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<PN>Part I</>

<PT>Foundations</>

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<CN>Chapter 1</>

<CT>The Life of the Maggid</>

<EPI>With you people, the Hasidim are one thing, and the teacher and the teachings are another. That is why you need written texts. We, our teacher, and the teachings were all truly one. We had no need for written texts.

—The Wolper Rebbe, disciple of the Maggid</>

<EPI>The experiences of the group are reflected in the activities of the individual; they stimulate him and help fashion the forms of this creativity. The trail-blazer leaves his imprint on his age and on future ages, but his age leaves its imprint on him as well.

—Isadore Twersky</>

**<A>First Encounters</>**

The Jews of eastern Europe were well acquainted with holy men and mystical pietists. Some of these figures retreated from the world, fleeing into ascetic solitude or withdrawing from society in order to form small mystical fellowships. Others were popular faith-healers reputed for their shamanistic skills, including clairvoyance or miracle working. Such professional ba‘alei shem, or “masters of the Name,” represented an important element of eastern European Jewish society. They wrote amulets based on divine names, used incantations to cure the sick, and performed similar magical feats. Certain *ba‘alei shem* also developed expertise in herbal healing, and some knew bits and pieces of early modern medicine.[[1]](#endnote-2)

The eighteenth-century movement of renewal known as Hasidism emerged from the teachings of the BeSHT. Scholars debate the extent to which this enigmatic and creative mystic may rightly be described as the “founder” of Hasidism, as there is no evidence that he set out to establish a new religious movement within Judaism.[[2]](#endnote-3) The BeSHT lived in Podolia (present-day Ukraine) near the Carpathian Mountains, but we know very little about his life that does not come from internal Hasidic sources. Legends tell of humble beginnings; perhaps he worked as a slaughterer, and a schoolteacher’s apprentice. These jobs were evidently followed by a period of prolonged solitude, and, in the 1730s, the BeSHT began to share a new type of religious life that foregrounded the values of joy and ecstatic prayer. Although tax records reveal that he was employed as a resident Kabbalist by the Mezhbizh community, the BeSHT’s legacy in Hasidic memory has been shaped primarily by his impact as a religious teacher and spiritual guide rather his legacy as a *ba‘al shem*.[[3]](#endnote-4)

Dov Ber of Mezritsh is commonly portrayed in Hasidic sources as the foremost student of this famed religious leader. Scholars have disproven the once-regnant narrative in which the Maggid inherited some centralized position of leadership of Hasidism after the BeSHT’s death.[[4]](#endnote-5) Hasidism grew forth out of small circles of spiritual teachers and their disciples, all loosely connected to the figure of the BeSHT, and these groups had yet to develop a sense of coherent identity by the time of the Maggid’s rise to power in the 1760s. The different Hasidic communities that eventually emerged were linked by their allegiance to the memory of the BeSHT—and to the Maggid, with few exceptions—but these groups remained without any united or centralized leadership.

It is clear that the Maggid and his theology were transformed by encountering the BeSHT. Getting at the nature of their relationship, however, is particularly difficult. The notion of the Maggid succeeding the BeSHT as the leader of early Hasidism is hopelessly anachronistic. The commonly accepted model of an intimate, sustained relationship of master and disciple will not do either. Their interactions were likely very few in number, and they seem to have met only toward the end of their lives.

Evidence for this is found in the fact that Dov Ber’s homilies rarely quote the BeSHT directly. Nor do the Maggid’s sermons invoke his teacher’s name as a source of authority, setting his homilies apart from those of other early Hasidic thinkers. Rather than inheriting a corpus of specific teachings, what the Maggid absorbed from the BeSHT is best described, I believe, as an ethos, a sensibility, or an approach to the religious life. Dov Ber took this legacy and developed it further, reshaping and reinterpreting key aspects of the BeSHT’s teaching in light of his own religious personality and philosophy. The Maggid also combined the new spiritual orientation with a new social structure. In many crucial respects Dov Ber’s center in Mezritsh was the model for what became the Hasidic *hoyf*, or “court”—a physical and communal structure defined by rituals and choreography that remains the most important Hasidic institution into the present day.[[5]](#endnote-6)

Dov Ber must therefore be considered one of the foremost architects of the emergent socioreligious movement that developed into Hasidism. The Maggid’s role in the formation of Hasidism is much like Paul’s place in the inception of early Christianity. Like Dov Ber of Mezritsh, Paul was just one of a number of important leaders loosely connected to a charismatic spiritual teacher. Yet he was distinguished by his vision and the compelling power of his rhetoric, and, although by no means the sole founder of the early church, Paul had a critical hand in giving shape to the movement that coalesced around the legacy and memory of Jesus of Nazareth.[[6]](#endnote-7)

This chapter explores the arc of the Maggid’s life. Investigating this legacy will bring us to consider the intersection of discipleship and language. Dov Ber’s homilies describe the bond between master and student—or students—as rooted in the transformative power of words. Language functions as a vehicle of instruction, but the Maggid argues that teachers do more: they reveal God’s presence in human speech. Thus do they awaken their disciples to a cosmos that is saturated with sacred divine letters. The significance of language and the place of words in spiritual pedagogy was the subject of much reflection in medieval Jewish mysticism. It was also among the key tenets received from the BeSHT, though, as we shall see, Dov Ber expanded and rebuilt these ideas into a unique theory of language.

The Maggid, like the BeSHT, evidently preferred the oral word in spiritual education. Dov Ber did not chose to—or, perhaps, chose *not* to—put his own ideas into writing. Textual witnesses of the Maggid’s homilies were transcribed, edited, and translated by disciples. The absence of written teachings from Dov Ber himself compounds the scarcity of details concerning his life. These lacunae complicate our attempt to paint an intellectual portrait of this early Hasidic leader. We must piece together internal Hasidic sources and stories, and the paucity of reliable texts about the Maggid’s biography will require us to cast our net rather widely. The earliest layers of Hasidic hagiography are dotted with stories about Dov Ber, but such tales cannot support even a rudimentary sacred biography.[[7]](#endnote-8) We will therefore turn to stories recounted in his disciples’ books and to the oral traditions passed down and eventually published by his descendants.[[8]](#endnote-9) With due caution, we will also draw on the more recent collections from a later phase in the development of the Hasidic story.[[9]](#endnote-10)

Like Talmudic legends, Islamic hagiography, and Christian sacred histories, Hasidic traditions must be used with caution. Many tales bear obvious elements of imagination, exaggeration, and fantasy, especially as they were collected and retold by modern thinkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[[10]](#endnote-11) But hagiographical traditions have been an important part of Hasidic culture and religious life since the eighteenth century. These stories cannot be relied on for historical information, but the tales shed some light on how Hasidic tradition has preserved, interpreted, and, at times, reconstructed the image of its early leaders.[[11]](#endnote-12) The stories, together with homilies, reveal how the figure of the Maggid and his religious teachings have been seared into the memory of Hasidism.

One of Dov Ber’s sermons describes the Hasidic leader as a *tsiyyun* or *siman*, a “reference point” or “semantic marker,” gesturing toward the infinite beyond. Like a spoken word that alludes to the untold mysteries of the mind, the Maggid suggests that sacred individuals and religious teachers reach into the limitless pool of creative vitality and translate this silent potential into concrete language. A similar veil looms across the Maggid’s factual biography. The historical Dov Ber of Mezritsh is elusive, inhabiting a realm of shadowy eternity that is forever out of reach. A formidable image (or images) of the Maggid and his theological legacy, however, emerges from these varied hagiographical traditions and from the remarkable number of teachings preserved in his name.

**<A>Beginnings and Early Life</>**

Dov Ber Friedman was born in approximately 1704 in Lokatsh (Pol. Lokacze, Ukr. Lokachi), a small town near the city of Rovne (Ukr. Rivne). There are no indications that he descended from an established rabbinic family or scholarly line,[[12]](#endnote-13) though Dov Ber was well educated and must have studied Kabbalah in addition to the Talmud and legal codes.[[13]](#endnote-14) He evidently made his living as a *melammed*, a “teacher of children.” Dov Ber worked for a time in Torchin (Pol. Torczyn) to the east of Lokatsh, perhaps after having married the daughter of one of its residents, and followed the common custom of moving near his in-laws. In eastern Europe, the position of *melammed* lacked both prestige and ample remuneration, and traditions describe the destitution of Dov Ber’s family in these years.[[14]](#endnote-15) The Maggid’s later homilies on the religious significance of poverty may have been born of this experience from his young married life.[[15]](#endnote-16)

Dov Ber moved to the nearby city of Mezritsh (Pol. Międzyrzecz; mod. Ukr. Mezhyrichi) at some point in the early 1760s, perhaps after a short tenure in the town of Rovne.[[16]](#endnote-17) He was employed as the *maggid* (preacher) in Mezritsh, serving the same function in the neighboring town of Korets (Pol. Korzec). The position of *maggid* (pl. *maggidim*) was an important one in eastern Europe, though it was considerably less prominent than that of the official town *rav* (rabbi). *Maggidim*, both itinerant and stationary, represented a social class of second-tier intellectuals, standing somewhere between the masses and the scholarly rabbinic elites.[[17]](#endnote-18) The title *maggid meisharim* was generally conferred on one who had been appointed as the preacher of a particular community, but it is worth noting that, to my knowledge, no stories depict Dov Ber delivering a sermon before a large public audience in a communal synagogue.

