

# THE BAAL SHEM-TOV BALLADS OF SHIMSHON MELTZER

by

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The literary ballad, as a form of narrative metric composition in which lyric, epic, and dramatic elements are conjoined and whose dominant mood is one of mystery and dread, drew its inspiration from European popular ballads rooted in oral tradition. Most literary ballads are written in a concentrated and highly charged heroic and tragic vein. But there are also those which are patterned on the model of Eastern European popular ballads, and these poems have on the whole a lyrical epic character, in which the horrific motifs ordinarily associated with the genre are mitigated.

The European literary ballad made its way into modern Hebrew poetry during its early phase of development, which took place on European soil; and the type of balladic poem most favored among Hebrew poets was the heroico-tragic ballad, whose form was most fully realized in Hebrew in the work of Shaul Tchernichowsky. With the appearance in 1885 of Abba Constantin Shapiro's *Dāvid meleḵ yiśrā'ēl hay veqayyām* ("David King of Israel Lives"), the literary ballad modeled on the style of popular ballads was introduced into Hebrew poetry. This type of poem was subsequently taken up by David Frischmann, Jacob Kahan, and David Shimoni, although the form had only marginal significance in the work of these poets (Yaniv, 1986).<sup>1</sup> Among modern Hebrew poets it is Shimshon Meltzer who stands out for having dedicated himself to composing poems in the style of popular balladic verse. These he devoted primarily to Hasidic themes in which the figure and personality of Israel Baal Shem-Tov, the founder of Hasidism, play a prominent part. In what follows I shall undertake to trace the

1. See David Frischmann's *Qri'at hattôrāh* (1893) and *Handāḇāh* (1898); Jacob Kahan's *Mar'ot umšôrôt* (1909-1920) and *Ballādôt* (1942-1955); David Shimoni's ballads in *Dôr ledôr* (1909-1920).

development of this variety of poetry in Meltzer's work, with particular emphasis on those ballads that center on the person of the Baal Shem.

Shimshon Meltzer's choice of confining his scope to Hasidic themes, set out in the manner of popular ballads, did not come about suddenly but emerged by degrees. His earliest acquaintance with balladic form undoubtedly resulted from his exposure during his youth to the Yiddish folk ballads that made the rounds among the Yiddish-speaking public in Eastern Europe. Later, while studying at a Hebrew training college for teachers in Poland, he became familiar with the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz, whose ballads were celebrated throughout the region and cultural ambience in which Meltzer's literary personality and taste were initially formed. However the Hasidic material from which he later derived the thematic content of his poems was a natural legacy which he inherited from his hometown of Tlust, where the Baal Shem-Tov's true nature was first revealed.

We can obtain some idea of Meltzer's earliest approach to the art of the ballad from his poem *Ve'elem ʔehād* ("And a Lone Youth"). In the version in which it first appeared, in the newspaper *Dāḇār* (24 July 1936), the poem bore only the title *Ballādāh*; and this was indeed the very first ballad that Meltzer had written and published in Palestine. The subject of the poem was taken from a news item about a young Polish Jew who had met his death while attempting to enter Palestine illegally. Another early "occasional" ballad written by Meltzer in response to significant events of the day was published by him in the journal *Gāzît* in 1942. The poem's narrative is set in Nazi Germany and tells the story of a German mother who, after having been informed that her son had died in action at the front, is told by a priest that the British had reported on the radio that her son was in fact a prisoner of war; the priest is then arrested by the Gestapo after the woman reports him for listening to enemy broadcasts.

These early efforts are noteworthy if only for the reason that topical poetry was then very much in vogue among Hebrew poets, and for Meltzer this approach represented a dead end from which he subsequently withdrew. The second poem, in which the flow of narrative is interrupted by passages of dialogue, resembles in its thematic and formal structure that of Alterman's topical verse, as exemplified in the poems he published every Friday in the weekend *Dāḇār* under a by-line in his column "*Hatūr hašḇī'i*." The fact that Meltzer excluded both these poems from the published collection of his complete poetry, prose, and letters (1976a-e) testifies to the extent to which he rejected topicality and the idea of thematic contemporaneity, at least in the matter of his own

poetry. In the 1950s Meltzer published a poem called *Ballādāh bahālōm* ("Dream Ballad"), which is a meditation in verse on the poet's own past and the succession of generations from father to son, but without any reference to Hasidism. Although this poem was included by him in one of the volumes of his collected works, it appears among the group of poems printed under the general title of *Šīrīm rišōnīm vešōnīm* ("Early and Miscellaneous Poems," 1976c, pp. 519–523).

In 1937 Meltzer wrote the ballad *Rīqqūdō šel rabbī zušā*<sup>3</sup> ("Rabbi Zusha's Dance"), which appeared in print in the same year in *Dāḥār* (18 June 1937). This poem contains most of the salient characteristics of the type of Hasidic ballad that Meltzer was to stake out as his special province, and it establishes the groundwork for his subsequent poems in the genre. The *Rabbī Zušā*<sup>3</sup> poem was reprinted by Meltzer in the first volume of his complete verse *Bešīb<sup>3</sup>āh mētārīm* (1939), together with four other ballads, and may be regarded as the first seed planted by the poet from which the series of poems sprang that were eventually to make up the set entitled, *Or zarū<sup>3</sup>a laccaddīq* ("Light Sown for the Righteous," 1976a, pp. 27–141).

