Introduction: Jewish Folklore and Ethnology: What, Why, and Whither?

Simon J. Bronner

University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee, bronners@uwm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/jewishfolklore

Part of the Folklore Commons, Jewish Studies Commons, and the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/jewishfolklore/vol1/iss1/2

This Introduction is brought to you for free and open access by the WSU Press at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jewish Folklore and Ethnology by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@WayneState.
Jewish Folklore and Ethnology: What, Why, and Whither?

SIMON J. BRONNER

The inspiration for and significance of field-based Jewish folklore and ethnology studies as a distinct branch of learning devoted to the understanding of tradition in relation to diasporic Jewish studies and folkloristics is traced back to the Talmudic directive to “Go out and see what the people do.” The shapers of the field include S. An-Ski, Max Grunwald, Yoysef-Yehude Lerner, and Dov Noy along with theoretical influences of Franz Boas and Erving Goffman heralding a shift from textual sources to analyses of practice and performance. The characteristic definition, content, method, and theory of Jewish folklore and ethnological studies since the nineteenth century are analyzed as growing out of a concern for change and continuity to Jewish community and identity amid the force of modernization. Future trajectories of research and goals for the field are considered in the digital age in which new definitions of community and culture are emerging.

The origin story of folklore studies is that, inspired by the early nineteenth-century collections of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in Volks-Märchen (folk tales), English antiquarian William John Thoms in 1846 suggested “a good Saxon” compound, “Folk-Lore” as a general rubric for “manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc.,” and the term subsequently stuck (Thoms 1846). The Grimms particularly impressed Thoms with their attention to the “voice of the people” in the living lore the brothers reported from living tellers, and he proudly wanted to see a comparable national collection for England. Yet the basic concepts of appreciating the traditional knowledge of the people and documenting the corpus of material that Thoms described were well familiar for centuries before to Jews whose diaspora
gave rise to a vibrant rabbinical scholarship about localized differences in religious practice and the ethnic differences that Jews displayed in their far-flung homes and communities. For example, the Babylonian Talmud dating to the first century reports a long, heated exchange among sages over the standards for constructed side posts in an alleyway fit for a Jew to carry goods within an eruv on Shabbat. The Talmud relates that Rava bar Rav Chanan espoused that the way to settle the argument was essentially to conduct fieldwork to record the traditions of the community. Differentiating between law (halakhah) as dictated rules and minhag, or living lore as cultural practice, Chanan exclaimed, “Go out and observe what the people are doing; it is common practice to rely on a side post of minimal width” (BT Eruvin 14b). The Gemara provides a precedent for this recognition of the deeds and voices of the people as significant to the identity of Jews. Realizing that the blessing recited prior to drinking is prone to variation, the observational technique of ethnography to note symbolic communication is apparent in the report from the field that “the customary practice is to say: By whose word all things came to be” (BT Eruvin 14b).

Offering analysis of custom, practice, and sayings, and providing a precedent for the comparative perspective pervading nineteenth-century folklore and ethnological studies, is the HaMapah (tablecloth) of Moses Isserles (1530–1572). In answer to the Shulchan Aruch (set table, 1565) of Yosef Karo (1488–1575), which dictated behavior as codified law for Jewish observance based on Sephardic custom, Isserles attempted to analyze differences in the lived religion of Jews in different Ashkenazi areas of settlement across Europe. Isserles recorded hundreds of variants of customs that he credited rather than criticized as the collective creations or folk traditions at the grassroots in community (Freehof 1967, 210). His questioning of the feasibility of a unified code of law in light of Jewish diasporic variation led many scholars to comment on localized and regionalized practices and their migratory patterns in Jewish communities around them. In the nineteenth century, a research movement in response to the rise of cultural nationalism centered in Central European Volkskunde (lore or knowledge of common people) added a non-religious component to inventory secular speech, legends, tales, crafts, and gestures that distinguished Jews ethnically as well as religiously.
Implied was a shift at the time from redefining Jews from a race (Rasse in German) to a folk (Volk or people), based on the space the community occupied and the customs and oral tradition they shared in common. This emerging social as well as intellectual movement, sometimes referred to as the “Hamburg Movement” for its center in Hamburg under the leadership of Rabbi Max Grunwald, founder of the journal *Mitteilungen der Jüdische Volkskunde*, had as a goal to show the cultural richness of Jews that was compatible with modernization and Enlightenment values (Schrire 2017). With many linguistic-ethnic groups vying for national recognition as a wave of protests against monarchies raged in Central and Eastern Europe, Grunwald strived to formalize the study of Jewish living traditions as an intellectual source for a sense of Jewish cultural peoplehood, if not nationhood (see Gottesman 2000). To gain respectability as a branch of learning, he sought to establish the study of Jewish folklore and ethnology as a social science. He organized a society devoted to the documentation and interpretation of Jewish folklife and built the Hamburg Jewish Museum as an institutional basis for scientific study and public education. Appreciation of holiday customs and legends were fundamental to religious education, and Grunwald proposed spreading that knowledge outside of the community, to build appreciation for Jews as an ethnic as well as religious group. Grunwald issued elaborate questionnaires in the German-language journal on various Jewish secular practices such as foodways, dress, and speech to gather quantifiable data to make his case. The movement influenced the writer S. An-Ski to organize a scientific expedition to the Yiddish-speaking Pale of Settlement in Czarist Russia before World War I to comprehensively document in photography and audio recordings shtetl life, lore, and traditions (Deutsch 2016). A connection between culture and ideology emerged with the celebration of Yiddish folklore as a basis for a Yiddishist nationalist view. Yoysef-Yehude Lerner (1847–1907), in his 1889 study of Yiddish folksong “Di Yudishe Muze” (The Jewish Muse), argued that secular folk traditions tied to the distinctive ethnic language and lore of the land in which Jews resided constituted an alternative to Zionism and assimilation (Lerner 1889; see also Gottesman 2000, xvii–xix).

While the lore collected from Jewish communities could be called “esoteric” (Jansen 1959), an “exoteric” lore from non-Jews about Jews also began to be
documented (for example, “The Jew in the Thorns [or Brambles/Bush]” reported by the Grimms as no. 110, Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 592) amid a rising tide of antisemitism in Europe. In the United States, Bavarian-born immigrant Moritz Ellinger asserted that to fight defamation and make a case for “life of a nationality,” Jews needed “careful collections toward the preservation of folklore” (Ellinger 1897, 147). Recognizing that the study of Jewish minhag among rabbinical students was isolated in yeshivas, he looked to integrate Jewish ethnological studies into academic folklore studies represented by new learned societies with “folklore” in their names in England (1878) and the United States (1888). Joining Jewish folklore to the study of ethnic life rather than religious observance of other groups, Ellinger declared the sympathy of Jews to other groups threatened by modernization. He wrote, “Nothing enhances the value of a treasure more than the danger of losing it. Such a danger threatens today every nationality in the ratio as its peculiarity falls victim to the all-leveling culture of modern times” (Ellinger 1897, 147). He recognized that a challenge would be to change the perception of folklore as a sign of backwardness into what he called a “treasure.” He advocated for “the task of science to confer life and to preserve it [folklore]” as a “fruitbearing field” (Ellinger 1897, 147; see also Bronner 2021b). Joseph Jacobs (1854–1916), active at the time in both folklore studies and Jewish studies, was appointed editor of the journal Folk-Lore in 1890, but he kept his work in Jewish studies separate. He did, however, criticize the predominant evolutionary method of the Society folklorists in favor of a diffusionist approach to the spread of folklore that was based on the diasporic characteristic of Jews (Fine 1987). A breakthrough, however, for identifying Jewish studies as part of folklore studies was the selection of Romanian-born Moses Gaster (1856–1939) as president of the Folklore Society based in London in 1907. His Jewish Folk-Lore in the Middle Ages, published in 1887, appears to be the first book in English with “Jewish Folklore” in the title. Ten years earlier, Thomas Kelly Cheyne, an ordained Anglican priest and professor of the Bible at Oxford, published “Jonah: A Study in Jewish Folklore and Religion” in the London-based Theological Review (1877). Based on scriptural and literary sources, he argued that the Book of Jonah was not historical but was the fictional folk product of a creative writer elaborating on mythological motifs and inserting “Jonah” as
the symbolic name of the “Jewish nation” (Cheyne 1877, 219). A clue to Cheyne’s use of “folklore” is his citation of Edward Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871), in which he discusses folklore of Jews as examples of cultural practices in the pre-civilized stage of an evolutionary ladder. As Thoms suggested, folklore provided for Cheyne a convenient rubric that covered myths, beliefs, customs, and tales, and in Tylor’s theory constituted “survivals” of ancient practices that had lost their meaning in the present.

Gaster’s conceptualization of Jewish folklore involved more than Cheyne the Jewish understanding of meaningful and adaptive community tradition ranging from custom to narrative, particularly legendary material transmitted in diverse Jewish cultures in the present as well as historic sources. Gaster published on various non-Jewish topics for the Folklore Society (England) but felt compelled to comment on a non-Jewish scholar’s paper titled “Jewish Folklore from Jerusalem,” regarding what she called superstitious charms. Gaster chastised her assumption that Jewish folk practices as non-Christian were somehow bizarre or backward, and low on an evolutionary ladder. He opened his critique declaring, “It is a somewhat dangerous procedure to call religious ceremonies ‘superstitions’” (Gaster 1904, 192; see also Freer 1904). Yet Gaster’s presidential address did not mention Jewish folklore (or his Zionist activism), although he was publicly identified with the topic (Gaster 1908).

