



The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader (The Tauber Institute Series for the Study of European Jewry)

Immanuel Etkes

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Founded in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, the Hasidic movement dramatically transformed modern Judaism. The figure of the Ba'al Shem Tov (known in acronym form as the BeSHT) - the purported founder of the Hasidic movement - has fascinated scholars, Jewish philosophers, and laypeople interested in popular Jewish mysticism in general and the contemporary Hasidic movement in all its variety. In this volume, Immanuel Etkes enters a rich and heated debate over the origins of the movement, as well as the historicity of its mythic founder, Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, who lived much of his life as a miracle worker. The eighteenth century, as Etkes vividly portrays, was the heyday of the kabbalists, who dabbled in the magical power of letters and words to solve personal and communal problems. Etkes sheds light on the personality of the Besht, on his mysticism, and on his close circle of followers. Equally important, he challenges the popular myth of the Besht as a childlike mystic, wandering the fields in prayer, seeing visions and engaging in acts of godliness and piety. According to Etkes, it was never the intention of the Besht to found a religious movement. Although Etkes shows great empathy for his subject, the Besht who emerges in these pages is much more down to earth, much more a man of his times.

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