

Jewish Folk Literature

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For Batsheva

Four interrelated qualities distinguish Jewish folk literature: (a) historical depth, (b) continuous interdependence between orality and literacy, (c) national dispersion, and (d) linguistic diversity. In spite of these diverging factors, the folklore of most Jewish communities clearly shares a number of features.

The Jews, as a people, maintain a collective memory that extends well into the second millennium BCE. Although literacy undoubtedly figured in the preservation of the Jewish cultural heritage to a great extent, at each period it was complemented by orality. The reciprocal relations between the two thus enlarged the thematic, formal, and social bases of Jewish folklore. The dispersion of the Jews among the nations through forced exiles and natural migrations further expanded the themes and forms of their folklore. In most countries Jews developed new languages in which they spoke, performed, and later wrote down their folklore.

As a people living in diaspora, Jews incorporated the folklore of other nations while simultaneously spreading their own internationally known themes among the same nations. Although this reciprocal process is basic to the transmission of folklore among all nations, it occurred more intensely among the Jews, even when they lived in antiquity in the Land of Israel. Consequently there is no single period, no single country, nor any single language that can claim to represent the authentic composite Jewish folklore. The earliest known periods of Jewish folklore are no more genuine, in fact, than the later periods, with the result that no specific Jewish ethnic group's traditions can be considered more ancient or more

authentic than those of any of the others.¹

The Biblical and Post-Biblical Periods

Folklore in the Hebrew Bible

Descriptions of Storytelling and Singing

The Hebrew Bible describes both the spontaneous and the institutionalized commemoration of historical events. In victory women such as Miriam (Exodus 15) and Deborah (Judges 5) spontaneously welcomed their warriors home. This was the custom among other peoples in the region as well (2 Samuel 1:20). In defeat women, as well as men, lamented the deaths of their heroes (2 Samuel 1:19-27; Jeremiah 9:16). Both forms reveal the stylistic earmarks of oral poetry.

The preservation of historical events in a national collective memory requires the institutionalization of a ritual narration of history. This process is evident in the biblical instructions for the commemoration of the exodus from Egypt: “You shall say to your children, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand’” (Deuteronomy 6:21; see also Exodus 13:8).² The ritual observance of the transmission of historical narratives became known as *leil shimurim* (“night of vigil,” Exodus 12:42), a term that likely refers to all-night storytelling. Evidently the ritual narration was not only a religious command but also a practice. The Book of Judges, in Gideon’s reply to the angel of the Lord, refers to it: “Please, my lord, if the Lord is with us, why has all this befallen us? Where are all His wondrous deeds about which our fathers told us, saying, ‘Truly the Lord brought us from Egypt?’” (Judges 6:13). Such formal occasions for storytelling extend throughout history.

In the biblical period there were speakers and singers who specialized

¹ Implicitly this statement refers to two propositions that students of folklore have addressed in the past, though at present very few agree with them. The first is that in the diaspora Jews do not have their own genuine folklore (see, e.g., Berger 1938:12; T. Gaster 1950:981; J. Jacobs 1903b). The second proposition is that the folklore of one Jewish group can be of greater authenticity than that of another. Patai (1960) has argued against the first proposition, and M. I. Berdyczewski (bin-Gorion) has vigorously opposed the second (see Ben-Amos 1990a).

² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are made according to *Tanakh: The Holy Scripture: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

in certain genres of oral literature. The *moshlim* were those who spoke in parables (“bards,” Numbers 21:27; “riddlemonglers,” Ezekiel 21:5). Jeremiah (9:16) refers to the *meqonenot* (“mourning women”) and the *hakhamot* (“wise women”) as paired female wailers. Male and female singers, *sharim* and *sharot* respectively, were part of the royal entourage of entertainers (1 Samuel 19:36), and post-exilic texts refer to the singers’ role in the cultic worship in the Temple (Ezra 2:41; Nehemiah 12:28).

Quotations from Oral Literature

The Hebrew Bible includes direct quotations of oral proverbs.³ For example, when the young David confronts King Saul and proclaims his innocence of any desire to usurp the throne, he concludes his speech by saying, “As the ancient proverb has it: ‘Wicked deeds come from wicked men!’” (1 Samuel 24:14). He cites the proverb in conclusion to his statement in much the same way that people living in current oral societies do. When the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel wish to proclaim a new moral order for the land, they quote the same proverb (Ezekiel 18:2):

The word of the Lord came to me: “What do you mean by quoting this proverb upon the soil of Israel: Parents eat sour grapes and their children’s teeth are blunted? As I live—declares the Lord God—this proverb shall no longer be current among you in Israel.”⁴

Biblical Repetitions

The clearest evidence of oral tradition in the Hebrew Bible is the repetition of a theme or a story in multiple and sometimes contradictory versions. There are numerous examples of this phenomenon. For example, the story of the creation of woman appears in two contradictory verses. First, the Bible states that “male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27), but later we read that the “Lord God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And the Lord God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman” (Genesis 2:21-22).

The defeat of Goliath serves as the origin-story of the Davidistic

³ For an analysis of quotation in the Hebrew Bible, see Schultz 1989.

⁴ Cf. Jeremiah 31:29.

dynasty (1 Samuel 17), but another tradition, albeit an obscure one, proclaims that “Elhanan son of Jaare-oregim the Bethlehemite killed Goliath the Gittite” (2 Samuel 21:19; cf. 1 Chronicles 20:5).

The story of Sarai, Abram’s wife, in the Pharaoh’s palace (Genesis 12:10-20) is repeated in the biblical biography of Isaac. His wife Rebecca is taken to the court of Abimelech, king of the Philistines, just as Sarai had been taken to the court of the Pharaoh (Genesis 26:1-11).

The story of Saul’s ascension to the throne appears in three successive versions. The first centers around the search for the lost asses (1 Samuel 9:1-10:16), the second around Saul’s competing qualities of humility and stature (1 Samuel 10:17-27), the third on his success in defeating the Ammonites (1 Samuel 11).

The introduction of young David to Saul appears in two versions that establish David’s twin images as both psalmist and hero. In the first he is a musician who relieves the king of his depression (1 Samuel 16:17-23); in the second he is the unexpected victor over the Philistines (1 Samuel 17).

The motif of barrenness (M444 “Curse of Childlessness”) is repeated in the life histories of several biblical figures.⁵ Two of the matriarchs, Sarah (Genesis 17:1-18:15, 21:1-8) and Rachel (Genesis 29:31; 30:1-2, 22-24), conceive after prolonged barrenness, as do the mothers of Samson (Judges 13:2-25) and Samuel (1 Samuel 1:5-28). Repetitions such as these demonstrate the vagaries of oral tradition rather than the inaccuracies of historical reports.

Comparative Analysis

Several biblical themes recur in the ancient traditions of the Near East, while others have enjoyed a worldwide distribution. For example, the flood story (Genesis 6:9-8:14) bears a remarkable similarity to the creation narratives of many peoples.⁶ The story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39) relates the very common tale of the seduction of a younger man by an older woman; the Egyptian tale of the “Two Brothers” is a parallel.⁷ The above-mentioned story of David and Goliath follows the fairy-tale pattern of the youngest son who, upon killing a monster, is

⁵ The term *motif*, when followed in parentheses by a capital letter, a number, and a phrase in quotation marks, refers throughout to Thompson 1955-58.

⁶ See, for examples, Bailey 1989 and Dundes 1988.

⁷ See Hollis 1990.

rewarded with marriage to the king's beautiful daughter (in this case, Michal: 1 Samuel 17-18). Tales of rainmaking, healing, and providing food are at the core of the Elijah and Elisha narrative cycles (1 Kings 17-19:6; 2 Kings 2:19-22, 4-5); such tales recur in many traditions, and often feature holy men who are very much like these prophets.

Poetic Style and Formulas

Biblical prophecy, as well as biblical poetry, both display stylistic features typical of oral poetry: parallelism, paired words, and repeated formulaic phrases. The recurrence of such pairs as earth and dust (Psalms 7:6), lips and mouth (Psalms 66:14), tents and dwellings (Numbers 24:5)—or such formulaic phrases as “he lifted up his eyes and looked” (Genesis 18:2)—can serve as a turning point in the narrative and therewith suggest oral origins for biblical poetic and narrative art. Among others, these poetic devices are found in the texts of neighboring peoples, a fact that suggests a shared currency in the literary traditions of the entire region.⁸

Folklore in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

The Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, and Oral Tradition

Originally “Apocrypha,” from the Greek *ajpovkrufu~* (“hidden”), meant secret books. It now refers to a set of thirteen books that appeared in the codices of the Septuagint but not in the Hebrew Bible. These books are: the Epistle of Jeremiah, Tobit, Judith, Third Ezra (1 Esdras), Additions to Esther, Prayer of Azariah, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, 1 Baruch, Ben-Sira, Wisdom of Solomon, 1 Maccabees, and 2 Maccabees. Extant in Greek, these books were originally written in Hebrew during the last two centuries BCE, with the exception of Tobit, which was written down earlier.

The Pseudepigrapha (“with false superscription”) are books whose authorship was attributed to various ideal figures in the Hebrew Bible.

⁸ There is a rich scholarly literature of different approaches and schools of thought regarding the folkloristic study of the Hebrew Bible. For a survey see Ben-Amos 1992b, as well as selected works and discussions in Avishur 1984, Fontaine 1982, Kirkpatrick 1988, Niditch 1987 and 1995, Rogerson 1974 and 1979.

They are extant in Aramaic, Armenian, Ethiopic (Ge'ez), Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Old Slavonic, and Syriac; their original languages vary and are the object of scholarly inquiry. Most of these books date from 200 BCE to 200 CE; the prominent exception is the book of Aḥiqar, which likely dates from the seventh or the sixth century BCE and whose Aramaic language is likely a translation from an Akkadian original.⁹

The rabbis considered the apocryphal and the pseudepigraphic books to be “outside the Jewish canon,” *sefarim ḥizonim*. A statement attributed to Rabbi Akiva (second century) pronounces that anybody who reads them forfeits his share in the world to come (JT, *Sanhedrin* 10:1).¹⁰ Because these books are not canonical, they include, by definition, ideas and narratives that escaped the control of the Jewish religious leadership. They contain sectarian views, and appear to have been oral traditions that enjoyed a general currency in society even though they had not obtained rabbinical approval. Quite likely some were written in Jewish communities outside the Land of Israel; consequently, the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha provide documentation for what were, in part, folk traditions of the emerging Jewish diaspora.

Literacy played a role in the transmission of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphic books, which are replete with references to a literate, rather than an oral, tradition. For example, God commands Enoch

to give them the books in your own handwritings, and they will read them and they will acknowledge me as the Creator of everything. And they will understand that there is no other God except myself. And let them distribute the books in your handwriting, children to children and family to family and kinsfolk to kinsfolk” (2 Enoch [J] 33:8-9; see also 48:7).

Each testament of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Sons of Jacob the Patriarch, begins with a formula that alludes to the scriptural nature of the text: “A copy of the testament of. . . .” Literacy afforded these early writers the choice to make their texts either secret or public, as the Fourth Book of Ezra makes clear (14:45-48):

And when the forty days were ended, the Most High spoke to me, saying, “Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in

⁹ For a recent translation and analytical introduction, see Charlesworth 1983; for a survey of this literature, see Nickelsburg 1981.

¹⁰ JT=Jerusalem Talmud; BT=Babylonian Talmud; MR=Midrash Rabbah.

order to give them to the wise among the people. For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the river of knowledge.”
And I did so.

Within an oral tradition such control over knowledge is all but impossible unless the listeners swear to secrecy. Furthermore, oral transmission does not serve these writers as a source of verification or confirmation, nor does it provide a sanction for ideas, laws, or narratives. Yet the presence of oral traditions is evident in the apocryphal and the pseudepigraphic literature as well. The cosmological views, the visions of heaven, and the apocalyptic descriptions in books such as Enoch, Baruch, and the Apocalypses of Abraham, Adam, Daniel, Elijah, Sedrach, and Zephania each bear the stamp of cultural or sectarian ideas that share a broad social basis; they cannot, therefore, be grounded in the imagination of a single author.

Narrative Expansions of Biblical Tales

Several narratives that drew upon oral tradition recur independently in later rabbinical literature. These traditions expand the biblical narrative, record certain folk legends of the Second Temple period, and even contain fictive folk tales. In the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha, the narrative expansion of the Hebrew Bible focuses on particular biblical figures rather than elaborates on scriptural text. The tales supplement the biblical narrative with causation compatible with Jewish culture, collective memory, and worldview. For example, the pseudepigraphic romance of Joseph and Aseneth explains the apparent incongruity in Joseph's biblical biography: in Jewish tradition Joseph is a model of piety and virtue, yet he marries a foreign Hamitic girl, the daughter of Potiphera (Genesis 41:45). In an attempt to reconcile this contradiction, the romance sees Aseneth fall in love with him, destroy her idols, and embrace Joseph's religion before their marriage. Several years after the wedding, the Pharaoh's son, whom Aseneth had earlier rejected, sees her, and his prior infatuation returns. He tries to secure the help of Joseph's brothers in order to kidnap her but fails and later dies. Joseph ascends to the throne and thereafter rules over Egypt for forty-eight years.

Jewish oral tradition associated geographical landmarks such as trees and tombs with biblical figures. A unique book that draws upon such local legends is *The Lives of the Prophets*. Although written by a Palestinian Jew in the first century CE, it was known primarily in Christian circles. The writer records the story of the martyrdom of the Prophet Isaiah, who

was cut in two on the order of King Manasseh (1:1). This story appeared in another pseudepigraphic book of the first century (The Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 5) and remained a part of the local oral tradition; it was later included in the Jerusalem Talmud (JT, *Sanhedrin* 10:2, 28c). Another legend expands the account of the slaying of the prophesying priest Zecharaia, son of Jehoiada, whom King Joash killed near the altar (2 Chronicles 24:20-22; The Lives of the Prophets 23:1). Rabbinical oral tradition considered this incident to be the cause of the great carnage among the Judeans during Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem. It vividly describes how, after his death, Zecharaia's blood pulsed until Nebuzaradan, the army captain, avenged him (MR, Lamentations, "Introductions" 23; Ecclesiastics 3:16, 10:4; BT, *Gittin* 57b; and JT, *Ta'anit* 4:5).¹¹

The apocryphal book of Susanna supplements Daniel's biography and depicts him playing the role of the wise child. He is able to confound the testimonies of two old men who have sexually harassed Susanna, herself an extraordinarily beautiful woman. Susanna had not acquiesced to their demands, however, and thus to cover their own acts they charged her with adultery, which was at that time a crime punishable by death. Her innocence then comes to light through Daniel's inquiry, and the two old men are punished. The same story recurs in later rabbinical tradition (BT, *Sanhedrin* 93a). Daniel plays the narrative role that the figure of Solomon fulfills in later Jewish medieval folklore.¹²

Contemporaneous Legends

The two books of the Maccabees chronicle the revolt of the Maccabees against the Seleucid Empire (166-160 BCE). The second book, a summary of five books written in Alexandria by Jason of Cyrene (latter second century BCE), contains several narratives of a distinctly legendary

¹¹ If we follow the suggestion of Yassif (1999:55-57), it is possible to consider the book a travel guide to Judea, a kind of Palestinian Pausanias, that follows the prophets' tomb sites. For text and a study, see Torrey 1946 and Satran 1995; for analysis of the pulsating blood legend, see Blank 1937-38; and for the prophet-martyr biographical patterns, see Fischel 1946-47.

¹² Whenever applicable, bin-Gorion 1990 serves as a reference for further bibliographical information about individual tales. For the literature about Susanna and about the child Solomon, see bin-Gorion 1990:28-29, 32-36 [nos. 17, 20-22], 79-81 [no. 42].

character. Prominent among them is the martyrdom story of the mother whose seven sons choose to die rather than worship foreign gods. After their death she throws herself from the rooftop (2 Maccabees 7). This legend reverberates in later rabbinical oral tradition (BT, *Gittin* 57b; MR, Lamentations 1:50) and in medieval and modern Jewish folklore. Contrasted with such martyrdom legends are the tales of divine retribution in which an oppressor suffers. Such is the story of Heliodorus, who comes to confiscate the Temple treasures and is mysteriously punished (2 Maccabees 3:7-40). This narrative pattern is common in later Jewish folk tradition.¹³

Fictive Folktales

In ancient Jewish folklore, fictive folktales are rather scarce. Whenever they appear, the writers historicize them in terms of the Jewish national past. The similarity between the basic folktale morphology and the story of the origin of the Davidistic dynasty was mentioned above. The apocryphal book of 1 Esdras (3:1-4:63) cites another story (tale type 2031A, “The Esdras Chain: stronger and strongest, wine, king, woman, truth”), therewith providing a basis for the renewal of the Davidistic leadership among the returning exiles. Zerubbabel, a scion of the House of David and the head of the repatriates, is a young guardsman of the Persian king Darius. In a contest held among the king’s three guardsmen to name what is strongest, Zerubbabel selects a woman (in her several roles as mother, wife, and lover), while the other two guardsmen choose a king and wine, respectively. The king rewards Zerubbabel’s honesty with permission to return to Jerusalem.

The apocryphal Book of Tobit is a version of a classic international fictive folktale. Completely detached from Jewish history, it is known as the complex of tale types 505-508, “The Grateful Dead.” Stylistically it deviates from the fairy-tale form. The characters’ names are allegorical: the names of the father and son, Tobit son of Tobiel and Tobias, respectively, resonate with kindness (tov[b], “good”). The action takes place not “once upon a time” but in a specific time and place, yet follows a fictive pattern. The father, a righteous man, engages in the burial of the dead, often risking his life in defiance of the king’s decree against it, and thereafter is blinded by a bird’s dropping. Impoverished, he sends his son to recover a sum of money that he had left with a relative in Madai.

¹³ See bin-Gorion 1990:109-11 [no. 51], 148-51, 275-79 [nos. 148-51].

The angel Raphael, disguised as a man, accompanies him on his journey. On the way Raphael saves the son, who is swimming in the river, from a fish that is about to swallow him. After dissecting the fish, they preserve its heart, liver, and gall for future magical use. Raphael then leads the son to the house of his relative Raguel, whose daughter Sarah is depressed and suicidal as the result of the deaths of her seven previous bridegrooms in the nuptial chamber, all of whom were stricken by a demon. As Tobias readies himself to marry Sarah, he burns, on Raphael's instructions, certain parts of the fish's heart and liver—the smoke of which then chases the demon away. They consummate the marriage, and upon returning home the father is cured by the son, who conjures the magical healing power of the fish's gall. Like other tales in the Apocrypha, this story recurs in later Jewish oral tradition.¹⁴

Oral Tradition and Jewish Folklore

The Cultural Idea of the Orality of Tradition

The literary-religious creativity during the first six or seven centuries CE in Jewish societies in the Land of Israel and in Babylon, including the books that preserve it, are known as the oral Torah (*torah she-be-al-peh*). This contrasts with the term for the written Torah (*torah she-bi-khtav*), which designates the Hebrew Bible. And although these terms, singularly and as a contrasting pair, occur in relatively late sources, the rabbis attribute their use to earlier prominent figures of the period. The following narrative attributes these terms to Shammai and Hillel the Elder (first century BCE), the last pair in the chain of the Torah's transmission, the human origin of which began, of course, with Moses (Mishnah, *Avot* 1):

A certain man once stood before Shammai and said to him:
“Master, how many Torahs have you?”

“Two,” Shammai replied, “one written and one oral.”

Said the man: “The written one I am prepared to accept, the oral one I am not prepared to accept.”

Shammai rebuked him and dismissed him in a huff. He came before Hillel and said to him: “Master, how many Torahs were given?”

“Two,” Hillel replied, “one written and one oral.”

Said the man: “The written one I am prepared to accept, the oral one I am not prepared to accept.”

¹⁴ See bin-Gorion 1990:81-85 [no. 43], 74-77 [no. 40].

“My son,” Hillel said to him, “sit down.” He wrote out the alphabet for him and (pointing to one of the letters) asked him: “What is this?”

“It is *'aleph*,” the man replied.

Said Hillel: “This is not *'aleph* but *bet*. What is that?” he continued.

The man answered: “It is *bet*.”

“This is not *bet*,” said Hillel, “but *gimmel*.”

(In the end) Hillel said to him: “How dost thou know that this is *'aleph* and this *bet* and this *gimmel*? Only because so our ancestors of old handed it down to us that this *'aleph* and this *bet* and this *gimmel*. Even as thou hast taken this in good faith, so take the other in good faith.”¹⁵

Consistent with this amusing anecdote, the rabbis articulated the distinction between the two Torahs primarily in conversations with non-Jews.¹⁶ Awareness of this distinction dominated Jewish social and religious life. The written Torah consisted of twenty-four books that comprised the Holy Scriptures, but the oral Torah was a comprehensive entity that encompassed Jewish culture as a whole. It spoke in a dialogic voice. The language of the marketplace and the language of the academy, the language of the synagogue and the language of politics, the revered Hebrew and the daily Aramaic—each interacted with the other within a social and cultural discourse.

The Babylonian and Jerusalemian Talmuds, as well as the midrashic books from this period, furthermore, make up a unique record of oral discourse concerning social life, theological ideas, supernatural beliefs, and historical accounts. Taken in their entirety, these books represent the orality in Jewish culture at that time. However, the narratives, parables, proverbs, and metaphors contained in these books were drawn from the wider context of the Jewish folklore of the period. The religious and legal context of these documented oral deliberations contributed to the exclusion

¹⁵ Taken from Goldin 1955:80. The compilation of this source, known by its Hebrew title as *'Abot de-Rabbi Natan*, likely dates from a period between the seventh and ninth centuries, though, on the basis of its language and the authorities cited, its traditions probably date back to the third or fourth century.

¹⁶ In another version of this anecdote (BT *Shabbat* 31a) it is indeed a proselyte who approaches the two rabbis. Rabban Gamliel (second century), a descendant of Hillel the Elder, replies to Agnitus the *hegemon* that the Jews have two Torahs, “one in the mouth and one in writing” (Sifrei, *Deuteronomy* 33:10, § 351, p. 145a). Another version (Midrash ha-Gadol, *Deuteronomy*, p. 764) ascribes a similar encounter to Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai (first century CE), the youngest of Hillel the Elder’s disciples, and Agrippa. In the *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* (102b), a midrash of the seventh century, Rabbi Yodah (fourth century) interprets the biblical image of “two-edged swords” (Psalms 149:6) as a metaphor for the two aspects of the Torah.

of some oral genres such as songs, children's rhymes, and even fictive tales, since neither the rabbis nor the editors had deemed them appropriate or relevant.¹⁷

The literate sections of the Jewish society were quite obviously responsible for preserving the oral discourse in writing. Yet their learning did not separate them from the peasants, the craftsmen, and the urban traders. They were intellectual commoners within a society of limited literacy. In such a historical context the distinction between the popular and the learned classes, as far as the performance and transmission of tradition are concerned, is of limited value. Knowledge of popular culture does not depend on reported contacts in which sages learned from commoners' biblical interpretations (MR, Genesis 78:12) nor on folk medical cures that the rabbis applied (BT, *Shabbat* 66b-67a). Nor do the legendary biographical traditions of several rabbis, such as Rabbi Akiba (BT, *Ketubbot* 62b-63a), who had been a shepherd in his youth, and Rabbi Yoḥanan (second century), a shoemaker by trade, provide the necessary indicators of class relations in post-biblical Jewish society. Rather than class, the crucial factor was the principle of orality, which at that time was prevalent to varying degrees throughout Jewish culture.¹⁸ The entire oral, imaginary, mythical, and historical creativity of the culture has always constituted an integral part of the verbal art of post-biblical Jewish society.

The distinction between the written and the oral Torahs also had pragmatic implications. In order to avoid confusion between the two, a clear proposition states, "You shall not deliver/transmit sayings [transmitted] in writing orally; you shall not deliver/transmit sayings [transmitted] orally in writing" (BT, *Gittin* 60b; *Temurah* 14b);¹⁹ this proposition thus affirmed the selfsame boundaries that the rabbis had apparently transgressed. Worried as they were about the demise of those traditions through forgetfulness, Rabbi Yoḥanan and Resh Lakish—both of whom were leading sages of the third century who at one time headed the academy in Tiberias—wrote down oral traditions. Other rabbis did so for

¹⁷ The issue of distinguishing folklore within a largely historical oral culture is similar to the problem modern anthropologists face in the study of non-literate societies; see Bascom 1953 and 1955.

¹⁸ See BT, *Shabbat* 66b-67a; *Gittin* 57b; MR, *Genesis* 78:11.

¹⁹ For other statements of such a distinction, see MR, Exodus 47:4 and BT, *Megillah* 18b.

mnemonic purposes.²⁰

At the same time, both in ritualistic and in learning contexts, there were professional memorizers known as *meturgemanim* and *tannaim* who committed to memory large portions of the written scripture and who also went on to apply the same skill to the oral Torah itself. In all likelihood, oral recitation of the oral Torah continued long after it had been committed to writing.²¹

Oral Tradition and the Hebrew Bible

The interdependence of orality and literacy in the post-biblical literature opened new venues for oral tradition. Interpreters, translators, preachers, and teachers articulated the unwritten knowledge that they had inferred from, or referred to, the Hebrew Bible. Through wordplay and poetic associations in which personalities, localities, and dates form symbolic paradigms, the oral tradition projected an imagined and imaginative order onto a past that was receding into the crevices of mythic memory. By bridging textual gaps and proposing causes for various actions, the Jewish oral tradition expanded the biblical narrative by means of verbal performances in the synagogues and academies, as well as in privately told tales.

In his monumental work *The Legends of the Jews* (1909-39), Louis Ginzberg synthesized the oral traditions swirling about the Hebrew Bible. He considered these traditions to be the fundamental traditional knowledge of Jewish society and disregarded as accidental the historical period of their literary articulation. An extreme example of his method is the incorporation of an Oedipal story into the legendary biography of Joshua, son of Nun. This tale, which involves patricide and a barely avoided instance of maternal incest, did not appear in writing until the eighteenth

²⁰ See BT, *Hullin* 60b; *Shabbat* 6b, 89a, 96b. For a discussion of the relationship between orality and literacy in the rabbinical period, see Gerhardsson 1961.