What exactly is that topic? As the different approaches and content that fell under the heading of folklore during the formative late nineteenth-century period attest, “folklore” generally referred to expressive and customary traditions, defined as practices socially transmitted through time and space. As a manifestation of traditional knowledge, folklore could be found in oral, written, gestural, and material forms. Early on, a differentiation was apparent between literary approaches to the documentation and interpretation of folklore as objectified, comparable, and classifiable texts, and the visual observation of symbolic communication and social action in cultural scenes and communities. The latter, reflected in the Talmudic directive to “go out and see what the people do,” came to be associated with “ethnography” and its analysis as “ethnology.” Thus the frequent use of “Jewish folklore and ethnology” (and other prefixes of “ethno,” such as poetics in Jewish languages...
describing cultural studies) represented the integration of textual (especially scriptural) and observational methods of contemporary practices toward interpretations of the dynamics of culture and tradition. Sometimes, scholars clarify the wide purview of ethnic and religious components by referring to an ethnology of Jews and Judaism, although ethnology has leaned toward “Jewish studies” of “ordinary” Jews at home, work, and on the street, while Judaica studies have focused more on the synagogue, rabbis, and scriptures. Folklore, meanwhile, is more likely to take up exoteric as well as esoteric manifestations of beliefs and attitudes toward Jews by non-Jews in legend, tale, humor, song, and image. This is also evident in a folk rhetoric in which “Jew,” in places without Jews, can be a derisive verb as well as an identifying noun.

Rather than “Jewish” in “Jewish folklore and ethnology” being an interchangeable modifier with other ethnic groups, the adjective signals characteristics that are distinctive to its study. Folklorist Haya Bar-Itzhak outlined three such distinctions: (1) dispersion and consequently influence of cultures into which they migrated; (2) multilingualism, including languages of ancient sacred texts in Hebrew and Aramaic, those of host societies (e.g., Russian, Polish, English), modern Hebrew (Israel), and dialect forms such as Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish, and Judeo-Arabic; and (3) the significance of the written word in the creation, transmission, and preservation of folklore.

To this list I would add the frequent affiliation to a secular identity that is not dependent on religious fidelity, even though Jews are associated with a religious tradition. Consequently, Jewish folklore and ethnology often explores social difference and navigating identities and situations in which they are part of a mixed or urbanized crowd. In addition, one cannot escape its ideological component that suggests ways to respond politically as well as culturally to discrimination and persecution. Underpinning the response is the question of how Jews are racialized and ethnicized. Psychologically, Jews as a culture tied to physical characteristics are prone to what W.E.B. DuBois described for African Americans in 1897 as a “double consciousness” of constantly being cognizant not only of the group and traditions to which one belongs but also to the way that the group and traditions appear to others. Since much of Jewish studies has sought to
understand and combat racialized stereotypes, often involving the imaginary of a Jewish body, Jewish folklore and ethnology studies has especially dealt with the psychology of anxiety in Jewish culture, caused by double consciousness growing out of racial-ethnic awareness and migratory patterns as often unwelcome guests within host societies (Gilman 1991; Jütte, 2021; Konner 2013). Consequently in their theory-building, Jewish folklorists and ethnologists have gravitated toward applications of psychoanalysis, functionalism, diffusion, and transmission/communication more so than other scholars as a result of this anxiety. These patterns are apparent, as I will show, whether they study Jews or, as “familiar strangers,” the patterns of other marginalized groups and traditions (Bronner 2008, 17–20). Although the label of Jewish folklore and ethnology does not presuppose that researchers identify as Jewish, it is also true that historically the field has been a place for Jews to locate Jewish perspectives that inform general studies in arts, humanities, and social sciences.

More so than for other fields, Jewish folklore and ethnology provides basic questions of how and why people use and think about tradition. Considering the centuries-old discourse on the behaviors that characterize Jews and their communities, Jewish folklore and ethnology is, or should be, central to Jewish studies overall because of the special problems of tradition, ethnicity, and practice in theory building in Jewish studies. Certainly it is the foundation of the emerging hybrid field of Jewish cultural studies (Boyarin and Boyarin 1997; Bronner 2021). In many ways growing separately from the development of folklore studies through the Grimms and Thoms, Jewish folklore and ethnology is nonetheless in the twenty-first century pivotal to modern folkloristics because of the claim that as a globally dispersed, 4,000-year-old continuous cultural identity, (an “unbroken chain of tradition from generation to generation” in the repeated gloss of the Kaddish, for example) Jewish lore and life is fundamental to a theory of tradition, identity, and belief that is basic to folklore. In a sense, all folklorists in their work pay an intellectual debt to the sages of Judaism for setting out the talking points of communities expressing tradition through legend, image, and custom, well before Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm sought the voices of the Volk or people and William John Thoms popularized an existing term of folklore as a key to cultural identity.
Shapers of, and in, the Field

The writing of S. An-Ski (Shlomo Zanvil Rappoport, 1863–1920) was not the first word on Jewish folklore and ethnology, but it was notable for setting up a milestone in the organized field-based research in the midst of spreading intellectual discourse on modernization. Signifying a move in Jewish interpretation from ancient sacred texts and theology to the study of cultural expression as the basis of social connection, An-Ski’s vision was critical, not just to collect but also to use and symbolize folklore toward the perpetuation of Jewish identity and, ultimately, Jewish communitarianism/nationalism (see Gottesman 2003, 75–110; Rabinovitch 2005). More so than others, he used the term “expedition,” which was rhetorically associated with geographic exploration, to comprehensively chart all traditions of Jewish locales. It allowed for contemplation of the evolution of Jewish customs into the present and their comparability to other Jewish corners of the world. Yet there was a powerful etiological statement in the presentation of stories and songs hailing from the Russian Pale of Settlement. Folklore from this area, particularly for a group without a country, emerged as the poetic soul for Jews elsewhere. His great project looked to Eastern Europe as the cultural source area of traditions that appeared to have disappeared elsewhere with modernization.

Rather than view the traditions of the shtetl as backward or bizarre, An-Ski took a cue from the romantic nationalistic ideology of the Grimm Brothers in celebrating peasant expression as vernacular artistry at the heart of sustaining national creativity and identity (Gonen 1994, viii).1 For Dov Noy (1920–2013), the American-educated, Polish-born leader of Jewish folklore as a distinct field of study, An-Ski “anticipated the basic precept of modern ethnography concerning ‘ethnicity’—i.e., that a custom is Jewish even if its origin and language are not, provided that it is performed in a clearly Jewish context” (Noy 1994, xvii). Fellow Israeli folklorist Haya Bar-Itzhak credited An-Ski with the neologism “ethnopoetics,” which in describing a group’s aesthetic systems on its own terms, became central to modern folklore studies (Bar-Itzhak 2010, 28).

Yet organizing, in Bar-Itzhak’s words, “the first fieldwork in the study of Jewish folklore that applied the research tools of modern folkloristics,” An-Ski became
problematic as a progenitor of folklore at the core of Jewish cultural and identity studies because of his emphasis on what appeared to be an archaeological obsession with the relict minutiae of the past in isolation, rather than giving attention to emerging practices and situated performances in modern everyday life (see Kugelmass 2006). The “modern” in Noy’s ethnography and Bar-Itzhak’s folkloristics was, at bottom, process rather than product oriented. Instead of romantically forging the nation through its people of the land, as An-ski hoped, folklore for them framed the processes of variable social interaction in a mobile, transnational society. Folklore, as a topic and a vision, was tied less to place and more to a portable, intangible heritage. It defined a malleable, adaptable Jewishness that could be enacted on certain occasions, rather than being a totalistic “folklife.”

With the creation of a national state of Israel and the emergence of North America as a population as well as cultural center for Jews, the role of folklore as a vehicle for romantic nationalism changed. With an expanded historiography I present here, one has to question whether folklore and the understanding of ethnopoetics still figure significantly in the conceptualization of Jewish sustainability in a fragmented, global Jewish culture. A place to begin the inquiry into the uses of folklore in a philosophy of Jewish cultural action is to examine An-Ski’s essay on ethnopoetics, originally published in 1908 in Perezhitoye, the organ of the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society of St. Petersburg, Russia. He has two epigraphs that set the tone for the essay. The first comes from the pen of Ilya Orshansky (1846–1875), known more as a lawyer and historian than ethnographer. His main legacy is as an activist for the abolition of discriminatory laws and achievement of Jewish emancipation in Russia. The quote that An-Ski uses refers apparently to the limitations of history and the advantages of understanding identity through “a people’s poetry,” or folklore viewed as grassroots artistry: “A people’s poetry depicts, vividly and in clear relief, the hidden inner world of national life, to which we are admitted neither by the pen of the diligent historian nor by the sharp eye of the chronicler” (An-Ski 2010, 34). The second epigraph is the Talmudic directive, “Go out and see what the people do” (BT Eruvin 14b). An-Ski justifies the need for organized fieldwork that this knowledge is hard to come by when he states, “One may boldly say that there is no other people who speak about
themselves so much and know themselves so little as the Jews do” (An-Ski 2010, 34). An-Ski contended Jews can be revealed, or that is to say their “inner world of national life,” through their customary expressions or “people’s poetry.”

