

STORIES OF THE HASSIDIM

Around 1750 a profound spiritual revival began to spread among the Jews of eastern Europe, attributed to a legendary teacher and wonder worker, Israel ben Eliezer. His disciples called him Baal Shem Tov, master of the good Name, referring to the belief that he could use the divine name of God to provide access to acts beyond the abilities of almost any one else. His stories, and those told about him, celebrated the presence of divinity everywhere in the world, and his way of joyful worship could lift toward heaven even the most mundane human experience. His students and their students continued to tell stories, parables really, which are masterpieces of exploring the spiritual life.

Of course, the revival didn't really begin with the Baal Shem. Its roots grew in centuries of mystical research, in the constant low-grade or openly violent oppression that Jews in Eastern Europe lived with each day, and in a (failed!) messianic movement of the mid 17th century. It's adherents called themselves Hassidim, passionate and pious ones, as they are known to this day.

The stories were collected and published, first by the rabbis' disciples, and later by others who, though not followers of the Hassidic way themselves, were fascinated by them. Like much of Jewish literature, they require close reading. Their authors, aware that "inquiring minds want to know," held back from revealing the full meaning of the mysteries they were communicating. It's a general characteristic of Jewish literature that the plain meaning of the text is only one of multiple meaning levels. Searching for the levels is a delightful challenge.

We'll begin with an exploration of the origins of the Hassidic movement and move into reading the stories themselves. I've gathered them mostly from collections edited by Martin Buber, Harold Schwartz, and Elie Wiesel. For each one we'll try to tease out the message(s) that the author intended to provide and talk about what the story and its message bring up in our own psyches and spirits. I'll be your guide through the background Jewish information you'll want to know.

LEADER: Rabbi Bob Freedman was inspired to become a cantor and a rabbi though these stories and he continues to enjoy a satisfying career.

FRIDAYS: 10:00 a.m. to noon, 7 weeks beginning October 8 through November 19

MAXIMUM: 25

