Archival Recollections:
Rabbinic Figures as Folk Heroes

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ABSTRACT: Out of twenty-four thousand tales documented in the Israel Folktale Archives named after Dov Noy (IFA), only two hundred center on rabbinic figures of late antiquity. This small corpus presents a clear, and curious, profile: while half of it addresses two figures who are venerated saints in contemporary Israel, and are thus the focus of mainly hagiographic narratives in which the figures are active agents in the present, the remainder of the tales, in which Rabbi Akiva is the prominent character, tend to characterize the rabbis as tricksters or to embed them in trickster-like narratives. Implementing semiotic and folkloristic tools, this article suggests that the underlying selection that informs the subgroup of rabbinic tales in IFA should be construed in the context of the IFA project itself, as an arena of conflicting motivations and discourses. Within the intricate and conflicted web of hegemonic and marginal forces, the stories and their tellers stage hidden transcripts, including one of trickster-like oppositions to the institutional hospitality offered by the IFA.

THE ISRAEL FOLKTALE ARCHIVES (IFA), named after its founder Dov Noy, was established in 1955, in the nascent state of Israel and a decade after the Holocaust. Impelled by a sense of the urgent need to salvage the potentially vanishing lore of Jewish communities from European, as well as Muslim, cultures, the founding of the IFA nevertheless involved conflicting motivations. From a hegemonic perspective, the archive clearly sought to present

Jewish folklore in the service of an imagined—national—unified Israeli community. On the other hand, the archive gave voice to marginal, and multiple, exilic traditions that subverted the notion of a newly born Zionist identity.[1] Beyond this broad characterization of the archive as an institutional site of competing discourses, one can attempt to delineate other traits pertaining to more specific aspects of its corpus. Here, however, the pictures that emerge invariably become more tentative, relying on a myriad of unaccountable factors, including, for instance, the aesthetic tastes of the field-workers who elicited and wrote down the tales. The impression of randomness and arbitrariness may thus loom large. While acknowledging the tentative nature of an inquiry into the character of the actual materials in the archive, I will attempt to do exactly that by examining its tales about rabbinic figures (rabbis of late antiquity). I seek to understand the profile that emerges from this textual subcorpus in terms of its "selective recollection," which I explain in the context of the interplay of hegemony and marginality as staged and performed by the tales and their tellers.

Among the twenty-four thousand tales in the archive, only two hundred involve rabbinic figures (usually as protagonists). That scarcity may echo the poetics of rabbinic literature of late antiquity itself, which refrained from extended biographical narratives and did not single out a specific sage over others.[2] The archival collection of tales may thus have been generated by the "original" poetics of rabbinic literature. The small group of tales about rabbinic figures in the archive also shows a clear selection of rabbinic characters and plots: about half the tales center on Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (RASHBI) and Rabbi Meir—two figures whose graves in the Galilee are sites of pilgrimage. In their IFA tales, which are of a hagiographic nature, they appear mostly as active agents who perform miracles in the present.[3] The ritual associated with these two figures accounts for both the nature of the stories told of them and their popularity. The remaining one hundred tales can be divided into three clear subgroups: twenty-five that feature pietistic figures (who are already "folk" figures in ancient rabbinic literature);[4] miscellaneous; and Rabbi Akiva. It is important to note that unlike RASHBI and Rabbi Meir (in the majority of their tales), Rabbi Akiva is confined—as are the pietistic and miscellaneous figures—to the rabbinic era. He does not act in the present.

That Rabbi Akiva should hold a prominent position within the rabbinic IFA corpus is hardly surprising. Here, again, the IFA collection seems to echo rabbinic literary sources, where Rabbi Akiva is held in such high esteem that he is worthy of receiving the Torah, or at least so Moses

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[1] See Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Textualizing the Tales of the People of the Book: Folk Narrative Anthologies and the National Identity in Modern Israel," *Prooftexts* 19, no. 1 (1999): 71–82.

