

19 Oral Traditions in a Literate Society: The Hebrew Literature of the Middle Ages

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Since the time of the Koran and early Islam, the Jews have been known as the 'People of the Book'. This phrase has a double meaning: not only did the Jews give the world the Bible, the 'Book of Books', but books have always been central to the life of the nation.¹ That being the case, it might be thought that oral traditions have never played a major role in Jewish culture. As we shall see, however, research into the Jewish world of the Middle Ages reveals that, like many other cultural notions, this perception is based on mistaken assumptions. The fact is that the status of written sources was inferior to that of oral traditions, at least in the early part of the Middle Ages.

Among the most influential figures in early medieval Judaism were the heads of the large *yeshivot* (religious academies) in Iraq, who were considered religious and social authorities of nearly royal standing. Among them was R. Aaron Sargado, head of the Pumbeditha Yeshiva from 943–960. In a Geonic (formal head of the academy) responsum regarding his *yeshiva's* reading of a Talmudic text, R. Sargado maintained that 'our whole *yeshiva*, of which it is known that its version [of the Talmud] comes from the mouths of the great ones [...] most of them [the members of the *yeshiva*] do not know anything of a book.' As his school's version of the Talmudic text was based on an unbroken oral tradition that reached back to the Talmudic masters themselves (about 400 years previously), he argued, it should be accepted as the more authoritative version (Ephrat and Elman 2000: 114).

Thus, in the mid-tenth century, in an effort to demonstrate the superiority of his institution over others, the head of the Pumbeditha Yeshiva, one of the most prominent figures in the Jewish religious world at the time, boasted that his scholars relied on no books whatsoever, but only on ancient oral traditions that could be traced back directly to the period of the Talmudic masters themselves. He therefore made a claim for the greater authority of his textual version on the basis of the differences between the oral and written texts, and the unquestioned superiority of the former. The words of R. Sargado illustrate a basic premise regarding the oral tradition: it was believed to be passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation in precise, literal, and authorita-

¹ For the sources of the phrase and its implications see Jeffrey 1996: xi–xii. pp. xi–xii. The centrality of the book in Jewish culture since antiquity and the concept of canonization are discussed by Halbertal 1997.

tive form. The written text, on the other hand, did not bear the same ancient cachet, and therefore lacked the authority and authenticity of the oral text.

It would be mistaken to believe that this view of oral vs. written traditions was current only among the scholars of the time or was restricted to a certain geographical region. Our second example comes not only from a different literary genre, but also from a completely different cultural space. In the second decade of the thirteenth century, a simple Jew by the name of Menachem ben Peretz ha-Hevroni returned to his home in France after several years in the Holy Land. He brought with him stories he had heard in the Land of Israel, legends about a vicious beast with a single horn (a combination of the European unicorn and the Middle Eastern hyena), a magical tree that played sweet melodies when the wind blew through it, a land of midgets, and the figure of Abraham the Patriarch appearing to a widow in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. But most of his stories were about holy gravesites. He described them, identified the people buried there, and told of the miracles that happened to the pilgrims who visited them. In addition to being one of the first Jewish folklorists known to us by name and conducting what is tantamount to ethnographic fieldwork, Menachem ben Peretz provides us with intriguing information in the introduction to his stories, avowing:

I received this from the people in the Land of Israel and I, Menachem ha-Hevroni, have written it down from beginning to end. If any of the distinguished men whose names appear above should read this, let them not suspect that I have written it to find favour with them or to demand money from them. For as God is my witness, I heard it from the people in the Land of Israel. And if the reader should ask how these people know of the graves of the holy men who have been buried there for three thousand years, I the writer will answer, *they come from the mouths of the people of the Land of Israel and not from the written word*. Those who live today in the Land of Israel have never left it to this day [...]. The sons of their sons are still living in the Land of Israel and each of them heard it from his father since the time of the destruction of the Temple and so they know of it and so I, Menachem ha-Hevroni, heard it.²

What is so surprising about Menachem's statement is the supreme authority which he attributes to the oral tradition. As these stories and others like them were never written down, yet seem to have enjoyed a large measure of credibility among the Jewish community in the Land of Israel at the time, one might be expected to wonder about the source of their authenticity. Menachem's reasoned response is based on the perception that oral tradition is more reliable than the written text. And it seems obvious from what he says that this is not merely his own opinion, but reflects the attitude both of those from whom he heard the stories and the audience to which his words are addressed.³

This is the extent of the similarity between the two examples. Whereas R. Sargado was referring to a precise, authoritative legal text, Menachem the traveler was not alluding to the accurate preservation and transmission of the exact words of a specific text, but to folk traditions about holy gravesites which, as he was well aware, could take a

² Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Or. 135, fol. 362b–363a; see Yassif 1988–89: 890–91.

³ On these concepts compare Reiner 2005a.

variety of different forms even though they told the same story. This, in fact, is the essential distinction between scholarly and folk oral traditions.

R. Sargado's contention is less surprising in light of the findings on the Mishnah and the Talmud that have appeared in research since the mid-twentieth century. The Mishnah, the most important text in the Jewish world after the Bible, was given final form around 200 CE and the two versions of the Talmud in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. Yet they continued to exist as oral traditions and were set down in writing only in the ninth and tenth centuries.⁴

Both in the Talmud itself and in Geonic literature there is considerable evidence of the manner in which these central sources were transmitted orally for over five hundred years. There was a position in the *yeshiva* that was held by *Tanaim* who were not scholars, but rather served as 'rememberers', or, as Lieberman dubs them, 'living books.' It was their function to memorize the laws handed down by the rabbis in the course of their studies in the *yeshiva*. Committing them to memory word by word and organized by subject, they then passed them along to the next generation. Whenever the rabbis were in need of the precise wording of a law for purposes of teaching or debate, they would summon the 'living books', who would recite the words from memory as they had been passed down orally for hundreds of years. Presumably, at least some of these people made notes for their own use, but these written reminders had no scholarly or legal value. We also know that the 'rememberers' were tested periodically by the *yeshiva* head, when the accuracy and reliability of the texts they had committed to memory were examined.

