Jewish Folklore as Counterculture

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Abstract
A literacy divide runs deep in Jewish society. The scribes, the priests, and the prophets who wrote the Bible referred to the folk on the other side of the divide as ha-'am (the people), and the sages, who taught the books that followed, called them 'olam (the world population). Both terms resonate in subsequent Jewish languages. The Yiddish word 'amkha (all the people), and its analogue in Judeo-Spanish, povlacho, have their roots in the Bible where the concept of the "people" is ubiquitous. It occurs in a variety of forms as kol ha-'am (all the people), 'am ha-'arez (the people of the land)—a term which already in the Bible, and certainly later, had furthered its semantic scope—and in supplications to God as 'amkha Yisra'el (Your people Israel). In some dialects of Judeo-Arabic the terms that draw upon postbiblical usages are 'amah, 'olam, or 'al-'olam 'al-kul. In the Bible the term refers to mindless multitudes, immense crowds, or a general population mass. While the writers of these texts shaped Judaism as we know it, the 'am, the folk, experienced Jewish life in a way that we had—and still need—to discover.

Disciplines
Cultural History | Folklore | History of Religion | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Oral History | Yiddish Language and Literature

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A literacy divide runs deep in Jewish society. The scribes, the priests, and the prophets who wrote the Bible referred to the folk on the other side of the divide as *ha-'am* (the people), and the sages, who taught the books that followed, called them *'olam* (the world population). Both terms resonate in subsequent Jewish languages. The Yiddish word *'amkha* (common people), and its analogue in Judeo-Spanish, *povlacho*, have their roots in the Bible where the concept of the "people" is ubiquitous. It occurs in a variety of forms as *kol ha-'am* (all the people), *'am ha-'areż* (the people of the land)—a term which already in the Bible, and
certainly later, had furthered its semantic scope—and in supplications to God as 'amkha Yisra'el (Your people Israel). In some dialects of Judeo-Arabic the terms that draw upon postbiblical usages are 'amah, 'olam, or 'al-'olam 'al-kul. In the Bible the term refers to mindless multitudes, immense crowds, or a general population mass. While the writers of these texts shaped Judaism as we know it, the 'am, the folk, experienced Jewish life in a way that we had—and still need—to discover.

What was that experience and how was it verbally represented? Is it possible to reach out and observe the lives of the Israelite multitudes beyond the literacy barrier, beyond the priestly prescriptive religious and ethical rules, and the prophecies that admonished their transgression? And for later periods, is it possible to perceive the lives of the common Jewish folk in Vilna, Baghdad, Fez, Salonika, Sana'a, and other cities and villages of the Diaspora? Is it possible to do so without condescension? Is it possible to overcome the paradox of literacy, which, at times, preserves orality only in its own terms?
It is not so easy. Literacy transforms knowledge in a selective and teleological way. Oral traditions filter through the sieves of literacy in bits and pieces and then function to advocate or reaffirm the writers' ideology. Surely, over time, as literacy spread, the control over its venues has loosened. Ideas, beliefs, narrative themes and forms, humor, and folk-wisdom have seeped through the cracks and become available, free from strict sectorial control. This enabled the oral and the literate to intertwine, converge and diverge, contradict and complement one another. Counterculture and culture have become the spiritual twins that thrive through their differences.
The folklore of the biblical period becomes apparent in the text through narrative repetitions, recurrent themes, and slips of pen. Intra- and intercomparisons evince the presence of orality in biblical literacy. The stories of divine announcement of the births of Isaac, Samson, and Samuel, the barrenness of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah, and the miracle tales of the early prophets, are the staples of folklore of many peoples as well as the ancient Israelites. In the Bible, they support fundamental religious and ethical tenets, or historical narrative constructions. The story of the young David, who killed the monster Goliath and married King Saul's daughter, integrates the widespread theme of the dragon slayer into Israelite dynastic and national history. Another story, which at the time was available regionally, the Egyptian tale of the two brothers, Anubis and Bata, a story of sexual abuse and false accusation, was incorporated into Joseph's biography as a prelude to the central myth of nation formation: the Exodus from Egypt. The folklore that ancient literates could not appropriate, they condemned. Magic and witchcraft, demons and ghosts, and the witches and wizards that controlled them, were banned. But the stronger the condemnation, the more solid is the evidence of their entrenchment in ancient Israelite religion and society.
In Hebrew and Aramaic postbiblical literature, literacy and orality intertwine. The orality of these narratives is text dependent. The Midrash is the exegesis of the Bible and the Talmud of the Mishnah. Yet neither is limited by the texts it interprets. They include legends, fables, proverbs, tales about postbiblical events and personalities, and jokes that circulated orally at that period.

