"Let Me Tell You Some Stories, and You Will Record Them": Dan Ben-Amos and the Study of Jewish Folklore and Ethnology

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Cover Page Footnote

I could not have written this essay without Dan Ben-Amos's generous steady pipeline to me during his lifetime of emails, documents, photographs—and deep reflections. I am also indebted to Batsheva Ben-Amos after Dan's passing for providing me with material from his personal papers. Wolfgang Mieder, who co-edited with me a festschrift for Dan (2019), kindly provided his compilation of emails with Dan (2023), additional manuscripts, and many insights. My thinking and writing about Dan also benefited from two major tribute events at the University of Pennsylvania in which I was honored to participate and interact with Dan's students, colleagues, and friends: "A Symposium in Honor of Dan Ben-Amos," sponsored by the Jewish Studies Program and the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, November 19, 2023 (https://jwst.sas.upenn.edu/events/2023/11/19/symposium-folklore-honor-dan-ben-amos), and "Dan Ben-Amos: Fifty Years of Jewish Folklore at Penn," sponsored by the Jewish Studies Program, April 23, 2017 (https://jwst.sas.upenn .edu/events/2017/04/23/dan-ben-amos-fifty-years-jewish-folklore-penn).

"Let Me Tell You Some Stories, and You Will Record Them": Dan Ben-Amos and the Study of Jewish Folklore and Ethnology

SIMON J. BRONNER

Dan Ben-Amos (1934–2023) was associated with groundbreaking work beginning during the 1960s on concepts of context and performance and the paradigm shift in folkloristics with his groundbreaking essay "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context." His odyssey from Israel to the United States, including formative experiences as a youth absorbing ideas about social reality and Jewish folklore as counterculture, has a profound influence on an equally profound shift in the understanding of Jewish experience as well as on the globalization of folkloristics as a discipline. In addition to interpreting his culminating work of the *Folktales of the Jews* series of books, this essay shows the continuation of his legacy in other projects he initiated or envisioned.

After news spread of Dan Ben-Amos's death on March 26, 2023, tributes to his extraordinary scholarship, mentoring, and leadership in folklore studies over a long productive career burst forth from near and far (Bronner 2023; Horowitz and Shuman 2024; Howard 2023; Köiva 2023; Mieder 2023b; Öztürkmen 2023; Zhang 2024a). Most of the commentaries cited his groundbreaking work beginning during the 1960s on concepts of context and performance, his advocacy for globalization of "folkloristics" as a discipline, and his many years of teaching and service at the University of Pennsylvania. Almost every writer lauded the paradigm shift that he

signaled in folklore studies and the emblematic conceptualization of folkloristics with his groundbreaking essay "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," in which he famously declared, "Folklore is artistic communication in small groups" (Ben-Amos 1971a, 13; see also Ben-Amos 1993, 210–11; Ben-Amos 1998, 454–56; Bronner 2006; Bronner 2016; Rosen 1997–1998).

Often overlooked in Dan's scholarly profile of being the exemplar of contemporary performance approaches is that he produced some of the most extensive textual annotations of folk narrative to date using what he called "traditional folklore methodologies" (Ben-Amos 2014a, 22), linked his work to the founding mission of the Grimms (Ben-Amos 2017), pored over ancient scriptural material (Ben-Amos 1994b; 2016), relied upon historical literary and archival sources (Ben-Amos 1978; 2010), and contributed an incisive survey of the concept of tradition (Ben-Amos 1984), which he concluded was basic to the "idea" as well as definition of folklore (Ben-Amos 2020a, 1–7).

Even before his passing at the age of 88, a number of retrospective articles on his scholarly achievements were issued (Bronner 2019a; Buccitelli and Zhang 2020; Lee 2014; Rosen 1997; Yassif 2019), and Wolfgang Mieder and I produced a thick festschrift with 34 contributors from around the globe honoring him on the occasion of his 85th birthday (Bronner and Mieder 2019a). In 2020, luminary folklorists Henry Glassie and Elliott Oring anthologized Dan's theoretical "greatest hits" as *Folklore Concepts: Histories and Critiques*, but it included no essays on Jewish folklore and ethnology. Yet of his twelve English-language books, half were devoted to Jewish topics, he spent the bulk of his later years in a department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations, and he had a primary affiliation with the university's Jewish studies program. Indeed, Dan devoted the last third of his adult life to completion of *Folktales of the Jews* originally projected to be issued in five volumes (three volumes, over 1,000 pages each, were published in his lifetime—2006, 2007, and 2011—and the first won the National Jewish Book Award in the Sephardic Culture category). Most of his professional service was in Jewish studies during his later years: he was editor of the robust Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology for Wayne State University Press, editorial board member of *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions* (Bar-Itzhak

2013), and advisory board member of *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* and *Yeda 'Am: Journal of the Israel Folklore Society*. He was an original editorial board member of, and was instrumental in the launch of, our journal *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology* (*JFE*) with Wayne State University Press and its predecessor, *Jewish Cultural Studies*, for the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization published by Liverpool University Press.

Expressing genuine humility and collegiality to the end, Dan repeatedly denied a lofty scholarly status even when he received lifetime achievement awards and, in acceptance of them, would talk about how much more he had to do and his endless quest for wisdom and insight beyond the incomplete acquisition of knowledge. Without necessarily making his Jewish background explicit, he referred to the wisdom traditions of the Hebrew Bible (see Crenshaw 2019; Legaspi 2018, 76–81). In his secular messages to various learned assemblies of folklorists and ethnologists, he emphasized his reliance on the cooperation of scholars worldwide to join in common cause of folklore studies and encouraged younger scholars and students to join the pursuit of the field. Often confessing that the more he studied, the more he realized that he had to learn, he could be seen through a Jewish lens taking the persona of a *hakham* [Heb.: sage; cf. Taylor 2021 about Jewish folklorist, rabbi, and hakham Moses Gaster] deserving of *kavod* [Heb.: respect, honor], and accordingly we dedicate this issue of *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology* (*JFE*) to him.

It is not an exaggeration to say that if students work in the field of folklore and ethnology, then they have to know Dan Ben-Amos's scholarship, and further, if they are to grasp Dan's oeuvre, then they need to start with his Jewish life history, philosophy, and worldview (for bibliographies, see Gutenberg 1997–1998; Zhang 2024b). Further, Dan reminded folklorists and ethnologists that they needed to recognize ancient and medieval compilations of Jewish customs (Heb.: *minhagim*) and folk literature (Heb.: *ma'aseh* or tales, *guzmah* or tall tales, *mishlei shu'alim* or fables, *aggadot* or legends, and *mashalim* or proverbs) as critical early sources of global folk traditions and their diffusion with migratory Jews (Ben-Amos 1999). He also cited rabbis and sages who were proposing folkloristic analysis, indeed of field work (i.e., the Talmudic directive, BT Eruvin 14b, to "go to the people" and question and observe them to know of reasons for variation of Jewish practices in

diverse communities), well before the Grimm brothers and William John Thoms proposed studies of *Volk* and folk, respectively (Ben-Amos 1999, 193–207; see also Bronner 2022, 1–12; Veidlinger 2016). That knowledge of the way that folklore study was embedded in Jewish religious scholarship and his desire to broaden the historiographical awareness of contemporary folklorists and ethnologists prodded him to write to me when the first volume of *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology* appeared to opine that the journal signaled not only a "new stage in the study of Jewish folklore, but of folklore generally" (email August 27, 2022). He referred to the aim of the journal to integrate historical, ethnographic, and literary/poetics approaches that represented converging paths for him as he worked on *Folktales of the Jews* (Ben-Amos 1999; 2017; Bronner and Mieder 2019b). Further, he hoped that the journal would draw folklorists and ethnologists who have not worked in Jewish studies to the importance of Jewish materials in comparative international perspectives that he felt had been pushed aside with contemporary microanalytical trends.

This issue in the journal that Dan helped bring to life contains, therefore, historical, ethnographic, and literary/poetics approaches to Jewish material with implications for the broad understanding of tradition and expressive culture. As Dan would have wanted, contributors to this issue are inspired to expand the horizons of the study of Jewish folklore and ethnology and address its lessons for what he called "social reality." To set the stage for their analytical studies, and to contextualize my allusion to him as our folkloristic *hakham*, I present in this introductory essay an overdue correlation of his scholarly legacy and mentalité with his Jewishness.

"That Guy from Petah Tikva": A Transformational Folklorist's Jewish Odyssey

Dan often prefaced his emailed requests to me for assistance with a variation of the waggish declaration, "You probably don't need to be bothered by another question from *that guy from Petah Tikva*" (email April 20, 2022; emphasis added), or would sign off his message with "Just That Guy from Petah Tikva." He was narrat-

ing himself as an unlikely academic hero rising from lowly roots after wandering about until he found his true calling and embarked on an archetypal Jewish quest for a sense of at-homeness and attainment of profound wisdom. Born on September 3, 1934, in Tel Aviv, British Mandatory Palestine (known by Jews as the *Yishuv* or pre-state Israel), Dan was the second son of Yiddish-, Russian-, and Hebrew-speaking, working-class parents, Zalman (1898–1983, original surname of Castroll) and Rivka (Feinsilber) Ben-Amos (1898–1984). He came of age in the relatively underdeveloped locale of Petah Tikva (literally meaning in Hebrew a gate or opening of hope) 10 miles east of the bustling city of Tel Aviv on the Mediterranean Sea. Eleven years his elder, his older brother Emmanuel (1923–2007) was in the household for only a few years before moving on. The Petah Tikva of Dan's youth was a modest agricultural *moshavah* (a form of intentional community in which property is privately owned). With characteristic humor, Dan recalled that as a child he saw "more camels than cars" (email April 30, 2017).

