LITERATURE AND HISTORY
TEXTUAL SYMBIOSES IN MODERN JEWISH STUDIES
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Interdisciplinary Discussions
Scholars from a variety of disciplines employ literary texts in both teaching and writing about the past. Works of literature are used to confirm and illustrate historical findings, and, at times, even as a basis for historical studies. This is particularly true for social historians focusing their work on disenfranchised sectors of the populace. In a similar and commensurate vein literary scholars often find themselves using literary texts as tools in the construction of social and historical paradigms. Literary methodologies such as new historicism, Marxist criticism, and gender or ethnic literary critiques employ literature as a primary channel through which to apprehend the relationship between aesthetic output and social exigency. Historians and literary scholars thus often employ the same texts with similar objectives, yet their methodological differences lead them in very different directions. In dialogue, these different findings on the basis of similar primary materials can prove quite fruitful. The present volume grew out of the premise that both individual scholars, and scholarship as a whole, benefit when we expose such divergences to open critique and collaborate in seeking creative dialogues between the different disciplines.

This project, and the conference that preceded it, grew out of an ongoing interdisciplinary conversation between the two editors. Over the course of our graduate studies, and much more frequently once we both found ourselves at the University of Maryland, we have shared an interest in East European Jewish culture, and in the challenge of locating women within it. Attending each others’ conference papers, meeting at various professional engagements, reading each others’ work, we found that we were often reading the same materials, but approaching them from different disciplinary perspectives. Sheila Jelen’s background in comparative literature and Eliyana Adler’s in history gave us each a particular set of critical skills, knowledge, and tools. Our desire to pool our resources, and to learn from one another, ultimately led to the conference
“Jewish Literature and History: An Interdisciplinary Conversation” at the Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Studies, University of Maryland, in the spring of 2004. At the conference scholars from across North America and Israel, representing the fields of history and literature, as well as other related fields, came together to discuss ways of reading Jewish literary texts in their historical context.

In this volume we seek to expand the conversation even further and engage the scholarly community at large. The papers present material on a wide variety of topics and time periods. Although the topics come out of Jewish studies, the theoretical and methodological concerns apply to other fields as well. The participants have made an effort not only to present new material and interpretations but also to demonstrate explicitly how they arrive at their conclusions. The reader will be granted access, as it were, to the internal structure underlying the finished product. In order to demonstrate that process in action, we have provided two brief readings of the same short story by Dvora Baron (1887–1956), the only canonic woman prose writer of the Modern Hebrew Renaissance, below.

“What Has Been”

Dvora Baron has attracted scholarly attention over the past several decades because of both the quality of her short stories and her unique status as a Hebrew woman writer in a milieu dominated by men. In recent years her writing has been translated and anthologized and a number of scholars have written about her both in the context of contemporaneous writers and as a subject in and of herself.1 Part of what makes Baron and her work so engaging to scholars and readers interested in Jewish women's lives in Eastern Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is her choice of subject matter; her stories focus, frequently, on women's lives in fictional shtetleh and employ the voices of female narrators who mark themselves as "insiders" or, in the language of Ruth Adler, as "daughter[s] of the shtetl."2

Among writers of the New Yishuv (the early Jewish settlement in Palestine; Baron immigrated from the Pale of Settlement to Palestine in December 1910 after seven peripatetic years as a student and tutor), Baron was unusual in her general preference for depicting life in Europe as opposed to life in Palestine. Although she was the literary editor, from 1911 to 1923 of Ha-poel ha-tsair, the Labor Zionist newspaper and a major nationalist organ for ideologues of the New Yishuv, Baron did not follow the general trends in literary production of the period. She was not, as were many of her peers, committed to the idea of depicting pioneers and agricultural collectives as a means of creating a new "native" Hebrew literature that attempted to wed spoken language with literary language. The fledgling literary establishment in Palestine prided itself on its depiction of life "as it was" in the settlements and the agricultural collectives and "as it was" in the hearts and minds of the pioneers who were trying to build a new country. The Hebrew texts being created by writers within and about a burgeoning landscape of Hebrew culture were prescriptive, modeling a Hebrew speaking culture in text for the settlers of the New Yishuv. By continuing to write about life in Eastern Europe throughout this period, Baron attracted much criticism as to the "usefulness" of her work. What good would such depictions be to the Zionist enterprise? Why did she even bother writing in Hebrew? Her work was viewed as the autobiographical musings of a lone writer, or the ethnographic rantings of someone who could not quite settle into her new homeland. Clearly, the ideological tensions raised by Baron's subject matter of the shtetl even while writing in Palestine raise the stakes of our understanding of her works' historical value. Baron herself problematizes dogmatic readings of her work as either wholly fictional or wholly historical by lacing her stories with autobiographically recognizable details as well as with ethnographic rhetoric even as she forces readers to retreat from strictly "biographi-

