Martin Buber's Essence of Hasidism in The Legend of the Baal-Shem *and* Tales of the Hasidim

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Abstract: The existentialist philosopher Martin Buber focuses much of his scholarly attention on revealing the spiritual core of Hasidism. While the historian Gershom Scholem criticizes Buber's methods for their lack of historical grounding, Buber argues throughout his work that the folktales of Hasidism represent its spiritual core, despite never explicitly identifying what this spiritual essence actually is. In vaguely searching for this essence, Buber published and reinterpreted a collection of Hasidic folktales in his volume The Legend of the Baal Shem in 1907. Later, however, he backtracked, claiming to have reinterpreted these legends in a way that was unfaithful to the essence of Hasidism. In 1947, Buber published Tales of Hasidism in which he retold a number of stories he originally compiled in The Legend of the Baal Shem. Buber's literary style differs between the two works, which raises the questions: How exactly does Buber's interpretive style differ across the collection of stories? How does Buber reinterpret the stories differently in the two collections? And, ultimately: What is Buber's idea of the essence of Hasidism? Using the introduction of the two collections, as well as the short stories in each collection that relate to the early life of the Baal Shem Tov, I will attempt to answer these questions, ultimately concluding that Buber's conception of the essence of Hasidism is the sanctification of the Here and Now, the present-day world of real people.

In 1961, Gershom Scholem, the historian of Jewish mysticism, criticized Martin Buber, the Jewish existentialist philosopher, for his interpretation and analysis of Hasidism. In his essay "Martin Buber's Hasidism," Scholem writes of Buber's interpretations of Hasidic folktales that "the spiritual message he [Buber] has read into them in his more mature works is too deeply bound up with assumptions that have no root in the texts—assumptions drawn from his own very modern philosophy of religious anarchism."[1] Although Scholem only criticizes Buber's "more mature works," implying the existence of a distinction between Buber's earlier and later works, Buber maintains a relatively consistent interpretation of "the essence of Hasidism" over forty years, as can be seen in his introduction to *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* (published in 1907) and *Tales of the Hasidim* (published in 1947).

Instead, where Buber's writings change over time is in his method of transmitting the legends of the Hasidim, which he attempts to do in both works. Buber's theoretical analyses of Hasidism are strikingly similar, but his versions of the Hasidic legends are quite different. Buber explains his shift in interpretive method in the introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*, but he is not specific about what the exact result of this change is or what it says about the essence of Hasidism. I will attempt to answer these questions: What is Buber's idea of the essence of Hasidism? How do the differences between Buber's and Scholem's projects weigh on the latter's criticism of the former? How does Buber's interpretive style differ across the collection of stories? How does Buber reinterpret the stories differently in the two collections? What might that reinterpretation tell us about Buber's ideas about the essence of Hasidism over time?

Scholem, a historian, argues that Buber, a philosopher, prioritizes discussions of the spiritual over historical accuracy. These differences in priority reflect a difference in the methods of a historian versus a philosopher. Of Buber, Scholem wrote: "He combines facts and quotations as suits his purpose, which is to present Hasidism as a spiritual phenomenon and not as a historical one […] he ignores much material which does not interest him, although for an understanding of Hasidism as a historical phenomenon it may be of the greatest value."[2] In fact, Buber himself identifies that he is concerned not with a history of Hasidism but with the spiritual essence of Hasidism. In his response to Scholem's attack, Buber writes that he was not preoccupied with narrating a history, but instead "with restoring immediacy to the relation between man and God, with helping to end 'the eclipse of God.'"[3] Jon Levenson, commenting on Buber's methods, describes

[1] Gershom Scholem, "Martin Buber's Hasidism" *Commentary*, October 1961. https://www.commentary.org/articles/gershom-scholem/martin-bubers-hasidism/.
[2] Gershom Scholem, "Martin Buber's Hasidism," *Commentary*, October 1961, https://www.commentary.org/articles/gershom-scholem/martin-bubers-hasidism/.
[3] Martin Buber, "Interpreting Hasidism," *Commentary*, September 1963, https://www.commentary.org/articles/commentary-bk/interpreting-hasidism/.