His repeated quip about his humble boyhood roots showed his appreciation for the hardscrabble training ground out of which he emerged as a contrast to his later circumstances of living in cosmopolitan Philadelphia in intellectual pursuits as a privileged Ivy League academic. He felt defensive about his professorial appearance of stately clothes and soft hands that stood in stark contrast to the plebeian identity and look of his immigrant parents and neighbors as gritty *halutzim* (Heb.: pioneers) who were proud of literally getting their hands in the dirt in *Eretz Yisrael*, the symbolic "Land of Israel." They and their fellow *halutzim* visualized themselves as earthy, tanned, and muscular from intensive agricultural and manual labor—and part of a new secular vision of assertive Jewish life apart from the Old World stereotype of Jews as an inferior, persecuted minority community. Dan served, in fact, as a shepherd on a kibbutz, but he sounded apologetic about never having handled a plow or driven a tractor (see Mieder 2023a, 198). Despite not fulfilling his parents' expectations as he took up professorial life across the Atlantic, Dan in our conversations would refer to a feeling of redemption in America by manifesting a driving work ethic of building a novel social as well as physical edifice as a member of what he considered the educator working class. And to that point he teased me, with an undertone of concern, when I became

a dean, a position that he viewed in the university world as crossing over to the "other side."

Dan knew that I would understand his feelings not only because I too was born to working-class *olim* (Heb.: immigrants with the implication of coming to *Eretz Yisrael* with oppressed status in their former countries and hoping for a brighter future in a Jewish state) from Eastern Europe, but I also hailed from another upstart Israeli town with a dowdy reputation of Kiryat Motzkin in the shadow of the city of Haifa, comparable to the way that in the regional imagination agricultural Petah Tikva paled in comparison to the cosmopolitan city of Tel Aviv. In Dan's words, "While Tel Aviv was the epitome of sophistication, Petah Tikvah was the 'bush,' the backward country. The distance between the two cities or towns is no more than 10 miles, *but culturally they were a world apart* (email April 30, 2017; emphasis added). His catchphrase, "that guy from Petah Tikva," narrated his odyssey as a Jewish academic *bildungsroman* with Horatio Alger motifs of pluck and luck allowing the lowborn protagonist to rise, and mature, in the world (see Baker 1975; Freese 2013; Keeling 2012; Weiher 1978). He intimated that he was still surprised and humbled by his scholarly prestige and would not hide his ignoble roots. Dan let me know that despite my unaccented English (his speech clearly clued native English speakers that he came from elsewhere), he understood my hardscrabble roots and commented that it was a natural foundation for becoming a folklorist and ethnologist.[1] In Dan's childhood experience, Petah Tikva, known colloquially as *Em HaMoshavot* (Heb.: mother of the Moshavot), still showed signs in Dan's youth of its founding mission by religious East European Jews in 1878 as the first modern Jewish agricultural settlement in Ottoman Southern Syria, but was moving toward an industrial economy, including the production of textiles, metalwork, and plastics.

Dan became exposed to Hasidic life with the rise of dozens of yeshivas and the arrival after World War II of over twenty leading rebbes in the vicinity of Tel Aviv, rivaling the concentration of Hasidic courts in Jerusalem (Bar Ze'ev 2020). Despite his secular leanings, he was intrigued by the expressive rituals within emerging Hasidic enclaves and their exuberant performances of stories revolving around their mystical founder Israel ben Eliezer (1698–1760), who they called Ba'al Shem

Tov (Heb.: Master of the Good Name; see the essay in this special issue by Elly Moseson on magic in the life of the Ba'al Shem Tov). By the time of his bar mitzvah, Dan was surrounded by swirling secular and religious movements reshaping what it meant to be Jewish in the post-Holocaust world. Dan's family lived in sight of the early orthodox religious Kibbutz Rodges (named after an agricultural training farm in Germany, part of the Kibbutz Ha-Dati Movement preparing emigrants for communal work in Palestine) (Fishman 1987, 773–79; Rosenberg-Friedman 1999). They heard from the kibbutzniks the historical narrative of breaking away from their intrepid Central and Eastern European refugee forebears by embracing socialism and creation of an egalitarian society. The kibbutz later became a religious boarding school (Mossad Aliya) and took on the progressive metaphor of Kibbutz Yavneh (Heb.: God Builds).

Dan's education was mainly in the secular schools of the labor movement, and it is from this experience that he derived the rhetoric he would later use of "social reality" in relation to art (Ben-Amos 1971a, 7; Ben-Amos 2014a, 16; Ben-Amos 2019a, 35; see also Shapiro 1973). He joined the socialist youth organization *HaNoar HaOved VeHaLomed* (Federation of Young Students and Workers) and as a teenager envisioned that he would join a communal kibbutz and engage in farming and shepherding, which he did for a time in Kibbutz Yiftah (Heb.: he will open) in northern Israel after his discharge from mandatory army service. Dan's brother, in fact, was among the founders of Kibbutz Manara, also an agricultural settlement established by *HaNoar* in northern Israel. Dan served in the Nahal infantry brigade devoted to establishment of agricultural settlements (which included a stint guarding the first Prime Minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion at Kibbutz Sde-Boker located in the Negev desert of southern Israel) (Mieder 2023a, 198). The Nahal group combined social volunteerism, agricultural work in kibbutzim, and military service (see Heymont 1967). As with many Israelis, he became sensitive to the often tense negotiations between the traditionalism of religion and building a new secular culture as well as a modern nation, but in his life as well as in his scholarship he never avowed to be a political ideologue.

With his humanistic interests growing, particularly for new creative writers in modern Hebrew among whom he counted himself, Dan turned away from

Figure 1. Dan Ben-Amos in 1952 at the age of 18 while residing in Petah Tikvah, Israel. After a period of military service and kibbutz work as a shepherd, he entered Hebrew University of Jerusalem an undergraduate student six years later. Photo courtesy of Dan Ben-Amos.

agriculture and enrolled at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (a public university that opened in 1925) to study literature (see figure 1). Reflecting on this period later in his life, Dan cited the influence on his decision of literati in Hebrew such as Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934), who in addition to establishing in 1918 *Reshumot* (Heb.: Records), the first folklore journal published in Hebrew, produced the three-volume *Sefer HaAggadah* (1925 [1908–1911], The Book of Legends), containing folktales and proverbs scattered through the Talmud and at the same time, newly composed songs and poetry that became integrated into

Israeli national life (Ben-Amos 2013; see also Bialik and Rawnitzki 1925). Dan later undertook the translation of another Hebrew writer and poetic heir apparent to Bialik, Nathan Alterman (1910–1970), who had a profound literary as well as political influence on young Israelis (Alterman 2018; Ben-Amos 2016c. See also Avraham and Cohen 2006; Goodblatt 2004; Laor 2013).

Dan's mother grew up in Vilna (now Vilnius in Lithuania) and his father in Minsk, a major center for the socialist labor movement in Belarus. The Ben-Amos siblings gained an appreciation of community organizing from them. Dan commented admiringly that his father "was elected to numerous local committees, councils, and boards of his party, union, and specific projects and after a hard day of work at his [construction] job he would go and attend all kinds of 'meetings.' My mother was an active member of the irgun ima 'ot 'ovdot [Association of Working Mothers] and volunteer for all kinds of projects of this organization, and in later years was also a salaried office holder in this organization" (email January 5, 2019). Zalman and Rivka's sons meanwhile showed a creative streak, with Dan writing poetry and fiction (Ben-Amos 1960, 1961) while Emmanuel became a prominent actor in the renowned Cameri Theatre and starred in films (Cameri 2019).

The dualities of the ancient and modern legacies and religious and creative lines of expression were apparent in Dan's declared majors upon entrance to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem of Biblical Studies and English Literature (Ben-Amos 1975a, 11). It was an unusual curricular combination because most students of Bible took courses in ancient or religious studies, whereas most devotees of English literature combined it with European history or humanities subjects. Wanting to change majors but desiring to keep the credits he had earned, he turned to the major in Hebrew Literature (Ben-Amos 1975, 11; Ben-Amos 2002, 25). That is when he fell under the influence of folklore professor Dov Noy, who had received the PhD in folklore in 1954 from Indiana University, with a dissertation supervised by literary folklorist Stith Thompson on the motif-index of Talmudic-Midrashic tales. Dan recounted that Noy, with his freshly minted PhD, "was the only one who allowed me to take his advanced seminar simultaneously with his introductory course, thus enabling me to meet the requirements of the department without losing a year" (Ben-Amos 1975, 11). Dan's first two papers in folklore, all

based on library work, were comparative textual analyses of the Hebrew versions of Aarne-Thompson Tale Type 505 "The Grateful Dead" and "Color Symbolism in Jewish Folk-Literature" (Ben-Amos 1975, 11; for tale types, see Aarne 1961). Noy bestowed on Dan an award for producing the best paper in the two-semester seminar and encouraged Dan to continue his studies in folklore. Finding a subject in which he could excel and excited by the coursework connecting the past and present of Jewish tradition, he asked Noy how he might concentrate on folklore work after he graduated in 1961. Dan reminisced, "By the end of this year [his sophomore year in 1959] I began to realize how little I knew about folklore studies and was sure that somewhere there must be a place where I could study about the significance of symbols, the structure of narratives, the ethnographic context of folklore performance" (Ben-Amos 1975, 11). Noy advised him to study at his alma mater of Indiana University in the United States that under Thompson's world-renowned leadership emphasized the study of folk narrative.