Eighteenth-century Mezritsh was home to an elite *beit midrash* (study-house)for learned scholars that included a number of Kabbalists, but Dov Ber does not appear to have been counted among its members.[[18]](#endnote-19) This *beit midrash* was one of many similar institutions sprinkled throughout towns and cities of central and eastern Europe. The disastrous collapse of the movement that surrounded the seventeenth-century Shabbatai Tsevi, a kabbalistic maverick with messianic pretensions, had left many Jews suspicious of mystical religion. In central Europe bans were issued against the dissemination of Kabbalah in an attempt to restrict its knowledge to small circles of elites. Numerous elite kloyzen (also “study-houses”) were established so that scholars could study mystical texts in a sequestered environment.[[19]](#endnote-20) But in eastern Europe, a region whose culture had long been infused with mystical pietism and magical practices, the roots of popular kabbalistic ideas and rituals were deeply entrenched. In these communities, folk practices blended with rituals adapted from those of the Safed Kabbalists.[[20]](#endnote-21) In these lands Kabbalah remained an integral part of popular practice as well as elite religion into the eighteenth century.[[21]](#endnote-22)

Dov Ber came of age as a traditional eastern European Kabbalist, an ascetic mystic and perhaps a visionary but not a popular healer or a wonder-working *ba‘al shem*. The Maggid’s early devotional life evidently focused on study and penitence, and his later sermons and hagiographical traditions continue to espouse a religious ethos defined by a deep fear of sin. This ethos was similar to—but not identical with—the attitudes of eighteenth-century moralistic literature produced by eastern Europe Jews.[[22]](#endnote-23) It was only after many long years in this mode of worship that Dov Ber came to be associated with the BeSHT.

The BeSHT was wary of the dangers of religious guilt and the psychological and physical damage wrought by penitential practices.[[23]](#endnote-24) His teachings emphasized that one must be ever mindful of the divine vitality in all aspects of the cosmos, often described as sparks of holiness or divine letters trapped within the corporeal world. Freeing these sparks is one of the ultimate goals of religious service, delivering the fallen *shekhinah* (the divine presence, often depicted as female) from current exile. For this reason, one may serve God through all “ordinary” physical deeds, such as eating, drinking, and dancing, as well as by performing the commandments. Dov Ber’s encounter with the BeSHT and the latter’s relatively world-affirming mystical theology changed the Maggid significantly, but the ascetic impulse remained part of Dov Ber’s spiritual path long after their meeting.[[24]](#endnote-25)

**<A>The Maggid and the Ba‘al Shem Tov</>**

Dov Ber must have encountered the BeSHT for the first time in the 1750s. We know very little about the circumstances or frequency of their interactions, and literary evidence suggests that they met only a few times.[[25]](#endnote-26) One of the earliest texts to reflect on their connection is the introduction to *Maggid Devarav le-Ya‘akov* (1781), the first printed compendium of Dov Ber’s sermons. Shlomo of Lutsk, the book’s editor and the author of this introduction, was a relative of Dov Ber as well as a devoted disciple. He had much to gain from asserting a unique connection between the BeSHT and the Maggid. It is thus noteworthy that Shlomo’s presentation is a far cry from the overwrought descriptions of Dov Ber’s “succeeding” the BeSHT as the leader of Hasidism found in later hagiography:

<EXT>One time I heard [the following] from his [i.e., the Maggid’s] holy mouth: he studied the language of the birds and the palm trees, and so forth, with the BeSHT. He learned the secrets of the holy names and unifications (*yihudim*),[[26]](#endnote-27) and studied the book *Ma‘ayan ha-Hokhmah* with him as well.

He taught him the explanation of each word. He [the Maggid] showed me the letters and script of the angels *Sefer* *Razi’el [ha-Malakh]*, saying that [the BeSHT] had taught him all this.[[27]](#endnote-28)</>

The Maggid, claims Shlomo of Lutsk, received a set of miraculous skills from the BeSHT. This included direct knowledge of the angelic alphabet and how to decode the language of nature. The ability to grasp the “language of the birds and the palm trees” crops up in rabbinic and mystical literatures, where the skill is associated with figures like Shimon bar Yohai and Yitshak Luria. Attributing such knowledge to the Maggid—and the BeSHT—situates them in a long line of venerated mystical leaders.[[28]](#endnote-29)

*Sefer Razi’el ha-Malakh* and *Ma‘ayan ha-Hokhmah* typify the sort of literature that the BeSHT and the Maggid may well have studied together. The former integrates reflections on the power of language in *merkavah* traditions, Rhineland Pietism, and pre-Lurianic mysticism, combining them with the texts for various amulets and incantations commonly found in medieval Kabbalah.[[29]](#endnote-30) Several works called *Ma‘ayan ha-Hokhmah* were known in eighteenth-century Poland, all of which were much concerned with issues of language, creation, and revelation. Some of these works include meditations on God’s sacred name that are said to induce knowledge of the languages of nature.[[30]](#endnote-31) Neither of these books can be described as a mainstay of the classical kabbalistic canon. Blending the magical, theological, and experiential elements of religion, these works are precisely the sort of books that would have been cherished by eastern European *ba‘alei shem*.[[31]](#endnote-32)

Shlomo of Lutsk’s introduction also claims that Dov Ber learned certain angelic names from the BeSHT, which would enable him to predict the future and to prevent calamties slated to befall the Jewish people. When Shlomo asks the Maggid why he, unlike the BeSHT, did not put this arcane knowledge to practical use, Dov Ber offers a cryptic reply: “To do this, one must perform certain unifications (*yihudim*).”[[32]](#endnote-33) Are we to understand the Maggid’s apparent reticence may have stemmed from humility or an outright lack of confidence?

More likely it reflects a turn away from the more magical approach of the BeSHT. The Maggid’s homilies struggle with the notion of changing God’s will through prayer, but neither his sermons nor the hagiographical stories about his life refer to the predictive, apotropaic, or otherwise magical qualities of angelic names. *Sefer* *Raziel ha-Malakh* and *Ma‘ayan ha-Hokhmah* are almost never mentioned in the Maggid’s homilies.[[33]](#endnote-34) The reticence to build a reputation on miracles or to invoke these magical works may indicate that the Maggid was distancing himself—consciously or unconsciously—from the class of the *ba‘al shem* without depreciating their skills or subverting his revered teacher.[[34]](#endnote-35) The Maggid was an introverted, contemplative mystic driven by a set of theological and social concerns quite different from that of the expansive and extroverted BeSHT.[[35]](#endnote-36)

A wealth of later literary and oral legends attempted to fill in the striking gaps regarding the relationship between the Maggid and the BeSHT, reconstructing the bond between these two masters in the decades after their deaths.[[36]](#endnote-37) Among these, the tales of Dov Ber’s first encounter with the BeSHT preserved in *Keter Shem Tov* (1794) and *Shivhei ha-BeSHT* (1814) stand out because of their early date as well as their influence on later Hasidic tradition. Both accounts refer to the Maggid’s initial meeting with the BeSHT as a kind of life-altering conversion to a different way of approaching religious life.[[37]](#endnote-38) The dissimilarities between the tales, however, are quite telling, as are the many questions that they leave unaddressed.[[38]](#endnote-39)

The tale of their meeting presented in *Keter Shem Tov* describes the Maggid as an accomplished Talmudic and kabbalistic scholar. Hearing of the BeSHT’s reputation for efficacious prayer, the Maggid decides to visit him and judge the master’s spiritual prowess for himself. Dov Ber is astonished when he is greeted by strange behavior and offhand remarks rather than a deep spiritual teaching. He decides to return home, but before he departs, the Maggid is summoned to meet with the BeSHT:

<EXT>The Baal Shem Tov asked the Maggid, “Can you learn?” He replied, “Yes.” The Baal Shem Tov said, “Yes, I’ve heard you can learn.” He then asked, “Do you know something of the wisdom of the Kabbalah (*hokhmat ha-kabbalah*). “Yes,” the Maggid replied. ...

