

The Martin Buber book I carried around while my marriage failed

## ***Tales of the Hasidim* was an unlikely companion.**

by [Jon Sweeney](#) in the [May 19, 2021](#) issue



Martin Buber (Dutch National Archives)

Books have stories, and not only those told between their covers by their authors or in the marketing copy by their publishers. They also have stories told by readers who enjoy them. For me, Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* is a story that involves a failing marriage, an employer who I wanted to impress, the loneliness of business travel, and the associations of a singular volume that make it unique.

I married in 1989 at age 21, and from the start it was not a success. We had just completed college, and I think we each felt compelled as part of the graduation ritual to pick a mate. Two wonderful children came early, for whom I'll always be grateful, but neither husband nor wife was happy for long.

Four years in, I had a job in publishing that required a lot of travel, and that felt fine. Two years after that, I was in a position with a rather large travel budget and an employer that wanted me out of the office with regular frequency. I was young and earnest and told to grow our business by finding new and unusual retail customers

for our books.

While sitting in meetings in our Minneapolis offices, I would jot on a notepad the names of cities I might visit and of retailers I might woo while there. This was the 1990s, when brick and mortar retail was at its zenith. The only reason I was ever in Walnut Creek, California, was to target a new toy company I thought I could convince to stock our children's books, and while I was in town I stumbled upon *Tales of the Hasidim*.

The business appointment went quickly, as they always did. I then had a free afternoon, so I went to what I'd heard were the best used bookstores in the area. At the top of that list was Bonanza Street Books, a store that sadly is now gone. It was the kind of used and out-of-print specialty store that people on Yelp today complain about as "too stuffed with books," as if having difficulty moving about in a bookstore due to excess inventory were a bad thing.

I saw the Buber on display in an area marked "New Arrivals." I picked it up and turned it over, the way bread makers examine a loaf just out of the oven. That author photo! I would have purchased the book for it alone. Then I opened the book to the middle and bent over slightly to smell the pages. I cannot really explain this.

I knew of the book. I'd read Buber's *I and Thou* and felt that it changed my way of relating to other people and to God. I'd heard of the Hasidic tales and had read some of them from paperback volumes while standing in a library. But I'd never seen the hardcover, and I frequented bookstores enough to know that it was scarce, especially in the dust jacket. So I snapped it up and didn't let it out of my hands as I browsed for the next hour.

Two other aspects of the object drew me to it that day. The first was a name, unknown to me, stamped on the bottom edge of the book block: "Gordon L. Foster." The second was tucked inside the front cover: a publisher's card sent with the book as a review copy. This revealed the publication date as March 14, 1947. Foster seems to have valued his copy, not only because of the stamping but also because he signed the front flyleaf, and underneath his name he wrote, "New York 1946." He must have been a book reviewer—he had the book in his hands at least three months before publication.

Many book reviewers have been known to sell their unneeded copies to used book dealers for cash. But Mr. Foster's copy didn't end up on a sale table at the Strand in

Manhattan. At some point, it must have been packed into a box with the rest of his belongings for a move to the Bay Area, where I found it half a century later.

I have not yet addressed the meaning that this book held for me then and holds for me still. Only a book lover will understand this: I placed it in my shoulder bag—the bag that I carried with me everywhere every day—and kept it there for two years. During that time I probably purchased or otherwise acquired two or three books a week, but none displaced this one in my bag.

I read it like a talisman, for the meaning of life. I cannot explain this fully, either. I'm sure that part of the appeal was the strangeness of its stories and teachings. Very little in my life has corresponded with the experiences of Lithuanian and Ukrainian Jews in the 18th century. Still, I immediately felt certain similarities between Hasidic teachings and tales and those of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the early Christian tradition. These two from page 107 are good examples:

#### *To Say Torah and to Be Torah*

Rabbi Leib, son of Sarah, the hidden zaddik [righteous man] who wandered over the earth, following the course of rivers, in order to redeem the souls of the living and the dead, said this: "I did not go to the maggid [preacher] in order to hear Torah from him, but to see how he unlaces his felt shoes and laces them up again."

#### *How to Say Torah*

The maggid once said to his disciples: "I shall teach you the best way to say Torah. You must cease to be aware of yourselves. You must be nothing but an ear which hears what the universe of the word is constantly saying within you. The moment you start hearing what you yourself are saying, you must stop."

Two years later, when the spell of the book began to wear off and I was willing to release it from my shoulder bag, I discovered there was a second volume, also in hardcover. By that time, online shopping was sophisticated enough that it was easy to find this other book, and I did so. But it did not have the same hold on me.

It would be another decade before my marriage ended. During that decade, I left my job in Minneapolis, we moved to Vermont, and I worked for seven years for a Jewish publisher. Perhaps my Buber helped me in those transitions. A goyish Christian guy heading up a marketing department for a Jewish book publisher always seemed odd to some.

Then, two years after the end of my first marriage, now working back on the Christian side of book publishing, I met the new rabbi in our small Vermont town. Within six months we were engaged. We're still married, and I'm still a goyish Christian guy learning from Jews and Judaism.

I imagine the reason why that second volume of Buber's Hasidic tales did not fill me with as much curiosity and passion as the first will remain a mystery. My best explanation is that certain books, for complicated and varied reasons, enchant us—and in ways that are not easily duplicated.

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