

Derekh ha-malkhut: R. Yisra'el me-Ruz'in u-mekomo be-toledot ha-Hasidut
[Regal Way: The Life and Times of R. Israel of Ruzhin]



Review Author[s]:
Arthur Green

AJS Review, Vol. 25, No. 1. (2000 - 2001), pp. 131-133.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0364-0094%282000%2F2001%2925%3A1%3C131%3ADHRYMU%3E2.0.CO%3B2-H>

AJS Review is currently published by Cambridge University Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/cup.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

divine revelation is balanced by a recognition that all humankind stands in relationship to God by virtue of divine creation" (p. 138).

Newman's book is a rich storehouse of scholarship and independent thought on many important issues relating to Jewish ethics, including the fundamental question: What does it mean to speak of Jewish, as differentiated from universal, ethics? *Past Imperatives* is not a textbook, not a book for an introductory course on Jewish ethics; it is a book for accomplished scholars in Jewish thought, for fellow theologians and philosophers devoted to a study of Judaism in depth.

Milton R. Konvitz
Cornell Law School
Ithaca, New York

David Assaf. *Derekh ha-malkhut: R. Yisra'el me-Ruz'in u-mekomo be-toledot ha-Hasidut* [Regal Way: The Life and Times of R. Israel of Ruzhin]. Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 1997. (Hebrew).

Ever since Gershom Scholem's remark that all of Hasidism "centers around the personality of the Hasidic saint . . . [and] personality takes the place of doctrine" (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 344), the call has been rife for critical biographies of the dominant figures of Hasidism. The author of this review published such a work on Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav in 1979 and more than once considered going on to treat other figures in the history of Hasidism in a similar manner (my next candidate was to have been Levi Yiṣḥaq of Berdichev). I was stopped from doing so, as others have been, because of the nature of the sources: the absence of biographical materials in the collections of early printed Hasidic teachings, and the lateness and obvious hagiographic intent of the Hasidic legends. Because of these factors, there is great difficulty in determining key issues of personality, the very thing Scholem would have had us seek, on the basis of reliable sources, and in separating truth from legend and history from another mere retelling of well-known Hasidic tales.

Now David Assaf has stepped forward and taken up the task. Wisely he has leaped forward by a generation, writing on Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin (1796–1850), one of the best-known and most controversial figures in Hasidism. This great-grandson of the *maggid* Dov Baer of Miedzyrzec (1704?–1772), the virtual founder

of Hasidism as a historical movement, is the figure most associated with the grand style affected by certain Hasidic rebbes: the “court” fashioned after that of the Polish nobleman, a life-style adorned by gold and silver vessels, and high-handed treatment of his followers as near-servants. R. Israel, who left no collection of teachings in print and very little in the oral tradition, was also reputed to have been innocent of any real contact with Torah learning. There are even traditions that he was able to write his name only with difficulty, and the maskilim of his day whispered loudly that he was essentially an illiterate.

R. Israel was involved in a great scandal that brought him to the attention of the tsarist authorities; he was arrested, and after his release fled across the border from Russia to Austria. In 1836 two Jewish informants to the Russian government disappeared from the area around Novo-Ushytia, a town not far from Kamenetz-Podolsk. These were the days of Nicholas I, notorious for the cantonist conscription of children into long-term army service. Jews took various illegal actions to protect their children, including keeping them entirely “off the books” of the government’s records, thus freeing them from payment of taxes as well as army service. Such a climate brought forth informants, paid by the authorities, and Jewish communities more than once took care of such traitors by causing their quiet disappearance. This time, however, the matter became public, and R. Israel, the great Hasidic authority of the region, was accused of having permitted their murder.

From the historian’s point of view, all this is terribly helpful. It means that R. Israel appears significantly in Russian archival sources, documents that were not subject to hagiographic enhancement by generations of disciples. There is also much discussion of this highly publicized event in correspondence and memoirs of the era, a good deal of it by maskilim as well as Hasidim. The wealth and variety of documentation happily led Assaf to decide that the Rizhiner was indeed a good candidate for a critical biography.

The result of this decision is a finely crafted work that shows R. Israel in the context of his family (the amount of genealogical detail, something well preserved by *yihus*-concerned Hasidim, is staggering here), the Hasidic movement at the height of its power, and the struggle against the Haskalah, all against the background of the tragic situation of Jewry in the Russia of Nicholas I. Assaf is a scholar who knows how to manage vast bits of detail but also how to fit them together in a coherent and plausible whole. The Rizhiner and his predecessors and

immediate successors in the dynasty called by his name are freed both from the derision of maskilim (down to Scholem, who wrote that “Israel of Rishin, the so-called Rabbi of Sadagora, is to put it bluntly, nothing but another Jacob Frank who has achieved the miracle of remaining an orthodox Jew” [*Major Trends*, p. 337]) and from the extreme defensiveness of everyone who has written about him from within the Hasidic tradition. In the course of reading this fascinating biography, we learn some new facts about the complexity of Jewish life in those times. Nothing leaped out so sharply to me as the knowledge that the Rizhiner lent financial support to Judah Baer Levinsohn, the arch-maskil of Russian Jewry, who turns out to have been his relative!

The best thing about this book is that Assaf makes no pretentious claim to have solved the problem of how to use legendary sources for the grains of historical truth that they so often contain. Whenever possible, he backs up tale-based claims with sources of another kind. When he cannot do so, he looks at the frequency with which a motif occurs in the tale literature. He considers its believability, ponders nonhistorical motives that writers might have had for saying it, and proceeds cautiously forward. Sometimes he adds a “Hasidic tradition tells us” when he knows he is on thin ice. This is especially true regarding the early years of R. Israel and the accounts of his father and grandfather. Assaf has used the only possible method for sifting among the sources, that of common sense. He has done so with great success and produced a first-rate biography. Let us hope that others will now follow his lead.

Arthur Green
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

Issachar Ben-Ami. *Saint Veneration Among the Jews in Morocco*. Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998. 388 pp.

Issachar Ben-Ami's latest book on saint veneration in Morocco is the most comprehensive work published hitherto on Maghribi Jewish folklore. Based largely on field research conducted over the past decade and on reliable secondary sources, it includes an exhaustive list of 656 saints, twenty-five of them women. Part I of the