In turning his hand to poems on Hasidic themes and in the style of popular ballads during the decades of the thirties and forties—this, following the appearance of Shlonsky's *Aḥney bohū* and Alterman's *Kōḡabīm bahūc*—Meltzer had thrown down the gauntlet to his contemporaries. His Hasidic ballads were at least in part conceived by him in order to challenge the subject matter and poetic practices of Shlonsky and Alterman. In particular Meltzer took exception to the sort of modernism represented by what he called "urban verse," dedicated to the "smoke rings" of the café and to producing "homeland horas." In an interview with Jacob Pat (1959, p. 512), Meltzer observed: "There were about two hundred Hebrew poets at the time, all of them lyricists, all of them singing about the homeland. . . . This was choral song, and I just couldn't join it."

Meltzer's attitude to Shlonsky's poetry was ambivalent, and this is brought out both in his poems and essays. So, for example, among the *Šīrīm rišōnīm vešōnīm* we find poems such as *Štāv* ("Spring," 1976c, p. 511) and *Yōm šūq* ("Market Day," *ibid.*, pp. 513–512), which are unmistakably in the Shlonsky manner and even whose language recalls the distinctive idiom of that poet. On the other hand, in an essay written by Meltzer in 1940 called *Ga<sup>3</sup>āgū<sup>3</sup>īm* ("Yearnings"), and published only a year after the publication of *Bešīb<sup>3</sup>at mētārīm* ("With Seven Strings"), he observes with great regret that although when he was eighteen he "drank thirstily" from the poems of Shlonsky, as though they were the

“sweet water of life,” he found he was no longer able to follow in their path (1976d, pp. 99–101).

Poignant testimony to the difficulties that Meltzer was experiencing in determining his relation to the modernism that was then in the ascendant is furnished by his poem *Mē'ir hakklīzmār na'āśāh qômīśār* (“Meir the Klezmer Is Made Commissar”). The ambiguity of Meltzer’s situation is pointedly conveyed in the irony of the closing stanzas of the poem in the version in which it was originally brought out (Meltzer, 1940). Thus he writes:

לֵבָן חֲבָרֵי לְשִׁירָה מְרַנְנִים  
 שְׂאִינְנֵי מוֹדֶרְנֵי, אֵינְנֵי “צְעִיר”,  
 — הַפְּעֵשׁ”ט, רַבֵּי זוּשָׁא — כֵּן הֵם טוֹעֵנִים —  
 הַזֶּהוּ נוֹשֵׂא לְפּוֹאֶסְיָה, לְשִׁירִי ?

My comrades-in-verse therefore bruit it about  
 That I am not modern, not “young,”  
 —The Besht, Rabbi Zusha—they say—  
 Is this, then, a subject for poesy, for verse?

עַל כֵּן מֵה שֶׁמִּחֲתִי מְאוֹד בְּהָאִיר  
 לְקִרְאָתִי דְּמוֹתֶךָ מְרַגְלִית גְּבוּרִי !  
 אִמְרָתִי: הַפְּעֵם אֲשִׁיר כִּ”צְעִיר”  
 הַפְּעֵם מִצָּאתִי “נוֹשֵׂא” לְשִׁירִי !

So, how overjoyed I was when I saw looming  
 Before me your figure, Margalit, my hero!  
 I said: Now let me sing like a “youth”  
 Now have I found a “theme” for my song!

And further on, the irony undiminished, Meltzer pronounces a provisional valediction to modernism:

וְעַד שֶׁאֲצַעִיר וְאֶהְיֶה מוֹדֶרְנִיקָט  
 שְׁלוֹם, מְרַגְלִית, גְּבוּרִי הַפְּלָאִי . . .

So till I’m rejuvenated and am modern  
 Farewell, Margalit, my wonderful hero . . .

Shortly thereafter Meltzer appears to have decided to make a final and irrevocable break—in token of which he published a new version of *Mē'ir hakklīzmār* (*Dābār*, 31 May 1940), from which he expunged all reference to modernism. He supplanted the poem’s original ending with one which was entirely devoted to an imaginary return to the home of his childhood and to his native Tlust. Moreover in rewriting the poem he began to give shape to the poetic diction and idiom that was to

distinguish his mature work. Baruch Kurtzweil, in his review of the decade of Hebrew literature following the establishment of the State of Israel (1958), defended the direction chosen by Meltzer and compared his originality of approach favorably to the shortcomings of his contemporaries. In Kurtzweil's judgment, Meltzer's poetry served as a bridge spanning the middle period of Hebrew poetry in modern times. In summing up his assessment of Meltzer's contribution in the field of poetry, Kurtzweil notes:

*Sēpēr haššīrôt vehabballādôt* is the significant and highly valued product of a sincere and forthright endeavor to endue Hasidic folk poetry with the realities relevant to the life of modern Israel. Here we have an instance of an effort to "translate" scenes from an outdated past into the idiom of modern life.