²¹ Saul Lieberman (1955-88, vol. 1:14) cites a response of Rav Natronai bar Hilai (ninth century CE) that includes testimony about the role of the *tannaim* in the academic study of traditional texts. See Y. Epstein 1948:688-91 for additional references and quotations from the *responsa* literature, which records rabbinical answers to questions of law; for Gerhardsson's suggestion that the *tannaim* were "purely and simply living *books*: textbooks and concordances," see Gerhardsson 1961:98-99.

century.²² Theoretically, it could have been known orally in Jewish societies earlier, yet, significantly, it is nowhere mentioned. Its omission from print could be due to rabbinical censorship or simply a result of its absence from Jewish tradition. In ahistorical synthesis, however, Ginzberg could include it as part of the oral tradition about the Hebrew Bible, thereby implicitly suggesting the timelessness of the narrative.

Another example involves the construction of the figure of King Solomon in *The Legends of the Jews*. Oral tradition portrays King Solomon as a wise man (BT, *Berakhot* 57b), as a magician (BT, *Gittin* 68a-68b; JT, *Sanhedrin* 2:2), and later, in the *Tales of Ben-Sira* (tenth century CE), as a clever lover who seduces the Queen of Sheba.²³ But his image as a prodigiously wise child, like Daniel in the apocryphal book of Susanna and Ben-Sira in his own book, becomes apparent only in an early sixteenth-century pamphlet entitled "Parables of King Solomon."²⁴ This presentation of oral narrative in synthetic form blurs historical contexts and misses the dynamics between orality and literacy in the tradition.

No doubt the discovery of the respective historical periods of these narratives, interpretations, and metaphors is an extremely difficult and all too Sisyphean task. Yet only such an analysis could cast light upon their place in the historical context, as well as upon their internal literary developments. While Ginzberg's synthesis often obscures historical contexts, it must be recognized that his comprehensive annotation laid the foundation for modern scholarship.²⁵

The specific modes of interdependence between orality and literacy in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible have been the subject of numerous studies. They have brought into focus a complex system of textual exegesis. For the sake of simplification it is possible to delineate three modes of oral exposition of the written text that, it should be noted, are not mutually exclusive: the interpretive, the expansive, and the associative.

In the interpretive mode, speakers often clarify obscurities and

²² It is possible that this tale became part of Jewish tradition in the Middle Ages or even later in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For a bibliographical discussion, see bin-Gorion 1990:25-26 [no. 15].

²³ See Yassif 1984a:50-59; Lassner 1993; Pritchard 1974; Stern and Mirsky 1990:180.

²⁴ See bibliographical references in bin-Gorion 1990:28-73 [nos. 17-39].

²⁵ For programmatic proposals and studies of midrashic narratives and metaphors, see Bloch 1978, J. Heinemann 1974, and Vermes 1961.

inconsistencies and propose causes or motivations for actions. The oral interpretation completes a missing segment in the biblical text. For example, there is a textual omission in the Hebrew Bible's description of the quarrel between Cain and Abel. At Genesis 4:8 the text reads, "Cain said to his brother Abel," and does not specify what he said. The Septuagint and other translations complete it with the phrase, "Come, let us go into the field," which is quite plausible. But for the oral interpreters this omission is fertile ground for exegetical narrative (MR, *Genesis 22:7*):

And Cain spoke unto Abel his brother (4:8). About what did they quarrel? "Come," said they, "let us divide the world." One took the land and the other the movables. The former said, "The land you stand on is mine," while the latter retorted, "What you are wearing is mine." One said: "Strip," the other retorted: "Fly [off the ground]." Out of this quarrel, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, etc.

R. Joshua of Siknin said in R. Levi's name: Both took the land and both took movables, but about what did they quarrel? One said, "The Temple must be built in my area," while the other claimed, "It must be built in mine." For thus it is written, *And it came to pass, when they were in the field: now field refers to nothing but the Temple, as you read, Zion [i.e. the Temple] shall be plowed as a field* (Micah 3:12). Out of this argument, *Cain rose up against his brother Abel, etc.*

Judah b. Rabbi said: Their quarrel was about the first Eve [Lilith]. Said R. Aibu: The first Eve had returned to dust. Then about what was their quarrel? Said R. Huna: An additional twin was born with Abel, and each claimed her. The one claimed: "I will have her, because I am the firstborn;" while the other maintained: "I must have her, because she was born with me."

The rabbis to whom the editors attribute these interpretations are from the third and fourth centuries. Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* itself dates back to the end of the fourth century. Yet allusions to some of these ideas appear already in the Septuagint (third century BCE), a fact that suggests their antiquity in oral tradition.

In the expansive mode narrators employ a received tradition or creative interpretation. Such a mode explains the tale of Abraham in the furnace. The Hebrew Bible hardly accounts for Abraham's discovery of a monotheistic faith in the midst of a pagan world—as if *in medias res* the biblical narrator introduces God's command, which Abraham obeys, to continue the migration to Canaan that his father Terah had begun (Genesis 11:31-12:5). Hence, it was up to oral narrators both to fill in the missing episodes and to describe Abraham's awakening to a faith in a single God. The earliest evidence for such a tradition dates from the second century

BCE in Jubilees 12:12-13:

In the sixtieth year of the life of Abram, i.e. the fourth week, in its fourth year, Abram arose in the night and burned the house of idols. And he burned everything in the house. And there was no man who knew. And they rose up in the night, and they wanted to save their gods from the midst of the fire.

The crime of arson deserves a like punishment. However, the book of Jubilees reports nothing of it. Only an oral tradition attributed to narrators of the second century CE claims Abraham as a potential martyr. During a time when the Romans were persecuting the Jews, the biblical interpreters made Abraham, the founder of the religion, into a model for behavior and hope. King Nimrod put him in a burning furnace, a scenario that recalls the biblical story of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Daniel 3:13-30); God, however, saves Abraham from death (MR, *Genesis* 38:28, 44:6-7).²⁶

During the Hadrianic persecutions that followed the crush of the Bar-Kokhva rebellion (132-35 CE), leading rabbis died at the stake. In their search for reason in history, sages in the fourth century applied to these events an ancient expansion of biblical narrative that dates to at least the second century BCE. In the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Zebulon contends, “I had no share in the price received for Joseph, my children. But Simeon, Gad, and our other brothers accepted the money, bought shoes for themselves, their wives, and other children” (Zebulon 3:1-2). Oral interpreters associated the verse “Because they sold the righteous for money and the needy for a pair of shoes” (Amos 2:6) with this tradition. The prophet’s allusion in this verse is obscure, but the following interpretation would be a possibility. Since Joseph, who resisted seduction (Genesis 39), is considered the model of a righteous man, the ancient interpreters applied the verse to him, considering his sale to be the primordial sin in Jewish history, the one for which the rabbis atoned with their own deaths.²⁷

The application of prophetic verses to Pentateuch stories is also fundamental to the associative mode of interpretation. Poetic in nature, this mode of association relates textually remote biblical verses to one another, forming models and drawing analogies between individuals, places, times, and actions. Interpreters conceived of the entire Scripture as a closed system, and projected into it their own traditional associations. A feature,

²⁶ Many interpreters repeat and allude to the tale; see Ginzberg 1909-39, v:218. For an analysis of the historical significance of the legend, see Urbach 1960.

²⁷ See also bin-Gorion 1990:156-62 [no. 81].

an object, a place, and a time each unite unrelated persons and chronologically remote actions. By employing the associative mode the ancient interpreters proposed that thirteen persons were born circumcised, a sign of perfection: Job, Adam, Seth, Noah, Shem, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Balak, Samuel, David, Jeremiah, and Zerubbabel. They earned this distinction not only by their actions but often also by their textual association with the word for perfection, *tam*, in the scripture.²⁸

In the liminal twilight hour of the first Sabbath Eve, God created ten supernatural things (Mishnah, *Avot* 5:6):

The mouth of the earth [that swallowed Korah and his confederates (Numbers 16:30)], the mouth of the well [which Moses opened by striking the rock (Numbers 20:7-11), or the mouth of the Well of Miriam which followed the Israelites in their wandering (Numbers 21:16-18)], the mouth of the she-ass [of Balaam (Numbers 22:28)], the rainbow, the manna, the rod [of Moses], the shamir [herb, worm, or insect], the text, the writing, and the tables. And some say: also the sepulcher of Moses, our teacher, and the ram of Abraham, our father, and some say: also the destroying [spirits], and tongs too, made with tongs.²⁹

Traditions about Moses' rod—its origins and successive owners—appear in *Yalkut Shim 'oni* (*Exodus* §168), a medieval midrashic anthology that was edited, at the earliest, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. According to this tradition, Adam took the rod with him when God expelled him from Paradise, and subsequently it was passed on to Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and finally Jethro, who planted it in his garden, whence Moses plucked it. The verse “The Lord will stretch forth from Zion your mighty scepter” (Psalms 110:2) serves as a basis for a different list of users: Jacob, Judah, Moses, Aaron, King David, and every successive king in David's dynasty until the destruction of the Temple. Then, “it was hidden and will be given to the Messiah upon his appearance” (*Yalkut Shim 'oni*; *Psalms* §869; MR, *Numbers* 18:23). Moses' rod therefore effectively associates figures who embrace a national and universal history spanning the creation of the world through slavery, liberation, and destruction, to eternal salvation.³⁰

Both opposition and analogy are principles of temporal association, as in the following verse: “On the day that they descended into Egypt, they

²⁸ See Goldin 1955:23, ch. 2; Ginzberg 1909-39, vii:87.

²⁹ See Ginzberg 1909-39, v:109, n. 99.

³⁰ Cf. Kushelevsky 1992.

departed therefrom. On that same day, too, Joseph was released from captivity” (MR, *Exodus* 18:11). The cyclical nature of the calendar qualifies specific days as paradigmatic for either auspicious or ominous events. The date of the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE has become such a day. Its precise identification depends upon oral rather than written tradition. The Hebrew Bible contains two different dates for the destruction of the Temple—the seventh (2 Kings 25:8) and the tenth (Jeremiah 52:12-13) of the month of Av—but rabbinical oral tradition fixed the ninth of this month as the paradigm for disaster. On that day God decreed that the Children of Israel would not enter the Promised Land, and on that day the Temple was destroyed for both the first and second time. Also on that same day, Bethar, the last stronghold of the leader of the second-century rebellion against the Romans, was captured (135 CE), and a year later Jerusalem was ploughed up (Mishnah, *Ta’anit* 4:6; cf. BT, *Ta’anit* 26a-b; JT, *Ta’anit* 4:5).

The association between contrasting events becomes apparent in this passage (MR, *Lamentations* 1:51; JT, *Berakhot* 2:4, 17a-17b):

The following story supports what R. Judan said in the name of R. Aibu: It happened that a man was ploughing, when one of his oxen lowed. An Arab passed by and asked, “What are you?” He answered, “I am a Jew.” He said to him, “Unharness your ox and untie your plough” [as a mark of mourning]. “Why?” he asked. “Because the Temple of the Jews was destroyed.” He inquired, “From where do you know this?” He answered, “I know it from the lowing of your ox.” While he was conversing with him, the ox lowed again. The Arab said to him, “Harness your ox and tie up your plough, because the deliverer of the Jews is born.” “What is his name?” he asked; and he answered, “His name is ‘Comforter.’” “What is his father’s name?” He answered, “Hezekiah.” “Where do they live?” He answered, “In Birath’Arba in Bethlehem of Judah.”

Locations such as the *axis mundi* have a similar associative function. When David dug the foundations of the Temple, he sought to reach the primordial waters of the depth. Instead he came upon a potsherd informing him that, in fact, it had been in this same location from the moment that God revealed Himself to the Israelites on Mount Sinai. David removed it with the result that the primordial water threatened to destroy the world. Only after the name of God was rewritten on the sherd and it was replaced did the water subside (JT, *Sanhedrin* 10:2).³¹

The rabbis interpreted the ambiguous Hebrew term *even shtiyyah*,

³¹ See M. Gaster 1924:113-14 [no. 155] and J. Heinemann 1974:17-26.

which can mean either “drinking stone” or “foundation stone,” to refer to the cornerstone of creation. It becomes, in turn, the center of the Temple and the stone upon which the world rests (Tanḥuma B. *Kedoshim* §10). The location is central both cosmologically and religiously. According to the rabbinical conception, the altar upon which the Israelites placed their offerings to God was located in the very same place that Cain and Abel, Noah, and, somewhat later, Abraham erected their altars (*Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* 31). Oral tradition generally identifies Mount Moriah with the Temple Mount. As a result, location then associates offerings to God with national and universal history. And while these associations defy logic and chronological and narrative order, they nevertheless demonstrate the poetic imagination that emerges through the application of orality to a written text.³²

Oral Tradition of the Rabbinical Period

The Talmuds and the Midrashic Books

The Talmuds and the midrashic books include many narratives about post-biblical events and figures as well as examples of the proverbial speech of that era. These traditions appear in quotative speech: when such speech is not anonymous, its transmitters specify their sources, thereby validating the veracity of the tales they consider to be historical. Mostly the *amoraim*, the rabbis who lived between the third and the sixth centuries, tell these tales about the *tannaim*, the rabbis and holy men of the first and second centuries. The language of the *amoraim* was Aramaic—the vernacular language of the Jewish communities in Babylon and Palestine.

There is also a geographical gap between the narrators and their subjects. The traditions in the Babylonian Talmud are mostly concerned with Palestinian events and personalities. Filled with longing and nostalgia, they represent exilic traditions about the Land of Israel. Frequently these narratives can be found in parallel versions contained in the Palestinian midrashic books and in the Jerusalemian Talmud. In both traditions it is possible to delineate narrative roles, thematic patterns, and folklore genres.

Narrative Roles

³² I. Heinemann articulated these aggadic principles (1954:15-74).

There are three major narrative roles in Jewish oral literature: holy men, rabbis, and martyrs. Alongside these there are several minor roles such as the young student, the obedient son, and the faithful wife. The holy men— both pious personalities, *hasidim*, and miracle workers, *anshei ma'aseh*— figure in tales about extraordinary occurrences that have an effect on themselves or on their communities. Such was Ḥaninaanina ben Dosa (first century CE), a poor but pious man whose prayer was pure. He put his heel over the hole of a lizard that had injured other people previously, and when it came out to bite Ḥaninaanina, it died (BT, *Berakhot* 33a). When Ḥaninaanina's wife urged him to pray for relief from their poverty, a heavenly hand reached out and gave him the leg of a golden table. In a dream he saw that this leg was of his heavenly table, which would henceforth be defective. Receiving his wife's consent, he prayed to restore the leg to his table in paradise (BT, *Ta'anit* 25a). Examples of other holy men are Ḥaninaoni the Circle Drawer (second century BCE) and Nakdimon ben Gurion, both of whom were rainmakers (Mishnah, *Ta'anit* 3:8; BT, *Ta'anit* 19b-20a, 23a). These men figure exclusively in stories about healing and rainmaking; the tradition does not contain any biographical tales about their birth, their childhood, or their death.³³

In contrast to the narratives about holy men, oral narrators told episodic biographical narratives about rabbis, concentrating on their own childhoods, adulthoods, and, occasionally, even their own deaths. There are, interestingly, no tales about the rabbis' mothers and their difficulties with conception—a tribulation that some biblical mothers experienced. The biographical narrative begins with the rabbis' youth and their struggle to acquire knowledge. When Hillel the Elder (first century CE), for example, was barred from the house of learning because of his poverty, he climbed up to the window in order to hear the teacher. Sitting there, he was covered by snow and was not found by the rabbis until the next morning (BT, *Yoma* 35b). Rabbi Akiba (second century), the leading rabbi of his time, was an illiterate shepherd until the age of forty and even then began his studies only at the urging of his fiancée (BT, *Ketubbot* 62b-63a). When a rabbi is traditionally known to have come from a wealthy family, as in the case of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (first century), the narrators would adjust the biography to fit the pattern. His story begins with an episode in which the father refuses to support his son's desire to study, thereby reducing him to poverty. Only later, after Rabbi Eliezer has become a shining student, does

³³ For selected studies about these figures, see Ben-Amos 1994, Boxer 1985, and Sarfatti 1956.

his father have a change of heart (*Avot de Rabbi Nathan* 6).³⁴

A cycle of martyrdom stories, focusing exclusively on rabbis, emerged after the Hadrianic persecutions of the second century.³⁵ The rabbis' learning and charisma appear to be mutually exclusive in their relationship to martyrdom in Jewish tradition. When a rabbinical figure straddles both categories, as Rabbi Simeon Bar Yoḥai did, traditional narratives do not accord him the martyr role, although historically speaking, he lived during a period of religious persecutions. Narrators instead wove a story about his life in seclusion, about how he hid in a cave together with his son (BT, *Shabbat* 33b). In this instance we can see that the earlier pattern of the prophet-martyr differs from the rabbinical-martyr role. While prophet-priests like Zecharaia son of Jehoiada, together with the prophet Isaiah, were killed by their own people,³⁶ the rabbis, later known by a formulaic number as the Ten Martyrs, were executed by an alien force.³⁷

Miracle workers, sages, and martyrs became named figures within the oral tradition, as historical narratives require. Anonymous characters fulfill other narrative roles, most often appearing in moralistic tales that advocate the importance of cultural values. Stories about the student who seeks sexual favors from prostitutes (BT, *Menahot* 44a) serve to condemn such behavior. In contrast, tales about the faithful wife, such as the unnamed wife of Ḥaninaanina ben Dosa who endures her husband's poverty, and Rachel, the wife of Rabbi Akiba, who possesses great tolerance and understanding for her husband's studies, set a rabbinical model for female behavior by means of their exemplary conduct.³⁸ Unlike the wise women in the Hebrew Bible who enjoy independent identities (see, for example, 2 Samuel

³⁴ Further discussions and bibliographical references related to these figures and narrative cycles may be found in Ben-Amos 1980:62-66 and in bin-Gorion 1990:128-33 [nos. 60-62]. Yassif (1999:6-20) offers a different interpretation of the biographical legends, one structured upon the biographical pattern of the hero that Lord Raglan (1934) formulated and that Noy (1967b) modified and adapted to biographical narratives about rabbis.

³⁵ See, e.g., BT, *Berakhot* 61b; *Sanhedrin* 14a; *Avodah Zarah* 18a.

³⁶ On Zecharaia see MR, *Lamentation*, "Introductions" 23; *Ecclesiastics* 3:16, 10:4; BT, *Gittin* 57b; and JT, *Ta'anit* 4:5. On Isaiah see BT, *Sanhedrin* 103b and *Yevamot* 49b.

³⁷ See bin-Gorion 1990:156-62 [no. 81]; Blank 1937-38; Fischel 1946-47; Satran 1995; and Yassif 1994a:64-68.

³⁸ See bin-Gorion 1990:131-33, 136-37 [nos. 62, 66].

14:2-20 and Jeremiah 9:16), rabbinical oral literature defines women as dependent upon their holy or learned husbands (although rare, and for that reason significant, exceptions do occur).

Unique among the traditional personalities is the character of Elijah the Prophet. As a biblical figure who did not perish but rather “went up to heaven in a whirlwind” (2 Kings 2:11), he crosses the boundary between the mythical *cum* biblical and the oral traditional periods as well as the boundary between heaven and earth. As a divine figure in the garb of an earthling, he appears to people in person and in disguise, as well as in dreams, visions, and daily life. He guides the perplexed and puzzles the confident, hurts the haughty and supports the needy. In his many roles he has continued to be the most popular narrative figure in the Jewish folklore of many communities, even down to the present day.³⁹

Historical Tales

In the Jewish tradition narrators do not distinguish between fictive and historical tales, the one exception being sheer tall tales. From the narrators’ perspectives all stories, the biographical as well as the miraculous, are true. The narrative interpretation, expansion, and association of biblical events and figures take the biblical text as evidence for their veracity, and therefore they too are true.

Within the oral tradition, however, there are accounts referring to major political events of a particular period. These accounts relate history that other sources do, in fact, corroborate, yet unlike Josephus, who, in the tradition of Hellenistic historiography, wrote the history of the Jews and their wars, the oral narrators of oral tradition described wars and catastrophes and focused on commoners rather than political leaders.⁴⁰ Whenever the speakers offer commentary they do so succinctly, employing proverbial or literary language. Rabbi Yoḥanan (third century) said, “The destruction of Jerusalem came through a Kamtza and a Bar Kamtza.” He follows this statement with a tale about divisiveness and political rivalry in the embattled city (BT, *Gittin* 55b-56a). Other narrators treat the besieged Jerusalem by describing the famine and its effects on individuals (MR,

³⁹ For a psychological study of the figure of Elijah, see A. Wiener 1978; bin-Gorion (1990:427-40 [nos. 219-26]) includes further texts of stories about Elijah as well as bibliographical references to other studies of him.

⁴⁰ See Josephus 1926-65, Villalba i Varneda 1986, and Feldman and Hata 1987.

Lamentation 1:48):

It is related of Miriam, the daughter of Nakdimon, that the Rabbis allowed her five hundred gold dinars daily to be spent on her store of perfumes. Nevertheless, she stood up and cursed them, saying, “Make such a [paltry] allowance for your own daughters!” R. Aha said: “We responded with Amen!” R. Eleazar said: “May I not live to behold the consolation [of Zion] if I did not see her gathering barley from beneath horses’ hoofs in Acco. . . .”

Or (MR, *Lamentation* 1:51):

It is related that Doeg b. Joseph died and left a young son to his mother, who used to measure him by handbreadths and give his weight in gold to the Temple every year. When, however, the besieging army surrounded Jerusalem, his mother slaughtered him and ate him.

The stories about Bar Kokhba, the leader of the second-century rebellion against the Romans, remark upon the supernatural strength of his recruits (MR, *Lamentation* 2:4). The descriptions of his defeat and the fall of Bethar, his last fortress, are similar in their metaphoric intensity to the descriptions of the destruction of Jerusalem (BT, *Gittin* 58a; MR, *Lamentation* 2:4).⁴¹

Fictive Forms, Metaphoric Parables, and Proverbs

Religion and history notwithstanding, the compilations of oral tradition also include humorous tales, parables, and proverbs. Furthermore, the oral tradition illuminates their currency, use, and function in society. Rabbah, for example, did not begin a lesson without telling jokes (BT, *Shabbat* 30b). Sources reveal that people often engaged in humorous exchanges, and that these exchanges, furthermore, often crossed boundaries of age, nation, and locality. Such anecdotes function as joking relationships do—by easing, or even averting, social tension. The wise men of Athens said to Rabbi Joshua ben Ḥaninaanania (second century) (BT, *Bekhorot* 8b):

“Tell us some stories [*milei de-bdayyah*].”

He said to them: “There was a mule which gave birth, and round its neck

⁴¹ For an analysis of the description of daily life, see Hasan-Rokem 1996. For historical and archaeological studies about the Bar Kokhva revolt, see Marks 1994, Oppenheimer and Rapaport 1984, and Yadin 1971.

was a document in which was written, ‘there is a claim against my father’s house of [one hundred] thousand *zuz*.’”

They asked him: “Can a mule give birth?”

He answered them: “This is one of these stories.”

This is a “catch” tale that derives its humor from its inherent contradiction. Most other humorous narratives are tall tales (*divrei guzma*) whose narrator was, according to tradition, Rabba Bar Bar Ḥaninaana (fourth century). He traveled between Babylon and Palestine, and in each location exaggerated his or other travelers’ adventures.

The art of telling these tall tales required that narrators present them as truths that should not, however, be mistaken for reality: an exaggeration that proclaims its own falsehood is a contradiction in terms. The tall tale must mask as fact but constantly point to the existence of the mask. For example (BT, *Bava Batra* 74a):

Rabbah Bar Bar Ḥaninaana further stated:

“We traveled once on board a ship, and the ship sailed between one fin of the fish and the other for three days and three nights; it [swimming] upwards and we [floating] downwards. And if you think the ship did not sail fast enough, R. Dimi, when he came, stated that it covered sixty parasangs in the time it takes to warm a kettle of water. When a horseman shot an arrow [the ship] outstripped it. And R. Ashi said, ‘That was one of the small sea monsters which have [only] two fins.’”

This collective narration accumulates exaggerations in order to ensure that the listeners would not mistake fiction for reality and thereby miss its humor. Rabba Bar Bar Ḥaninaana told stories about the distant seas and deserts he had crossed, the far lands from which he had come, and the “olden days” before the destruction of Jerusalem. The editors assembled these talmudic tall tales into specific tractates of the Babylonian Talmud (*Bava Batra* 73a-74b; *Eruvin* 30a; *Gittin* 57b-58a; *Ketubbot* 111b-12a; *Shabbat* 21a; *Ta’anit* 22b) and the Jerusalem Talmud (*Pe’ra* 7:3-4).⁴²

In contrast, the parable (*mashal*) is a widely used form interspersed in discourse and written texts. The formula *mashal le-mah ha-davar domeh, le. . .* (“A parable: what is the matter like? It is like. . .”) opens the parable, establishing it as an analogy to a given situation, and the word *kakh* (“it is like”) closes the metaphoric description and serves as a transition to its application. An abbreviated introduction, *mashal le. . .* (“A parable: It is

⁴² For further analysis and additional bibliographical references, see Ben-Amos 1976 and Yassif 1999:182-91.

like . . .”), is also common. Occasionally the opening formula is omitted. The parables draw their figurative language from the domains of plant, animal, and social worlds, and in particular from the royal court. These latter parables illustrate situations by means of analogies to a generic king, “king of flesh and blood” (*melekh basar va-dam*), implicitly contrasting him with God, the divine king of the universe.

The interpretive use of the fable offers a dramatic, and sometimes ironic, presentation of scripture. Commenting upon the verse “Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men” (Genesis 33:1), Rabbi Levi (late third to early fourth centuries) drew an analogy between the biblical scene—in which Jacob divided his household into two camps as they approached Esau—and the fable about the appeasement delegation that the animals had sent to the lion. The animals had initially appointed the fox as their leader, but, when it approached the lion, the fox actually withdrew from the head to the end of the line (MR, *Genesis* 78:7).⁴³

The political use of parables often depends upon the linguistic codes of the period. In Jewish speech, references to the biblical Edomites alluded to the Roman armies of the post-biblical era. The analogy draws upon the red flags of the Roman legions and the name “Edom,” which, with slight vowel change, becomes the Hebrew *adom* (“red”). With this cultural information in mind, the apparently innocent interpretive use of a parable becomes politically charged. Thus in his interpretation of the list of the clans of the Edomites (Genesis 36:40-43), Rabbi Levi inserts the following parable (MR, *Genesis* 83:5):

The wheat, the straw, and the stubble engaged in a controversy. The wheat said: “For my sake has the field been sown” and the stubble maintained: “For my sake was the field sown.” Said the wheat to them: “When the hour comes, you will see.” When harvest time came, the farmer took the stubble and burnt it, scattered the straw, and piled up the wheat into a stack, and everybody kissed it. In like manner Israel and the nations have a controversy, each asserting: “For our sake was the world created.” Says Israel: “The hour will come in the Messianic future and you will see how Thou shalt fan them, and the wind shall carry them away (Isaiah 41:16); but as for Israel—And thou shalt rejoice in the Lord, thou shalt glory in the Holy One of Israel.”

