All Tales are True: Yiddish Folkloristics and the Competition for the Jewish Experience, 1908-1938

by

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Introduction

The People of the Book have always been a people of stories. Many of those stories were written down, and many were not; some were canonized, and some were not. From the Torah to the Israel Folk Archives, the Jewish narrative record and the Jewish historical record work in concert to document the past of the Jewish people and its culture. Throughout millennia of movement and change—more than most other peoples endure—this culture has relied on the one story that helped it to maintain a connection with its identity: its foundation myth.

This story begins with Abraham’s covenant with God in Genesis, and ends with Exile and the development of the Jewish Diaspora. Since then, Jewish stories have reflected the issues and challenges of the times, but Jewish storytellers have always drawn strength from the existence of a single foundation myth, which cultivated sustained cohesion through unified self-definition. Yet Jewish history is not merely the story of a people’s development over time; it is also the story of a people in Diaspora. Separation through time and space has driven Jewish communities into a constant fight for the preservation of an identity united by the overarching Jewish narrative. Although this narrative has persisted over time, it has also branched out into a multitude of stories. The tension between this unity and fracturing came to a head in early 20th century Europe.

The issues faced by Yiddish-speaking European Jewry in the early 20th century were both rooted in history and contingent on modernity: anti-Semitism and pogroms, the dangers of assimilation, the appeal of nationalism, and the violence and destruction of World War. The identity of this Yiddish-speaking people transformed and expanded outward in order to accommodate new religious sects and new relationships with non-Jewish communities, adding immeasurable nuance to its old and already multifaceted
identity. In the midst of these ever-evolving challenges, Jewish people continued to tell stories and—precisely because of those challenges—the Jewish intellectual elite developed a self-reflective interest in collecting stories. In the era of nationalism, the process of defining a national identity and achieving cultural legitimacy required the construction of a national story with which to justify the establishment of a unified nation. In most cases, the combined power of a national story and claimed national territory created the foundations for a nation-state. But without a Jewish national territory, the legitimacy of a Jewish nation relied entirely on the national story. Therefore, despite the lack of consensus on the precise identity of the Yiddish-speaking nation, Yiddishists recognized the necessity of stories to preserve its culture—so they turned to folklore. Somewhere in these stories lay a national narrative, hidden away.

But as they put their theories into practice by collecting folktales, Yiddishists encountered the fundamental changes undergone by Jewish communities in Diaspora, and, with them, the changes to the story they were trying to find. Yiddish folklorists struggled with disparate understandings of the Yiddish nation because, while the history of the Jewish people did not end in Diaspora along with the foundation myth, its nature changed. A dispersed nation realizes itself differently than a territorial nation. James Clifford describes how Diasporas are not defined autonomously, but are instead “caught up with and defined against…the norms of nation-states.”\(^1\) Moreover, a Diaspora signifies both “transnationality” and the “political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community.”\(^2\) The totality of the Diaspora, which transcends national borders, is nevertheless dependent on the development of intimate, local communities.

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2 Ibid 308.
within foreign nations because, together, these localities form the totality. Consequently, in the decades between 1900 and the outbreak of World War II, Yiddish folklorists collected entire archives’ worth of material, united under the label of “Yiddish folklore,” but varying greatly in content and composition. Each folklorist developed her own definition of the Yiddish nation, and collected based on that definition. Each believed her definition of the Yiddish nation created the proper balance between inclusivity and exclusivity, and evoked cultural borders with the proper degree of selective permeability.

Modern Jewish scholarship continues to struggle with this diasporic tension. The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research asserts that it is “dedicated to fostering knowledge of the ongoing story of Jewish life,” a story “that’s still unfolding and still being told.”3 The YIVO’s admirable mission statement rightly emphasizes the relationship between Judaism and storytelling, but it underestimates the complexity of the Jewish diasporic narrative. While Diaspora can foster cultural unity across time and space, it also limits the extent of that unity. Multiple loci of Jewish life and culture have developed, each with varying customs, languages, and experiences, and therefore different sources from which to draw inspiration for folktales. Once in Exile, the stories of local communities became distinct from the overarching narrative. As a diasporic nation, the Jewish people possess a single foundation myth, a multitude of local stories, and no consensus on the relationship between the two.

Thanks to the YIVO and other, similar institutions, these manifold stories and cultures are relatively well archived. But in the efforts to investigate the relationship and tension between local communities, the surrounding environment, and the possibility of

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a transnational Jewish identity, little attention has been given to what the stories themselves may have to say. Too often, research presupposes the existence of an enduring Jewish identity and the retroactive emergence of folklore, rather than interrogating the relationship between storytelling and ongoing identity formation. This methodological oversight neglects the development of identities that are simultaneously unique to specific localities, and part of a pattern that extends across European Jewish communities. But, as this thesis hopes to prove, stories have a tendency to be smarter than the people who tell them, and they are certainly smarter than the people who collect them. As such, the folktales collected by Yiddish folklorists such as Y.L. Cahan of New York City and Shmuel Lehman of Warsaw have more to say about the identity of the Yiddish nation than either folklorist believed, because the Yiddish nation’s identity contained more layers and less unity than the nationalism of the time would allow. Only an investigation of the stories themselves can uncover these layers.

In order to establish the stakes for close readings of select folktales from Cahan and Lehman’s collections, this thesis must first determine the broader framework in which Yiddish folktale collecting began. This history ranges from the influences of German folktale nationalism, to questions of Jewish identity that were first formulated during the Enlightenment, to the institutionalization of conflicting conceptions of the Yiddish folk at the turn of the 20th century. Only a deeper understanding of the characteristics individual collectors expected to find in the stories they encountered will allow an exploration of the tales’ transgressions of these presupposed frameworks.

In my first chapter, I describe the context in which the field of Yiddish folkloristics developed in order to establish the existence of a multiplicity of national
voices within the European Jewish community, as well as the desire to combine them. The ideological trends of post-Enlightenment, nationalist Europe—particularly nationalist Germany—championed the need for a single nation with a single national identity. The Jewish intelligentsia encountered this ideology at a time when no such singular identity existed for the Jewish people, which prompted the development of several nationalist movements. Each movement aimed to distill European Jewish identities into a single nation, and each claimed superiority over the others. The modern Yiddish movement emerged as one of these ideologies.

In the second chapter, I demonstrate the consequences of the desire to simplify and unify the Jewish national identity in Europe via a focus on the Yiddish language, and the obstacles encountered when ideological theory meets practice in the form of the encounter between the Jewish intelligentsia and the Jewish folk. I also introduce the specific Yiddish folklorists whose collections will become the focus of chapters three and four: Y.L. Cahan and Shmuel Lehman. I describe their unique understandings of the Yiddish nation and of their roles as Yiddish folklorists. Finally, I introduce a method of analyzing each folktale as a self-contained system that addresses the ambiguity of Yiddish identity by formulating the relationship between its Jewish and non-Jewish elements into nuanced tensions of “we” and “other,” stability and transgression, hope and struggle.

The third and fourth chapters are devoted to close readings of stories collected by Y.L. Cahan and Shmuel Lehman, respectively. The third chapter analyzes two stories from Cahan’s collection titled *Yidishe folksmayses: oys dem folksmoyl gezamlt* or “Jewish folktales: collected from the mouth of the folk” (1931). Cahan uses these stories to demonstrate that all folktales have an international, universal core, and that Jewish folktales can only be distinguished by a superficial, external layer. In practice, however,
the Jewish and universal layers of Cahan’s tales intertwine and interact; one cannot exist in isolation from the other. Furthermore, the tales resolve by constructing a world in which interactions between Jews and non-Jews are no longer harmful, and therefore no longer define the Jewish community through exclusion. The folktales aspire to a world in which the relationship between the Jewish and the universal undergoes a permanent and fundamental shift that Cahan does not address in his methodology.

The fourth chapter discusses two stories from Lehman’s contribution of folktales to the anthology titled *Bay undz yidn* (1923). His collection is titled “Ganovim un ganeyve,” or “Thieves and Thievery.” Unlike Cahan, Lehman doesn’t concern himself with questions of a story’s inner core or outer shell. Lehman’s collecting practices indicate his beliefs that Jews are self-defined, and that there are as many different kinds of Yiddish folktales as there are Yiddish-speaking Jews. As such, the folktales he collected cannot be readily framed by their negotiation of the Jewish and non-Jewish elements they contain. Instead, their challenge is to discover how many kinds of Jews and Jewish subcultures exist within the community. In focusing on these subcultures, storytelling becomes more than a means of showcasing identity; it is the struggle to create identity. As these folktales explore and expand our understanding of the relationship between the Yiddish folktale and the Yiddish folk to whom it belongs, they also question the extent to which a story can belong to a folk as a collective. And if storytelling is a constant battle for ownership of a narrative, then moral justice won’t determine the victors—may the best story win.
Chapter One: The Setting

The European nationalist discourse in the 19th century created the ideological context for the subsequent emergence of 19th and 20th century Jewish nationalist movements. The Yiddish folklorists of this era were faced with a unique task, brought on by the circumstances in which the field emerged. 19th and 20th century Yiddish folklore studies were inspired by the relationship between language and nationalism as defined in the German nationalist writings of Herder in the late 18th century and as expanded on by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm in the early 19th century. The process of amassing and redistributing Yiddish folklore was also heavily influenced by the ideology of the Jewish Enlightenment, or Haskalah, which demanded that Jewish scholarship reach modern, non-Jewish standards.

The Jewish encounter with European nationalism was complicated by two factors. Firstly, the form of nationalism that gained momentum in 19th century Europe was inherently anti-Semitic. Particularly in Germany, the nationalist reframing of Herder’s theories led to the institutionalization and valorization of xenophobic and anti-Semitic tendencies already present in the Germanic folk spirit. This nationalism could therefore provide only an incomplete framework for the unification of distinct communities necessary for the subsequent Jewish nationalist movements. Secondly, European Jewish communities encountered nationalist Europe in a moment of internal discord, provoked by the advent of modernism and the Haskalah. Unable to agree on the “purest” form of Judaism, disparate factions were nevertheless determined to demonstrate the superiority of their varied understandings of Judaism and its relationship with the modern world. This discord had both theoretical and practical effects on the attempt to locate and define a pure, cohesive Jewish nation. As one of
these factions, the modern Yiddish movement utilized Yiddish folklore in an attempt to distill the Jewish response to modernity into a single, unified theory in the same way the Brothers Grimm had utilized folklore to strengthen Germanic nationalism in the previous century. The rise of Yiddish folklore studies was intrinsically linked to the compulsion to prove the legitimacy and purity of non-territorial, diasporic nationalism over other Jewish cultural and religious ideologies.

**German Nationalism and Folklore**

The German nationalist movement of the 18th and 19th centuries and the parallel, associated development of German folkloristics became formative influences on the development of Yiddish folkloristics in the following century. Eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder first proposed that common history and spirit are necessary to produce national art. Several decades later, Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm popularized and legitimized Herder’s theories in their writings, including the various editions of their collection of German fairy tales titled *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. The Grimms’ methodology and the stories that it produced—several of which contain explicit anti-Semitic elements—did not single-handedly create German nationalism, but they guided its inception. Nineteenth-century German nationalism was one of several nationalist movements in Europe at the time, and contributed to the novel and forceful desire to define the European nation conclusively—a desire that eventually produced the Jewish nationalist movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The parallels between the German and Yiddishist understanding of the national “folk” are especially clear and significant due to the emphasis placed by German nationalists such as the Grimms on folklore as a means of national self-determination. The parallels were also
self-acknowledged; Y.L. Cahan cited Herder’s theory of nationhood in an epigraph of his collection of Yiddish folksongs, and references the Grimms in several of his methodological texts.⁴ An understanding of the relationship between German nationalism, the German “folk,” and German folklore is therefore crucial to understanding the development of the “Yiddish” folktale and its significance for Jewish nationalism.

The German concepts of “folk” and “spirit” as they pertain to the identity of the German nation originate with the late 18th century Enlightenment philosopher and literary critic Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder was born in East Prussia in 1744 and studied at the University of Königsberg, where his insight caught the attention of Kant, who gave Herder special attention. Herder’s philosophical works on language, religion, and politics were important influences on the greatest minds of the German Romantic movement, including Goethe.⁵ Herder discusses his theories on a community’s “folk” and “spirit” in his essay on Shakespeare, which he published in 1773 within a collection of shorter writings titled Von deutscher Art und Kunst, or “Of German Character and Artistic Form.” In Herder’s analysis, “drama,” interpreted broadly as literature, develops differently and uniquely depending on the location and culture in which it arises. “In Greece,” for example, “it [drama] was what it can never be in the north”—that is, in

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Germany, and “[i]n the north it is not and cannot be what it was in Greece.” Drama, according to Herder, must follow the flow of Nature. Otherwise, artificiality will deprive it of “soul.” If, in accordance with Nature, the civilization that produced classical Greek drama ceased to exist, “so Nature, the true creator of Greek drama, was bound to change also,” and Greek drama can no longer be produced in accordance with Nature. Any recreation of the Greek dramatic form in the present day would be “an effigy outwardly resembling Greek drama” but it would lack “all the elements that move us.” Therefore, any attempts by English, French, or German artists to emulate Greek drama have been mere imitations, and their impacts have been inherently limited by their lack of legitimacy and soul.

Herder proposes that a nation can only create authentic drama out of its own identity; otherwise, the art is a “mere walnut shell.” The soul of a piece of art comes, therefore, not from the individual artist, but from the nation as a whole. The soul comes “out of its [the nation’s] history, out of the spirit of the age, manners, opinions, languages, national prejudices, traditions, and pastimes.” Herder does not praise Shakespeare for his unique ability to create drama that moves people, but for his ability to seek out elements within his own nation’s identity to incorporate into his art, giving it depth and legitimacy. Artistic depth demands national context, but beyond this demand Herder does little to define the parameters of a singular nation or folk. Accordingly, he never refers directly to a “German” nation—Herder’s theory retains the possibility of

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7 Ibid 24
8 Ibid 23.
10 Ibid 27.
11 Ibid 27.
countless Germanic nations, comprised of different folk and possessing different spirits. Insofar as his conclusion applies to the fragmented German lands of his time, therefore, Herder implies that the German people will not possess artistic depth without a national identity, but he does not demand a singular national identity for all German lands.

Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm met Herder’s demands for a national identity that could support legitimate art with their collection of fairy tales, and made the additional progression of uniting Germanic people under a singular, national, German identity by classifying their tales as German fairy tales. In doing so, they popularized Herder’s revolutionary concept of “soul” in the German literary tradition. Born in Hanau one year apart in 1785 and 1786 (Jakob was the elder), the brothers were two of the six surviving children of Dorothea and Philipp Wilhelm Grimm. Raised in a Calvinist, German bourgeois household, Jakob and Wilhelm went on to work in a series of governmental and pedagogical positions first in Kassel, then Göttingen. As Louis L. Snyder explains, Jakob Grimm took Herder’s analysis of nation and drama to heart, connected it with his desire for a single German nation, and devoted his life and writings to Pan-Germanic nationalism. His work includes, for example, the suggestion of a connection between Germanic blood and a Germanic way of thinking. The Grimms’ initial endeavor to create an etymological German dictionary is consistent with Benedict Anderson’s observation that the advent of nationalism frequently coincides with the

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12 Lee M. Roberts, “The Brothers Grimm and German Fairy tale Nationalism,” in Literary Nationalism in German and Japanese Germanistik (Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2010), 27.  
15 Roberts 34.  
creation of language dictionaries or lexicons and the publication of respected literary works in print languages. The brothers’ early work shows the strong nationalist tendencies that eventually culminated in their collection of fairy tales. Because of the inherent connection between folk and folklore, the Grimms evoked the concept of a unified German “folk” simply by referring to their collection of tales as *German*.

In the preface to *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* the Grimms prioritize the truth and purity of their chosen tales, necessitating the existence of a German truth and purity with which to equate their findings. They wanted their collection to move their German readers, for whom it was written. In their words: “We seek purity in the truth of a direct narrative which does not hold back anything unjustly.” Once an authentic German nation had been defined, it needed to be distilled by removing the inauthentic elements. Herder’s influence is clear in the preface’s methodological explanation:

> Concerning our methods of collecting material, it was faithfulness and truthfulness which mattered most to us. We did not add anything of our own, nor did we embellish any circumstance or feature of the tales. We simply reproduced their content just as we had received it. It is self-evident that the expression and execution of the details is in large part ours, yet we have sought to keep every unique feature that we noticed, so that in this way, too, the collection could be given over to nature's diversity.

Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm took upon themselves the responsibility of preserving all of the “details” they “noticed” in the stories they were told—a task they

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19 Ibid 4.
could not accomplish without preexisting notions of the “details” they might find. The Grimm's desire to discover a unified German identity required that they give some thought to what might be considered authentically “German” prior to the assembly of the fairy tales. The German nation existed in the Grimm's minds long before they used their fairy tales to legitimize its existence. In a letter to Achim von Arnim, Jakob Grimm affirms this belief by distinguishing between “Kunstpoesie,” which “stems from the individual,” and “Volkspoesie,” which “stems from the soul of the entire community.”

“Volkspoesie,” then, is that described by Herder, which belongs to the community because it cannot exist without the community’s history, culture, and customs. If German “Volkspoesie” exists, so, too, must the German nation.

With this belief, the brothers took Herder’s philosophy a step further, identifying and emphasizing the unique elements of a German national identity that already existed, but which had not yet been delineated. Jakob Grimm explicitly asserts and explores the existence of a German national identity in his Circular-Letter Concerned with the Collecting of Folk Poetry (Circular wegen der Aufsammlung der Volkspoesie). Grimm describes the “hidden beauty” found in the “wealth of material” that fills the “fatherland.” He proposes that German “literature, history, and language cannot seriously be understood in their old and true origins” without first exploring German “Volkspoesie.” The Grimms accepted Herder’s definition of the relationship between folk and literature, which leaves open the possibility for any group to be defined as a “folk,” and applied it explicitly to the German people as a whole, thereby defining the qualities that constitute Germany as a singular community, which can possess a legitimate body of literature.