So the Baal Shem Tov showed him a certain passage in *Ets Ḥayyim*.[[39]](#endnote-40) The Maggid said, “Let me take the book and examine it for a while in order to really grasp it.” Then he told the Baal Shem Tov the plain-sense meaning (*peshat*) of the passage. The Baal Shem Tov said, “You don’t know anything.” He kept studying, telling the Baal Shem Tov, “My explanation is correct. If you know a different explanation, please tell me and we’ll see with whom the truth is found.” The Baal Shem Tov replied, “Stand up,” and he did so. The names of several angels were included in this passage, and, as soon as he recited it, the entire house was filled with light and a fire surrounded them. They actually witnessed the angels that were being mentioned. The Baal Shem Tov told the Maggid, “Your explanation was correct, but your study was without any soul.”[[40]](#endnote-41)</>

The Maggid is described as a learned scholar who reads kabbalistic sources with ease. But the tale depicts Dov Ber as lacking the BeSHT’s skill for conjuring up a mystical experience through reading texts. The Maggid’s interpretation of the source was apparently sound, but his exegesis is portrayed as purely cerebral, lacking heart and meaning. This was the spiritual deficiency that the BeSHT sought to correct. The story in *Keter Shem Tov* describes this moment of illuminated reading as fundamentally transformative, for the Maggid remains in Mezhbizh and absorbs “great and deep wisdoms” (*hokhmot gedolot ve-‘amukot*) that he carried with him upon returning to Mezritsh.

The parallel account of this meeting presented in *Shivhei ha-BeSHT* is patterned on the earlier story in *Keter Shem Tov*, but the early nineteenth-century witness includes a few critical differences.[[41]](#endnote-42) It portrays Dov Ber as weakened by his self-imposed penitential regimen, journeying to Mezhbizh to seek the BeSHT’s well-known healing powers. The Maggid is once again greeted with bizarre behavior, but the author of *Shivhei ha-BeSHT* informs the reader that the BeSHT has actually been waiting for Dov Ber to come to visit him. As the sorely disappointed Maggid prepares to depart, he is summoned to meet with the BeSHT and asked to read aloud from a work of medieval Kabbalah. The BeSHT is unsatisfied with the Maggid’s interpretation, and as he begins to recite the text himself, the room is filled with a terrifying splendor of “lights and torches” like those that accompanied God’s revelation at Sinai. The awestruck Maggid remains in Mezhbizh to study with his newfound master, but, as Dov Ber readies to depart, the BeSHT begs him for a blessing.

The tales preserved in *Keter Shem Tov* and *Shivhei ha-BeSHT* agree in depicting Dov Ber as a mature intellectual and scholar before he met the BeSHT. Neither refers to the Maggid’s other teachers, emphasizing the special connection between these two individuals.[[42]](#endnote-43) The two accounts also concur in describing the Maggid’s conversion after witnessing the BeSHT present a startling new method of reading mystical texts. Early Hasidic teachings generally favor oral speech over the written word, but the flights of mystical exegesis foregrounded in this tale embody the complicated hybridity of Hasidic culture.[[43]](#endnote-44)

In his landmark study of the oral scaffoldings that surround many religious writings, William Graham writes: “A sacred text can be read laboriously in silent study, chanted or sung in unthinking repetition, copied or illuminated in loving devotion, imaginatively depicted in art or drama, solemnly processed in ritual pageantry, or devoutly touched in hope of luck and blessing.”[[44]](#endnote-45) These tales of the BeSHT and the Maggid illustrate the mutual dependence of written and oral culture among some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jews. The Hasidic stories describe how a sacred text may be turned into an oral gesture when it is recited aloud. The result is a revelatory theophany, an intimate mode of performative interpretation born of the direct encounter of master and disciple.

Though perhaps intimated in the story in *Keter Shem Tov*, the depiction of the Maggid as destined to inherit the BeSHT’s mantle of leadership is clear in the tale in *Shivhei ha-BeSHT*.[[45]](#endnote-46) This argument of succession reflects the overall thrust of *Shivhei ha-BeSHT*, an early nineteenth-century attempt to construct a sacred history of Hasidism and its intellectual origins. Most later Hasidic hagiography continues this narrative of inheritance, though tales from various groups do so in very different ways. The stories of the Ruzhin dynasty, a Hasidic community founded by Dov Ber’s great-grandson Yisra’el of Ruzhin (1796–1850), highlight the Maggid’s singularity by minimizing his connection to the BeSHT.[[46]](#endnote-47) Other hagiographical traditions take the opposite tack, accentuating the Maggid’s fealty in bringing his own students to visit the BeSHT.[[47]](#endnote-48)

We noted that this notion of linear succession, once treated as historical fact, has been disproven in recent decades.[[48]](#endnote-49) Historical evidence suggests that the Maggid was one of many individuals in the loose-knit circle around the BeSHT. Several of these figures attracted their own disciples and operated as Hasidic leaders independent of Dov Ber’s influence.[[49]](#endnote-50) Individuals who had been connected to the BeSHT did not, by and large, become students of Dov Ber after the former’s death in 1760.[[50]](#endnote-51) Stories about the BeSHT’s disciples vying to assume his position are undoubtedly anachronistic, although the profound differences in personality and spiritual ethos found in the hagiography may indeed be grounded in historical reality.

Dov Ber was not the sole inheritor of the BeSHT’s legacy, or even the closest disciple of the paterfamiliasof Hasidism. The encounter between the two was clearly a determinative moment in Dov Ber’s life, but it is noteworthy that the Maggid’s sermons rarely invoke the BeSHT or his teachings by name.[[51]](#endnote-52) Direct references may have been included in the original oral forms of Dov Ber’s sermons, mentions that were lost as the homilies were put into writing. But the Maggid, who likely interacted with the BeSHT only a handful of times, probably did not possess a large body of specific teachings heard directly from the BeSHT.[[52]](#endnote-53)

The Maggid’s teachings make no significant attempt to ground his own ideas in the BeSHT’s teachings in order to prove their authenticity or demonstrate authority.[[53]](#endnote-54) Whereas the writings of Ya‘akov Yosef of Polnoye (d. 1783), another important disciple of the BeSHT, sought to *preserve* his master’s teachings by quoting them at length, the Maggid’s homilies may rightly be described as offering a new stage in the theological development and sophistication of the BeSHT’s approach to the spiritual quest. Dov Ber’s sermons integrate key elements of the BeSHT’s theology, including a radical conception of divine immanence, intense commitment to prayer, the importance of joy, and, above all, the centrality of words in the devotional life. But, as we shall see, Dov Ber recast the BeSHT’s ideas about human and divine speech into an original and sophisticated theory of language.

**<A>The Maggid’s Circle and Early Hasidism</>**

Dov Ber’s fame and reputation increased between 1760 and 1772, during which time he lived in the towns of Mezritsh, Rovno, and Hanipoli. Along with his duties as an official *maggid*, Dov Ber was occasionally called on to intervene in communal matters.[[54]](#endnote-55) The Maggid established himself as the leader of a loosely-knit circle of disciples, an array of charismatic figures and intellectual talents in their own right who went on to become the leaders of early Hasidism. Indeed, the Hasidic movement was built around the memory of the Maggid by personalities from among Dov Ber’s immediate circle of disciples. But the contours and dynamics of the group surrounding the Maggid are vexingly opaque.[[55]](#endnote-56) We do not know, for example, the number of disciples connected to the Maggid, how long each of these students stayed in Mezritsh, or how they related to one another during his lifetime.[[56]](#endnote-57)

There is a rather rich description of the Maggid’s center in the autobiography of Solomon Maimon (1754–1800).[[57]](#endnote-58) Together with the brief references to the Maggid’s circle in early anti-Hasidic bans (see below), and the occasional mention of gatherings or anecdotes in the works of Dov Ber’s disciples, Maimon’s description of his short visit to Mezritsh in his youth remains one of the most valuable sources regarding the Maggid’s life in the 1760s. These heavily edited reminiscences were first published in German in 1792–1794, intending to present eastern European Judaism to a western audience. But scholars have vetted Maimon’s account of Dov Ber’s court by comparing his version of the Maggid’s teachings to others preserved in Dov Ber’s name. And Maimon’s remarks on Hasidic ideology—including panentheism, devotion founded in joy, the quest for self-transcendence, and cultivation of feeling (rather than logical philosophy or rational knowledge)—were particularly astute.[[58]](#endnote-59)

Maimon visited Dov Ber at some point in the late 1760s, perhaps staying for as long as several weeks. His interest was piqued by secondhand knowledge of Dov Ber’s teachings, conveyed to him by a wandering disciple. Maimon claims, “I couldn’t help but admire the high quality of these thoughts, and was impressed with the ingenious exegesis supporting them.”[[59]](#endnote-60) The entrancing homily led him to journey to an unspecified master “B—” residing in the town of “M—,” surely none other than Dov Ber of Mezritsh himself. Denied a private audience,[[60]](#endnote-61) Maimon was invited to attend the leader’s Shabbat table and assured that he would find personal spiritual meaning in “the most exalted teachings directly from his mouth” during his public address:

<EXT>I arrived on the Sabbath for the festive meal and found that a large number of important men from all the region had gathered for the occasion. The great man finally appeared, cutting an impressive figure, dressed as he was in a white Atlas robe. Even his shoes and his tobacco container were white (among Kabbalists white is the color of grace). He gave each one of the arrivals a *Schalam*; that is, the great man greeted each of them.