After Dan arrived in September 1961 at Indiana University in Bloomington, his first encounter with American culture, he thought he made a mistake of landing in such a bucolic, *goyishe* place and prepared to return to Israel (Ben-Amos 1975, 11; Ben-Amos 2002, 24). The director of the Folklore Institute, Richard Dorson, raised in a Jewish family from New York City, convinced Dan to stay by taking a personal interest in his adjustment. Dan recalled, "When I just arrived in Bloomington looking for an apartment to rent, Dorson drove me around with his VW and as we began to talk he said to me: 'I too learned Hebrew until the Bar-Mitzvah.' For me this was a shocker. I thought I will have a 'meshumad' [Heb.: apostate] for a professor and, as I learned in Jewish literature and history in Israel, these kind of people hate the Jews more than the goyim. Of course, as you well know, nothing of that sort ever happened in this case. But his admission, and my silent shock, was an interesting introduction for me to folklore and Jews in the goldene medina [Yiddish: golden country]" (email July 2, 2014; for Dan's published reflections on Dorson, see Ben-Amos 1975, 1989).

Aided by a Ford Foundation Fellowship in 1961–1962, Dan, in classes with humanistic professors Warren Roberts and Edson Richmond at Indiana University, was immersed in the "Finnish school" of historic-geographic methodology

that involved motif and tale type analyses of texts to find origins and diffusion patterns of folktales and songs (Aarne 1961; Krohn 1971; Thompson 1946, 428–48). He also took in anthropological and social science perspectives on myth and tales from professors David Bidney, Ermine Wheeler-Voegelin, and Thomas Sebeok. For Dan, Richard Dorson, who taught theory and method in addition to American folklore, was influential for his perspective as a historian. Although none of those professors taught courses on Jewish folklore and ethnology,[2] Dan took note of theories of diffusion and acculturation that they discussed and applied them to thinking about cultural exchange of Jews with host societies in their forced and unforced migrations from antiquity to the present (see Ben-Amos 1963a, 1963b).

When Dan attended graduate school in the early 1960s, the hot theoretical topic across the humanities and social sciences was structuralism, and together with fellow students Richard Bauman, Alan Dundes, Elli Köngäs, and Robert Georges, among others who later left their mark on folkloristics, a seminar on the structural approach was initiated with Sebeok. Dan recalled that many out-of-class discussions of structuralism ensued with fellow students about redirecting folklore studies to behavioral theory (Ben-Amos 2002, 26–27; Ben-Amos 2014a, 18; see also Bauman 1969; Ben-Amos 1977, 2002; Bronner 1984; Dorson 1972, 45–47; Dundes 1976; Gabbert 1999). Of special interest to Dan was the French-Jewish background of structuralist theoretician Claude Lévi-Strauss, who lived with his maternal grandfather, the Rabbi of Versailles. Dan and others observed the influence of hermeneutic midrashic interpretations of textual patterns and symbolic oppositions on Lévi-Strauss's paradigmatic approach to structuralism (see Ben-Amos 2002, 25–26; Damrosch 1995; Loyer 2018; Mieder 2023a, 28; see also Boyarin 1990; Rojtman 1998; Stern 1996). Reflecting on his study of Midrash, Dan told an interviewer that "the modern application of the concept of Midrash to literary theory expands the concept in an important way, but it takes it out of the historical-literary situation in which it evolved" (Ben-Amos 2002, 26). In the introduction to *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, Dan, writing with University of Pennsylvania colleague Kenneth S. Goldstein (1975), also possessing a Jewish background, asserted that of Dorson's categories of approaches that were current in 1963—comparative, national, anthropological, psychological, and

structural—the last has the closest affinity to studies of folklore as performance and communication (Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975, 6).[3] Ben-Amos and Goldstein commented, "Both trends are concerned with the symbolic communicative capabilities of folklore. While structural studies for the most part focused primarily on the text itself, communicative studies of folklore performance concerned themselves with the interrelation between texts and situations. Both aim at discovering the symbolic codes of folklore as they relate to situations within the constraints of particular genres" (Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975, 6–7; see also the field report on East European gravestones by Ruth Ellen Gruber in this special issue).

In his dissertation, "Narrative Forms in the Haggadah: Structural Analysis" (1967), Dan applied a structural analysis of Jewish folk narratives (legend, tall tale, fable, exemplum, and riddling tale) from Hebrew and Aramaic sources to point out native categories of prose genres. Richard Dorson from the Folklore Institute served as chair, and anthropologist David Bidney, literary critic Newton P. Stallknecht, and Talmudic scholar Henry Fischel constituted his examining committee. Noteworthy in relation to his introduction of "artistic communication" in his 1971 definition of folklore is his concluding section of the dissertation discussing the artistic patterning of folklore. Through the identification of narrative structures, he proposed the "analysis of the artistic formal variations which occur in a single tale *in the process of oral circulation* and limit the range of narrative patterns of a given genre" (Ben-Amos 1967, 201; emphasis added). Although he does not use the word "context," it is clear that he was pondering the influence of situational context on narrative performance when he wrote, "It is necessary to examine the background and the form of circulation of the material" (Ben-Amos 1967, 201). Dan took to task Alexander Krappe's (1964) evolutionary approach to folklore for conceptualizing folklore genres "as if under their own power with no relation to *social context* and other literary forms in the same culture" (Ben-Amos 1967; emphasis added). Concerned with the arbitrary methods of classifying folklore, Dan left room for his future theory-building when he remarked that "the abstraction of a folklore genre from its cultural context is a methodological procedure rather than a conception of reality" (1967, 54; he repeats this complaint in Ben-Amos 1963c, 168, in reference to defining the "action" of the ballad). The reference

to reality was informed by the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, theorizing "occasions of experience" as a process of change (Whitehead 1929; see also Burke 1959; Hartshorne and Peden 2010; Seibt 2022). In contrast to the philosophical view of reality comprising static individuals, Whitehead emphasized the dynamic nature of experience, and indeed "dynamic," "process," and "experience" became keywords of Dan's theories of folklore that was rooted in social interaction. For example, Dan criticized the prevailing literary view of genre as a static category and suggested that examining genre as a process came closer to the way that people dynamically experienced the world through creativity. He foregrounded the issue in the organization of the book *Folklore Genres* in 1976 that derived from articles originally published in the journal *Genre* in 1969 and 1971 (Ben-Amos 1969, 1971a). Sensitive undoubtedly to his father's colloquial ethnic references to folktales as *bubbe-mayses* (Yiddish: literally grandmother stories, idiomatically dismissive in English as "old wives tales"; see Ben-Amos 2019, 301), Dan's own contributions, besides laying out the historiography and theory of genre in folklore scholarship (1976b), was to distinguish between analytical and ethnic genres (Ben-Amos 1976a). The latter involved an understanding of the perception of people native to a culture and the processes by which those genres were invoked, or evoked, in social situations.

Dan credited his Jewish professor Jerome Mintz (1930–1997) for first guiding him to use fieldwork to address the "conception of reality" (Ben-Amos 2013). Mintz taught a course on folkloristic fieldwork, and Dan for an assignment recorded a person who was referred to him as a master Jewish joketeller. The field experience led him later to consider further the distinctive performance of jests in a Jewish social context and the social construction of a category of "Jewish humor" (see Ben-Amos 1973b; see also Ben-Amos 1970). Mintz, a young Brooklyn-born Jewish professor (1968), was engaged at the time with fieldwork dealing with legends and storytelling among the Hasidim of New York City concentrated in Brooklyn (see also Mintz 1992). Mintz later collaborated with Dan, only four years his junior, on annotating and editing the first English translation of *Shivhei Ha-Besht* (Mintz and Ben-Amos 1970, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*). Ben-Amos had earlier helped with the annotation and editing of folk narratives with his Hebrew

Figure 2. Professor Richard M. Dorson (left), editor of the Folktales of the World Series for the University of Chicago Press and director of the Folklore Institute at Indiana University, discusses *Folktales of Israel* (1963) with graduate student Dan Ben-Amos (right), who provided annotations of the texts for the book, December 10, 1962. Photo courtesy of the Indiana University Archives.

University professor Dov Noy, when Richard Dorson included *Folktales of Israel* in his Folktales of the World series for the University of Chicago Press (Noy 1963; see figure 2).

In those works on narratives collected from Jews, and especially with Dan's longer annotations for the multi-volume *Folktales of the Jews* series drawn from folktales in the Israel Folktale Archives (2006, 2007, 2011), Dan shows an incredible command of folk literary sources from antiquity to the present. More than marking motif and type numbers, as was the practice in earlier headnotes, one reads in Dan's commentaries various previous interpretations of the story and analyses of historical and social contexts from archaeological, literary, and ethnographic

sources. From this analysis, he proposes possible meanings as the story was used in different situations and whether those meanings diffused with migration or were distinctive to the local context, much as sixteenth century Polish Rabbi Moses Isserles commented on local customs in his writing on Jewish *minhagim* [Heb.: customs] (see Bronner 2013; Davis 2002). Dan explained to an interviewer before the first volume was published the theoretical implication of the project as underscoring "the need for a synthesis between contextual" approaches, which he associated with his ideas on performance, "and historical analyses" (Ben-Amos 2002, 30).

