

Meshullam Feibush Heller and His Circle in Eastern Galicia

From the very first words of *Yosher Divrey Emet*, Meshullam Feibush Heller identifies himself as an adherent of Hasidism, the Jewish mystical school which traces its origin in the middle of the eighteenth century in the Ukraine to Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Ba'al Shem Tov (c. 1700–1760).¹ However, while Meshullam Feibush clearly acknowledges the Ba'al Shem Tov as founder of the movement and occasionally cites his teachings, the major portion of the material that he presents is drawn from the teachings of three of the Ba'al Shem Tov's disciples, R. Dov Ber Maggid of Mezeritch, R. Menahem Mendel of Premishlan, and R. Yehiel Mikhel Maggid of Zlotchov. Of these three, there is no doubt that Dov Ber is generally considered the most important. Known by Hasidim as the Great Maggid, Dov Ber (1704–1772) is, according to Hasidic legend, the chosen successor of the Ba'al Shem Tov.² It is Dov Ber's disciples who are generally considered to have been most responsible for the spread and popular success of Hasidism in eastern Europe. Nevertheless, although Dov Ber's influence permeates Meshullam Feibush's writings, a close master-disciple relationship does not seem to have existed between them. Indeed, the nature and extent of Meshullam Feibush's relationship with each of the four Hasidic masters is suggested in the very opening of *Yosher Divrey Emet*.

He asked me to write "upright words of truth"³ and faith which were heard from the enlightened ones of the generation, wonder workers, full of the holy spirit, whom I had personally seen, their fear and awe [of God] was like that of an angel, and all of them drank from one stream, namely, the divine Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov . . .,⁴ However, I only merited to see the face of his disciple, the divine R. Dov Ber, and later I acquired sacred writings [containing] his holiness' words⁵ [which] arouse the heart of [thosel who tremble for the service of God in truth. Several times I was also in the presence of the oak, the divine R. Menahem Mendel of Premishlan. But most of all, to distinguish between the dead and the living, [I am expounding] what I heard from the mouth of the holy of holies, son of saints, *zaddiq* son of a *zaddiq*, the exceptional *rav*, our divine master and teacher, R. Yehiel Mikhel [of Zlotchov], may his light shine.⁶

This passage tells us much of Meshullam Feibush's background. We see that he associates himself with the school of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov. Although he has never met him personally, he has had the opportunity to learn from three of the Ba'al Shem Tov's direct disciples. Since one of these, Menahem Mendel of Premishlan, emigrated to the Land of Israel in 1764,⁷ it may be that Meshullam Feibush only became interested in the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov during the period between the latter's death and Menahem Mendel's departure from Eastern Europe, that is, sometime between the years 1760–1764.

As for Dov Ber, although Meshullam Feibush did indeed meet him, his knowledge of the Maggid's teachings is very much influenced by posthumously circulated writings which he has but recently obtained. These writings must be the manuscripts that were indeed circulated by disciples of Dov Ber during the mid to late 1770s.⁸ We may also note that, while Meshullam Feibush mentions encountering Menahem Mendel several times, he only states that he "managed to see the Maggid of Mezeritch." The wording suggests that the two may have met only once. This reading is supported by other evidence in the text. Although reference is often made to Dov Ber's teachings in our text, in many cases the teachings are quoted from the manuscripts. Otherwise, Dov Ber's teachings are usually presented as having been heard from one of his disciples. Only once does Meshullam Feibush actually quote a teaching of the Maggid as something that he himself heard directly.

And I heard from the mouth of the holy of holies, the divine R. Dov Ber of blessed memory, on that *Shabbat* that I spent with him while he was alive, when they asked him about a certain midrash, and he spoke concerning an analogy there in midrash [Leviticus Rabbah] ...⁹

The text implies that Meshullam Feibush visited the Maggid on only one occasion, a certain *Shabbat*, when Dov Ber was asked to interpret the midrashic comparison of a disciple of the wise to a golden bell with a clapper of pearls.¹⁰

As for Meshullam Feibush's visit, it is known that during the late 1760s and early 1770s, the Maggid of Mezeritch began to gain fame. During the last five years of his life, he received many visitors who were interested in his teachings. For the most part, such visits were the result of the propagandizing activity of Dov Ber's disciples who encouraged prospective adherents to visit the Maggid of Mezeritch. It is also known, that the Maggid had the custom of improvising homilies on themes spontaneously suggested by his

audience.¹¹ Such might have been the case on the occasion recorded by Meshullam Feibush. At any rate, the evidence suggests that aside from the manuscripts that he had only recently received, Meshullam Feibush knew Dov Ber's teachings only indirectly. His great respect for the Maggid was due to the latter's reputation as a leading exponent of the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov. However, it is significant that Meshullam Feibush never explicitly referred to Dov Ber as the successor to the Ba'al Shem Tov. This may suggest the extent that Meshullam Feibush valued his own eastern Galician traditions concerning the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings.

Indeed, the two other masters mentioned, Menahem Mendel and Yehiel Mikhel, are quoted frequently on the basis of teachings which Meshullam Feibush heard directly. Thus, it is clear that these Galician masters are his primary teachers. This is particularly the case in regard to Yehiel Mikhel who was the only one of the three still alive at the time Meshullam Feibush began to write our text.¹² He is treated with the elaborate terms of reverence which befit a living master. Moreover, some of his teachings had been heard during the holiday of *Shavuot*, 1777, only shortly before the time of writing.¹³ Clearly, an important master-disciple relationship existed between Meshullam Feibush and Yehiel Mikhel who was certainly one of the most important figures associated with the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov in eastern Galicia during the late 1770s.¹⁴

In addition, both Menahem Mendel and Yehiel Mikhel were active in the same part of eastern Galicia where Meshullam Feibush lived and were themselves closely connected.¹⁵ Thus, we must assume that Meshullam Feibush was primarily influenced directly by Hasidic leaders in his own area. This is born out by the fact that, aside from Dov Ber, virtually everyone that Meshullam Feibush quoted in *Yosher Divrey Emet* was active in eastern Galicia. Even where he cited figures, who were more directly connected to the Maggid of Mezeritch, they were leaders from his own locality. It is significant that not one of the leading disciples of the Maggid of Mezeritch, such as R. Levi Isaac of Berdichev, R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, or even the peripatetic R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, who flourished in other parts of eastern Europe, was quoted as a source of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings.¹⁶

