

Folklore As An Expression of Intercultural Communication Between Jews and Poles – King Jan III Sobieski in Jewish Legends*

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This article examines the use of Jewish legends in Poland about the Polish king Jan III Sobieski as a means of folkloristic inter-cultural communication. The two extant legends dealing with the figure of Jan Sobieski are discussed. One of the legends exists in two versions: an eighteenth century version originating in the 'Beit Ya'akov' manuscript and a second version, which was written down by the Jewish scholar of folklore B.W. Segel and published in 1899. The second legend was recorded by the Polish Armenian clergyman Barącz Sadok from the oral tradition of the Jewish community of Żółkiew. The legends are examined from various facets, such as their cultural context, the literary patterns of the culture hero, narrative roles, and their deep structure.

Many scholars have noted the cultural insularity of Polish Jewry. Chone Shmeruk put it concisely in his article about Jewish literature in Poland before the Chmielnicki insurrection of 1648–1649: “Throughout the period in question we cannot miss the absence of any evidence in Yiddish literature of contact with Polish literature or with any other literature in a Slavic language, even when we are talking about Polish bourgeois folk literature. This fact attests, *already* [emphasis added] in that period, to the spiritual insularity of the Jews in Poland and the absence of any literary and cultural contact with the host population beyond necessary commercial communication and on essential planes only” (Shmeruk 1977, 312).

Nevertheless, folklore has always served as a principal medium of intercultural communication for, as Israel Zinberg put it: “Every cultural historian knows about the honorable role that the Jews played as intermediaries in the field of European folklore,” but most of these remained as oral traditions and the few elements of this folklore material that have survived did so only by chance (Zinberg 1958–1972, 4: 89).

If we relate to intercultural communication in the broad sense of the term, we can see diverse manifestations of this kind of communication in Jewish folklore in Poland: the use of Slavic words and even the interpolation of parts of non-Jewish songs (An-Ski 1925, 171–194); the use, after Judaization, of Slavic place names (Bar-Itzhak 2001, 27–44); and the use of iconographic symbols like the Polish eagle on books and ritual objects. In addition, Jews told their folktales to Poles, who listened to and even documented them—notably the Polish author Klemens Junosza (Bar-Itzhak 1997/8, 211–238), Roman Zmorski (the story of Abraham Prochownik [Bar-Itzhak 2001, 92–100]), and the clergyman and historian Sadok Barącz (a legend about Jan Sobieski—see

* A Hebrew version of this paper was published in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore*, 22, 2002/3, 9–24.

below). The incorporation of non-Jewish historical figures in Jewish folklore is another sort of intercultural communication. They occupy two contrasting niches in the folk literature of Polish Jewry: avatars of the wicked Haman in Polish Jewry history, such as Bogdan Chmielnicki in legends about the pogroms of 1648–49; and great benefactors of the Jewish people, including personages such as Count Lubomirski, Count Potocki, King Casimir the Great, and others (Bar-Itzhak 2001, 154). Frequently these are merely supporting characters; but some, like King Jan III Sobieski, play a starring role.



Photo 1 – Portrait of Jan III Sobieski, painted by an artist from the Royal Court after 1683.

Jan Sobieski was born in 1629 and reigned from 1674 until his death in 1696. He came from a noble family whose estates were around the town of Żółkiew. In his youth, Sobieski excelled as a bold warrior. In 1665 he was appointed Grand Marshal; the next year he was named commander-in-chief of the Polish army. He won many victories on the battlefield. In 1667 he defeated the Tatars and Cossacks near Podhajce. In 1673 he routed the Ottoman Turks near Chocim—a victory that paved his way to the Polish crown (Wimmer 1979, 8).

His greatest renown derived from his victory over the Turks who were besieging Vienna in 1683. Even though he had initially pursued a pro-French foreign policy,¹ in 1683 he signed a treaty with the Emperor Leopold I, under which each party pledged to come to the aid of the other in the event of an Ottoman threat to Vienna or Cracow. Sobieski did come when needed and lifted the siege of Vienna. In the wake of his victory over the Turks he was feted as the liberator of Europe, the savior of Christianity, and a fighter for freedom. During his reign, the kingdom of Poland and Lithuania was briefly resurgent and achieved greatness for the last time in its history. This led him to be compared to Casimir the Great.

