

ARTICLES

Culture-Specific Meaning in Personal Narratives

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Homo sapiens has been defined as the creature who “makes sense,” and social sciences and humanities are all preoccupied with different aspects of meaning. The anthropologist Ulf Hannerz emphasizes the importance of sense-making, which occurs constantly through experience, interpretation, contemplation and imagination. The study of culture for anthropologists, therefore, is above all the study of meanings which people create, and which create people as members of society [Hannerz 1992:3]. Linguists, studying meaning and sense in natural language, are also increasingly concerned with cultural aspects of meaning. The study of semantic phenomena is shifting its focus from the abstract analysis of meaning and sense-making to cultural facts that exist in people and for people [Frumkina 1999:4]. Cultural psychologists are engaged in determining the role of culture for people, viewing it as a vehicle shaping human capacities. They believe that humans build their understanding of the world through active engagement with it in specific contexts carrying a history in the particular culture [Smith 2001:133]. Our ability to interpret the meaning of particular contexts and situations would be impossible without a reliance on a wider system of cultural formations (discourse, genres, activity types, institutions, modes of representation) that are not wholly contained in the immediate situation itself [Lemke 1997:49].

The quest for meaning has long preoccupied folklorists; indeed it became a central topic of discussion in the 1980s. The Eighth Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, held in 1984, was dedicated to meaning in both traditional and contemporary folklore. According to Lauri Honko, the current interest in meaning was triggered by new approaches to fieldwork, which had developed from “routine collecting into an exciting enterprise in problem-defining and problem-solving ... Personal contacts with informants and culturally rich contexts of performance are likely to raise questions concerning meaning in the observing scholar, especially in cases where the answers seem to hide in the extra-textual sphere” [Honko 1986:38]. The interpersonal nature of meaning in folklore stems from the interpersonal nature of culture itself. It is impossible to participate in a culture without sharing its signs, and members of a given society interpret signs according to their cultural patterns [Voigt 1999:118]. Folklorists perceive meaning not as a frozen construct, but as a dynamic process and a relationship between a situation (the folklore product) and a person (the listener or analyst), who experiences it [e.g. Brown 1986:92-93; Dégh 1983:147-48; Honko 1986a:40-41; Honko 1986b:99]. The degree of variation in meaning depends upon genre and context. Mary-Ellen Brown points out that less formal genres, performed and communicated in secular, informal contexts, are more likely to have multiple interpretations than more formal genres [Brown 1986:92]. This statement applies to the genre of personal narratives discussed in this essay. As a genre, personal narratives combine the features of communal

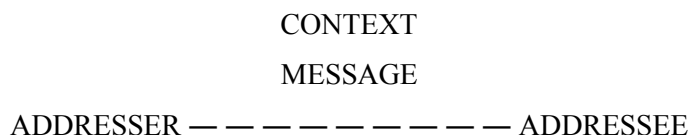
and private folklore [Dolby-Stahl 1985]. On the one hand they give listeners a glimpse of the storyteller's "inner life" and give access to his or her private thoughts and feelings; on the other hand they reflect systems of knowledge and meanings, symbolic templates and sets of values and beliefs which are culture-specific and shared by a given community.

The aim of this essay is to show both the process and the outcome of changes in meaning in the personal narratives of former Soviet citizens in Israel. These are a popular sub-genre of immigrant folklore. The source material for the essay came from face-to-face interviews conducted in 1999-2002 with immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union (FSU). The total sample comprised 119 interviews with 138 immigrants from the 1990s, amounting to approximately eighty hours of recording, transcribed in full.⁽¹⁾ In several cases family members and friends preferred group interviews to individual ones, and this accounts for the mismatch in the numbers. The interviews were conducted in Russian, the mother tongue of both interviewees and interviewers. All the participants in this study, as well as the authors, emigrated to Israel in the 1990s. The subjects were found in "snow-ball" fashion. The contexts of the interviews varied; some conversations were held in the homes of interviewers or interviewees, others in offices, still others in public places, such as parks or beaches. In general, the interviews present personal narratives that included such subgenres as memorates, novellas, and supernatural tales (*bylichki*). Additionally, they incorporate traditional and contemporary folklore genres such as jokes, proverbs, and satiric verses (a popular genre of Soviet urban folklore) [Belousov 1998:545-57]. Besides narratives proper, that is to say, complete and structured stories [Labov and Waletzky 1966; Labov, 1972], the interviews contain reflective monologues and dialogue exchanges. Seventy one stories told in the course of the interviews have been selected for preservation in the Israeli Dov Noy Folktale Archive (IFA). The folklore of immigration is one of the central themes in the IFA holdings. Among the main criteria used for selecting personal narratives for IFA is their structural and thematic proximity to traditional and contemporary folklore as well as the use of images derived from it. Most of the texts are in Hebrew, but in the last two decades stories have tended to be recorded in the language of the original. If a narrative is in Yiddish, Arabic, Russian and so on, it is preserved in that language as well as in Hebrew or English translation. To date, approximately 500 texts have been recorded in Russian.

Additional sources used in the analysis are the authors' own diaries containing ethnographic observations, material drawn from the Russian mass media, Russian-language newspapers in Israel, and Russian-language internet discussion groups.

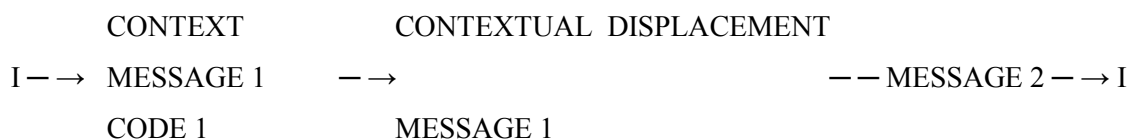
Scholars interested in culture are often reproached for over-theorizing, their remoteness from life and concrete cases, as well as an excessive emphasis on artifacts, such as magazines, films or academic books [Billig 1997:205]. Our approach is different: we concentrate on our subjects' life experiences, their feelings and thoughts, and turn to cultural artifacts to explain how shared meanings and views evolve. Today, when the communicative channels of folklore have changed and become less dependent on oral transmission, storytellers often reproduce or allude to the media and various products of popular culture [Kvideland 1990:17].