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The Grimms’ method allowed them to seek out strands of German nationalism in the stories as told by their oral narrators, which, in turn, allowed them to point to those narrators, rather than themselves, as the sources of unified German nationalism. According to the Brothers Grimm, “folklore could be seen as a collective cultural identity of a people leading to the assertion of their collective political rights.” The stories legitimized themselves as the source of this cultural identity by connecting the “modern” German spirit to the collective Germanic past. Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm’s belief in the value of the stories as a connection between the past and present is also clear in the preface to their collection: “If one ascribes a scholarly value to oral traditions, this means – one must admit – that mentalities and formations of earlier times are preserved in them.” Moreover, the preface to the collection conveys the urgency with which the Grimms felt the fairy tales needed to be preserved: “Even the memory of it all was almost completely lost among the people, but for a few songs, books, legends, and these innocent fairy tales.” For their purposes as German nationalists, the Grimms equated the slow decay of the folk memory and the loss of folklore to a tainted national spirit that needed to be recovered.

Before World War I, in the 18th and early 19th centuries, folklore was a particularly useful source of collective identity for the German nation because language was often seen as one of the few unifying factors in the politically divided German lands. In his treatise on nationalism, Benedict Anderson defines a nation as a “solid

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22 Snyder 40.
24 Roberts 28.
25 GHDI 5.
26 Ibid 1.
27 Naithani 15.
community” moving through time as one, regardless of any direct interactions that take place between its constituents.28 Orally transmitted tales, preserved and passed on in the spoken vernacular by individuals who may never interact directly with one another, are seen as “collectively owned,” and therefore representative of the entire nation to which they belong.29 The ability of two storytellers, who share a culture, but who have never met, to narrate the same or similar tales demonstrates the nation’s collective ownership of the tale, and the storytellers’ collective ownership of the nation. In transcribing the oral tales as a part of the nation’s literary tradition, the Grimms codified the connection between the German national identity and the fairy tales. Jack Zipes has observed that fairy tales have continued to function as a “national institution” in Germany in contemporary times, joining scholars, writers, and critics in dialogue with one another in a place of common contemplation.30 In the years and decades after the initial publication of Kinder- und Hausmärchen, the fairy tales already served the “secular religious purpose” of critiquing morals and political structures within the framework of a collective German identity.31 The Grimms devised a system in which, cyclically, the nation defined the folktale even as the folktale defined the nation.

In emphasizing the collective German spirit, German nationalists such as the Grimms created the necessity to delineate between German and non-German elements within the bounds of the nation. The act of defining authenticity immediately designated anything that didn’t belong as imauthentic. This process constructed borders between the “We” of the German nation and the non-German “Other” living within the German borders. Consequently, eagerness to legitimize the German identity manifested in the

28 Anderson 26.
29 Naithani 17.
30 Zipes (2002) 120.
31 Ibid 118.
form of xenophobia and overt anti-Semitism. Scholars have not come to a consensus on the nature of the relationship between the Grimms’ fairy tales, deception on the part of the Grimms, and the rise of fascism in Germany. However, the fairy tales popularized by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm display tendencies that make their style of nationalism incompatible with a Jewish, diasporic autonomy.32

The Grimms highlighted specific, praiseworthy, “German” traits in their stories by contrasting them with their undesirable, non-German counterparts, which contributed to the persecution and discrimination of Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries.33 The retraction of Jewish rights and privileges after the fall of the Napoleonic Empire evolved into fear and suspicion of the Jewish communities in Central Europe that often resulted in acts of violence. Like other marginalized communities, Jews were not included in the utopian future envisioned in the “Happily Ever Afters” of the Grimms’ fairy tales.34 Rather, they were the scapegoats on the basis of whose persecution that future was to be built, and the Grimms’ fairy tales played a role in rationalizing violence against the enemies of that future.35 These trends were responsible for the resentment of hatred of European Jews, and were instrumental in shaping the European Jewish

32 Zipes points to Robert Darnton and John Ellis as examples of scholars who overestimate the Grimms’ role in making German nationalism receptive to fascism, and argues that “[t]here is no evidence to indicate” that the Grimms’ goal was deception. Moreover, that the Grimms were able to “Germanize” their tales—and that the German people made the collection of tales a best-seller—proves the brothers’ success in isolating unique folk elements with which the German people already identified. See Zipes pp. 108-112 and Snyder pp. 46 for further analysis of the relationship between the Grimm brothers and German receptivity to fascism.

33 Snyder 35.


35 Harshbarger 495.

outlook on interaction between Jews and non-Jews. Anti-Semitic elements of German folklore comprise only one facet of the German folk tradition as delineated by the Brothers Grimm, but it is a facet that gained popularity and momentum and therefore can’t be ignored; one need only look to the rise of National Socialism for proof.

The German nationalist movement of the 18th and 19th centuries emerged in conjunction with the wave of nationalist movements that swept through Europe in the period following the European Enlightenment. The influence of Johann Gottfried Herder and Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm led to a distinctive emphasis on German folk identity and spirit in the struggle to define German national identity. Folktales, particularly those collected, constructed, and popularized by the Brothers Grimm, would become crucial to the German nationalist movement, and would eventually influence the Jewish nationalist movements that developed a century later. Herder’s theory of folk necessitates the existence of a Jewish nationalist movement, because European Jews, like Germans, can be defined as a distinctive cultural group with a shared history, customs, and traditions. However, the Grimms’ German and Germanized tales utilized Herder’s theory to define a singularly German nation, stressing certain characteristics of national identity that would be impossible to incorporate into a successful Jewish nationalist movement because they targeted Jews as the enemies of nationalism.

The evolution of German nationalism and the Grimms’ fascination with German folklore parallels the development of Yiddish folkloristics in the following century. Folktales’ movement from the oral to literary tradition also took on a role of significance for the modern Yiddish movement. The desperation to preserve a folk identity foretells the similar attitude of Yiddish folklorists following the violence and destruction of World War I, which combined with the forces of modernism and assimilation to
produce a similar danger for Yiddish folklore. Still, the two movements are far from identical; the alienation of Jews from the newly defined European nations and the incompatibility of European anti-Semitism with Jewish nationalism prompted a fixation on a different kind of utopia oriented around Jewish livelihood in the Yiddish folklore of the subsequent era. The tension between early Jewish nationalist movements and their German influences contributed to the lack of consensus within the Jewish community. Moreover, Jewish nationalism was forced to reckon with the tension between modernism and traditionalism that arose in conjunction with the Enlightenment, giving rise to an increasingly fractured Jewish identity in the subsequent centuries.

**Haskalah**

The Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, developed in Central and Western Europe in response to and alongside the broader European Enlightenment beginning in the 1770s. The Haskalah created the opportunity for Jews to encounter the secular world in the historical moment of the European nation, while the Jewish community was becoming increasingly fragmented. Modern Yiddishist scholars such as Emanuel Goldsmith and Itzik Gottesman have connected the principles produced during the Haskalah and the development of nationalist ideologies throughout Europe—particularly in Germany and Russia—with the emergence of Jewish nationalism and Yiddishism in the later 19th century. Although Yiddish was looked upon with disdain during the early

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Haskalah, the movement exposed the Jewish intelligentsia to Enlightenment ideals that eventually evolved into the first European nationalist movements, which, in turn, inspired early Jewish nationalist movements.

The term *Haskalah* is derived from the Hebrew word *sekhel*, meaning “wisdom” or “intellect.” The movement developed in the 18th century, during a time of schism within the Jewish communities of Europe. This conflict did not take place solely as a result of modernism and assimilation; disagreements developed within the religious community as well. As the Haskalah began to flourish, a pietistic religious movement called *Hasidism* emerged. Hasidism emphasized Jewish mysticism and religious fervor over rationality, while the religious rivals of Hasidism, *Mishna* (Hebrew for “opponents”) preferred religious practice centered on rabbinic Judaism and Jewish law, or *halakha*. The *Maskilim*, or Jewish scholars who adhered to the ideologies of the Haskalah, were not directly involved in the conflict between Hasidim and Mishna. They did, however, regard their own ideology as a reaction to the beliefs and practices of all ultra-religious movements, and to the customs and superstitions of uneducated Jews.38 Like the Hasidim and the Mishna, the Maskilim had a unique interpretation of how Judaism should be practiced in an enlightened world, and all three groups regarded their Jewish practice as the most meaningful understanding of the same religion and culture. Though not a wholly unified group, all Maskilim shared a primary aim: to devise a form of Judaism compatible with modern, secular life. The Maskilim produced a pedagogical

system that conveyed religious, moral, and secular knowledge in a cooperative manner. This form of Judaism eventually evolved into the modern Reform movement, which adapted Protestant practices and Enlightenment philosophy into services and liturgy that were manageable for the modern Jew and reassuringly familiar to the non-Jewish onlooker. Unlike the mysticism of the Hasidim or the strict religious hierarchy of the Misnagim, the “purified” Judaism devised by the Maskilim encouraged integration of European Jews into secular society.

With these unifying intentions, it is no surprise that the most ideologically extreme Maskilim such as Moses Mendelssohn—who was considered to be the father of the Jewish Enlightenment—demanded loyalty to secular rulers from their fellow Jews. Mendelssohn and his followers also identified themselves as “Germans.” Most early 19th-century Maskilim considered the emancipation granted under Napoleonic rule as the end of the Exile that began with the destruction of the Second Temple and saw it as the beginning of a new era in both the religious and secular lives of European Jewry. With the end of the Exile came the end of the Diaspora and the corresponding need for a Jewish nationalist movement that separated Jews from the European nations into which they could assimilate. For these Maskilim, assimilation rendered any form of Jewish nationalism redundant.

Ironically, the same Maskilic practices that encouraged assimilation over nationalism sparked a renewed interest in an aspect of Jewish culture that had tremendous consequences for the conceptualization of Jewish national identity: language.

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40 Shochat et al. 434.
41 Shochat et al. 440.
Crucial to the objectives of the Maskilim was the modernization and propagation of biblical Hebrew as a scholarly and literary language. In the centuries prior to the Haskalah, Hebrew had been limited to the role of “holy tongue” or lashon hakodesh. It had been used for prayer, recitation of holy texts, and little else; many members of the Hasidic movement were reluctant to use Hebrew even for these specifically religious tasks. The Maskilim believed that biblical Hebrew represented Judaism at its most cultured and enlightened, and they worked to strip away the “post-biblical layers” of the language in order to achieve mastery of its earliest—and therefore purest—form. This purity was crucial to the movement, because the Maskilim saw the intimate relationship between Judaism and Hebrew as their contribution to the broader, enlightened European society. The relationship manifested in theological and philosophical interpretation of religious texts, as well as scholarship and literature composed in a modernized form of the language itself. The system of education devised during the Haskalah therefore made Hebrew the language of both biblical exegesis and scientific scholarship. The Haskalah saw the evolution of Hebrew from a religious language into “a mechanically produced print-language.” This emphasis on producing modern literature in a language with which Jews had a unique relationship evolved into the linguistic-based nationalism of later decades.

Equally important to the Maskilim, however, was mastery of a secular European vernacular. Multilingualism was inherent to the ideology of the Haskalah because the Maskilim intended to integrate into secular society, bringing with them a purified form of their Judaism and their own language. Mendelssohn’s translation of the Five Books of

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42 Ibid 437.
43 Anderson 44.
Moses and the Book of Psalms from Hebrew into German exemplifies this fixation on multilingualism. Mendelssohn aimed to steer German Jews toward the study of both Hebrew and German by taking a Hebrew text with which most Jews had at least a cursory familiarity—the Hebrew Bible—and translating it into a language with which most non-urban, non-intellectual Jews had only limited familiarity—German. He believed that translating a Jewish religious text into modern, High German would be “the first step toward culture,” which German-speakers possess, but from which Jews, “alas, [are] so estranged, that one is almost ready to despair of the possibility of improvement.

The Maskilim were critical of and even embarrassed by Jews such as the Hasidim, who possessed neither the ability to converse in Hebrew about religious texts, nor proficiency in European vernaculars, but instead conducted much of their lives in an unsophisticated “jargon”: Yiddish. According to the Maskilim, the Hasidim and other unenlightened Jewish people were practicing a form of Judaism that was doubly corrupt, because it was both disconnected from its history and incompatible with the modern world. In a letter to lawyer Ernst Ferdinand Klein regarding the oath Jews were required to recite during German court proceedings, Mendelssohn expressed his distaste for Yiddish. “[T]his jargon,” he wrote, “has contributed more than a little to the uncivilized bearing of the common man.” Mendelssohn suggested that the oath be written in either “pure German or pure Hebrew…Anything at all rather than a mishmash of languages.”

Yiddish, as a crude combination of Old German, Hebrew religious vocabulary, and

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44 Shochat et al. 436.
assorted words of Slavic origin, perfectly represented the corrupt, unenlightened Judaism of those who spoke it. It was difficult for Maskilim to conceive of a place for Jewish “jargon” in enlightened Europe because it contradicted the movement’s emphasis on purity of religion and language.

The Haskalah was not, itself, a Jewish nationalist movement, but the marriage of Enlightenment ideals and Jewish traditions created a basis for the nationalist ideologies that developed in the following years, and underscored the issues that prevented those ideologies from being consolidated. The Haskalah introduced the question of purity to the quest for a Jewish national identity, and emphasized the role of language in unifying the Jewish people. These questions would take on an ideological character in the form of conflicts between Zionism and non-territorial Jewish nationalism; Yiddish folkloristics was one attempt to answer them.

**Jewish Nationalism and Yiddish Folkloristics**

Jewish intellectual responses to modernity evolved over the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries, influenced by the concepts developed during the Haskalah as well as the nationalist movements sweeping Europe. The external pressures of secular Europe, combined with the already fragmented nature of European Jewry resulted in disputes over the nature of fledgling Jewish nationalism. Initially, Yiddish played a limited role in these movements, and was often seen as an obstacle to a coherent and respectable national identity. As Yiddish literature began to flourish, the language gained respect among the Jewish intelligentsia, but its role within Jewish national identity remained unclear and contested. Yiddish folkloristics emerged as a response to this debate over Yiddish’s role as a Jewish language, combining Maskilic notions of a Jewish
linguistic and intellectual identity with a Germanic belief in the power of folklore as means of defining and valorizing cultural identity.

Print culture, the medium through which the Grimms had been able to popularize and institutionalize Herder’s nationalism for Germany, became a crucial element in all of the 19th century Jewish ideological movements. In many cases, including that of the German nationalist movement, print-vernaculars began to be associated with political borders in a way that Medieval Latin, as a universal language, never could.\(^{47}\)

Eventually, this association allowed nationalist movements to become territorial as well as linguistic. For the Jewish nationalist movements in Europe, however, no obvious political borders could be drawn. This lack of a delineated territory to claim emphasized the significance of language in the struggle for Jewish national identity. Without a physical territory, identification of a national language became a crucial unifying element for the progress of European Jewish nationalism.

The Jewish nationalism that emerged in Europe in the 19th century assumed varied forms, many of which were mutually incompatible and represented fundamentally different understandings of the nature of the Jewish people. In the introduction to his book on the Yiddish folklorists of Poland, Itzik Gottesman observes how, in the 19th century, no single form of Jewish nationalism existed because there was no single Jewish nation.\(^{48}\) Within religious Judaism, a schism remained—and would continue to exist—between the Misnagdim and the Hasidim. The Reform movement developed in Central Europe and spread to the United States. As the Enlightenment and Haskalah continued to develop, the later Maskilim became increasingly alienated from religious forms of

\(^{47}\) Anderson 40.

\(^{48}\) Gottesman (2003a) xii.
Judaism as they attempted to maintain a connection to Jewish ethics, morals, and history without adhering to tradition and ritual. They placed an increased emphasis on the Jewish oral record, rather than ritual remnants. This balancing act was difficult, however, because of the disparity between the centralization of the Jewish written record and the fragmentation of the Jewish oral record. The resulting theories of Jewish nationalism interpreted the relationship between Judaism, folk culture, and language differently, and ranged from diaspora nationalism to territorialism, Bundism to Zionism. David H. Weinberg identifies the three figures of Haim Zhitlowski, Simon Dubnow, and Ahad Ha-Am as representing three of the primary forms of Jewish nationalism developed by this “transitional generation” of Jewish thinkers in the 1880s and 90s. Zhitlowski developed a form of linguistic nationalism that would influence later Jewish socialist movements. Dubnow emphasized the importance of communal institutions in his writings, and, like Zhitlowski, called for Jewish autonomy within the Diaspora. Ahad Ha-Am, on the other hand, stressed the significance of Hebrew and the land of Palestine for maintaining unity and preserving Jewish culture. All three ideologies developed alongside many others in the later years of the 19th century, competing for attention and historical and spiritual justification.

The role of Yiddish in the Jewish nationalist movements of the 19th century evolved as the language gained more respect from the European Jewish intelligentsia, but its place as a Jewish national language remained contested even as its significance for Jewish identity became more defined. Emanuel Goldsmith compares the role played by

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49 Ibid xiii.
50 Ibid xii.
51 Weinberg 3-4.
52 Ibid 11-12.
Yiddish in Jewish Europe to that played by Aramaic in ancient Jewish history.\textsuperscript{53} As early as the Middle Ages, various Yiddish dialects assumed vernacular roles in Jewish communities across Europe, from France to Russia. Although Hebrew remained the “holy tongue,” traditionally used for religious purposes, many uneducated Jews spoke only limited Hebrew and conducted both their religious and secular lives in Yiddish. As the saying goes, “He who knows no Hebrew is an ignoramus, he who knows no Yiddish is a gentile.”\textsuperscript{54}

The rise of Hasidism gave Yiddish further respect because it resulted in the publication of Yiddish literary material. For the first time, Yiddish texts emerged with the capability of fulfilling the same or similar roles to that assumed by the Grimms’ fairy tales for the German nation of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Yiddish translations of Hebrew prayers and texts became more common, and Hasidic wonder tales were written in Yiddish. However, the Maskilic attitude toward Yiddish persisted well into the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. For the Maskilim, Yiddish, “symbolized foreignness and illegitimacy” in an era in which the Jewish intelligentsia was eager to be seen as both legitimately European and as a legitimate community in its own right.\textsuperscript{55} Those Maskilim who did write in Yiddish did so with the sole purpose of reaching audiences they were trying to draw away from the jargon.\textsuperscript{56} At best, these Hebraist Maskilim thought Yiddish could be used as a vehicle with which to bring Jews back to Hebrew.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{53} Goldsmith 31. \\
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid 250. \\
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid 36. \\
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid 40. \\
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid 60.
But Maskilic attitudes toward Yiddish became more ambivalent in the middle of the 19th century.\textsuperscript{58} The publication of the Kol Mevaser newspaper in Yiddish between 1862 and 1871 played a major role in the standardization of the language.\textsuperscript{59} Anderson stresses the significance of newspapers in the creation of communities due to the imagined linkage of a newspaper’s readership, and Kol Mevaser certainly gave legitimacy to the Yiddish language as a means of informed communication.\textsuperscript{60} Many Maskilim remained reluctant to recognize Yiddish as the Jewish mother tongue, but by the turn of the century, other members of the Jewish intelligentsia began to see the language as vital to their social ideology.\textsuperscript{61} Echoes of Herder are clear in Simon Dubnow’s writings; he saw Yiddish as the Jewish “folk language,” which made it the Jewish “national soul.” He connected the importance of Yiddish to his theory of diasporic Jewish nationalism, claiming that the merit of the Yiddish language was linked to “the merit of national existence in the Diaspora.”\textsuperscript{62} I. L. Peretz, one of the most famous and prolific Yiddish writers of all time, saw enormous value in the language and worked to bring Yiddish into the modern era by transforming Yiddish literature into “a literature of the entire Jewish people.”\textsuperscript{63} He saw the same literary vacuum in Jewish cultural nationalism as the Grimms had discovered in German nationalism.