[2] See, for example, Jacob Nuesner's explanation, according to which this poetic preference should be understood as one way in which rabbinic Judaism distinguished itself from Christianity. Jacob Neusner, *Why No Gospels in Talmudic Judaism?*, Brown Judaic Studies no. 135 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988). Although tales about rabbinic figures of late antiquity are scarce in the IFA, there are midrashic tales and motifs that are told without attributing them to a sage. In addition, there are tales that resemble ones from the rabbinic corpus but that in the IFA are told about figures who are not associated with the rabbinic era (usually they are told about anonymous characters). Clearly, however, this material does not involve rabbinic figures, and it is not necessarily identified by the storytellers with rabbinic literature.

[3] On concrete sites (e.g., tombs) as sources of a sustained narrative tradition, see Lucia Raspe, "Props of Memory, Triggers of Narration: Time and Space in Medieval Jewish Hagiography," in *The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages*, ed. Lucie Dolezalova, Later Medieval Europe 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 309–27.

[4] This is clearly true of their Babylonian characterization. See Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Did Rabbinic Culture Conceive of the Category of Folk Narrative?," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 3, no. 1 (2009): 19–55 (and earlier studies cited there).

suggests.[5] Moreover, from a literary-semiotic perspective, Rabbi Akiva's character in the rabbinic corpus is supplied with a surplus of archetypal scenes, spread out in different rabbinic compilations: he is, to borrow from Umberto Eco's discussion of "cult movies," a cult *hero*:[6] he is a poor shepherd who marries a rich heiress, against her father's will;[7] his turning point comes when he buries a corpse that had been left unburied;[8] he sleeps in a barn, picking hay from his beloved hair, and he goes off to study and returns twenty-four years later with twenty-four thousand disciples;[9] he finds immense fortune;[10] he marries an emperor's wife;[11] he dies a martyr.[12] All these, and more, are well-known motifs and plots that recur in a variety of literary traditions. The sense of déjà vu that Eco ascribes to the audience that watches a cult movie can thus be translated into the underlying dynamics that inform the recollection and transmission of tradition: a character that is composed of "citational" (archetypal) elements potentially generates more stories.[13]

The generative quality of the rabbinic Akiva might account for his prominence in the IFA, although not necessarily for the actual tales in which he figures. Surprisingly enough, we find no stories of his riches or of his romantic marriage. Here, again, Eco's model may provide further insight into not only the recollection of tales but also the selection that it implies. According to Eco, the citational quality of a scene relies on its semiotic identification, its ability to elicit a sense of déjà vu, or, in Roland Barthes's terms, on its "mythic," connotative symbolism.[14] That is, the "citation" has to be identified as a familiar scene. What, then, would constitute familiar scenes in the IFA? The equivalent of "citational scenes," I suggest, can be found in the folkloristic notion of the "tale type." The "tale type"—that is, an abstracted plot structure—was introduced by the Finnish school of folkloristics to serve in a standard classifying system of folk narratives. The tale type is used as a principal criterion by the IFA as well. The tale-type index of Aarne-Thompson, expanded by Uther,[15] includes stories that are repeated usually in more than one cultural area. The index was designed to reconstruct the historical and geographical migration of tales but it can also be viewed as a semiotic handbook of folk narratives.[16] That is, from a semiotic perspective the tales can be viewed as analogous to Eco's "archetypal scenes." Hence, one aspect of the

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5 b. Menachot 29b.

6 Umberto Eco, "*Casablanca*: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage," in *Travels in Hyper Reality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 197–211.

7 b. Ketubot 62b–63a; b. Nedarim 50a.

8 Derekh Erets 7:10.

9 b. Ketubot 62b–63a; b. Nedarim 50a.

10 b. Nedarim 50a–b. On the rabbinic list of the sources of his wealth, and its relation to other traditions, see Avigdor Shinan, "Meqorot oshro shel Rabbi Akiva" [The origins of Rabbi Akiva's wealth], in *Alfe Shinan: Mivhar ma'amarim u-tguvot talmidim* [Selection of articles by Avigdor Shinan and students' responses], ed. Dalia Marks and Gila Wachman (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronoth, 2014), 177–98.

11 b. Avodah Zarah 20a.

12 b. Berakhot 61b.