The understanding of culture in all its complex forms is inseparable from the study of communication. This is why the concepts and models developed by communication theorists have been transferred and applied to culturology [see Berry and Epstein, 1999: 18-22, on the parallels and differences between culturology and cultural studies]. One of the better known communication models is that proposed by Roman Jakobson in the article “Linguistics and Poetics” [Jakobson 1960:353].



$$\begin{array}{c} \text{CONTACT} \\ \text{CODE} \end{array}$$

The prominent Soviet culturologist and semiotician, Iurii Lotman, warned researchers against simplifications in the application of this model to culturological research. He regarded autocommunication, or “internal speech” (the term introduced by Lev Vygotskii) as an independent communication model. In the process of external communication, or in the “I-He” system, a text is introduced, encoded in the code’s system, transmitted and decoded. Given that communication seldom occurs without any interference, we frequently observe a decrease in information. In the process of internal communication, given a text that is encoded in a certain system, another code is introduced and the text is transformed. As a result of interaction with the new code an increase in information occurs. While in external communication the code constitutes the constant and the text is the variable, in internal communication the code constitutes the variable, and the texts differ at entrance and exit [Lotman 1977]. The scheme of communication in this case looks more complicated:



Lotman discussed the two communication systems in their application to fiction, while we are concerned with intercultural research into personal narratives. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are akin to diaries, which belong to the internal communication model “I-I.” In telling the interviewer the story of his/her immigration, an informant is trying to make sense of the past, to re-think and re-interpret it in light of experience acquired in the new country. Little wonder that many of the interviewees expressed gratitude for the opportunity of sorting out their experiences during an eventful and difficult period in their lives. On the other hand an interview is an external communication of the “I-He” type, or in this case, “I-She,” as both interviewees are women. If we take into account that each of the two types of communication includes its own constants and variables, in our interviews the number of variables increases: informants try to make sense of their past for

themselves; in this way a new code is introduced and at the same time the message is transmitted to another person, the interviewer. The constants are the language of communication, Russian, and a background knowledge of the realities of life in the FSU, Israel and the immigrant community. As Scollon and Scollon maintain, language is inherently ambiguous. In order to communicate we must always leap to conclusions about the speaker's meaning. We draw inferences from two main sources: the language used and our knowledge of the world. Furthermore, an essential element of this knowledge is our expectations of what people normally say in such circumstances [Scollon, Scollon 1995:10].

A degree of background knowledge is essential in formulating interview questions as well as for understanding and interpreting the answers. Ignoring interviewees' past experience can lead to misunderstandings and even a breakdown in communication. Moreover, in scholarly research it can lead to ambiguous results. A case in point are some of the sociological studies of immigrants from the FSU conducted in Israel. Questions about their education are based on the Israeli system and take twelve years' schooling as one of the basic categories. In inquiring into religious practices, the categories proposed are also those consistent with the Israeli situation: very religious, religious, traditional, non-religious [Ben-Rafael 1997:368]. The language of the question notwithstanding (Russian, Hebrew, English), the sense of these questions varies widely for addressers and addressees, as their different background knowledge functions here as the code. For an Israeli addressee, in this example the researcher, twelve years' education means that a respondent graduated from high school. For the addresser, the respondent from the FSU conscientiously answering the question about his/her educational level, the meaning of the category is obscure, because the length of study in various institutions of secondary and higher education was eight, ten, five or four years, but never twelve. As a result, to a former Soviet citizen twelve years' education could mean any one of the following:

- (i) Secondary school (ten years) plus two years at university
- (ii) Secondary school plus a two-year technical college (*tekhnikum*) training, e.g. a machine-building or teacher-training college
- (iii) "Incomplete" secondary school (eight years) plus four years at technical college
- (iv) Secondary school followed by vocational school, giving training for a variety of occupations (as turners, woodworkers, cooks, seamstresses, etc.)

To illustrate how misunderstandings caused by the different interpretation of concepts may arise, we quote a story told by Anatolii P.(2) Interpretation is understood here as the ability to extract appropriate meanings from signs and/or texts, and which involves familiarity with the meanings of signs in specific contexts, with the type of code to which they belong, and with the nature of their referents [Danesi 1999:26]. Anatolii believes that he was mistreated by a clerk in the Ministry of Education. The basis of the conflict was the discrepancy between the ten- and twelve-year school systems and the difference in the grading system for knowledge, percentages in Israel and a five-point system in the USSR.

Anatolii P., 26, emigrated from Leningrad in 1990, now living in Haifa and working as a sound operator (IFA 22054): And then there was school, on the first of September. Oh, yeah, and we go to *Misrad*

Hachinuch (Hebrew for Ministry of Education) And they say to me something like, “Well, well, fellow, you are... you are a sort of Down (Anatolii refers to Down syndrome.) Yeah, that is, this ... Well, and where was it? What building was it in? In Shekem? There was some *misrad* (Hebrew for office) in the building, and this old fart was sitting there. He had been sitting there for at least 150 years. And he says to my parents something like, “Well, well, he can’t go into the eleventh grade, he’ll hardly cope in the tenth.”

Interviewer: What made him think that?

Anatolii: Well, he was looking at my grades: “Yes, the grades are bad.” And I had 5 in English and 5 in sports. The rest were also sort of okay; that is 4 in geometry, well, 3 in algebra, 4 in Russian, 3 in chemistry, 3 in physics, 4 in biology, and a good behavior report. And yet he...and I see that my mum is looking at me like she was ready to bury me alive on the spot. That is, the situation is such that the best thing would have been to spit on his bald patch, but my mother is looking at me as though it’s all my fault. And what’s my fault? That he thinks that...and he automatically signs me up for the tenth grade!

Interviewer: That is, you...

Anatolii: That is nobody asked me. He immediately said, “You won’t be able to study.”

Interviewer: And age-wise were you going to be in the 11th grade?