By both advocating for and critiquing interpretations of the tales, Dan challenged readers as if they were a study partner in the Jewish educational tradition of *b'chavrusa* (Heb.: in partnership) to evaluate the range of possibilities and the use of word and story to collaboratively arrive at new perspectives (see Schwarz and Bekerman 2021). The contextual perspective enters Dan's commentaries with his detailed consideration of the relation of the narratives to different social circumstances in which they were told. Further, one can appreciate this work as the testing ground for his trenchant views of "motif" and "type" as symbols and functions that are variable in different cultural contexts rather than fixed literary forms (Ben-Amos 1980; 1995a; see also Zhang 2019). As he has done repeatedly with a number of concepts such as genre, tradition, and humor—and indeed context—he took what scholars viewed as givens and subjected them to deep philosophical as well as historiographical analysis (see Ben-Amos 1993, 1996b). Dan reflected that his questioning of the standardization of English terms internationally in the study of folklore resulted from "the fact that I am a Native speaker of Hebrew and English is a second language for me" (Ben-Amos 2002, 26). His questioning went further, too, because his immersion in historic Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish texts—both secular and religious—and his Jewish education that emphasized oral and community sources led him to be aware of precursors of folkloristic perspectives on issues of genre, tradition, and custom in particular. Indeed, he consistently published papers in his career outlining the significance of such sources and precursors (see Ben-Amos 1963b; 1992; 1994b; 1999b; 1999c). He self-identified outside the core of the mainstream

of the academic community, particularly in the United States, as a Jewish scholar on the border of humanistic and social scientific approaches, and secularism and religion. Consequently, in his perception of himself as a marginalized figure, he engaged in cultural as well as intellectual critique (see Gluzman 2003; Greenstein 2020; Lipset and Ladd 1971, 106–20).

Dan understood the academic position of folklore studies in the United States during the 1960s as fragile, but he saw signs of growth with the emergence of new academic programs devoted to the subject as he received his Master of Arts degree on September 8, 1964, and the PhD on June 12, 1967 (Ben-Amos 1973a; see also Dorson 1973, 1978). He could not be sure that he would be able to continue working in the United States as he contemplated his future with a folklore degree. After having taught as a graduate student in Asian Studies at Indiana University, Dan landed a one-year position in anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the 1966–1967 academic year. He felt fortunate in fall 1967, with his recently acquired doctorate, that the University of Pennsylvania hired him for a tenure-track position in its fledgling folklore and folklife program, which had begun offering doctoral degrees in 1963 (see Miller 2020). He had an immediate impact mentoring doctoral students who went on to have impressive careers (Ben-Amos 2002, 31; Samuelson 1983). Dan reached the rank of professor in 1977 and in 1999 added a departmental affiliation with Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (later Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations) and a programmatic connection to the Jewish Studies Program. He stepped up to leadership roles as chair of the Department of Folklore and Folklife in 1973–1974 and again in 1982–1984; he continued his advocacy for continuing folklore studies at the University of Pennsylvania, after it suspended admissions in 2004, by chairing the Committee on Folklore, which granted a Graduate Certificate in Folklore Studies (see Hufford 2020). Alumnus Jack Santino observed in 2014 that despite Dan's lonely battle with the University of Pennsylvania administration to bring back the Department of Folklore and Folklife, "Penn has fallen victim to the corporate mentality that has afflicted higher education of late. . . . He has courageously represented the interests of folklore studies in an uncaring, even hostile environment."[4] His classes, however, continue to fill, and he kept teaching after many of his colleagues had retired,

in large part to keep the fires of folklore burning at the University in the hope that new leadership would restore the department.

Among Dan's honors over the span of his career have been coveted fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies (1972–1973), Guggenheim Foundation (1975–1976), and National Endowment for the Humanities (1980–1981), and prestigious grants from the National Science Foundation (1968, 1970), African Studies Association (1971), and National Institute of Mental Health (1968). Of special importance is the honor from the American Folklore Society bestowed on him in 2014 for lifetime scholarly achievement. Even then, he expressed humility by stating the Hebrew proverb, *kol ha-rodef ahar ha-kovod, ha-kovod bore'ah mimenu*" (Everyone seeks respect, but it comes ultimately from within), and assuring me that "I have a fair amount of human frailty" (email December 1, 2013; see also Jacobs 1995, 28).

I sensed this frailty when Dan confided that despite his professional successes, Dan's parents were disappointed that he, as a child of *halutzim* and part of the early generation of sabras, did not become an engineer or an army officer building a redemptive Jewish state. Dan recalled that his "preoccupation with folktales seemed somewhat odd" to his tradesman father (see Dan's biographical note in Ben-Amos 2007, 493–94). At a pivotal moment early in Dan's career when he wanted to impress his parents with the venerable built environment of the University of Pennsylvania, his father shot back, "Professor-shmofessor, but what do you do?" implying that this intellectual pursuit was not "real work" (Ben-Amos 2019b, 301). Dan showed him an article he had written that sparked a surprising compliment from his father to Dan for being "pretty smart" (Ben-Amos 2019b, 301). Dan used this opening to explain the significance of being a teacher, a role exalted in Judaism,[5] to illuminate Jewish oral traditions and to combat antisemitism (see the essay in this special issue by Wolfgang Mieder on Nazi uses of proverbs in antisemitic literature). Moved by Dan's passion for folklore education, his father ordered, "In that case, let me tell you some stories, and you will record them" (Ben-Amos 2019b, 301). His father related a story in Yiddish of "The Pharmacist's Burial" (titled "The Death of a Wicked Heretic" in *Folktales of the Jews, Volume 2* [2007, 466–72] and assigned ATU tale type number 1824 [Uther 2004,

II: 428]) that became part of the Israel Folktale Archives and which Dan analyzed in *The Power of a Tale* edited by Israeli folklorists Haya Bar-Itzhak and Idit Pintel-Ginsberg (Ben-Amos 2019b).

Dan also wrote poignantly about his father's strategic use of proverbs and their relation to narrative in "Meditation on a Russian Proverb in Israel" (Ben-Amos 1995). Dan analyzed his family context to uncover the meaning of his father's statement of "Don't say 'hop' before you have jumped and landed," uttered in Russian by an immigrant for whom speaking Russian back in his place of birth carried prestige, Dan wrote, to admonish his Israeli-born, Hebrew-speaking son (Ben-Amos 1995c, 15). Following a structural analysis of the proverb, Dan used social psychology and historical context to arrive at the interpretation that in using Russian, his father purposefully inserted the proverb into the conversation to refer "to a different body of tradition" (Ben-Amos 1995c, 21). Dan pointed out, "Although both [Jewish speakers] spoke in Israel, they still internally maintained the social structure of the Jewish diaspora, in which the Jews were a minority who simultaneously resented and admired the culture of the majority group. In these cases the proverb has been sanctioned by the politically superior 'other,' the powerful influence of which immigrants remain under long after they have left their native country. Yet, by citing this proverb in Russian, the former partisan adds a further subversive dimension to his story as he targets it against a member of the same society whose language he speaks" (Ben-Amos 1995c, 21). As his father had drawn on his cultural memory of his move from Minsk in Belarus to Petah Tikva, so too did Dan reflect beyond his annotation of variants to see the lasting influence of his childhood on his own outlook on life and society, even though he felt worlds away in location and vocation from the kibbutz experience of Israel.

Part of that kibbutz experience was clearly a community activism and social organization that manifested in his mobilization of colleagues and students from many different backgrounds to join together to advance folkloristics as an international discipline. Coming out of a multilingual, multinational environment, for example, he championed the Translations in Folklore Studies series for the Institute for the Study of Human Issues and Indiana University Press that made available in English the classic works in folklore studies written in other languages.

He also was on international advisory boards of *Folklore* (Estonia), *Estudios de Literatura Oral Popular* (Spain), *Folklorismus Bulletin* (Hungary), and *Cahiers de Littérature Orale* (France). He served additionally as associate editor and book review editor of the *Journal of American Folklore* (1981–1985, 1987–1990) and associate editor for *Research in African Literatures* (1970–1990).

For all his dispensed advice—both solicited and unsolicited—about this journal, he might as well have been my associate editor for *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology*, but he insisted that such a role should go to someone younger who will build the field's future. He certainly served as a strong guiding hand for the journal, as he had for many institutions working with Jewish folklore and ethnology around the world. Among his many emails telling me what to do with the journal was an order comparable to his father's command to Dan to record stories: "Have a section in the journal to 'Classics in Jewish Folklore' in which it will be possible to publish essays that appeared originally in Yiddish, Judeo-Arabic, Espaniol and the like" (email April 20, 2022). An avid bibliographer, he served as head of the folklore section of the Modern Language Association International Bibliography and commented to me, "As you realize in my work, I still come across works I have not fully known, and I think am not alone" (email April 20, 2022; for his bibliography of Jewish folklore for *Oxford Bibliographies*, see Ben-Amos 2015). He was referring to long-repressed documentation from An-ski's fieldwork in the Pale of Settlement that had come to light with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Underscoring that many sources of folkloristic knowledge had yet to be uncovered, Dan wrote fellow folklorist Wolfgang Mieder in 2022 that "I am still working, discovering new articles about proverbs and other genres," and with his characteristic humor, he jested, "During my Bar-Mitzvah I did not know that this was going to be in my future, but there were many things that I found out only later" (Mieder 2023a, 202; see the essay in this issue by Wolfgang Mieder on antisemitic uses of proverbs in Germany).