13 The generative power of Rabbi Akiva's character has also expressed itself in popular novels that engage his figure, beginning with Marcus (Meir) Lehmann's German novel *Akiba* in 1880, up to Yochi Brandes's novel *Ha-pardes shel Akiva'* [Akiva's orchard] from 2012.

14 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and trans. Annette Lavers (London: J. Cape, 1972).

15 Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folk-Tale*, FFC 184 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961); and Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004).

16 For a semiotic use of the tale-type index, albeit a different approach to what I am suggesting here, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, "The Snake at the Wedding: Semiotic Reconsideration of the Comparative Method of Folk Narrative Research," *ARV: Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore* 43 (1987): 73–87.

archival semiotics is its distribution of tale types. If we turn now to the tales of Rabbi Akiva in the IFA, we see that there is one in particular that is repeated—told by a storyteller from Iraq and in a shorter version by an informant from Greece.[17] It is very similar to a tale told about Rabbi Akiva in the Babylonian Talmud, where he appears to act in a strange manner (IFA 8726):[18]

> Rabbi Akiva was president. As in every visit of a president, of course, all the people of the town, its elders and dignitaries, go out to greet him upon his arrival. He is always on his donkey, and with him are two men carrying candles to light up the night at the time of midnight prayer and also a rooster to mark the time and to wake them up.
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> Once he traveled as usual across the desert to arrive at his destination, and with him were his companions, the rooster, the candles, and his donkey. They arrived at the entrance of the town but no one came out to greet him. His companions asked him: "What is the reason for this?" He answered: "It is God's will. Whatever He does is good." They arrived at the city gates at night and no one came out to greet them. They entered through the gate, knocked on the first house, and no one answered. The companions asked him: "What is the reason that no one came out to greet us and that the master of the house does not want to host us? Where shall we turn?"
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> They retreated a few meters back into the desert, their hearts angry with the people of the town, except for Rabbi Akiva. They found a spot shaded by a ruined house, and they sat down to rest up from the weariness caused by the journey. They lit candles; the wind came and put out the light. Then came a fox and ate the rooster. A lion came and devoured the donkey. They had nothing left and they sat there feeling sad. They saw from afar how soldiers approached the town and burnt it all down. They did not leave a single vegetable, manger, or animal. They woke up in the morning, and they found that no person had survived in the town.
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> Rabbi Akiva told his students: "Now you have seen the miracles of the Blessed be He. If they had hosted us, we would now be dead; if the lion hadn't devoured the donkey, the donkey would have cried and they would have noticed us and come to kill us; if the candle had been lit, they would have noticed that there were people here and they would have come to kill us; if the rooster hadn't died, it would have called, and they would have noticed that there were inhabitants here and they would have come to kill us. All these miracles God did in order to keep us alive. Now take heed of God's actions."

The tale has been classified in the archive as AT 759: "God's Justice Vindicated." The crux of the tale is a venerated figure who behaves in a seemingly strange manner (and, typically, sacrilegiously or nonnormatively), to the dismay and bewilderment of the people surrounding him. Ultimately, his strange or deviant conduct turns out to be truly pious, fortuitous, or both. In the IFA this tale type appears more than 130 times, a relatively popular type in the archive. In terms of archival semiotics, it can thus be said to be a "citational scene," which may therefore at least partially explain the selection—and repetition—of this specific tale from the wider inventory of Akiva tales in the rabbinic corpus. Implicitly and by contrast, it may account for the "rejection" of

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17 IFA 8726; IFA 2530.

18 For the rabbinic source, see b. Berakhot 60b–61a. The tale is presented there in the midst of a discussion of the need to accept from God both the good and the bad (and not necessarily arguing that the bad is a disguised form of the good). For a similar tale, where Rabbi Akiva laughs at the site of the desecrated Temple, see Lamentations Rabbah 5:18 (and for a brief discussion that also associates the tale with theodicy, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature*, trans. Batya Stein [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000], 14–15).