We sat down to eat, and a solemn silence reigned during the meal. After we had finished, the leader sang a celebratory, spiritually uplifting melody. He held his hand in front of his forehead for a few moments, then began to call: “Z. from H.! M. from R.! S.M. from N.!”—the names and places of residence of all the new arrivals, something that astonished us more than a little. Each one of us was asked to recite a verse from the Holy Scripture. We did this. Thereupon, the leader began to give a sermon, taking the verses we had recited as the text. Even though they were completely unconnected verses from different books of the Holy Scripture, he linked them together with such artistry that they seemed to form a single whole. Even more extraordinary was that each of us felt the part of the sermon dealing with his verse contained something referring directly to his own pressing personal concerns. Naturally, we were amazed.[[61]](#endnote-62)</>

The young Maimon—probably in his teens—was greatly impressed by the Maggid’s charismatic presence as well as the philosophical depth of his sermon. He eventually grew disenchanted with Hasidism, but the experience in Mezritsh evidently left a significant and lasting impression on Maimon. This impact is visible throughout his *Autobiography*, often in surprising ways. He frequently uses parables to great effect in his book, drawing on the style of Hasidic homilies in addition to a medieval philosophical convention.[[62]](#endnote-63) His observation that Hasidic sermons emerge from exegetical improvisation rather than carefully planned sermons is quite insightful. Maimon even replicates the Maggid’s style of interpretive extemporizing in a later dialogue with Enlightenment figures in Berlin, revealing a way in which the Maggid’s style swiftly influenced Jewish discourse outside of Hasidic circles.[[63]](#endnote-64)

His short account offers historians critical grist for thinking about the Maggid’s center in Mezritsh as a precursor of the Hasidic court, which emerged as a highly structured institution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[[64]](#endnote-65) The Maggid’s practices, such as the public sermon around a ritualized meal on Shabbat, may well have served as a model for the courts founded by some of his immediate disciples. Dov Ber set himself up as a leader to whom others journeyed, a departure from the model attributed to his own teacher. Most legends describe the BeSHT as a peripatetic spiritual master, though historical records show that he was employed by the community in Mezhbizh. This hagiographical image of the BeSHT as a wanderer seems to be confirmed by the wide variety of disciples throughout Volhynia whose lives he touched.[[65]](#endnote-66)

The shift to a stationary model of religious leadership may have been precipitated by the fact that Dov Ber held an official appointment as *maggid meisharim* or communal preacher inthe towns of Mezritsh and Korets. If we are to believe the common hagiographical detail of his infirmity of the leg, the shift to a stationary mode of leadership may also have been a practical concession to his difficulty with walking. The choice to remain in Mezritsh had significant social and ideological results that changed the course of Hasidism. Dov Ber’s visitors experienced a kind of scholarly and spiritual performance, a tightly controlled display fusing theological reflection with theatrical ceremony. Maimon’s testimony reveals that this homiletical exhibition impressed many of those who called at the Maggid’s door.

Maimon’s work also suggests that Dov Ber delivered his homily before a random assortment of visitors rather than an exclusive group of scholars who were already well known to him.[[66]](#endnote-67) In addition to these public sermons, we may presume that other modes of personal instruction were made available to the Maggid’s closest disciples. The physical structure of later Hasidic courts often reflected what might be called concentric circles of membership or affiliation; the leader received the community at large and studied with more advanced disciples in different spaces.[[67]](#endnote-68)

Why might this range of visitors and students have been drawn to Mezritsh? Some talented intellects, many of whom went on to attain prestigious rabbinic posts, may have been attracted by the power of the Maggid’s theology. As was the young Maimon, such figures may have been “impressed with the ingenious exegesis” driving forward Dov Ber’s exegetical wizardry. But these scholars are only part of the story. A well-known Hasidic tale portrays a student traveling to Mezritsh simply to observe how the master tied his shoes, suggesting that this individual was enthralled by the Maggid’s charismatic presence rather than his scholarly reputation.[[68]](#endnote-69)

Another tradition recalls that the young Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745–1812 ), evidently a budding scholar of some repute, gravitated toward the Mezritsh circle because of Dov Ber’s passionate approach to fiery prayer rather than his Talmudic acumen.[[69]](#endnote-70) Only a few tales portray the Maggid as dazzling newcomers with his clairvoyance.[[70]](#endnote-71) But Dov Ber seems to have achieved renown among his disciples mostly as a scholar, a gifted homilist, and as a mystical pietist rather than a faith healer or clairvoyant seer.[[71]](#endnote-72) We do not have many tales of simple people coming to the Maggid—as they had to the BeSHT—in search of blessings or healing. That lack is significant, for the Maggid himself could hardly be called a popularizer.

Relatively little is known about the time these visitors-cum-students spent in Mezritsh. We do not know how long they tarried with the Maggid, nor do we know which books or religious exercises were the focal point of their studies. Considerable attention must have been given over to the rituals of Sabbath and other holidays, particularly since these were likely the times in which people visited Dov Ber. Some may have come to Mezritsh with the expectation of studying with the Maggid consistently. Themodel of the *yeshivah* came rather late to the Hasidic world, and it is unlikely that the Maggid’s center functioned primarily as an academy for improving textual scholarship.[[72]](#endnote-73)

The large volume of early Hasidic manuscripts does reveal that several of Dov Ber’s disciples were transcribing huge numbers of teachings; he must have addressed his followers frequently. The highly varied corpus of written sources transcribed in Dov Ber’s name may represent private classes, instructions given to a core group of students, and public sermons delivered before a broader community. Many of these creative homilies present spiritualized interpretations of passages from the Talmud, the curricular heart of the academies of learning in central and eastern Europe.[[73]](#endnote-74) Only a small number of teachings appear to be sustained discourses on aspects of Lurianic Kabbalah. The sophistication and intricacy of these homilies make them worthy of note, and they reveal the depth of Dov Ber’s engagement with kabbalistic traditions, but they are uncharacteristic of the Maggid’s corpus as a whole.[[74]](#endnote-75)

Bracketing the question of curriculum, a few internal sources by his disciples shed some light on their time in Mezritsh. The following excerpt from a letter by Avraham of Kalisk (1741–1810), for example, describes the circle’s studies with Dov Ber as follows: “When I and my colleagues heard just one word of the Maggid of Mezritsh, we would be satisfied with that one utterance for a long while—if we had come only to hear a single word, it would have been enough for us. We kept guard over [the teaching] with holiness and purity, until a second word was forthcoming, as it says, ‘when you find honey, eat what you need, lest [you become filled with it and vomit it forth]’ (Prov. 25:16).”[[75]](#endnote-76) Avraham’s words paint a vivid picture of Dov Ber’s disciples studying together with assiduous focus, slowly moving from one matter to another only after a significant period of consideration. This letter was written at least two decades after Avraham’s tenure in Mezritsh. It was penned in response to the publication of a theological treatise by his colleague Shneur Zalman of Liady, an event that Avraham of Kalisk saw as the untoward outpouring and popularization of kabbalistic secrets that were best restricted to the elites. This context reveals a polemic edge in the passage cited above, but Avraham’s description of studying with the Maggid is fully consistent with Dov Ber’s descriptions of sacred study as an exercise in sustained contemplative attunement.