Perhaps even more significant was the total absence of any reference to two other disciples of Dov Ber, R. Samuel Shmelke of Nikolsburg and R. Elimelekh of Lizensk, both of whom had been active in Galicia by this time. While the Rabbi of Nikolsburg died in Moravia only shortly after Meshullam Feibush was writing,¹⁷ his disciple, R. Elimelekh, continued to be fully established at that time as a *Zaddiq* in Galicia and functioned as such

only slightly to the west. Indeed R. Elimelekh's position would seem to parallel that of Yehiel Mikhel. Both were famous as *Zaddiqim* and important for establishing early centers of Hasidic activity in Galicia.¹⁸ Moreover, a close disciple of Elimelekh, R. Zekhariah Menahem Mendel of Yaroslav, wrote a defense of his master and of *zaddiqism* at about the same time that Meshullam Feibush was writing his epistles.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the only connection between these two major figures, which occurred in Meshullam Feibush's writings, was indirect. One of the sons of Elimelekh's older brother, the famous Hasidic master, Zusya of Anipol, was mentioned as having been present at the court of Yehiel Mikhel during one of Meshullam Feibush's visits.

The evidence presented above suggests that the positions taken regarding Hasidic teachings in Meshullam Feibush's writings and especially the specific attitudes expressed concerning Dov Ber's practices may not only represent the views of a distinct eastern Galician school that operated somewhat independently, but also parallel to another influential Galician school of disciples of the Maggid of Mezeritch, which may trace its origins to Shmelke of Nikolsburg. Rabbi Shmelke's school had a profound influence on the spread of Hasidism into Poland. Among Shmelke of Nikolsburg's disciples were Levi Isaac of Berdichev, Elimelekh of Litzhensk, and Israel of Kozhenitz.²⁰ However, the eastern Galician school may have originated with Menahem Mendel of Premishlan. Nevertheless, its central figure and undisputed leader during the 1770s must certainly have been Yehiel Mikhel of Zlotchov. While too rigid a distinction between the members of these two schools should not be assumed, it seems highly likely that Meshullam Feibush's epistles were addressed to a circle of eastern Galician Hasidim that not only centered around the teachings of Yehiel Mikhel, but which was also distinct from the Hasidic school in the north associated with R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and, later, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi.²¹

However, this eastern Galician "school" was certainly not essentially hostile to Dov Ber and his teachings. Important relationships between close disciples of Dov Ber and members of this school were evident.²² Meshullam Feibush himself visited the Maggid of Mezeritch on at least one occasion and it is clear that he was intensely interested in Dov Ber's teachings. Yet, it is also apparent from Meshullam Feibush's writings that certain crucial differences existed between the teachings of the Maggid of Mezeritch and the Hasidic path that Meshullam Feibush had learned directly from his eastern Galician masters. It was precisely the tension that resulted from loyalty to Dov Ber as authentic interpreter of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings and a sense of urgency concerning the need to interpret his teachings in the light

of Menahem Mendel and Yehiel Mikhel's example, that motivated Meshullam Feibush to address certain key aspects of Hasidic practice in his tractates. Undoubtedly, Meshullam Feibush was also influenced by extra-Hasidic historical factors. He must have been at least partially motivated to tone down radical elements in Hasidic teachings as a result of organized and severe opposition to Hasidism in the Brody region.²³ Nevertheless, I have chosen to emphasize inter-Hasidic tensions which may have required resolution even without the added external pressures.

In the remainder of this chapter, the biographies of the two Galician masters who directly influenced Meshullam Feibush and formed the center of his circle will be discussed. After discussing the lives and selected teachings of Menahem Mendel of Premishlan and Yehiel Mikhel of Zlotchov, the discussion will turn to the life of Meshullam Feibush and his writings.

Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Premishlan

As in the case of many other early Hasidim, little is known concerning the life of R. Menahem Mendel of Premishlan. He has composed no works,²⁴ has founded no dynasty, and has figured only infrequently in Hasidic hagiographic sources. Nevertheless a collection of his teachings and several scholarly works, dealing with aspects of his life, provide a basis for drawing the basic lines of his character and teachings.²⁵

Little is known concerning Menahem Mendel's early life. We have no sources concerning his place of birth, ancestry, or early teachers. It is only known that his father's name was Eliezer and his mother's name may have been Batsheva.²⁶ He had at least two brothers. One was known as Zvi the Hasid. He resided in Zlotchov as well as in Yampol and was closely associated with R. Yehiel Mikhel, the Maggid of Zlotchov. One of the most important editions of the teachings of Dov Ber of Mezritch, *Or ha-Emet*, was based on a manuscript that had belonged to Zvi the Hasid.²⁷ Another brother, Eleazar, helped support Menahem Mendel while the latter was in the Land of Israel.²⁸

The earliest references to Menahem Mendel concern events that occurred during the period 1757–1764 when he was already an important disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov. A story in *Shivhey ha-BeSHT*, a collection of legends dealing with the Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples, indicates that Menahem Mendel was thirty-six years old in 1764.²⁹ Thus, he may have been born in 1728. One account indicates that Menahem Mendel met the Ba'al Shem Tov.

According to the *Sefer Vikuah* of R. Israel, the Maggid of Slutzk, Menahem Mendel joined the Ba'al Shem Tov and his brother-in-law, R. Gershon of Kutov for a meal that occurred sometime between 1757–1760.³⁰ However, it is neither possible to determine how close a relationship existed between the Ba'al Shem Tov and his young disciple, nor whether Menahem Mendel learned the Ba'al Shem Tov's esoteric teachings directly from the master.