Today we also know the answer to the question of why the *yeshivot*, all of whose members were literate, did not choose to record the ancient traditions in writing in order to give them permanence and authority. It was a strategic decision taken by the *yeshivot* in Babylon to ensure their religious and political predominance (Ephrat and Elman 2000). Anyone anywhere in the Jewish world who was in need of an accurate version of the Mishnah or Talmud – and everyone was – had no alternative but to turn to the Babylonian *yeshivot*. Had these books been available in writing, each community would have had its own authoritative copy. In other words, the familiar contention that control over literacy was a means for certain social classes to ensure their dominion over society operated in the opposite direction in the Jewish world until the tenth century. It was control over the oral traditions that enabled the *yeshivot* to maintain their authority.

Most of the texts transmitted orally, and the mechanisms devised to preserve them, belong to the genre of Halakhic law. Although the Mishnah – and particularly the two versions of the Talmud – also contains numerous non-legal Aggadic texts, these were always considered of lesser importance. Nevertheless, their precise wording was also committed to memory for purposes of instruction. In contrast, the local legends that Menachem ben Peretz heard on his travels in the Land of Israel in the thirteenth century took many forms, changing from one storyteller to the next, as he himself noted. All Galileans may have identified a particular place as the same holy site or grave, but each informant would have related a different legend about it, or a different version of the same

⁴ This theory was developed over many years. Some of the most significant studies are: Lieberman 1950, Gerhardsson 1961, Neusner 1979, Drory 1988:55–80, and the most comprehensive account of the sources and their study by Sussman 2005.

legend. These discrepancies had no significance for Menachem. On the contrary, he regarded the various traditions as confirmation of the reliability of the basic information to which they bore witness. Thus the two examples that we have offered demonstrate the two major models of oral traditions in the Jewish world in the Middle Ages, the scholarly and the folk traditions, each with its own genre, social role, and function.

Jewish society was distinct from the two dominant societies of the Middle Ages, the Muslim and the Christian, in that all members (or at least all males) were literate. This was the result of the religious injunction to teach every boy to read and write from about the age of five so that he could read the Torah.⁵ Consequently, any discussion of Jewish oral tradition of the period must take into account the fact that every member of the community could have opened a book in Hebrew and read from it (although they may not always have understood what they were reading). In this sense, medieval Jewish society is a clear example of what Brian Stock calls 'weak orality', that is, a society in which rich written literature exists side by side with diverse oral traditions (1990: 5–6). Unlike the situation in other medieval societies, however, the written texts were accessible to at least half the members of the Jewish community (the men), and not merely to a small class of scholars, as was the case for Christians and Muslims.

This fact is clearly reflected in the familiar religious/social ritual of the annual Passover Seder. Here the extended family members and guests gather around the ritually laid table to read the same text, the Haggadah, which tells the story of the exodus from Egypt and its religious and historical significance according to Jewish tradition. This is a perfect example of the combination of oral and written traditions in a literate society. The core of the text was passed down to medieval communities from ancient Jewish sources, most likely orally, as described above. This core was then expanded and modified by the different communities, a fact attested to by the large variety of versions of the Haggadah that have survived from the Middle Ages.⁶ The Seder ritual can help demonstrate how oral and written traditions come together in the Jewish world. Today, each participant, including the children, holds their own copy of the Haggadah which they follow as the leader of the Seder reads aloud from it, periodically joining in the recitation or singing. This was probably not the case in the Middle Ages, however. At that time, a Haggadah was quite expensive, and therefore relatively rare. Thus on most Seder tables there would have been a single copy of the book. Poorer families might not even have been able to afford that luxury, and would have recited the text entirely from memory, or perhaps with the help of notes they had jotted down for themselves from a Haggadah in the community. This practice is also familiar from the medieval European university

⁵ See for example the astonishing testimony of one of Abelard's students, writing in 1140: 'When Christians send their sons to school, they do not send them for the love of God, but for lucrative reasons [...] But the Jews, moved by piety and by the love for the law of the Lord, send to school all their children, so that everyone of them may understand the law of God [...]. A Jew, even poor, would he have ten sons, will send all of them to school, not in order to obtain any [material] advantages, as Christians do, but for the study of the law of God, and [he will send] not only his sons but also his daughters' (Grabois 1975:633). See also Marcus 1996 and the vast literature presented on the subject there.

⁶ Major publications of the earlier sources and their studies are Goldschmidt 1960, Kasher 1967, both in Hebrew, and in English, the condensed and updated entry, with good additional bibliography and text-sources, by Goldschmidt et al. 2007.



19 – Seder Table, Second Nuremberg Haggadah (15th c.)

and Muslim madrasa, where due to the scarcity of written manuscripts, each classroom contained a single copy of the textbook from which one student would read while the others listened. There is an essential difference between these two customs, however, as Jews gathered around the Seder table in the Middle Ages not to study, but for social reasons: to strengthen family and community ties and to shape the collective memory of the nation's past and its hopes for the future.

The Seder ritual combined reading from a book – and as we have mentioned, all the male members of the family were literate – with hearing and remembering the oral traditions heard on previous Seder nights and the ritual traditions of the family or community. The written text provided the formal framework for conducting the ceremony, while the fact that only one or two participants actually had a book in front of them made it an oral tradition and enabled oral traditions from other sources to be incorporated as well into the formal framework, producing the open diverse nature of the event. This is evidenced not only by the different versions of the Haggadah, but also by its concluding portion, which is seemingly informal. This section contains the poems and folksongs that appear at the end of the text and are different from one Haggadah to the next and from one community to the next. The lyrics were undoubtedly sung rather

than read, using the words and melodies passed down to the participants from previous generations and influenced by the local culture to which they belonged, including the non-Jewish culture.⁷ The blend of written and oral traditions in a literate society may explain the diverse, dynamic nature of the Passover Haggadah, which exists side by side with the unchanging literary framework in which the different materials are 'encaged'. It may also account for the huge popularity of the ritual throughout the ages. Fondness for it cannot be attributed solely to religious observance, but doubtlessly derives also and perhaps primarily, from the social and creative aspects that result from combining the two types of tradition.