An-Ski complained that the Jewish “intelligentsia” who were more occupied with recognition in the fine arts and humanities have not helped unveil this “inner world.” Indeed, they appeared to him bent on separating from and hiding their cultural roots to achieve success. A new kind of study and student is necessary, he maintained, to expose “matters of Jewish ethnography and folklore, that treasury of folk art which provides the only way to discover the Jewish national character and to penetrate to the depths of the worldview of the Jewish people and its ethnographic-cultural and moral lineaments” (An-Ski 2010, 34). The meaning he wanted to convey is apparent in the rhetorical equivalence of ethnography and lore with art, suggesting that attempts to restrict Jewish cultural production to the elite level of “civilization” in enlightenment discourse were misplaced. It creates a situation in which fine artists are not true to themselves and lose the richness of traditions as a cultural resource.

Looking to scholars who previously worked with folklore, his models for action were nineteenth-century Russian ethnographers Vladimir Dall, Lev Y. Sternberg, M.A. Krol, Vladimir Bogoraz, Pavel Schein, and V.I. Jochelson (An-Ski 2010, 35). But he griped that although they were of Jewish origin, they gave little attention to Jewish folklore or else devoted themselves to “savage and half-savage nomads” out in the remote Siberian tundra, rather than population centers of Jews in the Russian Pale of Settlement. He also lamented that although songs and proverbs had been collected in chronicles of Jewish folklore, “no attempt has even been made to collect and record the folktales, legends, parables, spells, superstitions, and so on.” Taken together, these kinds of material could show the holistic fabric of the interrelatedness of Jewish culture, he thought, rather than isolating a particular thread. The urgency of this collection of texts for An-Ski owes to the disappearance of folklore that he compared to losing a treasure trove of art. “Every year, and even every day,” he wrote, “the most precious pearls of folk art are being lost. The older generation, that which preceded the cultural revolution, is departing this world and taking with it to the grave a millennia-old heritage of folk art” (An-Ski
The cultural revolution to which he referred dates to the late nineteenth century when Russia felt pressure to modernize as its western European neighbors had. The changes took the form of transitions from village life to industrialization and urbanization that were sustained by an ethos of progress and innovation, rather than tradition and social intimacy. Trouble was, according to An-Ski, that with this modernization came the potential extinction of Jewish culture because of the imposition of a mass society dictated by the majority culture.

An-Ski sounded in the essay what can be read as a call to cultural arms by folklorists and ethnologists: “Our task today is to organize without delay the systematic collection of the works of folk art, of the monuments of the Jewish past, and to describe Jewish lifestyles over the generations. This task is not partisan but national and cultural, and the best forces of our people must be mobilized and unified for it. The time has come to create Jewish ethnography!” (An-Ski 2010, 35).

An-Ski’s definition of “folk art” was oral rather than visual: “tales, legends, songs, parables, superstitions, sayings, proverbs, and so on, produced by the people itself, as well as works that penetrated it and won great popularity” (An-Ski 2010, 40). He noted the frequently made criticism that the Jews appeared “cultureless” because their folklore resembled the traditions of the host society (Boyarin 2013, 85–92), and he hypothesized that going to the people to see what they do would reveal “forms, character, and orientation” that are distinctively Jewish (An-Ski 2010, 51). He called for analysis of European literary “motifs” that are rendered in folk tales performed by Jews with a “different form and character.” An example he gave was of the “hidden tzaddik” or nister replacing the fool of European Märchen. Although Jewish and European narratives are structurally similar, the function of the character is different in Jewish culture, he declared. Although the nister is depicted as a simpleton, the apparent butt of many jokes, An-Ski pointed out that “when the time is ripe—generally when Jews must be saved from peril—he is suddenly revealed and turns out to be wiser than all the greatest tzaddikim, with total mastery not only of the entire Torah but also of the arcane lore that only angels achieve” (An-Ski 2010, 61). He generalized that whereas in European folklore this and other motifs appear against the background of “material and physical might, in Jewish art they are shown against the background and in the domain of spiritual
power only” (An-Ski 2010, 51). Suggesting a function of folklore not just as entertainment but potentially as resistance to oppression and a parable of social reality, he commented that Jewish heroes fight with spiritual strength rather than physical power. They “act not with the sword but through a word and the power of the spirit,” he wrote (An-Ski 2010, 51). An “ethnopoetics” thus served to identify from a group’s perspective its own “patterns, images, and terms,” or put another way, its folk aesthetics and native classifications. It is distinguished from the kind of poetics that looks for universal external, or what he calls “superficial,” similarities and therefore emphasizes the uniformity of culture rather than its differences by ethnic and religious affiliation. The ethno in ethnography and ethnopoetics emphasized the distinctiveness of the group as expressed in their artistic expressions, most vividly evident in the collective folklore of people close to the land.

An-Ski’s ethnic fervor apparently came late to him (Lukin 1994, xiv). He claimed to have had earlier in his Russian literary career a “hatred and contempt” for Jewishness until he discovered in folklore “the beauty of the poetry that lies buried in the old historical foundations and traditions” (Roskies 1992, 247). But Jewish literary critic David G. Roskies views this return to Jewish identity as “far from being a pious act of self-negation, Ansky’s was a Western sensibility engaged in a highly self-conscious act of retrieval” (247). Seeking out the original versions of “old historical” poetic texts surviving in the present among peasants uncontaminated by modernization, An-Ski wrote that his expedition would venture into a zone he recalled from his childhood as “the thick of Jewish life” (Roskies 1992, 247). Aware that some collectors in America such as Leo Wiener and Y.L. Cahan had recorded Yiddish folksongs from Eastern Europe among Jewish immigrants in New York City, An-Ski insisted in a letter to Chaim Zhitlovsky that “Yiddish tales, legends, and the like must be collected among old folks who carry the past with them in unadulterated form” (Roskies 1992, 257). That form could be recovered from the cultural source area of the Pale containing presumably homogeneous, tradition-centered communities of orthodox Jews. Roskies observes that in An-ski’s emphasis on spiritual power in folklore is a reckoning with, or remaking of, Judaism in his old age in the midst of social and technological change. Roskies proclaims that with An-ski’s idea of a collecting expedition in 1912 to
salvage remains of a cultural ancestor of modern Jews, An-ski “turned the disparate remains of Jewish folklore and folk life into an all-embracing Oral Torah” (Roskies 1992, 260). Consequently, An-ski established a paradigm for Jewish revitalization with a cultural rather than religious turn. He epitomized the folkloristic and ethnological stance for the twentieth century of the insider turned observer to confront the sacrifices he or she had made to assimilate and modernize.

Dov Noy describes this liminal folkloristic position in fieldwork in Jewish terms of the meshulah, or messenger-collector (others refer to the position as “new class” consciousness; see Bronner 2005; Bruce-Briggs 1979; Mechling 1989). “A meshulah, unlike a shaliah (messenger),” Noy writes, “acts in total dedication to his mission, initiating original and individual steps and often displaying bizarre behavior, casting him in the image of an outsider” (Noy 1994, xvii). Noy notes that in An-Ski’s The Dybbuk (1914), the meshulah yearned for the coming of the Messiah but was paradoxically immersed in the materialism of modern life, and Noy sees parallels with An-Ski’s situation and many of his followers in the folkloristic and ethnological field (Noy 1994, xvii). One weakness of this preoccupation with the spiritual, Noy claims, is a relative neglect for visual tradition, although he notes An-Ski’s growing awareness of the material once out among the people on his expedition. Although not as comparative or visual as Noy hoped for the future generation of Jewish folklorists and ethnologists working to preserve old as well as construct new identities, An-Ski holds, Noy wrote, “a distinguished place as a pioneer in folkloristics and ethnography” (Noy 1994, xvii). For Noy’s student Haya Bar-Itzhak, representing the next generation of Jewish folklorists into the twenty-first century, An-Ski made too many sweeping generalizations and over-relied on textual evidence, but nonetheless she recognized him as “the keystone of Jewish folklore studies to the present day” (Bar-Itzhak 2010, 33).

As important as An-Ski was to the long-term project of collecting folklore in constructing a comprehensive ethnography of Jews, his influence did not significantly extend to North America (Kugelmass 2006, 346). Yet a scholar of Jewish background, Franz Boas (1858–1942), who arrived in the United States in 1884 at the age of 26, established principles of cultural relativism and particularism in his folklore-based ethnography that were similar to An-Ski’s. From his
teaching post in anthropology at Columbia University, he referred primarily to African-American and Native-American folklore to encourage replacement of the reigning paradigm of an evolutionary ladder that all cultures climb from savagery to civilization. Cultural evolutionists of the Folklore Society and American Anthropological Association placed modern industrialized societies, devoted to science rather than superstition, at the top and relegated ethnic groups such as Jews to a “barbaric” stage at the lower rungs because of their holding onto old “superstitious” traditions. Boas proposed instead a flattened heterogeneous model of many cultures that were relative to one another rather than being classified as superior or inferior. Aware of the treatment of Jews as a darker, inferior race, Boas maintained that relativism countered a racist undertone in evolutionary thought of connecting biological differences to a cultural hierarchy from dark to white peoples. Facing resistance to his ideas and antisemitism from colleagues in the American Anthropological Association, he used the American Folklore Society and the Journal of American Folklore (JAF), which he controlled as editor from 1908 to 1924 (and influenced through 1940 with his students Ruth Benedict and Gladys Reichard at the helm), to expand his vision of culture as holistic, relativistic, and pluralistic (Liss 1995).

