

The Baal Shem Tov

Founder of Hassidism (ca. 1700–1760)



The Baal Shem Tov— “Master of the Good Name”—was the title given to Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer of Mezbizk, founder of Hassidic Judaism. Rather than providing a set of teachings, the Baal Shem Tov communicated his lessons through a certain attitude, a spirit of joy, an instinct for the holiness of existence, that would inspire a following far beyond the Hasidim, or “pious ones,” as his followers came to be called.

He was born in a small town in the Ukraine, a region steeped in pogroms and the birthplace of a number of messianic movements. After an uneventful early life, he began to travel the region, performing wonders and proclaiming a mysticism of the everyday. Within each task and moment, he taught, there was a spark of the divine. Our responsibility was to discover and fulfill the potential holiness embedded in our ordinary existence. This responsibility should be discharged in a spirit of joy. He spoke of prayer as a window to heaven and called the entire world a prayer house.

The Hassidic community in Eastern Europe was largely decimated by the Nazis. But vibrant communities in the United States and Israel continue to live out the joyful and compassionate vision of the Baal Shem Tov. As he lay dying on May 22, 1760, he said, “I am not worried at all for I know that I am leaving through one door and entering through another door.” (By Robert Ellsberg)

“The world is full of wonders and miracles but man takes his little hand and covers his eyes and sees nothing.” —The Baal Shem Tov