Much of Dan's drive, I contend, was to record stories and traditions that were not fully known and to have the folklorist explain it as the storyteller—and historian, literary scholar, or linguist—alone could not. Although he had intended to contribute an essay to the journal, as he was forced by failing health to "see more

doctors than librarians," he asserted, "I must finish the Folktales of the Jews series" (email November 26, 2022), designating it as the culminating project of his career. In 2022, he confided that he was undergoing chemotherapy, and as a result "going through periods of total fatigue" (Mieder 2023a, 202). Still, he would not give up teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, and even from his hospital bed, he vowed to return to the classroom. After more than sixty years of instruction that included Jewish studies as well as folklore, teaching was a top priority for him because it perpetuated the study of folklore and ethnology with young minds who would shape the future by blazing new paths as he had.[6] He dipped into Jewish folklore to capture his predicament: "This situation is summarized by the Jewish proverb: 'Everybody loves to live a long life but hates to get old'" (email December 24, 2022).

"Why Were You Not Zusya?": The Jewish Work of Folkloristics and Ethnology

Remarking on the future of folkloristics in an address to the American Folklore Society on the eve of the new millennium, Dan concluded his paper with a condensed version of a poignant Hasidic parable: "Rabbi Zusya said, 'In the coming world, they will not ask me: "Why were you not Moses?" They will ask me: "Why were you not Zusya?"'" (Ben-Amos 1998, 274; his source was Buber 1991, 251). In the longer version, the teller describes the historical figure of the rabbi (known as Meshulam Zusya or Zusha of Hanipoli or Anipoli [present Ukraine], 1718–1800) as a humble, even timid, man although being a *tzaddik*, or righteous man, who was characterized in legend as a "true man of the people." In one version, upon his death the heavenly tribunal presses him on why he was not like Moses during his life, to which he could only answer "because Moses was a prophet and I am not." In many versions of the story, the Rabbi is then asked why he was not like Abraham, Jeremiah, Jacob, David, and Akiba or other great Jewish figures of the *Tanakh*. To the final question of why he was not Zusya, he has no answer. Or else the narrative is set on Zusya's deathbed surrounded by his students. The students ask the teacher whether he is crying because he fears death. He replies "no." He tells them that

what he fears is that instead of asking him why he did not match the greatness of Moses, the judges will ask him why was he not more like Zusya.[7]

I cannot be sure how many folklorists in the audience understood Dan's reference to Zusya. Having heard the story before from Hasidic rabbis, I understood his point as that folklorists need to be true to themselves and not be tempted to imitate, futilely, a better-known model, or field, that does not serve their purpose. The common rabbinical interpretation is that people need to have their own mission in life and not compare themselves to others. And maybe he related to it because it described his own insecurities as much as it conveyed a message of concern about what he perceived as folklorists abandoning the name as well as the core values of the discipline. Dan believed, as he told the audience, being a folklorist is being someone who specially "records in order to analyze and interpret." Rather than bowing to expectations of popular and public culture of conducting "research of the eleventh hour" (Ben-Amos 1998, 274), folklorists should be devoted, he avowed, to the "communal process of traditionalization and the scholarly search for tradition" (Ben-Amos 1998, 274). As a Jew as well as a folklorist he was sensitive more than most to the power of tradition of groups forced into migration and confronting their cultural sustainability through millennia.

Decried in his youth as a rebellious upstart responsible for smashing the long-standing foundation of folklore studies, he found himself in the twenty-first century defending past scholarship under the rubric of "folklore" to folklorists overly occupied, he thought, with ways that outsiders construed the appellation negatively and whether the response should be to change it or align with other fields (e.g., ethnology, cultural studies, heritage studies, performance studies). The critical comments from his younger colleagues obviously struck a nerve to someone versed in the legacy of Jews pressured to convert to the nationalistic religious majority in host societies. Having been over the span of his career outspoken about closely scrutinizing the fundamental concepts of the discipline, such as "tradition," "motif," "group," and "genre," he erected bridges between the past and future by reminding his audience of folklorists that "the moments of self-evaluation that punctuate the history of our discipline could serve as constructive, critical self-examination; those may become our theoretical and methodological

turning points. But in those moments let us not lose sight of the fundamentals of folklore and the intellectual traditions from which we draw and to which we attempt to contribute" (Ben-Amos 1998, 274). He noted the changing landscape of disciplines in the twenty-first century and observed that the blurring divisions in humanities and social sciences "only strengthens the position of folklore" (1998, 274). Making the jump from the small disciplinary frame of folklore studies to the big picture of higher learning, he declared, "Folklorists, who know their own subject more profoundly than students of other disciplines, could formulate research questions that reflect their knowledge and at the same time relate their interest *to broader intellectual concerns*" (1998, 274; emphasis added). Instead of capitulating to the imperial disciplinary majority and seeking popular approval, he called for the minority discipline of folkloristics as a firmly academic pursuit to take a firm stand on the distinctiveness of its identity growing out of a long intellectual legacy and to edify the other disciplines that are either ignorant or prejudiced toward the tradition-based study and terminology of folklore (see Ben-Amos 2019a).[8]

Many students of folklore presume that Dan had erased tradition from the folkloristic lexicon, but nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, his article "The Seven Strands of *Tradition*: Varieties in Its Meaning in American Folklore Studies" (Ben-Amos 1984) in a special issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* on "Culture, Tradition, and Identity" was a major statement that he composed in response to the view that his definition of folklore and disciplinary practice abandoned the concept of tradition. His mind for clarification and definition is apparent when he writes, "Definitions flourish when the semantics are vague, and the neglect from which the term *tradition* has suffered reflects, paradoxically, a healthy position in scholarly and literary discourse" (Ben-Amos 1984, 98). Much as he viewed folkloric events as dynamic and complex, so too did Dan approach intellectual history as a structured multi-perspectival search for meaning in different social and political contexts. Instead of using the usual metaphor of containers or types for rhetorical differences, Dan visualized interwoven *strands*. Beginning with the foundational idea of "Tradition as Lore" from American Folklore Society founder William Wells Newell, Dan moved to "Tradition as Canon," "Tradition as Process," "Tradition as Culture," "Tradition as Langue," and ended on a self-critical

note of "Tradition as Performance," Having unraveled the strands, he wove them back together in the tapestry of folklore by identifying *tradition* ultimately as "a symbol of and for folklore," indeed a principal metaphor "to guide us in the choate world of experiences and ideas" (Ben-Amos 1984, 124; see also Blank and Howard 2014; Bronner 1998; Bronner 2011; Bronner 2019b; Glassie 2003; Noyes 2009; Oring 2021; all these references cite Dan's foundational essay). He concludes that one strand is not more proper than the other, and each can be analyzed much as a narrative for the functions it served for "different periods and different persuasions" (Ben-Amos 1984, 124). He advocated for treating folklore not only as a form and process in social reality but also as a significant concept in philosophy and the history of ideas (Ben-Amos 2020a, 1–7). He reached back as the broad-visioned folklorist to the historiography of folkloristics, a subfield he helped establish, indeed a way of thinking about theory, to help shape present practice as well as forecast future trends and questions (Ben-Amos 1984, 124; see also Ben-Amos 1973a; Ben-Amos 1985; Ben-Amos 2014c; see also Bronner 2019a). His thinking on tradition drew on the emphasis within Judaism on the concept, as he told an interviewer from India: "I am interested to find out how people name and interpret their terms for tradition and for the forms of folklore and trying to explore these questions not in the scholarly but in the ethnic context" (Ben-Amos 2002, 26).

Historiographers might understand Ben-Amos's philosophizing about tradition as well as genre in line with his structuralist goal of thinking "with" words and narratives even more than thinking about them (Ben-Amos 1998, 257; for the structuralist origin of the rhetorical distinction of thinking "with" and "about," see Lévi-Strauss 1962, 89). As with tradition, Dan observed the dominant role that the concept of genre occupies in folklore studies, but despite its familiarity, he found that its meanings and implications for the discipline have not been adequately unpacked. Particular genres such as myth, tale, legend, proverb, and riddle, he claimed, have been subject to scrutiny extensively compared to the investigation of evolving/permanent/discursive forms and classificatory systems of genres (Ben-Amos 1976b, xii-xiii; see also Jolles 2017). Within Jewish studies, he challenged conventional wisdom influenced by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic readings of Jewish jokes, for example, on what he called the "Jewish-masochism thesis" (core

of self-mockery) defining "Jewish humor." Based on the evidence of dialect jokes told by children of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, he suggested instead a meaning of social differentiation (Ben-Amos 1973b, 124–25; see also Ben-Amos 1970). He wrote, "The fact that Jews tell jokes about each other demonstrates not so much self-hatred as perhaps the internal segmentation of their society" (Ben-Amos 1973b, 129). In keeping with his contextual ideas of revealing social reality in the performance of folklore, he called for "the ethnography of Jewish humor . . . to examine the relationship between the narrator and the subject matter of his jokes, but also to map the direction of mockery within the network of the community itself" (Ben-Amos 1973b, 130; see also the essay in this special issue by Tsafi Sebba-Elran on humorous memes about Haredim in Israel).