Sobieski had an acute commercial sense and was extremely well-to-do, thanks to his intelligent investments, mainly in Żółkiew, his ancestral estate, in Jaworów, and in his palace at Wilanów near Warsaw. Some attribute his good relations with his Jewish subjects to his economic policy. Others maintain that they were a product of his tolerance in matters of religion and his desire to incorporate members of all religions into Polish life (Matwijowski 1992, 128, 136).

The Jews viewed Sobieski as their paladin (Ringelblum 1933, 58; Bałaban 1936, 55). He granted them many privileges in Lithuania and Poland and defended them against the clergy and petty nobility, though not always successfully (Bałaban 1925, 317). The Jews were granted special privileges on his ancestral estate in Żółkiew as well as in Lwów. Most of the leaseholds in Żółkiew were held by Jews (Każmierczyk 1992, 121–126). He approved the establishment of a Hebrew printing press in Żółkiew (Goldberg 2000, 48). Two Jews attained high office in the royal court and became thorns in the eyes of the other courtiers and the clergy; we shall return to them later.

We should note that Sobieski was also known as a patron of culture and the arts. A number of sources remark his great interest in the East in general and in Jewish folklore in particular (Każmierczyk 1992, 121).

Sobieski's fabled victory over the Turks outside Vienna garnered him an important place in European folklore. Jerzy Śliżiński (1979)² collected literary works and folklore of various peoples about him—Czech, Slovak, Serbian, Croatian, Slovene, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Austrian, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, Romanian, and Greek. These depict Sobieski chiefly as the savior of Christianity from the Muslims.

His Turkish campaigns are prominent in Polish folklore (Kryżanowski 1977, 108), but he also features as a benevolent ruler over his people (Żyga 1974, 18–26). In addition, he is a character in humorous stories (Kryżanowski 1977, 108–147).

Reading the stories and praises about him in the folklore of Poland and other European nations raises the question of Sobieski's image in Jewish folklore. We might assume

¹ Some attribute this to his French wife. See, for example, Śliżiński 1979, p. 2.

² I would like to thank Prof. Olga Goldberg for her assistance in this matter.

that a figure considered to have been good to the Jews would certainly appear in their folk literature, while conjecturing that his military triumphs would not inspire them.

In fact, Sobieski does occupy a prominent place in folklore of Polish Jews. This is reflected in the saying used to indicate that an event had taken place in the good old days: "Oh, that was back in the time of King Sobieski" (Wolf 1899, 23). But Sobieski lived on in the collective memory of Polish Jewry mainly in the two legends I will discuss below.

I have found two versions of the first legend, which, following one of the versions, we shall call "A Legend about King Jan Sobieski." The first is in a manuscript penned in the second half of the eighteenth century and entitled, "*Beit Ya'akov*, Responses and Insights by Rabbi Jacob Hailperin of blessed memory, head of the religious court in Zhvanets, and by his son, Rabbi Solomon Isaac of blessed memory, head of the religious court in Bar and the province of Podolia." The story in the manuscript has been published twice—once in Menahem Nahum Litinski's *Annals of Podolia and the Antiquities of the Jews There*, published in Odessa in 1895, and again in Solomon Buber's *Lofty City—The Town of Zholkva* (Żółkiew), first printed in Cracow in 1903. The story is recounted as a family tale, as follows:

My great-great-grandfather, the renowned rabbi and prince, our Rabbi and Teacher Itsik Zholkver, was very rich and never ceased learning Torah. [...] Now the son of the lord and prince of Zholkvi, Pan Sobieski, used to dine at their table. Once a wayfarer came to the house of my great-great-grandfather, the aforesaid Rabbi Itsik, just at twilight. Later, the aforementioned prince came to their house, and this guest stood up out of respect for him and told my great grandfather that this one would soon be king of Poland. The aforesaid rabbi was astonished by his words and kept silent until after the traveler had left his house. Then my great-great-grandfather told the prince what the traveler had said. The prince asked him to bring the traveler to him. They searched for him throughout the town but could not find him. The prediction came true, for before three years had passed he became king of Poland, etc. (Litinski 1895, 56–57; Buber 1903, 40–41).

As noted, the tale is recounted as family lore. In addition to the etiological element—trying to explain why Jan Sobieski was good to the Jews—it also aims to lionize the family (its pedigree, wealth, relations with Pan Sobieski and his son). Generically it is a sacred legend. Alongside the realistic characters there is also a supernatural character who, although not named outright, is implicitly identified as the prophet Elijah: he appears as a wayfarer who stops to dine at the rich man's table, predicts future greatness, vanishes without a trace, and, of course, whose prophecy comes true.

