
Spinning Tales

Encyclopedia of the Jewish Story
Yoav Elstein, Avidov Lipsker, and
Rella Kushelevsky (editors)

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373 pages.

Reviewed by Ido Hevroni

Once there was a winter coat, sewn by a tailor for his first-born son, Gedaliahu. When the boy outgrew it, the coat was given to the next in line—Shmaryahu-Leizer—and he, in turn, passed it on to Beyla. The coat passed from child to child, with each owner leaving his mark: This boy ripped its sleeves and that girl tore the lining, this girl shredded the pockets and that boy made a hole at the knee. The fate of the tattered garment—the focal point of Yiddish writer Kadya Molodowsky's poem *Reincarnations of a Coat*—is reported by the youngest boy, Peretz: "The right side I gave/To the cat I remembered/The left side I sent/To the cat I forgot/And the

rest—hole for hole—/You will each get in turn."

The poem is intended as a bleak allegory about the dilution of Jewish tradition in each passing generation. It has often been lamented that our tradition, passed ceremoniously from father to son, so often has been abandoned the moment its recipient felt its constraints: As a new generation becomes caught up in a dynamic new culture, essential parts of Jewish heritage are abandoned until Jewish tradition as a whole ends up largely cast aside, leaving behind a void, a "hole for hole" in its entirety.

Until recently, that lamentation was a standard feature of Jewish cultural discourse. But today, some scholars are making a valiant attempt at inspiring interest in Jewish traditions by revitalizing the rich history of Jewish storytelling. One product of such scholarship is the excellent first volume of the *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Story*, edited by Yoav Elstein, Avidov Lipsker, and Rella Kushelevsky of Bar-Ilan University. The editors

argue that Jewish culture—or more precisely, Jewish *storytelling*—has not lost a bit of its vitality over the generations, and has in fact become richer and more profound, like a snowball rolling down a slope, gathering new material as it goes. One gets the impression from the volume that the poet Molodowsky’s seemingly surprising claim—“Another year/ the coat is slightly/ even more slightly beautiful”—is also an apt description of the progress of Jewish storytelling.

The *Encyclopedia* is a product of the Jewish Themes Research Project at Bar-Ilan, which collects Jewish stories from all periods and genres and treats them according to a unique method developed by Elstein and Lipsker. Comparing different versions of one story is already a feature of storytelling research both internationally and with regard to Hebrew literature, but the project at Bar-Ilan is the first time the technique has been applied to Hebrew literature in a rigorous and systematic way.

From the outset, the Israeli researchers were amazed to discover how vast were the treasures buried in the trove of Jewish stories. If in non-Jewish literature up to forty multi-lingual versions of one story have been found, in the Jewish tradition they found many stories that had some eighty variants in

Hebrew alone, spread throughout Jewish history.

The story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife, for example, first appears in the Bible, then returns in various forms in the Apocrypha, in medieval literature, in essays of the Haskala or Jewish Enlightenment, and in contemporary literature. The variety of renderings and their sweeping historical range posed a special problem to scholars: On the one hand, within the story’s variants there is clearly a set of timeless archetypes—a kind of cultural genome. On the other, there were often profound differences in the tone, details, and intention of the various versions of the story.

That problem necessitated new research methods that could address questions such as how to distinguish between a chain of different versions of the same story and an entirely different story altogether, and how to preserve the uniqueness of each of a story’s multiple versions.

Elstein and Lipsker developed an approach that examines stories not as autonomous works of literature, but as occupying a place along two axes—*diachronic* and *synchronic*. Along the diachronic axis, a story is viewed as one part of a long tradition of Jewish literature through the ages. Along the synchronic axis, a story is viewed more locally, within the sociohistorical context in which it

was created. This method examines four key elements of a work of literature: Its basic motifs; the fundamental segments that together advance the plot; its format, or structure; and the idea or moral it conveys (its *telos*). A story's format determines to which thematic series it belongs, though this still allows differences between versions (sometimes essential) in other respects to become apparent. Differences in motif often indicate the concrete historical context in which a story was created, whereas differences in idea reflect the conceptual world surrounding the formulation of a particular version.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first opens with an introductory article by the creators of the method offering a historical overview of its forebears, beginning with an anthology of nineteenth-century stories, continuing with *The Book of Legends* by Bialik and Ravnitsky and Berdichevski's *Mimekor Yisrael*, and ending with contemporary research.

Following the introduction, there are treatments of specific themes: Yoav Elstein analyzes the theme of the "princess in the tower"; Avidov Lipsker discusses the various incarnations of the aura of the *tzadik*, or righteous man; Rella Kushelevsky deals with the *midrashic* interpretations of the death of Moses; Yaffa Berlovitz reviews the

anthology of stories by Ze'ev Yavetz, and so on. These articles demonstrate the variety of possibilities elicited by the new method.

The second part of the volume presents the *Encyclopedia's* first nine entries, including "The Honey Pots," "The Tale of the Book of Genesis," and the story of "The Jewish Pope." Each of the entries follows the same pattern: Each traces a particular story's development and adaptations, discusses its motifs, and lists all the versions of a given story.