An anecdote in *Shivhey ha-BeSHT* indicates that Menahem Mendel was astonished upon learning "the Ba'al Shem Tov's wisdom" from R. Nahman of Horodenka. The term "wisdom" possibly referred to the Ba'al Shem Tov's new esoteric method for elevating wayward thoughts during prayer.³¹ Thus, it would seem that Menahem Mendel only learned this unique teaching of the Ba'al Shem Tov after the latter's death.³² Indeed, although Menahem Mendel became a major Hasidic leader and follower of the Ba'al Shem Tov, there is no indication in his extant teachings that he ever accepted or taught the controversial method of elevating wayward thoughts.³³

It appears that Menahem Mendel had gained considerable recognition by the 1760s. In 1764, he visited R. Jacob Joseph of Polnoy, the Ba'al Shem Tov's leading disciple. Although perhaps twenty-five years his senior, Jacob Joseph treated Menahem Mendel with great respect, placing his own quarters at his guest's disposal. In addition, he made arrangements so that Menahem Mendel could lead the prayers in a private prayer quorum of his own. Moreover, according to a legendary source, when Menahem Mendel reached the town of Old Konstantynow, "the whole city went out to welcome him."³⁴ A particularly important relationship existed between Menahem Mendel and R. Nahman of Horodenka (c. 1680–1765). The latter became a close associate and disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov sometime during the 1740s.

R. Nahman's second son, Simhah, was later to marry the Ba'al Shem Tov's granddaughter, Feiga. Among their children was the famous R. Nahman of Bratzlav.³⁵ In 1764, Menahem Mendel emigrated to the Land of Israel with R. Nahman of Horodenka and several other Hasidim, including R. Fridel of Brody.³⁶ From a contemporary account of the voyage, Menahem Mendel was able to afford larger than average quarters on the ship. The Hasidim reached Tiberias on the eve of *Sukkot*. They were favorably received by the dominant Sefardic community and quickly became leaders of the small Ashkenazic community. The flattering account of two Ashkenazic Hasidim that appeared in a contemporary work by R. Hayyim Joseph David Azulai is, in all probability, an eyewitness description of the two.³⁷ The same author explicitly cited Menahem Mendel in his commentary to Psalms.³⁸

While the aged R. Nahman only lived until the following summer, Menahem Mendel survived as leader of the Ashkenazic community in the Galilee for several more years. His prominence was indicated by two additional sources. In the summer of 1765, R. David Halperin of Ostrog, a wealthy disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov, died. In his will, he bequeathed 200 thalers to Menahem Mendel and 150 thalers each to R. Nahman and R. Fridel.³⁹ In addition, Menahem Mendel's name appeared at the top of the list of signatories on an appeal for funds for the Jewish community in the Galilee.⁴⁰

The exact date of Menahem Mendel's death is not known. According to one source, he died in 1771.⁴¹ The tombstone in Tiberias indicates only that his death occurred on the 21 of Tishri.⁴²

The reasons for Menahem Mendel's emigration to the Land of Israel are obscure. However, at least three factors may have influenced his decision. In the letter to his brother, R. Zvi the Hasid of Zlotchov, Menahem Mendel emphasizes the sanctity of the Holy Land and chastises his brother for remaining abroad. (Love for the Land of Israel was an important motive in early Hasidic thought. The Ba'al Shem Tov, himself, according to Hasidic legend, failed in two attempts to reach the Holy Land.⁴³ Other important figures like Jacob Joseph of Polnoy and Pinhas of Koretz also saw their dreams of living in the Land of Israel frustrated.) Thus, love for the Land of Israel, itself, might have been sufficient motivation for Menahem Mendel's emigration. While, the extant sources do not suggest that this motivation was tinged by messianism, *per se*, this motive cannot be entirely ruled out. It was certainly a factor in the thought of his disciple Meshullam Feibush, who explicitly mentions it in connection to the Hasidic emigration of 1777.⁴⁴

A second factor may have been the desire to escape persecution by the opponents to Hasidism. However, such persecution is best documented and seems to have been most pronounced in eastern Galicia at a somewhat later period.

Beginning in the late 1760s and continuing into the 1780s, Hasidim were persecuted in the Brody region. In 1772, a ban against Hasidim was published in Brody. Less than a decade later, the first Hasidic publication, *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, was publicly burned there, outside the residence of R. Yehiel Mikhel.⁴⁵ However, Meshullam Feibush indicated that opposition had already been directed against Menahem Mendel.⁴⁶ Although such early opposition probably did not equal the organized persecution later suffered by the Hasidim, it may yet have contributed to Menahem Mendel's decision to leave for the Land of Israel.

Abraham Rubenstein suggested a third reason. In the period following the Ba'al Shem Tov's death in 1760, various Hasidic leaders and factions vied for the role of successor to their master. Only sometime after Menahem Mendel's departure, R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch became the dominant Hasidic leader. Rubenstein speculated that Menahem Mendel may himself have been a candidate for Hasidic leadership and may have fled from the role due to his extreme modesty.⁴⁷ However, the plausibility of this theory is mitigated by the fact that Menahem Mendel was recognized as a leader almost immediately upon his arrival in Tiberias. The Ashkenazic community there was a small one and his role there could not have been commensurable to the position of authority he might have attained in eastern Europe. Thus, the desire to escape fame and its responsibilities could conceivably have motivated him to some degree.⁴⁸

While Menahem Mendel's association with the Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples, Jacob Joseph of Polnoy and Nahman of Horodenka is clear, his relationship to Dov Ber, the Ba'al Shem Tov's successor remains problematical. To my knowledge, only one Hasidic legend exists concerning their meeting.⁴⁹

According to this account, when Dov Ber had become famous, Menahem Mendel wished to visit him. However, perhaps to test the Maggid, Menahem Mendel concealed his identity. His servant was instructed to introduce him as an ordinary Jew named Barukh. Dov Ber, nevertheless, welcomed him as R. Mendel of Premishlan. When Menahem Mendel protested that his name was Barukh, the Maggid replied with the verse, "*Barukh* (blessed) he shall be."⁵⁰

While the historicity of this alleged encounter is difficult to verify, it is nevertheless worthwhile to take note of the relationship between the two Hasidic leaders that the story depicts. First, the legend indicates that Menahem Mendel only met Dov Ber after the latter had become famous. This would probably have occurred during the 1760s, since Dov Ber became associated with the Ba'al Shem Tov only shortly before the latter's death. Menahem Mendel, presumably, did not know much about Dov Ber or his teachings. Nevertheless, positive relations were established between the two. The story is curious for several reasons. Significant differences exist between the teachings of Dov Ber and the extant teachings of Menahem Mendel. The harmonization of these differences, indeed plays a central role in Meshullam Feibush's synthesis of conflicting early Hasidic approaches.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the one work attributed to Menahem Mendel *Darkhey Yesharim*, is primarily a variant of material contained in a manuscript of Dov Ber's teachings.⁵²

This text would seem to deny that important differences existed between the teachings of Menahem Mendel and Dov Ber. However, it is now apparent that *Darkhey Yesharim* may well have been edited by Meshullam Feibush. Thus, the tendency to harmonize the relationship and teachings of the two early masters may be the result of Meshullam Feibush's efforts. In this case our story would merely reflect this tendency.

