**“I Heard from My Master and Grandfather…”**

Family Traditions of the Besht

as Preserved by R. Moshe Chaim Efraim of Sudilkov

in Comparison with Traditions from

the Students of the Maggid of Mezeritsh and R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye

If there were ever any writings penned by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (known as the Besht, a Hebrew acronym for Baal Shem Tov, ‘Master of the Good Name’), these have not survived.

In their absence, the 300 year project of investigating this figure who had such a decisive influence on the Jews of Europe and beyond has not been a simple one. As of 1960, there was no known evidence that could even confirm his historical existence. Since then, scholars of Jewish thought and history have progressed in their research on the Besht and recent studies have even begun to distinguish between the traditions, some in his name and some not, preserved by his various students. The primary distinction is between the corpuses preserved by his two main disciples: R. Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritsh, whose own disciples spread the teachings of the Besht and established multiple courts in his name throughout Poland and the Ukraine, and R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye, the disciple responsible for recording his master’s words. These disciples became acquainted with the Besht at an advanced age, after having previously opposed his way of divine service, and they recorded the Besht’s words after they had become embedded within the disciples’ earlier conceptions as they integrated their new religious modes into their old ones.

In contrast to extensive research into the students of the Besht, the role of family traditions as a tool for identifying the Besht’s path has been all but ignored. The current study treats the family traditions that were transmitted through the Besht’s grandson R. Moshe Chaim Efraim of Sudilkov (c. 1740-1800). The traditions that appear in his book *Degel Machaneh Efraim* allow us to investigate the Besht and his thought and to locate ideas and traditions that are inaccessible through his major students.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Efraimgrew up with the teachings of the Besht, receiving them as a *tabla rasa*, that is, free of other ideas with which he had to reconcile those of the Besht. Furthermore, he experienced the powerful personality and spirit of the Besht in an unmediated fashion in his daily life: the family members lived together; his mother Edel passed on to him the influences she absorbed from her own parents; he sat on the knees of his grandfather; and he relied on him as a mentor for many years. In this sense he differed from the Besht’s primary disciples, who saw the Besht intermittently and received a specific answer to their questions or whatever teaching he desired to offer at the time. This being the case, the current study aims to include not only theoretical material but also material that depicts R. Moshe Chaim Efraim’s formative experiences alongside the Besht. In addition to investigating the content of the material, this study will also explore its style of writing and the depictions of reality that it contains.

*Degel Machaneh Efraim* contains 277 homilies in the name of the Besht, including five unique teachings given to Moshe Chaim Efraim by the Besht, who referred to them as *hakdamot*. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Efraim or the Besht (or both) understood these as condensed statements addressed especially to the spiritual elite. The ideas expressed in these homilies are by their nature intended for further development. The *hakdamot* reflect these masters’ conceptions of the theoretical and innovative basis of the future Hasidic movement. As such, an analysis of these teachings will provide the framework for the study, which also includes a comparison to similar sources derived from the Besht’s primary disciples. This analysis will attempt to identify the power and innovation of Hasidism as understood by the grandson and his grandfather.

All the *hakdamot* passed on by the Besht through R. Moshe Chaim Efraim, or what I call “the family channel,” are unique in their content or their presentation, containing traditions not found in the teachings of the Maggid or R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye. Furthermore, every *hakdamah*, each in its own way, reinforces the connections between conceptual elements found throughout the book: the connection between man and his mission, man and the holy spark reserved for him alone; between man and his role in the process of rectification; between man and his limits; between man and the parts of himself and his world, which serve as a perfect vehicle for unification with the Creator; and between an individual man and the commandments. In every case, we encounter a connection, considered to be self-evident, between the elements of existence and the unified whole.

The bulk of the study’s sources come from the basic theoretical literature of Hasidism and scholarship on that literature. In hagiographic literature, I have focused on *Shivhei haBesht*. I have also drawn substantially from computerized databanks, and have demonstrated a statistical dimension in theoretical scholarship (typical of experimental studies) throughout the study and especially in the chapter on the holy sparks.

