



Imagining Holiness: Classic Hasidic Tales in Modern Times (Mcgill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion)

Justin Jaron Lewis

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Hasidic tales are often read as charming, timeless expressions of Jewish spirituality. The best-known versions of these stories, however, have been rewritten for audiences outside traditional Judaism and few works have explored Hasidic tales as they were created by Hasidic Jews. In "Imagining Holiness", Justin Lewis offers a radical reappraisal of how we think of Hasidic tales, calling into question received notions of authenticity. He focuses his study on the neglected Hasidic literature of the early twentieth century - primarily the work of Israel Berger and Abraham Hayim Michelson - and the literary and historical dynamics of its emergence, posing questions about its place in Hasidic society, the attitude of the Hasidim towards this literature, and orality in Hasidic tradition as manifested in these Hasidic books. Berger and Michelson wrote in the decade before the First World War, a time of loss and decline for Hasidism. Their books resisted modernity and positioned Hasidism as authentic Judaism but also reflected modern literary trends, expressed tensions within Hasidism itself, and depicted struggles between the soul and body. "Imagining Holiness" - a timely study, given the growing influence of Hasidism - will help readers understand the inner motivations of this religious culture at an important moment in its history.

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