The relationship between Menahem Mendel and Meshullam Feibush's other Galician master, R. Yehiel Mikhel of Zlotchov, is well attested. Menahem Mendel's letter to his brother, Zvi the Hasid, adds greetings to Yehiel Mikhel and his son, R. Joseph of Yampol. It also mentions Solomon Vilner, who is quoted by Meshullam Feibush.⁵³ The letter indicates that Menahem Mendel maintained close relations with Yehiel Mikhel and his school even after his move to Tiberias. Although no other letters are presently extant, the possibility must be considered that additional correspondence may have existed between Menahem Mendel and Meshullam Feibush's circle. While Meshullam Feibush is not mentioned in this letter, this may be explained by assuming that he was not in Zlotchov at the time. Other letters directed to him in Zbarazh may have existed which are simply lost to us at present. At any rate, one source claims that Menahem Mendel entrusted the spiritual guidance of the young Meshullam Feibush to Yehiel Mikhel before he embarked for the Land of Israel.⁵⁴ While the story may be apocryphal, there is reason to believe that Yehiel Mikhel was in some sense the successor of Menahem Mendel among the Hasidim in the Brody area.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, while Yehiel Mikhel may have shared certain attitudes with Menahem Mendel, he was also directly connected to the Ba'al Shem Tov and seems to have formed a relationship with Dov Ber of Mezeritch, perhaps after Menahem Mendel's departure.

Although the details of Menahem Mendel's life are scant, key aspects of his personality emerged rather clearly from the sources at hand. According to an anecdote in *Shivhey ha-BeSHT*, Menahem Mendel disliked the adulation his fame as a holy man brought him. When he visited R. Jacob Joseph in Nemerov in 1764, shortly before embarking for the Land of Israel, he was reported to have complained "about the great honor that was accorded to him."⁵⁶ When Jacob Joseph informed him that the Ba'al Shem Tov used to pray that people would disparage him, he replied that he had also considered such a course. Humility, of course, was a major theme in virtually all early Hasidic teaching. According to Meshullam Feibush's view, the Hasidic *Zaddiqim* never pursued fame and authority. Precisely because of their great humility, they were chosen and compelled by God to assume the mantle of leadership.⁵⁷ In all likelihood, Meshullam Feibush's concept of the Hasidic

leader was modeled on the personal example of his teachers, Menahem Mendel and, especially, Yehiel Mikhel of Zlotchov.

Although a Hasidic account denied that Menahem Mendel ever practiced asceticism, his temperament must nevertheless be regarded as essentially ascetic in nature. The same account informed us that Menahem Mendel welcomed and prayed for afflictions which he considered signs of divine favor.⁵⁸ As for shunning ascetic practices, the meaning must be that Menahem Mendel deemphasized fasting and other practices that weakened the body. Excessive fasting as a basis for repentance characterized the kabbalists of Safed and was typical of pre-Beshtian hasidim in eastern Europe. Menahem Mendel, like several other early Hasidic teachers, was opposed to practices that afflicted the body. Nevertheless, it is clear that he followed a rigorous path of self-discipline and shunned physical pleasure. Detachment from corporeality was an essential element in his teaching and practice. According to Meshullam Feibush, Menahem Mendel was especially critical of those who believed that they could sanctify the act of eating by merely making use of Lurianic *kavvanot*.⁵⁹ As long as they continued to delight in the pleasure of their meal, he felt that their pious intentions were of no avail.⁶⁰

Indeed, eating in sanctity seems to have been at least as important to Menahem Mendel as prayer. A Hasidic source tells us that he was accustomed to immersing himself in a ritual bath before meals, but not before prayer. Meals for Menahem Mendel were primarily an occasion for uplifting divine sparks.⁶¹

Menahem Mendel practiced an intense form of self-awareness. R. Abraham David of Buczacz reported that Menahem Mendel's spiritual perfection was the result of an unusual practice. He paused in the middle of each statement, presumably in order to detach himself and to rest his consciousness in *devequt*. He also practiced a similar form of detachment whenever he was looking at something.⁶² Intense concentration on his inner state was accompanied by a concern for purity of speech that is reflected in a number of Menahem Mendel's extant teachings. Moreover, the importance of this concern may have impelled him to adopt another extreme and somewhat unusual practice. The author of *Shivhey ha-BeSHT* stated that when Menahem Mendel made his visit to R. Jacob Joseph, he had not spoken for twelve years. During that time, he communicated only by writing. Apparently, Menahem Mendel was so out of the habit of speaking that he was unable to respond coherently to Jacob Joseph's questions.⁶³

Silence as a spiritual practice is well attested to in a number of spiritual traditions.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the story concerning Menahem Mendel may exaggerate what was probably a definite tendency towards restraint in

speech rather than a long-standing practice of silence. No reason is given for Menahem Mendel's breaking his silence in order to speak to Jacob Joseph. Nor is his practice of silence confirmed in other sources.

A document from the Asher Pearl library provided another interesting view of Menahem Mendel's behavior, shortly before he left eastern Europe.⁶⁵ As reported in *Shevhey ha-BeSHT*, before arriving at Nemerov to visit Jacob Joseph, Menahem Mendel spent some time in Cekinowka, a town on the left bank of the Dniester, in the region of Yampol. According to the document, while in Cekinowka, Menahem Mendel became very angry at people who were clapping their hands during prayer. He, himself, "stood still as a corpse," not moving at all while reciting the eighteen benedictions, except for the mandatory bows. He stayed up all night learning Torah. Shortly before dawn, he immersed himself in the ritual bath so as to be ready to begin his morning prayers precisely at dawn. The account bears out Menahem Mendel's rather severe demeanor. (Clapping and exuberance during prayer is an Hasidic hallmark which frequently was criticized by the movement's opponents. However, it is clear that not all Hasidic masters favored excessive emotionalism.)