Like the poems and folk materials that have come down to us through the various versions of the Haggadah, other oral traditions from the Middle Ages have survived only in written sources. In other words, they exist today after extensive alteration at the hands of the scholarly elite. This situation obviously limits our ability to understand them as they were in the 'original'. The historian Aaron Gurevich claims that a scholar engaging with medieval folk culture should not be discouraged by the fact that all the sources are essentially in the form of scholarly literature. What is important, in his opinion, is the dialogue between them, as well as the recognition that this symbiosis with educated society was the only means by which the folk culture of the period could have survived (1992:64). In an attempt to comprehend the spiritual world of a sixteenth century Friulian miller by the name of Menocchio, Carlo Ginzburg demonstrates how the combination of local folk traditions and the books that he chanced upon shaped the miller's unusual, subversive views (1992:27–32, 58–62). The testimony from surviving court records of his Inquisition trial (again, his activities are recorded in the writings of scholars, his most bitter enemies) also reveal how important it was to the miller to present his ideas and attitudes to church officials and other erudite individuals in order to receive their opinion. Thus, the dialogue between the local folk culture and educated society was one of the major forces that forged Menocchio's views and intellectual activity.

As we have seen, in the Jewish world, in which the book was held as sacred at least from the height of the Middle Ages, the dialogue between local oral culture and scholarly society was particularly intense. What were originally oral traditions have been preserved in every type of written source from the period: commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, the profuse Halakhic literature, historical writing, chronicles of journeys, mystical literature, and *maqamat* (rhymed prose). Each of these instances of the oral tradition within scholarly literature generated both a dialogue and tension between the two primary forms of contemporary communication which appear side by side and one within the other. This dialogue and tension are central to any such understanding of Jewish culture of the time.

Let us consider two typical examples which illustrate not only the nature of the dialogue, but also the methodological significance of the oral/written relationship in the medieval Jewish world. The first is a text whose source in oral traditions is not in ques-

⁷ On these see the separate entries on Jewish music, and studies of the specific folk-songs like *Ḥad Gadya*, *Ehad mi Yodea*, *Dayyenu*, *Adir bi-Melucha* and many more, in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, under these specific names or in the central entry (Goldschmidt et al. 2007).

tion. Benjamin of Tudela (from the second half of the twelfth century) is one of the most well-known and important of Jewish travelers, largely due to the journal in which he described in detail what he saw on his long journey.⁸ In one famous episode during his stay in Jerusalem, which was then ruled by the Crusaders, he relates that a local man told him of an event that had taken place there several decades earlier. When the workers repairing a church removed stones to use as building materials, they uncovered a deep cave. Climbing down in the hope of finding hidden treasure, they discovered beautiful palaces, but when they tried to enter, a fierce wind from below blew them back out. A friend carried them home, unconscious, and the next day they were found dead in their beds. The storyteller explained that the cave was the burial place of the kings of the House of David, and the workers were punished for their sacrilege in entering the site. As recorded by Benjamin of Tudela, the story has all the hallmarks of an oral tradition. It is offered with contextual accuracy, told to the traveler by an 'eye witness' who was present at the event and who most likely pointed out the precise place where it occurred. The style is also indicative of the colloquial language of speech, containing idiomatic expressions, folk sayings, and formulaic repetition of key phrases. Benjamin appears to have considered the story to be of particular significance, and therefore recorded it almost word for word as it was told to him.

Scholars have noted that the story is an analogy for the conflict between Jews and Christians over control of the religious sites in the Holy Land. It implies that it is the Jews who hold true knowledge of the sacred biblical sites and dominion over them, not the Christians who conquered them by force.⁹ To a large extent, the book as a whole expresses the same idea by means of detailed descriptions of the Jewish communities in the Middle East which stress their ancient heritage and wide dispersion. By including this story in the chronicles of his journey, Benjamin was calling on local folk traditions to reinforce the journal's message. The story makes use of devices typical of folktales: the mysterious cave, a taboo that is broken, a supernatural force emerging from the depths, and an unearthly punishment. It is incorporated into the realistic description of a journey, replete with geographical and economic details and insights, thus constituting a different communicative form whose genre contrasts with the majority of the book, yet which has its own purpose and intent.

If this example represents texts whose oral origins are undeniable, the second represents those whose roots in the oral tradition are assumed rather than explicit, since their source is not immediately obvious. Most of the textual evidence of oral traditions that has come down to us in the works of medieval scholars and writers belongs to this category.

An important genre of Jewish literature is the Hebrew collections of tales which began to appear on the scene around the ninth century (Yassif 2004). Probably originating in Eastern Jewish communities (Iraq, Persia), the tales drew their narrative materials from two major sources. As was only to be expected, the first was Talmudic and Midrashic literature, rich in stories. As this literature achieved its hallowed status in the Mid-

⁸ For text and translation, see Adler 1909; essential information and bibliography is found in Roth 2007; see also the important study by Praver 2005.

⁹ See Reiner 2005b, which includes the Benjamin text.

dle Ages and was considered to be the foundation of Jewish life and culture, it is not surprising that its narratives appeared again and again in collections of Hebrew tales from the period. This transfer might be said to be emblematic of the realm of elite scholarly literature: like their contemporaries in Europe, the writers and editors of the collections of tales borrowed from classical sources (Yassif 2004: 9–30). However, it might also be seen as a more complex process in which the Aggadic narratives from the Talmud and Midrash themselves became an oral tradition in the Middle Ages. In other words, they were taken from Talmudic literature and told, that is, transmitted orally, to broader sectors of the population. It was from these oral traditions, rather than from the books themselves, that they were then written down and compiled as collections of tales.¹⁰

One of the best ways to distinguish between the two processes is to examine the differences between the stories in the rabbinical sources and those in the collections from the Middle Ages. If the discrepancies are merely a matter of a word here and there or an insignificant detail, it may be assumed that they are solely philological and stem from differences in the particular manuscript to which the writer of the tale had access. On the other hand, if there are essential differences which include reference to a reality or attitude characteristic of the Middle Ages, it is logical to infer that they were the product of the second process, that is, that they were written on the basis of an oral tradition deriving from the Talmudic texts.

