of such excess is his exhaustive treatment of the famous letter of the Besht to his brother-in-law, R. Gershon of Kutov. At the end of his thirteen-page discussion (pp. 88–100) of this already overworked text, Etkes has not added much to its understanding, beyond elaborating upon Scholem's denial that it bears an urgent messianic message. Then again, Etkes certainly succeeds in presenting a convincing case—Scholem's many subsequent interlocutors notwithstanding—that the Besht did not see himself as a messianic figure at all. Quite the contrary, his entire calling was based on the struggle with an unredeemed world, and the conversation with the Messiah during his ascent of soul showed clearly that messianic redemption was not expected by the Besht in his own lifetime.

However thorough and clear the picture of the Besht that emerges from this book, he remains one of Jewish history's most clouded figures. Even for those who accept all of his methodological assumptions and historical conclusions, Etkes' book raises new ambiguities and paradoxes. I shall deal with two of the most conspicuous examples.

First, central to Etkes' argument about the Besht's originality as a mystic was his denial of any reality to evil forces that had hitherto been confronted with utmost seriousness by Kabbalists and by *Baalei Shem*. Yet, in his discussion of the Besht's practice of Baalshemism, Etkes recounts several tales in which the Besht seems indeed to take demonic forces with utter seriousness, including one case in which he deals with a rather cute couple of *hitsonim* who had been conceived and born in a synagogue as the result of an arrogant baritone *Hazzan's* vanity during prayer. At the end of the day, sensing the need to get them out of the shul, the Besht finds them alternate housing near a deserted well (pp. 59–60). It is unclear how to reconcile such accounts of the Besht's engagement with *hitsonim* with his denial of reality to netherworldly and evil forces at work in the world.

Second, throughout the book, particularly in the long chapter on the Besht's "circle," Etkes presses the point that the Besht consciously and deliberately cultivated a group of followers who were meant to continue his work, thus spawning the Hasidic movement. At the same time, Etkes demonstrates clearly that the Besht was possessed of a belief in his uniqueness, suggesting the impossibility of any competent spiritual heirs. In fact, Etkes devotes a long discussion to what he terms the Besht's *bil'adiyut*, or total singularity, as a mystic and Baal Shem (pp. 78–87), but he never quite resolves the inherent tension between that self-perception and the Besht's allegedly self-conscious role as the harbinger, if not the direct founder, of the Hasidic movement.

These problems notwithstanding, Immanuel Etkes has produced a major, highly erudite re-evaluation of the Besht that both clarifies and clearly contextu-

alizes the work of many earlier scholars, and as well presents a well-documented and deeply learned portrait of the still-mysterious Israel Baal Shem Tov. This book is essential reading for those working in the field of East European Judaism, as well as for anyone interested in the origins and early history of Hasidism.

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Daniel M. Swetschinski. *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam*. London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000. xiv, 380 pp.

When Daniel Swetschinski's dissertation appeared in 1980, it immediately became an indispensable work. It was a wide-ranging, clearly-ordered synthesis of scholarship on the Portuguese—Jewish community of Amsterdam in the seventeenth-century, incorporating some important original research. It surveyed the community's legal, demographic, economic, and institutional history, with a brief chapter on certain aspects of its cultural life. Its most original contribution was a detailed study of demographic data gleaned from the Amsterdam *puyboecken*, the municipal registers of intended marriages. On the basis of these records, Swetschinski charted in detail the immigration to Amsterdam of ex-conversos with origins in the Iberian Peninsula. His examination of the community's institutional life relied to a considerable extent on existing studies in Dutch, but also incorporated his own archival work, and it raised important questions about the structure of the community. Moreover, at a time when this was the exception rather than the rule, it dealt with the Portuguese Jews in an unsentimental, unromanticized fashion. The dissertation was far from exhaustive—a task beyond the reach of any young scholar—but it was a valuable contribution to Jewish communal history.

Reluctant Cosmopolitans draws heavily in structure and contents from this dissertation. To be sure, the book reflects an effort to rethink and update, but it is not a new work, and does not seriously take into account the scholarship of the last two decades. This is not entirely apparent from the bibliography, which lists important recent works, however, in the text itself, Swetschinski tends to draw on these works (if at all) only vaguely, and without attribution.

The first chapter, on the history of toleration in seventeenth-century Netherlands, is a simplified treatment of a complex topic. Much has been done on this topic since Joseph Lecler and Henry Kamen wrote their seminal books in the 1960s. Thanks to recent work in this area by scholars like Jonathan Israel, Nicolette Mout, Martin van Gelderen, and Benjamin Kaplan, we possess a relatively nuanced and ramified view of the vicissitudes of toleration in the Netherlands, in opinion and practice. None of this work is cited in Swetschinski's footnotes, nor does he make use of it to refine the chapter conceptually.

The core of Chapter Two, an examination of immigration to Amsterdam, is