The first section provides background for the study as a whole and specifically for the treatment of the *hakdamot*. The first chapter contains a literature review and identifies the goals of the study. The second chapter provides a survey of R. Moshe Chaim Efraim and his life, addressing the period of his life surrounding the passing of the Besht, his appointment as rabbi in Sudilkov, his book, his style of writing, and the court of the Besht. Special attention is paid to the collection of extensive information on these aspects from the book itself, while taking note of biographical details appearing in other sources that are not found in *Degel Machaneh Efraim*. The third chapter clarifies the concept of the *hakdamah*, introduces the five *hakdamot* transmitted to R. Moshe Chaim Efraim by the Besht, and surveys the characteristics common to R. Moshe Chaim Efraim’s citations of his grandfather throughout *Degel Machaneh Efraim*.

The second section of the study is a textual investigation and close reading of the five *hakdamot*, in comparison to the Maggid and R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye and at times to R. Nachman of Bratzlav (the great-grandson of the Besht). A chapter is dedicated to each of the five *hakdamot*.

The fourth chapter discusses a *hakdamah* on the topic of the holy sparks (*Degel Machaneh Efraim,* Lekh Lekha, s.v. *vayeshev*). In it I survey the conceptual roots of the idea in the Kabbalah against the background of Gershom Scholem’s approach to the concept of the holy sparks in Hasidism, as well as investigate the changes the concept underwent between Lurianic Kabbalah and Hasidism and their reception by Hasidic thinkers. I have distinguished between “sparks of the worlds” (those that were scattered in the chaos of Creation according to Lurianic teachings and have a cosmic function) and “sparks of the soul” (those that were scattered as a result of Adam’s sin and have a personal function in the Lurianic teachings as well), a distinction that has not been made clearly enough in scholarship. My claim is that these two types of sparks were combined in Hasidism by R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye as a result of an integration of Beshtian ideas and his extensive knowledge of Lurianic Kabbalah.

An analysis of the style of writing found in a number of homilies in *Degel Machaneh Efraim* on the topic of the holy sparks reveals evidence of a discourse between the Besht, the Maggid, and R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye and seems to indicate that R. Moshe Chaim Efraim received the *hakdamah* from the Besht late in this dialogical process. A statistical analysis of the types of sparks reveals that discussions of “purely” personal sparks in the name of the Besht are rather rare and appear primarily in homilies by R. Moshe Chaim Efraim, while the Maggid, in *Maggid Devarav leYaakov*, opposes the idea of personal sparks in isolation from cosmic ones. The chapter also charts new areas of discussion of the holy sparks in early Hasidism by these three teachers, among them practical descriptions of the technique of raising the sparks, individual characteristics of the idea unique to each teacher, and the idea’s messianic context.

The *hakdamah* itself treats the surprising preference for saving property over saving lives – the prioritization of saving the sparks trapped in Lot’s possessions, which are of utmost importance to Abraham, over the saving of Lot himself, which is secondary. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Efraim explicitly states that he hesitated to transmit the *hakdamah*, presumably because certain aspects of the idea were likely to weaken social mores and to encourage deviations from behavioral norms. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Efraim, in his grandfather’s name, “opened a door” and presented the case of Abraham as one in which a personal spark draws a person after it, drawing him to the location of the spark. We cannot overlook the fact that this “unintended” consequence of personal sparks was left undeveloped in early Hasidism, including by R. Moshe Chaim Efraim (outside of this one homily), despite the fact that the personal element of divine service is central to Hasidic thought. This aspect is less salient in the teachings of the Maggid and R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye. I suggest that we see later Izhbitz Hasidism, which allowed personal aspects that deviated from the norm in one’s individual service of God, as a development of R. Moshe Chaim Efraim’s *hakdamah*.