Another version of the story was transcribed by S. B. Wolf, the pseudonym of the Jewish folklorist Benjamin Wolf Segel.³ Here the folkloristic recording is unmistakable.

³ Benjamin Wolf Segel (1866–1931)—journalist, author, and folklorist—was a fascinating character full of self-contradictions. He fought relentlessly for the emancipation of the Jews of Poland, viewing it as the solution for the condition of the Jews in Eastern Europe. He was a sharp-tongued adversary both of antisemitism and of ideological movements that saw Jewish nationalism as the solution to the Jewish problem. At the same time, Segel was a great lover of Jewish literature and studied it assiduously. Zalman Shazar, who wrote an article about Segel, described him as "a solitary and tempestuous Jewish intellectual" (Shazar 1955, p. 179). Segel

Segel took it down from a Jew of the Zaleszczyk region and published it in the Polish-language Jewish periodical *Izraelita* in 1899.

Segel notes that in his translation of the story (from Yiddish to Polish) he was careful to avoid modifying its original tone.

A Legend about King Jan Sobieski

In the town of Żółkiew there once lived a God-fearing Jew, eminent in the community, who held a lease on the estate of Pan Sobieski, the lord of Żółkiew. Pan Sobieski had an only son who had been drafted into the army. The old nobleman was sorely distressed about his only son, who had to wander in foreign cities, dine on soldier's rations, and sleep in the barracks. But what could be done? When the king commands one must obey.

In olden times the custom was that when a distinguished Polish lord leased a tavern or mill to a Jew and was persuaded that the Jew was an honest man, the Jew's livelihood was secure in his old age. If, for example, somebody came to the lord and told him, "Your honor, here is a room full of red ducats. Give me the tavern or mill that this Jew is leasing," the nobleman would throw him out of doors. In addition, the nobleman considered such a Jew to be one of his own, because the lord had confidence in him. That is how it used to be, and that is how it was for Pan Sobieski and the Jew who leased his property. So the old nobleman was in the habit of coming to his Jew to pour out his troubles to him, as well as his longing for his son. The Jew, hearing this, would comfort him: "All-powerful Lord, don't be sad, all-powerful lord, nor let your noble lady be sad. I know the young lord, Jan, for I carried him in my arms. The lad has a brain in his head and a brave heart. He will not be lost in the army and may even become a major or a colonel. What am I saying—he could even become a general, he has such a head!"

That is what the old Jew would tell his lord every time the latter sighed, yearning for his son, so far away. Once an officer came to the palace. It was none other than the young Pan Sobieski, who in the meantime had been promoted to a position even higher than general. He was resplendent in gold to the point that his own mother did not recognize him at first. His sword, a gift from the king himself, as was his custom with senior officers, hung at his side, inlaid with pearls and precious stones. It was a Friday. That evening the young general went to see what was going on with the old Jew. Everyone was sitting at the Sabbath table. Pan Sobieski sat down at the table and they served him fish, hallah, and vodka. A number of poor people, who had been invited by the householder to dine with him, were

made an important contribution to the study of the ethnography and folklore of Polish Jewry. His anthologies, most of them in German and Polish, are of great value and still a fertile source for research. The most important collection, which he published under his own name rather than one of the pseudonyms he normally employed (Bar-Ami, B. Safra, Dr. Schiffer, Dr. Zev, B. Rohatyn, and others) is the "Materials for the Ethnography of the Jews of Eastern Galicia," published in the important Polish series on anthropology: B. W. Segel, 1893, "Materiały do Etnografii Żydów Wschodnio-Galicyskich," *Zbiór Wiadomości do Antropologii, Krajowej XVII* (Kraków, Komisja Antropologiczna Akademii Umiejętności), 261–331. On his publications in folklore and ethnography, see also Schwarzbau 1968, pp. 5, 14, 74, 109, 150, 157, 158, 181, 224, 292, 318, 323, 343, 473.

also sitting there. The young lord told his host about his adventures in battle and the distant lands and cities he had seen.

Suddenly one of the poor guests leaned over and whispered in the host's ear that this young lord would soon be elected king.