Buber as "the spiritual historian of Hasidism," whose goal is "not to paint as comprehensive a picture as possible, but only to divine the vitalizing essence."[4]

Confirming Levenson's read, Buber writes that divining "the vitalizing essence" is his goal in both the introduction to *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, written in 1907, and in the introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*, written in 1947. In the introduction to *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, Buber writes: "I only desire to communicate the relation to God and the world that these men intended, willed, and sought to live."[5] Here, Buber admits that his "only desire" is to communicate the relationship Hasidim desired with God; Buber is only focused on what went on in their souls, not on their historical reality. Buber further frames his work in the introduction as a history of the soul, saying: "*The Legend of the Baal-Shem* is not the history of a man but the history of a calling."[6] A history of a man, the implication goes, would require more historical accuracy than would a "history of a calling." Similarly, in his introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*, Buber refers to "the reality of the experience of fervent souls," which he calls the "true legend."[7] Buber writes that "something happened to rouse the soul," and that he wants to discover and communicate as best he can what exactly that is.[8] Scholem is thus completely correct that Buber attempts to understand Hasidism as a spiritual phenomenon; Buber himself admits that this is his project.

Considering his purpose is to identify the spiritual essence of Hasidism, Buber writes in his introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim* that the legendary anecdote is the best material for achieving this discovery. Scholem, in contrast, argues that Buber's "emphasis on the preeminence of legendary tradition over the theoretical literature" betrays a questionable methodology.[9] Buber continually defends his decision throughout his work to focus on legend over theory. In his introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*, Buber writes: "The purpose of this book is to introduce the reader to a world of legendary reality."[10] Buber also claims that the Hasidic legends "are not authentic in the sense that a chronicle is authentic."[11] Instead, for Buber, they are informative of a spiritual reality that Buber seeks to reveal. He writes that the legends "are to the elated soul perceived as reality and, therefore, related as such."[12] Although what is related in the legendary anecdotes is perhaps not itself true in the sense of historical accuracy, it represents, to Buber, something even more true: "The single incident in question conveys the meaning

[4] Jon D. Levenson, "The Hermeneutical Defense of Buber's Hasidism: A Critique and Counterstatement." *Modern Judaism* 11, no. 3 (1991): 315. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1396110.
[5] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 9.
[6] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 13.
[7] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 1.
[8] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 1.
[9] Gershom Scholem, "Martin Buber's Hasidism," *Commentary*, October 1961. https://www.commentary.org/articles/gershom-scholem/martin-bubers-hasidism/.
[10] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 1.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

of life."[13] For Buber, the content of the legendary material represents the type of truth for which he is searching–that which explains the meaning of life.

Buber expresses his belief in the subjective reality of the Hasidic legends which he identifies both in his introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim* (1947) and in his introduction to *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* (1907). According to Buber, these folk legends reveal the spiritual truth of myth and mysticism. In his introduction to *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, Buber directly connects his project to that of Jewish myth, writing: "My narration stands on the earth of Jewish myth, and the heaven of Jewish myth is over it."[14] Buber believes that Hasidism most recently reflects and makes accessible the "truth" of myth. Through Hasidism, according to Buber, "mysticism became the possession of the people."[15] Buber writes further in his introduction to *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* that Hasidism "is the latest form of the Jewish myth that we know."[16] In contrast to myth, however, Buber claims that the theory of religion "rests on an enormous simplification of the manifold and wildly engulfing forces that invade us: it is the subduing of the fullness of existence."[17] Buber continues on, expressing skepticism that focusing on theory, as religion does, might achieve his goal of discovering what sparks the soul because, in his view, theory necessarily requires simplification. In contrast to theory, however, Buber sees that all myth "is the expression of the fullness of existence, its image, its sign; it drinks incessantly from the gushing fountains of life."[18] Therefore, Buber focuses on what he considers myth in order to discover spiritual truth. Buber continues this avoidance of theory in *Tales of the Hasidim*. In the introduction, he writes: "Not a single passage hails from the extensive theoretical writings of Hasidism; all are taken from the popular literature."[19]