He tied the concept of performance to genres by noting that in addition to constituting analytical constructs, genres are "distinct modes of communication which exist in the lore of peoples" (Ben-Amos 1976b, xxxi). He observed that the shift from literary-linguistic approaches oriented toward classificatory systems according to library principles to ethnography of communication "not only adds new supplementary information but also changes the perspectives of the text from linear narration to multidimensional performance, from a tale to a telling" (Ben-Amos 1976b, xxxvi). According to Dan, distinctively "in this context" of ethnographic methodology, folklore genres are "modes of verbal symbolic interaction," especially evident in the shift of focus from concern with *analytical* classification of folklore genres to the *ethnic* systemization of forms (Ben-Amos 1976b, xxxvi, xxxix; see also Jolles 2017). He called for more research of ethnic, native, or community (cf., "emic" in the structural system of Dundes 1962) names as well as conceptualization and traditionalization to move from a theory of behavior to one of mind, as evidenced, in his words, in "their symbolic value in the network of formal communication and their position in the *cultural cognitive categories*" (Ben-Amos 1976a, 235; emphasis added).

Dan engaged faculty colleagues in the exploration of a theory of mind at a University of Pennsylvania faculty seminar that he organized with literary scholar and psychoanalytical theorist Liliane Weissberg in 1993–1994 on the concept of cultural memory and the construction of identity (Ben-Amos and Weissberg 1999;

see also Ben-Amos 1994a; Ben-Amos and Ben-Amos 2020a; Weissberg 2022). A factor in formation of the seminar was the approach of the new millennium that sparked retrospectives on the past and forecasts for the future. Using rhetoric that underscored to a non-folkloristic audience the significance of folklore as the manifestation of collective memory in everyday life, Dan declared, "No longer the negative side of history, it [folklore] is the bond that unites societies, creating images that attain the truth value of a symbol, even if deviating from facts. As such, collective memory becomes the creative imagining of the past in service of the present and an imagined future" (Ben-Amos 1999a, 299). Relating to a point he advanced in his article "The Name Is the Thing" (Ben-Amos 1998), Dan told the audience to engage in a complex ethnography of memory unveiled unapologetically through the study of traditions. After all, he wrote, "the acceptance of tradition as the function of memory allows one to consider the selectors of appropriate subjects that a society retains in its collective memory, their public guardians, promoters, and transmitters, not as self-interested producers of social mythologies but as people who, in their professional capacities, whether journalists or storytellers, artists or architects, politicians or scholars, serve society and register on its social landscape of the present the memory of the past" (Ben-Amos 1999a, 299–300). As such, the study of folklore as shaped by Jewish experience informs other fields in an interdisciplinary intellectual synthesis bridging the past and present, history and society, fact and fiction, language and art.

"Wait, I Think He Is Still Moving": Fulfilling Dan Ben-Amos's Vision

After seeing into print three volumes of *Folktales of the Jews* in five years while largely working in solitude, Dan got sidetracked from finishing what he told friends and colleagues was his magnum opus by an editing project, "The Challenge of Folklore to the Humanities." In the midst of widespread political and economic discourse of globalism in the twenty-first century, Dan wanted to use the platform of the journal *Humanities* to reassert the importance of folklore studies in consideration of international issues of geographic mobility and transnational identity. In Dan's historiographical view, professional folklorists early on viewed

the evidence of folklore as a key to charting global movements and cultural developments that had a significant impact on world history, and yet they were not being adequately consulted in contemporary forums on the pressing issues and even crises of forced and unforced migration. Within his own discipline, he also hoped to alter the concerning ethnographic trend of avoiding generalization in microanalytic, ahistorical studies, particularly among performance-oriented folklorists who he had taught (see Ben-Amos 2018; Haring 2016). As he undertook the *Folktales of the Jews* project with its sweeping global purview, he considered the lack of comparative analysis in contemporary studies of singular events as a barrier to expanding international communication. He argued for interpretative strategies that would include historical and literary/poetics considerations of folkloric events and would address group patterns as well as questions of global "universals" (Ben-Amos 2011b, 978–79; Ben-Amos 2017). Consequently, he meant the "Challenge" project to spur or renew comparative studies and humanistic generalization.

Another motivation to take on the "Challenge" project was his desire to respond to university administrators facing budget cuts to drop relatively small academic programs such as folklore studies or swallow them up in larger units of English and history, often lodged in divisions of humanities. He hoped to make the case through the project that folkloristics was a vibrant field that was relevant to current and future students and scholars. Reflecting on the occasion of public tributes to his fifty years of teaching folklore at the University of Pennsylvania and inspired by eminent folklorist Stith Thompson's 1964 article "The Challenge of Folklore" in *PMLA*, a leading journal of the humanities, he mobilized nineteen international scholars to contribute essays in an open-access online format that would facilitate a broad readership. His guidance to authors was to address the challenge not only of folklore as evidence and a discipline to non-folklorists in the humanities but also to contemporary folklorists to assess their theoretical as well as historical underpinnings (Ben-Amos 2021). Encouraging an "introspective analysis," he claimed that the common thread of these objectives was a view, using Thompson's terms, in which "folk cultures challenge civilization." Dan's background in the diasporic experience of Jews led him to emphasize folklore's significance in the contemporary age to understand dramatic shifts in inter-community

relations rather than the monolithic, static idea of civilization. To his folklorist colleagues, he suggested building studies based on the discipline's roots in transmission to account for the characteristic of folklore changing across time and space rather than viewing folklore as constituting isolated events in siloed communities (see Ben-Amos 2011c). It is this vision to which I promised Dan I would devote my energies in expanding the project to a book titled *The World of Tradition* that went beyond the humanities in its coverage to social and natural sciences. I looked at filling gaps in the coverage of regions, genres, and globalization themes of the "Challenge" project and received agreement from over 40 authors, more than double the number of contributors to the original special issue to fulfill Dan's international vision (see https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp .0368). Unlike the special issue in *Humanities*, the plan for the contents of the book includes a separate section on various global diasporas such as Jews, Muslims, Mexicans, Turks, Roma, and Irish.

Dan considered the study of folklore and ethnology ever more important in the twenty-first century to counter the suppression of oral traditions as society by elites, including those in the scholarly community. As an example, he referred to the Hebrew Bible and the ways that "rabbinic Judaism controlled literacy and eliminated or rejected texts that did not conform with its religious and ethical values" (Ben-Amos 2021, 2). He harked back to his early studies balancing the study of the Hebrew Bible and contemporary Jewish culture in asserting a "dialogic relation of validation and valuation between orality and literacy" among Jews that became representative of patterns that continued in other ethnic culture. (Ben-Amos 2021, 3). Put another way, Dan viewed the challenge of folklore as the voice of the people often in opposition to "the dominant ideological cultural attitude." (Ben-Amos 2021, 3; see also Ben-Amos 1991; 1999b, 149–58).

Shifting to an audience of Jewish Studies scholars, Dan expanded on the political as well as cultural line drawn between orality and literacy by pointing out the historic role of folklore as a tool of countercultural movements. He pointed out the biblical designation of "the folk" as *ha'am* (the people) and *olam (*the world population) and the condescension and even animosity by the literate priestly class. According to Dan, "The folklore that ancient literates could not appropriate, they

condemned. Magic and witchcraft, demons and ghosts, and the witches and wizards that controlled them were banned. But the stronger the condemnation, the more solid is the evidence of their entrenchment in ancient Israelite religion and society" (Ben-Amos 2014b). Dan asserted that in postbiblical eras, rabbis did not report traditions that became the "foundational narratives of Jewish folklore." He claimed that for over a thousand years, Jewish folklore represented a liberation from rabbinical authorities. In his view, an evolution occurred in which diaspora communities expanded the thematic range and creative limits of Jewish tradition from the synagogue to the home, marketplace, street, and other secular venues. An example is women's singing, which was banned by the rabbis because it aroused sexual desire but yet as women's folk song came alive in the folkloric tradition of *ha'am*. Bringing into the argument his own experience, Dan reflected that in the newly created state of Israel, "A new society requires a new folklore, and poets and composers imagined a folk poetry composed of a synthesis of ancient imagery, contemporary reality, and messianic orientalism that became known as shirei 'Erez Yisra'el" (Ben-Amos 2014b). With his analytical antennae up for ways that cognitive categories of genre constitute a factor in the efficacy of folklore's counter-cultural or class function, Dan hypothesized that "the folk genre with the least presence in Jewish literacy, [that] once discovered, made the greatest impact upon the modern literate world and attained recognition unto itself" is Jewish humor. Dan called it "a subversive form of communication, built upon incongruity, inversion, and dissonance" (Ben-Amos 2014b; see also Ben-Amos 2020a and the essay in this issue by Tsafi Sebba-Elran on humorous memes about Haredim in Israel). Integrating historical and ethnographic perspectives, Dan suggested that humor subverts the voice of the elite sages and, into the present, inverts national societies that doubt Jews have the creative imagination to be funny, musical, and artistic.