The tales in the eleventh-century collection entitled *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity* clearly illustrate the latter process. Written by R. Nissim ben Jacob ibn Shahin, one of the leading Halakhic authorities in Kairuan in North Africa, it offers a perfect example of the dialogue between scholarly and popular culture (Brinner 1977). Here a distinguished scholar, whose thorough knowledge of Talmudic literature cannot be questioned, wrote a collection of tales in the local dialect (the variety of Arabic spoken by North African Jews). Although many of the narratives are taken from Talmudic literature, they are presented in entirely different versions, with which R. Nissim was obviously familiar. Presumably, they evolved in the following way. At the *yeshiva* that he headed, R. Nissim would take advantage of various occasions to orally impart stories from the Talmudic sources in order to convey a moral or didactic lesson to his students and the community at large. However, he customarily modified the tales, adapting them to the times, his audience, or his purposes. Only later were his stories written down, either by himself or by his students. Thus the *Elegant Composition* shows evidence of the two methodologies described above: the dialogue between scholarly and oral literature and the oral tradition underlying the written tales, even if their initial source was Talmudic written material.

Whereas the written sources of medieval oral traditions, like those of early rabbinical literature, are readily discernible, the other source of the narratives – folk traditions, whether Jewish or otherwise – are harder to identify and to investigate. The claim that a given text derives from a folk tradition can be based primarily on two features: the fact that a certain narrative cannot be found in any earlier source in Jewish literature; and the existence of parallels in the folk narratives of the cultures among which the Jews lived, either in the Muslim East or in Christian Europe. We know that few Jews at the

¹⁰ See Yassif 1999a: 250–64 ('Rabbinic Agaddah as Folk Narrative in the Middle Ages').

time read books in foreign languages, and those who did were interested in philosophy or science (such as Maimonides), not narrative traditions. It may therefore be assumed that traditions which are absent from early Jewish literature and have parallels in folk non-Jewish literature entered the medieval Jewish world through oral channels.

The following example of an early collection of tales, probably from the ninth century, is presented here in detail in order to illustrate, in concrete rather than solely theoretical form, many of the issues addressed thus far. Known as *Midrash of the Ten Commandments*, it is arranged in the order of the Biblical commandments, offering a few comments on the importance of each, followed by a series of tales aimed at demonstrating the moral precept as manifested in the real world. The fifth chapter is thus devoted to the fifth commandment, 'Honour thy father and thy mother'. The second story in the chapter is the tale of 'The Child and the Book of Genesis'. After much prayer and supplication, a pious, rich, and childless man was given a son in his old age. Every day, he would carry his son to school on his shoulders. When he inquired of the teacher with which book of the Torah he would start teaching his son, the teacher replied, 'with Leviticus'. 'Start my son with the Book of Genesis', said the father, 'which declares the praises and greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He' (Bin Gorion 1990: 163). One day, when the boy refused to be carried to school and went alone carrying the Book of Genesis in his hand, he was kidnapped by a knight from a faraway kingdom. After many days, the king of that land fell ill, and asked to be read to. The Book of Genesis was chosen at random from his library, and as no one could read it, one of his ministers recalled the Jewish child-slave in his house. The boy was brought, and read and translated for the king, who was fascinated with the wonders and greatness of God. He recovered, and sent the boy back home with great honour and riches (163–64).

The story of 'The Child and the Book of Genesis' has come down to us in dozens of versions, the earliest of which, including that in *Midrash of the Ten Commandments*, have been dated to around the ninth century.¹¹ The supposition that the majority of the stories in this collection originated in independent folktales that were brought together by an editor who sought a normative framework for the tales in oral traditions, gains credence from the fact that the connection between the fifth commandment and the story is tenuous at best. The child's refusal to be carried on his father's shoulders was not related to the issue of honouring his father (as enjoined by the fifth commandment), but to his desire not to be mocked by the other children. Hence, it seems likely that the story did not evolve within the literary context of this commandment, but in some other, independent, context.

At first glance, the power and popularity of the tale lies in its simplicity. The father and son observe the religious commandments (prayer and supplication, teaching Torah to one's children, honouring one's father and mother), and are rewarded in this world and the next. Thus by means of the psychological mechanism of reward and punishment, of putting fear in the hearts of sinners or promising great benefit to the pious, the story conveys its message without sermonizing. It employs a much more persuasive method, the narrative. It is the same technique used in the medieval *exemplum*, which was very popular in the two dominant religious cultures of the time, Christianity and

¹¹ Compare Bin Gorion 1990: 163–65; Levin 2004.

Islam (Berlioz and Polo De Beaulieu 1992), as well as in the minority religion, Judaism, as illustrated here.

The same explanation of the meaning and function of this tale in Jewish society can be applied to dozens of other stories from the Middle Ages. What makes 'The Child and the Book of Genesis' stand out from all the rest, however, is the middle episode of the fabula, in which the father asks the teacher with which book he will start and instructs him to begin not with the Book of Leviticus, but with the Book of Genesis so that the boy may learn of the greatness of God. The father's request is an indication that he was familiar with the educational curriculum for young children and that he objected to it, demanding an alternative approach for his son.

Indeed, a close reading reveals this exchange to be the narrative focal point of the story. In whatever version the tale is told, this episode is the turning point of the plot, since it is immediately followed by a change of direction: the child is kidnapped and the story shifts to a different geographical region and society. The father's behaviour raises two questions. First, how could a Jew of this period dare challenge the explicit precept: 'R. Assi said: Why do young children commence with [the Book of] The Law of the Priests [Leviticus] and not with [the Book of] Genesis? – surely it is because young children are pure, and the sacrifices are pure; so let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure.'¹² This was obviously the accepted norm in his community. Secondly, how would the story have been different had the teacher begun with the Book of Leviticus, and if this were the book that the child was carrying when he was kidnapped?

It is impossible to understand the events in the story without being aware of the dispute in the Geonic period between different communities, and possibly within communities themselves, over didactic issues. We know that despite the explicit rabbinic instructions, several communities determined that the teaching of young children should begin with the Book of Genesis, whereas others continued to adhere to rabbinic instructions.¹³ The explanation for making the change is expressly stated in the story: a child should first be acquainted with the Creator and His deeds, the Creation and the beginning of all. Although the Book of Leviticus deals with pure animal sacrifices in the Temple, they derive from God's greatness and should therefore be taught subsequently.