But even as Yiddish gained respect and sophistication, it was still forced to contend with Hebrew for the status of a Jewish national language. The debate over Yiddish’s role in European Jewish life, particularly in opposition to Hebrew, culminated in the Czernowitz Conference of 1908, which met for the singular purpose of

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid 41.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid 45.
\textsuperscript{60} Anderson 33.
\textsuperscript{61} Goldsmith 47.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid 56.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid 133.
determining the role of Yiddish in European Jewish life in the coming years. Organized by the linguistic nationalists Haim Zhitlowski and Nathan Birnbaum, the conference attracted some of the most well-known and respected Yiddish scholars and writers of the time.\textsuperscript{64} Birnbaum and Zhitlowski aimed to use the conference to dispel what they believed to be the misrepresentation of Yiddish as an impure, uncultured jargon and to discuss the future of the modern Yiddish movement in Europe with its strongest proponents. However, the conference was sidetracked by the debate over the superiority of Yiddish or Hebrew as the national language of the Jewish people.\textsuperscript{65} Taking one position were Yiddishists such as Birnbaum, who believed Modern Hebrew to be disconnected from “the absolute idea of Judaism.”\textsuperscript{66} On the other side were Hebraists such as Ahad Ha-am, who believed that Yiddish could not serve as the Jewish national language because it had not been “the vehicle of national self-expression in successive ages” and did not have the same rich history as Hebrew.\textsuperscript{67} I.L. Peretz was likely the most well-known and respected writer in attendance, but his position in the debate was ambivalent. Peretz saw Yiddish as a folk language with the potential to become a better national language than a “mechanically received” Hebrew, but Yiddish had yet to attain that nationalist status, and Peretz was unsure it could ever establish itself in that role.\textsuperscript{68} The conference concluded without having achieved the goals set by Birnbaum and Zhitlowski, and Yiddish’s nationalist potential remained in dispute.\textsuperscript{69} 

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid 6.
\textsuperscript{66} Goldsmith 226.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid 236.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid 231.
\textsuperscript{69} Weiser (2010) 6.
As the Yiddish movement continued to evolve, Yiddish folkloristics emerged within the debate over the Jewish national language as a means of connecting the Yiddish language to folk identity and history. Interest in Yiddish folklore for these purposes developed in the late 19th century, during the waning years of the Haskalah and several decades before the Czernowitz conference. Yosef-Yehude Lerner was one of the first Jewish scholars to use folklore to “define a Yiddish nation.” Lerner believed folklore possessed cultural capital because it contained elements that were inherently Jewish, but not inherently religious. Jewish cultural folklore could provide the Jewish intelligentsia with an alternative to religious practice as a means of connection to fellow Jews. In the early 20th century, I.L. Peretz encouraged his following of young writers to collect and publish Yiddish folksongs and, at the Czernowitz conference, went as far as to credit the Hasidic folktale as the beginnings of Yiddish literature. Peretz’s claim demonstrates the beginnings of a shift in momentum among a Jewish intelligentsia, who began to perceive the necessity of legitimizing Yiddish as a Jewish language, and who saw folk culture as a means to do so. But the conflicts between Jewish nationalist ideologies were far from over, and the ensuing attention to Yiddish folk culture reflected this enduring contention.

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70 Goldsmith 132.
71 Gottesman (2003a) xix.
72 Ibid xx.
73 Goldsmith 132, 193.
Chapter Two: The Dramatis Personae

Twentieth-century Yiddish folklorists were compelled to reckon with tensions both within the Jewish community, and between the Jewish community and European society at large. Jews living through fresh waves of anti-Semitism and violence were asked to choose between assimilation and continued segregation. The deleterious forces of modernism and assimilation, along with the physical violence of pogroms and a World War forced the Jewish intelligentsia to interrogate their relationships with Jewish identity and set out down paths of experimentation and discovery. The work of forerunners to the field of Yiddish folkloristics such as I.L. Peretz and Sh. An-Sky called attention to Yiddish folklore as a defined and unique phenomenon and established respect for the field, allowing others to follow in their wake. But the same oppositional forces that enabled Yiddish folkloristics to develop also caused persistent tensions and heated debates within the field itself. Jewish nationalists were faced with the existence of multiple Jewish “nations,” some with diametrically opposed ideologies, all striving for control over the future of the Jewish people. Within the context of European nationalism, this multiplicity was unacceptable; like the Grimms’ German nationalism, Yiddish diasporic nationalism required unification through a unified understanding of folklore. But if folklore is the voice of the nation in its plainest form, then the Yiddish folklorists of the early 20th century could not come to a consensus about which nation was speaking.

The effort to find a single, cohesive thread within the multiplicity of Jewish national voices led to a range of folkloristic methodologies and interpretations of the Yiddish folk. Owing to the scholarly discord, the development of Yiddish folkloristics from the turn of the 20th century until the outbreak of World War II did not just have
one school, or one center. Instead, it encompassed centers of activity in both Warsaw and Vilne, becoming increasingly institutionalized as a function of the urgency following World War I. The height of the movement during the interwar period saw the publication of collections of essays and recorded folklore representing fundamentally different understandings of both the denotation and connotation of “Yiddish folklore,” despite a demonstrated consensus on the necessity of its preservation. For example, the folklore collected by Yehude Leib Cahan (1881-1937) in his *Yidishe folksmayses: oys dem folksmoyl gezamlt* and analyzed in his *Shtudyes vegn yidishe folksshafung* bears little resemblance to the stories collected by Shmuel Lehman (1886-1941) in his contribution to the journal *Bay undz yidn*. Yet both insisted their collections contained Yiddish folklore. The work and methodologies of these two folklorists illustrate how the same influential forces prompted distinct interpretations of the material in question. This variation was characteristic of the movement in the years directly before and immediately following World War I. Moreover, folklorists such as Cahan and Lehman encountered an issue not addressed by earlier theorists of Jewish nationalism such as Dubnow or Ahad Haam: Cahan and Lehman had to prove the value of their conceptualizations of a Yiddish nation in practical application to the material they collected. This additional step forced the discrepancies in their understandings of the Yiddish nation into the light, providing the context for the existence of two kinds of collections of two kinds of stories, both of which labeled as “Yiddish folklore.” And these discrepancies became all the more frustrating as modernization and anti-Semitism continued to threaten the existence of distinct Jewish communities in Eastern Europe.

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74 See pp. 28 and 31 above.
Destruction and Urgency

The era between the turn of the 20th century and the outbreak of World War II presented a series of threats to the Jewish communities of Europe that necessitated a shift in the priorities of the “alienated intellectuals of the traditional shtetl.” Although they were originally attracted by the assimilationist movement, the Polish pogroms of 1881 and 1882 disrupted assimilationist momentum and drew many Jewish intellectuals back to the Jewish folk culture they had abandoned. These Jewish modernists recognized their complicity in the destructive effects of modernism on folk culture, and Yiddish folkloristics was characterized by the desire to reconcile Maskilic modernism and Romantic sentimentalism.

Initially, the assimilationist movement of the mid- to late-19th century saw significant support among the young Jewish intellectuals of Europe, who were embarrassed or ashamed of their family’s isolationist lives. Isaac Leib Peretz (1852-1915), one of the stars of the Czernowitz Conference, was born to a respected observant family in southeastern Poland, and abandoned religious Judaism in favor of a secular education as an adolescent. Peretz was attracted to the idea of assimilation as a young man, but the pogroms of 1881 and 1882 drew his attention back toward Jewish culture. As a member of a later generation of Maskilim forced to reckon with the perceptible decline of Jewish folk culture, Peretz saw that knowledge of Russian, Polish, and German was

75 Itzik Nakhmen Gottesman, “Yiddish Folklore and Jewish Nationalism in Poland, 1918-1939” (University of Pennsylvania, 2003b), 17-18.
77 Moss 230.
not only supplementing, but also replacing knowledge of both Yiddish and Hebrew.\textsuperscript{78}

Like other aspects of the secularization of the Haskalah, the Maskilic effort to purify the Jewish relationship with language had deleterious side-effects. Motivated by Polish ethnographers on their own quest for national self-determination, Peretz began to collect examples of Jewish folk expression and use it as the basis for poetic works written in a truly literary Yiddish.\textsuperscript{79}

Shlomo Zanvil Rappoport (1863-1919)—more widely known as Sh. An-Sky—was also born into a religious life, which he abandoned as a teenager in favor of Russian socialism.\textsuperscript{80} Like Peretz, An-Sky displayed renewed interest in Jewish culture at the turn of the century, following several decades of alienation from the Jewish community. During that period of estrangement, he was exposed to Russian, then French and German folklore.\textsuperscript{81} When An-Sky subsequently discovered Peretz’s work, he saw what Peretz had already realized: “[I]t was possible to draw on folklore and express modernism and European sentiments in Yiddish.”\textsuperscript{82} The perfect marriage of his socialist ideals and renewed interest in Jewish life, An-Sky saw vast amounts of potential in the

\textsuperscript{79} Wisse xxii-xxiii.
\textsuperscript{81} Haya Bar-Itzhak, Pioneers of Jewish Ethnography and Folkloristics in Eastern Europe, trans. Lenn Schramm (Ljubljana: Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenien Academy of Science and Arts, 2010) 28.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid 29.
project of “creat[ing] Jewish ethnography.” Both Peretz and An-Sky were attracted to the connection they felt, through folklore, to the Jewish lower classes.

Several decades later, the tension between modernity and traditional Yiddish culture came to a violent head, providing “a new sense of urgency” to the work of Yiddish folklorists in the young field. The outbreak of World War I and the rise of Eastern European nationalism made clear that physical destruction was as much of a threat to Eastern European folk culture as modernization. The movement suffered losses to its collectors’ and scholars’ ranks, as well as casualties amongst the folk and the material collected. Inspired by the renewed focus on the threat of loss and destruction, Yiddishists stepped up attempts to streamline and unify their endeavors, systematizing and expanding the collection and analysis of Yiddish folklore. In Vilne, the An-Sky Vilne Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society (AVJHES) put out calls for materials in newsletters, bulletins, and on flyers. The Society’s board, which was comprised of a mix of Zionists, Yiddishists, and Bundists (Jewish socialists) kept their collecting criteria as broad as possible for the sake of future scholars who might use the material—everything was recorded, for fear that something important might be lost.

Also in Vilne, the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) and its Ethnographic Commission took up the task of collecting folklore. Founded in 1925 by Noykhem Shtif, the YIVO was meant to serve as a “central body for scholarship in Yiddish and on the

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85 Ibid 323.
86 Ibid 326, 322.
history and culture of Yiddish-speaking Jewry.” Shtif also intended for the YIVO to legitimize the still-developing field of Yiddish folkloristics by publishing collections of Yiddish folklore in respected and established Yiddish journals. The Ethnographic Commission was established to further systematize the collection of Yiddish folklore. Led by Max Weinreich, the Commission had its first meeting in the fall of 1925, when it began to recruit zamlers, i.e. collectors, in Poland and throughout Eastern Europe.

Taking advantage of the post-war urgency to collect “the treasures of Jewish folk creativity” before it was lost, the YIVO began an enormously successful collecting campaign that led to a Jewish folklore archive of unparalleled scope. The Ethnographic Commission was responsible for the formation of numerous ethnographic circles comprised of young zamlers all over Eastern Europe. Through its facilitation of the project and sustained communication with its zamlers, YIVO’s Commission also developed perceived authority over the process of collecting folklore; many of the zamlers asked for official authorization from YIVO to collect folklore. The enterprising zamler stationed in a small Jewish shtetl in Eastern Europe became a crucial node in the Yiddish folkloristic network. By June of 1928, the Comission had acquired 34,000 items for the YIVO’s archives.

Yiddish folkloristics outside of Vilne saw an increase in activity as well; both folktale collections whose stories will be analyzed below were published during the interwar period. Bay undz yidn, the journal containing Shmuel Lehman’s collection, was

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87 Ibid 329-330.
88 Gottesman (2003b) 212.
89 Kuznitz 330.
90 Ibid 331.
91 Gottesman (2003b) 226.
92 Ibid 220.
93 Ibid 247.
published by fellow folklorist Pinkhes Graubard in 1923. In the introduction, the journal’s editor M. Vanvild echoed the call of the AVJHES, praising folklore collectors for their preservation work and pleading with others to follow suit.94 Y.L. Cahan published his collection of folktales, titled Yidishe folksmayses: oys dem folksmoyl gezamlt in 1931. The following year, the Yiddish folkloristics community in Poland celebrated Lehman’s thirtieth year of collecting folklore, hosting events in his honor. In 1937, the Shmuel Lehman zamblukh, a collection of essays and anecdotes from Lehman’s colleagues and friends, was printed in order to raise funds for Lehman to publish more of his own substantial collection of folklore.95 The increased activity following the Polish pogroms, and again following the First World War demonstrates that the Yiddish folklorists, like the Brothers Grimm before them, feared that the destruction of folk culture and the death of the “older generation” of Jewish folk threatened the future of folklore, which needed to be collected before it is lost forever.96 For Yiddish folklorists, as for the Brothers Grimm, the impending loss of folk sources and material provided an incentive to institutionalize and purify the process of identifying and collecting folklore for the sake of preserving cultural legitimacy. In order to do so, however, folklorists faced the challenge of interacting with the source of the lore: the folk itself. And first contact was not without complications.

94 Gottesman (2003a) 7.
96 An-Sky 35.
The Producers and the Consumers

The Jewish intelligentsia’s revived interest in Jewish folk culture established a new relationship between the educated, partially assimilated elite and the more isolated folk—but the relationship was unequal. The folk were at the mercy of the folklorists even as some folklorists felt they were at the mercy of the folk. Influenced by Herder’s theory of nationhood, aspiring folklorists were in need of a Jewish “folk” who would validate their cultural legitimacy. However, the theoretically happy reunion between the urban, worldly folklorists and their cultural origins served as a reminder of the wide rift that had developed in the intervening years; Jewish intellectuals had their roots in the folk, but they were no longer of the folk. From the early use of folklore as poetic inspiration to debates over folkloric authenticity in later decades, the relationship between the collectors and producers of folklore was characterized by alienation, suspicion, and even mistrust.

I.L. Peretz, for example, brought respect and prestige to modern Yiddish literature and, more broadly, the Yiddish language, but his use of Yiddish folklore was utilitarian and selective, and focused on reinterpretation and reinvention. In a modern world where the Jewish people lacked the unity valorized by European nationalist movements, Peretz saw Yiddish as “the surrogate for nationhood.” As such, he “salvaged from the ruins only those aspects of Jewish culture that could stand for secular humanistic values.” He “provided Jews with the vocabulary of their experience,” but he did so by taking what the folk had to offer, pruning away all he deemed useless in a modern world, and returning it to the folk in its new, literary form.

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98 Wisse xxv.
inevitably reshaped not only the intelligentsia’s conception of the Jewish folk, but the
folk’s self-conception, which was at the mercy of those with the power to define it.

Echoing the Grimms’ scholarship in the previous century, Sh. An-Sky demonstrated the
privilege of defining that self-conception in his essay titled “Jewish Ethnopoetics,” in
which he ascribed a “national worldview” and “national peculiarities” to the Jewish
people as a whole—including, implicitly, both the Jewish folk and his fellow Jewish
intellectuals. An-Sky declared Jewish ethnography and folklore to be “the only way” to
study that national identity, a project that should be conducted for the sake of collective
self-knowledge, without acknowledging the multiplicity of nations within that
collective.  

The alienation of the intelligentsia made genuine connections between folklorists
and the folk rare, and often necessitated the development of new relationships. The
YIVO encouraged its young zamlers to collect folklore from their hometowns and
family members.  

Shmuel Lehman worked a series of jobs over the course of his
lifetime that allowed him to establish contact with potential informants for his
collections. In the introduction to Bay unded yidn, Vanvild made a special point of
praising Lehman, who had contributed the largest section of the book. He admired
Lehman’s commitment to the cause, calling him “a child of the folk” with a special,
enviable connection to folklore. Vanvild went still further with his praise, claiming that
one of Lehman’s folk songs was worth more than all of Ahad-Haam’s Zionist writings
combined.

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99 An-Sky 34.
100 Gottesman (2003b) 233.
102 Gottesman (2003a) 7.
But Lehman’s own writings depict a less idealized relationship between the collector and the folk. In his contributions to the *zamlbukh* published in 1937 in his name, Lehman describes two anecdotes from his experiences in the field in which he emphasizes the danger and unease he felt as a collector in the midst of the folk. In the first, Lehman attempted to record songs performed by a young girl as a crowd looked on and mocked him for his odd desire to collect folklore. In the next anecdote, a prostitute asked Lehman to marry her after he gave her money to buy clothing; she refused to speak with him again after he turned her down.  

“Lehman,” according to Itzik Gottesman, “portrays the folk as duplicitous; the folklorist is the potential victim, the sucker.” Gottesman suggests that Lehman’s experiences exemplify the “ambivalence” felt by the Yiddishist scholars of his time toward the Yiddish-speaking uneducated poor. Though they shared a language, the folklorists felt they could not truly share the “treasure” of the folklore. Fieldwork was a battle between the folk and the collector, during which the collector reclaimed the folklore and the folk were dispossessed of their own texts. If the informants were conniving, perhaps it was only in response to the invasive behavior of a collector such as Lehman. From the perspective of a fellow folklorist such as Vanvild, Lehman may have appeared to be the “child of the folk,” but he could not impersonate the Other to the Other.

