

MIRACLES AND MARTYRDOM:
THE THEOLOGY OF A YIDDISH-LANGUAGE
MEMORIAL BOOK OF HASIDIC TALES
IN THE CONTEXT OF EARLIER HASIDIC
HAGIOGRAPHY

JUSTIN JARON LEWIS*

Scholarship on the rich tradition of tales about Hasidic spiritual leaders (Rebbes) has focused on Hebrew-language books,¹ while Yiddish collections of Hasidic tales, generally intended for a more popular audience, have been relatively neglected. This article will consider two collections of the latter type – *Beys Tshernobl*,² from the 1920s, and *Seyfer Kedoyshim*, a memorial book of the *khurbn*³ published in 1967.⁴

* Jewish Studies Program, Queen's University at Kingston, Ontario.

¹ The foundational scholarly work on the topic is Gedaliah Nigal's *The Hasidic Tale*, forthcoming in English from the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization. Also very significant are Joseph Dan's *HaSipur HaHasidi*, Yoav Elstein's *HaEqstaza Vehasipur HaHasidi*, and most recently Susanne Galley's *Der Gerechte ist das Fundament der Welt* and Rivka Dvir-Goldberg's study of tales told by Rebbes, *HaTsadiq HaHasidi veArmon HaLivyatan*. There has been some scholarly attention to the living oral traditions of Hasidic tales, notably Jerome Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim*. My own research on this subject is reflected in my Ph.D. thesis, *Imagining Holiness* (University of Toronto, 2003).

² *Beys Tshernobl* consists of two booklets: *Beys Nokhem* and *Beys Mordekhay*, Warsaw, 1926 (photo-offset reprint in one volume, Israel, 1968). Probably *Beys Tshernobl* as a single book is a creation of the printer in Israel, since *Beys Nokhem* and *Beys Mordekhay* also appear in photo-offset reprints one after the other but without an overall title in *Vunderlikhe Mayses BeYidish*, volume 4. The two are written, however, in the same rather ornate style, likely by the same author, so that treating them as a unit makes sense.

³ The Yiddish term *khurbn*, which also refers to the paradigmatic catastrophe in Jewish memory, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, will be used rather than Holocaust or *shoah*, as appropriate to the culture under discussion.

⁴ *Seyfer Kedoyshim: rebeyim oyf kidesh-hashem* by Menashe Unger. New York: Shulsinger Brothers, 1967.

The earlier book, *Beys Tshernobl* (“The House of Chernobyl”), was selected almost at random for this study. It is typical of Hasidic hagiography, especially of the flood of booklets of Hasidic tales in Yiddish published in Poland during the 1920s.⁵ It is anonymous, and may be a popularized adaptation from Hebrew originals, as are many such Yiddish books.⁶ The later work, *Seyfer Kedayshim* (“A Book of Martyrs: Rebbes who died for the Sanctification of God’s Name”) is an original work of Yiddish literature.⁷ While recognizably in the hagiographic genre, it is set apart by its grappling with the legacy of the *khurbn*. This article will compare *Seyfer Kedayshim* with *Beys Tshernobl* as a representative example of earlier Hasidic hagiography in Yiddish, focusing on the implicit theology of these works.

Both books consist of biographical stories of Rebbes, with attention to their dates and places of birth, their parents and relatives, and various events in their lives. *Beys Tshernobl* is specifically about Rebbes Nahum and Mordecai/Motele of Chernobyl. *Seyfer Kedayshim* is about many Hasidic Rebbes who perished in the *khurbn*. While neither book is overtly theological, both are permeated with theological implications.

⁵ Publication and widespread circulation of such booklets, cheaply printed and easily affordable, continued until the eve of the *khurbn*. See Baumgarten, *Récits hagiographiques juifs*, 480. Many of these Yiddish books, with dates ranging from the 1910s till the eve of the *khurbn*, have been reprinted in the series *Vunderlikhe Mayses Beyidish*, in which each hardcover volume contains a dozen or so reprinted booklets. Another series, *Vunderlekhe Mayses Vesipurim...*, first printed in Warsaw in 1936, has been republished in Brooklyn, 1984.

⁶ I do not know of a Hebrew original in this case, however. The titles *Bet Tshernobl*, *Bet Nahum* and *Bet Mordekhai* do not correspond to anything in Nigal’s substantial bibliographical lists of Hebrew books of Hasidic tales. There is a series of Hebrew books of tales largely about the Rebbes of Chernobyl, published between 1902 and 1908 by Isaiah Wolf Tsikernik, a Hasid of R. Isaac of Skvira, of the Chernobyl dynasty. *Beys Tshernobl*, however, is not a translation of these books or of selections from them; both the style (wordy in *Beys Tshernobl*, laconic in Tsikernik) and the narrative content are quite different.

⁷ There is a Hebrew version of *Seyfer Kedayshim* (Unger, *Admorim shenisfu bashoah*, 1969), but it appears to be a translation of the Yiddish version published earlier. Unger wrote primarily in Yiddish.

The Choice of Yiddish

In the Ashkenazi Jewish context, the choice of Yiddish rather than Hebrew has traditionally meant an appeal to a “lowbrow,” popular audience rather than to the elite, who were comfortable with Rabbinic Hebrew. In the particular context of these books, the choice takes on additional significance.