Anatolii: Yes, I was going to be in the eleventh grade. Because in Russia I, sort of, had finished the tenth grade. In terms of a 12-year system I had finished the tenth grade. Although I had been studying for nine years, I had finished the tenth grade, and according to my age, I ought to be in the eleventh grade.

Interviewer: But he didn’t let you ...

Anatolii: No, he didn’t. And he was such a... but his eyes were SO KIND, SO KIND... Like in the joke about Grandpa Lenin. He (Lenin) is walking along the street with a loaf of bread in his hands. And there are hungry ...children there, they’re hungry and they say: “Grandpa, give us ...Grandpa Lenin, give us some bread.” “Get lost, kids, get lost.” But his eyes were SO KIND, SO KIND.

Anatolii’s integration into Israeli society was long and painful. He had resented the idea of immigration, and his first encounters with bureaucracy reinforced his rejection of Israel. The clerk may have acted with the best intentions and tried to prevent the new immigrant from falling behind his new classmates. He acted in terms of the twelve-year system, not thinking that nine-years’ education with grades that were mostly good or fair were equivalent to ten-years’ schooling in Israel. But the decision to “demote” Anatolii and put him into a class with younger students had the opposite effect. Both the interviewee and his mother said that it had demotivated him, and for a while he lost interest even in his favorite courses. Nine years after the incident, Anatolii was as upset as if he had suffered the unfairness the day before. It pained him that he was helpless vis a vis the clerk and that his mother chose not to support him. He compensated for his feeling of helplessness by using violent language in the narrative.

This passage is a good example of how the laws of oral narration formulated by Olrik function in personal narratives [Olrik 1965]. Firstly, it follows the Law of Opening and Closing: Anatolii divides up his story with an introduction and ends it with a joke summing up his experience. Secondly, the Law of Two to a

Scene leaves Anatolii's mother silent in the background. The active participants are the narrator and the official, and Anatolii uses direct speech to render the conversation. This enriches his performance as he imitates the clerk's body language and intonation. And thirdly, we see here multiple manifestations of the law of contrast: one is old, the other is young; the clerk has long tenure in Israel and knows how to pull the strings, while the family of newcomers has no experience or understanding of how things work in the new country, and finally, the bureaucrat is powerful and the immigrant is powerless.

In this passage we also see several features characteristic of the speech behavior of contemporary Russian speakers. The Russian linguist, T. M. Nikolaeva, classifies them as a tendency to enlarge facts and events; a dislike of single concrete facts; and a dislike of precise information [Nikolaeva 2000:123]. Firstly, we note Anatolii's tendency to hyperbolize, something typical of folk narrative: the clerk had been in that job for over 150 years, his mother was so angry that she was ready to bury her son alive, and the narrator was "diagnosed" an imbecile.(3) Typically, embellishment and exaggeration are used in describing unpleasant experiences, bad expectations, unfair treatment; hence the persistence of litany in the repertoire of speech genres among contemporary Russian speakers [Nikolaeva 2000, Reis 1997]. At the beginning of the story Anatolii repeatedly uses impersonal constructions. Although a characteristic feature of Russian syntax, in the context of this passage it has an additional feature presenting the narrator as confronting a multitude of anonymous subversive "they" figures. The multitude of hedge words, such as "well," "like," "sort of," "something of the sort," the repetition of the hypothetical form "as if" and false starts make Anatolii's statements imprecise and uncertain.

Instead of directly evaluating the situation, Anatolii cracks a joke about Lenin which functions as a commentary to his own story. As Lutz Röhrich observes, the joke seems to be the most important and vivid genre of folklore narrative in modern society, encompassing all sides of life, and which is determined socially as well as culturally and individually [Röhrich 1990:127, 135]. This genre was particularly important for a politically suppressed society such as the Soviet Union, where many themes were taboo in any other type of discourse. The most successful jokes were so often told, that like proverbs they acquired semiotic power. Many of our interviewees allude to them to describe situations and evaluate people and events. The pervasiveness of allusions to jokes is characteristic not only of informal discourse. Strikingly, many social scientists writing today about the Soviet and post-Soviet periods allude to the jokes in the same fashion as our informants [e.g. Brym 1994:21; Gitelman 1997:22; Remennick 1998:256; Rotenberg 2000:214; Ryvkina 1996:43, 44].(4)

A joke about Lenin cited by Anatolii was from a popular series of celebrity jokes. Official Soviet propaganda strove to create an idealized image of a wise, kind, strict but fair leader. The duality of the image has roots in the Christian tradition. Analyzing the evolution of Lenin's image in Soviet literature and propaganda, Mikhail Vaiskopf has shown that some of the leader's features emphasizing his power over the world were modeled on Jahweh, while his humanity imitated Christ's. His dual personality was frequently reflected in the description of his eyes, both kind and strict [Vaiskopf 2001:342]. The image of "the most humane of all humans" (Maiakovskii's oft-quoted phrase), however, was in sharp contrast with the folk image

of Lenin. Party leaders, as well as famous writers, artists, and prominent scientists, were also mythologized. Their biographies in school books were generally reduced to a listing of their moral virtues. In reaction to official ideology, a vast repertoire of jokes demythologizing the iconic figures of Lenin, Pushkin, Turgenev, Tolstoi, and so on circulated widely in the country. According to Muriel Saville-Troike, the use of metaphors, proverbs and jokes is a time-honored communication strategy for depersonalizing criticism [Saville-Troike 1984:36]. Our other informants, as well as participants in internet discussion groups, also use jokes and sayings widely, not just in order to express a criticism but also to prove a point, generalize a situation, or classify a particular experience. In many cases instead of telling the whole joke, narrators give only the punchline, which shows that the joke is used as a sign familiar to the addressee. In the nineteenth century the Russian philologist Alexander Potebnia was already analyzing the way folklore and literary texts such as fables are abbreviated in everyday communication [Potebnia 1976:509-29]. The modern-day Russian folklorist K. A. Bogdanov has expanded Potebnia's ideas, showing that the genres found in communication today have been expanded by allusions to phrases from popular songs and movies, as well as political slogans. He points out that "mutual understanding in a group is inconceivable without a silent presupposition that these texts are well known" [Bogdanov 2001:48].