Much of the folk flavor of the ballads in <sup>2</sup>*Or zārū'a laccaddīq* derives from the character of the poetic narrator. In fourteen of the total of twenty poems in the group, the story is told by an impersonal narrator speaking in the third person who keeps himself in the background and places the focus of his narration on the events of the tale. The only instance of an entire poem couched in the first person is the *Teḥillah labba'al-šem behārim* ("The Baal Shem's Prayer in the Mountains," pp. 37-38), in which the speaker is directly addressing God; but since this is not a "story poem" there is some question as to whether it can properly be called a ballad. A number of the ballads are told by a witness-narrator who alludes to his intimate association with the family or community on which his story centers. An example in kind is furnished by the poem *Keter* ("The Crown," pp. 27-32), in which the speaker's references to *zqentēnū rahēl* 'our dear old Rachel' and *sābīā' šellānū* 'our very own Granny' mark him as being a sharer in the milieu of both the poem and his audience. Unlike the self-effacing impersonal narrator, the witness-narrator takes pains to establish a bond of intimacy with his hearers. And rather than suppress his role as transmitter, he goes out of his way to assert his special qualifications for the task by intimating that he knows far more than he is telling, and that he brings to his account a perspective of the historical context within which the episode he is describing unfolds. Thus in *Āteret tīp'eret* ("Crown of Glory," pp. 33-36) the narrator abandons his stance of observer, and in the last stanza slips into a proleptic mood:

אין צריך לספר, מה גדלה חרדתו של הרב!  
 .....  
 וידוע כמה אחר-כך את גיסו הוא אהב,  
 וכתב לו: מורי ורבי ועטרת תפארת . . .

No need to tell how great was the rabbi's dread!  
 .....

And we all know how greatly he came to love his son-in-law,  
 And wrote to him: My teacher and master, and Crowning  
 Glory . . .

Still another facet of the engaged narrator is revealed in the poem *Haggūlgūl* ("Transformation," pp. 52–58), in which the teller of the tale lets his audience know of his awareness of more than the mere external aspect of events. This he communicates to his hearers by implication through the use of irony—as in his treatment of the ordinary and unperceiving Jewish horse-dealer and his Gentile servant, Aleksey.

As we progress from one ballad to the next in the series, the narrator seems to become ever more involved in the story he tells, and to seek increasingly to arouse the sympathies of his audience. For instance, in *Takrīkīm* ("Winding Sheets," pp. 73–76) the narrator resorts to the rhetorical device of anaphora by repeating the phrase *mah pele*<sup>7</sup> 'little wonder!' five times in the course of the story as an affective cue. In other ballads the narrator takes on the guise of a popular storyteller giving full play to his repertory of yarning tricks to magnify the significance of his tale and enhance its credibility. So, in the poem *Haqqôzačôq šel hassābbā*<sup>7</sup> *mišpôli* ("The Kazachok of the Old Man of Shpoli," pp. 103–113), the narrator begins his story with time-honored grandiloquence, in the best manner of the storytellers of old ("Incline your ear and bring it nigh / And I shall whisper it a joyous tale right from the heart"); and in the final lines of the poem he assures his audience of the accuracy of his account and urges them to tell it to one and all ("So did I hear, so have I told it; and now, let it be heard from you!"). In the ballad *Keyādû*<sup>7</sup> *bišôrtqûb* ("In Chortkuv, You Know," pp. 130–135), the narrator incorporates two roles by being both part of the community in which his story takes place and one in a chain of the transmitters of the tale. Thus he opens with the intimate formula *anšey šelômēnû mesapprîm ma*<sup>7</sup> *āseh* 'our brethren tell the tale', and winds up his narration by retracing the chain of transmission to its point of origin ("And our brethren heard it, each from his kinsmen / Who heard it from Hershl, who stood hearken-ing to it / from the blessed lips of the Old Man"). But in the interim, between the beginning and end of the story, he makes certain to maintain his links with his auditors by interrupting his tale to share his uncertainties with them ("But maybe? Who knows to whom he spoke / Who knows to whom he told his story?"). And, finally, in the poem *Haššābîs šel sâbtā zîsl* ("The Bonnet of Granny Zisl," pp. 136–141) there is an intrusive narrator, too, who conceives of himself as a representative

of the community at large, which he addresses intimately as his “dear friends,” whom he exhorts to join together in a common folkloric enterprise (“As we have been favored . . . so shall we be still, when we bind all our songs together to make a divan”).

The balladic narrator becomes even more markedly a storyteller in the very last group of poems in the *Or zarûcā* volume as whole. The style of the speaker in the ballad *Bicpaṯ ʿir haqqôdeš* (“In Safed the Holy City,” pp. 157–161) the style of the narrator is quintessentially that of a popular storyteller, and this mode of narration is established at the very outset of the poem:

בְּצִפְתַּי עִיר־הַקֹּדֶשׁ שָׁמַעְתִּי סִפּוּר  
מִפִּי אִישׁ בְּעַל מְתֵק וְנָעִם דְּבוּר,  
וְיָפָה הַסִּפּוּר וּפְשׁוּט כְּשִׁיחָה  
וּבְנָה אֶסְפְּרוּ וּבְלֹא אֲרִיכָה.