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objective. The narrator’s posture of verisimilitude or reportage about the goings-on of a typical small Jewish town is interspersed, in many instances, with the presentation of individual lives, rendered in full realist color. This dynamic is best demonstrated by the opening passages of “What Has Been.”

Of all the youngsters I went about with in my hometown, the one dearest to me was Mina, our neighbour’s girl, who was nicknamed “Spotty” on account of her freckles. Mina was hardly what one might call a pretty girl; but, we all know the saying that it is in the earthenware jar that the best wine is preserved, and have we not seen the living word of God inscribed in a simple scroll? Yet, as I come to tell about her I find I cannot abstain from sketching in details of the life surrounding her, just as it would be inconceivable for a painter to draw any object, living or inanimate, without setting it in an appropriate background.3

In this passage, the narrator juxtaposes the narrative she is about to tell about Mina with the “background” or “setting” of this particular narrative. The “details of the life she sketches in” around Mina can be found in passages such as the following:

The condolence of mourners was a precept dutifully observed by the inhabitants of our little town. They said very little, but the pain in their eyes bespoke their sympathy—which is but a reflection of the sufferer’s grief when it is tinged with genuine compassion. They read from the Book of Job and all present anguish seemed to pale before the woe of the man who has come to be the symbol of human suffering.4

The reference to “our little town” personalizes what is otherwise a rather generic description of mourning rites in traditional Jewish culture. Immediately after this description, the narrator eases us into a description of the specific mourning ritual that goes on in Mina’s household after the premature death of her younger brother Ephraim. The narrator is wholly absent from the scene of mourning, with the exception of her allusion to “our little town,” which places her squarely into the description but also serves as a counter to the generic, almost ethnographic quality of the passage containing it. The tension between the generic and the personal, between the general and the specific is central to assessing the suitability of reading Baron’s works in an ethnographic or historical light; and Baron further complicates matters by challenging this ethnographic-historical posture through contradictory and poetic

3 Dvora Baron, “What Has Been,” in The Thorny Path and Other Stories, 77.
4 Ibid., 140.
statements about the role of narrators in the telling of tales. Early in the story, for example, the narrator states:

All these people, they say, perished later in the Holocaust; and I who knew them, regard myself as a kind of negative that has survived long after the photographed object no longer exists. Am I not duty bound then, to commit some of my memories to paper as a memorial to these events?5

A few pages later, the narrator states:

It was much later that I realized that the good narrator does not labour his subject and encumber it with explanations, which only obscure it; he merely shines his torch on it, as it were, so that it becomes illuminated and clearly visible.6

The negative and the torch as figures of narration are strangely contradictory. In the first case, as the narrator in this story presents it, the negative is all that remains of a disappeared object. It exists instead of the object and serves not merely as a representation of it but as a “memorial” to it. A memorial, while attempting to capture the essence of a tragedy or something that has been extinguished, does not serve as an accurate replacement for it. Rather, a memorial is a testament to its own inadequacy, to its own inability to serve as a stand-in. Similarly, the photographic negative represents that which is not captured on camera and reminds us that photographs themselves are carefully constructed illusions contrived from the interplay between presence and absence.

In the torch allusion, on the other hand, the object focused upon is primary and the narrator’s role is wholly secondary. The object—still present—can speak for itself and the only mediation necessary is the light of an impartial viewer. Both of these forces—that of a mere cipher, as in the case of a torch, and that of a memorial not attempting to replace or represent that which has disappeared, as in the case of the negative—operate throughout Baron’s story and also throughout her work as a whole. The narrator consistently voices opposite points of view regarding her own role in the story at hand.

I have always been inclined to dismiss historical uses of Baron’s work because such trends have frequently been built upon an implicit critique of her artfulness and her literary integrity within early twentieth-century modern Hebrew writing circles. Additionally, Baron’s playful deployment of ambivalent narrators—declaring themselves simultaneously as wholly constructed (like a negative) and wholly transparent (like a torch)—complicates any straightforward attempt to identify her with her narrators and to thus mark her fiction as “true.”