⁴³ From a literary point of view this is a unique fable. In this literature the term for animal fables is “fox-fables” (*mishlei shu'alim*), so named for the animal that appears most commonly in them. However, in this text the fox becomes both the subject and the narrator of fables. He volunteers to head the animal delegation because he knows, as has been said about several rabbis, three hundred fables with which he plans to appease the lion.

In context, the meaning of the parable gives hope for a better future to an oppressed Jewish community.

The moral application of parables does not require the codified language of politics (BT, *Bava Kamma* 60b):

To what is this like? To a man who has had two wives, one young and one old. The young one used to pluck out his white hair, whereas the old one used to pluck out his black hair. He thus finally remained bald on both sides.

Oral tradition also provides reports of rabbis who knew Aesopic fables. Hillel the Elder (first century), Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai (first century), and Rabbi Meir (second century) were famous for their special expertise in fables (Tractate *Sofrim* 17:9; BT, *Sukkah* 28a; *Bava Batra* 38b, 134a). According to later accounts, Rabbi Joshua ben Ḥaninaananiah (late first to second centuries CE) used the fable of “The Wolf and the Heron”⁴⁴ to calm a crowd demonstrating against the ruler, Hadrian, who had gone back on his promise to rebuild the Temple (MR, *Genesis* 64:10); Rabbi Akiba (second century) once told a fable about a fox who tried to lure fish onto dry land in order to escape from the fishermen (BT, *Berakhot* 61b).⁴⁵ The popular fable “The Fox with the Swollen Belly” interprets the Ecclesiastic verse “As he came out of his mother’s womb, so must he depart at last, naked as he came” (Ecclesiastics 5:14; MR, *Ecclesiastics* 5:14).⁴⁶

Royalty, in contrast, often modeled after provincial rulers, serve as parabolic metaphors. The rabbis drew an analogy between a given biblical situation and the hypothetical acts of a generic king (*The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* 21):

As it is said, *And I took hold of the two tablets, and cast them out of my hands, and broke them* (Deuteronomy 9:17).

Rabbi Yose the Galilean says: “I shall tell thee a parable; to what may this be likened? To a king of flesh and blood who said to his steward, ‘Go and betroth unto me a beautiful and pious maiden, of seemly conduct.’”

⁴⁴ See B. Perry 1952:no. 156; B. Perry 1965:nos. 8, 94.

⁴⁵ An analysis of this fable is in Schwarzbaum 1979:25-47. The fox has this narrative role in the Aesopic fables; see B. Perry 1952:415, 419 [nos. 241, 252] and B. Perry 1965:470, 472.

⁴⁶ See Schwarzbaum 1979:210-18 [no. 35]; B. Perry 1952:331 [no. 24] and B. Perry 1965:107 [no. 86].

That steward went and betrothed her. After he had betrothed her, he went and discovered that she played the harlot with another man. Forthwith, of his own accord, he made the following inference; said he, 'If I now go ahead and give her the marriage deed, she will be liable to the penalty of death, and thus we shall have separated her from my master forever.'

So too did Moses the righteous make an inference of his own accord. He said: 'How shall I give these tables to Israel? I shall be obligating them to major commandments and make them liable to the penalty of death, for thus is it written in the tablets, *He that sacrificeth unto the gods, save unto the Lord only, shall be utterly destroyed* (Exodus 22:19). Rather, I shall take hold of them and break them, and bring Israel back to good conduct.'"

These parables often occurred in learned contexts, involving textual disputations between sages and non-Jews. Just as frequent as parables in oral tradition are quotations of proverbs. These serve to validate an authoritative position. The speakers introduce such proverbs with the Aramaic formula *ki-de-amrie inshei* ("As people say") or *mashal hediot omer* ("A commoner's proverb says"). Rhetorically, the sages thus evoked with proverbs the authority of the oral tradition of the people. This authority was weaker than that of the written scripture, but still powerful in its own right.⁴⁷

The Institutions and the Performers of Oral Tradition

Jewish society in the post-biblical period established formal institutions and had informal occasions for the performance of oral tradition. The formal institutions centered around the synagogue (*beit kneset*) and the school (*beit midrash*). Informally, the narration of tales, the citation of proverbs, and the interpretation of written texts took place in personal conversations and during public celebrations. Oral performances in private had to become the subjects of oral accounts in public before their inclusion in the edited compilations.

The reading of biblical texts became a social institution upon the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, beginning in 538 BCE. Then Ezra assembled them, as Nehemiah 8:1-2 reports:

When the seventh month arrived—the Israelites being [settled] in their

⁴⁷ For a comprehensive study of the parables in the talmudic-midrashic literature, see Stern 1991, as well as Meir 1974 and Ziegler 1903.

towns—the entire people assembled as one in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which the Lord had charged Israel. On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Teaching before the congregation, men and women and all who could listen with understanding.

The report then alludes to oral interpretation and translation, which became an integral part of the later reading: “The Levites explained the Teaching to the people, while the people stood in their places. They read from the scroll of the Teaching of God, translating it and giving the sense; so they understood the reading” (Nehemiah 8:7-8). This description of a model assembly succinctly summarizes the community’s bilingualism and its effects on the ritual reading. The returning peoples were the second and third generation of the exiles. After fifty years in Babylon they had acquired the local language and customs. For them, pre-exilic Hebrew texts required translation and interpretation, two acts that contributed to the articulation of the oral tradition.

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE the synagogue emerged as the central location for communal life. The public reading of the scripture became a regular feature of the service, accompanied by a translation, interpretation, and sermon. Initially there were historical, perhaps even regional, variations in the time of the sermons, ranging from the Sabbath Eve to the next day at noon (JT, *Sotah* 1:4; BT, *Gittin* 38b). Later the preacher’s homily, which took place after the scriptural readings, became an integral part of the synagogue ritual. In this context the distinction between reading and oral delivery seems most appropriate, as a dictum states, “The words which are written thou art not at liberty to say by heart, and the words transmitted orally thou art not at liberty to recite from writing” (BT, *Gittin* 60b). In another passage the statement is: “. . . matters received as oral traditions you are not permitted to recite from writing and . . . written things [biblical passages] you are not permitted to recite from memory” (BT, *Temurah* 14b). During the sermon the preacher moved his audience (MR, *Genesis* 33:5), but at other times turned them off, with the result that they dozed (MR, *Genesis* 58:3; *Song of Songs* 1:15, iii) or even left the synagogue altogether (BT, *Bezah* 15b).

The preacher (*darshan*, *doresh*, or in the Aramaic, *derusha*) had an assistant (*meturggeman* or *amora*) who repeated his message to the public.⁴⁸ The earliest teachers whom tradition considers to be *darshanim* (pl.) were

⁴⁸ See further Kosovsky 1959.

the first-century BCE sages Shemaiah and Avtalyon (BT, *Pesahim* 70b). Later preachers developed expertise in the two main branches of oral tradition: some specialized in law and were known as *ba'alei halakhah*, while others specialized in lore and were known as *ba'alei aggadah*. In the records of the oral tradition there is a trace of a slighting attitude toward the latter, whose talent was in verbal entertainment (MR, *Genesis* 12:10, 40 (41); BT, *Sotah* 40a). Nevertheless, the tradition attributes extensive knowledge of primarily oral genres such as parables to some of the most distinguished rabbis, men such as Hillel the Elder, Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, and Rabbi Meir (Tractate *Sofrim* 17:9; BT, *Sukkah* 28a; *Bava Batra* 38b, 134a). Parables served not only religious but also political purposes, as demonstrated by the speech of Rabbi Joshua ben Hlananiah (MR, *Genesis* 64:10).

In modern scholarship there is an ongoing debate concerning the contexts of performance of the extant folk-literary texts. Some argue that the literary records of oral tradition preserve the public sermons of the synagogue service, while others contend that these exegetical texts, since they exhibit learned literary qualities, are the products of those who possessed some formal education.⁴⁹ This is no doubt an important distinction; however, from current folkloristic perspectives both the school and the synagogue were contexts in which orality and literacy interacted with each other. Therefore, both contexts provide a framework for the exposition and articulation of oral tradition in Jewish society.

In addition to the formal social institutions, daily and annual events occasioned the performance of oral tradition. Rabbis engaged in the casual exchange of tales (BT, *Gittin* 57a):

Once when R. Manyumi b. Ḥaninaelkiah and R. Ḥaninaelkiah b. Tobiah and R. Hluna b. Hliyya were sitting together they said: "If anyone knows anything about Kefar Sekania of Egypt, let him say." One of them thereupon said: "Once a betrothed couple [from there] were carried off by heathens who married them to one another. The woman said: 'I beg of you

⁴⁹ There is a vast scholarship on the midrash that addresses this issue directly and indirectly. The main current proponent of the approach that considers the midrashic literature as a product of formal education is Fraenkel (1991). The other approach, which regards this literature as a representation of public sermons and more popular literature, is implied in Neuman 1954. The latter approach is also discussed in, among others, J. Heinemann 1971 and Hirshman 1991, 1992. For general studies, see Boyarin 1990; Fishbane 1985, 1993; I. Jacobs 1995; and Stemberger 1996. See also the bibliography in Rafeld and Tabori 1992.

not to touch me, as I have no *Kethubah* from you.⁵⁰ So he did not touch her till his dying day. When he died, she said: ‘Mourn for this man who has kept his passions in check more than Joseph, because Joseph was exposed to temptation only a short time, but this man every day.’ Joseph was not in one bed with the woman but this man was; in Joseph’s case she was not his wife, but here she was.” The next then began and said: “On one occasion forty bushels [of corn] were selling for a denar, and the number went down one, and they investigated and found that a man and his son had had intercourse with a betrothed maiden on the Day of Atonement, so they brought them to the Beth din and they stoned them and the original price was restored.” The third then began and said: “There was a man who wanted to divorce his wife, but hesitated because she had a big marriage settlement. He accordingly invited his friends and gave them a good feast and made them drunk and put them all in one bed. He then brought the white of an egg and scattered it among them and brought witnesses and appealed to Beth din. There was a certain elder there of the disciples of Shammai the Elder, named Baba b. Buta, who said: ‘This is what I have been taught by Shammai the Elder, that the white of an egg contracts when brought near the fire, but semen becomes faint from the fire.’ They tested it and found that it was so, and they brought the man to the Beth din and flogged him and made him pay her *Kethubah*.”

Rabbis also reported the scriptural interpretations and popular medicine that they had learned from common people (MR, *Genesis* 78; BT, *Shabbat* 66b-67a), and sometimes stated in conversations with narrators that their reliability depends upon their age (BT, *Gittin* 57b). In a few cases, such storytelling became a subject of narration, as in the following description of the feast that Rabbi Judah made for his son’s wedding (MR, *Ecclesiastics* 1:3):

. . .He invited the Rabbis, but forgot to extend an invitation to Bar Kappara (who was his student). The latter went and wrote above the door [of the banqueting hall], “After all your rejoicing is death, so what is the use of rejoicing?” Rabbi inquired, “Who has done this to us?” They said, “It was Bar Kappara whom you forgot to invite. He was concerned about himself.” He thereupon arranged another banquet to which he invited all the Rabbis including Bar Kappara. At every course which was placed before them Bar Kappara related three hundred fox-fables, which were so much enjoyed by the guests that they let the food become cold and did not taste it. Rabbi

⁵⁰ *Kethubah* (also *ketubbah*) is a marriage contract that specifies the financial obligations of the husband toward his wife. According to law, it is forbidden for the bridegroom to live together with his bride until he has written and delivered the *kethubah* to her.

asked his waiters, “Why do our courses go in and out without the guests partaking of them?” They answered, “Because of an old man who sits there, and when a course is brought in he relates three hundred fox-fables; and on that account the food becomes cold and they eat none of it.” Rabbi went up to him and said, “Why do you act in this manner? Let the guest eat!” He replied, “So that you should not think that I came for your dinner but because you did not invite me with my colleagues.”⁵¹

The Genres of Oral Tradition

Jewish oral tradition includes some classical forms of folk narratives such as: the historical, local, and hagiographic legend; the exemplum and fable; the tall tale; and the personal narrative. The texts of the talmudic-midrashic literature are replete with proverbs; in contrast, the standard fairy-tale is rather rare. The language of the rabbis includes an abundance of terms for the description of speaking as well as for the description of genres of speech. After all, public discourse was one of the rabbis’ major preoccupations, and, not surprisingly, they amassed a vocabulary of verbs and nouns in order to describe it. This vocabulary encompassed fine rhetorical distinctions that from today’s standpoint reflect generic categorization. The scholar Wilhelm Bacher described these terms and identified their uses and sources in a still-indispensable dictionary (1965).

Torah she-be-al peh (“Torah of the mouth”) is the most comprehensive term that describes the entire literature of the period; *aggadah*, the Babylonian form, or *haggadah*, in the Palestinian pronunciation, refers to those utterances that have no religious or judicial regulatory significance. Initially *aggadah* included exegetical narrative acts that employ verbal play; in later years the meaning of the term was extended to encompass all the nonjudicial elements in the oral tradition, in contrast to the *halakhah*, which refers to law and religiously sanctioned customs.

The term “midrash” modifies both *halakhah* and *aggadah*. Midrash is an exegetical method that follows specific principles for the derivation of meanings from scriptural text. *Midrashei halakhah* are concerned with regulatory principles, while *midrashei aggadah*, themselves poetic in nature, interpret narrative and poetic texts. The term *ma’aseh*, on the other hand, occurs in both halakhic and aggadic contexts. In judicial discussions *ma’aseh* refers to acts or judgments that establish precedent, although in the

⁵¹ Cf. MR, *Leviticus* 28:2.

aggadah the same word signifies a tale about the lives and experiences of the rabbis. The *ma'aseh* (pl. *ma'asim*) is a narrative of events that both the teller and his audience assume presents an actual occurrence, even if, and sometimes specifically because, the narrative includes divine intervention and the performance of miracles. Quite common in this context is the opening formula *ma'aseh be* ("A tale about"), which introduces most of the legendary, biographical, and martyrological tales.

In contrast to *ma'aseh*, the rare terms *dvar bedai* ("false word") and the Aramaic *beduta* refer to the untruthfulness of a story. *Guzmah* means "exaggeration" and designates tall tales. Narratives that function as poetic and metaphoric examples are *meshalim* (sing. *mashal*). Fables, parables, and animal tales are called *mishlei shu'alim* ("fox-fables"), and thereby single out the trickster featured in the repertoire of the Hellenistic world. The term *mashal* also refers to the proverb, a genre designated as well by the Aramaic term *pitgam*.

These terms do not comprehend all appellations for the speech genres of the oral tradition. Many more occur, operating in historical and regional variations, and appear as modifiers of the terms *milah* and *davar* ("word") and *lashon* and *saphah* ("tongue" and "language," respectively). *Ma'aseh* is by far the most common generic term, one that is current both as a category and as an opening formula in this literature, and one that established the texts as true accounts of the events of the period.

The Medieval Period

Introduction

Historical periodization of oral literature is often misleading. First, the writing down of an oral tradition lags behind its performance in society. Second, textualization is a prolonged process subject to writing, editing, and copying. In each stage the text is subjected to change. Furthermore, the relationship between the original utterances and the extant versions thus gives rise to extensive research and numerous subsequent revisions. Third, literacy does not terminate oral performance, nor does it remove recourse to memorization; consequently, literate practice does not necessarily stabilize the text, nor does it eliminate variations in its later renditions.

The Arab conquest in the seventh century marks the end of the talmudic-midrashic period in Jewish literature, and opens the beginning of the medieval period. Interestingly, the composition and editing of oral traditional texts continued well into the late Middle Ages by drawing on

both oral and written sources. Prominent among the books from this period are the midrashim of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, as well as the *Tanhuma*, all of which date to a period between the second half of the seventh and tenth centuries. Like earlier midrashim, these are scripture-dependent traditions. Their forms of presentation remained viable up to the thirteenth century and beyond, when editors such as Simeon ha-Darshan (“the Preacher,” probably of Frankfurt) compiled the *Yalkut Shim‘oni*, while David ben Amram Adani of Yemen edited the *Midrash ha-Gadol*. While both midrashim draw upon earlier sources (both extinct and extant), they also include texts from oral tradition. The epithet of the *Yalkut Shim‘oni*’s editor suggests the text may have served as a preacher’s handbook in a manner similar to *The Golden Legend* of Jacques de Voragine (d. 1298).

Scholars occasionally elucidated post-biblical texts by drawing upon narratives that they had learned through oral tradition. For example, in the Babylonian Talmud (*Ta‘anit* 8a) there is a cryptic allusion to the story of “The Weasel and the Pit,” but only the medieval interpreters Rashi (1040-1105) and Nathan ben Jehiel of Rome (1035-c.1110) offered in their commentary a version of the story of the neglected bride and the death of the bridegroom’s offspring to which the talmudic phrase refers.⁵²

Such an interdependence of written text and oral information was an integral part of the editorial process. The completion of a book did not put an end to possible additions, emendations, and elucidation. According to tradition (BT, *Bava Mezia* 86a), Rav Ashi, the head of the academy of Mata Meḥasya (352-427), and Ravina, the head of the academy in Sura (d. 500), both put the final touches on the editing of the Babylonian Talmud. But later rabbis continued to add to it until the time of the Arabic conquest. Even later, rabbis and copyists added to the canon of oral tradition, often by including narratives that might have been, and later definitely became, an integral part of Jewish folklore. For example, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* was added to the talmudic-midrashic canon, even when in text, style, and personalities the book belongs to the tannaitic era. The story of “Rabbi Akiba and the Dead Man,” which tells of a redemptive prayer that saves a dead man from his punishment in Hell, appeared in the minor tractate of the Babylonian Talmud (*Kallah Rabbati* 52a), itself dated to the seventh and ninth centuries. Later in the Middle Ages this tale sanctioned the institution of the *kaddish*, the prayer for the dead.⁵³

⁵² See bin-Gorion 1990:170-72 [no. 87].

⁵³ See bin-Gorion 1990:202-3 [no. 112], Kushelevsky 1994, and Lerner 1988.

The medieval period, in sum, marks a change in the transmission of tradition in Jewish society. At the same time that certain older modes of transmission persisted, new ones began to emerge. The retelling of tradition involved decentralization, individualization, linguistic diversity, generic and thematic expansion, and the adaptation of new literary modes of presentation. Let us explore each of these in turn.

Decentralization

During the talmudic-midrashic period Jewish literary activity was centered in the Land of Israel, and later shifted to Babylonia (modern Iraq). In the Middle Ages, and even earlier, Jewish populations dispersed to Asia, where viable communities emerged in Iran, Afghanistan, and Yemen; to southern and central Europe, in particular to Italy, France, Spain, and the Rhine valley; and to North Africa, that is, to Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and, further west, to Algeria and Morocco. The Jewish communities in each of these countries sustained a literary activity that involved, among other things, the recording of oral traditions as well as the composition of books that themselves drew upon and incorporated folklore forms. Many of these books entered the medieval manuscript tradition.

Babylonia continued to be a center in which writers and editors, often anonymously, composed books that contained folk-literary texts. The *Midrash on the Ten Commandments* (*Midrash 'aseret ha-dibrot*) and the *Alphabet of Ben-Sira* are two major tale collections that likely originated in Babylonia. The first of these dates from no earlier than the seventh but no later than the eleventh century, while the second can be dated to the tenth century. During roughly the same period, the leading Tunisian rabbi in Kairuan, Rabbi Nissim ben Jacob ibn Shahin (c. 990-1062), wrote a collection of tales in Judeo-Arabic known as *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity* (*Hibbur Yafe me-ha-Yeshu'ah*). In subsequent years this text was translated into Hebrew and still later, in the sixteenth century, it became a very popular folkbook and was circulated widely throughout Jewish communities.

The Jewish community of Kairouan was also the source for the oral tradition and written dissemination of epistolary literature concerning the legend of the "Ten Lost Tribes," which became one of the most significant stories in Jewish folklore. Eldad ha-Dani, a traveler who claimed to have arrived from the land of the ten lost tribes, reached this community in the ninth century. Weaving together several themes already current in oral tradition, he created a utopian fantasy that not only inspired folk and

literary narratives but also motivated travelers hoping to discover the tribes.⁵⁴

The narrative collections that emerged from Near Eastern and Mediterranean communities still drew upon talmudic-midrashic sources. By comparison, the *Book of the Pietists* (*Sefer Hasidim*) reflects a dramatic change in orientation. Rabbi Judah he-Ḥaninaasid (“the Pietist”) of Regensburg (d. 1217), who wrote most of the book as an ethical guide for communities of Jewish pietists in the Rhineland towns of Speyer, Worms, and Mainz, drew heavily upon the medieval German folk belief system. The stories about demons, witches, and werewolves were steeped in European folk traditions.⁵⁵

Not only prominent religious leaders but also professional scribes compiled records of Jewish folk literature in the Middle Ages, posting by their labor milestones that indicated the spread of tales through either oral or manuscript cultures. For example, Ms. No. 135, now found in the Oriental collection of the Bodleian Library at Oxford, contains several medieval narrative and fable collections such as *Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, *The Mishle Shu‘alim* (“Fox-Fables”) of Rabbi Berechiah ha-Nakdan, *Tales of Sendebor*, *A Chronicle of Moses*, *Midrash of the Ten Commandments*, and *Midrash va-Yosha*. In addition, this manuscript includes a collection of sixty-one tales, twenty-four of which draw upon the talmudic-midrashic literature, while nineteen have parallels in other Jewish medieval collections; eighteen more are newly recorded. The scribe wrote the manuscript in the northern Champagne region of France during the second quarter of the thirteenth century, but no later than 1250.⁵⁶

Individualization

The oral tradition of the talmudic-midrashic period is a communal literature in a literal sense. Its editors used two methods of source-attribution: (a) they either cited as their source the collective body of previous rabbis, employing the formula *tanu rabannan*, or else deliberately implied its anonymity, which amounts to communal authority as well, or (b) they traced the history of a tale or a proverb by proposing either a real

⁵⁴ See bin-Gorion 1990:217-22 [nos. 119-20] and Morag 1997.

⁵⁵ See Alexander-Frizer 1991; bin-Gorion 1990:441-47 [nos. 227-34]; Dan 1968, 1971, 1974:162-88; Marcus 1981; Yassif 1994.

⁵⁶ See Beit Arié 1985 and Yassif 1984c.

or a fictional line of transmission that *ipso facto* represented the community. In addition, the editors introduced propositions into which they wove narratives through dialogues with a community of listeners. Hence the Jewish oral tradition became a dialogic literature of multiple voices.

The rise of a manuscript culture in Jewish society shifted the responsibility for the text from the community to the individual editor or scribe. The direct consequence of this process was a relaxation of collective control over the preservation of tradition. *The Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, for example, begins with a bawdy incest narrative (shocking even to modern scholars) that explains how Ben-Sira and his mother were both the children of the prophet Jeremiaiah.⁵⁷ The basis for this narrative assertion is the traditional exegetical principle of *gematria*, according to which there is an affinity between two persons whose names are written with letters sharing the same numerical value. In Hebrew the names Sira and Jeremiah both equal 271. The book also includes a narrative about the sexual relationship between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba that rarely appears in other Jewish sources.⁵⁸ Thus an individual scribe could record tales that a community preserved by oral means, even when such tales had been censored from the written record of its collective memory.

The writer of the *Alphabet of Ben-Sira* preferred to maintain the cloak of anonymity. Others, however, including later scribes who copied his works, came forth to claim their literary presence. Such was Elazar son of Rabbi Asher, a scribe who lived in the Rhine valley at the end of the thirteenth century and at the beginning of the fourteenth century, who copied *The Chronicles of Jerahmeel*. For him, and for others, individualization was a conscious process whereby they made their presence known. At the same time they disavowed any possible perception of their labor as self-promotion, rather offering their maintenance of tradition as a community service.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Although Joseph Dan refuses to mention the bawdy episode in his analysis (1974:71), modern translators of the text have not censored it. See Stern and Mirsky 1990:169.

⁵⁸ See bin-Gorion 1990:39-43 [no. 25]; Stern and Mirsky 1990:180; and Lassner 1993. Cf. also Stein 1993.

⁵⁹ Elazar son of Rabbi Asher's statement of purpose is instructive: ". . . I, Elazar son of R. Asher, the Levite, have set my mind upon writing from precious and valuable secular books, for my spirit bore me aloft and filled me with enthusiasm in the days of my youth, when I was easygoing and keen-witted. For I saw many books scattered and

Linguistic Diversity

Hebrew served as the normative literary and religious language of the Jews in the diaspora, but in speech new languages combining Hebrew with local languages emerged. Speakers of these new hybrid languages maintained the Hebrew alphabet, as if, as some contend, deliberately to maintain an ethnic barrier, or perhaps because visual linguistic habits are harder to break than oral ones. In their respective Jewish communities, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Berber, Judeo-Greek, Judeo-Italian, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Spanish, Yiddish, and perhaps Judeo-French, not to mention the many varieties of these languages, became the languages of folk literature. Indeed, Rabbi Nissim ben Jacob ibn Shahin of Kairouan wrote one of the earliest medieval collections of talmudic-midrashic tales in Judeo-Arabic, titled *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity* (*Hibbur yafe me-ha-yeshu'ah*).⁶⁰

In poetry, the *qissa* was a genre that combined biblical narratives, praise for saintly men, and recitations on occasions of joy and sorrow. It was sung primarily by women. The written Judeo-Arabic texts followed their performance in oral tradition. Though no medieval manuscripts are extant, some later manuscripts indicate that the roots of the *qissa* are in the oral literature of the twelfth century.⁶¹ The songs and tales in Judeo-Berber that emerged in neighboring North African countries apparently remained

dispersed here and there. I then resolved to collect them and unite them in one book. I then made a collection of the words of the wise and their aphorisms, and wrote them down in a book for the use of those who love parable and history, and for wise men generally who are not otherwise occupied, in order that they may reflect upon those things, so that they may see, understand, and know the truth concerning a few of the events which have taken place under the sun, and of a few of the troubles and afflictions which our ancestors endured in their exile, and what vicissitudes they underwent when the tempest swept over them, so that they may not be forgotten by their seed. Therefore I called this book the 'Book of Chronicles,' wherein may be recorded many varied events. For I have collected in this book records of all events and incidents which have happened from the creation of the world until the present day as it is written in this book, and as I found, so I copied, and I have deftly woven the materials to form one book. Nor did I write them to make myself a great name, but to the glory of my Creator, who truly knows, and so that this book should be a memorial for future generations; and whoever chooses to add to this book may add, and may blessing fall upon him. . ." (M. Gaster 1971:1-2).