Y.L. Cahan was equally wary of the duplicity of the folk. In an analysis of a sampling of folksongs, Cahan cautions his reader about the existence of people among the folk who believe the collector to be gullible. These people would attempt to provide

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105 Ibid 4.
the collector with songs that were not, in fact, genuine folksongs.\textsuperscript{106} It is likely that Cahan’s preoccupation with the question of the authenticity or inauthenticity of folklore stemmed in equal measure from his ideological disagreements with his fellow folklorists and from his mistrust of the folk.

The alienation of the folk from the intelligentsia formed a new, We/Other relationship between the two communities, which differed from the We/Other relationship developed by the Grimms’ German nationalism because it existed \textit{within} the Jewish community. Because the dichotomy was self-contained, the “We”—the Yiddish folklorists—embarked on a path of \textit{self}-discovery through the \textit{re}-discovery of the “Other”—the Jewish folk. Paralleling the creation of a pure, German national identity by contrasting the “We” of the German nation with the constructed “Other” of perceived foreigners such as Jews, the Jewish elite constructed an “Other” within their own community. The new Jewish ideological movements built solid foundations for their causes on the shoulders of a folk that were half-discovered, half-created. And, because its creators lacked unity, so did the product.

\textbf{The Collectors and the Scholars}

Yiddish folkloristics was also defined by divisions within the community. Due to the nature of its project, the YIVO’s Ethnographic Commission made a distinction between the zamlers who collected Yiddish folklore and the researchers who studied it.\textsuperscript{107} When the Commission published an instruction manual for its zamlers in 1929, methodologies for analysis and organization were intentionally left out, as it was assumed

\textsuperscript{107} Bar-Itzhak 25.
that educated researchers would conduct this work.\textsuperscript{108} The Commission relied on its zamlers for raw material, while it relied on scholars, such as Y.L. Cahan of New York, for analysis and parameters of authenticity.\textsuperscript{109}

In reality, this distinction extended beyond the YIVO. Shmuel Lehman, for example, was no folklore scholar. A prolific collector of stories, jokes, idioms, and songs, Lehman rarely published his findings independently. Even in those few cases, such as the collection of folksongs titled “Arbet un frayhayt,” Lehman provided no analysis of the material and little explanation of his methodology, save in brief footnotes. Like many of the other folklorists of his era, Lehman was clearly of the belief that collection and cataloging must precede scholarly work in the field of folkloristics.\textsuperscript{110} Lehman’s lack of analysis does not indicate that he believed no fruitful analysis of Yiddish folklore could be accomplished. As a member of Noyekh Prilutski’s circle of Warsaw folklorists between 1909 and 1912, Lehman frequently published his stories and jokes in concert with notes and memoires by folklorists such as Prilutski, Pinkhes Graubard, or A. Almi. But Lehman’s attempts to keep his own voice out of his work demonstrate his belief in the job of zamler as uniquely important and independent of the folklore scholar who follows on the collector’s heels.

As one such scholar, Y.L. Cahan maintained a close relationship with the YIVO’s Ethnographic Commission throughout his career, but his methodology was even more precise and discriminating than the Commission’s own standards. While it respected his authority, the YIVO’s board did not adhere to Cahan’s principles in their

\textsuperscript{108} Gottesman (2003b) 251.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid 250, 236.
\textsuperscript{110} Bar-Itzhak 24.
preservation strategies.\textsuperscript{111} Over the course of his career, Cahan wrote a series of essays describing his criteria for establishing the authenticity of Yiddish folklore. These essays were assembled and published posthumously by Max Weinreich in 1952. In one such essay, which served as the introduction to Cahan’s two-volume collection of Yiddish folksongs published in 1912, Cahan declared that the Yiddish “folksong” is not a folksong simply because it is sung by the folk, nor because it is sung in Yiddish. The folk do not choose or distinguish what is considered a folksong.\textsuperscript{112} Rather, the folklorist must be able to “discriminate between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ folklore.”\textsuperscript{113} If, for Cahan, there is a “true” Yiddish folksong, then there must also be false or fake Yiddish folksongs and folktales.\textsuperscript{114} Cahan saw it as his responsibility to recognize these distinctions.

But in addition to his efforts to define and lead the scholarly field of Yiddish folklore studies, Cahan also considered himself to be a zamler. The suggestions he provided for other zamlers’ in his writings indicate some of his own practices. Cahan claims that a zamler must on occasion become a “romantic” in order to bring the past back to life in the form of recorded stories. He stresses the importance of the zamler forming a non-condescending relationship with the informant, and crediting the informants for their contributions.\textsuperscript{115} Sometimes a zamler must narrate their own stories until their listener works up the courage to narrate. Unlike Lehman, for whom the voice of the zamler was irrelevant to the collection of folklore, Cahan showed the zamler’s

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid 78-79.
\textsuperscript{112} Cahan (1912) VI.
\textsuperscript{113} Bar-Itzhak 78.
\textsuperscript{114} Cahan (1912) VII.
voice to be present in the folktales they collect, even if it is not the voice telling the tale.\textsuperscript{116}

\textbf{“Yiddish Folklore”}

Dichotomies within Yiddish folkloristics extended beyond the folklorists or the folk; they contextualized and enriched understanding of the folklore, itself. From An-Sky’s “Jewish Ethnopoetics” in 1908 through Cahan’s essays published in 1952, Yiddish folklorists faced the same questions and came to different conclusions: What makes an item Jewish, and what makes it folklore? According to An-Sky, Jewish folk art has historically lacked a “motif of heroism” due to the nation’s diasporic nature and constant persecution. Instead, Jewish principles within the folktales emphasize spiritual connection over physical strength.\textsuperscript{117} The common thread amongst all Jewish folktales is the desire to overcome material obstacles to achieve a more intimate spiritual understanding of the Torah. For this reason, the “tzaddik” or “righteous one” is the hero, rather than the knight in shining armor.\textsuperscript{118} An-Sky’s analysis hinges on his observation that Jewish folktales only resemble the European folktale externally. Internally, they contain the same themes and motifs that have permeated Jewish texts since the Talmud and Torah.\textsuperscript{119}

That An-Sky took a comparative approach anticipated the work of Y.L. Cahan and his study of universal tales, but, unlike Cahan, An-Sky developed his understanding of Jewish ethnopoetics before the collecting movement began in earnest. Lacking in

\textsuperscript{117} An-sky 37-39.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid 46.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid 40-41.
documentation of the material he utilized and written before his own ethnographic expedition began in 1912, An-Sky’s analysis betrays his personal beliefs and biases regarding the nature of Yiddish folklore.\textsuperscript{120} Nevertheless, An-Sky’s early attempt to answer the questions facing all Yiddish folklorists in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century became enormously influential on the work of subsequent Yiddish folklorists.

Shmuel Lehman, one such folklorist, took a considerably different approach to the delineation of Yiddish folklore. Lehman’s work focused on an expansive vision of the field in which the texts themselves spoke with the loudest voice, and it was the job of the folklorist to listen as well and as widely as possible. Lehman and his mentor and inspiration, Noyekh Prilutski, concentrated their efforts on a kind of folklore that, unlike An-Sky’s nationalist ethnopoetics, emphasizes the diversity of Yiddish culture. Prilutski’s literary salon met between 1909 and 1912. Despite its short life, the group was extremely prolific, and its members—including Lehman, A. Almi, and Pinkhes Graubard—continued to publish together after the circle broke up. Concerned primarily with collecting folklore, Prilutski’s group was responsible for expanding the field of folkloristics to include new types of people and “oral genres.”\textsuperscript{121} For the purposes of A. Almi’s collections, for example, the definition of the word \textit{mayse} or “folktale” was expanded to include anything “performed in face to face communication” in Yiddish, regardless of the content of the story.\textsuperscript{122} Almi was doubtless aware of An-Sky’s thoughts on the definition of Yiddish folklore, but he evidently saw An-Sky’s analysis in his essay

\textsuperscript{120} Bar-Itzhak 32.
\textsuperscript{121} Gottesman (2003a) 5.
\textsuperscript{122} Gottesman (2003b) 38.
on ethnopoetics as descriptive, not prescriptive. The features An-Sky claimed were present in all Jewish folktales had no bearing on Almi’s own collecting vision.

Similarly, Lehman and Prilutski were fascinated by the “diversity, individuality, and dissemination of Yiddish creativity,” as evidenced by their focus on the unique folkloric elements found in small towns, rather than the most universal elements of Jewish folklore.\textsuperscript{123} Bay undz yidn “introduced an expanded notion of Yiddish folklore” from what had been accepted at the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{124} Like Almi, Lehman did not consider An-Sky’s essay sufficiently authoritative to limit his own practices as a zamler of Yiddish folklore. Several of the songs Lehman collected for his anthology of folksongs titled “Arbet un frayhayt” clearly contradict An-Sky’s theory that physical combat and the hero motif do not exist in Jewish folklore.\textsuperscript{125} All of the work published by Prilutski’s circle—and the substantial material that remained unpublished—represents an effort to expand the definition of Yiddish folklore so as to collect as much and as widely as possible. The stories, songs, and jokes included in Lehman’s collections demand a definition of “Yiddish folklore” that can include anything and everything produced by the “folk.” In the eyes of the zamler, exemplified by Lehman, the genre of folklore remained in the hands of those who produced it, not those who collected it or those who analyzed it. Yet, while Lehman’s broad approach resulted in an impressive collection, it also raised questions about the underlying definition of folklore, and provoked critiques from those with more orthodox definitions. In fact, both An-Sky and Y.L. Cahan criticized the first volume of a collaborative anthology by Prilutski and Lehman as having too broad a definition of folklore. Lehman’s work brought him into

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid 44.  
\textsuperscript{124} Gottesman (2003a) 6.  
\textsuperscript{125} Gottesman (2003b) 44-49.
repeated contact—and conflict—with Cahan, who had his own ideas about how to
define Yiddish folklore and who, unlike Lehman, was fully prepared to express them in
his essays and reviews of other folkloristic texts. For a scholar like Cahan, such a broad
definition of folklore was difficult to accept.

Y.L. Cahan devoted much of his career in folkloristics to the delineation of
specific terminology and parameters for determining the authenticity of Yiddish folklore
collected by him and others. As a comparative folklorist, Cahan stressed the importance
of interaction across cultural borders for determining the authenticity of a folktale. For
Cahan, a story was “Yiddish” because of its language, voice, style, and other external
elements, and it was a “folktale” because of the universalistic content and motivations
within.126 The point at which Cahan chose to construct his boundary between Yiddish
and not-Yiddish—between “We” and “Other”—is particularly significant because the
stories in his own collection, published in 1931, are not necessarily what one would
expect; they have neither the structure nor the content of the old stories in religious
mayse-bikblikh.127 In previous analyses, such as that of Sh. An-Sky, religion had been an
obvious site of strict division between “We” and “Other.” But religion constitutes an
internal, structural aspect of a folktale, and Cahan saw his folktales as Yiddish because of
their outer shells, which contain culturally specific elements such as language. The inner
“core” of the folktales, on the other hand, is of an international, non-specific origin
common to all cultures, and implies prior interaction across cultural borders.128 The
further back in the oral tradition of a tale one goes, the stronger the connection to the

127 Ibid 240.
128 Ibid 242.
universal, international tale from which it came.\textsuperscript{129} The longer these folktales remain within a culture, the more the tales become entwined with culture-specific language and history, and the more \textit{beynish}, or local, they become.\textsuperscript{130}

With his new, universalistic parameters for Yiddish folklore in place, Cahan had his own questions about the folktales in his collection. Cahan considered his collection to be the first and only of its kind in its focus on the \textit{yidishe folksmaysele}, though he does mention the existence of collections in journals such as \textit{Bay undz yidn}; but if his collection is indeed unique, why had no folklorist published such a collection before? Is it because these stories are not truly “Yiddish,” of “Yiddish” origin, and are simply loaners from other cultures? They look much more like German, Russian, or Arabian tales than like classic Jewish religious tales. They are not Jewish legends and they have no religious morals; they are closer to universal tales, and therefore indicate a degree of exchange across cultural borders not present in religious tales or biblical legends, but alluded to by the very tales in Cahan’s collection.\textsuperscript{131} Evidently, therefore, some answers can be found in the stories themselves, but Cahan gave himself very specific parameters for his investigation. Perhaps some of his inquiries require a more expansive definition of Yiddish folklore; perhaps some of them require a Lehman.

Cahan did not shy away from assessing the methodologies of other folklorists in his writing, both Jewish and otherwise. For example, he disagreed with Sh. An-Sky’s suggestion in “Jewish Ethnopoetics” that one should approach Yiddish folktales solely from within the Jewish ethno-religious realm.\textsuperscript{132} Where An-Sky claimed that the external appearance of Jewish folklore may resemble that of other cultures, while the inner

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid 248.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid 242.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid 249.
\textsuperscript{132} An-Sky 40-41.
content always consists of tendencies and traits that trace back to the Torah and Talmud, Cahan proposed precisely the opposite.\footnote{Cahan, “Vegn yidishe folksmayses” 246.} Yiddish folklore such as that in Cahan’s collection belongs to a larger “partnership” of folklore, and it is only the external elements that make it Yiddish. Therefore, Yiddish scholars can learn much from general folklore research and the mistakes made therein, even if it does not pertain directly to Yiddish folklore.

In keeping with his own suggestion, Cahan pointed to the Brothers Grimm for the purpose of both inspiration and critique. The Grimms believed folktales could be traced back to the earliest days of history, but they were also stubborn in their belief that their own stories came from entirely Indo-European—that is, Aryan—origins. Although the brothers did not deny that folktales could pass from culture to culture, they were preoccupied with their nationalist, Protestant vision and did not consider this phenomenon to be the norm. Later in their careers, the Grimms were surprised by similarities amongst folktales from around the world and acknowledged that the stories must be connected, but insisted that different ideas and disparate understandings kept cultures distant. Wilhelm explained away these apparent connections by suggesting that similar tales stem from situations and thoughts that are so simple and natural to humanity that they are experienced everywhere.\footnote{Ibid 247.} Cahan emphasized the interference caused by the folklorist’s private agenda in the attempt to deliver folktales as they are received. For these reasons, the “classic collections” such as \textit{Kinder und Hausmärchen} and its Russian equivalent, Afanasiev’s stories, are examples of folktale-art, but they are not “truly folkstimlekher” because they do not deliver the voice of the folk.\footnote{Ibid 249.} Evidently,
Cahan believed he had evaded these missteps in his own collection, and had achieved a more objective perspective on folklore than either the Grimms or Afanasiev.

With such fundamentally different conceptions of Yiddish folklore, in a field and culture in which such varied conceptions were acceptable—if not encouraged—it is inconceivable that Lehman and Cahan’s collections would contain similar stories. The two folklorists were recording the voices of two different nations. A long history of Jewish debate, discourse, and acceptance of multiple solutions to a given problem suggests that the existence of Cahan and Lehman’s remarkably different understandings of Yiddish folklore does not require us to determine which understanding is more “correct.” But, the question remains whether the folktales retain some element or experience unique to the Jewish communities of Europe, which other folktales—such as those collected by the Grimms—lack. The existence of two versions of Yiddish folkloristics does not preclude the possibility that Cahan’s and Lehman’s stories do, in fact, share certain commonalities, which may point to the elements of Jewish culture that unify local communities. And while their collections cannot be compared for the sake of elevating one over the other, they might yet provide a foundation for a deeper and more complex understanding of Yiddish culture than either of them envisioned.

In fact, another Yiddishist—and editor of Cahan’s posthumously published collection of folkloristic writings—Max Weinreich provides an alternative framework for the analysis of Jewish folklore in an essay on Jewishness and “the ghetto myth.” For Jewish customs and behaviors, “outward resemblance” to non-Jewish customs is inconsequential, as long as those social patterns can be explained internally, through reference to Jewish tradition and law. In Weinreich’s words, “The distance between
Jewish and non-Jewish patterns is created not by a difference in the ingredients proper but rather by the way they are interpreted as elements of the given system.” Following Weinreich’s lead, an analysis of each story as an individual, self-contained product—as a “given system”—avoids the limitations of Cahan’s methodology, which relied upon elements external to the system of the tale, as well as the limitations of Lehman’s methodology, which does not acknowledge the existence of any system.

Because both Lehman and Cahan were operating with limited definitions of Yiddish folklore, which excluded the perspectives of other folklorists, a gap lies between their perceived purpose of the tales and the tales’ actual functions. This gap demands an analysis of more than the folklorists’ methodologies; it requires an analysis of the folktales they collected. How do the tales interact with their historical context? What role does Judaism play in characters’ identities and in the tales’ settings? What form does this Judaism take? Only an analysis of the stories, both in isolation and in dialogue with one another, can determine the extent of their relationship with the transnational Jewish narrative.

Chapter Three: “And they are good, and we are even better”

Y.L. Cahan sought out Yiddish tales whose folkloristic authenticity could, in turn, demonstrate the authenticity of the Yiddish folk as a distinct cultural group. Published in 1931, his collection of 34 yidishe folksmayses is comprised of stories, which, per his definition of the “Yiddish folktale,” feature apparently universal tale structures with apparently superficial Jewish modifications. Although the stories in this collection meet this definition, Cahan did not demand enough of the relationship between folklore and the folk. Cahan’s folktales exist in active communication with the folk that perform them. Even as the universal structure of the stories demonstrates the existence of what Cahan designates as “authentic” folk culture in the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, those communities utilize their unique identities to alter the universal structure of their folklore on both a superficial and a fundamental level. This process is evident in the ninth and thirteenth stories in the collection, “The Mazl” and “A Story about a Banished Princess.” These two stories utilize universal folktale structures and motifs to address the uniquely vulnerable situation of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, specifically as they existed in opposition to the non-Jewish communities with which they were increasingly forced to interact. Facilitated by the use of the Yiddish language, folkloristic elements that came into existence separately from Yiddish culture cross the border into the Yiddish domain and become a part of the spirit of the Yiddish folk.

