

"THE LESSON" OF THE BESHT",  
ITS SOURCES AND REVERBERATIONS

MOSHE IDEL

*Tel Hebrew University of Jerusalem and The Shalom Hartman Institute*

Abstract

In this study, three extant versions of a short text describing a lesson delivered by R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov - the Besht, are presented and analyzed together for the first time. It then claims that this is a version parallel to a longer text adduced also in his name, and in the two cases the principle of the "the power of the creator is found in the creature" - koah ha-po'el ba-ni'al - is prominent. However, it is only in the "lesson" that it has been associated with extraordinary powers attributed to the Besht. The essay argues that this idea stems from a Neoplatonic text widespread in the Middle Ages – *Liber de Causis* – whose traces can also be detected later in the Besht's career, in the famous "Parable of the Walls." Other Hasidic terms can also be better understood as related to this Neoplatonic treatise.

The Besht's lesson reverberated in a number of Hasidic texts, up to the 20th century: in the school of R. Dov Ber Friedmann, the Great Maggid of Medzirech, in the writings of R. Isaac Yehiel Yehudah Safrin of Komarno, of R. Zvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov, of R. Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century R. Aharon Roth from Me'ah She'arim. In some of its versions the Hasidic theory of the divine immanence has been associated with this Neoplatonic principle.