These traditions leave us with the mysterious figure of the Maggid standing at the heart of the loosely defined circle in Mezritsh. His life and homilies represent a critical moment, an intermediary stage in the emergence of the Hasidic notion of *tsaddik*. The idea of the “righteous person” or “holy man” as a communal leader was one of the most important social and theological innovations of the Hasidic movement.[[76]](#endnote-77) Drawing on a range of earlier models, the Hasidic master fused the aspects of the biblical priest, prophet, and the king, as well as kabbalistic notions of the *tsaddik* and, in some cases, the eastern European institution of the *rav*.[[77]](#endnote-78) Dov Ber’s sermons refer to the *tsaddik* as a powerful individual whose worship and words are capable of transforming the cosmos. Rarely does the Maggid describe this figure as a communal leader surrounded by disciples, or as one who “descends” into the masses in order to raise ordinary people to a higher spiritual level.[[78]](#endnote-79)

How should we account for the discrepancy between Dov Ber’s foregrounded role in the emergence of Hasidism on the one hand, and his depictions of the *tsaddik* as a private, inwardly driven mystic on the other? There may have been a marked disconnect between the Maggid’s teachings on the nature of the *tsaddik* and the leadership institutions that emerged in his lifetime.[[79]](#endnote-80) But Dov Ber’s sermons on the power of the *tsaddik* must have had a self-referential dimension, fusing reflexive murmurings with theoretical meditations on the nature of the kabbalistic holy man. This doubling of language may indeed have been clear to the members of his circle. Perhaps, as Arthur Green has suggested, the tension reveals that the naturally retreating Maggid was hesitatingly drawn into his position as a communal leader in Mezritsh.[[80]](#endnote-81)

There is another perspective on this question that must be considered. Theholy manof Dov Ber’s homilies may not preside over a fully developed Hasidic community, but a significant number of his sermons do refer to the *tsaddik* as a teacher surrounded by a flock of students. These disciples, claims the Maggid, force the master to emerge from the comforts of contemplative silence. Such sermons depict the *tsaddik*’s struggle to overcome the limitations of language, translating the expansive vistas of his mind into concrete words that must be unpacked by his disciples. This combination of spiritual teacher and communal leader in the *tsaddik*, embodied in the figure of Dov Ber as well as in the ideational content of his sermons, became a defining characteristic of almost all later Hasidic leaders.[[81]](#endnote-82)

**<A>Dov Ber’s Final Years and the Legacy of the Maggid</>**

Conflict was fated to play a major role in the last two years of the Maggid’s life. Dov Ber relocated from Mezritsh to Rovne between 1770 and 1772,[[82]](#endnote-83) and, during this time, the scholarly elites of White Russia and Lithuania were growing more vocal in their opposition to early Hasidic leaders and practices.[[83]](#endnote-84) The Maggid’s students had spread his teachings into White Russia and Lithuania as well as Podolia and Volhynia. In 1772, the conflict with the opponents of Hasidism, who eventually coalesced into a bloc called *mithnaggedim* (opponents) broke out in earnest with the publication of a *herem*, or “writ of excommunication,” in the towns of Brody, Vilna, and Shklov. These decrees were followed by caustic anti-Hasidic pamphlets and the public burning of Hasidic manuscripts.[[84]](#endnote-85)

Though accusations of theological infractions were not entirely absent, these polemics suggest that Lithuanian scholars were incensed more by the social improprieties of some of Dov Ber’s students than by their theology.[[85]](#endnote-86) Such flashpoints include the formation of their own prayer quorums, changing the times of prayer, adopting new regulations for ritual slaughter, unbecoming and boisterous movements during worship, and acting disrespectfully toward scholars of Torah. A few of these documents refer to the Hasidim collectively as Mezritsher, obviously alluding to their connection to the Maggid, but it is worth noting that Dov Ber’s name rarely comes up in these polemics. When Dov Ber does appear in broadsides, the Maggid is mentioned briefly and without any of the vehemence marshaled against other early Hasidic leaders.[[86]](#endnote-87) The authors of the anti-Hasidic writings may have been reticent to ridicule Dov Ber directly, perhaps seeing him as a reputable scholar or Kabbalist.[[87]](#endnote-88)

Lack of direct textual evidence makes it difficult to determine the Maggid’s reaction to the growing opposition by the Lithuanian elites. Nothing in the immediate corpus of teachings attributed to Dov Ber seems to be a direct reaction to them, although in several homilies—perhaps late ones—the Maggid counsels silence as the correct response to accusations from one’s detractors. But Dov Ber may have attempted to prevent his students from inciting the wrath of the Lithuanian scholars.[[88]](#endnote-89) A public letter written by his student Shneur Zalman of Liady, who emerged as one of the most important Hasidic leaders of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, describes a gathering of the Maggid’s disciples in Rovne in summer 1772 in response to the writ of excommunication. Shneur Zalman claims that the Maggid rebuked his disciple Abraham of Kalisk for outrageous public displays of enthusiasm in 1770, including deprecating the study of Torah and performing cartwheels in the public square.[[89]](#endnote-90)

This letter must be read with a critical eye. It was written in 1805 amid a fiery controversy between Shneur Zalman and Avraham of Kalisk.[[90]](#endnote-91) Both economic and theological issues were at stake in this conflict, which hinged on the question of which leader’s spiritual path was more authentic to the legacy of the Maggid. This context, however, does not make the letter’s mention of a meeting necessarily inauthentic, and it seems unlikely the idea was made up out of whole cloth. The epistle was an open letter addressed to the Hasidic community, referring to the Rovne gathering in 1772 as an event that was “publicly known.” Shneur Zalman described a similar meeting in an earlier letter from circa 1778:

<EXT>These [anti-Hasidic] tracts were sent throughout the communities of the Diaspora. It would not be believed, were I to tell of the great humiliations and afflictions suffered by the famous *tsaddikim* of Volhynia. They were unable to remain in their homes, and they sought refuge beneath the wings of our great master, of blessed memory, in the holy community of Rovne.

[They held] a meeting of counsel, inquiring what to do. There were many ways to proceed, to thwart and disrupt their thoughts [i.e., the malevolent intentions of the *mithnaggedim*]; to write things about them that are bitter many times over, in the language of truth that endures forever, publishing them and sending them throughout [the lands of] Jacob. And there were other paths as well.

But our great master chose to take no action against them, because the power of Israel lies entirely in their words, to cry out to God and to disrupt their wicked thoughts and prevent their hands from doing anything. Just as he interpreted it for us, so it was.[[91]](#endnote-92)</>

Shneur Zalman depicts the Maggid’s students, downtrodden and pursued, as fleeing to their teacher in order to escape the wrath of their accusers. He claims that they were ready to turn the tables on their opponents by circulating broadsides of their own, but the Maggid enjoined them to take no action other than prayer. Such supplications, claimed Dov Ber, are the only way to inspire divine intercession and thus ensure defense of his disciples. Salvation is found in the language of prayer rather than polemics; words, not deeds, deliver them from the hands of the *mithnaggedim*. We shall see that this emphasis on the redemptive qualities of language is reflected throughout the Maggid’s sermons.[[92]](#endnote-93)

Dov Ber relocated from Rovne to the small town of Hanipoli (Pol. Annopol) in the last months of his life.[[93]](#endnote-94) Very little is known about the reasons behind this move or the final period of the Maggid’s biography. The Maggid had been infirm and physically weak for many years, and his illness appears to have intensified considerably in this period.[[94]](#endnote-95) Dov Ber died on December 15, 1772, and he was buried in Hanipoli. His close disciple Meshullam Zusya Weisblum, a native of that city, was interred next to him nearly three decades later.[[95]](#endnote-96)

The Hebrew date of the Maggid’s death—the 19th of Kislev—came to be celebrated in Hasidic communities. Hasidic legends embellish the circumstances of his death. One particularly interesting tale describes Dov Ber’s coffin moving of its own accord, refusing to rest until his disciples cried out that such a miracle would transform the whole world into followers of Hasidism.[[96]](#endnote-97) This story is obviously a bit of late hagiography, but it does mirror the Maggid’s reticent attitude toward miracles. The tale may also reflect Dov Ber’s misgivings, or at least ambivalence, about turning the spiritual ethos forged by the fellowship in Mezritsh into a mass movement.[[97]](#endnote-98)

The Maggid’s influence on later generations of Hasidism was shaped by his family as well as his students. Hasidic tradition remembers the Maggid and his wife as having had only one child, a son born circa 1730 after many years of infertility. Avraham, named for the Maggid’s father, is often called “the Angel” (*ha-malakh*) because of his ascetic leanings. Legends describe his intense introspection and piety as having been even more extreme than Dov Ber himself.[[98]](#endnote-99) Avraham served as the *maggid* in Fastov (Ukr. Fastiv), perhaps struggling to inhabit a public role despite his brooding contemplative piety.[[99]](#endnote-100)

Dov Ber’s saintly child outlived him by just a few years. Avraham died at a young age in late 1776. His first wife predeceased him, but Avraham’s second wife, Gittel, the daughter of a prominent Talmudic scholar, survived her husband for many long years.[[100]](#endnote-101) Hasidic lore glowingly refers to her wisdom, describing Gittel as witnessing visions of Dov Ber and her deceased husband.[[101]](#endnote-102) She never remarried, and although the account of her life in *Shivhei ha-BeSHT* concludes with a rosy ending, Gittel was evidently financially bereft and died after moving to the land of Israel.[[102]](#endnote-103)

