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Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization)

Moshe Rosman

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The Ba'al Shem Tov is an elusive subject for historians because documentary evidence about his life is scanty and equivocal. Until now, much of what was known about him was based on stories compiled more than a generation after his death, many of which serve more to mythologize him than to describe him. The portrait provided in this book is drawn from life instead of from myth. Based on innovative critical analysis of familiar and previously unexplored archival sources, and concentrating on accounts that can be attributed to the Besht or to contemporary eyewitnesses, the book goes further than any previous work in uncovering the historical Ba'al Shem Tov. Additionally, documents in Polish and Hebrew discovered during research for the book give the first detailed description of the cultural, social, economic, and political context of the Besht's life. Founder of Hasidism supplies the history behind the legend. It presents the best, most convincing description that can be drawn from the existing documentary evidence, changing our understanding of the Besht and, with it, the master-narrative of hasidism. A substantial new Introduction considers what has changed in the study of Hasidism since the influential first edition was published, these changes being in part due to the influence of the book. There are new approaches, new sources, and new interpretations, and these are reviewed and critically assessed. Criticisms of the original edition are answered and key issues are reconsidered, including the authenticity of the various versions of the Holy Epistle, the ways in which Jacob Joseph's books can be utilized as historical sources, and the relationship between the Maggid of Mezhirech and Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye. [The first edition of Founder of Hasidism was the winner of the 1996 National Jewish Book Award for Jewish History and the 2000 Zalman Shazar Prize for Outstanding Achievement in Jewish Historical Research.] *** "The subject is crucial, the approach is bold and brilliantly chosen. The result is a persuasive revision of a fundamental chapter in the Jewish experience." - Gershon Hundert, McGill U. *** "In the extensive and detailed introduction to this edition, Rosman deals with the questions raised [from the first edition]....This discussion is an extremely importand addition to contemporary research on Hasidism and is also of significant historiographical interest. This book is an essential starting point for any scholarly study of Hasidism and this edition is needed in any relevant collection of books even if it already has the first edition." - Religious Studies Review, Vol. 40, No. 4, December 2014Ëœ

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