Itzik Nakhmen Gottesman
Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland
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For many of the peoples caught up in the nationalist movements of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Eastern Europe, the study of folklore assumed a central role in the forging of a national identity. The Jews of the region were no exception, apart from the relative lateness with which they began to collect, study and publish the works of their own tradition. Yet once they embarked on this endeavour, their enthusiasm matched that of any other group, as thousands of ordinary Jews volunteered their time and effort as *zamlers* [collectors] of Yiddish proverbs, folk songs, folktales, and other genres. In *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland*, Itzik Nakhmen Gottesman traces this phenomenon from the turn of the twentieth century until the outbreak of World War II. He surveys the work of individual folklorists active in Warsaw and the institutionalization of the field in Vilna with the creation of the Ansky Vilna Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society and YIVO's Ethnographic Commission. Gottesman shows how Yiddishist intellectuals, with their populist bent, found folklore—the quintessential product of folk culture in the vernacular of the East European Jewish masses—a source of fascination and inspiration, as well as of some ambivalence.

The value of Gottesman's study begins with its apt title, which emphasizes how scholars used ethnography to portray Yiddish-speaking Jewry as a group with distinct traditions and thus worthy of recognition alongside the other nationalities of the region. In this way he underlines how closely linked was cultural work to a nationalist--and thus implicitly political--agenda. Furthermore, his title phrase nicely encapsulates the contours of this national community as imagined by Yiddishists, highlighting the centrality of language in their definition of Jewish identity.

Gottesman's account shows how the new discipline of Jewish folkloristics mirrored the central dilemmas of building a modern Yiddish culture. Collectors and scholars first had to define their object of study and ask, as the title of a 1929 YIVO publication put it, *Vos iz azoyns yidishe etnografye?* (Just What Is Jewish Ethnography?) Some limited the term to creations of the anonymous folk; others included works by known authors intended for popular consumption. European scholars saw folklore as the product of rural peasant life uncorrupted by the forces of modernization, secularization, and urbanization. Many Yiddishists similarly looked to the provincial shtetl as the locale of pristine folk traditions. At the same time, because they were overwhelmingly city-dwellers, Jews also pioneered the study of urban folklore, including underworld figures such as criminals and prostitutes among their informants. Some, such as the linguist Noyekh Prilutski and the Mizraḥi (religious Zionist) supporter Yeshaye Zlotnik, traced folkloric motifs back to biblical and rabbinic sources to emphasize the distinctiveness of Jewish traditions. Yet such an approach was anathema to Marxist scholars who sought to construct a secular Jewish culture divorced from its religious roots.

Most fundamentally, ethnographers had to face questions about the importance of their object of study. Was folklore merely the product of an antiquated, superstitious weltanschauung doomed to die out in the modern age? As historian Yitskhok Shiper asked, what was the value of documenting dozens of variants of a single folk song in an

era of pressing social and political upheaval? Some scholars and collectors, such as Ber Borokhov and Sh. Ansky, believed that folklore could reveal essential Jewish qualities and values, thus underlining the uniqueness of Jewish culture. Educator Shloyme Bastomski rejected Ansky's interest in the moral content of folklore as too tied to outdated religious beliefs, but viewed songs and tales as useful pedagogical tools.

Since ethnography was defined as part of the discipline of philology, which also included the study of language and literature, it is not surprising that many turned to folklore as a source for linguistic research. For his work on the history of Yiddish, Max Weinreich sought out the oldest texts, which provided evidence of the antiquity of the language and thus of the *yikhes* (lineage) of the Yiddish nation. On the other hand, Prilutski, a dialectician, prized the many variants of folk songs and proverbs as evidence of the diversity and thus the vitality of the Yiddish-speaking folk. Similarly, Shmuel Lehman stressed how recent events such as World War I had inspired new folklore, demonstrating the ongoing creativity of the Jewish masses. As Gottesman points out, all of these scholars (with the possible exception of Ansky) privileged oral genres of folklore over material culture in keeping with the centrality of language for the Yiddishist definition of Jewish identity.

Folklorists had to satisfy not only themselves about the value of ethnographic study, but also the legions of dedicated *zamlers*. YIVO's Ethnographic Commission felt a responsibility to those who volunteered their time and energy to build the institute's collections and sought to assure them of the importance of their contributions. Yet if scholars sometimes looked down on folk culture, regarding it as the product of a primitive past, the same could be said of their attitude toward the people among whom it originated. While Yiddishists shared the romantic nationalist view that idealized the folk, Gottesman shows how they often treated individual *folksmentshn* with condescension. One of the leaders of the Ethnographic Commission, Y. L. Cahan, believed that many informants and *zamlers* were too ignorant to relate and transcribe folklore accurately and that scholars should 'correct' texts that had been corrupted in transmission. Thus, however much they sought to draw on popular traditions in their work, Yiddishist intellectuals often displayed an elitism that kept the masses and their culture at arms' length.

Gottesman might have further explored this tension between high and low culture by providing more of the perspective of the *zamlers* themselves. He includes revealing profiles of several leading folklore enthusiasts who became students in YIVO's Aspirantur training program. Yet hundreds of surviving letters from less exceptional individuals offer additional insight into the motivations of the *zamlers* and their attitudes toward the scholars to whom they sent the fruits of their efforts. Such material would have situated the phenomenon of folklore collecting more firmly in its wider social context, showing how and why it became not just the preoccupation of a few intellectuals but of thousands of ordinary Jews. Indeed, in many places Gottesman touches on fascinating aspects of his subject that would have stood greater elaboration.

Given its long gestation, this published version of Gottesman's 1993 doctoral dissertation could have benefited from incorporating more recent work in the field as well as the fragmentary records of YIVO's Ethnographic Commission recovered from Lithuania in the mid-1990s. The text is unfortunately marred by a lack of careful editing, resulting in spelling errors, inconsistent treatment of Yiddish terms, and redundancies.

These shortcomings aside, Gottesman's work is an important contribution to the study of modern Jewish history, scholarship, and nationalism, showing just how complex was the project of constructing a modern Yiddish culture.

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