

2022

## Yahrzeit ... Haya Bar-Itzhak (1946–2020)

Simon J. Bronner

University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee, [bronnners@uwm.edu](mailto:bronnners@uwm.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/jewishfolklore>

 Part of the [Folklore Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bronner, Simon J. (2022) "Yahrzeit ... Haya Bar-Itzhak (1946–2020)," *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology*. Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/jewishfolklore/vol1/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the WSU Press at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jewish Folklore and Ethnology by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@WayneState.



# Yahrzeit . . . Haya Bar-Itzhak (1946–2020)

SIMON J. BRONNER

**H**aya Bar-Itzhak was a driving force behind this journal and a shaper of the global study of Jewish folklore and ethnology. In her teaching, writing, and editing, she brought into relief the long lineage of work in periodicals devoted to Jewish folklore beginning in the nineteenth century (Bar-Itzhak 2010, 16–26) and inspired the editors of *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology* (JFE) with a vision for a journal that would go beyond an audience of Jews to become indispensable for all folklorists and ethnologists. The JFE editors, indeed all who care about understanding tradition, lost a friend and mentor when she died at her home in Haifa, Israel, on October 25, 2020.

An organizer par excellence, one of her last projects was bringing together fieldwork-oriented scholars from around the world in 2013 to forge connections in a conference around the Talmudic directive to “Go out and see what the people do” (BT Eruvin 14B) as a folkloristic rallying cry. The conference occurred the same year that her *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions* in two volumes was published, which she took over from Raphael Patai. And now the editors of *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology* find themselves similarly continuing a trajectory from her to a new generation of scholars and readers. With health issues mounting for Haya, the book based on the “Going to the People” conference came out in

*Jewish Folklore and Ethnology*, 1, Fall 2022, pp. 210–16.

Copyright © 2023 Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan 48201-1309.



Figure 1. Haya Bar-Itzhak, August 2007. Photograph by Simon J. Bronner.

2016 under the editorship of Jeffrey Veidlinger, but Haya's influence on the work is clearly evident, as it is on every page of this volume of the journal and many more in several languages across several continents.

Haya was born in Berlin, Germany, on August 17, 1946 to Polish Holocaust survivors. After emigration to Israel, she received her bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Haifa and finished her PhD in 1987 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem with a dissertation on "The 'Saints' Legend' as a Genre in Jewish Folk Literature" under the supervision of renowned folklore

professor Dov Noy. She returned to the University of Haifa as a professor and in 1992, became chair of the Department of Hebrew and Comparative Literature and in 1994, head of folklore studies and the Israel Folktale Archives. A peripatetic teacher and scholar who attracted admiring students and colleagues wherever she went, she held visiting professorships at Indiana University, University of Michigan, Penn State University, University of Pennsylvania, and the University of California–Berkeley. In addition, she was a fellow of the Simon Dubnow Institute in Leipzig, Germany. She received numerous grants and awards for her work from organizations such as the Koret Foundation, Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, S. O. Sidore Foundation, and the Council for Higher Education of Israel.

She had broad interests in folklore that spanned Eastern Europe, northern Africa, Israel, and North America, and having taken on the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, in many ways her parting gift—and challenge—to the field, her scope of work extended to the far-flung corners of the world. She maintained specialties in folk narrative, particularly legend and women’s culture from ancient times to the present. Her research and publications in English, Hebrew, German, Polish, and Yiddish earned her renown globally for a conceptualization of ethnopoetics informed by the Jewish experience.

Her authored books in English include *Jewish Poland—Legends of Origin* (2001), *Israeli Folk Narratives: Settlement, Immigration, Ethnicity* (2005), and with Aliza Shenhar, *Jewish Moroccan Folk Narratives from Israel* (1993). Her edited books include *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, 2 volumes (2013), *Pioneers of Jewish Ethnography and Folkloristics in Eastern Europe* (2010), and with Idit Pintel-Ginsberg, *The Power of a Tale: Stories from the Israel Folktale Archives* (2019). In Hebrew, she edited *Folklore and Ideology: Studies Dedicated to Prof. Aliza Shenhar* (2014), *Legends of Poland: Ethnopoetics and Legendary Chronicles* (1996), and with Aliza Shenhar, *Folktales from Beth-She’an* (1981) and *Folktales from Shlomi* (1983). She also was the editor of the journals *Chuliyot: Journal of Yiddish Culture* (volumes 2–11) and *Dappim: Research in Literature* (volumes 13–19). Showing her multilingual abilities, the former was published in Yiddish and the latter in Hebrew with English abstracts.



Figure 2. Haya Bar-Itzhak, far right, listening to Moroccan-Jewish storytellers residing in Beit-She'an in Israel as part of a team project, 1977-1979. See Bar-Itzhak and Shenhar 1993. Photograph courtesy of Dina Stein.

Haya served on the editorial boards of the *Jewish Cultural Studies* book series (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization), *Cultural Analysis*, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore*, *Raphael Patai Series in Folklore and Anthropology*, and the *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review*. She was also chair of the Board of Directors of the Haifa Museums, member of the Publication Committee of the National Authority of Yiddish, and a member of the Board of Governors of the Max Stern Yezreel Valley College in Israel. Among her honors is selection as an International Fellow of the American Folklore Society, Lerner Foundation for Yiddish Culture Award, and National Jewish Book Award (for *Jewish Poland—Legends of Origin*).

Organizationally, she was involved with the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, Israel Folklore Society, and the Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Section of the American Folklore Society. As head of the Israel Folklore Archives at Haifa University, she was a global leader in folklore archives work and ways to apply digital technology to broaden their accessibility. The organizational work I

mentioned of the “Going to the People” conference was a crowning achievement preceded by her leadership of more than a dozen international conferences.