137 Yehuda Leib Cahan, Yidishe folksmayses: oys dem folksmoyl gezamlt (Vilne (Poland): Press of B. Kletskin, 1931). For English translations of the tales analyzed below, see Appendix A (pp. 92 below). For the original Yiddish texts, see Appendix B (pp.109 below).
The thirteenth story in Cahan’s collection is titled “A mayse fun a fartribener kinigz-tokhter,” or “A Story about a Banished Princess.” According to his brief source notes, Cahan collected the story in the 1929 from a woman named Royze Keydor. On its surface, the tale appears to embody perfectly the type of Yiddish folktale Cahan wished to assemble in his collection. It is a “folktale” because of the universal structural elements that link it with similar folktales from other cultures around the world. It is “Yiddish” because of the language in which it was performed, the identity of the narrator, and the surface-level elements that mark it as a Yiddish “oicotype,” or localization of a universal tale, in this case, “Cinderella.” If Cahan aimed to demonstrate that Yiddish folktales were only authentically “Yiddish” on a superficial level, “A Story about a Banished Princess” appears ideally suited to prove this point. But Cahan’s eagerness to prove the universality of Yiddish folktales overlooks the true impact of the encounter between universal folktale functions and uniquely Jewish characteristics. The addition of Jewish elements to a seemingly universal structure transforms the folktale. Instead of a Cinderella-style tale of social mobility, it becomes a conversion narrative that functions as a power fantasy with a communal, forward-looking, and forcefully utopian resolution—a victorious response to the Grimms’ German utopias, from which Jews were deliberately excluded.

The apparent similarity between “The Banished Princess” and “Cinderella” explains its enduring popularity in the Jewish world. Since Cahan recorded and published the story, the tale has been reproduced in several forms. In 1988, it was included in a translated collection of Yiddish folktales by Beatrice Silverman Weinreich and Leonard

138 Cahan (1931) II.
Wolf under the title “How Much Do You Love Me?” and a picture book by Nina Jaffe titled *The Way Meat Loves Salt: A Cinderella Tale from the Jewish Tradition* was published in 1998. Jaffe’s subtitle it telling: even sixty years after his death, Cahan’s desire to prove the authenticity of Jewish folklore through comparison with folklore from other cultures lives on. The association is certainly tempting; like “Cinderella,” the story falls under tale type #510 in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Classification Index. Like “Cinderella,” the story tells of a girl, who is abused by her stepmother, receives aid from a mysterious and supernatural figure, dances with a handsome young man in disguise, and eventually marries him and lives happily ever after. In Cahan’s Yiddish version of the tale, the young man is a rabbi’s son instead of a prince and the supernatural helper is probably (but not explicitly) Elijah the Prophet instead of a magical tree or godmother, but the equivalencies are intuitive and the relationship between Cahan’s tale and the “Cinderella” of Charles Perrault or “Aschenputtel” of the Brothers Grimm is obvious.

“The Banished Princess” also seems to function in accordance with more recent analyses of Jewish oicotypes of universal tales. In a study of Jewish animal tales, Dov Noy proposed two kinds of deviations between universal types and Jewish oicotypes. “Minor changes” concern the insertion of Jewish-specific “realia,” such as synagogues or rabbis, Hebrew phrases or prayers. The substitutions of a rabbi’s son for a prince or Elijah the Prophet for a fairy godmother fit this category. “Major changes” to tales

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consist of “narrative deviations” or “structural changes,” which, according to Noy, occur primarily at the beginnings or ends of tales.¹⁴³ This observation is also consistent with “The Banished Princess,” whose functional structure does differ most obviously from “Cinderella” at its outset and conclusion. The heroine has no stepsisters and is not set impossible tasks by her stepmother. Instead, following the initial situation of the tale, in which the princess lives happily with her parents, she is banished by her father at the encouragement of a new stepmother for giving too much tzedakah, or charity. Furthermore, “The Banished Princess” continues after the marriage that concludes the tale of “Cinderella,” providing resolution to the story in the form of reconciliation between the princess and her father at the ceremony for her newborn son’s circumcision. Ostensibly, these changes preserve the primary structure of the tale, while allowing a Jewish narrator to pique the attention of a specifically Jewish audience at the beginning of a performance, as well as end with a bang of recognition.¹⁴⁴

Both Cahan’s theory of the internal universality of Yiddish folktales and Noy’s contemporary analysis of Jewish oicotypes allow for these idiosyncrasies in a Yiddish version of a universal tale type. But neither folklorist addresses the impact of those idiosyncrasies on the overall form and function of the tale, as narrated by a Jewish woman in early 20th century Poland. For example, the substitution of a rabbi’s son for a prince is apparently inconsistent with the existence of a king, queen, and princess in the domain of the same folktale. In Europe, Christianity is the religion of royalty. The figure of the rabbi’s son is certainly capable of fulfilling the same function as a prince for a

¹⁴³ Ibid 173.
¹⁴⁴ Ibid 173.
woman of lower socio-economic status, but the woman in question does not occupy a lower stratum in the same social hierarchy. Instead, her own titular nobility is fundamentally incompatible with that of the rabbi’s son. The existence of a rabbi’s son and a princess in the same tale demands the convergence of two worlds—the Jewish and the Christian—that rarely interact so intimately in the world of the Yiddish folktale. In order to attain higher status in one world, she must forego the other entirely; the heroine cannot be both a princess and the rabbi’s daughter-in-law. Her actions over the course of the tale functionally constitute a conversion from Christianity to Judaism, which introduces an element to the tale that is entirely absent in the story of “Cinderella,” and entirely unique to the Jewish experience in Eastern Europe.

Although the princess’s conversion is not made explicit in the tale, it is supported by elements within the folktale as well as precedent in the Jewish tradition. From the story’s outset, the princess is made to stand apart from other members of the royal society. She aligns herself with the Jewish community even before she becomes aware of its existence. Her mother, from whom she has been taught to give charity, dies, leaving her alone with her father and stepmother. The stepmother does not appreciate her stepdaughter’s charitable inclinations and convinces the king to choose between his daughter’s life and his marriage. He chooses his marriage. The princess, with her stubborn desire to give charity, does not belong in the royal palace, so she is forced to leave. Charity plays an important role in Christianity, but because the tale is told in Yiddish—a Jewish vernacular—the term used, tzedakah, evokes an explicitly Jewish concept of charity. Max Weinreich uses precisely this example in his discussion of the distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish patterns of practice. “Charity is a distinctly Jewish trait” because it is “based on earlier Jewish precepts and practices ultimately
grounded in the Talmud and the Bible.” The princess is not only acting generously, she is also acting *Jewishly*.

After her father’s servants abandon her in the forest, the princess receives guidance from a mysterious old man, who guides her to a Jewish *shtetl*. Though Cahan’s version of this tale does not mention Elijah by name, the Biblical prophet frequently fills this role of magical helper in Jewish folklore. That Elijah provides help to this Christian princess by leading her through the forest to an isolated Jewish shtetl indicates that she poses no threat to this community and, moreover, may even *belong* there. Her identity as a natural member of the community is confirmed when she arrives and begs to work for the rabbi’s family in order to remain with them. The image is potent: a Christian princess living and serving in the dirt and ashes at the rabbi’s feet. The princess’s transformation serves as more than simply a disguise or a spatial transference; in the eyes of the Jewish community, it is the ultimate power reversal.

This triumphant subversion of power relations alludes to common framing elements of conversion narratives in the Hebrew Bible. Like “The Banished Princess,” the Hebrew Bible never explicitly describes the conversion process, but it contains stories of at least four people who are commonly understood to have converted to Judaism. In accordance with Jewish tradition, none were encouraged to convert, and Ruth of the Moabites was actively discouraged by her mother-in-law, Naomi. Judaism is not a missionary religion; it does not require universal conversion for universal reward. Yet all four examples declared loyalty to the Jewish people and adherence to the word of

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145 Weinreich 2205.
the Jewish God. Three of those four figures—Ruth, Rahab the Canaanite of the city of Jericho, and Naaman the Assyrian soldier—come from peoples who were considered to be the sworn enemies of the Jewish people. This narrative, in which an enemy of the Jewish people recognizes the superiority of the Jewish God, proves the ultimate superiority of the Jewish religion. The same narrative is present in the tale of “The Banished Princess,” whose desire to remain with the rabbi’s family overpowers the rebbetzin’s reluctance.

That this narrative of conversion as a Jewish power and revenge fantasy comprised a part of the Jewish folk tradition in early 20th century Poland exemplifies the turbulent environment in which the Jewish folk of Eastern Europe have always lived. The foreign pressures of Christian prejudice and persecution combined with inward religious withdrawal led to a stark isolationist attitude in Jewish communities, where interaction with the (often hostile) outside world was both undesirable and harmful. Nevertheless, contact between Jewish and non-Jewish communities was always a fact of life. It was these interactions, more than the customary isolation, that defined the nature of the borders between the worlds. In the context of Diaspora, these border crossings belonged to two primary categories: assimilation on the one hand and anti-Semitism and pogroms on the other. Both avenues ultimately aimed at the destruction of the Jewish religion, and this danger of both spiritual and physical extinction became the practical form of the border between the Jewish and non-Jewish world. Jewish communities therefore had every reason to view border crossings with suspicion. In such

circumstances, it is no wonder that the initial situation of the Jewish world in “The Banished Princess” prohibits border crossings without the magical guidance of the prophet Elijah.

Thus, the princess’s entrance into the shtetl represents a rare, productive border crossing in the Eastern European Jewish world. She proves her worthiness to the magical helper, Elijah, who grants her initial access to the Jewish community. Once the princess recognizes her desire to become a permanent member of this world by marrying into the rabbi’s family, the rabbi’s son briefly assumes the role of hero so as to acquire the “reward” of the worthy princess on behalf of the entire Jewish community. During this interim movement of the tale, the perspective shifts from that of the outsider—the princess—to that of the Jewish community, personified in the rabbi’s son. This new hero’s agency indicates the Jewish community’s consent to the princess’s conversion, and its acceptance of a new member. When the perspective of the tale returns to the princess, she is a Jewish woman and no longer constitutes a threat to the insularity of the shtetl. Moreover, as a firmly established member of the Jewish community, she may do her part in the perpetuating the Jewish community by giving birth to more Jewish children.

But the story does not end with the princess’s marriage, nor does it end with the birth of her son. The princess has a second encounter with the magical helper, and this time, Elijah is no longer the guardian of the Jewish community. As part of his dream-message, Elijah reveals that the king-turned-beggar is already wandering the surrounding area, implying that the border has been breached. The idealized border crossings of worthy princesses are no longer possible, because the likes of the weak-willed king have
become capable of finding the Jewish world without magical guidance. Much like in the real world, the intermingling of the Jewish and Gentile domains only increases, and the singular conversion of the princess is therefore not sufficient to provide total resolution for the folktale. At this pivotal moment, the tale could easily take a more vengeful—or even violent—turn. The king, who once sat on the literal throne of secular power, is at the mercy of the Jewish community, now personified by his daughter. But the final section of the folktale, in which the king begs and receives forgiveness from the estranged princess, provides a more universal resolution in contrast to the princess’s isolated conversion. The king’s recognition of his wrongdoing established a model for border crossings between the Christian and Jewish world that, unlike the reality faced by Eastern European Jews, preserves the integrity of both domains.

Crucial to this understanding of the resolution of the folktale is the lack of one element that is present in all of the Biblical instances of conversion to Judaism: the Jewish God. In the stories of Naaman, Ruth, and Rahab, the final step in the conversion is the admission of the superiority of the Jewish God over all other gods. Not only does “The Banished Princess” leave out this statement, it leaves out mention of the Jewish God entirely. When the princess demonstrates her loyalty to the Jewish faith, she does so solely through her commitment to the Jewish community, not the Jewish God. Likewise, when the king recognizes his behavior as sinful, he follows Jewish tradition and begs forgiveness from the human he wronged—his Jewish daughter—not the Jewish God. The king is thereby granted the opportunity to atone for his sins without the additional step of religious conversion; he is allowed to make peace with the Jewish community without joining it, demonstrating the possibility for a border crossing that does not change the fundamental nature of either domain.
The reconciliation between king and princess goes a necessary step beyond the revenge fantasy of the princess’s conversion. The power reversal enacted by a Christian princess giving up her royalty for the sake of the Jewish community in which she truly belongs is affirming, but unsustainable. Not every non-Jew is “worthy,” nor is every non-Jew willing to undergo the complete restructuring of one’s life that Jewish conversion demands. On the other hand, the king’s recognition of the harm he caused and his attempt to restore harmony creates the possibility of a future world in which the Jewish and Christian domains can continue to come into contact without causing harm to either domain, or to the borders that separate them. In this future, retellings of the story of “The Banished Princess” are rendered unnecessary, because the nature of border crossings between the Jewish and Christian worlds has undergone an essential change. The Jewish community will be perpetuated by Jewish people like the princess and the rabbi’s son, who have Jewish children, as well as by Gentiles like the old king, who live peacefully alongside them.

To call “The Banished Princess” a Yiddish oicotype of the universal folktale type ATU #510 is an oversimplification of the interaction between the outer and inner elements of a folktale. The core structure of “The Banished Princess” does stem from the universal tale type, and the story does bear the external features that Cahan establishes as the defining characteristics of a Yiddish oicotype. But Cahan’s analysis implies that these aspects of the story operate on separate levels when, in fact, the Yiddish elements are responsible for the story’s ability to function as a folktale for the Yiddish folk. The “Cinderella” story of social mobility may be universally relevant, but a tale of border crossings and hopes of utopian reconciliation is relevant in a specifically
Yiddish context. The tale reformulates the functions of the universal tale and adds supplementary elements to create the “Cinderella” story of an entire community. Cahan intended for his collection to demonstrate that a Yiddish folktale is authentically Yiddish if the outer elements are Yiddish. In the case of “The Banished Princess” this analysis is accurate precisely because of the internal effects of those outer elements.

The ninth story in Cahan’s collection, titled “Dos Mazl” or “The Fortune” ostensibly bears fewer external Jewish characteristics than “The Banished Princess.” Moreover, unlike “The Banished Princess,” “The Mazl” does not have an obvious equivalent in the well-known collections of the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault. It is, however, comprised of motifs common to local and universal tales that explore the nature of fortune and human control over destiny, such as the motif of the golden egg-laying bird, which appears in the Grimms’ story “Das Goldei.” Cahan collected “The Mazl” in 1925 from a 32-year-old painter named Yosl Kotler in Zhitomir. Despite its apparent lack of the markings of a Jewish oicotype, “The Mazl” enriches the understanding of Jewish life in 20th century Eastern Europe and the interactions between Jewish and non-Jewish communities that is developed in “The Banished Princess.” “The Mazl” expands the commentary on power relations across cultural and economic borders and depicts the active role of Jews in the quest for utopian coexistence.

Like many folktales, Jewish and otherwise, “The Mazl” uses as its initial situation the relationship between two brothers, who exist in contradistinction based on a specific, defining characteristic. In other cases, this feature can be intelligence, morality, or age.

148 Cahan (1931) II.
For the two brothers in question, the characteristic is wealth. The hero of the tale is revealed to be poor, and in the service of his much more affluent brother. Unlike in other tales involving two brothers, however, the foil for the hero of this story never actually appears as a character. The wealthy brother’s primary influence on the story is in his absence, which requires his poor brother to stand guard at his gate and interact with the wealthy Mazl. His absence is further evident in the enduring poverty of his brother, who is forced into his counterpart’s employ as a lowly security guard. As the poor brother later explains to his Mazl, he is incapable of providing comfort for his family, despite his servitude. The poor brother stands outside his brother’s gate, ensuring that no harm befalls his brother or the wealth to which he is beholden, but he is forbidden from experiencing that wealth or safety for himself. Indeed, the wealthy brother is necessary to the tale so as to put the hero in contact with wealth and riches—and therefore the wealthy Mazl—without allowing him to experience the very wealth to which he is exposed everyday.

The omission of the wealthy brother’s presence from the tale calls attention to the lack of competition in the structure of the plot. The poor hero does not have to prove to a father figure that he is more deserving of his Mazl’s gift than his brother, because there is no father figure who sets out to compare the two brothers, and because his brother has already reaped the benefits of an active Mazl. In a practical sense, moreover, the poor hero cannot afford to make an enemy of his brother, because he relies on his brother for what little livelihood he possesses. “The Mazl” depicts the interaction between two socioeconomic classes in a power imbalance; the lack of animosity between the brothers is not a matter of choice, but of necessity. If the poor
brother causes harm to his brother or his brother’s wealth, he will, in turn, cause harm to himself and his family. The motif of filial rivalry is therefore absent in “The Mazl.”

On a more symbolic level, the lack of competition in “The Mazl” calls attention to the poor hero’s true enemy in the tale: not his brother, but his lack of good fortune. As the poor brother of a wealthy man, the hero at the tale’s outset embodies an important character archetype in Jewish folklore: the schlimazel, or the man doomed to experience bad luck at his own hands and at the hands of others. The hero’s identity as a schlimazel is evident in the fact that he is truly down on his luck at the opening of the story, and then in the fact that his Mazl is sleeping more deeply than any of the other sleeping Mazls in the field. Crucial to the identity of the schlimazel is humanity’s lack of control over destiny and luck, an interpretation of fate present in Talmudic and kabalistic sources, but also part of a larger pattern of world folklore concerning fate. However, a second pattern exists as well, in which “a human is able to counteract his Destiny.” It is to this pattern that “The Mazl” must belong, because the hero is able to literally shake his destiny into submission through resourcefulness and persistence.

The poor brother is only able to search for his own Mazl because of his stubborn pursuit of information from his wealthy brother’s Mazl. After managing to obtain this guidance, the poor hero is not discouraged by the apparent difficulty of the journey, and sets out immediately on his quest. Despite meeting still more resistance from his Mazl, the hero persists—and eventually succeeds—in his attempts to awaken his fortune. Again, he is met with difficulty and lack of clear guidance; the Mazl says “absolutely

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149 Haim Schwarzbaum, Studies in Jewish and World Folklore, Supplement-Serie Zu Fabula. Reihe B, Untersuchungen ; Bd. 3 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968), 261.
150 Ibid 260.
151 Ibid 261.
nothing” when it hands him a single coin, as if this will solve all of his problems. The Mazl is nothing like the figure of the mysterious old man in the forest in “The Banished Princess,” who must determine the princess’s trustworthiness, rather than the other way around. And the advice the poor hero does receive—to purchase the first thing he finds—is frequently associated with evil or foolish deals in other kinds of folklore. The hero of a folktale always regrets making a deal with the devil to kill the first thing he sees upon arriving home. Inevitably, he finds his daughter, rather than his dog waiting for him. But the poor hero of “The Mazl” judges the Mazl’s advice to be a worthy risk, and his gamble pays off, allowing him to achieve independence, happiness, and satisfaction for his family.

