

German-Jewish Traditions: A Mystical History (1898)

Abstract

One of the common antisemitic topoi in the German Empire [*Kaiserreich*] was the disparagement of Judaism as a “rational religion.” To counter this, several German-Jewish intellectuals founded the Society for Jewish Folklore in 1898 to research the mystical traditions of Judaism. They collected stories about Polish Jewish mystics or Caucasus Jews in order to introduce Jewish equivalents to the peasants glorified in the dominant political culture. In their work, they also emphasized similarities between Jewish folklore and well-known German folktales. If the contemporary (i.e., turn-of-the-century) concept of homeland is applied to their work, then it is arguable that these intellectuals communicated a quasi-transnational understanding of homeland. German-Jewish identity thus demonstrated that Germanness could also consist in reconciling various cultural traditions.

Source

Folktales and Legends of the German Jews

By reason of his homeland, the person is given a good angel in the familiar form of a fellow wanderer who accompanies him when he goes out to lead his life: Anyone who does not suspect what a good thing that is for him may well feel it when he crosses the border of his fatherland, where the angel leaves him. This beneficent accompaniment is the inexhaustible stuff of folktales, legends, and history. – Grimm, *Deutsche Sagen* [German legends], Preface to V.

What the observatory is to the astronomer, the children’s nursery is to *Völkerpsychologen*, that is, psychologists who deal with communal and cultural products of human nature. There in the heavens of the child’s mind, the sharp eye easily discerns the paths taken by the people’s fate. There, constellations related to cultural history can be calculated with high probability for that people’s future. And even more! There, like nowhere else, *Völkerpsychologie* comes close to the ideal of all psychology: experimental research. The means that stands at its disposal in this case is called education.

To have recognized this early and made education productive for its purposes is a crowning achievement of Judaism. “You must instruct your children! You must talk to your child! Those are the leitmotifs of Israel’s teachings. Instruction through conversation, educating by talking; that is the unequaled art of sacred history. And to admire therein the model for all public education was already usual in Jewish circles long before [Gotthold Ephraim] Lessing.

But it didn’t stop at admiration. Not only was the history learned; people learned from it. It was not enough, by including the dear names in the blessing uttered for the child’s future, to officially recognize the educational power of the living example, which let all its magic play out in the ideal forms of the forefathers’ history, captivating both old and young hearts. These words paved the way to the child’s heart. More just than in a lively way, these examples were to be brought to life before the child’s eyes whenever possible. Every new generation sought to tailor its own way of living and thinking based on these models. And if in performing this task the characteristics of the archetype were scarcely still recognizable, universal human types had in any case been

created and preserved in hearts. What does it hurt that Rafael's or Rembrandt's Bible pictures are not historically accurate in their accessories and garb? What prevents the most modern [artists] from planting the northern oak next to the road to Emmaus?

What is true of the examples is even truer of the words. Personal experience and historical and natural life provide support to and evidence for the written word. In an ever-new spirit and in ever changing, often strange forms, the Jewish art of education has sought to deepen its meaning and to expand its application. Just as Qoheleth [represents] the ethnic expression of an entire cultural epoch and at the same time the sum of a rich human life, the "apothegms of the fathers," later their "testaments," "give us the essence, the enduring in life experience, as well as in the experiences of "the wise people" in their times. But the axes around which these crystals grow are more or less clearly recognizable, thoughts and words of the book of books; their law for education in the spirit "of the law." Thus, the history of the people becomes a string of pearls consisting of the deepest moral insights, which all allow the thread that was spun on Mount Sinai to shimmer through.

For like the figures and words of the Bible, so fared the heroes and teachings of later Jewish literature. For all its sobriety, which tended more to anthropomorphism than to apotheosis, the restlessly, inexhaustibly creative legend was able to weave its favorites into a nimbus of literary immortality. Folktales, fables, and history went hand in hand to support law and custom on a psychological foundation. The *maschal*, the Old Testament parable, was revived, especially where the surroundings provided models. The *ma'asse*, the historical event, was invoked as a witness to the truth. Therein lie the beginnings of Jewish history writing; of course, often enough legend becomes history and history becomes legend.

