

The
JEWISH
CULTURAL
TAPESTRY

International Jewish Folk Traditions



STEVEN M. LOWENSTEIN

**The Jewish
Cultural Tapestry:
International Jewish
Folk Traditions**

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To my family with love



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Acknowledgments



THIS PROJECT, MORE THAN ANY THAT I HAVE UNDERTAKEN, IS THE PRODUCT OF the efforts of a large number of people. Some of the ideas, which eventually were incorporated in this book, go back to the training I received as an interviewer and researcher for the Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry in the 1960s. The director of the Atlas, Uriel Weinreich and his assistant director at that time, Marvin Herzog, went out of their way to train me and give me the rudiments of linguistic theory as well as practical knowledge of the Yiddish language. They spent countless hours explaining their ideas to me and were willing to devote a great deal of effort to me, although I was only 20 years old at the time. Mordkhe Schechter, one of my colleagues at the Atlas, devoted much effort and zeal to get me to learn the Yiddish language. I owe many of the insights, which led to this book to fascinating courses I audited at the Max Weinreich Center for Advanced Jewish Studies at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York. Especially influential were two memorable courses, one on Jewish vernacular languages given by Haim Blanc, and the other on Jewish folklore given by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. I picked up first hand knowledge of a non-Ashkenazic Jewish culture during the year (1969) I spent in Montpellier, France, working on my dissertation in French history. I attended a North African synagogue, was invited for Sabbath and holiday dinners by community members and was treated with great hospitality. The Elkyess and Kalfa families were



especially hospitable and we have remained in contact. In the mid 1970s our family belonged to a congregation of Sephardic Jews from Greece in Highland Park, New Jersey and we were exposed to new melodies, languages, and customs.

The students of my class “Jewish Folk Traditions around the World,” who used an early version of this book, gave me valuable feedback which helped me improve it. I owe a special debt of gratitude to David Greenfield, formerly my student and now resource center media coordinator at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles. David’s computer graphic skills helped me get many of my ideas into usable charts and maps at an early stage of this project. Someday I hope we will be able to realize our joint dream of creating an interactive, multi-media method of presenting our ideas on Jewish folk traditions around the world.

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Introduction



WORKING ON THIS BOOK HAS BEEN A DEPARTURE BOTH FROM MY OWN USUAL scholarly pursuits and from previous approaches to this subject. My own writing up to now has been focused on the close analysis of the process of modernization of German Jewry. It has dealt with carefully delimited topics and been addressed mainly to an audience of scholars and specialists. This volume, on the other hand, is a study of a very wide field—Jewish folk tradition—covering the entire world settled by Jews before the nineteenth century and all of Jewish history; it is addressed to the educated lay reader. There was no way for anyone to know all the subjects I cover in the detail that a scholarly specialist would know. Yet I felt that a general overview of the entire subject was the only way to achieve my goals. I wanted to present the overall structure of Jewish culture, to compare and contrast Jewish folk traditions in various parts of the world, seeking similarities and differences among them. I was looking for patterns that applied widely rather than details of a single narrow aspect. Only a comparative study of a large number of regions and a large number of aspects of folk life would enable me to discover the overall patterns I sought to describe.

This book makes no claims to represent the latest in scholarship on the Jews of Yemen or India or China. It is written for the general reader who, I hope, shares my interest in a broad, general overview. In most cases I have not undertaken original research in the many fields covered by this book (the exceptions are in

Ashkenazic linguistic and musical traditions). I have endeavored to be as accurate as possible. I have read very widely in the abundant secondary literature available on Jewish traditions, which allowed me to benefit from the scholarly discoveries of others and to apply the techniques of scholarly research in order to choose among rival claims made in the various sources. I did not want to fall into the trap, characterizing many books on “exotic” Jewish communities, of making very vague claims, presenting flawed information, or going way beyond my sources in reconstructing the past. My goal was a popular book, but one true to the standards of scholarly excellence.

What makes this book popular rather than scholarly, besides its reliance on secondary sources, is its style. I have tried to write in a conversational tone using the kind of language I would use when giving a talk to a general audience or teaching a class. Unless absolutely necessary, I have not used technical terms and, when it was necessary, I have tried to give clear explanations of the terms. From time to time I have even tried to inject some humor into the narrative (successfully, I hope). I have also left out all footnotes and almost all source references in the text. For those interested in further reading and in the main sources of the ideas presented in this book, I have provided a bibliography of the major works in the field.

Jewish folk traditions have long fascinated me, even though they have not been the focus of my scholarly work until now. One stimulus for this interest comes from my own background. I grew up in Washington Heights, a traditional German Jewish community in New York City, where many Western Ashkenazic folk traditions in music, cuisine, and synagogue liturgy were still practiced. By the time I was a teenager, I had already noticed how different these traditions were from the Eastern Ashkenazic traditions, which predominated outside our little community, and discussed them with others (probably to their annoyance). By a series of coincidences in college, I was selected as an interviewer of German Jews for the *Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry* at Columbia University. There I was introduced to the concepts of linguistic geography and to the idea, which horrified most of the members of the German Jewish community, that what we considered German contained many remnants of the now extinct Western Yiddish dialects.

After college, these interests became dormant until 1979, when I was asked to teach courses in the Continuing Education program at the University of Judaism, in addition to my regular academic courses. I began to develop a “repertoire” of courses on genealogy, Jewish folk traditions, and Jewish languages. The students of these courses, mostly adults, some of them with direct knowledge of Jewish folk traditions in their own families, always expressed great enthusiasm about the subject, asking me to recommend a book for further reading. I always had to tell them that there was no single book covering all the subjects I discussed, but rather a large number of works on specific aspects. Eventually I came to the conclusion that I should try to write the book that wasn’t available elsewhere. That was the genesis of this volume. In the spring of 1998, I taught this subject for the first time as a regular undergraduate course using an early draft of this book. Again there was a great deal of enthusiasm. I owe many thanks to the students of History 290—“Jewish Folk Traditions around the World”—for their suggestions and feedback.

In this study, I have emphasized precisely those aspects of the Jewish tradition that have received the least emphasis (and certainly the least systematic treatment). Most Jewish religious education introduces students to the sacred texts and the general history of the Jews, but it rarely addresses the largely unwritten folk traditions that once loomed so large in Jewish life. The contemporary member of the Jewish community who has received some formal Jewish education is faced with a strange gap. What do the biblical or talmudic texts composed in the Middle East thousands of years ago have to do with the recent traditions of his or her family that stem from Eastern Europe, North Africa, or Yemen? One of the goals of this book is to bridge this gap by showing the interrelationship between these two aspects of Jewish life—the ancient written tradition and more recent local traditions.

Many books about Jewish traditions in various parts of the world emphasize the picturesque, exotic, and “primitive.” Much more has been written about the customs of the far-off Jews of Yemen, Ethiopia, and Kurdistan than about the more familiar Ashkenazic Jews of Northern Europe. The tone of many of the descriptions of these “Jews of the East” is in the style, that Edward Said has called

“Orientalism,” emphasizing the strangeness of the “mysterious East.” In this book I have consciously avoided this Orientalist style. I have tried to make no distinction between the way I describe the customs and folkways of European, Asian, and African Jews. The emphasis has been on comparison, not on exoticism.

This book is intended as an introduction to a very broad and complex field. I could cover only a tiny percentage of the many aspects of Jewish traditional culture that are available for study. My intention is to give food for thought and to whet the appetite of the readers so that they will wish to explore this exciting subject further. I hope you will find this book to be as enjoyable, entertaining, and enlightening as it was to write.