

The illustration is a medieval-style painting. In the center, the Virgin Mary stands, wearing a long white robe with a blue mantle. She holds a white lily in her right hand and has her left hand extended towards a man kneeling before her. The man is wearing a dark tunic with a red and black diamond pattern and is looking up at Mary with a reverent expression. In the background, a group of men in white robes are watching the scene. To the left, there is a large, ornate altar with a crucifix. The overall style is characterized by soft, blended colors and a focus on religious iconography.

JAN M. ZIOLKOWSKI

# READING THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME

Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings



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## 12. The Hasidic Tale of “The Little Whistle”

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In the *Confessions*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau tells in passing an [anecdote](#) about the nature of prayer. In the little story, the eighteenth-century Genevan philosopher and writer juxtaposes the highest of the high to the lowliest of the low. In this case the two poles of ecclesiastic authority that are brought into comparison are not an abbot and a lay brother, as they are in “Our Lady’s Tumbler” and its many descendants, but instead a bishop and an old woman:

I have read that a wise bishop, in a visit to his diocese, found  
an old woman whose only prayer knew only to utter  
“Oh!”  
“Good mother,” he said to her, “continue always to pray in this  
manner. Your prayer is better than ours.”  
This better prayer is also mine.

The old woman’s monosyllable is the plainest and simplest form of prayer, giving voice to pure adoration. In any case, no question exists of a direct relationship between “Our Lady’s Tumbler” and the Enlightenment author: neither knew of the other. Rather, the similarity arises from an age-old contention between top religious authorities and lowly laypeople over the mystery of what constitutes sincere and effective prayer. Often the core issue at stake is the even bigger one of letter and spirit—whether formal adherence to set structures or informal expression of inner feeling has more efficacy in reaching God.

Jewish lore contains a narrative that betrays intriguing parallels to the medieval poem that has stimulated this anthology. In this tale, a simpleminded and uneducated shepherd boy comes with his father to synagogue to pray on the eve of the Day of Atonement, known in Hebrew as Yom Kippur. The concluding service on this day is the Ne’ila, Hebrew meaning “locking.” The ceremony includes recitation of the final prayers of repentance. Despite repeated warnings from his parent, the youth, frustrated at his inability to recite properly, here resorts to sounding a rudimentary whistle or flute that he has with him, since he can offer God this skill alone. The congregants are shocked by the sacrilege. According to Jewish law, playing musical instruments is strongly prohibited on the Sabbath, even more so on Yom Kippur. The sole exception is

the shofar, made of a ram's horn. On this trumpet a blast is sounded on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But, as the rabbi explains, the illiterate boy's offering, because of its purity, does not cause offense. Rather, the blowing of the shepherd's pipe operates in tandem the shofar to break a spiritual blockage. In effect, it enables the congregation's prayers to go aloft and to reach God.

This legend circulated in variants already in the [early nineteenth century](#) as a legend about Yisra'el ben Eli'ezer (ca. 1700–1760), who is recognized for having founded Hasidism. He is commonly called the Besht, the acronym for Ba'al Shem Tov. In Hebrew the full phrase means "Master of the Good Name." His biography rests heavily on accounts transmitted orally by his students and other followers. Hasidic tradition, which originated in regions of Eastern Europe now located in Ukraine and Poland, relies on a large body of legends, about Yisra'el ben Eli'ezer among others, that have been called sacred anecdotes. By the late 1800s the story of the young herder was packaged regularly in anthologies of such Hasidic lore. [Retellings of the legend](#) have been folded into collections of tales from the Hasidim, especially those associated with Ba'al Shem Tov.

Outside Hasidism, the story of the shepherd and the whistle has been enshrined even in the general body of [Jewish folktales](#). The roots of the narrative have been traced to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, in the [Sefer Hasidim](#) or "Book of the Pious" by Judah ben Samuel of Regensburg, a leader of the Jewish movement known as the Hassidei Ashkenaz or "Pious of Germany." In one form of such stories, a boy who does not know how to pray formally makes leaping over a ditch his means of worshipping God. In all cases, the Jewish tales tell of a young man of low status and little education who engages in a type of devotion that is initially deemed heterodox but that proves eventually to have greater efficacy than any of its more orthodox counterparts. The tale has often been called "[the ignorant's prayer](#)" or "the simpleton's effective prayer."