As we have noted, the religiosity of our informants is also difficult to discuss through concepts appropriate for the veteran population of Israel. A high percentage of immigrants from the FSU to Israel are secular. In the perestroika years, when anti-religious propaganda in the USSR ceased, the population began to show an interest in religion. Jews started attending synagogues, to participate in Hanukkah and Seder Night "parties," while Russians, Ukrainians and others were no longer afraid of baptizing their children or going to church on major Christian holidays. This, however, did not affect the everyday life of large sectors of the urban population. At the same time there was an explosion of interest in extra-sensory phenomena, healing, and UFOs. Eclecticism of beliefs is characteristic of the post-Soviet period. As R. Ryvkina remarks, their concepts often do not reflect a religious worldview, but a general philosophical belief that "there is something somewhere guiding our life" [Ryvkin 1996:59]. In our sample this applied to Jews and non-Jews alike. Here we quote from the interview with an ethnic Russian, Inna P.

Inna P., 48, emigrated from Cheliabinsk, Russia, in 1992, now living in Haifa, an economist now employed as a cleaning woman (IFA 22053)

Interviewer: How do you feel in a country in which religion, well, is so closely connected to the state?

Inna: I feel good about it, because (pause) in some sense, I am a believer myself. I, I was baptized. And so my attitude is reasonable, even good. Yes, not simply reasonable, but good. Well, probably, with those Orthodox Jews ... they sort of, but I don't really, they don't have much to do with me. But religion, I, because I believe, I believe all of this. Well, not everything. But in any case, I think God created man; that is, he sent us. And we, with all our, with all our *baayotami* (Russified Hebrew for problems), with all the problems and well... No, my attitude is very positive.

Interviewer: Do you know that there is an Orthodox church in Haifa, a Russian Orthodox church?

Inna: Oh, oh, I was there once. And I didn't like it. In what sense? They simply didn't let me in. I learned...

Interviewer: But why?

Inna: Yes, I learned, the church is in Carmel (a district in Haifa), well ...

Interviewer: On *Shderot haNassi* and ...

Inna: Yes, Boris and I went there together, er, because, er, I don't remember why. Probably, when Keren (Inna's granddaughter) was born, and then again when she was five, and something was not right. Someone had put the evil eye on her, and we had (pause) to go to church and light a candle, or something of the sort. And, ha, excuse me, but I think the guy who came to the gate was a KGB officer. I rang, the gate was locked, I rang and he snubbed me completely, and that's all. And it was very ... So now, if I want to talk to God, and sometimes I do, if I want to do it, then I go to Stella Maris (a Catholic church in Haifa), and light a candle there. I apologize if it is not the right thing, because it is, well it's not Orthodox, it's Catholic. Well, God is One, and I light a candle there, I sit there for a while, I pray in my own way, because I don't know (any prayers) by heart. I don't know how to pray, but, but I sort of, talk to Him in my own way, I tell Him whatever there is to tell, and I walk around a bit. In the past, I don't know, whether it is because of the Arabs, or because of our people, but in the past there was a big, long lane near Stella Maris, and there were all those religious statues on it, well, you know those religious statues. And now, because they began roasting shashlyks there and all sorts of things, the alley is closed. I used to go for walks there. And the most important thing is that you walk there without being afraid that someone might jump out at you or something. Well, but the Orthodox church, I did, you know, after they gave me such a welcome, I didn't even try to go back.

As we can judge from the passage, Inna's notion of Christianity is vague and mixed up with folk belief, such as the power of the evil eye.⁽⁵⁾ She is not familiar with dogma, nor does it matter to her which church she goes to, so long as she is well treated, can perform the few rites she knows, and spend some time in peace and quiet. She is apologetic about her non-standard approach to church-going and ignorance of prayers. She admits she is a believer "in some sense." What matters for her is her hope of receiving protection and help in coping with her problems. Such an attitude to religion is characteristic of many ex-Soviets, both inside Russia and out. Soviet ideology always presented the state as the protector of its citizens and guarantor of their future. Although in the last decades of Soviet power such propaganda was derided, it still impacts on psychology. Disappointed in its promises and exposed to new realities of insecurity and the necessity of making choices, people turned to religion for protection and comfort. As we see from this passage, church premises can also be perceived as the only place where the immigrant feels physically safe, even if this feeling is illusory.

Referring to the hostile behavior of the official of the Russian Orthodox Church, Inna likens him to a KGB officer. Many stories circulated in the USSR about the involvement of the KGB in the affairs of the church. Our narrator transfers this mythology to the Israeli soil, and makes sense of the new realities in terms of symbols related to her pre-immigration experience.

One further observation relating to attitudes to religion among the immigrants is based on several interviews with religious Christians. These interviewees are much more tolerant of Judaism than secular Jews. Although few subjects expressed militantly atheistic ideas, lack of respect for religion and the religious was not uncommon. And this brings us to the next topic, that is, what constitutes Jewishness for our informants?

In the Soviet Union Jews were viewed as an ethnic group with shared genetic characteristics. The systematic destruction of Jewish cultural institutions, the persecution of teachers of Hebrew and discrimination against religious believers made several generations of Soviet people, including the Jews themselves, forget the religious culture that defines and unites Jews wherever they live [Garfinkle 1997:5].

Arkadii T., 57, emigrated from Kharkov, an engineer now working as a home attendant

Arkadii: I thought, well, it might have been a primitive idea ... I thought that Jewishness is just blood. Let's compare, say Christians. Say he is a Catholic. Say, in England, Poland, former Russia or, say, Africa or Australia. But this African guy, from, say, Mozambique, doesn't become English, French or a Pole. It's just his faith. Well, with us, as we see, it doesn't really matter where you come from. A black Ethiopian or a *Taimanets*... In fact, how do you call a *taimanets*?

Interviewer: A Yemeni. *Taimanim* are people from Yemen.

Arkadii: Yemeni? Well, so this is what matters. The main thing is your faith.

Interviewer: And have you accepted that?

Arkadii: Yes. Absolutely, and without any ... Well, after all, why not? If this is what matters ... then may it be as long as he is, as they say, a true *ben-adam*, a proper human being.

