

From the Rabbi's Desk  
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**That Won't Work! You Heard the Story**  
(Unwrapping a Hasidic Story)

Buber, Martin: Tales of the Hasidim. The Early Masters. Schocken Books. New York. 1947. Page 286.



**Background to Our Story**

**Martin Buber**



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin\\_Buber](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Buber)

Martin Buber (Hebrew: מרטין בובר, German: *Martin Buber*, Yiddish: מארתין בובר; February 8, 1878 – June 13, 1965) was an Austrian-born Israeli Jewish philosopher best known for his philosophy of dialogue, a form of existentialism centered on the distinction between the I-Thou relationship and the I-It relationship. Born in Vienna, Buber came from a family of observant Jews, but broke with Jewish custom to pursue secular studies in philosophy. In 1902, he became the editor of the weekly *Die Welt*, the central organ of the Zionist movement, although he later withdrew from organizational work in Zionism. In 1923, Buber wrote his famous essay on existence, *Ich und Du* (later translated into English as *I and Thou*), and in 1925, he began translating the Hebrew Bible into the German language.

In 1930, Buber became an honorary professor at the University of Frankfurt am Main, but resigned in protest from his professorship immediately after Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933. He then founded the Central Office for Jewish Adult Education, which became an increasingly important body as the German government forbade Jews to attend public education. In 1938, Buber left Germany and settled in

Jerusalem, Mandate Palestine (later Israel), receiving a professorship at Hebrew University and lecturing in anthropology and introductory sociology.

Buber was a direct descendent of the prominent 16th century rabbi, Meir Katzenellenbogen, known as the Maharam of Padua, as was his cousin, cosmetics queen Helena Rubinstein. Karl Marx is another notable relative.

Buber's wife Paula died in 1958, and he died at his home in the Talbiya neighborhood of Jerusalem on June 13, 1965. They had two children: a son, Rafael Buber and a daughter, Eva Strauss-Steinitz.

Buber was a scholar, interpreter, and translator of Hasidic lore. He viewed Hasidism as a source of cultural renewal for Judaism, frequently citing examples from the Hasidic tradition that emphasized community, interpersonal life, and meaning in common activities (e.g., a worker's relation to his tools). The Hasidic ideal, according to Buber, emphasized a life lived in the unconditional presence of God, where there was no distinct separation between daily habits and religious experience. This was a major influence on Buber's philosophy of anthropology, which considered the basis of human existence as dialogical.

In 1906, Buber published *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman*, a collection of the tales of the Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, a renowned Hasidic *rebbe*, as interpreted and retold in a Neo-Hasidic fashion by Buber. Two years later, Buber published *Die Legende des Baalschem* (stories of the Baal Shem Tov), the founder of Hasidism.

Buber's interpretation of the Hasidic tradition, however, has been criticized by scholars such as Chaim Potok for its romanticization. In the introduction to Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*, Potok notes that Buber overlooked Hasidism's "charlatanism, obscurantism, internecine quarrels, its heavy freight of folk superstition and pietistic excesses, its tzadik worship, its vulgarized and attenuated reading of Lurianic Kabbalah." Even more severe is the criticism that Buber deemphasized the importance of the Jewish Law in Hasidism. This is ironic, considering that Buber often delved into Hasidim to demonstrate that individual religiosity did not require a dogmatic, creedal religion.

## **Yisroel Hopstein**



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yisroel\\_Hopstein](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yisroel_Hopstein)

Yisroel Hopstein (1737–1814), also known as the Maggid of Kozhnitz, was the founder of Kozhnitz Hasidism, and a noted *hasidic* leader in Poland during the late 18th and early 19th century. He was a student of both the Magid/Dov Ber of Mezeritch and Elimelech of Lizhensk, and wrote many books on Chassidus and Kabbalah.

Hopstein was born in Opatów, to his father, Shabbetai, who was at an advanced age, after having received a blessing from the Baal Shem Tov. The father was a bookbinder; his mother's name was Perl.

As a young child he was recognized as an *illui* (prodigy). He studied under the tutelage of Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg, who eventually convinced Hopstein to learn with Dov Ber, the *Maggid of Mezritch*. After the passing of Dov Ber, he went to learn with Elimelech of Lizhensk.

Hopstein lived for years in Kozhnitz (Kozienice), was founder of the Kozhnitz Hasidic dynasty, and died the 14th of Tishrei (Sept. 28, 1814).