Both books were published in Yiddish in contexts where the language was endangered. Though Yiddish was the traditional language of Eastern European Jewry, ongoing processes of secularization and urbanization meant that by the 1920s there were many Jews, especially in urban centers like Warsaw, where *Beys Tshernobl* was published, who did not know Yiddish at all, and even more who rarely used the language.⁸ The choice of Yiddish rather than a European vernacular thus addressed a book to the portions of the Jewish reading public either that were still bound to tradition or that consciously chose, for ideological reasons, to maintain the traditional language. In the ideological ferment of pre-*khurbn* Polish Jewry, the latter could include adherents of various competing strains of Jewish nationalism, Orthodoxy, or both, but probably not ardent Zionists, more universally minded socialists, etc.

In the 1960s American context of the publication of *Seyfer Kedoyshim*, the choice of Yiddish still addressed a book to an all-Jewish readership and still carried overtones of populism and affinities to both Yiddishism and Orthodoxy.⁹ Far more than in the earlier setting, however, Yiddish was now experienced as a dying language, fatally wounded first by the enthusiastic assimilation of American Jews to the English-speaking culture around them, and then by the murder of most of its native speakers and the destruction of its cultural centers in the *khurbn*. In this context, a memorial book of the *khurbn* written in Yiddish is an act of defiance, perpetuating the culture whose destruction it mourns. As shown by the stubborn retention of the

⁸ An earlier and poignant example of the trend toward linguistic assimilation among Eastern European Jews is the fact that the most famous and popular of the Yiddish writers, Sholom Aleichem, spoke Russian rather than Yiddish with his own family. On the decline of Yiddish in Eastern Europe, see the recent discussion by Jeffrey Shandler in *Adventures in Yiddishland*, 71f.

⁹ Non-Zionist implications of the choice of Yiddish had diminished by this point, as illustrated by the publication of a Modern Hebrew translation of *Seyfer Kedoyshim* in Israel, noted above (ftn. 7). The author of *Seyfer Kedoyshim*, Menashe Unger, would in fact have had affinities with both Yiddishism and Orthodoxy, being a Socialist from a Hasidic background.

Yiddish language in Hasidic communities that have re-established themselves and grown exponentially since the *khurbn*,¹⁰ such defiance can be a theological statement.

Between Tradition and Modernity

Yiddish uses two words for “book.” A *seyfer* is a *holy* book, a *bukh* is a secular book. *Beys Tshernobl*, like most religious storybooks of its type, lays claim on its title page to the designation *seyfer* – though this would likely not be taken seriously by readers, who would typically refer to such a book as a *mayse-bikhl*, “a little story *bukh*.” *Seyfer Kedoyshim*’s self-identification is ambiguous: it is referred to, on the page thanking patrons of the publication, as the “*bukh Seyfer Kedoyshim*.” It thus locates itself on the boundary between the traditional/religious and the modern/secular.

The author, Menashe Unger (1900–1969), was himself a boundary crosser. The son of a Hasidic Rebbe, Shalom David of Zabno, he was also a committed socialist and Zionist. He was comfortable in both these worlds; he made his living as a Yiddish journalist in non-Hasidic circles in New York, while maintaining “close contact with prominent members of Hasidic dynasties.”¹¹

This duality is not unique. Michael Rodkinson (Frumkin), a key figure in the first outpouring of books of Hasidic tales, in the 1860s, was a Habad Hasid who left the fold and became a *maskil* – whether before or after the publication of his books of tales is disputed.¹² The prolific author Abraham Hayim Simha Bunem Michelson, whose often-reprinted compilations of Hasidic tales appeared in the years before the First World War, also made this transition.¹³ Joseph Dan has argued that in general, many books of Hasidic tales were compiled by people on the fringes of the Hasidic world and intended for a largely non-Hasidic readership.¹⁴ Thus, we need not assume that the anonymous author of *Beys Tshernobl* was less involved than Unger in the modern, non-Hasidic world. In fact, there are indications that neither the author nor the expected readership was fully immersed in the Hasidic milieu. For example, Rebbe Nahum is introduced as “the

¹⁰ On this resurgence see Gutwirth, *The Rebirth of Hasidism*.

¹¹ Deutsch, *The Maiden of Ludmir*, 38, 39; see also Marcus, *Concise Dictionary of American Jewish Biography*; Rabinowicz, *Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 515.

¹² See Nigal, *Melaqte HaSipur HaHasidi*, 19–22; Dan, “A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism.”

¹³ See Stockfish, *Sefer Zgyerz*, vol. 1 p. 495, vol. 2, p. 82.

¹⁴ See Dan, “A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism.”

author of the esteemed Hasidic book *Meir Einayim* that explains many [Scriptural] passages according to the Hasidic approach (*vos erklert fil shteln loyt der shites hakhsides*).¹⁵ A Hasidic reader would not need this reminder – and would know that the title of R. Nahum’s book is in fact *Meor Einayim*.

In terms of genre, these books have much in common. *Seyfer Kedoyshim* displays more journalistic concern for getting the facts straight, but *Beys Tshernobl* too is concerned about the facts (“how long the Rebbe Reb Nahum stayed in Medzhibozh with the holy Baal Shem Tov... is not known; however, people say...”).¹⁶ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* is not without the miracle stories, pious formulae and rambling organization that characterize earlier Hasidic literature such as *Beys Tshernobl*. Most importantly, both books are predicated on the fascination of the Hasidic tale with the person of the Rebbe.

Despite their basic similarities, the books’ differences are significant. One obvious difference is in the story titles. Many stories in each book have nearly identical titles, but in *Beys Tshernobl*, the typical title is *Nokh a vunderlikhe ertseylung fun dem Rebn ____*: “Another wondrous tale of the Rebbe ____,”¹⁷ while in *Seyfer Kedoyshim* the typical title is *Der ____ Rebe iz umgekumen oyf kidesh hashem*: “The Rebbe of ____ died for the Sanctification of God’s Name.” These themes of miracle and martyrdom are central to the difference between these books.