⁶⁰ See further Abramson 1965, Nissim 1977, and Obermann 1933.

⁶¹ See Chetrit 1994.

exclusively within the oral tradition.

In present-day Iran, Jews spoke Persian long before the Arab conquest (651 CE), and the Judeo-Persian literature that emerged there in the Middle Ages incorporated aggadic material into biblical translations and prayer books; later such narratives appeared in several midrashic books in Judeo-Persian. The most prominent works in Judeo-Persian offering a literary rendition of Jewish and non-Jewish oral themes were the epic poems of Mawlana Shahin of Shiraz, the leading Judeo-Persian poet. His *Musa-Nameh* (c.1327), modeled after Firdowsi's *Shah Nameh*, retells Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy in poetic form. In this epic Moses engages in combat against monstrous beasts. In *Ardashir-Nameh* (c.1332) he retells the stories of the Book of Esther, and his poetic rendition of the book of Genesis (c.1358) includes several classical tales from Jewish biblical and oral traditions.⁶²

The documents of oral tradition in Yiddish, like the epic poems of Mawlana Shahin, date back to the fourteenth century. The Yiddish language itself emerged around the tenth century among the Jewish communities in Lotharingia in the Rhine valley; from there it spread to northern Italy, northern France, and Holland. Old Yiddish (1250-1500) was primarily a spoken language, and served not only for daily communication but also for tales, proverbs, and songs. The earliest document of literary activity in Yiddish, known as "The Cambridge Codex," was discovered in a cachet of manuscripts (a *genizah*) in Cairo. It dates from 1382 and includes poetic renditions of biblical themes; these renditions incorporate some of the oral elaboration discussed earlier.⁶³ The documentary evidence from this period does not include talmudic-midrashic narratives, but their ready availability in later centuries suggests that, at least by oral means, the Yiddish speakers told and retold these stories within their communities.

Sparse linguistic evidence indicates—and sheer logic suggests—that Jews spoke Judeo-Spanish in the Iberian peninsula before their expulsion in 1492.⁶⁴ The literary use of Judeo-Spanish is evident from a fifteenth-

⁶² See Marzolph 1992 and Moreen 1991a, 1991b, 1994a.

⁶³ See especially Fuks 1957 and Hakkarainen 1967-73. For further discussion see Baumgarten 1993:163-200; Shmeruk 1978:117-36; Turniansky 1982; Zinberg 1975, vii:49-118.

⁶⁴ For an important study of the documentary evidence for the language used by the Jews before the expulsion, see Minervini 1992. As is the case with so many other publications concerning Judeo-Spanish folklore, I owe my awareness of this study to

century text, written in Spanish with Hebrew letters, of Santob de Carrión (alias Shem Tov ben Arduel, c.1290-c.1369) entitled *Proverbios morales*, or *Consejos y documentos al rey don Pedro*. The text is a collection of versified proverbs that likely occurred in daily speech.⁶⁵ Once the Jews were out of Spain they restored and therewith preserved the language that they had earlier spoken; they clung to their oral poetic and proverbial tradition and furthermore retained the ballads, *romances*, that were popular in Spain at the turn of the sixteenth century. Judeo-Spanish became a viable, dynamic language that absorbed new elements from Greek, Arabic, and Turkish, and at the same time retained medieval Spanish forms that have long since disappeared from the Iberian peninsula.⁶⁶

Generic and Thematic Expansion

Jewish medieval folk literature expands the documentation of oral tradition in three areas: (a) the international folktale tradition; (b) translations from folk literatures in other languages; and (c) medieval, family, local, and general Jewish history.

International Folktale Tradition

In the talmudic midrashic period, Jews knew and orally told stories of other nations, but only sparingly wrote them down. For example, in a midrash attributed to a fourth century rabbi *Tanhuma* (*Haazinu* 8), there is a rabbinical version of tale types 505-508, "The Grateful Dead," that is at variance with the Apocryphal version of the Book of Tobit.⁶⁷ Similarly the talmudic allusion to tale type 1510 "The Matron of Ephesus (Vidua)" (BT *Kiddushin* 80b), that medieaval interpreters elucidated, demonstrates that Jews accepted such tales into their repertoire even though they rejected them

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⁶⁵ See Klausner 1965; Kleinerman 1969; T. Perry 1986, 1987; and Shepard 1986.

⁶⁶ Currently there is a very active scholarship in Judeo-Spanish studies that encompasses language, culture, history, and folklore. For bibliographical references see Armistead 1979, 1994; Bunis 1981; Haboucha 1992; Sala 1976; and Stillman and Stillman 1999.

⁶⁷ See bin-Gorion 1990:74-77 [no. 40] and Friedman 1990.

from their canon.⁶⁸

In the Middle Ages the gatekeepers of literacy could no longer keep out the secular, even bawdy, stories told by Jews, and such stories appear in texts in Hebrew and other Jewish languages. For example, the Parma manuscript of the *Midrash of the Ten Commandments*, codex 473, includes Hebrew renditions of tale types 670 (“The Animal Languages”), 899 (“Alcestis”), 938 (“Placidus”), and 976 (“Which Was the Noblest Act?”).⁶⁹ In *The Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, a child is the tricking figure found in tale type 860 (“Nuts of Ay Ay Ay”). In addition, animal tales such as tale types 91 (“Monkey [Cat] Who Left His Heart at Home”), 200 (“The Dog’s Certificate”), and 967 (“The Man Saved by a Spider Web”), as well as anecdotes such as tale types 830C (“If God Wills”) and 670 (“Animal Language”) appear in the book.⁷⁰

Medieval manuscripts of earlier midrashic books also include new tales that internationalize the narration of biblical stories. For example, *Tanhuma* is a midrashic book that includes biblical exegesis by rabbis of the late fourth and early fifth centuries, although its editing took place between 750 and 900. In 1883 Solomon Buber published an edition based on nine medieval manuscripts, and in the one designated by him as the third manuscript, now in the Bodleian Library, he came across a tale about King Solomon and his daughter, which is a Jewish version of tale types 310 (“The Maiden in the Tower [Rapunzel]”) and 930A (“The Predestined Wife”).⁷¹

Similarly, manuscripts of new books demonstrated this tendency toward internationalism in medieval Jewish folk literature. Codex 135 of the Bodleian Library, mentioned above, contains, among other things, a collection of sixty-one tales. Some are taken from talmudic-midrashic literature, others from earlier medieval collections such as the *Midrash of the Ten Commandments* or *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity*; still others are novelistic tales that often combine tale types such as 531 (“Ferdinand the True and Ferdinand the False”) and 554 (“The Grateful Animals”), 653 (“The Four Skillful Brothers”), 712 (“Crescentia”), 883A (“The Innocent Slandered Maiden”), and 910K (“The Precepts and the Uriah Letter”). In these versions the internationally known

⁶⁸ See bin-Gorion 1990:395 [no. 205].

⁶⁹ See Noy 1968, 1971; cf. Lerner 1990.

⁷⁰ See Yassif 1984a.

⁷¹ See bin-Gorion 1990:70-72 [no. 38].

tale types acquired the thematic and stylistic features of Jewish folktales.⁷²

Translations from Folk Literatures in Other Languages

The expansion of Jewish folklore also occurred through the direct translation of books that included the oral and semi-oral traditions of other nations. Scholars and writers translated these books mostly into Hebrew rather than into the Jewish vernacular languages. The fictional or historical narrative frames suggest that some tale collections achieved a degree of popularity in oral tradition even before their translation. For example, the story that frames the Hebrew translation of the Indian *Panchatantra* suggests that the book was known outside of India. The Sasanian king Khusraw Anūsharān (531-79), who had apparently heard about these tales, sent his physician Burzōe to India to obtain the book and translate it. Burzōe translated the book into Pahlavi, and two centuries later ‘Abd Allah b. al-Mukaffa (b. c.725) translated it into Arabic. It was this Arabic translation, known as *Kalila and Dimna* (after the two principal characters, two jackals named Karataka and Damanaka), that the poet, philosopher, and grammarian Jacob ben Eleazar of Toledo (twelfth-thirteenth centuries) translated into rhymed Hebrew prose. At the same time Rabbi Joel, about whom nothing save his name is known, also translated it into non-metrical Hebrew. Even before the known Hebrew versions of *Kalila and Dimna*, the Jewish poet and scholar Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164) had already mentioned it in his writings as a book of fables, the translation of which was surrounded by legend.

Scholars sometimes confused *Kalila and Dimna* with the Hebrew translation of the *Tales of Sendebār*. In both books the name of the wise man and, in manuscript no. 1282 in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the name of the translator, Rabbi Joel, appear to be the same.⁷³ *Tales of Sendebār* is a frame narrative that belongs to a group of medieval books known in the East as the *Book of Sindibad*, and in the West as the *Seven Sages of Rome*. It contains several tales on the wiles of women, a popular theme in antiquity and in Jewish medieval folklore and literature.⁷⁴

These translations follow a common pattern that is found in other books as well. They repeat familiar themes and sets of figures, expanding

⁷² See Yassif 1984, 1999:345-46.

⁷³ M. Epstein (1967:363-69) untangles this confusion.

⁷⁴ See bin-Gorion 1990:395, 404-8 [nos. 205, 208].

them with new tales or with new versions of older stories. Such is the case with the twelfth-century translation of the *Romance of Alexander*. Alexander the Great appears in talmudic-midrashic sources as a type of universal monarch (BT, *Tamid* 31b-32a; *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*, pp. 80-83). The medieval Hebrew translations draw upon either the anonymous third-century *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, the tenth-century Latin *Historia de Preliis Alexander Magni*, or an Arabic translation of the latter.⁷⁵ These Hebrew books expand the Alexander traditions in Jewish folklore, transforming them from the historical into the fantastic.

Treading between translation and original writing, Rabbi Berechiah ben Natronai ha-Nakdan (twelfth or thirteenth century), who likely lived in Provence or northern France, composed a collection of animal fables, *Mishlei Shu'alim* ("Fox-Fables"), in rhymed Hebrew prose that for the first time in Jewish literature presented the corpus of this genre in a single collection. While several medieval books—Marie de France's *Lais* or various medieval versions of Avianus' *Fables*—could have served as his source or inspiration, this does not seem to have been the case. He drew instead on the general medieval Aesopic tradition, and only two percent of his fables remain without parallels.⁷⁶

Medieval, Family, Local, and General Jewish History

Reports about historical events have always been an integral part of the talmudic-midrashic tradition. Although some of these accounts are no more than incidental and anecdotal matters, for the most part they concern events of national significance, even if they are presented from personal perspectives. In the transition to medieval historical writings, such accounts shift their focus to the regional, the communal, and even the familial. The documents that survived represent a narrower and yet more diversified perspective, even when they are framed within a universal history. For example, Abraham ibn Daud of Toledo (c.1110-81) starts his book *Sefer Ha-Qabbala* ("The Book of Tradition") with a chronology of a transmission chain that has Adam as its universal starting point. He continues by singling out biblical and talmudic figures as links in this chain, but when he reaches the Middle Ages he resorts to the oral history of his own time and tells the story of the Four Captives:

⁷⁵ See bin-Gorion 1990:89-104 [nos. 44-48] and Bekkum 1992.

⁷⁶ See Schwarzbaum 1979 and Gutenberg 1997.

Prior to that, it was brought about by the Lord that the income of the academies which used to come from Spain, the land of the Maghreb, Ifriqiya, Egypt, and the Holy Land was discontinued. The following were the circumstances that brought this about.

The commander of a fleet, whose name was Ibn Rumahis, left Cordova, having been sent by the Muslim king of Spain ‘Abd ar-Rahman an-Nasir. This commander of a mighty fleet set out to capture the ships of the Christians and the towns that were close to the coast. They sailed as far as the coast of Palestine and swung about to the Greek sea and the islands therein. [Here] they encountered a ship carrying four great scholars, who were traveling from the city of Bari to a city called Sefastin, and who were on their way to a Kallah convention. Ibn Rumahis captured the ship and took the sages prisoner. One of them was R. Hushiel, the father of Rabbenu Hananel; another was R. Moses, the father of R. Hanok, who was taken prisoner with his wife and his son, R. Hanok (who at the time was but a young lad); the third was R. Shemariah b. R. Elhanan. As for the fourth, I do not know his name. The commander wanted to violate R. Moses’ wife, inasmuch as she was exceedingly beautiful. Thereupon, she cried out in Hebrew to her husband, R. Moses, and asked him whether or not those who drown in the sea will be quickened at the time of the resurrection of the dead. He replied unto her, “The Lord said: I will bring them from the Bashan; I will bring them back from the depths of the sea.” Having heard his reply, she cast herself into the sea and drowned.⁷⁷

He continues this account by describing the transition of the center of Jewish learning from Babylonia to the countries of the Mediterranean. Though presented as historical fact, the story is replete with traditional themes.

A century earlier, Aḥimaaz ben Paltiel set out to trace his family roots back to Jerusalem, whence his forefathers left following the destruction of the city in 70 CE. They came to the River Po as exiles and later moved to Oria in southern Italy. His book *Sefer Yuḥasin* (“A Book of Genealogy”), better known as *Megillat Aḥimaaz* (“The Scroll of Aḥimaaz”), is a family chronology written in rhymed prose in 1054. The figures he mentions function as characters in the events that became part of his family saga. He writes about Rabbi Aaron of Baghdad, who once harnessed a lion to millstones, rescued a lad from the spell of a witch who had transformed him into a donkey, and recognized a dead man trying to pray in a synagogue together with the living. His concept of the past is sometimes anachronistic; he imagines, for example, an academy in Jerusalem as a medieval house of learning. He also weaves into the story

⁷⁷ Cohen 1967:63-64; 1961. See also bin-Gorion 1990:232-33 [no. 124].

of his family's economic and social rise certain narratives concerning the living dead and demonic possession. These are themes that were an integral part of European medieval narrative traditions and were later to become a distinct strain of Jewish folklore. Ahimaaz ben Paltiel's stories were part of a tradition transmitted within the intimate quarters of a family, and in spite of their poetic rendition and their common supernatural motifs, they represent a historical oral tradition that previously was not available.⁷⁸

New Literary Modes of Presentation

The primary shift in the mode of presentation of Jewish folklore involves a transition from textual dependency to framed narratives. Medieval editors and writers were free to abandon the interpretive function of narrative and free to put the texts to ethical and aesthetic use. The departure from textual dependency implied that biblical books, or other phenomena such as the annual ritual cycle, no longer served as the organizational frame for tradition: authors were now at liberty to use literary devices such as narrative frames.

Scholars consider the anonymous *Midrash 'aseret ha-dibrot* ("Midrash on the Ten Commandments") to be a transitional text that moves away from traditional, scripture-dependent exegesis toward serial, independent tales. Each commandment, still a biblical verse, serves as a thematic framing principle around which the editor clustered the tales. The book itself is of uncertain date, but external references suggest the seventh century as the earliest and the eleventh century as the latest date of composition. It probably originated in present-day Iraq, but later it circulated widely in manuscript form. It ranged in size from seventeen to forty-four tales; the theme of the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:13), attracted the largest number of tales.

The frame of *The Alphabet of Ben-Sira* (an anonymous Hebrew book written likely in Iraq between the ninth and the tenth centuries) is essentially a narrative, although, as its title implies, its structure depends upon the number of letters (twenty-two) in the Hebrew alphabet. Rhetorically speaking, biblical verses do serve as proof text, but their function is stylistic rather than structural. The book has three parts, each alphabetically dependent. The first part consists of the birth story of Ben-Sira and twenty-two proverbs, arranged in alphabetical order, each of which Ben-Sira explicates and by doing so reveals his precocious wisdom. In the

⁷⁸ See further Benin 1984-85; Yassif 1983, 1984b, 1999:318-19.

second part, King Nebuchadnezzar learns about the prodigious child and summons him to his court. His wise men, jealous of the boy, put before him twenty-two questions to which he responds with narrative answers. The third part consists of twenty-two proverbs, only some of which have narrative answers. In both *Midrash on the Ten Commandments* and *The Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, numbers replace scriptural text as a framing, ordering, and mnemonic device.⁷⁹

In the eleventh century, the leading Tunisian rabbi in Kairuan, Rabbi Nissim ben Jacob ibn Shahin (c.990-1062), wrote in Judeo-Arabic a collection of tales known as *Hibbur Yafe me-ha-Yeshu'ah* (*An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity*). Within the history of Jewish folklore, this book represents a further removal from the orality of the text, and it organizes the tales by means of a somewhat vague thematic association that fulfills the aesthetic, didactic, and psychological purpose of consolation. Rabbi Nissim followed the model of, and likely translated the title of, the work *Kitab al-faraj ba'd al shiddah* that the Iraqi scholar and judge Abu 'Ali al-Muhassin al-Tanukhi (c.938-94) had earlier written. Al-Tanukhi had followers in Islamic society, and through their literary efforts *al-Faraj* books began to emerge as a literary genre.

The Literature of Magic

The literature of magic consists of incantations, invocations, and spells. A prominent feature of these genres is the use of the different names of God and his angels uttered or written down by healers or miracle workers. Most of the available texts from this genre date from the Middle Ages onward, but in fact the literature of magic transcends historical boundaries. A supposed antiquity is one of the features that endows these texts with potency. Textual evidence suggests that age is not only an imaginary attribute belonging to formulations of magic, but in fact an actuality. The third commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain" (Exodus 20:7), suggests that the priests neither condoned nor eradicated the use of magic in Israelite society. The same attitude, with the same results, prevailed in later periods—so much so that the sages, rabbis, and other religious authorities pragmatically admitted magic into Jewish life. Practitioners of magic evolved a system of verbal formulations, keyed to the Hebrew language, to Jewish religion, and to the holy

⁷⁹ See Stern and Mirsky 1990:91-120, 167-202; and Yassif 1984a.

scriptures, and then transmitted them under the cloak of secrecy through an apprenticeship system from generation to generation.

The Jewish literature of magic has two forms that are not mutually exclusive: formulaic incantations and books of magical prescriptions known as *sifrei segulah* ("charm books"). The language used in the magic formulas is reverse or referential. In both forms the practitioners of magic take words, names of the divine, and biblical verses out of their established context, nullify their semantic content, and then transform them into a combination of letters that would be totally meaningless outside of its magical use. However, the magical efficacy of these letters is derived from the supernatural quality attributed to the original phrases, names, or words on the one hand, and from the difficulties inherent in having to memorize sets of formulae that are meaningless in themselves on the other.

A system common to the formulation of an incantation in the reversal method involves the substitution of the letters of names: for example, by replacing the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *alef*, with the last letter, *tav*, or else by replacing a letter with the following one in the alphabetic order, such as saying or writing "b" instead of "a." The referential method involves the use of the combination of letters that are the first or the last letters of a biblical phrase. Thus, for example, one of the most powerful combinations is known as the name of the seventy-two letters. It groups them in a sequence of clusters of threes. These letters refer to the three verses of Exodus 14:19-21. Each of these verses has seventy-two letters. The first group of three letters combines the first letter in verse 19, the last letter of verse 20, and the first letter of verse 21, while the second group continues in the same manner until all the letters of these biblical verses are exhausted.

Both the reversal and the referential methods transform language from a semantic system into a jumble in which sounds and letters have an independent, non-semantic existence as a code—the deciphering of which is based on its properties within the alphabetic or the scriptural order. The performance of the literature of magic takes place by oral means in healing rituals and in written form on amulets, notes, utensils, or other objects that have magical purposes. Devoid of their original semantic content, they also occur in combinatory squares of three or four letters, the numerical value of which equals that of a divine name.

The charm books approach healing not through language but through nature. Plants and animals, or parts of them, acquire symbolic value, with the result that the prescribed concoction made out of them is believed to offer a cure for various physical ailments. While no doubt some of these materials contain some substances that have medical value, their use in

charms is based primarily on their symbolic significance.⁸⁰

The Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries

Two unrelated events that occurred during the middle and the end of the fifteenth century, respectively, had, among their other consequences, a decisive effect on the course of Jewish folklore. The first was the invention of printing, the second the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in the summer of 1492.

Printing and Jewish Folklore

In Germany, where printing began around 1445, the guild rules barred Jews from learning the craft. Nonetheless, when two printers migrated to Rome they imparted their knowledge to Jews who began printing Hebrew canonical books, the Bible, the Talmud, prayer books, and ethical literature during the last quarter of the fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century printing spread sufficiently, and Jewish publishers in Italy and Turkey began to print some non-canonical texts that until then had circulated only in manuscript form. Such, for example, were the two written narratives *Divrei ha-Yamim shel Moshe Rabbenu* (“The Chronicle of Moses our Teacher”) and *Meshalim shel Shlomo ha-Melekh* (“Parables of King Solomon”) that were printed together in Constantinople in 1516. As rewritten biblical narratives the tales draw upon midrashic sources, but also add medieval elements to the portrayal of these two central figures in Jewish tradition. Moses becomes a resourceful military strategist who wins a war after a prolonged standoff and is rewarded for his accomplishments with a kingship and a wife. The tales about King Solomon present him as a judge, thereby confirming his traditional image as a wise man. The first printing of the book includes five tales, each of which were either previously unknown in Jewish tradition or, if known, did not present Solomon as a judge. Among them are versions of tale types 920C “Shooting at the Father’s Corpse, Test of Paternity,” 612 “The Three Snake-Leaves,” 910 “Precepts Bought or Given Prove Correct,” and motif

⁸⁰ See Davis and Frenkel 1995, Harari 1998, Matras 1997, Margulioth 1966, Morgan 1983, Naveh and Shaked 1993, Schrire 1966, Sperber 1994, and Trachtenberg 1939.

J1655.3 “Coins Concealed in Jar of Oil (Pickles).”⁸¹

However, the significance of the invention of print was not limited to the transformation of manuscripts into books. Writers and editors could imagine and address new readers and make their selection of texts accordingly. The anticipation of an expanded public influenced the themes, the forms, and the languages of their texts. In Jewish communities they could draw upon medieval oral literature and document narratives that circulated only orally, printing them in Hebrew and other Jewish languages.

(I) Biblical Figures in Medieval Garbs

The retelling of the biblical narrative, in parts or in whole, in literate or oral forms, has been an integral aspect of Jewish tradition. The translations of the Hebrew Bible, the apocrypha, and the midrashic books represent different forms of restating the scripture with appropriate modifications. This literary tradition underwent transformation in the Middle Ages when writers composed full-scale books that retell segments of the Hebrew Bible in prose with relative independence of the scriptural text. *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* of the seventh or eighth centuries and *Sefer Ha-Yashar* (1625; the date of composition is uncertain⁸²) are other examples of this genre.

The biblical epic poetry in non-Hebrew Jewish languages represents another form of retelling the biblical story. In these poems, such as the Yiddish “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” “Joseph the Righteous,” “The Death of Aaron” (known from a 1382 manuscript), the Judeo-Persian *Musa-Nameh* (c.1327), *Ardashir-Nameh* (c. 1332), the poetic rendition of the book of Genesis (c. 1358) of Mawlana Shahin of Shiraz, and the Judeo-Arabic epic poetry, the narrators recast these familiar tales and figures into the style of medieval heroic poetry. In the Middle Ages these poems were performed orally and circulated in manuscripts, as versification and marginal annotations attest. Quite likely, the individual authors who composed these poems modeled them after the respective medieval epic poetry in their own countries. They enjoyed oral performance during the fourteenth and more likely the fifteenth centuries, and some began to appear in print in the middle of the sixteenth century. The most prominent of these books are the

⁸¹ See bin-Gorion 1990:28-29, 33-36, 52-53, 59-63 [nos. 17, 21, 22, 30, 34, 35]. For discussions of these two books, see Shinan 1977; Yassif 1986.

⁸² See Dan 1986.

Shmuel-Bukh (“Book of Samuel”), printed first in Augsburg 1544, and the *Melokhim-Bukh* (“Book of Kings”), printed in Augsburg in 1543. Other Yiddish books that recount episodes in the books of Joshua, Judges, and Daniel also appeared in the second half of the sixteenth century. The heroic military acts as well as their romantic episodes could well correspond to the European medieval epics and romances, thus presenting the biblical figures as medieval heroes.⁸³

(II) *Medieval Jewish Personalities and Events*

Within their medieval societies Jews could not imagine princes, princesses, knights, and heroes. The personalities whose lives they selected to celebrate through tales and legends were great rabbis, philosophers, and pious people. Royalty in their tales was demonic, even when it maintained a Jewish appearance. “The Story of the Jerusalemite,” a version of tale type 470* (“The Hero Visits the Land of the Immortals”), which was published first in 1516 bound together with “The Chronicle of Moses” and many times thereafter,⁸⁴ is a tale about a marriage between an adventurous young Jewish man, who disobeys his dying father’s last words, and a princess. However, the conventional happy ending in European and Arabic tales receives a tragic twist in this story because, as it turns out, the young man arrived at the land of the demons where the members of the royal family, including his bride, are demons.⁸⁵

Narrators attributed magical power, albeit non-demonic magical power, to leading medieval personalities. The descriptions of their lives often included elements of traditional biographical patterns in Jewish folklore as well as in narrative traditions of other peoples. Two books, published fifteen years apart in Hebrew and Yiddish respectively, each written for different purposes and addressed to two different types of audiences, include biographical episodes of medieval Jewish personalities. The first is *Shalshet ha-Kabbalah* (“The Chain of Tradition,” 1587), written by Gedaliah ben Joseph ibn Yahya (1526-87), who began to write this book in his youth in 1549 and completed it shortly before his death.

⁸³ See above note 63. For studies about epic poetry in Judeo-Persian, see Moreen 1991a, 1991b, 1994a, 1994b. Chetrit 1994:375 lists a work in progress on epic poetry in Judeo-Arabic.

⁸⁴ See bin-Gorion 1990:373-86 [no. 200].

⁸⁵ For further examination of this theme see Zfatman 1987.