Avraham is rightly counted among the Maggid’s students whose teachings bear the imprint of his father’s legacy.[[103]](#endnote-104) His homilies are conceptually and terminologically similar to those of Dov Ber, including the focus on the contemplative quality of the intellect, the quest to experience the divine Naught (*ayin*), and the necessity of total abstention from the physical realm.[[104]](#endnote-105) Of particular note is Avraham’s consistent focus on issues of language. Like his father, he frequently refers to the practice of raising up speech to its source, linking spoken words to their origin in the worshipper’s mind and ultimately to the font of language streaming forth from the Godhead itself.[[105]](#endnote-106) Avraham denounces the allure of silence despite his ascetic bent, arguing that God created the cosmos in order to reveal the divine presence through the medium of human speech.[[106]](#endnote-107)

Inherited dynasties had not yet emerged on the scene of Hasidic history by the 1770s. Dov Ber’s son neither fashioned himself as leader after his father’s death nor took a prominent role in the spread or emergence of Hasidism.[[107]](#endnote-108) This decision to remain a small-town *maggid* rather than a leader among Dov Ber’s disciples may reflect Avraham’s personal theology as well as his retreating personality. Amplifying his father’s teachings on the subject, Avraham’s homilies portray the *tsaddik* as a private mystic who turns inward and journeys into the deepest realms of the devotional mind.[[108]](#endnote-109)

Hasidic communities were founded by some of the Maggid’s later descendants. Avraham’s son Shalom Shakhna of Prohobist (Ukr. Pohrebyshche), who died in 1802, left behind him a six-year-old son named Yisra’el. This young man went on to establish one of the most important and powerful Hasidic dynasties in the city of Ruzhin, and then Sadagora. Yisra’el was a controversial but charismatic leader, and his claims to authority and legitimacy were, at least in part, based on being the great-grandson of the Maggid.[[109]](#endnote-110) His own descendants, who established themselves as *tsaddikim* in Sadagora, Chortkov, and Boyan, remain a very important part of the present-day Hasidic landscape.

The theological and social legacy of the Maggid was primarily carried forward by his many disciples. In fact, several of these students—including Aaron of Karlin (1736–1772),[[110]](#endnote-111) Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk (ca. 1730–1788), and Avraham of Kalisk—seem to have operated as independent leaders and teachers of smaller communities during their master’s lifetime. This fact, argues Ada Rapoport-Albert, further demonstrates that neither the BeSHT nor Dov Ber should be described as the leader of united Hasidic movement.[[111]](#endnote-112)

Hasidism as such was born in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, as the ideology and new social structures began to crystalize through the efforts of the Maggid’s students, and as increasingly public conflict with the *mithnaggedim* forced the Maggid’s disciples to articulate their theology as their identity as a distinct social group began to cohere. This makes it tempting to dismiss the notion of a Mezritsh “circle,” even as a relatively unstructured community, as an anachronistic projection.[[112]](#endnote-113) Rapoport-Albert has claimed that individual disciples traveled to study with the Maggid for variable periods of time, departing Mezritsh without maintaining close ties—either with the Maggid himself, or with the other scholars and students with whom they may have come into contact. Her argument is grounded largely in textual silence, based on the small number of witnesses to communication between Dov Ber and his students and among the disciples themselves.

It is possible, however, to refer to a decentralized group of scholars as a flourishing religious movement even though it lacks centralized leadership.[[113]](#endnote-114) Numerous references to one another in the later published works of Dov Ber’s students offer some evidence of an emerging “circle” of disciples,[[114]](#endnote-115) as do the many letters they exchanged[[115]](#endnote-116) and the relatively early hagiographical traditions in which the Maggid’s students interact with one another.[[116]](#endnote-117) This is also true of the figures mentioned in the anti-Hasidic bans starting in 1772, writings that gesture toward a loose-knit group of people associated with this circle.[[117]](#endnote-118) Important familial connections were also forged between Dov Ber’s disciples as well. In addition to marriages between their children, we should note that the Maggid’s own grandson was raised by several of his former disciples.[[118]](#endnote-119)

Attempting to identify a stable or cohesive circle of well-defined disciples is to misunderstand the links that held the Mezritsh group together. Theirs was a shared theological project of renewal, one that emerged from their own religious personalities and creativity and the legacy of the Maggid.[[119]](#endnote-120) The homilies and teachings of Dov Ber’s students bear the unmistakable influence of the Maggid’s theology, even when not directly citing a specific tradition from their teacher.[[120]](#endnote-121) The disciples may not have kept up “any links by regular correspondence” with the Maggid, but the charismatic image of their teacher and his theology were imprinted on their careers and spiritual paths.

By the mid-1760s Dov Ber had emerged as one of the most powerful voices in the chorus of those branching from the BeSHT’s spiritual ethos. The core group of some dozen disciples, including a wide range of extraordinary and talented students, built Hasidism in the decades after the Maggid’s death. The spread of these disciples did not reflect a conscious decision, either as a consensus or from single centralized authority, to turn Hasidism into a popular or mass movement. Dov Ber did not send out his disciples to carve up the territory of eastern Europe and champion the banner of Hasidism, nor can he be described as the architect at the head of this transformation. This transition from elite circle to mass movement was an organic process, a development driven by spiritual excitement and born aloft by the religious personalities of the leaders.

The expansion of Hasidism from small groups into larger communities, both during the Maggid’s lifetime and after his death, was swift though not instantaneous. It took on distinct forms in White Russia, Ukraine, and regions that are now Poland. Some of Dov Ber’s particularly learned disciples traveled far in order to secure official positions as the rabbis of prominent towns and cities; these included Shmuel Shmelke Horowitz in Nikolsburg (1726–1778), Pinhas Horowitz in Frankfurt am Main (1731–1805), and Levi Yitshak in Ryczywół, Pinsk, and Barditshev (ca. 1740–1809). Other students, like Shlomo of Lutsk, remained in the area of Mezritsh and Korets long after the Maggid’s death. Still others, like Shneur Zalman of Liady and Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, went on to found Hasidic fellowships in or near their places of origin.[[121]](#endnote-122) The very different attempts of these disciples to adapt, recast, and translate Dov Ber’s spiritual message grew into the multifaceted religious movement that exerted a powerful force on Jewish modernity.

<N-1>Chapter 1</>

<UNN>Notes to epigraphs: Heilman, *Beit Rabbi*, 189–190, translated in Green et al., *Speaking Torah*, 1:vii; Twersky, *Introduction to the Code*, 76.</>