Although Buber attempts to communicate spiritual truth over theory in both *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* and *Tales of the Hasidim*, his interpretation style differs, intentionally so. In *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, Buber attempts to remain faithful to the essence of the folk stories, yet alters the stories with relative freedom. For example, in the introduction of *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, Buber writes: "But within these limits, which forbid bringing in alien motifs, all freedom remained to the epic form."[20] At this point in his life, Buber sees the potential for freedom in reinterpretation in order to get his idea of the true motifs of the legends. Confirming this read further, Buber describes his process of transmission of folktales accordingly, writing that he has:

[13] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), xxi.
[14] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 10-11.
[15] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 12.
[16] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 13.
[17] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 11.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), xxii.
[20] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 7.

> [...] received it and have told it anew. I have not transcribed it like some piece of literature; I have not elaborated it like some fabulous material. I have told it anew […] I bear in me the blood and the spirit of it has become new.[21]

Buber justifies this approach to his work on the Baal Shem Tov, by arguing that his method "build[s] up his [the Baal Shem Tov's] life out of his legends, which contain the dream and the longing of a people."[22] Buber believes that in "building up" the Baal Shem Tov's life and making the spirit of the legends new, he is able to transmit "the dream and the longing of a people." In altering the stories, then, Buber argues he is more able to recount their spiritual essence. In *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, Buber "builds up" the Baal Shem Tov's life by making the folktales more literary. In his preface to *Tales of the Hasidim*, Chaim Potok writes that in his creation of *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, Buber:

> […] began by faithfully translating the material at hand. Again the result was heavy disappointment. The already existing stories were for the most part recorded in crude and clumsy fashion; they did not become more winged in translation. Thus here too I came to my own narrating in growing independence; but the greater the independence became, so much the more deeply I experienced faithfulness.[23]

Buber thus comes up against an aspect of the nature of the Hasidic tale: its un-literary-ness. Later, in his introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*, Buber identifies the often crude nature of the tales, writing: "The Hasidim never shaped their legend into a precious vessel; with few exceptions, it never became either the work of an individual artist or a work of folk-art; it remained unformed."[24] In his work on *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, Buber sees this unformed nature as disappointing, and therefore attempts to render it more formed and therefore more literary.

Later in his life, Buber decided that his previous interpretive approach had been wrong. In the introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*, Buber writes that after the publication of *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* (in 1907), that he "rejected [his] method of dealing with the transmitted material, on the grounds that it was too free."[25] As Chaim Potok wrote in the preface to *Tales of the Hasidim*, years later Buber "discovered 'another manner of artistic faithfulness to the popular Hasidic narrative.' And that new faithfulness we find in the remarkable collection, *Tales*

[21] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 10.
[22] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 10.
[23] Chaim Potok, introduction to Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), xiv.
[24] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), xix.
[25] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), xxiii.

of the Hasidim."[26] In his introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*, Buber explains his new interpretative style. He emphasizes doing "justice simultaneously to legend and to truth, supply[ing] the missing links in the narrative."[27] He seeks to elevate the awe embedded within Hasidic legends, while not discounting the importance of truth. He explains his attempt to remain faithful to the nature of the tales thusly:

> I considered it neither permissible nor desirable to expand the tales or to render them more colorful and diverse…Only in those few cases where the notes at hand were quite fragmentary did I compose a connected whole by fusing what I had with other fragments, and filling the gaps with related material.[28]

In this work, Buber claims that he has been "faithless" to the legends in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem.*[29] Buber further asserts that he has contorted the essence of Hasidism in his previous writings.

Since we know that Buber attempts to address this issue in *Tales of the Hasidim*, we can infer that there should be something different about the essence of Hasidism as it is portrayed in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* versus *Tales of the Hasidim*. But what is this different essence? Jon Levenson relates that Scholem criticizes Buber for his idea of the essence of Hasidism, writing:

> The essence that Buber extracted from Hasidism was quite convenient to his own "religious anarchism." The essence was, as we have seen, a teaching that was this-worldly, non-halakhic, democratic, universalistic, and experiential, and thus paralleled Buber's own religious thought to a degree that Scholem found irresponsible.[30]

Is this "essence" what Scholem thought it was, merely a convenient repackaging of Buber's "religious anarchism?" It is hard to say. Buber never outrightly identifies the essence that he so desired to find. However, in analyzing the introductions of each book, which explain Buber's interpretive process, his analysis of the relative spiritual "truth" of the legends, and the differences between his two interpretations of the legendary anecdotes, I hope to discover how exactly the two works differ in their portrayal of the spiritual essence of Hasidism.