Miracles

The narrator of *Beys Tshernobl* has reservations about miracles. He notes that the Baal Shem Tov’s miracles actually antagonized some Torah scholars, who thought he was making forbidden use of divine names. The great Rebbe Nahum, however, was drawn to the Baal Shem Tov by the depth of his learning and the fact that his followers became more God-fearing – not by miracles.¹⁸ “Unfortunately,” the narrator comments, “the majority of people only told about miracles that happened...”¹⁹

Nevertheless, miracles are emphasized, as noted, in the titles of stories, and on the book’s title pages (“in this *seyfer* are narrated very wondrous things that happened with the Rebbe...”). The book opens

¹⁵ *Beys Nokhem* 3.

¹⁶ *Beys Nokhem* 15.

¹⁷ *Beys Mordekhay* 41, 45; cf. *Beys Nokhem* 28, 38, 46, *Beys Mordekhay* 3, 25, 28.

¹⁸ *Beys Nokhem* 11f.

¹⁹ *Beys Nokhem* 12.

with a miracle story that strains all credibility. As a child, Rebbe Nahum prays for two rubles and his stepfather and tutor actually witness the coins' appearance out of nowhere.²⁰

Other stories, in typical Hasidic fashion, involve nothing that would appear miraculous to an outside observer, but hinge on the reader's belief in the Rebbe's explanation of supernatural goings-on beneath the surface. For example, a Rebbe's odd behavior of first refraining from eating a particular bird and then devouring it is explained by the necessity of fixing the soul of a Hasid who had transmigrated into it.²¹

The Rebbe's power to work miracles is seen as granted to him by God because of his holiness. There is ambiguity as to whether the Rebbe or God is behind a miracle. In a representative story,²² while the title, "A wondrous story of the holy Rebbe R. Nahum, how he raised the dead with his prayers," appears to credit the Rebbe's own power, and a character in the story praises the impression made in heaven by the Rebbe's prayer, the Rebbe himself credits God's kindness.

The Rebbes' involvement with miracles makes them formidable opponents. A persecutor of Rebbe Nahum inexorably lost all his wealth.²³ The narrator concludes the story with the prayer, "May God protect us from the anger of a holy man!"²⁴

In *Seyfer Kedoyschim*, there is an almost, but not total, absence of miracle stories. Unlike in *Beys Tshernobl*, there are no ideological statements about the relative importance of miracles. In fact, however, their place has been radically reduced compared to almost any previous collection of Hasidic tales.

When *Seyfer Kedoyschim* mentions someone's escape or survival during the *khurbn*, it generally says it was by a miracle ("*al pi nes*"). Usually no details are given, however, and when they are, they have to do with the practical arrangements that were worked out.²⁵

Occasionally an earlier, pre-*khurbn*, Rebbe is described as being known as a miracle-worker (*bal-moyfes*). This is stated matter-of-factly, just as another Rebbe may be mentioned as being "known as a charity giver (*bal-tsdoke*)." On the other hand, while the text never

²⁰ *Beys Nokhem* 6f.

²¹ *Beys Mordekhay* 3–8.

²² *Beys Mordekhay* 28f.

²³ *Beys Nokhem* 46ff.

²⁴ *Beys Nokhem* 48. On this topic, see "The Zaddik as a Source of Danger," in Jacobs, *Their Heads in Heaven*.

²⁵ E.g. 52, 80 about the Belzer Rebbe.

says that a Rebbe *was* a miracle-worker, only that he was known as one, it will say without qualification that someone was, for example, a great scholar.

The text appears to avoid emphasizing miracles. For example, there is a story about the Borsher Rebbe, Phinehas (“Pinkhesl”) Hager,²⁶ who was known as a *bal-moyfes*, a miracle worker. A story from the prewar years tells how the Rebbe’s prayers caused a childless wife to have three children. He had been asked for *zera shel kayema*, children who would live, and indeed the three children and their mother survived the *khurbn* and moved to Jerusalem.²⁷ The narrator, however, does not explicitly connect their survival with the Rebbe’s prayer, and in its account of the war years, the text ascribes no miracles to the Borsher Rebbe, who perished in the *khurbn*.

The Ostrovster Rebbe, Meir-Yehiel, of an earlier generation, is said to have fasted for 40 years (i.e., he kept every day as a fast day and ate only at night).²⁸ Before reading about him, I had heard of this Rebbe from people involved in Hasidic studies.²⁹ According to them, he fasted for 40 years to delay the *khurbn*; the implication, of course, was that he succeeded.

This form of the legend was probably available to the author of *Seyfer Kedoyshim*, had he wished to include it. Instead, the narrator presents the Rebbe’s fasting simply as an example of piety – not of power.

There are a few narratives about what appears to be supernatural protection during the *khurbn*, but the narrator does *not* use the term “miracle” to describe them. In any case, the protection turns out to be only temporary. For example, Rebbe Solomon Zalman Veltfraynd of Tomaszow-Lodz, while living in Lodz, repeatedly expressed faith that the merit of his late father, and especially wearing his father’s fur coat, would protect him. Indeed, he remained alive while there. He was killed later, however, after he was brought to “safety” in Warsaw. We

²⁶ Many Rebbes are referred to by affectionate diminutive forms of their names – thus, R. Motele of Chernobyl. This may be more the case in *Seyfer Kedoyshim* than in earlier books of tales; if so, it would be in keeping with the diminishment of the Rebbes to ordinary human stature, where they can be objects of compassion as well as wonder.