The story also alludes to another, possibly more fundamental and problematic issue. Imagine that the kidnapped child had been holding the Book of Leviticus, rather than the Book of Genesis, and had read and translated it for the king. What would the king and his court have known of Judaism? That its rituals are filled with blood shed in the House of God? That the God of Israel is bloodthirsty? Instead, they heard the universal

¹² *Midrash Vayikra Raba*, 8, 3 (Margulies 1972: I, 156).

¹³ Yassif 2004: 18–19; Levin 2004: 346, n. 1. An outstanding piece of evidence, from early eleventh-century Kairuan (Tunisia), is given in Rabbi Nissim ben Ya'akov of Kairuan's collection of tales, *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief After Adversity*. After telling this story (in Arabic, like all the tales narrated there), he concludes by saying that when he was a little boy and read from the book of Leviticus in front of his father, 'the head' of the great *yeshiva* of Kairuan, he stopped and asked his father why it is that children start with Leviticus and not with the first book of the Torah. His father explained that after the destruction of the Temple, as there are no more sacrifices, the reading of the sacred words of Leviticus becomes the atonement for one's sins in their absence. This evidence presents the opposing attitudes which were heard in the Jewish communities. See Brinner 1977: 88–89.

message of the Book of Genesis, the creation of a world that belongs to all human beings. Thus, the choice of the Book of Genesis was not only a didactic issue, but one of *weltanschauung* as well. It was the choice between particularism and introversion in the Book of Leviticus in contrast to the Book of Genesis, which manifests an openness to the nations of the world and an attempt to bring them closer and to present the universality of Judaism. These were more than merely theoretical issues in the Middle Ages; they were existential concerns shared by Jewish communities both in Muslim countries and in Christian Europe.

In this interpretation, the story 'The Child and the Book of Genesis' offers an answer to a fundamental existential question of medieval Jewish society. The members of this society had a choice between two books of the Torah, both of which strengthened their bonds to the Jewish past and to the sacred literature in which their identity was grounded. The question of which to choose could not be answered simplistically with 'study both,' as the choice itself was symbolic. It represented the choice between two essentially different approaches and worldviews. By setting the Book of Genesis against the Book of Leviticus, the story defines the character and meaning of each, otherwise what difference would it make with which of the two books the child began his studies?

The issue of the source of the story is extremely pertinent here. The tale has no precedent in earlier Jewish literature; it appears for the first time in that context in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, contemporary folktales contain many of the same motifs: a childless couple blessed with a child late in life; God answering the prayer for a child; a child being kidnapped and treated brutally; the wisdom of a child being recognized far from home, and so on.¹⁴ In other words, the two hallmarks of oral traditions noted above characterize this tale, as do many of the stories in *Midrash of the Ten Commandments*. It seems clear that the author/editor became acquainted with them through the oral traditions of the Jewish society in which he lived, or the tales he heard in non-Jewish (Arabic or Persian) society. He later wrote them down after revising them in a manner that is difficult for us to recreate today. The many Hebrew collections of tales produced in the Middle Ages are therefore a rich and important source for understanding the oral Jewish literature of the period.

Our analysis of 'The Child and the Book of Genesis' brings us back to a key feature of medieval oral traditions, the dialogue between folk and scholarly literature. Both as an exemplum and a folktale, the story was created by and for a broad cross section of Jewish society. It reflects the deep commitment of members of the community to Jewish education and the teaching of its religious legacy, as well as the equally deep anxiety regarding non-Jewish society and its sucking in of Jews, whether willingly or by force. It is also an expression of the unshakable faith that better days awaited the Jews – present hardship, separation, wandering, violence, and so on notwithstanding – and that these days would come only if Jewish society preserved its identity and ethos. These were

¹⁴ For the Middle Ages, see Tubach 1969, s. v. 'Child,' 'Children'; see also in Thompson 1955–59 the motifs B 543.3 and R311.3: Stolen Child; S 300– S359: Abandoned children; H 1292 and J 129: Wisdom learned from child; compare also the rich source material in Boswell 1988 and Finucane 1997.

supreme values shared by all members of the community in one form or another, regardless of education, and they are distinctly present in the story in the 'naive' context of reward and punishment. Nevertheless, as indicated, the story also adopts a firm stance in a scholarly debate. It deals with didactic and philosophical issues of immanent historical significance. It may be assumed that the Jewish public at large was not concerned with the question of how to educate the next generation and how this decision would impact on relations with the non-Jewish world, or indeed on Jewish existence in the Diaspora as a whole. In the Middle Ages, this was a philosophical and historical issue that belonged to the realm of scholars, thinkers, and educators. Yet the two dimensions exist side by side in the story and are inseparably intertwined. A Jewish scholar who heard the tale, say in a debate over the program of studies in the community school, would also have been exposed to its simpler exemplary meaning. Similarly, if the story were told to broader sectors of the community, in the synagogue for example, they would have learned of the dispute over whether to begin the children's studies with the Book of Genesis or the Book of Leviticus, even if they did not understand its full implications. In addition, it is of considerable significance that this folktale centers on a book. It includes the desire for a book, dependence upon it, and its determining the fate of a society. The fact that the nature of Jewish existence is defined here by 'the book' is a fine illustration of the symbiosis between the oral and written traditions in medieval Jewish culture.

Our discussion thus far makes it clear that the distinction between oral and written traditions in Jewish society was not based on social class or status. That is, oral traditions were not restricted to the lower classes and the uneducated, and written traditions were not the exclusive domain of scholars. Instead, the distinction was primarily a matter of content. R. Nissim of Kairuan, the author (or teller) of *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity*, was a preeminent scholar and religious leader who belonged to a dynasty of Jewish scholars. Yet he was intensely involved in oral literature, most likely telling his stories both to the students in his *yeshiva* and to the community at large in the synagogue, in homilies delivered to the public, etc. R. Nissim was unique not because he told these tales, as many others did so as well, but because of their content. Most are oral versions of stories from the Talmud and classic Midrash. That is to say, he made deliberate use of his religious knowledge and status to transfer classic stories to the oral tradition and to tell them to the community in its colloquial language, Jewish-Arabic, changing their narrative form and adapting their content to contemporary life.