Where does this situate my dialogue with Eliyana? I simply prevail upon her to be very cautious in how she uses Baron’s works to illustrate her educational research and in the kinds of questions she asks of Baron’s work. Appropriately, Eliyana has long turned to texts like Dvora Baron’s that thematize women’s traditional Jewish education (or lack thereof) as historical corroboration, if not as historical sources. Whereas Eliyana has asked questions in her work about what kinds of Jewish schools were available to girls, and what they learned in those schools, I have asked questions about how Dvora Baron learned Hebrew as a woman, and what kinds of primary Jewish texts Dvora Baron used to construct her Hebrew stories. Did she use the Talmud? Did she use midrash? Did she use liturgy? Did she use women’s devotions in Yiddish, translating them into a Hebrew idiom? And if she used these texts, when she used these texts (because in the absence of a Hebrew vernacular idiom, which was the case at the outset of her career, she had no recourse but to construct her text out of other Hebrew texts), did she twist them in any identifiably “female” ways, or did she try to use them in ways that resembled those of her male literary cohort of former yeshiva students? It seems to me that questions such as these—embedded in the narrative style of the work—are appropriate reflections on the educational climate out of which Baron grew as a woman writer. Broader claims of historicity, based on generic identification of her work as autobiographical or artless, are more difficult to support.

An Historian Reads Dvora Baron

Perhaps due to the nature of Jewish society—its frequent separation from state authority and its commitment to study—literary sources are often most of what remains from the past. Jewish societies have produced a number of unique and important literary genres, and the ongoing challenge for historians is how to read these works. What follows is my own meditation on how one literary source might illuminate the study of Jewish women’s education in Eastern Europe.

Dvora Baron’s story “What Has Been” is not about women’s education in turn-of-the-century Eastern Europe. Nor is it about education more generally. In fact, the story is barely about the protagonist, Mina. Rather, just as Mina the character continually deferred to others, even in the story purportedly dedicated to her, she seems to crave anonymity. The narrator originally justifies this seeming omission by explaining:

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5 Ibid., 79.
6 Ibid., 80.
Yet, as I come to tell about her I find I cannot abstain from sketching in detail of the life surrounding her, just as it would be inconceivable for a painter to draw any object, living or inanimate, without setting it in an appropriate background.  

But later she points to yet another imperative behind the decision:

All these people, they say, perished later in the Holocaust; and I who knew them, regard myself as a kind of negative that has survived long after the photographed object no longer exists. Am I not duty-bound, then, to commit some of my memories to paper as a memorial to those events?  

However the story is certainly not simply an elegy to a lost world. In all of her writing Baron unstintingly shows the bad with the good, and this is no exception, as Baron herself appears to highlight in stating parenthetically at one point, “In the hands of an able writer, no doubt, this would have made a fitting subject for a simple love story.”

The story is complex in both its plot and its purposes. Nonetheless, I propose to use it as a source on women’s education. Such sources are difficult to obtain. In my research I have been fortunate to uncover quantitative information about women’s education in Eastern Europe in archival documents, but the informal, unstable, and unregulated nature of most Jewish women’s introduction to literacy in Eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century makes the qualitative side much more elusive.

In “What Has Been” the narrator, an erudite and educated young woman, takes it upon herself to teach her illiterate friend, Mina, to read. Although Mina’s brother attends heder, and their beloved older sister retains her “old school-books” from the city, suggesting that she too had some formal schooling, Mina’s education has been neglected. The fact that these three young women, two in the same family, had such different educational experiences, is consistent with my own findings and those of Iris Parush.

Parush, in her innovative work on women as readers in Eastern Europe writes of separate educational spheres for men and women. Whereas men were expected to follow the traditional religious curriculum, and were granted status for doing so, women’s education was both less respected and less regulated. Parush memorably terms the situation for women “the benefits of marginality.”

Similarly, in a study of women’s memoirs from Eastern Europe I found that Jewish girls often had both more, and more varied, educational experiences than Jewish boys. The lack of a standard educational setting, or even curriculum, for Jewish girls potentially opened up greater educational options.

In this case, then, literature can be used to support research based on other sources. Even more crucial, yet controversial, is the access it can provide to communal customs of informal education. Baron’s narrator describes in detail the process of teaching Mina how to read:

...I began to show her how to make out the different letters. We started with the alphabet, and once she was able to form syllables, we passed on to the prayer book. It was not long before we were reading the Humash, which was used at the time as a textbook for Hebrew lessons.