It remains difficult for many immigrants to grapple with the concept of the Jew. In the Soviet Union the concepts of nationality and citizenship were separated, hence Arkadii's inability to understand that an African from a former French colony can be a French citizen. This misconception is not an idiosyncratic one, but was reported by other informants.

Apart from genetic features, our informants mentioned language, and Yiddish in particular, as the determining factor in defining the Jews. This is how it was put by Tamara Z., a fifty one-year-old engineer, from Zhitomir in Ukraine, now living in Haifa and working as a home attendant: "I still think that Jewishness, it must unite all Jews. Culture and everything should be united. And I think that if someone is Jewish, he must know Yiddish. And if he doesn't know Yiddish, he is not really a Jew."

A number of other interviews reveal that the definition of a Jew is based on an idealized image and includes such features as intellect, a sense of responsibility and humane character. Thus Arkadii is ready to come to terms with the fact that dark-skinned Yemenis and Ethiopians are Jewish if they are "proper human beings;" one other informant, Albert R. goes so far as to imply that malice cannot and should not be expressed in the "Jewish language." Equally mythical is the image of the Jew presented in the following excerpt from an interview with Anastasia N., 61, a biochemist who emigrated in 1990 from Kharkov, Ukraine, and now lives in Haifa: "The only thing which really upsets me here is that ... I had always thought that en masse Jews were very

intelligent. Intelligent and sensible; that is like Prometheus, seeing things ahead of time. And they turned out to be Epimetheus, every one, I think. Well, with few exceptions, just like everywhere else.”

The idealization of Jews as a group, which may have been a way of compensating for social inequality in the USSR, existed side by side with the desire of many Soviet Jews to distance themselves from everything Jewish. In some sense the Soviet legal system even encouraged Jews to give up their official ethnic identity. In the USSR children of mixed marriages could choose their mother's or father's ethnicity when they received their ID at the age of 16. Always prepared for a deterioration of the political situation and new surges of anti-Semitism, most parents instructed their children to register as non-Jewish. According to ethno-sociological research in the late 1980s, 90-95% of children from mixed marriages were registered as non-Jews [Dymerskaya-Tsigelman 2000:39].

The desire to undo all ties with Jewry was derided by Jews and non-Jews alike, and triggered the emergence of numerous jokes and sayings. Many of them were related to physical features, family names and patronymics. Let us compare two examples. In the first a teacher comes to class and says, “Children, tomorrow we are to host an Arab delegation. Rabinowitz, Haimovitz and you, Ivanov on your mother's side, stay at home tomorrow.” The other example is the jocular phrase “Ivanov, a Jew on his mother's side.” The two phrases look almost identical, but refer to two different situations. In the joke, “Ivanov on his mother's side” has a Jewish father so he is not a halachic Jew (i.e. not a Jew according to Jewish law). Nevertheless, he, too, is subject to anti-Semitic abuse. As a rule, children bore their father's name, although they could choose their mother's family name instead. But, as emerges from the joke, the mere change of name would not deceive a vigilant anti-Semite. In the second example, the father is Russian and the name has not been changed. Paradoxically, having a Jewish father made a person more of a Jew in Soviet terms. Although any person with a Jewish mother is a halachic Jew, in the Soviet mind the name Ivanov was only for Russians, and it was as much of a symbol of Russianness as Rabinowitz was a symbol of Jewishness; so a Jew bearing the prototypical Russian name, Ivanov, is a hilarious absurdity. At the same time both phrases could be used by Jews to indicate that these “ethnic marginals” belonged to the in-group and so were not rejected.

Boastfully calling itself “the family of brotherly nations,” the Soviet Union bred interethnic intolerance and xenophobia, which was frequently reflected in the language. It is from the Soviet Union that Russia inherited an underdeveloped culture of interethnic relations, in which citizens of a country are treated not as citizens but as “bioids,” species with different blood and facial features [Ryvkina 1996:137].

Soviet social realities triggered the appearance of the concepts of “half” and a “quarter” with reference to ethnicity. In addition, the expression “Jew on her mother's/father's side” were often used in earnest. Our sample provided the following example, recorded from Boris N., 59-year-old retired engineer, who emigrated from Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 1999, and now lives in Afula. He remarked: “My daughter [pause] went to university. Her friends seemed a peculiar bunch of people; that is, well, there were all sorts there, Uzbeks and Jews, and you know ... And then she goes and marries a Jew, well, a Jew on his father's side, yeah, a Jew on his father's side.” During the interview Boris, an ethnic Russian, boasted that all his life he had Jewish friends, who

always considered him “one of ours.” Yet, describing his daughter’s multi-ethnic environment he refers to its denizens as a “peculiar bunch of people” and people of “all sorts,” both phrases with slightly pejorative connotations. The outcome of such friendships, marriage to a “Jew on his father’s side” did not enthuse Boris, because it increased the possibility that his daughter, a “Jew on her mother’s side,” would emigrate, a possibility other family members were not considering at that time.

The concepts of “halves” outlived the Soviet system and is still widely used in the immigrant community. Recently one of the authors overheard the following conversation between two workers in a supermarket. One of them explained to her colleague how to make Uzbek dishes such as *plov*, *shurpa*, *hamsa*, and so on. The latter asked in surprise:

“How do you know all this?”

“Because I am half Muslim; after all, my father comes from Central Asia.”

[Cited from the authors’ ethnographic diaries.]

The far more intense exposure to Jewish culture in Israel than in the FSU, and even the knowledge acquired in the process of studying in Israel, have still proved powerless to expel the distorted Soviet concepts of ethnicity, ethnic identity, nationality and religion. Here are some more examples from our sample:

Leonid B., 36: “According to my ID I’m Belarusian.”

Ekaterina R., 24: “My father’s classmate ... and incidentally, if you are interested in nationality, he was a Muslim.”

Iakov K., 80, speaking to his colleagues on his retirement, said that in the Soviet Union he had never concealed his nationality and added, “I have never been religious, I have never been a Zionist, but I have always been a Jew!”

[The latter example is cited from the authors’ ethnographic diaries.]