other potentially "archetypal" episodes—such as the poor man who marries a "princess"—that are found in rabbinic and, importantly, also in later popular compilations but are less popular in legendary narratives in the IFA (as opposed, possibly, to their prominence in the fairy tale genre in the archive). As for AT 759 and its thematics, it should be noted that this tale type implies much more than what is subsumed by its final culmination in "just retribution."[19] It also implies a discrepancy between what one sees and a hidden underlying reality. Most important in this context is that before the tale restores an apparent theological equilibrium, it presents a topsy-turvy reality, where categories are undermined and mixed up: the somewhat grotesque convoy that accompanies Rabbi Akiva receives a successive set of blows eliciting nothing but a Panglossian-like response from the ever-cheerful Rabbi Akiva. Explaining away the seeming discrepancy and absurdity of the events as God's mysterious—and just—hand is tantamount to addressing the solution to a riddle without acknowledging its entire structure. The plot of the tale resembles the way a riddle operates: it initially juxtaposes unmatchable categories but ultimately presents a correspondence between them.[20] Like the riddle, the tale of Rabbi Akiva's enigmatic behavior ends by matching the contradictory categories but only after having shuffled them in a way that points to their possibly inherent arbitrariness: a pious man is refused hospitality, the candle that serves for religious practice is extinguished, etc. There is no inherent correspondence between ethical categories and categories that compose a variety of external plots. This undermining, reflective quality is a key aspect of the narrative, to which I shall return.

Because versions of Rabbi Akiva's beginnings, most notably the one where he is a shepherd who marries a wealthy heiress, are often included in folk and popular compilations, we can assume that the storytellers interviewed by the IFA field-workers were familiar with those versions but chose—consciously or not—to ignore them.[21] The selection implied in the archival recollection of the rabbinic Akiva is striking when we consider not only the left-out tales of his early life—such as his marriage to a princess—but one other tale that is found in the IFA, whose source is a fourteenth-century Yemenite midrash, Midrash Hagadol (IFA 18946, told by Asher ben Harush, Morocco):

> Rabbi Akiva didn't know how to read and write until he was forty.
> His wife said to him: "Start learning."
> He said to her: "They will laugh at me!"
> "OK," she said.
> What did she do? She took two boxes, filled them with soil, planted flowers in them and grew them. When the flowers bloomed, she put the two boxes on either side of the donkey.
> "Go to the market," Rachel, the daughter of Kalba Savu'a, said to Rabbi Akiva, her husband.

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[19] Indeed, the studies that have addressed this tale type in different Jewish corpora, including the IFA, have argued that it is a quintessential tale of theodicy. See Haim Schwarzbaum, "The Jewish and Moslem Versions of Some Theodicy Legends," *Fabula* 3, no. 1 (1960): 119–69; and Dov Noy, "The Jewish Theodicy Legend," in *Fields of Offering: Studies in Honor of Raphael Patai*, ed. Victor D. Sarna (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1983), 65–85. While I don't disagree with these studies regarding the ultimate resolution the tale offers, they do, to my mind, overlook a crucial aspect of its plot.

[20] For an overview of theoretical approaches to the riddle and riddling tales, see Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors: Reflexivity, Midrash, and the Rabbinic Self* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 37–39.

[21] Compare, for example, with the popular *Ma'ase-buch* (a book of Jewish tales and legends) and *Sefer Oseh Pele* (Book of He Who Works Wonders), where a variety of traditions regarding rabbi Akiva are told. Given that these books, and especially *Oseh Pele*, served at times as the sources on which the storytellers drew, the selective profile of the IFA corpus is telling.

"How?"

"With the donkey."

"And what about the boxes and the flowers?"

"Go with them!"

"They will laugh at me."

"Go!" she ordered him.

He went to the market. They laughed at him. He came back home scolded.

"Go once more!" she ordered him.

The following day he went again. Now they laughed at him less. The next day, the third day, she said to him: "Go once more."

He went. Now they were not laughing at him anymore, because they had gotten used to him.

His wife asked him: "Today did they laugh at you?"

"No."

"So this is what it's going to be like when you start learning with six-year-olds. The first day they will laugh at you; the second, less. And on the third day they will get used to you."