In this remarkable passage we see the progression of teaching the decoding of the Hebrew language. Note that writing was not part of the instruction. The narrator suggests that her educational methods were normative. And indeed it would be logical for a beginning student to focus on pronouncing the more familiar texts in the prayer book before going on to the Bible, or Humash.

In moving on to the Bible, the tutorial also began to include religious content. Interestingly the two girls started at the beginning, with the book of Genesis, rather than Leviticus, which was typically the opening text in the heder.

And the way in which they read the text is also significant:

Just as my father had done when he had taught me the Scriptures, I illustrated the text with numerous homilies and legends, the meaning of which she readily grasped.

In this brief description the reader witnesses not only Mina’s introduction to Jewish literacy, but even the narrator’s.

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7 Baron, “What Has Been,” 77.
8 Baron, “What Has Been,” 79. In Intimations of Difference Sheila Jelen points out the jarri-ingly anachronistic decision of the translator to render the Hebrew zvah’h [horror] as Holocaust at the end of this story, published in 1939 (Jelen, p. 43). He does the same for tmurat ha-tim [the ravages of time] here at the beginning of the story (Dvora Baron, “Ma she-baya,” in Parshtiot: Sipu-rim mekubitzim [Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1968], 127).
9 Baron, “What Has Been,” 126.
10 Baron, “What Has Been,” 88.
13 Baron, “What Has Been,” 89.
15 Baron, “What Has Been,” 89.
One of the things I have learned from my ongoing conversation with Sheila is that the tendency to read Eastern European Jewish literature as historically accurate is particularly strong in the case of women writers. Sheila’s work has demonstrated that critics and historians have often read Yiddish and Hebrew women writers as ethnographers rather than creative artists. In part this may have to do with women writers privileging different topics and moments in their writing.

In her book The Home Plot: Women, Writing & Domestic Ritual, Ann Romines contends that women’s writing about domestic themes has often been trivialized. She recommends reading “…women’s writings about housekeeping not as safely minor diversions but as central, powerful, and potentially explosive documents of women’s culture.”16 Roberta Rubenstein writes about women’s powerful and ambivalent grappling with their homesickness. “Implicit in the deeper register of nostalgia is the element of grief for something of profound value that seems irrevocably lost—even if it never actually existed, or never could have existed, in the form in which it is “remembered.”17

These examples are meant to problematize Baron’s writing, rather than to essentialize it. Despite the homey and nostalgic tropes of “What Has Been,” Baron was far too sophisticated a writer to serve only as a “negative.” Rather I suggest that this story provides us with a brief and intimate glance at women’s educational practices precisely because they are part of the “appropriate background.” In fact if education were a major concern of the story, it would be far less trustworthy.

It is the very lack of attention that makes the educational material so useful. When maskilic writers tackled education it was usually to pillory the heder. As part of their didactic and propagandistic purpose, they had to exaggerate. The heder and melamed became stock characters of ridicule in their fiction and autobiographical writing.18 From such works the historian can learn about the educational concerns of the writers, but not about the educational practices of the time. In this case, however, the peripheral nature of the depiction of education makes it potentially much more useful.

In other stories Baron explicitly treats a number of issues affecting Jewish women’s lives in Eastern Europe. Her early stories in particular were, accordin to Naomi Seidman, “…forthright in their critique of Jewish culture.”19 Following Timothy Dow Adams’ classification of autobiography, we might call this “narrative rather than historical truth.”20 Like the maskilic writers above, Baron used excess to attract attention to her subject. To use such subjects as historical sources would be difficult to justify.

In this case I have used a story purportedly about a young woman, but also about Dvora Baron’s relationship to her past, for information about women’s education. It is rare to find as intimate a portrayal of the process of teaching and learning as Baron provides in “What Has Been.” She tells us about the varied nature of women’s education, about tools and methods for teaching Hebrew reading, and how religious and historical content were introduced alongside basic reading. In conjunction with additional sources, autobiographical, archival, and other, Baron’s story is part of the greater story of Jewish life in Eastern Europe.

The Present Volume

The essays contained in this volume will not treat the same material as explicitly as in the example above. Nonetheless, they are part of the same conversation and touch upon common and overlapping themes. We have organized them in order to draw out complimentary and thought-provoking methodological approaches. On the whole the groupings do not take into account either geography or chronology. Rather they seek to highlight methodological approaches to a variety of texts from within different disciplinary domains.