A student from the University of Haifa submitted a course project, in which she interviewed immigrants from the FSU and then analyzed their narratives. On the form providing personal data about her interviewees she described one of them as “half Jewish, half Christian.”

Just as the new meaning of “halves” has gradually spread from the description of Jews to other ethnicities and even religions, another cliché of the Soviet era used in talking about Jews has become one element in the xenophobic vocabulary of the post-Soviet period. In the Soviet press and public discourse the word “Jew” was carefully avoided, as if it were pejorative. Instead, Soviet propaganda coined the phrase “persons of the Jewish nationality.” In his collection of words and expressions characteristic of Soviet newspeak, Benedict Sarnov refers to this absurd combination as a euphemism, a manifestation of the Soviet hypocrisy. The word “Jew” disappeared from public discourse in the USSR as if mentioned it was something shameful. But all its replacements, “rootless cosmopolitan” a “zionists,” and a “person of Jewish nationality” were political labels and were continuously used to unmask “enemies of the people”. Sarnov remarks they were no more than calques of “kike’s snout” [Sarnov 2002:221-27]. In the 1990s, the same “euphemism” was applied to people from the Caucasus. Whether they were Chechens, Ossetians or Circassians, they all came to be called

“persons of Caucasian nationality,” or “persons from the Southern nationalities.” Needless to say, these are mythological constructs. It is typical of an ethnocentric worldview to see various “others” as a uniform group, for example *aziaty*, *chornye*, *churki*, *uzbeki* (Asians, blacks, lumps, Uzbeks), all of them referring to people of non-European appearance. Such a usage not only expands the meaning of the words, it makes its connotational components prevail over denotational. Members of various ethnic minorities are sensitive to the contempt expressed in such labels, and this is reflected in folklore. Alexandra L., a pensioner from Moscow, told us a joke, the essence of which is a pun: the Russian word *litso* has several meanings, among them “face” and “person.” The joke runs as follows: “Advertisement: I would like to exchange the face of a Caucasian national for a kike’s snout. Additional payment guaranteed.” Since the beginning of the unrest in the Caucasus (ethnic conflicts in Nagornyi Karabakh and Abkhazia, and above all the Chechen war), xenophobic attitudes towards people from the Caucasus have become more marked than towards Jews. The joke implies that the social status of the Jew has greatly improved thanks to the possibility of emigration from Russia.

We have assembled an entire collection of texts containing the original cliché and its paraphrases. These range from academic essays to newspaper articles, published in both Russia and Israel. For example, when analyzing various waves of emigration from Russia, the linguist E. A. Zemskaja writes, “The third wave, to a large extent, consists of dissidents, persons of the Jewish nationality, and representatives of various creative and intellectual professions, who had to leave or were expelled from the USSR” [Zemskaja 2001:41]. The statement seems peculiar, not only because a linguist uses in earnest a cliché that has become notorious for its xenophobic connotations, but also because it implicitly includes Jews in the groups opposing Soviet power.

As a hint at the special status enjoyed by the residents of Moscow, a journalist from the popular weekly *Argumenty i Fakty* (Arguments and Facts) referred to them as “persons of Moscow nationality,” and in an article on Islamic terrorism the same paper expressed concern about the the rapid growth of the Arab population: “Today, sixty out of every hundred people in the world are “persons of the Arab-Asian nationality” [*Argumenty i Fakty* 2001:no. 42]. Increasing xenophobia in Russia mostly targets non-whites and are supported by the actions of the authorities. As Alaina Lemon has observed, in the post-Soviet years those termed “blacks” and “southerners” are routinely rounded up and driven out of Moscow for document violations [Lemon 1998:46].

In a growing number of texts allusions to the cliché are used to criticize and mock xenophobia. The Russian historian V. Diatlov entitled a chapter of his book on ethnic relations in Siberia: “Persons of geographic nationality: Migrants from the Caucasus in the socio-economic life of Irkutsk.” He points out that the gradually evolving notion of a *kavkazets* (a Caucasian) now frequently includes people from Central Asia [Diatlov 2000:91]. Here too, we can see the meaning of the word expanding.

In an article about the various difficulties confronting non-Jews in Israel, the Israeli journalist V. Martynova writes that “persons of a ‘mistaken nationality’ still cannot get married in Israel or invite members of their family to visit them” [Martynova 2002]. The most curious example of all is the title of an article by the literary critic Iu. Barabash, “‘Persons of the Basurman nationality’ in the writing of Gogol’ and Schevchenko” [Barabash 1999]. *Basurman* is an archaic word used to denote someone alien, a person of a different faith,

primarily Muslims. In contemporary speech it is used pejoratively to refer to people from Central Asia, Muslim clergy and even drug traffickers from Central Asia [Mokienko, Nikitina 2001:53]. Thus the Soviet stereotype can even be applied to the analysis of pre-Soviet literature, where it requires the addressees to make complex transformations, and interpret historically distant texts within the framework of the same social code [Hodge, Kress 1988:162-68]. Importantly, the greater the semantic disparity between the attribute and the noun “nationality” in these examples, the more complex the transformations, the more intense the ironic power of the allusion. Lauri Honko points to the importance of such linguistic phenomena as implications, allusion and ellipses for folkloristic research. They “fill” sentences with meaning via the context; it is impossible to read the meaning only from the wording of the sentences, because they act as signals carrying the transformal meaning to the addressee [Honko 1986a:41].

Returning to the self-perception of the Soviet Jews, it would be an exaggeration to say that their Jewishness was reduced merely to a stamp in their ID. Many spoke about some elements of the Jewish tradition that had been preserved in families despite all the obstacles. But the meaning of the tradition had undergone significant changes, often remaining obscure even to those who tried to observe it:

Arkadii T., 57, an engineer by training, works as a home attendant, while Iulia T., 50, an engineer by training, washes dishes in a hospital

Interviewer: Was your family interested in its Jewish roots?

Arkadii: Yes, yes, we ... we were forced to ... because beginning with our ID, from the “fifth paragraph” ... and very often “they wouldn’t hit your ID, but would hit you in the mug.”