This is a book of Jewish history in which ibn Yahya drew upon written books that were available to him. However, in the absence of reliable written sources he turned also to oral narrators. He often points out that he learned one tale or another from “the elders” or “the wise men.”⁸⁶ The second book is the *Mayseh Bukh* (“A Book of Tales”), a collection of 257 tales in Yiddish that was edited by a Lithuanian book dealer named Jacob ben Abraham but was printed in 1602 in Basel by the press of Konrad Waldkirch. The target audience of this book, which includes talmudic-midrashic material as well as medieval narratives translated from written and oral sources, was the Jewish women who were more fluent in Yiddish than in Hebrew.⁸⁷

The images of the medieval Jewish personalities that emerge from these tales do not necessarily correspond to their intellectual reputation. Maimonides (1135-1204), the most influential Jewish medieval philosopher, codifier, and rabbinical authority, himself also a physician, appears in *Shalsholet ha-Kabbalah* as a miracle-worker who was able to travel magically, escape from his enemies, and win a contest in magic forced upon him by jealous court physicians. Like many other heroes of folk tradition, his childhood contrasts sharply with his adult life. In legend the rational philosopher was an ignorant and hard-to-teach boy.

Rashi (1040-1105), the great medieval interpreter, was born, according to legends in *Shalsholet ha-Kabbalah*, as God’s reward to his father for deliberately losing a precious stone that the king had requested in order to decorate a pagan idol. Gedaliah ibn Yahya had Rashi meet Maimonides in Egypt and the poet Rabbi Judah Halevi (1075-1141) in Spain, as well as Godfrey of Bouillon (c.1058-1100), the crusader who conquered Jerusalem, thus defying chronology and facts. According to ibn Yahya’s account Rabbi Judah Halevi made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. After he had arrived and was kneeling in prayer, an Arab rode him down, trampled him, and slew him—a legend that resonated in later Jewish tradition and even inspired Heinrich Heine to write his poem “Jehuda ben Halevy” (1851). He also included a story, repeated later in the *Mayseh Bukh*, about a Pope who was Jewish.⁸⁸ The *Mayseh Bukh* contains among its tales a narrative cycle about Rabbi Judah ben Samuel he-Hlasid, “Judah the Pious” (c.1150-1217), the leader of a pietistic sect in Baden and Bavaria. These stories (nos. 158-67, 171-72, 175-78, 180-83) dwell upon

⁸⁶ See David 1976.

⁸⁷ See M. Gaster 1934; Maitlis 1958, 1961; Meitlis 1933, 1969; Zfatman 1979.

⁸⁸ See bin-Gorion 1990:234-42, 249-55, 294, 301-3 [nos. 126-28, 129, 133-37].

Rabbi Judah's childhood, who like many leading personalities was unruly and illiterate in his youth. Upon his transformation into a pious and learned man, he displayed magical abilities, second sight, and healing powers.

Editors prepared such narrative collections in Yiddish manuscripts, but print made it possible for them to increase the quantity of tales and, later, to increase the quantity of published copies. *Mayseh Bukh* was a generic designation for these collections, not simply the title of the specific anthology so known. The larger previously known manuscript of such tales recently discovered by Sarah Zfatman included as many as one hundred tales,⁸⁹ a quantity that more than doubled in print. During the seventeenth century more than sixty books of various lengths, thematic combinations, and differing proportions of medieval and talmudic-midrashic tales appeared in western and central Europe.⁹⁰

Toward the end of the century, Eliezer Liebermann translated from Hebrew to Yiddish and published in 1696 in Amsterdam a collection of historical legends and accounts that his father, R. Juspa of Worms, had written down. He was the sexton of the community who, upon coming to the city as a young man, was fascinated by the legends that its members told. R. Juspa of Worms wrote down 25 of them for posterity, but only occasionally recorded his sources and recording circumstances. This book, *Sefer Ma'ase Nissim* ("A Book of Wonders"), became the first tale collection in Jewish folklore whose editor deliberately recorded its texts from oral tradition. Unlike the fairy-tales that Charles Perrault (1628-1703) published a year later in Paris (*Histoires ou contes du temps passé*), these tales address hostility toward the Jews, popular persecution and tolerance by the authorities, rape, magic, miracles, romance, and, not surprisingly, events that had changed the lives of individuals and the community and thus were believed to be historical.⁹¹

The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain

The banishing of Jews from regions and towns in Europe was not a rare occurrence, but their expulsion from Spain in the summer of 1492 caused major tremors in Jewish life, particularly in the Mediterranean basin. Jews were an integral part of the Spanish social, cultural, and economic

⁸⁹ See Zfatman 1979.

⁹⁰ See Zfatman 1985.

⁹¹ See Eidelberg 1991.

fabric of life. They excelled in literature, science, philosophy, theology, and biblical interpretation. The historical evidence about their folklore and popular culture in Spain is meager yet valuable, extant mainly through literary writings in Hebrew, Latin, and to a lesser extent Judeo-Spanish. For example, Joseph ben Meir ibn Zabara (1140-1200), a physician and a poet, rendered popular tales and proverbs in his *Sefer ha-Sha'ashu'im* ("The Book of Delight") in a poetic form. He includes versions of tale types that were well known in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, such as "The Wolf Overeats in the Cellar" (41), "The Clever Peasant Girl" (875), "The Clever Girl at the End of the Journey" (875D), "Shooting at the Father's Corpse, Test of Paternity" (920C) and "The Matron of Ephesus (Vidua)" (1510).⁹² A century earlier Moshe Sefardi, who upon converting to Christianity in 1106 assumed the name Petrus Alphonsi (b. 1062), included within his *Disciplina Clericalis* narratives and proverbs that he drew from Jewish and Arabic sources, some of which might have been also popular in the oral tradition of his time.⁹³

However, it was not until the Jews were expelled and sought refuge in Amsterdam, North Africa, Italy, the Balkan Peninsula, Turkey, and the Land of Israel that the oral literature in their language received deliberate attention, motivated by nostalgia and the search for social and cultural identity. Once removed from their country, their oral tradition became both a memory and a living culture, combining the past with the more recent historical, cultural, and linguistic experiences of their newly found countries. The narrative songs, the *romanceros*, which were based on various themes, be they secular or biblical or Jewish historical themes, became at the time the cultural and later the scholarly favorite.

The sixteenth-century Jewish repertoire of these ballads, which were popular in Spain before and after the expulsion, is particularly apparent in the numerous first lines and key internal verses that served as tune indicators in Hebrew hymn collections. Such a use suggests that the Spanish ballads were popular and at the time did not require writing for mnemonic purposes or recollection. The first available full text of a Sephardic ballad suggests an interest from without rather than within. It was a Dutch translation of a popular ballad reportedly sung by the false messiah Shabbetai Zevi (1628-76) in Izmir, Turkey, which apparently had

⁹² See Davidson 1914; Dishon 1985. For bibliographical references for the occurrence of the last three tale types in Jewish folklore, see bin-Gorion 1990:35-36, 200, 394, 457-61 [nos. 22, 110, 205, 247, 248].

⁹³ See Hermes 1977; Schwarzbaum 1961-63 and its reprint (1989:239-358).

been audited in 1667, a year after Shabbetai Zevi's conversion to Islam. Other texts appeared within a manuscript miscellany from 1683, which was transcribed in a mixture of Spanish and Portuguese—in other words, just as it had been sung by the Sephardim in Amsterdam. The eastern Mediterranean manuscript texts date to the early eighteenth century, when the Sephardic Jews began to write them down in family notebooks. While these *romanceros* that were sung by Sephardic women do have analogues in Spanish texts from the sixteenth century, their transmission demonstrates both linguistic retention and innovation.⁹⁴

The songs rather than the tales served the Sephardim as a means to recall their lost culture and country. Their early tales are not nostalgic but in fact historical, and document various oral accounts of the expulsion. Solomon ibn Verga (1460-1554), a historian and a community leader, included in his book *Sefer Shevet Yehudah* (Sabbioneta, c.1560-67), written around 1520, oral histories about the horrors that the expelled Jews had encountered, that is to say, about blood libels in Spain and the hunting down of those newly converted to Christianity. The availability of print shortened the time that the narratives were able to circulate orally. While Gedaliah ibn Yahya wrote down in the sixteenth century tales about Jewish personalities of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, ibn Verga reported accounts in the name of eyewitnesses or recent hearsay tales.⁹⁵

The writing down of the romances and other poetic genres amounted to a cultural trend in which literate members of the society sought to draw on their spoken language and oral literature in order to construct their own cultural identity while in exile. The most prominent product of this effort is the compilation of written and oral Jewish traditions entitled *Me-Am Lo'ez*, initiated, but not completed, by Ya'acob Huli [Culi] (c.1689-1732). In this work, Huli combined the style of oral narration with that of the re-written Bible then common in Hebrew during the Middle Ages, in order to render the talmudic-midrashic tradition and the multiple oral versions concerning biblical heroes in Judeo-Spanish.⁹⁶

The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

The recording of Jewish folklore during the nineteenth and twentieth

⁹⁴ See Armistead and Silverman 1989.

⁹⁵ See Shohat and Baer 1947.

⁹⁶ See Culi 1964-74 and 1977-87.

centuries was undertaken with great intensity both within and outside the tradition. Literate individuals in different Jewish communities, whether they were rabbis, local writers, or printers, began to record and publish local traditions and stories known and gathered from oral sources. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as the discipline of folklore began to consolidate and its scholarship started to influence students of Judaica (not to mention the rise of Zionism), scholarly, national, and literary motives energized folklore into becoming a dynamic field that remains vibrantly studied down to the present day. Folk tradition and its recording enjoy an inverse relation to each other: as traditional social life is on the wane, its recording and analysis is on the rise.

Folklore within the Tradition of Selected Communities

Hasidic Tales

Hasidim rose as a religious sect in the Ukraine and southern Poland. Its leaders imbued storytelling, singing, and dancing with religious significance, and consequently all three have become a major part of Hasidic tradition and worship. Quite coincidentally, and without any known ramifications, around the time that Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812-15), two important books appeared in small towns in the Ukraine: these books signal the transference from orality to literacy of the rich narrative tradition that vibrated at that time throughout the Hasidic communities. Storytelling enjoyed a ritualistic importance among the Hasidim. During the third Sabbath meal celebrated with their rabbi, the *rebbe*, the Hasidim listened with delight to their tradition's storytelling. They celebrated in words the devotional, miraculous, and charitable actions of their leaders. The act of telling stories in praise of the rabbi (*le-saper be-sheveh*) generated a new narrative genre, which, although thematically and structurally resonant with talmudic-midrashic and medieval miracle tales, acquired a new significance within the Hasidic society.

The Hasidim, who had emerged as a movement already by the eighteenth century, considered Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov of Medzhibozh ("The Master of the Good Name") to be their founder, and during his lifetime (and even after his death in 1760) they both circulated tales about his wonders and constructed a biography that would suit his stature. Rabbi Dov Ber ben Samuel, son-in-law of the Besht's amulet scribe, wrote down these tales and as a result manuscript versions of the tales circulated among

the Hasidim for several decades. (One such manuscript has survived and was recently published.) In 1814, Israel Yofe, a printer in the town of Kopys, Poland, published these manuscripts; the resulting book enjoyed immediate popular success.⁹⁷

The second book that appeared at approximately this same time is on the margins of oral narratives and may well belong to Yiddish and Hebrew literature, as in fact many scholars consider it to be. However, the circumstances of its writing and its content make it an important link between oral expression and literary representation. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810), a great grandson of the Besht on his mother's side, told the thirteen tales that appeared in *Sefer Sippurei Ma'asiyyot* ("A Book of Told Tales," 1815), likely in Yiddish, between 1806 and 1810. His disciple, Rabbi Nathan Sternhartz of Nemirov, wrote them down as he heard them either directly from Rabbi Nahman or from his followers. He also published them in a bilingual edition of Hebrew and Yiddish. The title page of the first edition emphasizes this oral aspect of the tales, indicating that their presentation is faithful to the way "they were heard." The meanings of these tales are subject to extensive traditional and scholarly interpretations. Unlike the stories of *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, the narratives of *Sefer Sippurei Ma'asiyyot* draw upon motifs and themes that were current in European folktales, including stock characters such as kings, princesses, and paupers who were involved in some of the stock episodes of these magical and perhaps allegorical tales. This book serves as a unique case and provides testimony to narrative oral performance and its literary rendition in a traditional society.⁹⁸

After the publication of these two books, Hasidic narrative tradition shifted into an era of oral creativity and transmission that in turn lasted about fifty years. This was an intensive period in which tales about the Baal Shem Tov and other rabbis in his circle (even later ones) continued to circulate vigorously in Hasidic circles. Literary documents are almost totally absent from the period, but their absence hardly attests to any lull in narrative creativity. Among Hasidic circles oral narrative tradition continued well into the twentieth century, including the time of the Second World War and beyond.

However, in 1864 Hasidic oral tradition received a boost from an unexpected source. Michael Levi Frumkin, alias Michael Rodkinson, who

⁹⁷ See Ben-Amos and Mintz 1970; Mondstein 1982; Grözinger 1997; Rosman 1993; and Rubinstein 1991.

⁹⁸ See Band 1978; Green 1978.

came originally from a respected Hasidic family, began to publish popular anthologies of Hasidic tales. His books were *Kehal Hasidim*, *Adat Zaddikim*, *Sefer Sippurei Zaddikim*, and *Sefer Shevah ha-Rav*. Neither authorship nor date nor place of publication seem to be noted in them, but Joseph Dan has subsequently ascertained that Michael Frumkin was their author. The purpose of this editing and printing activity in which others like Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg joined was, by and large, entrepreneurial, although it inadvertently fed narratives back into oral circulation and in fact constituted the impetus for a popular trend in which Hasidim and non-Hasidim engaged. This activity resulted in the publication of Hasidic tales devoted primarily to Hasidic readership, and thereby provided readers with texts by means of which communities were able to emulate their rabbis. These collections included not only specifically Hasidic tales but also material from the rich oral traditions of East European Jewry, traditions that have become known only through twentieth-century scholarship.⁹⁹

Judeo-Spanish

Toward the end of the nineteenth century the *romancero* tradition, which had been up to then an integral part of the Judeo-Spanish oral and written traditions, began to appear in small chapbooks. If the example of Yacob Abraham Yoná (1847-1922) is any indication, this transition had little more than economic motives, although it enabled an individual to use available technology for purposes new to the community. Yacob Abraham Yoná was originally from Monastir (in the former Yugoslavia) but later moved to Salonika. As Armistead and Silverman (1971) describe him, he was a poor man, the head of a large family who struggled to make ends meet. After learning the printing craft, Yoná's deep personal interest in ballads and ballad singing moved him to publish his own chapbooks of material that he had audited himself. The range of his repertoire corresponds to the types of ballads that scholars recorded from oral tradition then and later. These are versions of older Spanish ballads, as well as ballads on biblical and historical Jewish themes. The Judeo-Spanish *romancero* tradition selects as its themes royal and romantic episodes from the Hebrew Bible—subjects that talmudic-midrashic as well as medieval rabbinical narratives either overlooked or underplayed. In the western Mediterranean countries there was no use of Hebrew characters in the

⁹⁹ See Dan 1975:189-235; Nigal 1981, 1988; Rosenberg 1991.

printing of Judeo-Spanish ballads.¹⁰⁰

In prose the most prominent book that was circulated in Judeo-Spanish communities was a Hebrew collection of tales entitled *Oseh Pele* (“The Miracle Worker”), a book that Yosef Shabbetai Farhi published in four volumes in Livorno between 1845 and 1869. The anthology contains versions of talmudic-midrashic and medieval tales as well as international motifs and tale types such as motif H486.1 (“Test of Paternity: Adhesion of Blood”) and J1176.3 (“Gold Pieces in the Honey-Pot”), and types such as 505-8 (“The Grateful Dead”) among many others. Such a tradition of local publication continued well into the twentieth century. Books like *Revue Na’aneh, Otzar ha-ma’asiyyot* (“A Trove of Tales,” 3 vols., Jerusalem, 1965) and Moshe Rabbi, *Avoteinu sipru* (“Our Fathers told [us],” 2 vols., Jerusalem, 1975) reflect awareness of methods and concerns with folklore scholarship, yet they continue in a line of folk-literary traditional printing.¹⁰¹

Iraq

The Jews in Iraq share a history of two thousand five hundred years, the longest of any community outside the Land of Israel. Over the years they lived through periods of rise and decline in cultural activities. Yet even in the most dynamic periods, only a trickle of their own local oral tradition reached literary documentation. The Babylonian Talmud, two-thirds of which is folkloric in nature, represents the deliberations in the academies of Babylonia up to the sixth century and reflects the oral traditions of the Land of Israel more so than those of Iraq. The story in the Babylonian Talmud (*Berakhot* 54a) concerning travelers who survive the dangers of a lion, a crazy camel, and thirst in the desert is a rare example of an Iraqi local legend. In the medieval period scholars assumed that Iraq was the home of the anonymous composers of the *Midrash of the Ten Commandments* and *Alphabet of Ben-Sira*. The popular literature of the Iraqi Jewish community was further enriched by copies of the Tunisian Judeo-Arabic narrative collection, *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity*, which had reached its territory. Locally circulated manuscripts suggest that among the most popular narratives were “The Story of the Righteous Joseph” (*Qissat Yosef al-Sadiq*) and the versified

¹⁰⁰ See Armistead and Silverman 1971.

¹⁰¹ On the popularity and influence of this book, see Yassif 1982.

story of “The Mother and her Seven Sons” (*Qissat Hanna we-sab’a welada*), which, in Iraq as in Judeo-Spanish communities and in other Islamic countries, were performed in the synagogue on the ninth of Av.¹⁰²

The absence of available documentation does not attest to any decline in oral transmission. The tribute that Yitzhak Avishur pays to his father offers a glimpse into oral narration in the life of the Iraqi Jews (1992b:9-10):

My father was an honest, religious, and moral man. He was a talented storyteller who could attract his listeners, Jews and Moslems, young and adults, women as well as men, with his long tales. He told them in the long winter nights within the heated rooms, and in the moonlit summer nights on the rooftops, when relatives and neighbors joined the family.

It is quite likely that different individuals wrote down some of these tales earlier, but the available manuscripts, written in Judeo-Arabic or Hebrew, stem from the nineteenth century. Lacking the devotional character of the East European *Shevaḥim*, they were prepared for individual use in personal and family entertainment such as a child’s bar mitzvah assignment or as fulfillment of a request of a woman about to leave Iraq for India. These include oral tales as well as texts copied from other manuscripts: secular narratives, animal tales, Arabic epic texts, and stories about biblical characters. The scribes often engaged in literary amplification and did not necessarily reproduce oral delivery. The earliest of these manuscripts dates from 1834 and the latest from 1864.

Since manuscripts were not available for public circulation, printing was not a direct process of textual transformation but involved the deliberate preparation of new texts for publication. Because of the lack of Jewish printing presses in Iraq, the earliest books were published in Bombay and Calcutta, appearing toward the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The first of these collections in Hebrew was *Sefer ha-ma’asiyyot* (“A Book of Tales”) written by El’azar ben Aharon Sa’adya ha-Kohen (Calcutta, 1842) and in Judeo-Arabic *‘Ajab al-‘ajab* (“Wonder of Wonders”) by Yosef Eliahu ha-Kohen (Bombay, 1889).¹⁰³

Three leading rabbis and writers of traditional literature stand out as the major contributors to the publication of Jewish-Iraqi oral tradition. Rabbi Yosef Hlayyim (1834-1909) published a Hebrew book, *Nifla’im ma’asekha* (“How Wonderful Are Your Actions,” Jerusalem, 1912), which

¹⁰² See Avishur 1981, 1992a, 1992b; Sassoon 1932.

¹⁰³ See Jason 1988:24-27.

includes 164 tales. Among them some are common to the Jewish narrative tradition in Islamic countries, like the tales about the “Two Headed Heir” (28) and “The Merciful Widow” (156), and some have international distribution, such as “The Story of a Woman-Loving King,” tale types 891B* “The King’s Glove” (117), 736 “Luck and Wealth,” and 736a “The Ring of Polycrates” (151). But in addition the book also includes tales about French and Spanish kings (31, 42) and a story about the founding of the city of Vilna (Vilnius), the capital of Lithuania that had a large Jewish community. Shlomo Bekhor Hluzin (1843-92) published an expanded edition of *Sefer ha-ma’asiyyot* (Baghdad, 1892) and two years earlier three Hebrew books of his own, entitled *Sefer ma’ase nissim* (“A Book of a Miracle Tale”), *Sefer ma’asim tovim* (“A Book of Good Deeds”), and *Sefer ma’asim mefo’arim* (“A Book of Magnificent Acts”) (Baghdad, 1890). Rabbi Shlomo Tweina (1856-1913), who emigrated from Baghdad to India, published in Calcutta in Arabic some of the narrative and proverb traditions of the Iraqi Jewish community during the 1890s.¹⁰⁴

Kurdistan

Traditionally the folk literature of the Jews of Kurdistan was completely oral. Ancient and isolated in a mountainous region divided between Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, this community enjoyed a dynamic oral tradition that had minimal, if any, contact with manuscript literacy, let alone print literacy. The latter simply was not locally available. Even religious literacy, scarce as it was, was orally dependent and limited to men. When members of the community finally did write down their oral literature, they did so only after they had moved to Jerusalem, and only then at the urging of non-Kurdish scholars. Their Neo-Aramaic epic poems, interspersed with songs and proverbs in Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, and Turkish (all of which were once performed in the villages and towns of Kurdistan, on the rooftops in the summertime and inside the houses in the cold winters) were mostly on heroic biblical figures. While renditions of the stories of the sacrifice of Isaac, the sale of Joseph, and other narratives about victimized biblical heroes occur in midrashic manuscripts, the Jews of Kurdistan did not translate them into oral poetry. The popular martyrology legend about the mother and her seven sons was performed in the synagogues on the Ninth of Av and had, like other narrative poems at the time, a religious rather than a secular function. The more popular themes

¹⁰⁴ See Avishur 1992b, i:11-40; Ben-Yaacob 1984; Jason 1988:5-28.

in Kurdistan were the stories of David and Goliath, Samson, Jael and Sisera, and other somewhat less combative biblical personalities. Their performance was often dramatic. Such an emphasis on the heroic aspect of the biblical narrative corresponds to Kurdish Jews' favorite secular themes, which they sang at family celebrations in the Kurdish rather than the Neo-Aramaic language. These were primarily heroic epics, although they were replaced by romantic narratives when performed at wedding celebrations. Only in circumcision ceremonies were they sung in Hebrew. The folktale tradition was by and large secular and included themes, motifs, and types that are known internationally. In Israel, Hakham Alwan Avidani made a deliberate effort to preserve this tradition in writing for the purpose of curbing the eroding influence that modern life had wrought on the new generation; he wrote down the historical legends of the Kurdish community in *Sefer Ma'aseh hag-Gedolim* ("A Book about the Acts of the Great People") in five volumes (Jerusalem, 1972-76).¹⁰⁵

Yemen

Like the Jews of Kurdistan, the Jews of Yemen maintained their cultural tradition by oral means for quite a long period. Literacy was limited by subject and gender to religious texts and men. Narratives, proverbs, and riddles, as well as festive, ceremonial, and entertaining songs and women's poetry, were all part of a dynamic oral tradition that had but minimal contact with literacy. Furthermore, a negative rabbinical attitude toward folk literature enforced this division between orality and literacy. Consequently, while scribes appended scattered tales in a written variety of Judeo-Arabic to manuscripts here and there, thus far not a single manuscript devoted to the recording of oral tales has been discovered. The available narratives drew upon talmudic-midrashic themes that commonly occurred in medieval Jewish societies, and, linguistically speaking, these narratives differ from the spoken variety of Yemenite Judeo-Arabic.

The sharper distinction between orality and literacy meant that social and historical realities came ultimately to bear upon the folklore. Confined to religious subjects, literacy did not foster in Yemen a class of local intellectuals who wanted to break down the negative social attitude toward oral tales and songs in order to record them; such tales and songs were, not surprisingly, often regarded as trivial, marginal, and valueless. Consequently, scholarly interest in the oral traditions, the poetry, and the

¹⁰⁵ See Brauer 1993; Rivlin 1959; Sabar 1982, 1992.

language of the Yemenite Jewish community rose from without before such concerns emerged from within.

Initially, even before the establishment of the State of Israel, Jewish-Yemenite songs and dances were exoticized and, once modified, they entered the repertoire of the popular poetry of Eretz-Israel. Later, after the mass migration of the Yemenite Jews in the early 1950s, the need for internal cultural revival emerged. The uprooting of communities was compounded by various unexpected “traps” to tradition: the threat of romantic admiration that European Jews in Israel bestowed upon them on the one hand, and the lure of mass media on the other. Hence, motivated by nostalgia, by goals of cultural preservation, and by concerns for the survival of cultural identity, Yemenite individuals in Israel began to record, write, and rewrite their oral literature, albeit in Hebrew rather than Yemenite Judeo-Arabic. Editors such as Mishael Caspi, Nissim Benjamin Gamlieli, and A. Yarimi were exposed to folklore scholarship and presented their texts as ones that aimed for a synthesis of scholarly demands and public appeal.¹⁰⁶ Their books have a broad thematic and generic range. They include tales about animals, tricksters, and fools, as well as stories that build upon the social, cultural, and economic life of the Jewish communities in Yemen and their coexistence in conflict and in peace with the Arab majority. Some of the narratives draw upon internationally diffused folktales, and others are renditions of talmudic-midrashic stories. Though Jewish religious values often guide their heroes, these tales are more entertaining than didactic—secular rather than pietistic—in outlook.