Another example indicative of the fact that the oral/written dichotomy was not associated with social divides comes from Rabbi Judah he-Ḥasid (the pious). A leading Jewish scholar of the Middle Ages, he was the founder of Ashkenazi Hasidism and the primary author of the influential book *Sefer Ḥasidim*, as well as the author of numerous works of commentary, philosophy, mysticism, and ethics.¹⁵ The more than four hundred exempla and folktales in *Sefer Ḥasidim*, along with the numerous demonological stories in his other books, provide ample evidence of Judah he-Ḥasid's keen interest in the narrative world (Yassif 2005). From his students we know that he habitually told them stories, all of which he included in his books. One account in particular is so clearly

¹⁵ See Dan 2007 and 1990, especially vol. I, pp. 107–65.

pertinent to our discussion that I offer it here in its entirety. The speaker is the anonymous author of *Sefer ha-Gan*, a fourteenth century commentary:

When I studied in Speyer before Rabbi Yedidiah of blessed memory, I found in his school the handwriting of Rabbi Zaltman [son of R. Judah the Pious]. This is [what it said]: My father and teacher, the Pious, told me that in his time there was an incident involving a wealthy man in Speyer who used scissors to shave his beard. My father and teacher would approach him and protest against [this practice]. The wealthy man did not heed his words, saying, 'a refined person (*istenis*) am I, and I cannot suffer the beard.' My father and teacher told him: 'You should know that you will know a bitter end, for after your death, demons resembling cows [will] trample your beard. This is the lot of those who cut their beards. And you will know the truth of the verse, "You shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar" (Leviticus 19:27), which is an acrostic [the Hebrew word for] "cows" (*parot*). And when that man of means passed away, all the great men of Speyer sat near [the corpse], and my father and teacher was there. He wrote a name and threw it on that wealthy man, and he [the dead man] stood up. And all those who had been sitting there ran out [in fear of the dead]. Then the dead man began to pluck at his head and pull his hair. My father and teacher said to him: 'What [is happening] to you?' He said to him, 'Woe is me that I did not heed you.' My father and teacher said to him: 'Please explain what is happening to your soul?' He said to him: 'When my soul left [my body], a demon, looking like a great cow, came with a vessel full of pitch, sulfur, and salt, and imprisoned it in it, so that [the soul] could not get out. The harsh justice ensued and took the vessel with the spirit [within] from the demon and brought it before the Creator of Souls. A divine voice sounded, and said to me: "Have you studied and repeated?" I said to him: "I have studied and repeated." At once he ordered that a *Humash* (Pentateuch) be brought and said to me: "Read it." As soon as I opened the book I found written, "neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard" and I did not know what to answer. Then I heard a voice declaring: "Put this one's soul on the bottommost level." As they were bearing [my] soul to the bottommost level, a divine voice sounded: "Wait. My son Juda is more righteous than he and has now asked mercy. His soul will not descend to She'ol." Until this point (in his words).¹⁶

The manuscript was found in the *yeshiva* where R. Judah's son had studied several years earlier, and the handwriting is identified as his by the writer. Like our first example, the story told to Benjamin of Tudela in Jerusalem, this tale has come down to us in a version as close as possible to that told by R. Judah to his son (perhaps in the presence of others as well). It is a folk-legend in every sense of the word, with the central motif of a divine injunction and the punishment that follows its infringement. Bringing the dead back to life by means of a magical name, the description of hell and the demons populating it, and the punishment that fits the crime were all common themes in medieval folklore.¹⁷ In other words, we see a scholar and religious leader making use of the hallmarks of folklore – the oral tale and its narrative model and motifs – in order to tell a story with both an overt objective and a covert agenda.

On the surface, it is a typical exemplum focusing on a particular commandment or taboo, the Biblical injunction against cutting one's beard and the punishment incurred

¹⁶ *Sefer ha-Gan*, attributed to R. Isaac ben R. Eleazar of Worms, Venice 1606, pp. 9b–10a.

¹⁷ See Patch 1950, and with special reference to the discussion of oral/literacy see Gurevich 1992: 50–64 ('Oral and Written Culture of the Middle Ages: Two "Peasant Visions" of the Late Twelfth to the Early Thirteenth Centuries'). The folkloric origins are described in: Gatto 1979; Gardiner 1993, and in Jewish culture, in Yassif 2001: 99–111, 460–68.

for infringing it. After hearing this story from an authority such as R. Judah he-Hasid, any Jew who believed in the next world and the punishment it inflicted – as did the overwhelming majority of the community in Ashkenaz at the time – would clearly have thought twice before deciding to ignore the injunction and shave his beard. But it is equally clear that the story also had a tacit purpose: to bolster R. Judah's leadership status in the community by reinforcing it among the stronger and wealthier sectors of the population. In essence, the conflict between R. Judah and the wealthy 'refined' man did not centre on the performance of some commandment or another. It was a struggle for power and standing, a question of whether the social or religious leaders would determine the behavioural code of the community, and of which group was subordinate to which.

This is another example of the complex function of the oral tradition, and here, at least, the oral nature of the story is not in doubt. It served both the intents and interests of the broadest sectors of Jewish society and the narrower concerns of its leaders and scholars, for whom the disputational aspects and the issue of authority were crucial. As we can see, these matters were not addressed solely in philosophical or Halakhic literature, but in oral narratives as well. That is, the leaders borrowed the popular forms of expression in order to draw attention to issues of importance to them. Thus the oral traditions served as loci of conjunction and communication between the differing, albeit not contradictory, interests of Jewish society at large on the one hand, and its leaders and scholars on the other.

It is not by chance that the concluding episode in R. Judah's tale brings to mind Dante's *Inferno*. Characterizations of the fearsome demons who torture the dead in hell, the different levels of hell, and recognizing the dead man as someone who was formerly a distinguished figure in the storyteller's own town and one who was involved in political intrigues are all central motifs in Dante's poem. The significance of these parallels is that each man, R. Judah he-Hasid in Germany and Dante Alighieri in Italy, took the motifs from the oral folklore current in his own time and place. Indeed, R. Judah's writings contain numerous materials familiar from European folk culture of the period, both Jewish and Christian, including descriptions of demons (vampires, witches, strigae), narrative motifs, and folk legends.¹⁸ From this perspective, R. Judah might even be seen as a sort of amateur ethnographer who recorded the local folktales and folk-beliefs that piqued his curiosity. His aim, of course, was not folkloristic, but rather religious and social. However, he used these tales and myths to reinforce the religious truths he expounded and to instill them in the Jewish community at large. And so, while this was never his intention, the fact remains that the hundreds of narrative texts preserved in his writings provide invaluable evidence of the diverse oral traditions popular in the Jewish community in central Europe in the twelfth century.