The host was startled, for this was *lèse majesté* against the reigning king, for which the penalty was death. In any case, the host did not react to the remark. Later, however, when the guests had gone their way and Pan Sobieski remained alone with his host, the latter could not restrain himself and told Pan Sobieski about it. Pan Sobieski was frightened, because he saw in it the finger of God, and it is no small thing to be king. But he recovered quickly and said, "as God ordains so shall it be." He immediately gave orders to search the entire city for the poor Jew and bring him to the palace. They hunted for him in every nook and cranny—for it was the Sabbath and he could not have left the city—but in vain. He had vanished as if the earth had swallowed him up: for he was none other than the prophet Elijah. Before three years were up Pan Sobieski had been elected king of Poland. (S. B. Wolf 1899, 23, 248)

The plot elements are similar in both versions: the close relationship between the Jew and Sobieski family; Elijah's prophecy of future greatness, delivered during a meal, and its realization.

Nevertheless there are also several differences between the two versions.

1. Whereas the first is a family history, the second version is anonymous. Two hypotheses may be entertained here. The first is that the legend was originally associated with the family in question, which had economic ties with the Sobieski family in Żółkiew, but became anonymous over time. The other is that legend was part of the oral tradition of the Jews of Żółkiew and was appropriated by the family to aggrandize its name.

2. The second version has epic expansions not found in the former version—details of the relations between the Jew and the nobleman and the description of the guests and the food served at the Sabbath meal. This difference follows necessarily from the fact that the first version is a concise transcription whereas the second is the text of an oral story.

3. The second version refers to young Sobieski's military service, a particular omitted from the first version. One may conjecture that a family legend, whose main goal is to glorify the family's antecedents, can do without details that place young Sobieski at the center of the story.

4. In the second version we are told about a Sabbath meal and not just any meal, as in the first version. Folk legends do indeed prefer special occasions in the Jewish calendar and lifecycle, as I have already pointed out with regard to saints' legends (Bar-Itzhak 1987).

5. Only in the second version is Elijah dressed as a poor man and explicitly identified as Elijah.

6. The second version explains the host's alarm when he hears the guest's prediction of Sobieski's future elevation to the throne.

In both versions, of course, there is the etiological element: explaining the king's benevolence toward the Jews by the fact that one of them foretold his future greatness. The second version emphasizes that the Polish nobleman accepts Elijah's prophecy as heaven-sent and refers to it as "the finger of God." In addition, both versions accent fun-

damental Jewish values: interpersonal relations—hospitality (the second version sharpens this point by noting that the host invites poor people to share his Sabbath repast); and, in the second version, adherence to ritual precepts—observing the Sabbath. We shall return to this later.

The classical Hebrew tradition includes a well-known legend that shares many of the motifs found in both versions of our tale—that of Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai and Vespasian (BT Gittin 55–57; Genesis Rabbah 10; Lamentations Rabbah 1; Avot de-Rabbi Nathan 4; Leviticus Rabbah; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5; Yalkut Shimoni *Ha'azinu*). In this legend, when the two meet Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai announces that the Roman general will soon be emperor, as indeed comes to pass. Here too there is an etiological element, meant to explain why Vespasian granted the rabbi's request to found a house of study in Yavneh.

The second legend is that of “The Poor Jaś.” It was written down by the Polish Armenian cleric Sadok Barącz.⁴ The transcriber notes that the legend is part of the oral tradition of the Jewish community of Żółkiew. The transcription is also a manifestation of intercultural communication of the sort I have discussed in the past (Bar-Itzhak 2001, 92–100; Bar-Itzhak 1997/8, 211–238), in which a non-Jew listens to and records Jewish folk tales. The legend was published twice: first in the Polish periodical *Dziennik Literacki* in Lwów, in 1854, and later in Barącz's *Legends, Traditions, Proverbs, and Songs from Russia*, published in Tarnopol in 1886 (Barącz 1889, 14–23). The transcription itself is problematic. Although Barącz was an amateur folklorist, he was also a nineteenth-century Polish churchman and as such did not hesitate to record the Jewish legend in a polemical fashion, with his own thoughts and criticism interpolated. He does not abridge the legend, though. Because of its length I can only summarize it here, incorporating direct quotations where relevant.

The legend begins with the arrival in the city of a poor child. He is starving and freezing, but no one offers to help him. Finally he takes shelter in the doorway of a Jewish home. The servant hears his crying and informs his master. The latter immediately tells him to bring the child inside and put him to bed. The next day the Jew asks the poor child if he would like to stay in his house and play with his son. The two boys get along well. The same day an elderly and respected rabbi visits the town. He goes with the householder to the synagogue, where they recite the evening service. After the service and sermon the man brings the rabbi home with him. When they enter the salon the rabbi stops in the corner where Jaś is sleeping the sleep of the just and the following a dialogue takes place:

“Who is this, sir?” he asked the householder.