North Africa

Proximity to Europe, a long tradition of literacy and learning, a dynamic community life, and the fifteenth-century influx of exiles from Spain have all made the Jewish oral literature in the five North African countries of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco amenable to writing and printing. Yet even in these countries where literacy was commonly available already in the sixteenth century, there still remained a communal consensus that implicitly controlled the subjects and genres whose transformation from orality to literacy was slowly underway. In poetry the transition was smoother. Local poets resorted to oral genres and practices, composing topical poems and eulogies. The results are extant in manuscripts from the eighteenth century; such a tradition of local literature

¹⁰⁶ For bibliographical information see Tobi 1992.

continued well into the twentieth century and did not cease with the immigration to Israel. These songs, which were clearly narrative in nature, told of social, political, and natural events that individuals and communities had experienced. In prose, the written and (later) printed narratives consisted of miracle and healing tales associated with the cult of the saints, which spread widely through Morocco and other North African countries. The Judeo-Arabic books that appeared in the nineteenth century, written by local authors, also portrayed the acts of these saints. This hagiographic tradition continued well into the twentieth century and, following the emergence and re-emergence of the cult of the saints in Israel, continues to appear in Israel to this day.¹⁰⁷

Folklore from Outside the Tradition

The turning point in the transformation of Jewish oral literature into an object of research dovetailed with German romanticism, a phenomenon that occurred long before William Thomas coined the term *folklore* in 1846. A pivotal figure in this shift was Rabbi Nachman Krochmal (1785-1840), a philosopher who devoted a whole chapter to the “Aggadah and the Masters of the Aggadah” in his book *Moreh Nevukhei ha-Zeman* (“A Guide to the Perplexed of the Time”), published posthumously in 1851. Krochmal considered the aggadah to be popular philosophy. According to his view, the aggadah revealed the essential tenets of Judaism to the unlettered folk. Krochmal distinguished between good, meaningless, and faulty narratives in biblical exegesis, making his judgment on the basis of their perceived spiritual value. These comments attributed to the aggadah a deductive function that supposedly brings ethical and religious instructions to the popular masses.

Leopold Zunz (1794-1886), who happened also to have edited Krochmal’s book, established both the theoretical and scholarly basis for this new approach. As a founding member of the *Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft des Judentums* (“Society for Jewish Culture and Science,” Berlin 1819), Zunz articulated and put into practice the principles of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (“Science of Judaism”). His book, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden, historisch Entwickelt* (“Historical Development of Jewish Religious Sermons,” 1832), provided legitimacy for synagogue sermons in German—contrary to Prussian prohibition. He argued his case through a critical, literary, historical, and bibliographical

¹⁰⁷ See Ben-Ami 1992.

analysis of the development of public speaking in Jewish social life, which he inferred from available sources. The second edition, published posthumously in 1892, became the basis for an updated Hebrew translation by Ch. Albeck (1954) that still serves modern scholarship. Although Zunz wrote in a Germany that had already discovered oral narration, he limited himself to religious books. For him this literature manifested “the Jewish spirit” in much the same way that it had for Herder and the romantics: oral songs and oral tales expressing the voice of the people.¹⁰⁸

The scholarly discovery of current oral tradition and its value in Jewish societies occurred practically in the last decade of the nineteenth century. A hundred years ago, in 1896, Dr. Max Grunwald circulated in the European Jewish press a public appeal for the collection of Jewish folklore. He accompanied his call with a questionnaire. In the following year he established in Hamburg the *Gesellschaft für jüdische Volkskunde* (“Society for Jewish Folklore”) and in 1898 began to publish the *Gesellschaft Mitteilungen für jüdische Volkskunde*, which continued to appear until 1922.¹⁰⁹ Dr. Grunwald himself began to record the folklore of Spanish-Portuguese Jews.

At the same time, and even preceding Grunwald, students of diverse disciplines began to record and analyze folklore. Writers and poets also initiated the recording of tradition and encouraged others to do so as well. They followed rigorous principles in their documentation of folklore and, even when lacking formal training, sought to meet the standards of international research in folklore and ethnography.¹¹⁰ Individually and in team projects these researchers explored the vitality of folklore in modern Jewish societies.

Jewish nationalism, in its ideological shades and varieties, motivated the explorations of Jewish folklore. In addition, intra-Jewish exoticism, a factor that would later manifest itself in social research throughout Israel,¹¹¹ partially inspired Grunwald’s own interest in Judeo-Spanish traditions. In its initial phases the very research method previously employed by scholars and amateurs served now to establish a broad public basis for folklore inquiry. In particular, the use of the Jewish press for the solicitation of traditional texts served to broadcast the importance of

¹⁰⁸ See Ben-Amos 1990b.

¹⁰⁹ See Daxelmüller 1983, 1988; Noy 1980.

¹¹⁰ See Yassif 1987-88.

¹¹¹ See Domínguez 1989.

folklore in Jewish culture. Notable in this regard were Saul Ginzburg (1866-1940) and Pesah Marek (1862-1920), who together circulated a questionnaire that yielded the material from which they selected 376 texts for their volume *Yidische Folkslider in Rusland* (“Yiddish Folksongs in Russia”) ([1901] 1991). The social shift in the position of the Yiddish language in Jewish society—from a despised jargon to a language of literature and poetry¹¹²—awakened a concomitant awareness of the Yiddish spoken idiom. Ignatz Bernstein (1836-1909) had acquired a personal passion for Yiddish proverbs already in the 1870s; his continuous recording appeared as *Jüdische Sprichwörter und Redensarten* (1908). Both books include texts in Yiddish and Latin characters, and, although a few other collections of smaller scope preceded them, these books serve as the cornerstones for future research in their respective genres.

The project that moved Jewish folklore from a series of individual studies into an organized field of research, however, was the Baron Horace Guenzberg’s Jewish Ethnographic Expedition to Volhynia, Podolia, and to the area of Kiev in 1912-14, financed mostly by his son Vladimir and headed by S. An-Ski [An-Sky] (the pseudonym of Solomon Zainwil Rapaport, 1863-1920). By this time An-Ski was already a well known literary figure who, seeking his Jewish roots after years of involvement with the Russian revolutionary movement, turned to folklore as a source of literary and spiritual renewal. In an article entitled “The Jewish Folk Creativity” (1908), An-ski proposed that “spirituality” distinguishes Jewish folk heroes from other nations’ heroes, whose excellence was based primarily on physical prowess. Highly aware of the transformations that had occurred in Jewish life, An-Ski called for the recording and documentation of traditions, songs, customs, and cultural memories. In addition to their historical and ethnographic value, these folk traditions were valuable to him as a source of national, cultural, and literary renewal.¹¹³

In addition to An-Ski, other leading Yiddish and Hebrew authors began vigorously to occupy themselves with the recovery of folklore. Influenced by neo-romantic and modernist ideas, Isaac Leib Peretz (1852-1915), for example, published two collections of Yiddish stories, *Khasidish* (“Hasidic [tales],” 1908?) and *Folkstimlikh Geshikhten* (“Folktales,” 1909), in which folktale themes served his own literary imagination. Through his

¹¹² See Fishman 1981; Harshav 1990.

¹¹³ See An-ski 1928; An-Sky 1992a; [An-Sky] 1992b; Bar-Ytshak 1999; Roskies 1992a, 1992b: espec. 245 n. 2, a list of important sources for his biography.

short stories and his collecting, as well as through his considerable personal influence, Peretz inspired younger writers and intellectuals—An-Ski among them—to explore the richness of Jewish folklore.¹¹⁴ Hlayyim Naḥman Bialik (1873-1934), the leading poet of his generation, also shared a strong commitment to folklore, the results of which became evident in his poems, songs, rewritten legends, and public speeches. A younger writer, Joseph Hlayyim Brenner (1881-1921), articulated (in an essay published in 1914 in Jerusalem) the frustrations that Hebrew authors faced as a result of the lack of indigenous folklore in their newly revived tongue, which at that time lacked the pulse of a spoken language.¹¹⁵ Shortly after the end of the First World War, A. Druyanov, H. N. Bialik, and Y. H. Rawnitsky began publishing in Hebrew the annual *Reshumot: Me'asef le-divrei zikhronot etnografia ve-lefolklore be-yisrael* (“Records: An Anthology of Jewish Memoirs, Ethnography, and Folklore,” Odessa, 1918; Tel Aviv, 1930). The folklore fervor that gripped Eastern European Jewish intellectuals at that time, however, found its most prominent institutional structure in the founding in 1925 of YIVO, *Yidische visnshaftlekher institut* (“YIVO-Institute for Jewish Research”). The institute inaugurated a “Folklore Commission” under the leadership of Judah Leib Cahan (1881-1937), who in turn organized a network of “collectors” (*zamlers*). In the inter-war years they sent in a massive amount of Yiddish texts of folktales, folk songs, and any number of other folklore subjects.¹¹⁶

After the destruction of European Jewry in World War II, the research activities moved to Israel (then Palestine) and to the United States. In 1944 Raphael Patai (1910-96) and J. J. Rivlin (1889-1971) founded the “Palestine Institute for Folklore and Ethnology” and its corresponding journal *Edoth*, of which only three volumes ever appeared (1945-48). Yom-Tov Lewinski (1899-1973), who had previously renewed the publication of *Reshumot* (“Records”) (n.s. 5 vols., Tel-Aviv, 1946-53), founded in 1948 the “Israel Folklore Society” and its journal *Yeda-‘Am*, which is still currently published. In 1954 Dov Noy established the “Israel Folktale Archives,” now at the University of Haifa, and likewise organized a network of collectors whose recorded tales provided the basis for modern folktale scholarship in Israel. In the United States YIVO offers an institutional framework for Yiddish folklore studies, but individuals, either as independent or university affiliated scholars, carry out research by their

¹¹⁴ See Kiel 1992.

¹¹⁵ See Ben-Amos 1981:10-12.

¹¹⁶ See Gottesman 1993.

explorations of Jewish folklore in the United States and Canada.¹¹⁷ The “Jewish Folklore Section” of the American Folklore Society and the publication of the *Jewish Folklore and Ethnography Review* (formerly *Jewish Folklore and Ethnography Newsletter*), founded in 1977, have become forums for scholarly communication. The transference of scholarly activities in folklore to Israel and to the United States involved also an expansion of the ethnic scope of research. Yiddish-speaking Jews were no longer the major targeted ethnic group. Rather, students of folklore expanded their research—which by that time had become motivated primarily by exotic sentiments and by the feeling of ethnic pride—to include other Jewish societies that speak different Jewish languages.¹¹⁸

Simultaneously with the emergence of research in Central and Eastern Europe, the noted Spanish scholar Joan Menéndez Pidal (1861-1915) initiated the recording and analysis of Sephardic poetry. He discovered in the Judeo-Spanish ballads and romances poetic vestiges of medieval Spanish balladry that had been lost in Spanish folklore of the nineteenth century but that had remained vibrant in the poetry of the Jews expelled from Spain four hundred years earlier. His work provides a foundation for modern research into Judeo-Spanish poetry.¹¹⁹

The scholarly study of Jewish folklore first established the currency of themes, tales, songs, proverbs, riddles, and other genres in the oral traditions of Jewish communities. Either under the auspices of an organization or as individual researchers, students of folklore insisted upon, and often provided the necessary documentation for, the oral narration, singing, or simple utterance of a text. Such an approach marked a crucial turning point in the study of Jewish society at large. Editors and printers had previously drawn freely from post-biblical and medieval traditions that were either in oral circulation or in popular publication and had presented the texts as “folktales”—even when they could not confirm their existence in the current oral traditions. For example, at mid-nineteenth-century Wolff Pascheles published in Prague a volume of *Sippurim* (“Tales”) (1853-70) that he described in the subtitle as “a collection of Jewish folk-legends, tales, myths, chronicles, memoirs, and biographies.” The anthology was an

¹¹⁷ For example, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1972; Mintz 1968. American folklorists tend toward ethnographic research of narratives and narrating, whereas in Israel the recording of tales previously had a literary focus and more recently veered toward ethnographic methods.

¹¹⁸ See Hasan-Rokem and Yassif 1989, 1990.

¹¹⁹ See Armistead 1978.

important publication and included for the first time the story of the Golem as a local legend of Prague;¹²⁰ the editor, however, has not underscored its orality, since he included it among other medieval texts without further mention of oral tradition. By comparison, the folklore research that emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century and expanded during the twentieth century discovered the tales and songs that Jews performed orally in their communities.

The emphasis on the oral currency of tradition shifted the scholarly perspectives on Jewish life. No longer solely pious, spiritual, and religious—since print reflected “Jewishness”—oral traditions present the secular dimension of cultural life, not the least of which included fantastic, demonic, bawdy, and erotic elements. Although Jewish mysticism presented some of these aspects previously (often coated in religious symbolism in order to reflect the particular perspectives of males in their prime), spoken language and the genres of oral folklore projected them in a differentiated way by distinguishing between tales, songs, proverbs and other formulas in terms of gender, age, class, education, and degree of religiosity. Furthermore, these forms display conflicts and amity between ethnic groups, classes, and genders within the community and the family, not unlike the folklores of other peoples.

The analysis of Jewish oral narratives has been mostly comparative, which is to say it has focused primarily on drawing out the similarities between the recorded oral tales and their analogues in international folktale tradition, in talmudic-midrashic and medieval texts, and in the repertoires of other Jewish ethnic groups. For example, tale types 510 (“Cinderella and Cap o’ Rushes”) and 923 (“Love Like Salt”) each combine within a single story a Yiddish version of “Cinderella” that corresponds to the Western and Eastern European model,¹²¹ but the Moroccan, Tunisian, and Yemenite versions of the tale, for which there are no earlier printed texts in any Jewish language, bear greater similarity to the sixteenth-century Mediterranean renditions. The most comprehensive comparative annotations for Yiddish tales are to be found in Haim Schwarzbaum, *Studies in Jewish and World Folklore* (1968), which employs as its basis texts sent by readers to a newspaper, rather than orally recorded tales.

The study of the secular oral poetry changed available knowledge of

¹²⁰ See bin-Gorion 1990:261-65 [nos. 142-44] and Pascheles 1853-70. For an English translation, see Field 1976. See also Idel 1990.

¹²¹ See Alexander 1993, 1994; Bar-Itzhak and Shenhar 1993:80-93; Bar-Itzhak 1993; Cahan 1931:54-63 [no. 13]; Dundes 1982; Weinreich 1988:85-88.

Jewish society even more radically. Songs of earlier periods were not available for analysis, and hence the newly published poetic texts revealed a dimension of creativity and communication that was simply unrecognized before. Since a great number of the singers were women, folk songs opened up a window into their world—the artistic representation of which was previously obscure. Thematically both tales and songs represented internal personal and communal tensions and aspirations that were often unique to Jewish life, even when drawing upon the repertoires of neighboring peoples.

Tales

Yiddish

By the time modern collection of Yiddish folktales began in the last decade of the nineteenth century, many Hebrew and Yiddish chapbooks had been circulating among the Ashkenazic Jews in the Pale of Settlement, the legal area for Jewish residence in czarist Russia.¹²² This popular literature included books of two kinds: (a) Hasidic hagiography and (b) tale collections (*mayseh bikhlekh*). No systematic analysis of this literature is yet available, but it is possible to surmise a degree of thematic overlap between the stories in print and in oral circulation, though the narrative pamphlets included a great amount of written popular literature, known in Yiddish as *schund literatur* (“shameful literature.”)¹²³ The sheer quantity of texts recorded by the members of the Jewish Ethnographic Expedition, the YIVO, and later the Israel Folktale Archives teams changes the quality of knowledge available concerning Yiddish folktales. At first, collectors sought out narrative texts in the Pale townlets, villages, and crowded urban centers; later they also recorded narratives from immigrants from this area who came to Western Europe, the United States, and Canada, and to Israel. In spite of apparent analogues, the recording of oral tales exposed certain aspects of them in a new light that print only masked before, a development that made possible in turn a better correlation of themes and forms with social factors. The recording of oral tales moved the narrators away from

¹²² See Weinreich 1992; Kiel 1992.

¹²³ See Shmeruk 1983. Some preliminary descriptions of the Harvard Library holdings of Yiddish pamphlet literature are in L. Wiener 1899:355-84 and Robak 1928. I would like to thank Sara Zfatman for further information on this collection.

the controlling normative influence of the learned rabbis, printers, and editors and therewith enabled them to tell freely the stories and anecdotes that they knew so well. Consequently, collectors began to register the presence of internationally known tale types in the Jewish narrative repertoire in increasing numbers. At first the international tale types were a rarity in Yiddish collections, and as late as the thirties Moses Gaster (1856-1939) expressed doubts about their currency in Jewish society.¹²⁴ Later research removed any such doubts. In their Yiddish or Yiddish-derived renditions, themes and heroes known in worldwide folktale traditions assumed Jewish garb and action according to Jewish social values. Folklore research revealed Yiddish narrators who told stories (local legends about their respective communities, their prominent landmarks, leaders, and historical events) that they had learned from the peoples among whom they had earlier lived. Consequently, these Yiddish narrators contributed to a renewal of stories that had once flourished throughout the larger Jewish tradition. Within this corpus there is, however, an apparent paucity of foreign legendary and historical narratives. The stories that defined the ethnicity of other groups, in either social or historical terms, seemed not to have crossed into the tradition of Yiddish narrators.

Judeo-Spanish

The initial motivation for the exploration of Judeo-Spanish folklore was a scholarly fascination with the linguistic and literary retentive ability of the Sephardim. Four hundred years after their expulsion from Spain and Portugal their language and oral tradition appeared to maintain vestiges of medieval Spanish ballads and romances that had long disappeared from the Iberian peninsula. Folktales have not manifested the same retentive quality that other genres have, and therefore their study has lagged behind. Max Grunwald, who initiated the systematic research into Jewish folklore, recorded Judeo-Spanish folktales (albeit in translation, first in German and later in Hebrew). Narrative texts in Judeo-Spanish began to appear in the works of linguists and dialectologists who explored Judeo-Spanish in Monastir (former Yugoslavia), Constantinople, the Balkan peninsula, and northern Morocco.¹²⁵ The recording of Judeo-Spanish folktales received a

¹²⁴ M. Gaster 1931.

¹²⁵ See for example Crews 1938, 1955a, 1955b, 1979; Larrea Palacin 1952-53; Luria 1930; Wagner 1914; and the bibliography in Haboucha 1992.

new impetus with the establishment of the Israel Folktale Archives, in which about 1500 Sephardic texts are now on deposit. These texts were recorded mostly from Near Eastern speakers, but also from recent immigrants from Greece, Turkey, Morocco, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. The rise in ethnic consciousness in Israel also encouraged the publication of popular bilingual editions of Judeo-Spanish folktale collections, thereby increasing the availability of Judeo-Spanish folktales.¹²⁶ Thematically, the Judeo-Spanish narrative tradition, which had enjoyed cultural contacts with both European and Near Eastern societies, is rich in international tale types, which were classified by Reginetta Haboucha in her *Types and Motifs of Judeo-Spanish Folktales* (1992). In addition, stories about biblical and post-biblical heroes and events and about medieval Sephardic figures like Maimonides, as well as those addressing local historical figures and events, all recur in the repertoire of the Sephardic narrators. These narrators (and their audiences, no doubt) seemed also to delight in various comic tales concerning Djuha, the Near Eastern trickster.

Judeo-Arabic

Jews spoke the dialects of Judeo-Arabic that flourished in North African countries, Iraq, and Yemen. The scholarly interest in these communities began with their early contact with European Jews in the first half of the twentieth century and increased after their migration to Israel upon the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. At that time scholars separated the study of speaking from the study of oral tradition. The linguists analyzed grammar and pronunciation, often focusing on the Hebrew Bible as a constant text with its oral reading as the dialectical variable, whereas the folklorists recorded the oral traditions of these

¹²⁶ See Koen-Sarano 1986, 1991, 1994. Recorded mostly from family members, recollection, and friends, her works have a higher representation of Italian tradition. See also Moscona 1985; Alexander and Romero 1988; Alexander and Noy 1989. The last collection includes Sephardic tales in Hebrew translation. In recent years the research on the Sephardic folktale in particular and the Jewish-Spanish culture in general has been intensified. See Alexander 1999; Lévy and Lévy Zumwalt 1993a, and Stillman and Stillman 1999. A leading role in the promotion and preservation of the culture of the Sephardic Jews has been taken by the “Ma‘aleh Adumim Institute for the Documentation of the Judeo-Spanish Language and Culture” (e-mail: maaleadum@barak-online.net).

communities in Hebrew translation.¹²⁷ While lacking the idiomatic turn of performance in the original language, these Hebraic texts present the prevailing themes that dominated the narrative repertoires of these communities. The most prominent, yet not exclusive, theme in North Africa is that of the hagiography of holy people, that is to say, legends associated with the cult of the saints. These narratives recount the magical prowess of the righteous men who performed personal healing and other miraculous acts that saved entire communities from disaster.¹²⁸ The Judeo-Arabic narratives in Iraq drew upon earlier Jewish and medieval Arabic traditions, as well as the tale types that have been diffused throughout Asia and Europe. Heda Jason classified these in her *Folktales of the Jews of Iraq* (1988). In some cases the Islamic renditions of the biblical narratives influenced the versions that Jews told about their own cultural heroes. Modern narrators told animal and demonic tales alongside legends of confrontation between the Jewish communities and the Islamic authorities. The popularity of the story of “Hannah and her Seven Sons” and its association with the fast of the Ninth of Av as in the Sephardic tradition, rather than with the Hanukkah festival as in Apocryphal literature and Ashkenazic Jewry, becomes indicative of historical cultural connections between Jewish communities in the Near East and Jewish communities in the Mediterranean basin. Compared with those in Iraq, the number of Judeo-Arabic folktale manuscripts from Yemen is rather small. Yet the art of Yemenite storytellers impressed ethnographers and folklorists to such a degree that they undertook to record their narratives in a rather intensive fashion.¹²⁹ Later Jewish-Yemenite scholars sought out these storytellers and upon finding them recorded stories on a broad set of topics ranging from historical to animal tales and from romantic to religious narratives.

The narrators in each of these countries speak distinct dialects of Judeo-Arabic. Likewise, their narrative traditions differ from each other. They share tales that are current among many nations and are known as tale

¹²⁷ For some of these linguistic studies, see Blanc 1964 and Morag 1997. Jastrow (1978, 1981, 1990) studies the local Arabic dialects among non-Jews, offering important information for comparative analysis. For folktale collections, see Agasi 1960; Noy 1965; and, in particular, Jason 1988.

¹²⁸ For linguistic studies of North-African Judeo-Arabic, see Bar-Asher 1987, 1992; Brunot and Malka 1939; Stillman 1988. Among the folktale collections are Bar-Itzhak and Shenhar 1993; Noy 1963b, 1966a, 1966b, 1967a, 1967b. See also Ben-Ami 1992. The basic study on the cult of the saints among Moroccan Jewry is Ben-Ami 1989.

¹²⁹ See Jason 1966; Noy 1963b.

types. The cultural contacts between the Jewish communities in Iraq and Yemen were more intensive than either of these communities maintained with North African Jewry, and consequently they share additional traditional literary themes respectively. In spite of these similarities, however, the narrative traditions of each of these communities have their own thematic clusters and characteristic features.¹³⁰

Hebrew

The longing for folklore in the Hebrew language was inherent in the Jewish national aspirations for the return to Zion, the renewal of pastoral and farming life there, and the revival of the Hebrew language. These ideals of return to nature also implicitly inspired the hopes for the creation of a cultural tradition associated with nature—folk songs, folk dances, and folktales. However, Hebrew was used in Jewish societies' folktales even before Zionistic ideology motivated its revival as a spoken language. Its high position in the diglossic Jewish societies influenced editors and printers to publish their collections of narratives in Hebrew. For example, *Shivhei ha-Besht* ("In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov"), which appeared in the Ukraine (1814), and *Oseh Pele* ("The Miracle Worker"), which Yosef Shabbetai Farhi published in four volumes in Livorno (1845-69), both published in Hebrew tales that were current in other languages in Jewish societies; these works served in turn as texts for oral performances.¹³¹ These and other similar collections attest to the use of Hebrew in the narration of tales before its revival as a language appropriate for daily speech. Secondly, the documentation in Israel of folktales in Hebrew followed different directions than those envisioned by nationalistic aspirations. Several scholarly projects and amateur efforts have, in fact, contributed to the current availability of Hebrew folk narratives for research purposes.

First and foremost of these institutions is the Israel Folktale Archives (IFA), founded by Dov Noy in 1954. Currently with about 20,000 narrative texts recorded from storytellers who came to Israel from over 20 different countries, the Archives hold the largest collection in the world of Jewish folktales. With a relatively few exceptions the texts are in Hebrew,

¹³⁰ For bibliographical information and additional discussion of Yemenite folktales, see Tobi 1992.

¹³¹ See Ben-Amos and Mintz 1970; Yassif 1982.

a language that most of the narrators knew as a second language, with varying degrees of proficiency. The Archives contain a set of indexes that facilitate research in a number of different areas: country of origin, heroes, and tale types. The most popular figure in these narratives, cutting across ethnic divisions, is Elijah the Prophet. Between 1961 and the end of 1980, forty-three collections of annotated tales appeared in the IFA Publications Series. Selections of these collections and some unpublished tales also appeared in English translation, occasionally retold rather than just translated.¹³²

Initially Dov Noy developed a network of collectors and storytellers whose orientation was toward the gathering of the folktales, primarily fairytales and legends, of the ethnic groups that had immigrated to Israel after the establishment of the state. Consequently, the dynamic narration of folktales recorded in the Hebrew language that emerged in Israel in other genres has not been well represented in the Archives; henceforth these related genres will require special projects for recording and analysis.

Hebrew wit and humor were a special case in point. As the concept of “Jewish Humor” emerged during the twentieth century,¹³³ some observers suggested that its allegedly unique qualities are a byproduct of the cultural clashes between Jewish traditionality and European modernity, and that they would fade away if restricted to a homogenous society in Israel.¹³⁴ Until the early fifties the publication of wit and humor in Hebrew involved East European Jewish jokes, originally told in Yiddish, as well as cycles of anecdotes that deal with prominent public figures in traditional and modern societies; these materials were, by and large, translations from stories that people had transmitted orally in Yiddish.¹³⁵ In 1956 two Israeli humor writers, Dahn Ben-Amotz and Hlayyim Hlefer, published an edited collection of jokes, *Yalkut ha-Kezavim* (“A Sack of Lies”), that included jokes and anecdotes told by members of the Jewish underground of the Palmaḥ during the forties. Elliott Oring has translated it and has furthermore

¹³² See Noy 1961; Cheichel 1992. In addition to the publication series of the Israeli Folktale Archives, several individual volumes have appeared in Hebrew and English. Among them are Bar-Itzhak and Shenhar 1993; Noy 1963a, 1963b, 1965, 1966a, 1966b, 1967a. Sadeh (1989) and Schwartz (1983, 1986, 1987, 1993) have retold tales from the Archives. Information about Jewish folklore research in Israel in general is now available on the Internet, prepared by Gila Gutenberg at the address: <http://www.folklore.org.il/>

¹³³ See Ben-Amos 1973; Oring 1992.

¹³⁴ See Landmann 1962, and also Reik 1962.