Buber's essay "The Life of the Hasidim," which appears at the beginning of *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, explains the four aspects that Buber considered to be essential to Hasidism, at least in 1907: *Hitlahavut*, *Avodah*, *Kavanah*, and

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[26] Chaim Potok, introduction to Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), xiv.
[27] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), xx.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), xiv.
[30] Jon D Levenson, "The Hermeneutical Defense of Buber's Hasidism: A Critique and Counterstatement." *Modern Judaism* 11, no. 3 (1991): 316. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1396110.

Shiflut. Buber defines *Hitlahavut* as "'the burning,' the ardor of ecstasy."[31] Next, Buber defines *Avodah*, as "the service of God in time and space."[32] *Kavanah* is described as "intention," and "the mystery of the soul directed to a goal."[33] Finally, *Shiflut* is translated by Buber as "humility."[34]

In the introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*, Buber mainly focuses on joy in the "Here and Now," as opposed to in future messianic time. He writes: "The core of Hasidic teachings is the concept of a life of fervor, of exalted joy."[35] Buber argues that although Hasidism does contain a Messianic vision, it still emphasizes the appreciation of the "Here and Now," writing: "The Hasidic movement did not weaken the hope in a Messiah, but it kindled both its simple and intellectual followers to joy in the world as it is, in life as it is, in every hour of life in this world, as that hour is."[36] This conception of joy mirrors Buber's earlier idea of *Hitlahavut*, ecstasy. However, his description of *Hitlahavut* is more fervent than his description of joy. *Hitlahavut* seems more intense, almost manic, and all-consuming, while joy connotes a feeling that is more universally positive.

Buber's descriptions of divine service and *kavanah* in his introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim* are similar to the ones found in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*. These aspects do not stand on their own now but are instead redirected towards giving God joy, which is found in the experience of the Here and Now. Buber writes in the introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*, "With your whole strength and with *kavanah*, with holy intent, you will bring about the union between God and the *Shechinah*, eternity and time."[37] Along with including the same definition of *Kavanah*, this also mirrors Buber's description of *Avodah* in *The Legend of the Baal Shem,* which similarly emphasizes humanity's role in God's reunion with the *Shechinah*, God's presence: "But it is given to human spirit, through its spirit, to be able to bring the *Shechinah*, the divine presence, near to its source."[38] However, one difference is that *Tales of the Hasidim* references a different kind of *Avodah*: *mitzvot*, or divine commandments. Counter to Scholem's characterization of Buber as a "religious anarchist", Buber in *Tales of Hasidim* does not downplay the importance of the *mitzvot*, although he does argue that within their bounds Hasidism desires the individual to find joy, writing: "Without lessening the strong obligation imposed by the Torah, the movement suffused all the traditional commandments with joy-bringing significance."[39] Buber's ideas of *Kavanah* and *Avodah* thus mostly parallel each other in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* and *Tales of the Hasidim*.

[31] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 17.
[32] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 23.
[33] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 33.
[34] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 41.
[35] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 2.
[36] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 3.
[37] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 4.
[38] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 27.
[39] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 5.

Buber's conception of the essence of Hasidism is relatively consistent, albeit with some minor differences and developments–Buber felt that he had correctly identified the essence of Hasidism in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, but that he had not represented this essence faithfully. Therefore, the only way to identify the meaningful differences between the two interpretive styles is to analyze the different versions of the stories themselves. For this purpose, I will analyze "The Werewolf" from *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* and "The Tree of Knowledge," "His Father's Words," "Vain Attempts," and "The First Fight" in *Tales of the Hasidim*. "The Werewolf" in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* and the previously identified group of stories in *Tales of the Hasidim* both tell the story of the beginning of the life of the Baal Shem Tov.

