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The modern individual and the hasidic praxis of storytelling

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways in which hasidic hagiography (ספרות השבחים) responded interpretively to modern notions of the individual, situating those interpretations alongside other trends in modern philosophy rooted in Kantian thinking and espoused by Kierkegaard, Buber and Nietzsche. Though generally treated as backward folklore representative of a primal Jewish past, or of the theological morality of hasidic homily, this paper shows how mass-produced hasidic hagiography in 1860s Galicia reflects key cultural changes in collective and individual consciousness and practice regarding the self in Eastern European Jewish society. After first establishing the historical and philosophical contexts within which hasidic hagiography emerged, this paper examines what these stories add to modern philosophical literary discourses. Considering Geörg Lukács' critique of the historical novel after the 1848 revolutions, this paper illuminates the social and personal qualities of hasidic storytelling. In these stories, I argue, the essence of individuality relies on the communal practice of storytelling and the intersubjective relationships it entails. Thus, the story, according to Hasidism, is neither a bourgeois abstract privilege, nor a literary means for establishing the imagined national community. Rather, it is an existential necessity; a product of individuated craftsmanship in an ever-developing community.

KEYWORDS

Hebrew literature; hasidism; hagiography; individuality; modernity; community

A. Introduction

Storytelling is a strong marker of one's individuality; it indicates one's realization of creativity. And yet, at the same time, storytelling is also clearly marked as a *communal* ritual that highlights the inherent and inescapable ties to one's concrete, communal surroundings. A story from Michael Levi Rodkinson's '*Adat tsadikim* (1864) beautifully manifests this nature of storytelling. In the story, Reb Ya`akov, an archetypally charismatic hasidic storyteller, loses his memory when he subversively crosses the spatial and communal boundaries drawn for him by his rabbi – the

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