¹³⁵ See Druyanov 1935; Sadan 1952, 1953.

supplemented it both with additional texts from the authors' manuscript as well as with stories that he recorded from these same (and additional) narrators; the result was published as *Israeli Humor* (1981). While this particular collection of humor puts to rest the issue of transference from the vernacular to Hebrew and from the diaspora to Israel, more importantly it reveals a variety of narratives. Some are certainly a direct outgrowth of the social life of youth in the Palmaḥ, others are adaptations of Arabic tales,¹³⁶ and still others are versions of Jewish (and generally diffused) tales applied to Israeli personalities.¹³⁷

Since its establishment the historical experience of Israel has been marred by a succession of traumatic events, ranging from periodic wars to catastrophes that were themselves related to the sort of military preparedness that the anticipation of war requires. These events spurred narrative cycles that phased in and out of oral circulation. In spite of their inherent transience, these cycles often followed traditional narrative patterns found in Jewish societies and likewise demonstrated the dynamics of the rise and decline of topical narratives.¹³⁸

In an ironic twist played upon ideology by Jewish history, the "new Israeli peasants" took charge of the recording and collecting of their own folktales. While not fully adherent to scholarly folkloristic principles and often bound by a romantic image of their own past, members of the kibbutzim in Israel began to record and collect their own local tales, each of which preserved the communal memory of the particular community. On occasion, the recording took place during live performances in front of local audiences; the ensuing texts thus reflect the dynamics of oral Hebrew narration. These tales remain on deposit in the "Local Tales" section in "Yad Tabenkin," the central research institute of the United Kibbutz Movement. Some of the tales have been published in pamphlets designed for local distribution. These have, in turn, and not surprisingly, entered the repertoire of local museum guides.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Compare, for example, Hanauer 1907:21-22 with Oring 1981:143 [no. 12a].

¹³⁷ Compare, for example, Dorson 1960:1968 [no. 76] with Oring 1981:122 [no. 142a].

¹³⁸ See Bar-Itzhak 1992; Katriel and Shenhar 1990; Schely-Newman 1993; Shenhar 1988, 1989, 1991; Shenhar and Katriel 1992; Yassif 1992.

¹³⁹ I would like to thank Gina Gali, the director of the Upper Galilee Regional Archives, and her brother, Professor Itamar Even-Zohar, for the information about the "Local Tales" project of the United Kibbutz Movement. See also Katriel 1994.

In the past thirty years there has been a growing polarization in Israeli society between secular and religious Jews. The jokes, the trauma narratives, and the local legends constitute narrative traditions that emerged among secular Israelis. As a result of the social cleavage, the religious Israelis have composed and performed, both in small groups and before mass audiences, narrative cycles of religious advocacy. These follow traditional hagiographic tales about the healing and second-sight abilities of individual rabbis. Eli Yassif considers these Hebrew tales the latest phase in the long history of the Hebrew folktale.¹⁴⁰

Folk Songs

Yiddish

During the second half of the nineteenth century “folk song” (*Yiddishe folkslid*) became a literary concept referring to popular songs written for, rather than sung by, the people. As scholarship emerged toward the end of the century, confusion between popular and traditional songs prevailed. At the very same time that Ginzburg and Marek published their groundbreaking volume of *Yiddish Folksongs in Russia* (1901), the poet Yakir (Marc) Warshavsky (1885-1942) published a smaller collection of his songs and music, *Yidische folkslider mit Noten* (“Yiddish Folksongs with Music”), about daily life and concerns. One of his songs, *Oyfen Pripetchik* (“On the Stove”), indeed obtained great popularity and in the United States still serves as a common example of a “Yiddish folk song.” Similarly, one of the lullabies sent as a folk song by a reader to Ginzburg and Marek turned out to have been written by Shalom Aleichem (pseudonym of Shalom Rabinovitz, 1859-1916) in 1892.¹⁴¹ Then, as now, folk songs moved back and forth across the boundary between orality and literacy. Such shifts notwithstanding, the study of Yiddish folk songs, more than of any other genre, made a major contribution to the study of Jewish life in the Pale of Settlement, thereby exposing a dimension of creativity that was exclusively oral and had no precedent in Jewish culture either in print or script. Jews sang in sorrow and they sang in joy. Music was part

¹⁴⁰ See Yassif 1999:429-60.

¹⁴¹ See Mlotek 1954:185-86; Cahan 1981. The new edition is a reprint of a copy that was in the hands of Shalom Aleichem, who inserted in his own handwriting corrections for the text published in Ginzburg and Marek [1901] 1991:113*-114* [no. 82].

of their life. The Hasidic Jews incorporated songs, music, and dance into their communal religious worship. Yet, while Hasidim and non-Hasidim wrote down and published their *narratives*, they neglected to do so for their songs.

An influential literary and intellectual figure who actively collected and published Yiddish folk songs was the writer Y. L. Peretz. However, the first book of orally recorded songs was J. [Y.] L. Cahan's *Yiddish Folksongs with their Original Airs* (1912), which was later incorporated into his 1957 volume *Yiddish Folk songs with Melodies*. Like other anthologies, Cahan's collection included the *vigliden* ("cradle songs") or *shlofliden* ("sleeping songs") with which Jewish mothers lulled their children to sleep. The lullabies expressed the mothers' aspirations for their children's future, their personal anxieties, and the fantastic rewards they imagined for their infants.¹⁴² Other genres were ballads and narrative songs that told stories about lovers—including their death, abandonment, and murder—and about unwed mothers, illicit love affairs, and the despair caused by love across ethnic boundaries. Singers, many of whom were women, often described young Jewish maids and youth, both of which figures are common themes in European balladry. Historic tragedies for the local community were recalled in these songs; singers commented on current affairs, family problems, and immigration from Europe to America and to Eretz Israel. The songs celebrated the joys and lamented the woes of individual, familial, and communal life. Traditional themes, subjects, and allusions to biblical, talmudic, and medieval topics and characters occur least frequently in secular Yiddish folk songs in comparison to other genres. As a result of immigration, the tradition of the Yiddish folk song has faded away. In Israel, although it enjoyed a revival among the populace during the fifties and the sixties, original creativity ceased. In the United States the Yiddish oral tradition was transferred into musical broad sheets of the "Tenement Songs." These broad sheets included similar love themes to which song writers added nostalgia for the "Old World" as well as expressions of their hopes and disappointments in the New World.¹⁴³

Judeo-Spanish

¹⁴² See Noy 1986.

¹⁴³ See Ginzburg and Marek [1901]1991; Rubin 1963; Slobin 1982; Vinkovetzky et al. 1983-87.

The study of Judeo-Spanish narrative poetry is the most dynamic field in current Jewish folklore scholarship. No doubt, the solid foundation that Juan Menéndez Pidal (1861-1915) provided, buttressed by the tireless and rigorous research of Samuel G. Armistead and the late Joseph Silverman (commenced in 1957), has ensured scholarly visibility and quality in this area. Individual interest, however, is hardly a sufficient reason for the proliferation of studies in Judeo-Spanish folk literature. Rather, it is the dual ethnic perspective as well as interdisciplinary goals and methods that motivate, stimulate, and define the issues that dominate the study of Judeo-Spanish oral narrative poetry. While Spanish students find in the objects of their research vestiges of medieval Spanish language and poetry, Judeo-Spanish researchers explore their own oral poetry in seeking to establish their cultural identity and its representations in the East Mediterranean. Judeo-Spanish ballads demonstrate the viability of oral transmission as a vehicle for the transference of literature from one generation to another and underscore the literary process of generic transformation in European poetry by pointing out a clear thematic relation between epic and ballads. At the same time these ballads exhibit the effects of change, literary influences, and adaptation to new oral traditions and languages to which Judeo-Spanish society has been exposed since the expulsion.

With a few exceptions, this balladry is a women's poetry. As the classification system that Armistead and Silverman constructed for their corpus of the texts aptly demonstrates, thematically speaking these poems range from tales of Spanish heroic epics, French Carolingian narratives, and historical and biblical ballads, to the whole gamut of romantic relations. These biblical ballads are thematically distinct from the themes upon which midrashic literature dwells. While the sacrifice of Isaac, the adventures of Joseph in the house of Potiphar, and the post-biblical stories of the martyrdom of Hanna (popular among Jews in the countries under Islamic rule) are stock themes in Jewish tradition and liturgy, the stories of the respective rapes of Dinah (Genesis 34) and Tamar (2 Samuel 13)—which also count among the themes of Judeo-Spanish biblical themes—rarely appear in Jewish medieval literature. They correspond to themes of rape and abduction in balladry, but were selected by the singers from biblical narratives. Narrative poetry dominates the Judeo-Spanish corpus and reaffirms the cultural ties of Sephardic Jewry to medieval Spain. Yet singers also perform other quite different songs such as lullabies, dirges, and wedding songs—none of which convey an ideological message or address a scholarly theory—that remain (and perhaps precisely for this

reason) an integral part of the Judeo-Spanish culture, life, and tradition.¹⁴⁴

Judeo-Arabic

The study of Judeo-Arabic oral poetry is in its inception. The ethnomusicologists who recorded songs in Near Eastern Jewish communities analyzed mostly the music rather than the texts. Not surprisingly, the current students of Judeo-Arabic songs are all native speakers of the respective dialects of the language. Regional differences notwithstanding, the folk songs of all three basic Judeo-Arabic speaking areas (Iraq, Yemen, and North Africa) share similar features: a) literacy supplementing poetic orality, b) women as the primary singers, c) a linguistic interdependence and thematic-contextual differentiation between the Judeo-Arabic and the Arabic poetry in these areas.

Iraqi poetic texts are available from nineteenth-century manuscripts that were, perhaps, mnemonic records used by the singers themselves. In North Africa there are texts from earlier centuries, although the textual differences between the early and the later nineteenth-century manuscripts suggest that the songs were subject to oral circulation and variation. In most cases men wrote down their poems while women maintained them orally. This division, which occurred in Yemen as well, is a function of the educational system in traditional Jewish communities.

The Jews of Iraq sang their songs in Judeo-Arabic as well as in local Arabic. In Judeo-Arabic they sang on Jewish themes, including parodies and comic songs, while in Arabic on general subjects. However, some of the songs in Arabic contained Jewish alongside Arabic names, attesting to their Jewish origins. They sang their religious songs about pilgrimage and during the ritual of grave visitation, while their secular songs were about love and weddings. Some of these songs were humorous, deflecting the social and psychological tension that weddings generate. The lullabies share themes and language with the Arab songs, though, in spite of their common human function, the Judeo-Arabic songs reflect Jewish cultural values and aspirations. Lamentations and dirges were part of the burial and mourning rituals. Most of the women's songs from Yemen are part of the wedding

¹⁴⁴ See Armistead 1978, 1979, 1994; Armistead and Silverman 1971-94, 1983-84, 1989; Attias 1961, 1972; Lévy 1959-73; Refael 1998. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Armistead for the most generous help he offered me explaining in detail current issues within Judeo-Spanish poetry and providing me with rich bibliographical references that the works cited in this survey only partially reflect.

ceremonies and hence have romantic themes and metaphors. In Morocco the women sing both lyric and epic poetry, the analysis of which is still in progress.¹⁴⁵

Hebrew

The promotion of folk songs that lingered in Yiddish succeeded in Hebrew. Initially, Eastern European poets and authors sought to write songs for and about the people, conceiving them as folk songs, but folklorists were quick to point out that folk songs are of—rather than for or about—“the folk.”¹⁴⁶ Yet, shifting the focus, in the Land of Israel, poets and bureaucratic folk song promoters in national organizations applied the same attitudes toward folk songs in Hebrew, discovering a fertile ground for their creativity. They meshed the idea of “folklore”¹⁴⁷ with national aspirations and formulated a prescribed tradition that projected pastoral longing onto the biblical countryside. This Hebrew folk song tradition complemented the idea of cultural revival. It appears as if the Jewish return to farming and herding in the biblical land could not have been complete unless accompanied by songs that relate the verses and melodies of old. The poetry and music of Near Eastern and particularly Yemenite Jewish communities, as well as Arabic melodies, became the sources that the European Jews tapped in their search for an idealized tradition of Hebrew folk songs. Thematically, these songs differ radically from the poetic traditions in other Jewish languages. Whereas the songs in Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish, and Judeo-Arabic revolved around events in the life-cycle and had their fair share of ballads and narratives, the poets who wrote the Hebrew songs associated them with the annual cycle of festivals celebrating agricultural rites and transitions; these poets only scantily recounted either recent or earlier biblical-heroic actions.

The distribution of these poems took place through the educational system of schools and youth organizations of political national movements. The Jewish National Fund has had a decisive role in the initiation and the promotion of such a “folk poetry.” Its officers commissioned and then published these songs, circulating them among the youth not only in Eretz-Israel but also in Europe during the thirties, in advocacy of national ideas.

¹⁴⁵ See Avishur 1987; Caspi 1985; Chetrit 1994.

¹⁴⁶ See Kahan [Cahan] 1981 [1952].

¹⁴⁷ See Ben-Amos 1983.

Alongside this strand of an idealized tradition there existed also a steady creation of countercultural tradition of Hebrew songs by children and adolescents, sometimes known as “street-songs,” which enjoyed a more informal oral currency in the Israeli and pre-state Jewish society. Many songs of both kinds are now on deposit at the Waches-Noy Jewish Folk Song Archives at the National Hebrew University Library in Jerusalem.¹⁴⁸

Proverbs

Yiddish

The proverbial quality of Yiddish, a language that was primarily spoken, and to which writers referred derogatorily as “jargon,” attracted scholarly attention from the inception of its linguistic and folkloristic analysis. Abraham Moses Tendlau (1802-78) collected Yiddish proverbs in his *Sprichwörter und Redensarten deutsch-jüdischer Vorzeit* (1860). However, the basic collection that provided the foundation for future Yiddish proverb scholarship was Ignaz Bernstein’s *Jüdische Sprichwörter und Redensarten* (1908); this particular edition was, in fact, a second edition of an earlier publication in 1888. The volume includes 3,993 proverbs arranged in alphabetical order according to their primary concepts. Later, other collections appeared, some in English translation. Popular books of Yiddish wit and wisdom often included a list of proverbs, yet none surpassed Bernstein’s volume in size. Among his proverbs are translations of or commentary on biblical or talmudic proverbs, such as no. 3955, “Syag le-Hokhmah Shtika—ober Shtikah aleyn is kayn hokhme nit” (“A fence to wisdom is silence—but sheer silence is no wisdom”), which offers metafolk-commentary on mishnah Avot 3:13. Others are Yiddish renditions of East-European and Baltic proverbs such as no. 1070, “sug nit ‘hop!,’ bis dü bist nit aribergeschprungen” (“Don’t say ‘hop,’ until you have jumped over”), which is common in the area languages.¹⁴⁹ Still others emerged within conversations in Jewish society, representing its ethos, mores, wit, wisdom, aggression, and aspirations.

The proverbial representation of these values, observations, and emotions endeared the Yiddish turn of speech to those who retained its knowledge while pursuing studies in other fields and other literatures. They

¹⁴⁸ See Bayer 1980; Shahar 1989, 1993, 1994.

¹⁴⁹ See Kuusi 1985: no. 519.

recall Yiddish proverbs nostalgically and at the same time perceive in them psychological verbal aggressiveness that seems to them uniquely Jewish. No wonder that Shirley Kumove entitled her English translation of Yiddish proverbs *Words Like Arrows* (1984).¹⁵⁰ Grammatically, it is possible to discern in Yiddish proverbs seven fundamental patterns: 1) conditional, 2) comparative, 3) imperative, 4) interrogative, 5) negative, 6) accusative, and 7) riddle sentences. Parallelism is, at times, a secondary grammatical marker.¹⁵¹

Judeo-Spanish

La Celestina (1499, 1502), the first masterpiece of Spanish prose, was written around the time that Spain expelled the Jews and includes highly proverbial dialogues. Such a mode of speaking has become better known in Spanish literature in the words that Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616) put in the mouth of his colorful character Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote* (1605-15). Speaking in proverbs has been retained as a prominent feature in Judeo-Spanish conversations and has attracted intensive scholarly interest. The first to publish these proverbs were Meyer Kayserling (1829-1905) and Raymond R. Foulché-Delbosc (1864-1929), both of whom recorded them directly and by correspondence, the first from Serbian and Bulgarian Jews and the latter from Judeo-Spanish speakers in Turkey and Greece. After the publication of M. Kayserling's *Refranes o proverbios españoles de los judíos españoles* (1890) and R. Foulché-Delbosc's "Proverbs judéo-espagnols" (1895), many other collections appeared in books as well as in scholarly and popular journals. Henry Besso's bibliography (1980) includes 145 entries. Early observers suggest, and later scholars indirectly confirm, that in the Jewish-Spanish society women were and remain the primary speakers of proverbs. The proverbs provide social commentary on people and actions rather than serve the purposes of confrontational discourse.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ See also Kumove 1999 and Matisoff 1979.

¹⁵¹ See Silverman-Weinreich 1978.

¹⁵² A comprehensive bibliography of Jewish-Spanish proverb collections is provided in Besso 1980. For additional studies see Bunis 1981:141-45 [nos. 1292-1333]; Alexander and Hasan-Rokem 1988; Goldberg 1993; Lévy 1969; Lévy and Lévy Zumwalt 1993a, 1993b, 1994.

Judeo-Arabic

The speakers of Judeo-Arabic in Yemen, Iraq, and North Africa make extensive use of proverbs in their discourse. Consequently, their collection and analysis have been a research priority among the ethnographers and folklorists of these communities, native and non-native speakers alike. Pioneering work (such as that undertaken by S. D. F. Goitein and I. B. S. E. Yahuda¹⁵³) laid the foundation for the prolific scholarship in this field to which many distinguished scholars later contributed.¹⁵⁴ The proverbs reflect both the influence of the respective Arabic communities and their dialects, as well as the continuation of the Jewish proverbial tradition. Speakers learned this tradition from biblical and talmudic-midrashic sources. Thematically, the majority of the proverbs concern family values and offer observations on human conduct. The analytical essays of Judeo-Arabic proverb scholarship deal with their subject from social, literary, and linguistic perspectives.

Hebrew

The study of Hebrew proverbs faces a precarious linguistic and literary situation. Since in Jewish societies not only diglossia prevails—a diglossia in which Hebrew holds a privileged position of a sacred language—but also a bi-literariness in which Hebrew literacy and vernacular orality co-occur, proverbs have often crossed the boundaries between the two linguistic and literary levels. As quotative behavior, the citation of Hebrew proverbs (often from the Hebrew Bible, the Mishnah, Talmud, or Midrash) provided speakers with the authority and prestige bestowed upon them by knowledge of tradition. Over the years Hebrew proverbs appeared in translation in other Jewish languages, or Hebrew terms became components in the constructions of proverbs and puns in other Jewish languages, thus creating bilingual proverbs and rhymes. For example, consider “Ka’as ve-heimah [Hebrew: “anger and rage”] makhn dem mentshen far a [Yiddish: “make the people to a”] behemah [Hebrew:

¹⁵³ See Goitein 1934; Yahuda 1932-34.

¹⁵⁴ For example, see proverbs from Morocco in Ben-Ami 1970 and Brunot and Malka 1937; from Iraq in Hayat 1972 and Avishur 1997; and from Yemen in Ratzaby 1983.

“cow” (generic word)]. It is quite possible, as was suggested by Israel Hlayyim Tawiow (1858-1920),¹⁵⁵ that there is a greater proportion of Hebrew in Yiddish proverbs than in other forms of speech.

With the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, a reversal has occurred; speakers translate proverbs and idioms from other Jewish languages into Hebrew. The change in the public attitude has turned the relation between Hebrew and other Jewish languages upside down, and has especially affected the domain of proverb communication. The citation of non-Hebrew proverbs in their original languages or in translation has become, in Hebrew discourse, a sort of affected behavior that is supposed to attest to a deeper cultural knowledge, and, according to their speakers, a new prestige. In other cases, proverbs and idioms from Jewish languages enter Hebrew speech and the constructions of new Hebrew proverbs. For example, the Yiddish optimistic idiom “zayin gut” (“[it] will be good”) transformed in the Hebrew slang of the fifties to “haya tov ve-tov she-haya” (“it was good, and it is good that it was,” speaking of the past) as a commentary on a grueling experience that was nevertheless personally enriching. The newly created proverb has a chiasmic structure that occurred in early Hebrew proverbs.¹⁵⁶ “The Israeli Proverb Index,” a project that Galit Hasan-Rokem has initiated and directs at the Hebrew University, holds on record about 10,000 proverbs, listed in their original languages as well as in Hebrew translation and indexed according to several parameters: key thematic terms, ethnic groups, informants, names, and poetic devices. Ethnographic descriptions of potential use and contextual situations accompany each proverb.¹⁵⁷

Riddles

Yiddish

As in many other societies, among the Eastern European Jews the

¹⁵⁵ See Tawiow 1917, 1921.

¹⁵⁶ Compare with Ecclesiastes 7:1, “A good name is better than precious oil,” which in Hebrew has a chiasmic structure: *tov shem mi-shemen tov*. Idiomatic and proverbial expressions of Hebrew slang from the forties through the sixties can be found in the popular book by Ben-Amotz and Ben-Yehuda 1972-82.

¹⁵⁷ For a study done under the auspices of “The Israeli Proverb Index,” see Hasan-Rokem 1993.

riddle is primarily a children's genre. Speakers grow out of riddling as they do from other early verbal behavior. Consequently, the recording and analysis of Yiddish riddles is glaring in its paucity. Fittingly, their first collector was an educator and a publisher of children's books, Shloyme [Solomon] Bastomski (1891-1941), whose *Yidishe folks-retenishn* (1917) was part of the new secular educational program that he promoted for Jewish schools. For Bastomski the riddles served as a pedagogical vehicle by which he transferred traditional learning techniques to a modern school system. The collection included 171 riddles and was later increased to 222, but it included neither linguistic nor social analysis, nor any further information. Later a few collections of Yiddish riddles appeared sparingly in journals, and only recently have scholars turned to their analysis.¹⁵⁸

Judeo-Spanish

By comparison to studies of Spanish riddles¹⁵⁹ and other genres of Judeo-Spanish folklore, riddle analyses are few and far between. All in all, only about fifty riddles have been recorded, thirty-three by Max A. Luria in Monastir (former Yugoslavia), the rest by various scholars in Turkey. These riddles reflect the general characteristics of other Sephardic genres in which it is possible to trace medieval vestiges alongside local linguistic features. Thematically their solutions are taken from the domestic world, including animals and foodstuffs, and they therefore represent a somewhat narrower range than that found in the medieval literary Hebrew riddles from Spain.¹⁶⁰

Judeo-Arabic

Riddles have hardly been a research subject in the study of Judeo-Arabic dialects. This absence is particularly puzzling, since the literary antiquity of the form in the Near East and its currency in Arabic medieval popular literature are well established. Riddles are prevalent in the folklore

¹⁵⁸ See An-ski 1928b; Dowling 1991; Lapidus 1994.

¹⁵⁹ See Armistead 1992:109-22.

¹⁶⁰ See Armistead 1988-89:25-38; Armistead and Silverman 1983, 1985; see also Rosen-Moked 1981.

of the Arabic world,¹⁶¹ yet so far only a few riddles have been found in Yemenite and North African manuscripts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; since even these texts appear in Hebrew rather than in the Judeo-Arabic of the respective regions, a literary rather than oral context suggests itself.¹⁶² To put it simply, the recording of Judeo-Arabic riddles is an urgent task in the study of Jewish folklore.

Hebrew

Riddles have enjoyed a literary representation in Hebrew from the biblical to the modern period. Their renditions follow the principles according to which speakers formulate oral riddles. Furthermore, it is likely that the editors of the Hebrew Bible, the Talmuds, and the midrashic books, as well as the medieval and Baroque poets who resorted to this form, drew upon the metaphors and solutions that appeared originally in the oral traditions. The latter medium, however, has not been subjected to systematic recording or analysis.¹⁶³

Humor

The concept “Jewish humor” applies, in fact, only to the tradition of East European Jews and their descendants in other countries. Students have yet to research the jokes and wit of other Jewish ethnic groups. While in the nineteenth century some major European scholars and essayists such as Ernest Rénan (1823-92) and Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) considered the Jews to be a humorless people, in the twentieth century this attitude has completely reversed itself, and modern writings, as well as popular opinion, attribute to the Jews a unique humor of puzzling qualities. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) is responsible for the view that Jewish jokes are “stories

¹⁶¹ See El-Shamy 1995.

¹⁶² See Ratzaby 1983.

¹⁶³ See Schechter 1890; Turczyner 1924; Rosen-Moked 1981; Pagis 1986; Stein 1993. Alterman 1971 is a book of poetic riddles that was published posthumously. The editor, Menahem Dorman, summarizes the notes toward an introduction that were found among Alterman’s papers. They attest to his familiarity with folklore riddle scholarship and his intention to address some of the basic issues with which the students of riddles are concerned.

created by Jews and directed against Jewish characteristics.”¹⁶⁴ His followers hence considered aggression turned against the self to be “an essential feature of the truly Jewish joke,” that is to say, symptomatic of paranoia or masochism, or in the service of a masochistic mask such as deflecting external aggression or achieving a victory by defeat. Sociologists regard Jewish humor as a mark of social marginality, while others observe that humor serves Jews as a defense mechanism. Jewish East European intellectuals who have shifted from traditional to modern circles and who previously spoke Yiddish, but also Hebrew and a European language, out of longing for the life and language they left behind, considered Jewish humor to be the apex of wit because, in their opinion, it is grounded in linguistic and logical incongruities that are absent in the humor of other peoples.

As the opinion that Jews lacked humor reflects ignorance of Jewish life and letters, so too does the exaltation of Jewish humor as unique reveal an ignorance of other peoples’ jokes, anecdotes, and languages. However, as is the case in other societies, Jews tell jokes and sharpen their wit in relation to their particular languages, cultures, and social and historical experiences. In East European cities and townlets the local jesters (*badhanim*) entertained their audiences in wedding parties with tragicomic narratives involving family, religion, and society. The socio-historical position of an ethnic minority, and the bilingualism that has prevailed among Jews, also generated jokes that represent the conflicts and tensions inherent in these situations. They may be Jewish to the extent that their themes, characters, and languages are Jewish, but this reference and use does not make their humor inherently unique nor does it prevent Jews from incorporating into their narrative repertoires jokes told by other peoples. The self appears as the butt of jokes very widely, and not only among Jews. It is in general a very prevalent form of humorous exchange, highly tolerated by society; when the target is the collective self, or the community, however, among the Jews as with other groups, the narrators in fact split their society and laugh at those segments from which they seek to dissociate themselves.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ See Freud 1960:112.