Menahem Mendel's approach to prayer emphasized concentration and sincerity through the unity of mind and utterance. This is the approach which Meshullam Feibush strongly advocated in *Yosher Divrey Emet*. Another practice for which some Hasidic leaders were criticized was delaying the beginning of prayer until the appropriate spiritual preparation had been achieved. Such clearly was not Menahem Mendel's habit. Like the Ba'al Shem Tov, he began his morning prayers at the preferred time, dawn. It is interesting that the account did not depict Menahem Mendel as having ceased his learning for the superogatory midnight devotions. This practice, *Tiqqun Hazot*,⁶⁶ appeared in most kabbalistic prayerbooks and was adopted by many Hasidim. Menahem Mendel, however, was depicted as having spent the entire night immersed in Torah study.

In general, Menahem Mendel was inclined to a rather austere life-style of self-discipline. His legendary silence and disdain for adulation indicated a dislike for social intercourse. According to the Asher Pearl document, Menahem Mendel left for the Land of Israel precisely because "[people] began to travel to him in order to receive a blessing."⁶⁷ Nevertheless, several of the teachings attributed to Menahem Mendel indicated concern for the less fortunate. An example of the extent of his compassion was also recorded in the Asher Pearl document. At the time that Menahem Mendel was visiting in Cekinowka, Bessarabia, which was located on the other bank of the Dniester, belonged to the Turkish Empire. Once, when Menahem Mendel went

to immerse himself in the river, he heard a Jew calling to him from the other bank. The Jew was being held captive by the Turks in Soroki, Bessarabia. Menahem Mendel crossed the river and redeemed the Jew with the money he had received from his uncle for the trip to the Land of Israel. (The Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples were famous for their efforts to redeem Jewish captives. However, such behavior was by no means typical.) Indeed, Menahem Mendel's uncle became angry at him when he learned of the good deed. Menahem Mendel regarded the religious obligation of *zedaqah*, aiding the unfortunate, in a special light.) An early Hasidic source preserves a teaching in his name which argues that divine commandments that are observed for ulterior motivations would be better left undone. The only exception was *zedaqah*.)⁶⁸

Like many of the early Hasidim, Menahem Mendel was famous for the intensity of his prayer. Twice in *Shivhey ha-BeSHT*, it was mentioned that Jacob Joseph praised the prayer of Rabbi Mendel. Once he said: "I, too, became like one of the common folk and forgot the way to pray. They reminded me of the way of prayer."⁶⁹ Yehiel Mikhel of Zlotchov was also impressed by Menahem Mendel's manner of praying. Generally, Yehiel Mikhel always insisted on leading the prayers himself. He was reported to have told his disciples that only for the Messiah would he relinquish his position. Nevertheless, when Menahem Mendel visited, he was accorded the honor of standing before the ark. When Yehiel Mikhel was questioned concerning this, he replied, "for [Menahem Mendel,] Messiah would also relinquish the position of prayer leader."⁷⁰ On another occasion, Yehiel Mikhel is said to have fled from the room where Menahem Mendel was leading the prayers, lest his soul expire from the sweetness of Menahem Mendel's prayer.⁷¹ According to an early Hasidic source, Menahem Mendel taught that prayer should be so intense that even the wicked who have never prayed in their lives, would feel compelled to pray.⁷²

We have already mentioned Menahem Mendel's emphasis on eating as a sacred act. An interesting teaching reported in his name sheds light on his approach to eating and asceticism. According to Menahem Mendel, a person who ceases his meal while he still has desire for food attains a higher spiritual level than a person who fasts. For the former feels more intensely the desire to eat since he restrains himself precisely in the midst of his desire. On the other hand, while fasting, one's soul is not so afflicted, since he is not directly tempted by the taste of food.⁷³ The teaching seems to echo a radical tendency in the sixteenth-century popularization of Safedian Kabbalah, *Sheney Luhot ha-Berit*, where it is maintained that greater merit is attained when a *mizvah* is performed with both "urges." A higher level is attained

when one acts after subduing the evil urge.⁷⁴ In general, Menahem Mendel seems to have disapproved of fasting as a spiritual practice for two reasons. First, it weakens the body and thus results in a reduced capacity to carry out other religious practices effectively. In addition, he seems to have seen in fasting a not very effective method of turning to God, which could easily be employed in an hypocritical manner. One might think that the merely physical deprivation of fasting atoned for spiritual deficiencies.

Menahem Mendel was more interested in a transformation of both one's inner state and outward behavior. Consequently, he recommended a spiritual regimen that began with the "fasting of the limbs." One began, for example, by a fast of the eyes. For one day a week, one refrained from looking at anything that is not essential. Gradually, the length of time is increased. Subsequently, the same principle was applied to hearing and the other senses. Only when the total process of transformation had been completed, was a single day of fasting, in the conventional sense, of great value.⁷⁵

After leaving eastern Europe in 1764, Menahem Mendel spent the remainder of his life in the Land of Israel. It is clear that the Holy Land held great spiritual significance for him. In one teaching, he asserted that the second day of holidays (celebrated only outside the Land of Israel) was more important than the first day. The reason was that the sanctity of the holiday manifested in the Holy Land on the first day, but does not reach the Jewish communities abroad until the second day.⁷⁶ Despite the superior sanctity of the Holy Land, Menahem Mendel initially was not able to attain the spiritual level he had experienced in eastern Europe. However, he soon overcame his problems until even his simplest prayers in the Land of Israel were equivalent to his most intense spiritual experiences in eastern Europe.⁷⁷ In a famous dictum, Menahem Mendel was reported to have said that while he was still in eastern Europe, he used to beg God to allow him to pray one entire prayer properly. However, the atmosphere of the Holy Land made him wiser. Now he asked only that he be permitted to say a single word properly.⁷⁸