1. See Petrovsky-Shtern, “Master of an Evil Name,” 217–248; idem, “You Will Find It in the Pharmacy,” 13–54; and Rosman, *Founder,* 1–42, 173–186. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. See Rosman, *Founder*; and Etkes, *Besht*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. On this shift, see Green, “Hasidic Tsaddik.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. See Rapoport-Albert, “Hasidism After 1772,” 76–140; and cf. Dubnow, “Maggid,” 58–66. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. For a helpful study of the ritual complexity life among courtiers, nobility, and monarchs, see Elias, *Court Society*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. See Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*; and Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*. See also Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate*, 131–170. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. On *Shivhei ha-BeSHT*, the most important collection of Hasidic tales, see Rosman, *Founder*, 143–158; and Etkes, *Besht*, 203–248; and Fishbane, “Perceptions of Greatness,” 195–221. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. See *Bi-leshon Hasidim Tithadesh*. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. See Bodek, *Seder ha-Dorot ha-Hadash*, 31–32; Berger, *‘Eser Orot*, 12a–14a; Buber, *Tales*, 98–112. Heilman’s *Beit Rabbi* offers an image of the Maggid from the perspective of the Habad Hasidic community; see Karlinsky*,* “Dawn,” 20–46. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. See Gries, *Book in Early Hasidism,* 35–40; Dan, “Bow,” 175–193; Meir, *Literary Hasidism*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. On Hasidic tales and their use, see Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” 218; and cf. Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation,” 228–250. See also Green, “Buber, Scholem”; Kauffman, “Hasidic Story,” 101–126; Rapoport-Albert, “Hagiography with Footnotes,” 119–159; Nigal, *Hasidic Tale*; and Dynner, “Hasidic Tale,” 655–675. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 132–134, notes that lineage swiftly became determinative for Hasidic leadership in Poland. For attempts to construct an illustrious pedigree for the Maggid, see *Kerem Yisrael*, 7–8; *Ner Yisra’el*, 6:424–428; and *Ohalei Ya‘akov*, 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Despite his distaste for all things Hasidic, Graetz, *History of the Jews*, 5:402, was moved to write: “He was well read in Talmudical and Kabbalistic writings, was a skillful preacher (Maggid) ... [and] removed from the Chassidim the stigma of ignorance.” The claim that the youthful Maggid studied with the renowned Talmudist Ya‘akov Yehoshua Falk (1680–1756) lacks evidence. See Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 232. Cf. *Ner Yisra’el*, 6:413; and Lederberg, *Gateway*, 318. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. See *Igra de-Pirka*, ch. 1; and *Ner Yisra’el*, 6:430. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. See SLA, 35–36; and Pedaya, “Social-Religious-Economic Model of Hasidism,” 343–344. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. The account in *Kerem Yisrael*, 11a, has the Maggid living in Rovne before Mezritsh. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. See Weiss, “Beginnings of Hasidism,” 125–128; Piekarz, *Beginning of Hasidism*, esp. 42–44, 114–115, 142–146, 163–168; Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, 44–63; and Katz, *Tradition and Crisis*, 144–147, 186–187, 194, 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. The Maggid’s name does not appear among the scholars mentioned in the introduction to *Mahberet ha-Kodesh* (Korets, 1783), a kabbalistic work printed from a manuscript in the Mezritsh *beit midrash* by Shlomo of Lutsk. See Gries, “Hasidic Managing Editor,” 150–151. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. See Reiner, “Wealth, Social Position, and the Study of Torah,” 287–328; Kahana, “Changing the World’s Measures,” 29–53. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. See Scholem, “Tradition and New Creation,” 118–157; Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, 38–83; Hallamish, *Kabbalah*. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. On the state of Kabbalah in eastern Europe, see Idel, Hasidism, 33–44; idem, “One from a Town,” 79–104; and Hundert, Jews in Poland-Lithuania, 119–185. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. See Piekarz, *Beginning of Hasidism*, esp. 11–174, 269–302, 361–377. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. See the letter in Rosman, *Founder*, 114–115. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. See, for example, LY, no. 191, fol. 58a; and *Ner Yisra’el*, 6:432. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. See *In Praise*, 81; and Lederberg, *Gateway*, 81 and 342 nn. 117–118. The impetus behind the Kherson Geniza forgeries, the purported correspondence between early Hasidic figures, demonstrates how little is known about their relationships; see Rapoport-Albert, “Hagiography with Footnotes,” 131–137. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. *Yihudim* or “unifications” refer to the kabbalistic practice of uniting divine names and the *sefirot*; see below. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. MDL, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. See b. Sukkah 28a. See Zohar 3:228a, 1:11a; *Bereshit* *Rabbah* 79:6; Zohar 2:6b, 3:201a-b; *Shivhei ha-Ari*, ed. Hillel, p. 20. See also Rapoport-Albert, “Hagiography with Footnotes,” 123; Fishbane, “Perceptions of Greatness,” 205–206; and *In Praise*, 242–244. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. On *Sefer Razi’el ha-Malakh*, see Idel, *Hasidism*, 381 n. 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. See Verman, *Books of Contemplation*, 49; and Avivi, *Kabbala Luriana*, 1:204–208; 2:564–568. See also *Or Ne‘erav*, 3:3, 24; and *‘Emek ha-Melekh*, 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 348–350; Idel, *Hasidism*, 9–30, 65–81, 206–207. See Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science*, esp. 102–160. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. MDL, 2–3. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. See OT, *va-era*, no. 79, p. 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. See also Cooper, “But I Will Tell of Their Deeds,” 127–163. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. See *In Praise*, no. 36, p. 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. See Nigal, “Primary Source for Hasidic Tales,” 349–364; Lederberg, *Gateway*, 81–113; and Amshalem, “Stories in My Praise,” 27–64. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. See Nigal, “Primary Source for Hasidic Tales,” 349–364. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. See Idel, “Besht Passed His Hand,” 79–106; Garb, *Shamanic Trance*, 113–114, 144, 214 nn. 104–106. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Mention of this key work of Lurianic Kabbalah, first published in 1782, is a telltale anachronism. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. KST, no. 424, 264. See Lederberg, *Gateway*, 86–89; Amshalem, “Stories in My Praise,” 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. See *In Praise*, no. 62, pp. 81–84. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. See the note in *In Praise*, 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. See Thomas, *Literacy and Orality*. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. The usability of *Shivhei ha-BeSHT* is further complicated by the fact that it circulated almost simultaneously in Hebrew and Yiddish versions. See Mondshine, *Shivhei ha-Besht*; and Grözinger, “Source Value,” 354–363. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. *Ner Yisra’el*, 6:423. Cf. *Ohalei Ya‘akov*, 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. See *Sefer Likkutei Amarim*, fol. 9a; and Mondshine, *Migdal ‘Oz*, 368. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. See Dubnow, “Maggid of Miedzyrzecz,” 58–66. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. The 1765 will of a certain wealthy man connected to the BeSHT lists the Maggid of Mezritsh as the beneficiary of a small sum of money together with many others, including Pinhas of Korets and Yehiel Mikhel of Zlotshev. This text neither singles out the Maggid nor implies that he is the BeSHT’s primary disciple, but it confirms that the Maggid’s connection to his teacher was publicly known during Dov Ber’s lifetime. See David ben Israel Halperin, *Darkhei Tsiyyon*, unpaginated; and Etkes, *Besht*, 200–201. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. See *Seder ha-Dorot ha-Hadash*, 19b–23b; *Imrei* *Pinhas ha-Shalem*, 1:484; Heschel, *Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, 19–29. See, for example, the story *Kahal Hasidim ha-Hadash*, fols. 11d–12b, in which Ya‘akov Yosef admits the following after witnessing Dov Ber deliver a sermon: “Since the day our master the BeSHT died, *shekhinah* departed with her pack and established her place with the Maggid.”Seealso *Ben Porat Yosef,* vol. 2, *derush le-shabbat ha-gadol,* 606; and *Imrei Pinhas ha-Shalem*, 1:391. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. See MDL, no. 95, p. 164; and *Dibrat* *Shlomo, pekkudei*, 210; ibid., *shemini*, 262. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
52. See Idel, “Your Word,” 235–236 and n. 69; cf. idem, *Ben*, 536. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
53. Here the brief contrast of a phenomenon from the Islamic world will be instructive. Since the eighth century Muslim scholars have sought to establish an authentic *isnad*, a chain of tradition, for each *hadith* that supports and verifies its authority. See Juynboll, *Studies on the Origins*, esp. 155–175, 343–383; and Robinson, “Study of Islamic Historiography,” 201, 205–208, 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
54. See Dinur, “Origins of Hasidism,” 139–140; Chone Shmeruk, “Hasidic Movement, 182–192, esp. 187; Ettinger, “Hasidism and the *Kahal*,” 66–67. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
55. See *Kahal Hasidim*, fol. 41a. In his *Ve-Tsivah ha-Kohen*, 84, a certain Aaron ha-Kohen recalls visiting the Maggid in Torchin and Rovne, suggesting that Dov Ber was already a public leader before moving to Mezritsh. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
56. See *Ve-Tsivah ha-Kohen*, 84, suggests that some disciples remained with the Maggid for weeks at a time. See also Wilensky, *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*, 1:308; and cf. *Ner Yisra’el*, 6:413. For later attempts to list the Maggid’s students, see Walden, *Shem ha-Gedolim*, 11a-b; *Seder ha-Dorot ha-Hadash*, 31–49;Alfasi, *he-Hasidut,* 1:139–192; Berger, *‘Eser Orot*, 17b–18a. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
57. See Maimon, *Autobiography,* 86–100; Weiss, “One of the Sayings,” 107–109; Assaf, “Teachings of Dov Ber,” 99–101. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
58. Socher, *Radical Enlightenment,* 76–78, argues convincingly that, despite his many criticisms, Maimon respected the Maggid’s teachings and the high level of self-perfection they demanded. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
59. Maimon, *Autobiography*, 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