Yulia: No, Arkadii, the question was, whether your family had observed any Jewish traditions.

Arkadii: I believe the Jewish traditions were observed in many intelligentsia families. We tried to observe such holidays as *Pesach*. We would try to get *matza*, tried to make a meal. Of course, we kept all these memories, and had some idea of what *Pesach* is all about. And the same was true about *Rosh Hashanah* in the fall. And, of course, we knew that festivals like *Purim* and *Hanukkah* exist. And we even enjoyed being different, particularly with our friends. We liked it because when we were students, we mostly mixed with Jewish kids. And those who knew at least something would even show off their knowledge of Jewish traditions and the Jewish way of life.

Arkadii’s misunderstanding of the interviewer’s question is not accidental. He habitually interprets everything Jewish in terms of nationality, rather than as culture and a distinctive way of life. Moreover, unwittingly, he reveals that he perceived his Jewishness as an act of coercion on the part of the state, and not as an internalized and consciously chosen identity. Arkadii mentions the notorious “fifth entry,” the fifth line on the Soviet identity card, which indicated the bearer’s nationality. Although it was to be found on all IDs, it came to connote Jewishness, and was used in such expressions as “he has the fifth entry,” “he didn’t get this job because of the fifth entry,” “he/she is an invalid of the fifth group/entry.” Martynova’s definition of non-Jews in Israel as “persons of a mistaken nationality,” which we quoted earlier, is a milder version of “invalids of the fifth entry,” and implies that their situation mirrors that of the Jews in the Soviet Union. The connotative

meaning of the “fifth entry” was ultimately fixed in the language after the anti-Semitic practices of the Soviet authorities were derided in a song by the prominent poet and cult figure of the 1960s and 1970s, Vladimir Vysotskii. The song is about two drunkards, a Russian and a Jew, who decide to immigrate to Israel. The Russian is granted permission to emigrate, while the Jew is not, because of the “fifth entry.”

Arkadii implies that Jews, including “halves,” were always ready to confront anti-Semitism. He alludes to the Soviet joke built on the antithesis of official documents and physical features; Russianness as expressed by the prototypical name Ivanov versus disguised Jewishness:

“Ivanov, don’t go to Lenin Street.”

“What’s up?”

“They beat Jews up there.”

“But what does it have to do with me? It says in my ID that I am Russian.”

“You don’t understand. They won’t hit your ID, they’ll hit your bloody mug.”

When Arkadii’s wife clarifies the interviewer’s question about his interest in his Jewish roots, he does not give a direct answer about his family, but prefers to generalize. It is not clear from his enumeration of the Jewish holidays whether he was familiar just with their names, or really knew their history and meaning. The only exception is Passover, which is consistent with what we heard from other subjects: even secular and assimilated Jews knew about that holiday, and tried to get or even make their own *matza*. Arkadii’s answer is another example of Russian speakers’ dislike of concrete facts and precise information that we mentioned earlier.

The other interesting motif in this extract is that Arkadii links the observance of tradition to social class. In claiming that it was the prerogative of the intelligentsia he turns tradition into an elitist practice. Moreover, even meager knowledge of it would elevate someone in the eyes of his or her peers. Judging from other interviews, Arkadii is wrong in his assumptions about the role of the intelligentsia in the preservation of Jewish tradition.

Our observations are confirmed by sociological data: there is an inverse relationship between the level of education and involvement in Jewish cultural life. The higher the level of education, the less intense is the involvement [Ryvkina 1996:54]. As is the case in many cultures, it was the older generation who will not let a persecuted culture die; moreover, very often it was barely literate old folk, who still remembered and tried to observe at least some elements of the tradition, although in a manner that deviated from mainstream Judaism. It was less important to observe the tradition correctly, than to refer to it in some way. That is why our informants’ interpretation of the concepts relating to tradition is loose, and allows for deviations which would be unacceptable for true observers as the next two excerpts illustrate:

Dana L., 23, from Rostov-on-Don, now living in Haifa, and studying at the university there

Dana: In principle, almost everybody in our family is Jewish. That is, both my parents are Jews with roots. It is very ... that is, I have known that I am Jewish since childhood.

Interviewer: Did you celebrate, did you celebrate any holidays? You observed some traditions; you have roots, haven't you? That's why I'm asking.

Dana: You know what? We didn't. But my mum intuitively separated... But here we began to observe ... Now we light candles ...

Interviewer: On the Sabbath?

Dana: Yes. And on *Yom Kippur* we try to ... We do try. For example, I've been observing the fast days since we arrived here. Well, my mum, she is not very well, but she tries to do whatever she can. We observe whatever we can.

Interviewer: Do you drive on the Sabbath?

Dana: We don't have a car, so we don't drive. That's how things are. But I do things. If I have something I need to do, I do it, schoolwork, for example. But in Russia, say, my mum intuitively separated meat and dairy products. She simply thought it wasn't hygienic, it was unpleasant. So she separated dishes, although she didn't know why. And (pause) we used to eat *matza*. And there was a funny incident. An acquaintance of ours, a Russian, invited my parents, he invited them over to his place to watch movies. He had a video. And it was considered really something! But he didn't know what *matza* was. He thought it was some sort of biscuit. So he put the treat on the table. And the treat was *matza* with lard. It really does taste good.

In answering the interviewer's questions, Dana is re-considering her family's way of life. In terms of Lotman's model of internal communication, Dana codes her experience anew, when she tries to classify her behavior in the framework of her new knowledge of Jewish tradition acquired in Israel. After some hesitation she admits that, in spite of trying to be traditional, the family still fails to behave consistently, and follows only those rules which do not interfere with their habits. An interesting detail is Dana's explanation of her mother's habit of separating dishes. In their house this was viewed as a hygienic norm, rather than a religious commandment. Dana's distorted understanding of the concept of Kashrut became clear in an informal conversation with the interviewer, two years after her interview.

Interviewer: What can I offer you? I can give you white cheese with sour cream, that's the only kosher dish I can make.

Dana: Oh, are you kosher?

Interviewer: I'm not, but I understand that you are.

