

An Interview with Dan Ben-Amos, series editor of **Folktales of the Jews**

Q: Your book is being heralded as on par with Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*, what makes a collection of folklore so significant?

A: Obviously, I am flattered by the comparison. Surely, like every person who is involved in Jewish folklore research, I admire Ginzberg's scholarship and his annotation to the *Legends of the Jews*. My work aims in scope and methodology to meet his very high standard. But our work is also very different. The nature of the stories we worked with ensures that.

Q: How so?

A: Well for one thing, Ginzberg's legends were part of a canon of tales that had been selectively edited by the rabbis of the late antiquities. The rabbis only included in their books tales that they considered to have some religious or ethical significance. They censored out any narratives that did not conform to their religious views. *Folktales of the Jews* represents the oral traditions that common people told: to their family, to their friends at synagogue, to their customers in the shops. By and large the tales represent Jewish life and literature not in terms of their religiosity and piety, but as earthy, secular lore.

Also, Ginzberg tells these stories in his own words. In contrast, *Folktales of the Jews* recounts the stories as they were told by the narrators themselves. There is an attempt to let the individual voice to be heard in translation, rather than a synthetic voice summarizing their narration.

Finally, Ginzberg's work was conclusive, dealing with traditions from the remote past, and therefore he rightly titled his work *The Legends of the Jews*. In contrast, my project involves narrative traditions that are constantly emerging, constantly becoming, fusing past and present narratives. Narrators create new stories, even when they assume they just repeat what they heard and learned from their elders. It is impossible to put a final seal on it.

Q: This first volume focuses on the stories of Sephardic Jews. Are there any features that make these stories distinct from the stories of other Jewish communities?

A: This gets to the heart of the major contribution of these volumes. Assembling the tales from different Jewish communities and analyzing and commenting upon them, demonstrates the similarity between the traditions of Jewish communities and at the same time the distinctive features of the narrative repertoire of these traditions.

All the Jewish communities in the Diaspora lived as minority ethnic and religious groups within either Christian or Moslem countries. The pressures and persecutions of the Jews manifest themselves in stories found in all communities. Narratives about blood libels represent these pressures in the extreme, and they occur in both Moslem and Christian countries. Even when there were periods of calm and comfortable neighborly relations between Jews and non-Jews, the Jews in all these countries embodied the "Other" people from the local perspectives.

At the same time each Jewish community tells its stories in familiar terms to its narrators and listeners. The tales of the Sephardim are told about figures of the Sephardic communities. While practically all Jewish communities tell stories about the Jewish medieval philosopher Maimonides, narrators of the Sephardic Jewish community tell about him as their own cultural hero.

At the same time a Sephardic Jew may tell an Ashkenazic tale. These exchanges of traditions are an important dimension of social life in Jewish societies. Instead of tailoring the tales to a concept I might have had about the respective traditions, I let the narrators speak for themselves and include many of the tales which they told even if they did not conform to an image I might have had.

Q: So which is your favorite story?

A: I love them all, and my favorite story is the one that I study in any particular moment, exploring its significance in Jewish tradition and its narrative performance.

I find in folklore all the richness, depth, and artistry that literary critics and theoreticians find in the writings of the best writers in every language. The orality of folklore in no way limits its ability to express the human spirit.