“A poor child on whom everyone turned their back. I brought him into my house as an act of kindness.”

⁴ Sadok Barącz (1814–1892) was born in Stanisław to a poor family of Armenian descent. He studied at the theological seminary in Lwów and the department of philosophy of the University of Lwów. In 1835 he entered the Dominican monastery in Podkamienie. After holding various posts on the outside, including librarian of the Dominican monastery in Lwów, professor of Bible at the monastery institute, and schoolteacher in Żółkiew in 1842–1845, he returned to Podkamienie in 1855. There he lived in ascetic seclusion, devoting himself to scholarly pursuits. His work has been widely criticized, mainly because of his lack of formal training in historical research. His major contribution is considered to be the vast amount of source materials he collected.

"Do you see the light shining from his face and the aura that surrounds his forehead like a halo?"

"Yes, I do see it," replied the astonished householder.

"The Lord is with you. This halo is the covenant that the Lord has been pleased to make with your house. The light prophesies that tremendous wealth will flow from him to you and your children. Treat this lad with respect, view him as your son, and take special care to teach him our lore, delving into the Talmud, the book of our life."

Saying this, the old man spread his hands above Jaś as the high priest Eli did when he took the young Samuel into his confidence, for the good of his people.

The rabbi leaves the next day. The Jew raises Jaś as if he were his son and teaches him Talmud. His real son shows a talent for commerce, whereas Jaś proves to be a talmudic prodigy. The householder pictures his future prominence with two sons like this. Suddenly, though, Jaś disappears. The Jew dies without ever meeting him again.

Years later the king arrives in the city and inquires about that Jew. He learns that the Jew has passed away, but that in the meantime his son has married and is prospering in business. He orders him to be brought before him. Quaking in his boots, the Jew comes to the royal audience.

The king came out of this study with great courtesy, went up to him, and put his hand.

"What, you don't know me?! I'm Jaś, your old companion."

The Jew looked at his eyes. "Oy vey," he cried out, "Jaś!"

"Indeed," replied King Jaś, "you have recognized him, but Jaś has become Jan."

The Jew knelt, trembling with fear, joy, and amazement. The king raised him to his feet. "Enjoy my favor," he said. "I grant you a lease on the royal estates. May God bless you and may only good fall to the lot of your family. Go in peace."

Barącz adds, "the king was Jan Sobieski, his Jewish companion was Becal, and his Jewish physician, who contributed to his death, was Jonasz."

Before we discuss the story we ought to say something about the two historical figures mentioned by Barącz. As I noted previously, two Jews attained influential positions in Sobieski's court and aroused enmity that lasted for many years, as can be seen from Barącz's remark about the physician. This was Dr. Simha Menahem (Emanuel) de Jona, whom the Poles called Jonasz.⁵ He was the son and grandson of physicians, Johanan Baruch and Simha Menahem, who lived in Lwów. He studied medicine in Padua and was renowned for his medical skills in both Jewish and non-Jewish circles. That was how he came to the royal court.

In addition to serving as Sobieski's court physician, Dr. de Jona was a Torah scholar, well-versed in the Talmud, and worked tirelessly on behalf of the Jewish community. The inscription on his tombstone in Lwów reads:

⁵ For a detailed discussion, see Bałaban 1930b, pp. 48–58.

Here lies the rabbi, leader, and prince in Israel
The chief famed in his generation, the expert physician,
Whose hand was open to the poor and needy,
Charity warden, rabbi of Jerusalem,
The honored lord and prince, our teacher and rabbi Simha Menahem
Son of our teacher and rabbi Johanan Baruch of Jona, may the memory of
the righteous man be a blessing for eternal life.
May his soul be wrapped up among the living.