R. Judah was not the only figure to borrow from local folklore. The anonymous author of *Midrash of the Ten Commandments* did not invent the dozens of stories in his collection either. The large majority of them were tales being told in Jewish communities in the east in the eighth and ninth centuries. And like R. Judah, he too did not display an interest in them for what we would define today as folkloristic, but instead

¹⁸ See Dan 1961, 1990, and 2007; Yassif 2005.

sought out those stories that could best illustrate the fundamental values expressed in the Ten Commandments. Nonetheless, his decision to create a collection of stories rather than to write moral lessons on the commandments is an indication both of his fascination with them and of his belief, shared by numerous Eastern and European preachers and moralists, that the tales were a more effective means of influencing the community as a whole. And whatever his primary intention, by the very act of collecting or collating the tales, the anonymous author also established himself as an early ethnographer, documenting the oral traditions of his community in the awareness that human memory, on which the survival of this tradition depends, is unreliable. Hence, their cultural legacy could best be preserved for future generations by means of a written text.

Thus far we have seen two types of ethnographers. The first were Jewish travelers such as Benjamin of Tudela and Menachem ben Peretz ha-Hevroni. Other well-known travelers included R. Pethachiah of Regensburg, Jacob ben Nathaniel, and Samuel bar Samson, to name but a few. These individuals had two major interests. The first was to report on the size and conditions of Jewish communities throughout the world, thereby fostering a sense of nationhood and social unity. The second was to describe the holy places in the Land of Israel, which provided a historical link with the magnificent past of the nation and helped sustain the hope that its former glory would one day be restored. In order to achieve these goals, the travelers listened to the stories related in the various Jewish communities that they visited and retold them to their own community on their return. They were written down either by the travelers themselves, or, in most cases, by other writers who considered it important to preserve these materials for the generations to come.¹⁹ We have seen examples of this sort of documentation in Benjamin's story of the burial place of the House of David and Menachem ben Peretz's tales of the wonders of the Holy Land.

The second type of 'ethnographer' was the educators and religious teachers. The author of *Midrash of the Ten Commandments*, R. Nissim of Kairuan, the writer of *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity*, and R. Judah he-Ḥasid all collected stories from the local oral traditions in both their own communities and in the dominant Christian or Muslim societies among which they lived in order to use them to disseminate moral precepts. Recognizing that these tales had more influence on the conduct of the community at large than did any moral lessons, they took advantage of any narrative, whether Jewish or otherwise, that would serve to demonstrate proper behaviour or, alternatively, conduct that deviated from religious or social norms. Consequently, like the wealth and diversity of exempla in the Christian world, the collections of tales documented by these educators are a rich source of knowledge of the oral traditions of their period and their role in the cultural reality of the time.

Medieval Jewish society also saw a third type of collector and recorder of oral traditions: the chroniclers and historians. It is a well-known fact that historians in the Middle Ages made considerable use of oral legends which recounted historical events of significance to the local community or to society as a whole.²⁰ The authenticity of these legends was derived from a complex system which relied on factors such as the credibility

¹⁹ See Reiner 2005a; Limor 2005.

²⁰ On the vast research on this topic, see Yassif 1999a: 519–20, and Yassif 1999b.

of the people who told them, their grounding in an explicit historical time and familiar geographical location, their similarity to other legends recounting the same event, and most importantly, their meaning and function in the society in which they were related. Historical legends from medieval Jewish society have survived in a wide variety of sources that are not necessarily historical in nature, such as midrashim, commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, books of Halakha and ethics, liturgical poetry, and so on. Nonetheless, the most salient sources from this period remain the historical writings and chronicles based on legends taken largely from oral traditions. Such works include the tenth-century *Yosippon*, the eleventh-century *The Chronicle of Yerachme'el* or its expanded version as a fourteenth-century *Book of Memories*, the thirteenth-century *Sefer ha-Kabbala* (Book of Tradition), and the *Shalsbelet ha-Kabbala* (Chain of Tradition) from the sixteenth century.

The Chronicle of Ahimaaz is a family history from southern Italy written in 1054 by Ahimaaz ben Paltiel. It presents the annals of the author's family from their arrival in Italy in the Roman era to the time of its writing, conveyed in the form of tales concerning its most prominent members. The chronicle was unknown until it was discovered in the archives of the Toledo cathedral in the mid-nineteenth century (Yassif 2004: 97–135). Since then it has made a substantial contribution to numerous areas in the study of the period. In the context of our present discussion of medieval Jewish oral traditions, its major importance lies in the fact that it seems never to have gone beyond the confines of the family, and that a single copy, most likely in the author's own handwriting, has survived, after making its way to Spain in some unknown manner. As *The Chronicle of Ahimaaz* was totally obscure, it could not have influenced parallel traditions, that is, similar tales that appear in other contemporary sources. Therefore, they could only have had their source in independent oral traditions which can be analyzed and compared with the stories in the chronicle. In the words of Ahimaaz himself, as recorded in the introduction and conclusion to his book:

In the name of Him that dwelleth in the heavens of splendor, I will begin to tell the story, diligently to investigate, arrange and present a collection of the traditions of my forefathers, to unfold them in proper order, to explain them with notes, to trace without confusion the genealogy whose parts must be collected like stubble[...]. That I may inculcate lessons of truth [...] in the seat of the elders, in the company of the learned [...]

He has granted me with what I have so ardently asked of Him. I have pondered and examined and have found what my heart desired, the lineage of my family. With God's help I have arranged and written it in poetic form [...]. In a book I have collected and compiled and narrated it for the generation to come. (Salzman 1924: 60, 101)

In other words, Ahimaaz ben Paltiel's overriding aim was to record, 'in a book', his family lineage for future generations. To do so, he 'collected and compiled', words clearly associated with oral traditions, and made explicit reference to 'elders' and 'the learned', that is, the members of the community who remembered the events, or the traditions that contained accounts of them. Further evidence that *The Chronicle of Ahimaaz* relied lar-

²¹ This was suggested already in the pioneering work of Jan Vansina (1965: 19–30, 'Tradition as a Chain of Testimonies').