Dan was particularly interested in those occasions in which the agency of the people surfaces with the aid of folklore and transforms knowledge as well as society. He described the possibility of oral traditions filtering "through the sieves of literacy in bits and pieces and then function[ing] to advocate or reaffirm the writers' ideology" (Ben-Amos 2014b). It is possible, and significant for understanding of a group, Dan avowed, when "ideas, beliefs, narrative themes and forms, humor,

and folk-wisdom [in the form of proverbs and sayings] have seeped through the cracks and become available, free from strict sectorial control" (Ben-Amos 2014b). For years, Dan was working on what he considered a telling example of this process of the intertwining of the oral and the literate in the curious case of Kol Nidrei sung at the opening of Yom Kippur, but did not get the project to the publication stage.

Dan presented a long paper on his research as the Don Yoder Lecture in Religious Folklife at the American Folklore Society Annual Meeting in 2016 (https://media.dlib.indiana.edu/media_objects/b2773w98f). As the discussant for the lecture, Dan sent me his manuscript from which I present excerpts here for the first time. Relevant to his idea of Jewish folklore as counterculture is his statement that

> the recitations of the Kol Nidrei are a folk-practice, folk performance that was introduced into the service by the praying public rather than by the rabbinical authorities. Its inclusion in the siddur, is a rabbinical response to a pressure from the community, rather than the other way around, a learned composition that was taught and introduced by the rabbis.

Dan recognized the long bookshelf on Kol Nidrei that tends to interpret it in terms of its legal use. He offered a folkloristic and ethnological interpretation based upon comparison to the usage of incantations and protective amulets in current context. Connected to his views of Jewish folk humor expressing social differentiation, Dan hypothesized that "if we consider this recitation as an absolution of vows, and prohibitions, and bans in terms of the language of magic and popular use expressing ill will and social tension with the community, the position of Kol Nidrei in the service is clear: This is a cleansing ritual that purifies the community from the negative social tension, emotions of anger and hatred that accumulate over the year like a [dental] plaque impeding the communication of positive human emotion. This is a ritual of purification and social renewal." In the formal synagogue service, Kol Nidrei asserts from the outset the "voice of the people." As such, according to Dan, "Kol Nidrei is a recitation of renewal and affirmation of communal cohesion and brotherhood, rather than, as it was interpreted, a way out of obligations." Time

and again in his commentaries on narratives in *Folktales of the Jews*, Dan looked to the function of folklore to differentiate and bond communities. The essays in this special issue speak largely to that function in situational contexts—whether in historic texts of magic in the life of the Ba'al Shem Tov (Moseson), visual humor in memes about the Haredim in contemporary Israeli society (Sebba-Elran), malicious antisemitic distortion by Nazis of exoteric proverbs about Jews (Mieder), and the iconography of candlesticks on women's gravestones in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe (Gruber). They also fulfill Dan's vision of folk materials as providing crucial evidence for comprehending the meaning of cultural memory and identity, and the lessons of those materials and their contexts for "humanity at large" (the phrase comes from Dan's correspondence in Mieder 2023a, 197).

Folktales of the Jews can be viewed as a re-interpretation of oral tradition as the neglected, and suppressed, living voice of the people in the diverse, changing communities of the Diaspora over time and space (figure 3). The inspiration for the project was Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*, published between 1909–1930 in seven volumes and republished in a second edition in two volumes by the Jewish Publication Society in Philadelphia, which also served as the publisher for *Folktales of the Jews* (Ginzberg, L. 2003; see also Ginzberg, E. 1966; Hasan-Rokem and Gruenwald 2014; Yassif 2019). Yet the contents retold by Ginzberg, a Russian-born American rabbi, were drawn mostly from *Tanakh* rather than collected from contemporary narrators as part of their oral tradition, as Dan's volumes were planned to present. Another difference is that Ginzberg was religiously motivated to show a unified, refined framework for Jewish beliefs and values while Dan, inspired by Hayyim Bialik's call for *kinnus* (gathering) of traditional literature from the many sources of immigrants coming to the land of Israel, wanted to represent the distinctive streams of traditions—secular as well as religious—and variable meanings from the diversity of ethnic groups in the Jewish diaspora. Dan in consultation with Dov Noy, who first conceptualized the project, wanted to feature creative, expressive individuals rather than lumping them into groups repeating the plots of tale types. Dan explained, "The present tales are not stultified and venerated classics, but narrations in which the narrator's voice vibrates with its human artistic fallibility and fortitude" (Ben-Amos 2006b, xxiii).
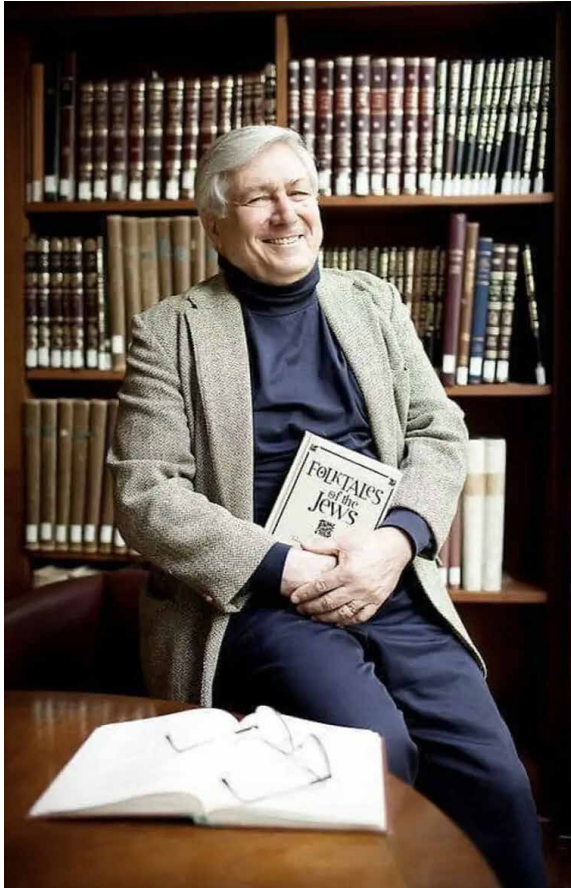
Figure 3. Professor Dan Ben-Amos at the University of Pennsylvania promoting the first volume of *Folktales of the Jews*, 2006. Photography by Candace DiCarlo. Used with permission of the photographer and the University of Pennsylvania.

Their diversity and conflicting trends notwithstanding, the tales that Dan selected were intended to be, he wrote, "not just imagined communities, but a community of a shared imagination" (Ben-Amos 2006b, xviii). The reference implies, Israeli folklorist Eli Yassif observed, the key idea that "*folklore is the language, the expressive means, used by the vast majority of Jews everywhere*, from biblical times and through the ages" (Yassif 2019, 327; emphasis in original). As

a prime example of an alienated community, Jews exemplify the use of folklore as the differential identity of both communal culture and counterculture (Ben-Amos 2014b). Hardly a unified nation or even linguistic-cultural group, Jews in Dan's commentaries lived as ethnic minorities among other peoples. As he did in his principles of folklore theory, Dan underscored the "we-ness" of folklore's being situated in small groups and of providing a sense of community. He wrote in the first volume of *Folktales of the Jews*, for example, that the tendency of Jews toward localization, even as they were globally dispersed and connected by history, "manifested itself in the emergence of distinct regional Jewish languages; the development of community histories revolving around known locals, events, and figures; and the influence of local traditions upon Jewish narrative repertoires" (Ben-Amos 2006b, xx-xxi).

Dan's statement and organization of the volumes based on communal Jewish identities can be contextualized in his experience in the United States and what Israeli folklorist Eli Yassif interprets as "a strong form of protest against the Israeli effort to eradicate local identities preserved for centuries in the Diaspora" (Yassif 2006, 329). To Yassif, what is significant about Dan's devoting his energies at the height of his academic career to the text-based study of narratives from Israel in *Folktales of the Jews* is his demonstration of a "diasporic mentality and ethnopoetics" in the world outside of the "Jewish state" (Yassif 2019, 330). Dan was intentional in leading off the series with a title that identified tales coming from the Sephardic *dispersion* (2006a). Dan's introduction to the second volume on Eastern European tales opens with the statement "Eastern European Jewry was a relatively late Diaspora. Its communities evolved after the Jewish societies in other Diasporas such as Spain, the countries of Islam, and Western Europe had had their period of glory and turbulence" (Ben-Amos 2007b, xvii). The third volume covered what he called the "Arabic diaspora," stretched across a wide geographic expanse. Rather than representing a homogenizing ingathering of peoples, the narratives and his commentaries Dan presents underscore, according to Yassif, "a diverse, dynamic and deeply challenging Jewish culture" (Yassif 2019, 330).

Dan planned the fourth volume of the *Folktales of the Jews* series to be on Central Asia but did not get much past compiling notes on a batch of narratives.

Still on the drawing board, the fifth volume was supposed to include material from Iran, India, Ethiopia, and other countries. It will take a whole team of folklorists from those areas, in addition to someone familiar as Dan was with the Israeli Folktale Archives, to undertake the completion of the series. I have agreed to assist so as to fulfill Dan's vision of covering the multifarious "community of shared imagination." In this and other incipient and ambitious projects, he modeled a transformative scholarly enterprise to feature creative Jewish voices of the people in community that relate to their broader social environments. Hearing and observing these expressions, our awareness grows of the power of folklore to subvert and convert, connect and alienate, persuade and question, and ultimately prod our conscience (see Frankel 2006, xiv).

