

# Around the Maggid's Table: Translating Black Letters and White Spaces

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Over the past several months, I have had the pleasure of engaging in a new translation project with my teacher and colleagues. Arthur Green, Ebn Leader, Ariel Mayse, and I have been meeting weekly to study and translate the homiletic teachings of Rabbi Dov Baer (d. 1772), the Maggid of Mezeritch, and several of his leading disciples. The Maggid was one of the chief architects of the Hasidic movement, and his students, including Rabbis Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, Elimelekh of Lizensk, and Shneur Zalman of Liadi, played a major role in the development of Hasidism in its formative stage.

We chose to translate the *d'rashot* (sermons) of these pioneering teachers because of their exegetical creativity, psychological sensitivity, and spiritual insight. These rabbis were not only gifted intellectuals but also dedicated community leaders. Our vision of Jewish life and thought and our own work as rabbis have been greatly influenced by these figures. As we seek to help renew the Jewish tradition in our age, we turn back to these revivalists from another age and engage with them in conversation across space and time.

The goal of our project is to provide a broad readership — including those who cannot easily access these texts in the original — with a meaningful source for study and contemplation. The volume will also include the original Hebrew texts. The book is organized according to the weekly Torah portions and Jewish calendar, with four or five teachings in each section. We have structured the volume this way so that it can serve both as an in-depth introduction to early Hasidism and as a resource for Shabbat and festivals.

While we find many of the texts inspirational and instructive, others are challenging and even disturbing — including teachings on the theurgic powers of the rebbe, the role of women in Jewish life, and the spiritual status of non-Jews. Though we struggle with some of these teachings, to exclude them from the volume would be irresponsible, as we are trying to facilitate a genuine meeting between the Hasidic masters and our readers. What we have attempted to do is to let the rebbes (Hasidic masters) speak for themselves while offering our own personal responses — including criticism

— in brief comments following each text.

To help readers gain a fuller understanding of the worlds of Hasidic life and thought, we will also include an extensive introduction to the book in which we discuss the social and political contexts in which the teachers lived and worked, as well as significant intellectual and religious influences on them.

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Among the many translation questions we have been discussing is how best to communicate some of the cultural resonances imbedded in the words before us. When, for example, is it important to consider how the rebbe may have said a phrase in Yiddish (the language of Hasidic preaching) before it was written down in Hebrew (the language of publication)? When does a Hebrew or Aramaic term carry with it an established rabbinic or mystical meaning, and when is the preacher introducing a new interpretation? When does a word shift meaning based on the context of a homily? In brief, how can we translate both the black letters and the white spaces on the page, knowing that some things will be lost in translation?

We have designed our project such that each of us is primarily responsible for one Hasidic book from the Maggid's circle. Every week, we take turns reading our translations and comments, inviting our study partners to critique our work. While there is always some anxiety about sharing our efforts, we are all close friends and colleagues who trust one another to offer constructive feedback.

Of course, there are disagreements and moments of tension. Most times, we work by consensus; other times, we defer to our teacher or let the person translating a particular text have the final word. Challenging as this work can be, we remain committed to it because we find the teachings of this mystical circle powerful and we want to share these sources with others. It is our hope that this volume will help to enrich the current renaissance of Jewish mysticism, including conversation about the promise and complexity of translating the ideas and values of our Hasidic forebears into contemporary life.



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