In Safed the holy city I heard a tale  
From a man of sweet and agreeable speech,  
And the story’s lovely and as simple as a chat  
So I’ll begin straight off and waste no words

The closing words spoken by the narrator of the volume’s last poem, *Maʿāšeh bimlammēd, bešôdēd ûbʿap* (“Tale of a Melamed, a Robber and a Nose,” pp. 222–228) offer a fitting summation of Meltzer’s station as a poet in making the conscious choice of being the last representative in the line of crafters of ballads in the popular vein:

וּסְפַר דּוֹר לְדוֹר בְּעַל־פֶּה עַל הָאֶף,  
עַד שֶׁקָּמְתִי אֲנִי וְרָשָׁמְתִי בְּכֶתֶב!

And one generation told of the nose to the next,  
Till I came and wrote it down!

## II

There are nine Baal Shem-Tov ballads included among the poems in *Or zarûcā laccaddîq*. These form a thematic unit of some importance in Meltzer’s poetic oeuvre.<sup>2</sup> Fifteen years separate the poem *Bên ʿelûst hāʿir uʿlûst hakpār* (“Between Tlust the City and Tlust the Village”) and

2. The following is a list of the Meltzer’s Baal Shem-Tov ballads according to their first appearance in print: *Keṭer* (Lamdan, 1942, pp. 107–8); *ʿAtereṭ tipʿereṭ* (*Deḅar haššābûʿa*, 16 Oct. 1952); *Dōbûš vehabbaʿal šem-ʿôḅ* (*Dāḅār*, 2 Oct. 1938); *Bên ʿelûst hāʿir uʿlûst hakpār* (*Dāḅār*, 4 Jan. 1938); *Haggilgûl* (*Dāḅār*, 22 Sept. 1950); *Gazdāʿ* (Meltzer, 1944, pp. 22–23); *Haʿôreaḅ*, first published under the title of *Belēyl hassēder* (*Dāḅār layyelādîm*, 14 April 1938); *Beyôm ʿālep šel ḡag šābûʿôṭ* (*Dāḅār*, 18 May 1953).

*Beyôm ʿalep šel haq šābūʿōt* (“On the First Day of the Feast of Shabuoth”); so that the subject of the Baal Shem had preoccupied the poet over a considerable span of his career. The sequence in which these ballads are arranged does not correspond with the order in which they were written, but follows the chronology of the Baal Shem’s life. They tell of his parents and birth; of his marriage and manner of existence before he was revealed under the guise of the Baal Shem-Tov; of the wonders he wrought and his teachings; and, finally, of the manner of his death.

The legends of the Baal Shem were the principal sources from which Meltzer drew his material for the thematic content of these ballads. Meltzer himself admitted as much at the time of the first publication of *Beyôm ʿalep šel haq šābūʿōt*, to which he gave the subtitle *Dap miṭṭōk sēper šibhēy habbaʿal-šem-ṭōb* (“A leaf out of the book, ‘In Praise of the Baal Shem-Tov’”; cf. Horodezky, 1947). We should keep in Mind, too, that the recorded legends depend on a long oral tradition, and that these stories had gained wide currency among the Hasidic community, where they were told in Yiddish. Therefore the published Hebrew material is strongly flavored in content and style by the original language of transmission and its cultural milieu.

The legends of the Baal Shem-Tov furnished thematic material for modern Hebrew poets, beginning with Jacob Fichmann, and continues to be used down to our own time by Meir Bosak, Amir Gilboa, and K. A. Bartini.<sup>3</sup> But Meltzer stands apart in this regard for the reason that his use of the Baal Shem-Tov legends is intimately bound up with his poetic outlook. And the manner in which Meltzer refashioned and elaborated his sources is well worth following. It would be of interest, therefore, to compare Meltzer’s treatment of Baal Shem-Tov with that of the original legends, and to examine what aspects of the Baal Shem’s personality which are described in the sources are either given prominence or suppressed by the poet in his ballads.

First in the order of Baal Shem-Tov ballads in *ʿOr zarūʿā* is *Keter* (pp. 27–32), whose subject is the Baal Shem’s mother. This in itself is significant because in the sources a great point is made of the father’s high status so as better to exalt the son; the Baal Shem’s mother, on the

3. See Jacob Fichmann, *Šir haprīdāh ʿāšer labbeʿšī* (1944, pp. 160–70), *ʿAlīyyat habbeʿšī* (ibid., pp. 171–202); Amir Gilboa, *Rabbi yīsrāel baʿal-šem-ṭōb* (1971, p. 220); Meir Bosak, *Beriqqūd keneged halbānāh* (1950), *Camrōt batpillāh* (1985), and there many ballads on the Baal Shem-Tov theme; K. A. Bartini, *Ballādōt gecārōt ʿal habbeʿšī* (1982, pp. 11–14); Itzik Manger, *Habbeʿšī haqqādōš*, translated from Yiddish by Meltzer (1976e, p. 229).



other hand, receives short shrift (Nigal, 1973, pp. 138–145). Meltzer redresses the balance by speaking of her at length, without once bringing up the subject of the Baal Shem's father. But to add substance to his picture of her, and to fill in the missing pieces, Meltzer turns to suitable analogous material in the Hebrew Bible. Correspondingly, in order to enhance the mother's standing, he brings into association with the episode in the poem describing the delivery and placement of her gravestone the biblical story of the recovery of the Ark of Covenant from Philistine captivity, and its return on a cart drawn by "two milch kine, on which there hath come no yoke" (1 Sam 6:7–8). This he does purely on the level of language, by following the wording in the biblical text, with appropriate changes to accommodate the requirements of the subject, diction, and meter of the ballad. In point of parallels between the ballad and the Bible regarding circumstances and persons—the Baal Shem, like Isaac, is the son of his parents' old age, and the mothers of both are named Sarah.