The fifth chapter discusses a *hakdamah* treating melancholy (*Degel Machaneh Efraim*, Eikev, s.v. *kol medvai*). Unlike the general approach of the Besht that teaches that all things can be lifted up and rectified and so returned to their roots, the personal experience of the Besht in this endeavor left him exhausted. The *hakdamah* recorded by his grandson and his instructions to R. Yaakov Yosef indicate that the Besht specifically taught them to distance themselves from melancholy and to exorcise it. Counter to this, the Maggid saw melancholy as praiseworthy and necessary for service of God. Rabbi Yaakov Yosef was much more troubled by strange thoughts than by melancholy and understood it as an imbalance between giving and receiving or between joy and fear. Despite the Besht’s many exceptional abilities, in this endeavor the Besht recognized his own limitations and sought divine instruction through dream questions addressed to his masters Achiyah the Shilonite and Elijah the Prophet. In this chapter I show that the difficulties the Besht suffered from melancholy were bound up in his sensibility that he had failed in effecting a rectification for the sins of the Sabbateans. While the Maggid, R. Yaakov Yosef, and R. Nachman of Bratzlav all followed independent approaches to the problem of melancholy, R. Moshe Chaim Efraim transmitted the teachings of the Besht as his grandson without judgment.

The sixth chapter discusses a *hakdamah* on the topic of rectifying holy sparks of the thirty-nine forms of labor forbidden on Shabbat (*Degel Machaneh Efraim*, Ki Tissa, s.v. *uvacharoshet eitz*). Such rectification is effected by a Torah scholar through study, with no action, that is, not through *avodah begashmiyut,* service through corporeality. This is a surprising turn, for service through corporeality was one of the principles of the Besht’s thought and he was recognized in his own generation as possessing unique wisdom on it. Nevertheless, in this *hakdamah* the Besht relays to his grandson the opposite instruction, teaching that a Torah scholar is forbidden to engage in an act of labor and must effect the rectification of the forbidden labors through rectifying the worlds of the spirit. This idea is found only in the teachings of R. Moshe Chaim Efraim and not those of the Maggid or R. Yaakov Yosef.

The seventh chapter discusses a *hakdamah* on the topic of *yihud* or cosmic unification (*Degel Machaneh Efraim*, Vayeshev, s.v. *vatisa*). In early Hasidism we encounter multiple and varied examples of *yihudim*. Nevertheless, the writings of R. Moshe Chaim Efraim are silent on this specific form of *yihud*. In this chapter I investigate the layers of R. Moshe Chaim Efraim’s writings in *Degel Machaneh Efraim* and locate this *yihud* within the earlier layers, from his relative youth. The methodology employed in this chapter creates a framework for chronological mapping of R. Moshe Chaim Efraim’s writing, which suggests that the development of this *hakdamah* leads to a *yihud* that is a “prayer for the Shekhinah,” via the intermediate stage of the homilies “when Malkhut is without *yihud*” appearing in *Degel Machaneh Efraim*. The innovation in this *hakdamah* is an understanding of human suffering as deriving from the suffering of the Shekhinah. Such a situation is a call to the individual to see the needs of the Shekhinah in his own personal and existential experience and through this identification to pray for the Shekhinah. In the teachings of the Maggid and R. Yaakov Yosef we encounter a certain reticence regarding what is stated explicitly by R. Moshe Chaim Efraim.

Such a conception of the Shekhinah as in shared need with the individual and as an independent hypostasis requiring human prayers is not found in the teachings of the Maggid. The Maggid instructs his listeners to pray for their own needs only from within the *ayin* or divine Nought or to pray for the Shekhinah after stripping themselves of corporeality, while R. Yaakov Yosef also fears to transfer the responsibility for the sufferings of the individual to the Shekhinah. In the family traditions, however, this *yihud* was further developed by R. Nachman as an expression of human dignity, since the king himself reveals his needs to his beloved. These different approaches testify to a different value system and underscore the fact that R. Moshe Chaim Efraim places great trust in the abilities of man to act as an intimate partner working within the divine immanence. The development of this stage in the concept of prayer for the Shekhinah was apparently made by the Besht.