60. The custom of a personal audience with the *tsaddik*, known as *yehidut*, became an important and widespread Hasidic practice in the generations after the Maggid’s death; see Etkes, *Rabbi Shneur Zalman*, 31–47, 94–95; and Pedaya, “Social-Religious-Economic Model,” 353. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
61. Maimon, *Autobiography,* 96–97. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
62. See Socher, *Radical Enlightenment*, 134–135. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
63. See Maimon, *Autobiography*,106–107 where he notes the importance of understanding the “language of animals” in mystery cults. See also Melamed, “Spinozism, Acosmism, and Hassidism,” 75–85. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
64. See Etkes, “Early Hasidic ‘Court,’” 157–169. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
65. See Weiss, “Beginnings of Hasidism,” 129, and 179–181. See also Rosman, *Founder*, 117–119; Etkes, *Besht*, 218–223; and Wolfson, “Walking as a Sacred Duty,” 180–207. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
66. For a firsthand description of the Maggid’s house as filled with people varying in age and scholarly ability, see *Or ha-Me’ir*, vol. 2, *devarim*, p. 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
67. See Gellman, *Emergence of Hasidism*, 101–145. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
68. See *Seder ha-Dorot ha-Hadash*, 35; cited by Scholem, *Major Trends*, 344. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
69. See Heilman, *Beit Rabbi*, 8 n. 2; and Scholem, *Major Trends*, 338. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
70. See *Kahal Hasidim ha-Hadash*, fol. 11a; Maimon, *Autobiography*, 96–97; *Kahal Hasidim*, fol. 45b; *Imrei Pinhas*, 1:267; *Divrei David*, fols. 4b–5a; and Amshalem, “Stories in My Praise,” 42–49. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
71. See Heilman, *Beit Rabbi*, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
72. See Stampfer, *Families, Rabbis, and Education*, 252–274. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
73. See Reiner, “Wealth, Social Position, and the Study of Torah,” 287–328. Gries, *Hebrew Book*, 68, argued that the sermons printed in MDL loosely follow the order of the Babylonian Talmud. This suggests that the scholars assembled in the Maggid’s *beit midrash* were studying Talmud, and he addressed them regularly, grounding his homilies in the shared text. See *Kahal Hasidim ha-Hadash*, 18d–19a. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
74. See LY, nos.137–159, fols. 46a–53b. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
75. Barnai, *Hasidic Letters*, no. 65, 244. It is worth recalling that this letter, like that of Shneur Zalman described below, was written amid the conflict between these two disciples of the Maggid. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
76. See Etkes, “Zaddik,” 159–167. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
77. See Green, “Typologies of Leadership,” 127–156; idem, “Zaddiq as Axis Mundi,” 327–347. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
78. See Green, “Zaddiq as Axis Mundi,” 338–339. Cf. Weiss, *Studies in Braslav Hasidism*, 104–107; and Rapoport-Albert, “God and the Zaddik,” 318–320. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
79. See Pedaya, “Social-Religious-Economic,” 351–352; and Piekarz, *Hasidic Leadership*, 92–94. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
80. See Green, “Around the Maggid’s Table,” 85–86. This interpretation is epitomized by the well-known story in which the Maggid demands to know why God has punished him with fame; see *Kerem Yisrael*, 8a. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
81. See Etkes, “Zaddik,” 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
82. *Yesod Yosef*, *hakdamah,* unpaginated, includes a letter from Zusya of Hanipoli that mentions a rabbinic figure in Rovne who adopted some Hasidic practices under the influence of the Maggid. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
83. The conflict with the *mithnaggedim* may have started as early as the 1760s; see the sources cited in Wilensky, *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*, 1:27 n. 1; and Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 284 n. 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
84. See Wilensky, *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*, 1:27. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
85. See Wilensky, *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*, 1:42–43, 66, 182, 252–267; ibid., 2:201. See also Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, 165; and Gries, *Book in Early Hasidism*, 19. See, however, Wilensky, *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*, 1:150, for an anti-Hasidic ban from 1787 that explicitly mentions MDL (citing it as *Likkutei Amarim*). [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
86. See Wilsensky, *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*, 2:259–260. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
87. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
88. See Gries, “Hassidic Conduct Literature,” 198–236, 278–305. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
89. See *Iggerot Kodesh—Admor ha-Zaken*, vol. 1, no. 51, 125–126; Barnai, *Hasidic Letters*, no. 68, 255–256; and Etkes, *Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady*, 240–241. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
90. On the conflict, see Gries, “From Myth to Ethos,” 117–146; and Etkes, *Rabbi Shneur Zalman*, 208–258. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
91. *Iggerot Kodesh*, pt. 2, 19–20. This account is mirrored in a letter from Pinhas Horowitz in Hillman, *Iggerot Ba‘al ha-Tanya*, 117–118. See also Mondshein, *Migdal ‘Oz*, 246–248. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
92. See below; and ST, 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
93. See Wilensky, *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*, 2:237, 247; and Heilman, *Beit Rabbi*, 19 n. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
94. See Wilensky, *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*, 1:40 n. 24. See also *Ner Yisra’el*, 6:416–417. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
95. Hasidic tradition records a special relationship between the two, so perhaps Zusya moved there to help his teacher in the final months. See *Kerem Yisrael*, 11a; and see *Kitvei* *Yoshiy* *Shub*, no. 16, pp. 92–93. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
96. See *Yoshiya* *Shub*, no. 3, p. 89. See also *Kerem Yisrael*, 11a. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
97. See Green, “Levi Yizhak of Berdichev,” 254–268. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
98. A fascinating—though admittedly late—tradition claims Dov Ber and his son were no longer on speaking terms because of Avraham’s unwillingness to be intimate with his wife. This tradition appears in a note in box 294 of the Abraham Joshua Heschel Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library of Duke University. See also *Seder ha-Dorot ha-Hadash*, 33–34. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
99. See *In Praise*, no. 72, pp. 91–92. [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
100. See *In Praise*, no. 75, pp. 94–99. See Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 232–233. [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
101. *Sivhei ha-BeSHT* includes a lengthy story—one of the longest in the book—that was preserved and retold by Gittel. See Margolin, *Human Temple*, 206–210; and Kauffman, “Hasidic Women,” 223–257. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
102. The story of Gittel was the subject of a recent Israeli novel, appearing in English as Herzfeld, *Trail of Miracles*. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
103. Snippets of his teachings appear in the works of Dov Ber’s disciples, and a collection of Avraham’s sermons was published as *Hesed le-Avraham* in 1851. See also the manuscripts in Mondshine, *Migdal ‘Oz*, 389–398; and Gries, *Conduct Literature*, 132. For later Hasidic traditions claiming that Avraham was the study-partner (*havruta*) of Shneur Zalman of Liady, see *Beit* *Rabbi*, 9–10, 178–179. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
104. See Kauffman, “Typology of the Tsaddik,” 239–272; and Stillman, “Transcendent God, Immanent Kabbalah,” 310–330. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
105. See *Hesed le-Avraham*, *noah*, 26; *va-yetse*, 43–45; *va-yishlah*, 46; and *ha’azinu*, 87–88. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
106. See *Hesed le-Avraham*, *toledot*, 42; and cf. ibid., *likkutim me-shir ha-shirim*, 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
107. On the emergence of Hasidic dynasties, see Polen, “Rebbetzins,” 53–84. [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
108. See *Hesed le-Avraham*, *hakdamah*, 21; ibid., *lekh lekha*, 30–32; *va-yishlah*, 45; *va-yeshev*, 47–48;and *ki tavo*, 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
109. See *In Praise*, no. 72, pp. 91–92; and Assaf, *Regal Way,* 32, 47–56. [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
110. See Shor, *Ketavim*, 242–297. [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
111. Rapoport-Albert, “Hasidism After 1772,” 76–140. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
112. See Rapoport-Albert, “Hasidism After 1772,” 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
113. See Etkes, *Besht*, 113–202, 249–258; Rosman, *Founder*, 166–168. [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
114. See *Orah le-Hayyim*, vol. 2, *va-ethanan*, 293; *Kedushat Levi*, vol. 1, *likkutim*, 481. [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
115. For example, see the letters in Hillman, *Iggerot Ba‘al ha-Tanya.* [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
116. It is curious that Shlomo of Lutsk, a relative of Dov Ber as well as an important editor and transcriber of the Maggid’s teachings, is scarcely mentioned in any of the hagiographic traditions or theological works by the other disciples. For a rare story in which Solomon is a minor player, see *Kahal Hasidim ha-Hadash*, fol. 11b. [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
117. See Wilensky, *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*, 1:43, 28, 64–65; and idem, 2:101–102. [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
118. For example, the grandson of Levi Yitshak of Barditshev married the granddaughter of Shneur Zalman of Liady; see Shneur Zalman’s letter of consolation to Levi Yitshak after the death of the latter’s son, included in *Sefer ha-Tanya*, *iggeret ha-kodesh*, ch. 28, fols. 147b–148b. [↑](#endnote-ref-119)
119. Here I find myself agreeing with Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism and Mysticism*, 260: “There were many disciples in Mezhirech [*sic*], each one of whom clearly derived his own personal message from the teaching of the Maggid, but who nevertheless shared a common ground giving meaning to the concept, ‘the school of the Maggid.’” See the epilogue in the present book. [↑](#endnote-ref-120)
120. See Mayse, “‘Moving Mezritsh.’” [↑](#endnote-ref-121)
121. See Green, “Around the Maggid’s Table,” 73–106; and Stampfer, “How and Why Hasidism Spread,” 201–219. [↑](#endnote-ref-122)