As an older person confronting his own mortality, Dan advised a sick friend, "The good Lord can wait, don't rush to meet him. Tell Him that you want people to say after your death: '*Wait, I think he is still moving*'" (Mieder 2023a, 82). Through the continuation of projects either initiated or inspired by Dan, we can feel that he is still moving, for his vision and scholarship seem ever present. In his presentations, Dan talked about the immense amount of traditional knowledge that required documentation. He urged his audiences to take up folkloristic work that desperately needed to get done. Even with all his accomplishments, he never rested on his laurels. Someone asking him for suggestions for research was liable to receive a long list of needs. I can apply a midrashic proverb to Dan that he used to reflect on the unfinished tasks of his senior University of Pennsylvania kindred spirit and folksong scholar Kenneth S. Goldstein: "When a man departs this world, he does not have as much as half of his desire in hand" (Ben-Amos 1996a, 320). Dan noted Goldstein's incomplete manuscripts, untranscribed songs, and unrecorded singers, but pointed out that Goldstein's passion for teaching would result in his scholarly goals being carried on by his students. Dan shared that passion and gained a large following at the University of Pennsylvania and his presentations to students and junior colleagues around the world. To be sure, I know from conversations from his students that they registered for his classes with simultaneous fear and excitement because they heard he was a demanding professor and had the reputation of having the most sweeping breadth of knowledge, linguistic

ability, and global experience in the department. Once in the class, they realized that Dan distinguished himself among professors for the amount of extra support and attention he extended. A student from the last class he taught spoke for her peers when she reflected after his death, "What I miss most of all is his advice, even if I didn't listen. It's what I long for most as I begin to navigate the world outside of university" (Klein 2023). This care for students' needs might have prevented him from researching and writing more, but he felt determined to serve as a professorial *Rav* (Heb.: master teacher and sage at a level above most rabbis, or a teacher of teachers) to perpetuate the academic study of folklore.

The blessing and curse of Dan's work is that he thought big. He valued the local but typically strived to be global. I contend that the deep, broad net of folklore and ethnology that he cast as he foresaw the possibility of no longer walking among the living owed to his Jewish experience. To be sure, he made significant contributions to African and Asian studies, ethnological and performance theory, and literary and linguistic scholarship, but I daresay that his odyssey as a Jew constituted a mission to find wisdom on the dynamics of tradition, identity, ethnicity, and belief at the heart of human experience—and social reality. Inspired by his teaching, leadership, and writing, we stand in awe of what he managed to accomplish in his time with us. The authors in this volume, along with the many students and colleagues around the world whose minds and emotions Dan stirred, join together to raise the impressive intellectual edifice whose foundation he artfully laid.

Acknowledgments

colleagues, and friends: "A Symposium in Honor of Dan Ben-Amos," sponsored by the Jewish Studies Program and the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, November 19, 2023 (https://jwst.sas.upenn.edu/events/2023/11/19/ symposium-folklore-honor-dan-ben-amos), and "Dan Ben-Amos: Fifty Years of Jewish Folklore at Penn," sponsored by the Jewish Studies Program, April 23, 2017 (https://jwst.sas.upenn.edu/events/2017/04/23/dan-ben-amos-fifty-years-jewish -folklore-penn).

Notes

1. Two emails in discussion about uttering proverbs authentically with fellow immigrant folklorist Wolfgang Mieder, who also speaks with an "accent," convey Dan's humorous, and revealing, commentary on responses to his speech patterns in English: "You are lucky, because whenever I use an 'authentic' American proverb people ask me, 'From which country are you?'" (September 22, 2021; see Mieder 2023a, 181); "Displaying in public my linguistic skills in various languages probably the listeners will react paraphrasing the characterization of Roman Jakobson who spoke six languages and all of them in Russian" (April 5, 1994; see Mieder 2023a, 32).

2. Dan told me that the Ukraine-born, Canadian-educated Bidney (1908–1987), however, identified as Jewish and invited Dan to his family's Passover seders. Although Jewish studies was not a research or teaching area for Bidney, he wrote on Jewish-Portuguese philosopher Baruch Spinoza and generally on the ethnology of religion (Bidney 1954, 1962). Dan appreciated Bidney's invitation because Dan reported feeling out of place and minoritized in Bloomington, Indiana, as an Israeli Jewish student. Dan also reflected that he related to Bidney's straddling of borders between humanities and social sciences with his "humanistic anthropology" (Goldstein 1955).

3. In Richard Dorson's expansion of the 1963 survey in 1972, he named Dan Ben-Amos as one of the paradigm-changing "young Turks" (Dorson 1972, 45). On Dan's view of the significance of Kenneth Goldstein's Jewishness to his folkloristic work, see Dan's 1996 obituary for Goldstein in which he called him "the *rabbi* of folklore" (Ben-Amos 1996, 320; emphasis added). In a Jewish context, the term *rabbi* connotes not only a community/spiritual leader but also a teacher and studious person (see Rosenberg 1961). Dan was referring to Goldstein's leadership as chair of the Department of Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania for nearly twenty years and as Head of the Department of Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland for three years; Goldstein also served as president of the American Folklore Society in 1975–1976 and its secretary-treasurer between 1965 and 1972.

4. Letter from Jack Santino to the American Folklore Society, Lifetime Achievement Awards Committee, February 19, 2014, Simon Bronner Collection. For other comments by former students, see Coben, Lu, and Lowthorp 2020.

5. Justin Hofmann writing in *Religious Education* points out that in addition to Jewish tradition's viewing the teacher as indispensable to any community, the teacher is associated with Hashem (Hofmann 1967, 335–36; see also Morosohk 2022). Further, the rabbi as spiritual leader is interpreted in Jewish tradition as filling the roles of a teacher and mentor (American-Israeli Cooperative 1998–2023; Cedarbaum 1999; Rosenberg 1961; Sacks 2023). Although Dan's narrative about his father's questioning the work of the professor implies a preference for manual labor, Zalman Ben-Amos subscribed to the value in Jewish tradition of the teacher to community building. Dan recalled that his father was in fact a *melamed* (Heb., teacher; Psalm 119:99; Proverbs 5:13), a title of honor among East European Jews for a religious teacher usually appointed by the community to educate children in Hebrew and religious texts (on the historical context of the *melamed*, see Schiff 1957).

6. The administration of the University of Pennsylvania offered Dan incentives to retire. Dan wrote Wolfgang Mieder on Oct 12, 2020, p. 168: "I had my 50th year at Penn 3 years ago. They gave me a wrist watch with a nice inscription—"50 years of service"—and they thought that I'll go away. This year the Provost circulated a letter in which he promised to pay extra for faculty over 65 if they retire this year. You know what I told him (politely)" (Mieder 2023a, 168).

7. I heard this last version told by Lubavitcher Rabbi Levi Brook during a conversation in Waukesha, Wisconsin, at a "break the fast" meal after Yom Kippur on September 25, 2023. The context for the expression of the parable was the rabbinic reference to Yom Kippur as the date Moses descended from Mount Sinai with the second set of tablets, followed by his expressing his inclusive attitude toward welcoming to Chabad Jews who have varying levels of observance. He undoubtedly also told this version with a teacher and his students because he was aware of my professorial appointment at the university. Later, I asked him where he heard the narrative, and he told me that he did not have a single source. He underscored that it is a common story repeated often among Hasidim from early childhood on.

8. A context for his call for folklorists to reassert their academic lineage is Dan's observation that the growing landing spot in the twenty-first century of university-trained folklorists in governmental, corporate, and media occupations has damaged the academic reputation of folkloristics as a discipline and sacrificed intellectual integrity (compare Dan's view to that of his dissertation director Richard M. Dorson who was also an opponent of public folklore as he built a department of folklore at Indiana University and advocated for the study of folklore as a discipline; see Bronner 1998, 349–412; Dorson 1971; Dorson 1973; Dorson 1976, 1–29). Dan pointed to the perception of folklore study as a popular rather than academic pursuit as a contributing factor to the demise of the Department

of Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania and other academic programs. After publishing his critique of the popular and political uses of "public folklore" in "The Name Is the Thing" (Ben-Amos 1998; see also Ben-Amos 2019a; Bronner 2019a, 9–11; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988; Siporin 2000), originally an address at the American Folklore Society annual meeting, Dan answered an interviewer's question: "I gather that you have very strong objections to folklore being presented in public through the public section folklorists. Is that right?" (Ben-Amos 2002, 29). Dan gave the interviewer a warning about the experience of the enlistment of folklore to serve the totalitarian regimes of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, which were particularly disastrous for Jews. He mused, "I do think that the moment a scholar gives up his academic freedom and yields his intellectual independence to a politician, on any level, he abdicates his duties and privileges as a scholar. He is no longer doing scholarship, but enters into a bond of servitude to politics. It does not matter whether the politician is the President of the United States or the Head of a neighborhood community center—it does not make a difference. Our duty is to maintain our freedom to think, to research and to express our opinion and publish the results of our findings. That is the basic reason why I oppose public folklore" (Ben-Amos 2002, 29).

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