²⁷ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 64f.

²⁸ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 31.

²⁹ In a workshop with Neila Carlebach, Rabbi Samuel Intrator, and Barry Barkan, Elat Chayyim retreat center, New York State, summer 1996.

are not told whether he had said anything more about his father's protection.³⁰

The sense of inevitable doom that would befall the persecutors of a Rebbe, so strong in *Beys Tshernobl* that the reader needs protection from it, is altogether absent in *Seyfer Kedoyshim*. Even the Rebbes' miracles now show their powerlessness against oppressors. Thus, the Opler Rebbe, Jeremiah Kalish, while giving practical advice about escape or hiding, promised his Hasidim: *oyf mir veln di rotskhim keyn shlite nit hobn!* – “those murderers will have no power over me!” This came true: When the SS entered his home, he died before they could lay hands on him.³¹

Two startling stories in the books counterpoint each other. In the miracle story of the two rubles, mentioned above, the young Rebbe Nahum, whose father has passed away, refers to God as his *lebediker tate*, his “living father,” who gives him what he asks for.³²

In *Seyfer Kedoyshim*, by contrast, we find a Rebbe appealing to his dead father to stop the *khurbn*. Ezekiel (“Yekhezkele”) Holmstock, son of the above-mentioned Rebbe Meir-Yehiel Ostrovster, “when the murders of Jews began... could not grasp how his father, who had fasted for forty years in succession, could allow entire Jewish communities in Poland to be killed.” He concluded that “the gates of heaven were shut and his father... knew nothing of what was happening.” He therefore went with a minyan to the cemetery and spent an entire day weeping and reciting psalms. The narrator gives the text of the *kvitl* (letter of petition) which the Rebbe left on his father's grave: *Tate! Farvos derloztu az men zol umbrengen di eyde kedoyshes fun Ostrovtses un ale yidn in Poyln? Gey far dem kise-hakoved un shray un bet rakhamim far di yidn, vayl di sakone iz zeyer groys!* (“Father! Why are you allowing them to kill the holy community of Ostrovtses and all the Jews of Poland? Go before the Throne of Glory, shout, and pray for mercy for the Jews, because the danger is very great!”).³³

This has the ring of a classic Hasidic story – except for the ending. A similar story in any earlier book would have ended with different results: the prayers would have been answered and the persecutions stopped. In *Seyfer Kedoyshim*, however, the emotional text of the *kvitl*

³⁰ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 187f.

³¹ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 41f.

³² *Beys Nokhem* 6.

³³ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 34.

is the end of the story. This story is not about a miracle but about the touching, rather naive faith of the Rebbe.

This highlights the change in the concept of the Rebbe that had taken place in the interim period between these two books. In *Beys Tshernobl*, the Rebbe is a model of faith whose faith gives him great power. In *Seyfer Kedoyshim*, the Rebbe is simply a model of faith, with no power. In *Beys Tshernobl*, the reader is invited to feel amazement and awe toward the Rebbe; in *Seyfer Kedoyshim*, to feel pity. There has been a humanization of the Rebbe and a stripping away of his aura of supernatural might.

God

As for the concept of God, it is significant that the place of the “living father” of the story in *Beys Tshernobl* is taken by the dead, human father in *Seyfer Kedoyshim*. The focus of *Seyfer Kedoyshim* is on human faith and love between human beings. The divine object of faith is hardly mentioned.

In *Beys Tshernobl*, faith in God’s helping power is expressed not only in the stories but also in appeals to God by the narrator on behalf of the reader: *Hashem yisborakh zol undz helfn mir zoln geholfn vern mit alem gutn*: “May God help us, that we may be helped with all good!”³⁴ In *Seyfer Kedoyshim*, the only appeal to God is the frequently repeated abbreviation *h.y.d.* [*Hashem yakom damo*] – “may God avenge his blood” – after the name of each victim of the Nazis. Whether this expresses real belief in God’s avenging power is not clear. Certainly, the possibility of God helping the reader is not raised.

One of the very few direct references to God in *Seyfer Kedoyshim* is in a story about a teaching of Dov-Ber Kalish, the Loyvitsher-Skenievitser Rebbe, about trusting in God. In a kind of counterpoint to the well-known Jewish joke where God tells a man who prays to win the lottery “you could have bought a ticket,” the Rebbe advises a Hasid *not* to buy a lottery ticket but to have faith in God alone to give him prosperity.³⁵ The narrator conveys this teaching with approval. This is ironic, since it conveys a passivist view of God as firmly in control of the world regardless of human action, contradicting all the rest of the book. This shows that the theology of the text is not carefully thought through – and thus all the more worth studying as an expression of a Hasidic outlook in the aftermath of the *khurbn*.

³⁴ *Beys Mordekhay* 40.

³⁵ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 216f.

In a number of stories, Rebbes say that “the gates of heaven are shut.”³⁶ This view of God as inaccessible to human beings, reflected by the general lack of mention of God in the book, perhaps best expresses the author’s theological outlook.

The Rebbes

The focus of both books, as with other collections of Hasidic tales, is not on God, but on the Rebbes. Both assume the centrality of the Rebbe in the Hasidic worldview. Both, too, highlight many of the Rebbes’ same admired characteristics: devout observance, intensive study and prayer, and human kindness.

