

Baal Shem Tov

Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760), built one of the most democratic spiritual systems to ever grow out of Judaism. Unflinchingly ecstatic in his constant companionship with a living God, he built his mystical system out of the ideas of earlier, Sufi inspired Jews, turning away from the staid worship of northern European orthodoxy and towards the ecstatic vision of the earlier Jewish/Sufi mystics. Joy, intoned the Baal Shem Tov, was not just a passing emotion, but a way of life and devotion, the *proper* attitude, even in the traditionally stilted Jewish house of prayer.

Breaking with earlier Jewish tradition – though in keeping with the undercurrent of Sufi ideas in aspects of the Kabbalah – the Baal Shem Tov emphasized the salvation of each individual, which, of course, had to precede the redemption of the world. Building on ideas first touched on in the *Zohar* (and imported from Sufi sources), the Baal Shem Tov transformed social phenomena like poverty, crime and charity into legitimate concerns for the mystic. Building on medieval Sufi conceptions of legislative prophecy, where it became the mystic's obligation to remake the world in which we live, the social mission and the mystical quest became intertwined for Jews in new and important ways.

The Baal Shem Tov's mystical practice was riddled through with specific Sufi doctrine. The manner in which followers collected around a single charismatic leader; meditational prayer based in the Sufi-inspired "Science of the Letters;" specific conceptions of the

power of letter-energies, ideas concerning the adepts ability to cleave directly to God, the ability of the spiritual leader to act as a conduit for God's power into this world and many other initiatives came to the Baal Shem Tov from the Sufis, via medieval Jewish intermediaries.

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