¹⁶⁵ For references see Ben-Amos 1973; Bermant 1986; Brandes 1983; Davies 1991; Dorinson 1981; Dorson 1960; Dundes 1971, 1985; Landmann 1962a, 1962b; Lipman 1991 [1993]; Raskin 1992; Reik 1962; Rosenberg and Shapiro 1958; Schwara 1996; Ziv 1986.

Folklore in the Holocaust

During World War II, in the ghettos and the concentration camps as well as among the partisan units in the forests, idiomatic expressions, coded language, legends, and songs became an integral, often necessary, part of culture and communication. These forms transmitted and maintained traditional themes and usages and, adjusted for their new situations, became Jewish folklore of the Holocaust period. By the beginning of the war, folklore consciousness among East European Jews was well advanced, with the result that when conditions permitted, folklorists and men of letters felt obliged to record the folklore in their lives as one of the commemorative cultural monuments to the horrors they had experienced. An entry in the diary of Yitskhok Rudashevski, a fourteen-year-old boy in the Vilna ghetto murdered on the fifth or sixth of October 1943, records:

Monday the 2nd of November [1942]

Today we had a very interesting group meeting with the poet A. Sutskever [Sutzkever]. He talked to us about poetry, about art in general and about the subdivisions in poetry. In our group two important and interesting things were decided. We create the following sections in our literary group: Yiddish poetry, and what is most important, a section to engage in collecting ghetto folklore. This section interested and attracted me very much. We have already discussed certain details. In the ghetto dozen of sayings, ghetto curses and ghetto blessings are created before our eyes; terms like *vashenen*, "smuggling into the ghetto," even songs, jokes, and stories which already sound like legends. I feel that I shall participate zealously in this little circle, because the ghetto folklore which is amazingly cultivated in blood, and which is scattered over the little streets, must be collected and cherished as a treasure for the future.¹⁶⁶

The incorporation of a folklore collecting project into an educational program was rare. The poet Abraham Sutzkever (b. 1913), who motivated the youth, was a major literary figure in Vilna and cared not only for oral creativity in the ghetto but also for the many Jewish books and documents at YIVO, the Institute for Jewish Research, that he had saved from destruction. The diary of Yitskhok Rudashevski offers little clue as to the success of this collecting project. Most of the available information about Jewish folklore during the Holocaust draws from memories and recollections of survivors.

The Yiddish coded phrases and idiomatic expressions include a

¹⁶⁶ Holliday 1996:167-68.

disproportionately high representation of the Hebrew component of the Yiddish language as well as of terms of religious practice. The relatively high number of German-derived words in Yiddish required that speakers resort to Hebrew terms in order to maintain secrecy. These are often terms of warning about approaching German officers. For example “ya’aleh ve-yavo” is a special formula inserted in the daily prayer on holidays and the first day of the month. These two words mean “He shall rise and come.” But verbal play adds to the meaning: “yavan,” phonetically reminiscent of “yavo,” is “Greece” in Hebrew and Yiddish, and even referred to foreign soldiers in earlier slang.¹⁶⁷

The ghetto and concentration camp jokes expressed black humor, not necessarily the optimism that is often associated with Jewish humor. For example,

In Treblinka, where a day’s food was some stale bread and a cup of rotting soup, one prisoner cautions a fellow inmate against gluttony. “Hey Moshe, don’t overeat. Think of us who will have to carry you.”

Also from Treblinka:

The consolation to friends upon leaving was, “Come on, cheer up, old man. We’ll meet again some day in a better world—in a shop window soap.” To which the friend would reply, “Yes, but while they’ll make toilet soap from my fat, you’ll be a bar of cheap laundry soap.”¹⁶⁸

Certainly, other jokes still maintained irony and aggression, as the following conveys:

Two Jews had a plan to assassinate Hitler. They learned that he drove by a certain corner at noon each day, and they waited for him there with their guns well hidden.

At exactly noon they were ready to shoot, but there was no sign of Hitler. Five minutes later, nothing. Another five minutes went by, but no sign of Hitler. By 12:15 they had started to give up hope.

“My goodness,” said one of the men. “I hope nothing happened to him.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Kaplan 1982:33-48, espec. 34.

¹⁶⁸ Quoted in Lipman 1991 [1993]:151.

¹⁶⁹ Lipman 1991:16.

The songs of people in the ghettos were often written by known songwriters and achieved a very high degree of popularity. Many of the group songs as well as the lullabies expressed hope, defiance, and nostalgia. However, among them were some that were not composed in the ghetto. For example, a nostalgic song about Vilna, written by an immigrant in the United States, suddenly acquired high popularity in the ghetto among the youth who had witnessed the destruction of their city and its recession into the past.¹⁷⁰ The street singers in the Lodz ghetto articulated social criticism against the German-appointed leader Chaim Rumkowski. Their songs expressed irony, sarcasm, and at the same time hope.¹⁷¹

Troubled times are fertile ground for tales about miracles and the powerful actions of miracle workers. The Hasidim told such tales about their rabbis in peacetime. The Hasidic rabbis then proved their mettle by curing the sick, making the barren fertile, and anticipating fateful encounters. During the war the intensity of the narratives about them increased tenfold, since they now concerned questions of life and death.¹⁷²

Literature

Modern Jewish poets and writers were at the forefront of folklore research. Their public visibility made them an influential cultural force that brought traditional life into the social consciousness of European Jewish society. In their writings some demonstrated an ambivalent and ironic attitude toward folklore scholarship, conceiving of such activities as in conflict with their literary creativity. Sh. Y. Agnon (1888-1970), a Noble Prize winner (1966), humorously represented this attitude in his novel *Shira* (1971), putting the following dialogue in the mouths of two of his characters:

Weltfremdt said, "I assume you brought up pharmacists to make a point. So, where you come from, in Galicia, they would say that an ordinary pharmacist is a fool, why?" Taglicht said, "A man who spends all those years in school and is content to be a pharmacist rather than study medicine

¹⁷⁰ Dvorjetski 1951:257-77, esp. 258. Some of these songs have been performed in the film *Partisans of Vilna*, directed by Josh Waletzky, and are available on a CD by that name produced in 1989 by Flying Fish Records, FF 70450.

¹⁷¹ See Flam 1992.

¹⁷² Eliach 1982; Mintz 1968:356-79.

is foolish, right? This applies to folklorists, who have so much material, and are content to present it as folklore rather than make it into a story.” Weltfremdt said, “Then why don’t you write stories?” Taglicht said, “I’m like those philosophy professors who aren’t capable of being philosophers.”¹⁷³

Yet, like romantic artists, they considered folklore to be a source of cultural renewal, searching for themes that would replenish their imagination and offer their urban intellectual readers a revived contact with the tradition they left behind and from which they had already alienated themselves. Some writers, such as Y. L. Peretz and Sh. Z. An-ski, actively engaged in research on oral traditions;¹⁷⁴ others, such as Hl. N. Bialik and M. J. Berdyczewski (bin-Gorion) (1865-1921), pored over ancient sources and folk-books, culling legends and constructing tradition for the future. Bialik, a publisher as well as a leading poet, articulated his agenda of *kinus* (“gathering”), that is to say, the process of canonizing traditional literature and bestowing upon it a renewed intellectual vigor.¹⁷⁵ In his key programmatic essay, “The Hebrew Book” (1913), in which he outlines his plan for Jewish cultural revival, Bialik designates a respectable position for folklore and related subjects. Among the subjects that he regards as necessary for Jewish cultural renewal, he considers Aggadic literature, Hasidic literature, and specifically,

folk literature, written as well as oral: folk speech, folktales, fox fables [i.e. animal tales], common fables, proverbs, wit and jokes, folk songs and so forth—it is necessary to collect the best of each genre, from all types of literature (from post-Aggadah until the present day), and from people from all walks of life, presenting them in one or two volumes, properly classified, according to themes, folk characters, or any other classificatory system, and the introduction to these volumes should articulate the principles of folklore and their manifestation among the Jews.

¹⁷³ Agnon 1989:318.

¹⁷⁴ Concerning Peretz’s folkloristic work, see Kiel 1992; Cahan 1952; Grunwald 1952. For discussions of An-Ski’s attitude toward and research of folklore, see An-ski 1928 [1919], 1992a; Kiel 1991:401-24; Noy 1982; Roskies 1992a, 1992b.

¹⁷⁵ See Kiel 1991:213-21. Bialik delivered his lecture on “The Hebrew Book” in the Second Conference on the Hebrew Language and Culture that convened in Vienna August 23-25, 1913. He later published it twice. An abbreviated version appeared in *Ha-Zefirah* (1913), nos. 185, 186, 191, and the complete text in *Ha-Shilo‘ah* 29 (1913): 413-27. See Werses 1981.

Bialik himself followed up on his own suggestion. *The Book of Legends*, which he edited together with Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky as an anthology of talmudic-midrashic legends, has become a standard text in many home libraries.¹⁷⁶ Another prominent Hebrew writer of a younger generation, Micha Josef Berdyczewski, followed suit with a collection of primarily medieval folktales. The book, which also includes tales from later periods, appeared first in German as *Der Born Judas*, later in the Hebrew original and, even later, in an English translation.¹⁷⁷ A third set of folktales, *Sefer ha-Ma'asiyyot* ("A Book of Folktales"), which was edited by Mordekhai Ben-Yehzeki'el, drew upon the nineteenth-century folk books that circulated primarily among the growing Hasidic population and included a few tales that he had recorded orally (though without specifying his sources).¹⁷⁸ The collection of Hasidic tales that Martin Buber edited, *Die chassidischen Bücher* (1927), represents the same trend among European Jewish intellectuals who delved into folklore in order to reinvigorate the national and enlightened Jews with the spirit of tradition.¹⁷⁹ Sh. Y. Agnon has continued in this role of cultural literary mediator and has edited several volumes of fragments he assembled from a wide range of books. Prominent among them are *Days of Awe* (1948), *Sippurei ha-Besht* ("Tales of the Baal Shem Tov," 1987), *Atem re'item* ("You Witnessed," 1995 [1959]).

However, in their literary and scholarly creativity authors appear to be more at ease with the written word than with living narrators and singers. Except for Y. L. Peretz and Sh. Z. An-Ski, who actively engaged

¹⁷⁶ First published as *Sefer ha-Aggadah* (Odessa, 1908-11), the book went through eighteen impressions, including an enlarged edition published by Dvir in Tel Aviv in 1936. The latest revision appeared in 1952, and this in turn has served as the basis for the current English version (Bialik and Ravnitzky 1992).

¹⁷⁷ For his scholarly publications M. J. Berdyczewski used the Hebrew name of Josephus Flavius and in the first edition appeared as Micha Josef bin Gorion (1916-23); a second German edition appeared in 1966-73. A Hebrew edition, edited by his son Emanuel bin, was published in 1939-45 (2nd edition, 1952; 3rd edition, 1966). An English edition appeared in 1976, and it was followed by an abridged and annotated edition in 1990.

¹⁷⁸ See Ben-Yehzeki'el 1925-29.

¹⁷⁹ After World War II this collection appeared as *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim*, (Zurich: Manesse, 1949); in English as *Tales of Hassidim*, trans. by Olga Marx. 2 vols. (New York: Schocken, 1947-48, 1961, 1966), and in Hebrew in 1957.

themselves in recording of folk songs and folktales, most other Jewish writers confined themselves to the literate tradition. These writers responded to folklore in two ways: by rewriting traditional tales and songs and by alluding to traditional ways in their short stories and novels, sometimes going so far as attempting to recapture the storytellers' and the singers' voices. These authors, in whose writings a resonance of folklore is perceptible, were in fact only once removed from the traditional life that they had previously experienced themselves. In the short stories and novels of Jewish writers whose world was shaped by modern education, however, folklore fades away. It had become by that time a mythologized past, an object of inquiry or of undefined yearning but not a living tradition. Such an alienation gives folklore the Midas touch: it enriches the observer but fossilizes tradition. Agnon puts this anguish in the words of Gabriel Gamzu, one of the central characters in his short story "Edo and Enam" (1966:210):

How should he know? If an article of that kind came into my hands by chance, and no-one told me what it was, would I know? Besides, all these scholars are modern men; even if you were to reveal the properties of the charms, they would only laugh at you; and if they bought them, it would be as specimens of folklore. Ah, folklore, folklore! Everything which is not material for scientific research they treat as folklore. Have they not made our holy Torah into either one or the other? People live out their lives according to Torah, they lay down their lives for the heritage of their fathers; then along come the scientists, and make the Torah into "research material," and the ways of our fathers into—folklore.

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Appendix

Selected Sources of Oral Tradition

Tannaitic Sources

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan. Critical Edition: Schechter 1887. Translations: (Version A) Goldin 1955, Neusner 1986a; (Version B) Saladrini 1975. The largest of the extracanonical Minor Tractates at the end of the fourth division of the Babylonian Talmud;

the current versions of this text were compiled between the seventh and the ninth centuries in Babylon. In style, language, and cited authorities, however, it belongs to the tannaitic literature.¹⁸⁰ It is both a commentary on and amplification of *Avot*, the only Aggadic tractate in the Mishnah. While *Avot* consists mainly of proverbs and aphorisms, *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* includes biographical, historical, and ethical legends.

Mekhilta of R. Ishmael. Critical edition: Horovitz and Rabin 1960. Translation and critical analysis: Lauterbach 1933-35, Neusner 1988a. A collection of *beraitot* representing tannaitic interpretation of parts of Exodus, this text is a product of the school of Rabbi Ishmael (second century). While *halakhic* in purpose, half of the book is *aggadah*.

Mekhilta of R. Simeon ben Yohai. Critical edition: M. Epstein and Melamed 1955. This is a lost *halakhic* tannaitic midrash on Exodus that was known in the Middle Ages. Since neither Babylonian nor Jerusalemian sages mention it in their respective Talmuds, scholars assume that it was edited in the Land of Israel no earlier than the fifth century. Its aggadic material appears to be taken from the *Mekhilta of R. Ishmael*. The current edition is an incomplete reconstruction based on quotations in later midrashim and in Geniza fragments.

Mishnah. Translations: Danby 1933, Neusner 1988b. The major compilation of tannaitic literature, it consists mainly of *halakhah*, with only brief segments of *aggadah* (the tractate *Avot*, mentioned above). It was edited in the Land of Israel by Rabbi Judah “the Prince” at the end of the second century.

Sifra. Critical editions: Finkelstein 1956, 1983. Translation: Neusner 1985b. A tannaitic *halakhic* interpretation of Leviticus, this book contains very little *aggadah*. It offers a running interpretation of the text in Hebrew in an exegetical style that emanates from the school of Rabbi Akiva.

Sifrei to Numbers. Critical edition: Horovitz 1917-39. Translation: Neusner 1986b. A tannaitic exegesis of parts of Numbers that expounds the interpreted parts verse by verse. The book includes *aggadah* as well as *halakhah*, and likely derives from the school of Rabbi Ishmael. Since it is mentioned in neither Talmud, it must have been edited in the Land of Israel after the completion of both.

Sifrei Zuta. A supplemental midrash to Numbers, *Sifrei Zuta* (“The Little Sifrei”) was known in the Middle Ages but ultimately lost. Horovitz (1917) has reconstructed it on the basis of medieval quotations. Lieberman (1968) considers it the oldest tannaitic midrash.

Sifrei to Deuteronomy. Critical edition: Finkelstein 1993. Translation: Neusner 1987a. For many years scholars considered the *Sifrei to Numbers* and the *Sifrei to Deuteronomy* to be a single book—they follow the same expository method—but now most believe that the latter emanates from the school of Rabbi Akiva. *Halakhah* and *aggadah* make up almost equal parts of the book.

Tosefta. Critical editions: Zuckerman 1881, Lieberman 1955-88. Translations: Neusner 1977-81. A compilation of *beraitot*, tannaitic statements that were excluded from the *Mishnah*; this text is very similar in structure, language, style, and cited authorities to the *Mishnah*. The *Tosefta*, however, includes more *aggadah* than does the *Mishnah*. It was edited in the Land of Israel in either the third or the fourth century.

¹⁸⁰ Fraenkel (1991:10) considers it a late rather than an early midrash.

Amoraic Sources

Babylonian Talmud. Standard edition: *Talmud Bavli*. Vilna: Widow and Brothers Romm, 1880-86. Translations: I. Epstein 1961, 1983-90; Goldwurm 1990; Neusner et al. 1984-94; Steinsaltz 1989-. The BT is the accumulative record of the learning and debates on the Mishnah that were carried out in the Babylonian academies from the first half of the third century until the end of the fifth century (499 CE). Traditionally, Rav Ashi (352-427) and Ravina (d. 500) are its editors. It contains two-thirds *aggadah* and one-third *halakhah*.

Jerusalem Talmud. Standard edition: *Talmud Yerushalmi*. Bomberg: Venice, 1523-24. Translation: Neusner 1982-84. Also known as *Talmud di-vene'i ma'arava* ("The Talmud of the West") or *Talmud de erez yisrael* ("Talmud of the Land of Israel"), the JT contains the interpretation and elaboration of the *Mishnah* by the rabbis in the academies of the Land of Israel, particularly in Tiberias, Caesarea, and Sepphoris. Only one-sixth of the text is *aggadah*. It was compiled by R. Johanan (last quarter of the third century) and his students up through the middle of the fourth century.

Midrash Rabbah. Standard edition: Vilna, Widow and Brothers Romm, 1878. Modern edition: Mirkin 1982-87. Translation: Freedman and Simon 1939. "The Great Midrash" is a collection of ten separate books, five on each of the Pentateuch books, and five on each of the "scrolls." The midrashim date from different periods and are of different kinds (see entries below). Assembling the books as *Midrash Rabbah* was a printers' construct, although the designation "Rabbah" had appeared in manuscripts of some midrashim. It first appeared in Constantinople from 1512-20.

Critical Editions and Translations of Single Books of the *Midrash Rabbah* and Other Midrashim

Midrash Mishle. Critical editions: Visotzky 1983, 1990. Translation: Visotzky 1992. An exegetical interpretation and a commentary on the Book of Proverbs from either the Land of Israel or Babylonia that dates back to the ninth century and includes anti-Karaite polemics.

Midrash Rabbah: Genesis. Critical edition: Theodor and Albeck 1912-36 [1965]. Translation: Neusner 1985a. The earliest of the midrashic books from the Land of Israel, this text dates back to the end of the fourth or to the beginning of the fifth century, or, as others contend, to the end of the fifth century. It is an exegetical midrash that follows the biblical verses, interpreting the entire book of Genesis.

Midrash Rabbah: Exodus. Critical edition: Shinan 1984. A late book (from an unidentified country) that probably dates back to the tenth century, this midrash has two clear parts. Chapters 1-14 are exegetical, elucidating the first ten chapters of Exodus. Chapters 15-52 are homiletic, consisting of sermons that build upon the first verses, which opened the weekly Bible reading in the triannual cycle customary at that time.

Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus. Critical edition: Margulies 1953-60. The earliest of the homiletic midrashic books from the Land of Israel, this text dates back to the fifth or sixth centuries, or at least to a time that was clearly before the Islamic conquest of Palestine in 634. Although the biblical book of Leviticus deals with religious laws, its midrash is primarily an aggadic book rich in narratives. The homilies revolve around the beginnings of each portion of the weekly Bible reading in the tri-annual cycle that was customary at

that time. They follow a pattern: a proem (or several alternative proems), a sermon, and an uplifting conclusion.

Midrash Rabbah: Numbers. The latest midrashic book to be included in *Midrash Rabbah*, this text dates to the thirteenth century. It consists of two unequal parts. The first and larger part (chapters 1-14) interprets the first eight chapters of the Book of Numbers, and the second (chapters 15-33) covers the rest. The editor incorporated into the first part sections taken from the homilies of Moses ha-Darshan (eleventh century) and earlier midrashic books such as *Tanhuma*. In fact, the second part is almost identical to the chapters on Numbers in the *Tanhuma*.

Midrash Rabbah: Deuteronomy. Critical edition: Lieberman 1940. A homiletic midrash from the Land of Israel that dates back to the eighth or ninth century. The starting point of each homily is the first verse or verses of the weekly Bible reading portion in the tri-annual cycle. Like the *Tanhuma* midrashim, each sermon opens with a halakhic question, to which the preacher elaborates a response that he connects with the opening verses of the Bible reading portion. Then, following several alternative proems, the editors include the central part of the sermon and an uplifting conclusion. In his critical edition, Lieberman uses a Sephardic manuscript that differs from the more common version of the book that was known to central European scholars.

Midrash Rabbah: Song of Songs. Translation: Neusner 1989a. An exegetical midrash from the Land of Israel that dates back to the sixth century. It opens with five proems and continues with interpretation of the biblical verses.

Midrash Rabbah: Ruth. Translation Neusner 1989b. An exegetical midrash from the Land of Israel that dates to the fifth or sixth century. The interpretations represent apocalyptic and eschatological tendencies.

Midrash Rabbah: Lamentations. Critical editions: S. Buber 1899, Mandel 1983; see also Hasan-Rokem 1996. Translation: Neusner 1989d. An early exegetical midrash from the Land of Israel that dates back to the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century. It opens with a group of thirty-six proems that begin with a verse from another part of the Hebrew Bible and concludes with the verse "How doth the city sit solitary" (Lamentations 1:1). The interpretive part follows the order of the biblical text.

Midrash Rabbah: Ecclesiastics. An eighth-century exegetical midrash from the Land of Israel.

Midrash Rabbah: Esther. Translation: Neusner 1989c. This midrash has two parts. The first six chapters date back to the fifth or sixth century, while the rest of the book is apparently from the eleventh century.

Pesikta de-Rav Kahanah. Critical edition: Mandelbaum 1962. Translations: Braude and Kapstein 1975, Neusner 1987b. The existence of this book was first demonstrated by an amazing feat of scholarship by Zunz, who in 1832 reconstructed it on the basis of quotations, references, and allusions in medieval texts. Later that century Salomon Buber (1868) published an edition based on four newly discovered manuscripts that confirmed Zunz's basic proposition. The book consists of homiletic midrashim to Torah and *haftarah* readings for festivals and special Sabbaths of the Jewish annual cycle. Each section (*pesikta*) begins with several alternative proems, continues with the sermon, and ends with an uplifting conclusion. The discovery of a sixteenth-century manuscript that served as the basis for Mandelbaum's critical edition confirmed that the book begins with Rosh Ha-Shanah and concludes with the Sabbath before the holiday. The name of this midrash, which dates back to the fifth century, comes from the opening formula "R.

Abba b. Kahana opened. . .” These words appear in twelve of its chapters, beginning with the Sabbath after the seventeenth of Tammuz. Another possibility is the occurrence of the name Rav Kahana in the Rosh Ha-Shanah homilies in two manuscripts.

Pesikta Rabbati. Critical edition: Friedmann (Ish Shalom) 1880. Translation: Braude 1968. “The Great Pesikta” is a medieval midrash that draws upon the *Pesikta de-Rav Kahanah*, the *Tanḥuma*, and other amoraic sources.

Tanḥuma. Critical edition: S. Buber 1885. Translation: Townsend 1989. The *Tanḥuma* is a homiletic midrash on the entire Pentateuch that follows the triennial Torah reading cycle. Each homily opens with a rhetorical *halakhic* question and then shifts to alternative proems, followed by the sermon and an uplifting conclusion. The text shows evidence of late literary editing. There is a printed text of midrash and an edition prepared by S. Buber (1885) that refers to a fourth-century Palestinian *amora*, Tanhuma, to whom these midrashim are attributed. In addition to these books, several other midrashim—among them parts or entireties of the *Midrash Rabbah* to Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, as well as parts of the *Pesikta Rabbati*—include homilies attributed to this *amora*. They open with a rhetorical *halakhic* question preceded by the formula “Yelammedenu Rabbenu . . .” (“May our teacher instruct us . . .”) and are therefore known collectively as the *Tanḥuma Yelammedenu* midrashim. The midrash *Tanḥuma* was first printed in Constantinople in 1522 and appeared thereafter in many editions. Buber’s edition is based on manuscripts and differs sharply from the printed edition. While Buber considered his version to be an older text, it is more than likely only one of several extant versions of the book.

Medieval Sources of the Midrash

Midrash ha-Gadol. Critical editions of its parts: Fisch 1972; Hoffmann 1913-21; Margulies 1956, 1967; Rabinowitz 1967; Steinsaltz 1976. This thirteenth-century Yemenite midrash on the Pentateuch was written by David ben Amram Adani, and became known to European scholars in the nineteenth century. Adani incorporated into his work extracts from earlier midrashic tannaitic and amoraic sources. His accuracy and clarity have made his work a valuable resource for the reconstruction of both known and previously unknown midrashim.

Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer. Critical edition: Higger 1944-46; see also Stein 1998. Translation: Friedlander 1916. A pseudepigraphic eighth-century aggadic book that draws upon earlier midrashim and the Talmuds, weaving them into a historical narrative that begins with the Creation and concludes with the wanderings of the Children of Israel in the wilderness. The available versions are incomplete. In form and references the text shows evidence of the Islamic influence to which the author was subject in his country. The author was also familiar with the apocryphal and pseudepigraphic literature of the Second Temple. First published in Constantinople in 1514, the book was often reprinted.

Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu. Critical edition: Friedmann (Ish-Shalom) 1904. Translation: Braude and Kapstein 1981. Also known as *Seder Eliyahu*, this text has two parts, *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* and *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, both apparently written by the same anonymous author. This is neither a homiletic nor an exegetical midrash, but an exposition of ethical and theological values derived from and sanctioned by the Bible. The date and place of composition are a matter of scholarly controversy. Estimates range from the third to the

tenth century.

Yalkut Shim'oni. Critical edition: Hyman 1965-74. This medieval midrashic anthology, likely compiled by Shimon ha-Darshan of Frankfurt in the thirteenth century, has become a very important source for earlier midrashim. In most cases the editor recorded his sources, thereby offering us glimpses of the manuscripts that were available to him as well as of those manuscripts' renditions of texts that other sources preserve differently. The book, which began to circulate widely only at the end of the fifteenth century, quickly became very popular, particularly after its publication in Salonika (1521-26), and eventually replaced its sources.¹⁸¹

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¹⁸¹ The scholarship concerning the oral literature of the talmudic-midrashic period is voluminous and requires special bibliographies. For preliminary and basic references, in addition to those mentioned in notes 32-51, see Bacher 1965, Bialik and Ravnitzky 1992, Safrai and Tomson 1987, Sperber 1994, and the motif index of Neuman 1954.

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