There could be no lack of desire and incentive to talk when the admonition, "Ask your father so that he talks to you!" was the response to the precept, "You must talk to your child!" And there was no shortage of material; Persia and Rome, Greece and Arabia, Germany and Egypt, Spain and Poland, the Jewish ghetto and primordial village life, they were not far enough apart in Jewish striving for bread and teachings for it not to be possible to tie them all together intellectually. Anyone who, as a merchant or traveling student, was almost constantly underway, anyone who could open up foreign intellectual treasures to other peoples, and very especially distant folktale worlds, anyone who took lively, active part in contemporary folk literature, probably also had something to tell his family at home, could probably also merge the Occident and the Orient, the old and the new homelands there in the children's' nursery, and probably also had a feeling for the song and legend world of the fathers.

In this case, too, the old tenet for Jewish education proved itself. Talking was not only a pleasure to the father, not just delight in spinning a yarn. "You must talk!" was a commandment, a commandment of God. For he also had to pay attention to whether what he told the child was in keeping with the sacred responsibility that he had to view as his foremost duty as a father: raising [his children] to serve God.

Don't read from the Book of Cows,
Nor should you concern yourselves with
Dietrich von Bern and Master Hildebrand.
They are truly nothing but trash.
They give you neither warmth nor heat;
Nor are they comforting.
You just need for God to forgive you.
Our *soferim* [Jewish scholars] write [that] it is a sin [as big] as a house
To read from them on the holy sabbath.

But if you want to spend your time with reading,
I will write a lovely *ma'asse* book [book of Yiddish folktales].

With this intention, the author of the *Ma'asse* Book went to work, and with him many like-minded authors. The sources from which they drew were the repeatedly collected folktales and legends in the Talmud and Midrash, the *Sefer Ha-Qabbalah* [Book of tradition], the *Mussar* books [books of ethical teachings], Kabbalistic writings, and especially, orally transmitted material. Because these are usually tied to local and temporal circumstances and make certain people the protagonists, it is more difficult than usual here to differentiate between folktales and legends.

The tone of the narrative is thoroughly in keeping with folk culture; the form is that of the well-known folktale: first the question, "Where does the proverb come from, etc.," "Why does this city have this name?," and the answer with "Once upon a time...," "*Ma'asse* of a man, who etc." The conclusion is the sometimes the rhymed moral of the story, often rendered as a written verse. The language is the Middle High German usual for German Jews at the time; reminiscences from Jewish life and writings are left in the Hebrew original. The time of origination for most of the tales, when they are not based on historical events, can be determined with as little certainty as in the case of German legends and folktales, which they recreate or alongside which they can be placed as striking additions.

Thus, "the three weaponsmiths" of Worms in (No. 2) can be recognized as the brothers Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher, who freed Queen Brunhilda from the dragon. The valiant Volker from Alzey [from the *Nibelungenlied*] reappears as the "trusty lute player" (No. 9). We also encounter the fiddler from "Mother Hulda" [a Grimms' fairy tale] there.

No. 3 is reminiscent of Gudrun's constancy and Horant's ruse. "The Green Staff" (No. 5) is known to us from Tannhäuser and the fairy tale "The Three Green Dwarfs." The "golden woman's hair" that a swallow throws to the king provides the reason for Tristan's journey as well as Chanina's adventures (No. 4) in which, as in "Loyal Fernand," the loyalty of the "thankful animals" leads the messenger to his destination.

Nos. 6,7, and 18, among others, belong to the broad circle of the Faust legend and related legends, which especially persistently appealed to the Jewish imagination. Thus, almost every one of the tales reproduced here, even if in a jumbled disorder as in a kaleidoscope, exhibits ties to German folk literature.

In any case, we thus gain insight into the old-time Jewish children's nursery and the educational plan of the German ghetto Jew.

Source: "Märchen und Sagen der deutschen Juden," in *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Jüdische Volkskunde*, with contributions by preeminent scholars, edited by Max Grunwald, vol. 2 (1898), pp. 1–4. Available online at: <http://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/cm/periodical/pageview/2643138>

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