Boas’s explanation of cultural similarities in different parts of the globe followed the historical experience of Jews in diaspora. He embraced folklore as primary cultural evidence to reveal the particular character of a group and the ways that cultural ideas move. Folklore for Boas comprised the tales and myths that revealed the specific values and history within a bounded group. Using folklore even more than linguistics or physical anthropology, he described cultures by their geographical spread and special conditions rather than by their level and type (M. Jacobs 1959; Reichard 1943). As editor of the JAF, he encouraged the anthropological stance of objectivity by ethnographers who he thought should be outsiders to the cultures they observe. Thus he discouraged his Jewish students Paul Radin and Melville Herskovits from studying Jewish communities, but he nonetheless published the collections in 1916 and 1918 by Russian-born, Yiddish-speaking Jewish high school teacher Leah R.C. Yoffie (1884–1956) among Eastern European Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants. Although she noted in
both articles that “the majority of their practices are common to the orthodox Jews in all the lands of the earth,” she drew attention to emergent lore of immigrants adapting to the particular conditions of St. Louis (Yoffie 1916, 413). For example she collected the saying “Zie is azei dick wie die grobe blecherin” (She is as large as the tinner’s fat wife) and commented that “this is a purely local St. Louis expression. About twenty years ago there lived on North Seventh Street a tinner whose wife was abnormally large. This simile is the result of that good woman’s excessive girth, and is still used by Yiddish-speaking Jews in this city” (Yoffie 1918, 165). In contrast to An-Ski’s search for authentic lore in isolated rural environs, Yoffie declared the urgency of going into the cities where Jewish immigrants had settled to collect their folklore and get a sense of their continuity and change. With rhetoric of “inner life” and a “lack of knowledge” of Jewish culture, she declared “very little is known to most of us about the inner life of the people who have recently come to this country from other lands. There is a promising field for the scholar in the folk-lore of the immigrants in our large cities. This is especially true of the legends and customs among the orthodox Jews in our country” (Yoffie 1916, 413; emphasis added).

Boas, like An-Ski, was concerned for religious and ethnic identity in a modernizing society that is associated with individual freedom, but Boas expressed more ambivalence toward the contribution of tradition to progress. Perhaps with the tradition-centered East European Ostjuden in mind, in contrast to the “liberal” Jews of Germany, he announced, “My whole outlook upon social life is determined by the question: How can we recognize the shackles that tradition has laid upon us? For when we recognize them, we are also able to break them” (Boas 1938, 202). Boas, then, was not calling for the preservation of tradition as much as using its knowledge to enhance intellectual freedom. In a rare reference to his Jewish upbringing, he used his father’s example to make his point: “My father had retained an emotional affection for the ceremonial of his parental home without allowing it to influence his intellectual freedom. Thus I was spared the struggle against religious dogma that besets the lives of so many young people. . . . As I remember it now, my first shock came when one of my student friends, a theologian, declared his belief in the authority of tradition and his conviction that one
had not the right to doubt what the past had transmitted to us. The shock that this outright abandonment of freedom of thought gave me is one of the unforgettable moments of my life” (Boas 1938, 201). For others, Boas’s stance sounded revolutionary, and indeed, Boas had publicly mentioned that he had been conditioned by “a German home in which the ideals of the revolution of 1848 were a living force,” referring to unsuccessful protests of noble privilege and efforts to guarantee civil liberties for Jews and other minorities (Boas 1938, 201; see also Bronner 1998, 129–34; Glick 1982).

As a result of his social and political views, Boas frequently suffered antisemitic as well as ideological attacks in America. Working in the same city as Boas, Brooklyn Museum curator Stewart Culin (1858–1929) unleashed some of the most vitriolic rhetoric against the Columbia professor. Embittered in the 1920s because of the decline of museum evolutionism and fired up with Henry Ford’s support of antisemitic tracts such as the *International Jew* (1920), Culin implied that Boas’s scholarship was a brand of Russian-inspired radical socialism inspired by a conspiracy of International Jewry. He observed at a council meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Philadelphia that members “were aligned, divided into two parties, who separated and seated themselves on opposite sides of the room. On one side were the Jews and the converts and supporters, mostly students of Franz Boas of Columbia University, and on the opposite side, their opponents. The Jews stood for Internationalism, and so proclaimed themselves. They had succeeded in securing possession of this important association and used it for their personal and political ends” (Bronner 1998, 133). Culin’s friend Adolph F. A. Bandelier (1840–1914) accused Boas of clannishly relying on Jewish ethnographers composed of “some blooming youngsters and . . . a Sheeny from Russia.” He viewed them as culturally as well as academically ill-equipped because they did not live up to the standards of Christian modernism. These “children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” he sarcastically wrote Culin, compose “the JEW speculating on the ignorance of others” (Bronner 1998, 134).

Beyond ample evidence of ethnic prejudice by evolutionary anthropologists Culin and Bandelier against the very idea of Jewish ethnographers, there was an intellectual problem for them in the discourse on evolution posed by the presence
of supposedly “superstitious” Jews in the advance of rational science, indeed the very persistence of ancient Judaism in modern industrial civilization. The progress and mobility of Jews, indeed the recurring reference to an ascribed Jewish scientific “genius,” challenged the consistency of evolutionary racial doctrine (see Gilman 1996). Joseph Jacobs (1854–1916), an Australian-born Jewish scholar known for his diffusionist folklore studies, presented results of an elaborate social study defying evolutionary predictions of cultural backwardness. In essays such as “The Comparative Distribution of Jewish Ability” (1886) that built a case for the claim of Jews as being “civilized,” expressed ultimately in *Jewish Contributions to Civilization* (1919), he found that Jews have shown a higher rate of intellectual ability than evolutionary doctrine predicted, in his prideful phrase, “’Tis a little people, but it has done great things” (Gilman 1996, 71).

Typical of the case for Jewish racial typology in cultural evolution, John Sterling Kingsley in *The Standard Natural History* insisted on Jews as a race at a “low stage of culture” characterized by ignorance, fanaticism, and superstition (Kingsley 1885, 472). Yet if an evolutionary racial classification based on English Christian superiority categorized Jews in a primitive cultural run, Kingsley had to explain the renown of highly regarded Jewish scientists, intellectuals, and leaders such as English prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, who was of Jewish heritage. “A Jew, it is true,” Kingsley admitted, “can rise to be the premier of the British empire, but this is the exception noted; here there was contact with other people. To see the Jew in all his purity and the accompanying degradation, we must visit those places, like southern Russia, where they form whole communities” (Kingsley 1885, 472; emphasis added). With this prevailing intellectual bias against the shtetls that allegedly epitomized the degradation of Jewish culture in mind, An-Ski’s insistence on the grassroots artistry of the Russian communities and Boas’s defiance of biological determinism bear the stamp of their concerns for Jewish emancipation resulting from an appreciation of Jewish expressive folk traditions as artistic. Although they viewed Jewish folklore as material for a relativistic, liberating agenda, they were aware of the vulnerability of Jewish folklore being used as signs of social backwardness for racist purposes. An-Ski’s response was to elevate and creatively adapt Jewish folklore as a national symbol. Boas’s was to redirect Jewish concerns of
racism and antisemitism to compelling and distinctive non-Jewish native artistry in exotic locales.

Joseph Jacobs (who is notable in his roles as editor of the British journal *Folklore* as well as *Jewish Social Studies*) was a Jewish folklorist of the era who dealt more with Jewish-Christian relations in relation to folk process rather than isolating a collective folk, and raised a ruckus as a result. He openly ridiculed attempts by renowned British folklorists such as George Laurence Gomme and Andrew Lang to portray Judaism as a “savage” religion displaced by Christianity and therefore render Jews obsolete and necessarily “backward” (Bronner 1998, 134–37; see also Dorson 1968). He mocked the Victorian folklorists by stating if that is the case then the Christian mass of eating the host is barbaric because it involves eating the host. He connected Passover historically to Christian communion but argued that Passover’s meaning cannot be narrowed to the original commemoration of Exodus, as the Victorians were wont to do. Pointing to varieties of customs attached to Passover in different Jewish communities, he contended that customs should be observed to determine how they function differently according to the locale. He argued that rather than being a survival of the ritual eating of unleavened bread as a historical commemoration, the consumption of the communal wafer in the Christian mass functions to create holiness by the belief in bodily transference. Years later, eminent folklorist Alan Dundes, who had a Jewish background, went one step further with psychoanalytic interpretation to hypothesize that the blood-libel legend is a “projective inversion” of Christian guilt over the cannibalism of eating the host. He theorized that this guilt is projected onto narratives of Jews killing the Christian child for blood to eat in a wafer-like matzoh instead. It thus is a legend with the function of relieving anxiety by Christians rather than an outgrowth of historical practices (Dundes 2007, 386–409).