There are, however, significant differences. *Beys Tshernobl* frequently emphasizes the Rebbe’s role in bringing people to repentance (*tshuve*). This theme occurs only rarely in *Seyfer Kedoyschim*, which, on the other hand, places strong emphasis on the Rebbe’s role in comforting and strengthening Jews during their suffering.³⁷ It includes many stories of Rebbes feeding the hungry and providing other concrete, physical help.

In general, there has been a humanization of the Rebbe in *Seyfer Kedoyschim*. While in *Beys Tshernobl* and Hasidic literature in general the Rebbe is wise to the point of infallibility, in *Seyfer Kedoyschim* we are witnesses to the Rebbes’ miscalculations in attempts to escape – fleeing from villages to cities and from cities to villages in the expectation of greater safety, and perishing in the end.³⁸

In *Beys Tshernobl*, the Rebbes are seen as powerful even on behalf of the reader. The stories frequently conclude with a plea that the merit of the Rebbes should bring us redemption and help us in every way.³⁹

In *Seyfer Kedoyschim*, not only are there no such appeals, but Hasidim are presented as helping Rebbes at least as often as Rebbes help Hasidim. This is a major reversal in the expectations of Hasidic stories, and comes up most frequently in connection with attempts to rescue Rebbes from the Nazis. Exemplifying the helplessness of many Rebbes in this regard, the Sokhatshover Rebbe, David Bornshteyn, continued sitting and studying as if nothing were different; the Hasidim had to more or less force him to put on a disguise and accept

³⁶ E.g. *Seyfer Kedoyschim* 34, 173.

³⁷ This is emphasized in the author’s introduction, x.

³⁸ Summed up in the author’s introduction, ix f.

³⁹ *Beys Nokhem* 25, *Beys Mordekhay* 23, 27f., 29, 31, 40.

a ride to another town.⁴⁰ This does not mean that the Hasidim had any more power in the face of the Nazis than the Rebbes did; with the conspicuous exception of the rescue of the Belzer Rebbe,⁴¹ the safety procured for the Rebbes was only temporary.

This humanization of the Rebbes has a more positive side: the fact that the Rebbes are shown as weak and vulnerable allows them to emerge as admirable in more ways than they could have otherwise, especially in their readiness for self-sacrifice. *Beys Tshernobl* contains a story in which Rebbe Nahum sells his portion in the world-to-come in order to build a mikveh and arouse people to repentance.⁴² This is presented seriously, as a remarkable act of self-sacrifice, but one is not left with the impression that the Rebbe now faces damnation; presumably he will earn back a favored place in the world-to-come over time.

In *Seyfer Kedoyshim*, however, we meet many examples of Rebbes sacrificing their lives in *this* world on behalf of others, as the highest manifestation of their care for and solidarity with their Hasidim and Jews in general. A striking example is that of the Karliner Rebbe, Abraham Elimelech, who was visiting Palestine in the months before the war began. It was clear to all that disaster was looming, and Hasidim begged him to stay in the Land of Israel, but he insisted on returning to be with the Jews of Poland, and refused subsequent offers of rescue.⁴³ Several Rebbes were offered rescue at the cost of other Jews' lives, and refused.⁴⁴ Once again, in comparison with earlier Hasidic literature, the sense of the Rebbe's holiness has remained but belief in his power has disappeared.

Seyfer Kedoyshim focuses more than its earlier counterparts on the Rebbes as individuals. While *Beys Tshernobl* is ostensibly about two Rebbes, Nahum and Mordecai of Chernobyl, as is typical for this genre, the focus slips from time to time. *Beys Mordekhay* contains many stories about Rebbe Nahum, and stories of other Rebbes are brought in on one pretext or another;⁴⁵ the story matters more than to whom it happened. The tale mentioned earlier about eating a bird begins: "Once the holy Rebbe Motele Chernobyler of blessed

⁴⁰ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 256; other examples e.g. 5, 61, 188, 205, 219, 278, 393f.

⁴¹ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 81f., 201.

⁴² *Beys Mordekhay* 17.

⁴³ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 367; see x, 278, 393f., 410.

⁴⁴ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* x, 71, 234.

⁴⁵ *Beys Nokhem* 38, *Beys Mordekhay* 23.

memory – and some say this happened with his father, the holy Rebbe Reb Nahum of blessed memory –”⁴⁶

Seyfer Kedoyshim, on the other hand, contains many dates and facts important for knowing about the Rebbes as individuals, rather than being interesting as narratives.⁴⁷ The book also includes photographs of nearly every Rebbe memorialized. While contributing nothing to the narrative, they make the Rebbes more vividly present as human beings.

By the Second World War, there were many Hasidic Rebbes in Eastern Europe, most of them descendants of earlier Rebbes. Some Rebbes, however, were more famous than others and were known as scholars, miracle workers, or community leaders; and they were much more likely to become the subjects of books of stories. Rather than selecting the most important Rebbes, the author of *Seyfer Kedoyshim* has apparently included *all* the Rebbes he could find information on. The Rebbes are presented in alphabetical order, which represents all-inclusiveness, as in the biblical acrostics that strive to include all praises or laments possible. It is also an essentially arbitrary order, with no relation to anyone’s importance, suggesting that no Rebbe is more important than another.

The author tells us, however, that his intentions go beyond recognition of each Rebbe as an individual. He sees this recognition as symbolic of that recognition that every Jew who died in the *khurbn* should ideally receive: “...So we ought to keep an eternal memory of every individual, but unfortunately we do not have information about every particular individual; we have more information about religious leaders than about other Jews.”⁴⁸

Thus, we find a story beginning: “among the six million Jews who were killed for the Sanctification of the Name by the German murderers, was also the Khentshiner Rebbe...”⁴⁹ This is deeply surprising in the context of Hasidic tales. The standard assumption is that Rebbes are a higher type of person; telling stories about *them* is a mitzvah, and the roles of other people in the stories are usually secondary. Here, in striking contrast, we find Rebbes presented as representative Jews, of whom many more should be eternalized in stories. The worldview of Hasidic hagiography had always focused on

⁴⁶ *Beys Mordekhay* 3.