Many traditions that were either excluded from or generated by the Bible became newly valuable in an exilic situation. The ordinary people that the Bible, with a few exceptions, hid under the general category of ha-'am, came alive in postbiblical literature, in their mundane struggles and in their confrontation with history. At times, they became allegories for moral principles. True, some people stood out: Stories about sages, students, miracle workers, and martyrs recurred with greater frequency than tales about other people. Yet even these exemplary personalities act in an ordinary world in which demons and magic freely take part, moving in the liminal crevices between categories of place and time. The biblical world
from which they were banned receded into the mythical past. The many postbiblical traditions that the rabbis did not report became the foundational narratives of Jewish folklore. Subsequent generations expanded them into a compendium of themes, personalities, historical events, and figures that populated Jewish imagination, conversation, storytelling, and song.

The next thousand years or so—from the early Middle Ages to early modern times, which, as far as folklore is concerned, edged into the nineteenth century—witnessed the liberation of Jewish folkloric creativity from the rabbinical authorities. Individual authors and scribes wrote down tales and described haunted worlds. Their manuscripts became the treasure troves of Jewish medieval folklore, which after the print revolution enjoyed wider circulation as chapbooks, broadsides, and market literature.

The narrative repertoires of Diaspora communities expanded the thematic range of Jewish tradition at the same time that they made apparent latent divisions among Jewish societies. Jews commemorated common biblical and postbiblical events and personalities in synagogues, but at home, in the market place, and at secular venues narrators and singers spun tale types into Jewish oral traditions.
Stories about regional and ethnic personalities and locations became the talk of the town in diverse Jewish languages and communities. Life cycle rituals were occasions for combined celebrations. Communally, Jews were oppressed by ruling authorities that subjugated them politically, economically, and socially. Individually they suffered from poor health and poverty. In this period the Jewish cult hero—a rabbi magician known not so much for learning as for miracles—took form. These heroes saved threatened communities and helped desperate individuals. They were charismatic leaders, from Rabbi Meir Ba’al Ha-nes to Rabbi Israel Ba’al Ha-shem who assumed central positions in Jewish societies and in Jewish narratives. In their death, their tombs became pilgrimage destinations. To lift their spirits Jews imagined supernatural beings—male and female demons—that conferred wealth or seduced them into promiscuous sex. At times, the new tales functioned like the old ones to reaffirm Jewish social, ethical, and even religious, values. Yet Jewish folklore contained the seeds of secularism in Jewish societies long before they sprouted in the Enlightenment period.
Modernity and its tendency to turn lore into a subject worthy of study were late in coming to the Jewish folk. As S. Y. Agnon, the Israeli Nobel laureate, had the hero of his tale "Edo and Enam," say:

"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 the 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.

Not quite as cynical and nihilistic as Agnon imagined them, scholars and amateurs, motivated in their quest for identity by nostalgia, curiosity and, paradoxically, alienation began to search for folklore in Jewish societies, after the term was coined in 1846. Cultural relativity and diversity in Jewish ethnic groups were first to be discovered. The Ashkenazim in Europe, the Sephardim in and around the Mediterranean basin, the Mizrahim in Arab lands, and the many other groups, from India to Ireland and further west, combined in their respective cultures Jewish and foreign aspects. Their folklore had its own integrity manifested in speech, narrative, and poetic genres and in celebrations and rituals.