Jacobs, known like Boas as a diffusionist, made a major contribution to the use of folklore studies generally by recasting the meaning of “folk,” arguably based upon his Jewish experience. Reflecting a concern for diasporization, Jacobs presented folklore not as an irrational survival of savage practices but as a functional expression of tradition that spread with social movements and was capable of producing new forms emerging in contemporary situations (Fine 1987). Resisting
racial stereotypes, Jacobs characterized the “folk” not as primitives but as social segments of societies, “many-headed . . . and often many-minded” (Jacobs 1893, 234). Instead of portraying culture as a hierarchy with folk at the bottom and moderns at the top, Jacobs declared the relativist concept that “we are the Folk as well as the rustic, though their lore may be other than ours, as ours will be different from that of those that follow us” (Jacobs 1893, 237). In this conception, folk shifted from a noun for a remote group or lower level of culture to an adjective for traditional process that marks, and indeed is needed by, all people. It could be collected in the city as well as the country, among the elite as well as the peasantry, and even more significantly could constitute individual agency of, rather than placing “shackles” on, as Boas lamented, one’s identity.

With the devastation of the Holocaust in mind and Jewish rediasporization renewing ethnographic urgency for collecting folklore of new destinations for Jews in Israel, Australia, northern Europe, and the Americas toward a revised picture of post-shtetl, modern Jewish culture, a landmark meeting titled the Regional Conference on Jewish Folklore, organized by the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) at the Spertus College of Judaica in 1977, sought to reflect on the progress of Jewish folkloristic and ethnological work and to query whether it represented a unified movement. The conference gave special attention to the problem of accounting for uprooted communities from Eastern Europe and North Africa in new locales, particularly in the United States and Israel as destinations for Jewish refugees. The reference to “regional” in the title, in relation to the national AJS, belies its global importance. Dov Noy, the conference’s driving force from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, announced that it was the first Jewish studies conference outside of Israel devoted explicitly to folklore, and went on to view it historically as the “cornerstone in the development of the academic study of Jewish culture as part of the field of Jewish Studies,” implying that this interdisciplinary field was more hospitable to Jewish folklore analyzed by Jews than was anthropology (Noy 1980, xi). He pointed out that in Israel where folklore was a popular subject, Jewish folklore studies had been narrowly defined as a literary resource, and its study was centered on origins of narratives in ancient texts. In the Americas, there was an opportunity to integrate new developments beyond
literature in Jewish studies and a greater acceptance in folklore studies than in anthropology of “fieldwork at home.”

To be sure, Jewish folklore and ethnology since the nineteenth century had been previously discussed in scholarly meetings, including those of the American Folklore Society and Association for Jewish Studies, but the Chicago conference conspicuously pushed for folklore as material and concept to represent a distinctive approach to Jewish culture as well as a type of renewable, modern resource in Jewish studies. This concern for folklore as key evidence to a new interdisciplinary Jewish studies aiming to uncover cultural relationships was especially evident seven years after the AJS conference in the organization of “Living Tradition: Jewish Folk Creativity and Cultural Survival” sponsored by the Center for Jewish Studies of the City University of New York and YIVO in New York City. The organizers of the New York City conference boasted that because the AJS conference was a regional conference, “Living Tradition” was appropriately “the first national conference devoted to Jewish folklore” (Conferences and Meetings 1983–1984, 5–6). The conferences had many of the same speakers who were visibly initiating courses on Jewish folklore at Indiana University, University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, UCLA, and other prominent national universities. Folklore emerged as a large umbrella under which to connect genres of narrative, music, and art as well as confront big ideas about ethnic identity, interrelationship of tradition and modernity, and cultural massification and sustainability. Yet folklore and ethnological studies was the product of scattered individuals rather than the kind of concentrated, comprehensive team project represented by the An-Ski expedition. Still based upon fieldwork with outstanding tradition-bearers and varied cultural scenes, the participants in the conferences presented more of Jacobs’s picture of a many-headed and many-minded Jewish culture than An-Ski’s ur-source of Jewishness in the shtetl.

These events of the 1970s and 1980s suggested to participants the beginnings of a movement, a period of consolidation that led to a push for new ethnographic perspectives on contemporary Jewish culture, countering the prevalent emphasis on ancient literary and historical foundations of Jewish civilization. In many ways, the movement took the An-Ski expedition as inspiration for this effort, although
it wanted to be sure to present new ethnography not as a salvage operation but as an inquiry into the adaptation of traditional forms and emergence of new ones. It also faced a lack of institutional support and contemplated whether such a movement could be sustained with individual, rather than organized team, projects. Although not driven by a singular project, the ethnographic perspective on the Jewish subject, I maintain, has cast the problem of Jewish culture as a paradox of identity out of the conflict of tradition and modernity and challenged conventional categorizations of Jewish studies. No longer amassing poetic material for a case for cultural nationalism, many conference participants, observing Jews in the practice of traditions that were not isolated in time and place and those analyzing “urban villagers” as folk societies such as the Hasidim in new modern settings, problematized the supposed primary function of group maintenance. More of the issues at hand concerned the way that practices and performances of folklore constructed individual identities and projected anxieties about the relation of Jewishness to a dominant Christian and sometimes Muslim society. Rather than treating popular culture as sitting on an opposite pole from tradition, more questions arose about the hybridization of folk and popular culture into ethnic symbols.

In a major theoretical move from positing functions of Jewish practices to situated behavior within frames of communication, ethnographers of the Jewish subject redefined culture as a process of representation and subjective organization of experience (Bronner 2013a; Georges and Jones 1999, 289–93; Hasan-Rokem 2002, 969–72; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 17–78). This is an old story in social sciences, but the narrative I propose that is new or revised is the uneasy alignment of folklore and ethnology in the emergence of Jewish studies. In the twenty-first century, I contend, a new period of reconfiguration was recognizable in which Jewish folklore and ethnology, viewed in the context of popular culture, merged into Jewish cultural studies.

With the theoretical shift came a different historiography that emerged from the study of Jewish folklore in the modernized, heterogeneous societies of central and western Europe rather than the isolated, homogeneous shtetls of eastern Europe. Reflecting on the achievements and tasks of Jewish folklorists from 1897, the date of Max Grunwald’s publication of “Zur Volkskunde der Juden”
(and subsequently the journal *Mitteilungen zur jüdischen Volkskunde*, the organ of the Gessellschaft für Jüdische Volkskunde [Association for Jewish Folkloristics], begun in 1897 in Austria; an endowed chair in folklore at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem was named for Grunwald [1871–1953]; see Grunwald 1923; Müller 1999; Noy 1982; Schrire and Hasan-Rokem 2012, 331–32), Dov Noy noted the instrumental use of folklore as an umbrella term to cover the spectrum of culture, including (1) names and oral aspects, (2) poetry, (3) belief and legend, (4) customs and folkways, (5) augury, and (6) material culture. Notably absent is music, which had aligned largely with musicology, although Noy included presentations on the ballad and Yiddish music to draw attention to the possibilities of folkloristic perspectives on music and song, much as it had been done for Anglo-American folk music (Noy 1980, 5–10). Another factor in the integration of music into folklore studies came from the Yiddish world, where figures such as Vilna-born Yehudah Leib Cahan (1881–1937) promoted the linkage of folk narrative and folk song studies as part of *folksshaftung*, or folk creativity, and others worked with the broader concept of *folkloristik* (folkloristics, oriented toward social science) for the study of traditions (Cahan 1952; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1985). Still, the predominant approach of mining historical texts for references to folklore was evident in books such as *The Folklore of the Jews* (1937) by Angelo S. Rappoport, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (1939) by Joshua Trachtenberg, and *Holy and Profane: Evolution of Jewish Folkways* (1955) by Theodor Gaster, all of which appeared in the United States and Great Britain and were concerned with the origins of modern customs in pagan or ancient rituals. They owed to Grunwald’s stated aim of *Volkskunde* to go back to the roots of humankind (“Rückwärtschreiten zu den Wurzeln der Menschheit”) (see Hödl 2002–2003, 56).

Dov Noy, who had been a Talmudic scholar, broke away from religious studies, literature, and anthropology by receiving a degree in folklore in 1954 from Indiana University and viewed folklore in the Boasian sense as a mirror of culture. Together with anthropologically oriented Raphael Patai and literary scholar Francis Lee Utley, Noy spearheaded a volume titled *Studies in Biblical and Jewish Folklore* (1960), published by Indiana University’s Folklore Institute to show new research by individuals calling themselves folklorists. Patai used the opportunity...
to reiterate a call he made in “Problems and Tasks of Jewish Folklore and Ethnology” in 1946 (in English; it appeared in Hebrew the year before) advocating for “the study of the folklore of present-day Jewish communities” receiving “the highest priority within the general field of Jewish learning” (Patai 1962, 11; emphasis added). The folklorists were the ones mainly agitating for a shift from an emphasis on the historic relics or survivals of Jewish beliefs to an ethnological project analyzing the contemporary functions of Jewish customs in everyday life. Sensitive to the charge that Judaism as an ancient religion was “superstitious” and therefore anachronistic, the folklorists wanted to show the rationale, indeed necessity, of Jewish folkloric production in the modern age. Richard Dorson, for example, posited the need of an assimilated American generation to deal with their immigrant legacy in the formation of Jewish-American dialect stories, and Beatrice Weinreich closed *Studies in Biblical and Jewish Folklore* with a classic study of the Americanization of the Passover seder (Dorson 1960; Weinreich 1960). By the time the Chicago Conference came together in 1977, the peripatetic Noy was especially sanguine about the relation of Jewish folklore as a key to unlocking puzzles of Jewish culture in multiple locations specifically and, more broadly, its connection to mass culture within the new interdisciplinary construct of Jewish studies. The contemporaneousness of folklore was rhetorically conveyed by dropping “biblical” from the title of the publication of the conference, *Studies in Jewish Folklore* (Talmage 1980) and its sponsorship by the Association for Jewish Studies.