²² See the seminal study by Reiner 1996.

gely on oral sources is the great esteem in which the author holds the 'book'. Had he had in his possession any written documents recording the family history, he would undoubtedly have indicated as much, as this would have enhanced the credibility of his composition. The fact that no mention is made anywhere in the chronicle of even a single document from which he drew his information allows us to conclude that most, if not all, of it was derived from oral traditions.

The chronicle contains dozens of tales of miracles, exorcisms, raisings of the dead, the use of magical names, and struggles both within the Jewish community and between it and non-Jewish society in southern Italy. Byzantium and its history are present in the background. Momentous events, such as the reconquest of North Africa from the Vandals and Ostrogoths, the establishment of a Byzantine dynasty in Egypt, and so on, are all attributed to the writer's forefathers, members of the Ahimaaz line, going back two hundred years.

The stories in *The Chronicle of Ahimaaz* suggest the existence of sustained oral traditions that served to reinforce the status of wealthy and distinguished families. These traditions belong entirely to the genre of folk-legend: stories passed by word of mouth that are anchored in an explicit historical time and a familiar geographical location, and which are regarded as reliable histories by the community despite their supernatural motifs. The chronological order of the legends (which we are told is the work of the writer) presents the historical memory of both the family itself and its community. *The Chronicle of Ahimaaz* thus constitutes important evidence of an entire body of oral traditions, rather than a single narrative, which was preserved by the family and which shaped its collective memory over the course of two hundred years. Admittedly, the amateur ethnographer Ahimaaz ben Paltiel did not conduct objective fieldwork. He had a specific agenda which he states clearly: to demonstrate the importance of his family. As a result, he undoubtedly manipulated the material he collected and made considerable modifications to suit his purpose. Nevertheless, the material itself, the manner in which it is presented (its arrangement, rhyming pattern, and style), and his interpretation of it make an enormous contribution to our understanding of the historical oral traditions of the period.

A further example of the oral sources used by early Jewish historiographers is *Shevet Yehudah*. Written around 1520 by Solomon ibn Verga, it documents the blood libels against the Jews in Spain which led to their expulsion in 1492 (Shochat 2007). Here is how the writer describes his sources:

I heard this from the mouth of a great sage of Ashkenaz who came as an emissary [...] I also heard from the mouth of a kabbalist sage who had come from France, that in one city [...] a decree was proclaimed [...]. From such a pious and wise man as R. Abraham ibn Arama I heard that a miracle was performed by my master, R. Judah ibn Verga of Seville. I will write of it here [...]. I heard from elders, emigrants from Spain, that one ship came here because of the plague. (Baer 1947: 91, 92, 122)

Solomon ibn Verga composed his account some thirty years after the expulsion. At the time, the expulsion of 1492 and those that preceded and foreshadowed it were subjects of consuming interest to Jewish society. Historical narrative traditions of these events were widespread, and were told in numerous communities, yet few were worthy of being

enshrined in ibn Verga's book. Still, the sources he records indicate that the majority of tales that he did include, like those in other historiographical works, were created, developed, and disseminated in Jewish communities as oral narrative traditions before ever being set down in writing (see also Loeb 1892).

These two historiographers, Ahimaaz ben Paltiel in eleventh-century Italy and Solomon ibn Verga some three hundred and fifty years later in Spain, as well as all the Hebrew writers between them, provide distinct evidence of the significant role played by oral traditions in perpetuating the collective memory and promoting a social agenda (the status of the Ahimaaz family or remembrance of the Jews expelled from Spain). Both Ahimaaz and ibn Verga were well aware that the history of their community was preserved in its oral traditions, and therefore drew on them as they were recounted by any source they regarded as reliable: community elders, rabbis, religious authorities, social leaders, or family members. They received their materials in the form of historical legends relating to particular events bound to a certain time and place, and saw it as their primary task to incorporate them into a comprehensive historical record. We must not forget that this record only came into being when the individual traditions were brought together and written down. As oral traditions they remained the province of different tellers in different places, so that no cohesive historical account existed. These two works are thus of paramount importance for the examination of oral traditions and the changes they undergo when transferred into writing.²¹

The fragmentary nature of oral traditions in medieval Jewish culture, as opposed to the comprehensive and cohesive character of its written works, may also explain why there are no epic Jewish oral narratives from this period. Nothing has been found to compare to the great French or German epic poems from the Middle Ages (*The Song of Roland*, *Nibelungenlied*) or the South Slavic epics. The closest we can come would be the Passover Haggadah, which might be considered a combined oral and written work used for the communal ritual of telling the story of the Exodus. Other epic works in the Jewish literature of this time are all written compositions for which there is no evidence to indicate that they were ever oral traditions. We can therefore state with considerable certainty that the oral culture produced in the Middle Ages in literate Jewish society was principally local and fragmentary. It created folktales and legends, myths and rumours that related to life and society in a particular region and a specific historical and geographical reality. Such were the traditions recorded by Jewish travelers like Menachem ben Peretz or Benjamin of Tudela, and such were the many Galilean traditions regarding Jesus/Yeshu'a – whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim – which similarly reflected the geographical and social reality of the local population.²²

These examples attest to the importance of uncovering and reconstructing oral traditions in a society that is not only literate, but that expressly reveres the written word and discounts oral accounts. Investigations of this sort reveal a cultural product whose qualities, purposes, and meanings are distinct from those which the religious and social hierarchy strives to present. It is here that the tension between scholarly literature and the traces of oral traditions within it manifest themselves most conspicuously. This is the task which future research should set itself, to find in the written work that which scholarly authorities would prefer to remain enshrouded. The perception of the Jews as the 'People of the Book' has cast a shadow over a major aspect of medieval Jewish society –

its oral traditions. Preconceptions regarding the educated elite versus the unlearned populace and the book as the focus of culture versus inferior oral literature have led generations of cultural development and the study of Jewish literature since the nineteenth century to ignore this key feature of the Jewish world.

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