This is a book about a book. Or, in fact, it is a book about how a work conceived of as a book, is not a book. It begins with a list of abbreviations of manuscripts of the so-called book, and ends with a 40-page catalog of those manuscripts. In the 86 pages in between those lists of books, Ivan Marcus, one of the foremost scholars of medieval North European Jewish culture, known by its biblical moniker *Ashkenaz* (Gen 10:3), lays out the case for why this is so.

The book in question is “the Book of the Pious,” *Sefer Hasidim*, attributed to one Judah the Pious of Regensburg, a scholar, mystic, and pietistic figure who died in 1217. (The 800th anniversary of Judah’s death was marked by a conference, the proceedings of which will soon be published as a special issue of *Jewish History*, edited by Elisheva Baumgarten, Elisabeth Hollender and Ephraim Shoham-Steiner). Marcus has devoted much of his career to the historical, social and theological aspects of Ashkenazi Pietists, the circle that cropped up around Judah and which continued the production of this “book” and others attributed to him. (This circle has also left some material remains: a number of existing Ashkenazi manuscripts of late ancient literature, such as *Order Qodashim* of the Babylonian Talmud and the *Hekhalot* literature, are associated with the Pietists’ exceptional scholarly and religious interests in sacrifice and mystical visions). [1] Marcus has engaged extensively with Sefer Hasidim over the course of his storied career, and for many years worked towards the production of a critical edition.

As the manuscript catalog at the end of the book can attest, this was a complex project. There are 37 manuscripts and three primary printed editions. Each one of them is different. Some are longer than others, some contain only some of the material found in the printed editions. Clusters of material move around between manuscripts, others are omitted from some MSS, and many of the MSS are fragmentary. The project would have required both philological and historical acumen.

However, there is no edition, and this book explains why. Marcus argues that an edition would be actively detrimental to understanding the import of passages in the Book of the Pious. Following an opportune comment by Simcha Emanuel in 2014, comparing *Sefer Hasidim* to Lego® (127), Marcus explains that this book is not a book at all: it is an agglutination of short text units, disjunctively combined. (The analogy is not entirely accurate, however: Lego blocks are meaningless out of context, and their import changes according to context. Their only utility is when as part of a pirate ship or a castle; one block can be a windowsill one day and a drivers' set the next. The
point of Marcus’s work, conversely, is that Sefer Hasidim units were meaningful on their own. The complex textual situation of the book does not reflect different recensions or editions of an ur-text, but instead it reflects an ongoing practice of rearranging and reconfiguring the basic units of the text. "Sefer Hasidim is made up of small, independently written passages that the author arranged in different sequences more than one parallel edition. These editions are all original version of the same book. [...] There was no single original book and so no single edition is the 'real' Sefer Hasidim. All of them are" (6). Marcus distinguishes this activity from editing or redaction (7) and also from the work of "activist scribes," who take liberties with a text that already exists (see 127-128).

Armed with this realization, Marcus notes that this practice is reminiscent of rabbinic literature: there, too, the various works are made up of disjointed units which often parallel similar units in other works. (And there, too, scholars debate similar questions). [2] Earlier works or some parts of them, like the Pseudepigraphical "book" known as 1 Enoch, circulated in similar circumstances in late antiquity. Daniel Abrams has shown in great detail, that parallel dynamics of "book"-production animate the creation of mystical literature, from the Late Ancient Hekhalot to the Late Medieval Zohar and beyond. [3] Marcus proposes that the form of Sefer Hasidim is a cultural statement, which eschews the Roman literary norms prevalent in both the contemporary Latin Christian and the Muslim worlds, in favour of more "Jewish" ones, retained, borrowed or revived from rabbinic literature (8-9).

Marcus lays out this case succinctly in his introduction. The following four chapters are expansions and applications of this basic thesis. In chapter 1 Marcus discusses the nature of Sefer Hasidim, reconstructing the techniques of literary production which prevailed in the circle of Judah the Pious. He surveys the manuscripts and explains how each is unique and not a representative of one of two recensions. He offers new definitions of key terms, such as Sefer ("book," but in this circle any agglutination of paragraphs in a codex or notebook), and gleans his literature for clues on how they viewed their own work as well as rabbinic literature.

In chapter 2, "Rewriting Jewish Pietist Traditions," Marcus continues this theme into what might be termed the reception history of the Sefer Hasidim traditions. Traditions, exempla, practices, all circulated as small textual units, attributable to Judah the Pious, and found their way into other works. They were also reconfigured and formed into works by others. Marcus discusses a particularly interesting case in which one reconfiguration replaced the penitential theory of Sefer Hasidim with that of Maimonides. The former prescribes confession and physical penance; the latter is a spiritual process of self-betterment and involves significantly less mortification of the flesh.

The Maimonidean presence in Ashkenaz interests Marcus also because of the former author’s modes of literary production. Despite the influence of Maimonidean ideas in Ashkenaz, the forms in which he wrote did not catch on. Ashkenazi Jews continued to write in the form of disjointed paragraphs. As Marcus shows in chapter 4, this is not only a feature of Sefer Hasidim but of a large number of Ashkenazi literary products.

Chapter 3, the longest in the book (27 pages), is an application of Marcus’s insights on the nature of Sefer Hasidim to the historical and biographical study of its instigator, Judah the Pious. Marcus, true to his insight on disjointed paragraphs, does not attempt to reconstruct Judah’s life according to each
"book." Instead, Marcus uses his new-found understanding of disparate traditions to explain "how [Judah's] life story took a dramatic turn when he mysteriously left his family home in the Rhineland town of Speyer, and moved to the...Regensburg some two hundred miles away" (45). Marcus uses sources that speak about Judah the Pious in halakhic literature and compares them to anonymous stories in the Sefer Hasidim literature to piece together Judah’s personality and life story. His new literary understanding of Sefer Hasidim allows him to tease out a more accurate historical record from it. Marcus is able to show that Judah left or was run out of Speyer due to run-ins with the rabbinic establishment of Speyer and then that in Regensburg he became part of the establishment himself.

The book reads pleasantly and calmly, making its points cogently and explaining itself well. It is directed at specialists in Ashkeanzi medieval Jewish studies: those in the know will, for example, recognise, amid the clam, the polemic the Marcus wages in this book against other scholars of Sefer Hasidim. The book is well edited and copyedited (on p. 4, Mishneh should be Mishnah), and the hardcover book is handsomely produced.

The entire book is the product of an earlier, analog, stage of scholarship, in which manuscripts were catalogued on cards and consulted on microfilm. The catalog which concludes the book is a testament to the importance of the scholarship produced in that age, between World War II and the advent of the internet, during which the Jewish manuscript culture of the middle ages was collected into two rooms, one at the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem, and the other at Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan. In that sense, Marcus’s book is not only a study in the history of the book, but an artifact for future scholars of the same discipline to study.

Marcus dedicated the book to his son, Magen Dror Marcus, MD, who died in 2010 at 41, after a year-long battle with kidney cancer.

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4. Cf. the recent alternative dating (and narrative) in Ephraim Shoham-Steiner,