Raphael Patai laid the foundation for this realignment of practice with functionalism in a Jewish perspective by his assertion in *Studies in Biblical and Jewish Folklore* that

As an anthropologist, one agrees with the anthropological definition of folklore as “dependent on oral transmission” and thus including “myths, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles, the texts of ballads and other songs, and other forms of lesser importance, but not folk art, folk dance, folk music, folk costume, folk medicine, folk custom or folk belief.” But as a student of Jewish culture one knows that Jewish legends and tales can be studied only in the context of Jewish folk custom. (Patai 1960, 21)
His emphasis on the significance of custom as a context for analysis suggests that in Jewish culture, the function of tradition matters most because it explains the persistence of a variety of traditional material in terms of the social and psychological benefits it provides, rather than a backward, stubborn, or superstitious character of a group of people. Explaining Jewish cultural scenes as rational responses to diverse social and cultural contexts held an urgency to many mid-twentieth-century anthropologists and folklorists willing to study their own cultures. Yet it also carried over into analyses of other groups. Folklorist Roger Abrahams, who had Jewish roots and devoted a career to African American folklore, in the lead essay of the Chicago conference even asserted “to the extent that we all study others that we may better understand ourselves, for me all folklore is, at least by refraction, Jewish” (1980, 14). For Abrahams, the concept of folklore as a key expression of culture shifted discussion of race to ethnicity and the capability of agency in the formation of identity.

Discontent with functionalism arose during the 1980s, however, because of skepticism that it served as explanation for cultural practice. According to Jewish folkloristic critics such as Elliott Oring (1976), it often described unintended consequences of events rather than their causes. It also raised a psychological question of whether functions outside of the awareness of participants constitute motivations by those participants to engage in cultural scenes. One could posit functions as factors contributing to the perception of an event rather than a reason for behavior within the cultural scene. This criticism appeared to signal a general anti-psychological turn in ethnographic work as ethnographers worked to validate the experiences of participants as reasons for engagement with culture (see Dundes 2005). The criticism led to a frequent assertion of multiple meanings coming out of a single event, coupled with the charge that functionalism was reductionist because it relied on the analysis of an observer rather than participants. Potentially, there could be as many explanations as there are participants, because they each bring individual perspectives to an event. In historiography, one could speculate on the American connection to this view because of the popularity of performance or post-structural ideas in individualistic societies related to the critique of functionalism. Yet one might also note that Jewish folklore studies,
judging by the contents of *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review*, relied heavily on functionalist explanations of contemporary events through its run from 1977 to 2000. In advancing the symbolist position coupled with functionalism that participants do have motivations and impulses outside of their awareness, folklorist Alan Dundes especially advocated for psychological analysis of Jewish practices such as Sabbath observance and those that reference Jews, such as the blood libel and wandering Jew legends (Dundes 2002; Dundes 2007; Dundes and Hasan-Rokem 1986).

One adjustment to functionalism was to ground it in specific situations, many of which are not bounded in space but defined by individuals who form a cultural relationship. Such situations went by the terms “cultural scenes” or “frames.” Sociologist Erving Goffman, whose book *Frame Analysis* (1974) is a benchmark for this kind of study, underscored the often unspoken negotiation of socially constructed frames by participants in a cultural “situation” when he wrote, “I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them” (1974, 10–11). Although credited with promoting frame analysis, undoubtedly influenced by his experience in a family of Ukrainian Jews migrating to Canada in the late nineteenth century, he did not analyze many Jewish situations for his examples of frame analysis (Burns 1992, 8; Cuddihy 1974, 68; Fernandez 2003, 206–7; Goffman 1963, 60, 114). Nonetheless the problem of socially constructed frames, according to those who knew him, was aroused by issues of Jewish identity and his negotiation of social interactions far from his Manitoba home. Classmate Saul Mendlovitz, who shared a Jewish background with Goffman, remarked of their graduate school experience together at the University of Chicago, for instance, “Erving was a Jew, acting like a Canadian, acting like a Britisher . . . he felt that he was Jewish yet didn’t want to be Jewish. He wanted to be something else. He really wanted to be an English gentleman [in line with] the picture of him that he had in his head” (Shalin 2009). A central problem in Goffman’s paradigm-changing approaches to social interaction was one of identity that could be appropriated and related through expressive acts of gesture and talk in selected settings.
Goffman never wrote about his childhood, but he was quoted as asserting that “being a Jew and a Russian Jew at that, explained a lot about me,” which biographer Ronald Fernandez took to mean that “he was a perennial outsider, caught between his ancestry and the prejudices of the larger society” (2007, 206–7). Taking the analytical role of observer looking in on someone else’s culture, Goffman sought to be an insider looking out, and developed theatrical metaphors for cultural behavior of stages and performances to describe variable social roles, much like those of touring actors who adapted to different physical settings and audiences. Mendlovitz indicates that Goffman “was very much into that observational stuff very early on,” based on his concern for his fit as a Jew and Canadian with different social groups on campus. Mendlovitz, who also had a self-impression of himself as an outsider in Chicago, recalls that as Jews, “Erving and I used to go to [ethnically mixed] parties and agree that we would exchange [thoughts on] what we had seen. He especially was interested in what we had seen and then he would take copious notes on that. . . . And we would then go over very carefully what the girl said to him, who was going off into another room, what was the content, how come there were no paintings on the wall, but it was a full range of ethnography and that kind of stuff” (Shalin 2009). In these settings often populated by strangers, Goffman noticed that a standard part of dialogue would be the extraction of information such as birthplace, occupation, and ethnicity from one another to figure out another person’s identity and categorize what to expect socially from that person. Goffman was apparently concerned about what the label “Jew” meant to others and how that identity matched his own self-awareness. Even though Goffman was self-conscious about his Jewish background as a basis for frame analysis, as a professor he encouraged ethnographers, including his Jewish students, to avoid studying their own families or cultural groups so as to maintain an objective distance from the observed scenes.

One can read a concern for the kinds of interaction among individuals who have a self-awareness of ethnic difference in Goffman’s reference to “stereotype” in his groundbreaking study, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959): “If unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals
roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to him. They can also assume from past experience that only individuals of a particular kind are likely to be found in a given social setting” (1959, 1). Before Goffman applied the terminology of the “frame” drawn from the work of anthropologist Gregory Bateson, he used the looser terminology of “situation” to refer to a recognizable context, or at least recognizable by participants, that drives distinctive forms of expression, and impression, people convey to one another. Goffman was interested in the attempts of participants to manage situations, often through symbolic communication in talk and action, to advance their own interests. A proposition he advanced that was especially developed by Jewish folklorists and ethnologists is the idea that in these situations, boundaries as well as connections are established through symbolic communication often embedded in artistic performances, including the use of proverbs, slang, and “body language” (see Abrahams 1977; Ben-Amos 1971; Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1975).

Goffman’s microsociological approach attracted wide notice because of the implication that participants have agency in the formation of their social life, rather than blindly following precedents of traditions or repeating fixed texts of lore in their expressive talk (Scheff 2006). He outlined an ethnographic goal of analyzing through observation whether the expressive and often ethnically inflected communication that occurs within a situation is dictated by the setting, often outside the awareness of participants, or strategically guided by one or more figures in the frame. Setting up a frame socially is an attempt by interacting participants to gain social order by emphasizing connections among one another and moving potential conflicts to the margins or edges of the frame. Goffman declared that this constant negotiation of different social settings is a function of modern everyday life in which identities are open to alteration in response to conditions of high mobility, social diversity, and extreme individualism. He conceptualized modern society as one in which people are strangers to one another and consequently create social frames constantly to establish familiarity and construct an identity appropriate to the situation (see Kim 2002; Packard 1972; Sennett 1977). Identities are not shaped by family line or locality alone, therefore, but are flexible and overlapping.
Modernity offers individuals choices for who they want to be or how they appear to other strangers, but with those choices comes the often difficult cultural work of formulating and managing their identities in various social relations on a daily basis. Forced into this role of presenting themselves, individuals become actors to one another and learn from culture the dimensions of acts they can ply variously to communicate and impress others. To this sociological premise, other scholars into the twenty-first century have added historical and psychological inquiries into the experiences and drives that shape socially framed behavior, particularly in Jewish contexts where issues of stereotype, migration, boundary, and difference abound (Boustan, Kosansky, and Rustow 2011; Boyarin and Boyarin 1997; Bush 2011, 57–67; Bronner 2012; Heilman 2006; Prell 1989; Sklare 1993).