The eighth chapter discusses the *hakdamah* of the parable of the doctor (*Degel Machaneh Efraim*, Vayeshev, s.v. *vatisa*). This *hakdamah* treats the autonomy of the expert in his field with the aid of the Besht’s hallmark parable of the doctor who saves the critically ill patient with a medicine that under normal circumstances would be considered a poison. The criticism by less experienced doctors receives more elaboration in the explanation of the parable than in the parable itself. Against this backdrop, the question arises: What ability does a rabbi have to provide solutions and halakhic innovations that less expert rabbis fear to offer? I suggest that we identify the four homilies on *or zarua* (*Degel Machaneh Efraim*, Vaethanan, s.v. *umi*; Tzav, s.v. *hakham*; Bereishit, s.v. *o*; Hayyei Sarah, s.v. *o*), which appear only in *Degel Machaneh Efraim*, as teachings of the Besht, since the ideas expressed in these homilies are one of the applications of the autonomous power of the “doctor.” I show that we can trace the chronological order of these four homilies and that their remarkable daring was attenuated over time, apparently following opposition to certain elements in them by the Maggid and his students.

The continuation of the chapter surveys the spread of the statement “the Holy One, blessed be He, Israel, and Torah are all one.” Although this statement is widespread in R. Moshe Chaim Efraim’s writings, it does not appear in *Degel Machaneh Efraim* in the name of the Besht, is found only once in the works of R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye in the name of “sages of truth,” and is not mentioned at all in *Maggid Devarav leYaakov*. The chapter also treats three ideas unique to R. Moshe Chaim Efraim that evoke surprise at the fact that the name of the Besht, the “great doctor,” is mentioned in only the first, and only by R. Moshe Chaim Efraim.

The concluding chapter also discusses R. Moshe Chaim Efraim’s self-awareness as reflected in one of his dreams, recorded by him and appended to the book by his son. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Efraim saw himself as “the shofar of the Besht,” the sounding of which had been delayed. This self-awareness can be explained against the background of the differences between R. Moshe Chaim Efraim and R. Yaakov Yosef, and even more so the Maggid, and in light of the scarcity of citations of R. Moshe Chaim Efraim, which stands in contrast to the frequent citation and development in later Hasidism of Beshtian elements within the teachings of the Maggid and R. Yaakov Yosef.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Efraim bequeathed a holistic and harmonistic approach stressing intimacy, accessibility, and partnership between man and God and focusing one’s thoughts on “the master of the world.” In this sense, the *hakdamot* are faithful windows into the content of *Degel Machaneh Efraim*, reflecting the folk-religious approach empowering man and human experience and allowing every individual to serve God in every moment and in every individual arena, without overly demanding stipulations or complex rituals.

Beyond an assessment of the conceptual developments among early Hasidic figures and a comparison of their ideas on other topics (for example, divine immanence within man himself), this study casts light on the gulf between the transmission of the Besht’s teachings by R. Moshe Chaim Efraim and by the Maggid, a gulf that invites renewed investigation of various aspects of the legacy of the Besht’s teachings in the two generations that followed. The disputes of R. Baruch of Mezhibozh and R. Nachman of Bratzlav can also be understood against the backdrop of conceptual breadth of the family traditions within Hasidism at the time when the staff of leadership was given to the Maggid and his students. On the other hand, we must discern to what extent the Besht’s family was aware of the knowledge and spiritual path they possessed, which could be “digested” only with the passing of the generations. Such a renewed assessment touches on many and varied questions, such as, Why did the descendants of the Besht not establish courts? and Why is it only in our own generation that the teachings of R. Nachman have become so popular? In this context, we must reassess the editing of the writings of the Maggid, both early and late, and determine to what extent the initial publication of *Maggid Devarav leYaakov* and the conflation of the Besht with the Maggid in *Tzavaat haRivash* served to stymie further Hasidic writing. Furthermore, this study addresses various assessments of the stages of transition from a Lurianic terminology to a Hasidic one. This treatment, which is essentially theosophical, psychological, and semantic, provides a broad platform for further treatment of such questions as, To what extent did Hasidic teachers see themselves as innovators? How did they transmit these conceptions? and What was the role of each individual teacher in this process?

In the absence of new material on Hasidism, there exist both the challenge and the need to exhaust the existing material, to locate the foci of discourse between the teachers, and to analyze anew the forms of direct and indirect citation by students of their teachers as features of early Hasidic writing in particular and in theoretical literature in general. This study provides a methodological and research-based platform for continued analysis of these topics.