He listened to her. He went and he began to learn, and this is how it was. He learned and learned until he became the famous Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Akiva of this tale is hardly depicted in sublime terms. His willful wife sends him off to the marketplace leading a flower-bedecked donkey. The reversal of normative gender roles, and his grotesque mission, create a comical and carnivalesque narrative.[22] The beginning of Rabbi Akiva's belated initiation, presented elsewhere as a heroic exemplum, is transformed in this version into an amusing scene, in which Rabbi Akiva is a passive, clownish character, evoking pity and laughter from the marketplace audience as well as from modern listeners of the tale. The image of a donkey decorated with flowers hovers metonymically over the head of the novice student, Rabbi Akiva. This is clearly a Menippean version of the initiation of a sage that mixes the lofty with the lowly, the sublime with the despised.

So, here again we are presented with a narrative that involves the mixing up of categories (e.g., sage and donkey). Both the previous tale and this one share a sense of the comic and the absurd. They both, I suggest, have a trickster-like quality. By saying "trickster-like" I am following Barbara Babcock's discussion of the trickster, where she offers a broad characterization of the trickster narrative.[23] The trickster, she argues, is a liminal figure that marks the paradoxes and contradictions between creation and destruction, the individual and society, center and margins. He is a sign that embodies unresolved ambivalence and cultural tensions—just as Rabbi Akiva possesses sublime knowledge despite his baffling, seemingly absurd responses, and because of them; and just as he is an esteemed rabbi despite his implicit comparison to a flower-bedecked donkey, and because of it. The trickster, and this is a point worth stressing here, is defined through

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22 It should be noted that in the Talmudic version of Rabbi Akiva's beginning (n. 7 above) his wife is indeed the active force that drives him to study, rendering the story a rabbinic fantasy of the ideal wife who not only does not pose demands that conflict with Torah study but in fact encourages her husband to stay an extra twelve years away from her at the house of study. See Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 150–55. The version cited here can thus be read as a parody on the Talmudic version that served the learned elite. I thank Gal Sela for this observation.

23 Barbara Babcock, "'The Tolerated Margins of Mess': The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 11, no. 3 (1975): 147–86.

his relation to a trickster-like discourse, a discourse that involves subversion and shuffling of categories, norms, and hierarchies. The trickster narrative obviously contains a playful element and often—although not always—a comic component.

Trickster-like discourse may also express itself in distinctive genres—such as riddles or riddling tales. It is not surprising therefore that in IFA 10832 Rabbi Akiva is the leading character in a riddling tale modeled on a riddling tale from the classical midrash Lamentations Rabbah (where the figures are anonymous).[24] This tale too, like the first one cited, depicts Rabbi Akiva on the road, accompanied by his students:

> Once Rabbi Akiva went with his students to visit [Jewish] communities,…to raise money for charity and for his yeshiva in Bnei Brak. En route they entered an inn at a crossroads between two cities where heathens lived. As soon as Rabbi Akiva crossed the threshold of the spacious house that served as a guesthouse and that also provided meals for passersby, he felt that the owner of the place was not a decent man. But because he and his students were tired from the journey and were hungry, they entered the inn.
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> Rabbi Akiva said to his students: "I see by the owner's face that he is both a thief and a cheat."
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> Said one of the students: "The meat this man served us smells of dogs."
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> Said the second student: "And I am certain that the wine this Jew poured in our glasses came from a cemetery."
>
> Said Rabbi Akiva: "And I suspect that he is a bastard and therefore excluded from the congregation of Israel."

And so the tale proceeds. The innkeeper overhears the conversation and sets out to check the truth of the allegations: the guests prove to be right regarding the food and drink he had served. Indeed, the wine came from a vine that grew in the cemetery, and the meat came from a lamb whose mother died and who consequently suckled from one of the dogs that guarded the herd. These realizations drive him to ask his mother about the third allegation regarding his identity. He finds out that he is the son of a heathen whom his mother had fallen in love with after she was widowed.[25] In his agony upon hearing this devastating news, he kills himself by jumping off the inn's roof.