A beacon to students, she supervised more than 30 theses and dissertations in Israel and many more reviews of dissertations for universities in the United States and Poland. Her spirit is evident in numerous books dedicated to her, including my own *Jewish Cultural Studies* (2021). In 2020, her students, colleagues, and admirers presented her with a bilingual festschrift in her honor, *Masoret Haya* (Living Tradition), edited by Tsafi Sebba-Elran, Haya Milo, and Idit Pintel-Ginsberg (2020).

To recognize the publication of the festschrift, I organized a panel at the 2020 American Folklore Society annual meeting to discuss her contributions to folklore research and theory. She planned to join us virtually but succumbed to illness shortly before the conference. Her daughter Chen, a formidable literature scholar in her own right, stepped in to represent her. What was intended as a theoretical discourse turned into a memorial tribute. She was remembered as a brilliant, energetic scholar and an incredibly generous, kind soul. She was, many scholars underscored, a community builder who spread her passion for folklore-ethnological work and Jewish studies around the world. Tsafi Sebba-Elran, JFE associate editor, presented a photograph of Haya in Israel with Moroccan Jewish storytellers and compared it to early twentieth-century fieldwork photographs of the An-Ski expedition to the shtetls of Eastern Europe to point out Haya’s position as a participant in a sharing event (see Bar-Itzhak and Shenhar 1993b, 133). Dan Ben-Amos, JFE editorial board member, added that Haya was in a line of great Jewish folklorists from S. An-Ski (1863–1920), about whom she had written (Bar-Itzhak 2010; Bar-Itzhak 2019, xxiv–xxv), through Dov Noy (1920–2013), and future stars she inspired as students and colleagues of Jewish folklore and ethnology. She was instrumental in that progression of moving away from a melting pot perspective on Jewish culture that is fixed in the past to an ethnologically oriented view of continuity and change in adaptive living traditions that are different in localized and even personalized differences through practice and performance (see Bar-Itzhak 2005; Bar-Itzhak and Shenhar 1993b).

Haya’s introduction to *The Power of a Tale* (2019), her last published essay while she was alive, could easily have been titled “The Power of Mentors,” of which

she was an exemplar. She reflected on the diversity of approaches and material by stating, “The articles are evidence of the lively research being conducted today on folk literature. . . . The younger generation of folklorists continues to expand and innovate, building on their teachers’ work” (Bar-Itzhak 2019, xxxi). She used the metaphor of the content of folklore and its study as a “plum pudding” of wisdom that she gladly shared for the “delectation” of her many colleagues and students. The greatest tribute we can bestow on Haya in gratitude is to carry on her groundbreaking work *L'dor v'dor* (from one generation to the next).

## References

- American Folklore Society. 2020. “Masoret Haya: On Haya Bar-Itzhak.” Accessed August 20, 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0Yt9PSr\\_BU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0Yt9PSr_BU).
- Bar-Itzhak, Haya. 1996. *Legends of Poland: Ethnopoetics and Legendary Chronicles*. Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim. [Hebrew]
- Bar-Itzhak, Haya. 2001. *Jewish Poland—Legends of Origin*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Bar-Itzhak, Haya. 2005. *Israeli Folk Narratives: Settlement, Immigration, Ethnicity*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Bar-Itzhak, Haya. 2010. “The Beginning of Ethnography and Folkloristics in Eastern Europe—A Survey.” In *Pioneers of Jewish Ethnography and Folkloristics in Eastern Europe*, edited by Haya Bar-Itzhak, 13–26. Ljubljana, SI: Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.
- Bar-Itzhak, Haya, ed. 2013. *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, 2 vols. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Bar-Itzhak, Haya, ed. 2014. *Folklore and Ideology: Studies Dedicated to Prof. Aliza Shenhar*. Haifa: University of Haifa. [Hebrew]
- Bar-Itzhak, Haya. 2019. “Introduction: The Israel Folktale Archives and the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage in Israel.” In *The Power of a Tale: Stories from the Israeli Folktale Archives*, edited by Haya Bar-Itzhak and Idit Pintel-Ginsberg, xxiii–xxxii. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Bar-Itzhak, Haya, and Idit Pintel-Ginsberg, eds. 2008. *The Power of a Tale: The Jubilee Book of the Israel Folktale Archives*. Haifa: University of Haifa. [Hebrew].
- Bar-Itzhak, Haya, and Idit Pintel-Ginsberg, eds. 2019. *The Power of a Tale: Stories from the Israel Folktale Archives*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

- Bar-Itzhak, Haya, and Aliza Shenhar, 1993a. *Jewish Moroccan Folk Narratives from Israel*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Bar-Itzhak, Haya, and Aliza Shenhar. 1993b. "Processes of Change in Israeli Society as Reflected in Folklore Research: The Beit-She'an Model." *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 15: 128–33.
- Bronner, Simon J. 2021. *Jewish Cultural Studies*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Sebba-Elran, Tsafi, Haya Milo, and Idit Pintel-Ginsberg, eds. 2020. *Masoret Haya: 33 Essays in Folklore in Honor of Professor Haya Bar-Itzhak*. Haifa: Pardes.
- Shenhar, Aliza, and Haya Bar-Itzhak. 1981. *Folktales from Beth-She'an*. Haifa: University of Haifa. [Hebrew]
- Shenhar, Aliza, and Haya Bar-Itzhak. 1983. *Folktales from Shlomi*. Haifa: University of Haifa. [Hebrew]
- Veidlinger, Jeffrey, ed. 2016. *Going to the People: Jews and the Ethnographic Impulse*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.