In an even wider multicultural context, the narrative has been grouped with other international religious folktales. In the taxonomy developed in folklore studies, the story has been given its own [classification number](#) as a [tale-type](#). Earlier the folktale was given a title that telegraphed its relation specifically to the Jewish tales as "A Shepherd Knows Nothing of God." More recently the tale has been given a more ecumenical title and summary:

### A Pious Innocent Man Knows Nothing of God

A pious man (farmer) worships God in his own way and never goes to church. A traveling preacher teaches him how to pray properly and continues on his way. When the pious man forgets the prayer, he follows the preacher's ship by walking on the water. By this miracle the preacher recognizes the man's holiness and understands that pious innocence is pleasing to God.

Did a prototype of the Jewish legend or a related tale exist more than a half millennium before Hasidism as we know it today originated, and did it migrate across religious and cultural divides to influence Christians and to inspire the exemplum underlying the medieval French poem? Or did the dynamic function in the opposite direction, as the story of the lay brother percolated across time and space from French Christians in the Middle Ages to eastern European Jews in the eighteenth century? If such seepage took place in either direction, was the chief conduit of transmission in Europe or in the Holy Land? Or were the [two traditions](#) altogether independent?

The legend tied to the Besht is here laid out succinctly, as retold by Martin Buber, who lived from 1878 to 1965.

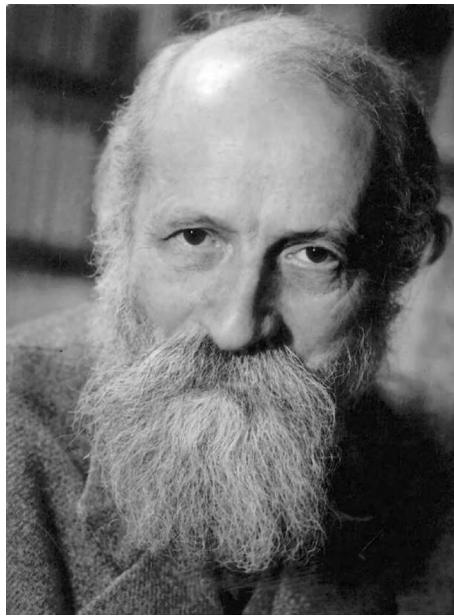


Fig. 14: *Martin Buber*. By The David B. Keidan Collection of Digital Images from the Central Zionist Archives (via Harvard University Library), Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11508348>

A very prominent intellectual figure in the first half of the twentieth century, this philosopher devoted one strand of his bountiful output to retelling stories of Hasidism. Buber, who was born in Vienna to an Orthodox family and died twenty years after World War II in Jerusalem, hoped that these writings would contribute to a renewal of Jewish culture.

## Martin Buber, "The Little Whistle"

A villager, who year after year prayed in the Baal Shem's House of Prayer in the Days of Awe, had a son who was so dull-witted that he could not even grasp the shapes of the letters, let alone the meaning of the holy words. On the Days of Awe his father did not take him to town with him, because he did not understand anything. But when he was thirteen and of age according to the laws of God, his father took him along on the Day of Atonement, for fear the boy might eat on the fast day simply because he did not know any better. Now the boy had a small whistle which he always blew when he sat out in the fields to herd the sheep and the calves. He had taken this with him in the pocket of his smock and his father had not noticed it. Hour after hour, the boy sat in the House of Prayer and had nothing to say. But when the Additional Service commenced, he said, "Father, I have my little whistle with me. I want to sing on it." The father was greatly perturbed and told him to do no such thing, and the boy restrained himself. But when the Afternoon Service was begun, he said again, "Father, do let me blow my little whistle." The father became angry and said, "Where did you put it?" And when the boy told him, he laid his hand on his pocket so that the boy could not take it out. But now the Closing Prayer began. The boy snatched his pocket away from his father's hand, took out the whistle and blew a loud note. All were frightened and confused. But the Baal Shem went on with the prayer, only more quickly and easily than usual. Later he said, "The boy made things easy for me."