In this tale too we find a host whose hospitality is compromised, albeit here not because he—the innkeeper—acts maliciously but because unbeknownst to him he provides his guests with dubious refreshments. The riddling tale involves a series of muddled categories: meat that smells of dogs, wine that reeks of a cemetery, and ultimately, a seemingly respectable innkeeper who is really a bastard, seemingly Jewish but in truth the son of a gentile father.[26] All this takes place in an inn, a site of mixed crowds to begin with, in a mixed-up environment that includes a Jewish-owned (or so it seemed) inn on a crossroads between two gentile cities. Distinct, incompatible categories are suggested in the three successive riddles: wine/graves; lamb/dogs; respectable

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[24] On the midrashic riddling tale, see Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life*, 39–87.

[25] His mother's explanation doesn't render him a bastard according to Jewish law, nor could she have been a widow at the time of his conception according to the sequence of events she presents. The text is clearly flawed here.

[26] He is legally Jewish, and he is a bastard only if his mother was married when she conceived him from another man. Here the midrashic version has it right: the formal father is infertile, so the mother, while still married, has her son by another man. The legal aspects of the midrashic tale are clear.

innkeeper/bastard. The categorization is ultimately resolved by contrasting appearances with underlying truths, with untold stories, but not before presenting us with topsy-turvy images.

Whereas in the midrash the riddling tale concerns anonymous characters, the IFA tale identifies the main character as Rabbi Akiva. This should be understood in the framework of Rabbi Akiva's prominence in the IFA rabbinic corpus in general and in light of his trickster-like character in particular. Here we may be afforded an additional glimpse into underlying processes of the semiotics of archival recollection. If, as I suggested earlier, rabbinic tales of Rabbi Akiva that fit AT 759 were recorded at the IFA while others, undoubtedly well known, were not, this may have to do with the trickster-like aspects of the tale type itself, where the protagonist performs nonnormative deeds or utters counterintuitive responses. Moreover, because Rabbi Akiva is a prominent figure in the archival corpus of rabbinic tales, and one that bears trickster-like qualities, trickster-related tales that in rabbinic sources are told about anonymous figures or even specifically about other sages are attributed to him. Such is the case with a tale that early sources told of Rabbi Yehushua ben Levi but that is attributed to Rabbi Akiva in the IFA (3691).

Rabbi Akiva does not, however, stand alone. His character in the IFA is typical of the characterization of other rabbinic figures in the corpus. If we set aside the tales told about RASHBI and Rabbi Meir, which are predominantly hagiographic tales that address the figures as active agents who perform miracles in the present, we find that there is a dominant humoristic and playful element in the tales told of other rabbinic figures. The tendency becomes even more evident if we look at the small subgroup of tales told about RASHBI and Rabbi Meir that relate to them as sages operating in the rabbinic era. There too we find distinctly trickster-like tales in which rabbinic figures tamper with categories and norms and in which visible reality is contrasted with a hidden truth.[27]

The IFA corpus of tales about rabbinic figures strongly suggests that it is the product of selective—conscious or not—recollection from an existing pool of tales about sages, from the rabbinic sources themselves, from later popular compilations, and from oral traditions. Why, of all the possible narratives that could have been told about Rabbi Akiva and other rabbis, were the ones that carry a trickster quality told and recorded? One possible explanation is that the storytellers themselves were not highly learned and that by recounting trickster-like tales about well-known rabbinic figures, they were sticking a pin in what was in their view an inflated image of the erudite elite of Torah scholars. The fact that the IFA holds a large number (twenty) of stories about pietistic figures, figures that are not associated with institutional-*halakhic* knowledge, may support this explanation.

It is possible that there is yet another explanation for this curious selection, one that touches directly on the project of collecting folktales in Israel, in the first years of statehood. As I mentioned above, alongside the underlying national motivation, unifying the "twelve tribes of Israel," the collection was also triggered by the desire to give voice to an alternative to the hegemonic-national discourse. And additional ambivalence is embedded in the labeling of the corpus as

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[27] See, for instance, the tales told of Rabbi Meir, who, in one story, orders a woman to spit on him (IFA 10712), and in another, he visits a whore (IFA 5893). Both stories have rabbinic sources, and the rabbinic tale of Rabbi Meir's visit to a brothel even stood at the center of Daniel Boyarin's discussion precisely of the rabbi as trickster in the late antique text. See Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 67–93. On Rabbi Meir and the women who spits on him, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 55–85.