While still guided by the Talmudic directive to go out and observe what the people do, twenty-first century folklorists and ethnologists were asking what people thought as Jews and of Jews in various situations and through various electronic media that mark modern life on the move. This query of cognition is especially evident in confronting Jewish coding in digital communication, often to resolve paradoxes of tradition and modernity in technological tools that on their surface reduce ethnic affiliation but might be harnessed to raise it (see, for example, an analysis of the Jewish joke online in Bronner 2021, 292–323). The very notion of ethnic community set in place and the basis of folkloric transmission in face-to-face interaction is challenged by digital communication. The idea of tradition in a future-oriented culture also is subject to re-definition as a praxis, or symbolized repetitive behavior, rather than a following of the past. This frame for cultural behavior is evident in studies of emergent, personalized, and invented rituals and traditions adapted to twenty-first-century sensibilities and new social networks (e.g., disabled, homosexual, and converted Jews; see Ochs 2007). Yet technologically oriented folklorists and ethnologists also opened a novel line of inquiry about the mediation of community and tradition-building among isolated Jews in non-traditional Jewish locales. The openness of the internet also fostered awareness of exoteric lore on a global scale that often featured antisemitic tropes in novel, often visual, folk forms of memes, emoticons, and spreadable media (see Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013).
Still a complaint is evident that although this sociopsychological view of Jew-

ishness as a framed cultural quality is applicable to the Jewish subject, it has not
been integrated into prevailing Jewish Studies, perceived as grounded in historic-
ity and hermeneutic reading of texts. Whether or not that perception is defensible,
one can point to the evidence in the categorization of AJS Review by historical
periods and the mission statement that refers to “Judaic scholarship” rather than
Jewish culture. Its starting point is “from biblical and rabbinic textual and histor-
ical studies.” Folklore and ethnology studies gravitate toward a separate develop-
ment of a Jewish cultural studies that arises as a new hybrid distinct from Jewish
studies and cultural studies (see Bronner 2008). Perhaps in reaction to the pre-
sumption of biblical and ancient sources dictating later behavior that follows tradi-
tion, this hybrid often seeks sociological and psychological explanation that posits
the production of tradition and culture prompted by individuals acting in agency.

Spreading the Word and Image of Jewish Folklore and Ethnology
Studies from JFEN to JFE

Unlike the anthropological tradition exemplified by Franz Boas discouraging his
Jewish students from studying Jews, folklore studies not only allowed but encour-
gaged students from various ethnic backgrounds to document and interpret their
own communities. During the 1960s, identification with “folkloristics” signaled
the rise of folklorists representing a discipline. In 1962, the Folklore Institute at
Indiana University became a doctorate-granting academic department, and the
same year the Graduate Program in Folklore and Folklife at the University of
Pennsylvania was launched and attracted a number of Jewish students. Around
the same time, an interdisciplinary academic movement of Jewish Studies em-
braced contemporary culture more than the archaeologically oriented Judaica
Studies. The Association for Jewish Studies was founded in 1969 and its second
president, Arnold Band, studied modern Israeli literature and folklore. At the
American Folklore Society’s meeting in Philadelphia in 1976, the Jewish Folklore
and Ethnography Section of the Society was formed. Signaling its interpretative
attention to “going out to see what the people do,” the Section was the only one in
the AFS with “ethnography” and later “ethnology” in its title. In May 1977, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Lynda Burack of the Department of Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania circulated a newsletter among the charter members of the Section. The newsletter was bolstered by the co-sponsorship of the Max Weinreich Center for Advanced Jewish Studies of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York. The inaugural issue did not offer a definition of Jewish folklore and ethnography, but arguably it tried to show the scope of the field by listing a variety and global reach of resources and institutions devoted to Jewish folklore and ethnography. The second issue in Fall 1977 carried a new title of *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Newsletter*, because in the words of the editors, “The term ethnology precisely reflects the comparative and theoretical orientation of the field” (Burack and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1977). In September 1979, a directory was produced with over 350 Jewish folklorists and ethnologists from more than a dozen countries. Into the 1980s, special issues with interpretative articles on Jewish foodways, Sephardic Jewish communities of North Africa and Europe, and Jewish museology appeared, in addition to the listings of resources. It had become more of a journal, and in 1987, it changed its name again, this time to the *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review*, to serve as the main communication for the study of Jewish folklore and ethnology and cement the linkage of folklore and ethnology representing a unified field within Jewish studies and folkloristics. Rather than setting boundaries for the field, Section leaders invited exploration and expansion, as if the field was a topical frontier. In the journal, young editors Shalom Staub and Yael Zerubavel referred to the field growing organically, shaped by the interests of the Section’s members: “Studies in Jewish folklore and ethnology are blossoming, with new topics and approaches constantly emerging” (Staub and Zerubavel 1987, 3). The masthead focusing on Jewish folklore and ethnology lasted until the twentieth volume in 2000 with a special issue on global studies of Jewish folk dance.

At that point, I stepped in to suggest that a way to link folklorists and ethnologists to a wider network of scholars, students, and public intellectuals interested in Jewish culture was to un-silo the field and join a Jewish cultural studies movement. I negotiated a book series under the title of “Jewish Cultural Studies” with
the prestigious Littman Library of Jewish Civilization. It was the first book series to be devoted exclusively to Jewish cultural studies, and I intended to have folklore and ethnology central to its development. I described its scope this way: Jewish cultural studies is objectively the study of Jewish culture. Subjectively, it analyzes and explains the way that Jewishness is perceived and created, by non-Jews as well as Jews. Studies show Jews to be a diverse lot, and give special attention to the expressions and representations of Jewishness that convey the plural identity of Jews among other Jews, alongside questions of how the singular Jew is viewed, stereotyped, and appropriated by non-Jews. Scholars contribute to the understanding of particular genres, whether film, folklore, music, literature, architecture, or art. Taken together, the studies represent a concern for cultural meaning as a theme of inquiry that cuts across genres and themes. Studies invite comparative inquiry into the patterns and significance of culture, and they force reflection on the intellectual legacy that makes culture central in human investigation. The label of Jewish cultural studies draws attention to the importance of culture to the identity people call Jewish.

Six volumes ensued with a core of folklorists and ethnologists as contributors, and two volumes received recognition as finalists for the National Jewish Book Award. The books, consisting of multiple essays by scholars of various disciplinary stripes, were organized around philosophical themes addressed by studies of culture and tradition: identity, expressiveness, home and domestic tradition, innovation and ritualization, mediation, and boundaries and borders. With the field-building meetings of the 1970s on Jewish folklore in mind, in 2008 we organized an international conference to emphasize the engagement of Jewish tradition with modernity and the ethnological goals of interpreting the diversity of Jewish cultures around the globe. Titled “Modern Jewish Culture: Diversities and Unities,” the conference was hosted by the Department of Jewish Studies at the University of Wrocław. It led to the publication of *Framing Jewish Culture: Boundaries and Representations*, thematicizing the Goffman-Bateson frame theory (Bronner 2014b). To provoke re-examination of Jewish cultural diversity and racial questions, the book cover featured black tallit-adorned men of the Shuva Letzion congregation in Lagos, Nigeria. The last volume continued the modernity theme.
with essays on the effect of twenty-first century digital culture and emerging traditions on the mediation of Jewish community (Bronner and Battegay 2018).

Although folklorists and ethnologists had found common ground with historians, literary critics, religious studies scholars, sociologists, and geographers in the study of Jewish culture past and present, a number of students and scholars expressed at folklore and Jewish studies conferences the desire to further develop Jewish folklore and ethnology as a separate field by building on the distinctive intellectual legacies of An-Ski, Grunwald, Noy, Bar-Itzhak, and Ben-Amos to go out and observe in the twenty-first century new or adapted old customs of diverse, often migratory people (Bronner 2016; Yassif 2019).

Thus the annual volume of *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology* was born. It both continues the concern of previous serials to a global study of Jewish traditional practices at the grassroots in communities and at the same time sets new paths and challenges of understanding the concept of tradition, situated variability of Jewish identity for individuals, and cognition of Jewishness. In the original call for papers drafted by the editors, emphasis was placed on Jewishness manifested in various ways by both Jews and non-Jews. We called for studies that analyzed the diverse ways in which Jewishness is expressed, conceived, transformed, and perceived by Jews and non-Jews through folklore, tradition, and social/cultural practice. We listed various genres in addition to the conventional folkloristic interests of narrative, song, and speech: ritual, belief, art, craft, architecture, dance, dress, and food. Besides the long-standing ethnographic concern for custom, we proposed studies of practices and performances of the body, faith, home, and community in the past and present. And we sought historiographical, philosophical explorations of the ideas of Jewish tradition, identity, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, thought—and of course, culture. Rather than limiting our contributors to folklorists and ethnologists, however, we asked for contributors applying perspectives from various disciplines in the humanities and social/natural sciences that could expand the field of Jewish folklore and ethnology.