Several of Menahem Mendel's teachings have been preserved regarding the problem of disturbing thoughts during prayer. The teachings indicate an approach to the problem that differs significantly from the teachings of Dov Ber of Mezeritch. According to Dov Ber, wayward thoughts or distractions that enter the mind while praying, are divinely granted opportunities for releasing holy sparks that have fallen captive to the external shells. When one becomes aware of the intruding thought, the divine source of the fallen spark can be identified. For example, a sexual thought ultimately derives from *hesed*, loving-kindness. Dov Ber advocates elevating the holy sparks

through concentrating on the appropriate divine source or root of the wayward thought.⁷⁹ However, according to Menahem Mendel, wayward thoughts arise during prayer because one is not satisfied with his current spiritual level. The desire for higher spiritual states interferes with the concentration that is required for true prayer. Only through self-effacement and humble acceptance of one's present state can genuine communion with God be achieved. Like Dov Ber, Menahem Mendel also sees the goal of prayer as *devequt* through detachment from corporeality. But the practice of elevating wayward thoughts plays no part in the process of attaining intimacy with God.⁸⁰

Further evidence that Menahem Mendel did not advocate the practice of elevating wayward thoughts, which was an innovation of the Ba'al Shem Tov, can be deduced from a teaching found in *Degel Mahaneh Efraim*. Menahem Mendel recommended the practice of mentally visualizing the Tetragrammaton as a remedy for overcoming wayward thoughts.⁸¹ In the passage cited, Menahem Mendel attributed the passage to the Safedian kabbalist, Isaac Luria. This was a standard Hasidic practice which the Ba'al Shem Tov wanted to replace by the new method of elevating rather than merely dispersing wayward thoughts. The newer method was more appropriate for the non-dual tendency in the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings, which asserted that God was present in every thought. Interestingly enough, the passage in *Degel Mahaneh Efraim* juxtaposed both approaches. After attributing the old approach to Menahem Mendel, the method of elevating wayward thoughts was recommended by the author as a teaching he learned from his grandfather, the Ba'al Shem Tov. As suggested by the juxtaposition, the new method never entirely replaced the old.⁸²

As a disciple of Menahem Mendel, who later came under the influence of Dov Ber, Meshullam Feibush was acutely aware of the need to resolve the inherent conflict between the two approaches. His solution in *Yosher Divrey Emet* presented a position that would often be echoed in subsequent Hasidic literature.

Although the available evidence strongly suggests that Menahem Mendel did not embrace the new method of elevating wayward thoughts during prayer, he may, nevertheless, have accepted the principle of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching, at least in part. A reliable early Hasidic source attributes a teaching to Menahem Mendel that does explicitly mention elevating thoughts that are tainted by impure motives. Possibly, he had in mind elevating impure thoughts that occur at times other than prayer. The implication seems to be that vices need to be replaced by their corresponding virtues.⁸³

Of the teachings that Meshullam Feibush brings in the name of Menahem Mendel, mention should be made of one passage which asserts that

mystical experience or *devequt*, is the essence of Jewish esoteric teachings. While *devequt* is, perhaps, the most fundamental teaching of early Hasidism, Menahem Mendel's position is extreme. He argues that the term *nistar* does not, as conventionally conceived, refer to the esoteric literature of the Kabbalah, per se, but rather to the ineffable inner experience of love and awe of God.⁸⁴ While Menahem Mendel continues to speak in Lurianic terms of elevating holy sparks as the primary religious task, *devequt* rather than the esoteric Lurianic meditative formulae is the essential element that accomplishes the goal.

Due to several factors, Menahem Mendel remained a somewhat obscure figure in the early annals of Hasidism. He left eastern Europe before Hasidism became a popular movement. Most of his mature period was spent in the tiny Ashkenazic community of Tiberias. He founded no dynasty to establish his teachings and immortalize his name. Nevertheless, Menahem Mendel must be regarded as one of the foremost early Hasidic figures in eastern Galicia. His teachings were preserved in several of the most important early Hasidic texts by such authors as Benjamin of Zalozitz, Abraham Hayyim of Zlotchov, Uziel Meisels, Moshe Hayyim Ephraim of Sudilkov, Raphael of Bershad, and others.⁸⁵ As for his disciple, Meshullam Feibush, in his view, Menahem Mendel was a divinely inspired spiritual giant of the same order as the Ba'al Shem Tov and his nominal successor, Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritch.

Yehiel Mikhel, the Maggid of Zlotchov

Sometime after Menahem Mendel of Premishlan emigrated to the Land of Israel, Yehiel Mikhel of Zlotchov became Meshullam Feibush's spiritual master. A disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov in his youth, Yehiel Mikhel became one of the most important and influential of the early leaders of Hasidism in Galicia.⁸⁶ Yehiel Mikhel was a spiritual aristocrat: the descendent of a long line of rabbis, ascetics, and charismatics, which dated back, according to family tradition, at least to the medieval French exegete, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi (Rashi). His paternal great-grandfather was Moses of Pityn, Rabbi of Swierze (near Premishlan), whose martyrdom is described in Barukh of Kossover's *Amud ha-Avodah*.⁸⁷ The account of Rabbi Moses' death indicated the extraordinary level of religious dedication that Yehiel Mikhel was to inherit. It is said that although a wooden spike was driven through virtually the entire length of his body, he felt no pain. The murder took place just before the eve of the Sabbath. Since R. Moses fasted all week, his bowels were empty. He managed to avoid experiencing pain as a

result of concentrating his mind exclusively on the fervent repetition of God's praises.⁸⁸ Yehiel Mikhel's grandfather, Joseph of Pistyn, was an ascetic like his father, Moses. In his later years, about 1742, he emigrated to the Land of Israel where he died. According to a story in *Mayim Rabbim*, Joseph encountered the Ba'al Shem Tov on the way to the Holy Land. He predicted that he himself would reach the destination, while the Ba'al Shem Tov would be compelled to return to eastern Europe.⁸⁹

Yehiel Mikhel's father, R. Isaac of Drohobitch (before 1700–c.1758),⁹⁰ was famous in eastern Galicia as a religious judge and kabbalist. Primarily during the 1730s, he was a member of the rabbinic court in Brody that also included Isaac Horowitz of Hamburg and Ezekiel Landau, author of *Noda bi-Yehudah*. About 1754, he moved to Ostrog, where he was one of the ten subsidized scholars at R. Yospe's House of Study.⁹¹ His final years were spent in Horochov.