The version of the story about the early life of the Baal Shem Tov begins chronologically earlier in *Tales of the Hasidim* than it does in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*. In *Tales of the Hasidim*, the Baal Shem Tov's story begins with his soul in the Garden of Eden, as recounted in the story "The Tree of Knowledge."[40] The story describes how all the souls in the world were inside of Adam's soul when he ate from the Tree of Knowledge, but "the soul of the Baal Shem Tov went away, and did not eat of the fruit of the tree."[41] This story presents the Baal Shem Tov as a perfect person who was not implicated in the first human sin. But it also portrays a leader defined by childlike simplicity–the fact that the soul of the Baal Shem did not eat of the tree suggests that he also did not gain the same insights as the rest of humanity. Beginning the narrative in this way portrays the Baal Shem as a perfect, innocent, and simple figure.

On the other hand, the version of the narrative in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* begins with the death of the Baal Shem's father in the story "The Werewolf." This same narrative is recounted in *Tales of the Hasidim* in "His Father's Words." In "The Werewolf," the Baal Shem Tov's father, Rabbi Eliezer, warns the Baal Shem on his deathbed of "the Adversary," but also assures him that his soul is strong and God will protect him.[42] On the other hand, in "His Father's Words," there is no mention of the Adversary. Instead, Rabbi Eliezer simply tells the Baal Shem to "remember all your days that God is with you, and that because of this, you need fear nothing in all the world."[43] The version in "The Werewolf" certainly dramatizes the narrative, as a future enemy is introduced and given a name. This same dramatization is absent from "His Father's Words," as Satan only appears in a later story, "The First Fight."

Furthermore, there is a greater emphasis on literary style in "The Werewolf" than there is in "His Father's Words." In "The Werewolf," at the end of the narrative about Rabbi Eliezer's death, Buber recounts the Baal Shem Tov's response to his father's warning: "The child read with astonished eyes the words

[40] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 35.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 51-52.
[43] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 36.

from the withered mouth. The words sank in and remained."[44] On the other hand, in "His Father's Words," the Baal Shem Tov's response to his father's words is described much more simply: "Israel treasured these words in his heart."[45] In the version recounted in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, the Baal Shem Tov's response is dramatized, as his eyes are described as "astonished" and his father's mouth is described as "withered." The version in *Tales of the Hasidim* lacks these more descriptive terms.

Buber also describes the Baal Shem Tov's experience of schooling (or lack thereof) differently in each version. "The Werewolf" narrative continues from the end of Rabbi Eliezer's death and relates the Baal Shem Tov's experience in school.[46] The parallel narrative in *Tales of the Hasidim* can be found in the story "Vain Attempts."[47] Both stories describe the efforts of the villagers to send the young Baal Shem Tov to school and his attempts to escape traditional education and instead go to the woods. In "Vain Attempts," the villagers find the Baal Shem Tov alone in the woods, after he escapes there "over and over."[48] What the Baal Shem Tov does in the woods is absent from this narrative. On the other hand, the version recounted in "The Werewolf" is much more vivid, writing that the Baal Shem Tov "delighted in the trees and the animals and moved familiarly in the green woodland without the least fear of night and weather."[49] Here, the Baal Shem Tov has a connection with nature, moving through it with ease and without fear, even being compared to an animal. The narration describes him as slipping away from school "softly as a cat" and as a "wild creature."[50] Finally, while the villagers give up bringing him back to school in both stories, only in "The Werewolf" is it suggested that the Baal Shem Tov is raised by animals when he remains in the woods.[51]

The "Werewolf"'s idea that the Baal Shem Tov was raised in the wilderness by animals functions similarly to his soul not eating from the tree of knowledge in the "The Tree of Knowledge" story from *Tales of the Hasidim*. Both of these stories suggest that the Baal Shem Tov is more connected to the natural world and lacks book knowledge and typical socialization. However, the narrative in "The Werewolf" occurs in the physical, material world, while this similar narrative in "The Tree of Knowledge" occurs solely in the Baal Shem Tov's soul, before he is born. Buber's choice to bring a childlike, simplistic, and uneducated narrative into the material life of the Baal Shem Tov in "The Werewolf" collapses the tension between the Baal Shem Tov's godly purity of soul and his essential humanity. For the Baal Shem Tov to be a leader of a movement dedicated to hallowing the Here and Now, he must be a human being, albeit one with a