Dana: Well, when I said that mum used separate dishes for meat and dairy foods, I didn't mean they had to be separated in the stomach as well.

[Cited from the authors' ethnographic diaries]

Confusion of this kind is quite common, and appears in several interviews. A case in point is Elvira A., a mountain Jew from Dagestan or Azerbaijan (see note 3), who defines her family as traditional. She told us that her grandmother had kept a kosher house. Yet she would make pork steaks for the children, because she believed it was important for growing youngsters. Significantly, on such occasions she sat them at a different table from the rest of the family.

The incident involving eating *matza* with lard mentioned by Dana was not unique to her family, as is clear from an interview, recorded in 1996, with Sergei S., 42, an electrician now living in the Haifa Bay area, who emigrated from Odessa in 1990:

My mother sometimes brought *matza* from the synagogue. As a rule it took a long time to eat it up, because my family is not religious. So I would take it when I was off hiking. It is very convenient to have on a trip: it's light, easy to pack, and an excellent substitute for bread. So I told my companions, those who didn't know what *matza* was ... I explained — it was fun for me, but I did it with an earnest expression on my face — I used to tell them that these were special biscuits for paratroopers. And they accepted my story at face value. It's a bit of a blasphemy, but a *matza* sandwich with properly salted thin slices of lard makes an excellent snack.

Both Dana and Sergei obviously enjoy their stories, although Sergei qualifies his behavior as blasphemy. Playing jokes amuses them for several reasons. First, they feel they possess secret knowledge, which gives them some sense of the superiority of the initiated. Second, although they are not afraid of the consequences of violating the rules of Kashrut, forbidden fruit is sweet. In addition, Sergei enjoys telling his non-Jewish friends tall stories and tricking them into eating Jewish food.

As we have tried to show, immigrants' personal narratives, a subgenre of modern folklore, demonstrate serious changes in meaning. This occurs as a result of double change which the text and the code undergo (see Lotman's terminology cited earlier). In personal narratives some of the concepts brought from the old country and acquired in the new may have connotations greatly deviating from the denotational meaning.

The process of immigration always involves intercultural contacts, and consequently the differing assumptions of specific cultural groups are always being challenged in the process of communication. Knowledge of each other's past, habits and customs, particularly if such knowledge has been acquired in childhood and adolescence, can be an asset for society as a whole, since it will contribute to more effective negotiation of social meanings, and, hopefully, more effective intercultural communication.

The qualitative analysis of personal narratives provide folklorists and anthropologists with rich data about the culture-related meanings shared by studied groups. They can also influence relations between folkloristics and social studies. While so far folkloristics has benefited from sociological methodology, social studies seldom use the results of folklore research. The situation is gradually changing, and the attention that social scientist pay to jokes may be the first sign of this change. Interdisciplinary interaction should, however, move from the application of folkloric data in preparing questionnaires to consultations in which folklorists could assist social workers, psychologists and other professionals responsible for immigrants' integration.

NOTES

1 Twenty of the interviews were conducted by students from the University of Haifa: Hanna Shmulian,

Svetlana Berenshtein, Alina Sanina, Marina El-Kayam and Laura Abramov. They then placed these at our disposal. The rest of the interviews were conducted by the authors.

- 2 We have translated excerpts from the interviews without editing in order to preserve the specific features of oral narration and the individual style of each storyteller. We have also preserved instances of code switching. Hebrew insertions in the excerpts are italicized. Some of the interviewees were apprehensive about disclosing their identity. We have respected their views and changed all the names. The informants' age, professions, place of origin and occupation remain unaltered.
- 3 The speech of other informants also abounds in hyperbole. For example, describing the exodus of Soviet Jews in the 1990s, Inna Kh. says, "... everyone took off, just everyone who wasn't lazy ...". This phraseological unit is used to emphasize the multitude of participants in an event or activity. While talking about the loss of social status among immigrants she amplifies the phenomenon by calling them "25th-rate people." Referring to a repair job she and her husband attempted to complete on their own, Anastasia N. evaluates this modest ambition as "impudence and despair." Recounting her son's conflict with the Soviet customs, Gaiane A. refers to the episode as "tragic circumstances" and so on. In most cases informants hyperbolize negativity, be it unpleasant states and feelings, unfavorable impressions or failures.

All the researchers quoted allude to Soviet-Jewish jokes. Brym, for example reminds his readers that a well-known Russian quip defines a Jewish wife as a means of transportation. In a slightly different form the same joke appears in Ryvkina: Jewishness is not a luxury but a means of conveyance. She also quotes another joke: A man applies for a job. He is asked, "What's your nationality?" He answers, "Well, you got it right..." Gitelman alludes to Soviet Jews as "invalids of the fifth category" and so on.

Eclecticism in religious beliefs is characteristic of Jews and non-Jews alike. We would like to cite two further examples from interviews with younger informants, both from Muslim republics of the FSU. One of them, a Mountain Jew (also called Tats, living in Dagestan or Azerbaijan and speaking Judea-Tat, a dialect of Judea Persian (Farsi) [Wigoder 1989: 385]), Rasul O., 24 from Makhachkala in Dagestan, claimed that "strange as it may sound, the elementary customs of the Torah, of the Jewish Bible have been transferred to the laws of the Shariah. That's why the people of Dagestan, their laws are a combination of the laws of the mountain people (the Jews) and the Shariah, i.e. Islam." Another subject, Ekaterina R., 24, from Tashkent, considers herself Christian. Her mother is Russian and Orthodox Christian, her father Jewish. In Tashkent the family was well-integrated into the Muslim and local Uzbek cultures. Ekaterina remembers that both of her grandmothers "purified" the house, one with Jewish prayers, the other with Christian ones. Ekaterina is seeking an integral religion, and she told us about her encounter with a member of a sect claiming a symbiosis of the great religions: "Three religions are combined in this movement. The sign of this religion, and this is what she showed me, is *Magen David* (Hebrew for the "Star of David") Inside it is a cross and below is a crescent. Have you heard about it? And a person (a follower of the movement), according to what she told me, should be a Muslim by education, while the basis of law is the Torah, and the road of faith is Christian experience."

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