In treating the subject of the Baal Shem's youth in *Keter*, Meltzer is on the whole faithful to the tradition that as a boy he was in the habit of running off to the forest, "until the townsmen despaired of making a decent man of him" (Buber, 1947, p. 64). The ballad however differs with the Hasidic legend on an important point. In the original stories, the Baal Shem's neighbors give up on him entirely, whereas in the ballad the glorious future that awaits him is foreseen—*Veyisru'liq 'ap hu' 'ôd yigdal veyizkeh li"šlošâh ketârîm*" ("And even Yisrulik will grow up, and obtain 'three crowns'"; p. 30). Meltzer also evades having to account for the Baal Shem's youthful escapades and flight from the Heder by interrupting the narration of events in their proper sequence, and interweaving the episodes of Yisrulik on Earth in his role as *rêš dûhânâ*<sup>2</sup> 'Melamed's assistant' and of Yisrulik in Heaven. By sidestepping the unflattering aspects of the Baal Shem-Tov's boyhood conduct, Meltzer already prepares us for the aura of sanctity about his person that will grow as the series progresses. In the subsequent Baal Shem-Tov ballads, Meltzer proceeds along the path laid out in *Keter*: selective use of the Baal Shem legends, enriched by judicious employment of analogous material from the Bible; to these he added material gleaned from the Talmud.

The criteria applied by Meltzer in sifting his Hasidic sources is well illustrated in the poet's presentation of the Baal Shem-Tov during his period as village teacher of small children in *Keter* and *Āteret tip'eret*. A noteworthy story omitted by Meltzer in both poems is that of Baal Shem's killing of Satan, who had assumed the shape of a werewolf that

preyed on the schoolchildren of the village (Horodezky, 1947, pp. 41–42; Buber, 1947, p. 64). Meltzer undoubtedly rejected the episode by design. Were such unspeakable evil allowed to intervene, even were it vanquished in the end, the destruction wrought in the process would have certainly destroyed the harmony between the Baal Shem and the divine that the ballads were meant to convey. And what holds true for *Keṭer* can equally be said of *Āteret tip'eret*.

The ballad *Āteret tip'eret*, too, has as its purpose the celebration of the personality of the Baal Shem. The poem tells of the Baal Shem-Tov's betrothal and marriage, and for its narrative detail it relies on three principal Hasidic sources: the story of the Baal Shem's visit to his brother-in-law, Reb Gershon of Brody (Horodezky, pp. 45–46); the episode of the testing of Baal Shem's learning by the *Parnās arbba'at hā'ārācōt* 'Elder of the Assembly of Four Countries' (ibid., pp. 152–153); and the story of the Baal Shem's marriage (Buber, pp. 65–66). However all of these sources were altered in significant ways by Meltzer.

As regards the first source, in the *Sibhēy habbešit* it is the sister who decides that the betrothal contract should be honored; whereas in the ballad, the decision is Reb Gershon's, who must overcome grave misgivings about the suitability of the Baal Shem as a bridegroom for his sister. Reb Gershon presides over a rabbinical court and is absorbed with halakic law. A learned man, even whose everyday speech resonates with the language of the Gemara, he is profoundly appalled at the boorishness and ignorance of his sister's suitor. The concern of the ballad is the confrontation between these two men. Neither the bride nor her father are part of Meltzer's tale, and the betrothal and marriage serve only as a prelude to the more weighty matter taking place between Reb Gershon and the Baal Shem. The Baal Shem Tov's modest demeanor and humble appearance are the aspects of his personality that are made to stand out in the encounter with Reb Gershon, before the latter had come to appreciate his greatness.

Analogous material from the Aggadah is used to enrich the thematic and narrative content of this poem, as is indeed the case with all of the ballads of this group. In this case the parallel is drawn between Rabbi Akiva's success in bringing low the pride of his learned adversaries by the wisdom of his conduct (*Aboth de-Rabbi Nathan*, 6:52), and the Baal Shem's censure of Reb Gershon for belittling him because he was dressed in a peasant's coat of course animal skin. The connection with Rabbi Akiva is brought up in the case of another of the ballads, this time with respect to the selflessness of the wives of the two men in their conduct toward their husbands. In *Ṭepillāh labba'al-šem behārīm*, the wife of the Baal Shem is represented as following her husband's cart and

gathering clay to be sold for making brick. The analogy implied here is with the self-sacrificing behavior of Rabbi Akiva's wife in selling the braids from her head and giving her earnings to her husband, so that he might continue his studies (T. J., *Shabbat*, 6:1).