Both David Roskies and Jeremy Dauber take as their starting point a single story. By reading closely and utilizing a variety of methods and external sources, each of them demonstrates the potential of constructing cultural history out of literary materials. Roskies effectively shows not only how Sholom Aleichem’s story “On Account of a Hat” (1913) contains within it a number of embedded stories but, that it informs us broadly about Jewish storytelling. Sholom Aleichem’s comic style and playful use of language are in fact commentary on the relations between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors in Eastern Europe in a uniquely Jewish mode. The Yiddish language, with its elastic and absorptive properties, is able to subtly convey aspects of a variety of Jewish cultural stances in Sholom Aleichem’s able hands. Similarly, folkloristic and other literary tropes and subgenres are invoked as critical aspects of a Jew-

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18 See, e.g., chap. 2 of Moshe Avital, Ha-yeshiva ve-ha-hinukh ha-mesorati ba-sifrut ha-Haskalah ha-IVrit (Tel Aviv: Reshimim, 1996).
19 Naomi Seidman, introduction to “The First Day” and Other Stories, xx.
ish literary tradition that is often overlooked in favor of more formal and frequently documented Yiddish canonical literary trajectories.

Dauber uses his study of an early modern Yiddish tale ("The Tale of the Spirit of the Holy Community of Koretz during the Chaos of War," circa 1660s) to identify and discuss a largely unexplored genre. The ghost story, as illuminated by intertextual reading and historical contextualization, has the potential to inform us about broad cultural concerns as well as about the expectations of an early modern Yiddish readership. Dauber illustrates the symbiotic relationship between the sacred and the secular, between genre and subgenre, not only in early modern Yiddish reading communities, but in early modern Yiddish culture.

Whereas the authors above rely on one story to make cultural claims about a historical period, Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern and Miriam Isaacs focus on the oeuvre of one particular author to illuminate historical movements. In each case the writer is somewhat obscure, but both Petrovsky-Shtern and Isaacs succeed in showing how the work of their chosen author was influenced by his or her historical period and in turn reflected aspects of that period. Petrovsky-Shtern uses the life and work of Raisa Troianker (1908–1945) to illustrate the brief flowering of the Jewish-Ukrainian cultural encounter. Relying on Troianker’s published poetry and contemporaneous references to her, as well as a recently discovered family archive, Petrovsky-Shtern is able to showcase both Troianker’s unique literary contributions to, and her participation in, Ukrainian literary circles in the early years of the Soviet Union. Ultimately political realities spelled the end of both Troianker’s Ukrainian phase and of the entire literary world she inhabited.

Isaacs uses both the specific biographical circumstances of Peretz Hirschbein’s life (1880–1948) and the general historical circumstances in which he lived to explain his linguistic and generic trajectory. She shows how Hirschbein not only lived through the major transformation of East European Jewish life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but also reflected and mediated it for his readers. Hirschbein could have adopted Hebrew, Russian, or, later, English for his writing, but he maintained a connection with his dispersed readership by retaining Yiddish. His choice of genre developed over time in response to his perception of the most effective means of communicating his themes. Although neither Raisa Troianker nor Peretz Hirschbein were typical figures, their lives and literary careers nonetheless give us a sense of the historical movements of their day and the range of Jewish cultural response.

Elisha Carlebach and Alice Nakhimovsky each approach a fairly overlooked genre of literature and demonstrate how it can be used historically. Carlebach draws on scholarship about letter writing in Europe, as well as on Jewish life there, to offer the first systematic approach to Jewish epistolary conventions. While using the available secondary sources on letter writing and reading, Carlebach also demonstrates the need to examine particularly Jewish manifestations of the epistolary mode. Carlebach shows the continuity between apparently historical and literary letters, thereby alerting scholars from either background to the importance of reading historical sources in a literary context and vice versa.

Nakhimovsky conducts a longitudinal study of the evolution of Russian-Jewish émigré identity in America through the use of obituaries. She shows how the emigrants of the immediate postrevolutionary era subsumed their Jewish concerns within an actively Russian, and even Russian Orthodox, garb in one major Russian-language American newspaper (Novoe Russkoe Slovo). However, the emigrants of the 1970s and onward sought to combine Russian and Jewish life and produced and published obituaries that reflected their new cultural stance. Just as Carlebach demonstrates how literary and historical sources must be read in concert, Nakhimovsky offers a practical example of cultural evolution rendered comprehensible by the combination of literary sources and historical insights.