⁴⁷ This is also the case for some earlier Hasidic hagiography in Hebrew, but hardly at all for works in Yiddish.

⁴⁸ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 422.

⁴⁹ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 202.

the Rebbe, and this is a profound change in that worldview: from the Rebbe as superhuman to the Rebbe as representatively human.

Germans and other Gentiles

I just wrote “human” but an important question in Hasidic literature is the view of human beings who are not Jewish. In *Beys Tshernobl*, Gentiles are viewed with familiar contempt tinged with fear. An explicit theological expression of this common view in Hasidic literature is found in the assertion in the classic work *Tanya* that only Jews have a “divine soul.”⁵⁰ In the stories of *Beys Tshernobl*, this outlook is exemplified by an episode where Rebbe Nahum is falsely accused of killing a Gentile, and other Gentiles are about to kill the Rebbe for it. The Rebbe prays, and the dead man comes back to life – just long enough to exculpate the Rebbe.⁵¹ The Gentile’s life is not what is important.

On the other hand, the Yiddish style of *Beys Tshernobl* is extremely *daytshmerish* – influenced by modern German. There is extensive use of German words and expressions that have no roots in Yiddish, such as “*selbstverständlich*,”⁵² “*obwohl*,”⁵³ or “*sich vervollkommen*.”⁵⁴ Thus, the anonymous author emulates rather than rejects Gentile culture.

Not surprisingly, the attitude of *Seyfer Kedoyshim* to the Germans in particular and to Gentiles in general is more intensely hostile. The Yiddish of this book contains very few *daytshmerisms*. The narrator’s attitude toward the Germans is clear and emphatic: his introduction ends, “*Lomir gedenken vos di daytshn hobn tsu undz geton! Gedenken un keynmol zey nisht moykhl zayn!*” – “Let us remember what the Germans did to us! Remember and never forgive them!”⁵⁵ The text rarely mentions Germans without adding “*yemakh shmom*” (“may their names be erased”) or calling them “the German murderers” or “beasts.”

No distinction is made between Nazis or perpetrators of war crimes, and Germans in general. The text supports belief in the collective guilt of the German people, and in the appropriateness of Jewish hatred of all Germans.

⁵⁰ *Tanya*, 11 (end of *pereq 2* and beginning of *pereq 3*).

⁵¹ *Beys Mordekhay* 28f.

⁵² *Beys Mordekhay* 4, 28, and frequently.

⁵³ E.g. *Beys Nokhem* 46.

⁵⁴ E.g. *Beys Nokhem* 9.

⁵⁵ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* xi.

The text's stance toward non-German Gentiles is somewhat less forceful. Often they appear on the scene as murderers, collaborators with the Nazis. Some Gentiles, however, are presented as preserving valuable manuscripts,⁵⁶ or saving Jewish lives. Fairly typical of how the narrator deals with these cases is the story of a "*shabes-goye*" (a Gentile woman who handled tasks forbidden to Jews on the Sabbath), who attempted to defend "our rabbi," as she called him, Rebbe Moses Mordecai Twersky of Lublin. She was beaten for it and left scarred for life.⁵⁷ Her story appears, but the subtext seems to be "see what devotion the Rebbe aroused even in a *shikse*." The narrator expresses no praise or gratitude for the woman's heroism, nor does he name her. Here we are back on the familiar Hasidic ground of casual contempt for non-Jews and low regard for women.

As mentioned above, the narrator adds to the name of each Rebbe who died in the *khurbn* the Hebrew abbreviation *h.y.d.*, "may God avenge his (or their) blood." This is also the last "word" of the book.⁵⁸

The fact that God has not avenged the *khurbn* is an outstanding problem for Jewish theology. The traditional model would call for such revenge, even if one were to see the Germans as instruments of divine punishment of the Jews.⁵⁹ At the end of the war in Germany, as bombs rained down on cities that lay in ruins, there were Germans who felt that God's anger had been let loose against them. (This view is memorialized by a post-war inscription on a ruined church tower in Berlin, left unrepaired as a testimony to *Gottes Rache an unserem Volk*, "God's vengeance on our people.") Subsequent history, however, with the quick recovery of Germany (ironically called the "economic miracle," *Wirtschaftswunder*) and the survival into peaceful old age of many Nazis and war criminals, seems to have made a mockery of this concept. If the loss of the war was divine punishment, the punishment was far too brief and its effects too shallow to match the magnitude of the crime.

The narrator of *Seyfer Kedoyshim*, however, with the simple use of an abbreviation, has not given up an insistent call for divine vengeance. Although the sincerity of the desire for such vengeance is

⁵⁶ E.g. *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 72ff.

⁵⁷ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 212.

⁵⁸ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 425.

⁵⁹ Some Hasidic thought has seen the *khurbn* as divine punishment for assimilation or Zionism. The perpetrators should still be punished, just as the various oppressors of biblical Israel are seen both as instruments of divine justice and as deserving of punishment.

clear, it is harder to imagine what form the author might have thought it could take. Writing in the sixties, he may still have hoped for some new catastrophe to overtake Germany. Perhaps he has in mind a judgment of the perpetrators after death, although there is little in the book to indicate any strong belief in an afterlife.