Significant features of the Hasidic legend concerning the Baal Shem and Reb Gershon are omitted from *Āteret tip'eret*. An outstanding omission is the story told in *Šibhêy habbešit* of Reb Gershon's failed attempt to teach Torah to the Baal Shem. One reason for the exclusion of this incident is that it would have detracted from the Baal Shem's stature. But its elimination also serves to concentrate the focus of the ballad more forcefully on the implications of Reb Gershon's attitude toward the Baal Shem Tov.

The Hasidic zaddik is characteristically torn between his inner need to withdraw from the world so as to devote himself to his meditations on the divine mystery, and the imperative to intercede in the affairs of the world in behalf of his fellow creatures. The Baal Shem's retreat into the Carpathian Mountains was a necessary stage on his way to revealing himself to the world as one of God's righteous. This tension between the conflicting needs of remaining hidden and of revealing oneself is stated in the opening lines of *Āteret tip'eret*, as though announcing the underlying theme of the action set out in the ballad:

באותם הימים הבעל-שם טוב היה עוד נסתר,  
והיה מתעלה מדרגה לדרגה במסתר,  
.....

ואולם בנגלה מלמד חינוכות בכפרים.

In those days the Baal Shem Tov was still hidden,  
And ascended from rank to rank, unseen,  
.....

But openly—a teacher of small children in villages.

The ascent to ever higher ranks of spirituality required submitting oneself to very severe forms of self-purification by ordeal. The practice is alluded to in the poem *Bên ʔelūst hāʔir uʔlūst hakpār* (pp. 45–47), which is based on the well known legend of “The Peasant on the Bank of the River” (Buber, 1947, p. 69), which tells of how the Baal Shem immersed himself in an ice-covered river to forestall the fulfillment of an omen of great evil.

Tradition teaches that the Baal Shem-Tov was also a healer of the body. On this subject Gershom Scholem has observed:

It is generally agreed that there is some truth to the tradition that claims that the Baal Shem-Tov was at the beginning both a professional physician and a folk doctor, a kind of combination of healer by way of psychological influence and a folk doctor, to use contemporary terms. (1950, p. 337)

In his capacity as a *ba<sup>c</sup>al-šem* ‘master of the Name’ he did indeed employ the magical arts alongside naturopathy. He is said to have distributed remedies and amulets, to have exorcised demons and evil spirits, to have helped deliver children in cases of difficult labor, and to work miracles by invoking the divine names of God. Some of his disciples tried to convince him to restrain his practice of magic, and pointed out to him that there was a difference between being a *ba<sup>c</sup>al-šem-ṭôḇ*—a ‘master of the *good* name’ and therefore a spiritual being in touch with the divine—and a mere *šem-ṭôḇ* and conjurer. In any case, these exhortations failed to dissuade him. He continued his healing work throughout his life, and traveled great distances to bring relief to the suffering. Nor did he abandon sorcery and wonderwork. References to sympathetic magic abound in Hasidic lore concerning the Baal Shem, and supernatural motifs recur throughout the corpus of legends about him (Ben Amos and Mintz, 1984, pp. 290–305). Yet when we turn to Meltzer’s Baal Shem-Tov ballads, we find only two in which the character of the Baal Shem as a worker of miracles is dominant. These are *Ha<sup>o</sup>ṛēah* (“The Guest,” pp. 64–67) and *Haggilgûl* (pp. 52–58). The classifications of the legends treating the miracles of the Baal Shem proposed by Joseph Dan (1975, pp. 89–90) are worthy of consideration in regard to these two poems.

Dan distinguishes three varieties of wonder stories among the Baal Shem-Tov legends. These are (1) stories of the “experience of wonders,” in which the members of the Baal Shem Tov’s circle experience a wave of elation and excitement generated by the force of his personality; (2) stories of the “knowledge of wonders,” in which the Baal Shem reveals his knowledge of hidden things; (3) stories of the “working of wonders,” in which the Baal Shem performs actual wonders. Accordingly, *Ha<sup>o</sup>ṛēah* tells of the Baal Shem bringing a child back to life and therefore belongs to the third category, the stories of the “working of wonders.” On the other hand, in *Haggilgûl* the Baal Shem reveals his knowledge of the hidden thoughts of men and beasts, and the story of the poem is therefore to be classed among those of the second category, the stories of the “knowledge of wonders.”

The story of *Haggilgûl* comes from *Sēper šibhēy habbešṭ* (p. 151), which is the source of the stories of many of Meltzer’s ballads. In this particular tale the Baal Shem-Tov visits the stables of a prosperous Jew.

And being one who has knowledge of hidden things, the Baal Shem discovers that one of the horses is the reincarnation of a man who took his life because of his failure to pay a debt, the promissory note for which is held by the owner of the stables. The Baal Shem asks for and receives the dead man's note of hand as a gift from the stable owner. When he tears up the note the horse dies, and the man's soul is released from its body and returns to its proper place. The ballad follows the legend in drawing on folk motifs. But there are also mystical allusions whose source is biblical. For example, the Baal Shem's horses and cart are transmuted and become *sûsim re'ûmîm lemirkēbet šel šalhelet ve'eš lehābāh* 'horses harnessed to a wagon of flame and blazing fire' (p. 53); and *hassûsim sûsêy lahat, hammirkēbet ke'eš-lehābāh* 'the horses blazing steeds, the wagon like flaming fire'. The reference is unmistakably to Elijah's "chariot of fire, and horses of fire" (2 Kgs 2:11). The story of the poem is in the characteristic mode of Baal Shem-Tov legends, by which he is generally represented as acting in ways that ordinary people cannot understand. The owner of the stables in the ballad is amused by Baal Shem-Tov's seemingly odd behavior and even contemptuous of him for it. Only at the end is the significance of what he did revealed.

