

Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov,
with a New Introduction by Moshe Rosman.
The Littman Library of Jewish Civilisation, 2013.

In 1996 Moshe Rosman, Professor of Jewish History at Bar Ilan University in Israel, published a highly controversial book on the Founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Eliezer, citizen of Miedzyboz in Poland-Lithuania. For the Hasidim he was their revered Baal Shem Tov, Master of the Good Name, (Besht) credited with creating their own Jewish revolution; for Rosman he was an historical figure to whom references are made in historical papers from the town in the 1740s.

Eight years later the book has been republished with a new introduction partially inspired by the reception the original book received, notably at the hands of the various Hasidic groupings. Rosman details the approaches of the different schools of thought on his subject but is unashamed in trying to put the Besht in his historical and cultural milieu, his feet firmly placed on solid ground.

Those who cherish facts over fictions will applaud this approach, enjoy hugely Rosman's fine work, and feel no less intrigued by and interested in the Ba-al Shem Tov than they were when their knowledge of him was restricted to Hasidic *bubbe-meises*; those who refuse to see the immediate traditionaries as the true creators of Hasidism and who prefer myth to reality will be challenged, and those who read it specifically to be incensed by its contents need to get out more.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh