

**FOLK SONGS.** The Yiddish folk song was sung and disseminated by the Jews primarily of Eastern Europe. It constitutes a lyrical reflection of the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the Jewish people in Yiddish. The songs shed light on religious and secular practices and customs, holidays, and celebrations and convey personal insights into daily life and historical events. Manuscript collections of folk songs exist from the as far back as the sixteenth century, although systematic collection and publication did not begin until the end of the nineteenth century.



Studio portrait of "Munye the *shames* (synagogue sexton)," who was also a folk singer, Dubrovno, Russian Empire, ca. 1900. (Courtesy YIVO Institute for Jewish Research)

**Origins.** The Yiddish folk song originated approximately in the fourteenth century on Germanic soil, and by the sixteenth century had spread to Slavic territories. One of the earliest references to the genre is a comment by the Central European rabbi Ya'akov ha-Levi Molin (Maharil; 1365–1427), who denounced Yiddish songs that celebrated the unity of God and the 13 articles of faith. He feared that the simple person would then not fulfill his religious obligations or perform the precepts.

Manuscript collections of folk songs have survived from the sixteenth century, mainly in Central Europe, including Sabbath *zmires* (Heb., *zemirot*; table hymns), *getlekh* (religious) songs, holiday songs, wedding songs, love songs, dance lyrics, and riddle songs, as well as songs

of satiric or didactic content. Among the last are songs that contained criticism of leaders of the Jewish community; condemnation of greed and of the evils of money and gambling; warnings of the inevitability of death; and disputes between wine and water or between good and evil inclinations. Songs from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries record historical events such as fires and plagues, the expulsions of Jewish communities, and massacres in various locations; there is also a song about Shabetai Tsevi and his pseudo-Messianic movement, and others with didactic and holiday motifs. The songs attributed to Rabbi Levi Yitshak of Berdichev extol the omnipresence of God and recount his *din-toyre* (litigation) with the Almighty.

**Songs of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.** The Yiddish songs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are either entirely in Yiddish or combine Hebrew and Yiddish words, appearing as macaronic or mixed-language songs. Others take the form of translations or acrostics. Songs celebrate the oneness of God, praise the patriarchs, and recount the marriage of Moses and the people of Israel and the Torah and were sung at Sabbath and holiday celebrations. Historical songs reflect the cantonist era, lament

the impressment of boys into the tsarist army, or criticize the malpractices of community elders. They shed light on pogroms in Odessa, Kiev, Bialystok, Vilna, Proskurov (Khmel'nyts'kyy), Kishinev, and elsewhere; deplore the experiences of recruits and soldiers in World War I; reflect the 1905 Revolution; reveal attitudes toward immigration; and recount the plight of *agunes* (abandoned wives). Finally, workers' songs, some of which paraphrase older folk songs, bemoan the poverty and hard lot of apprentices and seamstresses and their ill treatment and exploitation, and relate the protests and strike actions of factory workers.

Cradle songs foretell the auspicious future of an infant: for example, a pure white (or gold) kid, standing beneath the cradle, trades in *rozhinkes mit mandlen* (raisins and almonds); that occupation, it is sung, will be the infant's calling too. An infant boy will be proficient in the study of Torah; if a girl, she will marry a scholar or a rabbi. Children's songs include nonsense ditties, imitative of adult songs, to accompany play; alphabetical rhymes serving as mnemonics for memorizing the Hebrew alphabet; concatenated songs of rhyming definitions; number songs; and cumulative songs.

Love songs represent the largest and most poetic body of folk songs. They are usually sad and plaintive and tell of the longing and separation of lovers, sometimes owing to parental displeasure and interference, to social barriers, or to obstacles presented by the absence of *nadn* (dowry) and *yikhes* (family pedigree). Courting and nuptial songs have the girl sometimes preferring a scholar or a rabbi for a husband. Wedding and postmarital songs deal with a bride's leave-taking at the end of the festivities. Some reflect anger vented at matchmakers, strained relations with mothers-in-law, or the foiled expectations of bridegrooms. Among these is the song of the *goldene pave* (the golden peacock), which accompanies the young bride to her in-laws' home and brings sad tidings of her circumstances to her parents. The *goldene pave* became the poetic symbol of the Yiddish folk song in Yiddish literature, carrying sorrowful messages to the Jewish people. Other categories of folk song include humorous songs and songs of the underworld, of the Hasidic and Haskalah movements, and of Zion. Ballads, some of international stock, describe unrequited love affairs, intermarriages, personal tragedies, drownings, suicides, and murders.

The fact of cultural interchange between Jews and gentiles can be inferred from various rabbinic prohibitions about singing. Gentile songs may not be used as lullabies; Jews may not teach a Jewish melody to gentiles, lest the latter use the melody in their own worship; secular songs may not be sung by Jews; listening to music on the Sabbath is prohibited even when a non-Jewish musician is playing, and so on. Scholars have found German, Slavic, English, and other international parallels in Jewish folk songs. The Soviet Yiddish folklorist Moisei Beregovskii, analyzing similarities between Yiddish and Ukrainian tunes in 1935, concluded that melodies were not adopted mechanically from non-Jewish neighbors but rather were altered to

correspond to the mood and expressive demands of the Jewish folksinger and the differences in Jewish text and content, verse structure, and cadences. Beregovskii discussed the performance styles of the informants, noting the distinctive interpretations of traditional singers, their range of voice, and the intonation and embellishments in their performance. Folk songs were not accompanied by instruments, he noted, and singers interpreted songs freely according to their tastes, usually within the range of an octave to a tenth, sometimes even wider.

Folk songs were predominantly sung by the lower social and economic spheres of the population: workers, toilers, and artisans. They were sung by women who learned and recalled songs that they heard at home, at family gatherings and celebrations, during visits to relatives in other towns, and at dances. They heard songs from itinerant singers, wedding entertainers, and factory workers. Religious songs, along with macaronic songs in Hebrew, Slavic, and Yiddish, were sung among learned circles at Hasidic or Haskalah venues, usually by men. In later periods, Jews picked up and transmitted songs sung on gramophone records and in the theater, and this new media altered and accelerated the dissemination to broader segments of the population.

In addition to anonymous composers, the body of folk songs encompasses songs of literary origin that underwent a similar process of oral transmission and dissemination. This type includes songs of the folk poets of the mid-nineteenth century, such as Berl Broder, Elyokum Tsunzer (Zunser), Mikhl Gordon, Avrom Goldfadn, Benjamin Wolf Ehrenkranz (Welwel Zbarazer), and later writers, including Mark Warshawski and Mordkhe Gebirtig. The lullaby “Shlof mayn kind” (Sleep My Child) by Sholem Aleichem, first printed in Odessa in 1892, became folklorized by 1901, after it was submitted to collectors with changes by five individuals from different localities. Songs by David Edelshtat and Morris Rosenfeld in the United States were exported to Eastern Europe. Songs by Tsunzer and Ehrenkranz were paraphrased to become workers’ and love songs. Gordon’s popular songs of 1868, “Di bord” (The Beard) and “Di mashke” (Whiskey), passed through several transformations and were printed in a number of variants. Songs of the 1860s by Goldfadn were turned into folk music, paraphrased, and parodied.

**Structure and Poetic Devices.** Folk songs often appear as quatrains, with an *abcb* rhyme scheme. As many as 50 percent are in the minor mode. Beregovskii writes, “In the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries Jewish folk art was influenced by German folk music, in which the natural minor occupied an important place. It is also one of the predominant scales among the Eastern Slavs, among whom Jews have been living for several centuries” (Slobin, 1982, p. 294). Many songs utilize the liturgical *Ahava rabo* (Heb., *Ahavah rabah*) mode with the augmented second interval, or the

altered Dorian scale with the raised fourth degree. A number of songs are based on other parts of the liturgy.

Certain poetic devices are characteristic features of Yiddish folk songs: the use of diminutives, such as *beymele* (little tree) and *shnayderl* (little tailor); repetitions (Dos meydele vil a hitele hobn; Dos meydele vil a kleydele hobn [The little girl wants a hat; the little girl wants a dress]); the use of questions and answers (Vos vestu ton in aza vaytn veg? Ikh vel shrayen: vesh tsu vashn [What will you do on your journey? I will shout: clothes to wash!]); dialogues between mother and daughter (Vu bistu geven, tokhter getraye? Geven in Palestine [Where were you, devoted daughter? I was in Palestine]) and between lovers; refrains, such as “Lyulinke, mayn feygele” (Hushabye, my little bird) and “Neyn, mameshi, neyn” (No, mother, no); expressions of lamentation, such as *Oy vey* (Oh, alas) and *Vey iz mir* (Woe is me); allusions to traditional Jewish life, such as *shteln a khupe* (put up a wedding canopy in preparation for a wedding) and references to the kaddish; biblical allusions, such as *vayngortn* (vineyard), *meylekh un malke* (king and queen), and *veynen vi oyf a khurbn* (weep, as over a destruction); liturgical allusions, such as “Ovinu meylekh, dos harts iz mir freylekh” (Our Father, the King, my heart rejoices); regional dialects (*yakh* instead of *ikh* for “I”) and dialectal rhymes (*shvimen-kimen* instead of *shvimen-kumen* [“swim-come”]); and the use of foreign words and phrases, such as *poyezd* (train) and *kartine* (picture).

Similarly, certain formulas and expressions distinguish the Yiddish folk song. Among these phrases are “Azoy vi es kumt der heyliker Purim” (As soon as holy Purim arrives), “Tsi hot ir, libe mentshn, gehert?” (Did you, dear people, hear?), and “Nisht azoy der eydem vi di tokhter aleyen” (It isn’t so much about the son-in-law as about the daughter). Another common feature is the introduction of nature and the elements to introduce or intensify a sorrowful song (In droysn geyt a regn [Outdoors it’s raining]; A shvartse khmare hot dem himl batsoygn [A black cloud covered the sky]); and the use of incremental repetition, as in: “Reb Elye iz gelofn tir tsu tir / Mayn tokhter Feygele iz nishto bay mir; / Reb Elye iz gelofn shkheynim tsu shkheynim / Mayn tokhter Feygele iz nishto bay keynem; / Reb Elye iz gelofn tsum galekh aheym / Hot er dort getrofn Feygelen shteyn” (Reb Elye ran from door to door: “My daughter Feygele isn’t at home!” / Reb Elye ran from neighbor to neighbor: “My daughter Feygele isn’t at any neighbor’s home.” / Reb Elye ran to the priest’s home, and he found Feygele standing there.). Other common features of folk songs are the existence of variant texts and tunes, and the appearance of drifting or “wandering” stanzas and lines that recur in many songs, such as “Vos toyg mir der sheyner vayngortn?” (What value is my pretty vineyard to me?).

**Folk Song Collecting.** The actual process of systematically collecting Yiddish folk songs began around 1896 with the work of Y. L. Peretz and Yehudah Leib Cahan in Warsaw. In 1898, Saul M. Ginsburg and Peysah S. Marek published appeals for songs in the Hebrew and Russian press in Saint

Petersburg and Warsaw, and in 1901 they published the first major collection of Yiddish folk songs. Also in 1898, Yo'el (Yoyel) Engel first transcribed the melodies of folk songs, later presenting lectures and concerts on the subject. In the same year, Max Grunwald started to publish the magazine *Mitteilungen zur jüdischen Volkskunde* (Communications on Jewish Folklore; 1898–1929), which contained numerous folk songs, and Leo Wiener published some folk songs in the United States. In 1908, folk song collection, arrangement, and performance were undertaken by the Society for Jewish Folk Music in Saint Petersburg. The Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Society, to Ukraine in 1912–1914, led by Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport (S. An-ski) with the participation of musicians Yo'el (Yoyel) Engel, Lazare Saminsky, and Zusman Kiselgof (Sussmann Kisselhof). Cahan, by this time living in the United States, published his two-volume collection of folk songs with melodies in 1912; in Warsaw and Vilna, collections were published by Noah Pryłucki, Menakhem Kipnis, Shemu'el Lehman, Hershele (Danilevitsh), Pinkhes Graubard, and Shloyme Bastomski. Folk songs also appeared in the publications *Der pinkes* and *Bay undz Yidn*.

The establishment of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in Vilna in 1925, with its Ethnographic Commission under the direction of Cahan, fostered the creation of a network of collectors throughout the world, published their materials, and also trained folklorists such as Shmuel Zaynvl Pipe. In the Soviet Union, institutes in Minsk and Kiev gathered collections of folk songs. Moisei Beregovskii pioneered in the scientific methodology relating to the collection and meticulous transcription of songs; he also studied musical cross-ethnic influences and performance styles. Numerous other collections and studies were published in the interwar period, notably in *Reshumot* (Tel Aviv) and *Tsaytshrift far Yidisher geshikhte, demografie un ekonomik, literatur-forshung, shprakh-visnshaft un etnografie* (Minsk).

During World War II, hundreds of songs were composed and sung. Many were adapted from earlier folk and popular songs, as melodies were contrafacted (adapted from earlier songs). After the war, anthologies of Yiddish folk songs continued to be issued, scholarly studies were published, and field recordings were made. Choruses and choirs performed folk songs in choral arrangements, and singers such as Isa Kremer, Ruth Rubin, Theodore Bikel, and Chava Alberstein produced commercial recordings. Yiddish folk songs were arranged for concert repertoire by Leo Low, Lazar Weiner, Yoyel Engel, and Aleksandr Krein; and they were adapted for classical compositions by Maurice Ravel, Serge Prokofiev, Dmitri Shostakovich, Hugo Weisgall, Stefan Wolpe, and Victor Ullman. Finally, accompanying the klezmer revival of the 1980s, Yiddish folk songs witnessed a burgeoning of interest and performance on the part of various ensembles and singers, who recognized the importance of the Yiddish folk song in the study of the Jewish cultural and musical heritage.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Moses Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii evreiskogo narodonaseleniia v Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 1861); Yoysef Yehude Lerner, "Di yidishe muze: Yidishe folkslider," *Der hoyzfraynd* 2 (1889): 182–198; L. Lowenstein, "Jüdische und jüdisch-deutsche Lieder," in *Jubelschrift zum siebzigsten Geburtstag des Dr. Israel Hildesheimer* (Berlin, 1890); Yaacov Molin, *Sefer Maharil: Minhagim* (Jerusalem, 1989); Felix Rosenberg, "Über eine Sammlung deutscher Volks- und Gesellschafts-lieder in hebräischen Lettern," in *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland*, vols. 2–3 (1888–1889; rpt., Nendeln, Liechtenstein, 1975), regarding the Isaac Wallich manuscript in the Bodleian Library; Ruth Rubin, *Voices of a People: The Story of Yiddish Folksong* (New York, 1973); Mark Slobin, *Old Jewish Folk Music: The Collections and Writings of Moshe Beregovski* (Philadelphia, 1982); Max Weinreich, *Bilder fun der yidisher literatur-geshikhte* (Vilna, 1928); Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language* (Chicago, 1980); Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, trans. and ed. Bernard Martin, vol. 7, pt. 8, *Old Yiddish Literature from Its Origins to the Haskalah Period* (Cincinnati and New York, 1975).

CHANA ELEANOR MLOTEK

---

The article presented above is a sample entry from *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, to be published by the Yale University Press. Copyright 2005 YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Inc. Reproduced by permission of Yale University Press and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Inc. All rights reserved.