## **Baal Shem Tov**



Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (born circa 1698, died 21 May 1760), known as the Baal Shem Tov (Hebrew: בעל שם טוב) or as the BeShT, was a Jewish mystic and healer, who is regarded as the founder of Hasidic Judaism. Besht" is the acronym for Baal Shem Tov, which means "Master of the Good Name" or "one with a good reputation".

The little biographical information about the Besht comes from oral traditions handed down by his students (Jacob Joseph of Polonne and others) and from the legendary tales about his life and behavior collected in *Shivhei ha-Besht (In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov*; Kapust and Berdychiv, 1814–15).

A central tenet in the Baal Shem Tov's teaching is the direct connection with the divine, "dvekut", which is infused in every human activity and every waking hour. Prayer is of supreme importance, along with the mystical significance of Hebrew letters and words. His innovation lies in "encouraging worshipers to follow their distracting thoughts to their roots in the divine". Those who follow his teachings regard him as descended from the Davidic line that traces its lineage to the royal house of David.



### Reading the Story.

**Buber, Martin: *Tales of the Hasidim. The Early Masters.* Schocken Books. New York. 1947. Page 286. & Twerski, Abraham: *Not Just Stories: The Chassidic Spirit Through Its Classic Stories.* Artscroll. New York. 1997**

A woman came to Rabbi Israel, the maggid of Koznitz, and told him, with many tears, that she had been married a dozen years and still had not borne a son. "What are you willing to do about it?" he asked her. She did not know what to say.

"My mother," so the maggid told her, "was aging and still had no child. Then she heard that the holy Baal Shem was stopping over in Apt in the course of a journey. She hurried to his inn and begged him to pray she might bear a son.

'What are you willing to do about it?' he [the Baal Shem Tov] asked.

'My husband is a poor book-binder,' she replied, 'but I do have one fine thing that I shall give to the rabbi.' She went home as fast as she could and fetched her good cape, her 'Katinka,' which was carefully

stowed away in a chest. But when she returned to the inn with it, she heard that the Baal Shem had already left for Mezbizh. She immediately set out after him and since she had no money to ride, she walked from town to town with her 'Katinka' until she came to Mezbizh. The Baal Shem took the cape and hung it on the wall.

'It is well,' he [the Baal Shem Tov] said.

My mother walked all the way back, from town to town, until she reached Apt. A year later, I was born."

"I, too," cried the woman, "will bring you a good cape of mine so that I may get a son."

"That won't work," said the maggid. "You heard the story. My mother had no story to go by."

### Comprehension Questions

**?** Why did the woman come to the maggid of Koznitz? What was her expectation?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** Why did the maggid ask the woman: "what are you willing to do about it" when she told him that she hadn't given birth to a son after a dozen years?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** Why didn't the woman know what to reply to the maggid's question?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why did the maggid tell the woman the story about his own mother and the Baal Shem Tov?

**Bonus ?** Why did the Baal Shem Tov hang the cape on the wall? **?**  
Why didn't Baal Shem Tov return the cape to the woman?

**Extra Bonus ?** The maggid explained to the woman that for her to give the maggid a cape wouldn't work, since she had heard the story, while his own mother didn't have a story to go by. What does the maggid want from this poor woman? What is she supposed to do?

### ***"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text***

**!** "What are you willing to do about it?" – Only by weaving your own "tikkun" story will the doors of blessing be open to you.

## EPILOGUE

This is indeed a strange story. A woman comes to the maggid in search of a blessing and the maggid seemingly demands some sort of compensation, telling the woman how his own mother traveled through towns and villages to bring a cape to the Baal Shem Tov as gift.

When the woman –after listening to the story- offers a "good cape" to the maggid, the maggid rejects the offer, explaining to her that the cape is not what he or even the Baal Shem Tov was interested in, but in the woman's own story, her own journey, her own unique "tikkun – fixing."

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n the question "What are you willing to do about it?" the stress is not on the what but on the you. The maggid seems to tell the woman: the cape was my mother's story. What would be yours?

Twerski, Abraham: Not Just Stories: The Chassidic Spirit Through Its Classic Stories. Artscroll. New York. 1997

A woman once came to the Maggid of Kozhnitz asking for his blessing for a child, since after a number of years of marriage, she and her husband were still childless.

The Maggid replied, "My parents, too, where childless for many years. Then my mother sewed a coat for Ba'al Shem Tov, and after that I was born."

The woman exclaimed, "I will gladly sew a coat for you, a beautiful coat!"

The Maggid shook his head. "No, my dear woman," he said, "That will be of no avail. You see, my mother did not know this story."