"folktales," for as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has correctly pointed out, naming an object as "folklore" performs a dual role of retrieving a cultural phenomenon from the social, ideological, or institutional margins while allotting it once again a marginal position by labeling it as "folklore."[28] The IFA as a national archive is thus a conflicted arena of competing discourses, mixing categories in a similar manner to the trickster-hero of its rabbinic tales. Moreover, within the Israeli literary polysystem, the oral narrative occupied a marginal position vis-à-vis the written text so that the very act of collecting and transcribing the tales—by proxies of institutional and academic centers—embodied a marginal position that marked an ambivalent stance regarding the institutional, social, or ideological center, and this marginal, and ambivalent, position is in turn expressed in the tales themselves. The stories thus stage the social-political drama that informs the folkloristic project itself, rooted in the nascent days of the state of Israel.

The trickster-like quality, though, does not express itself evenly in the IFA rabbinic corpus: as mentioned, there is a clear difference between the majority of tales told about RASHBI and Rabbi Meir, which are devoid of comic or trickster-like aspects, and the rest of the rabbinic tales in the IFA. The chronotope—the time and space—suggested by the hagiographical genre involves the present and the concrete-geographical Israeli landscape: it implies a physical site marked by tombs and pilgrimage. This is not the case for the chronotope of the other tales of rabbis in the IFA, which is a more abstract, distant time and space. It is precisely this distance and abstractness that allow for staging trickster-like narratives, and that project carnivalesque and Menippean elements onto the tales. Simply put, projected onto an abstract and chronologically distant landscape, the trickster reflects only indirectly on the social and political reality of the present.

It is possible that the marginality that these tales express, through their trickster qualities, conveys an intricate drama within the ingathering project; Rabbi Akiva, who did not know how to read and write (albeit only at the beginning), may be closer to the storytellers who represent a predominantly oral culture. The tale about him walking a donkey adorned with flowers to the marketplace, a freak show of sorts, stages the experience of the storytellers as "spectacles." Among other things, the tale may reflect humorously on the social-hegemonic center and its normative constructions, and maybe even on the act of writing down the tales and transforming them from oral to written tradition. The tale also tells of an infantilized hero who not only literally studies with other children but is taught a lesson by his wife who coaches him as a parent would his child. Infantilization and a falling apart of the traditional patriarchal-family power structure characterize the experience of many of the immigrants to Israel, who were also the storytellers of the IFA.[29] Rabbi Akiva's beginning as a mocked child standing in the marketplace, and the inhospitality that he was shown in the first narrative and in the riddling tale, are evocative metaphors of the experience of a new immigrant, a newcomer who, while playing along with the apparent welcoming project of his new hosts and providing them with "folktales," tells a hidden experiential transcript that connotes a pinch—a playful one at that—of humiliation and rejection. He is

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28 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Topic Drift: Negotiating the Gap between the Field and Our Name," *Journal of Folklore Research* 33, no. 3 (1996): 245–53.

29 On literary texts that addressed the paternal crisis, see, e.g., Herzle Hakkak and Balfour Hakkak, "Avot u-vanim le-nokhach mashber ha-aliyah la-arets: Defuse teguvah shel dor ha-banim le-hitnaptsut demut ha-av im ha-aliyah artsah" [Fathers and sons in the face of the immigration crisis: Reaction patterns of the sons' generation to the shattering of the father figure in the context of the immigration to Israel], *Sede Heme"d* 42, nos. 2–3 (1999): 103–13.

indeed a trickster, and as we know from James Scott's now-classic study, trickster tales are the best example of the tacit opposition of oppressed groups.[30] The storytellers, like their literary protagonists, are therefore tricksters who embody an ambivalent stance regarding an array of distinctions on which order, hierarchy, and social institutions—the IFA among them—are predicated. Their tales are folktales that both conform and subvert the national project that is embedded in the IFA, and they are also hidden transcripts, reflecting critically on power dynamics between the recorder and the recorded, the transcriber and the transcribed. Ⓐ

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30 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 162.