Evil and Resistance

God's failure to take revenge on the Germans is only part of the overall problem of the power of evil and the weakness of good in the *khurbn*. It is theologically shocking that God did so little and that God's holy men, the Rebbes, were so powerless in the face of the Nazis. The evil of the Nazis went beyond mere destruction: they practiced the greatest ingenuity in making the tortures and deaths they inflicted as demoralizing and degrading as possible. Since *Seyfer Kedoyshim* presents whatever is known about the deaths of Rebbes at Nazi hands, and often contains little other information about a Rebbe, be it from lack of information or lack of space, many of the most fascinating stories in the book are about the creative cruelty of the Nazis. One relatively mild example is enough: as the Nazis tortured the Ozarenitser Rebbe, Isaac Twersky, they made the Jews of the town watch and *applaud* whenever he groaned – degrading themselves and their Rebbe.⁶⁰ Readers of such stories are attracted to some extent by the evil described, because of its ingenuity, and thus even in being described, this evil reasserts its power.

This is bound up with the question of the seeming lack of significant Jewish resistance. This is an issue for the narrator, who comments on it at some length in several parts of the book.⁶¹ He maintains that not only armed resistance, but also every act of spirituality and indeed of humanity, every Jewish attempt to live a normal, human, life in the face of Nazi terror, was an act of resistance.

One purpose of the book is to illustrate the Rebbes' involvement in resistance in all its forms. The narrator tells of Rebbes and Hasidim who maintained religious practices at great risk, refusing to let their beards be cut off;⁶² refusing non-kosher food;⁶³ dancing on Hoshanah Rabbah and Purim even in a death train or a labor camp;⁶⁴ crowning a

⁶⁰ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 8.

⁶¹ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* x, 103, 166f.

⁶² *Seyfer Kedoyshim* e.g. 188, 205, cf. 224.

⁶³ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 279.

⁶⁴ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 6f., 279.

new Rebbe in the midst of the war;⁶⁵ interpreting the Torah with insights for the time;⁶⁶ singing *Ani Maamin* (“I believe...”) at the doors of the gas chambers.⁶⁷

There are stories of Rebbes who encouraged their followers to take action by fleeing,⁶⁸ or by armed resistance.⁶⁹ There are Rebbes who took individual action against the oppressors: Rebbe Solomon David Joshua of Slonim protested every time a Jew was beaten in the labor camp, and received extra beatings as a result;⁷⁰ Rebbe Arele Stoliner was killed trying to defend a pregnant woman from a Nazi.⁷¹ Others were resistance fighters on a larger scale: Rebbe Barukh’l of Vishev saved hundreds of Jews by forging papers for them;⁷² the Rovker Rebbe, Arele Petshenik, became a partisan fighter,⁷³ as did three brothers of the Radoshitser Rebbe Kalmish Finkler.⁷⁴

Still, all examples of resistance tend to pale by comparison with the constantly recurring accounts of massacres of hundreds and thousands of Jews, who offered no physical resistance and indeed often obeyed orders to dig their own mass graves before being killed.

In this context, the narrator tries to make much of little material: the Radomsker Rebbe Solomon Enoch Rabinowitz died “as a hero” because he told the Gestapo to kill him on the spot rather than dragging him to a mass execution.⁷⁵ The narrator also deals in a surprising way with a series of stories about practical acts of resistance (ransoming Jews from death trains, for example) ascribed to the Radzyner Rebbe, Samuel Solomon Leiner. Here, rather than in the context of any of the small miracle stories in the book, the narrator talks in terms of the emergence and dissemination of “legends” and notes in a footnote a parallel story about a much earlier rabbi, as if to prove that the version about the Radzyner Rebbe is non-factual.

What seems to have happened is that human practical resistance to evil has become as surprising and hard to believe in as divine miracles were for previous generations.

⁶⁵ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 171f.

⁶⁶ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* e.g. 213.

⁶⁷ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 103.

⁶⁸ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* e.g. 200.

⁶⁹ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 233, 403ff.

⁷⁰ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 279.

⁷¹ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 274.

⁷² *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 131, 140f.

⁷³ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 413.

⁷⁴ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 396, 398f.

⁷⁵ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 389f.

The most important theological response to the power of Nazi evil, however, both on the part of the narrator and of many of the people described, is the insistence on the concept of martyrdom, of *kidesh-hashem* (“sanctification of the Name”). The centrality of this theme is underlined by the title of the book and by the constant repetition of “killed for *kidesh-hashem*” in reference to every Rebbe whose death is mentioned. The narrator explicitly expresses the view that the death of every Jew killed in the *khurbn* was a martyrdom, an act of *kidesh-hashem*,⁷⁶ and appeals to Maimonides, who wrote to the Jews of Yemen that anyone killed because of being Jewish has died a martyr.

In fact, this is a transformation of Maimonides’ idea. In the medieval context, Jews were killed because they were Jews *if* they refused to convert. The refusal to convert bore witness to Jewish faith in the Jewish God. No such option was available to the victims of the Nazis, but the narrator insists on seeing them as true martyrs nonetheless. The tales show that many of the Jews who died at Nazi hands saw their own deaths in this way. Rebbes and others prepared themselves for death as martyrs,⁷⁷ preparing to say the appropriate blessing,⁷⁸ donning *kitl* and *tallit* (prayer robe and prayer shawl) and meditating when the time came,⁷⁹ and dying with prayers and shouts of *Shema Yisrael* (“Hear, O Israel...”).⁸⁰

In this context, the stance of the Zhelikover Rebbe, Abraham Shalom Goldberg, represents a radical transposition. In hiding with other Jews, he was asked: why hide when all the Jews are being killed? He answered: “We must hide – perhaps one of us will remain alive. *Yeder yid vos blaybt lebn iz mekadesh hashem barabim* – every Jew who remains alive is sanctifying God’s name before the multitudes... because he is not willing to give in to the Nazis or let his precious life be extinguished!”⁸¹ *Kidesh-hashem*, the sanctification of God’s name, traditionally a synonym for martyrdom, here becomes a synonym for survival.