For example, consider how the *Encyclopedia* handles the legend of King Solomon, who locked his daughter in a tower after he foresaw that she was destined to marry a poor man. Although the tower had no door and was surrounded by guards, the suitor (wrapped in the skin of a dead animal and carried in the claws of a giant vulture) miraculously managed to reach her, win her favor, and marry her. The tale first appears in the *Midrash Tanhuma*, recurs in the *Zohar* and in Rabbi Moses Haim Luzzatto's *Migdal Oz*, and its most modern iteration can be found in Bialik's adaptations.

There are important discrepancies in the story's motifs among the different iterations. In one version, rich in references to the medieval culture of knights, the hero is a squire, and he gains entry to the tower by tearing

open its roof (made of leather, as was the norm in medieval Europe). A banquet in the king's palace is also described in great detail, including all of the period's court etiquette. On the conceptual level, there are marked differences between the first version and Bialik's two versions, known as "The Legend of the Three and Four," and even between Bialik's versions themselves. Whereas in the *Tanhuma* the story is intended to express the inability of man to defy what has been predetermined by heaven, in Bialik's first version of 1917, the story, in keeping with the spirit of the times, takes a more anthropocentric approach. In the second, published twelve years later, eros features prominently as the story's driving force.

Instead of synchronic research that is restricted to a writer, a time period, or a specific genre, the reader is thus offered a diachronic examination grounded in the premise that literature is an ever-evolving cultural object, the parts of which cannot be understood without examining their relationship to the whole. John Hollander expressed this sentiment in *Melodious Guile: Fictive Pattern in Poetic Language*:

A poem refers to a previous poem as if a question had been raised in it and it provides the answer, explains it, adds clarifications to it, changes it the way poetry says "in other words..."

In these terms it can be said that the entire history of poetry is made up of a series of responses to primary texts—Homer and Genesis—themselves questions directed at a chain of generations of responders.

The Bar-Ilan project's application of this kind of literary interpretation thus repositions contemporary Hebrew literature as another link in the chain of Jewish creativity, instead of something that suddenly washed ashore on the waves of the Mediterranean. "Contemporary Hebrew literature cannot be properly understood or interpreted," the editors conclude, "without making a systematic study of its development."

This project, however, reflects a much broader trend of increased interest in classical Jewish heritage, both in academia and among the educated public. There has been an unprecedented flowering in recent years of research into the literature of the Sages, the Kabbala, and Hasidic and Jewish folklore. *Batei midrash* or study halls, both religious and secular, are emerging everywhere, with a view to acquainting modern Jews with the traditions of their ancestors.

Up until now, this trend, welcome as it is, has suffered from two main shortcomings. The first is the narrow focus of the areas of study: Concentrating on a certain period, genre, or

theme within the broader spectrum of Jewish cultural history results in a neglect of the study of how the culture developed and changed.

The second and more serious ailment is the frequent application of misguided or unproductive interpretative techniques. Feminist readings, for example, are intended not to understand the text as it may have been meant to be understood, but rather to expose a text's patriarchal, oppressive worldview. Examining Jewish history through a feminist lens may offer gender researchers valuable insights, but it is doubtful whether it adds much to our knowledge of Judaism.

Moreover, counter-interpretation—or as it is more commonly called, “subversive reading”—has a place only as a secondary means of reading a text, not as the primary one. Guided by this approach, many readers are far too quick to criticize a text before becoming sufficiently acquainted with it, and thus the method becomes a barrier to, rather than a facilitator of, learning. All too often, the objections raised are directed toward something that is not in the text, but in the interpreter's mind alone.

The innovative exegetical method proposed in the *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Story* provides a good answer to these problems. Contemplating the diachronic dimension of a story challenges those who would quickly

isolate it from the continuum of Jewish history; instead of focusing on one part of the past and divorcing stories from their historical context and relevance to the present, the *Encyclopedia* illuminates the developmental continuity of Jewish storytelling over many hundreds of years. Exposure to this perspective will even benefit researchers who are interested in only one aspect of the continuum. Like a bride walking to her wedding canopy escorted by her parents, a researcher will now be able to view texts under the escort of their vitally important forebears.

No less significant is the alternative the *Encyclopedia* provides to the widespread academic custom of tying Jewish texts to theoretical Procrustean beds. Rather than offer more “subversive” readings so prevalent in academia, the method presented here appreciates a text itself before it is subjected to any external scrutiny.

Jews looking to rediscover their heritage often profit from understanding the relationship between the past and present, and it is on this point that the *Encyclopedia's* contribution is quite significant. The sequences of stories presented by the *Encyclopedia* record the various answers that previous generations have given to fundamental problems. Moreover, apart from offering

scholars of literary tradition an alternative research method, this project may well influence the way future creative works are produced, as a new generation of Jewish artists can be inspired by this window onto their heritage. The insistence of the *Encyclopedia's* editors on putting every variation of a story in its historical context has allowed a broad spectrum of customs and lifestyles to be revealed that probably would otherwise have been doomed to obscurity.

Precisely because of the *Encyclopedia's* potential to be influential, it

is difficult not to be slightly disappointed by the academic nature of the project. If the *Encyclopedia* is to be influential beyond the world of research, it should be made more accessible to the intellectually curious layman. Its publication in a more accessible form would ensure its status as a must-read for every Jewish book lover. As it is, however, a place of honor should be reserved for the *Encyclopedia* in every research library.

Ido Hevroni is a post-doctoral fellow at the Shalem Center's Institute of Philosophy, Politics, and Religion.