The proverbs are the wisdom literature of the people, the philosophy of the folk. This is an applied philosophy. A general truth in metaphoric language, that is cast in an irrefutable formulation and applied to a conflict situation. Together, they map the value system of Jewish society. While proverbs are available in narratives and in lists, folk songs have an elusive presence in ancient and medieval literature. They are mentioned, but rarely seen. In addition to the literacy divide, they had to overcome the gender barrier, since folk singing was primarily a feminine art. Their songs barely left any traces in Jewish manuscripts and early prints, until folklore research discovered the feminine voice in Jewish folk poetry and found that Song of Songs came alive in the singing of Jewish women.
The folk-poetic pulse continued in the twentieth century and under new circumstances moved in different directions. In Europe male tenors, baritones, and basses joined the choruses in ghetto and partisan songs during the war. In many cases songs of known authors became the songs of the people. In others, ghetto street singers composed and sung poetic satires and laments. In postwar America a revival movement of klezmer music generated also a renewal of Yiddish vocal singing. A different kind of poetic revival occurred in Mandate Palestine and later in Israel. Its context was the Zionist renewal of Jewish rustic life in 'Erez Yisra'el. A new society requires a new folklore, and poets and composers imagined a folk poetry composed of a synthesis of ancient imagery, contemporary reality, and messianic orientalism that became known as shirei 'Erez Yisra'el.

In contrast to folk songs, folktales had a continuous visibility in Jewish literacy, and the discoveries of modern research, particularly the massive recording that was initiated by YIVO and continued by the Dov Noy Israel Folktale Archives (IFA), exposed a process that began already in the Middle Ages and was characterized by thematic internationalization, regionalization, and democratization. A Jewish Cinderella may avoid riding her magic carriage on the Sabbath, but in all other respects, her story follows the plot line and the motif cluster of other stories of this tale type, with an acceptable range of variations. The heroes of these tales may not be Jewish at all. However, when such narratives become confrontational stories, the Jewish hero or heroine is likely to be victorious. The legends—those stories the narrators would like to impress upon their listeners as true—resort to local landmarks, place names, and personalities as verifying agents that intensify the narrative's regional dimensions.

Finally, the rise in prominence of the common people, noticeable in the Jewish oral tradition of late antiquity, becomes dominant in Jewish ethnic narrative traditions. The common people populate Jewish folktales. Sure, rabbis, pious people, and miracle workers function in these tales. But when communities are in distress, deliverance is achieved through the mediation of a charismatic or a lowly figure. The biblical and the Talmudic-Midrashic personalities recede into a religious-mythic domain, with the distinct exception of Elijah the Prophet, who is the most ubiquitous personality in the folktales and legends of all Jewish ethnic groups. Modern authors drew upon modern oral traditions, thereby making some of them part of the international, rather than exclusively Jewish, literary canon, such as the stories of the dybbuk and the Golem of Prague.
Ironically the folk genre with the least presence in Jewish literacy, once discovered, made the greatest impact upon the modern literate world and attained recognition as a category unto itself. This is Jewish humor. As late as the end of the nineteenth century Jews were thought to have no sense of humor. With such a miserable history, it was believed, what was there to laugh about? But as it turned out Jewish history was fertile ground for humor. East European Jewish humor turned out to be so funny that it survived the relative prosperity of the United States and the Jewish political independence of Israel. In America Jewish folk humor attained a decisive presence in the mass media, and in Israel, in spite of some morbid predictions, Jewish humor is alive and well.

Humor is a subversive form of communication, built upon incongruity, inversion, and dissonance. These features occur in high concentration in other forms of folklore as well, vesting in them countercultural qualities. Romanticism sought to restrain these tendencies by appropriating them for nationalism and the expression of group solidarity, but this was only an ideological muffle of orality. In Jewish society in particular, without the voice of the people, the voice of the sages is hollow.