The poem *Ha'ôrēah* differs from the rest of this set of ballads in depending not on any commonly known Baal Shem legend, but on a folk tradition that the poet had picked up on his own. The ground motif of the ballad is the Passover blood libel and entirely Jewish in its associations; this is brought together with a universal balladic motif, that of the "dead come to life." In this poem, too, Meltzer enlarges the thematic scope of the poem by the incorporation of biblical references. Although the poem shares the motif of Baal Shem-Tov's revival of a dead child with a story in *Sēper šibhêy habbešit* (pp. 114-115), the two tales differ in some very significant ways. In the legend the Baal Shem restores to life a child that had only recently died. In the poem the miracle of bringing a corpse back to life is made to seem all the more prodigious by the fact that the child had been dead for a considerable time. In the traditional tale, moreover, the Baal Shem is so exhausted by his effort that he falls to the ground, "his arms and legs spread out," whereas in the ballad he accomplishes the miracle by the mere touch of his hand.

The Baal Shem-Tov is very closely identified with Elijah in this ballad. According to the well-established Jewish tradition, the prophet joins the celebrants at the Passover feast and then leaves; moreover he, too, is known for having brought a dead child back to life (2 Kgs 17:17-24). These correspondences resulted in Meltzer's rewriting of the last line of the poem, a choice which testifies in retrospect to the poet's having

unconsciously absorbed and been influenced by a particular folk tradition. In the version in which it first appeared (*Dābār layyelādīm*, 14 March 1938), the closing line of the poem read <sup>2</sup>ēlīyyāhū hū ha'ôrēah "Elijah, he's the guest." Although the poem was included by him among the Hassidic ballads in the volume of his early verse, his indecision about whether the miracle of reviving the dead child should belong to Elijah or the Baal Shem accounts for his having excluded it from his second published book of poems *Āsārāh še'ārīm* (1943). In subsequent collections, however, the name of Elijah is supplanted by that of the Baal Shem (*Ba'al šēm hu hā'ôrēah*). Evidence uncovered by Dov Sadan (1964, pp. 84–85) makes it very likely that Meltzer's emendation of the last line was the result of his having recalled a story he had heard as a child in which the miracle in the ballad was attributed to the Baal Shem-Tov.

The beliefs and the teachings of the Baal Shem-Tov are significant to the content of both *Gazdā*<sup>2</sup> (pp. 59–63) and *Dōbūš vehabba'al šēm-tōḥ* ("Dobush and the Baal Shem-Tov," pp. 39–42). Two legends are merged in *Dōbūš vehabba'al šēm-tōḥ*. One of these is contained in *Sēper šibhēy habbeṣṣ* (pp. 39–44) and relates to the Baal Shem's relations with the hill bandits, who honored him as a holy man and submitted their disputes to him for his judgment. The second has to do with a tradition concerning the Hutzul, a mountain people of the Carpathians, among whom the Baal Shem is supposed to have lived and who told stories of the bandit chief called Dobush and his friend, the "saintly Jew" (Noy, 1960, pp. 70–71). This, then, is the source material that Meltzer uses to fashion a ballad which he infuses with Hassidic ideas of the Baal Shem, and in particular the belief that sincerity of intention makes repentance possible even for great evildoers.

In the ballad Dobush has grown old and, dreading the approach of death, appeals to the Baal Shem to help him expiate the wrongs of a lifetime. The ballad sets out the sequence of the Dobush's moral redemption. The first phase of the bandit's repentance consists in his realization that he would be answerable to God for his conduct on earth: <sup>2</sup>ēlōhīm hū<sup>2</sup> yišpeṭēnī. / hū yiš'al māh pōh 'āsīṭī ("God will judge me. / He will ask what I have done here"). This is followed by Dobush's casting off his sins by throwing away the tokens of his wrongdoing—his ax and his gold, each at the Baal Shem's command: *haggarzen mimmekā vehal'āh* ('cast away your ax'); *hazzāhāḥ mimmekā vehal'āh* ('cast away your gold'). And last is the stage of ritual immersion in the river: *ve'aḳṣav redāh lappeleg* ('and now go down to the river'). The rainbow that appears in the sky after the angel of death brandishes his ax is a

sign of divine forgiveness for sincere contrition. Thus the point of the ballad is the spiritual superiority of the Baal Shem-Tov, who is able to guide a sincerely contrite wrongdoer to redemption by guiding him to an awareness of the metaphysical significance of human will and actions.