In also emphasizing death as *kidesh-hashem*, however, the narrator and many of the people in the tales triumph over the Nazi goal of degrading and dehumanizing Jews and making their deaths

⁷⁶ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 422.

⁷⁷ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* e.g. 233.

⁷⁸ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 378f.

⁷⁹ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 36.

⁸⁰ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* e.g. 98, 181.

⁸¹ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 181.

meaningless. If death at Nazi hands was martyrdom and sanctified God's name, then, theologically, evil did not triumph.

The narrator therefore even uses the traditional language of sacrifice: "the altar of the death of the six million martyrs";⁸² "the Belzer Rebbe [who himself survived] offered as sacrifices his Rebbetzin Malkah... his son-in-law Isaiah Zisha... along with his Rebbetzin, with seven children...."⁸³ Using a powerful image, Rebbe Solomon David Joshua of Slonim expressed joy about his coming death at Nazi hands: "The Zohar says that the Most High dyes His garments with the blood of people who have died for the Sanctification of the Name."⁸⁴ God's glory, the Rebbes and the narrator assert, is magnified by the death of the six million.

Continuity and Loss

Asserting this belief is a remarkable example of the narrator's fundamental refusal to let old beliefs and ways of thinking be altered by the trauma of the *khurbn*.

In many respects old patterns of Jewish thinking became useless and dysfunctional in the context of the *khurbn*. Thus, the Zhikhliner Rebbe, Samuel Abraham Abba, told his Hasidim that his late father had appeared in a dream and advised repentance, fasting and prayer to overcome the "*moyredike gezeyres*," the fearful decrees that hung over them.⁸⁵ One could argue that this advocacy of time-honored methods was doing the Hasidim a terrible disservice: fasting would weaken their bodies when maintaining physical strength was crucial. The same could be said of the teachings of Dov-Ber Kalish, the Loyvitsher-Skenievitser Rebbe, mentioned above, about trusting in God rather than in human means such as lottery tickets or, presumably, guns.⁸⁶ However, the narrator does not express any qualms about these or similar teachings.

In this light, crucial to the book's theology is what it most conspicuously avoids: any attempt at theodicy. God is not called to account, and the content of Hasidic belief in God is never questioned.

The choice of terms for the *khurbn* is often theologically significant. The narrator's use of the common Yiddish term "*der*

⁸² *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 38.

⁸³ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 81; cf. 53, 326, etc.

⁸⁴ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 280. Contrast Bialik's poem *Al HaShehitah* ("The Slaughter") where this image is used in protest.

⁸⁵ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 173.

⁸⁶ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 216f.

driter khurbn,” the third destruction, as of the two Temples, recognizes the enormity of the catastrophe, but also places it firmly in the context of previous Jewish history, part of an existing pattern.

The book, of course, is filled with recognition of loss – with anger and mourning. This becomes most poignant when the Nazi murders brought to an end not only the lives of individual Rebbes and families, but entire Hasidic dynasties, which had maintained themselves for generations.⁸⁷ Conversely, the persistence of some dynasties after the *khurbn* is celebrated, e.g., “the golden chain of Belzer Hasidism was not interrupted.”⁸⁸

Strangely, however, a deeper tone of loss is found in the earlier *Beys Tshernobl*. There, we read, for example, “in *those* times, the Torah was very important in Poland and in Lithuania, and was the only ideal in a Jew’s life...”⁸⁹ In the aftermath of the First World War, the narrator looks back with nostalgia on a whole way of life and set of values that he assumes has passed away.

Such a feeling is never found in *Seyfer Kedoyshim*. The narrator seems, on the contrary, to be telling the stories on the assumption that they will find receptive readers who cherish and maintain Hasidic values. This, perhaps, is this book’s ultimate answer to Nazism: the implication that at the deepest level of the Jewish mind and heart, nothing has changed. The dramatic resurgence of Hasidism in the decades since the book’s publication justifies the author’s confidence.

Yet much has in fact changed. In *Beys Tshernobl* and other books like it, the focus is on the Rebbe, a superman in close communion with God, whose power he shares. In *Seyfer Kedoyshim*, a book of martyrs of the *khurbn*, the Rebbe has become a human individual, with touching faith in an inaccessible God. He is without power, essentially no different from the ordinary Jew whom he has come to symbolize, resisting the brute and fascinating power of evil with all his being, in life and in death.

⁸⁷ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* e.g. 251, 347, 360, 390.

⁸⁸ *Seyfer Kedoyshim* 83.

⁸⁹ *Beys Mordekhay* 7f.

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Hasidic tales are often read as charming, timeless expressions of Jewish spirituality. The best-known versions of these stories, however, have been rewritten for audiences outside traditional Judaism and few works have explored Hasidic tales as they were created by Hasidic Jews. In *Imagining Holiness* Justin Lewis offers a radical reappraisal of how we think of Hasidic tales, calling into question received notions of authenticity.Â In the Hasidic community, Yiddish and Modern Hebrew have been competing as native tongues in an inconsistent bilingual sociolinguistic situation for over 60 years.