Our cover design represents the modernity and historicity of tradition. The widely dispersed traditional double-thumbed hamsa with modern styling offering protection against the evil eye, as well as a decorative symbol emblemizing
Jewish identity, signals the intention of *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology* to be global and diverse in its scope, attentive to image as well as text, inclusive of belief and cognition in addition to practice and performance, and sensitive to implications of folklore and ethnology as an embodied, multidimensional subject. It also points out the cultural interrelations of the Jewish subject, since as Shalom Sabar pointed out in his essay in the Jewish Cultural Studies Series, the hamsa has Arab roots and is widely dispersed in many variations before being adopted as an Israeli and Jewish symbol (Sabar 2010; see also Tom Fogel’s essay on Yemeni amulets in this volume). The colors and borders of the cover also have significance. Notice the pomegranates that serve as a Jewish symbol because of its association with Torah (613 seeds for commandments) and its traditional connection to the holiday custom of Rosh Hashanah. As the pomegranate represents “new fruit” at the Jewish New Year, so too for us it sets this serial as a new venture that reminds us from whence we came. And like the hamsa, it is both an object and a decorative image found in many forms. The one on the cover is based on a Jewish papercut design. And yet we should also point out that the pomegranate appears in Greek myths and the Quran, which to folklorists and ethnologists naturally raises questions about diffusion, function, and cognition among cultures past and present.

The cover’s use of a stone background for the deep blue color (recognized by Jews in biblical references to *tekhelet* in Hebrew) in Jewish folklore and ethnology is significant also as a protection against the evil eye, in threads used on *tallit* (Jewish prayer shawls), and part of the narrative of Hanukkah, among other conspicuous meanings and uses for Jews (see Sagiv 2022). For the editors, the rendering of the color and the texture on the cover also made us think of the Dundesian conceptualization of folklore’s components as “text, context, and texture,” with the latter often being the least noticed but equally important (see Dundes 1964). The stone evokes images of Mediterranean cultures, ancient and modern, in which Jews resided, and the stability and wisdom of Jewish traditions through time. A frequent example of metafolklore (folklore that is told about folklore; see Dundes 1966) is that the deep blue color is between white and black, or day and night. In that liminal, or betwixt and between, state is a space free of the distractions of workaday divisions to ponder meanings of life (see Turner 1974; Wagoner and
It fits our goal to foster nuanced analyses of the meaning of Jewishness with perspectives and materials drawn from folklore and ethnology.

The volume begins, for example, with Tom Fogel’s query of the perception of Yemeni Jews by both Jewish travelers and Arab neighbors beginning in the nineteenth century. Emblematizing cultural difference for these observers is the role of Jewish amulet makers for purportedly “occult” uses. Fogel examines intercultural relations in Yemen and in Israel for immigrant Yemeni Jews. He finds that the image of the Yemeni Jew affects orientalist attitudes toward Mizrachi (Jews from Arab lands in the Middle East) in modern Israel.

As Fogel has raised questions of functions of esoteric (expressive traditions about a group by group members) and exoteric (expressive traditions about a group by non-group members), so too folklorist Steve Siporin in the next essay introduces legend types from non-Israeli sources that report devious practices of the Israeli government/military. Using theoretical perspectives on belief and antisemitic narratives, he hypothesizes the function of the stories to demonize an enemy using the legend rhetoric of truth.

Stephen Michael Cohen as a calligraphic artist offers an insider view of the rise of Judaic calligraphy in the twentieth century. He reveals the symbolic connotations of different kinds of script as issues of tradition and modernity especially entered the choices that Jews made to illuminate traditional hand-rendered documents such as ketubot (marriage certificates). He considers the influence of a grassroots movement of the 1960s and its effect on the elevation of Jewish folk art.

Folklorists and ethnologists have for many years observed the role of ethnic foodways in the formation of Jewish identity. Applying Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s concept of a “kitchen Judaism” that marks a persistent Jewish domestic sphere in contrast to a public urban image of assimilation to a majority culture, Jacqueline Laznow looks to functions of Judeo-Spanish food among Argentine Jews in Argentina and in Israel. She refers to cultural praxis as more than the repetition of practice. It constitutes a symbolic, repeated way of doing things that connotes group think (see Bronner 2021).

Judith Neulander next steps into the debate over the verisimilitude of a modern-day community in the American Southwest descended from so-called
“crypto-Jews.” Because of historic patterns of persecution in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Spain, these individuals were Spanish Jews who supposedly practiced Judaism secretly, while professing outwardly to be Catholics. In the twentieth century, scholars claimed to have found evidence of traditional practices and material culture of this group in locales in New Mexico and Arizona. Neulander casts doubt on these claims and suggests that accounts of the group constitutes a metafolklore related to centuries-old legends of “lost tribes of Israel.”

Justine Orlovsky-Schnitzler’s essay turns on its head An-Ski’s “expedition” to salvage “authentic” folklore of the East European shtetl that opened my historiography of Jewish folklore and ethnology. She describes as a participant-observer the meaning of performance by a Jewish chorus that adapts Yiddish songs, many relating to the Holocaust, for modern social justice causes. Using interviews with performers, she reports the personal and shared meanings and emotions that they derive from the cultural “frame” constructed by Besere Velt, the name of the chorus that translates to “Better World.”

The new configuration represented by the contents of Jewish Folklore and Ethnology declares analysis to be about what people think of as Jewish, which may be distinct from the religious observance as a Jew or the cultural expressions and practices that mark Jews. A thread shared among contributors to this volume is that close scrutiny of individual and community practice blurs boundaries between Jew and non-Jew, past and present, folk and popular, and modernity and tradition (see Bronner 2013a). Whether the authors of the essays report returning to iconic Jewish places and re-reading classic texts or exploring new locales and situations—and peoples identifying as Jews or denying their identity—they follow and interpret the trajectories of tradition. In the twenty-first century they also look at points of cultural emergence, such as the internet, email, touristic zones, camps, and festivals, and adaptations of tradition betwixt and between national and ethnic identities (see Bar-Itzhak 2005; Gruber 2002; Lehrer 2013). Predicting the path of historiography into the future, I could note the transformation of the vessel of Jewish nationalism molded out of the cultural clay of the shtetl or community to what I call the “culturalism” of Jewish identity out of occasions or frames for expression perceived as Jewish in a transnational, dispersed culture. This concept
of culturalism locates the production of traditions that provide a sense of cultural identity in the absence or deterioration of institutions in a mass society devoted to handing down, and often imposing, values through folklore from one generation to the next (Bronner 2011, 261–66; see also Bronner 2001; Cooper 2012; Fromm 2007). Even as Jews are often left out of the discourse of racial multiculturalism, they also seek to comprehend the multiculturalism of Jews and their potential for unity and separation (Gilman 2006; Haynes 2018; Vail 2019).

The objectives as well as objects of the culturalism and multiculturalism trajectories diverge from the nineteenth-century romantic nationalism invoking the poetic soul, and soil, of the shtetl. Whither Jewish folklore and ethnology then? Jewish folklorists and ethnologists in the twenty-first century reframe Jewish identity as mobile enactments that are not necessarily tied to place in contemporary culture. In so doing, they establish anew an intellectual role for a field that contributes to but is distinct from Jewish studies, folkloristics, and anthropology. Presaged by Joseph Jacobs’s call to document and interpret the many-headed and many-minded Jews in the myriad cultural scenes of modern life, Jewish folklorists and ethnologists as well as folklorists and ethnologists of Jewishness set out to reveal what Jews think and why people “think with” Jews. There is continuity in this endeavor with a Jewish intellectual legacy that predates An-Ski, Grunwald, Grimm, and Thoms. The rising modern edifice growing out of the field of Jewish folklore and ethnology is indeed built on the foundation of the Talmud directive to see what people do and ask why they do it.

Notes

1. It should be pointed out, however, that despite the celebration of An-Ski in Jewish folkloristic circles, he is rarely cited in histories of folklore studies in Europe. Giuseppe Cocchiara’s 703-page The History of Folklore in Europe (1971) omits any reference to him, although it covers scholarship in Russia. Y.M. Sokolov has a chapter on “Problems and Historiography of Folklore” in Russian Folklore (1971), but it also makes no mention of An-Ski. No citations of An-Ski appear in The Study of Russian Folklore (1975) edited by Felix J. Oinas and Stephen Soudakoff, giving the impression that the study of Jews in Russia was separate from the study of Russian Christians.

3. Patai cites the definition of folklore as “verbal art” from the work of American-born Africanist William Bascom (1912–1981); see Bascom 1953 and Bascom 1955.

4. Renowned ethnographer Gary Alan Fine, who has a Jewish background, recalled that Goffman emphatically told him with a Jewish inflection when he proposed to study a Jewish wedding that “anyone who studies their own family is a schmuck.” He told this anecdote as part of his delivery of the Francis Lee Utley Memorial Lecture, “The Folklore of Small Things: Tiny Publics and Realms of Local Knowledge,” at the American Folklore Society annual meeting, October 2010.

5. The idea of “thinking with” subjects beyond thinking about them is credited to structural anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), who in Totemism pronounced that animals are “good to think with” because of their symbolic uses by humans and the way that their variety marked distinctions and differences (1963, 89). Lévi-Strauss was born to French-Jewish parents and lived with his maternal grandfather, who was the rabbi of the synagogue of Versailles. The influence of his Jewish background on his work and implications for ideas of tradition and modernity are discussed in Cuddihy 1974; Damrosch 1995. For examples of “thinking with Jews,” see Bortz 2018; Ezra 2012; Fredriksen 2018.

References


Europe, edited by Haya Bar-Itzhak, 27–33. Ljubljana: Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Science and Arts.
JEWISH FOLKLORE AND ETHNOLOGY | 39