[44] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 52.
[45] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 36.
[46] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 52.
[47] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 36.
[48] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 36.
[49] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 52.
[50] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 52.
[51] Ibid.

beautiful and distinct soul. Buber thus revives the Baal Shem Tov's essential humanity in his retelling of *Tales of the Hasidim*.

While the distinction between an ultimately human Baal Shem Tov and his exceptional soul is maintained in *Tales of the Hasidim*, Buber collapses this distinction in *The Legend of the Baal Shem*. In both "The Werewolf" and "The First Fight," Satan possesses a werewolf and tries to kill the Baal Shem Tov and his students, who are singing on their way to school. The Baal Shem Tov remembers his father's dying words and prepares to defeat the werewolf/Satan. However, the way in which the Baal Shem Tov kills the werewolf/Satan differs in each narrative. In "The First Fight," the Baal Shem Tov "str[ikes] him between the eyes" with "a sound stick."[52] On the other hand, in "The Werewolf," the Baal Shem Tov pulls out the werewolf's heart and buries it in the ground.[53] Along with the action in "The Werewolf" being more graphic, the language is also more vivid. The heart is described as reflecting "all beings of the world" in its "mournful mirror," and its reflection is "discolored by a burning hatred."[54] Then, when the Baal Shem Tov takes hold of the heart, he senses "the infinite suffering that was within it from the beginning."[55]

There are other, more philosophical distinctions expressed by the different Satan killing narratives. For example, while the Baal Shem Tov defeating evil by capturing its heart and empathizing with its suffering is a beautiful metaphor, it renders the Baal Shem Tov a mythical figure who is detached from reality. Similarly the defeat recounted in "The First Fight" is miraculous, as the Baal Shem Tov defeats Satan with a stick, but it remains connected to the physical world, as the Baal Shem Tov needs the help of a mundane physical object to defeat Satan. Furthermore, in "The First Fight," there is less graphic description and flowery language. The metaphor must be extracted more by the reader, as there is no mention of infinite suffering, but this also envisions the Baal Shem Tov as a miracle worker of this world, not as a supernatural savior.

In his original telling of the stories of the Baal Shem Tov, as presented in *The Legend of the Baal Shem*, Buber stylizes his collected legends in order to reveal the essence of Hasidism. He uses flowery, descriptive language and combines stories in order to construct a more formal narrative. But in this process, the figure of the Baal Shem Tov, the real-life founder of Hasidism, is transformed from a miracle worker who really lived into a kind of mythic figure divorced from the material world. In Buber's simplification of these stories in *Tales of the Hasidim*, he returns the figure of the Baal Shem Tov to someone with an amazing soul who still could have existed in real life. This reveals Buber's development of his analysis of the essence of Hasidism. In contrast to how the Baal Shem Tov is portrayed in *The Legend of the Baal Shem*, in the introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*, Buber emphasizes the importance of making the Here and Now holy. If

[52] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 36-37.
[53] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1907), 52.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

the founder of Hasidism is not an actual person who ever could have existed in the Here and Now, Buber's idea of the entire essence of Hasidism, joy and sanctification in the Here and Now, is contradicted by its own legendary tales. If Buber is concerned ultimately with a messianic setting, however, the figure need not exist in reality. But because Buber is interested in reality, the central figure must also be real. Thus, while in the introduction to *The Legend of the Baal Shem*, Buber extols the spiritual importance of myth, failing to describe a figure who is essentially human, in Buber's retelling of the Hasidic legends in *Tales of the Hasidim*, he emphasizes the Here and Now in his transformation of his portrayal of the Baal Shem Tov, revealing the essence of Hasidism to be sanctification in the Here and Now. Buber finds the spiritual essence, providing a more impactful revitalization of Hasidic thought than Scholem's desired historical analysis.

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