The schlimazel’s ability to change his luck has repercussions for Jewish society at large, because the schlimazel exists as a point of comparison for the rest of a community that might be down on its luck. In a world where luck is so rarely a source of happiness and satisfaction, the existence of a figure that is always doing a little bit worse is useful to maintain hope for the future and a sense of humor about the present. And if a schlimazel is a person whose luck is universally the worst, a schlimazel such as the hero of “The Mazl” has the added purpose of demonstrating the logical possibility for universal improvement. “The Mazl” does not describe the dangers of taking luck for granted; it demonstrates the possibilities when one utilizes a stroke of luck to its full advantage. The audience of this folktale is unlikely to experience more than a single stroke of luck in a lifetime; it is no coincidence that most of the Mazls the hero encounters in the field are asleep, and the only active Mazl he sees is that of his

152 See Appendix A below, pp. 100.
extremely wealthy brother. The tale therefore ends where most stories about birds that lay golden eggs begin: the discovery of the golden eggs. Unlike so many other folktale heroes, the schlimazel does not give in to the temptation to cut open the chicken because it has already given him the one thing he has never experienced in life: satisfaction. And when the chicken provides the opportunity for the hero to be satisfied, it implies the possibility of satisfaction for everyone.

This redirected emphasis is further reinforced by the lack of competition involved in the pursuit of fortune. The poor brother does not betray his wealthy brother in order to obtain his own wealth. Rather than cross his brother and master, putting his own livelihood at risk, the poor hero takes advantage of his brother’s fortune without antagonizing him. In tale’s resolution the two brothers achieve not a role reversal, but a form of presumed equality.

“The Mazl” contains no direct references to the interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Yet a closer look reveals that the story does subtly allude to the relationship between Jews and surrounding Christian communities in a manner that both emphasizes Jewish superiority and implies that this superiority does not demand the oppression of the inferior. The overall message of overcoming bad luck and coexisting in mutual satisfaction extends to this frequently fraught relationship between communities. In the only explicit interaction between a Jew and a Gentile, the goy, who sells the chicken to the hero, does not intend to deceive the hero, nor does the hero believe he is cheating the goy. Nevertheless, though the direct source of the chicken’s magic remains ambiguous, it is clear that the chicken is magical for the hero and unremarkable for the goy because of a series of conditions met by the hero, and only the hero, which implicitly affirms the stereotype of the enterprising Jew, who has a way with treasure. But the lack
of competition and trickery in “The Mazl” demonstrates that this stereotype does not go hand-in-hand with the anti-Semitic assumption of the Jewish usurer. In some iterations of the Golden Egg tale, the figure of the Jew is responsible for tricking the hero into giving up his wealth, or turning brothers against each other for sake of personal gain. “The Mazl” presents a (Jewish) hero, who undergoes a successful quest for wealth that results in satisfaction and independence for himself and his family, but his success does not undermine the livelihood of the other figures in the tale, challenging the assumption that the success of a Jew requires the downfall of a Gentile.

Understood in light of this subversion of anti-Semitic stereotypes, the relationship between the poor hero of “The Mazl” and his wealthy brother and master offers a different interpretation of the same social situation present in “The Banished Princess.” Where “The Banished Princess” depicts the consequences of interactions between two cultures existing in a power imbalance, the initial situation of “The Mazl” depicts an unequal relationship between two parties, in which the continued wellbeing of one party—the poor brother—relies on the continued mercy of the other. In the same way, the Jewish communities of Europe have always existed at the utter mercy of their non-Jewish rulers. With the ongoing risks of blood libel accusations and pogroms, Jewish communities stood to gain precious little from antagonizing their superiors in the power hierarchy.

The relationship between the wealthy and poor brothers in “The Mazl” is not a literal interaction between two cultures, as is the case with the princess and the rabbi’s family in “The Banished Princess”—brothers are related, after all. Nevertheless, the poor brother’s exile from the wealthy brother’s property creates a border between their
domains that functions in the same manner as the forest in “The Banished Princess.” The two domains exist precisely because a gate and guard are necessary to separate them. And, the tale later demonstrates an awareness of interactions between different cultural worlds through the sale of the chicken. The tale specifies the identity of the seller as a “goy,” implying that the poor hero is not a goy, and is therefore a Jew. The existence of this interaction between communities within the same tale as the two brothers creates the potential for an interpretation of the brothers’ relationship as a microcosm for contact between larger communities, and a desire for those interactions to take place without cultural vulnerability or economic dependency.

The strength of this desire to achieve stasis through satisfaction and belonging is evident in the final rhyming couplet of the story: “And they are good, and we are even better.” Like the resolution of “The Banished Princess,” this final line expands the microcosm of the hero’s story outward into the world of the audience and the community at large by creating a contrast without defining the elements of the comparison. If “they” are the wealthy, then “we” are the poor; if “they” are the poor hero and his family, then “we” are the poorer; if “they” are the goys, then “we” are the Jews. In all cases, the comparison suggests the possibility of utopian harmony that is qualified by the very tale in which it plays out. In this utopia, like in that of “The Banished Princess,” Jewish culture is no longer subject to the danger of assimilation, and Jewish livelihood is no longer at the mercy of the non-Jewish upper class. Retellings of the story of “The Mazl” become redundant, because the Jewish community has established lasting independence—its Mazl has been awakened. However, this peaceful coexistence is only achievable if the tale’s Jewish audience demonstrates the same

154 See Appendix A below, pp. 101.
perseverance and trust as the schlimazel, and that hard work will only pay off if it is supplemented by a stroke of very good luck. To meet these conditions might seem impossible, yet the tale ends on a hopeful note. If the schlimazel has found his magical windfall and improved his luck, then surely everyone else must be doing even better than he is!

The only elements of “The Banished Princess” that explicitly point to its identity as a Jewish variant of a universal folktale as defined by Y. L. Cahan are external, and ostensibly irrelevant to its overall structure. “The Mazl,” which exhibits still fewer of these elements, seems to be connected to its Jewish cultural source solely through the language in which it was performed. Cahan produced a collection of 34 Yiddish folktales such as “The Banished Princess” and “The Mazl” precisely because their relation to Jewish culture is apparently external. He aimed to prove that the authenticity of a Yiddish folktale as folklore is intrinsically connected to its authenticity as a universal folktale, while external elements are sufficient to render it authentically “Yiddish.” But Cahan’s efforts to peel back the Yiddish characteristics of folklore in order to delineate between authentic and inauthentic universal tales neglect the relationship between the external and internal elements of these Jewish oicotypes. The layers of these folktales interact; the external characteristics cause fundamental changes to the internal structure and purpose of the folktales. “The Banished Princess” is not a Jewish approximation of “Cinderella,” nor is “The Mazl” simply another in a long list of universal tales that utilize the motif of the golden egg. Together, these tales address the unique problems faced by the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. The tales depict the border crossings between the Jewish world and the world of non-Jews that held the fate of Jewish culture
in their hands and, in keeping with the function of folklore, offer possibilities for resolution that are logically consistent with the rules of these border crossings. By telling these tales and heeding their advice, the folk anticipate a future in which these same stories will no longer be necessary. The relationship between the folklore and the folk is not one-sided, as Cahan predicted, but mutually justifying.
Chapter Four: “Now that you are a part of our band…”

At first glance, the differences between the tales collected by Cahan in his Yidishe folksmayses and by Lehman in his contribution to the Bay undz yidn anthology appear striking enough to constitute two wholly separate genres, rather than two interpretations of the same genre. Regardless of the oicotypical alterations, Cahan’s stories are clearly fairy tales: they contain the functions and structural elements characteristic of fairy tales, they utilize the supernatural to advance the plot, and they handle the broad issues common to all fairy tales—familial relationships, social structures and hierarchies, and the relationship between mortality and fate. As such, Cahan’s choice to publish the tales in a single collection has a logical and straightforward justification. “Ganovim un ganeyve,” or “Thieves and Thievery,” Lehman’s collection in Bay undz yidn, consists of folktales, certainly. But they are grouped based on the identity of their heroes and narrators—all thieves—rather than based on any fairy tale-like characteristics. Despite the absence of Elijah the Prophet or other supernatural helpers, however, Lehman’s tales address the same themes as Cahan’s, which are the same themes handled by all fairy tales, and most other folktales. These themes include the importance and limits of communal ties, particularly the ties of family and the significance of the shtetl to Jewish life, the possibility of social mobility, and the challenge of changing of one’s luck.

That Cahan and Lehman both discovered tales with these common motifs speaks to the similarity of their missions as folktale collectors. The variations in all other aspects of the tales in their collections point to their different interpretations of that

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155 Shmuel Lehman, “Ganovim un ganeyve: rednsartn, tsunemenishn, shprikhverter, fragn, gramen, anekdotn, un mayses,” in Bay undz yidn (Vanvild, 1923), 43–92. For English translations of the Yiddish texts analyzed below, see Appendix A (pp. 92 below). For the original Yiddish versions, see Appendix B (pp. 109 below).
common mission. Cahan focused his work on differentiating the “authentic” Yiddish folktale from the inauthentic tale. Because his definition relied so heavily on the characteristics of the universal fairy tale, many of his tales contain universalistic resolutions, the uniquely Jewish elements notwithstanding. Overwhelmingly, Cahan’s tales concern themselves with bringing people together. For Lehman, on the other hand, the existence of an authentically Yiddish folktale was a given: it was a story, told by a Jew, in Yiddish. As a collector, it was not his responsibility to interrogate a tale’s authenticity; rather, it was his duty to cast his net as far and as wide as possible. His challenge was to find folktales that spoke to the experiences of the many different kinds of Jewish people—even the Jews of the social underworld, such as the characters in the stories of “Ganovim un ganeyve.” The thieves in Lehman’s tales suffer the same dependency on the external, Christian world for self-identification as Cahan’s heroes. Unlike Cahan’s tales, however, Lehman’s collection does not frame border crossings between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds as the primary focus of the lives of the Jewish folk, or of Jewish folktales. Rather, the collection contains tales that interrogate the often-tumultuous relations within the Jewish community. It gives society’s most vulnerable the opportunity to tell the better story by subverting conventions of the folktale structure. In doing so, the tales call attention to the powers and possibilities of the genre to which they belong, and the limits of that genre to provide a nuanced perspective on multi-faceted cultural identity.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Because Lehman did not demand the same universality in his tales as Cahan assumed was present in his, Lehman’s individual tales won’t be regarded as absolute wholes in the same way that Cahan’s were analyzed. Instead, Lehman’s entire collection will constitute the self-contained system, and the close reading of the tales within that system will be organized thematically.
Lehman’s locally focused approach resulted in tales that hint at a form of universal Jewish experience—nowhere near as defined and as isolated as Cahan believed, but nevertheless larger than the experiences of one or two deceptive Jewish thieves. In focusing its attention on the tales of the Jewish “underworld, “Lehman’s collection necessitates the existence of the whole Jewish world, without explicitly detailing this existence. Stories told about an underworld create a negative space, which is assumed to be filled by an “overworld.” But these tales also utilize the powers and limits of storytelling to tell the better and more complete tale in which the underworld wrests attention away from the elites looking down on them.

“Ganovim un ganeyve” is a collection of Jewish folktales told by Jewish thieves, about Jewish thieves, for Jewish thieves. As such, they do not focus on the relationship between the Jewish world and the non-Jewish world. Rather, they concentrate on the encounters between the social underworld of thieves, prostitutes, and street urchins, and the overworld of rabbis and merchants. The first story begins with a servant taking advantage of his master’s trust and making off with his treasure. The third story involves the constant antagonism between a student and two petty thieves. Due to the identities of the tales’ narrators, the Jewish underworld consistently has the narrative upper hand; the thieves may not always succeed, but they are always framed as the protagonists of the tales. The stories’ plots, like Cahan’s fairy tales, focus on addressing conflicts and challenges. But where Cahan’s stories are forward-looking and chronicle the development towards a utopian reconciliation, the relationships in the first and third stories of “Ganovim un ganeyve” are rife with deception and mistrust, never end in reconciliation, and provide utopian endings only for the luckiest thieves, evoking the difficulties of the reality in which thieves live in the compact form of a folktale.
Within the specifically Jewish world, the identities of the heroes in Lehman’s tales reinforce the (im)moral of the collection—that everyone is a thief—and provide opportunities for commentary on the relationship between the Jewish underworld and upper crust. The hero of the first story begins in a position of servitude in the upper echelon of society, as the subject of a non-Jewish tsar. At the encouragement of his friend, he gives up his position of servitude in the overworld, only to trade it for a position of glorified servitude in the underworld. His new masters, the band of thieves, hope to utilize his skills to win themselves a place in the overworld through the accumulation of wealth, but the servant remains dissatisfied with his lot in life, and their plan backfires. Having taken advantage of his skills, the band of thieves plots to kill their “sucker” and take his share of the riches. But the hero plots to do the same to his companions, and, because they both succeed, they all lose. The quadruple-homicide in which the tale culminates demonstrates the difficulty of movement within the Jewish social hierarchy, both between the lower and upper worlds, and within the lower world as an isolated community.

The hero of the third story in Lehman’s collection provides nuance to the relationship between the Jewish elite and lower classes. As a student in a yeshiva, a kind of religious college, this hero constitutes the apparent opposite of a thief. Yet he is quickly revealed to be a thief as well—more clever and more cunning than his two counterparts, but equally willing to steal from the church. It is because of his cunning, not his morals, that he repeatedly triumphs over the two petty thieves, illustrating the irrelevance of morality to the purpose of these tales. The yeshiva student tricks the petty thieves on multiple occasions in which they initially appear able to take advantage of him. First, he
is able to make off with the riches stolen from the church, and then he is able to keep his wealth and save his new bride when the thieves attempt to trick him again, later on. As the hero of the third story, the yeshiva student succeeds because he plans carefully and aspires to wealth without allowing his ambitions to exceed his means. The petty thieves of the third tale and all four thieves of the first tale lose either their livelihood or their lives because they acted *foolishly*, irrespective of their morality. The relationships in both tales subvert the assumption of solidarity within the Jewish community. Lehman’s tales show that external pressure, persecution, and cultural borders do not cement the unity of the Jewish world; individuals continue to search for identity through the exclusion of others from ever-shrinking groups and alliances. Irrespective of the external incentives, the tales portray the internal conflict between social classes as inherent to a Jewish cultural identity in which peaceful coexistence is absent.

But this genuine communal solidarity is not simply absent—the stories overwhelmingly see the very belief in such ties as a weakness. The tales utilize the appearance of cohesion to deceive the characters, as well as the audience. Both the first and third stories of the collection deal with the expulsion of undesirables, but the plots hinge on the *assumption* of strong ties within the Jewish community. In the first story, the band of thieves murders itself because its members turn on each other after having made a pact to support one another. In the third story, the petty thieves plan to betray the yeshiva student as soon as they have taken advantage of him, while the student successfully betrays the thieves once he has taken advantage of them. In the first story, the obviously unequal relationship between the tsar and the servant is juxtaposed with the ostensibly equal relationship between the servant and his friend. In the third story, the two petty thieves attempt to win the yeshiva student’s trust by impersonating a
member of his family. The pivotal moments in both stories occur when this apparent
solidarity is peeled back to reveal the deception and mistrust beneath. The servant in the
first story plots to poison his companions even as they plot to poison him. They are all
successful—and they all fail—because they are too distracted by their own deception to
suspect it in their partners. The yeshiva student is able to play along with the thieves’ act
precisely because they assume he possesses a strong belief in familial trust. Later, he is
able to deceive the two petty thieves for a final time by exploiting their assumption that
he would be completely honest with his new bride; in fact, he is willing to use her as
unwitting bait to catch his enemies.

Lehman’s efforts to pursue a more expansive definition of folklore resulted in
tales with a message that precisely contradicted the narrative put forth by Jewish
nationalists: Eastern European Jewry was not obligated to remain unconditionally united.
No amount of pressure to form a cohesive community can force unity into existence.
Eastern European Jewish life may have been as broad and widespread as the scope of
Lehman’s collecting missions, but it was also as varied, and Lehman’s work underscores
that variety. Eastern European Jewry encompassed urban intellectuals, earnest religious
students, petty thieves, and even thieves masquerading as earnest religious students. In
such a society, homogeneity is nonexistent, and purity can only be conceived artificially,
by neglecting elements of reality such as conflict, mistrust, and deception. In reality, the
urban intellectual and the street urchin are not friends, simply because they both have
Jewish mothers. In reality, every man is for himself.

By focusing on the shameful and immoral aspects of the Jewish communities of
Eastern Europe, as well as the specifics of the underworld subculture, Lehman’s tales
have the power to create a more complete image of the entire community, such as it existed. A German Maskil, eager to emphasize the moral, honorable elements of Jewish life, would experience little pride in identifying with the Jews of Lehman’s tales. But no community in the world exists without the presence of some quantity of antagonism and mistrust. Lehman’s tales are narrated by the self-aware losers of society and history; practically speaking, they have more in common with Christian thieves than with Jewish rabbis. They did not tell these tales so as to identify with the heroes, because these heroes are not meant to be venerated. Instead, the stories create distance between the narrators and their characters by distilling the life of a thief into the economical form of the folktale, in order to help the narrators and audience make sense of their role in the community. It is no accident, then, that the first tale in Lehman’s collection concisely introduces all of the thief’s immoral qualities—deception, thievery, and violence—and then ends in catastrophe. The tales do not indicate that these qualities are, good, nor that they are destined to change, as Cahan’s tales might imply. The thieves of the Jewish community—or of any community—are not inherently good, nor inherently moral, but they are inherent to the societies in which they live, and they refuse to be whitewashed. Despite Lehman’s ostensible lack of concern for the universal human experience, his collection stumbles upon a universal and unavoidable element of European society, isolated in the tales and interactions of the Jewish community: Every society has its shadowy, shameful underworld.

But Lehman’s tales do utilize the perspective of the lowlifes and underdogs of society to investigate tensions internal to the Jewish community. As such, the tales seem to have little reason to acknowledge the Christian world or its interplay with the Jewish
world, despite the similarity between the lives of Jewish and non-Jewish thieves. Yet the audience is constantly reminded of the thieves’ Jewish identity. In the third story, the hero is introduced as a “yeshiva-boy,” and his counterparts are introduced as “Jews” first and “thieves” second. The characters’ identity as Jewish—and not Christian—is therefore integral to Lehman’s tales, but the role of Jewish/Christian interplay in his tales is distinct from its role in Cahan’s tales.