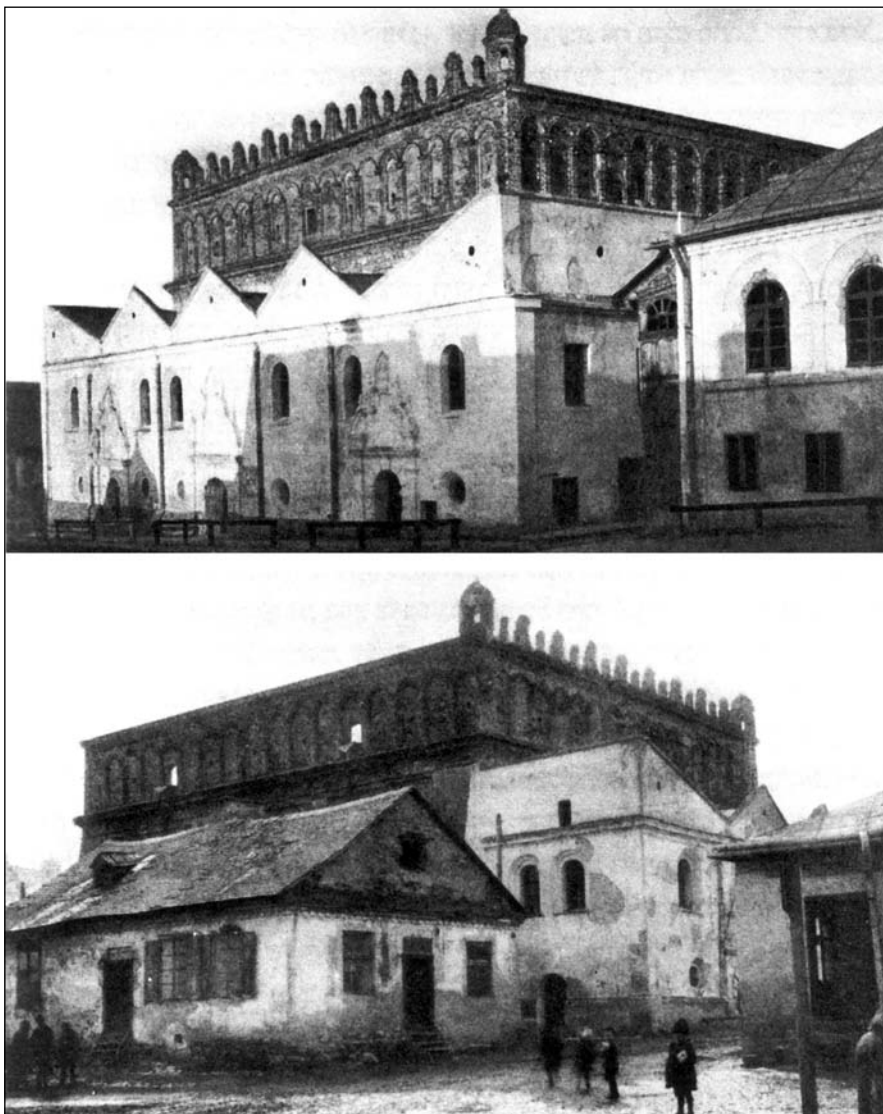


Photo 2 – The Synagogue in Żółkiew, 1692. Jan Sobieski granted a permit for the construction of the synagogue in 1687.

The second was Jacob Bezalel Ben-Natan, whom the Poles referred to as Becal. As Bałaban mentions, we do not know where he came from. It is known that his father was murdered during the Cossack insurrection and that around 1685 he settled in Żółkiew (Bałaban 1930a, 60). Jacob Bezalel was employed as the royal banker. He was also the principal leaseholder of the royal estates and a tax farmer. His lofty status aroused fierce opposition and many intrigues raged around him.⁶ He was accused of damaging merchants' interests and of defaming the Christian faith. He also worked extensively on behalf of the Jewish community. Thanks to his intercession, Sobieski granted a permit for the construction of a new synagogue in Żółkiew in 1687. Jacob Bezalel died that same year and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Żółkiew. The link that Barącz draws between the Jew in the story and Jacob Bezalel is clearly extracultural; it ignores the fact that Bezalel's father had been martyred during the Cossack insurrection, whereas the old Jew in the story dies a natural death. A Jewish informant from Żółkiew would not have made such a mistake.

This story, like the previous one, is etiological, advanced to explain King Sobieski's benevolence toward the Jews. Here the reason is reinforced: not only a prophecy of future greatness, but also the poor child's adoption and education by a Jewish family.

Like the two versions of the first legend, this too is a sacred legend. Both feature a supernatural event: the visit by the prophet Elijah and his prophecy of future greatness, in the first story; the rabbi's prophecy of the child's future eminence, based on the light that shines from his face and surrounds his forehead like a halo, as well as the prediction of the good fortune of the Jew and his family, in the second story.