The Baal Shem's custom of taking his disciples out to the fields to pray out-of-doors, even for the prayer to usher in the Sabbath, is the setting for the poem *Gazdā*<sup>7</sup>. The practice of praying in the fields which is commemorated in the legend (Buber, 1947, pp. 70–71) was connected with the Baal Shem-Tov's belief that thanks should be given to God while in the presence of His Creation. To this Meltzer adds the Hasidic tradition concerning the appearance of Elijah the Prophet under different guises to the great men of Israel. Hasidism as we know drew heavily on legends associated with the Kabbalists at Safed. In *Gazdā*<sup>7</sup> the poet makes use of a legend about Rabbi Isaac Luria. According to this legend, the Ari had once gone out into the fields with his disciples on the Sabbath and proposed that they should go to Jerusalem to usher in the Redemption; however the disciples wavered and the journey was not made, and the opportunity was lost (Bnayahu, 1967, pp. 168–169).

The detailed account in the ballad of preparations for pipe smoking is associated with Hasidic traditions that connect the reception of the Sabbath and Elijah's self-revelations with smoking itself. The last alludes to exalted states connected with events on the order of the kindling of the divine spark and the burning of incense at the Temple. It is noteworthy that David Shimoni made use of the legend concerning the Ari for a ballad dating from 1922 called *Qabbālāi šabbāi* in the collection entitled *Mē'aggādōt Cepak. Gazdā*<sup>7</sup> stands out among Meltzer's Baal Shem-Tov ballads for its presentation of the Baal Shem as an unassuming "man of the people." This flavor is conveyed in the manner in which he greets the passing peasant in the poem and introduces himself by his given name in its Yiddish diminutive form, to which he has added a Slavik suffix: *Ṣerū'igo Ba'al-Šem*. Had he wished to achieve a comparable effect in English he might have said "Izzy" Baal Shem.

The concluding poem in the group is *Beyôm 'ālep šel haq šābū'ōt* (pp. 68–72), which is based on a legend in *Sēper šibhēy habbešit* (pp. 167–171) and tells of Baal Shem-Tov's death. According to this account, the Baal Shem wished that when he died he might ascend heaven in a whirlwind, in imitation of Elijah. However he knew that he had not attained a sufficient degree of holiness to be worthy of being so favored. In dealing with this subject, too, Meltzer seeks to flesh out the tale by drawing on extra-Hasidic material. The source he selects is Talmudic

(T.B., *Ketúbbôt*, 104a). In this tale, the dying rabbi calls the sages of Israel to his bedside, so they could receive his last instructions before he departed from the world of the living. The same motif is taken up by Meltzer, who has the Baal Shem-Tov gather his disciples and continue to teach them until the very last. The rabbi in the Talmudic story hands the duties of his office over to his son; in Meltzer, too, the son is at his father's bedside. In both stories, those in attendance pray that the dying man should be spared, and in both instances the latter knows that there is no way to turn aside God's judgment. Finally, there is the evident correspondence of the imagery and concluding lines. Thus in the Talmudic story we read: "and the sages were ceaselessly imploring for mercy. The servant woman took a jug and threw it from the roof to the ground. The sages fell silent and the rabbi's soul departed with a kiss" (i.e., painlessly: *veyacāh nišmāṭô binešīkāh*). And in the poem:

רְעָשָׁה הַשְּׂרָשְׁרָת, נָפַל הַמְּשָׁקֶל  
 וַיִּקָּע בְּשַׁעוֹן לְכַבּוֹ בְּהִרְיָקָה.  
 וְרָאוּ הָעוֹמְדִים מִסָּבִיב לְמוֹרָה  
 כִּי יִצָּאָה נִשְׁמָתוֹ הַטְּהוֹרָה בְּנִשְׁיָקָה.

The chain made a noise, the pendulum fell  
 And the heart of the clock expired with a creak.  
 And those standing round their Master could see  
 His unspotted soul had departed with a kiss.

The Baal Shem-Tov ballads give prominence to the superior spiritual nature of their subject. The motif that runs through them is signaled by the verse in the Book of Psalms from which the collective title of the Hasidic ballads of which they form a part was taken: "Light sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright heart" (97:11)—which in Hasidism acquires the status of a principal article of faith. In Hasidic teaching, light is assigned a purely spiritual significance, and the passage is interpreted to mean that God "had, as it were, taken light of his own essence and sown it on earth, and from that light spring the righteous ones of the world (Horodezky, 1947, p. 11). In the ballads, light is employed figuratively and fulfills a literary function. So, for example, in *Dōbūš vehabba<sup>c</sup>al šem-tōḥ*, the sun emerges from behind the clouds to caress Dobush's supine body; and, after the Baal Shem immerses himself in the icy waters of the river in *Bēn ṭelūšṭ hā'ir uṭlūšṭ hākpār*, he "stood flooded in light" and it "flowed dripping into his body"; and, lastly, on the day of the Baal Shem's death, in *Beyôm <sup>2</sup>ālep šel Haq šāḥū<sup>c</sup>ōṭ*, the sun "scatters beams of light on everything." Light, indeed, suffuses this set of poems entirely, that none of the darker aspects of their subject's character and personality are allowed to obtrude on our consciousness.



Meltzer's accomplishment in his Hasidic ballads, taken as a group, is to have created an admirable fusion of their content and form—and it is particularly in his Baal Shem-Tov ballads that this achievement stands out most plainly.

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