The story of the student-thief, for example, alludes to the same stereotypical relationship with money attributed to Jews by Christians, which is addressed by the ninth story in Cahan’s collection, “The Mazl,” in a manner indicative of the differences between the purposes of Cahan’s and Lehman’s tales. Cahan’s story subverts the anti-Semitic stereotype of the jealous Jew, who betrays others for the sake of wealth by proposing a scenario in which a Jewish person is enterprising with wealth, but not at the expense of the rest of the community. Lehman’s third story uses precisely the opposite strategy; the hero is an immoral Jewish thief, who achieves wealth at the expense of both the Christian community and other immoral Jewish thieves. Moreover, the successful thief’s identity as a Jewish religious student is repeatedly emphasized, rather than explained away. The audience first meets the student while he is studying in the middle of the night, which is introduced as a habitual activity. His first course of action after escaping his incompetent deceivers is to seek out another yeshiva for study. In fact, the only tangible difference between the successful and unsuccessful thieves in the third story is the study of Jewish religious texts. And because folktales are fundamentally sparing with detail, it is reasonable to conclude that it is because of his committed study of Jewish texts that the yeshiva student is a better thief than his counterparts. Like the

157 See Appendix A below, pp. 104.
relationship between socio-economic classes, the role of the rabbi or religious student is not one-dimensional, nor is it glorified. Rather, the tale portrays qualities of the religious or studious archetype explicitly overlooked by “The Banished Princess,” which portrays the rabbi’s son as a role model, who is intelligent, honorable, and moral. This model of the religious student represents the most respected aspects of the Jewish community; the rabbi’s son is therefore a desirable reward for an honorable heroine and a moral hero in his own right. The hero of Lehman’s third tale utilizes the same status, intelligence, and presumed honor to act immorally, demonstrating that a religious student is as likely to be a thief as he is to be a role model. Evidently, Lehman’s tales do not share the purpose of portraying Jewish characters as morally or ethically superior to Christian characters. Instead, they stress the diversity of the Jewish experience, irrespective of Christian interference.

Due to this shift in emphasis of Lehman’s tales, the role of the Christian world in the structure of the tales is also different. In Cahan’s tales, particularly “The Banished Princess,” the interactions between the Jewish and non-Jewish domains move the plot steadily towards an integration of the two worlds. The tale is resolved with the introduction of a new and permanently changed relationship between Jews and Gentiles in which the plot could not repeat itself after the tale’s resolution because the two worlds have become peacefully unified. In “Ganovim un ganeyve,” on the other hand, the Christian world constitutes an interruption in the normal structure of the Jewish world. In fairy tales, such as Cahan’s tales, the supernatural world interrupts the mundane world so as to move the plot forward, and disappears when it has served its purpose. The Christian world operates in this manner in Lehman’s tales; it exists for specific and isolated purposes, and ceases to exist explicitly when it ceases to be necessary for the
The Christian world exists in the first tale to rule over the servant and encourage his descent into thievery. In addition, it exists to be exploited by the servant, who steals the tsar’s treasure. The Christian world also exists in the third tale to be exploited by the three thieves, and, when the plot requires a threat, it reappears to endanger the two petty thieves. As the sun rises and the thieves realize they have been tricked, they worry about being caught by a goy while in possession of paintings that have clearly been stolen from a church. Once they rid themselves of the paintings, the Christian world disappears along with the danger it presents. The isolated function played by the non-Jewish world in Lehman’s stories does not result in eventual integration with the Jewish world because this integration has no place in the structure of the plot, which is fully contained within the Jewish sphere.

Yet even the limited role of the Christian world in Lehman’s thieves’ tales demonstrates the vulnerability of the European Jewish community’s identity. Though the role of the Christians in Lehman’s tales is different from that of Christians in Cahan’s tales, it is also different from the role of Jews in the Grimms’ tales. As is noted earlier, Jews play certain, stereotypical functions in the Grimms’ fairy tales, usually related to money, and usually involving betrayal. These roles are ostensibly similar to those played by Christians in Lehman’s tales; they emerge when they are structurally necessary, and disappear once they have served their purposes. But the Grimms’ tales can be told without Jews because the conflicts can be brought about in a multitude of other ways. The identity of the Grimms’ heroes as Christians does not depend on the existence of Jews in the plot. By contrast, the Jews in Lehman’s tales are constantly defined by their identity as an “Other” to the Christian world in the same way that the Jews of Europe were constantly defined by their identity as “Other” to Christian Europe. The Christian
world is an inescapable, latent presence in both the first and third stories. It shapes the thieves’ identities as Jews, which determines their motivations as thieves; the petty thieves in the third story choose to rob a church, rather than a synagogue. In Lehman’s stories, the Christian world’s explicit existence appears and disappears according to the structure of the plot. However, its implicit existence as background noise is a constant necessity, which defines the borders of the Jewish world.

By challenging assumptions about the composition of the Jewish community and emphasizing its heterogeneous tendencies in tales by and about underdogs, Lehman’s stories also challenge the power of storytelling, itself. The ability to compose a consistent narrative about a community depends on the existence of a unified community around which to construct that narrative, and these tales repeatedly underscore the lack of unity in the Jewish community. The difficulty of telling cohesive and useful stories is introduced in the first line of the first tale, which also functions as the last line of the same tale: “This tale is true, as all tales are true.”¹⁵⁸ The necessity of this bookend to the tale challenges the very message it provides. The power and dangers of storytelling, which are introduced in the first tale, act as a methodology for Lehman’s entire contribution to Bay undz yidn. Lehman never describes his own method, but he collected more material than most other Yiddish folklorists over the course of his long career, and was only able to publish small samples of it, including this collection of folktales about Jewish thieves. He must have chosen these stories for a purpose, and the first tale in the collection gives him that purpose. The story ends in catastrophe; no one remains to literally “tell the tale.” So how can we take the tale at its word? Because, of course, all

¹⁵⁸ See Appendix A below, pp. 102.
tales are true. The line evokes the anxieties of the Jewish underworld in which death and destruction are so common that witnesses to its existence rarely survive long. Cahan’s tales conclude with the non-threatening implication of universal prosperity and Jewish financial independence from the economically empowered Christian world. Lehman’s third story is overtly threatening; the thieves steal from the Christian house of worship without a second thought. And Lehman’s collection of tales by thieves, for thieves, lacks even the façade of communal solidarity characteristic of a society under attack from the outside, which is evident in Cahan’s stories. Higher morality does not define Jewish thieves; if everyone is a thief, higher morality does not define the Jewish community at all.

But why would we, the Jewish audience, assume that these tales are worth telling, if they describe an undesirable reality, in which everyone is a selfish thief and all attempts at partnership end in death? Because all tales are true, and, therefore, if all tales are told, we have the same power as the characters in the tales to choose the best story. If other tales, such as those in Cahan’s collection, portray the Jewish community in a more attractive light, and are therefore more tempting to narrate, then someone must take up the thieves’ mantle and tell their stories as well. Lehman’s expansive definition of the Yiddish folktale and his search for increasingly specific and local tales demonstrates the universal connection between all folktales told in all areas of society, from the thieves to the rabbis.

The limits of storytelling also serve as plot elements in Lehman’s stories. In fairy tales as analyzed by Vladimir Propp—such as those produced by the Brothers Grimm—
the hero serves as the axis of the plot. Additionally, only actions of the dramatis personae are significant to plot, and thoughts are relevant only insofar as they lead to action. But Lehman’s tales confront the restrictions of this structure by introducing multiple heroes—and therefore multiple axes—to the plot. In the first story, the characters all tell themselves a story in which each is more deserving of the stolen wealth than his counterparts. Although the former servant is the apparent “hero” of the tale, the perspective shifts to his three companions in order to enable the audience to overhear them plotting betrayal and murder. The resolution of the plot results from the encounter between the individuals’ stories as separate axes. All of their stories were true; therefore, in the end, none of their stories were true.

The third story further explores the requirement that a tale must build on the standpoint of a single character. Rather than conform to this standard, the tale shifts constantly between the perspectives of the yeshiva student and the two thieves. Unlike in the plots of the Grimms’ fairy tales, this tale’s plot demands this shift; the story cannot be told from the singular perspective of the student, or from that of the petty thieves, because to do so would ignore whole sections of the tale in which the three characters do not interact directly, yet continue to influence each other’s actions. Like the Christian world, these other characters would intrude on the plot if they were not given explicit attention. Thus, instead of a straightforward performance, the tale becomes a battle of storytelling, in which the side with the better story—the yeshiva student—becomes the hero. The petty thieves, meanwhile, are shunted to the side, but rather than assuming the role of villains, they become anti-heroes. They do everything the hero does, but they fail

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160 Propp 81.
wherever he succeeds. The final section of the tale emphasizes the petty thieves’ centrality to the plot by giving them, not the yeshiva-student, the last word. When the student’s story comes to an end, the thieves’ tale plods on painfully for several extra sentences, in which the student is portrayed as the triumphant villain and the thieves as the failed heroes. That the tale ends with this final shift in perspective alludes to the possibility of telling the entire story from the thieves’ point of view, leaving out the elements that make the student more sympathetic. As the first story states, “all tales are true,” but the story is different, depending on who tells it.

This commentary on the powers and limits of storytelling, conveyed in a collection that opens with the self-aware introductory line to the first story, provides insight into the nuances of the Jewish community’s relationship with itself, in the same way that Cahan’s tales explore the relationship between the Jewish and non-Jewish community. Both of Lehman’s tales demonstrate the significance of a shift in perspective: the hero of one Jew’s tale is the villain of another’s, and anyone has the potential to make or become an enemy. But the limits of storytelling lead to the absence of the reconciliation in Lehman’s tales that concludes Cahan’s tales. Lehman’s tales do not end in reconciliation or integration because they do not take place in a world that believes in reconciliation; their world believes only in telling the better story. Whoever tells that better story is the hero. Therefore, as long as thieves tell these stories, they are the heroes. But if they allow the perspective to shift—if they allow someone else to tell their stories—they lose the narrative upper hand in their own lives. The story of an enterprising Jew, who improves his fortune honorably, will be told. A Jewish Cinderella-like story will be told. But the stories in “Ganovim un ganeyve” cannot be the better stories and cannot be believed if they are not told.
The tales in Lehman’s collection forego the integration of the Jewish and Christian worlds and focus on the disintegration of the Jewish community, as an isolated body. Like all Eastern European Jews, Lehman’s thieves cannot escape the influences of Christianity; indeed, the Christian world constitutes a latent presence in both the first and third tales in “Ganovim un ganeyve.” However, the narratives of Lehman’s tales do not consider the reconciliation of the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds to be inevitable or necessary. Instead, the tales explore the power of storytelling in a community fraught with internal tensions and conflicts. By calling attention to the limits of the folktale genre, Lehman’s folktales demonstrate the difficulties of communal cohesion—precisely the purpose of the modern Yiddishist and Jewish nationalist movements—even within an ostensibly united cultural group. Lehman’s tales do not render the universal integration and resolution of Cahan’s collection unequivocally impossible, but they certainly complicate it. Neither collection delivers a perfect likeness of the Jewish narrative, but the two together convey a more complete representation than either can alone.
Conclusion

The myth of the single, national story may be a myth, but it is an enticing one. A newly emancipated Jewish people first encountered secular Europe on the intellectual plane during a formative moment in the history of nationalism. Herder’s theory on the relationship between the spirit of a folk and cultural legitimacy had developed into a demand for unity in the West on the national level, a demand met by the Brothers Grimm in their Germanized collection of fairy tales. The emancipated Jewish intelligentsia attempted to meet this demand as well, resulting in the development of a multiplicity of nationalist ideologies. These theoretical movements prompted the practical encounter between the educated Jewish elite and the Jewish folk, upon whom the elite were compelled to depend for their legitimacy as a nation. For the Yiddish-speaking advocates of Jewish cultural preservation that recognized the absence of a Jewish national territory, folklore became the primary means of connecting the experiences of local, diasporic communities to a transnational and more universal Jewish narrative.

Y.L. Cahan attempted to legitimize the Yiddish folklore genre in relation to the folk and folklore of other nations. As a comparative folklorist, Cahan understood that Yiddish folksmayses possess a universal, non-national core, which is obscured by external Jewish characteristics. But where Cahan’s theories assumed these layers did not interact, the universal structure and Jewish elements depend on one another in practice to depict the uniquely Jewish experience of life in Eastern Europe as defined by the constant negotiation of relationships with the non-Jewish world. And rather than connecting to an overarching Jewish narrative, the plots of Cahan’s tales resolve by establishing a new,
integrated environment in which stories that handle the tensions between Jewish and non-Jewish communities are no longer necessary.

Shmuel Lehman’s collection also draws on interactions between the Jewish community and the Christian world, but his tales focus primarily on tensions within the ostensibly cohesive, self-defined Eastern European Jewish world. Like Cahan’s tales, however, Lehman’s collection does not lend itself to the construction of a single Jewish story. Rather than celebrating the unity of Eastern European Jewry, the tales challenge the assumption that any story can belong to an entire community. Lehman’s tales are not unduly pessimistic, but they stress that every individual has a story to tell, and every individual story deserves to be heard.

Despite their varied appearances, the four Yiddish folktales analyzed here do contain certain common structures and concerns. But they do not form a single, true story of the Jewish people, nor do the stories themselves claim to possess such national significance. The people may have needed a national narrative, but the tales know better: there is no one, true story of the Jewish people.

So why does the tension between cultural diversity and national unity no longer persist with the same form and potency in which it existed in the early decades of the 20th century? This historical moment of folkloristic inquiry did not lose out because it was the worse story, in Lehman’s terms; it lost because it was murdered. Shmuel Lehman died in the Warsaw ghetto in 1940. Most of his collected material, which he could never
afford to publish, was lost along with him.  Other folklorists, as well as most of the world’s Yiddish-speaking folk were murdered in the Holocaust by Nazis claiming to defend the purity of the German nation and national narrative. The ethnic cleansing carried out by the Nazis was an extreme manifestation of precisely the nationalist ideology that Lehman, one of its victims, was resisting with his investigation of Yiddish folklore. We believe the lie of the single, national story because the narrative of the nation-state succeeded in the West. In the face of that success, the Diaspora and the nuanced relationship between local communities and transnational unity were no longer seen as sufficient to constitute a national narrative. In the case of the Jewish nationalist movement, the establishment of the State of Israel and the triumph of Zionism are both symbols of and responses to the victory of the nation-state in the West.

Neither Cahan nor Lehman believed his contributions to be the culmination of the field of Yiddish folkloristics. Both conducted their work with the expectation that they were laying the groundwork for more exhaustive research and analysis in the future. That research has yet to be accomplished—but now, seven decades after Israel’s establishment and a century after Cahan and Lehman collected their material, the era of the nation-state is on the decline. The beginning of the 21st century has provided us with the opportunity to reconsider our identity as a Jewish nation, and the significance that the Jewish people have ascribed to territorial nationalism in the past seventy years. In this new era, as in the era of Lehman and Cahan, an exploration of the Jewish Diaspora provides an opportunity to positively affirm Jewish cultural identity, rather than merely argue against the legitimacy of a Jewish territorial claim.

161 Ravitch 36-38.
In the hopes of continuing that journey of self-examination and self-rediscovery, we must return to this earlier historical moment, and explore the lessons, hopes, and warnings these tales contain. No single narrative is any more capable of encapsulating the Jewish people now than it was a century ago, but the lack of a one, true story does not abolish the need to tell stories. On the contrary: If all tales are true—and they still are, even now—we must keep telling stories, we must keep listening to other people’s stories, and we must keep trying to imagine the stories other people may be telling themselves. We must explore the powers and limits of storytelling, like Lehman and his narrators, but we must always keep in mind the messianic potential for reconciliation, for which Cahan’s narrators yearned.
Appendix A

The Banished Princess

Once there was a king and a queen who had an only daughter. Like most royal families, they were very wealthy. The queen was kind-hearted, and gave tzedakah (charity) generously. She taught her daughter to be kind-hearted as well, and to give tzedakah.

Eventually, the queen died, and the princess continued to give tzedakah like her mother had taught her. But then the king married a second time and his second wife—the princess’ stepmother—did not appreciate her step-daughter’s generosity, and did not want her to give so much of their wealth to tzedakah. The new queen approached the king and told him she did not want her step-daughter to give so much tzedakah for fear of making them poor. The king agreed to speak to his daughter, and ordered her to stop giving so much tzedakah. But the princess only gave more. When the stepmother noticed, she returned to the king and threatened to leave, because she could not bear to watch the princess giving away their property. Once again, the king spoke with his daughter and warned her that if she did not stop giving so much tzedakah, he would banish her from their home. But the princess did not listen, and gave even more tzedakah than before.

When the king saw that the princess had ignored him, he called his servants and ordered them to cover the princess’ eyes and take her into the forest. Once there, he ordered them to take out her eyes and bring them back to the king, as proof that they had killed her. The servants packed up her royal finery, bound her eyes, and led her deep into the forest, where they bound her to a tree. But they realized they could not kill her, because she had been so good to them. They thought it over, and decided to abandon
her instead, because the animals would eventually eat her. They killed a dog and took its eyes to bring back to the king as proof they had killed her.

So the servants left and the princess remained through the night, weeping bitterly; after several days, an old man approached her and asked, “Why are you crying, my child?”

She explained everything; the whole story, how she came to be there. He said to her, “Come, my child, I’ll take you out of the forest. And when I have led you out, uncover your eyes and you’ll see a path. Follow the path, and you’ll arrive at a shtetl (small village); ask the townspeople about a poorhouse, and you’ll have a place to stay.”

And so it was. When she left the forest, the young woman unbound her eyes and saw that the old man had disappeared; she saw only a path, which she followed a long way until she came to a shtetl. It was a Friday, and already the afternoon when she arrived, and she was very hungry and thirsty. She sat on a stoop by a house and wept bitterly. In the house lived a rabbi and a rebbetzin (rabbi’s wife) with their only son. When the rebbetzin went to bless the [Shabbes] candles, she heard someone crying, so she went out onto the stoop and found a young woman, sitting and crying. She asked her, “Why are you crying, my child?”