Both Hannan Hever and Eric Zakim use artistic productions to examine the cultural milieu of the Zionist settlers in pre-state Israel. Hever’s interest in challenging normative Israeli literary historiography leads him to the poetry of Naftali Herz Imber. Hever reads Imber’s most famous poem, which forms the basis of the Israeli national anthem “Hatikva,” against the grain of its nationalist and mythological presentation and within its historical context. He shows how the poem’s adoption as a national symbol has obscured its actual foundations and the relationship of Imber to his literary cohort.

Zakim argues against a reading of abstract trends in Zionist art as a response to early twentieth-century historical circumstances in Palestine, and specifically the 1929 Arab riots. Rather he suggests a more complex and more integrated approach wherein art functions as part of history rather than only its reflection. While art critics have traditionally viewed the move toward modernist abstraction in Palestinian-Jewish visual arts as a response to the despair and nihilism of political unrest growing out of the Arab-Jewish conflict of the second decade of the twentieth century, Zakim demonstrates that the art of the period preceded, fomented, and participated in that unrest, as opposed to merely “reflecting” it. Ultimately both Hever and Zakim problematize assump-
tions of causality between action and aesthetics by showing that artistic trends in the Land of Israel participated in historical progress rather than merely responding to it.

The act of translation and its literary and cultural significance serve as major themes in the work of Sheila Jelen and Naomi Seidman. Both authors probe the process of translation by narrowing in on a particular, historically defined, case. Jelen explores the junctures between speech and text as a mode of translation as well as between Yiddish and Hebrew autotranslation in several short stories by S. J. Abramowitz (Mendele Mokher Sforim). Jelen challenges the critical truism that Abramowitz's intensely bilingual career fostered the transformation of a Yiddish vernacular voice into a Hebrew one, thus revisiting and revising the historiographical view that the Hebrew vernacular revival was directly informed by the birth of a Hebrew vernacular in Abramowitz's work. Naomi Seidman's work examines not so much the Hebrew Bible's actual translation into Greek as its cultural afterlife and ideological resonance in its new language. Seidman shows how translation narratives from antiquity reflect the concerns of a variety of stakeholders in the biblical translation project.

This volume, and its highly varied collection of essays, is the first contribution in book form to what we hope will be a long and productive conversation between scholars in a variety of disciplines who reach historical and cultural conclusions through reading and studying Jewish literary documents. As becomes clear from this collection of essays, the scope of Jewish literary output is perhaps limitless. We hope that the conversation about it will be similarly rich and productive.

YIDDISH STORYTELLING
AND THE POLITICS OF RESCUE

David G. Roskies

Storytelling and Jewish Literary History

The Jews are said to be a nation of storytellers. In the modern period alone, they seem to have all but stolen the market. Think of stories and you think of Peretz and Sholom Aleichem, Babel and Kafka, Singer and Schulz, Agnon and Appelfeld, Malamud and Ozick, Weisel and Daniele Kish, Max Apple and Steve Stern, Nathan Englander and Jonathan Safran Foer, not to speak of Nahman of Bratslav and the famous Buber-mayses. South of the border, you think of Borges, flaunting his Jewish pedigree. Small wonder that when Irving Howe—proud champion of the political novel—returned to reclaim his Jewish roots, he produced three anthologies devoted exclusively to stories: the Treasury of Yiddish Stories, Selected Short Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Jewish-American Stories.

How can one explain this cultural phenomenon? The naïve answer would be: Tradition! Home for the vast majority of Jews prior to 1900 was still the preindustrial landscape east of the Rhine, east even of the Vistula. They inhabited what Walter Benjamin called "the world of experience," as opposed to the alienated world of "facts." If ever there was a place for Benjamin's master metaphor of storytelling as an ecological art, in which the verbal craftsman uses "transparent layers" of personal and collective experience, of wisdom and practical knowledge gained over centuries, as a craftsman uses tools and techniques passed down from master to apprentice, that place was Yiddishland, spread from Krakow to Kiev, from Dvinsk to Odessa, with significant outposts in Whitechapel, the Lower East Side, and Buenos Aires. Storytelling, according to this scheme, was a natural inheritance, so deeply embedded within the folk culture that it withstood the geographic, linguistic, cultural, and ideological upheavals of the twentieth century.