In our discussion of the first story I noted the accent on Jewish values—hospitality and Sabbath observance. In the second story this is expressed by the hospitality and charity shown to the poor boy. These values are given added force in that they are the reason that the Jew's son eventually attains eminence. There is also a purely ritual value—the evening service after which the rabbi discloses the boy's latent greatness.

The legend is replete with motives drawn from Jewish legends. There are allusions to the stories of Moses: the *verbal* echo is of Exod. 34:29; but there is also the aggada that the infant Moses filled the room with light (Rashi on Exod. 2:2, citing B Sotah 12a and 13a). Moses was also raised by adoptive parents; and the story of Joseph. The light that shines from Jaś's face can also be found in non-Jewish legends about kings.⁷

An almost identical story can be found in Livy's account of King Servius Tullius. There too we read how a lower-class child (evidentially the son of a female slave or non-Roman captive) was recognized as the future king of Rome because of the flames that enveloped his head while he slept. Scholars associate this mark with the belief that the ancient Latin kings were descended from the Fire God and mortal women; hence the fire is evidence of Servius Tullius' divine and royal origins. The story goes as follows:

At that time an incident took place as marvellous in the appearance as it proved in the result. It is said that whilst a boy named Servius Tullius was asleep, his head was enveloped in flames, before the eyes of many who were present. The cry which broke out at such a marvellous sight aroused the

⁶ This is not the place for a discussion of historical character of Jacob Bezalel. A fascinating discussion and attempt to deal with the charges that Polish historians level against him can be found in Kraushar 1891.

⁷ On this see Bolte and Polivka, 1913–1932, Vol. II, 393.

royal family, and when one of the domestics was bringing water to quench the flames the queen stopped him, and after calming the excitement forbade the boy to be disturbed until he awoke of his own accord. Presently he did so, and the flames disappeared. Then Tanaquil took her husband aside and said to him, "Do you see this boy, whom we are bringing up in such a humble style? You may be certain that he will one day be a light to us in trouble and perplexity, and a protection to our tottering house. Let us henceforth bring up with all care and indulgence one who will be the source of measureless glory to the State and to ourselves." From this time the boy began to be treated as their child and trained in those accomplishments by which characters are stimulated to the pursuit of a great destiny. The task was an easy one, for it was carrying out the will of the gods. The youth turned out to be of a truly kingly disposition, and when search was made for a son-in-law to Tarquinius, none of the Roman youths could be compared with him in any respect, so the king betrothed his daughter to him. (Livy, *History of Rome I*, 39, ed. Rev. Canon Roberts [Perseus Digital Library])

This is woven into the Jewish legend, with the modifications required by the cultural context: the ostensibly lower-class child grows up in a Jewish home rather than a royal palace; the flames are replaced by light; and it is an eminent rabbi who discovers the aura that crowns by the sleeping child, explains the phenomenon, and gives instructions about how the child should be raised. The Latin version ascribes this to the queen. This may be associated with the belief mentioned above, that a child who has flames dancing around its head is the offspring of a god and a mortal woman, so that knowledge of the phenomenon is the special province of women. Whereas the Roman lad is "trained in those accomplishments by which characters are stimulated to the pursuit of a great destiny," the hero of the Jewish legend studies the Talmud, to which it implicitly attributes Sobieski's success as king of Poland.

Especially interesting in the story of poor Jaś is the inverted structure of the biography of the cultural hero, as formulated by various scholars, notably Lord Raglan (Raglan 1990). According to his scheme, after the unusual circumstances that accompany the hero's birth and the attempt to kill him, the hero leaves his birthplace and grows up far away in the home of adoptive parents, and there are no details about his childhood. Eventually he returns to his patrimony and future kingdom.

This scheme is utilized when a society recounts the story of its own cultural hero. Because the Jewish legend about Jan Sobieski deals with a hero who is not "one of us," the plot must invert this scheme and give us a glimpse of the dark side of the moon, which always remains unseen in legends about a hero who is one of us. Accordingly, the story is set in his childhood, the period when the hero is cut off from his natural environment and thus the only time when Jewish society can appropriate him. Most of the plot unfolds in the Jewish world, where the two most important spaces are home and synagogue. This may be seen as a metaphor for the insularity of Jewish life in Poland. The prophecy about Sobieski's future greatness is uttered in Jewish "quality time"—over the Sabbath meal or after the evening service.