The young woman explained that she was an orphan, without a mother and father, without anyone in the world. She told her she had met an old man on the way who had told her about a poorhouse in this shtetl, where she might find a place to stay. The rebbetzin said to her, “But where will you go to light candles this Friday evening? It would be better for you to come into the house with me and stay here for Shabbes, and on Sunday I will take you to the poorhouse.”
And so it was. She stayed in the rabbi’s house for Shabbes, and when Sunday came, when she was supposed to leave for the poorhouse, she began to plead with the rebbetzin: “Let me stay here with you, I will be your servant, I’ll only ask for food and water.”

The rebbetzin replied, “I have no room for you, no place for you to stay.”

But the young woman was not discouraged, and continued to plead, “Let me stay with you, even if I must sleep under the oven, that is good for me; anything not to go to the poorhouse.”

The rebbetzin reasoned that a servant for the price of only food and drink would be quite prudent--and she allowed the young woman to stay on as a servant.

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The rabbi was very well-known in the shtetl, and the wealthy townspeople, when they were having a wedding for one of their children or some other celebration, would invite the rabbi to the celebration with his wife and son. Now around that time, a rich man was having a wedding for his son. When the rabbi, the rebbetzin, and their son left for the wedding, the young woman stayed in the house. She reflected on how she had never been to a Jewish wedding before, and she wanted to attend this one. She came out from beneath the oven and retrieved the pack of belongings the king’s servants had brought when she was banished from the palace. Out of the pack, she took a beautiful dress, made herself up beautifully, and left for the wedding. When she arrived, everyone stared at her; they didn’t know from whose side she came—the groom’s or the bride’s?—because she was very beautiful and dressed very richly. She danced with
everyone who invited her to dance. She caught the eye of the rabbi’s son, who also asked her to dance. She danced with him until she realized how late it was, when she pulled herself away and fled home. When she got home she took off her beautiful clothing and dressed in tatters, and returned to her place under the oven. But the rabbi’s son had already become obsessed with her, though he did not know who she was.

Some time later, another wealthy townsperson had a wedding. Once again, the rabbi was invited along with his wife and son. They all left for the wedding. The young woman decided she wanted to attend this wedding as well. She dressed in even more beautiful clothes than the previous time, and left for the wedding. This time, when she arrived, the rabbi’s son saw her immediately, and asked her to dance. Together they danced and danced, until she realized it was growing late. She pulled herself away from him and quickly ran home. But as she was removing her beautiful clothes, she dropped an earring and left the earring-back in her washbasin, where she was washing herself. She didn’t notice the earring-back, and dressed in her tatters and returned to her place under the oven. But when the rabbi’s son returned from the wedding and took the basin to wash himself, he saw the earring-back and didn’t know where it had come from. He was, however, already a bit suspicious, and he guessed that the beautiful young woman, with whom he had danced at the wedding, must be somewhere close by. From that moment on, she did not leave his thoughts; he was in love with her.

Some time later, there was yet another celebration in the shtetl, and, once again, they were invited. The rabbi and rebbetzin went, but the rabbi’s son claimed to have an headache and said he would come later, and in the meantime he would rest in his room. But the servant girl didn’t realize he was still at home. She dressed in still more beautiful clothing and left for the celebration. As soon as the the rabbi’s son saw that she had left,
he left as well, and, once again, the two of them danced. And as they danced, he noticed that she was only wearing one earring, and he realized the earring-back he had found in the washbasin belonged to her. He asked her, “Who are you?”

She explained the whole story, who she was and how she came to be there. Then she left and quickly fled home. She returned to her tatters and her place under the oven.

Shortly thereafter, the rabbi and rebbetzin discovered that their son wished to marry their servant girl, which was an entirely unsuitable match for them: “What is this, a rabbi’s son marrying a servant girl? No, we shall not allow it!” they said.

But their son became ill [from this denial]. They brought the best doctors to see him, but none could help him; they didn’t know what was wrong with him. He became even sicker, until he was on the brink of death. A great professor was called. The professor said the sick man must have a desire, and if he was not granted this desire he would die. The rabbi and rebbetzin decided that if their son was going to die, it would be better for him to marry the servant girl.

And so it was. When their son recovered his health, the rabbi and rebbetzin called together the men of the town to make a khupe (wedding canopy). Meanwhile, the rebbetzin went to tell the servant girl that they had embroidered a white dress for her to wear at the wedding. She responded that she already had a dress to wear. She went inside and, from her pack, withdrew her mother’s wedding dress, which the servants had packed for her, as well as a crown. She put on the dress, which was embroidered with jewels, with the bejeweled crown on her head, and in that way went to the khupe. When everyone saw her dressed in this way, they were all astounded. Only after the ceremony did she explain to everyone who she was; everyone was happy, but none more than the rabbi and rebbetzin, who were quite satisfied with their son’s match with a princess.
A year later, when the princess was expecting a child, the old man from the forest visited her in a dream. He told her that her father, the king, had become impoverished, and was now a beggar. He begged there, in the surrounding area. [The old man told her to] invite all of the nearby poor folk to the bris (circumcision ceremony), and when her father came she should have all of his food prepared without salt. And so it was: she gave birth to a boy and began preparing for the bris. She ordered that a special table be prepared outside for the poor folk and declared that if any of the poor folk who ate at the table came inside to wish her a “Mazl Tov,” she would give them a silver half-rubl. The poor folk were made aware of this and word spread amongst them that the rabbi’s son was holding a bris where one could have a good meal and even receive a silver half-rubl.

On the day of the bris, many poor folk gathered, and the new mother saw through the window that her father had arrived, old and weary. She called a servant and told him to take the old man to a special table, and to prepare his food without salt and refrain from giving him salt at the table. And so it was. The fish smelled delicious and the old man longed for a taste, but he couldn’t eat it because it had no salt. He tried the soup, but couldn’t eat it either because it had no salt. He saw everyone else eating and tried with all of his might to eat something else, but he couldn’t because it all lacked salt. Shortly thereafter, everyone went inside to wish the new mother “Mazl Tov” and to receive the wonder gift of a silver half-rubl; they all left happy and satisfied. When the old man went in to give his blessing to the new mother, she requested that he sit with
her, and she asked if he had enjoyed the food. He answered, “Yes, my child, it was very
good food; everyone else ate, but I was not able to.”

She asked him, “Why were you unable to eat?”

He answered, “Because all of the food was prepared without salt and had no
taste.”

“Exactly, so,” she responded, “was it for me; it had a bad taste for me, when you
sent me away to be killed in the forest and asked for my eyes to be returned to you as
proof.”

As the old man heard this, he realized that this was his banished daughter. He fell
at her feet and begged her to forgive the great sin he had committed against her. She
forgave him for everything.

And they all lived happily and satisfied.
The Mazl

Once there were two brothers, one poor and the other wealthy. The poor brother served the wealthy brother. Once, when he was guarding his brother’s gate, he saw a tiny man approaching, wearing a golden hat on his head and carrying a sack of gold for the rich brother on his shoulder. The poor brother asked him, “Who are you?”

The tiny man responded, “I am your brother’s Mazl (fortune or Luck),”

The poor man was astonished. He questioned him further: “Do you happen to know where I might find my Mazl?”

“Of course I know,” said the tiny little man, “but nothing will come of it if I tell you, because your Mazl is somewhere on a large, gloomy field. It is rough and shabby and fast asleep, and extremely difficult to find.”

But the poor brother would not let the tiny man go. He began to beg and weep for him to say where his poor Mazl might be found. The tiny man had pity on him and said to him, “Very well, I will tell you: You must go far, far, away, until you come to a field where you will see a thousand sleeping Mazls. You must not wake them! Go further and you will see a thousand more Mazls; these are beginning to wake up. They will sit up and yawn and scratch themselves, but they shouldn’t concern you. Go even further and keep searching. When you find a Mazl that is sleeping more deeply and snoring more loudly than all of the others, you will know it is your Mazl!”

And with that, the tiny man with the golden hat disappeared.

The next morning, the poor man rose early to search for his Mazl. He walked and walked until he came to a gloomy field, exactly as the tiny man had told him He didn’t stop, but continued walking until he came to another field, also very gloomy. He
looked around and saw many different Mazls of all shapes and sizes, lying fast asleep and snoring. He did not touch them; he saw others sitting up, yawning, and scratching themselves, but he paid no attention to them and walked further and further, searching and searching, until he saw one that was sleeping more deeply than the others, and he knew it was his Mazl. He approached and began to wake it: “Mazl, Mazl of mine, get up! What are you doing, sleeping like this?”

The Mazl didn’t stir; it slept and snored with gusto. The man continued to tried to wake it, but it didn’t help. He began to weep and shout: “Mazl, Mazl of mine, get up! You have slept long enough! You have slept enough!”

With great difficulty, the Mazl stirred slightly and opened its eyes and yawned. When the poor man saw this, he rejoiced and began to beg, “Mazl, Mazl of mine, don’t sleep! Look around and see, my wife and children are hungry; help me, give me something!”

The Mazl said absolutely nothing, stuck its hand in its breast pocket, and withdrew a silver coin/zloty and gave it to him. “What can I get with this?” asked the poor man.

“You’ll get something, you’ll get something!” grumbled the Mazl. “Go to the market and buy the first thing you come across.”

The poor man left for the market, where he came across a goy (non-Jewish person) carrying a chicken for sale. He bought the chicken and carried it home and fell asleep. The chicken flew into the cupboard, where it also fell asleep.

At dawn, when he woke up, the poor man saw something glittering in the cupboard. He jumped up from his bed and saw that in the cupboard sat a golden egg, which the chicken had laid. He woke up his wife and children and showed them the
golden egg; they were all ecstatic, and began to dance and jump around. Later, the poor man took the golden egg and sold it for a large sum of money. From then on he became wealthier and wealthier.

And they are good

And we are even better.
This mayse (tale) is true, as all mayses are true.

Once, a tsar had a servant, whom he trusted deeply, and whom he placed in charge of the treasury. Like any man, this servant had a friend.

One day his friend said to him, “How long will you be beholden to this tsar? You need a lesson; here is a piece of advice that you should follow. As you are now, beholden [to the tsar], you can’t go anywhere and you must guard this wealth. My advice would be very good for you.

The servant asked him, “What is this advice?”

“The advice,” he said, “is like so: You should take gold and silver and we should both flee overseas.

And so it was. He took enough [gold] and enough [silver] and they both fled.

When they fled, they took with them two partners: the two greatest thieves in all of Poland. The four of them fled into a forest and there, they settled in a large cave. They shared their weapons between them, so two people would sleep while two would guard. They brought food from the city. They had enough gold that nothing was too expensive for them.

After a time, the three approached the servant: “Now that you are part of our band, you must learn to be a thief like us. Let us give you a first test.”

And they send him into a city to steal, and they went into other cities to steal as well.

In short, he completed the first test and it went well, and they sent him a second time and a third time and it all went well for him. They saw he was becoming a real thief.
He brought them much gold and silver, and more gold—more than he had taken from
the tsar.

The three thieves began to discuss amongst themselves: this man must meet his end. And they said, “It would be shame to kill him, because he has brought us great wealth. Nevertheless, we must seek a good death for him.”

And they decided that they should send him into the city for food, and afterwards they would send him back into the city for drinks. While he was on his way, they would cook food for him and poison it and give it to him, and in this way they would have all of the gold for themselves.

He brought the food, and as he went back into the city for the drinks, he had a thought on his way. He thought: “What will I get out of what I steal if they always take it away? I will poison the wine, and they will drink, and they will die, and that way I, alone, will have everything.”

And so it was: they didn’t know what he was planning and he didn’t know what they were planning.

In short, this is what happened: When he arrived, he was very hungry. He took the food, and was poisoned. They wanted to try the drinks he had brought and make merry. They all were poisoned as well.

And how exactly can one know what they had planned? This mayse is true as all mayses are true.
Once a yeshiva-boy sat learning; he would sit and learn the entire night. Once, in the middle of the night two Jews came to him, thieves; one hid behind the wall, and one sat next to him and questioned him: “Where are you from? What is your name? What are your parents’ names?” The boy told them everything: how he had no father, his mother’s name and his sister’s name. The man standing behind the wall heard everything. This second man came in to the boy and said to him, “Good evening to you, Berele, I bring greetings from your mother, Estherl, and from your sister, Khave, and your brother, Moyshe.

The boy asked, “Who is this man?”

“I,” he answered, “I am your uncle Shloyme, your aunt’s brother!”

“Oy, an uncle!” said the boy, and he was delighted.

“Yes, replied the Jew, “now listen to me, Berele, to what I need from you.” He said, “In that shtetl is a Catholic church, and in the church is a lot of gold that needs to be taken out. I want you to follow your uncle and go with us, and you will go into the church through a little window, and you will pass out all of the gold objects. We have a hard and wagon, and as soon as you have passed out the gold, we will quickly take it away on the cart.”

The boy said, “Good, I will go along.”

And so all three went away to the church and the boy went in through the small window and began to pass out the gold. One man took the objects and the second laid them out on the cart. But the boy only passed out paintings, and whenever he found gold, he took it for himself. The paintings that he passed out were wooden, but because it was dark, they thought that they were golden. When the boy saw that the wagon was
full and he had for himself a couple thousand rubles and gold and diamonds, what did he do? He already knew he had deceived [them], and he wanted to free himself [from them], so he found a solution: he gave a shout, “Oy! Uncle! Someone gave me a kick with their foot! Rescue me!” When the thieves heard this, they jumped on the wagon and fled. When the boy saw they were no longer there, he once again climbed through the small window and thought to himself, “It will be day soon, and the partners will see they have a wagon full of wood. Of course, they will come to me and say, ‘Mister! Good brother! You have deceived us. You have taken the gold for yourself and you gave us the wood!’ What will happen?” “No,” he said, “I won’t go back to the yeshiva, I’ll go away to a distant shtetl.”

So he thought, and so he did.

The boy began wandering, he saved three thousand rubles and the rest of the gold he used to wander, until he came to a good yeshiva, with fine young people, and he settled down there to learn.

The two thieves had considered him, and decided to cheat him. They had thought to themselves, “When he has given us the goods, we will abandon him and run away.” And when they thought they had been caught and they ran away, they thought they were free of him. But when they had driven far away, far from the city, and day began to break, they took a look in the wagon: “Oy! Woe is me! What will happen,” they said, “if a goy were to come by now? How unlucky we are!”

“First of all, we must throw away all of this,” said one, “and then we must return to the yeshiva-nik, who has deceived us!”

And that is what they did. They threw away all of the paintings in the forest and then they returned, desiring murderous revenge on the yeshiva-nik. And the more they
discussed him, the greater their anger grew. And now they understood why he had cried that someone had kicked him with a foot.

But when they arrived, they did not come upon him. They decided they must seek him out, and they drove around in cities here and there, as time passed.

One day, they came to a shtetl and saw that the whole shtetl was celebrating, with the people dressed in their Shabbes-best. They approached one person and asked what it was all about. He responded, “The Rov (rabbi) is marrying off his only daughter, that’s why! And the wedding is sure to be beautiful.”

When they heard this, the two partners said to each other, “Come, we will attend as well.” And they went to see the groom.

When they went inside to take a look, they saw that it was he, the man they had been looking for!

They sat down right next to him and looked him right in the eye. The groom went deathly pale; he recognized them too.

But leave them staring at each other. I must related how exactly the yeshiva-nik became the Rov’s groom.

When he came to the shtetl and settled down to learn, he did not eat in family homes [as is traditional for a yeshiva student]; he ate from his own money. This annoyed all of the young people; they were wealthy children, but they ate in family homes and he—didn’t. They went to the Rov and told him how there was a yeshiva student who learned beautifully, but never went anywhere to eat.
The Rov considered the matter and sent for the student, and asked him where he came from and what his name was and why he never ate in a family home.

He answered, “When my father died, he left money for me. I have saved a couple thousand rubles, and the rest I have for food. As long as I have my money, I won’t eat at a stranger’s table.”

When the Rov heard this he took a liking to him, and before long the wedding was planned! And now, here sit the two thieves, whom the groom had rendered penniless, and they are staring at him.

As they stared at him, the badkhn (wedding jester) came in and called him out to the khupe. The groom went, and they went with him; the groom left the khupe, and they went with him. Wherever the groom was led, they followed, and did as follows: one sat outside in the wagon, and one went to the home into which the bride and groom would be led, and lay down under the bed.

When the newlyweds had been led in and the bride lay down in the bed, the groom extinguished the light and approached her and said, “Listen to me, my bride, I have with me three thousand rubles and I must go out. Take them from me.”

And he went out and hid by the door.

When the thief hiding under the bed heard this, he quickly gave the bride a push and said, “Now, give it to me.” The bride through he was the groom, and gave him the money.

The groom was standing behind the door and heard how the thief took the money and ran with it outside, so he stepped out suddenly from behind the door and said to him, “You have it, you have it, give it here!”
The thief thought this was his accomplice, so he gave the money to him. The groom ran back into the house and locked himself in with the money, and became the Rov’s son-in-law and lived happily.

Once again, the thief ran to the wagon, where the other was sitting, jumped onto the wagon and gave a shout: “Drive!” And the two quickly fled.

When they had travelled a small distance away from the city, the one who had been lying under the bed shouted, “Nu?” The second said, “Nu?” The first said again, “Nu?” The second said, “Nu, nu, nu!”

And when they said “Nu” to each other, they meant, “Nu, let us distribute [the money]!” A great fight broke out between them, which only ended when they no longer had the strength to hit each other. When they were both good and bloodied, they began to talk to each other, and they realized they had fought in vain: the yeshiva-nik had duped them.

The first said to the second, “We must run away. That Gemara-head can still get back at us.” And with broken legs and without a single penny they ran away.
Appendix B

שמורות צעונים ידישאר
פליקרשטאודנ

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י"ט

שלום וברכה

זאת הספרייה של

ידיעות החינוך והתרבות

אנציקלופדיה

1952
פְּרוֹבָיסִים אֲרוֹן 24 דִּיוּרָה

לֵדֶת עֲדֵר טַעְנָכְבָּךְ. הַבָּטֵן וּפוֹרָיסִים אֲרוֹן 24 דִּיוּרָה הַשָּׁמֹואלִיִּן פְּרוֹבוָיסִים

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ניי צלנאי ורשה

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לא ניתן прочитать текст из-за распознавания его как изображения.
אין דף זה בשפת עברי.
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