As a member of the important rabbinical court in Brody,⁹² Isaac of Drohobitch possessed great knowledge of religious law. Yet, a curious story indicates that his legal decisions were not always made merely on the basis of legal expertise. Once, in a case involving the demand for payment of a debt owed by a deceased merchant, Yehiel Mikhel's father disagreed with Isaac Horowitz's ruling. Although no legal evidence of the debt existed, Isaac of Drohobitch claimed that he had seen the deceased who admitted the debt.⁹³ As for his prowess as a kabbalist, an early Hasidic source reported that once Isaac lost his way in a forest. As a result of utilizing a special mystical combination of letters (*yihud*) to bless the spirit of the forest, the forest guided him safely to his destination.⁹⁴

Isaac of Drohobitch did not become an actual follower of the Ba'al Shem Tov.⁹⁵ In all likelihood, R. Isaac, who was believed to possess prophetic powers,⁹⁶ was an ascetic kabbalist of the hasidic type that preceded the Ba'al Shem Tov's innovations. As such, he may initially have been opposed to the new Hasidic leader. Nevertheless, the two met on more than one occasion and Hasidic tradition indicated that they came to hold each other in high regard.⁹⁷ Isaac of Drohobitch's teachings were recorded by the authors of a number of early Hasidic works, including Benjamin of Zalozitz, Abraham David of Buczacz, Issachar Ber of Zlotchov, and R. Joseph Bloch.⁹⁸ In addition, several stories concerning Yehiel Mikhel's father were contained in *Shivhey ha-BeShT*.⁹⁹

It is difficult to determine the exact year of Yehiel Mikhel's birth; several dates appeared in the sources, ranging from 1721–1734.¹⁰⁰ In all likelihood, he was born in Brody, probably in 1726. A fantastic story concerning the birth maintained that many sons had previously been born to Isaac of

Drohobitch and his wife, before Yehiel Mikhel. However, on each occasion, the father expressed disappointment when he viewed the baby. As a result, the infant died shortly thereafter. When Yehiel Mikhel was born, his mother refused to permit Isaac to view the child until he had promised to spare him. When the father finally saw the child, he lamented that many finer souls than this one had already been rejected.¹⁰¹ Yehiel Mikhel was certainly born into a demanding environment. As a child, he was brought up severely and taught to disregard his needs. Although raised in great poverty, a tradition claimed that Isaac of Drohobitch slapped his son for complaining of his hunger.¹⁰² Later, Yehiel Mikhel taught his own sons to pray for the welfare of their enemies, a practice highly recommended in *Reshit Hokhmah*.¹⁰³

Yehiel Mikhel was raised in Brody, a town famous for its rabbis and kabbalists. While there he studied with leading rabbinic scholars like Ezekiel Landau and Isaac Horowitz of Hamburg. However, he was educated chiefly by his father. A Hasidic story claimed that once Yehiel Mikhel left his father in order to study in the *yeshivah* of Isaac of Hamburg. However, after three days he returned to his father. When asked why he abandoned the *yeshivah*, he replied, "Whenever I study Torah with my father, I see the letters flying forth from his mouth. This is not the case at the *yeshivah*."¹⁰⁴

Sometime during the 1740s,¹⁰⁵ Yehiel Mikhel married Rekhel, or, perhaps, Yente Rekhel, the daughter of Rabbi Moses of Bialeterkov.¹⁰⁶ In order to fulfill the terms of the dowry, the father-in-law was forced to mortgage his wine press. However, when his wife complained bitterly over her father's poverty, Yehiel Mikhel renounced his claim to the funds.¹⁰⁷ His extraordinary character was further revealed by his behavior after the wedding. According to a Hasidic record, Yehiel Mikhel isolated himself for a period of a thousand days, during which he neither spoke to nor saw anyone, devoting every moment to "serving the Lord with marvelous *devekut* [*sic*]."¹⁰⁸ After spending the first years of the marriage with his father-in-law in Bialeterkov, Yehiel Mikhel lived for a short time in utter poverty and anonymity in Boleslav. From here, he returned with his family to Brody.

In Brody, Yehiel Mikhel worked as a teacher of young children. He also studied with Hayyim Tzanzer at the Brody *Klaus*, where many of the leading kabbalists not only gathered to pray according to the *kavvanot* of Isaac Luria, but also to learn Torah. However, while in Brody, Yehiel Mikhel became a focus of controversy. He drew criticism because of his custom of beginning his prayers after the legally established time for saying them had elapsed.¹⁰⁹ This was a custom adopted by a number of the early Hasidim who felt that spiritual preparation for prayer was more important than praying at the prescribed times. Although Yehiel Mikhel gained his reputation as a *maggid*

or preacher, when he moved on to reside in Zlotchov and Yampol, he continued to visit Brody regularly. References to several important sermons that he preached in Brody can be found.¹¹⁰ He maintained a residence and House of Study there, even after he ceased being a full-time resident. As late as 1777, Meshullam Feibush made reference to having heard a homily preached by Yehiel Mikhel at Brody.¹¹¹ Moreover, the first Hasidic publication, *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef*, was burned outside his house in Brody in 1781. The choice of location, of course, indicated the prominence he had achieved by this time as the leading representative of Hasidism in eastern Galicia.

Most of Yehiel Mikhel's final years were spent in Yampol, a town near Ostrog, in Volhynia, where he served as preacher.¹¹² However, his reputation was established earlier in Zlotchov, a town in which a number of early proponents of Hasidism resided. Among the early Hasidim, there were Menahem Mendel of Premishlan's brother, Zvi the Hasid, Issachar Ber, author of *Mevasser Zedeq*, who was the town rabbi,¹¹³ and his son-in-law Abraham Hayyim, author of *Orah le-Hayyim*.¹¹⁴ It was in Zlotchov that Yehiel Mikhel became known as an itinerant preacher who had the power to discern a person's sins, merely by gazing at his forehead.¹¹⁵ Despite the considerable support he must have had there, Yehiel Mikhel was forced to abandon Zlotchov. However, the precise nature of the problems he encountered there is not known.¹¹⁶

From Zlotchov, Yehiel Mikhel moved to Kalki. However, his stay there was a brief one. He soon relocated to Yampol, where he was to remain until his death. According to Hasidic accounts, Yehiel Mikhel served as preacher in Yampol while Ezekiel Landau was Head of the Rabbinic Court. Since Ezekiel Landau left Yampol for Prague in 1755, Yehiel Mikhel must have arrived sometime before that year.¹¹⁷ Relations between the two were strained. Landau specifically objected to Yehiel Mikhel's habit of praying late. Pinhas ha-Levy Horowitz of Frankfurt intervened. His concern aroused the Head of the Rabbinic Court in Lissa, David Tevele, to write to Ezekiel Landau in defense of Yehiel Mikhel.¹¹⁸