Similarly, the recognition scene does not involve the hero's parents or kingdom, but the son of his benefactor; the manner in which Jan Sobieski revealed himself to his

parents or kingdom, when he returned from the Jewish world, does not interest the narrating society.

There is another inversion as well. In the first part of the story the Jews play the role of Propp's "donor" (Propp 1968), providing the child with shelter and both physical and spiritual sustenance. In the second part it is Jaś, now King Jan of Poland, who is the donor.

The deep structure of the legends reveals another aspect. Even though they tell of relations between Jews and the king of Poland—relations that clearly belong to the public

sphere—both legends transfer them from the formal public domain to the intimate private one. The first legend describes the personal relationship: the Jew held the young Jan in his arms, serves as the nobleman's adviser and supporter, and frequently entertains Jan in his house (on Friday night, according to one version). This is emphasized even more in the second legend. Here the alien hero grows up in a Jewish home and gets to know it from the inside. Not only is he adopted as a son of the family and becomes familiar with the Jews' daily life, he also knows the secret of their lives—the Torah. In their deep structure, then, these legends express the Jews' yearning to escape the alienation and accompanying stereotype they bear in the public sphere of Polish society and to cast off being the



Photo 3 – The title page of a Yiddish translation of the Old Testament printed by Emmanuel Attias in 1687, ornamented with Sobieski's royal emblem.

eternal “other” for the host society. They long for an intimate and genuine association that, as the legend implies, will lead the host nation to be sympathetic toward the Jews, as happened to their king, Jan Sobieski. The hosts, too, would reap rewards from such contact, much as the boy who later became a king of rare accomplishments did from his study of the Talmud.

Returning to our initial discussion of folklore as an expression of intercultural communication, we see that the Jewish legends about King Jan Sobieski of Poland are evidence of this. One manifestation of such communication is that one of the legends was told to and transcribed by a non-Jew (and a clergyman at that!). His polemical treatment of the text does not negate this. Beyond this, however, and beyond the fact that the hero of the Jewish legend is a Polish king, the legends express a desire for communication, for a genuine and intimate knowledge of Jewish culture on the part of the people among whom the Jews live.

Even though I have not dealt with material culture and folk art in this essay, we ought not to omit two such manifestations of intercultural exchange. A hanging lamp from the palace of Jan Sobieski in Żółkiew, marked with his crest, formerly illuminated the Great Synagogue of Lwów. According to the legend associated with this item, it was given to the synagogue by the royal physician Dr. Emanuel Simha Menahem de Jona, whom we mentioned above.⁸ And the title page of a Yiddish Bible printed by the well-known publisher Emmanuel Attias in 1687 (that is, during Jan Sobieski’s reign), is ornamented with the same royal emblem.⁹

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⁸ Baġaban dismisses the story and maintains that the chandelier was installed in the synagogue in 1804, Prince Radziwiłł’s bankruptcy, which entailed the sale of many valuable objects from the palace in Żółkiew (Baġaban 1930b, 48).

⁹ Many consider this to be one of the most beautiful copperplate title pages in the history of Hebrew bookmaking. On the story of this Bible see: Fuks and Fuks-Mansfeld, 1987, p. 296. I would like to thank Dr. Shalom Tsabar for his assistance in this matter.

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Folklor kot izraz medkulturne komunikacije med Judi in Poljaki – kralj Jan III Sobieski in judovske legende

Haya Bar-Itzhak

Avtorica raziskuje kako uporabljajo na Poljskem judovske legende o poljskem kralju Janu III Sobieskem kot sredstvo pri folkloristični medkulturni komunikaciji. Obravnavana sta dva tipa ohranjenih legend, ki pripovedujejo o liku Jana Sobieskega. Prvi tip legend obstaja v dveh verzijah: ena verzija je iz 18. stoletja in izvira iz rokopisa 'Beit Ya'akov'; drugo verzijo pa je zasledil judovski folklorist B. W. Segel in jo objavil leta 1899. Drugi tip legend je zabeležil poljski Armenec duhovnik Barącz Sadok po ustnem izročilu judovske skupnosti Żółkiew. Legende so raziskane in obravnavane iz različnih zornih kotov, npr. z vidika njihovega kulturnega konteksta, literarnih vzorcev o tem kulturnem junaku, raziskana je njihova vloga v pripovedništvu in globinska struktura legend.