

How the Baal Shem Tov Taught Teshuvah*

This way,
said Rabbi Israel
who shuffled into the room
introduced us to the teaching
he brought down from his teacher.

Exodus 3:3, Rabbi Israel said, God speaks to Moses
the bush burning but unconsumed.
Moses turns away
-- I will turn away now
and see about this bush
how it remains unconsumed.

Turn away?
Check the Rashi, said Rabbi Israel.

I will turn away from here
and approach There.

That's teshuvah, he said,

process not accomplishment
journey not destination
not goal-taking
-- movement.

Unstuck.

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*Baal Shem Tov, Master of the Good Name, R. Israel ben Eliezer (1698 – 1760), founder of Chassidut, later branch of mystical Judaism.
On September 7, 1993, I was sitting sleepily at the Rabbinical Association meeting at the Brith Sholom Kneset Israel synagogue. The room was underground, though the walls were white, it was dark within. Rabbi Rivkin came in, gave us a short teaching that he brought down from the Baal Shem Tov, on teshuvah. Teshuvah – a turning, a return, a response.

I didn't know if it was day or night, whether I was awake or dreaming. The person sitting next to me said, "if I had come into the world only to see hear these words, it would have been enough."