Yehiel Mikhel spent the last twenty-six years of his life in Yampol. During that time he influenced many of the next generation's Hasidic leaders. He, himself, became, along with Elimelekh of Lizensk, one of the two most important Hasidic figures in the area. His death occurred in Yampol on the 25 of Elul, 1781.¹¹⁹ According to family tradition, he was fifty-five years old at the time of his death.¹²⁰ A eulogy for Yehiel Mikhel appeared in the early Hasidic work, *Tiferet Uziel*, by Uziel Meisels.¹²¹

A rather detailed account of Yehiel Mikhel's death was written. According to this account, Yehiel Mikhel had become increasingly detached from

interest in the material world during his later years. He was given to many fasts and he became famous for the degree of his mystical absorption (*devequt*) in the divine presence. The intensity of his adhesion to God reached its peak on the Sabbath. His family became increasingly concerned, lest he expire in his total disregard for what was occurring around him. They made a point of stationing someone with him every Sabbath afternoon for the third meal, in order to recall him from his absorbed state. However, on the final Sabbath of his life, no one was with him. His daughter heard him moving around his meditation chamber repeating over and over, "at this favorable moment, Moses died." She ran to summon her brother, Isaac of Radvil. Although the son arrived in time to arouse Yehiel Mikhel somewhat from his *devequt*, he was too late to prevent his death. According to sources, Yehiel Mikhel is said to have died precisely upon uttering the word "one" in the declaration of unity.¹²²

It is not known exactly when Yehiel Mikhel became associated with the Ba'al Shem Tov. Since it is doubtful if his father, Isaac of Drohobitch, ever became a follower himself, it would seem that Yehiel Mikhel independently accepted the Ba'al Shem Tov as master. Nevertheless, he could have had contact with the founder of Hasidism already during his youth in Brody, during one of the Ba'al Shem Tov's occasional visits. According to the account in *Shivhey ha-BeSHT*, Yehiel Mikhel accepted the Ba'al Shem Tov as his master because he had been instructed to do so by Heaven. He was shown "'streams of wisdom' which led to the BeSHT."¹²³ According to other Hasidic accounts, this occurred only after Yehiel Mikhel was already a wandering preacher. Yehiel Mikhel only accepted his master after many efforts on the latter's part to demonstrate his spiritual eminence.¹²⁴

It would seem that one of the most important lessons that the Ba'al Shem Tov taught to Yehiel Mikhel was compassion and understanding of the suffering of sinners. Yehiel Mikhel clearly adhered to exceptionally high spiritual standards. In his younger days, his own fervor for serving God as perfectly as possible was accompanied by a lack of tolerance for the shortcomings of others. A Hasidic story recounted how once a person was compelled to violate the Sabbath laws as the result of an accident that occurred to his coach. When he told Yehiel Mikhel, who resided at that time in Bore Slav, what had happened, the young rabbi prescribed a severe penance. The man was ordered to undertake many fasts, to roll in snow, and to perform other ascetic acts that were recommended in the early ethical works. However, such an approach was foreign to the way of the Ba'al Shem Tov. When the man complained to the Hasidic master about the severity of Yehiel Mikhel's penance, the Ba'al Shem Tov replied that he could atone for inadvertently

violating the Sabbath merely by lighting a certain number of candles in honor of the Sabbath at the synogogue. He also told the man to tell Yehiel Mikhel that he was expecting him to spend the following Sabbath with him in a neighboring town. As it turned out, the very same misadventure that had occurred to the other person befell Yehiel Mikhel. He was not able to arrive before the beginning of the Sabbath. When he appeared before the master, brokenhearted over being forced to violate the Sabbath, the Ba'al Shem Tov upbraided him for the severe penance he had prescribed. According to the Ba'al Shem Tov, Yehiel Mikhel should have realized that the suffering and regret that the man had experienced were sufficient to atone for the sin.¹²⁵

Although Yehiel Mikhel seemed to have maintained his ascetic practices even after coming under the influence of the Ba'al Shem Tov, he may have somewhat softened his expectations of others. Meshullam Feibush portrayed him as a popular leader who attracted the masses. Nevertheless stories concerning his severity and ability to awaken the fear of heaven in others abound. Although his temperament seems to have been quite different from that of the Hasidic founder, Yehiel Mikhel became a strong supporter of the Ba'al Shem Tov. According to Hasidic tradition, it was Yehiel Mikhel's custom, every Sabbath, to relate a story concerning the Ba'al Shem Tov at the third meal, just before reciting the blessings after eating.¹²⁶

According to Hasidic legend, Yehiel Mikhel was one of only a few of the founder's disciples who unequivocally accepted the leadership of Dov Ber of Mezeritch, after the Ba'al Shem Tov's death in 1760.¹²⁷ According to *Shivhey ha-BeSHT*, Yehiel Mikhel turned to Dov Ber because it was revealed to him that the very same "streams of wisdom" which had previously flowed to the Ba'al Shem Tov, now reached Dov Ber. Several accounts exist concerning visits Yehiel Mikhel paid to the Maggid of Mezeritch. According to one story, Yehiel Mikhel visited once with his young son, Isaac of Radvil. When they arrived, Yehiel Mikhel sent the boy several times to summon Dov Ber, but the latter did not respond. When Yehiel Mikhel went himself to investigate, he found that Dov Ber was closeted with Elijah the prophet.¹²⁸

According to another account, Dov Ber held Yehiel Mikhel in the highest regard. Once Yehiel Mikhel came for a visit with his close disciple, Mordecai of Neshkiz. When the latter referred to Yehiel Mikhel as his "Rebbe," the Hasidic term for a spiritual master, he was mocked by Dov Ber's disciple, Solomon of Lutzk. When Dov Ber found out about this, he rebuked his disciple severely.¹²⁹ The high regard in which Yehiel Mikhel was held in the court of Dov Ber is also apparent from stories that are told in the HaBaD tradition. The founder of HaBaD Hasidism, Shneur Zalman of Liadi, was